Angela Davis: A Voice to Remember

BreAnna Rae
Western Oregon University, brae16@mail.wou.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/aes

Part of the Communication Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/aes/133
Angela Davis: A Voice to Remember

The Importance of Angela Davis

“What is the meaning of freedom? Angela Davis’s entire life, work, and activism has been dedicated to examining this fundamental question and to abolishing all forms of subjugation that have denied oppressed people freedom,” as described by Robin D. G. Kelley in the foreword of Angela Davis’s collection of speeches *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues* (2012).

A pioneer for a better tomorrow, Davis contributed to several different areas of injustice throughout her life. Her battle with social reform comes from very personal roots as she grew up deep in the segregated South, pre-Civil Rights movement. She was heavily influenced by her experiences as a young black woman and that fueled her to fight the bigger powers at play. Growing up, Davis knew something was corrupt in the way people were being treated and that there was a deep, growing hope inside of her for social change.

She has high expectations for the capabilities of America and she believes in the power of the people to create impactful change in society. In 2005, she reminded us that the world is filled with,

“People who are not afraid to dream about the possibility of a better world. They say that a non-exploitative, non-racist, democratic economic order is possible. They say that new social relations are possible, ones that link human beings around the globe, not
by the commodities some produce and others consume, but rather by equality and solidarity and compassion and respect” (Kelley, 16).

Davis, when she first made the decision that she was going to spend her life fighting for the people, for equality, and for justice, knew that she might die for the cause. But in that time, revolution was amongst the people, especially the black community as the fight for cultural citizenship began. These young adults felt that they were unstoppable in the fight for change and they believed wholeheartedly that their mission would be accomplished or they would die trying. That courage and dedication brought about historic change and Davis became one of the biggest names in the revolution.

She is a huge name in history that is often not recognized. Her name might strike one’s memory but in talking about my research to colleagues, I found that almost no one actually knew anything about her. Her work being of such great importance to social reform, this was disappointing. That is one of the many reasons I chose her because of her inspirational bravery that should make her a household name. In fact, a professor of criminology from Harris Stowe State University, Robin Ferguson Shaw, stated in her article *Unorthodox Criminologists: A Special Issue Part 2* (2009), “Angela Davis is the most recognizable figure within the prison abolition movement. Her unorthodox career path and approach to criminology sets her apart as unique and fearless… She is the model of a champion of the voiceless, and a scholar from whom we all can learn much.”

In this essay, I will explain the rich history of Davis starting from her battles as a child growing up dealing with racism to the unfortunate injustice that led her to become a political prisoner that inevitably shaped her work in the prison-industrial complex and made her an enemy
of the state. Her history is much more vibrant and expansive than I am allowed to hit upon but it is vital in understanding the analysis of her speech that we are familiar with her roots.

The Dynamic Life of a Young Activist

Davis was born in 1944 during a time of severe racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. The area where she grew up was called “Dynamite Hill” because of how many African-American homes were bombed by the Ku Klux Klan. Davis grew up with parents who were activists and their family friends were members of the Communist Party. Her mother was a member of the NAACP when it was quite dangerous to be affiliated with such organization. As a teenager, Davis and her mother moved to New York, where she attended the leftist Elizabeth Irwin High School (Kelley, 8).

In 1961, Davis began her higher education at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, where there were very few black students. During college, she was able to study abroad in France and Germany which opened up her global view of racism as she witnessed the treatment of North African and Algerian people in Paris. While in France, a tragedy struck in her hometown of Birmingham. Four girls were killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963. This incident, mixed with her new educational experiences and personal grievances really motivated Davis to pursue activism. It was also this incident that allowed Davis to live her life with this definition of freedom. In the foreword of The Meaning of Freedom (2012) Kelley describes Davis’s philosophy as, “freedom is the right to live, the necessity to struggle” (Kelley, 8).
In 1967, Davis was inspired by the Black Power movement and joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party. In the documentary *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners* directed by Shola Lynch (2012), Davis describes her involvement with these organizations,

“I had gotten involved very briefly with the Black Panther Party, the Black Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the black student organization on my campus, but I did not like the nationalism, I did not like the male supremacy, I did not like the fact that women were expected to take a back seat and, literally, to sit at the feet of the men.”

During her extensive activism, she completed her Master’s degree in 1968 at the University of California. That same year, Davis got introduced to and became a member of the American Communist Party, more specific the Che-Lumumba Club which was an all black chapter (Kelley, 9). Davis met Franklin Alexander, the Che-Lumumba Club Chairman which provided her a space that fit her better than the previous organizations she had tried to participate with. Alexander, in an interview about the mission of the Che-Lumumba Club, explained,

“I think, basically, what we're doing is we're saying that this system is rotten at its core, while we fight for the immediate needs of the people, constantly and continually. Better housing, you know, the end of police brutality. Stopping the depression level of unemployment in the black community. And while we continue to do those kinds of things, we do know, in fact, that this system itself creates those conditions. The changing of those conditions basically means establishing a socialist society” (Lynch, 2012).
Davis took those same values and ran with them. She is a very outspoken, well-educated woman. She knew the powers at play were corrupt and that the only change that would fix this was a radical one. As a victim of the system, Davis knew what corruption and misuse of power was happening at the institutional level and she knew that was where the work needed to be completed.

After graduation, Davis was offered an assistant professor of philosophy position at UCLA. Shortly after, she was dismissed from the position due to her affiliation with the Communist Party. She argued that her being a Communist did not affect her teaching or give them any grounds to fire her on. Many faculty stood up for her and defended her position since she was such a wonderful rhetor and scholar. However, the Governor of California at the time, Ronald Reagan, viewed her as dangerous. He wanted to repress the radical political movements that were stirring in the state and Davis had become a popular symbol of these movements. Reagan said, “she was not fired because she was a communist, but because she was unprofessional” (Lynch, 2012).

Her first lecture at UCLA drew in a crowd of 2000 students on the work of Franklin Douglass. She was a powerful rhetor and many had mixed feelings about whether or not she should be allowed to keep her position as a professor despite her political views. She quickly became a center of attention and the face of a movement. This publicity put Davis in danger because of her open distaste for the current government systems, her status as a woman of color, and her status as a very well-educated activist. Davis received hate mail varying in extremity from denouncing her values to threatening to murder her and her loved ones (Lynch, 2012).
During this time of revolution, there was an underlying tone of violence. It became almost a war zone on the streets with the activists versus the police (particularly the Black Panther Party with their wide display of weaponry). Around this same time that Davis was gaining popularity/infamy, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and Dr. King were all assassinated. Mixed with her daily life threats through the mail, Davis decided she needed to protect herself so she purchased the legal limit in her state of four guns. Her ownership of these guns became a very important part of her life story and shaped the rest of her political work (Lynch, 2012).

Davis’s life changed when she became involved with the three men who were unrightfully imprisoned in the Soledad prison, known as the Soledad Brothers. According to a political document written by the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee, this prison had heavy racial hostility and the maximum security wing was racially segregated. Despite that, on January 13th, 1970, a group of racially mixed inmates were taken to a recreation yard, with no guards to supervise, knowing a fight was bound to occur. The only guard was in the gun tower overlooking the yard, armed with a rifle.

The rest of the incident, according to prison authorities, involved a fight between inmates and four shots were fired into the common area by the guard. He killed three black men and wounded one white man. This caused a lot of anger within the community of color within the Soledad prison because it was a blatant murder, there was no reasonable cause for such violence. After the court ruled it a “justifiable homicide” a different guard was found dead in the prison hallway. The prison determined three inmates to be to blame: George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Clutchette (Soledad Brothers Defense Committee).
Their sentences prior to this alleged assault were already unjust. Jackson who was advised to plead guilty to his second-degree burglary charges was serving one year to life but had never received fair trial and was in prison for over 10 years. Clutchette and Drumgo were also both serving time for burglary charges, but all three men now faced the death penalty for the assault of a guard (Soledad Brothers Defense Committee).

In San Rafael, California, a federal judge and three other people were killed during an attempted kidnapping where inmates were smuggled in guns during a trial. It was a prison break plan allegedly conducted by Jackson’s little brother Jonathan Jackson, who Davis had known through George Jackson. Davis was accused of helping in this attempt. The guns used in the escape were all in Davis’s name despite her not being present or even aware that this attempt was being made with her own weapons (Lynch, 2012).

Davis, once identified as the gun owner thus affiliated with the murder and attempted prison break, was put on the FBI most wanted list. She fled around the United States, seeking refuge with those she felt she could trust. She changed her appearance and lived out of motels. She was able to hide for about two months before the FBI found her car and located her based on some polaroid photographs found in a couch cushion that showed her new appearance. She was detained in solitary confinement for 22 months under three death penalty charges for murder, conspiracy, and kidnapping. Davis stated in the film how she knew this was systematic and not just about her anymore,

“So he [the judge] wanted the death penalty three times. That made me realize how serious they were. And again, it made me realize that it wasn't about me because, first of all, I couldn't be killed three times. It was about the construction
of this imaginary enemy, and I was the embodiment of that enemy” (Lynch, 2012).

Davis said that this was the happiest day of her life when she was released. Although she was pleased, she still argued that a “fair trial would have been no trial at all” (Caldwell, 1972). One of her four lawyers Howard Moore Jr. stated, “If Angela Davis were not Angela Davis, she would have never been prosecuted” (Caldwell, 1972).

Davis continued to be an activist, scholar, and educator. She has authored several collections of speeches and books. Some of her most notable, but clearly not all of her publications, are: *Women, Race, and Class* on women in capitalism, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* on black women’s expressive culture, and the more recent *Are Prisons Obsolete? And Abolition Democracy* that tackle the need for ending the prison industrial complex. She also released a book of previously unpublished speeches called *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues* (2012) that were composed from 1994-2009.

*Davis, the Rhetor: An Analysis*

From *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues*, is a speech called *The Prison-Industrial Complex* by Davis on May 5, 1997 at Colorado College, Colorado Springs. Due to Davis’s past experiences and deep historic and financial understanding of the justice system in America, it is within reason that her speech is highly critical of the systematic racism of the prison systems in 1997 and even today. This speech highlights the profitability of prison’s essential slave labor, the systematic and unjust incarceration rates dependent on race, and how
change is possible despite the issue seeming to take a back seat in the minds of Americans. In the speech, she effectively persuades the audience about the need for civic engagement to assist with the social and political reform of the prison system in the United States through her use of narratives, artistic proofs, and localizing the issues.

Davis effectively utilizes narratives in the speech to create identification with her audience. In chapter 5 “Narrative” of *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, narratives are described as “representations, narratives are a form of symbolic action. They are referential, meaning they depict or describe events; they are not the event themselves” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 118). Identification, as described by rhetorical critic Kenneth Burke, is known as “a communicative process through which people are unified on the basis of common interests or characteristics” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 7). Burke believes that “the creation of identification is an essential characteristic of rhetoric and an integral element of persuasion” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 8).

Davis, during the first few paragraphs of her speech, utilizes narrative to provide understanding of her experiences with violent racism. She describes one of the first times she knew she had to be an activist as the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in her hometown, Birmingham, Alabama. She discloses the victim’s closeness to her own family, “Carole Robertson’s mother was my mother’s dear friend; she asked my mother to drive her to the church to pick up Carole when the news broke that the church had been bombed. They had no idea until they arrived at the church that Carole’s life had been taken by this act of racist terror” (Davis, 35-36).

This was effective because it grounds her early activism in a tragic event that could have happened to anyone. She was lucky enough to not be a victim of that particular violence but she
was still affected. Davis let her lost friends memory ignite a fire in her to serve her life as a catalyst for change.

She has many other examples of narratives. One very impactful narrative describes her time dealing with the UCLA teaching position she was offered being revoked as a result of her Communist activity. She begins,

“From my own experience, I can tell you what it is like to be a treated as a public enemy. When I was a member of the Communist Party, I accepted a teaching position at UCLA, but before I had a chance to teach my first class, I was fired by the Board of Regents at the instigation of Ronald Reagan, who was governor of California at that time. I did not know that such hatred was possible until I found myself the target of the most venomous attacks” (Davis, 41).

This was impactful because she uses this narration to transition into more background about her life during this time but also to transition to her larger connection to immigration, welfare recipients, and other “public enemies” such as herself. This created identification with her audience and some persona building as well.

The authors of *Rhetoric in Civic Life* emphasize that narratives “inform public life” and are an “important way to understand the world in which people reside” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 118). Through Davis’s narrative use, she is heavily influencing both her impact as a rhetor in terms of identifying with the audience’s values and how her audience is going to remember her message in the long term. Narratives help establish memory and invoke emotion in the listener.
To continue, Davis also calls upon Aristotle’s artistic proofs ethos, pathos, and logos to establish credibility and emotional understanding. This then leads to Davis’s ability to encourage civic engagement from her audience. Ethos is defined as “the character of a rhetor performed in the rhetorical act and known by the audience because of prior interactions” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 152). This is thought by Aristotle to be the most important proof for a rhetor to have because if the audience trusts the rhetor, they are more receptive to the overall message (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 12).

She begins her speech with a call to ethos. She talks about how she is often asked to talk about the events that led her to become the radical activist we see today. She delves into the narration of the bombing as a pivotal point, but states that she was active before that as well. Davis humanizes herself, defeating the mystification around rhetors where we view them as a higher authority, by saying she simply can’t answer the question. “There had never been a dramatic moment. Rather there had been a protracted process of learning how to live with racial segregation without allowing it to fully inhabit my psyche” (Davis, 36).

She goes on to discuss her parent’s influence in her character. “They taught us to imagine new possibilities, new worlds, and to connect the small things one does to those possible futures” (Davis, 36).

These contribute to the civic engagement aspect as well as establishing her ethos because it’s making this huge issue of social reform seem like something that any ordinary person can be involved with. She never had an epiphany that said she was chosen to do this work, she just chose to do this work because she cared and it mattered to her.
Civic engagement is “people’s participation in individual or collective action to develop solutions to social, economic, and political challenges in their communities, states, nations, and world” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 13).

This concept of civic engagement, from Davis’s role as a very successful activist, could be argued to be her main goal of this speech. She hopes her audience will see the connections she has made both from her past narratives and experiences and the culture of today’s politics. An example of her calling for audience’s civic engagement is during her introduction. Davis says to the crowd of young adults,

“So I want to begin by suggesting that whoever you are, wherever you are, whether you are a student, a teacher, a worker, a person involved in your church, an artist, there are always ways to gear your work toward progressive, radical transformation. I hope my presentation persuades you- if indeed you need persuading- that our society is in need of radical structural change” (Davis, 36-37).

An entire section of her speech is about what the audience can do after leaving the event. She puts the power in the people’s hands and provides ideas on ways to get involved with prisons as a way to form a bridge between the free world and the incarcerated. She says, “since the people who are inside are not allowed out, the people who are outside need to knock on the gates of the nation’s prisons and jails. This would be a small step forward” (Davis, 54).

Within her speech is also the utilization of pathos. Pathos is more about the emotions felt by the audience as a result of the rhetoric (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 12). There are several wonderful examples of pathos because of the topic of racism and injustice being so emotional.
Her use of narratives is a tool that also contributes to her overall pathos. She has a narrative that is particularly emotional in its connection to 21st century slavery through inhumane working conditions overseas.

She talks first about transnational corporations and global capitalism seeking maximum profits. Then she dives into a personal story about her previous adoration for the new brand of the 1970’s from Oregon called Nike. She was a runner who swore she could not run without her favorite pair of Nike’s. That was until she learned about the disturbing ways Nike was manufacturing their expensive sneakers. She compares these working conditions to “resemble slavery” (Davis, 44).

These workers in Vietnam make less than the $2.50/day minimum wage at $1.60/day (not hour). Davis said, “in a report on Nike factories, Thuyen Nguyen of Vietnam Labor Watch described an incident during which fifty-six women were forced to run around the perimeter of the Ho Chi Minh factory because they were not wearing the right shoes.”

This torture lead 12 people to faint and were hospitalized. This event took place, unfortunately, on International Women’s Day (Davis, 45).

The final artistic proof is logos. Logos refers to the “argument itself, by showing or seeming to show something” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 12).

Davis is a very well-educated woman and while a lot of her message come from personal experience, there are a lot of important arguments being made about the injustice found in the prison-industrial complex. She provides data about why she is observing racism in the justice system. “Some of you may know that the most likely people to go to prison in this country today are young African-American men. In 1991, the Sentencing Project released a report indicating
that one in four of all young black men between the ages of 18 and 24 were incarcerated... A few years later, the Sentencing Project released a follow up report revealing that within three or four years, the percentage had soared to over 32 percent” (Davis, 38).

Davis had to establish ethos, pathos, and logos in order to create an effective stage for her to display this information in a way that encourages the audience to become inspired to action. “Change (and maintenance) of social, political, and economic structures is accomplished through civic engagement, and civic engagement is accomplished through rhetoric” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 13). This call to action is localized to her audience as well as generic enough that those reading later still feel moved.

Davis solidifies her narrative fidelity through creating tailored examples to the physical audience of the larger social truth found in her message. Narrative fidelity “asks whether the events included in the story correspond to the experiences and understanding of reality of the audience” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 136). It is focused on the consistency of the story and asks people to see if it fits with their own truth.

Social truth is a concept that refers to “those beliefs and values that do not refer to some objective reality, but to social reality- those beliefs about what is right that people have arrived at together” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 133).

The following is an example of Davis expanding her narrative fidelity and relating to the social truth of her audience:

“Many of you are aware of the fact that the largest federal prison complex in the country is located not far from here in Florence, Colorado. Before the construction of the Federal Correctional Institution at Florence, local citizens held
bake sales and sold T-shirts to raise $128,000 to purchase land which they
donated to the Bureau of Prisons… Community people banded together to attract
prison construction because they assumed that the presence of a prison would
boost local economy” (Davis, 48).

She uses this example of a nearby prison many of these students are familiar with, to help
her launch into the economics of the prison industrial complex and the profits that benefit the
system. She is basically saying their community personally contributed to this problem and no
one realized it was even a problem to begin with.

Davis at the end of the speech brings up an example close to the audience’s heart with the
Focus on Family complex being headquartered in Colorado, where the speech was given. Davis
expanded with,

“Gays and lesbians can never have “real” families, according to the Focus on the
Family people, because the rest of us have remained relatively silent. Therefore, I
urge every single one of you who have come out to participate in this
community-building gathering to reflect deeply and seriously about what you can
each do to help create livable futures for us all” (Davis, 54).

While this topic seemed a little obscure in terms of previous content in her speech, it was
a relevant, local blow to an organization close to that location that does not support the LGBTQ+
community. It is also ending on a note of action where Davis seems as if she is speaking
personally to you to help create the future.

Too Long; Didn’t Read… A Recap
To conclude, Davis has a rich history in the social reform of America. She is one of the leading activists of the fight against corruption, more specifically in the justice system. Her life story, speeches, and scholarly works will inspire and educate generations to come. Her name should be one on the pages of history books when discussing powerful activists who brought about significant change.

As a rhetor, in her speech *The Prison-Industrial Complex (1997)* Davis uses Aristotle’s emotional appeals, narratives, and local examples to drive home her message and identify with her audience. She creates an exigence for action. Davis and her colleagues who so bravely tackled the fight for equality and justice will not be around forever to create a new revolution.

It is up to us to continue fighting for what is right. The world seems to be almost in the same political and cultural environment as it was so many years ago when Davis received the call that her friends had been murdered while attending church. We cannot let the work of Davis and the thousands of others who gave their lives, either in time, energy, or blood, for the movement go in vain. The situations we face as a nation today are daunting, but in the words of Angela Davis, please remember that “walls turned sideways are bridges.”
Works Cited


