

The Meaning of Freedom

Angela Y. Davis

Foreword by Robin D. G. Kelley



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Foreword

By Robin D. G. Kelley

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. It is not too much to call her one of the world's leading philosophers of freedom. She stands against the liberal tradition of political philosophy, the tradition derived from Hobbes and others that understands freedom as the right of the individual to do what *he* wishes without fetters or impediments, as long as it is lawful under the state. This "negative" liberty of freedom places a premium on the right to own property, to accumulate wealth, to defend property by arms, to mobility, expression, and political participation. Davis's conception of freedom is far more expansive and radical—collective freedom; 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 collective striving for real democracy. For Davis, freedom is not a thing granted by the state in the form of law or proclamation or policy; freedom is struggled for, it is hard-fought and transformative; it is a participatory process that demands new ways of thinking and being. Thus it is only fitting that she is among the few major contemporary thinkers who takes seriously Karl Marx's 1845 injunction that "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it."

Angela Davis was born and raised in apartheid Birmingham, Alabama, under conditions of extreme and blatant unfreedom. She grew up in the 1940s and '50s, when black middle-class homes were being firebombed regularly by white supremacists with the blessings and encouragement of police chief Eugene "Bull" Connor, and when black opposition to racism eventually brought the city to a standstill. She was nurtured by activist parents whose best friends were members of the Communist Party, and she came of age amidst a community in struggle. By the time she enrolled in New York City's Elisabeth Irwin High School (nicknamed the Little Red School House for its left-leaning philosophy) in 1959, she had already contemplated the meaning of freedom and understood that the question was no mere academic exercise. The quest for freedom drew her to radical philosopher Herbert Marcuse with whom she studied at Brandeis University. It drew her to the writings of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Jean-Paul Sartre, and to France, where she studied abroad. During her stay in Paris, Davis developed an even more global perspective on the quest for freedom by witnessing the French racism against North Africans and the Algerian struggle for liberation. And, sadly, it was in France, in September of 1963, that she learned of the bombing of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church and the murder of her childhood acquaintances, Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley. Their deaths wedded her to a life of struggle. She knew then, contrary to Jean-Paul Sartre's assertions, that there was no freedom in death. Freedom is the right to live, the necessity to struggle.

Davis continued her studies dedicated to producing engaged scholarship. With Marcuse's support and encouragement, Davis pursued her doctorate in philosophy at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany, with the intention of studying with Theodor Adorno, but by this time Adorno had little interest in engaged scholarship. (Her model at Goethe University was a young professor named Oskar Negt, who never shrank from political engagement and actively participated in the

Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund [SDS].) West Germany was too far from the sites of engagement that most mattered to Davis, so after two years she returned to the states to resume her doctoral studies under Marcuse's direction at the University of California, San Diego.

The year was 1967, and it seemed as if every aggrieved group—youth, women, people of color—identified with liberation struggle. Freedom was in the air, and Davis threw herself mind and body into the movement. The rest of the story is quite familiar: her path from the Black Panthers to UCL and her tangle with Governor Ronald Reagan, to Soledad Prison and the subsequent campaign that forever associated her name with Freedom. As an incarcerated political prisoner, she became the center of an international movement whose supporters pinned their own freedom to Davis's, concluding that to “Free Angela” was a blow to the blatant acts of state violence and unfreedom that crushed protests at the Democratic National Convention in 1968, that murdered Salvador Allende in Chile, that justified the dropping of napalm and herbicides on villages as far away as Vietnam and Mozambique. And like so many incarcerated revolutionary intellectuals, such as Antonio Gramsci, Malcolm X, Assata Shakur, George Jackson, and Mumia Abu-Jamal, she produced some of the most poignant, critical reflections on freedom and liberation from her jail cell.¹

¹ Two of her paradigm-shifting essays were written from prison, “Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,” and “Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation,” both reprinted in Joy James, ed., *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 1998), pp. 111–128, 161–192.

Davis's trial, subsequent acquittal, and struggle to find work in the face of ongoing political repression have only reinforced her commitment to engaged scholarship, her explorations of the meaning of freedom, and her radical abolitionist politics. Even if one is not familiar with her leadership in the Communist Party USA, her role in the founding of the Committees for Correspondence, Agenda 2000, and Critical Resistance, or her prolific body of scholarship—from her collection *Women, Race, and Class* on the politics of reproduction, domestic violence, rape, and women and capitalism; her stunning *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* on the politics of black women's expressive culture; to her more recent manifestoes calling for the end of the prison-industrial complex, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and *Abolition Democracy*—the speeches published here prove the point.

Delivered between 1994 and 2009, these public talks reveal Davis further developing her critique of the carceral state, offering fresh analyses of racism, gender, sexuality, global capitalism, and neoliberalism, responding to various crises of the last two decades, and always inviting her audience to imagine a radically different future. They demonstrate the degree to which she remains a dedicated dialectical thinker. Davis has never promoted a political “line,” nor have her ideas stood still. As the world changes and power relations shift from a post-Soviet, post-apartheid, post-Bush world to the mythical “post-racial” one, she challenges us to critically interrogate our history, to deal with the social, political, cultural, and economic dynamics of the moment, and to pay attention to where people are. In the 1990s, she challenged parochialism and creeping conservatism in black movements; told us to pay attention to hip hop and the sigh of youth struggling to find voice; and warned us against nostalgia for the good old days of the 1960s when, allegedly, resistance movements had more leverage and enemies were easier to recognize. And she consistently takes on the prison-industrial complex. Davis frequently returns to the relationship between the formation of prisons and the demand for cheap labor under capitalism, and their unbroken lineage with the history and institution of slavery in the United States. Her powerful critiques of Foucault and other theorists/historians of the birth of the prison reveal the centrality of race in the process of creating a carceral state in the West. The critic

question for Davis centers on how black people have been criminalized and how this ideology has determined black people's denial of basic citizenship rights. Since most leading theorists of prison focus on issues such as reform, punishment, discipline, and labor under capitalism, discussions of the production of imprisoned bodies often play down or marginalize race.

While Davis's earlier speeches and many of the later ones could not have anticipated the election of Barack Obama, all of her words are incredibly prescient and relevant. Most pundits and commentators were quick to declare jubilantly that Obama's ascent to the presidency marked the end of racism. Color-blindness has triumphed, 'nuff said. Indeed, there is no need to even invoke the "r" word. Moreover, because Obama has been portrayed in such heroic light and his victory treated with such great symbolic importance for the African American community, to criticize or challenge the president is often regarded by liberal Democrats (especially black folk) as an act of disloyalty. But Davis said in one of her speeches: "We're hardly two years into the Clinton presidency, and we seem to have forgotten how to organize masses of people into resistance movements. Many black people feel obliged to stick with Clinton through thick and thin, now don't they? We seem to have fallen prey to some kind of historical amnesia." And again, in 2009, as Obama continues a version of Bush's military tribunals, decides to hold some of the 9/11 detainees indefinitely, escalates the war in Afghanistan, avoids prosecuting U.S. officials responsible for torture, proceeds to bail out banks, and offers parenting workshops in lieu of restoring federal public assistance for the poor, we seem to be suffering from recurring amnesia. Obama promised to return us to the good old days when the Democrats occupied the White House, but as Davis reminds us, President Clinton's top priorities were the anti-crime bill and the elimination of welfare; there was no discussion of full employment or creating jobs. She also reminds us that it was the Democratic Senator Carol Moseley Braun who introduced the provision to try young teenagers as adults, thus contributing to the increase in the number of children in the state and federal prison system.

Moreover, Davis has long challenged neoliberal claims that we've achieved a color-blind society. She reminds us that any outbreaks of blatant, explicit racism are "now treated as individual and private irregularities, to be solved by punishing and reeducating the individual by teaching the color-blindness, by teaching them not to notice the phenomenon of race." In one fell swoop, social institutions and state practices are relieved of responsibility. To our peril, Davis warns, the vast majority continues to ignore the fact that the dramatic increase of people of color locked in cages is a manifestation of institutional forms of racism—from the inequities of mandatory minimums to the War on Drugs, racial profiling, and employment discrimination, to name a few.

Never one to shy away from unpopular positions, Davis offers a brilliant and timely critique of the struggle for equality by subjugated groups. What does it mean, for example, for gays and lesbians to demand the right to enter the military and to serve in every capacity without a critique of the institution's inherent and deep-seated sexism and homophobia? She asks the same of marriage—it is one thing to challenge any and all discriminatory barriers; it is another to interrogate the institution itself. The push to legalize gay marriage is growing by leaps and bounds now, but as early as 2000 Davis explained to an audience in Boulder, Colorado: "The structures of heteronormativity and the various violences these structures and discourses entail, do not necessarily disappear when the sexuality of the participant is changed. I'm not suggesting that we do not claim the right of gays and lesbians to engage in this practice, but we also have to think about the institution itself. It is an economic institution. It is about property. It is not about relations! Not about human relations, o

intimate relations.”

Finally, we must acknowledge that in the aftermath of 9/11, when many on the Left openly supported the war in Afghanistan and softened their position on U.S. military policy, Davis’s position never wavered. From the outset, she delivered a blistering critique of Cheney and Bush’s War on Terror, though it was an unpopular position to take immediately after the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. She critiqued the erosion of civil liberties, the racial profiling of Arab Muslims, and South Asians, and the imposition of an oppressive “security state” fueled by fear mongering. And she questioned the patriotic turn, the resurgence of nationalism and all of its patriarchal trappings. She asks, “Why the nation?” The nation is constituted through exclusion, and after 9/11 “Americans” were not encouraged to identify with other people outside the nation, with the victims of torture, with Iraqis, with Africans and Asians, with others who might also have suffered from the aftermath of 9/11. Unfortunately, despite President Obama’s assertion that he is a “citizen of the world,” he, too, invoked “nation first” and set out on a foreign policy path that is not radically different from that of his predecessors. He continues to support a softer version of the expansionist, neoliberal, and militarist policies that have driven the last half-century of U.S. foreign policy. He certainly does not intend to limit American military power.

Ironically, Obama’s election initially had the effect of virtually eliminating social movements from our public discourse. Although grassroots organizing made his election possible, all of our national discussions of policy focus on the president’s individual decision-making to the exclusion of the demands of aggrieved groups. This is also affecting the way history is conceived in the popular consciousness: The New Deal of the 1930s, the foundation of the social welfare state, is now treated as the brainchild of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, not the product of struggles between capital, labor, civil rights organizations, communists, socialists, feminists, and the unemployed. Likewise, Abraham Lincoln, Obama’s other alter ego, is represented to the public as the man who single-handedly ended the institution of enslavement in this country. Even Lyndon Johnson is credited with giving us the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In every case, it is the combination of great men and the law that supposedly generates radical social change, not social movements, not the imaginations and actions of ordinary people. But, again, Davis warns against fetishizing the law as markers of freedom. She reminds us that the Thirteenth Amendment did not abolish slavery, and it did not abolish all forms of coerced labor. While President Obama characterizes the United States as a “nation of laws,” laws do not produce and guarantee freedom.

We still need abolitionists. And we still need an engaged citizenry to organize, agitate, and challenge injustice with movements for change. The year 2011 seemed to give birth to just that: a new wave of global uprisings, rebellions, riots, organizing, and mass movements. In the United States, this wave took form in the unexpected emergence of the Occupy movement, and ever since the first demonstrators settled into New York’s Zuccotti Park, Angela Davis has been a powerful spokesperson for, and presence within, the movement. From New York to Philadelphia, from Oakland to Berlin, the people’s mic has projected her words to the indignant crowds of people challenging the ascendancy of Wall Street and the privatization of what’s left of our public institutions. Davis reminds the Occupiers that in our efforts to hold Wall Street accountable for the economic collapse, we must not lose sight of the bigger objective: a new society. In every speech, she envisioned freedom in ways diametrically opposed to the Friedrich von Hayeks, Milton Friedmans, and Larry Summerses of the world—a vision of an inclusive community founded on justice, and equality; the provision of education, health care, and housing; and the abolition of the carceral/police state. She also warned crowds that such a vision of collective freedom requires a radical conception of community. It’s one thing to come together

parks and public squares, in streets and the halls of Congress. It is another thing to stay together and remake our relationships with one another. “Our unity must be complex,” she often says when addressing Occupy gatherings. “Our unity must be emancipatory. It cannot be simplistic and oppressive.” In other words, freedom is a process of becoming, of being able to see and understand difference within unity, and resisting the tendency to reproduce the hierarchies embedded in the world we want to change.

Ultimately, the speeches gathered together here are timely and timeless. They embody Angela Davis’s uniquely radical vision of the society we need to build and the path to get there. She still believes in social movements, in the power of people to transform society, and in a non-capitalist path. As she told an audience in 2005, the nation and the world are 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 cooperation and respect.”

So all you out there who are not afraid to dream, who wish to end all forms of military occupation, corporate dominance, hierarchy, and oppression: listen, read, and heed the call.

Report from Harlem

*Columbia University, New York City
September 9, 1994*

I would like to thank the Institute for Research in African American Studies for having brought together an impressive group of black activists and scholars, not only from throughout this country but from all over the world: Africa, Europe, the Caribbean. We are charged with the task of collectively reflecting on the theoretical and practical implications of political agendas taken up by black communities during this last decade of the twentieth century.

Negotiating the Transformations of History

It is good to be in Harlem on the thirtieth anniversary of Freedom Summer, one of the most extraordinary moments in the history of the black freedom struggle. Many of us (at least those of my generation and older) tend to look back upon that period with nostalgia. Sometimes we veteran activists simply yearn for the good old days rather than prepare ourselves to confront courageously a drastically transformed world that presents new, more complicated challenges. We evoke a time when masses of black people, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, along with our white allies, were on the move, determined to change the course of history. But instead of seeing past struggles as a source of inspiration impelling us to craft innovative approaches to contemporary problems, we frequently replace historical consciousness with a desperate nostalgia, allowing the past to become a repository for present political desires. We allow the present to be held captive by the past.

More than once I have heard people say, "If only a new Black Panther Party could be organized then we could seriously deal with The Man, you know?" But suppose we were to say: "There is no Man anymore." There is suffering. There is oppression. There is terrifying racism. But this racism does not come from the mythical "Man." Moreover, it is laced with sexism and homophobia and unprecedented class exploitation associated with a dangerously globalized capitalism. We need new ideas and new strategies that will take us into the twenty-first century.

What I am suggesting is that those of us who are elders have to stop functioning as gatekeepers. We cannot establish age and civil rights or black power experience as the main criteria for radical black political leadership today. How old was Dr. Martin Luther King when he became the spokesperson for the Montgomery bus boycott? He was 26 years old. How old was Diane Nash? How old was Huey P. Newton? Fidel Castro? Nelson Mandela? Amilcar Cabral? Jacqueline Creft? Maurice Bishop? As for myself, I was only 25 years old when I had to confront Ronald Reagan over the issue of my right as a Communist to teach at UCLA. We cannot deny young people their rightful place in this movement today or it will be our downfall. In many instances, young people are able to see far more clearly than we that our lives are shaped by the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Those of us who are older have a great deal to learn from our younger sisters and brothers, who are in a better position than we are to develop the political vocabulary, the theory, and the strategies that can potentially move us forward.

These last three decades, many years of which have been devoted to intense struggles and sacrifices, have certainly produced victories. Who could have imagined in 1964, when Fannie Lou

Hamer tried to gain entrance for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party into the Democratic Party convention, that we would have been able to elect forty black people to Congress, including a black woman to the U.S. Senate? And even more important, who would have imagined that this black woman in the Senate, heir to Fannie Lou Hamer, would sponsor one of the most repressive provisions of the recent crime bill? You see, it is no longer a question of simply resisting The Machine. Circumstances are far more complicated than they used to be, or than our perceptions of them used to be.

We speak today about a crisis in contemporary social movements. This crisis has been produced in part by our failure to develop a meaningful and collective historical consciousness. Such a consciousness would entail a recognition that our victories attained by freedom movements are never etched in stone. What we often perceive under one set of historical conditions as glorious triumphs of mass struggle can later ricochet against us if we do not continually reconfigure the terms and transform the terrain of our struggle. The struggle must go on. Transformed circumstances require new theories and practices.

The Cuban Revolution is three and a half decades old. Holding on to a strong vision of socialism in the aftermath of the collapse of the socialist community of nations requires strategies that are very different from previous revolutionary struggles—from the attack on the Moncada barracks and the landing of the *Granma* to the triumph of the revolution. But the struggle does go on. Those of us whose radical consciousness and political trajectories were fundamentally shaped by Che, Fidel, Camilo Cienfuegos, and Juan Almeida have a special responsibility to stand with our Cuban sisters and brothers during their most difficult period. The embargo must end, and it must end now!

The South African struggle has entered a new phase. Many of us fought for Nelson Mandela's freedom during a substantial portion of our political lives. We protested the apartheid government's repression of South African Freedom Fighters while Mandela survived the brutal conditions of his imprisonment. Today Nelson Mandela is free, and he is president of a new South Africa. This new South Africa is striving to be free, democratic, non-racist, non-sexist, and non-homophobic. The struggle for freedom continues. This victory is not forever guaranteed. If we associated ourselves with the dismantling of apartheid, we should find ways to help shore up that victory today, and tomorrow, and the next day. We often are so captivated by the glamour of revolution that when pivotal though less glamorous moments arise, when our solidarities are needed more than ever, we fail to generate suitable responses. Let us not forget how quickly the revolution in Grenada was brought down by the assassinations of Maurice Bishop and Jacqueline Creft and by the U.S. military invasion.

This brings me back to the earlier point I made about our collective failures to negotiate historic transformations. Some of us remain so staunchly anchored to the discourses and strategies of earlier eras that we cannot adequately understand contemporary challenges. We fail to apprehend the extent to which theories and practices that were once unambiguously progressive become, under changing political circumstances, regressive and flagrantly reactionary. While we do need to be genuinely concerned about the growth and visibility of black conservatism (from Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court to Phyllis Berry Meyers, who along with other black conservatives, played a key role in reversing the nomination of Lani Guinier for the Department of Justice's Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights). At the same time we need to beware of the insinuation of conservative ideologies in what is publicly acknowledged as forward-looking strategy for black liberation. Beware of those leaders and theorists who eloquently rage against white supremacy but identify black gay men and lesbians as evil incarnate. Beware of those leaders who call upon us to protect our young black men but will beat their wives and abuse their children and will not support a woman's right to

reproductive autonomy. Beware of those leaders!

And beware of those who call for the salvation of black males but will not support the rights of Caribbean, Central American, and Asian immigrants, or who think that struggles in Chiapas or Northern Ireland are unrelated to black freedom. Beware of those leaders! Regardless of how effectively (or ineffectively) veteran activists are able to engage with the issues of our times, there is clearly a paucity of young voices associated with black political leadership. The relative invisibility of youth leadership is a crucial example of the crisis in contemporary black social movements.

On the other hand, within black popular culture, youth are, for better or for worse, helping to shape the political vision of their contemporaries. Many young black performers are absolutely brilliant. Not only are they musically dazzling, they are also trying to put forth anti-racist and anti-capitalist critiques. I'm thinking, for example, about Nefertiti, Arrested Development, The Fugees, and Michael Franti (whom I have been following since Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy). Cultural and political imagination like theirs may help shed light on our present dilemma and perhaps guide us out of the worst situation black people have faced in this century.

I need not mention the deeply misogynist and homophobic themes that seriously weaken hip hop's oppositional stance. Before, however, we identify hip hop as the main adversary on this account, let us remind ourselves that our ideological universe is saturated with patriarchal and heterosexual assumptions.

Clinton, the Crime Bill, and Race

We are not yet two years into the Clinton presidency and the possibilities of oppositional politics vis-à-vis the state have steadily diminished. Black people play a major role in immunizing the Clinton presidency against mass critique. It is as if black people felt obliged to stick with Clinton through thick and thin. We seem to have forgotten how to assume stances of opposition and resistance, how to identify submerged racial codes and markers, how to recognize racism even when the conventional markers are no longer there. This ability has historically earned African American activists a special place among people of color worldwide, and among people of all racial and national backgrounds. What used to be a sophisticated appreciation of racism seems to be collapsing. In the aftermath of the collapse of socialism, and in the context of many problematic regimes throughout Africa, how can we extol Bill Clinton as a symbol of radical change? This is deeply problematic.

In the August 29 issue of *Jet* magazine there is a revealing article about a birthday party for Clinton organized by a coalition of black, Asian, and Latino Democrats. Approximately 1,500 people of color attended that party, and an unprecedented \$1.2 million was raised. According to the article, "For most minorities, President Clinton still was 'the main man,' holding to a commitment when human rights issues seem to have lost their glow." The fact that black people, along with Asian Americans and Latinos, could raise more than one million dollars in one evening should indicate to us that the political landscape has fundamentally changed. It should indicate to us that class configurations within the black community have undergone an important metamorphosis over the last two decades.

Contrast that million-dollar party with the situation that prevails here in Harlem. Some of us are far wealthier than we ever dreamt we would be. But far greater numbers of us are ensconced in a poverty that is far more dreadful than we could have ever imagined three decades ago. The film *Blade Runner* evokes the dystopian future of black inner cities—not only in Los Angeles but in East Oakland, Harlem, and the South Bronx—throw-away zones.

The *Jet* article praises Clinton for his many black appointments: Mike Espy, Ron Brown, and three others to his cabinet and more than five hundred black people to other posts in his administration. The

article also praises Clinton for “boldly pressing for the nation’s first health care and anti-crime bill. In fact, Clinton has established the crime bill as his number-one political priority, even more important than health care. Why was he so resistant to the single-payer initiative in health care? Why was this crime bill more important than a jobs bill? The last extensive discussion on full employment was the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act in 1978. Consider also that Clinton’s proposed welfare reform legislation will force women on welfare to work after two years of receiving welfare payments. But where will they find jobs?

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the most important priority should have been to convert the wartime economy that had consistently drained the country of jobs, created structural unemployment, and led to the development of a structurally unemployed group of people in the black community and other communities of color, into a peacetime, full-employment economy. In 1994, why is it so easy to forget full employment, health care, education, recreation? Why is there such widespread acceptance of Clinton’s law-and-order posturing? When the Republican Nixon first raised the cry of law and order, black people had no difficulty understanding the racial codes of that slogan. When the Republican Bush and his anti-crime campaign presented Willie Horton as the archetypal criminal—black, male rapist and murderer of a white woman—it required no extraordinary intelligence to grasp the discursive link between crime and blackness.

Today, however, Clinton, a Democrat, who received proportionately more votes from the black community than from any other group of people in this country, is lauded as the quintessential warrior against crime, with his shrewdly racist policies divested of all explicit racial content. Intentionally making no direct allusions to race, Clinton employs a rhetoric that focuses on victims of crime. The quintessential contemporary victim is the white girlchild Polly Klaas. Please don’t misunderstand me. Her murder was horrible, and I convey my sympathy to her parents. What I criticize is the rhetorical manipulation of her image as a crime victim. Clinton constantly has evoked Polly Klaas, and did so in the aftermath of the initial stalling of the crime bill. Although the suspect in the Polly Klaas case is a white man, there is enough socially constructed fear of crime entangled in the national imagination with the fear of black men that Richard Allen Davis, the white suspect, becomes an anomaly perceived as one white face representing a sea of black men who, in the collective mind’s eye, comprise the criminal element.

This recently passed crime bill allocates over \$30 billion over the next six years to protect “us” from the criminals. Read the racial codes embedded in the discourse around the crime bill. They have become infinitely more complicated, and a good number of black people have been led to believe in the inherent criminality of certain groups of African Americans. They, like people of other racial backgrounds, need protection from these black criminals. The crime bill authorizes \$8.8 billion over the next six years to put 100,000 new policemen and women on the streets of cities across the country; \$7.9 billion in state construction grants for prisons and boot camps; \$1.8 billion to reimburse states which are encouraged to incarcerate more undocumented immigrants from Central America, the Caribbean, and Asia.

Ever greater numbers of people will be herded into prison and under the three-strikes-you’re-out initiative; they will receive ever longer sentences, both in the state and the federal system. Ironically, under the provision introduced in the Senate by its first black woman member, Carol Moseley Braun, it will be easier to try young teenagers as adults. As a result we will soon have children in the state and federal prisons as well. There are already one million people in prison in the United States. This does not include the 500,000 in city and county jails, the 600,000 on parole, and the three million people on probation. It also does not include the 60,000 young people in juvenile facilities, which is to say, the

are presently more than *five million* people either incarcerated, on parole, or on probation. Many of the ~~people who are presently on probation or on parole, would be behind bars under the conditions of the~~ recently passed crime bill.

So, you see, even without the draconian measures of the crime bill, black people are already 7 times more likely to go to prison than are white people. If we have any doubts about the move away from conceptualizations that prioritize rehabilitation as an aim of incarceration, consider the fact that prisoners will no longer be eligible for Pell Grant assistance for higher education. Not only is the duration of imprisonment drastically extended, it is rendered more repressive than ever. Within some state prison systems, weights have even been banned.

Having spent time in several jails myself, I know how important it is to exercise the body as well as the mind. The barring of higher education and weight sets implies the creation of an incarcerated society of people who are worth little more than trash to the dominant culture. The crime bill does not impact just the black community, it has consequences for Latino communities, Native American communities, Asian communities, Arab communities, poor white communities, and immigrants.

As black scholars and activists, our analysis and concerns should extend beyond what we recognize as black communities. Our political communities of struggle embrace all people of color—black, Latino, Asian, indigenous—as well as the poor in this country. The very same conditions of globalization that have robbed the black community of so many jobs have also led to increased migration into the United States. Capital migrates from country to country in search of cheap labor and in the process it opens up circuits of human migration into this country. But now, according to the crime bill, the federal government will fund the incarceration costs of undocumented immigrants. We will all end up in the same place, whether we're African Americans, Haitians, Cubans, Latin Americans, Salvadorans, Mexicans, Chinese, Laotians, Arabs, so we'd better figure out how to build resistance movement together.

Who is benefiting from these ominous new developments? There is already something of a boom in the prison construction industry. New architectural trends that recapitulate old ideas about incarceration such as Jeremy Bentham's panopticon have produced the need to build new jails and prisons—both public and private prisons. And there is the dimension of the profit drive, with its own exploitative, racist component. It's also important to recognize that the steadily growing trend of privatization of U.S. jails and prisons is equally menacing. With this new crime bill, the Corrections Corporation of America, which is currently the largest company in the prisons-for-profit business, is very likely to grow. The union-busting trend that characterizes transnational capital is used by private prisons to cut their costs. Thus Corrections Corporation of America disallows unionization in its prisons. Moreover, its employees have no pension plan.

What was most worthy of note in the debate on the crime bill was that the black caucus insisted throughout on the inclusion of a racial justice act that would permit death-row defendants to use race as a mitigating factor. Unfortunately, that provision failed to be included. We therefore ask: How many more black bodies will be sacrificed on the altar of law and order? Why has it been so difficult to openly address issues of the social construction of race? Why haven't we more effectively challenged Clinton's erasure of race in the law-and-order rhetoric he has inherited and uncritically embraced? Perhaps because during the Reagan-Bush era the discourse on crime had already become so implicitly racialized that it is no longer necessary to use racial markers. What is troubling about the Clinton rhetoric is that the racisms that were so obvious in the law-and-order discourse of previous eras are becoming increasingly unrecognizable.

A New Abolitionist Movement

Dilemmas of law and order lurk in the background of discussions on black and Latino community anti-violence activism. When a child's life is forever arrested by one of the gunshots that are heard so frequently in poor black and Latino communities, parents, teachers, and friends parade demonstrations bearing signs with the slogan "STOP THE VIOLENCE." Those who live with the daily violence associated with drug trafficking and the increasing use of dangerous weapons by youth are certainly in need of immediate solutions to these problems. But the decades-old law-and-order solutions will hardly bring peace to poor black and Latino communities. Why is there such a paucity of alternatives? Why the readiness to take on a discourse and entertain policies and ideological strategies that are so laden with racism? Ideological racism has begun to lead a secluded existence, sequesters itself, for example, within the concept of crime. People who are deeply affected by the epidemic of violence understandably want to see an end to crime. But rarely do they have access to ideas other than those underlying retribution as justice. This is why it is so difficult to discuss possibilities of abolishing jails and prisons. I, for one, am of the opinion that we will have to renounce jails and prisons as the normal and unquestioned approaches to such social problems as drug abuse, unemployment, homelessness, and illiteracy.

In the nineteenth century, Thomas Malthus made assertions about the inexorability of poverty. He argued that wars, natural disasters, and disease were natural ways of reducing poverty, which he assumed was just as unavoidable as the diseases, disasters, and wars that resulted in the deaths of so many human beings. Just as capitalism has naturalized poverty, crime is similarly naturalized. If crime is inevitable, then there must be more police and more prisons. Black scholars can support abolitionist strategies in ways that will lead to constructive bridge-building with other social movements. In this sense, it is time to explore approaches to decriminalization, especially the decriminalization of drug use and prostitution.

When abolitionists raise the possibility of living without prisons, a common reaction is fear—fear provoked by the prospect of criminals pouring out of prisons and returning to communities where they may violently assault people and their property. It is true that abolitionists want to dismantle structures of imprisonment, but not without a process that calls for building alternative institutions. It is not necessary to address the drug problem, for example, within the criminal justice system. It needs to be separated from the criminal justice system. Rehabilitation is not possible within the jail and prison system.

One possible strategy, one that is supported by radical criminologist Pat Carlen, is to begin with women, who constitute a relatively small percentage of the country's and the world's imprisoned population, but who are most frequently convicted of such charges as drugs, prostitution, and welfare fraud. A policy of decarceration, especially for women who are convicted of so-called "nonviolent offenses" could result in the closing down of many women's jails and prisons. The resources thus liberated could be more productively used to develop educative and rehabilitative institutions. The successful elimination of women's prisons might then set a precedent that could be applied to men's facilities as well.

If decarceration and abolition are dismissed as too radical, then the only alternative will be to continue incarcerating the black population in greater and greater numbers. If trends continue, as a result of the crime bill 50 percent of young black men could be behind bars in ten years time. And in another twenty-five years it might be as much as 75 percent.

What I'm suggesting is that dangerous limits have been placed on the very possibility of imagining alternatives. These ideological limits have to be contested. We have to begin to think in different

ways. Our future is at stake.

Black scholars and activists, for example, need to learn how to engage in discussions that fearlessly point to the virulence of racism. We have to learn how to analyze and resist racism even in contexts where people who are targets and victims of racism commit acts of harm against others. Law-and-order discourse is racist, the existing system of punishment has been deeply defined by historic racism. Police, courts, and prisons are dramatic examples of institutional racism. Yet this is not to suggest that people of color who commit acts of violence against other human beings are therefore innocent. This is true of brothers and sisters out in the streets as well as those in the high-end suites.

The difficulty of acknowledging that an individual can be simultaneously acknowledged as a target of racism and as a perpetrator of injury was evident in the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill story. Many who charged racism felt compelled to defend the person whom they perceived to be the target of racism. Certainly there was racism at work in the way the Senate Democrats staged the hearings. After all, it was Clarence Thomas, not Ted Kennedy, who was taken to task for his misogynist behavior. Black congressperson Mel Reynolds, who was recently indicted for sexual assault on a 16-year-old campaign volunteer, has attempted to avoid discussion of sexual abuse by insisting that he has been made a target of racism. Of course racism enables such exposés. But this does not, and cannot, serve as a justification of assaults on women—especially by black men who are in positions of power. We cannot allow our recognition of the racism that permeates economic and political institutions to obscure the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and abuse in black communities—poor as well as affluent.

The process of identifying racism does not always exonerate the victim.

Accountability remains. Brother Ben Chavis, for whose freedom I passionately fought on several continents, must still be held accountable for his exploitative behavior toward women. I love the brother and certainly appreciate the leadership he gave to the NAACP—I joined the NAACP for the first time in my life when he became its executive director. But I want to know, for example, why there were not more women on the senior staff? A victim of racism can also be a perpetrator of sexism. And indeed, a victim of racism can be a perpetrator of racism as well. Victimization can no longer be permitted to function as a halo of innocence.

Consciousness of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality

One of the major challenges in black, Latino, Asian, and Native American communities is to develop popular consciousness of the complex relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In both scholarly and activist circles, we have been discussing the interrelatedness of these modes of oppression for more than a decade, but our politics continues to be driven by outmoded discourses and conceptions. As racism is on the rise, so are classism, sexism, and homophobia. Affluent black people are more willing than ever before to write off their poor, oppressed sisters and brothers. These are the same black folks who often claim to be victims of racism themselves when they don't get a promotion, but who won't even think about supporting the custodial staff's right to unionization.

With respect to gender, many of us are held captive by masculinist perceptions of the black community that dangerously trivialize black women's place. Black men continue to be evoked as "an endangered species" while black women are seen as responsible for the reproduction of poverty-stricken fatherless families, whose male children are destined to become prison statistics. Black women who dare to think that they can build families without men are represented as destroying the community. In this framework of ideological misogyny, black women are perceived as the reproducers of violent black men. Within discussions on African Americans in higher education, the

increasing percentage of black women receiving PhDs is often viewed as pathological. It is as if our problems would magically be solved if only black women recognized their traditional place and agreed to stand behind their men.

This discourse on saving young black men is often pervaded with sexism and misogyny. Women continue to be represented as appendages, as sex objects, as baby machines. And those women who achieve despite the terrific odds are often seen as a threat to the potential achievements of black men. Why is it not obvious that any successful effort to save black men is destined to fail if it relies on the subjugation of black women?

Kevin Powell writes about this dilemma in the current issue of *Vibe* magazine. "Somewhere in our collective mind," he writes, "black folks have managed to turn O.J. into a hero again. Because of our history in this country we immediately connect with any black person whom we perceive to be a victim of The Man. Never mind the fact that O.J. was a race-neutral athlete in his heyday, rarely going out of his way to help black causes. Never mind that O.J. repeatedly beat Nicole Brown Simpson. And never mind that for every minute of O.J. coverage there are many thousands of silent tragedies in black America." Powell concludes: "For sure O.J. will be glorified in rap songs, pimped by political leaders, his image mass-marketed in a black community near you. Then, once O.J. and his trial are over and of here, we will, as the Last Poets put it, party and bullshit until there's another fallen hero to rally around."

Breaking Down the Public-Private Dichotomy

A major challenge to black scholars and activists who are interested in radical theory and practice involves the contestation of the public-private dichotomy. Racism, when we do acknowledge it, is viewed as public and political. Violence against women, on the other hand, is still seen as private and personal. And it is about time that we stop assuming that breaking down these walls is narrow feminist work, or else we all need to become feminists, women and men alike!

As Cornel West has pointed out, the notion of a private sphere is very much connected to the capitalist market, to a laissez-faire notion of what is permitted on the market. That is to say, anything goes. If we say *no* to police violence, if we say *no* to racist violence, then we have to say *no* to violence against women. This means that our notions of what counts as political need to be changed as well.

Black people have been on the forefront of radical and revolutionary movements in this country for several centuries. If we fail to address some of these critical problems, we will be left behind. Our failure thus far to incorporate into our agendas issues of gender and sexuality is, in part, a reflection of our fear of opposing capitalism. But not all of us have given up hope for revolutionary change. Not all of us accept the notion of capitalist inevitability based on the collapse of socialism. Socialism of a certain type did not work because of irreconcilable internal contradictions. Its structures have fallen. But to assume that capitalism is triumphant is to use a simplistic boxing-match paradigm. Despite its failure to build lasting democratic structures, socialism nevertheless demonstrated its superiority over capitalism on several accounts: the ability to provide free education, low-cost housing, jobs, free child care, free health care, etc. This is precisely what is needed in U.S. black communities, in other communities of color, and among poor people in general.

Harlem furnishes us with a dramatic example of the future of late capitalism and compelling evidence of the need to reinvigorate socialist democratic theory and practice—for the sake of our sisters and brothers who otherwise will be thrown into the dungeons of the future, and indeed, for the sake of us all.

The Prison-Industrial Complex

*Colorado College, Colorado Springs
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I am often asked to narrate the events that led me to radical activism. *How did you become an activist? What led to your decision to become an activist? What pivotal event was responsible for your lifelong commitment to social justice?* These are questions that I have encountered over the years in many different contexts, questions that I have pondered over the decades. When *did* I really become an activist? What actually led me to commit my life to social justice work? For a long time I thought the answers would be as straightforward as the questions. I simply needed to learn how to make the questions inhabit my memories.

At first I thought that the cardinal moment must have been the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and the killing of the four girls who were attending Sunday school. I grew up in Birmingham and the families of Carol Robertson and Cynthia Wesley were very close to my own family. Through my mother, we were also connected to Denise McNair and Addie Mae Collins. 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 terrorism. Carole and the other three girls were from my neighborhood; they were my sister's friends; they were girls my mother had taught in school, girls whom I knew. This egregious act of racist violence thus had a profound effect on me. So for a while I had decided that the church bombing must have been that pivotal event that explained my activism. But I later reminded myself that I had been engaged in radical activism long before the 1963 bombing. This catastrophic moment had clearly solidified my sense of what I needed to do in the world, but it was not the complete story.

After reflecting on various likely explanations and possible pivotal moments in my life, I eventually realized that I had never experienced a single epiphany that directed my life toward social activism. The answers to these questions did not contain the anticipated drama my questioners and I were seeking. The answers turned out to be quite ordinary. 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. During my childhood years, Birmingham, Alabama, was the most segregated city in the United States. My parents made sure that all of their children recognized that racial segregation was not a permanent set of relations. They encouraged me and my siblings to be critical of the way things were, in order that we might be able to affirm our own humanity. They taught us to dedicate our lives to social transformations that would make this a better world for us all. They taught us to imagine new possibilities, new worlds, and to connect the small things one does to those possible futures.

Wherever I am, whatever I happen to be doing, I try to feel connected to futures that are only possible through struggle. 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.

Fear of Crime, Reality of Prisons

I have been thinking about the prison system for a very long time. In fact, my own stint in jail was directly related to my antiprison work in California during the late 1960s. I was one of many young activists who worked to free political prisoners as well as people whose prison experiences had radicalized them. We were very angry that vast numbers of people of color were being incarcerated at a time when the law-and-order rhetoric associated with then President Nixon was so clearly laden with racism. George Jackson was a young revolutionary, a self-taught and brilliant thinker and strategist who at age 18 had been convicted of being involved in a \$70 gas station robbery. Jackson was sentenced to from one year to life by the California Youth Authority, which meant that he could have been released after one year, or he could have been doomed to spend the rest of his life in prison. As it turns out, he did spend the rest of his relatively short life behind bars. He was killed twelve years after he was sentenced.

Working within movements to free political prisoners—George Jackson and the Soledad Brothers; Los Siete de La Raza; Huey Newton, Ericka Huggins, Bobby Seale, and other members of the Black Panther Party—we became aware of larger structural issues. Political repression was not only directed at political prisoners. Rather, the prison system as a whole served as an apparatus of racist and political repression, fixing its sights not only on those who were incarcerated for unambiguous political reasons, but on the majority of the incarcerated population. The fact that virtually everyone behind bars was (and is) poor and that a disproportionate number of them were black and Latino led us to think about the more comprehensive impact of punishment on communities of color and poor communities in general. How many rich people are in prison? Perhaps a few here and there, many of whom reside in what we call country club prisons. But the vast majority of prisoners are poor people. A disproportionate number of those poor people were and continue to be people of color, people of African descent, Latinos, and Native Americans.

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. Twenty-five percent is an astonishing figure. That was in 1991. 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. In other words, approximately one-third of all young black men in this country are either in prison or directly under the supervision and control of the criminal justice system. Something is clearly wrong.

The expansion of the criminal justice system, and the emergence of a prison-industrial complex accompanied by an ideological campaign to persuade us once again in the late twentieth century that race is a marker of criminality. The figure of the criminal is a young black man. Young black men engender fear. Black people are not impervious to this ideological process. Not only white people—and others who are not black—learn how to fear black men. Black people learn how to be afraid of black youth as well.

When we speak about the representation of the young black man as criminal, this is not to deny the fact that there are some young black men who commit horrible acts of violence. But this cannot justify the wholesale criminalization of young black men. Racism, incidentally, has always relied on the conflation of the individual and the group. The fact that increasing numbers of people of color are being sent to prison has a great deal to do with the expansion of the prison system and the development of new technologies of repression. It used to be the case that the very evocation of the

prison was linked to the notion of rehabilitation. It was assumed that people went to prison in order to pay their debts to society, and to learn how to become better citizens. Regardless of whether these assumptions reflected the realities of imprisonment, it is significant that the very concept of rehabilitation has become anachronistic. Incapacitation and punishment are now the unmitigated goals of imprisonment; there is not even a veneer of rehabilitation. One of the most recent developments is the super-maximum security prisons. Within these dehumanizing institutions of our democracy, people live in cells eight by sixteen feet with no fresh air, no windows, no human contact. Here in Colorado, at the federal supermax prison in Florence, prisoners have electronic escorts when they move from place to place. They are required to be in their cells for twenty-three hours a day, with only one hour of exercise, but they sometimes get even less.

How can we account for these new developments? Why are we not up in arms about the soaring number of prisons and the emergence of regimes of repression that recapitulate old techniques within the context of new, computerized environments? Many of us participate in the processes that allow for the construction of ever more prisons. We vote in favor of prison bonds. We vote for three-strikes-and-you're-out laws.

These are uncritical responses to the rhetoric employed by the media and by politicians who exploit the public fear of crime manufactured during the Reagan-Bush era and further deepened under Clinton. What happens if we face the current realities and ask why, in the last fifteen years or so, prisons have become increasingly necessary to our sense of security. What happens if we try to untangle the ideologies underlying this focus on crime?

We cannot deny that most of us are extremely afraid of crime. We cringe when we imagine the possibility of being the victim of a crime. It is true that we are surrounded by it, and I'm not going to suggest that it isn't real. There is indeed a lot of real crime, but it is not always committed by the people who are deemed by contemporary discourse to be the archetypical criminals. For example, there is corporate crime, oil spills and other crimes against the environment that will harm people for generations to come. But of course, those who are responsible for these far-ranging crimes are never considered to be criminals. If they are punished for their actions, they generally only pay relatively small fines.

If we turn to the acts of violence that flare up in our imaginations when the specter of crime is evoked, we discover that there has not been a substantial increase in crime, except—and this is extremely important—among youth. But, in general, where we have seen the most consequential rise in crime is in the media. In other words, there has been an extraordinary rise in the *representation* of crime and violence in the media—television and the movies. We're surrounded by mediated crime. We learn to fear crime in a way that does not reflect the actual threat of crime in our streets. Rather, we transfer to crime other fears for which we have no mode of expression. The message we receive from politicians and from the interminable series of crime programs on television is that we need not be afraid of unemployment, homelessness, the deterioration of conditions in poor communities; they endlessly suggest that we need not be afraid of war and the environmental degradation caused by business and military operations, but we should be afraid of crime and those who are represented as its most likely perpetrators.

Public Enemies

From my own experience, I can tell you what it is like to be 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

the governer 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. I received many thousands of hate letters from people in California and across the country who told me to "go back to Russia." Of course I had never been to Russia, nor had I been to Africa, where some of the letters told me I should "go back." (I have since visited both parts of the world.) What I found interesting then, and what can help us to understand the contemporary racialization of fear, is the way these people so cavalierly merged my blackness and my communist-ness.

During the McCarthy era, communism was established as the enemy of the nation and came to be represented as the enemy of the "free world." During the 1950s, when membership in the CPUSA was legally criminalized, many members were forced underground and/or were sentenced to many years in prison. In 1969, when I was personally targeted by anti-communist furor, black activists in such organizations as the Black Panther Party were also singled out. As a person who represented both the communist threat and the black revolutionary threat, I became a magnet for many forms of violence. The anti-communist and racist epithets used in the hate letters I received were so terrible that I do not want to say them aloud. If we can understand how people could be led to fear communism in such a visceral way, it might help us to apprehend the ideological character of the fear of the black criminal today.

The U.S. war in Vietnam lasted as long as it did because it was fueled by a public fear of communism. The government and the media led the public to believe that the Vietnamese were the enemy, as if it were the case that the defeat of the racialized communist enemy in Vietnam would ameliorate U.S. people's lives and make them feel better about themselves. With the socialist world in collapse, other figures have now moved into the vacuum created by the fact that anti-communist rhetoric has receded. In the absence of the communist, the feared enemy has now become the criminalized, the racialized criminal. The image of the new enemy is the young black or Latino man. Black women are also increasingly demonized as well. The woman of color on welfare is represented as pillaging the money earned by upstanding taxpayers. This racialized rhetoric on the welfare system helped lead to its disestablishment. When you consider how much national political debate focused on welfare, although welfare claimed less than one percent of the budget, we see that the ideological attack on welfare mothers can tell us something about the way enemies are created.

Now that the welfare system has been disestablished and no jobs are available for women who use welfare as a safety net, how will they find work? How will they pay for child care in order to guarantee the conditions that will allow them to work? What will happen to these women, who have been made to embody the enemy of society? Many of them will seek alternative modes of survival since they can no longer depend on welfare. Many will be lured into the drug economy or the economy of sexual services, two of the major alternatives available to people barred from the mainstream economy. This will send them straight into a jail or prison, and their presence there will justify the further expansion of the prison-industrial complex. This is a clear strategy of blaming the victim.

Since we are focusing on the creation of public enemies, we should look at the virulent attacks on immigrants. It is not accidental that as the anti-crime rhetoric and the anti-welfare rhetoric have developed, an anti-immigrant rhetoric has emerged. This anti-immigrant discourse effectively criminalizes people from other countries, especially people from the Americas and Asia, who come to the United States in order to make better lives.

Interestingly, the largest number of "illegal" immigrants come from European countries. But it is rarely assumed that a white person might be in the country illegally. Students from Britain, France, and other European countries sometimes overstay their visas, but they rarely feel threatened as do

undocumented Mexican workers. Many immigrants from Europe, those who are considered to be white people, are not afraid of the U.S. immigration authorities. On the other hand, people of color who are legally citizens or permanent residents, often fear what the INS might do to them. They know that if they forget their ID, they might be deported. They know that they have been made to embody the enemy.

In these examples of the production of public enemies, the respective communities have already been rendered vulnerable by the impact of racism. In the public imagination they become personifications of the enemy, the racialized public enemy.

Structural Connections

The connections between the criminalization of young black people and the criminalization of immigrants are not random. In order to understand the structural connections that tie these two forms of criminalization together, we will have to consider the ways in which global capitalism has transformed the world. What we are witnessing at the close of the twentieth century is the growing power of a circuit of transnational corporations that belong to no particular nation-state, that are not expected to respect the laws of any given nation-state, and that move across borders at will in a perpetual search of maximizing profits.

Let me tell you a story about my personal relationship with one of these transnational corporations—Nike. In the 1970s, when the Nike brand was created, I was just beginning to train as a recreational runner. I was really impressed by a small company in Oregon that was producing innovative running shoes. My first pair of serious running shoes were Nikes. Over the years I became so attached to Nike that I convinced myself that I could not run without wearing them. I have run in Nike Air, Airmax, Airmax Squared. But once I learned about the conditions under which these shoes are produced, I could not in good conscience buy another pair of their running shoes. It may be true that Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods have multimillion-dollar contracts with Nike, but in Indonesia and Vietnam Nike has created working conditions that, in many respects, resemble slavery.

Not long ago there was an investigation of the Nike factory in Ho Chi Minh City, and it was discovered that the young women who work in Nike's sweatshops there were paid less than the minimum wage in Vietnam, which is only \$2.50 a day. Nike workers make \$1.60 a day. Consider what you pay for Nikes and the vast differential between the price and the workers' wages. This differential is the basis for Nike's rising profits. 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. "One day during our two-week visit, fifty-six women workers at a Nike factory were forced to run around the factory's premises because they weren't wearing regulation shoes. Twelve people fainted during the run and were taken to the hospital. This was particularly painful to the Vietnamese because it occurred on International Women's Day, an important holiday when Vietnam honors women." This is only one of many incidents. If you read the entire report, you will be outraged to learn of the abominable treatment endured by the young women and girls who produce the shoes and the apparel we wear. The details of the report include the fact that during an eight-hour shift, workers are able to use the toilet only once and they are prohibited from drinking water more than twice. There is sexual harassment, inadequate health care, and excessive overtime. What was Nike's response to this report? They invited Andre Young (another black man alongside Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan) to be their main spokesperson in connection with this investigation.

Perhaps we need to discuss the possibility of an organized boycott of Nike. Are there any

members of the college basketball team here this evening? Basketball teams usually swear on the Nikes, don't they? I recently had a conversation with the hip hop musician Michael Franti, leader of Spearhead, who also plays basketball. He told me that he was going to try and organize the people with whom he plays basketball to stop buying Nikes. Given the global reach of corporations like Nike, we need to think about a global boycott.

Corporations move to developing countries because it is extremely profitable to pay workers \$2.50 a day or less in wages. That's \$2.50 a day, not \$2.50 an hour, which would still be a pittance. Workers are paid more than that by McDonald's. Moreover, a direct consequence of exploiting human workers living in countries of the global South is the deindustrialization of U.S. cities. Automobile companies no longer want to pay the wages and respect the benefits demanded by the United Automobile Workers of America. In other words, the migration of corporations to the global South is in large part an attack on the organized labor movement. The question we pose to help us understand the structural relationship between global capitalism and the prison-industrial complex has to do with the fate of all those people (and their children) who historically have worked with those corporations that have recently decided that it is more profitable to set up shop in a Third World country where they evade the demands of labor unions. These are precisely the people who end up participating in alternative economies—in the illicit drug economy—and who end up taking illicit drugs in order to alleviate the emotional pain of not being able to make a decent living.

The corporations that have migrated to Mexico, Vietnam, and other Third World countries also often end up wreaking havoc on local economies. They create cash economies that displace subsistence economies and produce artificial unemployment. Overall, the effect of capitalistic corporations colonizing Third World countries is one of pauperization. These corporations create poverty as surely as they reap rapacious profits. Just as we have considered the fate of people who are left with no prospect of jobs once corporations leave U.S. cities, we can also reflect on the fate of people who can no longer live in their home countries as a direct result of the presence of capitalistic corporations. When these men and women acknowledge that they have no real future in their home countries, they often look toward the United States, which is falsely represented in global public discourse as a place where any and all will thrive, as a place for a better life, as a place to put back together lives that have been torn asunder by profit-obsessed corporations.

Immigrant populations often travel along the same routes that have been carved out by migrating corporations. They simply retrace them in reverse. All they want is a chance at a decent life. But here in the United States, these work-seeking people are demonized and criminalized. They are deemed responsible for unemployment and they are arrested by the INS and thrown into detention facilities that are an increasingly crucial ingredient of the prison-industrial complex. Workers flee the appalling working conditions in Vietnam, risking arrest if they have no documents. Poor black youth—and Vietnamese American youth as well—are persuaded by sophisticated Nike ads, featuring the likes of Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods—that they cannot live without Nikes. Thus they sometimes steal the money to pay for a \$120 pair of Nikes. These are the processes we should describe to those who believe that the enemies of society are immigrants, welfare mothers, and prisoners.

The Prison-Industrial Complex

What these processes reveal are the economic and social conditions that have helped to produce what we call the prison-industrial complex. Prisons catch the chaos that is intensified by deindustrialization. People are left without livable futures. Jobs become unavailable because corporations close shop in the United States and move across national borders in search of ev

cheaper pools of labor. Prisons and immigrant detention facilities emerge to catch those who engage in illegal acts because they are searching for better lives. And, ironically, these new prisons are represented as a secure source of employment for those who have few remaining employment opportunities.

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. The Bureau accepted this land and eventually constructed a \$200 million prison compound that now incarcerates more than 2,500 people. Community people banded together to attract prison construction because they assumed that the presence of a prison would boost the local economy.

Indeed, one of the most developed sectors of the contemporary construction industry is prison construction. This is where profits can be gleaned. Of course, this means that there is a demand for architects who are willing to design new prisons. There is a demand for construction materials, concrete designs, and the development of new technologies. In other words, it is not possible to separate the rising punishment industry from the developing economy in the era of global capitalism. Another indication of the embeddedness of punishment in the capitalist economy is the trend toward prison privatization. Like all other capitalist corporations, private prisons run on the principle of maximizing profit. Moreover, corporations that are not directly involved in the punishment industry have begun to rely on prison labor, because the labor of women, children, and men living in developing nations can be more thoroughly exploited.

Prisons have become an integral part of the U.S. economy, which, in turn, creates profit-based pressure for the ongoing expansion of the prison business. The process is one of expanding prisons, incarcerating more people, and drawing more corporations into the punishment industry, thus creating the momentum for further expansion and larger incarcerated populations. If we do not attempt to intervene and stop this process right now, we will move into the next millennium as an increasingly incarcerated society. When I say that I am frightened by this possibility, I am speaking as a person who knows what it is like to live under conditions of incarceration. Of course, I cannot pretend to have experienced the terrors produced by supermax prisons and control units. But I can tell you how hard it was to live in conditions of solitary confinement for fifteen months. When I think back on that period of my life, I realize that I had an advantage over many people because I had spent many years of my life as a student. I was used to spending many hours at a time alone, studying. I am very serious when I say that reading and writing helped me to safeguard my sanity. Reading, writing, and yoga. But what about people who have not acquired the skills and discipline to study for hours on end? A substantial proportion of people sent to prison are functionally illiterate. How will they survive? In the years to come, to what extent will prisons create more mental disorders as they falsely claim to generate more security?

I have not painted this bleak portrait of a future prisonized society because I want you to feel apprehensive and depressed about the future. On the contrary, I want you to feel bold, courageous, and prepared to collectively challenge the prison-industrial complex. This prison-industrial complex has materialized and mushroomed because we have all learned how to forget about prisons; we push them into the background even if they're in our own neighborhoods—unless, of course, we want or need them because we labor under the illusion that it will solve our economic problems. We are afraid to face the realities of the prison industry even if we have relatives and friends in prison. In communities of color, almost everybody knows someone who has been or still is in prison. But we have not learned how

talk about the centrality of prison in our lives. We do not integrate discussions about this institution into our daily conversations. We rarely teach about the prison system, except in specialized courses that rely on academic discourses that bolster the idea that prisons and their attendant regimes of repression are necessary institutions in a society that promises security. We have not learned how to talk about prisons as institutions that collect and hide away the people whom society treats as if they refuse.

Prisons allow this society to discard people who have serious social problems rather than recognizing that many of them are simply hurting themselves and are in need of help. They are simply thrown away. Because disproportionate numbers of people behind bars are people of color, structural racism enables this process. Given the histories of colonization, slavery, and other forms of racist violence, the active use of the criminal justice system to permanently discard large numbers of young people of color is quite consistent with previous modes of racist dehumanization and destruction. Let us not forget that the majority of women who have found their way into prison are incarcerated on drug-related and mostly “nonviolent” charges. Recall our discussion on the disestablishment of the welfare system. The dismantling of institutions that purportedly help human beings to survive has been accompanied by an increase in the number and intensity of repressive institutions. According to the conservative popular discourse, people who are in prison deserve to be there. They deserve to be thrown away. If poor men and women of color are incarcerated, they belong there, and everyone is absolved of the responsibility of thinking about them. Those who are relieved of the burden of thinking about people in prison are also not obligated to think about the myriad of social problems that affect the lives and communities of people in prison. They are not obligated to think about poverty, illiteracy, bad school systems, racism, drugs, and so on.

But those of us who do recognize the processes of criminalization that have helped to generate the prison-industrial complex should try to shed light on these issues. People who have relatives or friends in prison should not have to feel ashamed. The ideologies that support the prison system demonize those who have been touched by it, and many of us are afraid to admit that we know someone who could be the kind of person who is behind bars. But prisoners are like you, and prisoners are like me. There may be bad people in prison, but there are also good people in prison. There may be good people in the so-called free world, but there are also some very bad people who walk the streets of the free world enjoying permanent immunity.

Moreover, prisons play a central role in the process of manufacturing crime and manufacturing criminals. This is true both in a literal sense and in a more expansive ideological sense. With respect to the literal production of crime and criminals, it is obvious that the institution of the prison with its vast collection of human beings is a venue that allows for the sharing of criminal skills. I learned a great deal about “boasting” during the few weeks I lived in the jail’s main population. For example, one woman boasted that she could walk out of a store with a color television set hidden between her legs. Of course TV sets in the pre-big-screen era were much smaller. The sparsity of educational and recreational activities means that she could teach the women on the corridor how to walk naturally with various objects—books and other things—between their legs. This was the main attraction. I wonder how many new careers resulted from these lessons. If you wish to reflect more deeply on the role played by the prison in the production of criminality, read Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

Communications Between the Free World and the Unfree World

So what can we do? If we agree to begin by acknowledging that there is no essential difference

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