

# Prison as a Border

## On Gender, Globalization, and Punishment

The following conversation on prisons between Angela Y. Davis and Gina Dent took place in Oakland, California, on November 4, 2000. This is an excerpt of a piece originally published in *Signs*, Vol. 26, No. 4, *Globalization and Gender* (summer 2001).

**Angela Y. Davis:** Our own visits to prisons in Europe, South America, Australia, and the United States have allowed us to begin to think about the appeal of the prison across time and space as the most influential paradigm for punishment over the past two centuries. We need to draw on the history of the prison as a colonial institution profoundly linked to that earlier era of imperialism in understanding the ease with which new models of imprisonment developed in the United States—such as the supermax (super maximum security facility)—travel around the world today. Don't you remember how stunned we were when we learned a company headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee (the Corrections Corporation of America) owns and operates the largest women's prison in Australia?

**Gina Dent:** And that white Australians, proud of a convict heritage, did not automatically link this history to the troubling contemporary circumstances for prisoners today—the overwhelming percentage of whom are Koori women (that is, aboriginal—approximately 2 percent of the total population but 30 percent of the prison population).

**AYD:** If I were to try to summarize my impressions of prison visits all over the world, and most of them have been to women's prisons, including three jails which I visited involuntarily, I would have to say that they are uncannily similar. I have always felt as if I am in the same place. No matter how far I have traveled across time and space—from 1970 to 2000, and from the women's House of Detention in New York (where I was myself incarcerated) to the women's prison in Brasilia, Brazil—no matter how far, there is a strange sameness about prisons in general, and especially about women's prisons. This sameness of women's prisons needs to be measured against how important it has been for feminisms to divest themselves of the notion that there is some universal quality we can call woman. This makes me think about your work on the challenge for us to rethink the boundaries between social science and the humanities as a means of thinking specifically about women in prison.

**GD:** Yes, I think our collaborative work also contests the hegemony of social science in producing knowledge about the prison—not only in the most obvious places but also in activism and popular culture. The assumptions that exist in these supposedly separate spheres have been remarkably consistent and mutually constitutive. Knowledge is never secured for use on only one side of the divide between science and the real of social life. I am always struck by the extent to which scholars, activists, and legal practitioners draw their assumptions not only from their personal experience but from the experience of popular culture as a source of understandings that are used like one's own life (assuming already that these understandings are not just drawn from other scholarship). Where these understandings are insufficient, we often assume they can be addressed with the facts. But what process generates these facts? So, we are forced to think seriously about the status of traditional social scientific paradigms (and their permeation in all kinds of arenas) as the more reliable, legitimate evidence. For example, in what sense could we produce knowledge about women in prison? How would this violate what we know about the shrouded conditions of imprisonment (where only the state permits access) and the missionary zeal that can be the most obvious sign of the desire to know about prison and prisoners? To what uses can we put knowledge produced under these conditions? This is not merely a question about how we have to rethink knowledge but about how to rethink an abolitionist politics that starts from the position of those women on the underside of capital but does not put them in another cage.

**AYD:** Any conventional social scientific study of women prisoners introduces you to the typical woman prisoner—generally characterized as a “mother,” with a relatively low level of education, who is also a drug addict. We know that when we go into a women's prison in a European country, we discover—as is the case with men—a disproportionately large number of women who are immigrants, noncitizens, African, Asian, and Latin American. But, as you point out, this is not enough. We also have to consider the role that criminology and penology have played in giving us this striking similarity, not only in the populations but in the methods of control, architectural models, and custodial practices that devolve from the psychology of the criminal generalized around the world. In other words, the institution of the prison and its discursive deployment produce the kind of prisoners that in turn justify the expansion of prisons. As a matter of fact, the term prison industry can refer precisely to the production of prisoners even as the industry produces profits for increasing numbers of corporations and, by siphoning social wealth away from such institutions as schools and hospitals, child care and housing, plays a pivotal role in producing the conditions of poverty that create a perceived need for more prisons.

**GD:** This is key to stating simply why more and more people are in agreement that the prison industrial complex underwrites the social problems that it purports to solve. And we have to consider scholars' role in this and also find the means to make use of the written history of the prison to understand race, gender, and globalization anew.

**AYD:** Well, we could start with thinking about the strange but predictable way feminism has been embraced by custodial hierarchies. The demand for more women guards and high-level officers has been complemented by the demand to treat women prisoners the same as men prisoners. This has occurred as departments of corrections discover that through “diversity management”—incorporating men of color and women of all racial backgrounds—their prisons run all the

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more efficiently. Thus putatively feminist positions have bolstered the trend toward more repressive imprisonment practices for women and specifically the move from the cottage/campus architectural model to the concrete fortresses being constructed today. An interesting example of this feminism that demands formal equality of men and women prisoners is some wardens' insistence that women prisoners have the right to be considered every bit as dangerous as men. Tekla Miller, the former warden at Huron Valley Women's Prison in Michigan, complained that the arsenal at the women's prison was inferior to those at men's institutions. She also successfully lobbied for the right to shoot at women escapees.

**GD:** And we know these new recipes for equality—part of the legacy of the conjunction of capitalism and democracy—travel as a preeminent American export. It seems that we're back to the point that prisons have become not only a terrain for our activism but also a challenge to our work as feminist intellectuals trying to think about the limits of feminisms and the terrain of new struggles. We can discuss, for example, the distinctions between an equality of sameness and an equality of difference, but what about an embodied theory that also considers agency? I'm thinking of two paradoxes that continue to haunt us. First of these is the incommensurability of women and the prison and the consequent symbolic use of women as the prison's excess. Amnesty

International's campaign image of the woman giving birth in chains is only one example. What if we set that picture up against a second example? In California, we know that one emerging “protection” for women is that no sexual relations between prisoners and guards will be considered consensual. The history of the resistances to women's subordination in prison also constrain us—inasmuch as they assume that these women are not agents. We know one means of rethinking this through feminism. Your references to the prison writing of Barbara Saunders, who compared life in prison to a violent domestic relationship—you can never be sure what will happen next and what it will require emotionally (cited in Chevigny 1999, xvii)—are helpful here. If the expression of agency against domestic violence is leaving the relationship, we know that women in prison present a further challenge to us. Of course, this is at the heart of why Critical Resistance took up the idea of “Go to Prison Week” to celebrate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Civil Rights Act. Visiting prisons—not so much to gain information, as researchers or tourists, but to work with women prisoners—helps to create a firmer basis for future work. This also suggests that we need to be able to talk about how some men are then also in such a domestic violence relationship. Who these men are—in terms of class, race, and location—matters then in a different way.

**AYD:** Well, we know that the gendering of men's prisons equates violence with masculinity and that not only is violence expected but the violence of the institution produces the relations between prisoners and guards and among prisoners themselves. As we saw in our visit to Calipatria State Prison in California, prisons—and this is the case in other states as well—a system of racial classification and separation prohibits black prisoners from being housed with white or Chicano (“northern Hispanic” in the official vocabulary) but permits them to be housed with Mexican (“southern Hispanic”) prisoners. This strict segregation inevitably produces violent clashes along racial lines. The historical gendering of racial contact in women's prisons intersects with policies governing sexual contact. Estelle Freedman (1981) points out that historical policies of racial segregation at Bedford Hills Prison for women in New York (which, of course, still operates and holds such political prisoners as Kathy Boudin) involved rules against racial integration of the prison population to prevent

interracial lesbian relations. While sex contained by race was tolerated, sex across race was treated as a major threat.

**GD:** Yes, and this is why it is important to think of the prison: not only because of the very genuine concerns for those who are incarcerated but also because of its place in revealing the organization of the structures that we hold to be democratic and their connections to gender and globalization. We have spoken in the past, for example, and in the context of U.S. history, of miscegenation as a threat that is legitimated not only through a racially proscribed heteronormativity but also through the assumption that the site of reproduction—the “mixed” child—is the site of fear. Prisons teach us that this analysis is insufficient. Perhaps the more reverberating site of fear is that of the reproduction of a social world that would read along and against the boundaries of nation-states, races, genders, and sexualities—the solidarity that is produced and most surveilled in the prison. Isn't that precisely the site of the critical resistance of which we speak?



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