

ALSO BY ANGELA Y. DAVIS

If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance
(The Third Press, 1971)

Angela Davis: An Autobiography
(Random House, 1974)

Women, Race and Class
(Random House, 1981)

Women, Culture, and Politics
(Random House, 1989)

The Angela Y. Davis Reader
(Blackwell, 1998)

Blues Legacies and Black Feminism
(Vintage, 1999)

Are Prisons Obsolete?
(Open Media Series/Seven Stories, 2003)

Abolition Democracy
(Open Media Series/Seven Stories, 2005)

The Meaning of Freedom
(forthcoming from City Lights Books, 2010)

ALSO BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS

“The Heroic Slave,” in *Autographs for Freedom*
Edited by Julia Griffiths, 1853

My Bondage and My Freedom (1855)

Life and Times of Frederick Douglass
(1881, revised 1892)

**NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF
FREDERICK DOUGLASS,
AN AMERICAN SLAVE,**

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF

A New Critical Edition
by Angela Y. Davis
including her
“Lectures on Liberation”

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EDITOR'S NOTE | PATHWAYS TO FREEDOM

The idea for this book came in 2008. It was an election year, and millions of people were organizing to elect Barack Hussein Obama forty-fourth president of the United States. During the months of intense campaigning, the issue of race entered the national conversation and simmered in the background until the controversy surrounding the Obama family's minister, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, brought the issue to a full boil. Obama's response to the controversy came in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008. In a speech that included references to America's "original sin of slavery" and the history of the struggle for equal rights, Obama said, "Words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part—through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk—to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time."¹ The country, at least for a moment, was talking about its history and the

roles slavery, race, and social struggle have played in making us who we are.

One of several books I was working on at the time was *The Meaning of Freedom*, a selection of transcripts of public talks by Angela Y. Davis (City Lights, 2010). In my research, I came across a reference to a small pamphlet titled *Lectures on Liberation*. Published by the NY Committee to Free Angela Davis sometime during her year-and-half incarceration, the pamphlet was originally sold for fifty cents a copy to raise funds for her legal defense. I purchased it online for forty dollars. When the slim, red staple-bound pamphlet arrived, I cut through the packaging carefully and felt like I was opening a time capsule. I sat down to read the two powerful lectures about Frederick Douglass, race, and resistance, and I was riveted. As a reader I was discovering a historic and invaluable out-of-print movement pamphlet, and as an editor I became excited by the possibility of sharing it with a new generation of readers, young people and educators. What better political moment could there be to publish these texts and introduce Angela Davis and Frederick Douglass together—two of the most important abolitionist intellectuals in U.S. history? I called Angela to share my excitement at having read the pamphlet, and during conversation the idea for this book was born.

The original *Lectures on Liberation* pamphlet contains three texts—transcripts of two lectures on Frederick Douglass, philosophy, and freedom that Davis delivered in



LECTURES ON LIBERATION

ANGELA Y. DAVIS

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the fall of 1969 at UCLA, a year before her arrest, and a letter of support written and signed by over two dozen of her fellow faculty at UCLA during the period of her incarceration and legal defense. Her colleagues' inspired introduction describes the political context in which the lectures were delivered and their broader significance: "It was, we thought, a vindication of academic freedom and democratic education. For the lectures are a part of an attempt to bring to light the forbidden history of the enslavement and oppression of black people, and to place that history in an illuminating philosophical context. At the same time, they are sensitive, original and incisive; the work of an excellent teacher and a truly fine scholar."

Angela Davis was a young, multilingual scholar who had graduated *magna cum laude* from Brandeis University, and while studying under Herbert Marcuse to earn her doctorate she had accepted a two-year teaching appointment in the philosophy department at the University of California in Los Angeles. On July 1, 1969, William T. Divale, an undercover agent of the F.B.I., published a statement in the *Daily Bruin* that the UCLA philosophy department has just hired an assistant professor who was a Communist, and on July 9, 1969 the *San Francisco Examiner* identified the professor to be Angela Y. Davis. Richard Nixon was president, Ronald Reagan was governor of California, and when the news reached the university's board of regents, they fired Davis before the semester had begun. Her

termination sparked considerable controversy, protest, and national media coverage.² With a groundswell of grassroots support, Davis fought back. In an act of resistance, she showed up for the first day of her course, “Recurring Philosophical Themes in Black Literature.”³ Expecting to deliver a lecture to the 166 students who had enrolled in the class, she instead found more than 1,500 members of the UCLA student body and faculty assembled in a show of support. The lecture she delivered that day is one of two talks about Frederick Douglass in the pamphlet and is presented here in book form for the first time.

As soon as the idea for this book was born, one of the first people with whom I discussed it was Mumia Abu-Jamal. At the time I was working with him on his book *Jailhouse Lawyers: Prisoners Defending Prisoners vs. The USA* (City Lights, 2009), for which Davis had written an introduction. Mumia would call me collect from Death Row, and we’d just as often spend most our fifteen-minute conversations discussing politics, race, and Obama as we would talk about the book.⁴ Could Obama win? What would it mean for liberation struggle?

In a written interview I conducted with Mumia that was posted on *Z-net* after the election, he wrote:

Social movements open up the eyes of the people, and present them with new ways of looking at the world, and hopefully moving in the world. Think about this. Everybody (esp. in the so-called left) is hyped about Obama’s

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election. As I wrote in a commentary last year, Mexico had a Black president over a century ago. If the abolition movement didn't fold their tents after the Civil War, and instead fought for broader, deeper social change, why couldn't Frederick Douglass have been elected president in 1870? To be sure, he was among the most brilliant men in the country; with eloquence, and erudition far beyond most men. He was financially and socially stable, and was one of the most respected men in the English world. As an ex-slave, his election would've set the lock and death-knell to slavery (instead of the hidden legalization of it thru the prison-industrial-complex), and made the Reconstruction Amendments real. Social movements have to have the ability to see beyond today's horizon, and have to have the stamina to work for social change. With social movements, everything is possible; without them, nothing is possible.⁵

Angela Davis, like Mumia Abu-Jamal, is more concerned with the people whose work drives social movements than the elected leaders and the legal system. In a public talk she delivered in Denver on February 15, 2008, she said:

I'm always very cautious when it comes to electoral politics. I think that particularly here in this country we have a tendency to invest our own collective power in individuals. We have what I sometimes call a messiah complex. This is why, when we think of the Civil Rights movement, we think of Martin Luther King. We can't imagine that that movement could have been created by

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huge numbers of people whose names we do not even know. We can't imagine that.

I often emphasize that the Montgomery bus boycott, which for many people is a defining moment of the Civil Rights movement, would not have been possible had it not been for black women domestic workers. These are the people we never think about. They are totally invisible, invisible in history, but those are the women who refused to ride the bus. Those are the black people who were riding the bus because they were riding from black communities to white communities because they were cleaning up white people's houses and cooking white people's food and doing their laundry. But we can't imagine that they were the agents of history that gave us this amazing civil rights movement.

All of which is to say this enthusiasm, this incredible enthusiasm that's been generated over the last period that has been called a movement, and Obama has specifically referred to what's happening around his campaign as a movement. If it is to be a movement, it has to demand much more than the election of a single individual, no matter what that individual may represent.⁶

It is in that spirit that this book is published—to increase our political literacy as a step toward demanding more of our current political moment. I use the word *literacy* intentionally because of the primary role that learning to read played in Frederick Douglass's learning to resist. In his passage on the subject in *Narrative* we see that it is through the defiant

act of teaching himself to read that Douglass underwent an inner shift that empowered him to think independently of—and ultimately break free from—his white enslavers:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and

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I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.

Throughout her more than forty years as a movement worker, author and educator, Angela Davis has worked ceaselessly to further understand and clear the pathways from slavery to freedom. She has written about Douglass both as a way of better understanding the impact and limitations of his work and as a way of analyzing how institutional racism enforced by legal slavery continued after the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

In her pioneering and critically acclaimed study published in 1981, *Women, Race & Class*, Davis discusses the historic role Douglass played in the nineteenth-century movement for women's liberation and his achievement of "officially introducing the issue of women's rights to the Black Liberation movement, where it was enthusiastically welcomed." "Frederick Douglass," she writes, "the country's leading Black abolitionist, was also the most prominent male advocate of women's emancipation in his time."⁷ She describes the impact he had at the first women's rights convention, the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848:

Among the approximately three hundred women and men attending the Seneca Falls Convention, the issue of electoral power for women was the only major point of contention: the suffrage resolution alone was

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not unanimously endorsed. That the controversial proposal was presented at all, however, was due to Frederick Douglass's willingness to second [Elizabeth Cady] Stanton's motion and to employ his oratorical abilities in defense of women's right to vote.

During those early days when women's rights was not yet a legitimate cause, when woman suffrage was unfamiliar and unpopular as a demand, Frederick Douglass publicly agitated for the political equality of women. In the immediate aftermath of the Seneca Falls Convention, he published an editorial in his newspaper, the *North Star*. Entitled "The Rights of Women," its content was quite radical for the times: "In respect to political rights, we hold woman to be justly entitled to all we claim for men. We go farther, and express our conviction that all political rights which it is expedient for man to exercise, it is equally so for woman. All that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being, is equally true of woman."⁸

In her studies of the prison-industrial-complex and her advocacy for the abolition of prisons, Davis closely analyzes the unbroken continuum between the slavery Douglass experienced in the nineteenth century, the racist terrorism she survived growing up in segregated Alabama,⁹ and today's interconnected problems of economic and political subjugation, prisons, capital punishment, police brutality, and the women, immigrants, and communities of color most impacted by them. One hundred fifty years after

Frederick Douglass fearlessly organized social movements and personally lobbied a reluctant President Abraham Lincoln to abolish slavery,¹⁰ Angela Y. Davis continues the tradition and describes her work today as “forging a twenty-first-century abolitionist movement.” In constructing her model of abolitionism, Davis draws deeply from W. E. B. DuBois and his concept of “abolition democracy”—the idea that U.S. democracy is inauthentic and compromised, and will continue to be until all institutions that perpetrate injustice and domination are replaced because “democracy for blacks had been withheld at the very moment it had been promised: upon the abolition of slavery.”¹¹ In her book with Eduardo Mendieta, *Abolition Democracy*, she writes:

DuBois pointed out that in order to fully abolish the oppressive conditions produced by slavery, new democratic institutions would have to be created. Because this did not occur, black people encountered new forms of slavery—from debt peonage and the convict lease system¹² to segregated and second-class education. The prison system continues to carry out this terrible legacy. It has become a receptacle for all of those human beings who bear the inheritance of the failure to create abolition democracy in the aftermath of slavery. And this inheritance is not only borne by black prisoners, but by poor Latino, Native American, Asian, and white prisoners. Moreover, its use as such a receptacle for people who are deemed the detritus of society is on the rise throughout the world.¹³

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Angela Davis continues to write, to agitate, to educate and to speak out in solidarity with global movements against racism, sexism, and political repression. As forms of oppression dating back to slavery still manifest today, so too do networks of resistance, creativity and hope. She urges us to join them. She urges us, with Douglass as a metaphor, to continue the work of the oppressed women and men whose struggles precede us. She urges us to increase our own levels of political literacy and critical engagement as defiant steps toward demanding—and winning—greater justice and freedom that we can all experience and enjoy together.

—Greg Ruggiero

October 2009

Brooklyn

INTRODUCTION TO THE CITY LIGHTS EDITION OF
*Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass,
An American Slave*

It has been more than a century and a half since *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* was first published. The text garnered a broad readership among Douglass's abolitionist contemporaries in the United States and Britain and later came to be regarded as the paradigmatic American Slave Narrative.

It is well known that Frederick Douglass wrote his first autobiography in 1845 in part to dispel doubts about his status as a fugitive slave. In the abolitionist circuit, white audiences were often so impressed by his literacy and eloquence as a speaker that they assumed he must have been a free black person who was formally educated. According to an article in the *Liberator*, the most important abolitionist journal of that period,

Many persons in the audience seemed unable to credit the statements which he gave of himself, and could not believe that he was actually a slave. How a man, only six years out of bondage, and who had never gone to school a day in his life, could speak with such eloquence—with

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such precision of language and power of thought—they were utterly at a loss to devise.¹⁴

Some scholars have also argued that William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionist leaders expected Douglass to confine his remarks to his own experience as a slave, leaving the analytical dimension to white speakers. By writing his autobiography, Douglass felt that he would not only be able to present irrefutable evidence of his background, but he would also be able to focus more freely on analyses of slavery and the abolitionist cause in his speeches and articles.¹⁵

H. Bruce Franklin has called the slave narrative the first distinctively American literary genre.¹⁶ Several dozen slave narratives had been published in North America before the appearance of Douglass's first autobiography, and altogether two hundred have been identified as having been issued and reissued during and after the period of legal slavery in the United States. This includes two more autobiographies by Frederick Douglass—*My Bondage and My Freedom* and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*—as well as multiple autobiographies by other authors.

The earliest example of the genre is Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Others include Nat Turner's *Confessions*, Moses Grandy's *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America*, Henry Box Brown's *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and*

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2 *Wide*, and Booker T. Washington's well-known *Up From Slavery*. As many feminist scholars have remarked, the slave narrative as genre is thoroughly gendered. Not only were few narratives produced by women—one thinks of Sojourner's Truth's *Narrative*, but most important Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—they also disclosed the way gender structured the telling of stories about slavery. Jacobs' *Incidents*, for example, reveals that she both sustained and worked against the influence of the sentimental novel of the era. She closed her book with an address to her readership that reminded them that her objective was liberation and therefore did not conform to the conventional denouement of sentimental novels and the anticipated aspirations of white women: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way with marriage."¹⁷

Of the countless editions of Douglass's *Narrative* that have been published over the last fifty years, some have attempted to help us grasp the gendered framework of his story—and, by extension, of the genre itself. Random House published Douglass's *Narrative* and Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* together in a Modern Library Classic edition in 2000 with an introduction by Kwame Anthony Appiah. Highlighting the role Douglass's violated masculinity plays in shaping his conceptualization of freedom, Appiah points out that "the driving energy of the book is Douglass's need to live not just as a free person, but as a free *man*. And he becomes a man . . . in part by besting another

white man—Covey the slave-breaker—in a fight.”¹⁸ What is not so clear in Appiah’s claim that for Harriet Jacobs, the author of the narrative accompanying Douglass’s, “the escape from slavery was a search for life not just as a free person, but as a free woman,”¹⁹ is that lurking within the definition of black freedom as the reclamation of black manhood is the obligatory suppression of black womanhood.

Deborah McDowell provided an insightful introduction to the Oxford University Press’s 1999 edition of Douglass’s *Narrative* in which she called attention to the patriarchal assumptions in the text. Any reader of Douglass’s autobiographies—whether the *Narrative*, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, or *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*—is familiar with the gripping scene of Douglass battling the slave-breaker Covey. Douglass wrote that in the period preceding the battle,

Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered above my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!²⁰

His later description of the fight with Covey is prefaced by this message to the reader: “You have seen how a man was made a slave: you shall now see how a slave was made a man.”²¹ According to McDowell, the aim of this passage is:

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. . . to underscore that “slave” and “man” are as mutually contradictory as “American” and “slave” . . . Douglass . . . leaves untouched the structuring opposition: male and female, for subject and object are thoroughly and conventionally gendered throughout the *Narrative*. In other words, inasmuch as “manhood” and “freedom” function throughout Douglass’s discourse on slavery as coincident terms, his journey from slavery to freedom leaves women in the logical position of representing the condition of slavery. Douglass’s refusal to be whipped represents not only an assertion of manhood but the transcendence of slavery, an option his *Narrative* denies to women.²²

One of the implications of the definition of “freedom” in terms of “manhood” is that the closest black women can come to freedom is to achieve the status not of a free man, but rather the unliberated status of the white woman. Harriet Jacobs may well have been intentionally troubling this idea when she decided to draw attention to the fact that her book closes with the attainment of “freedom” rather than “marriage.”

McDowell makes the point that in Douglass’s *Narrative*, maimed, flogged, abused black female bodies are the anchors of his description of slavery.²³ “The *Narrative*,” she writes, “is literally populated with the whipped bodies of slave women.”²⁴ One of McDowell’s references is to the beating of Aunt Hester, which Douglass describes at the

very beginning of his book. (“I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he [the overseer] used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood.”)²⁵ This was what Douglass referred to as “the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery.”²⁶

Of course Frederick Douglass was not alone in his evocation of women’s bodies as objects of slavery’s appalling violence, and it would be unfair to single him out individually for using this convention or for failing to apprehend how literary representations of black women’s bodies as targets of slavery’s most horrific forms of violence might also tend to objectify slave women and discursively deprive them of the capacity to strike out for their own freedom. Abolitionists—both black and white—were well aware of the way audiences could be expected to respond to evocations of slavery’s violences against women and thus frequently used examples similar to those in the *Narrative*. They also assumed that emancipation from slavery would entail in the first place, freedom for black men. Moreover, they assumed that the violent repression of black women was indirectly an attack on black men, who were not allowed to protect “their” women in the way white men might be expected to protect “theirs.”

As twenty-first-century readers, our historical vantage point can be more complex and our reading can be more nuanced. Just as we know and applaud the accomplishments

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of the nineteenth-century Women's Rights movement, while recognizing that despite the best intentions of its participants, the movement was thoroughly saturated with racism, we are also able to hold Frederick Douglass in the highest regard, while also acknowledging his and his era's inability to imagine the full equality of women—especially those women who were subjugated by virtue of race and gender.

McDowell's analysis does not in any sense diminish the significance of Frederick Douglass's work. Indeed, even though he, like all of his contemporaries, was a product of his times, and was shaped by many of the prevailing ideological assumptions, he was able, more than most, to critically apprehend the fallacious ideologies justifying black inferiority and women's inferiority. As McDowell emphatically points out, Douglass played the most prominent role among all the men present at the first women's rights conference in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 and chose as a slogan for his newspaper "Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color."²⁷ Yet, it could not be expected of him to recognize all of the ramifications of the male supremacist ideas that permeated the institutional and ideological landscapes of his time. Thus, even as McDowell critiques what she perceives to be a rhetorical exploitation of the black female body, she also highlights the important role Douglass played in the nascent Women's Rights movement. The edition of the *Narrative* for which McDowell provides an introduction also