

# ALMEIDA THEATRE

## 'The Gates to Freedom' by Angela Davis

### The Speech

- Watch the speech, delivered by Pearl Mackie

<https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/speech/the-gates-to-freedom>

Duration: 10 minutes 22 seconds

- Discuss students' initial responses.

### Context

Angela Davis is an American political activist, writer and academic. She is a professor emerita of the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the founder of Critical Resistance, an organisation that campaigns to eliminate imprisonment, policing and surveillance as tools for maintaining social order and the authority of privileged groups.

In 1970 Davis was arrested and charged in association with an escape attempt and hostage situation that took place at the Marin County Hall of Justice in which 4 people were killed. The guns used were registered under Davis' name and despite not being present she faced charges for kidnapping, murder and conspiracy.

Initially found guilty, she spent over a year in detention before being acquitted by a jury in 1972.

- Ask students to research the events leading up to the armed assault on the Marin County Hall of Justice.
- Davis has received criticism for her support of political violence. Discuss with your students whether in their opinion violence is ever justifiable.

### Content

- Watch the speech again.
- Provide students with the chart below and ask them to note down the points Davis makes in relation to each heading.
- Ask students to number each point chronologically as they appear in the speech so that they can track the progression of ideas.
- Discuss how the structure of the speech and progression of ideas affects the audience.

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The Trial	Experience of people of colour in America	Capitalism	Solutions
	2. Similar to the condition of a prisoner – not given access to the freedom witnessed in other people.	1. Expectation of freedom from wealth and scientific advancement.	

## Language and Structure

- Ask students to read a copy of the speech and explore the rhetorical devices used. **A transcript of the speech is included at the end of this document.**
- This exercise encourages students to identify features of rhetorical language, and more importantly to comment on their effect.
- Provide students with the chart below. This exercise could be done individually with each student completing the full table or by splitting the class in to groups and allocating three lines of the table to each group and asking them to feedback on one.

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Language/ Structural Device	Example	Effect
Figurative language	Metaphorical meaning applied to the literal tools of the prison, for example the key.	
Ethos – a demonstration of the speaker’s credibility or strength of character		
Pathos – the emotional appeal of the speech		
Logos – appealing to the audience with reason and using facts and figures		
Contrasts		
Pronouns and modes of addressing audience		
Register e.g. informal or formal		

## Discussion

- Watch the discussion between Pearl Mackie and members of the Almeida’s Young Leaders Programme.

<https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/reaction/the-gates-to-freedom>

Duration: 4 minutes

The reaction group considers the importance of the relationship between leader and audience or followers. Which aspects of the speech do you think would have been most successful at drawing support?

## Extension Task

- Ask students to compare and contrast the current American justice and prison system with that of the UK.
- Ask them to present their ideas on whether prison reform is needed in this country.

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## Useful Links

### Websites

[Angela Davis](#) – Biography

[Angela Davis – Guardian Profile](#) – Articles written by Angela Davis

[Support the Soledad Brothers](#) – A pamphlet detailing the plight of the Soledad Brothers, 3 young black inmates accused of killing a white prison officer

[Soledad Brothers](#) – More about the Soledad brothers and the link with the assault at the Marin County Hall of Justice

[Critical Resistance](#) – Official website for Angela Davis' grassroots organisation

[HMP: A Survival Guide](#) - Extracts from *HMP: A Survival Guide* by Carl Cattermole

[Prisonism](#) – Website of Carl Cattermole, author of *HMP: A Survival Guide*

### Films

[13<sup>th</sup>](#) – Award winning documentary by Ava DuVernay about the American prison system

[Native Son](#) – Film based on the novel by Richard Wright

### Books

[Angela Davis – An Autobiography](#)

[Native Son](#) by Richard Wright

[Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson](#)

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## THE GATES OF FREEDOM

Angela Davis | 9 June 1972

*This is an edited version of the speech Angela Davis gave in Los Angeles, California at the Embassy Auditorium.*

It has been said many times that one can learn a great deal about a society by looking towards its prisons. Look towards its dungeons and there you will see in concentrated and microcosmic form the sickness of the entire system. And today there is something that is particularly revealing about the analogy between the prison and the larger society of which it is a reflection. For in a painfully real sense we are all prisoners of a society whose bombastic proclamations of freedom and justice for all are nothing but meaningless rhetoric.

In this society, today, we are surrounded by the very wealth and the scientific achievements which hold forth a promise of freedom. Freedom is so near, yet at the same time it is so far away. And this thought invokes in me the same sensation I felt as I reflected on my own condition in a jail. For from my cell I could look down upon the crowded streets of Greenwich Village, almost tasting the freedom of movement and the freedom of space which had been taken from me and all my sisters in captivity.

Our condition here and now – the condition of all of us who are brown and black and working women and men – bears a very striking similarity to the condition of the prisoner. The wealth and the technology around us tells us that a free, humane, harmonious society lies very near. But at the same time it is so far away because someone is holding the keys and that someone refuses to open the gates to freedom. Like the prisoner we are locked up with the ugliness of racism and poverty and war and all the attendant mental frustrations and manipulations.

We're also locked up with our dreams and visions of freedom, and with the knowledge that if we only had the keys – if we could only seize them from the keepers, from the Standard Oils, the General Motors and all the giant corporations, and of course from their protectors, the government – if we could only get our hands on those keys we could transform these visions and these dreams into reality. Our situation bears a very excruciating similarity to the situation of the prisoner, and we must never forget this. For if we do, we will lose our desire for freedom and our will to struggle for liberation.

Listen for a moment to George Jackson's description of life in Soledad Prison's O-Wing:

*"This place destroys the logical processes of the mind.*

*A man's thoughts become completely disorganised. The noise, madness streaming from every throat, frustrated sounds from the bars, metallic sounds from the walls, the steel trays, the iron beds bolted to the wall, the hollow sounds from a cast iron sink, a toilet, the smells, the human waste thrown at us, unwashed bodies, the rotten food.*

*Relief is so distant that it is very easy to lose hope. And the guards with the carbines, and their sticks and tear gas are there to preserve this terror, to preserve it at any cost."*

The terror of life in prison. The sociopolitical function of prisons today is about a self-perpetuating system of terror. For prisons are political weapons; they function as means of containing elements in this society which threaten the stability of the larger system.

In prisons, people who are actually or potentially disruptive of the status quo are confined, contained, punished, and in some cases, forced to undergo psychological treatment by mind-altering drugs. This is happening. The prison system is a weapon of repression. The government views young black and brown people as actually and potentially the most rebellious elements of this society. And thus the jails and prisons of this society are overflowing with young people of color. Anyone who has seen the streets of ghettos can already understand how easily a sister or a brother can fall victim to the police who are always there en masse.

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Tens of thousands of prisoners have never been convicted of any crime; they're simply there, victims – they're there under the control of insensitive, incompetent, and often blatantly racist public defenders who insist that they plead guilty even though they know that their client is just as innocent as they are. And for those who have committed a crime, we have to seek out the root cause. And we seek this cause not in them as individuals, but in the capitalist system that produces the need for crime in the first place.

As one student of the prisons system has said, "The materially hungry must steal to survive, and the spiritually hungry commit anti-social acts because their human needs cannot be met in a property-oriented state. It is a fair estimate," he goes on to say, "that somewhere around 90% of the crimes committed would not be considered crimes or would not occur in a people-oriented society."

A prisoner who had taken part in The Tombs rebellion in New York gave the following answers to questions put to him by a newsreader.

*"Question: What is your name?"*

*Answer: I am a revolutionary.*

*Question: What are you charged with?"*

*Answer: I was born black.*

*Question: How long have you been in?"*

*Answer: I've had trouble since the day I was born."*

Once our sisters and brothers are entrapped inside these massive medieval fortresses and dungeons whether for nothing at all, or whether for frame-up political charges, whether for trying to escape their misery through a petty property crime, through narcotics or prostitution, they are caught in a vicious circle.

George Jackson was murdered by mindless, carbine-toting San Quentin guards because he refused, he resisted, and he helped to teach his fellow prisoners that there was hope through struggle.

As I was saved and freed by the people so we must save and free these beautiful, struggling brothers and sisters. We must save them. And all of our sisters and brothers who must live with and struggle together against the terrible realities of captivity.

My freedom was achieved as the outcome of a massive, a massive people's struggle. Young people and older people, black, brown, Asian, Native American and white people, students and workers. The people seized the keys which opened the gates to freedom. And we've just begun. The momentum of this movement must be sustained, and it must be increased. Let us try to seize more keys and open more gates and bring out more sisters and brothers so that they can join the ranks of our struggle out here.