Abolition Democracy: Theory and Praxis

Lesson Plan: Session 2

Session 2: The Abolition of Slavery and the Origins of Abolition Democracy

A central thrust of Du Bois's writings serve to demonstrate that abolition was achieved through the actions of Black men and women: through escape to fight in the ranks of the Union army, through the general strike and the threat of a general strike, through forms of resistance, through their presence as the primary force that fueled the Southern economy.

The war transformed abolition into a democratic movement, against the will of the majority of the North and the South. The North had no choice but to bring enslaved persons into the democratic fold as a way to win the war. The South would have had to do the same in order to win the war, but it was, of course, unwilling.

In this seminar, we turn to interrogate the lessons that the abolition of slavery might teach us today in our struggles for abolition democracy. The passage from a *de jure* to *de facto* system of racial oppression in this country raises many important questions. Some involve the continuities and the differences: What can we learn from thinking of these different periods as similar or different? Some involve the lessons to be learned for abolitionist movements in other domains: In what ways do the struggles enrich each other? Some involve the hidden and not-so-hidden pitfalls of abolitionism: What are the shoals to be avoided in future abolitionist campaigns? These will be some of the themes we explore in this seminar on the abolition of slavery.

Readings:

Du Bois, W.E.B. Chapter 4: The General Strike. In *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*. New York: The Free Press, 1998.

Davis, Angela. *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Prisons, Torture, and Empire*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005.

Jones-Rogers, Stephanie. *They Were Her Property*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019, Chapter 8 and Epilogue.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, No. 26, Vol. 12(2), June 2008, pp. 1-14.

Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

Reidy, Joseph P. *Illusions of Emancipation: The Pursuit of Freedom and Equality in the Twilight of Slavery*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020 (selections)

Foner, Eric. *Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019 (selections)

Multimedia:

Center for Contemporary Critical Thought. Abolition Democracy 2/13 | Abolition Democracy with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Robert Gooding-Williams, Kendall Thomas, Flores

Reading Notes

Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Prisons, Torture, and Empire.*

- This book is a long interview with Angela Davis in which she covers her life, her activism, her research, her politics, and her activism. Throughout the text, Davis discusses the deep changes brought about the Civil Rights Movement as well as its shortfalls in the longterm especially in relation to the inadequacies and dangerous of relying solely on diversity and multiculturalism as metrics for racial justice.
- She discusses in particular also the ties between chattel slavery and contemporary systems of policing and prisons. Written at the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Davis makes an effort also to connect the prison industrial complex and the military industrial complex and to highlight the continuities between the torture of foreign nationals and American incarcerated persons, and continuities between the gender and racial injustices in war and in domestic incarceration.
- As her more recent work on Abolition Feminism in *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* puts into even sharper relief, Davis is an ardent feminist activist and scholar. In this work on the prison and military industrial complex, Davis focuses also on the sexual and gender-based violence in arenas of war and in prisons.
- Davis's definition of prison abolition: "When we call for prison abolition, we are not imagining the isolated dismantling of the facilities we call prisons and jails. That is not the project of abolition. We proposed the notion of a prison-industrial-complex to reflect the extent to which the prison is deeply structured by economic, social, and political conditions that themselves will also have to be dismantled. So you might say that prison abolition is a way of talking about the pitfalls of the particular version of democracy represented by U.S. capitalism."
- Citing Du Bois, Davis defines abolition democracy as the following: "When I refer to prison abolitionism, I like to draw from the DuBoisian notion of abolition democracy. That is to say, it is not only, or not even primarily, about abolition as a negative process of tearing down, but it is also about building up, about creating new institutions"
- The most important aspect of Davis's conception of abolition democracy, drawing on Du Bois and clarifying his more ambivalent idea, is that abolition democracy requires both the tearing down of oppressive structures like the prison, the death penalty, and slavery, as well as the building of institutions and structures that would ensure the flourishing of those formerly oppressed by these systems, i.e. schools, land, political rights, so on and so forth.

Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her* Property, Chapter 8 and Epilogue.

- This text focuses on the role that white women had in the institution of chattel slavery. It discusses the antebellum economy in which white women were more likely to own slaves than land and the violence and agency that white women exhibited in upholding the slave-owning system. Although antebellum white Southern society was undoubtedly

patriarchal, that did not exempt white women from participation in slaveholding, rather exacerbating their participation.

- These excerpts analyze how the emancipation of enslaved persons affected white women in the South, especially in relation to their own sense of self as enslavers and feelings of entitlement not only to opinions on formerly enslaved persons, but control over the bodies and labor of newly freed persons and their freed children.
- Scholars like Dorothy Roberts have pointed to the roots of the contemporary family policing system in the Reconstruction and antebellum eras. Jones-Rogers writes of these roots, describing the ways in which freed families were separated and children were sometimes kept by their former enslavers, who used the guise of care and apprenticeship to retain free labor.
- White women also had to change their labor negotiation practices after the war as they sought to hire the people they had formerly enslaved. In some cases, former enslavers became destitute and required the financial assistance of the people they had enslaved.
- Importantly, the end of the Civil War was an *economic* loss for white slave-owning women.

Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

- This short article exhibits the work that Hartman has done in what she calls "critical fabulation," or in other places termed "speculative fiction," in which she takes into account how historical archives, which are primarily legal/commercial documents and case files, have erased the lives of the enslaved, destitute, and otherwise powerless, and essentially fills in the chasms with well-researched guesses of what those lives would have looked like. In other words, as Hartman writes in this article, "Put differently, how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?" (3).
- It is about a dead girl named Venus that Hartman found within the ledgers of a slave ship and Hartman's own desire to write a history of Venus in defiance of the lack of archival records.
- This article is in fact in great part on the method of critical fabulation and the goals that it hopes to achieve to remedy in part the founding violence of slavery. The value of the story of Venus, Hartman suggests, is to demonstrate how the violence of that time is tied to the contemporary licenses to violence we accept.

Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince*

- This is an account of Mary Prince, an enslaved woman, by Mary Prince, given orally to a transcriber, originally taken down for abolitionist causes. It details in the first person her life from childhood to late adulthood, from the West Indies to England, and the various people who enslaved her and hired her.
- She writes at the end that her story is meant to demonstrate the strong desire for freedom that enslaved person has, and throughout, she exposes the wanton violence that was continuously and legally inflicted upon her including both physical violence and deep psychological and emotional torment. She was not only physically assaulted, but also torn from her family and her husband.

Discussion Questions:

Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Prisons, Torture, and Empire.*

- Davis discusses the ideas of the "communist," "criminal," and "terrorist" as placeholders for threats to public safety, public enemies, on which infinite punishment and torture might be justified without scrutiny. Are there other labels that exist that you think serve a similar purpose in the public imaginary?
- In which ways do the ideas of abolition democracy in Davis's work compare and contrast with Du Bois's original use, as well as with the use of the term by Allegra McLeod in last week's readings?
- This book was written in the early 2000s. Which updates would you make to the text today?

Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, Chapter 8 and Epilogue.

- Consider this quotation from the Epilogue: "De Saussure, a proud southerner and former slave owner, agreed. In her estimation, the contemporary Africans her friend described resembled 'the imported African before he was Christianized and humanized by the people of the South'" (201). Does this comment affect how you think about the ideas of "dehumanization" and "humanization" and the power dynamics inherent within these ideas?
- In which ways do you think the deep racism felt by white women (and men) toward Black persons and the economic interest they had in maintaining this racism affected each other?
- How do you think the separation of freed families during Reconstruction affects contemporary family policing and separation? Please consider this in relation to domestic "child protective services" as well as the separation of children from their families at the border.

Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

- On page 7, Hartman writes that this article is about a girl that she had made a passing reference to in an earlier work, *Lose Your Mother*. In other words, she is repairing chasms in her own archive. In which ways do you think even critical scholars today reproduce existing elisions in the archive, or even create new ones?
- Hartman writes on the last page of the article that even her story of Venus's life, turning it in a form of scholarship, puts undue burden on the dead girl. What responsibilities do you think writers, scholars, thinkers, practitioners, and anyone else who has the power to affect narratives have to ensuring that they do not exploit their subjects?
- Part of the goal of critical fabulation is to expand the bounds of what liberation might mean today. How would you use this method to try and achieve abolition as you understand it? In what ways does it relate to the positive aspects of abolition democracy?

Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince*

- Do you think that this work fills in some part the chasms that Hartman discusses?
- Mary Prince's last enslavers repeatedly say that her moral character is very bad as a blatant excuse to refuse her freedom. In what ways can you think of today in which those in power use morality as a vehicle to justify the oppression of others?