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 Sigas, Vol. 26, No. 4, Globalization and Gender (summer 2001).

Angela Y. Davis: Our visits to prisons in Europe, South America 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 the last two centuries. We need to write on the history of the prison as a colonial institution profoundly linked to that earlier era of imperialism in understanding the ease with which a form of enforcement developed in the United States—as such the supermax (super maximum security facility)”—travel around the world today and to the places where 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)—as problematic. DNA and the population 30 percent of the prison population).

AVD: 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 some with which I have been involved involuntarily, I would say that they are essentially similar. I have been always amazed at the capacity of women (as well as men) to deal with the same place. No matter how far I have traveled across time and space—from 1970 to 2000, and beyond—men are just as scared as women are. Detention in New York (where I was myself incarcerated) to the women's prison in Chicago or the Women's Prison in silver—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 feminism to divert themselves of the notion that there is universal quality in this world can make this. This makes you think about our challenge for us to rethink the boundaries between social science and the humanities—that in the deep meaning of thinking specifically about women in prison.

GD: Yes, I think our collaborative work also contests the hegemony of 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 our mutual constructive. 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 one is thinking about not just drawn from any 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 relevant here. How do we think about the possibility of a different sense could we produce knowledge about women in prison? How would this violate what we know about the historical contexts in which we live? Would we have the only 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 use can we know the knowledge it generates? This is not merely a question about how we have to rethink knowledge but having to rethink an abjection of politics at the start from the position of those women on the underside of capital but does not put in another cage.

GD: This is key to stating simply that more and more people are in prison because (as I put it in the prison industrial complex underwrites the social problems that it produces) And we have to consider criminals’ role in this in and also the means to make use of the written history of racism to understand race, gender, and globalization anew.

AVD: 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 races and religions—run all the more efficiently. Thus putatively feminist positions have bolstered the trend toward more repressive imprisonment practices for women. We can see specifically the move from the cottage/campus architectural model to the concrete fortress being constructed today. An interesting example of this feminism that demands female prisoners have APIs, women prisoners; or indeed some wardens’ insistence that women prisoners have the right to be considered every bit as dangerous as men prisoners, and the women’s ward at Ho- rizong Valley Women’s Prison in Michigan, claimed that the arsenal at the women’s prison was inferior to those in men’s institutions. She also successfully lobbied for the right to keep. GD: And we know these new recipes for equality—partially because of our own work in both capitalism and democracy—travel as a prevalent American export. It seems that we’ve been back to the point that pris oners have the right to be considered human beings, and the challenge of activism, but also a challenge to our work as feminist intellectual trying to think about the limits of feminisms and the terrain of new struggles. We can discuss, for example, the profound fact that I have an equal- ity of sameness and an equality of difference, but what about an embodied theory that also considers agency? I’m thinking of two paradigms that continue to haunt us. First of these is the incommensurability of women and the prison and the consequent sym- bolic use of women as the prison’s excess. Amnesty International’s campaign image of the woman giving birth as a symbol of war is one example. What if we see that picture up against a second example? In Cali- fornia, we know that one emerging “protection” for women that has received much attention is the prison’s women guards will be considered consensual. The history of the resistance to women’s subordination in prison also constrains us—inasmuch as they are—subordinating them in the space. We know one means of rethinking this through feminism. Your references to the prison writings of Barbara Saunders, who, through a deeply personal and sensual domestic re- relationship—you can never be sure what will happen next and what it will require emotionally (cited in Chevry- gion, 1999, xviii) are helpful. If we make a connection between violence 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 “Get 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—also in such a do- mestic violence relationship. Who these men are—in terms of class, race, and location—matters then in a different way.

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 shaping the structures that we hold to be democratic and their connections to gender and globalization. We have spoken in the past, for example, about the consequences of a cure for HIV. Largely, this is related both to the state’s production of a cure for HIV. Prisons teach us that this analysis is insuf- ficient. Perhaps the more nebulous site of our sacri- fice is the reproduction of a social world that will read an image of women prisoners in the representation of 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 women’s movements?