

Masking Radicalism: NPR and Angela Davis

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This study examines the larger patterns of how Angela Davis' activism have been covered by National Public Radio, one of the country's most respected establishment media outlets. The question is particularly relevant as Davis' work has inspired and influenced generations of scholars and activists working on a wide range of issues including mass incarceration, abolition, black liberation, feminism, political radicalism, anti-imperialism, democracy, and transnational solidarity. As the research demonstrates, the relative paucity of detailed attention to Davis' ideas in NPR's coverage is incommensurate with her undeniable cultural and political importance and is ultimately diagnostic of the liberal, establishment media system's inability to accommodate revolutionary, decolonial, and other radical critiques.

Keywords: Angela Davis, radicalism, NPR

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) announced in early January 2019 that it was reversing its decision to give the Fred Shuttlesworth Human Rights award to the legendary scholar/activist Angela Davis, many longtime advocates for Palestinian rights immediately suspected that the decision was a response to concerns about Davis' anti-Zionist views.¹ Their reading proved accurate as Davis soon confirmed in a public statement that it was her “long-term support for justice in Palestine” that was “at issue.”² Specifically, the Birmingham Holocaust Center (BHC) had written to the BCRI expressing “concern and disappointment” regarding the original decision to honor Davis, incorrectly accusing the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, which Davis has publicly endorsed, of “target[ing] the Jewish people exclusively.”³

The BHC's rhetorical strategy is a familiar one to anyone who has followed or been involved in public controversies in the U.S. regarding the Palestinian freedom struggle. The strategy involves a misleading conflation of Jewish identity with the Zionist, settler colonial project in order to lay the groundwork for painting a criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic. In her public statement, Davis undercut this strategy directly, insisting that her work has always been grounded in a spirit of “international solidarity” that includes being “as passionate about opposition to antisemitism as to racism” and that her work with Jewish organizations “has been integral to my growing consciousness regarding the importance of protesting the Israeli occupation of Palestine.”⁴ In the end, faced with mounting public mobilization on Davis' behalf, three BCRI members (including the chairman) resigned before the organization eventually reversed course a second time and presented Davis with the award in a virtual ceremony in June 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While intimidation campaigns against supporters of Palestinian rights have often been successful, the Davis case arguably exemplified how public discourse on the issue is slowly and steadily changing, thanks in part to the many prominent individuals working within the long tradition of Black-Palestinian solidarity. As these developments have begun to have an impact on the Democratic Party and have sharpened tensions between “moderates” and “progressives” within the party, establishment media outlets are starting to pay attention, as the *New York Times* did in an October 2018 article.⁵ Questions that may have been off-limits in the past, thanks to the ideological limits of the US media system so famously explored by Herman and Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*, are now finding their way into daily news coverage.

¹ An earlier version of this article was published in 2019 by *Weave News*. See John Collins, “NPR and Angela Davis: A Tale of Mythology and Missed Opportunities,” *Weave News*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.weavenews.org/stories/2019/04/08/2019-3-31-npr-and-angela-davis-a-tale-of-mythology-and-missed-opportunities>.

² Angela Davis, “Statement on the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute,” *Angela Davis* (Facebook page), January 7, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/angela-davis/statement-on-the-birmingham-civil-rights-institute/10156813038449788/>.

³ Roy S. Johnson, “Birmingham Holocaust Center asked BCRI to ‘reconsider’ Davis honor, yet ‘happy’ to meet activist,” *AL.com*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.al.com/news/2019/01/birmingham-holocaust-center-asked-bcri-to-reconsider-davis-honor-yet-happy-to-meet-activist.html>.

⁴ Davis, “Statement on the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.”

⁵ Catie Edmondson, “A New Wave of Democrats Tests the Party's Blanket Support for Israel,” *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/us/politics/democrats-israel-palestinians.html>.

The Davis/BCRI story, however, provides some reason for caution. In a pattern familiar to analysts versed in the critical analysis of US news coverage, the story was heavily covered by progressive news outlets (*The Nation*, *Colorlines*, *In These Times*, *Democracy Now!*, and others), influential outlets based outside the US (*the Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, *Ha'aretz*), and local and regional media in Alabama (*Birmingham Times*, [WBRC6 in Birmingham](#)), but there was minimal coverage from the most influential establishment news outlets. While coverage of the controversies surrounding Rep. Ilhan Omar's statements questioning the US-Israeli relationship has been plentiful, it appears that Davis' distinct perspective, grounded in decades of radical organizing, was a bridge too far.

Particularly striking was the lack of coverage of the Davis/BCRI case from National Public Radio (NPR), whose flagship programs (*Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, *Fresh Air*, and others) ignored the story entirely. NPR did publish on its website one story picked up from WBHM, its affiliate in Birmingham: a detailed story that mentions her scholarship and a range of her political views while also including critical perspectives from Marc Lamont Hill, Jewish Voice For Peace (JVP), and others.⁶ Audiences not tuned into WBHM, however, would not have known about the article unless they specifically searched the archive on NPR's website.

This puzzling absence led me to the central question of this research: What are the larger patterns in terms of how Angela Davis, her activism, and her wisdom have been reflected in the coverage provided by NPR, one of the country's most respected establishment media outlets? The question is particularly relevant as Davis' work has inspired and influenced generations of scholars and activists working on a wide range of issues including mass incarceration, abolition, black liberation, feminism, political radicalism, anti-imperialism, democracy, and transnational solidarity. As the research demonstrates, the relative paucity of detailed attention to Davis' ideas in NPR's coverage is incommensurate with her undeniable cultural and political importance and is ultimately diagnostic of the liberal, establishment media system's inability to accommodate revolutionary, decolonial, and other radical critiques.

NPR as Establishment Media

This research relies on the category of 'establishment media' as a way to refer to the collective body of highly influential news outlets (including those sometimes referred to as 'legacy' outlets) whose gatekeeping and agenda-setting roles are matched by their closeness to the very centers of power they claim to be holding accountable.⁷ I argue that other categories typically used in news media criticism, such as 'mainstream media' and 'corporate media,' are less successful in capturing the interlocking combination of political, economic, and cultural influence that is captured in the idea of 'the establishment.' With its origins in critical sociological and cultural analysis during the postwar period, 'the establishment' as a concept connects with a range of critical perspectives ranging from Frankfurt School analysis of the culture industry to C. Wright Mills' famous discussion of the 'power elite' to the work of independent journalists such as I.F. Stone.

⁶ Sherrel Wheeler Stewart, "Civil Rights Award Rescinded From Angela Davis After Jewish Community Objections," NPR, January 8, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/08/683250815/civil-rights-award-rescinded-from-angela-davis-after-jewish-community-objections>.

⁷ See John Collins et al., "The Magic Trick of Establishment Media: News Abuse in 2017-2018," in *Censored 2019*, ed. Mickey Huff and Andy Lee Roth with Project Censored (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2018).

Such critiques of ‘establishment media’ are grounded in a tradition of media criticism that has been heavily dominated by white, male scholars operating from Marxist, neo-Marxist, and anti-imperialist frameworks. Bringing a decolonial perspective to bear on this literature reminds us of the importance of angle of vision. From a traditional Left/Marxist point of view, corporate media are ‘the establishment,’ and independent media are truth-telling ‘outsiders.’ From a decolonial perspective, by contrast, all settler media (whether corporate or independent) could be considered part of ‘the (settler) establishment,’ serving to naturalize the ongoing settler project of territorial conquest, removal, and genocide.⁸ In the process, such perspectives reveal the ideological limitations of media criticism that is often silent about its own embeddedness in settler colonial structures.

One of the most striking things about NPR is the minimal amount of critical scholarly work addressing its content and its wider influence. Leaving aside the numerous trade books written by NPR journalists and other staff, there are very few book-length studies in the academic realm. Michael P. McCauley, who worked as a public radio reporter in Wisconsin before beginning his scholarly research, acknowledges the perspective of “liberal critics” but bypasses more radical voices in an attempt to adopt a relatively neutral perspective that emphasizes the “civilized voice” of NPR.⁹ Here a decolonial approach would reveal how the very discourse of “civilization” signals the operation of a colonial project and its mediatic armature. Similarly, Jack W. Mitchell offers concluding chapters on “Critics on the Right” and “Critics on the Left” (with the latter repeatedly referred to as “frustrated”), but these come across as afterthoughts to a large celebratory narrative of NPR’s centrist *boda fides* provided by an author whose career in academia was preceded by a stint as the first producer of NPR’s *All Things Considered*.¹⁰ Tom McCourt provides a more critical and rigorous approach grounded in theories of media history and the public sphere; even here, however, a discussion of NPR’s news and other content takes a back seat to the primary focus on NPR’s structural development and its attempts to “define the public.”¹¹

In short, when compared with the critical academic literature on major establishment newspapers or television news networks, particularly their ideological role in relation to the capitalist system and U.S. empire, NPR appears to be “hiding in the light” (to use Dick Hebdige’s memorable characterization of subcultures).¹² To a significant extent, this vacuum has been filled by media watchdog groups such as Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), whose critical work on NPR dates back to a major 1993 study that emphasizes the “conventionality” of NPR:

Though there are notable exceptions, NPR’s regular coverage mirrored that of commercial news programming: NPR stories focus on the same Washington-centered events and public figures as the commercial news, with the White House and Congress setting much

⁸ See Mark Cronlund Anderson and Carmen L. Robertson, *Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2011); Candis Callison and Mary Lynn Young, *Reckoning: Journalism’s Limits and Possibilities* (New York: Oxford UP, 2020); and Katie M. Grote and Jay T. Johnson, “Pipelines, protectors, and settler colonialism: media representations of the Dakota Access Pipeline protest,” *Settler Colonial Studies*, November 2021, DOI: [10.1080/2201473X.2021.1999008](https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2021.1999008).

⁹ Michael P. McCauley, *NPR: The Trials and Triumphs of National Public Radio* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005).

¹⁰ Jack W. Mitchell, *Listener Supported: The Culture and History of Public Radio* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005).

¹¹ Tom McCourt, *Conflicting Communications Interests in America: The Case of National Public Radio* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999).

¹² Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 35.

of the political agenda. NPR's sources often paralleled those of Nightline and other network public affairs shows, with a similar tilt toward government sources and politically centrist or conservative think tanks and publications. While NPR's special series and cultural reporting reflected considerable diversity, its day-to-day coverage of politics, economics and social issues, as well as its regular commentaries, did not come close to reflecting the ethnic, gender or class composition of the American public.¹³

FAIR's subsequent studies of NPR constitute a rich archive grounded in tried-and-true approaches such as source analysis, ideology critique, and comparative news analysis. Many of them emphasize the organization's failure to maintain a critical distance from corporate power, the US national security apparatus, and the talking points provided by Beltway pundits.

The claim that NPR operates squarely within the realm of 'establishment media,' of course, runs counter to much of the network's own self-image, which emphasizes its 'public' and 'independent' elements. Many sympathetic narratives of NPR's history, including a 2021 *Throughline* podcast celebrating the organization's 50th anniversary, include references to its 'outsider' and experimental origins, even as they acknowledge how it has come to occupy considerable space within the media marketplace in recent decades:

National Public Radio began as a small, scrappy news organization with big ideals and a very small footprint. Over the subsequent years of coverage and programming, NPR has grown and evolved into a mainstream media outlet, with a mission of serving audiences that reflect America.¹⁴

What stands out in many such narratives is the attention paid to the voices and identities of its on-air pioneers. As Jason Loviglio notes, these include the 'founding mothers' who helped open the door for more women to enter professional journalism while playing "a key role in giving NPR its distinctive sound," as well as the commentators whose regional and 'ethnic' accents helped chip away at the dominance of white, male, northern voices.¹⁵ This emphasis on the diverse "sonic palette" of NPR's airwaves reveals the extent to which many assessments of NPR's cultural role appeal to hegemonic notions of progress and (neo)liberal multiculturalism while eschewing a critical appraisal of news content.

NPR's establishment status was solidified through the 1980s and 1990s as the organization sought to respond to budget deficits, perpetual threats to its federal funding, and internal tensions over the relationship between local stations and NPR in Washington. As McCauley and others have noted, the debt issue played a significant role, with NPR's leadership during the Reagan years developing a new business model that was more consistent with the realities of a neoliberal political economy.

¹³ Charlotte Ryan, "A Study of National Public Radio," *Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting*, April 1, 1993, <https://fair.org/home/a-study-of-national-public-radio/>.

¹⁴ NPR, "Who is NPR (For)?" *Throughline* (podcast), June 10, 2021.

¹⁵ Jason Loviglio, "NPR is still expanding the range of what authority sounds like after 50 years," *The Conversation*, December 6, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/npr-is-still-expanding-the-range-of-what-authority-sounds-like-after-50-years-124571>.

This model included opening its doors to lucrative forms of corporate “underwriting” (a term carefully chosen to suggest a distinction from mere advertising or “sponsorship”), leading to inevitable questions about whether “going commercial” would overwhelm the commitments of public service and journalistic integrity.¹⁶

Equally revealing, however, was the decision to turn to senior leaders whose resumes included intensive involvement in Washington politics. Even prior to the formal start of the “Reagan Revolution,” the hiring of lawyer and former Robert Kennedy press secretary Frank Mankiewicz as NPR’s chief executive in 1977 signaled a strategic wager on the Washington insider. Mankiewicz’ controversial tenure, which culminated in NPR’s 1983 debt crisis, led to the hiring of former Carter administration official Douglas Bennet, who was succeeded by former diplomat, telecommunications executive, and political operative Delano Lewis. This series of leadership choices helped cement NPR’s own insider identity at a time when its news division was deepening its symbiotic relationship with sources in the national security state and in Washington more generally – a clear sign of establishment status.

Classic media studies concepts such as agenda-setting and gatekeeping provide a solid foundation for summarizing NPR’s establishment role in the production and reproduction of hegemonic frameworks associated with US empire, settler colonialism, and global capitalism. In particular, we can identify five interrelated forms of gatekeeping through which NPRs helps to shepherd the maintenance of colonial-capitalist common sense. In what might be called *narrative gatekeeping*, coverage of social issues is systematically refracted through the voices of other dominant voices and institutions: other establishment media outlets, Beltway pundits and think tanks, elected officials, and representatives of the national security state. Through *political gatekeeping*, NPR helps define the (inherently arbitrary) political center by policing the borders around it, providing ample space for Democratic and Republican party voices and minimal space for those operating outside these parameters. In the process, structural critiques of taken-for-granted positions held by both parties find little space on the airwaves.

NPR also plays an important *cultural gatekeeping* role, effectively enacting the culture of liberalism by curating the world for its listeners, delineating the boundaries of acceptable taste and discourse, and so forth. Similarly, the network carries out the work of *racial gatekeeping* and *settler gatekeeping*, presenting ‘acceptable’ and relatively non-threatening discussions of race for a primarily white, liberal audience while avoiding any direct interrogation of settler colonialism as an ongoing political project. These forms of establishment gatekeeping, all carried out through NPR’s particular brand and platforms, provide essential context for the analysis of the six coverage patterns presented below.

¹⁶ McCauley, 9-10.

Methodology

Research for this article combined gathering examples from NPR's own online story archive; an initial round of content analysis designed to illuminate possible patterns in the data; construction of categories through which to group the stories; qualitative analysis of the stories, both individually and in the aggregate; and finally, ideological critique of the patterns in NPR's coverage. The latter effort draws not only on longstanding critiques of establishment/corporate US news media and its deeper ideological role in securing support for US militarism and neoliberal capitalism, but also on decolonial frameworks that help illuminate the world-making practices of settler discourse.

In the interest of thoroughness, I sought to ground my analysis in an examination of the full set of NPR stories referencing Angela Davis as of March 2019. I gathered the data by using the search engine provided at NPR's website (www.npr.org), which aggregates NPR's national stories as well as selected stories from local affiliates.¹⁷ I also filtered the results by checking the "heard on air" box, since I was especially interested in learning how often NPR's listeners were given the chance to hear from Davis herself. This initial search, conducted in March 2019, turned up 45 results stretching between 1997 and 2018. Upon closer examination, six of the 45 results were irrelevant as they referred to other people also named Angela Davis. I removed those from my results, leaving a total of 39 relevant stories (see Appendix).¹⁸ Of those 39, all but one were available for review through a transcript or recording.

Beginning with a close reading/listening of each story, I paid particular attention to how the invocation of Davis, references to her history and work, and/or the inclusion of her own words fit within the story's narrative structure. Key analytical questions included: In what context is Davis mentioned? How is she characterized? In relation to which types of programming and coverage? When is Davis speaking? When, and by whom, is she being spoken about? Which aspects of her life and work are foregrounded? Which are backgrounded? Finally, I sought to step back from the individual stories and develop a critical analysis of the patterns in the data and their ideological significance. Here the concept of establishment media emerged in sharp relief alongside the specific aspects of NPR's political and cultural role referenced above.

Relative absence

Arguably the most interesting findings from this data concern the ideological patterns that are best revealed through qualitative analysis. At the same time, even a brief quantitative analysis can help situate NPR's coverage of Davis in relation to broader patterns. The numbers referenced above – 39 mentions of Davis over a 22-year period – constitute a striking pattern of (relative) absence for such a distinctive, prolific, and influential intellectual. Moreover, it is noteworthy that of those 39 mentions, only a very small number involve a direct engagement with her ideas and/or place her

¹⁷ It is unclear how NPR decides which local stories to include in its national archive.

¹⁸ It is important to emphasize that I conducted this search prior to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the subsequent wave of mass protests against police violence and white supremacy. Several new stories referencing Davis appeared in NPR's archive between March 2019 and the final writing of this article. I address these in the Postscript below.

at the center of the story. Instead, the majority of the stories mention Davis only in passing, with the invocation of her name serving as a brief example or point of context within a larger narrative.

In a 2006 *Talk of the Nation* interview on the Jim Jones documentary, for example, screenwriter Nolan Walker references how the People’s Temple emerged at a time of “revolutionary ferment” in Northern California. “They were friends with Angela Davis, they were friends with Dianne Feinstein, they were friends with Harvey Milk,” Walker observes, “and there was all of this kind of possibility that people felt in the air...”¹⁹ Here and elsewhere we see Davis mentioned in passing as a noteworthy figure from key moments in U.S. history, but her actual views are not discussed. In other cases, such as a 2007 reference to Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas’ interest in Davis during the former’s “militant phase,” the invocation of Davis functions as a synecdoche that segregates Davis’ relevance in a past era of the country’s own “militant phase,” obviating the possibility that her “militancy” might be able to speak to us today. We see similar patterns in stories that briefly link Davis with individuals including scholar Manning Marable, court reporter Linda Deutsch, and musicians Aretha Franklin and Fela Kuti.

While a larger examination of racial representation in NPR’s programming is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that race alone is insufficient to explain the scant number of references to Davis. Other prominent Black authors and political figures such as Toni Morrison, Jesse Jackson, Cornel West, James Baldwin, Henry Louis Gates, Clarence Page, and Al Sharpton are featured in NPR’s archive in greater numbers. References to Sharpton, for example, outnumber those to Davis by a factor of ten for reasons that likely have to do with the former’s high public profile within mainstream U.S. electoral politics. Perhaps a more interesting comparison concerns Baldwin, twenty years Davis’ senior, whose writing offers equally trenchant critiques of dominant culture, yet whose views have found a more sustained hearing on NPR.

Again referring to the numerical data, the relatively small number of references to Davis appears to place her within a different group of public intellectuals: those who offer deep structural critiques that place them firmly outside the ideological boundaries such as the two-party system, the so-called “Washington Consensus” on neoliberal capitalism, and hegemonic assumptions about the inherently benevolent nature of U.S. foreign policy. From NPR’s perspective, in other words, Davis has more in common with Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Bill McKibben, and Arundhati Roy.

Temporal removal

Qualitative analysis of the data reveals a number of patterns, all of which dovetail with well-established traditions grounded in ideology critique, decolonial studies, and other critical frameworks. The first pattern is the tendency to frame Davis as a public figure whose significance derives primarily from something that happened half a century ago. The NPR archive contains numerous references to Davis as a “1960s activist,” with the actual details of her political activities during that period typically hiding in the background. In such coverage, NPR presents Davis through a kind temporal removal: she is a memorable character in a specific chapter of American history that can now be viewed safely from a distance. The 2007 interview with court reporter Linda Deutsch, for example, temporally fixes the importance of Davis’ 1972 trial in an era that is

¹⁹ <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6375959>

implied to have ended definitively. “Some saw her as a hero. Others saw her as an activist,” observes the interviewer in a classic liberal “both sides” move, to which Deutsch responds:

I always say that trials mirror history. That if you wanted to know what was going on in America at a specific time, you needed to walk into a courtroom and look around and listen to what was happening. And you would see, for instance in the Ellsberg trial, you saw the Vietnam War. In the Angela Davis trial, you saw the story of the Black Panthers.

Presented as a kind of shorthand historicization, this removal does more than simply mask the specific character of the radical movements that forced their way onto the front page during the years surrounding Davis’ rise to public prominence. It also severs that specific history from the larger radical tradition into which it belongs – a tradition that predates the 1960s and extends into the present.

Through this type of coverage, Davis’ political importance – then and now – is magically converted into a less threatening form of cultural symbolism. The implication is that if NPR listeners need to know about Davis at all, it is as part of their general historical and cultural knowledge. To be sure, such coverage has the potential to help listeners understand how culture works as a site of political struggle. Too often, however, much like predominantly white universities that respond to material demands for racial justice by organizing cultural events, NPR employs such discussions as a “safer” way of addressing deeply political issues without upsetting its presumed (white, liberal) audience. Through this aestheticization of politics as refracted through the work of cultural elites, political radicalism emerges as something to be consumed visually or through historical narrative, not something that urgently belongs in discussions of contemporary news and politics.

Keeping revolutionary politics at arm’s length

When it comes to Davis’ actual political views in the present, a second pattern becomes quite clear: there is a striking absence of references to her entire body of post-1960s work as a scholar-activist, particularly her work on mass incarceration and prison abolition.

Davis’ formative contributions in the latter area include 2003’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 2005’s *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Prisons, Torture, and Empire*, as well as innumerable articles and public lectures on the subject. In addition to helping to popularize the phrase “prison industrial complex,” she is a co-founder of the influential group Critical Resistance, which “seeks to build an international movement to end the Prison Industrial Complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe.”²⁰

NPR has provided some coverage of mass incarceration issues and appears to be addressing the topic more frequently in recent years. *Fresh Air*, for example, has aired a number of interviews with guests such as Judge Victoria Pratt, author Julian Adler, law professor Emily Bazelon, lawyer Brittany Barnett, and sociologist Reuben Jonathan Miller.²¹ In keeping with the culturalization

²⁰ Critical Resistance, “About: Mission,” <http://criticalresistance.org/about/>.

²¹ Terry Gross, “How Can America Reduce Mass Incarceration?” *Fresh Air*, Aug. 6, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/06/635972655/road-map-how-to-reform-the-america-s-justice-system>; “American

pattern mentioned above, mass incarceration tends to appear on NPR's airwaves via discussions of novels, memoirs, films, hip-hop, and other cultural forms. Explicit references to mass incarceration in daily news coverage are much less frequent. Through all of this, NPR's curation of a public "conversation" about the topic appears to have left one of the most important radical voices on mass incarceration out of the room.

There are, however, a small number of important exceptions to this pattern within the dataset, and these exceptions reveal a third pattern: If not for the efforts of women of color - journalists, artists, activists - there would be virtually nothing in NPR's archive about Davis other than relatively superficial references. The first two cases here are interviews featuring two artists of color connected with the 2013 documentary *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners*: director Shola Lynch and producer Jada Pinkett-Smith. Both interviews were conducted by NPR studio host Michel Martin, whose NPR credits include creating the *Tell Me More* program and hosting the weekend *All Things Considered* broadcast.

In the first segment, Pinkett-Smith immediately puts Davis' importance in a global context ("she became this figure that embodied justice and freedom, and...people all over the world that were fighting for justice and freedom, you know, used her as the symbol in which to forge ahead") and insists upon the contemporary relevance of the historical material covered in the film ("I look at Angela Davis now as being a figure that was really in the middle of the building blocks of the America that we have today"). Unsurprisingly for a wealthy and successful entrepreneur, she also places Davis within a narrative of liberal progress that has enabled her family "to exist in the way that we do." Both Martin and Pinkett-Smith are careful to dance around the question of Davis' specific political orientation, with the former briefly mentioning Davis' membership in the Communist Party and the latter initially relying on liberal platitudes:

And I have to tell you that you might not necessarily believe in her political beliefs, and you might not necessarily appreciate her stance on certain things, but I tell you what. There's not a human being that I don't think that could look at Angela Davis and have respect for the courage to stick to her values and stay strong in her convictions through all of the turmoil that she encountered. And that is something to respect, because I - you don't see that a lot these days.

Toward the end of the conversation, however, Pinkett-Smith responds to a question about the cultural and racial politics of magazine covers by insisting that Davis' case reveals something important about what can inspire people to mobilize across racial lines in support of "justice and freedom."

Echoing Pinkett-Smith's careful "you might not necessarily appreciate her stance on certain things" statement, Lynch tells Martin in a subsequent *Tell Me More* broadcast that through making the film, she came to appreciate Davis' "integrity" and willingness to stand up for her beliefs

Prosecution & Mass Incarceration," *Fresh Air*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/10/711852274/american-prosecution-mass-incarceration>; "A Lawyer Combats The Mass Incarceration Crisis," *Fresh Air*, Dec. 9, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/09/944620114/a-lawyer-combats-the-mass-incarceration-crisis>; "The Afterlife of Mass Incarceration," *Fresh Air*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/24/980778161/the-afterlife-of-mass-incarceration>.

“whether I agree with her choices or not.” Martin then reads part of a letter her program received about the Pinkett-Smith interview from “an African-American law enforcement officer and former corrections officer” who chides NPR for skirting around the details of Davis’ actions. She then asks Lynch, “I did want to ask whether you feel that your film, in part, either sanitizes or glamorizes what she did.” Once again, Lynch is cautious in her language, arguing that it became clear through her research that Davis wasn’t the “mastermind” behind the violence and therefore should have been acquitted. For her part, Martin acknowledges that Davis may have had good reason to arm herself in self-defense, given the threats she had received as a member of the Communist Party.

As some of the most detailed discussions of Davis in the NPR archive, these two interviews use the release of Lynch’s documentary to inquire gently into Davis as a controversial figure in recent American history. While the stories themselves are exceptional when placed in the context of the scant coverage as a whole, they nonetheless run up against the limitations of NPR’s centrist liberalism. When NPR brings in others to talk about Davis, they give the mic to those who either distance themselves from Davis’ actions or are openly opposed to them. Nowhere is there a voice – Davis’ or any other – that seeks to defend, explain, or justify those actions on revolutionary or other grounds. For example, NPR’s listeners interested in Lynch’s documentary might have benefited from the perspective of a guest with direct experience in the Black Panther Party. Similarly, the issue that gives the documentary its title – the existence of political prisoners in the U.S. – is never discussed in detail as a past or present reality.

The third exceptional example is a 2017 *Fresh Air* review of Ava DuVernay’s award-winning film *13th*, which explores the roots of mass incarceration in the history of slavery. Here the inclusion in the film of Davis’ famous 1972 response to a white interviewer’s question about violence (“when someone asks me about violence, I just find it incredible because what it means is that the person who’s asking that question has absolutely no idea what black people have gone through”) provides an opportunity for listeners to learn something about the actual political motives behind Davis’ work. *Fresh Air* film critic John Powers builds the clip into his review, identifying it as “one of the strongest moments” in the film.

What emerges from all of these examples – both the superficial references in the archive and the more substantial discussions provided in the latter four stories, is a sense of Angela Davis as a person who is politically significant, yet whose actual political views on real issues are apparently not worthy of detailed consideration. Here a fourth pattern comes into view: to the extent that Davis’ political views are referenced at all, even obliquely, it is her anti-capitalism that is most unexamined. Instead, her perspective on issues of race and gender tend to be highlighted. Such is the case in a 2006 *All Things Considered* segment that features Davis (author of a 1999 book on blues singers and Black feminism²²) and several others contextualizing Mamie Smith’s famous 1920 recording of “Crazy Blues.” While a 2018 episode of *IA* does open with a quotation from Davis that speaks to issues of intersectionality in the political and social role of Black women (“Black women have had to develop a larger vision of our society than perhaps any other group. They have had to understand white men, white women, and black men. And they have had to understand themselves.”), the tendency is to situate her as part of a set of less threatening narratives

²² Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holliday* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

of cultural progress. Expressed most directly in Jada Pinkett-Smith's claim that Davis' work led teleologically to the election of Barack Obama and the success of Black entrepreneurs, this framing exists in tension with the radical critique of racial capitalism that lies at the core of Davis' worldview.

“Just this enormous head of hair, very intimidating”

Given NPR's tendency to tread carefully around any substantive discussion of radical politics and to rely instead on cultural intermediaries, it's not surprising that the dataset would show a kind of collective obsession with Davis' hair and her visual status as a cultural icon. “Her name is Angela Davis, and you might remember her as the woman with the big afro,” observes Martin at the start of her interview with Pinkett-Smith. In a 2014 story on the “hair politics” of a new version of the musical *Annie*, an interviewee notes that “the fro is too political or too threatening or too black or something,” to which the reporter responds, “Lest we confuse Annie with Angela Davis.” Davis' hair also makes an appearance in a 2017 story about the paintings of Kerry James Marshall and a 2014 interview with model and actress Yaya Alafia. And in 2013, quiz show *Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me* host Peter Sagal discusses afros with singer Carla Thomas: “Like Angela Davis is what I'm thinking of, you know, just this enormous halo of hair, very intimidating.”

When the *New Yorker* published a satirical and controversial cover cartoon showing a “fist bump” between Barack and Michelle Obama (the former shown in sandals, a robe, and a turban like the “secret Muslim” many Republicans claimed he was, the latter depicted with an AK-47 slung over her back and a large afro) in 2008 during the height of the U.S. presidential campaign, NPR showed significant interest in the debate surrounding Barry Blitt's artwork. While widely read as lampooning right-wing talking points and conspiracy theories, the cartoon's caption (“The Politics of Fear”) implicitly spoke equally well to the liberal fear of Black radicalism. The entire debate was also a perfect storm of establishment media fodder: a chance to talk about the intersection of the New York City cultural scene and the Beltway political scene.

While there is no denying that Davis' hair has political and cultural significance (both “then” and “now”), there is a clear ideological pattern in this coverage: for NPR, Davis' hair functions as a “myth” in Roland Barthes' sense of that term: a device designed to drain the item of its full historical and political context and fill it with a new meaning that is more palatable to and useful for the ruling class.²³ In this case, repeated references to Davis' hair and appearance, even when presented in discussions about race, serve to signify generic, decontextualized notions of “radicalism” or “militancy.” Meanwhile, to complete Barthes' mythological process, such references assist in what Barthes would call the “exnomination” (literally the un-naming) of the actual structures that Davis has spent most of her life seeking to name and dismantle: capitalism, white supremacy, settler colonialism, and the prison industrial complex.

Absent anti-Zionism

To return to where we began, there is also a final pattern: one would never know from listening to NPR's national broadcasts (until 2020 – see below) that Davis has ever articulated a position on anything to do with Israel, Zionism, or Palestinian rights. This is a glaring omission given that

²³ Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies: The Complete Edition, in a New Translation*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013 [1957]).

Davis is widely recognized in progressive and radical circles as one of the most eloquent, outspoken, and powerful supporters of the Palestinian cause. Her 2016 book, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, features solidarity with Palestine as a prominent theme and seeks to connect the Palestinian struggle with the Ferguson uprising and other contemporary movements. A decolonial reading of this absence demonstrates how the ex-nomination of anti-Zionism as a principled political position is organically related to the ex-nomination of settler colonialism itself. (The phrase “settler colonialism” appears even less often in NPR’s archive than Davis does.) This un-naming represents a failure to help readers understand what settler colonialism is and how it operates transnationally as a set of “deep structures” both within and across the boundaries of settler states. Specifying that establishment media outlets such as NPR are also settler media outlets points to larger implications that stretch well beyond media studies: “the establishment” is, by definition, a settler project.

If NPR seeks to present a range of relevant views on issues, why wouldn’t it want to hear from Davis as a representative of an influential radical tradition that takes a clear position on Zionism and the struggle for Palestinian freedom? Here it is worth noting that even when NPR was providing sustained coverage of Ferguson and the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter, Davis was never interviewed on the subject. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Davis’ commitment to a transnational, solidarity-based notion of solidarity provides the best explanation for her striking absence from NPR’s airwaves.²⁴

Postscript: signs of change?

The patterns in NPR’s coverage of Angela Davis during the period analyzed here (1997 to 2018) reveal a great deal about NPR itself, particularly its role in cultivating and maintaining a cultural consensus among the nation’s centrist elites while policing the boundaries of “acceptable” political discourse. Beyond NPR, the patterns also tell us something important about the American tradition of seeking to reduce radical, systemic critiques to historical footnotes and objects of cultural fascination. In the case of Davis, one is tempted to conclude that her systemic, intersectional critiques of capitalism, white supremacy, and U.S. imperialism are simply not admissible within the “common sense” that NPR serves to reproduce. Equally important, the relative absence of Davis’ voice from NPR’s airwaves signals the absence of attention to the entire Black radical tradition, most notably its anti-capitalist and anticolonial elements – as something that predates her emergence (which is treated as episodic) and continues down to today.

At the same time, a brief look at NPR’s coverage since the completion of the analysis for this study suggests that the “war of position” over these ideas is very much alive, even in establishment media outlets such as NPR. The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020, following several years of #BlackLivesMatter activism throughout the U.S. and beyond, appears to have pushed NPR to create more space for some dissident voices. As these contemporary movements have begun to amplify and widen the calls for police and prison abolition, for example, NPR’s coverage of these issues has included more references to Davis’

²⁴ See “Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Angela Davis on Ferguson, Palestine & the Foundations of a Movement,” *Democracy Now!*, March 28, 2016, https://www.democracynow.org/2016/3/28/freedom_is_a_constant_struggle_angela.

foundational work.²⁵ Similarly, a June 2021 *Morning Edition* story on the history of Black-Palestinian solidarity (dating back to the positions taken in support of Palestinian liberation by Malcolm X, Davis, and other Black radicals) would have been unthinkable prior to the recent period of Black mobilization and the explosion of global outrage in May 2021 against Israeli state violence against Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah, Gaza, and throughout Palestine.²⁶ Perhaps most striking is the June 2020 WBUR profile of Davis, in which reporters Tonya Mosley and Allison Hagan explicitly reference Davis' discussion of racial capitalism in the context of a broader discussion of what the George Floyd uprisings reveal about the long arc of the Black freedom struggle.²⁷

“Activists who are truly committed to changing the world should recognize that the work that we often do that receives no public recognition can eventually matter,” says Davis in the latter article, pointing to the example of abolitionist work. “Sometimes it's important to say what you mean and have the conversations,” she continues. “And of course, when many of us began to talk about abolishing these institutions back in the 1970s, we were treated as if we were absolutely out of our minds.” The fact that NPR is now allowing a bit of space for Davis to share her radical vision is cause for celebration, but also a confirmation of one of the patterns we saw above: NPR doesn't talk about Angela Davis in detail unless people of color push for it, either in the studio or in the streets.

Appendix: NPR stories examined for this research

1. “Nichols' Lawyer” (1997): Davis is mentioned briefly as one of the other people previously defended by the lawyer representing accused Oklahoma City bomber Terry Nichols. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1037539>
2. “Preserving Pacifica Radio's Archives” (2003). In this interview with the Pacifica Radio Archives Director, Davis is referenced as one of many people featured in the archive. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1177819>
3. “Campaign Stirs Debate over ‘Liberal’ Academics” (2006): This story on David Horowitz's book *The 101 Most Dangerous Professors* includes Davis as part of a list of “all the old 60s radicals” who “turn up in the book.” <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5223047>
4. “A Hattie McDaniel Postage Stamp?” (2006): This report on a new postage stamp featuring *Gone With the Wind* actress Hattie McDaniel notes, “Although her picture is positive enough and better looking than Aunt Jemima, you won't confuse her for Angela Davis or a member of the French Underground.” <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5306369>

²⁵ See Steve Inskeep, “Rochester, N.Y., Wants To Reimagine Police. What Do People Imagine That Means?” *Morning Edition*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/10/992517715/rochester-n-y-wants-to-reimagine-police-what-do-people-imagine-that-means>; and Emmanuel Johnson, “What Would It Take To Abolish Prisons And The Police,” *IA*, Aug. 18, 2020, <https://theia.org/segments/abolitionists-police-prison/>.

²⁶ Hansi Lo Wang, “The Complicated History Behind BLM's Solidarity With The Pro-Palestinian Movement,” *Morning Edition*, June 12, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/07/1003872848/the-complicated-history-behind-blms-solidarity-with-the-pro-palestinian-movement>.

²⁷ Tonya Mosley and Allison Hagan, “‘An Extraordinary Moment’: Angela Davis Says Protests Recognize Long-Overdue Anti-Racist Work,” *Here & Now*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/06/19/angela-davis-protests-anti-racism>.

5. “New Film Re-Examines Mass Suicide at Jonestown” (2006): In this *Talk of the Nation* interview, the co-screenwriter of a film on People’s Temple leader Jim Jones drops Davis’ name when referencing the political climate in Northern California in the 1970s. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6375959>
6. “Mamie Smith and the Birth of the Blues Market” (2006): Part of series on “The Sounds of American Culture,” this story includes Davis (author of a book on the blues and Black feminism) introducing herself as UC-Santa Cruz professor and speaking about Mamie Smith and the broader social/cultural context surrounding her music. <https://www.npr.org/2006/11/11/6473116/mamie-smith-and-the-birth-of-the-blues-market>
7. “Courts Reporter Looks Back on Memorable Trials” (2007): This interview with longtime court reporter Linda Deutsch includes three mentions of the Davis trial as one of many famous trials Deutsch covered. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6861047>
8. *Latino USA* (2007): This brief summary of the program’s contents notes that the episode featured an interview with Davis on Black-Latino relations. The audio of the episode is not available on NPR’s website, nor is a transcript. <https://www.npr.org/2007/02/16/7444139/latino-usa>
9. “Teacher, Student Recall a Segregated Classroom” (2007): This story excerpts a book written by a white teacher who taught in a segregated school in rural West Virginia. In it, the teacher recalls that some of his Black students went on to “pose for their senior class photographs in magnificent Afros worthy of Bobby Seale and Angela Davis.” <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9074320>
10. “Challenging Stereotypes Through Photos” (2007): Deborah Willis, curator of an exhibition on the Black American image in photography, briefly mentions an image of Davis as one that can prompt viewers to develop a better understanding of history. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11022034>
11. “Clarence Thomas Takes a Chance on Memoir” (2007): This John McWhorter review of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas’ memoir notes that an affinity with Davis’ ideas was part of the “militant phase” during which Thomas’ dropped out of seminary. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15005510>
12. “What’s Next For Obama?” (2008): This story draws a contrast between Barack Obama’s presidential campaign (“He’s standing to win”) and the previous campaigns for national office of Davis, Jesse Jackson, and Al Sharpton. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17984575>
13. “Michelle Obama Endures Public Scrutiny” (2008): This brief opinion piece describes Michelle Obama as “Angela Davis without the ‘fro.” <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91779977>
14. “World’s Oldest Blogger Signs Off at Age 108” (2008): In this roundup of “news worth an honorable mention,” the NPR host asks a guest about the controversial *New Yorker* cover by Barry Blitt picturing Michelle Obama “basically dressed as Angela Davis, black-power outfit, big afro, automatic assault rifle slung over his shoulder.” <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92510156>
15. “Satire In Politics: When Does It Go Too Far?” (2008): This episode of *Talk of the Nation* discusses the *New Yorker* cover referenced in the previous story. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92556059>

16. “‘Fela’ Celebrates the Father of Afrobeat” (2008). This story on legendary Nigerian musician Fela Kuti notes that he was influenced by a meeting with Davis during his 1969 U.S. tour. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95187083>
17. “‘Black Power!’: Inside the Movement” (2009): This interview with historian Peniel Joseph mentions Davis as a common symbol of the Black Power movement. The interview begins her first question with a reference to the *New Yorker* cover. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102691304>
18. “Willie Nelson: The Latest Hair-Raising Celebrity Tale” (2010): *Jet* magazine columnist Kelly Carter notes the popularity of Davis’ hairstyle during the late 1960s and early 1970s. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127220262>
19. “Uncovering the ‘Truth’ Behind Lennon’s FBI Files” (2010): In a *Fresh Air* interview, Author Jon Wiener mentions that he previously consulted on a documentary featuring Davis and others. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130401193>
20. “Mourning a Mentor: Students Pay Tribute to Marable” (2011): In this remembrance of prominent Columbia University scholar Manning Marable, a former graduate student recalls Marable’s closeness with Davis. <https://www.npr.org/2011/04/04/135113358/mourning-a-mentor-students-pay-tribute-to-marable>
21. “Time to ‘Redefine’ Media Portrayals of Black Women” (2011): In this *Talk of the Nation* discussion with author Sophia Nelson, there is an exchange between Nelson and a caller regarding the *New Yorker* cover and its connection with Davis. <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=137451473>
22. “Occupy Berlin Continues, For Now” (2011): A protester in Berlin mentions that Davis came to visit the Occupy Berlin encampment. <https://www.npr.org/2011/11/29/142893596/occupy-berlin-continues-legally-for-now>
23. “Jada Pinkett Smith: Respect for Angela Davis’ Turmoil...and Hair” (2013): This episode of *Tell Me More* features an extended interview with Jada Pinkett Smith, executive producer of the documentary *Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners*. <https://www.npr.org/2013/04/04/176239047/jada-pinkett-smith-respect-for-angela-davis-turmoil-and-hair>
24. “Angela Davis Film Explores the ‘Terrorist’ and Scholar” (2013): In this follow-up episode of *Tell Me More*, host Michel Martin interviews Shola Lynch, director of the Davis documentary. <https://www.npr.org/2013/04/18/177765543/angela-davis-film-explores-the-terrorist-and-scholar>
25. “Paris Has Been A Haven For African Americans Escaping Racism” (2013): This story names Davis as one of many Black writers who chose to move to Paris. <https://www.npr.org/2013/09/02/218074523/paris-has-been-a-haven-for-african-americans-escaping-racism>
26. “‘Queen of Memphis Soul’ Carla Thomas Plays Not My Job” (2013): NPR quiz show host Peter Sagal references Davis when discussing afros with singer Carla Thomas. <https://www.npr.org/2013/12/20/255731431/queen-of-memphis-soul-carla-thomas-plays-not-my-job>
27. “From Top Model To Black Panther, Actress Yaya Alafia Is ‘Truly African-American.’” (2014): *Tell Me More* host Michel Martin refers to Davis’ hair during a discussion with model and actress Yaya Alafia. <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=276054652>

28. “Bill Supporting Women’s History Museum Advances In Congress” (2014): This story from WBUR identifies “people like” Davis as a reason why negotiations over the proposed Women’s History Museum will be “sticky.”
<https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2014/05/08/womens-history-museum>
29. “Josh Healey – ‘JDate’” (2014): This *Snap Judgment* episode features Josh Healey telling a story about how his mother would like to meet a man with “Richard Gere's face and Angela Davis's politics.”
<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=347945124>
30. “The Annie Of Tomorrow Has The Same Hard Knocks, But Different Hair” (2014): This story on the new “Annie” musical uses Davis as an example of hairstyles often viewed as “too political or too threatening or too black or something.”
<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=369640628>
31. “Detroit Civil Rights Activist Grace Lee Boggs Dies At 100” (2015): This story includes a brief soundbite of Davis talking about the work of Grace Lee Boggs.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=446370828>
32. “‘13th’ Maps The Road From Slavery To Mass Incarceration” (2016) This *Fresh Air* review of the documentary *13th* includes the famous clip of Davis talking about violence in response to a question from an interviewer in 1972.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=498811546>
33. “Novelist Zadie Smith On Nostalgia And The Nature Of Talent” (2016): In an interview on *Fresh Air*, novelist Zadie Smith reads a passage in which a character expresses admiration for Davis.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=502857118>
34. “‘Peace Ball’ Takes Different Approach To Inauguration Festivities” (2017): This story mentions Davis as one of several “notable guests” at an alternative inauguration ball.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=509937042>
35. “‘Dolores’ Focuses On Life of Labor and Civil Rights Leader Dolores Huerta” (2017): This story notes that Davis one of the “famous feminist voices” heard in a new documentary film.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=511103628>
36. “Kerry James Marshall: A Black Presence In The Art World Is ‘Not Negotiable’” (2017): The curator of a new art exhibition in Los Angeles references Davis when noting the variety of hairstyles represented in the exhibition.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=521683667>
37. “Black Women’s Political Power And The Savior Syndrome” (2018) This episode of *1A* begins with a brief Davis quote on the social role of Black women.
<https://the1a.org/shows/2018-02-07/black-womens-political-power-and-the-savior-syndrome>
38. “TV Series Examines The Significance Of Trayvon Martin’s Death” (2018): This story includes a soundbite of Davis speaking about Trayvon Martin in the TV series.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=633891634>
39. “At Aretha Franklin’s Funeral, Gospel Was The Heart – And The Backbone” (2018): This story mentions support for Davis during her incarceration as part of Aretha Franklin’s political orientation.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=643828580>

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