



US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient name: Arianna Parisi

Project title: The Roots of the Black Abolitionist Feminist Tradition: From the Combahee River Collective to the Movement for Black Lives

Summary of project:

My PhD thesis aims to retrace the history of Black women's theoretical and activist contributions to the prison abolitionist movement in the United States, which led to what is today called Black abolition feminism. While the topic of this thesis has grown in popularity in recent years, especially after prison abolitionism has been popularised in 2020 during the Black Lives Matter demonstration in the United States, most of the existing literature stems from the disciplines of criminology, psychology, and philosophy rather than history. Moreover, much of the current work overlooks the contributions of Black women and Black feminists, particularly in the early stages of anticarceral activism. My PhD project aims to remedy these existing gaps in the literature. For this reason, much of the historical reconstruction that my project aims to do needs to be based on archival research.

Thanks to the US Phelan Centre Summer Grant I was able to extend my research stay in the United States and gain access to two additional archives. The grant allowed me to visit The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, in New York City.

At the Schlesinger Library, I had access to the papers of Angela Y. Davis, renowned activist, prison abolitionist advocate and Black feminist scholar, who was incarcerated for almost two years between 1970 and 1972 for political reasons. The collection in the library includes over 150 boxes of mostly unpublished materials such as correspondence, speaking notes, writings, teaching documents, spanning five decades of Davis's activism. Particularly well documented are Davis's incarceration and trial, with personal writings on her incarceration, on the prison system, and letters she exchanged with families, friends, supporters, and other incarcerated people in the United States and abroad. The documents I found have been crucial to my research at this stage, since Davis's early anticarceral activism is the topic of the first chapter of my thesis. Even if it has not received attention in the literature, I consider Davis's activism between the late 1960s and early 1970s a crucial period to understand how her political thought evolved and changed over time, and which is indispensable to comprehend Black abolition feminism today. Also, her period incarcerated between 1970 and 1972 is a critical time because prison became for her a catalyst for the development of a radical political thought against prisons. Furthermore, not only are Davis's works indispensable as primary sources, but the broader knowledge I have gained through the reading of various materials related to the anticarceral movement, a topic that remains understudied, has also been crucial. These additional insights, made possible by access to otherwise unavailable resources, are essential for reconstructing a coherent and complete narrative of how Black feminists have shaped and fuelled the anticarceral movement from the 1970s. Accessing these documents has helped me immensely as a scholar to acquire a better comprehension of both the prison abolitionist movement and Black feminists' engagement with issues surrounding incarceration.

At the Schomburg Library, I had access to the Angela Davis Legal Defense Fund Committee Collection and the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression Collection (NAARPR). The Angela Davis Legal Defense Fund Collection contains legal documents and related materials tied to the legal and political campaign to secure Davis's acquittal during her incarceration in 1970. The collection primarily consists of legal briefs and court documents, letters and notes between Davis and her lawyers. Additional materials reflect the coordinated political efforts of the Angela Davis Defense

Committees around the US, as well as other supporters to mobilise public awareness around her case. This has been illuminating to me to shed a light on the practical aspect of anticarceral activism, and the important role Black women have played in it. In particular, I had benefit from reading direct sources from Black communist Charlene Mitchell and the pivotal role she had in the defence of Davis. The collection also includes resources on other political prisoners and documents on the broader prison system in the US, which has been helpful as I aim to expand the narrative beyond the single individual case.

The National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (NAARPR) is an organisation founded in 1973 in Chicago, and still active today, and originated from the efforts of the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis. The organisation is dedicated to fighting systemic racism and political repression in the US. Considering the important role the organisation had for anticarceral organising and the extent of materials I had found in the collection held at the Schomburg Library, I am now working on reorganising one of my chapters in order to focus on the organisation's work. Through advocacy, campaigns and protests, the Alliance brought national attention to the conditions of both political and non-political prisoners, often corresponding directly with incarcerated people. This was one of the most interesting parts of the collection. Firsthand experiences of incarcerated people, particularly Black and Puerto Rican individuals, have been particularly illuminating as many of these people were not political prisoners in the strict sense. Nevertheless, many of them demonstrated a deep awareness of the role of the carceral system and became radicalised while in prison. The organisation's archives, while mostly centred on the US, also include international materials. This has proven to be of particularly interest to me, as I now intend to extend the scope and argument of my thesis to highlight the international dimension of Black feminism and the anticarceral activism carried out by these activists. Accessing these documents has allowed me to broaden my own perspective and the understanding of the US anticarceral movement and the role Black women in it.