Black Women’s Prison Narratives and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in US Prisons

Breea C. Willingham

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe the meaning of incarceration for African American women as depicted in the narratives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated African American women. This article uses black feminist thought as the primary theoretical framework to provide the relevant context for understanding the race, sexual, and gender oppressions that contribute to African American women’s experiences with imprisonment. I argue that black women’s prison narratives offer a unique insight into interlocking patterns of oppression that contribute to their incarceration, and how discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality extends into prison.

To imprison a woman is to remove her voice from the world, but many female inmates have been silenced by life long before the transport van carries them from the courthouse to the correctional facility. . . . Their essays, then, are victories against voicelessness – miracles in print.

Wally Lamb, Couldn’t Keep It To Myself 1

The increasing incarceration rates of African American women reflect the history of their social exclusion in US society. This growth alone suggests a need for a closer study of intervention and policy changes in the criminal justice and corrections systems, and as the black women’s prison population continues to rise, it becomes especially important to hear their stories to increase our understanding of their prison experience. Previous research, including Donna Rowe’s 2004 study on women’s prison writing, has indicated that writing in prison helps all inmates heal from and cope with the emotional issues that brought them to prison and to re-imagine a new life. 2 Although scholars have begun to address issues of literacy in women’s prisons, there is room
for more work analysing how African American women interpret the meaning of their prison experience through writing. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to describe the meaning of incarceration for African American women as depicted in the narratives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated African American women. This article uses black feminist thought as the primary theoretical framework to provide the relevant context for understanding the race, sexual, and gender oppressions that contribute to African American women’s experiences with imprisonment. I argue that black women’s prison narratives offer a unique insight into interlocking patterns of oppression that contribute to their incarceration, and how discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality extends into prison.

Black Women in Prison

The US prison population has grown from 300,000 in the 1970s to more than two million today. The war on crime, the war on drugs, mandatory drug sentencing laws, and the belief that society has become more punitive have all been blamed for the exponential rise in the nation’s prison population. Incarceration rates for African American women have increased more quickly than they have for black men, and though the rates have levelled off, incarceration rates for black women remain higher than for their white and Hispanic counterparts. One in every 300 black females is incarcerated, compared to about one in every 1,099 white females and one in every 704 Hispanic females.3

Despite their sustained presence in prisons and jails, the voices of black women are often excluded from discussions about the criminal justice and corrections systems.4 Mainstream ideas about prisons are usually those of men, and any references to women in prison are usually those of white women, as Victoria Law notes in her essay ‘Invisibility of Women Prisoner Resistance’. Law adds:

The stereotype of the male felon makes invisible the growing number of women imprisoned under the various mandatory sentencing laws passed within the past few decades. Because women do not fit the media stereotype, the public does not see them and are not then aware of the disturbing paradoxes of prisoners as mothers, as women with reproductive rights and abilities, and as women in general.5
Whereas white women prison writers are ‘doubly marginal’, being female and a writer in prison, black women suffer threefold – as a woman, prisoner, and African American. Black women’s prison narratives offer a different perspective and approach to analysing black women’s experiences with race, gender, and sexual oppressions. These narratives represent a unique form of activism and a continued struggle for freedom. Their stories fracture the stereotypical images of all women behind bars and reveal the mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, and friends who are often forgotten once the iron bars close. Their stories help us to see them as they are now, not defined by their crimes or past.

Learning about imprisonment from the people experiencing it raises key issues that go beyond an immediate concern with the institution of the prison, as prisoner writing interrogates notions of captivity, racism, classism, and oppression. Writing allows imprisoned women to create their own discourse within an oppressive system and in an oppressive space. Though their writings may not dismantle the system, they create a space where the women find their voice and educate themselves. While writing in prison may not be behaviour that is always seen as explicitly political, it can become important to the resistance to structures of privilege, exploitation, and power. On an individual level, writing can be transformative for the women, especially when it is done in a space where creativity, self-expression, and literacy are typically not encouraged.

H. Bruce Franklin argues that the power of prisoners’ writing, ‘comes from their lives as dropouts, rejects, criminals and rebels in American society, and as inhabitants of America’s prisons’. The power of African American women’s prison writing derives from their struggles as a subclass of people who no longer want to be ostracised, abandoned, or labelled as deviant. The significance of their writing is grounded in black women’s continuing struggle to find and maintain their identity in a racist and sexist society and prison system.

**Black Feminist Thought and Criticism**

This article uses black feminist thought to provide a relevant context for understanding the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality in black women’s prison narratives and the role these oppressions play in the incarceration of African American women.
Black women’s experience is at the core of black feminist thought; the overarching theme of black feminist theories is the desire to find a voice that can express a self-defined black woman’s standpoint. Patricia Hill Collins defines black feminist thought as specialised knowledge created by black women, which clarifies the ‘experiences and ideas shared by black women and provides a unique angle of vision on self, community and society’ and which is situated in black women’s struggle against systems of oppression.8

Black feminist criticism grew, in part, from the notion that black women’s experiences were seen as deviant, while those of black men, white men, and white women were regarded as the norm. In this context, as feminist scholars such as Deborah E. McDowell have illustrated, black women were traditionally not seen as deserving of literary attention.9 In response to such marginalisation, black female scholars became ‘justifiably enraged by the critical establishment’s neglect and mishandling of black women writers’ and sought to develop a black feminist criticism which would take black women’s literature as its focus.10 However, in an important qualification, Collins contends that while black women may share similar challenges resulting from ‘living in a society that historically and routinely derogates’ them, this does not mean that they have all had the same experiences. Simply acknowledging that a legacy of struggle exists does not make the meaning of the struggle the same for all black women, Collins adds.11 What black women’s literature does, though, is authenticate those shared challenges and allows a forum for black women to relate their experiences to the world, whether shared by other black women or not. In the view of critics such as Collins, active black feminism will always be needed as long as black women continue to face intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and sexuality.

I contend that black women’s prison literature constitutes a part of this active black feminism because it seeks to respond to race, gender, and sexual oppressions of black women, as well as address political and social topics. Therefore, some of the literature produced by black female inmates deserves to be included in the larger critical discourse on black women’s literature because incarcerated black women are able to reflect their own black feminist standpoint through writing when they find, represent, and liberate themselves through the written word. The emerging black women’s literature community, according to Collins, offers another ‘safe space’ where black women
can articulate a self-defined standpoint. Black women’s prison literature is arguably creating another safe space, giving the inmates a vessel through which to express their new found voice within a collective environment.

Although typically perceived as part of the state’s repressive structures, prisons, thus, are paradoxically also examples of what Collins calls ‘alternative institutional locations’ where black feminist thought can be located and become sites of black feminism. Though black female inmates are not commonly perceived as intellectuals, they contribute to black feminist thought from a unique perspective. As Assata Shakur suggests, ‘it is imperative that we, as black women, talk about the experiences that shaped us; that we assess our strengths and weaknesses and define our own history’. If women in prison do not write their own stories, then they will continue to be pushed to the side as an afterthought, instead of positioned at the forefront of, and included in, discussions about incarcerated women.

**Black Women’s Voices**

One of the common themes in black women’s prison writings is the abandonment and neglect experienced once women are incarcerated. Joyce Ann Brown, who spent nearly ten years in a Texas prison for a murder committed by another woman named Joyce Ann Brown, writes about the double standard she witnessed during her incarceration. If a man and woman are both sentenced to fifty years, the man will be parolled two or three times while the woman would not even get one chance to speak to the parole board. Furthermore, imprisoned women often experience a lack of support from their families and partners. When men are incarcerated, women are usually the ones ‘holding them down’, supporting them and taking care of their children, on the outside. The woman will regularly visit her man and promise to wait for him. But when these women become inmates themselves, they rarely get that same kind of support. A good example is the visiting room scene described by Ida P. McCray, who served nearly ten years in Pleasanton, California, after being convicted of hijacking an airplane. Pleasanton was originally a co-ed prison named ‘Dublin’ when McCray was incarcerated. The visiting rooms were packed with women and their children visiting the male inmates, McCray writes, but when the male inmates were moved and
the prison became women only in 1989, ‘the visiting room was barely ever full, ever. We’re replaced in society. Black women are replaced. If you’re in a relationship, nine times out of ten, you will be replaced within a year, if that long’.16

Black women are already often stereotyped as being promiscuous crack-whores not capable of taking care of their children. These images are only perpetuated in prison. Donna Hubbard Spearman, who spent twenty-four years in prison on drug-related offences, writes:

African American women are already subjected by a society that places us at the bottom of the totem pole. Within the prison system, not only are we placed at the totem pole, but we are considered less than the average inmate. We have a stigma of going back into a community where African American men are almost made martyrs and heroes when they come out of prison . . . but when we go back into our communities, we are not only unfit people, now we’re unfit mothers, and it’s hard to trust us.17

In short, though physically free after being released from prison, black women are still being held captive by the continued social injustices committed against them. Patrice Gaines, who was briefly incarcerated in 1970 on drug-related charges, notes that when women go to jail or prison, they become part of an ostracised community that no one expects to hear from: ‘The intent is to put them so far away to where they’re not heard, but engaging in a dialogue with and listening to these women can only enrich the community at large’.18 When there are thousands of women silenced, only a partial perspective of the community is left, Gaines insists. According to Gaines, once incarcerated, a woman is ‘forced to be still and forced to be quiet’.19 As a result, she has time to focus on herself and (re)discover herself through writing. Gaines adds, ‘Discovering that people can appreciate what you have to say can change you. They never had a place to say anything, and to not have to write for a grade and be able to write for your living and survival is healing. They really develop a passion for (writing) when they realise what they say is appreciated’.20 Through writing, women create a safe space in which they can recover from and reflect on the issues that brought them to prison, giving them some sense of freedom and ownership over their lives.

Sexual abuse is another common theme in the women’s writings. Sexual assaults are familiar to many women prior to their incarceration, but such attacks are also committed by male guards
Black Women’s Prison Narratives: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in US Prisons

in women’s prisons. The women are further victimised when some of the prison guards are not punished. This violent sexualisation of women’s prison life only perpetuates the degrading images of black women as ‘unnatural, dirty, sick and sinful’. Prison becomes a site of continual terror for some women and, as Angela Davis argues, ‘a space in which the threat of sexualized violence that looms in the larger society is effectively sanctioned as a routine aspect of the landscape of punishment behind prison walls’. Contemporary prison regimes thus reproduce the sexual oppression that was characteristic of slavery. Slave owners often used the concept of seduction as a source of power. Rape was defined in the nineteenth century as the illegal ‘forcible carnal knowledge of a female against her will without consent’, but as Saidiya Hartman explains, this law did not apply to female slaves. Instead, the concept of seduction was used to mask the actual violence committed against female slaves. Any sexual relations between master and slave were assumed to be consensual bonds of affection, not crimes.

Shakur describes another form of sexual abuse – strip searches:

The internal search was as humiliating and disgusting as it sounded. You sit on the edge of this table and the nurse holds your legs open and sticks a finger in your vagina and moves it around. She has a plastic glove on. Some of them try to put one finger in your vagina and another one up your rectum at the same time.

If women refused the search they were locked in solitary until they agreed to the search, Shakur adds. This regular practice illustrates how the woman’s body is often violated once she is incarcerated and subjected to abuse that is disguised as routine practice.

Women develop different coping strategies to deal with the threat of sexual abuse and the lack of ownership over their body, but during that process some end up perpetuating their own sexual oppression. Gaines offers an example in her memoir Laughing in the Dark when she describes the ‘stroll’ she and other inmates took on their way to the prison’s vending machines: ‘We passed those orderlies strutting our ashy legs. The orderlies … were just happy to see female legs and they whistled their admiration. None of us seemed to realize what we were doing, that even in jail we were performing for men, hoping to please them and exalting in our ability to do so’. Some women will often use their body to survive on the streets – engaging in prostitution to support their drug habit – and once in prison, some of them still use...
their bodies for attention, struggling to overcome internalised forms of sexual oppression.

**Writing as Recovery**

For some women, prison becomes a place of recovery; a place to escape the harsh life on the streets. In the free world, many black women are imprisoned by the effects of drugs or the inner turmoil stemming from physical and sexual abuse. It is not until their bodies are physically imprisoned that their souls are set free. Tabatha Rowley, who was convicted of first-degree assault in 1996 and sentenced to seven years, describes prison as a chance for her to get to know herself and become a physically, mentally, and spiritually stronger woman: ‘In prison, I detoxed from a ten-year binge, entered recovery, and little by little, began to understand who I was beneath all those bad habits and bad decisions’. Michelle Jessamy, sentenced to twenty years for manslaughter, says writing gives her a ‘sense of peace’: ‘The prison environment causes you to shut down and distrust other people, but writing has the opposite effect. By exploring my past through autobiographical fiction and sharing it with others, I am learning how to come to terms with the whys of my past actions and how to release my spirit from its prison’.

Writing allows women to seek their own understanding of why they are in prison and confront any other personal demons they may have. Ann Folwell Stanford regards writing as a way for incarcerated women to build bridges ‘to the self, to family, lovers and friends, to each other and to the community of readers who have no idea who the writers are, but may be changed a bit through reading their words’; incarcerated women, Stanford adds, are ‘doing dangerous things with words: they are resisting the narratives that society has scripted for them’.

The story of Cynthia Berry, an inmate in Bedford Hills, New York, serves as a good example in this context. Berry recounts how having been molested by her uncle at an early age continues to haunt her. Drugs and prostitution became Berry’s escape from the pain and the excuse for her destructive behaviour. By the time Berry realised her life had spiralled out of control, it was too late:

Thinking of the sweat of my uncle on my face as he molested me made it easy for me to believe I was a whore and that the only way to even
the pain was to literally make men pay. I never grew up until it was too late and when I did, it was in the courtroom learning what I had allowed myself to believe and a man now was dead.29

Berry, who is serving a sentence of twenty-five years to life for the murder of her seventy-one-year-old john, describes how the guilt of her crime weighs heavily on her conscience and the only way to make it right is to die:

I remember stabbing (him) three times. A forensics report said I stabbed this man twenty-eight times in his throat. Only three wounds were fatal, which leaves me the horror of ‘did I continue to stab a dead man?’ I’m guilty of my refusal to face self and grow out of the walls of my pain. There are days I wish my number would punch up in God’s computer so I can stop the bloodstain on my hands and in my heart ... stop everyday of being haunted by what I did.30

Berry notes that prison has allowed her to feel for herself and others. She no longer has to mask her feelings behind drugs and prostitution.

Megan Sweeney suggests African American women use creativity to negotiate their experiences before and during prison by focusing on their reading practices. Reading in prison ‘can counter forces of isolation, abandonment, and dehumanization by serving as an opening to other people, ideas, and the world outside prison’.31 Sweeney explores the ways reading enables some incarcerated women to ‘gain self-knowledge’ and ‘contextualize their experiences’ before, during, and after incarceration.32 Both writing and reading in prison allows some incarcerated women to explore their own understanding of why they are in prison, and this process, as Sweeney argues, ‘generates possibilities for prisoners to reenvision and rescript their lives – to view their experiences in relation to broader social and historical contexts and to glimpse different horizons as they engage with others’ stories’.33

Conclusion

Women’s prison writing is not a new phenomenon, but as Judith Scheffler writes in Wall Tappings, ‘The writing of women prisoners continues to reside in the margins of the literary canon – a curiosity, an anomaly, an oversight’.34 What is even more troubling is that despite the fact that African American women make up the largest
percentage of incarcerated women, they are also the most invisible prison population, because their voices are often ignored. As a result, literature on African American women’s prison writing is even scarcer, due to lack of access or knowledge. But black women’s prison narratives are deserving of more attention by critics because these texts add a significant voice to this voiceless segment of the prison population. Most importantly, they address broader social problems with race, gender, and sexual oppressions. African American women share a history of persistent racial and sexual oppression, but what is different about the incarcerated black woman’s story is that it allows some of these women to express themselves and define their existence – to tell us that they still matter despite their absence. Joyce Logan, who spent fifteen years in prison for aggravated robbery, reminds us that incarcerated black women may ‘have been separated, but we are not gone. We may be distant, but we are very much present’.35

Too often when women are sent to prison, many people are quick to label them as rejects or simply bad women. Many of them have powerful stories to tell, but because of the stigma attached to them, oftentimes people are not willing to listen. Through their poems, memoirs, and commentaries, inmates show us that despite being held physically captive, their minds are free, and through their liberated words they remind us that prisoners are people too.

Notes

1. Wally Lamb, ed., Couldn’t Keep It To Myself: Wally Lamb and the Women of York Correctional Facility (Testimonies from our Sisters) (New York: Harper’s Collins, 2004), 9. Lamb’s anthology features the testimonies of ten women incarcerated in the York Correctional Institution in Niantic, Connecticut. Some of the women have since died or been released. Lamb was a volunteer instructor in the prison’s weekly writing workshop in which he challenged the women to write about some of the most personal aspects of their lives. The book is a result of some of the writings produced during those workshops.

2. Donna Rowe, ‘From the Inside Out: Women Writers behind Prison Walls’ (PhD dissertation, University of Maryland College Park, 2004). Rowe analyses the writings of women in a creative writing class at the District of Columbia Detention Center, texts written by women prisoners and activists in an underground prison newsletter in Seattle, WA, and oral narratives by former prisoners. Rowe argues that prison writing that is ‘self-reflected for sharing or publication often contains important life-altering information about the writer, her life, and her circumstances that are essential to creating successful relationships between her past, her present, and her future’ (21).

4. In the US, jails are run by the county and house people who are awaiting trial or have been convicted of misdemeanours. A jail sentence usually does not exceed two years. People who are tried and convicted of more serious crimes, such as murder, serve time in prison. People who commit state crimes are held in state prisons; those who commit federal crimes are held in federal prison.


10. Ibid., 154.


12. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 110. Collins explains that safe spaces were ‘safe’ because they ‘represented places where black women could freely examine issues that concerned us. Such spaces become less safe if shared by those who were not black and female’. These spaces ‘were never meant to be a way of life. Instead, they constitute one mechanism among many designed to foster black women’s empowerment and enhance our ability to participate in social justice projects’ (110).


18. I conducted a phone interview with Patrice Gaines on 26 October 2010. According to her website (patricegaines.com), in the summer of 1970, when Gaines was twenty-one, she spent several weeks in jail as she faced charges for possession of heroin. She was a drug abuser speeding toward addiction. Today, Gaines returns monthly to the jail where she was held to teach an all-day workshop for women. The workshop is run through a non-profit
organisation, The Brown Angel Center, founded by Gaines and her friend Gaile Dry-Burton to assist women as they transition from jail or prison back to the community.

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
26. Tabatha Rowley in Lamb, Couldn’t Keep It To Myself, 98.
27. Michelle Jessamy in Lamb, Couldn’t Keep It To Myself, 265.

29. Berry’s story is featured in the 2003 documentary What I Want My Words To Do To You. It features fifteen women inmates participating in a writing programme at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Westchester County, New York, led by playwright Eve Ensler. Through a series of writing exercises, the women confront the realities of their crimes and explore their paths to prison. The Writing Group of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, What I Want My Words To Do To You, directed by Gary Sunshine, Judith Katz, Madeleine Gavin (Borrowed Light LLC, 2003), DVD.
30. Ibid. In this exercise, the women were asked to write a letter to the person who has most influenced their life. Berry chose to write to her mother-in-law, who she says is like a mother to her.
32. Ibid., 6.
33. Ibid., 3.
34. Scheffler, introduction to Wall Tappings, xxii.