

LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY LAW REVIEW

VOLUME 1

DECEMBER 2013

ISSUE 1

MAKING PRISONERS VISIBLE: HOW LITERATURE CAN ILLUMINATE THE CRISIS OF MASS INCARCERATION*

*Helen Elaine Lee***

Staggering rates of incarceration, especially for African Americans, make the examination of the lives of prisoners in the United States a matter of urgency. For many of us, especially academics and researchers, the topic of mass incarceration is often seen in terms of numbers and statistics, while the realities of the daily lives of people touched directly by the criminal justice system seldom come into focus.

While in 1978 there were roughly 450,000 people imprisoned in the United States, there are now more than 2.3 million people behind bars, more than one in a hundred American adults, and more than in any other nation. The United States has less than five percent of the world's population, but it has almost a quarter of the world's prisoners. Non-violent offenders comprise about half of the prison population, and a quarter of those who are locked up are incarcerated for drug-related offenses. Despite the fact that studies show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at similar rates, for

* Lecture given by Ms. Lee at Lincoln Memorial University Duncan School of Law's symposium "Navigating the Political Divide: Lesson from Lincoln," held April 20, 2012 in Knoxville, TN.

** Helen Elaine Lee is an Associate Professor of Fiction Writing in MIT's Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies

America's poor, and especially for its poor black men, prison is a destination and a fact of ordinary life. More than half of all black men without a high school diploma go to prison at some point in their lives. As a recent *New Yorker* article stated, there are more black men in the criminal justice system that are in prison, on probation, or on parole than were in slavery in 1850.¹ Currently, a black male in the United States has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime and a greater chance of going to prison than of going to college. For a Hispanic male it's one in six, and for a white male it's one in seventeen. In 2009, non-Hispanic blacks accounted for 39.4 percent of the total prison and jail population, and blacks, including Hispanic blacks, comprised only 12.6 percent of the United States population.

Black women make up 30 percent of all incarcerated women, although they represent only 13 percent of the nation's female population. The rate of incarceration for women has increased at nearly double the rate of men since 1985, and the impact of the absence of these primary caregivers on families is devastating. Women comprise seven percent of the state and federal prison population, expanding 4.6 percent annually between 1995 and 2005. There are more than eight times as many women in prisons and jails now than in 1980. Approximately 75 percent of incarcerated women are mothers, and almost one in three women in prison is serving time for drug-related crimes. The PEW Center reported in 2008 that while one in 355 white women between the ages of 35 and 39 were behind bars, for black women the rate was one in 100.²

These are hard truths. We are warehousing human beings in this society. However, perhaps the greatest outrage is the fact that more money is spent on corrections than education. In

¹ Adam Gopnik, *The Caging of America*, THE NEW YORKER, Jan. 30, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2012/01/30/120130crat_atlarge_gopnik.

² The PEW Charitable Trust, *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*, 6 (2008), http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/sentencing_and_corrections/one_in_100.pdf.

Massachusetts, my home state, for example, it cost an average of \$45,917.05 per year to lock one person up. Yet, we avoid looking directly at prisons by looking away—both political parties do this.

Art, however, has the power to transcend rhetoric and transcend the intellectual distance which often characterizes sociological and legal work on prisons to convey the human consequences for the imprisoned and the wrongfully convicted as well as for their families, their communities, and our society.

Determined to raise my voice about this crisis, I have spoken out through fiction about the lives of the incarcerated, who are exiled to invisibility, reduced to stereotypes in the media, and used as pawns in electoral politics. In my fiction, I have sought to reveal the experience of incarceration, the social forces which lead there, and the possibility of survival and transformation. I have tried to illuminate how and why we place our faith in a criminal justice system that does not operate fairly, equally, or reliably. The seed of these projects was my father's lifelong work as a criminal defense attorney. I understood his work as his way of agitating by serving as an advocate for people who did not have access, recognized voices, or a full set of choices and means to participate in American society. Because the circumstances of my father's clients, as well as related social and political issues, were part of the daily life and dialogue of my family, prisoners have never been invisible to me. They were not "other," they were part of our lives, our community, our people. When I decided to write about some of the people who were behind bars, I knew I needed to spend time with people who were locked up and people who worked with them. I knew I needed to earn the story I wanted to try to tell.

Twelve years ago, I began volunteering by teaching storytelling and creative writing to men who were locked up at a county house of corrections and a medium security prison. At first, I went because of the novel I was trying to write, but I was astonished by what went on in the workshop sessions I led. I was overwhelmed by the things people had endured. By the survival of dignity, by the

laughter that was inspired by good memories, I was struck by the self-interrogation as well as the generosity and gentleness that I often witnessed. Through sharing and hearing their stories, these men were able to bring forward their best selves. Through words they had a different conception of power, not derived from domination or material things, but power from within. They raised their voices instead of their fist. In these workshops, their words, which were spoken into the stale and recycled air, were soil in which something besides bitterness, fear, and violence might grow.

After volunteering for five years through several different organizations and programs and conducting interviews with ex-offenders and people who worked with prisoners, I helped to establish the PEN New England Prison Creative Writing Program, which serves two prisons in Massachusetts. I currently direct the program, and I continue to teach as a volunteer. I have rendered what I have observed and learned throughout this experience into fiction so I can begin to speak for those who live behind the walls of American prisons.

Every few weeks I read news stories about the plight of prisoners, the failures of the prison system, the struggle to get out and stay out. There are glimmers of insight and shifts in the public conversations about incarceration. Growing numbers of DNA exonerees have led to a shift of public opinion about the death penalty, and more and more questions are being raised about incarceration's effect on entire families. There is a growing consciousness and increasing debate about the absurdity of expecting prisoners to become straight world citizens when they receive neither education nor treatment when they are locked up, despite the fact that overwhelming numbers of them have a history of addiction and abuse. Although prison-based education is the single most effective tool for lowering recidivism, in 1994 Congress abolished Pell Grants, the means of financial aid for higher education, for prisoners.

There is some sense of a conversation taking shape about some of these issues. Once prisoners are released though, the fact of

incarceration prevents them from obtaining employment, public housing, education grants, and even food stamps. More than 5.3 million prisoners or former prisoners are denied the right to vote, and in 11 states the ban is for life for those convicted of certain crimes. Most of these people who are temporarily invisible will return. Those serving out life sentences comprise a little less than 10 percent of state and federal prisoners. Because most of those locked up will eventually be released and many who are sentenced under mandatory minimum laws are already getting out and returning to their old territories and ways of life, there is a growing movement to rethink the obstacles to reentry. There is growing public attention, and little government action, on the prevalence of rape and suicide rates in prisons. There is a national debate and some action on reforming offender reporting laws, also known as CORI laws (Criminal Offender Record Information Laws), disenfranchisement laws, mandatory minimum sentences, and treatment access. Increasingly, people are questioning the dismantling of programs, which could support the education and rehabilitations of prisoners, and are criticizing the American prison system which has become a punitive, revolving door.

There's also a building conversation fueled in part by Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*³, in which she argues that as the United States celebrates the nation's "triumph over race" with the election of Barack Obama, the United States criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control by locking up the majority of young black men in major American cities, and labeling them felons for life, thereby permanently foreclosing their participation in American society. Alexander cites racial disparities at every stage of the criminal justice process and argues that the legal rules which structure the system guarantee discriminatory results, so that the criminal justice system functions as a gateway into a larger system of racial stigmatization and permanent marginalization, creating what

³ MICHELLE ALEXANDER, *THE NEW JIM CROW: MASS INCARCERATION IN THE AGE OF COLORBLINDNESS* (The New Press, 2010).

she calls “an undercaste.” I know from my father’s life work that each person who is incarcerated has a story of the forces which have led him or her to incarceration and the path toward survival and change.

The prison environment of extreme deprivation, confinement, and existence, grounded only in the past and present tenses, is fertile ground for the exploration of the themes which continue to preoccupy me and my work: the role of narrative and memory in our lives, and the challenges of making art from loss. By telling some of these human stories, I add my voice to these urgent debates about a crisis, which we ignore at societal peril.

And yet our politicians turn away from it, talking around it, or offer simplistic sound bites with broad public appeal, lest they seem soft on crime, less than upright, in league with or unapologetic for the wrongdoers. Alexander points out in her book, for example, that even the Congressional Black Caucus failed to include incarceration within the 35 topics listed on its agenda in 2009. Incarceration is an easy response to crime, especially if the money to fund it is available. Indeed, faced with budgetary crises, many states are rethinking their lockup strategies. And because of money, rather than because of destructive social impact, as the prison population ages, the question of how to fund the medical cost of keeping people locked up begins to surface. It seems that the complex and nuanced conversation on any topic occurs less and less in the media; instead, a constant stream of rants and shallow coverage have replaced dialogue, commentary, and analysis, and we are left with the edited, decontextualized, recycled clips which come at us in every direction and live eternally on YouTube. The “dumbing down” of coverage on every issue, from deficit reduction to the causes of economic inequality, to the consequences of war, is rife. Our emotional reactions and personal experiences with crime and criminal justice are perhaps even more tangled, subterranean, and uninterrogated than other issues. We look away. And some of the political mechanisms which allow this are appealing to the racism and vulnerability of lower class whites, stoking the narrative that anyone with the proper discipline and drive

has the ability to rise to a higher class of America, narratives of black exceptionalism, and most devastating of all, the acceptability of indifference.

President Obama's 2013 budget supports the continued incarceration of people at the federal level through the activation or opening of new prisons. While spending for juvenile justice programs and initiatives that keep youth from becoming involved in the justice system are slated for federal budget cuts, "[r]esearch shows that the most cost-effective ways to increase public safety, reduce prison populations, and save money are to invest in proven community-based programs that positively impact youth."⁴ "According to the National Drug Court Institute, non-incarceration programs for non-violent drug offenders consisting of treatment, education, rigorous supervision and accountability result in a 70 percent success rate with only 17 percent of participants re-offending. Contrast that with the rate that 66 percent of people coming out of prison return within three years."⁵

Law and order and tough on crime just play too well to be abandoned as modes of response. The relationship between incarceration and poverty; substandard, underfunded and neglected schools; addiction; and the lack of opportunity are virtually ignored. While Romney said flat out that he did not care about the poor because there were programs to deal with them, apparently he does not have to care. And it was a matter of fierce argument that in President Obama's 2011 State of the Union speech, he failed to even

⁴ Justice Policy Institute, *Behind the Times: President Obama's FY 2012 budget focuses on prison and policing when prison populations have fallen for the first time in 40 years*, 1 (Feb. 16, 2012), http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/fy2013presbudgetfactsheet_final.pdf.

⁵ James P. Bond, *Non-violent Offenders Clogging State Prisons*, THE TIMES-TRIBUNE, Apr. 11, 2010, <http://thetimes-tribune.com/opinion/editorials-columns/guest-columnists/non-violent-offenders-clogging-state-prisons-1.725104>.

mention the poor.⁶ We look away and yet we know the poor are getting poorer and there are more of them. The gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is growing. Upward class mobility is increasingly out of reach.

On January 4 of this year, the *New York Times* reported on how the depth of American poverty entrenches people. Despite the myth of class mobility, “about 62 percent of Americans (male and female) raised in the top fifth of incomes stay in the top of two-fifths, according to research by the Economic Mobility Project of the Pew Charitable Trusts. Similarly, 65 percent born in the bottom fifth stay in the bottom two-fifths.”⁷ The United States has become less mobile than comparable nations, according to at least five large studies in recent years. As it becomes harder and harder for anyone at the bottom to rise, the effect of mass incarceration on families and communities is devastating. Whether you agree that the creation of an undercaste is a matter of intentional design or not, the condemnation and exclusion of ex-offenders from mainstream society is undeniable. This “ex-offender undercaste” and their families live across a widening and unbridgeable gulf from the rest of American society.

Returning to my assertion that art has the potential to transcend rhetoric, all of this background has motivated me to write about this issue. Unfortunately, because of the current nightmarish landscape in a publishing industry where people are not buying literary novels, publishers are owned by conglomerates, and editors have to get past the hurdles of their sales department in order to purchase titles, risk aversion has set in. It is harder and harder for writers to raise their critical voices about subjects which are unpopular or to speak out from alternative angles of vision. The job

⁶ Barack Obama, President of the United States, *State of the Union*, Jan. 25, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

⁷ Jason DeParle, *Harder for Americans to Rise from Lower Rungs*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/us/harder-for-americans-to-rise-from-lower-rungs.html?pagewanted=all>.

of the artist is getting more difficult in this market, in which everyone is looking for the next book that is just like *The Help*.⁸ Limited perceptions about what people want to read and will buy are intransigent. Nevertheless, I know that fiction has the potential to take the conversation past the surface, to move people past fear and indifference and make them feel the truth about lives ignored, rejected, and disappeared.

So, I want to close by reading a short, I promise it's short, excerpt from my novel *Life Without*, which is about the lives of ten characters who are incarcerated in two neighboring American prisons, one for men and one for women. The characters are connected by common experience and proximity, daily routines and interactions, and rolling domino and bid whist games to which they gather to socialize and philosophize. The characters are serving various sentences for different kinds of crimes. Each character struggles with violence and memory, and seeks to keep a way to keep alive. Some try to confront both hurting and being hurt. Some, more than others, achieve healing and momentary grace. Although the growing numbers of incarcerated Americans are either invisible to most citizens or presented as simplistic other in redacted media accounts, each one has his or her own story of loss, despair, imagination, and survival. And although my characters don't begin to comprise an exhausted portion of men and women who fill American prisons, all are part of the whole of prison life.

So, in this excerpt, which was published in a literary journal as a kind of prose poem, the narrator pans from cell to cell, kind of like a camera, just before sleep and asks that you enter the inner lives of these prisoners, moving past disregard and discomfort to take on their stories as your own. I do have to offer a warning, there is profanity in here, and you know, I struggled for the voice to do justice to this experience, which is so radically different from my own life experience. My voice tends to be rather lyrical. I made the decision to use harsh language sometimes in order to capture the harsh reality of

⁸ KATHRYN STOCKETT, *THE HELP* (Penguin Books, 2009).

prison of life. There are no kids here, so I should be ok.

This is called *Lights Out*⁹:

Night has come again.

Darkness amplifies the sounds of coughing, sneezing, shitting, weeping, talking, cursing, coming, praying, and somehow, underneath the noise, each body hears its own breathing, its own pulse.

All day long you pray for quiet, each one thinks. What you get is grief.

Sleep, escape for some and torment for others, has not yet come to Oak Ridge.

You are lying in your cell on your thin, hard bunk, and everything you have depended on, outside and in, is burned away. It is down to you, minus your possessions, your posturing and excuses, your legal analyses and time-doing strategies. Your walk and your bench presses, your prowess in dominoes and spades. Your jump shot and your hair-braiding talent and your glory stories. Your wolf tickets and your reputation for lunacy, your scorn and indifference. Your sneakers and commissary and pipeline to purchased bliss. Your place above the niggers or the honkies or the spies, above the pedophiles and rapists and faggots, even if you are below the thieves. You are not so low as some, *you* are not so low. You may still have your lies, but the night can take even those from you. It's down to you, and your story, and whatever *you* may call your god.

Marcus whispers, "Fuck all a you," so quietly that no one notices, and then slams his fist against his bunk to make them hear.

Monroe has almost recalled the reason he's locked up, before it slips away and he is old and sick and

⁹ "Lights Out," excerpt from manuscript of novel, "Life Without," Hanging Loose #92, 2008, pp. 44-47.

disappearing, lost again within in the past. And the man way down the tier can't help but wonder who will try to take him, and whether he can be the first to strike, whether he can keep alive that way, while the man in the cell above him can't escape his mother's absence and his father's disapproving eyes. This one, down below, he feels his blade meet flesh again and still can't stop it, while that one is shaking noiselessly from head to toe, terrified that he will use again and terrified that he will not.

Someone two tiers down is thinking its three years since he's had a visit and six since he's felt a women's touch, but maybe, maybe that faggot on the tier below will suck him off for extra toothpaste, or chips, or even quid pro quo. One of the new ones, over there, he's too bedazed with meds to know which crimes are his, which ones were done to him.

So many, so many are here. So many are back on the block, eyes closed as hip-hop warrior chants go throbbing in their heads, their hearts.

Travis is counting down the hours, wondering what he will find upon release, how he will join a world that's kept on spinning, regardless his plight. What will it mean, "exonerated," what will it mean outside the walls? What will it be? What will he do? What will he say to his sister and her boy?

Travis will be leaving Oak Ridge and Quake will be arriving, filled with pride and will and fury, while 3.7 miles down the road in Oak Hills, Keisha is starting her 5 to 10 behind his drugs and guns. She is dreaming of the daughter who is so far away, cursing the lover who played her, the father who left her, the hunger she has always felt. And below her, on the bottom bunk, Ranita is getting sort, picturing jewel-seeded pomegranates and her father's heartbeat, *my name's Ranita and I'm a addict*, circling through her, round and round and round, as she dreams of picnics and fishing trips and tucking in her kids for sleep, if she can only,

only get them back. Why will this release be different, she wonders, how will I know up from down?

In and out and in they go, In and out and in.

Some who take to living day-by-day, they find relief when the lights go out.

This one plans out his pencil sketches for tomorrow, praising Allah for his gift. This one reads by hallway light. That one thinks he is nothing and never will be, just like his mama said would happen, just like the one who owns him tells him as he fucks him in the ass, and that one uses his pillow to muffle his crying, wondering if his sons will grow up to look like him, if he will ever see them free, if he will manage not to explode into a livid firestorm, or die slow, from the inside out.

Over here, one is going over and over her mistakes: bad checks and desperate lies and nameless tricks, and never enough of anything to go around. Too many to name lie trembling and exhausted, breaking apart on the inside from the habits that have ruled their lives, unsure of who is out to get them, who will help them, how they got there, who the fuck they are. If they only had rock, a fix, a smoke, if they only had a quick escape of any kind. What can they choose, what can they choose but what they know?

For some the only choice is take or get took, law of the land.

“And fuck you, too,” Marcus says to everything above and below, to the right and the left of him, while Kelvin is thinking of the ripe flesh of falling pears as he tries to keep alive a self that’s young, a pleasure that’s simple, a taste that’s free, wishing as the ghosts of convict’s past march by, wishing he could holler out for all to know that he is more than his worst thing. Next door to Kelvin, Boo wills his eyes open, for the darkness brings with it the uncle who stole away his childhood nights. He takes refuge in the newfound

written word and tries to bear the heartbreak that cracks across his chest for his dead mother and his lost daughter, for love, so easy to say, so hard to do.

Over there, one is dying, a little more each night, one is crying. Two more locked-up brothers you won't have time to meet.

Maxine mourns Ranita, even though she's still three months to go before wrapping up. Trying to choose the struggles that matter, she thinks through reversible error and precedent, indenture and exploitation, power and politics. She imagines trees and ocean close. Eldora thinks of the family she has put together on the inside that has grown and shrunk and grown over so many locked-up, counted years. She thinks of the plants her granny introduced her to, and the stories they inspire which bind her kin.

Over there, one is caught in memory, unable to evade or stop the yelling and indifference and hurting, received and given and received again. And this one meets the dark with pure alarm. *Who's there*, she asks and she turns to face the wall, steeling herself for the taking, known since childhood, that lives on and on and on inside her head. Like the sister above her, like this one and that one, she is rocked by angry shame.

Their children recede, despite the conjuring of phone calls and letters and photographs, a missing limb, each one, with its abiding ache.

Some are praying silently and some are talking to their gods out loud. And over at Oak Ridge, Marcus turns on his side, pulling in his knees and forcing his gaze outward, and mutters, "Puck God, too. What's he ever done for me?"

Vernon tries to keep his eyes open and avoid his ghosts, returning to his "if only's," wishing it had rained and he had stayed inside that night almost a year ago, after which there was no turning back. He has let his mama, his little brother, even his woman

down. He has ended up uncertain, he has never managed to get anywhere but out. Below him, his cellie is regretting the robbery that sent him here the first time and the parole violation that brought him back, looking to Jesus for salvation this time, this time around. This one is praying no one finds out he is gay, and that one is praying no one finds out he is scared, and that other one, further down the tier, is cursing himself for the way he teased his sister about her gap-toothed smile, twenty years ago.

They pray for peace and sleep and a silence that's benign.

Other there one is clinging to her Jesus. Over there one is clinging to her temporary butch. Over here one is wishing she could believe in anything. Is this the end of the world, they wonder? Is there only winter up ahead?

And Avis tries to think of the good things and push away the endless skein of his ugly pretty words and the day of blood on starched, white shirts that she keeps on living, the day when she tried to save her life and died instead.

From Oak Ridge to Oak Hills, and back and forth and back again, this one and that one, too many to get to know, too many to name, lie curled up and dreaming of the sweet release of drugs, of arms that might hold instead of hurting, of doors that might stay open instead of locked. Trying to anneal their hearts for battle and for waiting, stuck in their mistakes, their crimes, their numb regret, they try to be more than their worst things. They cry for the world that has forgotten them. They cry for their sons and daughters, for their kinfolk, all. They cry for themselves.

The darkness comes, distilling what is and was. Magnifying what is lost again, this October night. The lights are out and they are finding sleep or waiting, still, for it to come. Vernon and Avis and Boo and Ranita and Travis and Quake. Keisha and Monroe and

Kelvin and Maxine and Eldora. Marcus, too, do not forget that he is here. And all the others above and below them, to the left and to the right, all the ones whose names you'll never learn. They live in the ever-present past and in the future, salvaging what they can from the present, grieving all the things they live without.

So, don't you look away. Thank you.

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