
ARTICLE

Etheridge Knight's Prison Poetry

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Etheridge Knight's value to the African American literary tradition and the Anglo-American literary canon extends beyond his legacy as a preeminent voice associated with the Black Arts Movement. In his books of poetry, *The Essential Etheridge Knight* and *Poems from Prison*, published while he was an inmate at Indiana State Prison, Knight employs language, themes, characters, and spaces that do not only locate places and liberating identities within a confined space, but also ushers in new kinds of rhetorics and sensibilities from the limited space within which he finds himself to assert the politics of race, the agency of the familial, and the psychological restoration of memory. Black American art forms served as a vibrant tool that enriched his poetic vision. Thus, the prison environment did not deter Knight's creative mindset but instead gave him room for constant communication between his creative mind and the physical world that existed outside of prison. The aim of this essay is essentially to demonstrate that constructed identities accounts for the distinctiveness of Knight's poems about his prison experience. Also crucial to our understanding of these poems is how his dependence on the imagined spaces of memory, solidarity, and kinship helped him to overcome the psychological and emotional trauma of incarceration on the poet's art.

Keywords: Language; identity; space; familial; psychological; memory; prison; trauma; experience

One of the abiding qualities that make a poet's work memorable is the representation of human experiences in a manner that leaves a lasting impression on readers. Corinth, Mississippi-born poet Etheridge Knight seemed to have mastered this quality during his lifetime. Knight authored five books of poetry that captured prison experiences in an unprecedented way. These books include the highly acclaimed *Poems from Prison*, *Belly Song and Other Poems*, *Black Voices from Prison*, *Born of a Woman: New and Selected Poems*, and *The Essential Etheridge Knight*. During his lifetime he received major literary awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, an American Book Award and a National Endowment for the Arts Grant to his credit, and also served as Writer-in-Residence at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Hartford and Lincoln University. Unfortunately, Knight's literary career was affected by circumstances beyond his control. According to *Poets.Org*, Knight "served in the U.S. Army in Korea and returned with a shrapnel wound that caused him to fall deeper into a drug addiction that had begun during his service." Traumatized emotionally and psychologically as a result of this experience, he had admitted, "I died in Korea from a shrapnel wound and narcotics resurrected me. I died in 1960 from a prison sentence and poetry brought me back to life" (Fraser). This emphatic statement by Knight summarized his life ordeal during what amounted to be, arguably, a short but distinguished literary career. Reginald Dwayne Betts, a Harvard Radcliffe Fellow and published poet who spent time in jail for carjacking and years later graduated as a lawyer from Yale University school of law, admits that "Still, despite his many accolades Knight was plagued by drugs and alcohol addiction to his last days" (11).

Indeed, placing Knight within a particular literary movement in America is not an easy task. For reasons both known and unknown, he has been understudied. Many of his well-known poems mirror his experiences as an inmate at Indiana State Prison in Michigan City and tend to historicize prison culture. Put simply, his prison poems display his keen ear for folk language and his knack for presenting images that are realistic. In his poems, words associated with Black American culture and speech patterns are given special place to apportion importance to the poet's message and the cultural value of the experience. It is for this reason

that Knight's stories captured in verse echo Judith R. Robinson's claim that "Poets write in order to bring others a meaningful perception of life and events" (xiii). Whatever meaning Knight sought in poetry writing remained valid to him until his death. Perhaps, as a survivor of America's prison system, he felt compelled to explore the reality of the incarcerated life and share with his readers the conflicts, both good and bad, that he witnessed as a convict. Michael S. Collins comments in his book, *Understanding Etheridge Knight*, that "Knight's best work deserves to be read by all those affected by the culture of incarceration: those who are incarcerated, and those who do or who applaud the incarcerating" (2). Collins becomes a conduit to examine and understand Knight's messages in his prison poems. The many stories that he presents in verse affect us all, culturally as Americans and intrinsically as humans.

Before I go on to discuss in detail the examples of prison experiences explored in Knight's poetry, it is only pertinent that I explain a little of the cultural background which has greatly influenced this American poet. In an interview by Charles Rowell, which appears in *Callaloo*, Knight had been asked to comment on the Black Aesthetic and he replied thus:

A man's politics is determined by how he views the world, how he sees God. Aesthetics, to me, means how one sees beauty, truth and love as they relate to all levels of life—not just watching the sunset, but how one's politics are dealt with and how one's economics are dealt with. All art stems basically from economics...All of our blues and things that we considered cultural grew out of economics. People sing about the river rising because their crop is going to be fucked up (967).

Knight's response to Rowell's inquiry shows that Knight himself has decided that he writes mostly from an American perspective that is indebtedness to the rich reservoir of his Black American culture. As a creative writer, his views of the world and the way he interprets things that affect humans are rooted in his beliefs regarding politics and its relationship to art and the artist. Thus, memory and images that he explores in his poetry to clarify his vision are represented out of a necessity to associate lived prison experiences with the social and political structure that dictates class, race, and economic structures in America. Knight was not an academic; however, the predominant themes in his prison poems illustrate an awareness and an urgency to identify and criticize unfair treatment of prisoners and the survival methods that abound in a prison environment that is also a world where only those with experience survive.

Thus, it is significant to read Knight's poems from the vantage point of an evaluator who notes the poet's motive but also is willing to make conclusions that are based on circumstantial evidence.

Knight was born on 19 April 1931 and was one of seven children. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade and subsequently enlisted in the US army in 1947. He was discharged in 1957 and later imprisoned for stealing a purse in 1960. While in prison Knight was actively involved in poetry workshops, an experience that helped to steer him away from the aloneness associated with incarcerated life and he later adopted the prison environment as his muse. It was as a result of this engagements that he consistently wrote poetry inspired by modernist features and a language indebted to Black American music (Blues, Jazz, etc) and the speech patterns of Black American English. A deep thinker, Knight did not separate his poetic calling from his beliefs about his heritage. More importantly, Knight's commitment to poetry was tied principally to his altruistic approach to life. It is this same way of thinking that dictates his characters' lives many of the stories he captures in his poems. These stories detail tragedies and struggles in a prison environment that offer inmates options to either become victims, fight back, or invent ways of avoiding victimhood.

For example, Knight's poem "For Freckle-Faced Gerald" has been described by Yusef Komunyakaa as "a tragedy in motion" (17). The poem's central character is a sixteen-year-old black male who is raped in prison. The circumstances of his unfortunate experience are captured by Knight to demonstrate that the event could have been avoided. The poem reads thus: "Take Gerald. Sixteen years hadn't even done/a good job on his voice. He didn't even know/how to talk tough, or how to hide the glow/of life before he was thrown in a 'pigmeat'/for buzzards to eat" (qtd. in Komunyakaa 17). The poem exposes the grave danger young convicts face when they are brought to a prison environment where they are marked as targets by the seasoned or older convicts. Gerald's "personality makes him vulnerable. He is in a place where prisoners have to create their own cycle of victims out of situational greed" (Komunyakaa 17). Perhaps Knight captures the sad part of this event in the line that states "Gerald could never quite win." A poet who depends on truth-telling to authenticate his messages, Knight had been told the details of the rape incident by fellow prisoners and had thereafter decided to compose a poem dedicated to the victim. In the interview he granted to Rowell, Knight elaborates on the conception of the poem and states thus:

I was lying in my cell reading one night, when all the guys came in. I had been working on the prison newspaper and had gotten off work early. When they came in, the word came that a young brother had been raped in the prison laundry by some older cons ... (qtd. in Betts 11).

Like many of Knight's poems about prison that focus on memorable characters and their struggles, Knight takes on the persona of one who cares about the victimized and chooses to engage in a solidarity of sorts. His expression of anger could be seen from different perspectives. First, he seems to be reacting in a way that justifies Tanure Ojaide's claim, in his essay on the poetry of the incarcerated South African poet Dennis Brutus, that "The poet is familiar with his country and the world and speaks of human suffering because of socio-political injustice from the wealth of his individual experience as a sage" (126). Gerald's unfortunate experience raises questions about the prison system and Knight, because of his familiarity with the environment, felt compelled to speak for the victim. Here is what he wrote to explain his feelings after learning of what had happened to Gerald:

I got a little angry. Here was this young brother—only sixteen and in prison. Also, at the same time he came into the joint, there were about five or six youngsters in there. But he was the youngest. There was also a young white boy from Indianapolis who had burglarized some homes and shot some people. He had gotten life, too. When he came to prison, the warden made him houseboy and kept him outside the walls—protected him. But the warden put Gerald inside the wall because he was just a nigger ... (qtd. in Betts 11).

Knight's interest in Gerald's well-being is marked out of solidarity for a young man whom he cared for. Perhaps Knight was also displaying a level of cultural solidarity and a protective role for a fellow human being. He felt Gerald deserved to be protected like every other prisoner irrespective of race or class. Hence, he shared his thoughts to condemn what he saw to be wrong about the way prison wardens looked after prisoners. Perhaps this aspect of his approach to his writing is authenticated by Komunyakaa's claim that "what is most remarkable about Knight's poetry is that it avoids moralizing" (20). Thus Knight's sympathy for young Gerald is understandable, especially as he is thrown into a place where "prisoners have to create their own cycle of victims out of situational greed" (Komunyakaa 17).

Interestingly, the concept of situational greed among prisoners carries on in Knight's poem "He Sees through Stone." Unlike the young Gerald in "For Freckle-Faced Gerald," Knight's character is a seasoned convict who appears to know the ropes of survival. Like Dudley Randall states in "Etheridge Knight," an article published in *Poetry Foundation*, "while Knight's poetry is 'influenced by the folk,' it is also 'prized by other poets.'" In this poem Knight makes use of folk language to give a cultural identification to his characters. The unnamed man in this poem triumphs in the end despite the threats and adversity he faced, not because he was protected but because he knew the environment very well, had mastered its danger spots and also sensed danger when it got close him. Hence, he could not be toyed with by the 'black cats.' In his review of this poem, Komunyakaa contends, regarding the unnamed character, that he is "The prototypical survivor—a patriarch of the initiated: 'he smiles/he knows/...The same 'black cats,' like shadows of the real men, who circled Gerald and brought him down like a young gazelle, also pace 'this old black one,' but they can't bring him down because of his experience" (17). The poet's angst mostly stems from the attempt to explain the order of things in a prison space such as the one Knight describes. The victims suffer out of ignorance, but those who have either witnessed the acts of perpetrators or heard about it try their utmost best not be counted among the victims. Thus, the question of survival is purely based on experience, the only weapon this unnamed character holds on to so he does not end up living in perpetual regret. Knight also chooses the right verbs and nouns to describe the mood of the unnamed character as the poem reads thus:

now black cats circle him
flash white teeth
snarl at the air
mashing green grass beneath
shining muscles
ears peeling his words
he smiles

he knows
 the hunt the enemy
 he has the secret eyes
 he sees through stone

In addition, Knight also uses verbs such as “flash”, “snarl”, “shining”, “smiles” and “hunt” to enhance the narrative mood of the experience captured. The poem takes place in an environment where seasoned convicts are not sympathetic to their fellow prisoners when compelled to act in ways that satisfy their sexual urges.

As a critic of the prison system, Knight offers his views on the discriminatory forms of imprisonment in the poem “A Fable,” where his speaker contends: “Once upon a today and yesterday and nevermore there were 7 men and women all locked/up in prison cells. Now these 7 men and women were innocent of any crimes; they were in prison because their skins were black” (63). In the poem Knight is playing with the fable tradition as he offers an intriguing perspective of what he considers a racialized method of imprisonment. The poem seems to be a bold statement condemning mass incarceration and imprisonment of people based on race. Given America’s history of tense race relations, and also considering how Knight ended up in prison for petty robbery, he was probably using this poem to further a discourse on the effects of mass incarceration of Blacks and Latinos. Knight has been a prisoner and his insider knowledge of the prison environment makes his claims bonafide. Thus, when Komunyakaa says, “[Knight] can speak for the victims, for the unaware, for the powerless who can only mock and shadowplay power with their audacious presence” (18), there is an overlapping evidence of reasons that authenticate the messages in “A Fable” and the cultural relevance attached to the poet’s angst. For a number of reasons Knight’s prison poems historicize events in America that ought to be remembered for the impact that they’ve had on either the particular community he is writing about or the country itself. This function of his poetry could be considered as an extension of his role as a spokesperson for minority discourse. In a way, he is also addressing reality creatively, a stance the South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile affirms in the book *Black Poetry Writing*, arguing, “And if poetry is creative activity steeped in reality, which it must be in order to be valid, we need poems that report on and explore the tragedy of our time” (13).

In “Feeling Fucked Up” Knight rants against everything after his woman leaves him. His anger is so clear in the language and the images he included for the poem. Emotionally charged, urgent and intense, the speaker of the poem goes against everything, including religion, philosophy, politics, third world solidarity, and nature as he laments the absence of his woman in his life. The poem is a declarative statement that shares Knight’s anguish and emotional loss. He has lost his woman because of his addiction to drugs. This is reference is accentuated in the lines “dope death dead dying and jiving drove/her away made her take her laughter and her smiles.” The poem also demonstrates Knight’s mastery of the poetic tradition that informs his writing as he uses repetition, alliteration (dope death dead dying drove), and cultural allusions to people with local and global significance such as Coltrane, Malcolm, Nixon, Mao, Fidel, Marx, Nkrumah, among others,) to give his reader a sense of the time, a sort of historicizing of the poem. From the narrative it is clear that Knight’s drug addiction had led to his woman leaving him. He is incomplete without her and makes this known in the last line that reads: “all I want now is my woman back/so my soul can sing.” In a sort of way, his woman symbolizes his muse. He has lost her and as such feels empty. The poem reads thus:

Lord she’s gone done left me done packed/up and split
 and I with no way to make her
 come back and everywhere the world is bare
 bright bone white crystal sand glistens
 dope death dead dying and jiving drove
 her away made her take her laughter and her smiles
 and her softness and her midnight sighs—

Fuck Coltrane and music and clouds drifting in the sky
 fuck the sea and trees and the sky and birds
 and alligators and all the animals that roam the earth
 fuck marx and mao fuck fidel and nkrumah and
 democracy and communism fuck smack and pot
 and red ripe tomatoes fuck joseph fuck mary fuck

god jesus and all the disciples fuck fanon nixon
 and malcolm fuck the revolution fuck freedom fuck
 the whole muthafucking thing
 all i want now is my woman back
 so my soul can sing (*The Essential Etheridge Knight* 33–34).

In addition, Knight also uses images that allude to romantic love to accentuate his message. Words such as “laughter”, “smile”, “softness” and “midnight sighs” echo the things his woman offered that he no longer has. He does not want the “sea”, “tree”, “birds” and “sky” because he is in a state of absolute emptiness. The repeated use of the derogatory ‘fuck’ is intended to demonstrate his anger and anguish. Many readers of the poem, especially women, have found it very appealing and relatable. A typical example that supports this point can be found in an anecdote Reginald Dwayne Betts recalls in his essay “FEELING FUCKED UP: THE ARCHITECTURE OF ANGE,” where he adds:

[Eleanor] Wilner told me of a poetry reading at a women's prison where Etheridge read his poem “Feeling Fucked Up.” And then was asked to read it again. And then was asked to read it again, and again until he'd read the poem ten times. There is a beauty in having a group of women so understand what you are saying that they ask you to say it again (11).

Betts' reference brings up his own assertion about Knight that “[he] did not approach poetry as a place for brilliant accidents. Instead he made use of rhetoric, figurative language and syntax to articulate a complicated truth” (11). Furthermore, this poem supports Betts' claim that in Knight's poetry “anger is never without source” (Betts 11). The fact that Knight's audience in this example presented by Betts comprises of entirely women goes to show that Komunyakaa probably is right when he states that “Etheridge knew how to get close to his feminine side, so much so that you could almost hear a woman singing underneath his voice ... singing one collective acknowledgement” (20). Also, the fact that the women inmates asked Knight to read the same poem over and over again goes to show the importance of not only the message but also the poet's diction and language.

“Cell Song” is yet another poem by Knight that demonstrates his rant and anguish. Set in prison, the poem focuses on the pronoun “I” to lead the reader through the speaker's emotional outburst. The poem's focus is on the speaker's mood and aspirations. Knight has lost his freedom and tries to meditate, mull his situation, so to speak. In the poem he is reassessing his condition and ends up questioning his own relationship with poetry. The poem reads thus:

Night Music Slanted
 Light strike the cave of sleep. I alone
 tread the red circle
 and twist the space with speech

Come now, etheridge, don't
 be a savior; take your words and scrape
 the sky, shake rain

on the desert, sprinkle
 salt on the tail
 of a girl,

can there anything
 good come out of
 prison (*The Essential Etheridge Knight* 9).

The first three words in the poem give away Knight's mood. There is the reference to time in “Night,” sound in “Music,” and emotion in “Slanted.” Always the innovative poet, Knight deliberately capitalized the first three words to emphasize the mood of the poem. Because prison life can be lonely for the creative writer

who is denied the company of friends and writing groups he once knew and participated in brotherly/sisterly workshops and performances with, Knight is at a crossroads in this poem. Nothing is making sense to him. The lines "I alone/tread the red circle" suggest a solitary mission for the poet. He is alone and must seek and find his happiness and comfort zone again. The last three lines "can there anything/good come out of/prison" is a moment of truth for the poet. The obvious answer to this question was answered by Knight many years ago when he stated, in an assessment of his years in prison, "My time made me see that prisons don't rehabilitate. If you come out with any degree of sanity at all, you're lucky. Prison is inhuman. It kills you" (Poletika). Knight had been in prison and knew firsthand the reality of losing social contacts that include family, friends, and creative enterprises that once served as his source of comfort and inspiration. He wasn't going to get any form of rehabilitation in prison when light struck "the cave of sleep." He had only poetry to help him sustain his sanity, since he was noted for toasting, making speeches, which is grounded in the African-American tradition.

Returning to family stories is an integral part of Knight's poetic vision. The poem "The Idea of Ancestry" expresses his mulling about his indebtedness to his family history and the lack of familial company that he misses while in prison. Nonetheless he finds in the photograph taped to his cell wall an agency for reclaiming family history and reuniting with the loved ones he has been separated from as a result of his imprisonment. The experience, for him, is sort of healing session as he goes through names and stories. The poem reads thus:

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grand fathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st & 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

I have at one time or another been in love with my mother, 1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts (1 went to the asylum), and 5 cousins. I am now in love with a 7 yr old niece (she sends me letters written in large block print, and her picture is the only one that smiles at me).

I have the same name as 1 grandfather, 3 cousins, 3 nephews, and 1 uncle. The uncle disappeared when he was 15, just took off and caught a freight (they say). He's discussed each year when the family has a reunion, he causes uneasiness in the clan, he is an empty space. My father's mother, who is 93 and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody's birth dates (and death dates) in it, always mentions him. There is no place in her Bible for "whereabouts unknown" (*The Essential Etheridge Knight* 12–13).

Knight's use of a photograph to harp on family history in his poetry is intentionally done in a redeeming light. The image gives him both a sense of touch and personal contact that he misses as a result of distance. Yet the fact that he sees family members, talks about them, and remembers pivotal information that remain pertinent to each of them helps him absorb the degree of regret that he experiences by virtue of losing contact with them. Hence, we see he makes allusion to names, dates and other references gain a release from what seems to be an unavoidable but harsh truth that he faces: he cannot leave his present space to go be with them. Photographs therefore do not only help prisoners to retrace the care and support they miss from family but also contribute to their well-being. The memories of loved ones bring back special moments that the one holding the photograph treasures. The poet through this experience emphasizes that images, especially those of family members, are powerful and should be kept on the walls by prisoners when to help them eschew depressive thoughts and moments. Nicole R. Fleetwood makes this connection as she points out in the following statement:

Etheridge Knight's 1968 poem "The Idea of Ancestry" engages the haptic and emotive function of photographs between prisoners and their families. The poem also provides insight into the impact that imprisonment has had on black family structures for generations and across generations ... photographs are material objects taped to the wall, as much as they are a familial lineage and emotional connection for incarcerated Knight; he signifies, "I am all of them, they are all of me." Knight's meditation on these photographs displayed in his cell illustrates how emotions circulate through photographs for incarcerated and nonincarcerated loved ones (491).

Over the years, many authors that suffered incarceration, be it political or as a result of making wrong choices in life, have reflected on their own prison experiences like Knight in order to find a redemptive light. One poet who has shed light on how prison helped him to enhance his writing is the South African poet Breyten Breytenbach, a survivor of incarceration during his country's dreaded apartheid era. In an interview granted to *The New York Times*, Breyten Breytenbach recalls his time in prison and states as "a writer and artist, he counts it an advantage to have been imprisoned and feels that his writing has been improved by the experience" (Woods). His admission calls upon a statement by Jean Anaporté-Easton who observed that "[Knight] tells Rowell that it is no easier to write in real in the outside world 'because in all the real senses I am still in prison.' Ironically, much of Knight's finished writing seems to have taken place while he was in prison" (941–946).

By and large, Etheridge Knight's prison poetry represents some of the finest work of American literature that addressed the carceral experience. In his work the fight against injustice, love, family, history and stories of survival in the face of adversity are accentuated. He addresses issues that bothered him as a human being, poet, and cultural spokesperson to give the public a lesson that crosses different generations. Issues such as mass incarceration, prison rape, and the silent voices of black women inmates are still matters of scholarly discourse in academic circuits. As a writer, Knight's motivation for writing was clear. Despite the wrong choices that he made in life, especially engaging robbery, becoming addicted to drugs, and spending time in prison, he was still thoughtful enough to use his voice and poetry to capture the imagination of his generation and the attention of those readers familiar with his work long after his demise. An iconic poet, Knight saw the art of poetry as a platform that offered the poet a window through which he/she captured crucial experiences that gave society reasons to rethink moral and ethical decisions that affect people's lives. Like Komunyakaa said, Knight "was a chronicler of prison life" and "he conveyed each story with such clarity that the images cut through almost anybody's armor." Indeed, these words authenticate the voice and vision of a poet whose poetry gave significance and acceptance to the way Americans read and appreciated prison literature.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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