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## EDITOR'S NOTE

# Introduction

Carolina Villalba

Florida International University, US

[linavillalba9@gmail.com](mailto:linavillalba9@gmail.com)

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This special issue of *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* combines critical scholarship on prison writing and personal narratives of carceral experiences. This collection brings together cultural commentary and personal testimony to explore intersecting questions about imprisonment, criminalization, and social inequality.

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In recent years, scholarship on imprisonment, mass incarceration, and carceral studies has gained a wider audience. Critical conversations on prison literature have also grown increasingly intersectional and multidisciplinary, as new anthologies are regularly published and writing from or about imprisonment earns greater scholarly attention. Popular fiction, non-fiction, films, and television series further attest to growing public interest in stories about prison. As we encounter more writing that originates from or focuses on the prison space, and as the subject of incarceration continually collides with important social and legal questions about human rights, we are called to examine these subjects through more complex perspectives. Thus we need to create more space in our critical landscape to further discuss and contextualize these stories, as well as analyze what they say about our justice systems. The essays in this special issue on prison writing and incarceration narratives demonstrate there are myriad angles from which to view this diverse subject.

The essays by Taija Mars McDougall, Dike Okoro, and Benjamin Moats provide fresh perspectives on some well-known works of prison literature. McDougall's "Left Out: Notes on Absence, Nothingness and the Black Prisoner Theorist" makes a case for considering the cultural influence of the black prisoner theorist, tracing the history of an uncited quote from George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* to interrogate the marginalization of prisoner-writers in scholarly conversations. McDougall shows how Jackson's uncite-ability, or the absence of authorial acknowledgement given to a writer like him, exemplifies historically rooted links between blackness, captivity, and second-class status. In "Etheridge Knight's Prison Poetry," Okoro similarly argues for the value of including prison writing in discussions about the contemporary literary canon. In particular, Okoro highlights how Knight's poems deploy rhetorical strategies that transgress and transcend the confining spaces from which they are written, serving purposes of resistance and healing, while also providing him with a self-created connection to the "outside" world. Moats's "Lives from Death Row: Common Sinners and Current Pasts" argues that Mumia Abu-Jamal's *Live from Death Row* makes a moral appeal to its audience to question not only the validity of his sentence, but also our complicity in systems of order and justice that are condemnatory. Moats shows how Abu-Jamal's work remains relevant to current conversations about imprisonment, as it positions both our prison system and the prisoner himself along a historical continuum that has slowly modernized slavery through racism, segregation, and mass incarceration.

Highlighting the experiences of imprisoned women in particular, essays by Suzanne Diamond, Anna Hinton, and Anne Katz and Ron Levine question traditionally accepted narratives about female criminalization. In "A Flower in a Hard Rain': Melodramatic Storytelling by, and About, Aileen Wuornos," Diamond analyzes how patterns of externalization in Wuornos's prison letters indicate her ambivalence about sharing her story through personal narrative. Diamond notes that, rather than give up control of how her story would be constructed, Wuornos opted not to publicly share her story at all. The ways in which Wuornos is alternately vilified and victimized in popular and critical narratives exemplifies what Diamond refers to as

melodramatic storytelling about imprisoned women. Hinton's "A War of Minds Waged Against Bodies: The Political Activist as Prisoner and Patient" uncovers some key connections between state violence, disability, and the black female body. Hinton argues that Assata Shakur's 1987 eponymous memoir testifies to experiences of becoming disabled both physically, through suffering numerous instances of sanctioned violence on the body, and culturally, by occupying a multiply marginalized social position as a criminalized black woman. In "Prisoners of Age: The Women," Katz and Levine also enable us to contemplate the complexity of aging as an imprisoned woman. Their important work helps humanize elderly and aging inmates in our corrections systems, sparking questions about health care, healing, and dignity as human rights. Only by allowing imprisoned women and men to be "seen" in ways like this can we properly reflect on the human lives our critical questions and conversations impact.

As such, the personal narratives by Luis Garcia, Yvonne Hammond, Eugene Hunter, and Treacy Ziegler bring unique subjectivity to stories of imprisonment. Garcia's "Prison Arts and Future IDs": A Social Art Practice Personal Narrative" speaks to the importance of prison arts programs in healing trauma and improving recidivism. Garcia describes his own experiences in the Future IDs program, which he says helped him regain positive self-worth and gave him a place in his community through service work. Hammond's "Prison Days: Observations and Reservations of a Public Scholar" analyzes her experience as a graduate co-facilitator of the Appalachian Prison Book Club to provide new insights about how women are positioned in both academia and the prison space. Her essay reveals the complexity of navigating leadership roles as a woman in these two highly stratified spaces. Hunter's "The Creation and Deconstruction of America's Inner City Criminals" blends prose and poetry to reflect on the experience of imprisonment, ultimately arguing for education as a pre-emptive means to combat the problem of mass incarceration. Ziegler's "The Incarceration of Kindness" testifies to the reverberating effects of kindness inside the prison space. Describing both her own observations and those offered by contributing prisoners, Ziegler notes that the ways kindness manifests in prison depends on the degree to which the prison's community and structure permit or obstruct expressions of human sympathy and connection.

The works in this issue accentuate how personal stories and cultural commentary about imprisonment connect to broader critical discourse. The issue's cover art, *Warning this may trigger debate*—created by Cuban-born, Miami-based artist Rosa Naday Garmendia as an extension of her *Rituals of Commemoration* project (2014-ongoing)—also reminds us of the urgency in continuing our conversations around social inequality, systematic racism, and law enforcement practices that influence criminalization. These conversations are inextricably linked to our criminal justice paradigms and practices, of which the prison is a cornerstone. Garmendia's project calls on its audience to reflect and participate through encounter. The essays in this issue similarly encourage our reflection and call us to engage in critical discussions that socially implicate us all.

## Cover Art

"Sandra Bland 2015," from *Warning this may trigger debate*, by Rosa Naday Garmendia (an extension of *Rituals of Commemoration*, 2014-ongoing).

Garmendia's project is an interactive "counter-monument" made up of 25 concrete blocks documenting the names and dates of lives lost to state violence or police brutality. Participants may take a photograph carrying the weight of a block to symbolize affirmation through memory, as well as their willingness to commemorate lives taken by state-sanctioned violence (*Warning this may trigger debate*, an extension of *Rituals of Commemoration*, 2014-ongoing).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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