



The Monster That Won't Stop Coming

Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States

Edited by Rickie Solinger, Paula C. Johnson, Martha L. Raimon, Tina Reynolds, and Ruby C. Tapia

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010, 458pp., \$21.95, paperback

Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women

By Victoria Law

Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009, 258 pp., \$20.00, paperback

The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison & Fighting for Those Left Behind

By Safiya Bukhari. Edited and with an introduction by Laura Whitehorn.

New York: The Feminist Press, 2010, 263 pp., \$15.95, paperback

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness

By Michelle Alexander

New York: The New Press, 2010, 290pp., \$27.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Martha Gies

I have read my share of prison literature, from the prison writings of Vaclav Havel and Jacobo Timerman to photocopied "books" stapled together by a Catholic religious sister working in a county jail. What I find unique about the anthology *Interrupted Life* is the equal voice it gives to lawyers, scholars, activists, social workers, and incarcerated women, a mix that keeps the academics honest and accountable, and the inmates fully integrated into the dialogue.

The five editors compiled this collection with the aim of showing the brutality and dehumanization of the prison system, to demonstrate why it should be done away with. "Reforming the prison," they explain,

entails changing its existing practices to make the system a better one. Abolishing the prison entails dismantling it wholesale. Reformers object to how the prison is administered. Abolitionists object to the prison's very existence. We have approached this project as abolitionists who seek to participate in the current swell of activism inside and outside the prison that focuses on its dismantling.

Interrupted Life contains a wide array of writings on various topics, including giving birth behind bars, gender-identity regulations, racism, writing programs, asylum seekers in detention, death row, convict labor, battered women, and children of felons, as well as a United Nations report on violence against women in US prisons. It's a hefty volume, with 87 separate contributions.

One of the most haunting pieces in the book is a diary of the bureaucratic fumbling of a release date, by Lorrie Sue McClary. For months after her parole hearing, she comes and goes from her counselor's office and the program office, expecting her imminent release. She's told there's no parole ducat, or ticket, and that she should return the next day: "No, McClary, you are not leaving today. There is some problem with your paperwork and we haven't been able to get hold of your parole officer; he is out of the office." She's living a Kafka tale. Finally, she is let out and reunited with her parents; she's been gone for thirty years. The journal from her first night reads:

Sleep. Not this night. I need to be here, and I can't afford to fall asleep and wake up back in the prison. I can't sleep. This bed is so soft...

I can open my window and hear crickets, an owl, coyotes howling, they sound so close. The air is so fresh. I can open my door and the bathroom has a night light also. In the living room, moonlight is shining through the sliding glass doors and windows. The shape of the trees lining the tops of the mountains around us in contrast to the night sky. God, thank you. I am home.

On impulse, I did an Internet search on McClary and learned that she had been convicted at age sixteen of the murder of an elderly widow. Her 23-year-old boyfriend committed the murder, testified against her, and pulled four years. McClary, instead of getting a lesser sentence as a juvenile, was tried in adult court and sentenced to seven to life. The lawyer who prosecuted her thought she should have gotten the death penalty and would show up at her parole hearings, even after he retired, to say so. Not even her boyfriend's eventual confession changed her situation. Finally, a new California law permitted battered women to submit evidence in cases where proof of battery would have changed the outcome of her trial. At age 46, McClary was released.

According to Ruby Tapia's introduction to the book, since 1977, the number of women in US prisons has increased by more than 700 percent, and nearly seventy percent of the women imprisoned in the United States are African American or Latina. Julia Sudbury, a well-known writer on prison issues who teaches ethnic studies at Mills College, contributes the lead essay, "Unpacking the Crisis: Women of Color, Globalization, and the Prison-Industrial Complex," in which she offers her own analysis of why US prisons are overcrowded to the point of crisis. For Sudbury, it boils down to four interlocking factors:

First, 1980s-era Reaganomics, which did away with social programs and invested, instead, in the military and corrections. "With social expenditure decreasing," Sudbury writes, "criminalization has become the primary response to growing poverty." This, she says, affects women, and especially women of color, the hardest. Low-income mothers are the first to feel the methodical withdrawal of resources from social welfare programs and from education, and the last, in a broken economy, to find a legal way of keeping the family housed and fed.

Second, the war on drugs. "Rather than viewing a rise in drug use as a public health crisis..." says Sudbury, "the war on drugs identifies drug use as a threat to public safety and pumps funds into the arrest and incarceration of both users and suppliers of criminalized drugs."

Third, globalization and the consequent "selective control of national borders," she says. "The surveillance and policing of Latinos/as, who are racially profiled as potential 'illegal aliens,' ensures that a disproportionate number of Latino/a immigrants are picked up for other infractions, from drug possession to driving without a license." Sudbury points out that more than sixty percent of incarcerated noncitizens are from Mexico.

Finally, prisons are big money. Prisoners are “warehoused in megaprisons designed for economies of scale rather than *rehabilitation*” [emphasis mine, of a word that turns up rarely in any of these books], and regardless of who runs the prison, it “transforms immense sums of public money into private profits.” Even worse, Sudbury argues, the prison-industrial complex has gone international:

As politicians around the world have pushed their own versions of US-style tough-on-crime strategies, global prison populations have begun to rise inexorably. ... Mass warehousing in “no frills” superjails...has increasingly become politicians’ solution, fueling the growth of a transnational prison-industrial complex.

In Bolivia, for example, the prison population has swollen since the 1988 passage of “*Ley 1008*,” originally drafted by the US as part of our War on Drugs. In Cochabamba’s San Sebastian Prison for Women, according to a 2005 UNESCO policy paper, seventy percent were jailed under this law, which has been criticized as unfairly burdening the country’s poor and indigenous people.

Sudbury offers three recommendations for developing a “vibrant antiprison movement”: we must believe a different world is possible, figure out how to reduce the prison population, and work toward building a world without prisons. There’s every reason to believe it will be a long, hard fight. As the prison-abolitionist Angela Davis described the situation to Amy Goodman, the host of the *Democracy Now!* radio program, four years ago:

The idea is to build more and more prisons to serve as receptacles for those people who no longer have a place because there’s no longer jobs for them, there’s no longer education for them, there’s no longer welfare for them, there’s no longer health care for them.”

The photographer and author Victoria Law has been fighting against prisons from outside the walls for most of her young life. She begins *Resistance Behind Bars* with the story of her close brush with incarceration, at age sixteen:

The unspoken Chinatown rule was that boys held the guns and girls were simply girlfriends. Somehow I was allowed to be an exception.

My initiation—an armed robbery—turned into an arrest. I was sent to the Tombs, the holding area for those awaiting arraignment in Manhattan’s criminal court...

Because it was my first arrest—and probably because 16-year-old Chinese girls who get straight As in school did not seem particularly menacing—I was eventually let off with probation.

Rather than run the other way, Law decided to dedicate herself to helping women inside prison and documenting their struggles. In 1996 she helped found a New York branch of Books Through Bars, and in 2003, asked by some incarcerated women to help get their work published, she responded with *Tenacious*, the only ’zine dedicated to the voices of women in prison. She spent eight years researching often-invisible instances of incarcerated women’s resistance and their tactics.

Law’s book does three things: it demonstrates that women in prison do, indeed, fight the system in conventional ways—i.e., the way men do, with hunger strikes and work stoppages; it gives examples of organizing that are probably uniquely female; and it offers a 25-page list of organizations and recommended reading for the reader who wants to participate in the movement.

During the September 1971 riot at the men’s prison in Attica, New York, women at Alderson, a federal prison in West Virginia, staged a four-day work stoppage to express their solidarity with their brother-prisoners under siege. Law cites this as just one example of women prisoners’ resistance that we rarely hear about. “Researchers, scholars and activists often do not search for acts of defiance among the growing female prison population,” she says, “often assuming that the silence around women prisoners’ agency and activism signifies passive acceptance.” Law points out that this lack of attention to women’s resistance—which includes organizing and activism, rioting, and litigation in addition to simple acts of friendship and solidarity—is self-reinforcing, discouraging future researchers from looking into the matter.

One serious 1974 disturbance, in which seven staff members were held hostage at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York, was “relegated to a paragraph buried in the back pages of the *New York Times*,” presumably because no one got killed. The incident, which Law dubs the August Rebellion, resulted in two-dozen injuries and another two-dozen transfers to the Matteawan Complex for the Criminally Insane “*without the required commitment hearings*” (emphasis mine). A 1975 sit-down strike at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women, which required “over 100 guards from other prisons...to quell the rebellion,” also made the *New York Times*.

But of the August 13, 1992, incident at the federal prison in Lexington, Kentucky—nothing. On that day, ninety women “refused to leave the yard for the prison’s afternoon count to protest a lieutenant’s assault of a black prisoner the night before. ‘We sang Bob Marley’s “Stand Up for Your Rights,” and chanted “Stop Police Brutality,” “We Want Justice,” “Let Them Out of Seg,” and “Figueroa [the lieutenant] Must Go,”’ recalls Laura Whitehorn, a political prisoner who participated in the stand-out:

While we demonstrated, we heard shouts of support from the windows of the housing units, and at least two ‘all-available officers’ codes to different units—meaning that the women who had returned to the units for count were doing some kind of support actions too.

Needless to say, the rioters were put into segregation; Whitehorn was among the group transferred to FCI-Dublin, California—where she would eventually meet Safiya Bukhari, whose *The War Before* she edited. More on that later.

Resistance Behind Bars is organized by issue: Law looks at healthcare, inmates’ access to their children, sexual abuse, education, prison labor, grievances, and legal redress, and in each area gives examples of the hardships women encounter, followed by examples of their organizing and protests. One type of resistance Law documents is “empathetic assistance,” prisoner to prisoner. For example, when a woman incarcerated in Michigan was unable to make a phone call home because a new Sprint program required an unexpected \$50.00 deposit, an inmate in California who happened to hear about the problem offered to pay the deposit. In the corrections environment, prison officials often see such kindness as a failure of control. Emotional bonding is discouraged. In fact, a well-known tool for manipulating and controlling prison populations is the device of playing off one ethnic group against the other. Race riots often develop in prison because staff has fomented them.

“Anyone who is truly passionate about social justice has the capacity to become a political prisoner,” writes Safiya Bukhari in *The War Before*. In the strictest sense, political prisoners are incarcerated for their ideals. Even though most Americans’ view of their country does not include such prisoners, the idea of whom conjures up Soviet forced-labor camps with bitter weather and brutal work, we do in fact have them. “Hundreds, perhaps thousands,” estimated Andrew Young back in July 1978, when, as US ambassador to the United Nations, he was asked about US prisoners by a reporter for the Paris newspaper, *Le Matin*. An angry President Jimmy Carter reprimanded Young for his widely reported remark.

Thirty-two years ago, when discussing political prisoners, Young would have had in mind civil-rights activists like himself, anti-Vietnam War protesters, and perhaps anti-nuclear demonstrators, more than 1,100 of whom were arrested at the construction site of the Seabrook, New Hampshire, nuclear power plant in May 1977. Today, we would have to add social activists of all stripes—tree-sitters, World Trade Organization protesters, trespassers on posted beaches hoping to save turtles from BP’s spilled oil—along with anyone who is Muslim.

At the time of Young’s remark, Amnesty International recognized eleven US political prisoners. Amnesty adopts only “prisoners of conscience,” who have been jailed solely because of their political views, not for acts of violence. Bukhari didn’t make that distinction. In 1998 she co-founded the Jericho Movement to support US political prisoners, most of whom were members of the Black Panther Party (BPP) who had been imprisoned on trumped-up charges. Today her movement’s website counts nine chapters across the nation.

Sadly, Bukhari died in 2003. Afterward, her daughter Wonda Jones appealed to Laura Whitehorn, then a senior editor at *POZ* magazine, to help her collect, edit, and publish her mother’s papers. Whitehorn, a Radcliffe graduate and former member of Students for a Democratic Society, had been sentenced to twenty years for her role in Weather Underground bombings, and Bukhari had met her while Whitehorn was serving time. As a prison-support worker, Bukhari had “communicated [the prisoners’] needs and ideas to

the outside world,” Whitehorn recalls, “and she wrote and spoke on their behalf, while the government, refusing to call them ‘political’ prisoners, kept trying to bury them.” *The War Before* consists of Bukhari’s speeches, radio interviews, out-of-print pamphlets, and essays published and unpublished, which she had hoped might one day grow into her memoirs or fit into a book on post-traumatic stress syndrome. Thanks to Whitehorn’s adroit organization, footnotes, and introduction, these occasional writings work together to tell a coherent, remarkable, and passionate story.

Bukhari was born in the Bronx in 1950 as Bernice Jones and raised in a large Christian family. In 1967, she started college in Brooklyn at New York City Community College with the goal of becoming a doctor, and the following year she pledged a sorority on a dare. Then, with some sorority sisters, she went on a field trip:

I was suddenly stripped of my innocence by a foray into Harlem and indecent housing, police brutality, hungry children needing to be fed, elderly people eating out of garbage cans, and hopelessness and despair everywhere. If I hadn’t seen it for myself, I would never have believed that this was America. It looked and sounded like one of those undeveloped third world countries.

Elsewhere in the book, she explains, “My mother had successfully kept me ignorant of the plight of Black people in America.”

Bukhari became an activist as a result of the visit, and when she and a friend tried to prevent two policemen from hassling a Black Panther selling the party’s newspaper, the two women were thrown in the back of a police car. Bukhari writes: “My friend went to say something and one of the police officers threatened to ram his nightstick up her if she opened her mouth again.”

Whitehorn remembers that Bukhari often said, “It wasn’t the Panthers that made me join the Black Panther Party. It was the police.” In early 1969, Bukhari began cooking for the Free Breakfast for Children Program, one of the Panthers’ several “survival programs.” She worked in the Harlem BPP office, in support of party members who had been arrested in a predawn raid on April 2, 1969, for allegedly conspiring to blow up the New York Botanical Gardens, department stores, and other targets. Though it was not understood at the time, the raid and conspiracy charges were the work of a secret FBI counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO, one aim of which was to discredit and dismantle the BPP.

On May 13, 1971, after the longest political trial in New York history, the defendants were acquitted of all charges, after just 45 minutes of jury deliberation. Still, the work of supporting and defending so many prisoners had been costly in money, time, and spirit; for two years, BPP recruitment was frozen and social programs suffered. COINTELPRO continued its disruptive tactics, and when Bukhari was subpoenaed by a New York grand jury, rather than testify against her comrades she went underground. As Whitehorn describes it,

She stayed under for almost two years, until 1975, when she was arrested at the scene of a grocery store shooting in Norfolk, Virginia. Convicted of robbery and felony murder and sentenced to forty years, Safiya began serving her time in the prison for women at Goochland, Virginia.

Bukhari served nearly nine of those years. She was disillusioned by the government’s war on the party’s community survival programs, astonished that police would spread the rumor that the Panthers served poisoned food to children, horrified that Panthers were being murdered outright (Bunchy Carter and John Huggins in Los Angeles; Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago), and heartsick at the trumped-up charges that put others, like Geronimo Pratt and Dhoruba Bin-Wahad, in prison for years. *The War Before* includes a twenty-page document called “Lest We Forget,” with biographical notes on 45 Panthers assassinated by the government. The names of political prisoners comprise a second text.

In August of 1983, when Bukhari was finally released from the Virginia Correctional Center for Women, it was only to find that

[t]hese brothers—and countless others who are in prison and have been in prison since the sixties and throughout the sixties until today—have sacrificed upward of seventeen years of their lives in the struggle for the liberation of Black people....The community has moved forward and these brothers have remained behind bars. It’s important that we, in some measure, show our support of the sacrifice they’ve made by getting involved in the effort to free these brothers and to see that justice is done.

In *The New Jim Crow*, the legal scholar Michelle Alexander presents these appalling figures: the US prison population has risen from 300,000 to more than 2 million in the last thirty years, giving the United States the shameful distinction of having the highest incarceration rate in the world. Moreover, she writes,

the United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. In Washington, DC, our nation's capitol, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison. Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America.

And, according to 2009 figures from the Institute on Women and Criminal Justice, more than 200,000 women are in prison and jail in the United States, and more than one million women are under criminal justice supervision.

Alexander argues that mass incarceration of blacks has created a separate caste of people who have fewer rights than the rest of us. A former director of the Racial Justice Project at the ACLU in San Francisco, Alexander provides many discouraging examples of how rights once lost, stay lost. She begins her account with this startling paragraph:

Jarvious Cotton cannot vote. Like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather, he has been denied the right to participate in our electoral democracy.... Cotton's great-great-grandfather could not vote as a slave. His great-grandfather was beaten to death by the Ku Klux Klan for attempting to vote. His grandfather was prevented from voting by Klan intimidation. His father was barred from voting by poll taxes and literacy tests. Today, Jarvious Cotton cannot vote because he, like many black men in the United States, has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole.

Alexander points out that convicted felons are not only ineligible to vote in many states, but they are also barred from receiving Section 8 housing assistance. They're stuck in a "catch-22" regarding employment: while eighty percent of the jurisdictions Alexander surveyed required parolees to find and keep a job or face going back to prison, in nearly every state employers may discriminate against applicants with criminal records. Once prisoners are released, they must also start paying post-conviction fees and fines, which often amount to as much or more than they could possibly earn. Homeless? Unemployed? Unable to pay debt? Probably you'll end up right back in jail. Even if ex-cons manage to stay out of prison, they remain second-class citizens.

In her analysis of how the problem grew this huge—both in terms of the sheer number of people under the control of the criminal justice system and of the skewed percentage of them who are black—Alexander finds that the system has abandoned African-American defendants at every stage. They face profiling by the police, an inadequate public defender system, pressure to plea bargain, and mandatory minimum sentences. As Safiya Bukhari points out,

We can't get a fair trial in this system for Black people, because we're already stereotyped; whatever we're accused of, we did it. If you got indicted, you did it. And if you got killed for doing it, then you did it. And if you didn't do it this time, you did it another time.

In addition, racially discriminatory sentencing laws impose far stiffer penalties for possession of crack than for powder cocaine, a more expensive version of the same substance.

Possession of a controlled substance can hardly be labeled a crime of conscience, and we've moved far away from Amnesty International's definition of political prisoner. And yet, looking at the larger picture, and the way the current system routinely funnels black males into prison, the US has a serious moral problem. These men should be regarded as what they are—political prisoners.

Her conclusion is that "the clock has been turned back" on racial justice. Worse, attention is fixed on a handful of black celebrities, such as Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey, whose remarkable success confuses the issue. Alexander writes,

For those left behind, especially those within prison walls, the celebration of racial triumph in America must seem a tad premature. More black men are imprisoned today than at any other moment in our nation's history. More are disenfranchised today than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the

basis of race.

Alexander has gotten a lot of well-deserved attention for this book, which is a mesmerizing—if discouraging—read, one that is hard to put down. Since its publication, Congress passed legislation reducing—but not eliminating—the sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine, and the new ratio (formerly 100:1, now 18:1) was signed into federal law on August 3. It does not apply retroactively, nor does it affect the sentencing practices in state courts, where most of the drug possession cases are prosecuted. Still, it is a start, and a victory for President Obama, who addressed the disparity in his presidential campaign.

Michelle Alexander has been tireless in her radio appearances, and it may be that her persuasive condemnation of the sentencing issue helped pass the reform in Congress. It would be a wonderful victory for justice if the voices of all of these authors could be equally heard and the urgency of their message as effective.

Martha Gies developed and taught, for the graduate writing program at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, a human rights course where students researched the cases of international writers imprisoned for their beliefs and advocated for their release. She is the author of *Up All Night* (2004) and of many stories and essays published over the last thirty years.