Assata Shakur

Women

in Prison: How It Is with Us

We sit in the bull pen. We are all black. All restless. And we are all freezing. When we ask, the matron tells us that the heating system cannot be adjusted. All of us, with the exception of a woman, tall and gaunt, who looks naked and ravished, have refused the bologna sandwiches. The rest of us sit drinking bitter, syrupy tea. The tall, fortyish woman, with sloping shoulders, moves her head back and forth to the beat of a private tune while she takes small, tentative bites out a bologna sandwich. Someone asks her what she's in for. Matter-of-factly, she says, "They say I killed some nigga. But how could I have when I'm buried down in South Caro-

lina?" Everybody's face gets busy exchanging looks. A short, stout young woman wearing men's pants and men's shoes says, "Buried in South Carolina?" "Yeah," says the tall woman. "South Carolina, that's where I'm buried. You don't know that? You don't know shit, do you? This ain't me. This ain't me." She kept repeating, "This ain't me" until she had eaten all the bologna sandwiches. Then she brushed off the crumbs and withdrew, head moving again, back into that world where only she could hear her private tune.

Lucille comes to my tier to ask me how much time a "C" felony conviction carries. I know, but i cannot say the words. I tell her i will look it up and bring the sentence charts for her to see. I know that she has just been convicted of manslaughter in the second degree. I also know that she can be sentenced up to fifteen years. I knew from what she had told me before that the District Attorney was willing to plea bargain:

Five years probation in exchange for a guilty plea to a lesser charge.

Her lawyer felt that she had a case: specifically, medical records which would prove that she had suffered repeated physical injuries as the result of beatings by the deceased and, as a result of those beatings, on the night of her arrest her arm was mutilated (she must still wear a brace on it) and one of her ears was partially severed, in addition to other substantial injuries. Her lawyer felt that her testimony, when she took the stand in her own defense, would establish the fact that not only had she been repeatedly beaten by the deceased, but that on the night in question he told her he would kill her. He viciously beat her and mauled her with a knife. But there is no self-defense in the state of New York.

The District Attorney made a big deal of the fact that she drank. And the jury, affected by TV racism, "law and order," petrified by crime,

and unimpressed with Lucille as a "responsible citizen," convicted her. And i was the one who had to tell her that she was facing fifteen years in prison while we both silently wondered what would happen to the four teenage children that she had raised almost single-handedly.

Spikey has short time and it is evident, the day before she is to be released, that she does not want to go home. She comes to the Bing (Administrative Segregation) because she has received an infraction for fighting. Sitting in front of her cage and talking to her i realize that the fight was a desperate, last ditch effort in hope that the prison would take away her "good days." She is in her late thirties. Her hands are swollen. Enormous. There are huge, open sores on her legs. She has about ten teeth left. And her entire body is scarred and ashen. She has been on drugs about twenty years. Her veins have collapsed. She has fibrosis, epilepsy, and edema. She has not seen her three children

in about eight years. She is ashamed to contact home because she robbed and abused her mother so many times.

When we talk it is around the Christmas holidays and she tells me about her bad luck. She tells me that she has spent the last four Christmases in jail and tells me how happy she is to be going home. But i know that she has nowhere to go and that the only "friends" she has in the world are here in jail. She tells me that the only regret she has about leaving is that she won't be singing in the choir at Christmas. As i talk to her i wonder if she will be back. I tell her goodbye and wish her luck. Six days later, through the prison grapevine, i hear that she is back. Just in time for the Christmas show.

We are at sick call. We are waiting on wooden benches in a beige and orange room to see the doctor. Two young women who look only mildly battered by life sit wearing pastel dresses and pointy-toed state shoes. (Wearing "state" is

often a sign that the wearer probably cannot afford to buy sneakers in commissary.) The two are talking about how well they were doing on the street. Eavesdropping, i find out that they both have fine "old men" that love the mess out of them. I find out that their men dress fly and wear some bad clothes and so do they. One has forty pairs of shoes while the other has a hundred skirts. One has two suede and five leather coats. The other has seven suedes and three leathers. One has three mink coats, a silver fox, and a leopard. The other has two minks, a fox jacket, a floor-length fox, and a chinchilla. One has four diamond rings and the other has five. One lives in a duplex with a sunken tub and a sunken living room with a waterfall. The other describes a mansion with a revolving living room. I'm relieved when my name is called. I had been sitting there feeling very, very sad.

There are no criminals here at Rikers Island Correctional Institution for Women, only vic-

tims. Most of the women (over ninety-five percent) are black and Puerto Rican. Many were abused children. Most have been abused by men and all have been abused by "the system."

There are no big-time gangsters here, no premeditated mass murderers, no godmothers. There are no big-time dope dealers, no kidnappers, no Watergate women. There are virtually no women here charged with white-collar crimes like embezzling or fraud. Most of the women have drug-related cases. Many are charged as accessories to crimes committed by men. The major crimes that women here are charged with are prostitution, pickpocketing, shoplifting, robbery, and drugs. Women who have prostitution cases or who are doing "fine" time make up a substantial part of the short-term population. The women see stealing or hustling as necessary for the survival of themselves or their children because jobs are scarce and welfare is impossible to live on.

One thing is clear: amerikan capitalism is in no way threatened by the women in prison on Rikers Island.

One gets the impression, when first coming to Rikers Island, that the architects conceived of it as a prison modeled after a juvenile center. In the areas where visitors usually pass there is plenty of glass and plenty of plants and flowers. The cell blocks consist of two long corridors with cells on each side connected by a watch-room where the guards are stationed, called a bubble. Each corridor has a dayroom with a TV, tables, multicolored chairs, a stove that doesn't work, and a refrigerator. There's a utility room with a sink and a washer and dryer that do not work.

Instead of bars the cells have doors that are painted bright, optimistic colors with slim glass observation panels. The doors are controlled electronically by the guards in the bubble. The cells are called rooms by everybody. They are

furnished with a cot, a closet, a desk, a chair, a plastic upholstered headboard that opens for storage, a small bookcase, a mirror, a sink, and a toilet. The prison distributes brightly-colored bedspreads and throw rugs for a homey effect. There is a school area, a gym, a carpeted auditorium, two inmate cafeterias, and outside recreation areas that are used during the summer months only.

The guards have successfully convinced most of the women that Rikers Island is a country club. They say that it is a playhouse compared to some other prisons (especially male): a statement whose partial veracity is not predicated upon the humanity of correction officials at Rikers Island, but, rather, by contrast to the unbelievably barbaric conditions of other prisons. Many women are convinced that they are, somehow, "getting over." Some go so far as to reason that because they are not doing hard time, they are not really in prison.

This image is further reinforced by the pseudo-motherly attitude of many of the guards, a deception which all too often successfully reverts women to children. The guards call the women inmates by their first names. The women address the guards either as Officer, Miss—or by nicknames (Teddy Bear, Spanky, Aunt Louise, Squeeze, Sarge, Black Beauty, Nutty Mahogany, etc.). Frequently, when a woman returns to Rikers she will make the rounds, gleefully embracing her favorite guard: the prodigal daughter returns.

If two women are having a debate about any given topic the argument will often be resolved by "asking the officer." The guards are forever telling the women to "grow up," to "act like ladies," to "behave," and to be "good girls." If an inmate is breaking some minor rule, like coming to say "hi" to her friend on another floor or locking in a few minutes late, a guard will say, jokingly, "don't let me have to come down there

and beat your butt." It is not unusual to hear a guard tell a woman, "what you need is a good spanking." The tone is often motherly: "didn't I tell you, young lady, to . . ."; or, "you know better than that"; or, "that's a good girl." And the women respond accordingly. Some guards and inmates "play" together. One officer's favorite "game" is taking off her belt and chasing her "girls" down the hall with it, smacking them on the butt.

But beneath the motherly veneer, the reality of guard life is ever-present. Most of the guards are black, usually from working-class, upward-bound, civil service–oriented backgrounds. They identify with the middle class, have middle-class values, and are extremely materialistic. They are not the most intelligent women in the world and many are extremely limited.

Most are aware that there is no justice in the amerikan judicial system and that blacks and

Puerto Ricans are discriminated against in every facet of amerikan life. But, at the same time, they are convinced that the system is somehow "lenient." To them, the women in prison are "losers" who don't have enough sense to stay out of jail. Most believe in the bootstrap theory—anybody can "make it" if they try hard enough. They congratulate themselves on their great accomplishments. In contrast to themselves they see the inmate as ignorant, uncultured, self-destructive, weak-minded, and stupid. They ignore the fact that their dubious accomplishments are not based on superior intelligence or effort, but only on chance and a civil service list.

Many guards hate and feel trapped by their jobs. The guard is exposed to a certain amount of abuse from co-workers—from the brass as well as from inmates—ass-kissing, robotizing, and mandatory overtime. (It is common practice for guards to work a double shift at least

once a week.) But no matter how much they hate the military structure, the infighting, the ugliness of their tasks, they are very aware of how close they are to the welfare lines. If they were not working as guards most would be underpaid or unemployed. Many would miss the feeling of superiority and power as much as they would miss the money, especially the cruel, sadistic ones.

The guards are usually defensive about their jobs and indicate by their behavior that they are not at all free from guilt. They repeatedly, compulsively say, as if to convince themselves, "This is a job just like any other job." The more they say it the more preposterous it seems.

The major topic of conversation here is drugs. Eighty percent of inmates have used drugs when they were in the street. Getting high is usually the first thing a woman says she's going to do when she gets out. In prison, as on the

streets, an escapist culture prevails. At least fifty percent of the prison population takes some form of psychotropic drug. Elaborate schemes to obtain contraband drugs are always in the works.

Days are spent in pleasant distractions: soap operas, prison love affairs, card playing and game playing. A tiny minority are seriously involved in academic pursuits or the learning of skills. An even smaller minority attempt to study available law books. There are no jailhouse lawyers and most of the women lack knowledge of even the most rudimentary legal procedures. When asked what happened in court, or what their lawyers said, they either don't know or don't remember. Feeling totally helpless and totally railroaded, a woman will curse out her lawyer or the judge with little knowledge of what is being done or of what should be done. Most plead guilty, whether they are guilty or not. The few who do go to

trial usually have lawyers appointed by the state and usually are convicted.

Here, the word lesbian seldom, if ever, is mentioned. Most, if not all, of the homosexual relationships here involve role-playing. The majority of relationships are either asexual or semi-sexual. The absence of sexual consummation is only partially explained by prison prohibition against any kind of sexual behavior. Basically, the women are not looking for sex. They are looking for love, for concern and companionship. For relief from the overwhelming sense of isolation and solitude that pervades each of us.

Women who are "aggressive" or who play the masculine roles are referred to as butches, bulldaggers, or stud broads. They are always in demand because they are always in the minority. Women who are "passive," or who play feminine roles, are referred to as fems. The butch-fem relationships are often oppressive,

resembling the most oppressive, exploitative aspect of a sexist society. It is typical to hear butches threatening fems with physical violence and it is not uncommon for butches to actually beat their "women." Some butches consider themselves pimps and go with the women who have the most commissary, the most contraband, or the best outside connections. They feel they are a class above ordinary women, which entitles them to "respect." They dictate to fems what they are to do and many insist the fems wash, iron, sew, and clean their cells for them. A butch will refer to another butch as "man." A butch who is well-liked is known as "one of the fellas" by her peers.

Once in prison, changes in roles are common. Many women who are strictly heterosexual in the street become butch in prison. Fems often create butches by convincing an inmate that she would make a "cute butch." About eighty percent of the prison population

engages in some form of homosexual relationship. Almost all follow negative, stereotypic male/female role models.

There is no connection between the women's movement and lesbianism. Most of the women at Rikers Island have no idea what feminism is, let alone lesbianism. Feminism, the women's liberation movement, and the gay liberation movement are worlds away from women at Rikers.

The black liberation struggle is equally removed from the lives of women at Rikers. While they verbalize acute recognition that amerika is a racist country where the poor are treated like dirt, they nevertheless feel responsible for the filth of their lives. The air at Rikers is permeated with self-hatred. Many women bear marks on their arms, legs, and wrists from suicide attempts or self-mutilation. They speak about themselves in self-deprecating terms. They consider themselves failures.

While most women contend that whitey is responsible for their oppression, they do not examine the cause or source of that oppression. There is no sense of class struggle. They have no sense of communism, no definition of it, but they consider it a bad thing. They do not want to destroy Rockefella. They want to be like him. Nicky Barnes, a major dope seller, is discussed with reverence. When he was convicted practically everyone was sad. Many gave speeches about how kind, smart, and generous he was; no one spoke about the sale of drugs to our children.

Politicians are considered liars and crooks. The police are hated. Yet, during cop and robber movies, some cheer loudly for the cops. One woman pasted photographs of Farrah Fawcett-Majors all over her cell because she "is a baad police bitch." Kojak and Barretta get their share of admiration.

A striking difference between women and

men prisoners at Rikers Island is the absence of revolutionary rhetoric among the women. We have no study groups. We have no revolutionary literature around. There are no groups of militants attempting to "get their heads together." The women at Rikers seem vaguely aware of what a revolution is but generally regard it as an impossible dream. Not at all practical.

While men in prison struggle to maintain their manhood there is no comparable struggle by women to preserve their womanhood. One frequently hears women say, "Put a bunch of bitches together and you've got nothin' but trouble"; and, "Women don't stick together, that's why we don't have nothin'." Men prisoners constantly refer to each other as brother. Women prisoners rarely refer to each other as sister. Instead, "bitch" and "whore" are the common terms of reference. Women, however, are much kinder to each other than men, and

any form of violence other than a fistfight is virtually unknown. Rape, murder, and stabbings at the women's prison are non-existent.

For many, prison is not that much different from the street. It is, for some, a place to rest and recuperate. For the prostitute, prison is a vacation from turning tricks in the rain and snow. A vacation from brutal pimps. Prison for the addict is a place to get clean, get medical work done, and gain weight. Often, when the habit becomes too expensive, the addict gets herself busted (usually subconsciously), so she can get back in shape, leave with a clean system, ready to start all over again. One woman claims that for a month or two every year she either goes jail or to the crazy house to get away from her husband.

For many the cells are not much different from the tenements, the shooting galleries, and the welfare hotels they live in on the street. Sick call is no different from the clinic or the hospital emergency room. The fights are the same

except they are less dangerous. The police are the same. The poverty is the same. The alienation is the same. The racism is the same. The sexism is the same. The drugs are the same and the system is the same. Rikers Island is just another institution. In childhood, school was their prison, or youth houses or reform schools or children shelters or foster homes or mental hospitals or drug programs and they see all institutions as indifferent to their needs yet necessary to their survival.

The women at Rikers Island come there from places like Harlem, Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, South Bronx, and South Jamaica. They come from places where dreams have been abandoned like the buildings. Where there is no more sense of community. Where neighborhoods are transient. Where isolated people run from one firetrap to another. The cities have removed us from our strengths, from our roots, from our traditions. They have taken away our gardens and our sweet potato pies and

given us McDonald's. They have become our prisons, locking us into the futility and decay of pissy hallways that lead nowhere. They have alienated us from each other and made us fear each other. They have given us dope and television as a culture.

There are no politicians to trust. No roads to follow. No popular progressive culture to relate to. There are no new deals, no more promises of golden streets, and no place else to migrate. My sisters in the streets, like my sisters at Rikers Island, see no way out. "Where can I go?" said a woman on the day she was going home. "If there's nothing to believe in," she said, "I can't do nothin' except try to find cloud nine."

What of our Past? What of our History? What of our Future?

I can imagine the pain and the strength of my great-great-grandmothers who were slaves

and my great-great-grandmothers who were Cherokee Indians trapped on reservations. I remembered my great-grandmother who walked everywhere rather than sit in the back of the bus. I think about North Carolina and my hometown and i remember the women of my grandmother's generation: strong, fierce women who could stop you with a look out the corners of their eyes. Women who walked with majesty; who could wring a chicken's neck and scale a fish. Who could pick cotton, plant a garden, and sew without a pattern. Women who boiled clothes white in big black cauldrons and who hummed work songs and lullabies. Women who visited the elderly, made soup for the sick, and shortnin' bread for the babies.

Women who delivered babies, searched for healing roots, and brewed medicines. Women who darned sox and chopped wood and laid bricks. Women who could swim rivers and shoot the head off a snake. Women who took

passionate responsibility for their children and for their neighbors' children too.

The women in my grandmother's generation made giving an art form. "Here, gal, take this pot of collards to Sister Sue"; "Take this bag of pecans to school for the teacher"; "Stay here while I go tend Mister Johnson's leg." Every child in the neighborhood ate in their kitchens. They called each other sister because of feeling rather than as the result of a movement. They supported each other through the lean times, sharing the little they had.

The women of my grandmother's generation in my hometown trained their daughters for womanhood. They taught them to give respect and to demand respect. They taught their daughters how to churn butter, how to use elbow grease. They taught their daughters to respect the strength of their bodies, to lift boulders, and how to kill a hog; what to do for colic, how to break a fever; and how to make a

poultice, patchwork quilts, plait hair, and how to hum and sing. They taught their daughters to take care, to take charge and to take responsibility. They would not tolerate a "lazy heifer" or a "gal with her head in the clouds." Their daughters had to learn how to get their lessons, how to survive, how to be strong. The women of my grandmother's generation were the glue that held family and the community together. They were the backbone of the church. And of the school. They regarded outside institutions with dislike and distrust. They were determined that their children should survive and they were committed to a better future.

I think about my sisters in the movement. I remember the days when, draped in African garb, we rejected our foremothers and ourselves as castrators. We did penance for robbing the brother of his manhood, as if we were the oppressor. I remember the days of the Panther Party when we were "moderately liberated."

When we were allowed to wear pants and expected to pick up the gun. The days when we gave doe-eyed looks to our leaders. The days when we worked like dogs and struggled desperately for the respect which they struggled desperately not to give us. I remember the black history classes that did mention women and the posters of our "leaders" where women were conspicuously absent. We visited our sisters who bore the complete responsibility of the children while the Brotha was doing his thing. Or had moved on to bigger and better things.

Most of us rejected the white women's movement. Miss Ann was still Miss Ann to us whether she burned her bras or not. We could not muster sympathy for the fact that she was trapped in her mansion and oppressed by her husband. We were, and still are, in a much more terrible jail. We knew that our experiences as black women were completely different from those of our sisters in the white women's

movement. And we had no desire to sit in some consciousness-raising group with white women and bare our souls.

Women can never be free in a country that is not free. We can never be liberated in a country where the institutions that control our lives are oppressive. We can never be free while our men are oppressed. Or while the amerikan government and amerikan capitalism remain intact.

But it is imperative to our struggle that we build a strong black women's movement. 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. It is imperative that we discuss positive ways to teach and socialize our children.

The poison and pollution of capitalist cities is choking us. We need the strong medicine of our foremothers to make us well again. We need their medicines to give us strength to fight and the drive to win. Under the guidance of Harriet

Tubman and Fannie Lou Hamer and all of our foremothers, let us rebuild a sense of community. Let us rebuild the culture of giving and carry on the tradition of fierce determination to move on closer to freedom.

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