STILL THEY RISE:

A LITERARY COMPARISON OF BLACK WOMEN'S PRISON MEMOIRS AND BLACK WOMEN'S SLAVE NARRATIVES

BY BRE-ANNA D. JONES

HONORS THESIS

FACULTY ADVISOR: DR. PAZARGADI

Still They Rise: A Literary Comparison of Black Women's Prison Memoirs and Black Women's Slave Narratives

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

- "Still I Rise," Maya Angelou, 1976[1]

In 2010, author Piper Kerman introduced the world to her experience in a U.S. Federal woman's prison, after being convicted of money laundering and drug trafficking. Her critically acclaimed text reached major audiences in 2013, once it became adapted into a television series of an abbreviated name, *Orange is the New Black*. Although her memoir made a point to highlight the stories of women of color that she encounters during her time in Federal Correctional Institution (FCI), Danbury, their stories were not the main focus of either her memoir or the show. They were seemingly only addressed to contribute to Kerman's experience and to help appeal to a "wider" audience. This suppression of their stories are why the works of Paula C. Johnson's *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison*, along with Robin Levi and Ayelet Waldman's *Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons*, are important to read and study. In their texts, the autobiographical protagonists discuss their daily lives while incarcerated, noting the inadequate healthcare, the physical and sexual abuse they

[1] By including, Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise," I aim to honor the resiliency of enslaved and incarcerated Black women. To them, I say thank you for never succumbing to your oppressors.

endured from the correctional staff, and discrimination throughout the criminal justice system. The prison narratives of the African American women within Johnson's and Levi & Waldman's texts, help not only to promote a raw and unfiltered account of the Black woman's life while imprisoned, but also brings awareness to the world and forces it to confront the injustices that the Black women must endure. Injustices that were missing from Kerman's text and Netflix's adaptation, take center stage in the prison memoirs of Elizabeth [last name redacted], Teri Hancock, Sarah Chase, Sheri Dwight, Olivia Hamilton, and Maria Taylor. They are six Black women, who bravely tell their stories of mistreatment without fear of consequences or judgement.

In many ways, Black women's prison narratives are not dissimilar from their historical predecessors, Black women's slave narratives, in that they both provide insights about deplorable conditions many will never experience and a truth that many have denied. Without nullifying the cruelties of slavery, it's important to discuss the comparisons between both prison and slave narratives because they show readers a world that has not changed. This comparison forces an open conversation about the inhumanity imprisoned Black women continue to experience, even after the abolishment of slavery. Slave narratives provide an avenue for readers to take a glimpse into the detrimental lives of formerly enslaved African Americans to spotlight the cruelty of what history books won't say. Notably, slave narratives like Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince* and Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* also held the power to humanize slaves and make a call for abolitionism. This call for reform can also be seen within the prison narratives of Hancock, Chase, Hamilton, Taylor, and Dwight. As a society, the need for slave narratives to be read side by side with prison narratives is rooted in the urgent need for change regarding human rights abuses against Black women. Readers must witness firsthand accounts of

what both enslaved and incarcerated Black women experience and use them both as a close comparative to show even with the abolishment of slavery, the living conditions of Black women have seen little progression within almost two centuries.

The slave narratives of Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs introduces readers to their lives in bondage as they retell their direct experiences in slavery. Their narratives include what life was like being sold, “touched” by their masters and the harsh realities of discrimination, while giving insight on what their current live are like now that they are free. Both authors state learning to read and write as a slave was not only forbidden but could be seen as a death wish. Yet, both women courageously found it more important to make their stories public and call attention to what really happened to Black women slaves while simultaneously forcing an outcry for aid in the antislavery movement. Prince, a formerly enslaved Black Caribbean woman, tells her story of enslavement and her acts of resistance towards her many owners. She focuses on the injustices and abuse from each of her four owners and details the animal-like treatment she received, sometime worse than the livestock she tended. Jacobs, while using the pseudonym of Linda Brent, freely talks about her life as if she was telling the story of someone else. She admits that most things are too painful to retell, yet, her goal, similar to that of Mary Prince, is to tell the truth, no matter what may come of her stories. These same actions of risk, bravery, and vulnerability are seen throughout both the prison and slave narratives of Black women as they share a similar demand for change in a world that has always seen them as less than and has treated them even worse.

In an effort to bring attention to and an awareness of the cruelty that Black women have historically experienced, a comparative analysis of themes of captivity, discrimination and dehumanization in Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs’ slave narratives will be discussed in

conjunction with those of the Black women prisoners in both Johnson and Levi & Waldman's texts. Through these examinations, the lack of progression for equal and human rights for Black women, from slavery to the current day penal institutions, will be detailed in showing that not much has changed or can be distinguished between the two. Ultimately, this illustrates the key importance of reading these life narratives with a mindset that although slavery has been abolished, the abuse, discrimination, and the mistreatment of Black women in the United States remains the same.

The Dehumanization of the Black Woman:

A Literary Comparison between Slave and Prison Narratives

Before discussing the turmoil that Black women slaves endured in comparison to those in which Black women face in prison, an analysis of prior arguments regarding the inhumane treatment of imprisoned Black women, will first need to be examined. While reviewing Breea C. Willingham' "Black Women's Prison Narratives and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in U.S. Prisons," the focus on the importance of why the prison narratives of Black women are needed, is addressed. Willingham states prison narratives can be used as an avenue for incarcerated Black women to escape from an environment of physical and mental bondage. The need and desire to escape is a journey that has extended across many generations of Black women, with origins routed in times of slavery. She opens with a monumental quote from Wally Lamb's *Couldn't Keep it to Myself,* which states "to imprison a woman is to remove her voice from the world, but many female inmates have been silenced by life long before the transport van carries them from the courthouse to the correctional facility…Their essays, then, are victories against voicelessness-miracles in print" (Willingham 55). Willingham makes a point to

open his article with this quote from Lamb to emphasize why prison narratives should be seen as not solely a method of gaining insight for political change, but to also provide a voice to women who have never been truly heard simply because of the color of their skin or their circumstance.

While there can never be an equal comparison between enslaved Black women and Black women who perpetrated a crime causing them to become imprisoned, it should be agreed upon that neither deserve the inhumane treatment they have received from the barbaric institution of slavery and the corrupt criminal justice system. As dating back to slavery, the voices of Black women in society have sadly fallen to the wayside. No matter the struggles, pressures of the world, hardships of protecting themselves and their families, Black women's voices have gone unheard, unnoticed, and placed in a category of "complaints" instead of survival. That's the beauty of memoirs and life narratives. These literary genres possess an essence of strength that provides a level of vulnerability to the writer that most forms of writing, specifically biographies, cannot provide. Willingham goes on to state Black women's prison narratives can be seen as a derivate of the struggle they face while being considered a "subclass of people." She continues that these specific narratives are additionally rooted in the Black woman's fight of "maintaining their identity" in a consistently racist and sexist world (Willingham 57). The consistent struggle to not have the label of being angry or deviant bestowed upon them, has been one Black woman have battled with for centuries, without the proper means to repair. However, memoirs and narratives at their core, can provide a gateway into a portion of their lives while acting as an aid to help win said battle.

Autobiographical writing, therefore, allows the writer to tell their story and compels the reader to focus on the experience through the writer's perspective as opposed to a biography that has been written on the narrator's behalf that uses words not necessarily belonging to the life

writing storyteller. When addressing prison narratives and their connection to those of slave narratives, as will be discussed soon, the similarities are uncanny. When discussing the topic of life narratives, autobiographical studies scholars, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, provide a helpful, modern concept to what many life writings encompass, including both prison and slavery narratives. In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Smith and Watson define prison narratives as "a mode of captivity narrative written during or after incarceration, writings from prison often become occasions for prisoners to inscribe themselves as fully human in the midst of a system designed to dehumanize them and to render them anonymous and passive" (Smith and Watson 277). Additionally, they define slave narratives as "a mode of life narrative written by a fugitive or freed ex slave about captivity, oppression—physical, economic, and emotional— and escape from bondage into some form of freedom" (Smith and Watson 280). With their definitions, the key similarity between them is the word "captivity." Generally, speaking, "captivity" is used when speaking of animals who are confined or held within in one centralized location. Astonishingly enough, it is mentioned in these instances when speaking of humans, not animals, showing that in a world that once believed in slavery and still does as a mode of punishment, African Americans can and are still seen as less than. Additionally, "captivity" draws further attention to the dehumanization that Black women prisoners and slaves succumb to from prison guards and slave masters, respectively.

Willingham recalls a statement made by Ann Folwell Standford, which highlights the benefits writing has for those who are incarcerated. Folwell emphasizing that prison narratives and writings permits the opportunity for women "to build bridges 'to the self, to family, lovers and friends, to each other and to the community of readers who have no idea who the writers are, but may be changed a bit through reading their words'" (Willingham 62). This can be seen as an

opportunity that should not be taken lightly or for granted to those it is awarded. This is an opportunity that most do not possess. Willingham further acknowledges that this sanctity and sense of security can come from the act of writing a memoir by allowing those in bondage to have a location of solitude and peace to reflect on their lives, without daily constraints.

NaTosha Briscoe additionally discusses in her article, "The Struggle for Survival in Nineteenth- and Twentieth- Century African American Women's Autobiography: Black Women's Narrative of Incarceration and Freedom," the affects and fight for survival that Black women have had to endure since the eighteenth century. Additionally, she speaks of the strenuous path to freedom they must push through while constantly being forced under society's thumb. She takes the time to point out the relationship between incarcerated Black women and the lack of educational opportunities available to them in comparison to the lack of literacy options awarded to the slaves. Briscoe emphasizes "literacy was one of the primary tools that masters withheld from the enslaved because literacy was the gateway to freedom" (Briscoe 103). Just as slaves were not permitted to read or write, since it was seen as a step towards educational enlightenment, the same can be said for incarcerated Black women. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the permission to write and availability of writing materials has been a right that prisoners have tirelessly fought for, noting that this right can attribute to the retention of their sense of humanity and allow an open flow of communication and information between prisons and the outside world (ACLU.org). The human right of having your voice be heard, unfortunately, is legally removed once the prisoner becomes incarcerated. For women, specifically Black women, this right is often granted as a "favor," of which many will have to pay for in unconventional ways, and as a means of control to force "good behavior." Due to the rare availability of these writings, Willingham emphasizes that this is a key reason as to why

"Black women's prison narratives are deserving of more attention," since they provide key information to a world that is often an oversight for critics and society.

A similar reason can be made as a justification why readers should pay closer attention to slave narratives. Slave narratives are grounded in providing an insight to "outsiders" who may never know true and factual details of what really happens when no one is looking or cares to listen. They beautifully place their readers into an ugly world of bondage, abuse, and maltreatment, pushing the cause of abolition. As Frances S. Foster states in her article "Ultimate Victims: Black Women in Slave Narratives," "The writer's imaginative influence upon the facts of his or her life is understood as helping to present a deeper reality that transcends individuality—thus increasing the value of slave narratives for comprehending slavery from the perspective of the victim" (Foster 846). The word "victim" can be universally applied to those who are oppressed and in bondage. Just as slave narratives allow the opportunity for Black women slaves' perspectives to be seen, as Foster stated, the words of Black incarcerated women are also awarded the opportunities to fight against the bondage and oppression they face daily. Through the use of prison narratives, incarcerated Black women are able to fight the feeling of being trapped or isolated from the world. A world in which many are not aware of the true hardships Black women face, even if they are inmates. While being an inmate, sexual abuse and discrimination go unnoticed and more often than not, are seen and heard as mere complaints from people who deserve whatever mistreatment and hardships they receive. However, for Black women in both instances, and although centuries apart, being seen as the property of someone or something, can diminish the effectiveness and impact their voices can have. Continuing with this thought, Foster emphasizes that for slaves "the lucky black woman could make 'advances from a state of chattelism toward that of a woman and a mother…the unlucky ones remained 'things,'

'chattels,' and 'property' (Foster 852). Yet, through their strength and perseverance, Black women slaves and Black women inmates used their stories to make strides to being seen as a person and not just a thing.

The freedom to be able to read and write is something that most may take for granted. Unfortunately, these are additional freedoms that imprisoned Black women are not awarded. While reviewing AnnMarie Mingo's analysis of Robin Levi and Ayelet Waldman's, *Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons*, Mingo makes a point to state "The stories of these women represent the risks they took to share and open the prison walls in ways that many outside the prison system would otherwise not be able to access" (Mingo 3). Mingo confirms the underlying risk that Black women took to get their voices heard beyond prison walls. This can be seen as a direct correlation to the fear of learning to read, write or speak out against their masters that Black slave women endured during the 1700s. The fear of gaining an education has been a concern for Black women for many centuries until narrators like Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs, took a stance to tell the stories of their lives in bondage. However, not all reviews of Levi and Waldman's text were initially positive, particularly those that have a conservative educational or professional background. As an example, Art Beeler, a Senior Lecturing Fellow at Duke Law, expressed that his initial reaction was routed in anger and annoyance while reading Levi and Waldman's text. As a former correctional administrator, he acknowledged that he presumed the text would be one that was written or edited by authors who knew little to nothing about prison affairs. So, he was surprised that a book dedicated to prison narratives would be as eye opening as it was for him. Beeler admits that although the book was difficult to read, he contends that "it is one I believe we need to read as we remember the psychological and sexual abuse is about the impact it has upon individuals" (Beeler 2). Beeler helps bring to light the ugly truth that most

tend to shy away from when reading prison and slave narratives: the notion that reality is too hard or too much for bearing witness. The awakening and understanding that Beeler obtained from reading *Inside This Place, Not of It…* are reasons why prison and slave narratives are important literary genres to be closely examined in academia. Collectively, they allow opportunities for readers, such as Beeler, to expand their understandings of other's experience-outside of their own assumption, and provides the reader a factual, firsthand account of the narrator's life.

As a reviewer of Paula C. Johnson's *Inner Lives…*, Deborah Cheney calls attention to the resiliency of Black incarcerated women in a world where their White counterparts are provided more privilege than them. Cheney applauds Johnson for taking the time to provide a haven for Black women to be heard and for their words to flourish, directly from their mouths with minimal edits. An opportunity that has traditionally only be awarded to the "elite" class of incarcerated women due to financial or socio-economic status. Cheney's statement helps with the direct correlation that even today, racism and discrimination are still very prevalent in all areas of life Black women. As it pertains to Johnson's text, Cheney mentions it provides a deeper look into the stereotypes of Black women portrayed in society and the struggles they experience while imprisoned (Cheney 1).Cheney's statement about Johnson's writing can be easily connected to a similar inference made by Willingham's article where she proclaims that "Black women's prison narratives offer a different perspective and approach to analyzing black women's experiences with race, gender, and sexual oppressions" (Willingham 57). With both analysis in mind, it can be declared that although Black women's voices are inherently belittled or missing from literacy rhetoric, its availability is just as, if not more, important that those of any other race or gender. Black women's voices and experiences are something to be studied and learned from.

Additionally, they should be heard with compassion, sympathy, and praise for bravery, especially if the U.S. intends to strive for equality, as it so often claims.

In comparison to the importance of examining prison narratives, an acknowledgement of slave narratives and their impact on literary genres must be analyzed as well. Slave narratives can be considered a foundational genre for prison narratives as they both encompass the act of sacrifice of oneself and taking back their human right to be seen and heard, from their oppressors. As a review of William L. Andrews *Six Women's Slave Narratives*, Bette S. Weidman describes the affects that a slave narrative from a Black woman's viewpoint, can have in the world of literacy. Weidman details how narratives and memoirs are "more structured than a diary" and "more professional and impersonal than an autobiography" (Weidman 150). She further highlights how these narratives can be used as a way of allowing a reader to connect to the world of the writer along with people and places (Weidman 150). While Weidman evaluates Andrews' storytelling of Mary Prince and how effective he was able to relay the highs and lows of Prince's life, she points out specifically that "Mary Prince's narrative amply fulfills the classic strategy of the slave narrative, it's witnessing to the sufferings of others" (Weidman 151). Witnessing such sufferings leaves readers with a feeling of empathy for the author as they take heed of each word that is written. Prince's narrative opens up the opportunity for raw conversations that may not have been had pertaining to slavery. It doubles as a gateway into a life many may have never heard of while simultaneously allowing readers to recognize the beauty of each passage and learn from someone who directly experienced an unfathomable era in history.

Similar to the toxic master/slave relationship Black women were made to succumb to during slavery, Black women prisoners are forced to endure an indistinguishable relationship

with guards. In prisons, correctional staff are the authoritative figures over inmates, which essentially places the guards into a "master-like" commanding position. As a comparison, both guards and slave masters use intimidation as a mode of control and as a means to further their sense of dominance over the lives of Black women, rendering them unworthy and only present to satisfy a desire or need. The malevolent actions of guards and masters are often excused or refuted as being false accusations by those in power, thus, invalidating the Black woman's experiences with their masters or guards. This often leads to the diminishment of the Black woman's voice and furthers the dehumanization of their lives. However, with the assistance of Smith and Watson's theoretical framing regarding the importance of both prison and slave narratives, readers are forced to read these types of life narratives as humanizing modes of literary criticism. These life narratives collectively provide a direct contrast to the dehumanization each author has experienced and allows readers to see that, despite being on the bottom of the ladder for centuries, Black women deserve to be treated as humans, with their efforts towards societal reform, supported.

Modern Day Slavery:

A Look into the Lives of Imprisoned and Enslaved Black Women

With the delicate nature the institution of slavery holds within all, there cannot be a true direct comparison to the cruelty Black women experienced. However, a paralleled correlation should be acknowledged between prison and slave narratives. When reviewing the historical narratives of both Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs, an argument of how unmatched their tales of navigating and attempting survival through slavery, can be made. Yet, when laid side by side with the experiences detailed from Black women prisoners in their narratives, it becomes a

difficult feat to remember that their stories are centuries apart. Readers are made to bear witness to the atrocities of slavery and the brutality Black women experience causing a desire to want to escape from the hold these narratives place on your mind and heart. An escape that these women in both prison and slave narratives are not capable of doing, even once they are "free."

The story of Mary Prince is told within Henry Louis Gates Jr's. edited text *Six Women's Slave Narratives*. Prince provides readers with a look into her life of slavery and the journey she embarked on as she was sold many times throughout the Caribbean and England. She attests a time when her master, Mr. D— (*name redacted from text*) when she was beaten for not succumbing to his sexual advances. Prince state, "He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks Sometimes when he called me to wash him, I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me" (Gates 62). Prince is describing what to most slaves was a typical master/slave dynamic. She is specifically drawing attention to a common occurrence where she was forced to either succumb to "licks" for disobeying her master or suffer from the continued sexual trauma. Again, a sense of dominance and control within the master/slave relationship has taken precedence in Prince's story. This dynamic is paralleled to those experiences between warden or guard and the Black women prisoners by which the women experience racial discrimination and oppression so deeply that one can only think of slavery as a close relation to the hardships witnessed. As witnessed with Teri Hancock, a prisoner interviewed by Levi and Waldman, the master/slave relationship extends and is dominant within the warden/prisoner relationship as well. Hancock recalls a time when the assistant deputy warden threatens to punish her for not allowing him to sexually assault her and intimidates her into believing that even if she was to report him, no one would believe a Black woman in prison

(Levi and Waldman 96). While further explicitly describing the sexual abuse she experiences at the hand of the ADW, Hancock's tale helps further solidify the connection between both slave and prison narratives by declaring that both provide an insight to a world most could never imagine.

In a similar scenario, Harriet Jacobs discusses in her narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the dominance she experienced when faced with the sexual abuse bestowed upon her from her master when she was a slave. Jacobs recalls, "I replied to some of his abuse... and he struck me. Some months before, he had pitched me downstairs in a fit of passion; and the injury I received was so serious that I was unable to turn myself in bed for many days" (Jacobs 178). The continuity of the demand to "do as your told" is a consistent theme which is upheld through the narratives of both enslaved and imprisoned Black women. The overwhelming number of experiences told by Black women of being oppressed, abused, and punished for failing to follow a command, are eloquently expressed. The reading of their misfortunes helps invoke a passion in readers to encourage a changing the inhumane treatment of Black women prisoners.

When specifically evaluating the dehumanizing themes of oppression and imagery in Robin Levi and Ayelet Waldman's *Inside This Place, Not of it…*and Paula C. Johnson's *Inner Lives…*, these prison narratives show that imprisoned Black women are treated no differently than if they were enslaved in the eighteenth century. Their memoir collection takes special care to relay the mental and physical turmoil each inhabitant has experienced while being incarcerated. We're poetically introduced to twelve brave Black women, who invites readers into their worlds including their lives before prison, during incarceration and post-release. The consistent imagery of being trapped in a never- ending time labyrinth of discrimination and abuse, both mentally and sexually, is shown throughout, causing us, as readers, to sink into this

hole with them, simultaneously praying for a way out or some sign of relief not only for them but for ourselves as well.

We begin our journey into this dark entrapment, by first being introduced to Olivia Hamilton, 25, who is a formerly imprisoned Black woman. She has elected to divulge her experience of being forced to give birth to her youngest son, while in prison. Olivia recalls the moments of feeling trapped, revolving around the birth of her child. While she is pregnant, she is considered as having a "health condition", and she is placed in isolated cells away from the other women. She states, "you can't look out the windows because they're all blacked out" (Levi and Waldman 36). Here, the illusion of residing in a dark room without access to the outside world is dominant, thereby, causing a feeling of anxiety and dread which has taken over her as Oliva now realizes that she must continue the remainder of her pregnancy in prison and alone. Throughout Oliva's narrative, sinking into the abyss is becoming more evident as she describes being forced to have an early cesarean section, despite having a healthy baby and pregnancy, simply because her due date fell on a holiday. The treatment she receives is so poor that even while giving birth she describes how she was restrained throughout the entirety of the procedure. She reflects, ""I think my medical treatment in prison was cruel, degrading, and shameful. Being shackled, being forced to have that c-section—it was the worst feeling, mentally and emotionally, that I have ever been through" (Levi and Waldman 38). It becomes easy for the reader to be faced with the unimaginable feeling of enduring a forced delivery, earlier than expected. The saddening feeling can be overwhelming realizing that due to being incarcerated, Olivia is not able to hold her newborn prior to it being quickly taken away and given to family since she's still tethered to a hospital bed. The treatment women endure, while attempting to navigate their healthcare, can be deemed as inhumane or less than animal like. Even in moments of desperation or absolute

weakness, Levi and Waldman depict the harsh reality that incarcerated women are reminded no matter what, they are prisoners above all else.

Olivia's story of her mistreatment while receiving inadequate healthcare attributes to the theme of discrimination and lack of care Black women live through while imprisoned and can be connected to similar experiences of enslaved Black women. Mary Prince recalls in her narrative a time when her pregnant friend Hetty, was stripped naked, tied to a tree, and "flogged" by their master, for accidently causing a cow to run off (Prince 7). Similar to the tethering of Olivia to a hospital bed while she is in labor, both narratives provide an animal-like image and provides a glimpse into the inhumanity of slavery and a discriminative prison system. An inhumanity that Black women continuously experience, regardless if they are seen as "free."

The imagery of confinement, shackling and restriction that slave narratives provides to readers are also detailed throughout Levi and Waldman's collective prison narrative; however, despite the fact that the women are imprisoned, the mental images of inhumanely being restrained in a moment of vulnerability and weakness calls attention to a human right many take advantage of. Readers are introduced to Sheri Dwight, a 35-year-old, another formerly imprisoned Black woman. She recalls the time she too was poorly and strictly confined to a hospital bed, even after surgery. After being diagnosed in prison with ovarian cysts, Sheri endured a cystectomy all while being shackled to the operating bed before her procedure and how it continued post operation. She mentions "After the surgery I was just handcuffed back on to my recovery bed, and after two days, I was released back into general population. If something were to happen, if a fight were to break out and I were attacked, I would have been in no condition to defend myself. I could barely walk then" (Levi and Waldman 49). The imagery of imprisonment and the theme of confinement are directly correlated themes of dehumanization.

Her story attributes to the consistent inhuman treatment of women when receiving healthcare and continues the dark journey into what can be described as an endless cycle of depression and desperation for light. This same kind of desperation mirroring those of enslaved Black women in a time when survival, by any means necessary, was their main concern.

As seen in both Olivia and Sheri's narratives, as well as several others, Levi and Waldman assists the readers in connecting an overwhelming feeling of restraints and entrapment by providing the explicit details provided to them. Words such as "handcuffed," "shackled," "isolation," and "trapped" are dominant across each prison narrative, highlighting that modern day slavery lives on behind prison walls. However, as the text continues, Levi and Waldman opens an additional door, by focusing on the continued hardship and mistreatment that the Black women they interviewed, encountered. With some narratives providing severely graphic details as the women remember their experiences, the feeling of despair takes ahold of the reader's mind. Readers become engulfed into their minds and their world of hardship, captivity and injustices which can only be provided through the use of prison narratives in their purest form. A further reason as to why these should be examined closer by society in order to render the change needed for those who are suffering. Despite the reason that these Black women are imprisoned for wrongdoings, the question that begs to be answered is, if these methods of inhumane treatment are truly deserved?

In addition to confinement and captivity, the rampant sexual abuse that further dehumanizes these imprisoned Black women, is brought to the forefront. Some of these narratives can become too hard to read or fathom to be true, however, the unthinkable cruelty these women have experienced are relayed in such raw terms that you're forced to remember this is not fiction. Just as Harriet Jacobs and Mary Prince Continuing in Levi and Waldman's text, the

author's states "the sexual abuse and violence that women in prison endure usually comes at the hands not of other prisoners, but of guards and staff" (Levi and Waldman 18). While living in an environment that has been constructed to house criminals, the Black women in this text express their woes with balancing their penance while protecting themselves from threats against their safety. Sarah Chase, a 21-year-old Black woman who is currently imprisoned, discusses her experiences with the guards and the sexual trauma she has endured. Chase depicts the following story,

> One touched me and let me touch him down there. He led me to believe he loved me and would help get me out if we were together. I was hoping that, by doing things he asked me to, he would get me out. Another officer would hold me, feel my body, but nothing really bad. Eventually I told the prison about them. As far as I know, nothing happened to them. (Levi and Waldman 81)

The image of pain and manipulation comes forth as Chase, being a young woman, is searching for any way out of prison, even if that means succumbing to sexual advances and abuse from her correctional officers. In a location where she is supposed to be protected, Chase shows just how low some Black women are willing to go to feel safe and that someone cares for their wellbeing.

Additionally, she experiences further sexual abuse from several other correctional officers who make her believe that they love her and a life with them, outside the prison walls. This level of desperation becomes more daunting as she continues her story by describing the many different acts that she would naively do to "please" the guards, just to feel wanted. She describes how she often undressed in front of them as they watched her "get into different positions" while some even came in and performed oral sex on her during times where there is

limited supervision of inmates. As readers are trying to digest the disturbance of what a young Black woman, such as Chase, encounters, shockingly, she admits she "wanted it" (Levi and Waldman 82). It becomes unimaginable to think that someone so young and seemingly impressionable would believe that although she wasn't "forced" to perform sexual acts on or with her abusers, that she in fact was not abused. Although not outwardly or directly mentioned and detailed within slave narratives, due a continued fear of their masters, this act of "consent under duress" is collectively seen as a way for Black women to survive through hardships in both prison memoirs and slave narratives.

Nevertheless, sexual consent in prison-specifically between prison guards and inmates-cannot exist due to the hierarchical imbalance of power, this does not prevent guards from placing blame on the women prisoners by stating the women "consented," when confronted with their wrongdoings. Yet, this is only a single example of a reality that is far too common amongst incarcerated Black women. Maria Taylor, a formerly incarcerated 37-year-old who was imprisoned in Nevada, proclaims how hard it was to be a prisoner, especially an unprotected Black female prisoner. She sums up her experience by stating,

> When you're a prisoner in that environment, you don't feel like you have the power to say no. Your life, your every move, is controlled by these people. When you eat, when you sleep, everything is known. At the beginning of my prison term, I didn't feel like I was a human being. I didn't feel like I had any rights. I didn't feel like anyone cared. I never felt like I had the power to say no… (Levi and Waldman 66)

This lack of feeling like a "human" can be seen throughout the prison narratives of Levi and Waldman's text and becomes a direct correlation to slave narratives predecessors. The removal of basic human rights, including the ability to maintain autonomy over your own body, has historically been used as a means of control and dominance to further suppress marginalized groups, specifically Black women. By analyzing Black women prison and slave narratives, this loss of bodily integrity can be seen, drawing attention to a generational battle that Black women continuously lose.

While looking at today's media, most have argued that racism is dead or that discrimination ended in the 1960s as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, however with an examination of Johnson's *Inner Lives*… text, the racial discrimination does not go unnoticed. Elizabeth [*last not provided*], a currently imprisoned Black woman within Johnson's text, speaks to the prejudices she experiences in her day-to-day life. Living through the times of Jim Crow, she attests she's become an expert in spotting racial injustices which has encouraged her to self-appoint herself as the one to call out against the discrimination to anyone who is willing to listen- just as Black women abolitionists did in their narratives. Elizabeth states, "There are about six hundred people here, about three hundred are black. When we first arrived here, it was real [sic] hard on us Blacks because of open discrimination and racial prejudice. They were not accustomed to blacks" (Johnson 94). The racial discrimination that Elizabeth mentions can be seen as a direct parallel to the discrimination Black women experienced during slavery. As Whites were freely segregating and inflicting racial prejudice against Blacks before the abolishment of slavery, Black women are experiencing the same thing while imprisoned. Thus, when society attempts to be blind to the continued racial disparities, prison narratives assist in broadening thoughts of what reality is still like, specifically for imprisoned Black women.

As a true testament to their lives, authors such as Prince, Chase, Taylor, Jacobs, and others, allow the readers of their narratives the ability to connect on a personal level with each of them. This act of allowing audiences to witness the strife and turmoil that has become of their lives, can be seen as nothing less than an honored sense of vulnerability. As Smith and Watson detailed, slave narratives have provided a "rich critical literature" that has been "influential" in the creative foundation of other African American narratives, including prison narratives. Hence why it is important to discuss slave narratives prior to prison memoirs. The prison narratives of Black women have essentially blossomed out of the similar tragedies enslaved Black women endured. Without the bravery, freedom, and sense of vulnerability that Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs express in their narratives, the writings of Elizabeth, Sheri, Sarah, Teri, Maria, and Olivia would never be heard. The strong foundation slave narratives provide helps uphold the prison narratives, thus, by comparing the two, it helps drive home the reason why both are important to literary genres. By exposing the truth and harsh realities of the lives of Black women, life narratives become a monumental aid to the reduction, and hopefully the removal, of abuse they must endure.

The Legacy of Slave Narratives Remains:

The Effect of Today's Prison Memoirs

This year (2022) will mark the 157th anniversary of the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment and the abolition of slavery, which was a monumental moment of United States history. As mentioned within the United States Constitution, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" ("Constitution of

the United States," amend. 13). Within this specific amendment, although the essence of slavery has been deemed illegal, if it is placed in the form of punishment for a crime, it is still permissible. Thus, this render those who have committed a crime, regardless of severity or if falsely accused, legal slaves of their state or the federal government, under the guise of "paying their dues to society." Unfortunately, for most imprisoned Black women, their experiences do not end with licit disenfranchisement. It continues in the form of physical abuse, rape, discrimination and segregation, all subjects that society shy's away from discussing and declares as being lies made up for sympathy. However, with the aid of prison narratives, these injustices are brought to the forefront, demanding a change to the age-old stereotype that imprisoned Black women deserve the inhumane treatment received and that they brought it onto themselves. These same arguments have become eerily familiar, as the struggles of oppression are exhibited in slave narratives and have collected similar responses from the public. As seen in the last almost 200 years, Black women have remained at the bottom of the hierarchal power struggle, with little results towards reformation in the country. Nonetheless, with the hope garnered from imprisoned Black women and through the assistance of prison memoirs and slave narratives, real change in the treatment of Black women can come.

Both genres possess a level of insight and vulnerability that other life narratives may not be able to provide. While slave narratives take readers through a historical firsthand account of the pain and abuse Black women experienced, the prison narratives of Black women opens up the injustices and cruelty they have to face. As Black women write prison memoirs, on the heels of slave narratives, their words force the actions of their oppressors to come into the light by showing a continuation of the dehumanizing treatment of the Black woman. As the old saying goes "what's done in the dark will always come to light" and the prison memoirs and slave

narratives of Black women are beautiful examples that this remains true. Thankfully and as we have witnessed, despite the perseverance of oppressors attempting to suppress the voices of Black women, still, they rise.

Work Cited

Angelou, Maya. "Still I Rise." *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems*, Random House, 1978.

Briscoe, NaTosha. "The Struggle for Survival in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century African American Women's Autobiography: Black Women's Narrative of Incarceration and Freedom". *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 26, 2022, pp. 100-112. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-022-09571-9

Beeler, Art. Review of Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons, by Robin Levi and Ayelet Waldman. *Corrections Today*, March/April 2019, pp. 55-53.

Cheney, Deborah. Review of Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison, by Paula C. Johnson. *Feminist Legal Studies*, January 2005 pp. 159-161. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-005-1464-3

Foster, Frances S. "Ultimate Victims: Black Women in Slave Narratives." *Journal of American* Culture, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 845-854

Johnson, Paula C. *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison*. NYU Press, 2003

Levi, Robin and Ayelet Waldman, editors. *Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons*. Verso, 2017.

Mingo, AnneMarie. Review of Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons, by Robin Levi and Ayelet Waldman. *The Oral History Review*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2013, pp. 433–34. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43863528.

"Prisoner's Rights." ACLU, https://www.aclu.org/issues/prisoners-rights. Accessed 24 October 2022.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. “Appendix A.: Sixty Genres of Life Narrative.” Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Second Edition, NED-New edition, Second, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, pp. 253–86. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv3m0.14.

The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription. National Archives, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 4 May 2020, www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript.

Weidman, Bette S. Review of Six Women’s Slave Narratives by William L. Andrews. *Legacy*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1991, pp. 149–52. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25684433.

Willingham, Breea C. “Black Women’s Prison Narratives and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in US Prisons.” *Critical Survey*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2011, pp. 55–66. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41556431.