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Book Review

LIVING “OFF-STAGE”: THE SEMIOTIC POTENTIAL OF
NARRATIVE IN PAULA JOHNSON’S INNER LIVES:
VOICES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN PRISON

Paula C. Johnson, *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), 339 pp., ISBN 0814742548.

I didn’t understand that my life-style was an act. I was on stage until I was almost fifty years old. I was really on stage being an image that somebody else had built me up to be. It wasn’t what I really wanted to be, and I learned to come offstage. I’m offstage now.

(Johnson, p. 139)

1.

In the above excerpt from Paula Johnson’s book, *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison*, Bettie Gibson – speaking of what she learned during her time served in prison for armed robbery, robbery, and petty theft – describes in penetratingly simple terms what it means to live as a representation: the Black female criminal. Fortunately for her, she subsequently found a place “offstage”, but it is clear from her story that she must continue to live in the shadow of representation. The hopelessness and hopefulness of Ms. Gibson’s voice, together with the voices of all of the women profiled in Prof. Johnson’s important new work, exemplify a semiotic response to the racism that permeates the criminal justice and prison systems in the United States. While *Inner Lives* leaves its reader with an appropriate and profound sense of outrage at the institutional and ideological failings of those systems, Johnson’s assemblage of narratives and photographs manages somehow to generate a sense of optimism, of “belief in the possibility of real change in the world”, as the late Dr. Roberta Kevelson put it, “. . . that something really new may be created, and that this real novelty is not manifest in the actual order of things but is present in the evolving concepts of signs which stand for a reinterpretation of values and meanings of relationships between things”.¹

¹ Roberta Kevelson, *The Law as a System of Signs* 35 (1988).



It is doubtful that most readers interested in the topic of ‘women in prison’ would link the voices of Ms. Gibson and Dr. Kvelson. But those interested in the study of law and semiotics should see these linkages clearly. Moreover, we should be drawn naturally to a book whose form is almost entirely comprised of (edited) narrative transcription, and whose content reflects the simultaneous dis/empowerment and institutionalization of Black women in the United States vis-à-vis their criminalization and imprisonment. Although the book’s form and content are refreshingly unconventional by legal scholarship standards, its stated goals are somewhat less so, as Prof. Johnson calls on her readers to “reconsider [...] the near-exclusive reliance on incarceration for crimes in our society”, and to use her “analyses of the women’s experiences, empirical data, legal theories, and social policies” to find more just alternatives to “crime prevention and public safety”, as well as “alternatives to incarceration and the creation of safer spaces for African American girls and women in U.S. society”.²

Johnson certainly achieves those goals, but the value of her book, like all good books, extends beyond the fulfillment of its stated purpose. In this Review, I hope to demonstrate how *Inner Lives* functions not only as a testament to the lives of the women profiled in it, but also as a model of how the semiotic process can lead to the “possibility of real change in the world”.

2.

During the three years Johnson spent researching *Inner Lives*, she conducted over one hundred interviews, all on a voluntary basis, with “incarcerated and formerly incarcerated African American women, their families and friends, prison personnel, prison activists, and members of the bench and bar”.³ In order to ensure a diverse representation, Johnson interviewed across a broad spectrum of women. She interviewed young, old, and middle-aged women who had been convicted of varying criminal offenses, from murder to petty theft.⁴ She interviewed women residing not only in prisons and jails, but also in halfway houses, transitional housing, and private homes and residences.⁵ Of currently incarcerated women, Johnson interviewed women serving time in maximum, medium,

² Johnson, *supra* n. 2, at 17.

³ *Id.* at 12.

⁴ *Id.* at 13.

⁵ *Id.* at 12.

and minimum security facilities,⁶ and her research took her to both coasts of the United States, as well as to the Midwest and the South.⁷ Inspired by the work of photographers like Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava (among others), Johnson also brought her camera wherever she went, photographing those women who allowed her to do so.⁸

Johnson makes it clear from the outset of the book, however, that she is neither a statistician nor an empiricist. Rather, in conducting and synthesizing her research Johnson employed a “life history methodology”, whereby she carefully identified several categories of experiences to discuss with the self-selected interviewees, such as: their experiences as young children, adolescents, and adult women; their experiences of entry into crime; their adjudication and imprisonment experiences; and their experiences dealing with their release from prison and “transition back to the community”.⁹

Following this description of methodology, the book begins. It is divided into three parts. Part I provides an excellent historical account of the ways in which American jurisprudence has and continues to criminalize the racialized body and, in particular, acts of Black resistance to systemic racial subordination.¹⁰ Here, Johnson explicitly links contemporary gendered and raced criminal stereotypes to the history of American jurisprudence, and we begin to see how the evolution of the American prison system made those linkages inevitable.¹¹ For example, after the incarceration became the dominant form of punishment in the eighteenth century, replacing other forms of punishment such as public humiliation and corporal punishment,¹² Black men in the South were imprisoned at staggeringly disproportionate rates, comprising in some Southern states between eighty to ninety percent of inmates.¹³ These inmates were subsequently “leased” out as laborers and often forced to work essentially as rented state property, often under conditions more exploitative than those existing under slavery.¹⁴ In this way, the criminal justice and prison systems in the post-Civil War era were used not only to quell self-determination movements, but also to replicate ‘legally’ the material and

⁶ *Id.* at 12–13.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 11–13, 16.

⁹ *Id.* at 14.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 19–26.

¹¹ *Id.* at 27–34.

¹² *Id.* at 27.

¹³ *Id.* at 27–28.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 28.

ideological conditions of slavery.¹⁵ The prison reform movements of the Progressive and post-World War II eras shifted the focus of the American penal system from punishment to rehabilitation, but this in turn led to the (raced) pathologization of the criminal body and mind that continues to pervade American penology today.¹⁶

Predictably, throughout American history, women have served their prison time in “separate spheres”, and cutting edge reform has come to them, as always, last.¹⁷ In the post-Civil War era, “White women were systematically channeled out of prisons, while African American women were systematically channeled into them”.¹⁸ This of course not only resulted in a largely Black female prison population, but also reinforced gendered and raced stereotypes, for example, of the victimized White prostitute and of the uncontrollable and highly sexualized Black prostitute.¹⁹

Today, although men far outnumber women in the American prison population, women are its fastest growing sub-population.²⁰ Moreover, African American women are disproportionately represented in both the state and federal prison systems, comprising roughly 48 percent of the federal and 35 percent of the state inmate population.²¹ Johnson reviews several different theories explaining this overrepresentation, and ultimately concludes that the continuing increase in the incarceration of women and African American women can be attributed to “society’s continued willingness to equate African American women with criminality, which in turn justifies disproportionately harsh treatment of them in the criminal justice system and throughout American society”,²² and to “the war on

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.* at 28–29.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 30–31. For example, Johnson writes:

Women’s reformatories initially housed misdemeanants and tailored the late nineteenth-century penology of rehabilitation to perceptions of women’s unique nature Accordingly, it was believed that obedience and systematic religious education would help the women form orderly habits and moral values. In this regard, domestic training was emphasized rather than vocational skills. During their sentences the women were taught to cook, clean, and wait on table; upon parole they were sent to middle-class homes to work as servants. Hence, women’s reformatories encouraged gender-stereotyped traits of female sexual restraint, gentility, and domesticity.

Id. at 31 [citations omitted].

¹⁸ *Id.* at 32.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* at 34–37.

²¹ *Id.* at 35–36.

²² *Id.* at 40.

drugs [which] has adversely impacted African American women as their bodies became battlegrounds for ideological [and political] wars regarding reproductive rights and drug law enforcement".²³ The narratives of the women in Part II of the book bear out Johnson's conclusions.

3.

Part II of *Inner Lives* is further divided into three parts. Part A includes interviews of currently incarcerated women, Part B of formerly incarcerated women, and Part C of criminal justice officials and various members of prison support networks. Although each interviewee speaks in her own distinct voice, there are identifiable but complex commonalities in their stories, particularly in the stories of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. All of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated interviewees, for example, were physically, mentally, and/or sexually abused at some point in their lives by family members, spouses, and/or lovers, and almost every one of the women has suffered or continues to suffer from drug and/or alcohol addiction (which is not surprising, given that so many of the women are/were incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses).²⁴ While these commonalities are extremely important in legal, socio-cultural, and public policy contexts, what is also interesting in a semiotic and representational context are the ways in which the narratives, individually and collectively, reflect the complex truth(s) of each woman's reality. And because each of the interviewees is fully cognizant of these coexisting and sometimes conflicting truths, her complex understanding of the worlds in which she exists and those in which she is represented gives rise to a strong sense of self-preservation, self-empowerment, and, above all, optimism in the ideal of community.

For example, forty-nine year old Bettie Gibson, who is no longer incarcerated but served time for armed robbery, robbery, and petty theft, remembers being seen and treated in her childhood and adolescence very differently from the way she perceived of herself.²⁵ Bettie was born to sharecroppers in Delta City, Mississippi, but lived with her grandparents.²⁶ Because her paternal grandmother was a fair-skinned schoolteacher, Bettie, who has dark skin, was occasionally elevated to a higher status

²³ *Id.* at 44.

²⁴ *Id.* at 37–39.

²⁵ *Id.* at 133–141 (narrative of Bettie Gibson).

²⁶ *Id.* at 134.

in the Black and sometimes White communities.²⁷ Yet, her sense of color-based inferiority took root at an early age:

When I was young, there was a show in town. We had to sit in different places than the little White kids. Then, at the end of the show they would have a Black man wrestle a bear, and then a Black kid would wrestle a bear, to win money. That was entertainment for the White people. Because of my grandmother, I got to do things that other Black kids didn't get to do. There was Sears and Roebuck, for instance. It was a big deal if you shopped out of their catalog. My clothes and Christmas gifts came from Sears and Roebuck, but the other Black children didn't have that. You had to have money to order something from Sears. But even though I had all of that, the feeling of being inferior brought me away from that place.

Sharecropping was very similar to slavery. The overseer on the farm would try to have sex with us when we were children. He used to come over and try to put his penis into my cousin and me, and give us money and other things . . . I was scared from that. I never told anyone about it until I was grown. He would come inside my grandmother's house. She and the other Black people were so afraid of the overseers and the other Whites. They would find women chopped up on the river with axes, dead. It was just hush-hush. I would hear mumbling and whispers, but when the overseer came around, they would be quiet. So as early as the age of three, I knew that we were inferior to White people and I couldn't take it. I know that something was not right in the house, that my grandparents were afraid of those people, and that we were beneath them.²⁸

At this age, Bettie already had learned about being seen by "the Whites", in more theoretical terms, as a "threatening Other [...] belong[ing] to a definite image-repertoire".²⁹ For dark-skinned Bettie, that image-repertoire included the minstrel bear-fighter, the fungible child-whore, the terrorized, the expendable, the severable. Thus, at the age of four or five, Bettie, rejecting her grandparents' advice, moved north with her parents to Chicago. To this disillusioned four-year-old who was far too old for her age, the Northern rhetoric of equality proved too irresistible.³⁰ How could she have known that the image-repertoire in the North was simply a variation of the Southern theme?

In Chicago, Bettie was not encouraged by her mother and father to pursue a formal education, because both of them had dropped out in the third-grade in order to pick cotton.³¹ "In this way", she recalls, "we were a dysfunctional family because two people didn't know anything except how to go to work and make some money. They didn't know how to tell us that

²⁷ *Id.* at 134–135.

²⁸ *Id.*; see also *id.* at 280 (discussing correlations between women's criminality, sexual abuse, and drug and alcohol abuse).

²⁹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* 54 (1989).

³⁰ Johnson, *supra* n. 2, at 135.

³¹ *Id.* at 135.

education was essential if we were going to lead productive lives”.³² Nor did she receive encouragement or any sort of real education from school officials and teachers, since “[i]f you weren’t outstanding, they didn’t put too much energy into you”; average or slower children simply were passed on to the next grade based on their height.³³

During her adolescence, Bettie’s parents separated and after an initial stint with her father, Bettie moved in with her mother and sisters.³⁴ She began to run away from home because she was “always being labeled”.³⁵ The first man she met on the street was a pimp, and Bettie began prostituting in order to earn a living.³⁶ But because she associated prostitution with her childhood experiences with the Overseer at her grandparents’ house in Mississippi, she soon changed vocations and turned to pick-pocketing and petty theft.³⁷ She earned a good living stealing from poor and rich men alike: “I lived in nice apartment. I had jewelry, nice cars, and my kids were dressed nicely . . . I started to buy a lot of nice things”.³⁸ Her success drew others to her, and the pimp reentered her life, this time introducing her to heroin, to which she developed a powerful addiction that she could support easily due to her successful pick-pocketing career.³⁹ Bettie was caught one night after picking \$1,600 out of a successful Chicago businessman’s pocket, and although she returned the money to him, the businessman physically assaulted both Bettie and her then-boyfriend.⁴⁰ The boyfriend in turn assaulted the businessman with a club, and a warrant was issued for both the boyfriend and Bettie’s arrest.⁴¹ When Bettie was subsequently arrested, she refused to plead guilty to an offense she did not commit.⁴² At trial, she was convicted of armed robbery and was sentenced to serve a five to fifteen year prison term.⁴³

Bettie speaks of “the prison for Black women” in which she was incarcerated as “a warehouse for people”,⁴⁴ where little attention was paid to rehabilitation of inmates.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.* at 135–136.

³⁵ *Id.* at 136.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 136–137.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 137.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 138.

They don't have programs to help you come back in society, to help you with your problems as to why you wound up there. It's just to get the money every time you come through the door. It's a lucrative business. So here you are going right back out there to do the same thing with fifty dollars. What is fifty dollars, with no skills and no training and no education, going to do for someone? Getting out of jail with fifty dollars would make me want to go use some drugs and forget what's going to happen two days down the line when I wake up with no money and no job There are three basic life-sustaining things that you have to have in life: food, clothing, and shelter. They don't come free, and you can't get them for fifty dollars People fail to realize that all the people out here on the street that they see walking down the street using crack cocaine and stealing don't do that because they want to do it. They have no other way.⁴⁵

Bettie speaks from experience regarding this recidivism – she has served five separate sentences for various crimes and offenses, and is currently on parole and in a transitional residence and program.⁴⁶

Yet, Bettie managed to use her collective time in prison productively, studying for and obtaining her GED and taking classes from local universities and junior colleges.⁴⁷ She did not come to the realization that her “life-style was an act” and that she had spent her life being “. . . an image that somebody else had built [her] up to be” until she entered the transitional program in which she is currently resides and is a participant.⁴⁸ Her “off-stage” space, as she so aptly puts it, is this transitional program, and, after reading her story, one hopes and has confidence that Bettie will remain off-stage, as she has recognized the stage show for what it is: representational oppression.

4.

In the telling of their stories and living of their lives, how do the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women profiled in *Inner Lives* engage in a working semiotics? In Bettie's case, she does so by reinterpreting, deconstructing, and reconstructing the socio-cultural image-repertoire that has been made singularly available to her and those deemed “like” her (i.e., poor, mostly African American women): she has simply gotten “off-stage”. But, unfortunately, the racially scripted repertoire that she identified from her childhood experiences in Mississippi has not changed all that much. One only has to turn on a TV or flip through a magazine to affirm this assertion. Although the media representations of Black

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 138–139.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 139.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

women and other women of color have grown in number, the ideological image-repertoire has broadened very little. In the media, Black women remain: highly sexualized (and, thus, freely available); interchangeable; draped in or on expensive material possessions but still inferior to their White counterparts; superhuman or subhuman; and, always, the Other. The image-repertoire perhaps has softened, but it has not really changed: it remains finite and closed.

The extraordinary thing about the narratives collected by Johnson in *Inner Lives* and exemplified by the life story described in this Review, is that they describe how women who have been placed at the very bottom of the American social consciousness are successfully constructing their own image-repertoires, often in the most depressing of settings. The women do so not by simply deflecting blame for the crimes they have (or have not) committed onto “the system” or the whole of American society. In fact, most of the women take responsibility and express sincere regret for the hurt they have inflicted on their own and others’ lives. This is not to say that the women profiled in the book do not have a collective understanding of the racism and misogyny inherent in the American criminal justice system and American culture; they are all too aware of our great failings. But by also realizing that each of their lives is comprised of a complex set of truths and circumstances that are often conflicting and usually connected to their functional Other-ness, the women profiled in *Inner Lives* can begin to disassemble and reassemble their own categorized identities so that they may form empowered “off-stage” selves and communities of their own. Each story in Johnson’s *Inner Lives* is thus worth pouring over not only as a parable of survival, but also as proof of “real change” out of semiosis.

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