

Loving in the War Years:

Support for Black women in detention

By Christina Wilson

I'm here to tell you a love story about Black women loving women. This story doesn't include white picket fences, or romantic walks on the beach. But inside one of the largest women's prisons in the world, Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla, CA, Black women are overcoming the odds every day and performing beautiful acts of love and resistance with one another.

Healing and Love as Acts of Resistance

Within their stories of destruction in relationship to self, to others, families, and community that women in this article spoke about prior to and during their imprisonment, the strength and endurance of spirit shine through. Love and self-care in prison are two of the most powerful stands women prisoners can take inside a prison system designed to shut them up, tear them down and break their spirits. With women prisoners in the state of California, you will hear endless stories of women receiving serious retaliation for advocating for themselves, and for others. Whether they are using their voices to try to gain access to space for prayer, receive reasonable medical attention, grow a plant, or spend time with a lover or loved ones, women face potential retaliation, physical and verbal abuse, and suffering just for asking for the ability to care for themselves and each other. But still they rise. Every hour, every minute, women are standing up against abusive prison guards, negligent doctors and an inhumane system. Women are taking power to demand the things they need to take care of themselves.

Women loving women inside prison are creating opportunities for self-growth, mutual support, intimacy and trust with incredible hope and intention. As YaVonne Anderson, a 21-year-old black lesbian who describes herself as "aggressive" says, "You get a chance to work on issues together, help support one another, grow together. Not that those things are impossible on the outside, it's just a little more intense because our lives have somewhat stopped in a sense or least have been stagnated."

According to The Drug Policy Alliance, since 1986, the number of women in prison has increased 400 percent. For

women of colour, the rise is 800 percent. The primary reasons for this increase are the War on Drugs, mandatory minimum sentencing, and federal conspiracy charges that incarcerate women for crimes where they did not directly participate but were present. The result of the attack on Black women by the criminal justice system is astounding. By the end of 2001, Black women were three times as likely as Latinos and five times as likely as white women to be in prison.

Impact on Families

As a result, the number of children entering the foster care system or with grandparents as the primary caregiver is also rising. Black children are nine times more likely to have a parent in prison than white children. What does this mean for our communities? Motherhood and family are primary to many women prisoners. Upon incarceration, many women are forced to deal with separation from children, parents, communities and partners. This detachment from everything familiar is the foundation on which women decide to build love for themselves and others.

Beverly Henry (aka Chopper) is a 53 year-old prisoner at Central California Women's Facility. She is a self-disclosed co-positive (HIV/Hepatitis C). Chopper was born and raised in Venice Beach, CA, and has a 26 year-old daughter. "I lost my mom in 1999, my dad in 2002, my brothers and sisters (eight of us total) are angry with me for being an addict and also with the system 'cause they want to know when the system is going to give me a break. They want the system to give me treatment. My daughter has no contact with me because she was raised by my parents—she considers my parents her parents."

Most women in prison are mothers concerned about the well-being of their children, whether or not they were identified as bi-sexual or lesbian prior to their incarceration. As Antoinette Mariah Mayer, a 39 year-old bi-racial lesbian explains, "My family is quite close so being away affects us. My greatest fear is my son. He will be affected the most because I am not there to raise my son. I need my insight there to ensure that he is aware of the dangers life can have, [but] only if you pursue them."

Cycle of Violence: Individual, Family, community, Political

In trying to communicate the reality of the relationships of Black women in prison, it is unfair and incomplete

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to describe these in isolation. All the women interviewed spoke of layers of violence and abuse: violence towards self, in romantic relationships, in relationship to family and children, as part of larger communities, and as political casualties. In order to understand what a radical act women loving women inside prison is, it's important to understand what the women prisoners themselves see as the relationship between abuse, violence and oppression in their daily lives.

YaVonne Anderson shares the intersections of pressure facing Black women in the criminal justice system. “It's outrageous. This [disproportionate number of Black women in prison occurs only] because of the lack of sufficient income, abusive backgrounds, prejudice, domestic violence, drugs, etc. We still succumb to our 'slave' mentality of being 'less than.' There's usually some form of abuse in almost every household, ranging from sexual to physical. And because our culture within itself has been known to be sacred and/or secretive, no one speaks on the abuse, let alone seeks help. We usually say 'that's for white folks.’”

YaVonne continues by sharing how she coped with her environment. “Those that know me in my community were taken back by the news [that I was in prison]. I was never a 'problem child.' I mainly smoked weed yet still maintained “A” and “B” average in school. So it was definitely a shock, and the same goes for my family. I was pretty much seen as a “good kid.” I respected my elders, was loved and welcomed by all of my family members. That was a façade though. Deep down I was hurting inside, and yearned for love which is why I got along so well because I expected and sought love in return.”

But what about love? Within the fear and pain, insecurities and doubts, pride and joy of living in intense, complex and often violent circumstances, where do Black women prisoner's definitions of a good relationship come from?

YaVonne's sentiments strike a chord for many of us who tried to develop healthy relationships when we ourselves encountered traumatic and difficult relationships as the mainstay of our childhood. “I have witnessed my mother have poor relationships and my father as well, as other family and friends. I saw what was wrong about those relationships, so I took the total opposite and applied it to mine. It doesn't always work because some women are used to [abusive dysfunctional relationships] ... and actually believe it's true love.” Many women in prison demonstrate that they continue to fight for a love beyond what they have experienced. As Barbara Jackson (not her real name), a 53 year-old mother of five and grandmother of 15, and who has 22 years clean, states, “Experiencing bad, unhealthy relationships has allowed me to fully understand what'll make a relationship work.”

Violence, dysfunction and disarray do not, however, provide the template from which every Black woman prisoners defines her sense of love. Chopper got hers from her parents. “My parents were together for 51 years. She died first, he died two years later. He said, 'It feels like someone talked for you and answered for you your whole life 'cause they know the answer. It's like my left side is missing—your mother is my whole world.’”

Building Relationships Within Prison

Within a context of violence and abuse, what does it mean to be a lesbian or bi-sexual, aggressive or femme, within prison? What does it mean to try to build and maintain relationships in the face of potential retaliation by prison guard when your life, choices, and movements are under 100 percent state control?

Some factors serve as additional barriers to Black women that are building safe and loving relationships with each other inside prison. A recurring theme women I spoke with communicated is trust, or the lack thereof. Contrary to what many may think, throwing thousands of women together in closed custody is not a lesbian or bisexual woman's paradise. Chopper refers to concerns shared by many women prisoners. “In prison, it is unaccepted and unacceptable to be involved in relationship with a woman. They [officers that are homophobic] do not approve. They will go to any lengths to separate you. In here, you have to be worried if a person cheats 'cause often you're not in the same unit. I don't want a person who gets [herself] in crazy situations. I don't want a partner that's telling you one thing and doing something else. Most people look for loyalty. Lots of women are with women 'cause they buy them stuff, not serious about the lifestyle.” Many women shared concern about whether or not a woman is actually attracted to women or is participating in relationships with women to “get over” or bide their time until they can get out of prison and be with men again.

Barbara Jackson shared some of the issues facing older women in prison. "[There is] no privacy, everybody knows your business, and you don't get any real alone time. A lot of women do not get to leave prison together, and by chance if you fall in love with a lifer, she may never come home. There is no real understanding of partnership so most women who might get sick cannot even ask for with their partner, and as we get older in prison, death and dying are an issue for the surviving partner that will never be looked at."



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Potential retaliation by prison staff is a serious barrier to building healthy relationships inside prison. Wanda Brown shares, "If you get caught with someone, it's an automatic write-up or you get sent to a new unit." When you consider that write-ups could destroy a woman's eligibility for early release on parole, the stakes are clearly high for sharing intimacy.

Antoinette Mariah Mayer says, "Most [prison staff] are anti-relationship, some couples are in unhealthy relationships. There is a lot of verbal and physical abuse, so it looks bad and the correctional officers don't condone couples, especially living together. The uncertainty of being in the same yard [is a difficult aspect of having a relationship with a woman inside]. It is difficult being unable to openly show affectionate gestures to one another, not ever having the chance to sleep in my lover's arms all through the night."

Stories of Love, Images of Good Relationships

You can tell a lot about people by what they want to bring into their lives. This holds true for many of the women I spoke to as well. YaVonne is strong in her resolve to find a woman to grow with. "I look for intelligence, common sense, inner beauty, independence, a nice body, respect, loyalty, humour, monogamy, open communication, honesty, trustworthiness, dedication, cleanliness, mannerism, standards, morals, and ethics, pretty good upbringing, good appearance and a determination to better herself. This goes for in and out of prison. The rules still apply. I have never been one to 'just be' in a relationship. We should definitely grow together and hopefully be together for a long time."

But what about the romance? When I asked women to tell me about a romantic moment in prison, I heard of microwave-cooked family dinners at Christmas time, commitment ceremonies, and most often, incredible acts of loyalty. "When I tested positive in 1994, there was a girl that I eventually ended up going home with (we paroled together)." Chopper continues, "We had known each other a long time and neither one of us thought we liked each other. But after I tested positive, she was the first person to come to me and

say, whatever happens to you, I am willing to go through it with you no matter what. I'm not afraid of HIV and I'm not afraid of you."

YaVonne's stories of romance with her partner also demonstrate a deep and powerful connection. "Once my woman sang to me and she can't sing worth a damn but she meant it from the bottom of her heart, so I thought it was pretty romantic. On another occasion, my woman caught the chicken pox and had to be housed in isolation 'til they cleared

her. Well, she had no paper to write me on so she used napkins and wrote me every day on a napkin. Once released from isolation, she gave them to me to read and I just about cried because I knew she meant every word of it. That was definitely romantic."

Moving Forward

As a community, we are all interconnected in our attempts to build our capacity to love ourselves and each other. It is our ability to heal ourselves and our relationships with each other that lays the groundwork for building political and personal power to overcome the violence and hatred confronting our communities. Many of the women interviewed for this article have a clear understanding of the devastation that has been inflicted on our communities by policies and practices of institutional and cultural oppression, but continue to defy all odds. I have learned so much from the women profiled in this article and want to take this opportunity to thank all of them for sharing their thoughts, fears, hopes and insight.

If you would like to be take part in supporting any of the women featured in this story, you can write to them at the following addresses:

Beverly Henry (Chopper) W72830, CCWF/510-23-02L, P.O. Box 1508, Chowchilla, CA 93610, USA
YaVonne Anderson W71200, CCWF/512-29-04L, P.O. Box 1508, Chowchilla, CA 93610, USA
Antoinette Mariah Mayer W87224, CCWF/C10-26-3L, P.O. Box 1508, Chowchilla, CA 93610, USA
Wanda Brown W22224, CCWF/510-14-3L, P.O. Box 1508, Chowchilla, CA 93610, USA

For information on how you can support Black women prisoners, contact me at California Coalition for Women Prisoners, 1540 Market Street, Suite 490, San Francisco, California 94102, USA; Tel: (1-415) 255-7036 ext. 4; E-mail: info@womenprisoners.org

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