theories and methodologies

Books as Bombs: Incendiary Reading Practices in Women's Prisons

MEGAN SWEENEY

READING RECEIVES CONSIDERABLE CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT IN THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES, FROM FACE-TO-FACE, televised, and online book clubs to community-wide reading initiatives such as Michigan Reads!; One Book, One Philadelphia; and On the Same Page Cincinnati. In United States prisons, however, opportunities for reading and education have steadily declined since the prisoners' rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s gave way to the retributive-justice framework of the 1980s and beyond.[1]

The United States Supreme Court's 2006 decision *Beard v. Banks* illustrates some of the forces that constrain reading—rather than foster it—in contemporary prisons. *Beard v. Banks* deems it constitutional for a Pennsylvania prison to deny secular newspapers and magazines to prisoners in its Long Term Segregation Unit, on the grounds that this denial acts as an "incentiv[e] for inmate growth" (8).[2] Because these prisoners have no access to television, radio, or telephone, they receive no current news. The dissenting opinion argues that access to social, political, aesthetic, and moral ideas is crucial for preserving one's sense of humanity and citizenship; according to the majority opinion, however, such claims are moot when "dealing with especially difficult prisoners" (11). *Beard v. Banks* thus constructs reading as a privilege that best serves the interests of the penal system when it is denied to uncooperative prisoners.[3]

Penal institutions sometimes restrict prisoners' access to novels as well. As I have learned from conducting individual interviews and group discussions with seventy-four women in two midwestern prisons, African American urban fiction has gained tremendous popularity among some incarcerated women. Written by authors such as Teri Woods, Vickie Stringer, Nikki Turner, and Noire and bearing titles such as *A Hustler's Wife*, *Project Chick*, and *Thug-a-Licious*, urban books have been a booming industry since 2001, and young black women in and out of prison constitute their primary readers. The librarians in the prisons where I conducted research receive daily requests for urban fiction, but both libraries exclude

MEGAN SWEENEY is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, with a joint appointment in English and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies. She was a 2007–08 fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Her essays have recently appeared in *PMLA*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, and she is completing a manuscript titled "'The Underground Book Railroad': Cultures of Reading in Women's Prisons."

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the genre because of its emphases on drug dealing, hustling, prostitution, and violence.[4] Although the prisons initially allowed me to use a limited selection of urban books for my group discussions with imprisoned women, an official in one of the prisons burst in to stop our discussion after discovering that the books were published by Triple Crown, a publishing firm—founded by a former prisoner—that specializes in urban fiction.[5] The official told me to collect the books and immediately remove them from prison grounds, as if, one incarcerated reader noted, they were "a bomb that no one can touch." These forbidden books—Tu-Shonda Whitaker's *Flip Side of the Game* and its sequel, *Game Over*—focus on a young woman's struggle to develop a healthy relationship with her mother, who is a recovering addict, and with her fiancé, a former drug dealer who has become a doctor.

Whether the restricted reading material is secular periodicals and magazines or urban fiction, these restrictions highlight the extent to which reading in the penal context is shaped by issues of access, control, and power, and they raise a number of questions that merit careful consideration: What is the relation between reading and rehabilitation? Is reading in prison a right or a privilege? What are desirable outcomes of prisoners' engagements with books, and who should decide? And, finally, how do penal policies about reading reflect broader cultural and political uncertainties about prisoners' status as human beings capable of reflection and growth?

Urban fiction is a particularly interesting site for exploring the intersections among reading, incarceration, and power. On one level, the books illuminate penal institutions' attempts to control prisoners by controlling their reading. On another level, urban books themselves consistently address themes of power and control, and some women use them as tools for negotiating an empowered subject position as they reckon with their pasts and seek to create different futures. Moreover, incarcerated readers often construct urban books as powerful agents that can produce negative or positive outcomes in the hands of various readers, and they sometimes advocate regulating other women's reading of the genre. In the following pages, I analyze how some imprisoned women navigate issues of agency and power as they engage with urban fiction. By focusing on this particular dimension of imprisoned women's multifarious reading practices, I hope to illuminate new ways of thinking about books' incendiary potential in the prison.

Given prison libraries' prohibitions of urban fiction, incarcerated women who can afford to do so ask family members and friends to send them urban books through online catalogs such as *BlackExpressions.com*. When a book arrives in the mailroom, a prison official decides whether it is acceptable, and if it is not the prisoner must destroy it or return it to the sender. Although the acceptance rate of urban fiction fluctuates depending on the whims—and sometimes the race—of the official involved, a substantial number of books have made it into both prisons where I conducted research, and prisoners circulate these books through what one woman calls the "underground book railroad." Darlene, a thirty-five-year-old African American woman, describes the underground book traffic in these terms: "You'll have about three hundred people in this compound waiting to read a book, so it's like a list that the [book owner] keeps on who got the book and how much time they got to read it and get it to the next person."[6] Miekal, a thirty-nine-year-old African American woman, is one of a few women who have managed to amass significant collections of urban books. Miekal has had "no choice" but to order her own urban books, she asserts, since the prison library contains mostly white-authored books with unrealistic plots about "werewolves" and "a blob that ate up the city." Describing her

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policies for circulating her books, Miekal explains, "I take my cover off and put your name in there, then I know you got my book. I have restrictions on my books. No bending my pages. No eating in my books, and I don't like my book left facedown 'cause it breaks my binder. . . . I expect for you to bring me my book back in three days."

Urban fiction has opened up a world of reading and writing for many women who were not readers, let alone writers, before coming to prison.[7] As Ronnie, a thirty-eight-year-old African American woman, explains, "I didn't read hardly at all," but after discovering urban fiction, "I was hooked. . . . And I keep reaching out and reaching out until I find more and more. They all just been good books; they talk about real life." Like Ronnie, women across racial lines enjoy reading urban fiction because they can personally identify with the events and issues depicted in the books. In the words of Kaye, a twenty-six-year-old African American woman, "I love them because I can relate to them. A lot have to do with growing up in the projects, selling, and using. I did all that. They're about people like you know." Through their engagements with urban fiction, some incarcerated women also begin to identify with the position of author and to imagine their experiences—and their vernacular speech patterns—as worthy of representation in a book.[8] Several women are writing their own books, and one woman has published a book and has two others under contract.

As they try to make sense of prisons' restrictions of urban books, incarcerated fans of the genre foreground racialized power dynamics. Valhalla, a twenty-nine-year-old white woman, speculates that prisons forbid urban books "because the one who decides what we can and cannot get tends to be a white man. . . . It's highly educated men that went to a good college and [had] a good life, and they don't understand. That book's ridiculous to them." Noting the prison library's vast collection of crime thrillers by the white author James Patterson—which routinely detail violent crimes—Miekal argues, "I think it's racism, and I think it's prejudice, and I don't think it's right, because you got James Patterson and all these killer books," with men who "kidnap women . . . and put snakes in their rectum and kill them, and they're rapists. . . . [But in urban books] it's not horrifying. It's just something that's going on in everyday life. It's happening whether they want to face it or not."

Lakesha, a twenty-seven-year-old African American woman, suggests that the prohibition of urban fiction contests incarcerated women's status as readers. "I'm reading a book. . . . Why don't you want me to read it?" she asks. "Why are you trying to take another black author off the shelf?" Noting that more prisoners watch TV than read books, Lakesha adds, "Everything they take away in books we can just watch with our eyes, so it doesn't make sense. I can watch *Prison Break* and I'm sitting in prison! So what's really your story?" In Lakesha's view, I should rename my study "Fear of Books."

In addition to the reasons that these readers offer, penal institutions' fear of urban books seems to stem from the conceptions of power and agency that many of the books espouse in depicting characters' efforts to attain and maintain power. Whereas Patterson's books typically foreground detectives' successful efforts to apprehend criminals, urban books often foreground characters' flouting of the legal system and their reliance on alternative economies of justice. Imprisoned fans of urban fiction occasionally emphasize their identification with this spirit of resistance to dominant white power structures. For instance, Monique, a twenty-nine-year-old African American woman, likes "rooting for the bad guy . . . the underdog or the guy that they think is a threat" because she believes that members of dominant white culture "are pleased as long as they see that you're not liv-

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ing up to your potential, but as soon as they feel like you're starting to gain an edge . . . that's when all the problems start."

Urban books also emphasize the immense wealth that characters achieve through participation in criminal activities, and they tend to depict this wealth as the gateway to power. Some incarcerated readers object to the genre on these grounds, arguing that it glamorizes a "gangster" lifestyle. Denise, a forty-six-year-old African American woman, argues that such a lifestyle "is what brought [women] to the penitentiary," yet urban books teach them "that this is what they should aspire to be." In Denise's view, urban books are "tragedies" in which "a lot of people die," yet women only see how the characters "live flashy"; they fail to recognize that only "one out of a hundred people" manages to live such a life. Indeed, the genre may perpetuate the fantasy that African American women can game their way to the top of a system that routinely excludes them from equal opportunity and chances for economic success.

Readers such as Soso, a forty-eight-year-old African American woman who will read a good urban book four times in a row, substantiate Denise's concerns in describing their attractions to urban books. "It excites me to read them," says Soso. "I look at all this money they're making. I can't wait to see the dollar signs. . . . I like how they're hustlers. How they con someone. It gives me a feeling of oh man, is it that easy? I coulda tried that!" Touché, a forty-three-year-old African American woman who is a reader and published author of urban fiction, likewise says of her first encounter with the genre, "The covers attracted me to the books. How the men looked, how the women were dressed—it was flashy. They represented money to me. Some type of hustle was transpiring and some money was being made." Touché also acknowledges, "Talking about my crimes gets me hyped, and the hype happened as I was writing my book. It felt like I was back there again doing it." Furthermore, she concedes that her book focuses "a lot on types of designers, clothes, and the amount of money [my character] was getting, and it makes people want material stuff. A few women have said they wish they were with me at the time I was out there. They wanted clothes and jewelry and weren't seeing that in their own hustle, so they want to be a part of mine."

As they attempt to situate their experiences in relation to those of urban book characters, some incarcerated readers communicate a tension between their lingering hope that they might replicate the wealth and power that characters achieve and their sense that the books may paint an unrealistic picture of such power. Marisa, a forty-six-year-old Latina woman, experiences a vicarious rush from sharing in female hustlers' adventures, particularly since she suffers from debilitating rheumatoid arthritis. "I put myself in their shoes," she explains. "With all the details about sex, I get those feelings. If they have money in their hands, if they're taking drugs, I feel it. I get that thing in my stomach to want to go flip the money or do heroin. My stomach starts bubbling. . . . I want money and drugs to relieve my pain and so I can do whatever I want physically."[9] At the same time, however, Marisa tries to inject some realism into the protagonists' portrayal, tempering her envy of their hustling prowess by wondering how they might fare if they put themselves in her shoes as an older, struggling mother. "There are never urban books about women my age who struggle," she observes. "They're always young and beautiful. . . . One character has six abortions. What if she kept one or two? Would it have slowed her down? I wish they had babies in the beginning [of the book], because as a mother, it would slow them down some. . . . Would they continue to hustle?"

Other imprisoned women read urban books as cautionary tales, focusing on the negative consequences of characters' efforts to attain wealth and power. This reading

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practice leads some women to reflect critically on the ways in which their own attempts to gain power have affected others. In discussing Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Barbara, a thirty-three-year-old white woman, draws parallels between her own actions and those of Winter, the selfish, status-obsessed protagonist. Commenting on an episode in which Winter sells crack to her own mother, Barbara acknowledges: "I sold drugs to my old man's mom! I'm no better than this woman in this book! It makes me sick to think that I did that!" Barbara then adds, "I'm getting ready to leave in thirteen days, and I'm scared shitless because I don't want to be a Winter." Denise, who typically disdains urban fiction, likewise reflects, "I haven't read a book that's had the power to make me see the criminal side of me . . . [but] I saw Winter in me. I saw Winter in my daughter. . . . Little pieces [of the novel] would jump out at me and would like stab me. Like oh God, this is what I done did to my child." For other women, reading urban books as cautionary tales is less a matter of ethics and more a matter of remembering the genre's golden rule: use "the game" as a "stepping stone," accumulate a vast quantity of money, and then retire from the game before it leads to your imprisonment or death. As Ronnie says, urban books "let you know that the glamorous life to make money—it don't last."

In addition to focusing on characters' efforts to attain power through wealth, imprisoned fans of urban fiction frequently focus on female characters' struggles to free themselves from the grips of power-obsessed men. Although female characters sometimes occupy powerful positions as players in the game, urban books routinely depict them as victims of physical abuse, sexualized violence, and even torture at the hands of men. Many readers note that they "couldn't stop crying" when reading about characters' experiences of gendered violence. Their emotional responses to these experiences seem particularly significant given that so many women in prison have sustained such violence themselves, yet counseling opportunities remain scarce in prison, and many correctional officers believe that imprisoned women need discipline rather than coddling through therapy.[10] Reading about female characters' victimization prompts some readers to reflect on their own agency and complicity as women. For Bobbie, a forty-six-year-old African American woman, urban books' depictions of violence against women reaffirm her own capacity for resistance: "When I read stuff like that, it teaches me what not to do," she explains. "I'm not gonna go get involved with a man that wants to whoop my ass like that all the time, or hold a gun to my head, or, you know, put a gun in my mouth. . . . You only got one chance to do that to me and I'm outta here, for real." Kaye, by contrast, has become critical of women themselves after reading more than fifteen urban books. "We women sell ourselves short," she argues. "Women do everything for money. All that matters is bring me diamonds and cars and I don't care how much [my man] runs around or what he does to me. . . . It's messed up that men treat us that way, but they only do what we allow them to do."

In their engagements with urban fiction, incarcerated readers often characterize the books as powerful agents that can enable women's positive transformation or contribute to their downfall. Whereas Ronnie says of urban books, "I probably won't come back to prison if I keep reading them books" because they "help me keep my mind straight" and "not get involved," Marisa argues, "Most of the ones who read urban books come back. . . . They don't want to change mentally." In attributing such power to the genre, imprisoned readers often argue that reading urban books is "good for me but bad for others," and they advocate restricting other women's reading of the genre. Such responses suggest that women sometimes displace or project their own anxieties about urban fiction onto other readers. For instance, although Marisa's own

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stomach bubbles with excitement when she reads about characters hustling and taking drugs, she expresses concern about her roommate's habit of reading one urban book a day: "It's not good for her to read them," Marisa contends. "She gets excited. It triggers her."

Imprisoned readers offer a range of explanations in arguing that reading urban books is good for them but bad for others. Some women emphasize that it's OK for them to read urban fiction because, unlike other women, they can distinguish between the books' elements of reality and fantasy. Urban books represent "the kind of life I'd like," says Sahara, a forty-six-year-old white woman, yet "the books focus so much on money and the lifestyle that they might have people thinking they can live like that. But the dealers I know in inner-city Philly are just making it. They don't have a Benz and millionaire houses and wads of money. That's fantasy!" Wendy, a twenty-eight-year-old African American woman, contends that she is "doing research" by reading urban books, because they foster her understanding of the "ghetto-type" people with whom she is imprisoned. Barbara—who loves urban books yet worries that Christians should not read them—reasons that reading urban fiction will assist her in doing prison ministry with other incarcerated women because the books "[help me] to really, really feel where these girls come from" but "always remind me not to go back out there." Yet when I asked whether Barbara imagines using urban books as part of her ministry, she laughed and responded "definitely not!" because other women "would probably go back to that lifestyle" after reading such books.

As they attempt to carve out new ways of being in the world, some women come to view urban fiction as impeding their own efforts to change. In the words of Natasha, a thirty-four-year-old African American woman who reads urban books almost exclusively, "The books that I read, they might not be good for me, 'cause they're like violence and sex books . . . and I'm trying to get away from all that." When she was first incarcerated, Natasha shares, "I could relate to the joy of dealing and the pimping and playing." Reading urban books "was exciting because what I was reading is what I was, and I wasn't ready to change that environment that I was in." Explaining her current desire to read other kinds of books, Natasha asserts, "I owe myself that. I want to have a better life and a better relation with my family and my kids. I don't want to keep looking around over my shoulder worried about going back to prison."

Given the possibilities and potential pitfalls entailed in incarcerated women's engagements with urban fiction, the genre presents great opportunities for group discussion. Readers sometimes deepen their critical engagement with urban books as they passionately address questions such as the following: What are sources of legitimate and long-lasting power? Does revenge pay? What are the pros and cons of getting fast money through hustling versus working legally at a lower-paying job? What are the communal consequences of selling drugs? Why do women knowingly allow themselves to be exploited or endangered? Can you call a woman strong if she has survived but made bad choices along the way? How can you learn to trust if you have repeatedly experienced abandonment? Finally, what are the effects of urban books' frequent portrayals of violence against women? Whereas penal authorities curtail imprisoned women's discussion of controversial urban books—for instance, one official forbade me even to mention two books during our discussions, though most of the participants had already read the books on their own—our conversations suggest that providing opportunities for critical engagement with the genre can open up possibilities for women's development as healthy citizens.[11]

Although the "underground book railroad" does not guarantee arrival at a particular destination, urban fiction gives many

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incarcerated women pleasure and enables some women to embark on journeys toward greater understanding of the roles that they have played—and might play—in the broader social sphere. At a moment when our highest court has construed the denial of reading to be an "incentiv[e] for inmate growth," it is crucial to recognize urban books' incendiary potential in prison—not as dangerous explosives that should be removed from prisoners' hands but as powerful tools for sparking critical reflection, igniting insights, and catalyzing dialogue among incarcerated and nonincarcerated members of our community.

Notes

1. Since 1994, the elimination of Pell Grants to prisoners has effectively defunded all higher educational programs in United States prisons and sparked broader cuts in all levels of prison educational programming. For a detailed discussion of reading in twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States prisons, see Sweeney, "Reading."

2. Prisoners can theoretically regain access to these materials if they improve their behavior. Since the Long Term Segregation Unit opened, however, only about twenty-five percent of those confined to the highest level have been moved to a lower level or out of the unit (Beard v. Banks 3).

3. They are, however, permitted religious and legal materials, two library books, and writing paper. For a detailed discussion of the case, see Sweeney, "*Beard*."

4. This exclusion is policy-based in one prison but de facto in the other.

5. I have facilitated a total of eleven conversations about five urban books.

6. Each of the incarcerated women featured in this essay has chosen a pseudonym to protect her privacy.

7. Because African American women constitute the fastest-growing population in the United States penal system, prisons merit particular attention as a site in which African American women's reading practices flourish.

8. Darlene feels especially inspired by the author Zane, who resisted editors' efforts "to change her words around" and has become "a *major* writer."

9. To "flip" money means to double it.

10. Wendy, a twenty-eight-year-old African American woman, says of the difficulty of procuring counseling, "Here in the system, they'll med[icate] you to death but you're on a waiting list for a counselor! I don't want to be high. . . . I just want to talk with someone." Heidi, a thirty-seven-year-old white woman sentenced to life in prison, recounts that she "saw one person for one hour" despite months of trying to meet with someone, and she eventually abandoned her efforts to seek counseling.

11. For further analysis of women prisoners' group discussions of urban books, see Sweeney, "Keepin'."

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