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From a Solitary Cell in Texas, Kwaneta Yatrice Harris Writes Letters Documenting the Torturous Conditions, Despite the Risk of Retribution

by Solitary Watch Guest Author | July 17, 2020

Editors Note: This powerful article was published in Juneon the website of Dissent Magazine*, and is reprinted in part on Solitary Watch with the permission of the author and publisher. Itprovides a rare look at the experiences of women in solitary confinement, where the trauma of isolation and deprivationcompound the historical traumas of physical and sexual abuse that affectthe majority of incarcerated women.Kwaneta Yatrice Harris, whose story is at the heart of the piece, also understands the deeper historical precedents of her experience in a Texas prison:Black womens bodies were playthings for slave masters and now are playthings for white prison guards, she writes to author Justine van der Leun. Violence against us is not only tolerated, but its routine. As van der Leun notes, however, unlike police brutality caught on cell phone videos, most violence in prisons and jails is concealed from view, and the incarcerated people who speak of abuses are societys most marginalizedoften discredited because of their backgrounds, lacking outside support, and unable to offer proof because of the opacity of their institutions. When Kwaneta Harris shared what she had experienced and witnessed, she faced severe retaliation. Independent journalist Justine van der Leun received a 2019-2020 Writing for Justice Fellowship from PEN America for reporting on the structural, historic, cultural, and legal forces behind the criminalization of womens defense and survival from abuse.Jean Casella*

In a solitary cell in a central Texas prison, as a global pandemic and protests raged, Kwaneta Yatrice Harris was eating cold bologna sandwiches on the better days. On the worst days, she was given nutraloaf, also known as discipline cake: a rectangle of meat, potatoes, margarine, syrup, liquified egg, and anonymous vegetable.

The food was slid through the door of a windowless room the size of a walk-in closet where Harris has been held since 2015. Eventually, she will be returned to a general population unit to serve the rest of her sentence, the estimated end of which is in 2058, when she will be eighty-six. Throughout her time in prison, Harris, like many incarcerated people, has been subject to questionable disciplinary cases brought by guards, including, most recently, the offense of aiding me to telephone her under a fraudulent name. She did not do this, but she is still being penalized. Punishments vary: nutraloaf is one of them; more time in solitary is another.

Like most people in womens prisons, Harris has endured worse. I first wrote to her in March 2019, while conducting background research, and we have been corresponding ever since. She has noted that she and those in her unit sleep, shower, toilet, and groom in camera-free spaces overseen by male officers. Black womens bodies were playthings for slave masters and now are playthings for white prison guards, she wrote. Violence against us is not only tolerated, but its routine. She had seen, she told me, a young woman, straight out of a juvenile facility, tackled by six guards, and other girls . . . slammed so hard it appears they bounce off the concrete.

In jails and prisons, there are no unmonitored phones. Theres no internet, no social media, no amateur videos. State violence remains hidden. Oh, how I wish the [correctional officers] wore body cams, Harris wrote. If [the public] only knew the horrors inflicted. . . . I bet the prisons wouldnt be as filled.

The over 230,000 women and girls incarcerated in the United States have singular stories but share common backgrounds. Studies suggest that nationwide, 60 percent of women incarcerated in federal prisons have a history of sexual or physical abuse, and in some state prisons, as many as 94 percent of the female population has been physically or sexually abused before entering the criminal justice system. A 2015 Human Rights Project for Girls report showed that the vast majority of girls in the juvenile justice system have been sexually or physically abused before their incarceration, often severely and on multiple occasions.

These trauma historieslargely unacknowledged or dismissed by attorneys, judges, and juriesoften play a role in gender-based criminalization. Harris was convicted of shooting and killing a boyfriend, an Air Force retiree, and then stealing money from him. In interviews for a salacious TV docudrama series in which Harris refused to take part, the white male judge said that Harriss levels of depravity are top five of any Ive ever known, and her own white male defense attorney seemed puzzled: I dont know why she went down this path that she did, he said. She had a very good mother and she was raised to be a good person. Harris had attended private school and her mother was an upstanding citizen, but she had also been molested as a child, gang raped and kidnapped at twelve, and physically abused by her first and second husbands.

The lawyersmy lawyerdid not want to hear about my history of sexual assault and specifically what my victim did and has done to me, she wrote to me. Over their on-off relationship of many years, Harris wrote, her boyfriend had been abusive and manipulative. He made nonconsensual sex tapes, which he used to threaten her; hacked her computer with spyware; and sent emails calling her a slut, a whore, and a thief to her colleagues at the hospital where she worked as a registered nurse. Harris wrote that her legal team did not wish to disparage a veteran. As a twelve-year-old, she added, she had dropped charges against her rapists and kidnappers, which the attorneys worried might make her seem lying or promiscuous. Harris did not push the attorneys. The stigma and shame of allowing myself to continually accept abusive behavior is stronger than the shame of being a convicted murderer.

In her time behind bars, she had met many others like her: a woman who had arrived in prison marked with all types of scars; another who woke the dorm by screaming in the night, reliving torture at the hands of her husband; one who had been trafficked as a child, forced to sleep in a chicken coop. White women who speak about rape and abuse have historically been dismissed as manipulators; Black women like Harris face even more skepticism and scorn, even though they experience higher rates of intimate partner and sexual violence.

In 2015, after six years in prison, Harris was accused of forging a judges signature on paperwork to lessen her sentence. She maintains that evidence shows another woman in the facilitylikely a member of an Aryan gangcommitted the act. In any case, Harris has now spent twenty-two to twenty-four hours a day in isolation, for over 1,600 days, awaiting a hearing. This is where she remained as the coronavirus spread through Texass 103 facilities. Over 7,821 incarcerated people have tested positive in the state, and to date, at least seventy-nine have died. Over 1,321 staffers have tested positive, and eight have passed away. A riderless horse walked across a field to honor the fallen officers.

On May 14, as the numbers rose, the Supreme Court struck down a bid by two elderly incarcerated men for better virus protections in Texas prisons, where social distancing is impossible, bleach often in short supply, and medical care scarce or nonexistent. That same day, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) uploaded a video of barefaced incarcerated individuals sewing masks by hand. One woman said that she and the others were excited to make masks, instead of the American flags they regularly sewed. The TDCJ denies that it uses slave labor or chain gangs, though work is mandatory and unpaid, and any jobs that take place outside of the prison perimeters, such as those in a field, are overseen by an armed officer on horseback.

Harris did not work because she was in restrictive housing, or administrative segregation, which is what Texas calls its solitary confinement. In late 2017, the state announced that it would do away with solitary confinement as a form of punishment, but the reform, in practicality, only affected seventy-five people, according to a 2019 report by the Texas Civil Rights Project. Solitary has been classified as torture by the United Nations, serves no rehabilitative purpose, and causes mental health to deteriorate in as few as ten days. After the pandemic lockdowns, many know this. Millions of people stayed at home for months, increasingly distressed, cut off from community. Those who were alone began to physically throb for human connection.

But true solitary is nothing like shelter-in-place: no quilts or sunlight, no fridges or Netflix or Zoom, no quick bike rides or walks around the block or brown-bag cocktails on the sidewalk at a six-foot distance. Ive been told by several individuals who have lived in solitary for months and years that the experience magnifies the senses: You can smell the guards perfume, hear the click of shoes echoing from far away. You will clean every corner of your cell on your knees, which grow calloused. Youll become desperate for touch. A woman in California kept a pet cricket and tore off one of its legs so it couldnt leave her. A man in Minnesota nurtured a baby mouse and taught it to sleep by his head in a Folgers jar.

Texas currently keeps over 4,000 people in segregated cells, for an average of five years, but up to twenty, at a cost of $46 million annually. Thats more people in solitary than the rest of the countrys prisons combined. The TDCJ declined to comment on the official reason for Harriss confinement

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