

Black Culture Behind Bars: An interview with Nikicia G.

White supremacy, censorship, and resistance in an Ontario women's jail.

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Jail is an environment that has been engineered to starve the senses. While creativity and culture at times seem to flourish among prisoners, these manifestations of the human drive for self-expression truly exist against all odds, and are often short lived due to institutional suppression.

For racialized communities in particular, this suppression of culture is a heavy reminder of the white supremacist nature of colonial state power. However, while the punitive measures of the prison system aim to demoralize and break the spirit, they can also have the contradictory effect of galvanizing prisoners by giving us no choice but resistance or spiritual death.

Experiencing racism and cultural repression while incarcerated has given poet and writer Nikicia G the inspiration to stand up, fight back, and encourage other women to do the same.

This interview was transcribed in January 2013 with a crayon-sized, prison issue pencil (the full sized ones presumably being too easily weaponized) on scraps of paper over a series of sessions when Nikicia and I were both inmates at the Vanier Center for Women, a provincial jail in Milton, Ontario.

Kelly Rose Pflug-Back: Tell me a bit about yourself and the experiences which brought you to jail.

Nikicia G: My name is really irrelevant. Behind these walls, I'm just a number in the eyes of the high authority. I am a Black woman, 32 years of age, with six children. I have been incarcerated for 26 months now and still have three months left to serve. I am here because of a choice I made, and I accept that. But when it comes down to it, racial profiling is what led me to make this choice.

My husband, my kids and I were living in a neighbourhood that was predominantly white and Asian, and police assumed that to be living in that area we had to be selling drugs. This led to my husband's arrest, which led to police and the CAS [Children's Aid Society] coming to my house. My husband's charges were withdrawn eventually, but not before the CAS and police tore my family apart.

I lost my house and my income, and my children were sent to live with family. Out of desperation, I became involved in an illegal activity. Me, my husband, another black man and an Aboriginal [Native Canadian] man were arrested for importation of firearms and alcohol. At the time of our arrest, the police separated us along racial lines. They asked the Aboriginal man, who was the driver of our vehicle, to tell them what he was doing "with the black people," and he wouldn't get arrested. He told them, and was arrested anyway.

I'd spent 14 months behind bars [in a remand centre in Sarnia, Ontario] by the time trial was over. Myself, my husband and the other black man were found guilty of importation of fire arms and alcohol, although it was stated [in court] that our co-accused had smuggled the firearms across the border while the three of us stayed on Canadian soil. The charges were later dismissed from him because he co-operated, while the three of us were sentenced to 3-5 years.

When you think about it, Aboriginal culture and black culture were both treated poorly by the white man. The natives had their land taken away. Black people had their bodies taken away. Both cultures were suppressed under the white man's control in different aspects, but face some of the same obstacles. Yet our communities are still divided against one another, instead of binding together to move forward and better ourselves and each other.

FE: I think in a lot of ways jail aims to break down women's self esteem by depriving us of access to education, books, or other ways of empowering ourselves. What kind of experiences have you had trying to access books and resources that are specifically by and for black people?

NG: There are no cultural resources here, no programs about black heritage or issues which concern black women. The library is very limited. The majority of the books are written for white folks. I just can't relate to most of them. I never grew up on a farm with a white picket fence.

After a lot of lobbying with two of the staff I was able to get some urban literature into the unit, but there are still only about ten books maximum. Authors like Nikki Turner, Cupcake Brown and Sister Souljah, I can relate to, whether it's about growing up in housing projects, hustling in the streets, having a single parent, to my roots in slavery; I can relate to it, because I can identify with the dark skinned character.

A guard opposed urban literature coming in to the jail because it is "all about drugs, gangs and crime," which makes no sense because you find the same material in books by white authors that are already in the library. I've talked to the jail's program coordinator about getting books by black authors, and she assumed that I just meant black history books. People don't understand that having novels which come out of black culture is just as important as having black history books.

As for breaking down women, the system does somewhat do that. You're entitled to your chance at parole, but that's really not the case. I personally waived my parole, I knew that I would be denied walking into a parole hearing based on I am black, I am on a serious charge, and I don't have a lot of support on the outside. Out of all the people that sit on the parole board, not one of them is black. I'm just a statistic to them, I'm not a human being.

FE: In what ways have you seen guards treat inmates differently based on racial stereotyping?

NG: What really disturbs me about women's provincial jail is that black women are treated like we are a danger and cause the most crime, but when you look at the actual population of the institution, blacks are not the majority. Automatically a black person is seen as loud, ignorant, and liable to cause trouble.

When I was in the Sarnia jail, which is smaller, I was called the N word by inmates and a "coloured girl" by the guards. Due to my charges I was labeled a "gang banger." I thought to myself at the time, what is this "gangsterism" they talk about? Wearing baggy pants, is that "gangsterism"? Three people rolling together, is that a gang? How are they going to preach about these things when they've never been there?

While the majority of guards here at the Vanier Center are not like this, there are those who make racist comments openly. One guard said while I was shoveling gravel that he felt like he should be holding a shotgun and whistling slavery songs.

It's funny, when I hear people say this person or that person is or is not racist, I say, "How do you know? You're white, I'm black, I can feel it." Only we can feel what the other person's hate is coming from. I just know what I feel—the look, the comments, the fact that they are ignorant or oblivious to our culture. One person could say something and I know it's a joke, another could say the same thing and I just feel the negativity and the true meaning behind that "joke."

FE: Do you think it has an emotional impact on you and other prisoners to be cut off from your own culture while in jail?

NG: Coming from my own personal experience, yes it does. At one point I felt lost—I was on a wing with no other black people for a while. It had me stir crazy—I had no one to talk to that I could speak my language to, relate to. No one I could be myself around. People believe that Jamaican Patois is gibberish, but speaking Italian, German, Russian, etc., is not.

Don't get me wrong, I tried talking to everybody, but they looked at me like I had three heads. I cried myself to sleep one night, needing the contact of someone from my culture. When they eventually placed two black women on my wing it made me feel somewhat whole, and not alone. It helped me do my time easier.

FE: I think a lot of the censorship that happens here has to do with the system's fear of inmates organizing and empowering ourselves. What are your thoughts on that?

NG: I think the system is a circle. They keep you down and stuck in it. They set you up, because that's how they continue to get their pay cheques. We don't have an inmate rights book. If you speak up for your rights or ask for an Ombudsman complaint form, you are quickly reprimanded and punished. They want us to keep believing that you cannot stand up for your rights while you are in jail.

To some women, jail teaches the same things they were taught on the outside. When your boyfriend is beating you, don't stand up because you'll get shut down. When the system abuses you, it's the same thing. How is it that the system says we are supposed to stand up, says we have our own woman right to say "no," but in jail we must keep quiet about what goes on behind these cement walls?

FE: Based on your experiences, what advice would you give to people who want to support prisoners?

NG: To support prisoners, you have to hear the stories of different women, from all walks of life. You can never actually fully understand unless you've walked in their shoes. People need to make more of an effort to understand lower class people, and not be ignorant to how society looks upon and treats those who are poor and have a criminal record.

We need to rise up in ranking, and inform people on the real reason a person traffics firearms, or a person lashes out at the police. Illegal industries come out of poverty and inequality. Anger towards the police comes from the violence they have inflicted on us. There are so many ways we can be doing this, reaching out and volunteering in our communities, writing about what we have experienced and letting the world know. Knowledge is key, and information is power.

FE: How have the hardships you've experienced inspired you to want to change things for others, and what advice would you give to other women who want to find their voice, in prison or on the outside?

NG: I've been through a lot during my incarceration. My eyes have been opened so much. The way it is now, this is a place where you sit and watch the world on the outside change and grow, while all you grow is resentment and anger.

My advice to the next woman is, you can't give up. You have a voice, a voice that's meant to be heard. You have to speak that voice, and don't stop. When you get out of jail, you must not forget what you have endured. Always remember that when you leave that cell empty, someone else comes in and fills it, just like you did.

It is a cycle that needs help in being ended, and your voice could be that help.

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