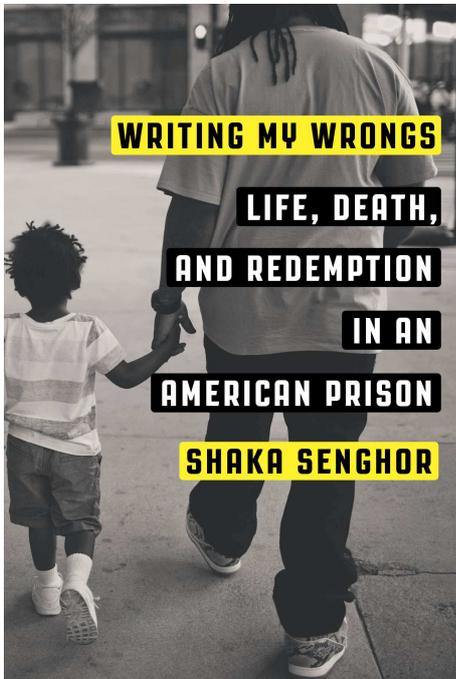




Writing My Wrongs: Life, Death and Redemption in an American Prison

Shaka Senghor

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Review by Beatrice Melodia Festa*

In her seminal work on prison activism, Angela Davis has forced us to confront the dramatic, looming presence of the American prison as a fundamental public structure of US crime control that “has posed complex challenges to the people who have lived with it” (Davis 2003, 22). Indeed, the prison system is based upon an essential form of punishment that in this age of mass incarceration often shifts from a rehabilitative aim to an essentially punitive one. In a lecture given in the 1950s and still relevant today, Harry Shulman asserted that “American penology stands immobilized with one foot in the road of rehabilitation and the other in the road of punishment” (1955, 662). With this premise in mind, the experience of imprisonment, often violent and dramatically painful, has been recounted by many among those who have lived confinement in first person. In this sense, prison narratives have tried to accomplish the difficult task of underscoring the strong emotional and mental influence of confinement on those experiencing the brutal consequences of imprisonment. This is certainly the aim of Shaka Senghor’s powerful memoir, *Writing my Wrongs* (2016), which offers an inspiring perspective on America’s mass incarceration, relating his experience of a 19-year sentence in an American prison, part of which took place in solitary confinement. An activist, speaker and above all, former inmate, Senghor is widely considered as one of the most prominent

* Beatrice Melodia Festa is a PhD Candidate and teaching assistant in Anglo-American Literature at the University of Verona. She graduated in Postcolonial and American studies at Ca’ Foscari University and she holds a Joint Master’s Degree (MA) in American studies from the University of New York-City College. Her research interests include Identity Theory, Technology and Literature, African-American Literature, feminism as well as the relationship between literature and culture.



advocates of prison reform in the US and a leading voice in the call to re-envision the criminal justice system.¹

Imprisoned for second-degree murder and serving a lengthy sentence of 19 years that ended with his release in 2010, in this extraordinary autobiographical account, Senghor guides us through the story of his emotional path of self-reformation, developed during the years of his detention. Drawing from the simple assertion that, “Being in prison and stripped of your freedom is painful and degrading, and each day is a fight to maintain your sanity” (Senghor 2016, 18), the author introduces us to the dramatic reality of jail as a place that, for him, led to an extraordinary emotional journey of self-redemption.

Recounted in a continuity of flashbacks between his past as a teenager lured into the degrading street culture of Detroit’s drug abuse, and the present, as he serves his sentence, Senghor’s narration dismantles any possible misconception of prison’s negative effects. His transformation offers an insightful starting point from which to consider prison as a potentially positive and corrective experience. Spending the first years of his detention under the sway of competing emotions such as sadness, fear, anger and bitterness, Senghor began to ponder on the consequences of his actions after he received a letter from his son who, as he recounts in the narrative, forced him to reconsider almost every idea he had of who he was. Senghor manages to process hate and turn it into emotional recovery elaborating the sense of hostility that led him to prison - a consequence of his past spent in “an environment where murder was an everyday occurrence” (Senghor TedX “Writing my Wrongs” 02:27-02:32).

As the narrative unfolds, he speaks of the power of writing as a form of self-healing. He believes that it kept him sane and helped him exteriorize his emotions, creatively reflecting on his personal deeds beyond the walls of prison. As he explains in one of the final chapters, when he was moved to Adrian’s correctional facility, he took advantage of classes offered by the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP), based on a series of workshops including creative writing, theatre, visual arts and music. Art programs for inmates have been recently viewed as an opportunity to deal with the difficult environment of prison. Creative writing and drama lead to positive benefits for prisoners who are eventually able to process emotions and raise their self-esteem. As Senghor observes, writing and acting became essential opportunities that inspired him “both as a writer and as an artist” (232).

The therapeutic power of writing blends with his love of literature, which Senghor considers “one of the greatest transformative tools we have at our disposal” (Senghor TedX “Writing my Wrongs” 14:55-14:59) that might inspire us to see ourselves differently. As he also came across black activists’ prison narratives, such as those of George Jackson and Malcolm X (whom he cites as an inspiration and whose prison experience strongly resembles that of Senghor), he considers reading and writing as a perfect combination that serves to alleviate pain and anger thus leading to examination and introspection instead. Black history was in fact what gave him the chance to regain a sense of pride and dignity leading to a spiritual and intellectual growth. Considering his carceral experience as a journey toward acknowledgement, apology and atonement, Senghor also speaks of the mundaneness of incarceration, in part through its brutality, and the power of self-reflection as a strategy for coming to terms with confinement.

Descriptive and emotional, this memoir forces us to closely examine a typical American story, offering a new perspective on mass incarceration, as it openly describes the dehumanizing experience of solitary confinement and the treatment of black inmates in American prisons. In *13th* (2016), the docufilm on incarceration representing the US prison system as the nation’s greatest shame for African-Americans since slavery, Ava DuVernay portrays American prisons as rooted in systemic racism. Likewise, Senghor offers a lesson on race and mass incarceration from the perspective of the black inmate. There are in fact many scenes in which the author dwells on the black convict’s prison experience marked by despair and a general sense of discrimination. Through this chilling portrait of detention, Senghor challenges us to face stereotypes of people of color in prison through an emotional lesson of self-redemption.

In an age of widespread violence, *Writing my Wrongs* helps us to look at life behind bars through a lesson of self-love, “learning to love those who no longer love themselves” (263), as he writes. In an influential talk, Senghor has further claimed that “The Majority of men and women who are incarcerated are redeemable,

¹ With 1.3 million views, his conference “Why your worst deeds don’t define you,” became one of the most popular TED talks of 2014.
https://www.ted.com/talks/shaka_senghor_why_your_worst_deeds_don_t_define_you/discussion?655804



and 90 percent of men and women will at some point return to our community. We have a role to determine how they get back to our community” (Senghor TedX “Why your worst deeds don’t define you” 10:47-11:01). The book shows us that prison often fails to do this. Senghor feels that the first way to get back to society is to process actions and feelings as a reformed being, freed from a past of anger and ready for a future of hope. In this way, his lesson becomes an example of coming to terms with the experience of imprisonment through a self-introspective path, a path that can prepare former inmates successfully to reintegrate into their community. In the opening section he declares: “I have used my talent as a writer to share my story – our story – so that others may learn from it and make better choices with their own lives” (5). The text thus becomes an example of how the ability to analyze ourselves is a fundamental tool to alleviate a sense of guilt that is not easily forgotten.

When we envision prison, what comes to mind is surely a system designated to punishment as opposed to rehabilitation and reform. As Angela Davis bluntly wrote, “Jails and prisons are designed to break human beings, to convert the population into specimens [...]” (2003, 23). However, Senghor’s experience stands way beyond the stereotype of incarceration as a punitive threat, envisioning instead its corrective potential and making us believe in the force of personal redemption. This story forces us to consider the power of the mind to overcome life’s low points, and thus letting the best of ourselves come out. In a narrative that is an enrichment of feelings, such as despair, hostility and finally hope, Senghor speaks of the possibility of avoiding recidivism through self-healing.

Writing my Wrongs is more than a traditional story of confinement - it is a testament to prison narratives, as well as an example of the power of the mind to come to terms with guilt and the burden of incarceration, proving that writing and self-introspection can indeed be forms of healing. This memoir tells of the strength of the human soul to reflect on our actions, seeing the penitentiary as a site from which to start to reconsider the Self. The first-person experience of Senghor allows us to look at prison through the eyes of those who have experienced it and who, with extreme realism, talk about an intimate emotional journey developed through detention. The dramatic rise of mass incarceration in the United States tells us that we need more narratives like this. The presence of activists such as Shaka Senghor, battling against the non-correctional aspects and the brutality of US prisons, is fundamental to the shedding of light on the failures of American penology.

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