

Prisons and Representations of Self: Understanding Mass Incarceration Through Memoir

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Introduction

Crime, prisons, and criminals have long been featured in popular culture. More specifically, television shows and movies often depict images of inmates and the criminal justice system. These representations typically fall flat, however. Television shows and movies that attempt to capture the “real prison experience,” usually lack insight from those who have real, lived experiences behind bars. Therefore, these media representations offer incomplete stereotypes about prisoners rather than authentic stories. Inmates are often portrayed in the media as evil and lacking remorse. The contexts in which they exist, meaning where and how they were raised as well as their life circumstances at the time in which they committed their crime, are rarely taken into account or discussed when describing the prisoner. Neglecting the conditions that led the criminal to commit a crime assumes that they are entirely responsible for their actions and their environment or upbringing had little to no impact on their decision making. In reality, one’s circumstances play a major role in the person they become and choices they later make. The opportunity for those who were formerly or are currently incarcerated to tell their own stories and represent themselves however they choose is an extremely valuable one. One important method of self representation is memoir writing.

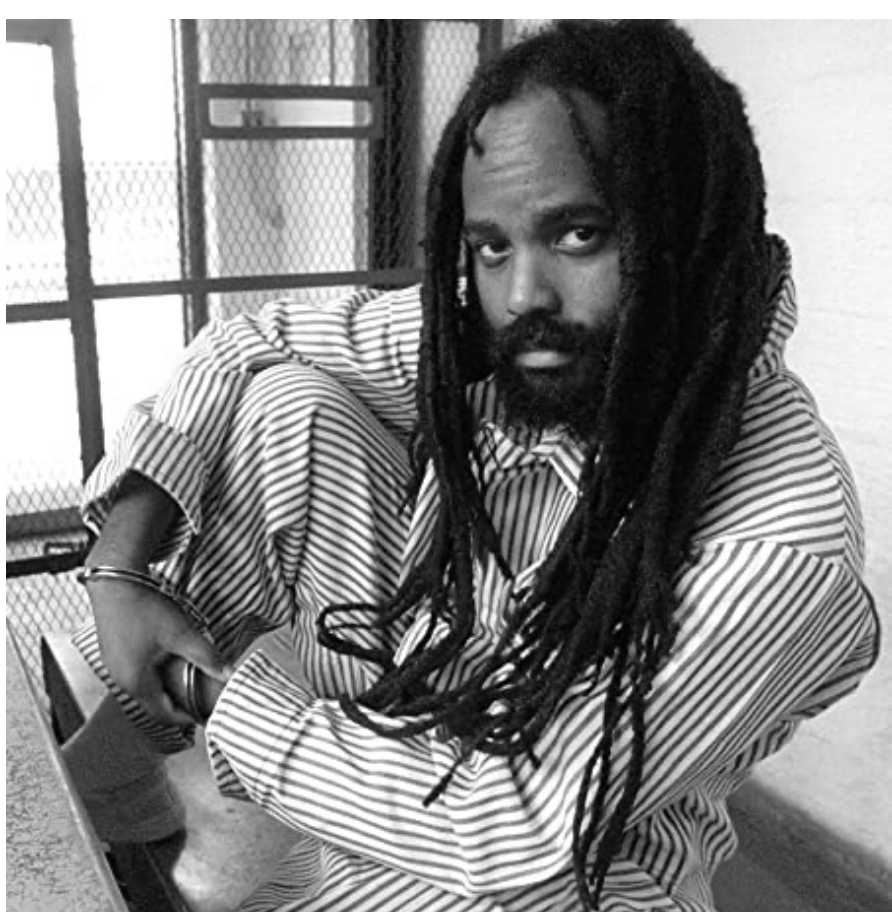
Methods

When thinking about how I wanted to learn about the prison experience, I decided on memoirs as the appropriate medium to study because memoirs offer an intimate look into the intricacies of the author’s life. When deciding which memoirs to include, I wanted to ensure that I selected books written by authors from a wide range of backgrounds and thus varying life experiences. I chose to include memoirs written by authors from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, who have committed a variety of crimes, from non-violent drug offenses to murder to domestic terrorism to stories from authors who were convicted of crimes they did not commit. In total, I selected 12 memoirs to read and analyze.

My procedures involved reading through the entirety of each memoir and writing in line notes of important themes and concepts. I created a spreadsheet with all of the major concepts I found in the memoirs. I wrote out the themes on the left side of the sheet and then included quotes and excerpts from the memoirs that exemplified those themes on the right side of the sheet. Before writing my analysis I went through the memoirs and re-read important sections I had noted in my coding sheet. I then determined several larger, umbrella categories that several of the themes fell into. I chose **dehumanization, transformation, adaptation, and survival, hope, and moving forward** to be the categories I focused on.

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Abstract

This study analyzed the way in which incarcerated, or formerly incarcerated people represent their time in prison through memoir. The recent rise in rates of incarceration in the United States has made understanding how inmates experience the penal system increasingly important. These intimate accounts provide valuable insight into the many injustices and failings of American correctional facilities and the innate complexity of all incarcerated people. In questioning what common themes exist across prison memoirs and what these themes say about incarceration as a social system, this study examined twelve memoirs written by authors from a range of backgrounds. A qualitative coding scheme was used to monitor recurring concepts, focusing on the psychological impacts of the prison environment. This study also examined what the recurrence of particular themes says about the criminal justice system as a whole. Results of the study indicate that prisons do not serve any rehabilitative purpose and instead cause long-lasting harm that takes a great deal of time and effort to reverse.

Results

Individually, prison memoirs offer an intimate look into the inner workings of the criminal justice system. As a genre, however, prison memoirs serve as an important commentary on the many failings of American prisons and act as a form of protest against the injustice that runs rampant within these institutions. When looking at the genre of prison memoir more broadly, a clear set of recurring themes emerge. These recurring themes demonstrate that, despite the variation in the authors’ backgrounds and place of imprisonment, there are many commonalities among the experiences of all incarcerated people.

More specifically, many inmates endure oppression and degradation but also encounter hope and personal growth. When discussing these themes, it is necessary to note the origins of these occurrences. Experiences of dehumanization, suffering, loss of a sense of self, and the transformation into a more violent person typically arise as a direct result of the ways in which prisons are run. Forming healthy relationships, receiving an education, and practicing one’s faith can happen while incarcerated, but can only occur if the inmate has the right resources readily available and has the motivation to make positive changes in his or her life. Therefore, the responsibility of rehabilitation falls onto those incarcerated rather than the prison officials who facilitate their incarceration.

