

***Prison Notebook V2957/88* by Gertrude Fester, 2022**

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Desiree Lewis

South African feminist writer, Gertrude Fester, was among the group of political prisoners who spent over 100 days in solitary confinement on Robben Island in the mid-1980s. In what became known as the Yengeni Trial, the trial of this group of activists, as well as their detention, dramatic accusation for “treason” and incarceration (which for many included days of solitary confinement), was one of the high-profile displays of gross apartheid injustice at the height of the decades-long Afrikaner Nationalist rule in South Africa. Fester’s book reflects on all this while exploring her experiences growing up in apartheid South Africa. It also reflects on her political and professional career as a feminist and teacher in post-apartheid South Africa and beyond. The book is therefore striking in locating the author’s prison experiences within the context of several decades of African feminist intersectional struggle. In many ways, then, Fester can be seen to be contributing to what is known as an “inter-generational conversation” about feminist struggle; her battle is exemplified in her detention at the end of the twentieth century. At the same time, her struggle – as a feminist; a humanitarian committed to social justice; an African focused on the fate of this continent’s postcolonial reconstruction; and a lesbian sharply alert to sexual rights and justice – straddles several trajectories and periods. In this sense, it is reminiscent of the autobiographically inflected work of a feminist like the late Molaria Ogundipe Leslie (1940-2019), whose life, politics and writing reflected on colonial, authoritarian, and changing postcolonial injustices as well as the role of African feminism in a global context.

Prison Notebook V2957/88, authored by a feminist who is now in her seventies, reflects extensively on life in South Africa over several political periods, especially the 1950s (just after the introduction of apartheid rule), the late 1970s and the 1980s (the height of Black Consciousness and popular nation-wide

resistance to apartheid). To some, it may seem ill-placed in a journal issue dealing with new millennial African feminist struggles, for example, the repercussions of #MeToo, social media activism, and the political registers and concerns of African feminists two decades into the twenty-first century. Yet it is an urgent reminder of the necessity for comparative and historical thought about feminist struggles, about how different axes of injustice intersect or diverge at various moments, and the need to avoid rigidly separating contemporary feminist struggles from past ones. It is also, as the rest of this review will hopefully make clear, a vivid exemplification of how such struggles are to be represented and interpreted.

One of the fascinating and distinctive features of this text is its intriguing battle with modes of representing memory, trauma and the convolutions of feminist and queer-centred struggles within the context of brutal anti-racist, anti-ethnicist and anti-authoritarian mobilisation and action. Especially worth noting is that the writer does not focus only on her experiences in prison. In fact, the actual prison experiences are dealt with mainly in chapters 6 and 7, and, reaching beyond 1994 as a moment of post-apartheid democratic triumph, Fester takes us to a context where the biographer, still a determined scholar, teacher and human rights activist, reflects on injustices of the infamous regime. She also foregrounds her years of work in Rwanda where she taught and explored that country's efforts to heal, making the important point that post-apartheid South Africa has much to learn from other African states. The book leaves us with tantalising provocations about how and whether South Africa too – following the nightmares of apartheid – will be able to “heal” in the wake of the genocidal conflict. *Prisoner V2957/88* therefore locates Fester's prison experiences within the context of protracted activism in an African context, and the book is likely to appeal considerably to readers interested in South African and, broadly, African politics.

Prison Notebook V2957/88 contributes to African feminist writing about connected struggles for many other reasons. Fester's story deals with her childhood, upbringing, and early teaching and political life before she became active in women's organisations and the underground politics that culminated in her detention. Her impassioned and deeply personalised view of social and

political experiences in South Africa is striking. The life described around the author's prison experience includes the writer's role as an activist, a prisoner, a lover, daughter and sister, a "coloured" woman student and a teacher and academic navigating a tumultuous South Africa. It is therefore a textured social history, peeling back the layers of personal, familial and political experiences that confront African women. Consequently, the book is reminiscent of other South African autobiographies by black women (including Ellen Kuzwayo, Miriam Tlali, Mamphela Ramphele and Emma Mashinini) as well as life histories by writers and activists from African countries including Nigeria (e.g., Buchi Emecheta's *Head Above Water*, 1986), Kenya (e.g., Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir*, 2006), and Uganda (Miria Matembe's *Miria Matembe: Gender, Politics, and Constitution Making in Uganda*,). By disentangling personal experience, social context and the intricate gendered dynamics embedded in, for example, workerist, student-led or populist anti-racist or anti-authoritarian struggles, these women's life narratives provide herstories from below (Fester does in fact refer to her book as a "womanscript" on page 7). These invaluable complement the scholarship of historians, sociologists and others who often do *not*, in fact, convey quite the depth and nuance that the biographers do in their positioned accounts of injustice and resistance.

Contributing to this robust tradition of life writing, Fester also refuses to compartmentalise her roles and experiences in ways that could only invite passive reading. Instead, she seems to prompt readers to grapple – along with the author – with the human complexities linked to her developing activism. In comparison with other African women's autobiographies that I have read, this one delves especially deeply into the multiple and often conflicting subject positions of the writer: Fester unravels what it means to be queer at a time when this politicised identification could not be named – within the left and within feminism – as a politically tenable one. She therefore anticipates storytelling that seems to be surfacing only in fairly recent and still emerging film (one is reminded of the film *Rafiki*, for example); visual archives (the work of the photographer, Zanele Muholi, is of pivotal interest here); literary and academic studies (Zethu Matabeni's and Sylvia Tamale's academic work on African lesbian struggles, for example). Fester also foregrounds the distinct journeys of women anti-apartheid detainees and political activists, highlighting a thread that continues to be neglected in writing about prison and activist experiences in Africa.

The prison-writing tradition in Africa is dominated by male writers, who are typically remembered as defining prison experiences. If I were asked to recollect an African prison narrative it would be one authored by a man: Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nelson Mandela, Jack Mapanje and, more recently Kiriamiti's *My Life in Prison* (2004). Nawal el Sadwai's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* might be recalled by some readers familiar with autobiographically represented prison experiences in Africa, although this is probably not the most (conventionally) celebrated record of prison experiences by an African author. Of course, this does not mean that women have not had prison experiences to write about; in fact, one could imagine women writers extending the prison writing genre by describing incarceration both in conventional gaols and in benign spaces such as homes, workplaces or communities (something that Fester hints at sometimes). The public erasure of women in prison therefore has less to do with their lived experience than it does with a learned sense of altruism in relation to writing about imprisonment. Fester obliquely hones in on this gendered situation when she describes the separation of the women and men prisoners on Robben Island and the male prisoners' glaring entitlements and socially sanctioned sense of importance. An attentive student or researcher would be able to explore - extensively - how different gendered subject positions prompt and are prompted by gendered socialisation and experiences, and how they foster a masculinised sense of importance, or a feminised sense of humility, modesty and altruism. In one of the incidents illustrating this experience, we learn that Fester never gave in to her brutal tormenters on Robben Island, although many other male (and female) prisoners did.

A further remarkable way in which Fester lays bare a gendered perspective in her book is her use of the "I" personal pronoun as well as her own name and surname to signal that her message concerning a collective is more important than her individual identity or personality; social experiences are what matter rather than those distinctively connected to the individual, who is usually named and affirmed, according to post-enlightenment patriarchal convention, by the use of the upper case. In ways reminiscent of bell hooks, Fester writes the personal pronoun, "i" and her name, "gertrude fester" in lowercase. The politics of this choice is explicit in her account of the growth of the organisation, the United Women's Organisation/Congress (UWO/UWCO), in Chapter 2, where she

provides frequent quotations and reminiscences from women involved in that organisation since 1981.

As significant as the book's response to the erasure of women in African prison writing is its defiance of a logocentric narrative structure and conventions, especially in its tentacle-like (some would use the term, "rambling"?) structure, its multi-genre-forms, its often abrupt shifts in tone from deep mourning and loss to child-like zealous joy, and the writing style. As I delved deeper into *Prison Notebook*, I became increasingly conscious of the book's unexpected shifts in subject matter, its unsettling digression into poetic registers, its avoidance of a linear structure, and for readers who pay close attention, the often illogical progression of time.

As the charge against us was treason, it was incumbent on the state to be able to link each of us... Ashley and Yasmina applied to get married while on trial – and it was then that I appointed myself 'mother of the bride'... This was written for Ashley and Yasmina.

As surely as the sun shall rise

You, Ashley and Yasmina, shall be together

Even though dark thunderous clouds prevail

Storms of oppression pelt perilously against us...

Our love and dedication shall rise above

Their barbarism, their barracks, and their bars (165-7).

Part of the women-centred focus, then, is the avoidance of linear "coherence" (there are sudden forays into poetry or musical lyrics, for example) or a sustained storytelling thread (timelines do not always make logical sense, although the idiosyncratic timelines may have personal or psychological meaning to the author, and events are often not coherently connected). In fact, Fester states in her introduction that her description of the trial in chapter 7 is "punctuated with many blurred and confused sections. Consequently it is not the trial experience but rather what I remember and interpret" (p 9). Generally, the plunge into different artistic forms (poetry and drawing) is especially fascinating in revealing writerly struggles to convey complex gendered and psychic experiences.

The author's exploration of imprisonment in gendered ways extends to foregrounding how the prisoner's experiences of incarceration, humiliation and authoritarian bullying become very distinctive when one takes gendered subjectivities into account. Commentators such as Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) have drawn attention to how arrest, torture, interrogation and imprisonment are linked to sexualised and eroticised encounters and behaviour. But it is significant how the represented perspectives of *women* in prison can make this abundantly clear. Fester was of course looked after by women wardens, but these were situated within a masculinist hierarchy of brutal militaristic authoritarianism. Within this hierarchy, black women prisoners in a white patriarchal system acquired distinctive gendered and sexualised statuses and roles, and they were othered as objects of torture and torment in distinctive ways. As Angela Davis reminds us in her reflections on her North American prison experiences, the trauma of imprisonment and the experiences of both those in prison and those who imprison them is an extreme relationship of eroticised/sexualised racial violence. The prisoner is helpless, alone, and tormented while incarcerated (literally and metaphorically *not* being able to escape the gaze and control of the imprisoner), being locked into a pornographic encounter with the jailer.

Because the book is so compelling in its exploration of socio-political detail, it is likely to prove of significant interest to students and scholars of South African history. Its novel style and structure would also make it a fascinating text for literary scholars and students. Moreover, its frank and direct testimony about different people, places and moments (including the description of the author's approach to her imprisonment on Robben Island, her jailer, and his absolute inability to comprehend "guilt" or "remorse"), stands out as a history of imprisonment. I am struck, for example, by the difference between this book and the very rationalist and depersonalised testimony of a South African woman's prison experience written by another famous South African woman activist, Ruth First in *117 Days*.

It may be tempting to read Fester's book primarily from a scholarly point of view and as a fascinating biographical text. But it is also an extremely poignant window into the courage and tremendous trauma associated with resisting injustices such as apartheid. There are numerous recounted moments that hint

at this trauma, but an especially memorable one for me is described in Chapter 10, titled “Reflections”:

“During my detention in solitary confinement, I no longer menstruated, /My doctor, post prison, examined me and diagnosed early menopause brought on by the trauma. I tried to suppress this memory as well as other very negative ones.” (p 227)

Fester goes on to explain how, when a friend of hers at 49 informed the writer of her pregnancy, Fester enquired from family and friends about when they had been able to bear children, and realised with renewed pain in her late forties how she – in her early thirties – had been denied the decision whether “I wanted to have a child or not” (p 227).

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