

“Straight away I was aware that I was Black”: Conceptualising the racialised pains of maternal imprisonment in England

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Abstract

The gendered pains of imprisonment, and particularly the partial or complete deprivation of mothering, have been increasingly recognised in prisons scholarship. Yet, given the ‘colour-blind’ representation of maternal imprisonment in much of the British literature, the distinctive experiences of Black mothers have received little attention. This article begins to address this problematic oversight by drawing upon narrative interviews with nine Black mothers who have lived experience of imprisonment in England. From the standpoint of Black Feminist Thought, our analysis identifies three intersecting pains of Black maternal imprisonment: Marginalised mothering, subtle discrimination, and self-censorship and appeasement. We argue processes of racialised and gendered oppression combine to shape Black mothers’ experiences within and through the prison walls and thus explicate the ways in which the prison perpetuates the systematic repression and regulation of Black motherhood.

Keywords

Pains of imprisonment, Black motherhood, mothering, Black feminist thought, intersectionality

Introduction

Few sociological studies continue to influence prison scholars as much as Gresham Sykes’s *The Society of Captives* (Sykes, 1958). Among other seminal observations, his identification of five psychological and social pains of imprisonment depicted the continuing hardships of contemporary custodial punishment, as well as the ways in which imprisoned people attempt to adapt to, cope with, and survive these intrinsic difficulties, both individually and collectively. In the decades since

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his monograph was published, so salient have ‘pains’ become to understanding embodied experiences of imprisonment that Sykes’s formulation has been repeatedly revisited and expanded to articulate new and diverse ‘burdens and frustrations’ (Crewe, 2011), extending far beyond the original case study of one maximum-security prison for men (see, for example, the edited collection by Crewe et al., 2022). Indeed, in this journal, Haggerty and Bucerius (2020) argued these ‘proliferating pains’ risk diminishing the concept’s continuing analytical usefulness and potential penological or political impact.

Nevertheless, the particular experiences of Black imprisoned mothers, whose pains are often shaped and exacerbated by those of racialisation and gendered racism, remain rarely acknowledged and poorly understood within scholarship premised upon the homogeneity of women’s imprisonment. Recognising these women’s pains, and the strategies they deploy to navigate reunification with children, is therefore an important ethical endeavour. This undertaking necessitates an intersectional framework originating from critical legal scholarship (Crenshaw, 1989) and Black feminist thought and activism (see Collins, 1990, 2000, 2022). This framework foregrounds the ways in which racism and sexism (among other forms of structural oppression) interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s lives, and thus how Black women’s experiences come to be impacted by White patriarchal institutions of power and control, such as the legal system (Potter, 2015). In the sociological literature, Ahmed (2007: 157) refers to this as the ‘institutionalisation of whiteness’, whereby particular institutional spaces come to be imagined, produced, and given meaning through racist hierarchies orientated around the valuing of ‘some bodies and not others’. Accordingly, this paper also invites critical reflection upon how the prison continues to harm ‘historically oppressed groups in ways that above all else oppress them further’ (Fleury-Steiner and Longazel, 2013: 2).

Before proceeding, some definitional and contextual clarity is necessary. First, we use the term ‘Black’ as an identity signifier for describing the connection between people belonging to the African diaspora who may – but should not be assumed to – share a collective experience. This experience is understood to be shaped by social processes of racialisation which produce constructions, understandings, and meanings of Blackness in different contexts. Blackness is therefore not a ‘fixed and stable identity’, but rather something fluid, negotiable, and complex (Crenshaw et al., 2024: 12). Second, women comprise 4% of the prison population in England and Wales, but as ‘race’ (and its various constructed categories) and ‘gender’ have historically been treated as separate variables in official data sets, it has been difficult to establish how many of these women identify as Black. Recent statistics, however, suggest Black women comprise 7.9% of the women’s prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2025a) whereas of all women in England and Wales, just 4.2% are racialised as Black (GOV.UK, 2023). This is consistent with the long-observed significant overrepresentation of Black people in the remand and sentenced prison populations (Ministry of Justice, 2024). The number of imprisoned mothers – irrespective of racialised identity – is also not recorded centrally¹; but data collected by His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (2022) from 5 of the 12 women’s prisons in England found 52% of imprisoned women were mothers to children under 18.²

Drawing upon the critical social theory of Black feminist thought, the purpose of this article is to centre and problematise the experiences of Black mothers imprisoned in England and advance an empirically informed discussion of the racialised pains of Black maternal imprisonment. This is achieved as follows: we first establish and explore the consequences of the neglect of Black women and mothers in the ‘gendered pains’ literature, before describing the qualitative methodology employed in this research. This comprised narrative interviews with nine Black and Black mixed-race mothers with personal experience of imprisonment, conducted by the first author during 2020. In our ensuing analysis, we identify three interconnected, personal and collective

pains and the women's associated strategies of mitigation and value Blackness as an embodied experience in and of itself, rather than as a descriptive variable. Following Collins (1994; 2022), we also recognise Black mothering as extending beyond one's biological or adopted children ('bloodmothers'), to honour nurturing undertaken by grandmothers, sisters, aunts or cousins ('othermothers') and 'community othermothers' such as women-led grassroots, welfare and activist organisations. This enables a multifaceted and nuanced account to emerge of how Black imprisoned mothers represent, and proactively resist, the 'set of threats or attacks which are directed against the very foundations of [their] being' (Sykes, 1958: 79).

Black motherhood and the pains of imprisonment

In one of the first, and still most influential, ethnographic studies of penal culture and social life, Gresham Sykes (1958) identified a series of deprivations or frustrations imprisoned men experience. These were: the loss of liberty and consequent awareness of societal rejection; the inability to access or choose personally preferred material comforts; involuntary celibacy; increased dependency and reduced autonomy through subjection to a controlling and bureaucratic penal regime; and the loss of personal security, requiring constant vigilance. These 'pains of imprisonment', Sykes argued, profoundly assail the self-image and personal dignity of imprisoned people – but also foster several functional responses as they individually and collectively attempt to manage and mitigate against the harms of their confinement. As Haggerty and Bucerius (2020) noted in this journal, however, the analytical appeal of Sykes's conceptual framework, and his lack of clarity about their intended definitional definitiveness, has led subsequent generations of scholars to problematise their generalisability and consequently, considerably expand their scope. This has included recognition of how racialisation and racism (Phillips, 2012), nationality (Warr, 2016), the physical environment of open conditions (Shammas, 2014) and/or the anticipation of release (Rennie and Crewe, 2023) produce distinct incarcerated-related 'pains'.

The distinctive and additional gender-specific pains endured by imprisoned women have also gained increasing recognition. The limited possibilities for mothering *in* (for perinatal mothers) or *from* prison invariably causes profound distress; and because for a woman 'to become a prisoner is almost by definition to become a bad mother' (Hale, 2005: np), a custodial sentence often demands a re-evaluation of maternal identity and purpose. The trauma of initial and enduring separation, which can extend beyond one's time in prison to the irreversible loss of custody; feelings of guilt and shame; the practical and emotional difficulties of maintaining contact, receiving visits, and/or navigating pregnancy and early motherhood; worries about their children's living situation, supervision, and schooling; and apprehensiveness about being able to reclaim and rebuild (sometimes fractured) relationships, demonstrate their 'fitness', and resume mothering once released, are all strongly evidenced themes (Abbott et al., 2020; Baldwin, 2018; Crewe et al., 2017; Mitchell and Davis, 2019; Nuytiens and Jhaes, 2022; Thomas, 2025; Walker and Worrall, 2000).

In much of this literature, however, the assumption is that the key variables *are* gender and motherhood. As a result, Black women's carceral experiences have largely been subsumed within an all-enveloping binary comparison of men's versus women's experiences but also erased by the monopolistic concerns of Whiteness. To appreciate the intersectional realities of Black women's experiences, the activist-intellectual Angela Davis (1981) helped pioneer the integrative study of race *and* gender (*and* class) with the purpose (crucially) of promoting Black women's oppositional, but long subjugated, knowledges and distinctive standpoints and concerns. In Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) landmark legal essay, she similarly demonstrated how a single-axis analysis of race *or* gender (*or* class) conceals and distorts the intersecting forces of oppression experienced by Black

women. In short, when gender is assumed – not least by Western ‘colorblind’ feminists (Potter, 2015) – to be the primary categorical identity, the resulting one-dimensional accounts of maternal imprisonment disregard and thus conceal the compounding effects of racialisation and racism. As Reynolds (2020: 4) argues, the experiences of Black mothers are ‘both a product of and response to ... racialisation process[es]. Consequently, any analysis of their experiences must be understood in this context’.

Intersectional approaches in criminological scholarship are now well established, especially in the United States (Parmar, 2017; Potter, 2015), and have problematised the connections between race, gender, class, and punishment. American scholars using the theoretical framework of Black feminist thought have discerned parallels between the historical state-sanctioned devaluation and brutalisation of Black women, including forced separation from children during slavery, and contemporary accounts of sexual and physical violence perpetrated against Black women by police and prison officers (Willingham, 2011, 2018), the criminalisation of Black women in mental health crises (Crenshaw et al., 2015), the shackling of women during labour and childbirth (Ocen, 2012), and the state’s disproportionate removal of children from Black mothers (Roberts, 2012). These harms, it is further argued, reflect historically rooted stereotypes of Black women and especially single mothers, as promiscuous, aggressive, assertive, and physically strong – not coincidentally, essentialist masculine attributes – but also as hostile to authority, lazy, welfare-dependent, and incompetent: a ‘bad mother’ from whom children (and society) must be ‘protected’ (Collins, 2022; Ocen, 2012; Roberts, 2012). Such narratives effectively restrict Black women’s maternal autonomy, producing discreet and distinct ‘pains of Black womanhood and motherhood’ (Mitchell and Davis, 2019: 423).

Only a small body of British scholarship, however, has empirically and/or theoretically accentuated Black women’s intersecting identities, experiences of imprisonment (for example, Agozino, 1997, 2018; Aiyegbusi, 2020; Charles, 2023, 2025; Chigwada-Bailey, 2008), and the historical legacies of colonisation particular to Britain. Even then, ‘motherhood’ has largely been framed as one aspect of such experiences rather than a focal starting point of analysis (although see Thomas, 2025). Our aim in what follows is therefore to highlight and contextualise Black mothers’ experiences of imprisonment in England through a Black feminist analytic lens that is attentive to these, previously overlooked, intersections between mothering, gender and racialisation.

Centring the narratives of Black mothers

This article analytically engages with the narratives of nine Black and Black mixed-race mothers. These narratives emerged from in-depth one-to-one interviews with mothers imprisoned in open conditions (Annette³, Donna, Malika and Sharon) and in the community (Chante, Joy, Kayla, Linda and Trish), as part of the first author’s doctoral research. Ethical approval and access were respectively granted by Cardiff University and HM Prison and Probation Service’s National Research Committee. In the open prison, interviews were facilitated by a third sector organisation and took place in a private office familiar to the mothers. In the community, the first author connected with mothers through third sector organisations as well as her own personal networks; these interviews were conducted online. All mothers gave written and verbal consent before engaging in the research and whilst a semi-structured guide was developed, each mother was encouraged to choose where she wanted to begin her narrative, what to include and how to conclude. Interviews were digitally recorded, supplemented by hand-written notes and subsequently transcribed.

The mothers described themselves as British and of Caribbean, West African or African American heritage, except for Joy, who identified as ‘not British’. All were mothers to children

under 18 but several women also expressed care for adult children, grandchildren and children in the community, reflecting the different contexts in which mothering was practised. Except for Chante, who was pregnant when remanded and subsequently acquitted, all had received custodial sentences between one-and-a-half- and nine-years and so had experienced enforced maternal separation.⁴ Their narratives were analysed using a Black feminist approach (Collins, 2022; Patterson et al., 2016). In rejecting the positioning of ‘race’ as merely a demographic variable employed comparatively to measure statistical difference (Phillips et al., 2020), this article privileges how the mothers articulated their custodial experiences whilst racialised as Black and the ways in which Blackness was negotiated and given meaning.

Mothering beneath the White carceral gaze

We utilise Black feminist thought to assist our identification and analysis of the intersectional dynamics of motherhood and racialisation in the recounted carceral-induced pains of nine women. Naming these pains is not to suggest the mothers’ experiences result *from* their racialised and maternal identities. There is nothing inherent within Black mothering that fosters such pains. Rather, our conceptualisation of these three embodied harms renders ‘institutional Whiteness’ (Ahmed, 2007, 2012) and the accompanying ‘White gaze’ (Fanon, 1952, 2021) visible in the prison. We emphasise the processes producing their pains without essentialising the mothers’ experiences; a position informed by the following reflection from Trish:

Because I’ve got a young Black daughter, for me, I’ve got to change the narrative. It’s not because I’m Black. Because that is ... whoever’s saying it’s still my fault. I have no control over the colour of my skin but the way that you think, you have control over that. So, it’s not because I’m Black.

Marginalised mothering

We all know our families ... But like, Social Services and the police look at us differently (Chante)

The mothers’ accounts contained detailed descriptions of what it felt like to navigate life under the intensive carceral gaze and the resulting implications for the construction and interpretation of their maternal identities. These experiences were situated within wider social contexts of marginalisation that shaped how the mothers came to be perceived within the prison and by the systems operating within and around it. Reflecting upon her arrival at reception in a closed prison, Trish recalled:

Straight away I was aware that I was Black. Straight away, and that was on my first night in prison. ... before they take you to the cell, you’re like in a holding area ... and I was the only Black person amongst all the other women ... Then every officer that I came in to contact with ... they were all White ... Then just the treatment. Straight away they assumed ... when I came in there that I was like some gang banger. That I was gonna be here causing them problems.

Imprisonment thus created heightened awareness of what it *now* meant to be racialised as Black when contrasted against ‘the sharp White background’ (Hurston, 1928: np) of the prison; a background which through the ‘racialisation of risk’ worked to miscode Blackness as a problem to be contained and controlled (see Warr, 2023: 1095). As Ahmed (2007: 159) notes, ‘bodies stand out when they are [framed as] out of place ... re-confirm[ing] the whiteness of the space’ and so invite ‘suspicion’ and ‘surveillance’ (Puwar, 2004: 54). This imposed re-definition of Trish’s body not

only made her hypervisible but also stood in contention to her *own* sense of self; producing an embodied and painful experience of misrecognition. Similarly, Kayla, Sharon, Joy, Linda and Malika articulated awareness of how misunderstandings of Black femininity had previously been, or could eventually be, used to justify their intensive supervision and regulation whilst imprisoned.

Trish contrasted this institutional preoccupation with her Blackness with the ignorance of her identity as a mother. She recalled how during the ‘first three months in prison ... [I] didn’t even get asked about being a mum’, reflecting a lack of carceral concern for her maternal identity and wellbeing:

Honestly, it is like your child is connected to you by an invisible umbilical cord and when I was in prison and I didn’t see her for so long, it literally felt like that cord was being pulled. And that’s the only way that I can explain it. The pain in my stomach. And when I’d explain this to the officers they’d be like ‘Oh yeah, yeah’ [and] brush it off.

Alongside this dismissal of the pain of maternal separation, Trish’s mental health, like many of the mothers, declined whilst imprisoned. While she was viewed as disruptive to others, her distinct needs and potential vulnerabilities were overlooked; further illustrating the racialised-gendered juxtaposition between hypervisibility and invisibility. Through centring this pain in her narrative, however, Trish was able to critique this institutional thoughtlessness and define her embodied experience.

Collins (2022: 225) argues that narratives of ‘the super strong Black mother’ permeate social discourses, thereby shaping how Black women are often seen by others, but also how they come to understand themselves, not least when surviving adversity (see also Aniefuna et al., 2020). Chante, for example, described herself as a ‘tough cookie’, representing both her resilience and strength. She recounted times during her pregnancy, and while coping with separation from her eldest child, when she had really ‘needed the support’ and ‘empathy’ of staff members. She had instead felt judged, particularly by officers racialised as Black:

I think sometimes when [they] see [their] own people there and [they] see what they’re there for - it’s like disappointment.

Mothers perceived to confirm, rather than challenge, social constructions associating Black womanhood with deviance may therefore be criticised for reinforcing the harmful trope of the ‘bad Black incarcerated ... mother’ (Williams et al., 2020: 1126). Chante’s use of the word ‘disappointment’ reveals both projected and internalised feelings of inadequacy, not only demonstrating the social judgment she experienced but also the pressure to uphold the ideals of motherhood celebrated and relied upon within Black families and communities (Reynolds, 2005, 2020; Willingham, 2011). Such feelings were echoed by Joy, who from her positionality as a West-African mother, reflected:

I had brought the family down and I had disgraced everyone. It’s harder for someone from my background ... although it was not publicised, internally, it was scornful.

For Chante and Joy, the shame associated with being an imprisoned mother had become entangled with conflicting internal, cultural and institutional expectations surrounding Black femininity and motherhood, resulting in new and multifaceted experiences of marginalisation.

These pains were also evident in the women's accounts of how their identities were delegitimised by other systems operating through and around the prison, including perinatal healthcare, housing, immigration, and social services. As Chante explained:

They ask you like a series of questions on your way in like 'do you have kids?', 'do you have benefits?' and then they don't tell you why, but then they contact them and let them know you're there. So, the [social worker] automatically booked... a visit without asking me... And then when she did her assessments, she told me that she didn't think my mum was a suitable carer and that if this [being in prison] was to continue, that she doesn't want him to stay there.

Chante was acutely aware that if she were to be found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment, her son would be placed in local authority care. She acknowledged how her mother, who had also experienced imprisonment, had felt 'criticised and judged' by social services for not being deemed a suitable carer for her grandson. This reveals how constructions of 'bad' mothering identities and the pains associated with this may also extend to family members ('othermothers') engaged in caregiving, with the resources of family networks scrutinised by the interconnected prison and local authority care systems which Chante felt viewed Black families 'differently'. Understandably then, she recalled feeling extremely frustrated at her family for not taking their initial reports and recommendations 'seriously', given the potential consequences:

I thought my sons going to be at the dumping ground and I couldn't believe that. Like, getting my family to understand... Because my family don't do well with bad news, my mum felt criticised, judged. Honestly, it's very hard if your family weren't taking it seriously and that's what the social worker said, she felt my mum was brushing things off and there's not a lot you can do because you have like an hour or two to sit with these people... there's not a lot you can do from where you're sitting.

As an imprisoned woman, Chante had felt powerless in her ability to encourage her family to 'paint the ceiling White' – her metaphorical representation of compliance with social services' requirements and standards. Such imagery illustrates conformity to such systems, with 'white paint' symbolically depicting the White institutional norms and 'ceiling', encompassing all the expectations associated with 'good mothering'.

Experiences of marginalisation were also shaped by, for example, the Sykesian and keenly felt 'deprivation of goods and services' – here, a lack of appropriate hair and beauty products for Black women:

They didn't have nothing on the canteen for us and my hair was falling out and it was dry... Literally they had, you know that Palmolive stuff? We don't even use that stuff for our hair, do you know what I mean? I know Palmolive for my skin - I don't know 'bout no Palmolive for my hair (Kayla)

Hair is an intrinsic part of Black women's identities, with hair practices being interwoven with political, cultural, classed, gendered and racialised expectations of being (Thompson, 2009). This inaccessibility of suitable products resulted in an additional layer of identity loss for mothers, who were unable to care for their hair in the same way as in the community. Sharon described this pain as being heightened during social visits as she was unable to present as herself to her children and family (see also Goddard, 2018), further demonstrating the interconnectedness between her racialised, gendered, and maternal identities.

The mothers identified additional, distinct pains arising from their experiences of visits in closed conditions. Sharon and Annette, for example, were distressed by the treatment of their children during the pre-visit search, which they attributed to their children's above average height perhaps making them appear particularly 'adult-like'. However, this also reflects Davis and Marsh's (2020) concept of adultification whereby Black children are perceived as particularly mature, leading to harsher treatment in White institutional settings. Trish, meanwhile, recalled her family's discomfort in the visits hall: 'My mum was like [leans forwards and whispers] 'I feel like we're the spot the Black people family' ... So, you know, there was a lot of times, you know, experiencing racism and it being brushed off'. The pains of marginalised mothering were thus not only experienced through the repression of maternal identities, but through witnessing these harms extend to their loved ones.

Open conditions, by contrast, enabled *somewhat* more authentic opportunities for mothering, as the women were able to engage in *some* 'day-to-day' mothering activities that were completely inaccessible in closed conditions:

I take him out, we do things, we cook, I do his hair – I just do the things I would do if I was back home full time. (Sharon)

Nevertheless, reflective of Shammas' (2014) acknowledgment that open conditions produce distinct pains of partial 'freedom', many of the mothers continued to associate open conditions with repression, the denial of their liberty but also – significantly for our arguments – heightened experiences of racialised marginalisation:

The further out you go it's just all, mostly White officers ... And when they go home and push their key, they don't see another Black person until they come back to work. So, they can't really re-e-e-l-a-te [Linda's emphasis] to you. They relate from the media [laughs]. You know what I mean [Aside acknowledging shared understanding with the first author]. (Linda)

Moreover, rural locations in Britain have become 'imagined as White environments' (Parker, 2019: para 1) shaping embodied experiences of the everyday in such settings. That open prisons are typically located in the countryside was thus framed as an additional burden (see also Carroll, 2004):

Kayla: I would never go back; the set-up is lovely like, it's great. You got loads of freedom and everything but the officers, they're not used to Black people up there I'm telling you.

Monica: It's quite in like an isolated location, in the countryside.

Kayla: Fields!

Kayla further recounted how, in open conditions, the assumed conflation between 'urban-ness', 'Blackness', and 'gangster-ness' positioned her as an increased security risk:

... They didn't know how to take me 'cuz it's up North. There was like a group of us from [Southern city] and they're saying we're bringing city gangster antics and we're like 'What do you mean we're bringing gangster antics?', 'Like up North don't have gangsters?' ... So, I found [it] quite racist. (Kayla)

A paradoxical tension exists between the heightened sense of physical and social freedom that defines open conditions and the continuing oppression of racism, which restricts anew the partially freed in such contexts. Yet, Donna described being ‘used to manoeuvring’ within predominately White middle-classed environments and navigating life ‘in the minority’. She attributed this to her ‘mixed-race’ identity and the rural area of her upbringing and survived – in and out of prison – by understanding and accepting her marginality:

I do tend to just sit on the edge and I don't belong in groups, and I think that sometimes that's to do with being mixed-race. I don't actually feel like I belong to a particular group ... You'll have a mixed-race girl; they've got completely different experience to me ... [But] they'd let me know I'm not one of them ... Do you get me? I'm not in the Black. And I'm like 'Oh okay, I thought that was up to me to decide; I didn't know people decided – didn't know you decide that for me' [chuckles].

Campion (2019: 197) argues that this rejection derives from the perception people racialised as mixed-race are ‘unable to fit into discrete, monolithic racial and ethnic categories’. For Donna, this resulted in a distinct form of isolation and disempowerment during imprisonment in that she conceived herself as marginal to Whiteness and, at times, Blackness too. For most of the mothers, therefore, while the increased freedom of open conditions allowed greater access to practices associated with mothering, this often came at the cost of intensified experiences of racialised misrecognition and marginalisation. The limitations of single-axis criminological frameworks are thus again apparent (Crenshaw, 1989). Importantly too, these unique consequences for Black mothering were found to shape access to – and experiences of – mother-child reunification, as we now explore.

Subtle discrimination

It's the subtleties of racism which people don't realise, yeah; they cut a lot deeper than you being openly racist (Trish)

For most mothers, it was the routinised forms of racism they encountered in prison they sought to emphasise, rather than incidents of overt racialised harm. ‘Subtle’ discrimination accordingly describes how structural racism becomes embedded and disguised within the policy and practices of institutional settings (see Igenozza, 2024: 122; Reynolds, 2005: 71). Examples provided by the mothers included slowed ‘progression’ to release, restricted access to ‘purposeful activities’, and intensive and intrusive monitoring, echoing some of the findings of Chigwada-Bailey’s (2008) pioneering research with Black women imprisoned in England. These recounted manifestations of racism, however, were often ‘hard to explain’ (Linda), difficult to ‘prove’ (against institutional definitions) and frequently ‘brushed off’ (Trish) by staff, augmenting their harm. The adjective ‘subtle’ (per Trish) therefore refers not to severity, but rather racist processes of discrimination which were experienced as being concealed within, as well as rationalised by, the carceral logics of the prison.

Many of the mothers argued that their ‘journey’ through the system was prolonged. They had to ‘wait longer’ (Linda) to gain Incentives and Earned Privileges, transfer to open conditions, and achieve Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) or Childcare Resettlement Licence (CRL)⁵:

Sometimes I'll go to them to get [my ROTL form] signed and they'll fob me off. I'll knock the door of the office, they'll see me there, they'll look me right in my face and turn their face away. But make somebody else [mouths the words White] go to the door and they'll say come in! Yeah, and I've stood there and I've seen this with my own eyes. Sometimes it's just the tone that they use ... and it's things like that which makes me don't want to interact with them (Sharon)

While nothing ‘explicitly’ racist was said, then, racism was communicated and felt in the subtleties of what was *not* said. In the silence, the ‘*tone*’ of voice, or the ‘*turn*’ away of the head, warmth was preferentially bestowed upon women racialised as White. It was this subtlety that Sharon found particularly painful and difficult – if not impossible – to challenge.

These discriminatory delays, disguised beneath the everyday and legitimised processes of the system, were found to have significant and prolonged consequences for maternal relationships:

It impacts more on the children because ... when I came here it took a long time to process everything in terms of paperwork, you name it. Even to get out [on ROTL] ... I feel like everything I’ve done has been a fight. (Malika)

Access to ROTL was particularly important to Malika who had decided not to receive prison visits from her children in closed conditions, as a protective mothering strategy to shield them from the psychological harms of the immediate prison environment: ‘I don’t want them to have those thoughts or even think of even entering a prison’. The embodied pain of subtle discrimination was thus produced through the extended wait and lengthy processes to which she was subjected before being able to mother in the emotionally safer and more appropriate environment of the community. Interpreted through a Black feminist analytic lens, therefore, this draws further attention to how racism, misogyny and *motherhood* operate as interlocking systems of power (see also Collins, 2022).

Furthermore, for women racialised as ‘foreign nationals’, like Joy, the political construction of immigration status additionally hindered progression (His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons, 2020). Joy recounted how, as ‘just a foreigner’, she was prevented from accessing open conditions for the entirety of her sentence and only once received a CRL:

All of the ladies that I was meeting, ... they were literally out on every weekend and we were on the same landing. There were mothers who had their babies after me, they were going out on visits ... they were giving them time to go with them, let alone somebody who was a new mother. Even on his second birthday there was nothing to celebrate, nothing. (Joy)

The classification of Joy’s immigration status created a specific burden through the delegitimation and devaluing of her mothering identity in prison which was compounded by the threat of deportation after release. As Bhatia (2023: 19) asserts, ‘the architectural plan of control and captivity is shaped by the racist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist state’ which position non-citizen mothers as particularly threatening, easily dispensable, and less worthy of state care. When discussing racism, Joy invariably situated her experiences in relation to the racialised construction of her nationality, demonstrating how ‘nationalism and racism’ – and here, the accompanying implications for motherhood – are bound ‘very tightly together’ (Gilroy et al., 2018: 181). Joy’s anxieties about her future post-detention thus mirror the specific deprivations of ‘certitude’ and ‘legitimacy’ identified by Warr (2016), through his research with men classified as ‘foreign national prisoners’, and were further augmented by her unequal access to maternal reunification.

Trish’s account additionally illustrates how subtle processes of intersectional-shaped experiences of ROTL:

I was always having to fight for things I was told I was entitled to ... It’s I’ve got to prove I’m not this, I’ve got to prove I won’t do this ... [and then when I did get ROTL] I would get spot checked. But then my friend ... [who lived in a more affluent] she never got spot checked, not once. And it would always upset me ... I’m

just coming home to bloody wash clothes and prepare uniforms for next week and just do my mummy role and there's people that you've never spot checked because on paper they look better than me. (Trish)

By extending into Trish's homelife with, and parenting of, her daughter, the White gaze of penal surveillance was perceived by Trish to have been disproportionately targeted against her as a Black working-class mother, and by implication, increased security risk. Yet, she could not challenge this targeted supervision as ROTL 'spot checks' were rationalised as legitimate. For many of the mothers, imprisonment was therefore not only experienced as a site of 'racialised punishment' (Davis, 2003: 360), due to the disproportionate use, and length, of custody, but also because of the everyday subtleties of discriminatory treatment in prison, which through the convergence of racialised, reproductive and classed oppressions had harmful consequences for Black maternal identities.

Beyond the home, imprisonment also restricted access to community-based motherwork, resulting in the further repression of Black maternal identities. As conceptualised by Collins (1994: 47), motherwork refers to the constellation of mothering activities, paid and unpaid, within and outside of the home, which ensure the 'survival, empowerment, and identity' of Black mothers, their children and communities (Collins, 2022: 225). 'Community othermothering' encompasses the caring and nurturing of children and communities through teaching, healthcare and any other purposeful action that enables Black women to respond affirmatively to, and to some extent, 'cope with and resist oppression' (Collins, 2022: 236). Trish described how she had been prevented from engaging in a youth-mentoring programme, a form of 'community othermothering', as her Offender Manager (OM) did not think she would be 'suitable', despite possessing relevant qualifications and work experience and having been a 'community leader'. Trish's Black mixed-race friend with 'very, very fair skin', however, had seemingly been appraised by the OM as a better 'fit':

I am a young Black girl, who has a young Black daughter, comes from one of the most ... well known deprived areas, who's qualified in these areas ... And my friend, she's never done it before. Never ... She put in and the same person that said no to me, put her on the course.

Colourism refers to racialised processes of prejudice and discrimination which result in people with lighter skin being favoured over people with darker skin due to their perceived proximity to social constructions of Whiteness (Walker, 1983). Trish's understanding of these different outcomes was thus informed by comparing her experience as a 'dark-skinned' woman with her 'light-skinned' friend. Importantly, though, this experience of colourism was felt to cut 'deeper', as the harm of this identity loss was obscured by discretionary practices.

Some mothers, however, did not experience their incarceration as defined by gendered racism:

I know other women have had difficult experiences and they may put it down to race, but I think once you've got a good mannerism with all the officers, they will just treat you ... individually. And I think I've been treated quite well since months into my sentence I've been brought to an open prison, so good behaviour does pay off. As long as you're not rude to them and you just get on and do your sentence ... it's actually not bad. (Annette)

By focusing on individual behaviours, Annette was able to 'get on and do' her sentence within an institution which necessitates compliance with its norms and values. Yet, as discussed previously these norms are informed by the White, middle-classed standards of the prison system (Warr, 2023), which shape definitions of presentability and respectability. As such, it is through this

lens Black women often come to be viewed as ‘aggressive’ (Trish), dangerous and particularly risky (Chigwada-Bailey, 2008). Next, we discuss the pressure felt by many mothers to perform a more passive, ‘whitened’ (Warr, 2023: 1093) and middle-classed version of Black womanhood, to progress through the system and reunite with their children.

Self-censorship and appeasement. ‘In this environment... you’ve gotta be really, really careful’ (Donna)

Many mothers felt a responsibility to comply with institutional demands to mitigate against the possibility of more punitive treatment, which might complicate their access to, or even delay reunification with, their children. As Ahmed (2012: 161) recognises, the ‘experience of racism can involve self-censorship’ as ‘to preserve the possibility of getting on and moving on, we are asked to put racism behind us’, or risk being misheard as ‘angry people’ (see also Eddo-Lodge, 2017). In this research, we identify acts of self-censorship and appeasement, comprising ‘keeping your head down’, ‘sucking it up’, and ‘not showing caring’, which the women deployed both to manage, lessen, and resist the pains of their marginalisation and discrimination and as purposive strategies of ‘Black motherwork’ to benefit their children. Recognised as a key Black feminist concept, therefore, ‘Black motherwork not only recognises the state’s power in disrupting (and sometimes permanently ending) maternal relationships but also the work Black mothers do to resist such threats’ (Thomas, 2025: 4).

Sharon formulated a strategic ‘plan to get to the open wing’, progress to release, and resume mothering of her teenage son, whom she felt had been ‘affected the most’ by her imprisonment. To achieve this as swiftly as possible, she recognised the need to avoid reacting to observed racism or felt racialised harms:

I just wanna get my head down, do the time and get out and sort my family out... In one of the prisons I was in it was very racist. But me as a mature woman I don’t interact with them [staff]. I try my best not to because... I’ve seen [other women speaking out], but I don’t want it for myself because I don’t know what my reaction will be.

These expectations of provocation, recalled by many of the mothers, shaped their experiences and understandings of the avenues available to them for resistance. To challenge racism was often felt to be futile when, as a Black imprisoned woman, ‘you can’t beat the system’ (Kayla). Kayla recollected that ‘if you’re Black and you start shouting and that, they don’t know how to handle it’ and described how, in her experience, officers were subsequently more likely to respond to Black women’s perceived ‘aggressive’ behaviour with physical force and restraint (see also Thomas and Bozkurt, 2023). Many mothers, therefore, opted to self-police themselves and avoid unnecessary interactions with officers, and in some cases, other prison staff and imprisoned women, lest they should give rise to potentially problematic situations.

After giving birth, Joy remembered having to pre-empt, and carefully operate beneath, the repressive gaze of the institution to retain her place in a Mother and Baby Unit (MBU):

I was much more worried that people was watching if I was coping... ‘Cuz it was very hard to get on the Mother and Baby Unit and people’s kids I understand are easily taken if they see that you are not coping... So, that makes me very anxious. Like, really trying and pushing myself.

She felt obliged to contain her opinions and feelings and self-consciously present as a ‘good mother’, so that as both a prisoner and a parent, she would pass unscathed through the intensive

monitoring and regulation of the MBU, and the additional scrutiny applied to Black and Black migrant mothering practices (Reynolds, 2020; Roberts, 2012). It is through this institutionalisation of Whiteness that Black motherhood is simultaneously rendered hypervisible and invisible. Black imprisoned mothers are positioned as requiring correction and control, even while their distinct vulnerabilities and pains are neglected by the institution and repressed by the individual. In her performative coping, Joy masked her anxieties and need for support, while experiencing increased hypervigilance, 'stress', and anxiety under the intense appraisal of MBU staff: 'There was no relief'. Moreover, Joy, while self-evidently separated from her family back home, anticipated that they would have contributed a 'joined' ('othermothering') approach to parenting, providing care for her child and for her, as a new mother, which further exacerbated her distress. Joy thus experienced the wider socio-structural processes of responsibilisation, whereby Black imprisoned mothers must develop strategies of motherwork to protect their maternal identities and continue caring for their children – albeit in the absence of institutional 'help' (Sharon) – whilst also physically and, to some extent, emotionally separated from their own maternal networks (Thomas, 2025).

Trish also directly associated the need to 'keep your head down' with her mothering identity: 'I knew that when I went in there, as a mum ... I've got a real-life outside and so I decided I would keep myself to myself'. However, such self-isolation was often met with suspicion from prison staff and could be misrecognised as indicative of risk (see Crewe, 2011 on the pains of psychological assessment) and then weaponised: as Malika explained: 'If you keep yourself to yourself, oh that's a problem'. Trish identified this painful racialised weight of hypervisibility and targeted surveillance in these terms:

Prison officers turned that around and used it against me and said that I was unsociable, that I think I'm better than everybody else [laughs]. And I'm like, no I don't think I'm better than any of these people ... I'd say to them 'At the end of the day I've had to come in here and prove myself more than anyone just because I'm Black' (Trish)

This evidences how constructions of Black womanhood become inextricably connected to experiences of Black motherhood (Reynolds, 2005), which has distinct implications for how mothering comes to be negotiated in penal contexts. Donna also reflected upon some of the 'inappropriate' racist comments she had heard prison officers say to other women in the open prison. Equally, however, she was reluctant to speak out because of the perceived threat this could pose to her place in open conditions and hence disruption to her 'journey' to release:

I've learnt now you've got to really know when to pick your battles ... because it can backfire and then you've got to think about your journey. It doesn't sit with me sometimes that I'll go, I'm a little bit like shut up ... Somebody said like 'Are you gonna suck that up?' or 'Are you gonna take that?' It's like yeah, I am, 'cuz I've got other things I need to do. And while I'm wasting my energy on that I could've been down the road doing that.

The mothers, therefore, recognised racism as an inevitable and inescapable feature of imprisonment, and to ignore or circumvent this was considered safer than attempting to challenge it. In this sense, 'sucking it up' did not represent passive silence or acceptance, but an agentic, planned and pursued strategy for securing release and the full resumption of the mothering role this would permit. Such accounts therefore caution against the romanticisation of resilience, vividly capturing both the racialised-reproductive labour employed by Black mothers (Thomas, 2025), and the painful burden of appeasement and self-censorship.

The mothers' narratives also revealed an awareness that showing emotions, seeking support and challenging decisions could be interpreted as causing 'trouble' (Trish). Trish, for example, explained how she had to perform a more passive and arguably 'whitened' display of femininity, as a physical embodiment of the perceived, omnipresent requirement, noted earlier, to 'paint the ceiling White':

In there I was conscious of the fact I was Black. So, when I did wanna respond to things I had to learn to speak nonchalantly, 'cuz if I show my passion and speak like I'm talking to you now, very expressive, this [opens arms] is aggression ... So, I had to speak about things like. 'Well you know' [and] as soon as I spoke in monotone and acted as though I didn't care, then it was like 'Oh what was that you said?', 'Well I'll see what I can do!'

Trish appreciated how, when interpreted through the lens of Whiteness, her tone of voice and body language became constructed as 'aggressive' and disruptive to authority. Kayla similarly recollected being called aggressive whilst she had 'tears in [her] eyes'. Puwar (2004: 50) describes this as 'the automatic mutation of a Black body in movement' where an embodied response such as trembling, laughing, or in this case, hand gesturing and speaking emotively, are interpreted by those observing them as something to be feared. The performance of 'not showing caring' thus reflects the need to move and speak in inexpressive and unemotive ways to alleviate the threat of misrecognition, due to gendered racism. It is this institutionalised framing of Black femininity when paired with the demand for passivity and compliance that results in what we conceptualise as the pains of self-censorship and appeasement for Black mothers.

Additionally, in her narrative, Malika described navigating the predominately White-middle-class standards of the open prison as an ongoing 'fight' to be understood:

If you know how to speak their jargon or get along with them [you'll get places] ... An environment like this, it's not my type of forte. It's not people that I would normally associate with.

The socio-linguistic and cultural capital required to navigate this institutionally White and middle-classed space resulted in Malika feeling isolated and unheard. The environment was culturally unfamiliar and this positioned her as peripheral to the linguistic discourses and processes within it. As a result, when Malika was denied access to see her children in the community, she considered staff misinterpreted her distress as disruptive behaviour which challenged their authority. To mitigate against this, she began to mask her emotions:

I feel that I've accomplished a lot more [in relation to ROTL] when I've showed that I just don't care anymore. Do what you want.

By 'not showing caring' and performing a disimpassioned and diminished version of herself, Malika thus observed that staff became more supportive of her applications for ROTL. Similarly, in order to receive enhanced privileges, achieve timely progression, and move towards eventual release, Warr (2019, 2023: 1092) describes how imprisoned Black men often feel compelled to undertake 'forms of narrative labour (externalised identity management, and the consequential internal effects of that)' and 'perform ... an acceptable, diminished, whitened [version of] rehabilitated Blackness'. These arguments cohere with our findings. In concealing their true selves, masking their feelings, and not drawing negative attention to themselves in an attempt to mitigate against 'imposed carceral identit[ies]' (Warr, 2019) and interpretations of their

Blackness, the mothers endured pains of self-censorship and appeasement. They did so as both a protective strategy of motherwork (Thomas, 2025), and strategised route by which to reunite with their children as quickly – and with as little *further* disruption – as possible, and in welcome anticipation of the maternal relationships and responsibilities that awaited them upon release.⁶

Concluding reflections

Generations of prison scholars have adopted and expanded Sykes's conceptual quintet to discern, for different populations, the less obvious harms and deprivations of prison life. This article contributes to this literature through our intersectional interrogation of the mutually reinforcing, racialised and gender-specific pains of Black maternal imprisonment, and arising from empathetic engagement with the recounted experiences of nine 'situated knowers' (Collins, 2022: 25). Specifically, we demonstrated the epistemological necessity of representing Black mothers' narratives through a Black feminist, intersectional framework of analysis, as this fosters recognition of the complex and multifaceted ways in which gendered processes of racialisation and racism, alongside other intersecting inequalities, produce, shape, and intensify distinctive penal harms experienced by mothers racialised as Black. In centring the collective (the mothers' shared experiences) and the personal (individual identities, histories and differing prison contexts) in our discussion, however, we are equally conscious that there exists neither a monolith experience of, nor universal 'truth' about, Black maternal imprisonment for us to represent.

Through identifying the pains of marginalised mothering and subtle discrimination, we theorised some of the ways in which dynamic processes of racialisation and racism were intertwined with, and inseparable from, gendered understandings and experiences of mothering within and through the prison walls. While the ability to access and perform the mothers' desired sense of selves, their mothering identities and their maternal relationships was inevitably curtailed by imprisonment, penal harms are neither distributed evenly nor felt uniformly, and for Black women, their pain was exacerbated by the institutional demands of 'Whiteness', resulting in the diminishment and devaluation of Black motherhood. Such experiences were often framed as difficult (if not impossible) to challenge directly, due to the repressive power and weight of the institution and wider system of White patriarchal control within which it is situated.

Yet, in narrating their engagement in protective forms of motherwork, the women also emphasised how, in the absence of institutional care or protection, they developed purposeful strategies for navigating and managing the racialised and gendered pains of marginalisation and discrimination and progressing successfully towards reunification with children in the community. Although these narratives testified to the mothers' resilience and adaptability, they also exposed the systematic processes of responsibilisation and institutional gendered racism that made such work necessary. In our identification and conceptualisation of the pains of self-censorship and appeasement, we therefore advocate for a more nuanced appreciation of coping strategies – not just as demonstrations of resilience – but also as manifestations of harm. It is our intention, then, that this article not only confirms the importance of Black feminist and intersectional frameworks of analysis within criminological discourses, but also critically interrogates accepted and legitimised processes of imprisonment which perpetuate the systematic oppression of Black women. For as Trish articulated:

The government has painted the Black woman to be an angry Black woman. To be one that can't follow directions, that has a problem with authority and that means that's what you're up against before you've even opened your mouth.

Ethical approval

The study was approved by HM Prison and Probation Service's National Research Committee and the ethics committee at Cardiff University (approval: SREC:3350) on June 11, 2019.

Informed consent

Respondents gave written consent for review and signature before engaging in the study.

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Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Notes

1. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-12-03/HL11076/>
2. When acknowledging mothering in all its forms, including that of adult children, this number would be substantially higher.
3. Pseudonyms are used to retain the mothers' identities whilst protecting their anonymity.
4. In 2023, Black women served an average of 18 months in custody, 6 months longer than the national average for women (Ministry of Justice, 2025b).
5. ROTL allows time-limited release, primarily to support 'resettlement'. CRL enables parents to spend time with their children in the community.
6. For consideration of the racialised-reproductive labour involved in negotiating day-to-day survival and wider resistance in response to these pains, as well as the implications of this for mothering, see Thomas (2025).

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