

Review of Captive genders: Trans embodiment and the prison industrial complex (expanded second edition), Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, Edinburgh, Oakland, & Baltimore: AK Press, 2015

Jess White
Independent Scholar

Captive Genders is a wide-ranging anthology that captures ethnographic studies, personal essays, and calls-to-action. Explicitly pro-prison abolition, the editors include content designed to help the reader become an effective prison critic and abolitionist, including a “Tools/Resources” section with writing and brainstorming exercises. The editors sought contributions from a diverse group of people affected by the prison-industrial complex (PIC); in the introduction, they mention that some of the writers they solicited may not have received calls for submission due to casual censorship and destruction of mail in prison.

The firsthand focus of this anthology grounds discussion of the PIC in that subjective experience. In the introduction, the editors describe how “the prisoner” as research participant and theoretical subject has been constructed as an incarcerated Everyman, the reflection of prison policies that flatten difference and ignore disparities among prisoners. Even in rhetoric about “gender-responsive” and “trans-accepting” carceral frameworks, the prisoner’s “diversity” or difference is framed as the reflection of prison policies that might make the instrument of carceral control less blunt. *Captive Genders* seeks to shift the discussion away from the map of policy and into the territory of consequence.

Most of the contributors to *Captive Genders* are trans, genderqueer, queer, and gender-nonconforming. Ethnographic research entries give significant attention to the testimony of participants, which makes for a uniquely resonant and powerful anthology. All of the contributors discuss the specific cruelty and humiliation that the PIC reserves for trans, genderqueer, queer, and gender-nonconforming people, including sexual abuse and harassment; discretion that permits unequal enforcement; and “compliance” standards based on gendered norms for appearance and behavior.

Contributors also describe the ways in which prison’s gender-segregated structure is used to attack trans people, as for example when a trans woman is sent to a men’s facility where she might be singled out for violence or sexual violence, or, in the case of one participant, forced into effective sexual slavery by prison staff. These violations are described in heart-wrenching terms. *Captive Genders*’ first-person collaborative format renders these injuries not through the drier aggregate framework of social science but as accounts by individual prisoners themselves. However, *Captive Genders*’ abolitionist thesis translates into an anti-“reform” stance. Editors and contributors argue that the PIC cannot be reshaped and must be dismantled. There is no form in which the PIC can exist and not harm everyone under its control; therefore, there is no version of the PIC that

does not harm trans, genderqueer, queer, and gender-nonconforming prisoners, whether due to their marginalized status or simply because they are prisoners.

This collection is most incisive when it indicts solutions as well as problems. Contributors describe straightforward homophobia and transphobia within the prison system, including verbal and physical abuse by staff. Contributors are no less critical of superficial “accommodations” – such as access to Hormone Replacement Therapy on a rationed basis, or “gender-responsive” facilities ostensibly intended to recognize the specific needs of women, trans, queer, genderqueer or gender-nonconforming inmates. The authors point out that “acceptance” on these terms is typically degrading and dehumanizing, e.g. “changes in the matrix” that might allow a trans male prisoner the extreme liberty of purchasing an exorbitantly-priced pair of boxer shorts, even though he must use funds earned at a prison job paying less than a dollar an hour.

Captive Genders contends that these are not simply failed or insufficient relief. They are, themselves, outrageous incursions on prisoner dignity and autonomy, and they serve as a means for the PIC to extend itself. Superficially progressive policies do not represent transformative improvement, even though they may remove some aspects of the explicit or effective criminalization these prisoners face due to their status. They comprise an elaboration and inevitable intensification of the PIC’s system of control. They represent a more effective incarceration of trans, genderqueer, queer, and gender-nonconforming prisoners, not an end to the inherently degrading and dehumanizing condition of imprisonment. Contributors also argue convincingly that “gender-responsive” policies are often used as a rationale for building more prisons. For example, a “gender-responsive” initiative in a state prison system might translate to allocating extra public funds to construct a new maternity unit on the grounds of a women’s correctional facility.

Some contributors and participants also highlight the pitfalls of “responsive” policies in practice, arguing that in prison, recognition often translates to discrimination. Participants in Lori Girschick’s study for her paper, “Out of Compliance: Masculine-Identified People in Women’s Prisons” were asked whether they approved of “segregation,” or protective separation of marginalized prisoners from the general population. They unanimously rejected it. Girschick also describes a “butch wing” in a Virginia women’s prison: administrators separated out gender-nonconforming, butch, and trans masculine prisoners solely for the purpose of stigmatizing them. In other words, prisoners experienced no practical difference between punitive isolation and supportive isolation. Separate recognition can also make prisoners more vulnerable in a system where guards perpetrated transphobic and homophobic abuse with impunity. Consolidating marginalized prisoners gave staff “complete access” and sanctioned abuse. This administrative “solution” could even potentially remove prisoners from some supervisory and surveillance protections in the general facility system, as well as from resources like education and work opportunities.

I was impressed by the extent to which the editors and contributors pursued a parallel analysis of the controlling, dehumanizing social structures of gender assignment and enforcement. *Captive Genders* takes an equally abolitionist stance towards coercive

gendering, and at several points compares frameworks for consolidating and enforcing gender to the mechanisms of control found in the PIC. In the introduction, Stanley compares gender assignment to entry into a “panopticon” – a structure of absolute surveillance designed to condition inmates to constant self-surveillance.

Editors and contributors also discuss the extent to which trans, genderqueer, queer, and gender-nonconforming people are punished and criminalized outside of prison, through such measures as police harassment; “anti-prostitution” and “anti-crime” street-level initiatives that target trans, genderqueer, queer, and gender-nonconforming people; criminalization of homeless people and young runaways who are disproportionately trans, genderqueer, queer, gender-nonconforming; sexist and transphobic school policies that may force minors into the prison pipeline; discrimination in public services like shelters; and economic inequalities. Transphobia and homophobia render trans, genderqueer, queer, and gender-nonconforming people “captive” long before they attract the attention of the criminal justice system.

The red thread of harm and vulnerability woven through this collection of impassioned writing adds moral and rhetorical force to *Captive Genders*’ demand for radical change. At every step, contributors remind the reader to consider policies not as they are justified, but as they are implemented. Although the abolitionist argument may seem extreme to a reader who has never been forced to confront the daily reality of the PIC – similarly, perhaps, to the idea that we must “crush the gender binary” – I could not deny its justice. I admire the willingness of both editors and contributors to insist on politically challenging solutions to the problem of incarceration, and the uncompromising critical scrutiny they direct at two entrenched systems of oppression.