Punishment’s Twin: Theorizing Prisoner Reentry for a Politics of Abolition

Renee Byrd, Ph.D. Dissertation


Punishment's Twin: Theorizing Prisoner Reentry for a Politics of Abolition investigates prisoner reentry as a discursive formation which shores up the naturalization of the contemporary prison as a means of managing populations deemed disposable through the vicissitudes of neoliberal globalization. Using a combination of ethnography and critical discourse analysis, my project argues that prisoner reentry is deployed using a vocabulary, which mimics a critique of mass imprisonment, in order to expand the punishment system and render it more flexible, cost effective and legitimate. In the chapter, titled ‘Where Ministry and Economics Meet’: The Convergence of Neoliberal and Evangelical Rationalities within Prisoner Reentry,” I analyze how neoliberal and evangelical Christian rationalities come together in prisoner reentry discourse. I intervene in the theorization of neoliberal political rationalities by showing how neoliberalism borrows from other ideologies in order to find purchase in a particular locale and that this borrowing is profoundly implicated with regimes of race and gender. Drawing on interviews with formerly imprisoned women in the Twin Cities, Chapter Three grapples with the politics of representation in prison activist scholarship. This chapter highlights two key findings from my interviews: 1) Using Priti Ramamurthy's concept of subjects-in-perplexity, I argue that the representation of the women's prison as an empowering space in Minnesota, as opposed to the disciplinary nature of residential reentry programs, naturalized the prison as the proper place where women prisoners could find help, healing and support; and 2) I found that the barriers attached to felony status often (re)produce the very vulnerability expected in accounts of imprisoned women's lives. Finally, the dissertation argues that in order to genuinely transform the conditions of mass imprisonment's emergence, prisoner reentry must be situated within a politics of abolition. Chapter Four provides a broad critique of 'prisoner reentry' as a discursive formation. Chapter Five theorizes the concept of "abolitionist reentry praxis." "Punishment's Twin..." serves as a call to prison activists to be alert to the potentially dangerous development that mainstream articulations of prisoner reentry represents and imaginative in constructing reentry work for a world without prisons.

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