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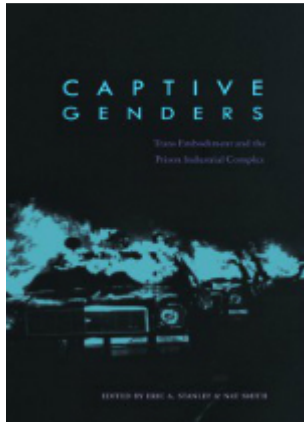
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Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex

by Rachel Wexelbaum

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Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex

Edited by Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith

AK Press

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In American prisons today, the exact number of incarcerated transpeople remains unknown. The Prison Industrial Complex of the United States is the last bastion of unforgiving gender segregation—one's natural genitalia determines their prison destination. For this reason, those who maintain databases containing information about the prisoners housed in different facilities do not bother to record inmate sex or gender. Lack of awareness on the part of prison officials and staff also leads to trans invisibility in the prison system, as most corrections personnel cannot distinguish between transpeople and queer cisgendered people. As the use of aliases by prison inmates is considered a violation of security, prison guards will refuse to call transpeople by their desired names or appropriate forms of address. And, as queer people traditionally receive the worst treatment in prison, a certain percentage of transpeople may keep quiet about their true identities. All of these reasons have contributed to the lack of trans visibility among the prison population, which has led to their continued abuse.

As LGBTQA activists have worked to increase awareness of transpeople in the mainstream population in order to end discrimination against them in housing and employment, incarcerated transpeople often remain overlooked due to their criminal status and race. In *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, editors Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith successfully demonstrate that, even though transpeople were the initiators of the Stonewall uprising, forty-two years later they still face police brutality and incarceration for their existence.

According to Stanley and Smith, “[T]his collection argues that prison abolition must be one of the centers of trans and queer liberation struggles.” In their Introduction, they define the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) of the United States as a system with a distinct economy and political structure that parallels capitalist, corporate structures. It not only includes the prison facilities themselves, but immigration centers, juvenile detention centers, juvenile justice courts, sheriff’s offices, psychiatric institutes, and military prisons, all which make their living from the collection, surveillance, and transfer of human beings. As the PIC sets out to partition people from society, then categorize them once again while in detention, it produces and is the product of racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

Stanley and Smith cite a statistic from a 1999 study of transpeople in California that “at least 65% of transwomen and 29% of transmen [who volunteered to participate in this study report that they] have been incarcerated.” While this is a twelve year old statistic, and easy to say that “times were different back then,” the existence of transpeople—particularly transpeople of color—remains criminalized. As of March 2012, only sixteen states and the District of Columbia identify gender identity as a protected class in their anti-discrimination laws. Transpeople of color often face “minority stress,” as they experience persecution as minorities in their own communities as well as within the majority population. Transwomen are at particular risk for incarceration, as those who could not finish their education due to a history of abuse engage in prostitution or the drug trade for lack of opportunities elsewhere. Those transwomen who choose to fight their oppressors run the risk of arrest and incarceration as well. Instead of “doing time to fit the crime,” however, incarcerated transpeople receive additional punishment in prison for their existence.

The editors of *Captive Genders* make a dynamic, authoritative duo in addressing transgender prison studies. Stanley, a high school dropout who calls himself “an outlaw academic,” is a published PhD candidate at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Mentored by Angela Y. Davis and Donna Haraway, Stanley researches and writes about trans/queer violence, necrocapital, and confinement. He is also involved in the queer direct action collective Gay Shame, and the activist group Critical Resistance, which “seeks to build an international movement to end the Prison Industrial Complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe” (Critical Resistance, 2012). Through Critical Resistance, Stanley met organizer Nat Smith. A book-keeper of color who only takes on radical non-profits and working class or social justice minded individuals as clients, Smith is also involved in the Trans/Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project, whose mission is “to challenge and end the human rights abuses committed against transgender, gender variant/genderqueer, and intersex (TGI) people in California prisons and beyond” (Trans/Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project, 2012). Both Stanley and Smith have personal and activist experience with trans issues, both had made films about queer civil rights issues (*Homotopia*, *Criminal Queers*, *Letters from Home*), and both had direct connections to previously incarcerated transpeople who knew of others.

LGBT academics from all disciplines, as well as human rights activists, would find *Captive Genders* a valuable resource, as it is the first book that specifically addresses transpeople in the Prison Industrial Complex. The twenty six contributors include academics, activists, and currently incarcerated transpeople. As well as scholarly chapters, personal essays, and

interviews, the book includes a “Tools/Resources” section that provides discussion points and strategies for PIC abolition from the Critical Resistance, as well as an address list of activist groups around the United States that combine queer activism with PIC abolition. While academics in other fields have published original research studies in scholarly journals on transgender prisoners and the issues they face during incarceration, *Captive Genders* will call a wider audience to action.

Further Reading:

Critical Resistance. (2012). “Critical Resistance.” Retrieved from <http://crwp.live.radicaldesigns.org/>

Jeness, V. (2010). “Approach to studying transgender prisoners from policy to prisoners to people: A “soft mixed methods”. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39 (517) DOI: 10.1177/0891241610375823

Shah, B.A. (2010). “Lost in the gender maze: Placement of transgender inmates in the prison system. *Journal of Race, Gender and Ethnicity*, 5 (1). Retrieved from https://www.tourolaw.edu/JournalRGE/uploads/Issues/Vol5Issue1/Shah_Final.pdf

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