QUEERING THE CARCERAL

Intersecting Queer/Trans Studies and Critical Prison Studies

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In “Queering Antiprison Work: African American Lesbians in the Juvenile Justice System,” Beth Richie calls for a “queer antiprison politic” that takes into account race, sexuality, and gender. She argues that this is necessary in order to attend to the “heteronormative imperatives” of the US prison system, imperatives that are intersectionally structured by gender, sexuality, and race. Published in 1995, this article has long been one of the rare queer scholarly engagements with the prison. Despite the fact that queer and especially trans and gender-nonconforming people are disproportionately incarcerated and otherwise affected by the US prison system, queer studies has rarely examined the prison, and critical prison studies has rarely engaged with queerness. However, in the past few
years, a new cohort of scholars has taken up Richie’s call and begun to explore the multiple and complex ways that queerness pervades the US prison system and the effects of criminalization and incarceration on queer, gender- and sexual-nonconforming, and LGBT people. The books in this review are an important core of this new scholarship: Regina Kunzel’s *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*; the anthology *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, edited by Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith; and Dean Spade’s *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. These books are joined by the also recently published *Queer (In)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States*, by Joey Mogul, Andrea Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock, and by a handful of journal articles.2

These books come at an important moment in which the field of critical prison studies is beginning to form. This field has theorized the US prison system as a key social and state institution in the United States and a central site of US statecraft, social and racial formation, and political control. Critical prison studies scholars have shown that the prison system is particularly enmeshed in white supremacy, helping produce and ground it.3 A few have also developed theoretical frameworks to understand the prison system as simultaneously racialized, gendered, and sexualized. As Dylan Rodríguez argues, the prison system is constituted by the convergence of “the discursive and material axes of white supremacy, heteronormative patriarchy, and capital.”4 However, the field tends to privilege race and white supremacy as the center of the US prison system and decenter other social categories, such as gender and sexuality, and systems of oppression, such as heteropatriarchy. Furthermore, the field’s discussions of gender and of men and women tend to assume that all incarcerated people fall neatly into the categories of male and female and that all men are in men’s prisons and all women are in women’s prisons. In other words, the field has not focused much attention on the incarceration and criminalization of queer, gender-nonconforming, and trans people. As the scholarship in this review shows, the US prison system is also built on and produces systems of gender normativity and heteropatriarchy. These oppressive systems are deeply enmeshed with the prison system’s racism, in the way it warehouses certain people of color and produces prisoners as both racially other and queer. Critical prison studies must, therefore, centrally engage with questions of gender and sexuality and do so intersectionally with its analyses of race and white supremacy.

As a site of deviance and perversion and as a system that deeply affects queer and trans lives, the prison system should be of interest to queer studies. Nevertheless, queer studies scholarship has yet to closely examine the US prison
system. Queer people are often caught in cycles of violence, poverty, and incarceration that are deeply connected to how they have been represented in popular culture, medicine, and social scientific literature. As Eric A. Stanley explains in the introduction to *Captive Genders*, “The historical illegality of gender trespassing and of queerness have taught many trans/queer folks that their lives will be intimately bound with the legal system” (8).

While gay and lesbian history, queer studies, and trans studies frequently engage with questions of criminalization and show that experiences of criminalization—particularly police harassment and raids—have been incredibly important in identity and community formation throughout the twentieth century, few scholars examine or connect this criminalization to the prison system. In addition, queer of color scholarship has shown that racialization produces people and communities of color as inherently gender and sexually deviant and nonnormative. In other words, queerness, deviance, and racialized criminality are deeply intertwined. For example, in “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” Cathy J. Cohen argues that white supremacy, patriarchy, and class exploitation produce many people of color as nonheteronormative. Racialized criminality is one important way that certain people of color are produced as queer and deviant. Joy James argues that in the United States, criminality, deviancy, and immorality are “embodied in the black because both sexual and social pathology are branded by skin color (as well as by gender and sexual orientation).” Here James ties together the racist productions of blackness as criminal and as sexually and socially pathological. More specifically, incorrigibility and criminality often hinge on the spectacle of the threat of black masculinity and the pathologization of black femininity. In other words, it is not just punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens but also criminals and prisoners who are queered.

**Historicizing the Prison as a Queer Site**

In *Criminal Intimacy*, Regina Kunzel examines the history of same-sex sex and sexuality in US prisons and how sex in prisons was constructed, organized, and made sense of in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Looking at representations of prisons in memoirs, social scientific literature, fiction, films, and activist work, she marks the presence of sex in prisons since the prison’s modern formation in the nineteenth century and traces the continuous but changing anxieties about prison sex through the late twentieth century. She shows that sex in prisons has long been talked about, but that the meaning of that sex, its place in prison societies, and its implications for US society beyond prison walls has changed over time.
Kunzel makes two central claims that help us understand the importance of queer engagements with the prison. First, she argues that sex in prisons has had a profound and central effect on the organization, definition, and structure of prisons since their inception. Throughout the book, Kunzel documents that sex was not only a concern of prison administrators and reformers from the creation of the penitentiary system through the (near) present but that sexuality was constitutive of the modern prison, informing and determining its design, organization, architecture, modes of confining and scrutinizing prisoners, and relations between prisoners. Second, she argues that the materiality of prison sex along with the discursive interpretations of it have played an important role in creating and defining “modern sexuality.” Echoing critical prison studies scholars, Kunzel argues that prisons and relations within them are not marginal or exceptional to US life and social structures. She shows that constructions of sexuality in prisons, particularly regarding same-sex sexuality and desire, were deeply influenced by and also helped construct “modern sexuality.”

Kunzel’s work reveals how the construction of “modern sexuality” and the modern prison system have been deeply intertwined for nearly two centuries. For example, in her second chapter, “Every Prison Has Its Perverts,” Kunzel examines the exchange among sexologists, penologists, and other writers examining prisons. Sexologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped produce a hegemonic understanding of homosexuality as a distinct and essential trait. Kunzel argues that the prison as a single-sex space, in which same-sex sexuality was relatively common, challenged this essentialist and binary framework of distinct sexual types, blurring boundaries, confounding categories, and producing queerness as a primary feature of the prison. To explain this, sexologists created two categories of homosexuality: constitutional and circumstantial. Sexologists’ construction of sexuality deeply influenced penologists’ interpretations of prison sex, and penologists influenced prison administrators, who used this knowledge to alter prison space in various ways, such as segregating “constitutional” homosexuals, who were deemed a contaminating influence on the rest of the prison population.

Prisons have long been linked to deviant sex, sexuality, and gender, and prisons are often viewed as sites of rampant sexual perversion. Kunzel historicizes this perception, showing that this has long been a central part of popular, scholarly, and reformist imaginaries of the prison. Like the other scholars in this review, Kunzel argues that this is not incidental but in fact matters to hegemonic constructions of sexuality, gender, and the US prison system. She shows that preoccupations with sex often took a central place in studies of prisons and argues
that they represented some of the first efforts in the United States to understand and codify deviant sexual types and practices. Yet this work also exposed “the impossibilities and instabilities inherent in that taxonomical project from the outset” (49). In other words, prison sexual practices trouble understandings of both “true” homosexuality and heterosexuality and reveal the fissures in conceptions of “modern sexuality,” which rest on notions of immutable and stable heterosexual and homosexual identities, thereby exposing its constructed nature.

Throughout the book, Kunzel shows that interpretations and practices of prison sexuality were deeply racialized and gendered. In fact, Kunzel’s work shows that the racialization of the prison and prisoners is deeply sexualized. In perhaps her most captivating chapter, “Rape, Race, and the Violent Prison,” Kunzel traces the history of the emergence of the now ubiquitous association between male prisoners and sexual violence, focusing on the centrality of race in this new narrative, which imagined a black sexual aggressor and white victim. Kunzel argues that this narrative was not just important in changing public perceptions of prisons but also contributed to national post–civil rights debates about black citizenship and politicization at a time when black men were incarcerated at increasingly disproportionate rates, in other words, on the eve of the rise of (racialized) mass incarceration. She argues that this narrative also offered new ways to understand sex in prisons. While sexual violence existed in prisons throughout their history, prior to the 1970s it received little attention or was interpreted as the result of sexual deprivation. In the 1970s and 1980s, sexual violence was reinterpreted as an expression of dominance and control, particularly employed by black prisoners to dominate white prisoners and prison officials. Reading this shifting interpretation of sexual violence in prisons in the context of an increased focus on violence in prisons, the shifting racial makeup of prisons, and the post–civil rights era backlash, Kunzel argues that these depictions of black sexual violence reinforced and reinterpreted black criminality, aggression, violence, and pathology. Kunzel’s interpretation of narratives of prison rape adds depth to critical prison studies scholarship on the rise of mass incarceration, revealing an important way that it was also sexualized.

A Queer/Trans Politics of Prison Abolition

While LGBT and queer activism is not the focus of her project, Kunzel’s final chapter examines how the gay liberation movement of the 1970s actively engaged with radical prison activism. In some regards, Dean Spade and the editors and contributors to Captive Genders pick up where Kunzel leaves off. Both of these
books engage with questions of LGBT, queer, and trans activist projects that critique mainstream LGBT politics and work to envision a more radical queer/trans liberation movement that treats prison abolition as one of its central tenets. These books also shift the focus to the broader prison industrial complex, or the vast carceral webs that run throughout US society and surveil and cage queer, trans, and gender- and sexual-nonconforming people. These carceral networks are deeply invested in and help construct gender and sexual normativity.

Written by scholars, activists, currently and formerly incarcerated people, and people who traverse some or all of those categories, Captive Genders offers a critical trans and queer analysis of the prison system. In his introduction to the anthology, Stanley argues that gender normativity and antitrans and antiqueer violence are central logics of the US prison system that marginalize and oppress trans and gender-nonconforming people. Echoing Kunzel’s analysis, Stanley explains that the prison industrial complex helps produce gender normativity and heteronormativity. Captive Genders errs on the side of breadth over depth. Its twenty-five chapters provide glimpses into the prison industrial complex that show how wide-ranging it is and in doing so allows the reader to grasp the immensity of this system. As Captive Genders shows, the prison industrial complex is not only prisons and jails but also immigration “detention facilities,” juvenile facilities, police, laws, courts, low-income housing systems, sex offender registries, and deportation policies. Those looking for a coherent narrative of what the prison industrial complex is and how it affects trans and queer people will not find such a narrative in this anthology. The value of Captive Genders is the way that it provides brief glimpses into aspects of the prison industrial complex and does so through numerous perspectives and voices.

Captive Genders starts and ends with calls for “a queer/trans politics of prison abolition” (237). As S. Lamble explains in “Transforming Carceral Logics: 10 Reasons to Dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex through Queer/Trans Analysis and Action,” this politics works to question, disrupt, and transform “the normalcy of the prison,” not only by helping “identify the role of imprisonment in perpetuating gender, racial, and sexual violence, but also [by providing] tools for developing alternative community responses that better address problems of harm” (237). The anthology’s first section, “Out of Time: From Gay Liberation to Prison Abolition,” challenges readers to reimagine a queer/trans liberation movement that centers queer and trans people of color and low-income people, the people most affected by the prison industrial complex. The authors in this section show us that we do not just have to imagine such a movement, we can
remember it as well as find it in the present day. For example, in “‘Street Power’ and the Claiming of Public Space: San Francisco’s ‘Vanguard’ and Pre-Stonewall Queer Radicalism,” Jennifer Worley discusses the emergence of the organization Vanguard in the 1960s, which shows “what queer activism might look like if it were firmly grounded in the interests, experiences, and agency of the most marginalized groups within our community” (53). Formed and organized by gay and trans youth, most of whom were sex workers living and working on the streets, Vanguard created a radical queer activist model that linked economic exploitation, homophobia, criminalization, police violence, and incarceration. While the anthology’s first section looks more to the past, the final section, “Bustin’ Out: Organizing Resistance and Building Alternatives,” looks to the present to find radical queer/trans politics and practices of prison abolition. The chapters engage with current queer antiprison organizing, centering the activism and knowledge of queer and trans people of color.

The two middle sections examine the workings and materiality of the prison industrial complex, showing how gender and sexual normativity, the criminalization and punishment of gender and sexual deviance, and white supremacy and neoliberalism are central to its logics, structures, and practices. The second section, “Prison beyond the Prison: Criminalization of the Everyday,” examines several pieces of the wide network of the prison industrial complex, including the juvenile system; low-income housing; penal management of HIV/AIDS; sex offender registries; immigration laws, incarcerations, and deportation; and the everyday violences that trans people of color experience. Together, these chapters demonstrate the breadth of the carceral webs of the prison industrial complex, while focusing on technologies of surveillance, and challenge their normalization in US society.

The third section, “Walled Lives: Consolidating Difference, Disappearing Possibilities,” examines the inner workings and logics of prisons and jails. For example, in “Out of Compliance: Masculine-Identified People in Women’s Prisons,” Lori Girshick explains that prisons are highly gendered spaces that “mirror a hyper expression of traditional gender roles” (191). Men’s prisons are viewed as spaces of concentrated masculinity, which naturalizes the violence of guards and administrators against their captives as well as the violence among prisoners, particularly against those who are viewed as weak, feminine, or queer. On the other hand, people housed in female prisons are expected to be passive, dependent, and emotional. Masculinity and gender-nonconformity in people in female prisons are often viewed as “part of” their delinquency. Prisons also enforce gender conformity. For example, Girshick’s masculine-identified informants describe how
the women’s prison in which they are housed provides clothing that is feminine in its cut and also requires its prisoners to wear panties (and considers boxers to be contraband). One of her informants, Cookie, calls this “forced feminization” (196).

All the contributors to Captive Genders discuss the violence of the US prison system and how that violence is simultaneously racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed. The contributors speak to what blake nemec calls “the cultural normalcy of violence in all locations of the prison industrial complex” (220). Stephen Dillon explains that “institutionalized white supremacist and heterosexist violence . . . [is] not exceptional nor spectacular, but rather routine, mundane, and everyday [in the US prison system]. . . . This violence is foundational and constitutive of regimes of punishment in the United States” (178). In “Being an Incarcerated Transperson: Shouldn’t People Care?” Clifton Goring/Candi Raine Sweet describes the multiple layers of violence that trans and queer people experience within penal institutions—or the ways that they are “put through hell”—from physical and sexual assault by staff and other prisoners to administrative neglect and complacency with that violence to experiences of isolation and constant fears of death (186). Goring/Sweet explains that trans, queer, and gender-nonconforming people face a particular kind of violence because of their queerness and gender nonconformity that other (straight and gender-conforming) incarcerated people do not have to face.

Dean Spade’s Normal Life has a similar political and scholarly project as Captive Genders but examines US society more broadly than just the prison industrial complex. Spade works to elaborate a critical trans politics, which “demands more than legal recognition and inclusion, seeking instead to transform current logics of state, civil society, security, and social equality” (19). He argues that this politics must center trans and queer people who are most vulnerable, namely, those who are people of color and low-income, which will lead activists to center political projects such as prison abolition, along with wealth redistribution and organizing against immigration enforcement. Despite this broader focus, I include Spade’s book here because Normal Life is an excellent example of queer/trans scholarship that includes an analysis of the prison industrial complex as central to analyses of heteronormativity and gender normativity as well as queer and trans lives and communities. In this way, his book is instructive to queer and trans studies in demonstrating the importance of taking seriously the prison industrial complex.

Normal Life brings together the various strands of the scholarship that Spade has written over the past decade or so, connecting his critiques of US law
with his critiques of mainstream LGBT activism with his work analyzing and imagining a more radical and critical trans politics while grounding this work in an analysis of power. Drawing from Michel Foucault, critical race studies, women of color feminism, and critical prison studies, Spade argues that current legal interventions espoused by mainstream LGBT activism, such as antidiscrimination and hate crime laws, do not fundamentally challenge racist, heterosexist, and transphobic legal, social, and economic structures and, in fact, misunderstand “how power works and what role law has in the functions of power” (29). While mainstream LGBT activism focuses on individual or intentional discrimination, Spade advocates instead for a biopolitical theory of power that focuses on norms that govern population management. He argues that this would require activists to switch focus from formal legal equality and recognition to the administrative realm as the site that has the greatest effect on the distribution of life chances and insecurity. He argues that these systems that “administer life chances through purportedly ‘neutral’ criteria” actually produce racist, transphobic, heterosexist, xenophobic, and ableist outcomes (30). Criticizing reform work that centers inclusion and recognition because it does not improve people’s daily lives, he argues that we must refocus our activism on the impact of systems and structures instead of their intent.

In particular, Spade examines three areas of law and policy that greatly affect trans and gender-nonconforming people: gender classification on IDs, sex segregation of key institutions (such as jails and prisons), and access to gender-affirming health care. He argues that these systems have a particularly large impact on trans populations because of their frequent investment and management of gender classification systems, which are often “banal and innocuous daily” parts of administrative systems with which trans people struggle. This gender categorization is an important way that the law and US state exert control over trans populations and has a particularly devastating and controlling influence over trans people of color and low-income people who tend not to have the needed resources to navigate these systems.

Spade also contextualizes his critique of mainstream LGBT politics and his call for a radical approach to critical trans politics in neoliberalism, which he ties to mass incarceration. He argues that mainstream LGBT organizations rely on a neoliberal framing of discrimination and violence that undermines strategies of resistance to economic and state violence experienced by queer and trans people who face intersecting forms of oppression. Spade draws on the literature on homonormativity in his critiques of mainstream LGBT activism, although he does not
name it. In doing so, he deepens the critique of homonormativity to include how homonormativity feeds the prison industrial complex through hate crimes legislation and other strategies that negate the existence of structural and intersecting inequalities and reinforce the idea that violence and discrimination are individual, aberrant acts that can be remedied by a supposedly neutral criminal legal system. Spade and a few others have made these connections elsewhere, but this critique of the prison industrial complex has not made it into most discussions of homonormativity.?

Spade and the contributors and editors of *Captive Genders* show that trans and gender-nonconforming people and communities are devastated by the US prison system. As Spade argues, “The criminal punishment system is the most significant perpetrator of violence against trans people” (90). Trans and gender-nonconforming people are particularly affected by police profiling, harassment, and violence as well as mass incarceration. Trans populations are disproportionately poor, unemployed, and homeless because of discrimination, family rejection, and barriers to accessing school, medical treatment, and social services. To survive, many trans and gender-nonconforming people turn to illegal economies, particularly sex work, that produce and reinforce high levels of criminalization. Within prisons and jails, trans and gender-nonconforming people face extreme levels of harassment, physical and sexual assault, medical neglect, and other violences. The US prison system also tends to refuse to recognize trans people’s gender identities, which in almost all cases causes trans people to be housed in penal institutions based on their birth-assigned sex. Trans and gender-nonconforming populations, particularly trans women of color, are main targets of the prison industrial complex.

**Queer Prison Studies?**

In her interview with Jayden Donahue in *Captive Genders*, Miss Major explains,

[Trans girls] already, from the moment we decide to be a transgendered person, are living outside the law. The moment this dick-swinging motherfucker wants to put a dress on and head on down the street to go to the store or something like that, they have broke the law . . . We can be beaten, attacked, and killed, and it’s OK . . . You are already a convict for just how you express yourself and you might start to live a lifestyle of a person that is living outside the law. Because you can’t get a legitimate job, you can’t get a chance in school, you can’t get a chance to function and survive as a
Here, Miss Major—a long-time activist and current Executive Director of the TGI Justice Project, which works on issues faced by trans people in the criminal legal system while centering the work and experiences of low-income trans women of color who are or have been incarcerated—articulates that many queer and trans people become involved in the prison industrial complex by simply living their lives.8 As Mogul, Richie, and Whitlock explain in *Queer (In)Justice*, queer people are constantly criminalized in US society and within the criminal legal system. While this criminalization sticks to all queers, it is amplified by racism, sexism, classism, and other systems of oppression. LGBT, queer, and gender non-conforming people experience violence within all levels of the criminal legal system. As Dillon explains, “When one factors in the ways that heteronormativity structures the visibility of certain bodies (and particular tactics of survival) to the police and technologies of discipline and containment, LGBTIQ poor people and people of color become one of the populations hardest hit by white supremacy and neoliberalism’s funneling of millions of human beings into the US prison regime” (173).

Prisons are queer spaces, both because queer, trans, and gender- and sexual-nonconforming people are criminalized and disproportionately incarcerated and also because prisons themselves are sites of deviance and nonnormativity, as Kunzel, Spade, and the contributors to *Captive Genders* show us. These scholars have taken up Richie’s call for a “queer antiprison politic” and scholarship, but more needs to be done.

Queer and trans studies as fields need to turn their critical lenses onto the US prison system, centering it to reflect its profound impact on queer and trans lives and communities. Kunzel reminds us that at one point, antiprison activism was an important part of the gay and lesbian movement. She quotes a gay liberation activist, speaking at a 1975 rally supporting the San Quentin Six, pledging the gay liberation movement’s support for the struggle of all prisoners “because we understand that the system that has created and maintained prisons as a method of social control is the same system that oppresses us on the outside who have the least vested interest in this social system” (193–94). This activist went on to explain that imprisonment is an “intensified version of what we all have gone through. . . . All of our lives are profoundly affected by the pressure of a legal code and a justice system and social attitudes that push us hard in the direction of conformity, in sexual things especially.” By supporting lesbian and gay prisoners, “we
help our community understand that the same system that puts people in prison also organizes the oppression in our lives” (195).

So too must critical prison studies as it develops into a field both make queerness a central and fundamental analytic lens and also attend to the specificities of the imprisonment of queer, trans, and gender- and sexual-nonconforming people. As Mogul, Richie, and Whitlock explain, “By bringing queer experiences—particularly those of LGBT people of color, immigrants, sex workers, youth, and low-income people—to the center, we gain a more complete understanding of the ways in which race, national origin, class, gender, ability, and immigration status drive construction of crime, safety, and justice.”

As these books stand at the intersection of queer/trans studies and critical prison studies, they fill in large gaps in the scholarship about queerness and about the US prison system. Nevertheless, as more and more people are disappeared into an ever-expanding prison industrial complex and as mainstream LGBT activists call for further investments into the criminal legal system, I think Richie’s call is still as urgent as ever.

Notes


7. Agathangelou et al., “Intimate Investments,” is an important exception to this.

