

[O'Brien on Stanley and Smith, 'Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex'](#)

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Eric A. Stanley, Nat Smith, eds. *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. Second Edition. Oakland: AK Press, 2015. 425 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84935-234-5.

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Learning from Trans Prison Abolitionists

To those who have not spent time in its ranks or among its informed allies, the queer left can be more than a bit perplexing. Knowledgeable partisans of the legacy of Marxist political economy, the varying strains of anarchism, or even contemporary movements for gay rights often know very little about the basic assumptions, key theoretical insights, terminology, or political motivations of the leading edge of radical intellectual and organizing work by queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people.

As many straight people on the left in recent years are coming into awareness about the political importance of gay movements for the first time, it is easy to be mistaken that the fight for gay marriage, for example, is a unifying consensus principle among sexual minority activists. In fact, a vibrant and dynamic movement actively rejects the right to marriage as a legitimate political goal, and has sustained and developed an impressive critique of mainstream gay rights activism. Here we find collections like the *Against Equality* series or the *Beyond Marriage* statement, critiquing the demand for gay marriage as culturally conservative and largely irrelevant to poor queer people, ignoring the rich diversity of family structures today.[1] Though few deny that marriage equality has some material benefits for poor and working-class queer people, these authors argue its benefits go disproportionately to the wealthier members of the gay community, and marriage's prominence in gay organizing of recent years is heavily driven by their interests.

The queer left, like any specific current of radical intellectual and organizing work, is heterogeneous and varied, though common themes emerge. One major current targets the tepid liberalism of mainstream gay activists on their politics of class, state violence, and American empire. *Against Equality*, again, has critiqued the demand for gays to serve openly in the military as bolstering US imperial aggression. Political groups like Gay Shame in San Francisco have targeted the active participation of gay elites in supporting the city's rapid gentrification and displacement of working-class people, queer and straight alike. Organizing in New York City and elsewhere has challenged Israeli "pink-washing," as the Israeli state brands itself as an isolated bastion of gay rights and gay tourism in the Middle East, often enlisting the support of mainstream gay institutions at the expense of Palestinian struggles. Underlying this queer left organizing is an analysis that sees the enlisting of gay elites into destructive neoliberal projects as reflective of a deeper logic. Queer and trans radicals, across a range of issues, link cultural assimilation of gay elites, state practices of social regulation, and the intensified suffering of the poorest queer people of color.

Socialist leftists have reacted to these queer intellectual currents in contradictory and confused ways. To take as an example, consider the International Socialist Organization (ISO), one of the largest US groups from the Trotskyist tradition, best known for its antimilitary organizing on college campuses. The ISO has been making new inroads toward trying to intervene in queer left debates, with peculiar effect. Drawing from the gay rights legacy of the early Bolshevik state, and a Leninist analysis that sees civil rights as a stage in the struggle for socialism, the ISO has long defended gay marriage and gay activism, unlike some other socialist counterparts. But until recently, despite its many vocal gay members, the ISO was totally unknown within this queer left milieu, and their marriage activism had won them few sympathizers in these circles. This last year, the ISO supported a speaking tour for Cece McDonald, an African American trans woman who was incarcerated for defending herself against racist and transphobic violence. Cece is well loved among both queer militants and Black Lives Matter organizers, and her engagements brought together many leading activists and organizations. Simultaneously, the ISO initiated a polemical attack on Darkmatter, a radical South Asian trans performance duo, critiquing them as an “extreme brand of identity politics.”[2] Darkmatter has been one of the many queer left voices critical of mainstream same-sex marriage campaigns, among a range of other controversial issues. The ISO’s critique was far-ranging, but often seemed to boil down to Darkmatter’s dismissal of white people and disinterest in white-inclusive multiracial organizing. Whatever one thinks of Darkmatter, they share good reasons with many sections of antiracist organizing in being skeptical of the legacy of white participation and white domination of social movements speaking in the name of black and brown communities. The ISO is attempting to build out its base and work with working-class queer and trans people of color. They are unable to grasp or appreciate, however, the major political insights emerging from these very circles.

For the uninitiated interested in what the queer left has to offer, there are a few excellent introductions. The second edition of *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* is one such strong and illuminating collection representing the very best of radical queer politics around the specific topic of trans people and prisons. Of all the varied currents of queer radical thinking, none has produced quite such an advanced body of thinking and organizing as have struggles against the impact of mass incarceration on trans and gender nonconforming people. It is here *Captive Genders* offers a pinnacle of queer radical thinking from a nonacademic press. The book’s reissuing in a new edition with several notable new essays offers an opportunity to reconsider its merit.

Gay mainstream politics has largely ignored the experiences of trans people in prison. When they have dabbled in issues of policing and incarceration, mainstream gay groups have largely supported more incarceration in the form of sentencing enhancement in hate crimes laws. Some have suggested changes in prison policies to be better protective of trans prisoners, such as constructing specialized, segregated units. Both solutions have earned the critical rage of queer militants, for both bolster and support *more* incarceration and an expansion of the police and prison state, and rest on the assumption that prisons and police are a viable way to solve social problems. Drawing on a different political thread that has developed over the last two decades known as prison abolitionism, queer and trans radicals have instead argued that a viable politics must start with a rejection of prisons and its many accompanying systems of social control.

Captive Genders brings together a variety of trans voices on the issue of mass incarceration, solidly

committed to a far-left, anti-prison politics. Most of the authors fall into one or more of three major categories, each integral to contemporary queer left politics: aspiring and established academics, trans people with personal experiences of incarceration, and/or staff people at one of the various leading nonprofit community-based organizing projects in the San Francisco Bay Area or New York City. A few, such as Miss Major or Bo Brown, are long-time veterans of queer radical organizing going back to the 1970s. A majority of the authors are trans or gender nonconforming people of color. Overall, the work is strong and worth the read.

The new, expanded second edition includes pieces by recent movement luminaries Cece McDonald and Chelsea Manning. Manning's case is well publicized; she was an army intelligence officer who was accused of leaking classified data on US intelligence operations abroad. The day after the ruling sentencing her to thirty-five years in prison, Chelsea came out as a transsexual woman. Since that ruling, in her column in *The Guardian*, Chelsea has been moving steadily to the left, from a liberal Democrat stance to one increasingly critical of gay mainstream politics, as well as the structural underpinnings of US empire and the prison system. Her essay in *Captive Genders* is one of a few recent pieces reflecting her leftward turn while incarcerated.

For substance in argument and political insight, I would recommend starting with Yasmin Nair's "How to Make Prisons Disappear: Queer Immigrants, the Shackles of Love, and the Invisibility of the Prison Industrial Complex." Though the essay hardly delivers on the promise of its title, it convincingly lays out the mainstream gay immigrant rights' movement dependence on a class-privileged respectability politics that sidelines most poor immigrants with less cultural capital. Gay immigrant advocates argue that gay relationships with US citizens should provide adequate grounds for undocumented immigrants to remain in the country. They have advocated for this by highlighting the most class-privileged and culturally normative cases, and distancing themselves from the more common experiences of working-class immigrants and those with criminal records. Nair takes aim at this approach armed with skilled writing and a strong argument.

S. Lamble's "Transforming Carceral Logics: 10 Reasons to Dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex Using a Queer/Trans Analysis" lays out the key political arguments of the whole collection in an accessible prose appropriate for undergraduates. Lamble, point by point, iterates why queer and trans politics and anti-prison and anti-police activism belong together. Lamble details the over-criminalization of low-income queer and trans people of color, the violent enforcement of gender norms in prisons themselves, the enlisting of LGBTQ elites in supporting prison expansion, and the ultimate core argument of abolitionist politics: investing in social services with dignity and other alternatives will better address violence and crime than mass incarceration.

Probably the most widely circulated and read essay in the collection, "Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got," combines virtually the entirety of radical queer politics into an impressive and impassioned read. Its authors, Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, each played pivotal roles in major radical trans nonprofit organizing projects and are well-respected movement leaders. Though its leaps of insight do not always hold up as consistently as, say, Spade's book *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of Law* (2011), the essay works well as a thorough manifesto. A chart contrasts "official solutions" with "transformative approaches," laying out in straightforward terms the ways trans radicals are trying to chart a particular orientation to queer issues that links them to multiracial working-class politics,

struggles against state violence, and the mobilization of the queer and trans people most affected by poverty and incarceration.

A number of first-person essays in the collection authored by formerly or currently incarcerated trans people reflect on the brutality they have faced at the hands of prison guards and institutional policy, the political insights that have emerged from their experiences, and their various organizing efforts. Kalaniopua Young, Kristopher Shelley “Krystal,” Clifton Goring/Candi Raine Sweet, Paula Rae Witherspoon, and Kim Love all offer short and strong testimonials. As perhaps the most rich prose stylist in the collection, Ralowe Trinitrotoluene Ampu analyzes the racist, anti-sex, and anti-poor institutional treatment they face in San Francisco single-room occupancy hotels.

In keeping with the abolitionist insight that prisons are just one of many spaces that constitute “the prison industrial complex,” Ampu is joined by several other authors analyzing parallel anti-trans carceral logics in various social practices. Erica R. Meiners considers the extensive post-incarceration controls placed on sex offenders in the historical context of the criminalization of gay sex. Tommi Avicolti Mecca, Nadia Guidotto, and Jennifer Worley all consider historical cases of police harassment of gender nonconforming and queer people.

Captive Genders, therefore, takes us well beyond a politics that sees gay and trans rights in terms of individual tolerance or institutional acceptance. Here I attempt to bridge some of the language and frameworks familiar to *Captive Genders* with other related and contrasting political traditions. Overall, I would discern the following insights and themes from queer and trans radical thinking as of particular interest, novelty, and substance for other left intellectuals.

First is the critique of normalization. Queer and trans activist intellectuals have developed a nuanced and extensive critique of systems of institutional power that rest on establishing and enforcing a “norm,” and punishing those that vary significantly. The more academically inclined draw on Michel Foucault and Foucauldian thought, though it intersects easily with the actual experience of trans people facing the day-to-day cruelties of welfare agencies, police harassment, school administrators, or prison officials. State institutions, the queer left has argued and demonstrated, use a whole set of social practices to regulate and police gender expression, sexual identity, and sexuality at the expense of queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people. Queer and trans people’s struggles for dignity, self-determination in gender expression, and basic rights in these institutions, in turn, point us toward a very different way of organizing social power. Rather than tweaking these institutions to be more inclusive of some specific minority identity, critics have argued, we need to radically restructure normalization, disciplinary power, and social regulation as constituent elements of state practice. This reflects an overall critique of the state, while often defending the right to basic social benefits currently managed through welfare institutions. The critique of normalization is spread across a range of social movements and intellectual currents since the uprisings of the late 1960s, though few have taken them quite as far as the queer left.

The second point is materialist intersectionality. “Intersectionality” has become a major buzzword of feminist politics in the last two decades, referring to the simultaneous interrelationship between sexism, racial oppression, and other forms of domination. The concept is correctly credited to black feminists, though often drained of the strong anticapitalist politics put forth by early intersectional thinkers like Claudia Jones, Marvel Cooke, Audre Lorde, or the Combahee River Collective. *Captive*

Genders offers strong examples of intersectionality at its political best, with trans people of color grappling with the many forms of violence, social control, and marginalization they face. Here, unlike many academic accounts, the intersectional analysis of multiple forms of interlocking social power has a strongly materialist character, as these structures directly work on the bodies and lives of people facing sustained deprivation and direct domination. Cognizant of the material (and not just cultural) dimension of social and institutional power, the collection's authors demonstrate how intersectional analysis can advance our understanding of the reality of state violence. Though "materialist intersectionality" is not a phrase queer radicals yet use, it accurately describes the strongest elements of their work.

Queer left activism and writing advances a politics of prison abolitionism. For those unfamiliar with it as a political current, abolitionism itself offers a remarkable take on efforts to challenge state violence, and one widely shared on the queer left. *Captive Genders* embodies this intersection. Critical Resistance and a network of similar organizations have forged "prison abolitionist" politics in the context of fights against prison expansion. It points toward a revolutionary future of "a world without prisons," with concrete implications in organizing today. Responding to the devastating impact of mass incarceration on poor communities of color, abolitionism rests on two arguments, each worth reckoning with: the first is that prisons are a very poor tool for addressing social problems and show little (or no) benefit in the stated purpose of crime reduction or community safety; and the second is that the concerns of reformers for the conditions faced by prisoners have been consistently enlisted to support efforts to expand prison construction and hence incarceration. Combined, these insights lead abolitionists to consistently oppose any and all prison reforms that call on further construction of prison facilities, or more funding for police and incarceration. Instead, they oppose prison construction while also advocating the development of a panoply of alternative, community-based, and transformative or restorative justice approaches that address the harms of violence without recourse to incarceration. Critical Resistance and other abolitionist groups have always included many queer and trans people, and *Captive Genders* represents the leading thinking of trans people rooted in an abolitionist framework.

The fourth major issue is a rejection of respectability politics. All these points combine in a strong rejection by queer left and trans radicals of a politics that tries to secure political gains through asserting gay people are not so different than the straight majority. Gay political elites have fought hard to win over popular opinion through asserting that sexuality is not such a big deal after all; that gays can share in mainstream's culture celebration of marriage and other accepted institutions; that nothing is threatening about gay people and gay culture. We are threatening, queer radicals declare, in that we challenge the oppressive power dynamics, brutal norms, and unspoken violence woven into social life. Some anti-prison activists, much to the frustration of abolitionists, advocate for scaling back the prison system by asserting that the vast majority of incarcerated people are in for nonviolent drug offenses—a claim true for federal prisons, but not the much larger majority in state facilities. Abolitionists instead argue that this sort of framework may work toward the release of people in prison for drug offenses, but can inadvertently naturalize and defend the incarceration of all those convicted of violent crimes. Through their grounding in materialist intersectionality, queer radicals assert it is not merely cultural values that need rectifying, an assumption often underlying political claims to respectability, but the structures of poverty and state violence that work against multiple marginalized communities. Queer radicals argue for a politics of power and dignity, not acceptance and respectability.

Finally, this literature helps us understand the class and racial cleavages within social movements. Queer leftists, in their sustained and extensive critique of gay mainstream politics, have drawn our attention to the considerable ways class interests and race shape the agendas, organizations, and campaigns of all social movements. They offer a lens through which we could critically interrogate the whole range of “new social movements”—such as feminism, environmentalism, anti-nuclear and peace activism, or more recently Black Lives Matter. Each has developed since the decline of socialism and workers’ parties as viable political forces, and are often classified as somehow unrelated to issues of class and class power. Though the authors of *Captive Genders* (in one case) distance themselves from unions, and overall say nothing on the socialist tradition, they are extensively aware how profoundly class and race have shaped contemporary LGBTQ politics. By foregrounding a political agenda rooted in the experiences of poor trans people of color, this collection points us toward a much more thorough and accurate understanding of progressive political movements writ large. Just as the agendas of LGBTQ mainstream organizations are often shaped by the most privileged of their members, all social struggles continue to operate on a terrain profoundly shaped by class power.

Though the focus of this review is on what socialists and leftists unfamiliar with queer radicalism may learn from its traditions, ultimately we would be well suited to build the spaces for mutual learning and exchange. The authors of *Captive Genders* would certainly have benefited from a much more extensive reckoning with the issues of more central concern to some leftists: the dynamics of capitalism, political economy, or the legacy of worker movements. The many references to poverty, capitalism, and neoliberalism throughout the reader reflect very few of the significant insights of recent research in political economy. Similarly, the critical reference to unions in one interview, though well justified, ignores the long and varied history of organized labor’s positive involvement in the rights of sexual and gender minorities, and the ways the informal and marginal labor sectors benefited from the rise of labor-driven social democratic regimes and suffered under their demise. Recent decades have seen major changes in the relationship between capitalist production and working-class family life, for example, that have far-reaching implications for how we understand the movements of queer and trans people. The authors’ disengagement with the core questions of political economy make it difficult to adequately identify how the changing dynamics of capitalism as a system shape our lives as sexual people, as well as systems of incarceration.

But *Captive Gender’s* break from the tradition of Marxism, socialism, and organized labor has gone along with their major theoretical and political advances that are needed throughout the left. Ultimately, we need a reconciliation that takes seriously the novel insights and work of queer and trans radicals, while also linking to other efforts to refound and renew socialist politics. For those seeking such a project, learning from the insights presented in *Captive Genders* is a great place to start.

Notes

[1]. Ryan Conrad, ed., *Against Equality: Queer Revolution, Not Mere Inclusion* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2014); Ryan Conrad, ed., *Against Equality: Don’t Ask to Fight Their Wars* (Lewistown, ME: AE Press, 2011); Ryan Conrad, ed., *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage* (Lewistown, ME: AE Press, 2010); and Beyondmarriage.org, “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families and Relationships,” July 26, 2006, <http://beyondmarriage.org/index.html>.

[2]. Sofia Arias, Keegan O'Brien, and Lindie Lou, "Solidarity Must Be the Guiding Principle," *Socialist Worker* (April 2, 2015), <http://socialistworker.org/2015/04/02/solidarity-is-the-guiding-principle>.

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