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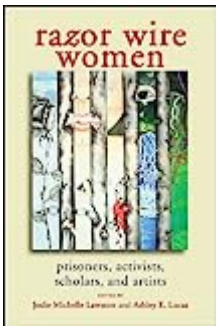

Jodie Michelle Lawston, Ashley E. Lucas, eds. *Razor Wire Women: Prisoners, Activists, Scholars, and Artists.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011. 352 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-3531-2; $26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-3532-9.

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Giving Voice to the Voiceless

Once the cell doors slam behind them, virtually all prisoners exist in a netherworld–invisible to people outside, while inside they are stripped of autonomy and any identity separate from the crimes for which they were convicted. âIn prison you crave space to be someone other than a label of âmurderer,â âbad mother,â âdrug addictâ â¦ âvictim of abuse,ââ writes Kathy Boudin in the foreword to *Razor Wire Women: Prisoners, Activists, Scholars, and Artists* (p. xix).

Boudin knows what sheâs talking about. A former member of the radical leftist group Weather Underground, she served nearly twenty years in prison for driving the getaway car in a 1984 robbery that ultimately left three people dead. Inside, she led projects focused on HIV/AIDS education, literacy, and social justice for incarcerated women. Since her parole in 2003, efforts to ameliorate conditions inside prisons and to educate those outside about the special problems faced by female inmates has become her lifeâs work. And women inmates do face different circumstances than their male counterparts, as *Razor Wire Women* makes eminently clear. Broken maternal and familial bonds, societal notions of how âgoodâ women should behave, and the constant fear of sexual abuse all render prison a particularly painful and terrifying experience for female inmates, who make up approximately 7 percent of those incarcerated in American prisons.

Boudin, like many other female inmates, had to relinquish custody of her child. But she was otherwise much more fortunate than most of her incarcerated âsisters.â As an educated woman from a prominent family, she could pull together resources unavailable to the vast majority of prisoners who are working class and/or women of color. Few people, as *Razor Wire Women* so poignantly illustrates, care anything about them. Whatâs more, to a majority of those outside, âbadâ women, like âbadâ men, seem to deserve societyâs indifference. âThe implicit logic [of the system] is that, if the courts function justly, and these are the people who are consistently being convicted, then perhaps indicators such as race, class, educational level, and the neighborhood where one lives actually reveal something about a personâs propensity

for crime,â writes Ashley Lucas, assistant professor of drama at the University of North Carolina, and one of two editors of the book. âThis misleading and stereotypical mode for depicting incarcerated women discourages us from seeing the actual consequences of the institutional violence of prisonsâ (p. 301).

Public apathy has facilitated and even encouraged this âviolence,â which is both physical and psychological. *Razor Wire Women* presents nearly two dozen essays, articles, poems, and artistic renderings by scholars and inmates who reveal a labyrinthine system with no clear objectives and virtually no incentive to treat inmates with even a modicum of respect, or humanity.

Jane Dorotik was a registered nurse before her conviction in 2000 for murdering her husband. She is incarcerated at one of Californiaâs three womenâs prisons. She describes guards looking the other way while inmates, jammed seven or eight to a single cell, routinely attacked each other; authorities purposely stalling inmates as they were led from one part of the prison to another, ultimately making the women late to appointments or to work assignments; and women âwritten upâ for displaying their bodies. Yet âthe cells are wide open for viewing,â she writes (pp. 111-112).

Johanna Hudnall describes the aftermath of her rape by a staff member at a California womenâs prison and being âplaced in a cage for approximately eight hours while inmates and staff continuously badgered and threatened meâ (p. 165). Another inmate discusses having to cut off ties with family members because her rapist, a prison official, threatened them. And another details a policy at Bedford Hills, New Yorkâs female prison, whereby guards walked the halls wielding batons amid a population comprised in large part of spousal abuse victims.

Immigrant and transsexual women are particularly susceptible to mistreatment. One of *Razor Wire Womenâ*s great strengths lies in its inclusion of inmate groups that ordinarily get overlooked in books and articles about prison abuses. Martha Escobar, a scholar and activist, describes the heart-rending impact of a punitive California policy used to terminate parental rights of immigrant inmates without regard to the best interests of the children. Transsexual women have, arguably, the most difficult situation. Prisons, like the rest of society, are set up according to binary gender categories. Authorities have little incentive to respect inmatesâ gender choices and thus have put transsexual women into cells with men, where they can be sexually assaulted.

And inmates arenât the only ones who suffer. Shirley Haviland Nakagawa details the arrest and imprisonment of her sister Natalie, a recovering drug offender convicted of âfelony assault on a minor,â following an altercation with her teenaged son, who sustained no major injuries. Previous convictions made Natalie a third-time offender under California law, thus netting her a long mandatory prison term. Despite pleas from her children, Natalie received a fourteen-year sentence. She was barred from seeing her son and daughter until they became adults.

Razor Wire Women convincingly paints a picture of prison as a broken institution that benefits no one: not society, not prisoners or their families, not even the bureaucracy itself, which seems to breed thoroughly nasty and loutish employees. What good can come from a system that beats people down so thoroughly that they can never get up? Very little, it is clear. Unless the American public can be convinced to change current policies, however, nothing is likely to change.

Razor Wire Women does reveal a few bright spots in this otherwise unrelentingly bleak picture–programs designed to give prisoners creative âspacesâ and the ability to tell their own stories. Such offerings as the Prison Creative Arts Project, or the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program, organized through universities, have been cut back in recent years, but fortunately have not entirely been eliminated. Art can be a âprovocative way to reconceptualize manufactured representations of incarcerated women,â writes Jodie Michelle Lawston, an assistant professor of womenâs studies at California State University, San Marcos (p. 5). Such programs facilitate cross-class and interracial interactions and encourage dialogue between inmates and individuals who would never otherwise see the inside of a prison, or meet an inmate. For non-specialists it is difficult to read the essays and poems or view the drawings and not feel the artistsâ pain and longing for ânormalcy.â

Take, for example, âDenied,â the collage-style drawing that serves as the bookâs front cover. Penned by former inmate Dawna Brown, it features parts of a womanâs face–mouth, nose, and eyes–and elements of the natural world–blue skies, flowers, birds, a waterfall, scattered about the canvas and overlaid by chains and prison bars. âEvery piece represents my longing for home in the hills of Kentucky, my pain of so many years of separation and loss, yet my determination to never give up,â Brown explains (p. xiv). Joanie Estes-Rodgersâ drawing, âBound,â features a woman on her hands and knees, surrounded by the fixtures of her life–her husband and child, home,

car. Chains bind her to her family, while prison bars loom darkly in the background. Estes-Rodgers created the drawing âwhile serving time because I let life and the things I was bound to â¦ lead me to self-destructâ (p. 102). Both Brown and Estes-Rodgers have been released from prison and are living productive lives.

Sadly, such âhappy endingsâ are few and far between in *Razor Wire Women* and in the criminal justice system as a whole. The bookâs real significance lies in the glimpses it provides of a potentially better world, one in which members of the public, and the political system, actually try to rehabilitate prison inmates, rather than locking them up, throwing away the key, and pretending that they donât exist.

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