theories and methodologies

# Profane Illuminations: The Gendered Problematics of Critical Carceral Visualities

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SINCE 1978, THE POPULATION OF WOMEN PRISONERS IN THE UNITED STATES HAS INCREASED BY FOUR HUNDRED PERCENT. THE NUMBER OF women now living and dying in cells exceeds 200,000 (United States Dept. of Justice). They are without access to proper health care, without the children that many of them will lose permanently: they are without. These are stark details, obscene in their materiality. They are facts, but they are not the picture. The picture is impossible. Indeed, the picture is the problem.

The image-making acts of writers and readers of incarcerated women's experiences are troubled in ways that go beyond the spectacularly racialized and sexualized logics that dictate images of women's incarceration in popular culture and that compel our artistic, theoretical, and activist struggles with these images. To be sure, there already exist invaluable analytics that depart from the question of "good" versus "bad" representations, frameworks that productively highlight the women's prison as a site of language crises and narrative failures, not just as an institution whose invisible realities sustain graphic stereotypes. The nature of the violences that women undergo while incarcerated make full articulation impossible. Still, those concerned with rendering the atrocities of the prison must and do make articulating gestures. We must and do paint pictures of the prison—in art, activism, and scholarship—as well as in the narratives we construct about this art, activism, and scholarship.

My own articulating gestures have recently concentrated on coediting a multidisciplinary volume subtitled *The Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States* (Solinger, Reynolds, Johnson, Raimon, and Tapia). The book will fail its title—substantially—and this is of critical importance. Publishing personal, academic, and artistic testimonies about the tools and intricacies of the prison machine is essential to dismantling it, but it is also essential to theorize what we cannot know. When it comes to representing the experiences of women who have been institutionally erased from the category human, we have to know that failures are certain, and we have

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to theorize why. This was my and my coeditors' challenge: to frame a picture of women's incarceration and the mobilization of activists within and outside prison, and to do so while highlighting the fragility of our frame.

Our anthology could not be a full picture of women's incarceration: it is a researched, multivocal struggle to highlight the gender-specific technologies of dehumanization in the prison system. It stages testimonies about the daily violations of the rights, bodies, and lives of women afflicted by the misguided, ineffectual, discriminatory, and deadly practices of criminal "justice" as they pertain to women. The testimonies and foci of each piece are different, and so are the remedies proposed. Through the voices of more than fifty incarcerated or formerly incarcerated women, of activists, policy makers, scholars, and other experts, it renders a dialogue about women's struggles against incarceration, not—as a whole—the experiences themselves. Each piece treats the violence perpetrated by the notion that rehabilitation can be accomplished through the use of human cages and identifies a specific struggle to end this violence. Real women's real experiences are at stake, but these experiences are not meant to be processed, assimilated, left on the page as understood. They are meant to inform and to incite others to seek more information, toward the goal of change.

As my coeditors and I negotiated the certain failures of a volume meant to show readers the workings of an institution whose violence is characterized by invisibilities and erasures, we worked with contributing authors from different fields who represented ideological positions from reformist to abolitionist. When the book's contents were finalized, a problem emerged that was as messy as the popular, artistic, and scholarly discourses of the prison. The challenge of how to frame the collection was something not to be solved but to be marked because it paralleled the challenge of mapping the terrain of the women's prison itself. What bound the contributors and their work was their shared imperative to speak about how the bodies, histories, and lives of women before, during, and after incarceration make prison a reality for which no general picture can account. Facts about women's incarceration that demand gender- and race-specific frameworks to be understood include the following:

Nearly 70% of women in prison are African American or Latina (Amnesty Intl. USA).
Women's imprisonment in the United States has increased by over 757% since 1977 (Frost, Greene, and Pranis).
Most women involved in the criminal-justice system are poor and lacking in economic support systems.
Most women in prison were accused or convicted of nonviolent offenses or low-level drug offenses.
Most women in prison have little formal education and severely curtailed employment opportunities and skills.
Many incarcerated women have been victims of physical or sexual abuse, often before the age of eighteen.
As a result of childhood trauma, many women in prison experience physical and mental health problems that persist and that have often led to substance addiction.
Most women in prison are mothers, and, before incarceration, mothers are more likely than fathers to be supporting and caring for their children (Women's Prison Assn.).

These realities not only make the violence of the prison gender specific, they also make representations of the prison—in popular, scholarly, and theoretical texts—things to be made and understood in gender-specific as well as prison-specific ways. For example, the suspicions of critical theories of representation with regard to a range of objects—testimony, authenticity, sentimentality—have to be revisited in the light of how the women's prison yields these objects and their implication differently. As someone who has spent many

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years writing critically about visual cultures of maternal sentiment, I was initially resistant to highlighting the experiences of incarcerated mothers in our anthology. The absurdity of my former position is now glaring, but it had been my academic life's work to call attention to the violence of sentimental visions, and I found that images of and discourses by and about incarcerated mothers consistently deployed this sentimentalization. I thought I knew what should and shouldn't be imaged and seen with regard to motherhood in the context of incarceration. I knew nothing, and many things worse than nothing.

The idioms of academic prison studies (ranging from dry and positivistic to cinematic and affecting), as well as the idioms of representation theories (ranging in focus from literary to visual to legal to historical narratives), are ill matched to the stakes of rendering the experiences of incarcerated women. We need another way of imaging, deciphering, and theorizing the brutality of women's prisons and the writing we do about them. What we think we know about dangerous investments in realism and the tenderly violent projects of sentimentality, for example, has to be revisited. The photograph is an illustrative place to start.

The photograph's documentation of social injustice is generally denied to visual discourses of the prison, but this denial appears to be more extreme in the case of women's prisons. Whereas there are a few available photo-documentary texts of prison life that focus on men, what the public "has" of images of women's incarceration is largely fictional and spectacular, most often transmitted by women-in-prison films.[1] What to lament here is not entirely clear, but this gendered discrepancy in photographic representation compels some important theoretical questions: What social-justice work can particular visual technologies perform in the women's prison? What can the photograph do in the context of the women's prison that would conform to its historically objectifying and sentimental uses? What could it do that would interrupt these uses, and how, and toward what end? Few of us, anywhere, have ever seen a photograph that even appears to "capture" an incarcerated woman's embodied location in the prison. What do visual-culture theorists and academic activists productively avoid and what do we dangerously foreclose when we breathe relief at this truth?

My first contact with one of my coeditors, the historian and curator Rickie Solinger, occurred in 2002, when I was organizing Solinger and Kay Obering's photography exhibition *Beggars and Choosers: Motherhood Is Not a Class Privilege in the U.S.* at Ohio State University. Solinger generously entertained my questions and criticisms about the show's sentimentalism, ethnographic dangers, and reification of women's humanity through the category of motherhood, however differently this motherhood looked. The exhibition consisted of more than sixty photographs of women as mothers (not all of them pictured with their children), which meant to tell something surprising and true about the face of motherhood in a racially, economically diverse, and profoundly unequal nation. The photographs were not images of beautiful suffering, but they were unmistakably and unapologetically beautiful.

Brenda Keneally's photograph *Mother with Newborn* was a powerful utterance in Solinger's narrative. In black and white, it shows an African American woman in a hospital gown sitting in a wheelchair that might be a throne, holding her new baby. The image is iconically Madonna and child, yet not, and never, and all this certainty wrenches. Resisting the traditional racial content of the form, mother and baby are black. Resisting the sentimental nature of the content, shackles are on the mother's ankles. Nothing is familiar, and all of it is real. Do we know how to read this picture or images like it? Knowing that we do not is essential because it demands a recognition that we cannot afford critiques of visual

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logics that easily embrace or reject the potential of realism or sentimentalism as radical.

The structural, geographic, and institutional properties of the prison elude visualization in material ways. Because the prison and its populations are largely invisible, because they are made to exist only in the jettisoned reaches of our society's landscapes, the possibilities of knowing them through seeing are foreclosed. The panopticon of the prison is a hidden one, the omniscience of its disciplining and punitive machinery is buried for its own protection. What is to be illuminated is a profanity of political materialism similar to what Walter Benjamin recognized through surrealism (191), but the narrative forms that might break complacency and apathy with regard to the death making of the prison need to be straight and "real" as much as they need to be twisted and inarticulable. Indeed, the twisted and inarticulable are the profane reality of the women's prison, and we cannot afford to simplify any channels through which political materialism and physical nature meet and rupture injustice. If the possibility of these channels can and does exist in the image sphere, as Benjamin suggested, our theories of images and visualities have to be illuminated enough to register it.

## Note

1. See, e.g., Lyon; Jackson and Christian.

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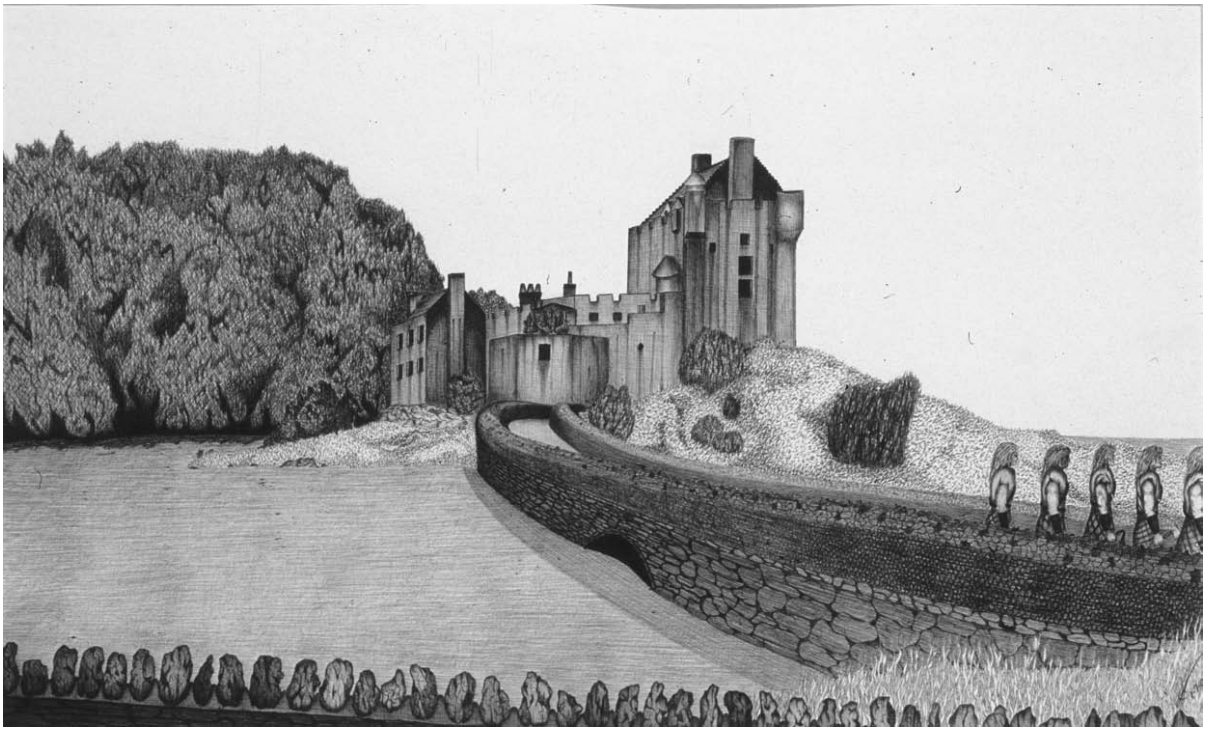
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