

Worth Reading

by Russ Immarigeon*

Biography

Bitter Crop: The Heartache and Triumph of Billie Holiday's Last Year

by Paul Alexander
Alfred A. Knopf
\$32.00, 368 pages (2024)

Billie Holiday, the legendary singer who died of alcohol-, drug-, and associated health-related conditions at the early age of 44, was plagued and haunted by criminal justice pressures and politics. In the late 1940s, Holiday served a one-year federal prison sentence for narcotics possession at the women's prison in Alderson, West Virginia. In the 1950s, a San Francisco jury acquitted her of other drug-related charges, and federal prosecutors in New York later declined to charge her with travelling in and out of the country while failing to register with the U.S. Treasury Department as a convicted drug offender.

Amazingly, as Hunter College journalist-biographer Paul Alexander painfully details, Holiday was also arrested, guarded by police officers, and threatened with prosecution while attached to life-support in her hospital bed, days before her death on July 19, 1959.

Alexander, who has written biographies of the poet Sylvia Plath and the novelist J.D. Salinger, is not the first Holiday biographer, and, as with others who have tackled the task, the foundation of his exploration lies with Holiday's 1957 autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*. Notably, no Holiday biography was written while she was still alive, although many articles, including a few written by Holiday herself, could be found in jazz and popular media archives.

Details about Holiday's life can be difficult to assess, especially since her own self-presentation in print is full of gaps, exaggerations, and misinformation. Still, Holiday's experiences with law enforcement and criminal justice are well known, but details are skeletal. Holiday's use of drugs from marijuana to heroin was common knowledge, not just in the jazz community but also with law enforcement, especially the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Far less is known about her experiences in court rooms, where she was left unrepresented at

times, and in prison, which, temporarily at least, broke her addiction but not her spirit.

Alexander sympathetically surveys other troubled aspects of Holiday's life, from the men who exploited and beat her, through the years of persistent drinking, to her sense of loneliness and the personal misery of never having her own child to care for.

For all her troubles, Holiday was a mix of insecurity and strength. However, her music—her voice—has long survived her, and that will remain, thankfully, the case.

Copies: Alfred A. Knopf books at customer.service@penguinrandomhouse.com.

Memoir

What Kind of Bird Can't Fly: A Memoir of Resilience and Resurrection

by Dorsey Nunn with Lee Romney
Heyday Books
\$24.00, 364 pages (2024)

Nearly 30 years ago, in 1997, Dorsey Nunn, who was only several years out of

abolitionist, who worked and later served as executive director for the California-based advocacy group, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children. He later founded All of Us or None, an advocacy group run by formerly incarcerated persons.

Nunn's personal experiences with incarceration in California were as a juvenile at the Deuel Vocational Institution and as an adult at the notorious San Quentin. At these facilities, unsurprisingly, he experienced pain and trauma. But his memoir is less about the physical and mental health consequences of his incarceration than about his incarceration being the soil for his development and growth as a national leader in the prison abolition movement.

Nunn served a ten-year stint before being released on parole. At first, resisting a return to drug use and sales, he connected with family and friends, but drifted around from one low-level or off-the-books job to another. Soon, though, one of his lawyers, Michael Sattris, called with a job offer, working with Prisoner Legal Services, which maintained its office just outside the San Quentin gates. With this job, Nunn states:

"He brought me into an environment where people supported and nurtured me, . . . a place where I could progress without being afraid of making mistakes, where I didn't have to hide my story."

prison, was invited to an international prison abolition conference in New Zealand. Arriving in Auckland, authorities provided him with paperwork that would allow him into the country. Filling it out, he felt pretty good, except that he reported having been a prisoner in the past five or ten years. The authorities temporarily held him back. Conference organizers were notified of the snag, and they asked one of the conference's speakers, Prime Minister David Lange, a former civil rights attorney, to intervene. He did, and Dorsey entered the country, attended the conference, visited some prisons, and did a bit of sight-seeing, an outcome that likely would not have happened if he was coming through American customs from New Zealand.

Calling himself a "practical abolitionist," Nunn's memoir, *What Kind of Bird Can't Fly*, is a confident telling of his multi-decade experiences as a prisoner and as a prison

Michael gave me something more valuable than a steady paycheck. He brought me into an environment where people supported and nurtured me, a place where I could progress without being afraid of making mistakes, where I didn't have to hide my story. Michael gave me breathing room.

Throughout Nunn's account, he covers conflicts of various sorts—among family members, his siblings, and his substance abuse, which eventually lands him in jail for a short while. But Nunn perseveres. He concludes:

I know in my head that I've accomplished a lot, but I don't always feel it in my heart. Trauma casts a long shadow, and healing is a process. I still wrestle with anger. But I've

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*Russ Immarigeon, book review editor for the *Journal of Community Justice*, can be reached at 563 Route 21, Hillsdale, NY 12529; phone: (518) 325-5925; email: russimmarigeon@fairpoint.net.

learned how to stand down, how to breathe, how to recognize that I'm capable of being fucking wrong. . . . It's clear as day that trauma is at the root of it, and when I retire, I might just take some time to attend to the old harms in a compassionate way.

Copies: Heyday Books, P.O. Box 9145, Berkeley, CA 94709; phone: (510) 549-3564; website: www.heydaybooks.com.

Abolition

How to Abolish Prisons: Lessons from the Movement Against Imprisonment

by Rachel Herzing and Justin Piché
Haymarket Press
\$18.95, 207 pages (2024)

How to Abolish Prisons opens with a brief description of state-wide youth services director Jerry Miller's early-1970s closing of

2015 and 2018) members of 12 American and Canadian abolition groups, including the Vancouver Prisoners' Justice Day Committee, Critical Resistance, and the Chicago Community Bond Fund. The book's six central chapters cover:

1. Prison abolitionist organizing principles;
2. Abolition organizing strategies;
3. Tactics abolitionists use to reach their objectives;
4. How abolitionists structure their shared work;
5. Various challenges that confront abolitionist in their work; and
6. Descriptions of illustrative "abolitionist victories."

In each chapter, Herzing and Piché use many narratives from their conversations with active abolitionists to illustrate what they've learned in their practice. In terms of objectives, for example, the authors highlight differences between reformist and abolitionist efforts and the importance of making the latter efforts practical, including those that result from the harms of social

very conditions required to maintain inequality by consuming resources that could otherwise be used to build people up rather than tearing them down.

Furthermore, they add:

Prisons also rely on other structures to provide them with the steady stream of bodies they contain. The relationships between the systems, institutions, and actors involved in driving people into cages, systems of imprisonment, and the systems established for monitoring and sustaining control of formerly imprisoned people post-release are interrelated and mutually dependent.

Copies: Haymarket Press, P.O. Box 180165, Chicago, IL 60618; phone: (773) 583-7884.

Disability Justice

A People's Guide to Abolition and Disability Justice

by Katie Tastrom
PM Press
\$19.95, 224 pages (2024)

"As long as the carceral state exists," writes independent researcher Katie Tastrom:

It will always use health and disablement as weapons—from who gets access to vaccines, to the ways government neglect leads to "underlying conditions" that make COVID-19 more likely to be deadly, to being forced into congregate settings through laws that criminalize poverty. . . . These policies make the difference between life and death, freedom and captivity, and health and sickness.

In *A People's Guide to Abolition and Disability Justice*, Tastrom, a former attorney and sex worker, provides an accessible and full-range compendium of information leading readers through the basics of carceral abolition and the history and principles of disability justice. She examines the relationship between sex work, disability, and criminalization. She explores short- and long-term care, medical systems, drugs, social work, benefits and charity, and disablement. She considers steps moving things forward.

Tastrom coins the phrase "carceral epidemiology" to refer to the methods and means systems of formal and informal control use communicable diseases—most recently exemplified throughout the COVID-19 crisis—"as part of the informal punishment of incarceration." By this, she means that

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"As long as the carceral state exists, it will always use health and disablement as weapons."

juvenile training schools in Massachusetts, after which formerly incarcerated youth were given community-based housing and support services. The so-called Massachusetts experiment, coauthors Herzing and Piché write, made clear "the limits of reform and the reality that prisons really can be closed, on a fairly rapid timeline, without chaos in the streets or spikes in crime."

The closing of the Massachusetts training schools may be one of the clearest examples of successful "prison abolition."

Throughout this instructive guide, American Rachel Herzing and Canadian Justin Piché share their respective experiences to describe how to organize, plan, and strategize prison abolition. Among other things, they examine the differences between prison reform and penal abolition. They argue that "strong organizations and movements are the surest ways to create the conditions necessary for prison abolition to take hold." They focus on "five core approaches," namely, grassroots organizing against prison and jail expansion, prisoner solidarity, arts and cultural work, police advocacy, and legal advocacy.

In compiling their collective thoughts, Herzing and Piché interviewed (between

inequality and incarceration itself. In terms of building a movement, they discuss:

- Creating safe places to examine abolition;
- Presenting a compelling vision of abolition;
- Connecting relevant struggles for power building;
- Sustaining conversations and individual as well as organizational relationships;
- Targeting strategic engagement;
- Staying grounded with tangible work; and
- Building a practical capacity for prison abolition.

In another chapter, Herzing and Piché examine sustaining organizations, resisting cooptation, and addressing political conflicts or disagreements. They conclude:

While the work of prison abolitionists necessarily begins with demands for the elimination of confinement, this marks a starting point rather than the end of the endeavor. The prison, like other total institutions that deprive people of their freedom, does to some extent operate separately from other social structures. Yet prisons and other carceral settings also contribute to the

“the risk of getting sick is an intentional aspect of punishment”:

The people who died and continue to die from COVID-19 aren't a random sampling of the population. They are disproportionately marginalized and institutionalized. When the government shirks its duty to keep people safe—both in times of emergency and in daily life—those who are already vulnerable pay the biggest price.

Tastrom argues that abolition is vital to “disability justice.” Prisons are alleged to provide safety, but she asserts that “disabled people are safer without prisons, police, and other carceral systems.” Prisons lock disabled people up longer, confront them more frequently with disciplinary actions and consequences, aggravate mental health conditions, and cause decompensation.

“Disability justice,” Tastrom argues, “requires leadership of the most affected, which means working in solidarity with those on the inside. Abolitionists sometimes get into theoretical debates about how much energy we should put (if any) into the current conditions of imprisoned people. But, in my experience, the two are rarely in conflict in practice, and there are usually ways to support people currently imprisoned without strengthening the system.”

In writing this book, Tastrom reports being appreciative of previous works. Accordingly, she identifies 10 principles of disability justice originally articulated by Patty Berne in the reader, *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement Is Our People; A Disability Justice Primer*. These ten principles include:

1. Intersectionality (the ways identities intersect and overlap);
2. Leadership of the most affected (those with lived experience);
3. Anti-capitalism (which stresses the ability to produce over all else);
4. Cross-movement organizing (working with other marginalized communities to build collective power);
5. Wholeness (treating disabled people as actual people);
6. Sustainability (avoiding burnout);
7. Cross-disability solidarity (the liberation of all disabled people, not just some);
8. Interdependence (caring for each other);
9. Collective access (everyone being at the table); and
10. Collective liberation (systems themselves are the problem).

Copies: PM Press, P.O. Box 23912, Oakland, CA 94623; website: www.pmpress.org.

Promises

Abolition: Politics, Practices, Promises, Volume 1

by Angela Y. Davis
Haymarket Press
\$19.95, 296 pages (2024)

Angela Davis, a retired University of California, Santa Cruz, philosophy professor, has been exploring “prison abolition” issues for nearly 50 years. In this volume, the first of two scheduled collections of articles she has written over this period of time, she compiles writings, some co-authored, that remind us or reveal to us her evolution distinguishing prison reform and prison

These writings may assist current [prison and police abolition] movement participants and scholar-activists to appreciate the fact that, even though there may be no straight-forward correlation between the changes we try to generate through radical movement practices and the actual consequences of those practices, these consequences can themselves potentially make a vast difference and may reveal changes that we might otherwise never have thought we needed. Every essay in this collection represents thoroughly collaborative insights and practices . . . for the purpose of apprehending the historical, intellectual, and practical progressions (and regressions) they enabled.

The volume's section on incarcerated women reprints three articles Davis, along

“The overutilization of imprisonment to address a range of social problems—which would more appropriately be dealt with by nonpunitive institutions—constitutes a major contemporary crisis.”

abolition issues. She also digs deeper than most advocates into broader aspects of abolitionist perspectives, including the relationship between the prison-industrial complex and the abolition of prisons and police.

Davis, a prolific writer, separates reforms, which can legitimize incarceration, from abolitionist efforts, which intend to break down carceral systems. She strongly believes in the utility of community-based options, such as helping persons released from confinement to find employment, health care, and housing. But she also stresses a broader vision—namely, the abolition of economic, racial, and other forms of capitalism.

In this volume, a dozen articles, written and published between 1996 and 2007, are captured within five sections covering:

1. The relationships between capitalism, democracy, and prisons;
2. Genealogical connections between slavery and the American prison system;
3. Emerging abolitionist frameworks;
4. Identification of the prison-industrial complex; and
5. Incarcerated women.

In introductory comments to *Abolition: Politics, Practices, Promises*, Davis expresses hope that:

with Kum-Kum Bhavnani, now at the University of California Santa Barbara, wrote between 1996 and 2000 on the imprisonment of women in the United States, the Netherlands, and Cuba. Davis and Bhavnani wrote:

We are interested in the ways in which [currently] and formerly incarcerated women can help explain the increasing reliance on public forms of punishment for women who historically have been punished largely within private spheres. We are also interested in the extent to which counter discourses forged by antiracist social movements inform imprisoned women's ability to explicitly theorize the role of racism in imprisonment practices. As women researchers of color—one South Asian and the other African-American—who have been involved in antiracist movements in Britain and the United States for many years, our own perspectives are informed by both our experiences as activists in different national contexts and by our commitment to link our academic research to strategies for radical social

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change. Our study thus begins with the assumption that the overutilization of imprisonment to address a range of social problems—which would more appropriately be dealt with by nonpunitive institutions—constitutes a major contemporary crisis. This means our work is linked to efforts to transform public policy and to activist strategies that emphasize the importance of including imprisoned women

According to Kim and her colleagues, these possibilities could build “a scaffolding” that unites the practices of social work and abolition for the purpose of addressing “the harms of social work while strengthening the liberatory visions and praxis of abolitionism.” In terms of evident paradoxes (conflicts and tensions between abolition and social work), articles explore “the contradictions and tensions embedded in social work’s complicity in carceral systems” and examine “the deep ties to racial capitalism and neo-liberalism that have long captured

- Social work and family policing;
- Abolitionist possibilities within professionalized social change work;
- Liberatory harm reduction and transformative justice; and
- Abolitionism and public and private sector mental health services (notably involuntary hospitalization).

“As scholars, organizers, and editors of this book,” Kim and her associates conclude:

We are less concerned with the formulation of an *abolitionist social work*, or the drawing of boundaries of what does or does not fit into a more rigid formulation. We are instead focused on the examination of whether and how we can bring abolitionist principles and politics into social work and the possibilities, paradoxes, and praxis that come from this exploration [emphasis in original].

Copies: Haymarket Press, P.O. Box 180165, Chicago, IL 60618; phone: (773) 583-7884.

Abolition Arguments

Pain in Vain: Penal Abolition and the Legacy of Louk Hulsman

edited by Justin Piché
Red Quill Books
\$39.95, 290 pages (2023)

Early prison abolition arguments and proposals were published in the 1970s by the Norwegian Thomas Mathesen (1974), the Americans Fay Honey Knopp and her colleagues, and the Canadian Claire Culhane (1979). In the 1980s, abolitionist works appeared from another Canadian, Ruth Morris, as well as Dutch abolitionists Herman Bianchi and Louk Hulsman.

Bianchi’s translated treatise, *Justice as Sanctuary: Toward a New System of Crime Control*, finally appeared in 1994. Until now, however, there has been no English translation of Hulsman’s 1982 classic, *Peines perdues: Le système pénal en question*, which originally appeared in French before being translated into several non-English languages.

Peines perdue, which chronicles Hulsman’s path to abolition and his thoughts on the necessity of abolition, resulted from conversations between Hulsman and a French official, Jacqueline Bernat de Celis. It appears in English for the first time in this volume. Also in this volume are eight essays

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“Collateral consequences of criminal convictions such as occupational restrictions, ineligibility for welfare benefits, and disenfranchisement from voting have drastic and long-lasting effects.”

in a new public discourse of resistance to imprisonment rather than to more conventional research agendas to generate knowledge *about* a subjugated group [emphasis in original].

Copies: Haymarket Press, P.O. Box 180165, Chicago, IL 60618; phone: (773) 583-7884.

Abolition and Social Work

Abolition and Social Work: Possibilities, Paradoxes, and the Practice of Community Care

edited by Mimi E. Kim, Cameron W. Rasmussen, and Durrell M. Washington, Sr.
Haymarket Press
\$24.95, 258 pages (2024)

Many people working within the legal justice system—pretrial agents, community volunteers, probation officers, pre-sentence advocates, community reentry practitioners—are supportive of the currently scarce, or even expanded, use of social work in police departments, courtrooms, and correctional institutions. While considering the utility of such social work involvement, however, it is important to ask about the extent that social work values of community care actually prevail over penal concerns, objectives, and outcomes.

In *Abolition and Social Work*, social work educators Mimi Kim, Cameron Rasmussen, and Durrell Washington, Sr., have gathered 15 essays that examine aspects of the possibilities, paradoxes, and practice of abolitionist social work.

the profession.” Abolitionist praxis, it is posited, already exists in some places and herein such efforts are highlighted “to bring together the intersections of abolition and social work.”

In 2020, the Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work (NAASW) was formed to challenge the traditional National Association of Social Work (NASW). As the new organization claims:

[The NAASW is meant] to challenge the idea that social work and the police are ever compatible, and it seeks to explore the ways that social work both limits and advances the realization of a world where people have access to the things that are foundational to personal and community safety and a world without police, prisons, and surveillance.

Abolitionist social work “guiding principles,” Kim and her colleagues maintain, are commitments to being anti-carceral, anti-oppression, anti-capitalism, decolonization, deprofessionalization, solidarity (not charity), life-affirming institutions and relationships, self-determination and autonomy, non-punitive approaches to harm and abuse, and “centering systems, structures, and ideologies as the problems, not people as the problem.” Articles in this collection cover:

- Abolitionist social work concepts;
- Missing historical links addressing racism and colonialism within the profession of social work;
- The obsolescence of social work;
- Social work and the welfare state;
- Ending carceral social work;

expressing various perspectives on Hulsman's work from Argentine, British, Canadian, French, and Serbian scholar-activists.

Concerning the totality of this collection, Piché observes that:

As abolitionists work to de-center punishment, not only in the realm of our injustice systems but in our relations—in our homes, schools, workplaces, community gatherings, and elsewhere—we must . . . reject oppressive institutional formations that impose a catastrophic, top-down, and narrow view that constrains how we can make sense of the problems we collectively face and thus bureaucratically limits our responses to them in ways that fail to account for the specificity, diversity, and complexity of our needs. For instance, abolitionists like Angela Davis have long cited the linkage made between crime and punishment as a significant barrier to envisaging other ways of imagining justice in the wake of criminalized conflicts and harms, which Christie noted are in “unlimited supply” for states that work to further entrench practices like imprisonment.

Copies: Red Quill Books, c/o Lightning Source, 193 Edwards Drive, Jackson, TN 38301; phone: (731) 265-5924.

Resources

Crime and Justice: A Review of Research, Vol. 52

Edited by Michael Tonry
University of Chicago Press
\$100.00, 531 pages (2023)

In the fifty-second volume of this venerable series of literature reviews, editor Michael Tonry has brought together an international assortment of scholars from Canada, England, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, South Africa, and the United States. As usual, the articles published herein—11 in all—cover a range of matters, including such traditional concerns as prison drug use, sexual offender recidivism, minority group sentencing, criminal personality, and victimization, and more recent interests such as virtual reality, dissent and protest, collateral consequences, and collective guardianship. Tonry himself authored two articles that address what he calls “exceptional violence,” “delegated vigilantism,” and “less-than-legal lynching” in the United States. All of these articles are extensively peer-reviewed.

In one article, Sandra Bucerius, Kevin Haggerty, and Luca Berardi examine how prisoners use “considerable ingenuity in modifying the prison’s physical environment to advance their drug-related agendas.” In another, Patrick Lussier, Evan McCuish, and Elizabeth Jeglic show how sexual offender recidivism rates in Canada and the United States have been “low and dropping” since the 1970s, well in advance of such punitive measures as public regulation and notification laws. In a third, Julian Roberts, Gabrielle Watson, and Rhys Hester conclude that sentencing commissions in the United States have been unable to determine the impact of their guidelines on racial disparity, that the Sentencing Council of England and Wales at least cautions judges about racial disparity, and that courts in Canada and New Zealand

Vigilantism and lynching, although in retrospect reviled, have modern equivalents that target Black people. Police use of the “third degree,” curbside punishment, and brutal prisons were for long acceptable to fearful and angry White citizens, just as racial profiling, police violence, and extreme punishment disparities are in our time. Call that “delegated vigilantism.” White citizens no longer themselves capture and kill alleged wrongdoers but, not so different, majorities have for half a century supported policies that authorize or mandate routine use of unprecedentedly severe punishments that ruin lives. Call that “less-than-lethal-lynching.”

In his second article for this collection—concerning common “serious intentional

“Many American laws—regarding self-defense retreat doctrines, stand-your-ground laws, permissive or minimal regulation of access to handguns and semiautomatic weapons, corporal punishment of children—are much more tolerant of behaviors that inherently present increased risks of violence and victimization.”

take a more active approach “mitigating sentences when offenders adduce evidence of discrimination or abuse by criminal justice officials.”

In an especially timely article, Alessandro Corda notes that:

Collateral consequences of criminal convictions such as occupational restrictions, ineligibility for welfare benefits, and disenfranchisement from voting have drastic and long-lasting effects. They hinder successful reintegration into society of people with criminal records and undermine efforts to reduce recidivism.

While states have taken some steps toward reform, he writes:

More, bolder, and more comprehensive changes are needed. Reforms should not only reduce the sheer number of collateral consequences and eliminate or mitigate their adverse effects but also incorporate awareness of their existence and knowledge of their effects into the day-to-day operations of the criminal justice system.

Finally, in the first of Tonry’s challenging articles, he concludes that:

violence” in America—Tonry posits the following:

Many American laws—regarding self-defense retreat doctrines, stand-your-ground laws, permissive or minimal regulation of access to handguns and semiautomatic weapons, corporal punishment of children—are much more tolerant of behaviors that inherently present increased risks of violence and victimization. American laws governing sentencing are unique among those of Western countries in both the absolute severity of the punishments they prescribe and allow and the absence of viable legal mechanisms for challenging sentences on the basis that either their absolute severity violates minimum human rights standards or they are disproportionately severe in relation to the seriousness of the wrongdoing for which they are imposed (in either case, a form of unjustifiable state violence).

Copies: The University of Chicago Press, c/o Chicago Distribution Center, 11030 South Langley Avenue, Chicago, IL 60628; phone: (773) 702-7010. ■



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