

Review:

Incarceration Nations: A Journey to Justice in Prisons Around the World

By Baz Dreisinger

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With the advent of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th*, our collective awareness about mass incarceration in the United States, and around the world, has taken on new significance. Fueled by these foundational contributions to our civic discourse, we are in the midst of a public reckoning about the dangerous ties between the prison industry and other systems of power like colonialism, racism, sexism, and classism. Criminal justice reform is now a bipartisan issue and a platform against which politicians are judged harshly. However, in spite of the progress we've made toward understanding the impacts of crime and incarceration, there is still concern about who the system is serving and how well. Are the proposed reforms meeting the needs of the communities most impacted by the carceral state? Or are they simply a continuation of the punitive, non-rehabilitative practices we've seen largely proliferated to date?

Prison education has been introduced and widely lauded as a viable, effective tool for rehabilitation and reintegration. Despite the devastating effects resulting from the discontinuation of Pell Grants for prisoners in the United States, there is still worldwide recognition of the importance of prison education. For example, in 2017, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime published a report advocating for the development of more prison-based education programs, echoing similar efforts by the UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice's Doha Declaration of 2015. It is within this international context of mass incarceration and the growing prison education movement that Baz Dreisinger's (2016) *Incarceration Nations* takes root.

Incarceration Nations takes us around the world to explore prison practices, reform, rehabilitation, and prison arts. Aimed primarily at a U.S. audience, this book asks complex questions about international practices of imprisonment: What does justice look like in other countries? What can we learn from others? Are there better alternatives to be found elsewhere? Dreisinger, currently the education director of the Prison-to-College-Pipeline program at John Jay College in New York, travelled to nine countries—Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, Jamaica, Brazil, Thailand, Singapore, Australia, and Norway—in order to “see the world by seeing its prisons” (18). What she found was a multitude of brave, innovative efforts providing education and rehabilitation, juggling the goals of personal improvement, community building, healing from historical and generational trauma, and hope for a better world.

More memoir than academic research, *Incarceration Nations* provides a necessarily superficial analysis of the various criminal justice systems that Dreisinger encounters in her travels. She often spent only a few days in each country, and her engagement with local prisons varied due to tightly controlled access and public relations schemes. However, the real contribution of this book is not its account of the empirical data, which unequivocally shows mass incarceration to be profoundly damaging to people and communities. Rather, it is the way in which Dreisinger imbues these statistics with emotional resonance. Dreisinger manages to humanize her prisoners and their grief, but also evoke the ambivalence and frustration she experiences

as a teacher and activist and the grace and compassion of forgiveness (particularly in the section on Rwanda) and hope in redemption. This emotional engagement is also in itself political. As Dreisinger notes, if the public began to decry prisons, so would politicians: how we engage with prison and prisoners is, therefore, far from superficial.

Dreisinger traces the historical roots of colonialism and penal colonies across the world. Sewing together pieces of a globalized system, we see how prison—both the place and the practices that encapsulate it—was indeed commodified, traded, and spread throughout history. We see how prison aesthetics bear a resemblance to certain colonial regimes in history: “gaols” set up in port cities modeled by Europeans in the sixteenth century, tools for bodily restraint used during the slave trade, and military prisons from imperial forces in the 1880s (51). We also see, perhaps too often, comparisons to Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania and Auburn Prison in New York—their architecture and models of confinement being replicated and held as the gold standard in several countries she visits. As Dreisinger notes, the United States’ criminal justice system and policies have been influential in not only shaping international values toward crime and punishment, but also in encouraging other countries to meet our standards of punishment and (in)tolerance: “In the United States, we have created a monster with tentacles entrenched in communities across the globe” (304). This influence is particularly stark in her depictions of extended solitary confinement in a supermax prison in Brazil and of the complicated role private prisons play in the Australian context. Here we see some of the most disturbing practices of the U.S. system being reproduced in other countries.

Incarceration Nations also explores prisons in countries that have adopted different attitudes towards incarceration. In Rwanda, in the most powerful investigation into the transformative practices happening inside prisons in the book, Dreisinger observes a restorative justice program for survivors of genocide and prisoners with historical ties to the militia, *génocidaires*. Her visit to Norway, meanwhile, highlights an alternative paradigm to the U.S. approach: In Norway, the denial of liberty itself is seen as the punishment. Prisons allow continued family relationships and emphasize reintegration into the community. Dreisinger doesn’t pretend either country’s prison

system is flawless, but both of these chapters emphasize the potential benefits of alternative approaches. These two chapters explore some countries' dedication to unite communities during times of harm rather than respond with a deterrence model of punishment based in fear, vengeance, and hate. Rwanda and Norway embrace the potential for communities to coalesce in times of tragedy—of which crime is a piece—to use pain and suffering to facilitate solidarity. Channeling Angela Davis, Dreisinger debates the potential of crime to be used: “Not as a change to engender separation from others but a profound reminder of how deeply interconnected we are, such that one person’s actions have the capacity to impact so many” (297).

Art—in the form of literature, theatre, and music—is shown to be cathartic and humanizing in the prison setting. Particularly poignant are the stories of excitement, hope, and vulnerability from the prisoners Dreisinger meets while facilitating programs or touring the prisons. Several prisoners she worked with continued to write her following her visits, expressing their commitment to writing, reading, music as well as growth and rehabilitation more generally. In Thailand, Dreisinger was able to co-lead a drama group for incarcerated women, which gave them the opportunity to envisage and act out alternate lives and to break from the identities they had been prescribed by society. In Uganda, Dreisinger was able to lead a one-week creative writing class with the goal that the students on the inside would be able to continue the program after her tenure. Sustainable programs are a key goal, and in several destinations, she sought to instill the hope of a prison-to-college pipeline program being left in her wake. In practice though, this usually amounted to delivering an elevator pitch to prison or governmental staff. Dreisinger shows readers the potentially positive impacts of art and education in prisons while being keenly aware of the ephemerality of many of her own efforts.

Incarceration Nations is at its best when problematizing prison arts, rehabilitation, and the culture of activists/volunteers. Alongside describing the hunger for education and arts programming communicated by the prisoners, Dreisinger also grapples with the realities of her visit: what good was she really doing traveling to prisons around the world? And for that matter: does writing or drama

or restorative justice meaningfully move the needle on overturning the systems of punishment and capitalism that led to the current crises of mass incarceration around the globe? Do these efforts constitute just “a Band-Aid on an amputated limb” (135)? Dreisinger extends this critique of rehabilitation programs to engage with the complicated role of raced and classed privilege in activist work. She observes the “unfortunate, too-familiar white-savior-of-black-souls dynamic” at play in prison reform and activist efforts (69). Yet she also acknowledges that her role as a professor at John Jay was sometimes actively deployed, and also deliberately manipulated by others, in order to gain access, publicity, and public support in such a way as to benefit prisoners. While these questions will weigh heavily on readers, particularly those involved in prison education or advocacy efforts, we are encouraged by the interplay of Dreisinger’s work and a recent RAND study (2013) finding that correctional education programs may be most effective at preventing recidivism when people on the inside are connected with community facilitators from the outside. With this in mind, we can keep Dreisinger’s concerns at the forefront of our work while also pushing forward to ensure continued access to education programs, outside support, and community engagement for people locked away in prisons around the world.

A single poem, restorative justice session, or prison theater troupe performance may not reverse the rising tides of the prison industrial complex, but they do lay seeds that will continue to sprout hope, solidarity, and a blossoming resistance to the spread of penal ideologies across the globe. *Incarceration Nations* captures the way that rehabilitative efforts can have profound impacts for incarcerated people. Yet while presenting the reader with powerful evocations of the transformative potential of these programs, Dreisinger leaves the reader in no doubt, by the end of the book, that mass incarceration, even with all the writing programs in the world, will remain a moral abomination. There are no easy answers here—and Dreisinger offers none—but there is hope, and a call to continued activism: For Dreisinger, “justice *is* movement” (300).

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