

FEATURE--BOOK REVIEW

An Unequivocal Challenge to the Value of Mass Incarceration

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

By Baz Dreisinger

New York: Other Press

Reviewed by BILL MUTH

Baz Dreisinger recently completed a “two year pilgrimage to prisons around the world.” *Incarceration Nations* tells her story as she attempts to penetrate the vagaries of incarceration in nine disparate countries—Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, Jamaica, Thailand, Brazil, Australia, Singapore and Norway. There is much to be gained from the book, but readers should approach it on its own terms—as a memoir, a personal journey, a form of witnessing. Many of *JPER*'s readers are quite familiar with prisons, even if we do not have Dreisinger's global perspective. We are accustomed to reading carefully parsed empirical studies as well as moving, first-person practitioner stories. The South African linguist, Hilary Janks (2010), describes two ways to approach a text, which she refers to as *reading with* and *reading against*. We might (and should) approach an experimental study skeptically, reading against the argument, looking for limitations and idiosyncrasies in method or logic. This is how ‘normal science’ progresses, as Kuhn (1962) would say. But *reading against* is not always a fruitful way to read texts, especially those in which the author shares personal experiences and invites readers to see something from her perspective. This requires a leap of faith; it has less to do with *knowing* the Truth and more to do with *understanding* another person's perspective, beliefs and values.

The right way to approach *Incarceration Nations* is to read *with* it—let yourself into Dreisinger's story, roll with the fear, disorientation, triumphs, frustration and outrage. The book aims to engage the head *and* the heart. For each prison system she brings to light with her breezy, contextualizing storytelling, Dreisinger provides a backdrop of statistics—in Singapore you can be caned for 30 different crimes; in Brazil, police officers reportedly killed 11,197 people between 2009-2014; in Thailand, only 550 of 25,231 incarcerated women were convicted of violent crimes; almost half of the prisoners in Uganda lacked access to safe drinking water; less than ten percent of the South African prison population is white; after the 1994 genocide and before the reforms of 1998, Rwandan prisons were so overcrowded that some prisoners, called *komeza*, were forced to walk through the night because there was no place to sleep...Dreisinger's data are well sourced but applied to her stories with a sometimes maddeningly broad brush.

In this book, it is the stories that matter.

So, I resisted the urge to read against the *univocity* of her thesis, which tends to cast all prisons, even the most progressive experiments, as Band Aids on deeper problems, and all prisoners, even those who committed genocidal acts, as worthy of reconciliation, restoration, and forgiveness. This, I readily admit, is an expression of my own equivocal outlook, the day after terrorist attacks in Brussels exposed the limits of my capacity to forgive and transcend judgment. Reading with *Incarceration Nations* meant confronting and temporarily suspending my own desire for retribution. Guardedly, I follow Baz on her trip. With her I: sit in three-hour traffic jams in Kampala; grovel before prison gatekeepers in Uganda who may or may not let us in; hang out in Kigali coffee shops with international workers; get ‘spun’ in unrepresentative model prisons by officials



in Singapore and Brazil; swim at a pristine beach in Perth; sleep in a barbed-wired compound (Uganda) and an exotic colonial-era hotel (South Africa); confront sweltering heat in Bangkok; and ferry across the Skagerrak Straight to Bastøy Prison, Norway. At almost every stop, we see (and smell, touch, taste) the inertia of wasted lives through eyes of prisoners and activists who experience it first-hand—and yet resist.

Resistance to the noxious effects of mass incarceration has many antagonists—from racism and neo-liberal capitalism to tribal hatred and restrictive customs. In *Incarceration Nations* we see how resistance and reform take many *imperfect* forms. Rwanda’s wide-scale restorative justice project includes censorship of tribal hate speech and “solidarity camps” in which inmates are indoctrinated to ideals of reconciliation, peace and “antivengence.” South Africa’s faith-based restorative justice program structures intense confrontations, dialogue and reconciliation, but family relations are complex and the damage is vast; the program is reaching only a fragment of those with needs. In a book club in a Ugandan prison, students respond nonchalantly to a reading of Fredrick Douglas’ slave narrative; their own traumas and losses of innocence are embedded not only in society but within the family itself. Brazil closes the notorious Carandiru Prison only to “out super-max” the US-inspired approach to long-term solitary confinement. Australia’s enlightened new prisons tout artisanal food and Aboriginal artwork; robust work-study, education and reentry programs; and state-of-the-art industries where prisoners get paid nine dollars a day and earn certifiable, transferrable skills. Yet in Australia this reform is in the hands of private prisons funded by the same global capital that lobbies for harsher sentences to raise occupancy rates for their publicly traded corporations.

What makes the trip compelling is Dreisinger’s gift for drawing the reader in, and her physical and emotional bravery. She is not afraid to go into dangerous and extremely depressing places. Nor is she afraid to share her feelings of anger and despair that might betray her deeper, univocally humanist values. For example, leaving Luzira prison:

...guilt and grief wash over me. It’s the same sadness I feel every day I leave class in a prison...

or learning of Rwandan’s efforts to silence those who criticize the current system:

...I begin to wonder if progress is a mirage...

or pondering the paradox that prison nurseries are an “improvement on the outside world” for some Thai mothers:

...which notion is more distressing...the idea that prisons are an improvement on the outside world... or the possibility...that they’re essentially on par with it? Both realities suggest that poverty itself is a kind of prison...

or reflecting on Norway’s prisons, perhaps the most humane in the world:

...prison is prison. No amount of beauty...can make up for the profound loneliness, the isolation, the time-freezing effect of a prison stay...

or considering the incalculable wreckage done to communities of color in the wake of the U.S.’s punitive crime policies:

...the reality is that tinkering with the system—a little change here, a bit of reform there, is not likely to produce the ‘revolution in values’ that Martin Luther King was talking about...

I *read against* this last quote. On one level, it is true that each of the reforms described in the book amounts to what Dreisinger calls a “Band-Aid... [sometimes] a supremely engineered one, from which there is plenty to learn, but a Bain-Aid still.” But *Incarceration Nations* was never intended as a “how to” book. It was always about human values, deeper commitments, and one person’s open encounters with a series of darkly carnivalesque affronts to her optimistic hypothesis.

And this, I believe, is why Dreisinger’s stories matter. Her specific ideas about reform are partial at best—she departs from a number of countries overwhelmed and in a state of grief—but her honest witnessing works at the level of the heart. Her lived experiences are told openly. We always know where Baz-the-optimist is coming from; yet she unsparingly challenges the viability of these values. Thus readers are invited on an inner journey too—one where uncompromisingly compassionate values are tested by the harshest realities. After all, if Rwandans can take up the anguishing work of post-genocide reconciliation, if Norwegians can transcend the cry for revenge in the wake of the horrific killings in 2011 in Oslo and Utøya Island, if Singapore can transform its shame-based approach to criminality (even if for less than humane reasons), then maybe it’s time to re-examine the desire for retribution lying beneath my own espoused beliefs in transformation and social justice.

Literacy educators Elizabeth Dutro and Andrea Bien described a “speaking wound” that connects writer to reader, “forged by the voice of the Other that speaks at one and the same time to its own and its listener’s pain” (2014, p. 12). Each Band-Aid in *Incarceration Nations* is a threshold to a universally human speaking wound. A wound that speaks to those *reading with* these piercing stories of human worth and asks us to let them to accumulate and trouble us, even in fearful times.

Postscript:

Baz Dreisinger, whose experiences setting up the “Prison to College Pipeline” project inside (and outside) a New York State prison are chronicled in volumes one and two of the *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry (JPER)*, is an associate professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. She is also an activist, journalist, freelance documentarian and radio producer. To hear Baz Dreisinger discuss her book with Boston’s public radio host Robin Young, go to: <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2016/02/10/prisons-around-the-world>

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