Review of Captive Genders

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Captive Genders is a groundbreaking and long-awaited anthology that performs the critical task of breathing transgender and gender queer voices, visions, and lives into movements for prison abolition, and so much more. The collection centers a multiplicity of transgender, gender nonconforming, and queer perspectives in a discussion of society’s reliance on policing, punishment, and cages to produce illusions of safety while enacting and entrenching systems of violence. Expanding the conversation on gender, sexuality, and criminalization in multiple dimensions, contributors fundamentally shift the terrain and goal posts of movements for safety and liberation.

This wide-ranging collection features first-person narratives of violation and survival inside and beyond prison walls, forgotten histories of queer resistance to policing and punishment, the results of a groundbreaking research study of masculine-identified people in women’s prisons in California, and essays on topics including the criminalization and punishment of HIV, the realities of queer youth in Louisiana’s juvenile justice system, and the roots of sex offender registries, reflecting a past, present, and future of queer lives lived in the spaces between control and resistance. Eric Stanley is a self-described radical queer activist, outlaw academic, and experimental filmmaker. His co-editor, Nat Smith, is a member of the Bay Area’s Trans/gender Variant in Prison Committee and long-time organizer with Critical Resistance. They bring together an eclectic group of authors, including currently and formerly incarcerated transgender and gender nonconforming people, academics, veteran activists, and everyday people touched by a story, an experience, or a relationship. Contributions are not limited to those one would expect to see in such an anthology, and even recognized voices are often combined in fresh and creative collaborations or conversations.

Captive Genders is solidly grounded in an analysis of the central role the police and prisons play in constructing, maintaining, and enforcing lines of racialized gender,

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and of the equally central role race-based gender policing plays in enabling and propping up the prison-industrial complex. The book pushes us to further complicate notions of gender beyond stock definitions, to firmly ground them in political and historical contexts, and to demand nothing less than gender self-determination as we build toward abolition. Captive Genders also challenges us to look beyond prison walls, immigration detention centers, and the control of probation and parole to see the often invisible but no less pervasive web of regulation and discipline operating in every aspect and context of our lives—a room in an SRO, a psychiatric facility, military jail, or the lock-down of administrative segregation.

While shining much needed light on the multiplicity of micro- and macro-aggressions of enforced gender and sexual compliance inside and outside sex-segregated institutions, Captive Genders pushes us to struggle around and beyond issues relating to searches, placement, and treatment of transgender and gender nonconforming people in prisons and jails. It cautions against efforts to single out the experiences of transgender people from those of broader prison populations or communities in ways that reinforce institutional violence against others. In addition, it alerts the reader to the challenge of developing transformative responses to violence in circumstances our evolving community-based strategies are not yet able to hold. How do we envision, build, and support grassroots antiviolence strategies for transgender and gender nonconforming people whose communities are fragile or nonexistent; who have been pushed out, abandoned, or are never seen by LGBT or activist communities, communities of origin, and prison communities; whose very existence is criminalized; and whose violators are ubiquitous and anonymous?

Captive Genders draws the reader to the inevitable, revolutionary conclusion that taking away tools of repression, taking people out of prisons, and tearing down institutional walls are necessary, but not sufficient tasks of the prison abolition movement. A world without prisons requires deeply interconnected struggles for racial, gender, and economic justice that stop short at nothing less than building an entirely different world. That world does not merely shift control, exclusion, and dehumanization to a different setting; racialized policing and punishment of gender transgression—by the state, in our communities, and in ourselves—is simply no longer possible or necessary. While offering solid theoretical frames, Captive Genders is firmly rooted in action, including imaginative and original organizing tools developed by co-editor Nat Smith. The collection opens and closes with calls to deepen our analysis and push our visions beyond what we can even dream. We have no choice but to answer them if we are to see a world without prisons or violence.