

BOOK REVIEW

Alexandra Cox, *Trapped in a Vice: The Consequences of Confinement for Young People* (Rutgers University Press, 2017)

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ALEXANDRA COX'S *TRAPPED IN A VICE: THE CONSEQUENCES OF CONFINEMENT for Young People* emerges against a backdrop of declining youth incarceration rates and continued mobilizations, frequently led by youth of color, against the racialized violence of policing and prisons. Despite these positive movements, the Trump administration continues to deepen its investment in law-and-order politics and to expand definitions of human confinement: ramping up immigration detention and deportation, eroding the limited rights available to transgender communities, and more. With a sharp focus on the limits of juvenile justice reform narratives, Cox provides a key analysis that should propel us to keep our collective eye on the prize and to challenge empty reforms that do not build liberation for all.

Trapped in a Vice emerges in the wake of a body of strong texts that explore related facets of juvenile (in)justice, including Sabina Vaught's (2017) *Compulsory: Education and the Dispossession of Youth in a Prison School* and Nell Bernstein's (2016) *Burning Down the House: The End of Juvenile Prison*, in addition to earlier pivotal works that explore the racialized practices of youth criminalization, such as Victor Rios's (2011) *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* and Laurie Schaffner's (2006) *Girls in Trouble with the Law*. A key contribution to the burgeoning field of critical carceral studies, and a valuable teaching tool for ethnographic methods courses, Cox's text offers readers in today's shifting political landscape new tools to track

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and engage the multifaceted, and ultimately destructive, consequences of juvenile criminal legal reforms.

Cox's rich and rigorous ethnography charts aspects of the experiences of incarcerated youth in New York, the site of the first juvenile prison in the United States, and grapples with the role of what she terms the "heavy hand of the state" (4) in reproducing a discourse of youth as ungovernable. Conceptualizing juvenile justice prisons as "living breathing organisms" where the staff and young people "do not always react and respond to the practices in the way intended by their creators" (125), Cox carefully weaves together vivid narratives from her participants drawn from interviews with 39 young people (selected by prison administrators and staff) and 113 staff from the various state-operated residential juvenile facilities. "Trapped in a vice" could also potentially reference the adult staff members who are objects of her study, as they too—through a very different power differential than young people—are shaped by the project of juvenile confinement. This ethnography is layered onto strong archival research and policy analysis to map the economic backdrop of young people's lives—and the communities they struggle to navigate—in order to illustrate how the mercurial scraps of what are touted as social welfare programs constrain young people and their families.

In chapter 1, "Reproducing Reforms," Cox offers an overview of the New York juvenile justice system and the various reform efforts that unfolded after the 1950s. She highlights the pervasive use of risk assessment technologies, such as those leveraged in strength-based approaches and models, and argues that their usage is indicative of New York's continued commitment to liberal and paternalist interventions. Chapter 2, "Ungovernability and Worth," explores how the juvenile justice system, in concert with a wider matrix of institutions shaping young people—schools, child welfare, and police—aims to manage and govern young people and, in doing so, attempts to define their value and worth: either salvageable and capable or *bad kids*. In chapter 3, "Racialized Repression: Barriers to the Emancipation of Young People at the Edge of the System," the reader is introduced to Marcus, Shayla, Maya, and other young people whose experiences highlight the domineering reach of the juvenile justice system pre- and postdetention. Cox carefully traces their pathways in custody and in the community across years of court-involved interventions to document the wide-ranging effects of the system on young people. Chapter 4, "The Responsibility Trap," maps the very local ways in which young people and staff members at these prisons negotiate the carceral state's neoliberal shift

toward a focus on personal responsibility. In chapter 5, “Change from the Inside,” Cox outlines the attempts of the system to support the rehabilitation of young people, despite her salient critique of these support services. Cox quotes one of her participants to suggest that change comes “from the inside” of individuals and not from any of the programs at the prison. Cox explores the tensions associated with institutionalization, a term she adopts to describe young people’s “resistance and a submission to ‘the program’” (140) and the decisions youth make given these constraints.

Cox’s nearly three years in the field—primarily in two juvenile prisons in New York State (169)—generate details that linger, particularly for audiences who may be less familiar with a juvenile carceral setting. For example, she describes the colored shoelaces that denote young people’s status in a prison’s behavioral change program: white shoelaces represent the “Orientation Stage” or the “Reluctant Learner” classification in the staff’s training manual (103). Cox’s meticulous attention to detail offers an almost 360-degree view of the carceral environment and those it affects: staff members, young people, their families, and the related communities.

A key theoretical strength of Cox’s work is her nuanced analysis of carceral responsabilization, particularly evident in chapter 4, and her attention to naming the gritty mechanisms or the specific technologies of punishment, masked as treatment or care, that increasingly frame young people’s relationship to the carceral state. The young people Cox profiles are required to ventriloquate forms of therapeutic discourse in order to be viewed as in compliance and for the staff to remain in control. Personal responsibility trickles down to teenagers caught in the juvenile justice system (but is rarely leveled against the institutions that have failed them, including schools, social services, and more). Cox cites a judge’s admonition to a group of incarcerated young people: “You have the keys to your jail cell in your control” (117). Cox charts that this was the reform won for some juveniles—to merit access to practices that are labeled rehabilitative—but her ethnography illustrates that this was far from a victory. The alphabet soup list of “cognitive behavioral programming” (114) [Cox notes that none of these programs’ effectiveness in institutions has been evaluated (126)] is geared toward eliminating faulty beliefs in young people such as “the false belief that life is always fair to everybody else” (116). Of course, the subjects of her research are also the juvenile justice staff, and their commitment to the role of providing care rather than control varies. Cox reports that one staff member, Brooks, gets “nervous” when another “bullshit” cognitive be-

havioral program comes along, because he doesn't see these young people as in need but rather as "criminal thinkers" (115).

Cox's analysis of carceral responsabilization ties *Trapped in a Vice* to other key bodies of research that explore the shifting contours of the carceral state and how expansion of punishment and regulation unfolds through reform-based discourses or what many scholar-activists have termed "carceral humanism." For example, Lynne Haney's study of community-based alternatives to incarceration for women, *Offending Women* (2010), documents the emergence of therapeutic governance, or the augmentation of recovery programs and cultures squarely within the carceral state, particularly for populations such as women.

Another key strength of the text is Cox's ability to represent and open for analysis the multifaceted and often contradictory relationships that exist in prisons. Cox notes that the face of the "colonial models" (64) associated with the institutions of criminal justice and social welfare are changing; in New York (and indeed across most of the United States), for instance, the formerly all-white workforce, made up of "parole and probation officers, foster care workers, and other agents of the state" (64), is now predominantly Black and Latina/o. Although more people of color as front-line staff can engender different and potentially valuable relationships between young people and staff, it is also a reminder of the carceral state's ability to absorb critique and dynamically address shifting political and economic demands. Though there are significant barriers created by the prison that prevent the development of relationships, Cox describes instances of informal support between carceral staff and young people, as well as friendship between residents, such as young people teaching one another "how to 'do program'" (150) or hugging and comforting other residents.

In addition, Cox elects to identify a particularly challenging thread in need of further exploration: some of the young people in her research express a desire for control and hard discipline (151). Cox argues that youth participants and staff members alike critique the therapeutic models and demand increased structure and a more hands-on approach, which for some staff might inspire actions that are harmful to young people, including the use of physical restraints. Cox suggests that youth are conditioned to desire overt control because it's familiar and it resembles "the violence of the streets" and arguably their homes (153); she suggests that potential parallels between parental discipline and forms of staff discipline may explain youths' desire for control (151–54). This discussion is troubling for multiple reasons. Black, Brown, and/or poor parents, families, and communities are too often named

as a source of harm, deflecting our attention from the powerful institutions that naturalize and legitimate state or structural forms of violence. Cox ends this discussion on a reflective stance, adding that institutions themselves may contribute to young people feeling “out of control” (154), but that may not be enough. Although her analysis is compelling and supported, this discussion about the racialized and heteropatriarchal dynamics that feed (and also mask) circuits of control and discipline merits more evidence, ink, and debate.

We end our reading, and this review, with questions for ourselves and the wider field of critical carceral studies, as much as for Cox’s beautifully crafted book. *Trapped in a Vice* offers a robust critique of juvenile justice as a persistent systemic investment in reforms that do not address fundamental issues: “punitive practices are essentially repackaged to look nicer, to be more welfarist in their orientation,” yet “they remain tied to the carceral state - they are still a form of punishment” (161). Reforms sometimes whitewash the carceral state and expand its reach and legitimacy. Perhaps, as Cox poses, debates about the scale or method of reform, which risk assessment instrument or new behavioral modification program to use, or whether the best site for intervention is the community or the prison miss the obvious point: “What if the very questions themselves, or the binaries they represent, obscure a greater project of governing young people that needs to be fundamentally challenged” (32). *Trapped in a Vice* clearly illustrates that there is no “what if” about it: The project of governing young people, and the rest of our communities, needs to be more than studied or challenged. We must build and practice abolition to create the communities that enable us all to flourish.

