



Book Review

Gifts from the Dark: Learning from the Incarceration Experience

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Gifts from the Dark: Learning from the Incarceration Experience (2022)

Joni Schwartz & John Chaney

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G*ifts from the Dark* poignantly delivers on a daring promise – to acknowledge and analyze certain potentials of the carceral space while, at the same time, affirming abolitionist and emancipatory values that might take us to a post-prison world. The “gifts” of imprisonment, which this book traces are twofold: first, there are the specific forms of knowledge – of power, punishment, and survival – that imprisoned people acquire, knowledge that is vital to social and political critique beyond debates over mass incarceration. Second, there is the gift of solitude – of the isolated cell – which, while severe, can inspire an inward deepening and discovery that is, for some, transformative.

The book’s four sections take imprisonment as a site and process of pedagogy: learning, as the authors describe, is “disorienting”; it draws on the resources of mind, body, and spirit; it is both solitary and relational; and, finally, it has the power to make change in the world. To make this case, Joni Schwartz and John R. Chaney draw on the perspectives and writings of canonical figures (and also lesser-known individuals) who have experienced incarceration firsthand: Nelson Mandela, Antonio Gramsci, Assata Shakur, Malcolm X, Angela Davis and many more. In analyzing the critical praxis and specific learning journeys of numerous incarcerated people, Schwartz and Chaney make no distinction between political prisoners and violent offenders, the highly educated and nearly illiterate, or those “rightly” or “wrongly” accused. For Schwartz and Chaney, it is the “commonality of the prison experience” that is solely relevant, not personal behavior or criminal responsibility (xii). This choice, while subtly wrought, amounts to a profound

moral statement, and it distinguishes their book from many other texts in the subfield of prison pedagogy. In *Gifts from the Dark*, imprisonment – as a unique and powerful human experience – is uncoupled from questions of individual morality, and this results in a set of conclusions (about what liberation is and how it may be achieved) that are in fact deeply ethical and that chart a course away from our collective and historical mentality of punishment and retribution.

Connecting the book’s fourteen chapters is a commitment to “blurring” the “inside and outside dichotomy of prison experience” (x). For these authors, this means unsettling a host of binaries (free/unfree, officer/prisoner, innocence/guilt), which conventionally serve to deny agency (as well as curiosity, joy, and intimacy) to incarcerated people. In the process, the authors tackle a range of thoroughly researched topics and theories on race, gender, motherhood, trauma, education, the law, emotional intelligence, surveillance, affect, and the body. While ambitious in its latitude, *Gifts from the Dark* is a highly accessible read, one that will appeal to scholars as well as to a wider audience of activists, educators, community leaders, family, and friends – really, to any of us, since (as the authors note) “we are all prisoners of something” (x).

REFERENCES

Schwartz, Joni and John R. Chaney. (2021). *Gifts from the Dark: Learning from the Incarceration Experience*. Lexington Books.



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