



*Book Review*

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## **Purgatory Citizenship: Reentry, Race, and Abolition**

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**Purgatory Citizenship: Reentry, Race, and Abolition by Calvin John Smiley. University of California Press. 240 pages. May, 2023. ISBN: 9780520385993.**

**P**urgatory Citizenship: Reentry, Race and Abolition" by Calvin John Smiley is an exciting read that analyzes the history of racial discrimination, particularly in Newark, New Jersey. The book focuses on mass incarceration and policies that impact low-income black communities. A discussion on issues relevant to criminal justice, economics, education, and housing were explored. Furthermore, an in-depth look into ongoing criminal justice issues such as reintegrating formerly incarcerated black people provides the reader with a profound evaluation of the issues that create challenges for socioeconomic disadvantaged black communities. This book offers a look into how these challenges impact Newark black residents from the past to the present.

The historical underpinnings of mass incarceration and its disproportionate impact on marginalized black and Latino communities was analyzed with the Newark riots providing a pivotal historical perspective of how black communities were impacted by racial animosity in Newark. Particularly discussed is how the era of law and order in the 1960s and beyond led to mass incarceration. Also, the effect of the War on Drugs and more punitive criminal justice policies that led to negative impacts on young black males from the 1970s until now underscores the author's view of purgatory citizenship. Draconian policies, increased budgets for police and the construction of jails/prisons served as a tool to weaponize the criminal justice system against black communities.

**A**cknowledging black leaders and their involvement in Newark New Jersey's civil rights movement provides the reader with a unique perspective of how influential Newark was to the evolving civil rights movements. For example, the book recounts how the Black Nationalist movement and the Nation of Islam were critical to Newark's civil rights movement. However, the rise in black power and nationalism led to more punitive criminal justice legislation on the part of federal and local governments that sought to halt such a prominent advancement of black communities. Smiley's ability to show correlations between political movements and the oppression of black individuals was well documented throughout the book.

A distinctive feature of "Purgatory Citizenship" is its emphasis on firsthand stories from people impacted by what he calls the "criminal legal system". Smiley creates narratives about peoples' experience with the criminal justice system that keeps the reader's interest. Smiley's unique style of writing personalizes the

firsthand narratives illustrated in his book, which serves to kindle the reader's emotions. For example, the story of Mustafa was an illustration of how the government may silence black leaders through incarceration. Mustafa told a firsthand story about being framed and prosecuted for a murder he did not commit and receiving a life sentence because he was opening a school. Another focus of the book is the impact of pretrial detention on black individuals. Smiley recounts stories from formerly incarcerated people to illustrate how minor offenses can have life altering impact upon their social reintegration. He provides a unique perspective on the emotional, psychological, and societal challenges that accompany discriminatory criminal justice policies with these poignant narratives.

**T**he concept of "purgatory citizenship" is explored and defined with numerous illustrative examples. According to Smiley "ultimately, I argue that reentry is an extension of, not a termination of, the carceral continuum, which exacerbates surveillance, punishment, and restrictions, creating a purgatory citizenship that places individuals in a precarious state of limbo somewhere between confinement and freedom." This quote is Smiley's distinctive perspective on what plagues our American society and how he defines "purgatory citizenship". Additionally, the book provides thought provoking ideas about abolitionism as a transformative approach to reforming the criminal justice system. The book challenges conventional notions of punishment, encouraging readers to picture a criminal justice system that is centered on rehabilitation, healing, and equity. According to Smiley, the current system is based upon retribution instead of restorative justice, which does more societal harm than good.

In summary, "Purgatory Citizenship: Reentry, Race, and Abolition" is a thought-provoking and timely contribution to the current exchange of ideas on criminal justice reform. Calvin John Smiley's style of writing and unique ability to discuss complex societal issues in laymen's terms makes this a must read.



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