

Michelle Daniel Jones and Elizabeth Nelson (eds), *Who Would Believe a Prisoner? Indiana Women's Carceral Institutions, 1848–1920*, New York: The New Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-62097-539-8 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-62097-540-4 (ebook)

The story of this remarkable work of abolition-feminist scholarship begins in the summer of 2013 when a group of 17 women incarcerated in the Indiana Women's Prison (IWP), the oldest continuously operated women's prison in the United States, embarked on a decade-long journey into the archives of carceral institutions in Indiana (prisons, jails, "homes" for women and girls, laundries, reformatories). Enrolled in a defunded college program in the prison that was kept afloat by an entirely volunteer faculty and a modest GoFundMe campaign that provided students with an always-dwindling supply of bare necessities like pencils and paper, the women were invited by the educational program director to research and write a history of the Indiana prison in which they were being caged. The project that ultimately became *Who Would Believe a Prisoner?*, co-created by several dozen incarcerated scholars and supported by a wide network of university professors, research librarians, and independent scholars on the outside, quickly outgrew the modest scope of the original class assignment and extended far beyond the geographical limits of the IWP. The book shares original research about and reimagines (in the form of a one-act play) the corrupt and colorful history of Stringtown, a suburb of Indianapolis that was a popular target for reform in the late 19th century and that played a critical role in the criminalization of sex work, the punitive control over female sexuality, and the rise of carceral institutions in Indiana. It also exposes abuses in Indiana prisons and in other carceral spaces, like the Indiana School for Feeble-Minded Youth (ISFMY) in Fort Wayne and the House of the Good Shepherd (HGS) in Indianapolis. Like all institutions for women in this period and beyond, the ISFMY and the HGS criminalized female sexuality and viciously policed the bodily autonomy and sexual agency of the people they confined.

The work of the Indiana Women's Prison History Project (IWPHP), as the collective of incarcerated scholars came to be known, is an excellent example of what research can look like when it is led by those directly impacted by the systems and institutional structures they are researching. The IWPHP created the space for incarcerated scholars to apply their lived

experience of criminalization, incarceration, and state-sanctioned violence as a critical lens through which to understand the history of carceral systems in Indiana and to excavate, elevate, and extend credibility to the stories of women and girls that are buried, distorted, and devalued within the official archive. In their position as “embodied observers” (p.xxxvii), the women of the IWPHP confront the carceral archive from the inside. As researchers, they are caged subjects, “captives” (p.xxxviii), who share with the women and girls they honor in their research not only the “indelible taint of criminality” (p.xxxii), but also the struggle to survive the trauma, violence, and devastating collateral consequences of incarceration. Co-editor Michelle Daniel Jones, currently a PhD candidate at New York University, explains¹:

We, as incarcerated scholars and thus embodied observers, know the truth of the conditions of confinement, the realities of carceral trauma, and the presence of gendered and sexual violence in our personal prison experiences. All this informs our examination of the archive: we captured the voices and the experiences of those women and girls, captives like us. Presenting these narratives alongside the stories of the prison reformers provides a more complex, nuanced, and accurate history of these spaces in this period. (p.xxxviii)

¹ Jones’ journey from prison to NYU illustrates some of these collateral consequences. After serving over 20 years in prison in Indiana, Jones was admitted to the PhD program in History at Harvard University in 2017, with support from distinguished faculty like Elizabeth Hinton, who called Jones “one of the strongest candidates in the country last year, period”. But Jones’ admission decision was ultimately overturned by Harvard leadership after two faculty members questioned whether Jones had “disclosed enough information about her past” in her application. According to Eli Hager (2017), reporting the story in *The New York Times*, these faculty members also expressed concerns “that her background would cause a backlash among rejected applicants, conservative news outlets or parents of students”. The role played by institutions like Harvard in reproducing and enlarging the human toll of incarceration is not unique to Jones’ story. Also in 2017, the Connecticut Bar rejected the membership application submitted by Yale Law School graduate, MacArthur “genius” award winner, and formerly incarcerated poet and author Reginald Dwayne Betts, on account of his felony convictions 20 years earlier, for which Betts spent eight years in prison. The Connecticut Bar Examining Committee reversed its decision seven months later (Collins 2017).

The IWPHP brings to this project a mix of care for their subjects, creativity in their methodological approach, and determination to make visible the violence they see not only inside women's prisons in Indiana, but also embedded within the logics of carceral systems more broadly. Theirs is a crucially important, multifaceted mission: to expose violence, to make the lives and struggles of captive women and girls "knowable", and, at the same time, to develop the critical tools we need to dismantle the systems that continue to capture and harm the most vulnerable among us. This is a fundamental abolition-feminist "both/and" approach: it seeks to illuminate and reduce the ongoing harm of incarceration, criminalization, and control, and, at the same time, it works to shatter the system in which this harm is made possible.

One of the key interventions of *Who Would Believe a Prisoner?* is its insistence on the fundamental right of incarcerated scholars to do this work. It affirms the basic authority of the women of the IWPHP to be "knowers", to create knowledge that is shaped by their intimate experience of carceral trauma, state and intimate violence, and the harms of the criminal legal system, and to put that knowledge in the service of structural change. The story of Eva Green, who was incarcerated in the Jeffersonville prison in 1866, illustrates the vital importance of this knowledge project. While incarcerated, Eva was raped repeatedly by a hospital steward who infected her with syphilis. Remarkably, Eva brought her attacker to trial after she was released in 1868, offering her own syphilitic body, scarred and covered with lesions and "putrid sores" (p.11), as physical evidence. The title of *Who Would Believe a Prisoner?* mocks the summation of the legal defense at trial ("You can't believe that woman; caught her in a thousand lies" [p.12]) and the book makes room for the humanity, the resilience, and the truth of the harms perpetrated against women like Eva to reappear. The IWPHP's return to the archival record assembled by Eva's jailers challenges the official account that discredited Eva's voice, disappeared her body, cleared her rapist, and sought to erase the violence she endured. By exposing and embracing the truth of Eva's tale of rape and abuse, IWPHP scholars not only honor Eva and the other incarcerated women who were raped in Jeffersonville and other institutions that forcibly confined women in Indiana. They also shine a light on the larger systems of domination and control that are at the root of rape and are still so clearly on display in the prisons, jails, youth

and immigrant detention facilities in which, currently, over 172,000 women and girls are caught and caged (Kajstura and Sawyer 2023).

The IWPHP privileges the unique capacity of incarcerated researchers to excavate and lift up the subjugated knowledge of captives like Eva and to read against the grain of the archive that disqualifies them as scholars, dehumanizes them as women, and discounts the credibility of the women and girls whose stories they share. The serious charges of medical and institutional abuse waged by incarcerated women against Sarah Smith, the celebrated Quaker reformer who, with Rhoda Coffin, founded the first women's prison in Indiana, and the reformatory head physician Dr. Theophilus Parvin, for example, were easily discredited by a review board and dismissed by the court of public opinion. Dr. Parvin went on, after his resignation from the Indiana Reformatory in 1883, to a distinguished career as chair of obstetrics at the Jefferson Medical College and president of the American Medical Association; Smith and Coffin evaded full accountability for the many acts of violence that they personally perpetrated and that, in their role as prison administrators, they enabled through the work of staff who reported to them. But these charges and the stories of abuse shared by women like Eva and like Mary Jane Schweitzer, who was forced to endure experimental surgeries and a range of other medical abuses and non-consensual treatments while incarcerated in the IWP in the 1870s, are believed and also credibly defended in *Who Would Believe a Prisoner?* In the chapter about Parvin and his reign of medical terror in the Reformatory, Anastazia Schmid writes: "Facts surrounding medicine practiced in institutions of social control are chronically overlooked by those who lack the firsthand experience of incarceration. Those with firsthand experience are aware the abuses they have suffered are purposely omitted from records, to protect the system and the powerful within it" (p.126).

By "heed[ing] the echoes" (p.138) of abusive practices in carceral spaces and by asserting their right to refuse the authority of the official archive and the celebratory tales of prison reform, moral progress, and white, middle-class benevolence that "historically exclude and devalue captive voices" (p.xxvii), the scholars of the IWPHP wage a powerful abolition-feminist critique and rewrite the history of women's prisons in Indiana. Jones argues, "Incarcerated scholars intimately understand and experience marginalization, secrecy and subjection. We are also better

able to comprehend through our own experiences the systematic subjugation of others. Unearthing human stories and the structures and formations that created their subjugated experiences is a vital strength we bring to our work” (p.xviii). *Who Would Believe a Prisoner?* uses these methodological strengths to upend the familiar 19th century history of progressive reform, “correction”, rehabilitation, and the delivery of what many abolition-feminists now refer to, ironically, as “carceral care” (Hwang 2019) in violent and abusive institutions of confinement like those that Smith and Coffin built up and managed over many decades. By centering the “captive” and refusing to replicate the violence of the archive in which she appears, often only in traces, the IWPHP creates a powerful counter-narrative that targets the occlusions, silences, and omissions of the archive.

Saidiya Hartman (2019: xiii) has observed that “[e]very historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor”. The collective of incarcerated scholars in the IWPHP takes on this critical work, paying tribute to the suffering, and also the “resilience and tenacity” (p.246), of the women and girls who experienced violence, resisted their abusers, exercised a measure of agency, and rarely survived long enough to share their stories on their own terms, as credible witnesses to their own and others’ experiences of abuse. A book that is “scholarly in nature yet also deeply personal and accusatory in tone” (p.xv), as IWPHP faculty Kelsey Kauffman has accurately described it, *Who Would Believe a Prisoner?* seeks to “rewrite history justly” (p.xxxix). The book stands as an eloquent answer to the question posed by Lara Campbell in the penultimate chapter: “I wonder how differently history might be written” (p.244), Campbell asks, if we were to take the claims of incarcerated women seriously?

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