

Review

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Elizabeth Comack. *Out There In Here: Masculinity, Violence and Prisoning*. Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008. 160 pp. ISBN: 9781552662588.

Elizabeth Cormack is a professor of sociology at the University of Manitoba where she researches various aspects of gender and criminalization. This book follows from her earlier work on violence against women and imprisoned women's perspectives on violence in their lives which drew on oral interviews with incarcerated women. It examines masculinity and violence in men's lives before and while they were in prison. Because we are incarcerating our citizens at an increasing rate, she argues, it is critical that we understand the way the prison experience intensifies and exaggerates pressures to "do' masculinity"(10).

Cormack explored this issue through interviews with nineteen incarcerated men, the majority of whom are aboriginal. The title gives a good indication of her theoretical and conceptual approaches: to critically interrogate masculinity as a social construction that shapes everyday experience, and to understand it as it intersects with class, race, and, especially, violence. She also employs standpoint analysis (chapter one). This book shares the view held by many criminologists and sociologists that the prison must not be treated as a distinct, separate space, and the criminal should not be treated as an "other." Rather, both are a part of mainstream society, a part of "us." By focusing on masculinity and violence in men's lives in *and* out of the prison, Cormack puts this theory into practice.

To undertake this research Cormack must wade into two distinct realms of ethical concern: gathering oral histories, and interviewing incarcerated men. From the social scientist's perspective, both are rife with potential problems. Is it possible for a white, female, feminist academic to enter a prison and have meaningful conversations with men who are for the most part poor, working-class, and aboriginal? Can men offer meaningful reflections on "masculinity" when they do not likely have a background in gender theory? How does the researcher approach very real experiences with sometimes tragic consequences as "constructed"? Will not the institution limit access to "star" prisoners? Will not prisoners be motivated to tell their stories in order to win favour with the administration? Thus, can any generalizations be made from this group?

Cormack deals with each of these issues in the book's afterword where she provides a detailed explanation of the research process, including acquiring the appropriate permissions to proceed, and creating a private space within the prison to conduct interviews. Only nineteen of the 459 men incarcerated at the institution

she worked with volunteered to be in her study, thus the sample, as she points out, is hardly representative (149). However, those who volunteered reflected the demographic diversity of the prison. Why anyone volunteered at all is the subject of some discussion (150-152) as is the issue of the truthfulness of the testimonies (152-154) and the problem of difference between the interviewee and interviewer (154-156). Skeptics would do well to read this section first. It may be the case that some barriers are impossible to overcome, but Cormack shows that with thoughtfulness and care tremendous strides can be made toward reducing and even eliminating some of the most obvious obstacles.

What her interviews, which lasted from thirty minutes to two hours, revealed, is that incarcerated men use the tools of masculinity which are most available to them – strength, force, violence – to get by in life. Drawing on James Messerschmidt's work (16-25), Cormack treats masculinity as a social construction for which power and control over others is its most central definition. Because most of Cormack's informants are aboriginal, the role of colonialism is also considered. Men with access to material and social resources can exercise control in myriad legitimate ways; men who come from unstable and violent families, and whose families were torn apart by state intervention, often lack emotional and financial resources and an education to "make it" in the straight world, and are forced to resort to criminal activities.

Theft, gang affiliation, drug dealing, and other illegal activities upon which many of her informants rely for their daily bread demand a willingness to engage in violent behavior. Not surprisingly, aggressive, confrontational, and defensive modes of relating to the world also affect personal relationships; some of her informants were serving sentences for spousal violence. Cormack makes no excuses for their violence, but makes the compelling argument that prisons "exacerbate rather than resolve the problem of crime, [thus] we need to seriously question the resort to incarceration as a solution to social disorder" (138).

Long and unedited direct quotes from her interviews (and secondary sources as well) are used to illustrate points along the way, thus letting informants speak for themselves. Since her interviewees' speech is punctuated by more than the usual "umms" and "ahhs," critics might argue that this approach risks undermining the credibility of the informants. When contrasted with the scholarly language that envelops their testimony, they appear much less articulate than the author. This critique is misplaced, however. Such judgments about different speech forms reveal more about the reader's prejudices than the narrator's competence as an 'expert' on masculinity. Others might find that direct quotes are too long and used too often but it is precisely this aspect of oral testimony-based research that I value the most. It empowers the informant as the owner and narrator of his story, and can be an effective way of revealing intensities of feeling that academic writing often flattens.

Written principally for sociologists and criminologists, *Out There In Here* will appeal to any one with an interest in gender studies, as well as prison studies. It would be a shame, however, if it were not read even more widely, for as Cormack says, incarcerated people are us. Their issues, their histories, and their lives are part of the world we have constructed. The life experiences of those we send into custody deserve more attention than we currently give them.