
Book Reviews

Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition by
Liat Ben-Moshe, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 366 pp.,
4 black-and-white photos.

Near the end of *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition*, Liat Ben-Moshe (Assistant Professor of Criminology, Law, and Justice at the University of Illinois at Chicago) writes, “There is an urgent need to understand the disabling and maddening effects of carceral sites, including jails and prisons, as not only segregating and incarcerating disability/madness (as asylums or ‘the new asylums’) but as sites of disablement and, more so, sites of targeted debilitation, which is a form of state violence” (p. 282). She continues emphasizing the necessity for “targeted debilitation . . . to be countered in a nonableist and intersectional way, one that understands lived forms of disablement that is, disability, as political . . . to mobilize disability collectives and movements for the service of abolition” (p. 282). Ben-Moshe powerfully argues that coalitional work, embedded in Black feminist thought, disability justice principles, and “crip/mad of color critique” (p. 28) works and struggles toward a future where *all* are free from carceral spaces. She refuses carceral feminist and white, liberal-rights-focused, disability-studies approaches that seek recourse from the state, especially when addressing sexual assault and violence. Instead, Ben-Moshe argues that by seeking “new ways of reacting to each other” (p. 28), we can begin the process of “disepistemology” (p. 283) to demand a “nonsegregationist logic” (p. 280).

Decarcerating Disability is an expansive text covering seven chapters and many decades of abolitionist and decarceral activism. Central to this genealogy (à la Foucault), is an understanding that abolition has happened before through the closing of large institutions for those with labels of intellectual disability and mental illness. These institutional spaces, such as Pennhurst and Willowbrook, once incarcerated thousands in violent, disabling spaces, separating individuals from their families, friends, lovers, and communities. Many of the individuals were locked away in these spaces supposedly because the “community” outside was violent but also needed to be protected from those incarcerated inside. This double-bind illustrates the institutional logic embedded in “non-non-nons” rhetoric around abolition that imagines only the “nonviolent, nonserious, and nonsexual

offenses” can be addressed outside of prison and other carceral spaces (p. 123). Yet, as Ben-Moshe rightly avers, keeping unchecked the logic that some (the supposed “severely disabled,” or “serial rapists,” or “criminally insane”) belong in institutions and prisons “masks the violence of the state and lets state apparatuses define what violence means” (p. 124). Ben-Moshe traces how when large institutions for those with labels of intellectual and developmental disabilities were closed, the supposed “severely” disabled were among the first to move to community placements demonstrating that no one needs to be institutionalized. Alongside Angela Davis, Ben-Moshe seeks to use “feminist, Black freedom dreams” and “queer of color critique” in order to “move into the kind of building from anew that are the work of abolition as dis-epistemology” (p. 125).

In chapter 1, “The Perfect Storm: Origin Stories of Deinstitutionalization,” Ben-Moshe complicates the commonly told and taught story of why large bed institutions (psych hospitals and institutions for those with labels of intellectual and developmental disabilities) closed. Many individuals, including myself in my own graduate training, are told that shifting public sentiment about institutions, coverage of the violent conditions in these institutions, efforts at cost-cutting measures, and the creation of prescription drugs that “treated” or “cured” created the “perfect storm” (p. 38) that led to deinstitutionalization. Ben-Moshe argues that these series of events should not be considered merely as sparks bringing the work of deinstitutionalization to the forefront, rather as mechanisms of state neoliberal interests, for example Governor Reagan’s closures of institutions and psych hospitals. Ben-Moshe critically asks, “Can we call the deinstitutionalization that resulted from such neoliberal ideologies, which show no concern for quality of life or life itself, a win? Is it abolition if the closure is done solely through neoliberal racist ideology?” (p. 60).

The second chapter, “Abolition in Deinstitutionalization: Normalization and the Myth of Mental Illness,” engages with the work of Thomas Szasz (for the abolition of psychiatry) and Wolf Wolfensberger (the principal of normalization). In this chapter, she explicates her theory of “Dis Inc.” referring to “two aspects of neoliberalism: ‘disability incarcerated’ and ‘Disability Incorporated’” (p. 14). Dis Inc. “simultaneously captures the corporatization of disability for profit by carceral institutions and the ways disability is subjected to incorporation in society, but only by respectability politics and assimilation” that uphold racial capitalism and able-nationalism (p. 14). Importantly, Ben-Moshe argues how discourses of normalization and abolishing psychiatry are often lacking intersectional analyses, in addition how white supremacy and ableism uphold each other. She also argues how post-deinstitutionalization, many individuals with labels of intellectual and developmental disabilities are living in locations where normalization brings around increased surveillance and segregation (pp. 108–109).

Chapter 3, “Abolition as Knowledge and Ways of Unknowing,” continues to explain how forwarding abolition requires centering “intersectional fugitive/maroon abolitionist knowledges” to demand a future free of carceral systems of violence and seclusion in order to change our relationship to discourses of “dangerous,” “criminal,” and “safety,” which are deeply embedded in white supremacist, settler-colonialist, hetero, ableist/sanist ways of being (pp. 112–113, 124–126). Abolition is not only for closing, but also, importantly, creating (p. 132). As such, “reclaiming utopia, unhappiness, uncertainty, as liberatory

disepistemologies would conceive abolition as helpful, and hap-full, in fashioning new ways of envisioning and being in the world” (p. 133).

Ben-Moshe continues to forward a decarceral, crip/mad of color critique in chapter 4, addressing the often-cited rhetoric that prisons are the “new asylums.” Many scholars and journalists will repeat such claims arguing that due to closing of asylums the number of homeless people increased at the same time jails and prisons expanded. Often connected to these claims is a statement casually claiming that the largest number of individuals per capita receiving mental health services are incarcerated. Ben-Moshe argues that these “slogans provide a reductionist political stance that flattens complicated historical and socioeconomic realities” (p. 135). There are many strong arguments made in this chapter including linking the conditions of neoliberalism to the expansion of homelessness: “housing insecurity cannot be explained by mental health status or deinstitutionalization because it is endemic to neoliberal life, not a side effect of it” (p. 142). In addition, Ben-Moshe argues that for prisons and jails to be seen as providing mental health services, they would have to be equipped to meet the needs of the incarcerated individuals, however, these locations are places “of disablement that create and exacerbate mental ill health. Discussing them as places in which people can or do get treatment is not only inaccurate but also ethically and ideologically problematic, as it legitimizes incarceration and makes it appear needed and normalized” (p. 156). Powerfully she maintains, “We need to work to end disablement as a form of state violence without ending disability or madness as a way of life or a way to view the world” (p. 156).

In chapter 5, “Resistance to Inclusion and Community Living: NIMBY, Desegregation, and Race-ability,” traces how racism and ableism intersect to conflate “criminalization with pathologization” (p. 168). In this chapter, Ben-Moshe discusses how the NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) discourse as resistance to the building of group homes problematically led disability advocates to argue that future residents of these group homes are not “criminal” or belong in “ghettos.” This discourse reinforces anti-Blackness and white supremacist constructions of the “normal” and “deviant,” thus erasing how ableism and racism intersect in the lives of disabled people of color. As such, Ben-Moshe traces how individuals were “welcomed into the community, as long as they don’t act or look transgressive, whether by race, class, sexuality, or disability” (p. 186). In chapter 6, “Political and Affective Economies of Closing Carceral Enclosures,” Ben-Moshe continues this analysis tracing how assumed innocent (“white”) disabled individuals are constructed as needing to be deinstitutionalized, but the “dangerous” and “criminal” (assumed but not explicitly named as BIPOC, or Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) should be incarcerated to protect the “innocent” (pp. 194–195). These discourses reinforce white supremacist systems that continue to incarcerate BIPOC, many of whom are disabled, crip, and/or queer as well. In this chapter, Ben-Moshe also addresses how labor unions are often opposed to closing down large institutions and other carceral spaces. She argues that labor and disability movements might have greater opportunities for alliance if “carceral enclosures were understood as sites of debilitation (physical, mental, etc.)” for all (p. 224). Ultimately, she argues, “Disability and the value of vulnerability, as well as reframing innocence and danger, could be an entry point into

the complex battles surrounding the closure of carceral enclosures and the labor and care involved therein” (p. 227).

In the last chapter, “Decarcerating through the Courts: Past, Present, and Future of Institutional and Prison Litigation,” Ben-Moshe traces the various cases that led to the closing of institutions and other places of incarceration, including *Halderman v. Pennhurst State School and Hospital*, *Wyatt v. Stickney*, and *Holt v. Sarver*. Ben-Moshe argues how incremental closing and reform do not challenge the “logic of incarceration” (p. 264). She powerfully argues for “anti-prison movements” by engaging with disability justice to “understand disability as an analytic, a lens from which to view the world and not only through ableist frameworks” (p. 266). Likewise, “abolitionist and fugitive knowledges in the prison arena can inform disability rights activism about the dangers of seeking relief through the state, and the need to grapple with state violence” (p. 266). These coalitional efforts can continue to challenge the logics behind incarceration.

Decarcerating Disability is an impressive text that powerfully argues for robust coalitional politics to challenge the logic of incarceration. Entire syllabi and reading groups can be structured around this text as Ben-Moshe opens up much to consider, especially how to effectively demand carceral-free futures, while also valuing disability. I am eager to follow how this book will shape and open up new conversations in disability studies. The archive of sources she brings together is also equally impressive. Ben-Moshe seamlessly utilizes queer of color critique, Black feminist writing, disability studies theories, and critical sociology alongside journalist accounts, legal rulings, and documentary film. This type of approach that moves through and beyond assumed disciplinary boundaries makes this text exciting to teach, impactful to read, and certainly something to share with colleagues and comrades committed to abolition and disability justice.

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***Materializing Difference: Consumer Culture, Politics, and Ethnicity among Romanian Roma* by Péter Berta, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019, 390 pages with 34 color photographs.**

Anthropology has a long and dark history in Romania. Not unsurprisingly, Roma communities have felt this darkness directly. In this way, the anthropology of Roma communities lives in the haunting shadows of the history of race science and eugenics, the legacy of modernity’s violence, and the legitimization of state violence.¹ There have also been numerous debates about the limits of anthropology and about the associated changes needed to undo the violent history of the discipline.² However, undoing and unhinging

1. See for example Marius Turda, “The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania,” in *Slavic Review*, 66 (3) 2007, 413–441; and Turda, *Eugenism și antropologie rasială în România 1874–1944 [Eugenics and racial anthropology in Romania 1874–1944]*, Cuvântul, 2008.

2. See perhaps most recently R.C. Jobson, “The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn: Sociocultural Anthropology in 2019,” *American Anthropologist*, 122 (2) 2020, 259–271.