

**Out There / In Here: Masculinity, Violence and Prisoning  
by Elizabeth Comack**

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*Reviewed by Krystle Maki*

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Feminist critiques of crime have always questioned gender in relation to women's criminalization and positioned it at the centre of the analysis, so why, Comack asks, have we not done the same to understand men's experiences of criminalization? This question leads her to conduct in-depth interviews with 19 incarcerated men in a Manitoba prison. Drawing on feminist standpoint methodology, this account is grounded in the detailed personal histories of the incarcerated men interviewed.

The first section of this book focuses on 'bringing masculinity into view'. Comack locates the incarceration of men within the context of neoliberal restructuring, which has rolled back social services and simultaneously invested resources into expanding prisons and crime control. Comack does not position violence as an inherently male characteristic, rather she frames male violence as a response to the 'social anxiety' exacerbated by neoliberal restructuring, which has heightened social inequality. By examining the current socio-political context and how it shapes everyday interactions, Comack moves beyond popular pathological and psychological explanations for crime and violence among men. To understand the experiences of the men interviewed, Comack draws on the theoretical work of criminologist James Messerschmitt, who she views as one of the few scholars attempting to highlight the relationships between men, masculinity and crime. His theory positions men's crime as "doing" masculinity – essentially claiming that we perform our gender, it is not an inherent, static or natural part of ourselves, but rather a performance based on societal norms and expectations.

*Sections Two and Four* of this text, explore the interviewee's experiences within broader society, both as children and as adults respectively. In both of these sections Comack highlights the ways in which institutions propagate violence. In some cases, interviewees convey how hegemonic masculinity acts as a resource and strategy for both boys and men to negotiate institutionalized violence. The third section looks at men's experiences as children, in what Comack refers to as "the care/custody mangle". Drawing on the men's narratives, this section explores their negotiation of masculinity growing up in state institutions, as well as how these institutions, such as foster care and detention centres, perpetuate violence. The fifth section focuses on how men negotiate masculinity within prison, illustrating how

prison, as well as other institutions perpetuate and normalize structural violence. The final section discusses resistance and explores other ways of “doing” masculinity.

The key thesis of this book is that violence is not an inherently masculine quality. Thus, it is important to look at the systemic violence that men have experienced, as well as how “prison itself is a gendering space, one in which violence figures prominently. It is also a gendering experience in which the pressures on men to ‘do’ masculinity are even more intense and exaggerated” (p. 10). Highlighting the narratives of her research participants to connect male violence with forms of structural violence they have experienced in youth and adulthood makes Comack’s contribution original and insightful.

At times I found it difficult to read the men’s accounts of their violence, particularly against women. However, by telling the stories of these prisoners, Comack questions dominant societal assumptions about what kinds of men reside in prisons, demonstrating that ‘they’ are more similar to ‘us’ than most wish to believe. Situating men’s violence – both in and outside of prison – within the larger socio-political context,

Comack is able to balance humanizing the male prisoners who make up her study, while not excusing their actions. I would recommend Comack’s book to men who have experienced criminalization, along with those who work with incarcerated men in and outside of prisons to gain perspective on structural violence.

#### ABOUT THE REVIEWER

*Krystle Maki* is currently a PhD student at Queen’s University in the Department of Sociology, where she also completed her MA. Her MA thesis is titled *Guilty Until Proven Eligible: Welfare Surveillance of Single Mothers in Ontario*. Krystle’s research interests include surveillance, feminist political economy, poverty and welfare policy.