BOOK REVIEWS

Abolitionist Intimacies
by El Jones (2022)
Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 218 pp.

Reviewed by David Dorson

This is a book that merits wide attention from anyone who cares about prisons, marginalized people, human rights and reasonable care for human beings. It can be read and appreciated by experts and lay people alike.

El Jones is well known across Canada as a fierce advocate for prison 'abolition' (more on that term later). She comes to that task from an academic perspective, but also as a poet and journalist. This book is a combination of poems, essays, and what Jones calls 'notes' – fragments of fieldnotes or journal entries drawn from her interactions with people in prison and those supporting them. Jones is striving to write in ways that accept academic conventions, but also go beyond them to honour her experience and that of the many prisoners she knows and supports. It is very different from most writing on the topic, and merits admiration.

The pieces are divided into eight themes or sections, although to my reading many of the central themes, such as the endemic racism in the system, or the way the humanity of prisoners (and their families) is ignored, run across all the sections.

It is difficult to write about the experience of prison in a way that accurately captures the realities of incarceration for readers who have not been through it, either as prisoners themselves or via a loved one. One of the many good things about El Jones' book is how well she manages to capture the emotional aspects of being incarcerated or supporting a prisoner, something I have found to be rare in the literature.

Jones writes: "To insist on loving, desiring, caring for, or being in relationship with someone in prison is to push back against not only state narratives but the very real mechanisms that stifle humanity, goodness, the possibility of transformation, or transcending the category of criminal". It takes a lot of courage, for which you may not be rewarded.

Because so many people assume that everyone in prison is guilty of doing something horrible, they also tend to think that anyone supporting, let alone loving, a prisoner also supports their crime. In many cases that I know of, family members or friends who maintained contact with a prisoner

were vilified by others, including people they regarded as friends or close colleagues. It's as if contact with a prisoner will spread contagion. And as Jones describes in several places, the prison system itself often treats family members and friends as potential dangers, not as crucial supports for prisoners' wellbeing.

Jones describes well the abuse, the boredom, the deprivation and humiliation of being locked up – and the equivalent things visited on those who care for prisoners. She is also eloquent on the ways that prison renders people helpless and often hopeless. She gives many examples of how our systems often make it impossible for people to do the things we say we want them to do, and then they are blamed and punished further for failing to do just those things. For example, we may require people in prison to gain further education, then offer substandard education or none at all and then deny people parole because they have not improved their education.

As another illustration, Jones uses the powerful story of Abdoul Abdi, who the government was determined to deport following his prison sentence because while he was a child ward of the state, he did not apply for citizenship. The fact that none of the adults responsible for his care during those years applied on his behalf is seen by the government as irrelevant.

The overall effect of the book is very powerful. Jones conveys as well as anyone I have ever read the frustrations, pains, and lasting wounds of imprisonment without ever condescending or otherwise belittling the people she writes about. Unlike many other attempts, in which those written about are objects for the writer's attention, the people here are always treated with respect, as subjects with agency, whatever their challenges might be.

Here is one of the best encapsulations of one aspect of the prison world that I have seen. "Out in the world, when something goes wrong you can make calls. You can ask questions…. you can complain. In prison, they can do what they want. It doesn't matter if it's unfair, or against regulations, or even illegal. What is anyone going to say when the prison has you at their mercy? If someone doesn't want to do their job, you have no way to make them" (p. 35). My experience was that prison is a place full of rules but where those rules may or may not be followed depending on the whims of staff. And there is no recourse. The grievance system is a joke, but in any case prisoners are subject to all kinds of repercussions for complaining. As a recent report of the Senate of Canada concluded, prisons themselves violate the law quite often (Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, 2024).

A key theme in the book is linking the wrongs of imprisonment to the larger issues of criminalization, notably racism and poverty. Jones provides scathing critiques of the failure of major institutions, such as the child welfare system, to do what they are supposed to and describes how their practices often create harm. Consider group homes or foster care where children were abused, or residential schools. She writes with great clarity and force about how different the experience of Canada is for people who are Black or Indigenous, and how some groups are so often treated unfairly by our supposedly impartial systems. The prison system itself is rife with discriminatory practices.

Another important aspect of this book is that Jones asks important questions about her role as an advocate for and support to imprisoned people. She raises the issue of how one can advocate for people who in some cases have done really bad things, and concludes: "I can't say, justice only for the people who are sympathetic. Rights only for the people we like. I can't choose who the 'good' people are. So I believe with all my heart we fight for justice for everyone… We'd like it all to be tidy and put away nicely, but it doesn't work like that" (p. 130). This is such an important point and one so often missed in the struggle for better justice.

The term 'abolition' often elicits negative connotations, indicating a kind of hopeless romanticism. Here's what Jones says (in part) about that term:

> Abolition… is not just about eliminating material structures of incarceration and punishment such as prisons and police; It is more deeply about shifting our relationships to land, to capitalism, to each other, and to ourselves… Abolition is also the shifting of knowledge hierarchies away from the idea that justice is the province of a few highly trained law experts and academics. Instead, we know the work of abolition lives in our communities every day, including in our refusal to abandon or dehumanize those living inside the walls period (p. 195).

That may be an ideal, but surely, it is one worth striving for.

REFERENCES

Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights (2024) "Cruel and unusual: As "draconian" solitary confinement continues, Corrections, Minister and Government fail to heed

Senate committee recommendations", Ottawa: Parliament of Canada – October 24. Retrieved from: https://sencanada.ca/en/newsroom/ridr-cruel-and-unusual-as-draconian-solitary-confinement-continues-corrections-minister-and-government-fail-to-heed-senate-committee-recommendations/

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

David Dorson is the pen name of someone who went through arrest, case disposition, imprisonment and parole in Ontario a few years ago.