



Book Review

Coming Back to Jail: Women, Trauma and Criminalization

Comack, Elizabeth. (2018), Black Point, NS: Fernwood. ISBN 9781773630106 (paper) CDN\$29.95. 272 pages

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Coming Back to Jail: Women, Trauma and Criminalization is a sobering look at how colonialism, gendered violence, and trauma come together to victimize and criminalize Indigenous women. With the rates of Indigenous women incarcerated in Canada continuing to skyrocket, Comack's arguments and explorations into this issue are timely and sorely needed. The book explores a variety of issues: poverty, familial and sexual abuse in Indigenous communities, and ongoing intergenerational trauma stemming from residential schools. Comack argues that colonial attitudes and ideas (e.g., capitalism and patriarchy) both contribute to these problems and remain so deeply embedded within the Canadian penal system that they only further oppress and traumatize criminalized Indigenous women.

Coming Back to Jail provides a vivid historical account of the criminalization of Indigenous peoples in Canada. However, the book is not simply an historical text. Rather, Comack expertly weaves in deeply personal and contemporary stories of trauma and resilience from the women she interviewed at the Women's Correctional Centre (WCC) in Headingley, Manitoba. The women's courage and ability to tell their own stories in their own words is a clear reflection of Comack's decolonial feminist stance. It also is critical in uncovering and understanding the issues that keep them in the ever "revolving door" of the penal system. What Comack makes startlingly clear is that the responsibility of keeping these women out of jail does not fall solely on the shoulders of the inmates themselves; from Comack's thoroughly sociological perspective, it is the system that is broken.

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Therefore, healing can only truly occur when that system is restructured to no longer encourage and contribute to colonialism, systemic racism, violence, and the criminalization of women.

The book sheds light on how the incarcerated women who shared their stories with her survive intersecting traumas and how, in many cases, it is survival tactics such as drinking and drug use that have landed them in jail. What is fascinating – and offers new insights and perspectives – is how Comack ties these women’s stories to theories about trauma as lived sociological experience as opposed to purely psychological fact. Comack opts to frame trauma sociologically because, she argues, this “avoids the tendency to construct the women as ‘psychologically damaged’ or as ‘embodying victimization’” (p. 28). A sociological framework enables an understanding of trauma (and hence these women’s criminalization) as resulting from systemic issues such as colonialism, thereby pointing to Canada’s history of systemic racism and cultural genocide as key factors in the ongoing criminalization of Indigenous women.

It is in this context of a deeply critical analysis that Comack calls attention to the bail system and related probation conditions that many of the women she interviewed breached. In particular, like the women with whom she spoke, Comack highlights that both of these systems set up already criminalized women for failure by demanding that they break crucial connections with family and friends who, while they also may be criminalized, often are these women’s only sources of social support. As a result, many criminalized women feel they do not have a choice but to breach imposed probation conditions, which only exacerbate their underlying traumas and further block their options for healing. Stated directly, from this perspective the bail system punishes an already marginalized and impoverished population, and the conditions of probation are just one of the many mechanisms of this broken system that keep women coming back to jail.

Despite these circumstances and the strikes against them, the women in the WCC display tremendous resiliency in prison. They openly discuss with Comack how prison brings with it many complex and confusing relationship dynamics, which are often challenging to navigate. In their interviews, they discuss having to endure boredom, fights with other inmates, aloof or sometimes cruel prison staff, overcrowded prisons, lack of resources, lack of adequate food and exercise, and being cut off from family and friends on the outside. Still, they manage to find ways to survive. For example, many spoke of friendships they formed inside the prison walls and the support they give and receive from other criminalized women. This is yet another reflection of the resiliency of Indigenous women.

It is clear that these women need more support than they are currently getting. Comack does not discuss many rehabilitation programs in the WCC,

and the ones she does mention are described as being too crowded for many of the women to access. This lack of discussion of rehabilitative programs available to incarcerated women could indicate a lack of programming and, thus, another way that the prison system continues to fail women. Throughout the book, Comack poses many tough questions, but offers very few explicit answers. This underscores the sociological complexity of how trauma, gendered violence, and colonization come together in ways that punish women for circumstances that are often beyond their control. Comack, does however, offer the reader hope for the future by listening to the voices of incarcerated Indigenous women.

Comack highlights decolonization as a way forward, that is ongoing efforts by all of us to hear Indigenous women's voices and understand the pain, intergenerational trauma, and cultural genocide that have occurred and continue to occur in Indigenous communities and to Indigenous people in Canada. To this end, Comack clearly seeks to tackle the issue of overrepresentation of Indigenous women in prison in a way that does not frame Indigenous women as the source of the problem, but rather as victims and survivors of colonization, patriarchal and gendered violence, and a justice system that turns a blind eye to the ways that their trauma is a product of socio-legal and historical structures rather than an expression of individual psychology. For criminologists and anyone involved in social justice, Comack's decolonial feminist perspective is crucial not only to help critically analyze issues like incarceration, but also to help to put an end to the toxic cycle that, if left unaddressed, will simply keep Indigenous women coming back to jail.