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Megan Sweeney. *Reading Is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xvi + 332 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3352-0; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7100-3.

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“Equipment for Living”: The Uses of Books in Women’s Prisons

When I began *Reading Is My Window*, the subject of reading in contemporary women’s prisons was quite foreign to me. Yet, as I read this book, which is categorized as Women’s Studies/African American Studies/Criminology, it drew me in on many levels and was very rewarding. Megan Sweeney, currently an associate professor of English at the University of Michigan, has written a book filled with psychological, literary, historical, pedagogical, and cultural insights. Her research is based on several reading groups that she conducted among ninety-four female prisoners, mostly between the ages of twenty-five and forty, with about half identifying their race as African American and half as white. The prisons were located in Cleveland, Ohio; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Muncy, Pennsylvania. In addition to group discussions, she also conducted 245 personal interviews.

Sweeney begins with a clear and provoking introduction, followed by two chapters that delve into the history of reading in prisons and the material aspects of reading for prisoners. The crux of this book is the next three chapters, each based on a single genre of literature—literature of victimization, urban fiction, and self-help. Two “interludes” in which Sweeney features in-depth portraits of two prisoners’ reading practices in the context of their life stories are also included. Prior to the conclusion, another chapter centers on reflections of the experience of the reading group. There is a great textual and visual depth to this book, even though it has only 258 pages of text.

Sweeney grounds her study in feminist and literary theory. Perhaps the most important theorist for her study is Angela Davis, who calls for a particular type of prison reform in her work, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003). Sweeney quotes Davis’s argument that anti-prison activists “must perform a ‘balancing act.’” Activists should work to create institutions that are “‘more humane, habitable environments for people in prison without bolstering the permanence of the prison system.’” Thus while helping prisoners in various ways, activists should also call “‘for alternatives to that sentencing altogether, no more prison construction, and abolitionist strategies that question the place of the prison in our future.’”[1] Sweeney argues that her own work “dwells in the space of this challenge by exploring some of the strategies that women prisoners adopt for surviving in the here and now.” She recounts that many of the women in her study “achieve critical insight, self-development, and even transformation” through reading within prison walls. Her work also opens “a window onto our society” by giving prisoners a voice, one that often highlights racial and social problems that undergird imprisonment. While illustrating the transformative nature of reading in prisons, she maintains, “we must reckon with the structural causes—and consequences—of current punishment trends” (p. 3).

Another important foundation for Sweeney is Kenneth Burke’s idea, which dates back to 1938, that books can be utilized as “equipment for living.”[2] Sweeney ex-

plains that this means “a tool for framing and making meaning of their experiences, and as raw material for continually fashioning themselves as subjects” (p. 7). This broad definition of reading informs much of her analysis of reading practices. She explains that “women engage in reading practices that sometimes resemble therapy and consciousness-raising” and that help women to “grapple with complexities of their own lives” (p. 7). In chapter 2, Sweeney develops the many uses of books in prisons. Aside from psychological awareness, women may seek to attain knowledge in a particular field, such as law or business, and copy important passages in a notebook for later use. Books also serve as a form of escapism and a way to structure time. Although the women have access to three television networks, many prefer reading and find watching television to be too passive.

Chapter 1 summarizes the history of reading in prisons and its radical, disciplinary, and therapeutic uses. A key movement that was in effect in some places from the 1920s to the 1970s was bibliotherapy, which is defined as “a discussion process, guided by a facilitator, using literature as a catalyst to promote insight, normal development, or rehabilitation” (p. 33). Bibliotherapists would allow prisoners to reflect and analyze literature in efforts to understand their lives and the world around them, yet the therapeutic use often co-mingled with the disciplinary. However, from the 1970s onward, funding for libraries and education decreased, and a shift toward “highly draconian penal practices” in the 1980s resulted in more censorship in many institutions (p. 40). Many left-wing works as well as urban fiction are often prohibited in the jail libraries. In essence, Sweeney is acting as a bibliotherapist, a term that is now somewhat of an anachronism.

Her first thematic chapter on reading revolves around the group discussions of works that deal with abuse and victimization. Some of these works fit the category of “misery literature,” which are memoirs of abuse, while two are fiction, including Gayl Jones’s *Eva’s Man* (1976). This genre has become popular over the last few decades, particularly among women, but authors have faced criticism from those claiming that the genre contributes to a “preoccupation with victimization,” and a “culture of dependency and attachment to suffering” (p. 83). Moreover, in focusing on individual growth and the process of becoming a survivor these narratives can occlude the need for social change. In addition, some feminist theorists do not always support women speaking out about suffering because they think that it promotes male hierarchy and is not politically useful.[3]

However, this genre served many purposes in the reading groups. Many of the women expressed a lack of resources for dealing with their emotional problems when in prison. The needs of prisoners to deal with issues that are found in these books becomes even more apparent when one understands that 89.4 percent of the women in Sweeney’s study experienced some form of physical or emotional abuse, sexual abuse, rape, or domestic violence. Reading narratives of victimization was a way for them to think about their own problems; there were many debates and discussions about such topics as “the abuse excuse,” sexual desire, and overcoming abuse (p. 97).[4] While some theorists worry that a focus on victimization will lead people to “wallow” in their victimization, one participant stated during the discussion, “I got to move on, because if I stay laying back here in this big old puddle of bull, how could I raise my kids? How can you even survive?” (p. 103). Instead of promoting self-pity, these narratives could lead to an appreciation of assertiveness. Prisoners also recounted their experiences of being silenced and disrespected by authorities, and how they often heard “what happens in the house stays in the house” (p. 93). While Sweeney admits that silence can have a “strategic and protective role” for women, she is able to assert, “The silence around victims is not old news; it remains a pressing issue for many women prisoners” (p. 127).

The second genre Sweeney and the readers discussed was African American urban fiction. This type of literature faces heavy opposition from prison officials, who often censor it, and from many in the academy who find it poor quality literature. Indeed, Sweeney herself had some reservations because of the “ideological underpinnings” of the books, which often promote mercilessness and violence to maintain material wealth, often through drug dealing (p. 145). In these books, women fight over powerful men who will care for them. They often espouse a notion of justice based on individual enactments of revenge, thereby leaving little room for imagining mutuality, cooperation, or shared struggle for collective benefit” (p. 145).

Despite these reservations, the groups read a series of urban books, which sometimes could not be left in the prison libraries afterward, like the other books Sweeney used in her research. Some of the women praised these books, did not question their main premises, and felt that they kept them in touch with their former social lives. They enjoyed the familiar language and focus on street hustling, and some became inspired to write their own books. Other women thought that the books were unre-

alistic and that women should expand their horizons to other types of books. For Sweeney, these books served as an interesting entry into a discussion of the American Dream and race. She also found that through reading urban fiction, “some women gain greater self-awareness, learn from the characters’ mistakes, increase their sense of agency, and even develop empathy for others” (p. 171).

The last genre was self-help, much of it Christian, which had a large presence in prison libraries due to donations from writers, such as Joyce Meyer. Self-help and positive thinking have attracted all types of criticism over the last twenty years, from writers who think that such books are psychologically superficial, to those who argue that they promote behavioral conformity and that they create an “individualization of social conflict” that focuses on personal change and transformation of the individual, rather than questioning social and political problems that influence individual lives.[5] Sweeney believes that some of the criticisms are apt but she emphasizes the lack of resources for prisoners. She writes that since “penal systems marginalize radical prisoners and deny women access to reading materials that emphasize structural models of change, books that foreground individual models of change are some of the only available resources.” Women in prison “are doing the best they can with available materials when they engage with self-help discourse” (p. 175).

In this section, Sweeney brings in Michel Foucault in a fascinating way. Sweeney writes that, “because self-help discourse can encourage individuals to scrutinize their psychology, social position, and upbringing, and because it can promote efforts to achieve socially defined standards of health, happiness, and success, the early Foucault might view it as a means by which individuals subject themselves to the disciplinary and normalizing demands of institutional power” (p. 179). Sweeney does not stop at that insight, which refers to Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). She includes a discussion of Foucault’s idea of “technologies of self.” She quotes his definition of this practice as one that “‘permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.’”[6] Thus, he asserted that self-analysis, becoming “‘the doctor of oneself’” and knowing “‘ontologically what you are,’” was part of making one’s life “‘a work of art’” and was a “‘practice of freedom.’”[7] Sweeney argues, “The women involved in my

study help to bridge Foucault’s earlier emphasis on the totalizing power of the prison and his subsequent emphasis on the aesthetic work of self-creation because they demonstrate some of the forms that care of the self can take in the heart of the carceral continuum” (p. 179). Through reading self-help, they examined themselves and social problems; they are conducting “‘critical ontology,’” which is a practice of freedom, while they are incarcerated (p. 180).[8]

The interludes, totaling roughly twenty-two pages, give in-depth portraits of two women who consider their reading to be very valuable. For Denise, it has been an extremely meaningful activity, inspiring reflection and self-discovery. After reading urban books exclusively for a period, Monique realized she wanted to change and now focuses on motivational books. She has a more selective reading process explaining, “Any book that I read, I take from it what I need and put the rest of it back on the shelf” (p. 221).

Sweeney is open about her challenges in conducting research and acting as a discussion leader for the reading groups. She often wanted the women to recognize the themes and passages she valued in literature and had trouble discussing books that lacked complexity. Yet, she learned that “although books may seem boring, irrelevant, or uninteresting to some readers, they can still spark meaningful and lively dialogue” (pp. 246-247).

Sweeney also had some uncertainty about her role as a researcher and facilitator and was not sure if she should “simply facilitate conversations about genres that are popular among women prisoners, play a more interventionist role by fostering women’s critical engagement with these genres, or introduce books that were unavailable and unfamiliar to incarcerated readers” (p. 14). To get over this, she had the women participate in creating the reading list. Moreover, during discussions, she often allowed the women great freedom and sought to facilitate conversations rather than act as a leader.

The women seemed to thoroughly enjoy the chance to talk about a common text in groups. Sweeney thinks that collectively, the women were able to reap more benefit from reading than they would have on their own. Several friendships seem to have developed due to the group, and some women told Sweeney that they continued to have informal discussion groups with their peers. Moreover, some have been inspired to read a wider variety of books. Although she does acknowledge some problems in her groups, it was an overall good experience for those involved. These women had been willing volunteers, and

I was left wondering about those who did not choose to participate in such a study. What is their “equipment for living?”

A great strength of Sweeney is nothing less than her understanding of emotional life. Although she states that she had no formal training as a counselor, at another point she does say she has been a social worker. She offers the women ways to question and discuss literature and in doing so, life also. In her interviews and general assistance, she offers them encouragement and understanding, which is even more significant for the prisoners because it is from someone who is “neutral” and not directly affiliated with the prison system, of which many are suspicious.

In regards to the use of this book in the history of education, I would say that although only one chapter is strictly historical, it is highly recommended. Anybody interested in the subject of reading will find this thought provoking. It also reminded me how one should not generalize what people take away from reading a given text; the reading process is always very subjective. Perhaps this is commonsense, but it is surprising how often we, as scholars, readers, and teachers, might forget.

Notes

[1]. Quoted from Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 103-104.

[2]. Kenneth Burke, “Literature as an Equipment for Living,” *Direction* 1, no. 4 (1938): 10-13.

[3]. Wendy Brown, “Freedom’s Silences,” in *Edge-work: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 83-97; and Renee Heberle, “Deconstructive Strategies and the Movement against Sexual Violence,” *Hypatia* 11 (1996): 63-76.

[4]. On the “abuse excuse,” see Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Abuse Excuse and Other Cop-Outs, Sob Stories and Evasions of Responsibility* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994).

[5]. For examples of criticism of self-help books, see Wendy Kaminer, *I’m Dysfunctional, You’re Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1992); Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel, *One Nation under Therapy: How the Helping Culture Is Eroding Self-Reliance* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2005); and Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[6]. Quoted from Michel Foucault, “Technologies of Self,” in *Technologies of Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, et al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

[7]. Quoted from *ibid.*, 31. Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 282, 288; and Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *ibid.*, 312.

[8] Quoted from Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” 319.

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