

Book Review

Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating disability: Deinstitutionalization and prison abolition*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2020; 366 pp. ISBN 9781517904425 (cloth), \$120.00 USD; ISBN 9781517904432 (paper), \$30.00 USD

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In the foreword to the 2014 collection *Disability Incarcerated*, edited by Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman and Allison C. Cary, scholar-activist Angela Davis reflects that the chapters within the collection demonstrate how it is “[. . .] effectively impossible to understand incarceration without attending to the confinement of disabled people.” (Ben-Moshe et al., 2014, p. viii). Nevertheless, as Ben-Moshe notes in her 2020 book, *Decarcerating disability: Deinstitutionalization and prison abolition*, although disability and madness are an essential part of mass incarceration, rarely do the critique and interest in mass incarceration and decarceration fully attend to disability and madness (Ben-Moshe, 2020, p. 1). In *Decarcerating disability: Deinstitutionalization and prison abolition*, disability and mental difference are placed at the centre of the relationship between disability history and abolition theory, activism and scholarship.

Decarcerating disability: Deinstitutionalization and prison abolition makes an original and rich contribution to this critical intersection and debate. Inspired by Michel Foucault’s work, the book offers a genealogy of the closure of large, state-run residential institutions and psychiatric hospitals in the United States through “deinstitutionalisation”. Examining deinstitutionalisation as both a “logic” and something people “fought for and won,” the book begins with the challenging and provocative claim that deinstitutionalisation can be considered the largest decarceration movement in U.S. history. To this end, Ben-Moshe provides a series of detailed and varied case studies demonstrating the ways in which carceral abolition was enacted through deinstitutionalisation and the move towards community living for disabled people.

Ben-Moshe’s analysis is undertaken with attention to the commodification of disability through incarceration and the disabling and maddening nature of incarceration and confinement itself. Through use of *crip/mad of colour* critiques, which urge us to consider the ways in which the state operates to enforce racialised disablement (Kim, 2016, 2017), the book’s analysis is attentive to how the incarceration of disabled people is yoked to the logics of “racial captivity” (Rodriguez, 2005) in the wider settler colonial context of North America. The book is set to become a vital text for both activists and scholars, particularly for those working in scholarly fields and sub-disciplines such as critical criminology, critical carceral studies, disability studies, and mad studies.

The book is organised into seven chapters. The first chapter investigates the various narratives that are frequently used to construct deinstitutionalisation's origin story. Rather than rely on one account of how and why deinstitutionalisation happened (such as cost-cutting measures, exposes, the development and introduction of psychiatric drugs, and shifting public opinion), Ben-Moshe investigates how these accounts merged and coalesced together in often unpredictable and unforeseeable ways that would ultimately make deinstitutionalisation a possibility. Chapter two investigates two different influential figures who advocated forms of "abolition" in the deinstitutionalisation era: Thomas Szasz, and his call to abolish psychiatry as a medical field, and Wolf Wolfensberger's principle of normalisation, which promoted the notion that people with disability, especially people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, should have their quality of life enhanced to resemble that of people without disabilities.

In chapter three, Ben-Moshe extends upon these examples of "abolition within deinstitutionalisation," to illustrate how deinstitutionalisation, prison abolition, and anti-psychiatry are forms of knowledge, ways of knowing and (un)knowing which move beyond liberal rights frameworks, to embrace a broader imagination of a noncarceral, anti-segregationist society and world. Chapter four problematises the now common sense understanding that deinstitutionalisation (particularly the closure of psychiatric hospitals) was a major contributor towards homelessness of the formerly institutionalised, leading to the rise of mass incarceration, as prisons became the "new asylums." Ben-Moshe challenges this dominant narrative by arguing that within it "homelessness" becomes medicalised and pathologised. Ben-Moshe argues that the thesis tends to frame deinstitutionalisation as the problem, leaving aside the neoliberal policies that create the conditions of deprivation and housing insecurity, cautioning that the "new asylum" thesis may also intersect or align with increased calls for a "return" to institutionalisation.

Chapter five interrogates how deinstitutionalisation advocates and supporters of community living for people with intellectual disability in the 1970s and 1980s deployed discourses of "innocence" and "likeness" to gain inclusion and acceptance for people with intellectual disability. Ben-Moshe details how deinstitutionalisation advocates did so in the face of backlash and resistance to the construction of facilities for those exiting institutions, which she assesses as being animated by concerns about violence, neighbourhood changes, and decreasing property prices. Noting that "almost no systemic study to date relates [deinstitutionalisation] ... to racial integration," Ben-Moshe argues that deinstitutionalisation can be thought of a "desegregation" measure, which "intersected with racial desegregation in the United States" (Ben-Moshe, 2020, p. 162).

Chapter six examines the complex and varied forms of resistance to deinstitutionalisation. The analysis in this chapter attends to the gendered and racial dynamics of labour in order to understand the resistance from workers at institutional sites, unions, and parents and

families, to institutional closure and community living. In this section, Ben-Moshe's analysis draws on insights from feminist disability studies and is undertaken with an appreciation for the political nature of care/work. The book's final chapter moves to investigate the strategic use of prison and institutional reform litigation and class action lawsuits in the U.S. in the 1960s and 70s, as part of a push for decarceration and abolition more broadly. The chapter discusses the implications of landmark cases including Wyatt, Willowbrook, Ramos, Holt and Pennhurst (the latter case, Ben-Moshe outlines as being a form of abolition litigation, an outlier that did not form arguments in service of institutional or carceral reformism).

Ben-Moshe also looks at how more recent prison and prisoner's rights litigation often relies on disability and mental health as tools for advocating for change in the courts. While the book is attentive to settler colonialism and the dynamics of race (or, what Ben-Moshe usefully terms "race-ability"), the book could have been enhanced with further commentary or exploration of the ways in which deinstitutionalisation might connote different dynamics or phenomena across various local or regional contexts, outside North America. The book is set to become a valuable resource and source of discussion and debate, both activist and scholarly. I would like to acknowledge the context in which I read this book, in conversation with others through a reading group, which was also the coming-together of people with disability, disability justice organisers, and prison abolitionists. This group is indebted to Vanamali Hermans and Georgia Mantle for their work in creating an accessible (online) space that brought people into conversation about the book's ideas, with an eye to their significance in so-called Australia. This demonstrates that the book, while deeply conceptual, theoretical, and scholarly, can be—and has been—put to use in informing activist knowledge. Ultimately, *Decarcerating disability: Deinstitutionalization and prison abolition* is a bold and challenging critical intervention, which puts critical disability studies, deinstitutionalisation, decarceration, and abolition theory and scholarship into closer conversation with each other. In so doing, the book has pushed these fields forward in new and interesting ways. The book's strongest contribution is its attempt to transform, redefine, and reframe what disability studies is and can be about, its appeal to frame and address issues of incarceration and decarceration as disability and carceral abolition issues, and the generative groundwork laid for fostering coalitional, liberatory politics and ideas.

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