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Book Review

# Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State

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In 1977, the George Jackson Brigade declared in a communiqué: 'If people want a better society, they can start by becoming active feminists, anti-racists, and anti-imperialists' (p. 2). This charge is the premise of Stephen Dillon's book *Fugitive Life: The queer politics of the prison state.* Comprised of four chapters, *Fugitive Life* is an examination of gendered and racialized state power, by exploring Black feminist writing. In this analysis, he exposes and critiques the neoliberal-carceral state, which he defines as 'the intimacy between the possession of life itself by the market under neoliberal economics and the exponential expansion of systems of racialized capture and caging under law-and-order politics' (p. 4). Throughout the book, Dillon analyses neoliberalism as a biopolitical project which governs society using carceral violence, a form of racial warfare. He ultimately imagines alternative temporalities from this violence by theorising the role of queer fugitivity.

Dillon's methodology utilises the disciplinary frameworks of literary criticism, feminist, queer, and ethnic studies. His critical intervention draws upon an archive of writings by the George Jackson Brigade, Angela Davis, Susan Choi, Assata Shakur, and the Weather Underground, arguing that 'knowledge produced by the prisoner exposes a truth about the United States that cannot be accessed from elsewhere' (p. 12). These underground sites of knowledge production 'acted as a temporal space that queered normative regimes of living, knowledge, and governance (…) the fugitive and the underground are formations that produced a conception of freedom founded on running away' (p. 24). The queer fugitive, a method located within activist writing and the underground, offers a site that disrupts these systems.

Differing from the freedom project of queer fugitives, Dillon also examines queer as a process of deeming some populations as disposable. In this interpretation, queerness is 'a method for comprehending how power produces racialized, gendered, and sexual difference as a proximity to suffering, subjection, and death' (p. 15). Neoliberalism dismantles the social welfare system, and through a rhetoric of personal responsibility, choice, and individuality, state-sanctioned premature death is obscured. The victims of structural oppression and violence are erased as non-normative or queer, to the state.

Chapter 1 examines the interlocking systems of neoliberal capitalism, carceral violence, and the state. Beginning with Milton Friedman's free market economic theories, Dillon highlights how individual liberty became central to expanding the U.S. prison system. These theories give rise to a 'temporality of violence' where prisons are central to a neoliberal utopia. As Dillon reveals, Goldwater and Nixon's 'Law and Order' politics argued that leftist movements threatened the nation's future, thereby bolstering mass incarceration state surveillance and policing.

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Chapter 2 examines 'neoliberal freedom' as an outcome the civil rights demands of the 1960s and 1970s. Disrupting the linear progression of this 'steady march forward,' he argues fugitivity provides a radical imagination toward the unknown. Through exploring the fugitive activists' Susan Choi's novel *American Woman* and Diana Block's memoir *Arm the Spirit,* he theorises the underground as an alternative time and space. These texts offer a glimpse at the unrecorded history of the underground and present the radical vision of freedom as fugitivity. Chapter 3 begins with an analysis of Assata Shakur as a Black feminist fugitive, arguing that 'the neoliberal state is the kinship shared between the free world and the prison—an affinity structured and produced by a gendered antiblackness inaugurated under chattel slavery. Technologies of antiblack, heteropatriarchal violence queer time' (p. 85). In this chapter, Dillon offers an important analysis of the role of reform in reifying the state and reorganising institutions of slavery and imperialism. This replication of power structures occurs not only through the penal system but is mirrored in the economic market.

Entitled *Only the sun will bleach his bones quicker*, Chapter 4 builds from Audre Lorde's poem 'Power' on police terror and white supremacy, in order to examine the epistemology of fugitivity through poetry. Here Dillon interrogates the way Black feminist poets explored the gendered and racialized state, as well as the terrain of desire. The chapter's analysis starts with the 1971 Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) occupation of Weinstein Hall at New York University. Activists of the 1971 occupation sought to answer: 'Pig power or gay power? Escape or capture?' (p. 121).

A far call from the politics of STAR, contemporary queer liberalism undermines the radical potential of these previous projects by prioritising a homonormativity in line with imperialism, white supremacy, and neoliberalism. Echoing the controlling apparatus of a Foucauldian panopticon, homonormative limitations expose policing as both a practice of the carceral system, and '*Policing is the disciplining and management of desire'* (p. 134). Concluding with the words of Audre Lorde's 'Uses of the Erotic,' Dillon theorises the erotic and desire as a practice of fugitivity that undermines the neoliberal-carceral state.

Dillon's lessons on fugitivity have important meaning following the summer 2020 uprisings against anti-Black state violence. What Dillon offers through archive is the incredible importance of the underground. Some of the most vital insurgent politics have been completed underground, as shown in his analysis of lesbian abolitionist Rita Bo Brown, a George Jackson Brigade member and captured fugitive. In his examination of Brown's 1980s feminist politics, Dillon argues that a devastating impact of neoliberalism has been the undermining of collective movements and shift toward non-profitisation. As he argues through Brown's work, this shift has produced a 'leftist, neoliberal desire for inclusion and incorporation, as opposed to abolition and liberation' (p. 151). Dillon's use of archives to offer an alternative temporality of liberation provides valuable lessons for a return to communiqués in an era of social media. As trans legal scholar Dean Spade has examined in his recent work on mutual aid, visibility, celebrity and social media branding have harmed movements:

> Social movements reproduce these hierarchies, valuing people who give speeches, negotiate with bosses and politicians, get published, get elected, and otherwise become visible as actors in ways that align with dominant hierarchies. Forms of celebrity similarly circulate within movements. It is glamorous to take a selfie with Angela Davis, but it is not glamorous to do weekly or monthly prison visits. The circulation of dominant hierarchies of valuation inside movement spaces shapes how people imagine what it means to participate in work for change, who they want to meet, and what they want to do and be seen doing. (Spade, 2020: 135-136)

In 2021, Stephen Dillon's work is even more timely than its publication in 2018. His rich archive affords the reader a queer temporal dialectic to this moment, offering us a glimpse of the abolitionist horizon: 'Rather than setting the limit of our radical imaginary at opposition to the conditions of genocidal warfare that make up the prison system, in camaraderie with the queer world-making of José Muñoz, we might figure abolition as a perpetual horizon, a "utopian hermeneutics." Horizons guide and direct our work "but as they perpetually recede ahead of us, they also refuse to let us become complacent"' (Abolition Collective, 2020: 4-5). If 'prison and market (…) colonise the future' (p. 28), Dillon's fugitive – 'a queer figure who is the site of a dramatic reimagining of freedom' – is the embodiment of an alternative temporality, the abolitionist horizon (p. 5).

Overall, as theorised throughout *Fugitive Life*, the neoliberal-carceral state greatly impacts the potential of leftist movements; for this reason, the text could be taught in courses on US cultural and political formations of neoliberalism, and in gender and ethnic studies. Furthermore, Dillon's theoretical framework would be powerfully taught alongside Julie Perini's 2017 film, *The Gentleman Bank Robber: The Story of Butch Lesbian Freedom Fighter rita bo brown.* In combination, they provide a study of life-long commitment to liberation – a pedagogical approach much needed in a time of uprisings.

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