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Human Rights, Suffering, and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature.
Edited by Yenna Wu with Simona Livescu. New York: Lexington Books, 2011.
216 pp. ISBN: 978-0739167410

Human Rights, Suffering and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature is a collection of essays exploring political prison literature from the vantage point of the beauty and symbolism of the writings. In the case of political prisoners, their writing about incarceration experiences raises awareness about their causes and their own personal fortitude withstanding injustice. Consider, for example, the moral potency of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and how it electrified the American Civil Rights Movement.

Prison narratives are appealing because they take the reader inside a purposefully closed and guarded social space and acquaint them with it intimately. The essays in this book deal with political prisoners' experiences from countries as diverse as China, Egypt, Syria, Uruguay, Morocco, Romania, the United States, and Canada with varying amounts of success. In one of the opening chapters, "Reviving Muted Voices: Rhizomatic Forces in Political Prison Literature," Yenna Wu frames the narratives of political prisoners as moral acts that simultaneously promote healing and enhance the public consciousness. Beyond the realm of psychology and politics, the chapter challenges us to consider prison literature not only for its evidentiary value, but for its aesthetic beauty. Aesthetic analysis is featured centrally in "The Cocoons of Language." In this chapter, R. Shareah Taleghani focuses on the memoirs and fictional writings of political prisoners tortured in Syria. Taleghani juxtaposes examples of formalized witnessing by victims of human rights abuses such as the "extraordinary rendition" of Syrian-Canadian telecommunications engineer Maher Arar, with narrative accounts making use of poetics and imaginative imagery, such as Hasiba Abd al-rahman's prison novel, *al-Sharnaqa*, (*The Cocoon*).

In "Remembering Pain in Uruguay: What Memories Mean in Carlos Liscano's *Truck of Fools*," Eugenio Di Stefano discusses the politics of remembering in the context of torture survivors from the civil conflict in 1970s Uruguay. Stefano asks the reader to ponder what it means when the narrator vividly describes the torture his body endured, but not the "reason" for his imprisonment. The body is seen as a place of resistance and at times, as a representation of the nation itself. Yet, when Liscano writes more of the intimate details of the torture than its political motivations, is it because there is no excuse for the pain his body withstood? Or, is it because the political cause for which he was imprisoned is no longer relevant to modern-day Uruguay? The survival of the body over all else, including ideology, mirrors the survival of the nation.

Other notable chapters include Susan Slyomovics's "The Argument from Silence: Morocco's Truth Commission and Women Political Prisoners," in which she tackles the role prison narratives play in speaking about torture to fill or confront the "silence emanating from the archives and the state apparatus" (p. 90). Ramsey Scott's "A Primer for the Politics and Literature of Resistance: Apparitional Subjectivity in the Collective Autobiography of the New York 21" deals with the experiences of incarcerated Black Panther Party members in the late 1960s and early 1970s and examines how the "in-the-round" manner of the narrative resists the linearity of record-keeping favored by the state.

While the editors state that the essays included in the anthology were chosen partly for their artistic values, the anthology does not include a clear definition of aesthetics. Had this been provided, it would connect the chapters' varying geographic and cultural contexts. Overall, the anthology is a good basic resource on political prison narratives. Of particular interest to researchers might be the way in which the narratives in this collection share dissidence as a theme that conforms neither to the state discourse on the events that took place, nor to the clinical and documentary report format that is necessary to document human rights abuses. The narratives presented here exemplify the will of victims of torture to tell their story, sometimes for evidentiary reasons, but also for their own reasons and in their own aesthetic manner. Is it acceptable for a victim of torture to make their story painfully beautiful? The contributors of this anthology seem to believe so; and in accepting this narrative style, we admit into the archives of atrocity a resilient version of "telling."

Reviewer

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