

## BOOK REVIEW

**Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts (editors), *Active Intolerance, Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), 297 pp. + xviii. ISBN: 978-1-137-51066-2**

The most exciting and radical parts of *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition* come not in the many excellent academic articles which comprise the volume, but in the interstices between the collection's four parts. *Active Intolerance* consists of fourteen essays grouped into four themed sections: "History: The GIP and Foucault in Context", "Body: Resistance and the Politics of Care", "Voice: Prisoners and the Public Intellectual", and "Present: The Prison and Its Future(s)". Between each part, however, is included a scan of a handwritten document by a prisoner incarcerated on death row at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in the USA. These documents, authored by Abu Ali Abdur'Rahman, Derrick Quintero and Donald Middlebrooks, are each titled "Intolerable", and are short statements regarding what the author experiences as intolerable in his prison experience. By including these statements, editors Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts crack open the genre of the essay collection to marginalised, incarcerated voices, finding a way to continue the work of the Prisons Information Group (GIP) within the academy.

The GIP, as Zurn's and Dilts' introduction explain, was an organisation created by a group of French intellectuals, most notably Michel Foucault, in the early 1970s, the purpose of which was to "[amplify] the voices of those with first-hand knowledge of the prison, thereby creating a space for articulations and assessments *from below*."<sup>1</sup> *Active Intolerance* aims to interrogate the GIP and its legacy, and does so in hope of more than purely academic illumination: this is a book composed, as Zurn and Dilts conclude their introduction by stating, "in search of a different future".<sup>2</sup> Many of the chapters draw connections between the GIP's work and related projects past and present, both highlighting the GIP's limitations and problematic aspects, and providing ways to draw on the GIP's history in modern radical anti-carceral movements.

The first part, "History: The GIP and Foucault in Context" opens with Ladelle McWhorter's "The Abolition of Philosophy", which explores the relationship between Foucault's work with the GIP and "Foucault's conception and practice of both philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts, "Active Intolerance: An Introduction," in *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, ed. Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts (2016), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

and political activism.”<sup>3</sup> Lynne Huffer follows with a chapter conceptualising the GIP’s activity as “a time of return to Foucault’s earlier analysis of speech and confinement,”<sup>4</sup> arguing that “the archive recursively redeploys imprisoned speech as genealogical events that can only emerge out of sync with their own time”. Colin Koopman’s article contributes an interesting reflection on the *political* value of Foucault’s shift in methodology during his work with the GIP, arguing compellingly that “Methodological transformations explain the political force of Foucault’s thought more so than his obvious contemporaneous shift in his fields and objects of inquiry.”<sup>5</sup> The richest chapter in this part, however, is Perry Zurn’s “Work and Failure: Assessing the Prisons Information Group”, which aims to answer the question of whether and how the GIP “worked” or “failed” using criteria “that are implicit within the GIP’s terrain itself.”<sup>6</sup> In doing so, Zurn develops a detailed taxonomy of “failure” – discursive, structural, deconstructive, systemic, and productive – which deepens the ways we might consider social or political projects to work and fail. This is one of the collection’s most thought-provoking pieces, providing too a set of criteria by which we might want to evaluate the anthology as a whole.

Part II opens with a searing and wide-ranging chapter from Steve Champion (Adisa Kamara), a prisoner housed on death row at San Quentin State Prison, which outlines the personal program of self-discipline and self-cultivation he has undertaken to cope with intolerable conditions, connects the Pelican Bay Human Rights Movement to the work of the GIP, and argues that the “GIP was critical in shedding a light on prison conditions in France.”<sup>7</sup> Dianna Taylor’s article “Between Discipline and Caregiving” continues the foregrounding of prisoners’ voices by exploring the role of caregiving in the California Men’s Colony as a process with the potential to counter normalization and prison’s disciplinary effect and instead facilitate the “experience of the possibility for critical self-awareness and self-transformation.”<sup>8</sup> This section of the volume concludes with an intriguing but not wholly cohesive article on “Hunger Strikes in Contemporary Politics”, in which Falguni A. Sheth compares two hunger strike cases – Pussy Riot member’s Nadezhda Tolokonnikova’s and the Guantanamo Bay prisoners’ – to argue that the hunger strike is “a vehicle ... by which to negotiate the conditions of ‘life’,”<sup>9</sup> in opposition to predominant frameworks for understanding hunger strikes.

Dylan Rodríguez opens Part III with a chapter which ought to challenge many readers of *Active Intolerance*, including myself, by explicating the notion of “white academic

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<sup>3</sup> Ladelle McWhorter, “The Abolition of Philosophy,” in *Active Intolerance*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Lynne Huffer, “The Untimely Speech of the GIP Counter-Archive,” in *Active Intolerance*, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Koopman, “Conduct and Power: Foucault’s Methodological Expansions in 1971,” in *Active Intolerance*, 59–60.

<sup>6</sup> Perry Zurn, “Work and Failure: Assessing the Prisons Information Group,” in *Active Intolerance*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Steve (Adisa Kamara) Champion, “Breaking the Conditioning: The Relevance of the Prisons Information Group,” in *Active Intolerance*, 104.

<sup>8</sup> Dianna Taylor, “Between Discipline and Caregiving: Changing Prison Population Demographics and Possibilities for Self-Transformation,” in *Active Intolerance*, 116.

<sup>9</sup> Falguni A. Sheth, “Unruliness without Rioting: Hunger Strikes in Contemporary Politics,” in *Active Intolerance*, 125.

raciality"<sup>10</sup> and its necessary "forced obsolescence ... as a form of being"<sup>11</sup> through a comparison between the GIP and the Los Angeles Coalition Against Police Abuse. This is followed by Marcelo Hoffman's illuminating account of "investigations" as tools which, in a Marxist tradition, are cast as "weapons of struggle rather than as instruments of a putatively neutral standard,"<sup>12</sup> arguing that the GIP's investigations were never intended to "aspire toward a standard of neutrality."<sup>13</sup> "The GIP as a Neoliberal Intervention" goes on to use Foucault's account of neoliberalism to show how the GIP "literalizes the kind of nonideological political strategy that neoliberal social rationality and practices also require"<sup>14</sup>, while Nancy Luxon concludes Part III by showing how the GIP went beyond "the inclusion of new voices on the political scene"<sup>15</sup> to disrupt and disorder "public discourse around prisons and the order they sustain."<sup>16</sup>

The final three essays explicitly look to the future of prison and prison resistance movements, in a Part titled "Present: The Prison and Its Future(s)". Lisa Guenther's contribution calls resoundingly for a "rejection of moral discourses on 'compassion,' 'empathy,' and 'tolerance,'"<sup>17</sup> focusing instead on the concrete needs of embodied beings, however small those needs might be. This is followed by a chapter which has heightened relevance to recent political events in the United States: "Resisting 'Massive Elimination'" brings spaces of immigrant detention into focus, arguing compellingly for the necessity of "extending Foucault and the GIP's project of 'giving the floor to detainees' to undocumented people, migrants, and others at the center of strategies of racist violence surrounding immigration."<sup>18</sup> Finally, Stephen Dillon shows how Black feminism, with its theorization of the intimacies of the carceral, "provides a theory of how to escape the prison even as it expands and intensifies"<sup>19</sup>, drawing on the writings of imprisoned Black women in the USA in the 1970s.

Finally, to "review", or even to summarise, as a white nonincarcerated academic, the statements of the "intolerable" from prisoners inserted between the parts of the volume would, itself, be intolerable. These pieces should stand unvarnished and unparaphrased, encountered head-on.

As is usually the way with collections of essays, the quality of work in *Active Intolerance* is variable: some essays have considerably more coherence and argumentative thrust,

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<sup>10</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, "Disrupted Foucault: Los Angeles' Coalition Against Police Abuse (CAPA) and the Obsolescence of White Academic Raciality," in *Active Intolerance*, 145.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>12</sup> Marcelo Hoffman, "Investigations from Marx to Foucault," in *Active Intolerance*, 180.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>14</sup> Shannon Winnubst, "The GIP as a Neoliberal Intervention: Trafficking in Illegible Concepts," in *Active Intolerance*, 198.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Luxon, "The Disorder of Discourse: Voice and Authority in the GIP," in *Active Intolerance*, 204.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Guenther, "Beyond Guilt and Innocence: The Creaturely Politics of Prisoner Resistance Movements," in *Active Intolerance*, 226.

<sup>18</sup> Natalie Cisneros, "Resisting 'Massive Elimination': Foucault, Immigration, and the GIP," in *Active Intolerance*, 251.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Dillon, "'Can They Ever Escape?' Foucault, Black Feminism, and the Intimacy of Abolition," in *Active Intolerance*, 262.

while others feel somewhat levered in to the volume's theme. However, in a work such as this, one should perhaps be focused more on an evaluation of what the collective project achieves than any individual voice therein, something to which the GIP itself was committed.

*Active Intolerance's* goal of continuing and critiquing the GIP's work, going beyond the intra-academic discussions of most scholarly essay anthologies, sits uneasily with the relative inaccessibility the volume shares with other academic publications. At £21.99 for the eBook, £27.99 for softcover and a staggering £79.99 for a hardcover edition, the book's cost implicitly restricts its readership to an academic audience. Similarly, while the "intolerable" documents in the volume's interstices "break against the prison as much as our own easy categories of significance,"<sup>20</sup> they also serve to highlight the limitations of the collection as a whole, uncomfortably juxtaposed with chapters by largely nonincarcerated academics. The question is raised whether the genre of the academic essay collection can ever achieve the ends to which Zurn and Dilts aspire. Yet it is only in the extent of its ambition that *Active Intolerance* might be seen as falling short. As Zurn argues in his chapter, "failure" should not be understood as a single moralised concept: it can also be productive. It is by its failure to be all that it aspires to be, I would argue, that *Active Intolerance* works to demonstrate the limits of our academic modes of writing and publication.

## References

*Active Intolerance, Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition.* Edited by Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts. New York, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016.

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<sup>20</sup> Zurn and Dilts, "Active Intolerance: An Introduction," 14.