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Book Review

Criminal Intimacy  
Situational Identities: Marginalized Culture and Mainstream Myths

In her 2008 publication "Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality," Regina Kunzel broaches the delicate and often essentialized subjects of sexuality, intimacy, violence, and identity in prison culture. Kunzel is currently a professor of Gender, Women & Sexuality studies at the University of Minnesota. She explores the prison world not as an alien, anthropologically distant world cut off from mainstream society but rather as an important and often ignored environment that uncovers truths about the human condition. She draws on perspectives provided by psychologists, sociologists, historians, journalists, writers, and poets to frame the concept of sexuality in prison, charting the relationship between prison culture and perspectives on sexuality in the United States. Kunzel examines the changing purposes, architecture, and quality of prisons from the 19th century to the 21st, reinforcing concrete factual accounts from inmates, guards and visitors with sociological and anthropological information. She distinguishes between the biases of academic or "armchair" perspectives, mainstream myths, and inmates’ coded autobiographies. In doing this she utilizes a wide array of sources while maintaining a critical eye throughout each chapter. Kunzel’s commitment to intersectionality is apparent throughout the work: she always makes a point to dissect how class, race, gender, age, and time-period influences the circumstances of the event cited, the tone of the person quoted, and the conclusions drawn.

Kunzel unravels two inter-connected perceptions: the idea of prison as an isolated place with culture unrelated to the real world and the concrete definition (or sexuality) that binds sexual practices to a singular identity. She begins by focusing on male culture, examining the historical taboo that has branded homosexuality between males as an “unnamable act.” As she explores the cultural structures and societal norms within prison, she unearths “sexuality” as a rigid or static identity and instead unravels the meaning of intimacy. Sex in prison is not only a focal point for drama, disdain, and voyeuristic intrigue – it also suggests that heterosexual normativity is simply a default, an easy way to inscribe the nuclear family and enforce a structured society. The
“economics” of sex behind bars and of intimacy behind bars questions societal labels and reveals that sex in any context can be a tool or a weapon, a simple truth or complicated performance. Intertwined in her focus on sexual acts behind bars is her emphasis on gender identity. Despite non-normative sexual acts, Kunzel uses first person accounts to show how in both male and female prisons gender performance and appropriation is utilized to instill a binary-dependent social order: femmes are for butches (women), and punks are for wolfs (men).

Her depiction of how female inmates’ familial structures set up grid of sexual taboo speaks to the complexity of “intimacy.” Kunzel explains how entire families are invented and constructed, some three generations deep. The strict rules imposed on female inmates that forbade hand-holding, hugging, or any kind of touching reveals how homophobia and normative culture ties the immorality of same-sex sex to any type of same-sex intimacy, making life behind bars even more complicated.

Committed to covering all aspects of sexuality and sexual acts in prison, Kunzel spends a chapter discussing violence and rape in prison, a tool that both male and female inmates and guards use to silence, oppress, or control. The issue of inmate’s rights and “cruel and unusual punishment” surfaced when ex-cons began speaking out about gang rape as a strategic silencing tool, specifically when a journalist was gang raped and later spoke out about his experience. This silence surrounding rape in prison was broken in the seventies, and inmates began to demand enforcement of their basic rights. However the movement to prevent sexual violence in prison was decidedly raced – that is, black inmates were seen as the natural perpetrators. Kunzel points out that rape is portrayed as a mainly heterosexual, black, and as the most frequent type of sexual behavior in prison. This mainstream myth reveals an “explaining away” of consensual homosexual sex as rape and a polarized depiction of rape as a solely racialized, anti-white hate crime.

In her last chapter, Kunzel explores the relationship between LGBTQ activist groups and prisoners, reiterating that prison culture is not isolated from mainstream America. She explores a communal bond formed in the 70s between the oppressed sexual minority beyond bars and people in prison, who may or may not identify as queer but whose captivity and non-normative life-style links them to these groups. Kunzel’s focus on lesbian and gay activist groups and gay press throughout the 70s and 80s
highlights the intersections between prisoner rights and gay rights, and human rights in general. Even in a same-sex environment, complex sexual norms and imagined gender binaries still oppress gay inmates. Sexual liberation is necessary for people of all sexualities, privileges, and circumstances. The emergence of gay rights in the 70s and a more visible, proud culture resulted in a dissonance between the imagined binaries and possessive objectification of “daddies” and “femmes” (the “straight” role in a same sex relationship, and the performed, but never admittedly gay role). In her epilogue, she discusses the AIDS epidemic and how prisoner’s rights were affected and compromised deeply, both by health officials, guards and inmates.

Kunzel successfully unravels sexuality, intimacy, and violence in and, eventually, outside of prison. She challenges norms and utilizes first-person accounts, expert analysis, and cultural trends throughout her research. The evolution of prison culture, beginning with secretive same-sex sex, emerging as a constructed, performative binary, and resolving with activists and gay inmates joining together to voice discontent with the twisted hetero-normativity of this performed prison culture is a complex story of identity in America. Kunzel tackles sexuality through a unique lens and with specific depth that concludes by expanding infinitely, questioning the permanence and meaning of American sexuality, morality, and culture.