Decarcerating Disability Justice

**Amber Karanikolas**

So my name is Amber Karanikolas and my pronouns are they/them.

**Pauline**

What are you currently doing, and what are you studying?

**Amber Karanikolas**

Yeah, so I'm currently doing a PhD at Latrobe University, School of Humanities and Social Sciences. So that takes up a lot of my time. But other things that I'm doing, I'm also a research assistant at the University of Melbourne. And I'll probably just let you know a bit about what my PhD is on. So my big loves are disability studies, critical disability studies. So I'm trying to merge that with critical carceral studies or critical criminology, which are kind of more critical approaches to looking at, you know, what gets constructed is crime and things like that, so.

**Amber Karanikolas**

I'm particularly looking at the experience of people who are subjected to involuntary mental health treatment - and I'm using treatment with quotation marks with my hands - while they live in the community. So particularly people with a mental health related disability or psycho-social disability of some people, people have different ways of talking about it. So yeah that's me!

**Amber Karanikolas**

Amazing. In a few sentences, what was your experience of the Incacerating Disability reading group? What do you think of the benefits of being part of such a group with other disabled people?

**Amber Karanikolas**

Yeah, so this year I was part of a disabled people led reading group on the book, Decarcerating disability: deinstitutionalization, and prison abolition. Which was the book that came out just this year by an American disability studies and mad studies scholar called Liat Ben Moshe.

**Amber Karanikolas**

It was, first of all, I was really happy to be invited to be a part of it by some really awesome Disability Justice activists. Mali Hermans and Georgia Mantle who put a lot of effort into making the space accessible, inclusive, and welcoming. And the best part about it, I think, is just getting to really like, connect what you're reading to real life and the context that you're in. But also, you know, the activism that we're all kind of interested in, particularly like, Disability Justice frameworks and abolition frameworks. So that was, was really great. And it was just a highlight of my lockdown period as well. Being here in Naarm, in Melbourne, so that was really great. And I got to connect with others. And yeah, talk about, you know, make some really like theory, dense kind of academic complex ideas, more real and applied to real life. So that was, that was really great. And learning from other people's experiences, was invaluable. It was a really great space.

**Amber Karanikolas**

What are two strong points you took away from the book to Decarcerating Disability?

**Amber Karanikolas**

So I might be, I feel like it might get too convoluted at this point. Let me know if I am. I think one of the biggest points and this is kind of like one of the central arguments of the book, but I found this really exciting and, you know, I was really excited about this book when it was coming out for this reason.

**Amber Karanikolas**

But um, it's really, the importance of connecting prison or penal abolition with deinstitutionalization. Basically it's trying to argue that they share a logic that is deinstitutionalization has a logic that is anti-carceral, or aboiutionary, which to me is really exciting idea. So I guess, in disability spaces, what we might call deinstitutionalization.

**Amber Karanikolas**

It has a link to, well it's primarily about the ending or closure or abolition of disability related or specific carceral spaces, to be more specific. You know, large scale, often state run institutions. So, former asylums that often later became psychiatric hospitals and residential facilities, not exclusively for, but often with people with intellectual disability. So it was really trying to connect those two struggles. And although deinstitutionalization isn't often spoken about being abolitionary, the book is trying to argue that inherently it is.

**Amber Karanikolas**

It is about a future where there is no need for segregating people based on disability away from the community and trying to link that with abolition. So that was the key point that I took away. That the struggles are really inherently linked, and that you know, deinstitutionalization should be framed as an abolition issue.

**Amber Karanikolas**

But disability also needs to be framed as an abolition issue as well. So that was one of the key points that I took away from it. The other big learning for me, I guess, other key point was to be a bit more critical about how deinstitutionalization gets framed and more in abolitionist spaces, having a bit more meat on the bones of how we talked about what deinstitutionalization was, and what it led to.

**Amber Karanikolas**

So sometimes, I guess the common narrative about what deinstitutionalization was, that was that people were dumped on the streets. These things kind of lead to the rise of prisons, taking the role of institutions, particularly for people who just don't have a safety net, and often are the most marginalized in our community.

**Amber Karanikolas**

But the book kind of argues that when we blame deinstitutionalization, for these things, we're often we have to be aware of how that kind of intersects with backlash towards the idea, the very idea of deinstitutionalization. Having a better appraisal of how different factors are actually to blame for these phenomena. So the removal of social safety nets, and things like that. Of course, not to use too much jargon, but you know, neoliberal reforms, greater social insecurity, and precarity.

**Amber Karanikolas**

These are the things that create the conditions for much of what happens in the post-deinstitutionalization context. Increased incarceration of disabled people. Particularly people with cognitive disability or psychiatric/mental health related disability. So that was a really key point that I took away from it. Is to kind of see how those arguments can actually bolster the claims or arguments of people who are actually maybe advocating for return to forms of institutionalization, or the continuation of contemporary forms of institutionalization. That was a really key point in it really. She obviously made it much better in the book. But that was a really key point that I took away from it. It really enlightened me, that part about different dynamics that are happening in these common narratives. I hope that wasn't too long!

**Pauline**

That was excellent, thank you. That wasn't convoluted at all, it was so incredibly clear. Final questions. So what is one question you still have after reading the book?

**Amber Karanikolas**

Hmm, that's a really good question. This is something that we unpacked a lot in the reading group, actually. And it's about how the book, it's a really good book. But like a lot of American writers and scholars, it's really occupied with the North American kind of context. I think the book does a really great job of unpacking settler colonialism. And in saying that, because it's talking about a settler-colonial context, there's so much we can apply here in so called Australia.

**Amber Karanikolas**

But there's also kind of an assumption in the book that a lot happens in the US applies everywhere, which I think, not necessarily true. I just, I want to know more about what has happened elsewhere in the world, and not just in settler colonial states. But how different is de-institutionalization in other places? What took place? How did that happen? Or did it? Did it happen and do other? Yeah, I just felt like there was a lot of open... I had a lot of questions about anywhere beyond the US. But I mean, of course, the book is based on that. But I feel like it was kind of just saying "everything that is applicable. This is what de-institutionalization was and is, this is how it happened and what informed it". But yeah, that's just one particular story in one particular place. We know that in Australia and in the US, it happens differently and in different places at different times. I just think there's so much complexity that, yeah, we need to look beyond those contexts. Sorry, that was a big question for me.

**Pauline**

Amber, thank you for your time.

**Amber Karanikolas**

Oh, no! Thank you. Thanks for having me.

**Amber Karanikolas**

You've just had Decarcerating Disability, a special program for 3CR's Disability Day broadcast. Stay tuned for more content after this break.

**Israel Kamakowiwo'ole**

Okay, this one's for Gabi.

Ooh-ooh-ooh

Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh

Ooh-ooh-ooh

Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh

Ooh-ooh-ooh

Ooh-ooh-ooh

Somewhere over the rainbow

Way up high

And the dreams that you dream of

Once in a lullaby, oh

Somewhere over the rainbow

Bluebirds fly

And the dreams that you dream of

Dreams really do come true-ooh-ooh

Someday I'll wish upon a star

Wake up where the clouds are far behind me

Where trouble melts like lemon drops

High above the chimney tops that's where

You'll find me, oh

Somewhere over the rainbow

Bluebirds fly

And the dream that you dare to

Oh why, oh why can't I? I?

Well, I see trees of green and red roses too

I'll watch them bloom for me and you

And I think to myself

What a wonderful world

Well, I see skies of blue and I see clouds of white

And the brightness of day I like the dark

And I think to myself what a wonderful world

The colours of the rainbow so pretty in the sky

And also on the faces of people passing by

I see friends shaking hands saying

How do you do?

They're really saying I, I love you

I hear babies cry and I watch them grow

 They'll learn much more then we'll know

And I think to myself what a wonderful world

World

 Someday I wish upon a star

Wake up where the clouds are far behind me

Where trouble melts like lemon drops

High above the chimney top

That's where you'll find me

Oh, somewhere over the rainbow

Way up high

And the dreams that you dare to

Why oh, why can't I?

Ooh, ooh Ooh, ooh

**Nakayn**

Hi I'm Nakayn.

**Leilani/Liv**

I'm Liv.

**Morag**

I'm Morag.

**Nakayn**

And you're listening to Imagining Disability Justice on 3CR.

**Morag**

A 12 hour broadcast for International Day of Disability.

**Nakayn, Liv, Morag**

Stay tuned! [laughter]

**Amber Karanikolas**

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