
Review of:
Suhomlinova, O., & O’Shea, S. C. (2025).
Transgender and Non-binary Prisoners’
Experiences in England and Wales. Leeds:
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In *Transgender and Non-binary Prisoners’ Experiences in England and Wales*, Olga Suhomlinova and Saoirse Caitlin O’Shea offer a deeply situated and collaboratively authored account of trans and non-binary life inside the carceral state. Based on three years of letter-writing with incarcerated individuals, the book resists the conventions of policy evaluation or sociological distance. Instead, it brings the reader into an affective, uneven, and reflexive research journey that foregrounds voices already speaking – yet too often ignored. This is not merely a book about prisons and gender; it is a study in refusal: a refusal of binary logics, of institutional smoothing, and of the expectation that researchers remain detached observers of suffering (Spellman, 2024).

From the outset, the authors position their work as an intervention into the growing hostility toward trans lives in the UK. They teach me about transmisia – rather than transphobia – to describe the structural violence they document. This shift in terminology is not incidental. As Spade (2015) argues, “phobia” implies personal irrationality, whereas transmisia names a social and administrative regime that punishes gender variance through law, policy, and everyday practice. Suhomlinova and O’Shea situate their project amid rising anti-trans sentiment, amplified by media institutions such as *The Times*, demonstrating how the prison becomes both a mirror and an intensifier of this hostile climate.

Rather than offering generalizable claims, the book presents rich, contextualized accounts of life inside men’s prisons from the perspectives of trans and non-binary people. In doing so, the authors reject “giving voice” as a framework. These individuals are not subjects to be decoded or translated for a cisgender audience; they are interlocutors and co-theorizers. The participants’ letters – some composed as fragmentary reflections, others as lengthy narratives – shape the architecture of the book. Chapters 4 through 9 uncover the correspondents’ “her stories,” their

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daily lives, experiences of violence, issues of safety and housing, and the material and interactional aspects of their confinement.

The book serves not only as a searing critique of the UK prison system but also as a document of the psychic, material, and administrative labor that trans and non-binary people are forced to undertake to survive within it. This includes negotiating access to gender-affirming clothing and items, navigating inconsistently applied policy frameworks, and managing the risks of visibility. Some participants report having to “perform” gender in particular ways – through clothing choices, hairstyles, or makeup – to appear “authentically” trans, often under scrutiny from both staff and healthcare providers. Others recount delayed or denied access to medical transition support, owing to the impossibility of fulfilling criteria such as real-life experience in an environment that actively suppresses gender expression.

The violence recounted in this book is relentless and multilayered: physical, certainly, but also bureaucratic, psychological, and epistemic. It manifests through institutional neglect, administrative gatekeeping, the denial of gender-affirming care, and the persistent framing of trans and non-binary existence as a risk. These violences do not occur at the margins of the system; they are embedded in its routines. As a white cisgender man, I recognize the limits of my ability to fully comprehend the depth and texture of what the letters share. Despite their extraordinary clarity and generosity, much of what they reveal remains affectively and materially beyond my lived experience. This asymmetry does not absolve but deepens my responsibility to listen, to stay unsettled, and to act in solidarity with those whose survival is made contingent on their erasure.

The research methodology offers a powerful contribution. Chapter 2 details the development of a correspondence-based approach, drawing on a small but growing literature on letter-writing in qualitative research (e.g., Vannier, 2018). While email interviews have gained traction in qualitative studies (Brewis, 2014), the authors’ committed to long-form, hand-written correspondence over several years – a methodologically rare and ethically profound choice, particularly within carceral contexts where communication remains tightly policed and temporally disrupted.

The authors did not treat letters as data points but as unfolding dialogues. Each reply from the research team followed a carefully constructed process, combining a standardized thematic structure with personalized responses to prior disclosures. Participants were encouraged to raise their own questions, set boundaries, or propose topics. This dialogic and iterative method aligns with Stanley’s (2004) ideas of the *epistolarium* – a mode of research in which correspondence becomes a space of mutual recognition, identity negotiation, and ethical relationality.

One especially compelling feature involves the inclusion of “A Life in the Day,” a narrative prompt inviting participants to describe their daily routines as a form of reflective autobiography. Modelled on *The Sunday Times Magazine* column, these accounts capture the minutiae of prison life: the selection of meals two weeks in advance, tight control of access to razors or tape, and criminalization of even minor acts of care. Beyond the constant experience of ridicule, Poppy discloses the traumatizing reality of everyday degradation: “Having another person’s human waste thrown over you does scar you mentally” (p. 136). Such dehumanizing encounters do not occur as exceptions; they form part of the routine. Participants document wolf-whistling, repeated struggles to acquire gender-appropriate clothing, the trauma of attempting to meet basic bodily needs under regimes of shame and surveillance, and the denial of medical attention. Yet, these accounts are not only stories of suffering. They are also stories of resistance.

Even in conditions of systemic neglect and carceral transmisia, participants continue to assert agency in the face of dispossession. For example, Winter Rose is studying for an Open University course – a quiet act of defiance against a system designed to erase.

The authors place these personal insights within a broader analytic frame. Suhomlinova and O’Shea trace how budget cuts, policy contradictions, and managerial discretion compound the harms trans and non-binary people endure. While national frameworks such as The Care and Management of Individuals Who Are Transgender exist, their application proves inconsistent and often weaponized. Many participants perceive the purportedly supportive Transgender Case Boards as sites of surveillance, discipline, or performative allyship. Similarly, decisions about prison placement frequently override self-declared identity, putting participants at a heightened risk.

Importantly, the authors do not romanticize participation. They write candidly about the research’s emotional toll on themselves and their correspondents. Their methodological reflexivity includes acknowledgments of logistical failure, pandemic disruption, and the exhaustion of trying to be present for dozens of individuals facing systemic neglect. However, the affective dimension of the research – its slowness, attention to detail, and mutuality – stands as one of the book’s strongest features.

What strikes me the most about the methodology is not only its emotional attunement but also its political refusal of extractive, one-directional knowledge production. Suhomlinova and O’Shea do not treat participants as case studies or data providers, but as co-theorizers whose reflections actively shape the research’s direction and substance. This orientation disrupts traditional hierarchies between the researcher and the researched, echoing calls in critical and decolonial scholarship to move from research *on* to research *with* (Bhattacharya, 2015). In doing so, the authors enact a methodological ethics rooted not in neutrality but in accountability and care.

This places the book in meaningful conversation with the work of the A.B.O. Comix Collective, a trans and queer prison abolitionist publishing project that likewise foregrounds correspondence as both method and resistance. Like Suhomlinova and O’Shea, A.B.O. Comix facilitates knowledge co-creation through long-form exchanges that oppose the carceral state’s efforts to isolate and silence. Both projects demonstrate that letter-writing is not simply a methodological workaround; it is a practice of solidarity. Within the UK context, this work also echoes CN Lester’s *Trans Like Me* (2017), which similarly critiques the cultural narratives and institutional barriers that shape trans exclusion. While Lester writes from a public-facing, cultural standpoint, and Suhomlinova and O’Shea from an academic one, both intervene in a climate of intensified moral panic and dehumanization, particularly around trans women.

Suhomlinova and O’Shea also offer pragmatic, if cautious, policy recommendations. These include centralizing access to gender-affirming items, reforming shower access, and mandating staff training in trans inclusion. Yet, consistent with Spade’s (2015) critique of liberal reformism, the authors recognize the limits of policy fixes within a fundamentally punitive system. Their conclusion suggests that the way forward requires more than policy; it requires listening, action, and a shift in the moral imagination of public institutions. Although the book does not explicitly position itself within abolitionist discourse, its findings unmistakably contribute to it. The systemic failures it documents – e.g., the denial of care, the violence of classification systems, or the impossibility of safety – reveal that prison does not function as an institution that can be reformed into justice. In this sense, the work resonates with recent trans abolitionist scholarship, which insists that freedom from transmisia cannot be achieved through carceral logics.

Instead, it demands a reimagining of safety, support, and accountability beyond the confines of punishment.

Ultimately, *Transgender and Non-binary Prisoners' Experiences* testifies to what research can become when rooted in care, accountability, and a refusal to look away. The book does not offer easy hope, nor does it end with tidy conclusions. It calls for something more difficult: reckoning with complicity, reimagining solidarity, and asking what it would mean to organize, not simply advocate, for those whom the system renders disposable. For scholars, students, and organizers working at the intersection of critical policy studies, carcerality, and gender justice, this book serves as essential reading. It stands as a model of relational method and writing that is as precise as it is compassionate. If, as the authors suggest, research always remains an act of witness, then this book reminds us: witnessing can, and must, also be a form of resistance.

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