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Documentary Review: Belly of the Beast

Clare Daniel

Tulane University, cdaniel5@tulane.edu

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Documentary Review: *Belly of the Beast*

Belly of the Beast (Cohn, 2020) chronicles the legal and political battle surrounding forced and coerced sterilization of women incarcerated in the Central California Women's Facility during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Uncovering a contemporary example of eugenics and the institutional logics that protect and justify those practices, this film provides a crucial tool for feminist educators teaching about reproductive injustice, racism, gender-based oppression, and the power of feminist activism. In what follows, I briefly summarize the film and offer a discussion of how it might be used as a tool of feminist pedagogy by 1) providing an opportunity to explore power relations based on the intersecting forces of racism, sexism, medicalization, and criminalization, 2) illustrating the value of multiple ways of knowing (personal experience, scientific inquiry, and legal and moral argumentation), and 3) exhibiting the power of feminist activism to bridge social and institutional divides and create meaningful change.

The film conveys the story of Kelli Dillon, one of over 1,000 women, most of whom were Black, involuntarily sterilized between 1997 and 2014 in California prisons. Told that she had abnormal cells and needed surgery, Dillon was sterilized without her knowledge or consent, and for no legitimate medical reason. Teaming up with activists from Justice Now, a nonprofit organization dedicated to ending human rights abuses in prison and prison abolition, Dillon helps to uncover the extent of the reproductive injustices committed against incarcerated people who can become pregnant in California. The film documents journalistic efforts to bring the story to light, as well as legal efforts to achieve restitution for Dillon and the larger group of survivors. It also follows Justice Now's political work to ensure that such procedures are no longer possible within the prison system.

Belly of the Beast provides a rich pedagogical opportunity to explore many tenets of feminist thought and pedagogy. First, it conveys a recent and personal example of racialized reproductive injustice, allowing students to confront the ongoing material and bodily consequences of the intersecting forces of patriarchy and white supremacy (Crenshaw, 1991). Dillon is a victim of intimate partner violence and her effort to survive that violence is criminalized. She is convicted of murdering her husband and sentenced to 15 years in prison. She is forcibly sterilized while in prison, and then, partially due to the discursive power of medical authority, she is discredited as a valid complainant during her lawsuit. The film offers educators and students the tools to identify and analyze the intertwined structural forces that wreak havoc on Dillon's body and devalue her subjectivity.

Second, the film provides a window into the importance of valuing multiple ways of knowing. Shifting between Dillon's personal narrative and determination, Justice Now's legal and political prowess, and the diligent investigative work of a journalist, the film offers an opportunity to explore how the authoritative accounts of medical and state institutions can be unreliable and incorrect. Educators and students can use this example to explore a crucial intervention of feminist epistemology: the interrogation and critique of who has traditionally been regarded as a valid knower and what has historically been seen as valid knowledge (Harding, 1987).

Third, *Belly of the Beast* displays a model of feminist coalitional work toward social justice. Tracing the relationships between an imprisoned and then formerly incarcerated Black woman, a

white woman who directs a nonprofit, a multiracial group of activists, incarcerated survivors of reproductive injustice, a Black man conducting investigative journalism, and a white woman state legislator, the film shows how the shared values of racial and reproductive justice can unite people across difference, in terms of both identity and institutional positionality, to bring about social change. At the same time, it provides a jumping-off point for exploring the difficulties inherent in this bridging work (Taylor, 2018).

Overall, the film is a pedagogical wellspring for thinking through key aspects of feminist thought, including intersectionality, subjugated knowledges, and coalition building. Educators across a wide variety of disciplines (e.g. women's, gender, and sexuality studies; sociology; public health; history; medicine; law, etc.) and subject areas (e.g. reproductive justice; intimate partner violence; the criminal legal system; racism and eugenics; social movements, etc.) will find it useful. *Belly of the Beast* is particularly well suited for undergraduate courses that explore the intersecting forces of racial and gender injustice, as well as those that investigate the rhetorical power of media-based activism and documentary filmmaking for social justice.

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