

RENÉE BYRD

Women Studies

2009 Graduate School Medal Awardee

Renée Byrd is a prison activist/ scholar who received her B.A. in Ethnic Studies from Mills College. She has worked as a legal advocate for women prisoners in California around issues of medical neglect and compassionate release for terminally ill prisoners. Additionally, she has done work as a family advocate for youth involved in the juvenile justice system and their families. In the spring of 2003, she began working in conjunction with the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights to produce a film entitled, "System Failure: Violence, Abuse and Neglect in the California Youth Authority." Her research interests surround prisons and policing, and the impacts on working-class communities of color, and the possibilities of building a transnational, feminist movement to combat the increasingly global prison industrial complex.

Ms. Byrd's personal statement:

**"Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."
-Arundhati Roy**

The above quotation captures something for me regarding both the impetus for my work as a public scholar and my vision for how I will go about doing that work. As a prison activist, I see my life's work as first and foremost about bringing a better world into being for those that will come after me and helping people to survive in the present. I engage in community-based projects which facilitate both diagnosing social problems and working to imagine and shape another world. As an undergraduate and graduate student, I have been lucky to have mentors who are able to almost seamlessly integrate their social justice and scholarly endeavors. As a result of their mentoring, I have models for being a 'scholar-citizen' and a passion for being a model for my students. In order to give a concrete picture of the various ways I have bridged my scholarly and activist commitments, it would be useful to describe some of the community-based projects which have significantly influenced my vision and passion for social justice, particularly around prisons and policing.

One of the most formative experiences that has shaped me as a researcher and activist is my work as a legal advocate for women prisoners in California. Beginning in the winter of 2002, I worked with terminally-ill and chronically-ill women prisoners with Justice Now, a prisoner rights non-profit in Oakland, California. While at Justice Now, I interviewed women prisoners at the world's two largest women's prisons on a biweekly basis. Most of my work entailed organizing compassionate release petitions for women prisoners who had been diagnosed with less than six months to live. Justice Now was where I first stumbled upon my life's work and met fiercely strong women who dared to live in the



face of enormous odds. After this experience, I felt it would be impossible to go on as if I were unaware of the conditions in U.S. prisons. I decided that I would commit my life to working on the impacts of prisons and policing.

My work with the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights is another site where I first began to see the possibilities for bridging my scholarly and activist commitments. At the Ella Baker Center I worked on the Books Not Bars Project, acting as a legal advocate for youth involved in the Juvenile Justice System and their families. I wrote a handbook for parents on how to advocate for their children, accompanied parents to court and wrote advocacy letters for youth in the California Youth Authority (CYA), the state's network of prison-like facilities for youth as young as 13. Working as a legal advocate was when I first began to learn of the abuses going on in the CYA. It was also as an advocate that I began to meet parents who desperately wanted to do something not only for their children, but for the children that would come in the future. It is with those parents, along with a former CYA ward that I began to work on making the documentary film, *System Failure: Violence, Abuse and Neglect in the California Youth Authority*. *System Failure* offers testimony of the human rights violations including sexual abuse, beatings, forced medication, and systemic mental health and educational neglect of young people taking place in the CYA.

My work with Justice Now and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights has shaped my approach to research on social problems, and my passion for social change. It was only later that I fully realized the valuable research skills I had been gaining during this time. I learned that sometimes the people who have the least know the most about the conditions of their lives and that projects which honor that knowledge could provide the imagination and courage that we need to build a world free of hunger and violence. These experiences also showed me the unique capacity of human beings to start over again and to hope for a better future, when the odds seem completely against them. My hope is to use all the skills I have to contribute to movements for human rights and social justice.

Since beginning graduate school, I have also become involved with Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, a national activist organization of feminists of color. In 2005, I joined other activists from Incite! in New York to begin planning a national campaign to stop law enforcement violence against women of color and transgender people of color. Since this meeting the campaign has produced an organizing toolkit used by organizations across the country.

My dissertation project is another site which embodies my commitment to integrating my scholarly work with the pursuit of a better world. Currently titled, "Street-Based Sex worker-Police Encounters as a Site of Gender (Re)production and Neoliberal State formation," my dissertation uses a post-structural and transnational feminist theoretical framework to look at the impacts of criminalization on the lives of street-based sex workers in San Francisco. The project consists of in-depth interviews with sex workers, analysis of government and media documents, as well as a participatory photography project. The interviews and discourse analysis are aimed at beginning to understand the logics that underpin police violence, rendering street-based sex workers legitimate targets of harassment and violence at the hands of both the public and the police themselves. The participatory photography project is aimed at beginning to imagine what genuine human security might look like from the eyes of some of society's most vulnerable members. Street-based sex workers will be given cameras and asked to take pictures that represent their ideas about security whether that revolves around food security, adequate housing or reproductive justice. This project showcases my passion for human rights and my unique approach to both analyzing social problems and working to imagine another world.

My desire to be a scholar sprang from my passion for social change. I am committed to using my skills to analyze our most complex problems that we may come up with complex answers with which to transform them. Thank you for taking the time to consider my nomination for this incredible honor.

Renée Byrd
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