

LEADING CHANGE

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McCormick

MCCORMICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CROSS-CULTURAL Urban Reformed ECUMENICAL

A place to enter: solidarity-making with a shared language

By Jia Johnson, project director for Theological Studies at Cook County Department of Corrections

Kaia Stern in *Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education and Healing* lifts up the voice of Mika'il DeVeaux, an incarcerated learner at Sing Sing Prison in New York and graduate of New York Theological Seminary's Master of Professional Studies in Ministry degree. Stern in her chapter on "Dehumanization" shares Mr. DeVeaux's reflection on the ways in which institutionalization strips folks with the experience of incarceration of their humanity and sense of personal identity:



Jia Johnson

"Upon entrance to prison, the person who is convicted of a crime is forced to bear a series of 'abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations, of self. His self is systematically...mortified.' Each person who has been convicted of a crime (and many who have never been convicted but simply cannot afford bail) enter a state prison, is stripped of his or her property, and given a state property uniform...the process of institutionalization, DeVeaux continues, 'is about compelling you to conform because prison [and jail] is not a place for individual. It's not a place for individual personalities. You know you are an individual but you lose...there is no room for individuality.' Furthermore, one of the things that prison [jails] is meant to do, he explains, 'is to deny you of your humanity, deny you of your ability to feel, to love, care and be concerned. These are qualities and experiences that people often lose while they are in prison.' The process of institutionalization demands that individual selves be destroyed through conformity and brutality."

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Mr. DeVeaux, in Stern's chapter "Transformation" goes on to provide an analysis of the function of language in the process of institutionalization. In particular, he reflects on the relationship of exercising one's agency to define one's self as an act of resisting the lopsided power dynamic of incarceration that dehumanizes persons with the experience of incarceration.

"You see the dynamics in prison...they want you to be on the low end of the social ladder and attempt to fit you into the role called "inmate." And

my thing was, listen, "I am not a prisoner. I am not an inmate. I am just in prison, so I refuse to take on this role." I had a lot of help from my pops, who told me, "Listen, don't become institutionalized." It took me a long time to figure out what he was talking about, but the thing was—don't make this you.

So, what I used to tell myself and tell some of the young brothers—we need to clearly understand that being here does not make this our reality, the sum total of our existence. And we must not allow this to define us—this is not who you are.”

As McCormick moves more deeply into the program for Theological Studies at Cook County Department of Corrections, we take seriously the wisdom, intellect, insights and experiences of the many Mr. DeVeauxs, both here in Chicago, nationally and globally. In this spirit, we want to begin to develop a common language that is humanizing when speaking about our students who are incarcerated at Cook County Department of Corrections in particular, and in general, anyone who has been impacted by the carceral system. In this act, we are entering into a co-laboring relationship of solidarity-making with our system impacted and directly impacted friends. Together, we strive to resist language that is dehumanizing by employing language that they have deemed to be humanizing for their lived experience.

We invite you to read, print, bookmark and share widely with your network [*Berkeley Underground Scholars' Language Guide for Communicating About Those Involved In The Carceral System.*](#)