Miller, R. J. (2021). *Halfway Home: Race, Punishment, and the Afterlife of Mass Incarceration*. Little, Brown and Company.

Dettlaff, A. J. (2023). *Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System: The Case for Abolition*. Oxford University Press.

Reviews by James C. Beaufils

Reuben Jonathan Miller's *Halfway Home* begins from a simple but devastating proposition: in the United States, punishment does not end at the prison gate. Instead, it lingers in neighbourhoods, in welfare offices, in housing policy and labour markets, shaping the everyday lives of those who carry a record and of the families who live with them. Rather than treating "re-entry" as an exceptional transition, Miller insists that what he calls the afterlife of mass incarceration is now an ordinary condition for many poor and working-class Black communities.

Written from Chicago but attentive to national patterns, the book blends ethnography, sociology and memoir. Miller is not a detached observer. He is a Black scholar, a pastor's son, and the brother and son of men who have been incarcerated. The book moves between interviews with men coming out of prison, observations in halfway houses, bus journeys and welfare offices, and reflections on his own family's experiences. The result is a text that feels restless and unsettled: part field report, part family album, part indictment.

For readers in working-class studies, one of the most striking contributions of *Halfway Home* is the way it reworks our understanding of work and class under conditions of extreme criminalisation. Miller shows how the formal end of a sentence is overlaid by a dense web of probation conditions, registry requirements, fines and fees, and informal surveillance by employers and landlords. These constraints structure decisions about where people can live, which jobs they can take, how they can move around the city, and even who they can visit. They also shape the labour of those around them. Partners, mothers, siblings and friends shoulder the costs of court dates, transport, childcare and commissary, while managing the risks that flow from living alongside someone who is formally "free" but still under constant institutional scrutiny.

Miller is at his strongest when he stays close to these entanglements of labour, kinship and punishment. He details the hustle of low-wage work that men and women with records take on—temporary warehouse shifts, restaurant jobs, informal day labour—only to discover that the stigma of a felony, or a parole requirement, makes those jobs contingent and revocable. At one point he describes a man sent back to prison for missing an appointment because he had finally secured a shift that might cover the rent. These are not only stories of "recidivism"; they

are stories about how carceral logics seep into workplace scheduling, landlords' risk calculations, and welfare eligibility rules.

Gender runs quietly but insistently through the book. Many of the people Miller follows are men, but the narrative repeatedly circles back to the women—mothers and grandmothers in particular—who hold families together in the wake of incarceration. Their homes become de facto re-entry programs, their wages and benefits the safety net that allows men to comply with conditions that the state imposes but does not resource. The afterlife of mass incarceration, in Miller's account, is carried disproportionately by Black working-class women whose labour is made both indispensable and invisible.

Formally, *Halfway Home* resists a neat divide between "data" and reflection. Miller writes in the first person, moves in and out of scenes, and allows his own doubts, weariness and love for his family to shape the story. Readers looking for a conventional policy blueprint may be frustrated; the book does not offer a ten-point reform program. Instead, its political force lies in the way it renders visible the thick mesh of policies, practices and everyday decisions that make up what he describes as a regime of "punishment work." It suggests that tinkering with sentencing laws, or adding a re-entry program here and there, will not be enough while housing, employment, welfare and family regulation remain organised around suspicion of those branded criminal.

For working-class studies, *Halfway Home* is important for at least three reasons. First, it insists that class in contemporary urban America is inseparable from the criminal legal system. The "afterlife" it chronicles is not an add-on to working-class experience; it is one of the primary ways class is lived in many Black communities. Second, the book offers a method for writing about over-studied communities that is both accountable and experimental—Miller's refusal to separate his family story from his academic analysis challenges the convention that legitimacy requires distance. Finally, it directs attention to the vast amount of unpaid, feminised labour that holds together lives marked by criminalisation: the rides, the phone calls, the beds made up for men coming home.

There are places where readers might want more. At times the book gestures towards but does not fully develop connections to prison abolitionist organising, union campaigns or tenant struggles that could situate its stories within broader working-class movements. Some of the analytic vocabulary, particularly around "civic death," may feel more familiar to sociologists than to community organisers or formerly incarcerated readers. Yet these are minor reservations next to the book's overall achievement.

Halfway Home is a demanding, often painful read, but it is also deeply humane. It refuses to reduce people to case studies or "re-entry clients," and it refuses to let the rest of us imagine that mass incarceration ends at the prison wall. For scholars, students and activists in working-class studies, Miller offers both a conceptual lens on the carceral afterlife and an example of what it means to write from, and with, communities living it.

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Alan J. Dettlaff's *Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System* is a slim volume with a very large ambition. In just under two hundred pages, Dettlaff asks readers to look squarely at the history of family separation in the United States—from slavery, through the post-emancipation era and the rise of "child rescue" schemes, to contemporary foster care

and mandatory reporting—and to accept a hard conclusion: the harms inflicted on Black families by the child welfare system are not accidental side-effects of a well-intentioned project. They are the predictable outcomes of a system designed to police, punish and control poor Black communities.

Dettlaff writes as both scholar and former child welfare practitioner. He spent years inside the system he now argues must be abolished, and the book carries the clarity that comes from having tried reform and finding it wanting. Each chapter pairs historical analysis with contemporary evidence and, crucially, with insights from Black parents, youth and organisers. The argument unfolds along two intertwined tracks: a genealogy of family policing and a sustained challenge to the profession of social work, which has often provided the system with its language, legitimacy and frontline workforce.

A central strength of the book lies in its insistence on seeing child welfare as a **carceral** institution. Dettlaff traces how practices of forced family separation developed as tools of racial domination: the selling of enslaved children, the apprenticeships and indentures imposed on Black children after emancipation, and the removal of Indigenous children to boarding schools. Contemporary foster care, he suggests, continues these logics under the cover of "best interests" and "safety." What has changed is not the basic function—regulating and fragmenting Black family life—but the bureaucratic and therapeutic vocabularies through which that function is justified.

For readers in working-class studies, the book's focus on race is inseparable from class. The vast majority of families investigated and separated by child welfare agencies are poor; many are also entangled with low-wage work, housing precarity, debt and the criminal legal system. Dettlaff documents how conditions labelled "neglect" are often straightforward consequences of poverty: inadequate housing, lack of childcare, leaving children with older siblings while working, relying on informal networks when formal services are inaccessible or punitive. Instead of providing material support, the system removes children, imposes "service plans" and orders parents to perform compliance in order to regain custody.

One of the most powerful through-lines in the book is the way Dettlaff dismantles the myth of benevolence. He shows how, across decades, reformers have framed child welfare interventions as acts of rescue, even as Black parents describe them as experiences of invasion and terror. He attends carefully to language: the shift from "child saving" to "child protection," the euphemism of "placement," the bureaucratic flattening of experiences into risk categories and case notes. Drawing on emerging abolitionist scholarship and organising around family policing, he argues that such language is not neutral; it is part of how the system defends itself against accountability.

Some of the most compelling chapters are co-authored with Black scholars and organisers, including Victoria Copeland and Maya Pendleton. These sections bring in voices from the upEND movement and other abolitionist formations that call for dismantling, rather than reforming, the family policing system. The co-authored chapters help prevent the book becoming a solo expert lecture; instead, it reads as a contribution to an already-existing Black-led conversation about abolition and care.

Where *Halfway Home* chronicles the afterlife of a carceral sentence, *Confronting the Racist Legacy* asks us to see child welfare itself as a carceral regime, one that targets Black working-class families even where no criminal conviction is present. For those of us working in youth

justice and child protection in other settler states—including Australia—the resonances are immediate. Over-surveillance of Indigenous and racialised communities, the pathologising of poverty, and the deployment of "neglect" as a catch-all category are familiar patterns. Dettlaff's historical lens invites comparative work on how family policing has operated alongside mass incarceration and border control as technologies of classed and racial domination.

The book's abolitionist stance will trouble some readers, including those in social work who recognise deep problems in the system but remain committed to reform. Dettlaff anticipates this unease and refuses the temptation to offer an easily digestible middle ground. Instead, he patiently unpicks the logic of recurring reform waves—better training, new assessment tools, family preservation programs—that leave core structures intact. Abolition, for him, is not a demand for instant dismantling but a call to take seriously the idea that a system so deeply rooted in racial terror cannot be made safe through incremental adjustments.

For working-class studies, the book offers at least two key provocations. First, it insists that any analysis of working-class family life must grapple with state violence not only in prisons and police stations but also in child welfare offices and foster placements. The removal of children is not just an emotional catastrophe; it is a reorganisation of household labour, income and social reproduction. Second, it challenges us to think about solidarity across sectors: what it might mean for unionised child welfare workers, teachers, healthcare staff and community advocates to take abolitionist critiques seriously rather than treating family policing as an unfortunate necessity.

Stylistically, *Confronting the Racist Legacy* is accessible and direct. Dettlaff writes in plain language, with minimal jargon, making the book suitable for undergraduate courses in social work, criminology, sociology and working-class studies, as well as for community reading groups and practitioner trainings. Its brevity is a virtue; there is little padding, and the argument is all the sharper for it.

If there is a limitation, it lies less in the book itself than in the enormity of the project it calls for. Abolishing the child welfare system and building community-led structures of support, housing and income security is a generational task. Readers may finish the book hungry for more concrete pathways, more detailed case examples of alternatives in practice. Dettlaff points towards mutual aid, community-based support networks and economic redistribution, but he does not pretend to have a ready-made blueprint.

That said, this is a book that does what the best abolitionist writing does: it shifts the horizon of what readers think is possible and necessary. For scholars and activists in working-class studies, *Confronting the Racist Legacy* is a reminder that the frontlines of class struggle run through child welfare courts and visitation rooms as much as through workplaces and polling booths. It is essential reading for anyone concerned with how states manage and fracture Black working-class families—and for those of us trying to imagine, and build, something different.

Reviewer Bio:

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