

# **Carceral Geographies, Police Geographies, and the Networked Continuum of State-Sanctioned Coercion and Control**

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## **Abstract**

This essay introduces a special issue of *ACME* focused on the “carceral-police continuum.” We use this phrase to highlight three important concepts in policing and carceral geographies scholarship. The first is the imminence of coercive state power, and its uneven distribution. The second is the tangled and expansive web of relationships through which carceral logics and practices operate. The third are the ways attention to these conditions can contribute a conceptual framework to abolitionist praxis. After first offering some additional commentary on each of the problem areas identified above, we then describe how each of the papers collected here advances our understanding of these issues. We conclude by identifying several directions for continuing development, including a need for ongoing conceptual and methodological innovation that supports efforts toward collective forms of organizing, mitigation and redress directed at various forms of state violence, carceral power and their repercussions.

## **Keywords**

Carceral geographies, policing, state violence, racial capitalism, scholar-activism, abolition

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## Introduction

The year 2020 observed the largest, most widespread and militant wave of protest against police violence and the systemic devaluation of Black life in the USA for at least a generation. During the past decade, popular uprisings, abolitionist organizing and the Black Lives Matter movement have continuously pushed national conversations on policing and mass incarceration as among the most consequential contemporary measures of state intervention aggravating decades of racist segregation, disinvestment and brutality. These grassroots movements are also popularizing visionary alternatives to the status quo, via measures that include defunding the police, prioritizing public investment in community services and institutions, and transforming peoples' routine exposure to violence and harm.

Critical scholarship has done a great deal to address these issues; however, these contributions have tended to proceed along two parallel trajectories of inquiry. On one hand, carceral geographies scholarship focuses a political economic lens onto practice and institutions of state violence (Gilmore, 2007; Bonds, 2009; Moran et al., 2018; Cassidy et al., 2020; Coddington et al., 2020; Martin, 2020). In the process, it reveals how space is instrumental to accomplishing the isolation, fragmentation and control of particular communities (Mountz, 2012; Moran et al., 2013; Moran, 2016; Gill, 2016; Conlon et al., 2017; Cassidy, 2018; Loyd and Mountz, 2018), and how this results in "group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore, 2007, 28; see also Derickson, 2017; Story, 2019). On the other hand, scholars focused on geographies of policing attend to the spatial logics, epistemologies, and tautologies that underlie racialized patterns of police intervention (Jefferson 2018; Loyd and Bonds 2018; Coleman 2016; Kaufman 2016; Herbert and Brown 2006). This work illuminates the subtle affective and corporeal approaches mobilized by police to control certain populations, while cementing affinity with others (Akarsu 2020; Woodward and Bruzzone 2015). Bifurcating places and people, the police produce and operationalize internal and international borders (Bloch 2021; Christensen and Albrecht 2020; Boyce 2018; Stuesse and Coleman 2014; Cuomo 2013; Coleman 2012). This "ordering and bordering" work reinforces broader dynamics of uneven development, neoliberal governance, displacement and gentrification (Ramírez 2020; Cahill et al. 2019; Bloch and Meyer 2019; Parekh 2015; Woods 2011).

Connecting the lines of inquiry identified above, a number of scholars have argued that policing and carceral power be read together as part of a shared "carceral continuum" (see Wang 2018; Wacquant 2001) that structurally and ideologically cultivates a condition of disposability integral to the reproduction of racial capitalism (see Kaufman 2020; Ramírez 2020; Story 2019; Shabazz 2015; Gilmore 2007). This special issue brings together articles that build on these insights in order to deepen our understanding of the carceral-police continuum, and of the manifold places and spaces through which it is produced, lived, and contested. In bringing these articles together there are three specific problem areas that we wish to highlight. The first is the imminence of coercive state power and its uneven distribution. The second is the tangled and expansive web of relationships through which carceral logics and practices operate. The third involves how attention to these dynamics can contribute to abolitionist praxis. In what follows we offer additional commentary on each of these questions. We then describe how the papers included in this special issue individually and collectively illuminate specific aspects of the carceral-police continuum. We conclude by identifying several possible directions for continuing development.

## Unravelling the Carceral-Police Continuum

The first problem we wish to address here is how theorizing carceral power and police geographies together helps to highlight coercive state power as both imminent and unevenly distributed. Relevant here are Benjamin's (1978) formative insights regarding the ontogenetic contributions of police violence to the foundation of social and political life. Importantly, for Benjamin, these contributions are substantively independent of any formal question of law, or the il/legality of any given person's status or behavior. Consider how, given that it is practically impossible for police to intervene everywhere with

the same degree of intensity, individual police agencies, patrol officers and beat cops are continuously compelled to make concrete decisions about *where*, *when* and *upon whom* to focus their limited resources and attention. Those who, as a result, become subjected to disproportionate police scrutiny find their everyday lives shaped by cumulative experiences of intimidation, harassment, dispossession and brutality; and their routine decisions and intimate relationships increasingly subjected to restrictive monitoring and control by police, courts, prisons, immigration officials, social workers, and probation officers (among others) along gradients of intensity that tie a complex knot of coercion. In this way, policing and related forms of carceral violence don't just *respond* to pre-existing hierarchies of race, gender, class and related patterns of socio-economic inequality; they also *drive* them.

This brings us to the second problem we wish to highlight: that carceral practices operate through and upon a tangled and expansive web of relationships. On the one hand, attention to these issues affords an expanded view of penal logic and carceral space as extending beyond discrete institutions like the jail, the prison or the detention center and into homes, neighborhoods, schools, mental health care settings, and a variety of other spaces and environments (see Massaro 2019; Gill et al. 2018; Moran et al. 2018; Allspach 2010; Moran 2016; Turner 2016; Shabazz 2015). On the other hand, this also suggests a need for greater attention to the networked dimensions of social life, including those relationships of interdependency necessary to everyday and generational practices of social reproduction. Indeed, through its emphasis on practices of separation, isolation, and individualized incapacitation and punishment, carceral power can itself be understood as operating via an assault on these kinds of relationships. At the same time, critical and feminist scholars have increasingly come to attend to how carceral practices appropriate and operate *through* these networks of care and interdependency (see Ngyuen this issue; Massaro 2019; Hiemstra and Conlon 2016; Williams and Massaro 2016) – particularly as states, counties and other government actors come under growing fiscal pressure to reduce their spending on more traditional custodial arrangements. One result is that police and carceral interventions aiming at any one individual will inevitably create effects that ripple out to affect many others. These effects unfold across households, neighborhoods and entire communities whose lives become routinely destabilized (see Smith et al. this issue; Ramírez 2020; Cahill et al. 2019; Story 2016; Shabazz 2015; Gilmore 2007). They also accumulate and persist over time. Indeed, given the networked condition of our lives, the emotional and material repercussions of police and carceral violence frequently become generational in scope (see Boyce this issue; 2020).

These observations bring us to the third and final problem we wish to highlight: how a foregrounding of the networked dimensions of the carceral-police continuum usefully contributes to abolitionist praxis, by providing a conceptual framework for steadily reducing peoples' exposure to police and carceral violence without falling into an absolutist paradigm that would imagine police or carceral power as being either fully absent or present in any given time, place or situation. We offer additional commentary on this last issue in the concluding section, below. But first, it is worth describing the papers collected in this special issue, and how each of these helps to illuminate particular features of the carceral-police continuum described above. The approaches taken by the authors included here range from an exploration of the intimate spaces of the home, the block, and the neighborhood, where conditions of freedom and confinement articulate across everyday practice (Pain 2015; Massaro and Williams 2013; Mountz et al. 2013; Dowler 2012); to more quantitative aggregations of generational conditions of vulnerability and dispossession. Studying the carceral-police continuum across these contexts reveals those everyday forms of state and state-sanctioned violence that articulate across the ever-evolving frontiers of racial capitalism. It also challenges the content and the stakes of criminal justice reform, as a host of actors coalesce around "alternatives to detention" that nevertheless often hinge upon the proliferation of new institutions, actors, and technological assemblages invested in the everyday mediation of unfreedom (Kurti and Shanahan this issue; Hiemstra and Conlon 2017; Crenshaw 2012; McKittrick, 2011; Herbert and Brown 2006). Finally, it is worth observing that much of the scholarship

collected here is informed by ongoing collaboration with grassroots activists and social movements – relationships that are essential to the breadth of coverage, the degree of conceptual innovation, and the depth of methodological rigor that these papers contain. It is to an expanded discussion of this work that we now turn.

### **The Papers in this Special Issue**

As already observed, mechanisms of policing and control are continuously advanced not only by uniformed state actors operating within and on behalf of discrete institutions, but also by those many other actors and institutions who participate in and/or contribute to the steady expansion of coercive state power. In her contribution to this special issue, Nicole Nguyen explores the exploitation of care networks by the United States federal government to counter “extremism” and “domestic terrorism.” In the process, Nguyen (this issue) introduces the term “carceral care work” to denote “how the US security state has intensified the relationship between care and control to advance its global war on terror agenda.” This is accomplished, in part, through the provision of vital social services like mentorship programs, free passes to play soccer, and funding for afterschool programs. Despite a lack of credible evidence regarding any relationship between these kinds of “countering violent extremism” (CVE) policies and the commission of acts of violence, Nguyen’s careful ethnographic work uncovers how this kind of carceral care work operationalizes racialized and xenophobic biases to transform the everyday fabric of immigrant and refugee communities by continuously bringing these communities into closer proximity with coercive state power.

Zhandarka Kurti and Jarrod Shannahan also delve into the expansive nature of control in the age of “decarceration,” by considering the “progressive” branding of mass carceral supervision by non-profit organizations like the Vera Institute. By introducing and elaborating on the conceptual frame of “carceral non-profits,” Kurti and Shannahan reveal the barriers such institutions have come to impose upon abolitionist visions and organizing. This includes examination of Vera’s support, in the wake of the closing of the Rikers Island prison, for smaller “neighborhood” jails distributed throughout New York City. This initiative ultimately re-spatializes the prison into a new and expanded carceral regime. Abolitionists, they note, now face “a mutated hydra of social-justice non-profit organizations, flush with funding... who embrace a version of decarceration shaped by fiscal concerns of the cost of incarceration” (Kurti and Shannahan, this issue). Within broader activist and advocacy campaigns, this tends to foreground questions of “efficiency,” which redirects energy away from more substantive conversations about reducing peoples’ exposure to organized institutions of violence. Thus, under a progressive guise, carceral nonprofits seek to “build a better prison,” which, similar to CVE efforts, accelerates the intimate infiltration of carceral power into communities through additional prison construction, increased supervision, invasive data collection, and digital surveillance (through, for example, technologies like ankle bracelets).

Yet even as surveillance and control are advanced by a variety of ancillary actors and institutions, its effects also often persist and accumulate across those expansive networks of dependency, care and support within which peoples’ lives remain embedded over time. The harms that result must therefore be understood as wide-reaching and *collective* – both in their nature and expression. Geoff Boyce’s contribution to this special issue expands on his ongoing work to document the uneven material impacts of border and immigration enforcement for communities throughout the United States, by focusing on the many kinds of financial consequences that result from immigration arrest, detention and/or deportation. However, Boyce (this issue) also addresses how communities come together to hedge against these financial consequences, and against the violence of immigration enforcement more broadly. The resulting patterns of organizing and mutual aid illustrate how targeted communities are more than just passive victims of policing or carceral power - they also engage in everyday practices of survival, regeneration and resistance that can be transformative in their cumulative effect.

The article by Jackson Smith, Vanessa Massaro and Greg Miller pushes examination of the relationship between policing and financial dispossession in another direction. It does so by applying a quantitative and mixed-methods approach to show how patterns of arrest and prosecutorial decisions about home forfeiture correspond with the spatial articulation of uneven development and urban change in Philadelphia, PA. This work expands on a number of scholarly interventions that reveal how “broken windows”-style policing shifts responsibility for racialized disinvestment away from state and capital onto the backs of those Black and Latinx communities who have most acutely suffered its harmful effects (see Camp and Heatherton 2016; Gilmore 2002, 2007; Smith 2001). In the process, their paper advances this scholarship by showing how everyday, racialized patterns of policing *itself* contribute to identifiable patterns of financial and material disinvestment. As a result, Smith et al. (this issue) contribute an important variable often overlooked within scholarly efforts to explain broader patterns of gentrification, displacement and development, while also offering a series of methodological innovations revealing how this variable can be meaningfully mapped and measured.

However, even as many of the papers in this special issue combine useful conceptual insights with methodological advancement, there remain considerable barriers to studying carceral practices and police institutions. In part this is because the actors and institutions involved in advancing state-sanctioned patterns of coercion and control are themselves often deeply invested in shielding their activities from scrutiny – while the power these actors yield to control access and information allows them to act on this disposition to operate with a considerable degree of obfuscation and secrecy (for more on these methodological difficulties in the study of policing and carceral geographies, see Belcher and Martin 2019; Boyce 2018; Hiemstra 2017; Coleman and Stuesse, 2016; Coleman 2016; Boyce et al. 2015). One might even consider this unidirectional cultivation of secrecy as itself a significant feature of state power – a kind of “state effect” (see Mitchell 1999; Abrams 1988). In their paper using data collected via public records requests that focused on the economic dimensions of immigration detention, Deirdre Conlon and Nancy Hiemstra offer considerable insight into this dynamic, its instrumental function in advancing and consolidating carceral power, as well as the problems this poses for research. At the same time, they also reveal how the complex interactions of scale, bureaucracy and jurisdiction through which these economies operate produce certain gaps and fissures in the architecture of information control that researchers can successfully pry in order to obtain empirical insight and evidence that might otherwise remain hidden from view. Meanwhile, through their advocacy of “muddling through” as a methodological approach to penetrating official barriers and patterns of secrecy, Conlon and Hiemstra (this issue) offer numerous concrete suggestions for how researchers might continue to make visible the silences and confusion strategically cultivated around carceral practices, economies and institutions.

In the sixth and final contribution to this special issue, Brittany Meché examines how anti-narcotics policing becomes mobilized to drive broader security sector reforms in the Sahel region of West Africa - reforms whose implementation comes to be used by Western governments and intergovernmental agencies as a measure for overall improvements in governance and development outcomes. In this way, Meché (this issue) demonstrates how, just as domestic efforts to “reform” prisons and policing repeatedly lead to a strengthening and expansion of carceral power (Kurti and Shannahan this issue; Kaba 2021; Gilmore 2017; 2015; Ritchie 2017; Murakawa 2014), attempts by U.S. and multilateral actors to teach “good policing” promote the cultivation of an expanded capacity for violence as a privileged approach for managing a host of heterogeneous social and political issues. On the flip side, Meché’s discussion also reveals how the geopolitical urgencies associated with terrorism, poverty and development are at the same time marshalled to sustain a War on Drugs paradigm whose legitimacy has increasingly come under challenge in the United States and globally. Meché’s work, therefore, not only contributes an international perspective to the topics explored in this special issue; it also offers a robust empirical illustration of how carceral logics and technologies of control circulate and trouble the

coherence of commonly-deployed categorical boundaries between foreign vs. domestic and civilian vs. military forms of state violence and government intervention (see also Loyd 2020; Seigel 2018; Neocleous 2014).

### **Concluding Comments**

By synthesizing seemingly discrete arenas, attending to lived, material realities, and articulating new lines of connection and solidarity across heterogeneous sites and communities, the papers in this special issue show that geography has much to offer to advance a conversation between critical literatures on policing and carceral power. Of course, there are many ways that this conversation can be developed further, and in the following, concluding comments we wish to map out several directions that we find especially promising.

One of these has to do with the issue of scale, including a need for ongoing conceptual and methodological innovation that can more effectively capture the networked and temporal dimensions and repercussions of the carceral-police continuum. Among other contributions, such efforts can help to support measures of mitigation and redress that both reduce peoples' exposure to policing and carceral power, and that are *collective* in both nature and approach. Of course, these are the very kinds of interventions already being advanced by the Black Lives Matter movement and related protest and organizing in support of police and prison abolition (Kaba 2021; MPD150 2020; Movement for Black Lives 2016; Taylor 2016; INCITE! 2008). And although a nascent literature aligned with and aiming to theorize these efforts has emerged in geography (this includes the formative work of Gilmore 2017; 2007; but also Heynan and Ybarra 2021; Ybarra 2021; Ramírez 2020; Roy, 2019 Loyd et al. 2012), much more could be done to cultivate and sustain this work. This includes greater attention to the uneven geographies of policing and carceral power, and how particular affinities and grassroots desires for state intervention become coopted into an escalating feedback loop of racialized violence (Akarsu 2020; Williams and Boyce 2013). It also includes championing practices of scholar-activism – including those mobilized by women, BIPOC and gender non-conforming scholars – in order to mobilize knowledge and inquiry undertaken in collaboration with those grassroots actors who are among the most impacted by this violence. Indeed, it is our belief that this kind of scholarship has driven some of the most exciting and impactful recent contributions within the discipline of geography (Bloch and Olviores-Pelayo 2021; Cahill et al. 2020; Jefferson 2020; Nguyen 2019; Loyd and Bonds 2018; Loyd et al. 2012; Gilmore 2007; Shabazz 2015). And yet even as the products of such collaboration are (occasionally) celebrated, the time, energy and commitment necessary to sustain this work rarely obtain the kind of institutional investment and material support that each deserves.

Finally (and in a related vein), we believe that there remains a need for continuing theoretical and empirical work that probes at the intersections of race, space and political economy, in order to unravel the contributions of carceral technologies and related patterns of state violence to the accumulation of difference and the differentiation of value under racial capitalism. Although these kinds of relationships remain an animating theme in much of the scholarship considered in this introductory essay, it is also our conviction that a great deal more remains to be done. With this in mind, it is our hope that our discussion above of the carceral-police continuum, and our description of how each of the papers collected in this special issue contributes to illuminating its contours, will be received as one modest contribution toward this effort.

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