Michael J. Coyle and Mechthild Nagel, Ed. *Contesting Carceral Logic: Toward Abolitionist Futures.* Routledge, 2022.Pp. 213. $49.95, paperback. ISBN: 9780367751326

In recent years, Americans across the political spectrum have recognized abuses in the U.S. criminal-legal system; however, the notion of this system as a “justice system”—that is, a rational set of institutions that may sometimes be corrupted by abuse but is fundamentally oriented towards justice and safety--remains deeply ingrained in the national consciousness. Except in more specialized circles, questions about the basic logic of our justice system are rarely raised. Building on a rich tradition of abolitionist thought, *Contesting Carceral Logic* helps a wider audience to raise more probing questions about the system we have called “justice.” Why, for instance, do we identify justice and safety with incarcerating people? Why are the same racialized and dispossessed populations locked up across the world? And why do we target and vilify the transgressions of socially vulnerable populations while ignoring the much more substantial harms of poverty and institutionalized racism?

The contributors to *Contesting Carceral Logic* share a commitment to radical critique of what passes as “criminal justice,” but their contributions vary widely in intellectual style and social and geographic standpoints. The heterogeneous collection does not offer a systematic critique of modern punishment or methodical elaboration of penal abolition and its links to broader transformation of the world that has given rise to prisons. The book does, however, present a rich variety of perspectives–anti-colonial, anti-racist, feminist, Marxist, Foucauldian, Southern criminology, activism-situated, and poetic--on the contradictions of the modern penal system. Readers new to these arguments will find a variety of inroads for critically examining the modern paradigm of justice. Readers familiar with abolitionist texts are bound to encounter some new provocations amongst the variety of essays collected here for exploring a kind of “justice” that does not exacerbate but helps us to heal from racist violence and other social harms.

An introduction by editors Michael Coyle and Methschild Nagel frames the volume in terms of an explicitly abolitionist stance. They contrast *carceral logic*–a logic centered on the premise “that threats, punishments, and imprisonment broadly work as solutions to social problems”--to *penal abolition logic,*  which rejects carceral assumptions and shifts the conversation to “how communities can best socially organize to respond to [all] transgression” (1, 5). While the discussion of penal abolition remains general, the introduction effectively brings under scrutiny the contours of a punishment-oriented mindset born of racism and violence that now dominates modern life. Citing decolonial theorists, critical race theorists, and Michel Foucault, it traces our punishment-oriented criminal-legal system to colonialism, white supremacy, and modern capitalism, each of which has invoked the authority of the law and the tools of state-sanctioned punishment to enforce power relations. It invites readers to consider how, from colonialism to the present day, the ruse of “criminal justice” has served as a cover to maintain control over subjugated populations.

The introduction also offers a compelling account of the broad reach of carceral logic across the neocolonial world. In the United States and elsewhere, the editors argue, the punish-and-imprison logic has exercised an “almost complete grasp. . .on what is called the ‘criminal justice system’” (2). This logic also has structured everything from immigration policy to schools, from mental health treatment to responses to “difference of almost any kind,” where state-sanctioned punishment is used to control people who trouble the social order (2). In fact, the editors argue, we have become so fixated on punishing troublemakers that we have largely overlooked the failure of our punishment-oriented systems to reduce crime and the possibility of alternative responses to harm. “[L]ike a hammer that sees only contexts in which to pummel,” say Coyle and Nagel, societies mired in the control-and-punishment mindset have become carceral states that “see only contexts in which to punish and imprison” (1).

When a logic becomes an unquestioned framework of our institutions, it often structures even the disciplines used to study those institutions, which become unwitting accomplices with that logic. The editors argue that this has become the case with the disciplines of criminology and philosophy of law, which aside from some important exceptions, have tended to follow received ways of seeing “crime” and “criminals,” reduce justice to punishment of “criminals,” and limit inquiry to theorizing the grounds or the appropriate degree of punishment (4). The project of *Carceral Logic*, however, is not to critically examine criminology programs or engage specific debates within these disciplines. Instead, it speaks to readers with a general interest in justice and social problems and offers them an array of perspectives from which to think critically about the role that prisons have played in our world.

Some of the most powerful essays are penned from currently incarcerated writers. These writings offer glimpses into the profound emotional and psychological harm that is endemic to our modern penal system. Beyond testifying to the depth of abuse, though, they also attest to the resilient humanity, insight, and value to our community of some of the people our criminal-legal system has treated as disposable. “Disenthrall,” by Emmanuel X, gives voice to the severe crushing of humanity that lies at the core of our penal system, not unlike that of the slave-trade. Having been caged for 5 years “in a cell smaller than an average bathroom with no TV, radio, or window. . . [s]hackled and handcuffed every time I move” (179), and having mustered strength from inside himself to reflect upon his experience, Emmanuel describes how incarceration does not merely detain but enacts a systematic pummeling of the human spirit.

Submerged into ruins losing all sense of hope and direction. Stolen. Stripped away from our opportunity to share the full experience of humanity. To thrive in society. To give and contribute to our communities. To experience nature – the nourishment of our kids and to provide for and watch our families grow.

…as if we’re a virus; a deadly plague stripped from civilization. . .as if we’re infected with a deadly disease that gnaws our identities until we become nothing more than a number (178).

Emmanuel is not the first to compare the U.S. penal system to slavery, but his experience-driven account of the continuities between enslavement and incarceration is particularly compelling. Struck by having witnessed “at least 85% of [his] male childhood peers become incarcerated,” Emmanuel traces the “hidden heritage” of his people: from hunted fugitive slaves, to people forced into the bondage of convict-leasing, to people targeted by a contemporary ”[r]acism masked behind the disguise of a penal system” (179, 180). Through the lens of this narrative, he notes that the prison system, like slavery, “can [regularly] hold an individual for ‘life’” (179, 180). Also like slavery, the carceral system uses guns and iron to tear people from their communities, thereby scarring the targeted individuals as well their kin. “I’m forced to raise my son from a cell thousands of miles away,” he tells us, “separated by razor wire fences equipped with motion-detectors, watch-towers and armed guards with assault rifles” (182). The prison’s continued obstruction of his efforts to connect with his family cause him “a constant pain that throbs in [his] brain and heart” while the children on the other side of the razor wire suffer “years of collateral damage that can never fully heal” (182). Given the suffering that Emmanuel has endured at the hands of his countrymen, when he speaks of his “craving to contribute to humanity as a whole,” and when he addresses readers as part of the “we” who can together “stand up to this plague that has been tormenting families for centuries” (183), it is not mere edifying prose; it is an act of resistance that counters prison divisiveness and dehumanization with an expanded sense of community and an image of his people as neither monsters nor victims but allies with much to teach us about resilience and solidarity.

Other contributions from currently incarcerated writers are also remarkable for their honest reckoning with painful experience and the insight gained from such reckoning. Joseph (Dont’e) Williams, for instance, reflects on his recurring returns to prison and the ways that prisons “emotionally and psychologically provok[e] people into being more aggressive, hypersexualized, and prone to commit more crime (18). Medical professionals have drawn similar conclusions about the ways that prisons exacerbate hypermasculinity and criminality.[[1]](#footnote-1) When Williams gleans this insight from probing the pressures on his own behavior–when he explains how prison has distorted his perception of women, produced in him (from regular strip searches) “an overwhelming need to overcompensate for years of state sanctioned sexual abuse,” and reduced him to a label that warped both others’ and his own expectations of himself–he attests not only to the depth of the trauma that prison inflicts on people. He also demonstrates the tremendous capacities of some of the people seared by the penal system to reveal and reverse dehumanizing processes.

Other essays stress the value for abolitionist thinking of anti-colonialist frameworks. The piece co-authored by Vicki Chartrand and Niko Rougier draws on Rougier’s critical insight as an Abenaki artist currently incarcerated at a maximum-security prison in Quebec to foreground the colonialist dimensions of Canada’s penal system. In colonialist fashion, the authors argue, this system tears indigenous people from their land and culture, which undermines their very sense of being. “The severing and destruction of ties and connections is a central component of colonial practice,” note Rougier and Chartrand, “and is intensified in the microsites of the prison” (26). Although prisons may tout rehabilitation or allow limited Aboriginal rituals, the authors argue, the prison is an “artificial environment” whose very design works “to separate and segregate families, communities and many other connections” (27). The authors also warn of colonialist elements in liberatory struggles when “white saviors” presume to rescue “the carceral other.” By calling attention to colonialist processes in prisons and in our own lives, and to the ways that such processes sever people—all people—from life-sustaining connections, the essay points to the value of relations-oriented Indigenous frameworks for building healthy relationships and broad networks of accountability within abolition movements.

Other essays glean lessons from grassroots abolitionist organizing, some of which underscore the importance of resisting carceral logic with practices of mutual well-being. The Foreword by Diana Block, for instance, addresses the radical implications of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) and its organizing efforts on behalf of incarcerated women, trans, and gender non-conforming people (TGNC). Block describes how CCWP members formed “communities of collective care” across prison walls, which resisted the divide-and-isolate strategies of the prison as well as provided a more nurturing alternative to “male-dominated” leftist political movements and a source of strength for bold political struggle (xviii) When the CCWP advocated for incarcerated survivors of sexual violence (women and TGNC people who have been sexually assaulted both before and after incarceration), and when they launched #MeTooBehindBars, they not only gave voice to hundreds of forgotten women. They also confounded the “victim/perpetrator” dichotomy of carceral logic and exposed the hypocrisy of anti-violence movements that rely on prisons to protect people from violence. Brown ends by briefly describing CCWP’s outreach to women’s struggles in Palestine and elsewhere in the Global South. This frames her call for a more broad-based abolitionist movement that links prison abolition to resistance against global structures of oppression.

Readers should not expect to find in this volume a full account of the various links the essays indicate between the carceral state, racial capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and global structures of oppression. Among the range of essays collected here, however, readers will likely find new ways of thinking about the contradictions of our penal system and new frameworks for disrupting our fixation on punishing others and shifting conversations toward how we can hold our communities accountable for profound historical and social harms.

Works Cited

Gilligan, James. *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*. New York: Random House: 1996.

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1. For instance, Gilligan, *Violence*, chapters 5 and 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)