

Article Title

Carceral Geography

Author and Information

Jennifer Turner

Department of Geography and Planning

Roxby Building, 74 Bedford Street South

University of Liverpool

Liverpool

L69 7ZT

jennifer.turner@liverpool.ac.uk

+44 (0)151 794 2876

Abstract

Three lines of investigation define carceral geography. These are the nature of spaces of incarceration; the spatial geographies of carceral systems; and the relationship between forms of carceral spatiality and the punitive state. This work comprises a wide range of methodological approaches and empirical foci. Studies in this area have not only pushed geographers into new empirical territories, but have likewise stimulated innovative theoretical advances by thinking spatially, through carceral space. Together, these lines of investigation have alerted scholars to the importance of carceral sites as very particular spaces for advancing geographical thinking around themes of place-making and home-making; emotion and space; bordering; mobility; time-space regimes; and the role of state power in defining practices of incarceration, and in the design of carceral spaces. By

extending carcerality far beyond the walls of the prison, it is theorised a framework within which to interrogate a wide range of other empirical spaces and contexts.

Keywords

Abolition, carcerality, carceral boundary, crimmigration, detention, discipline, incarceration, imprisonment, prison, punishment

Body Text

Introduction

In 1990 Mike Davis published his formative book, *City of Quartz* where he examined the city of Los Angeles and its vast networks of surveillance and hardened policing laws. By labelling LA a “carceral city,” Davis pushed the term “carceral” away from simply the prison and into the hands of human geographers who then also turned their attention to the spatial relationships inherent in gated communities, surveillance through Closed Circuit Television (CCTV), and other banal securitization of everyday life. The term “carceral geography” was coined around the end of the first decade of the 21st century to describe the field of geographical research that focuses upon spaces and practices of incarceration. In its early inception it was described as an extension to or sub-strand of geographical security studies because of the focus on spaces that secure – through the detention or locking-up/away – problematic populations. Carceral geography is in close dialogue with longer-standing academic engagements with the carceral, most notably criminology and prison sociology. More contemporary scholarship has taken a more nuanced approach to allow carceral geography to emerge as a standalone field of enquiry.

Dominique Moran's *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration* defined carceral geography along three lines of investigation that fold together studies of incarceration with an examination of their implicit geographies. The first characteristic of carceral geography is an enquiry into what constitutes the "nature" of a space of incarceration and the experiences that occur within them. The second focusses on spatial geographies of carceral systems (thinking particularly about the lived experiences of carceral sites, mobilities, movements within and between carceral institutions, and relationships across the carceral boundary between "inside" and "outside" of carceral space). The third aspect under scrutiny is the relationship between forms of carceral spatiality and the punitive state. This work comprises a range of methodological approaches (both quantitative and qualitative), couched very clearly within a recognition of the vulnerability of incarcerated individuals as research participants and the challenge of access to research sites (which can vary significantly according to geographical location and the stringency of gaining approval from the respective criminal justice system). Studies in this area have not only pushed geographers into new empirical territories, but have likewise stimulated innovative theoretical advances by thinking spatially, through carceral space. Together, these lines of investigation have alerted scholars within geography to the importance of carceral sites as very particular spaces for advancing geographical thinking around themes of place-making and home-making; emotion and space; bordering; mobility; time-space regimes; and the role of state power in defining practices of incarceration, and in the design of carceral spaces. Through such theoretical contributions, carcerality is a framework within which to interrogate a wide range of other empirical spaces.

Characteristics, systems, and relationships

In its traditional sense, carcerality has closely corresponded to a particular empirical focus. In its early development, carceral geographers turned their attention to spaces of captivity, holding, detention, quarantine, and imprisonment in particular. They have investigated diverse aspects of carceral life; focusing upon change and difference for various groups of individuals – for adults, children, young people, those convicted of crimes, migrant detainees, asylum-seekers, etc. – across space and time, and between cultures and jurisdictions. The breadth of empirical focus is large. While some scholars attend to the “mainstream” incarceration of “criminals” for custodial sentences imposed by prevailing legal systems, others are concerned with the spaces of migrant detention that confine individuals defined as irregular, such as non-status migrants awaiting decisions on admittance or removal to a particular nation state. Studies in carceral geography have noted the variances in carceral experiences (within and) by nation state, which is unsurprising since all countries rely on a system of imprisonment in some guise or another. There is also scholarship on the overlaps and synergies between spaces such as the interactions between prisons, migration, policing, and detention, including in the Global North and South. This work is not simply contemporary in its focus, with significant importance being placed upon historical work that tracks the development of carceral systems over time or the use/reuse of carceral sites beyond their lifespan.

Other work concerning carceral spaces has taken a more cultural approach, attending to emotional and embodied geographies of carceral life and carceral timespace and the body. Scholars have drawn upon the most dynamic and forward-thinking interventions made in other sub-disciplines in human geography to assay the experience of lived experience in carceral space. For example, drawing upon concepts developed in the “new mobilities” paradigm, carceral geographers have become interested in the ways in which carceral

subjects – prisoners, detainees, refugees, for example – move or are forced to move.

Although at first glance, the words “carceral” and “mobilities” seem to sit uneasily together, much research has challenged the assumption that carceral life is characterized by a lack of movement. Here, work – for example, on prisoner transportation between prisons in Russia; and prison ships transporting convicts from the UK to Australia – has used a mobilities lens to explore how movement might be disciplined, enforced and/or coerced; or occurring on macro and micro scales.

Carceral geographers have also focused upon how the design of carceral spaces affects not only those who spend time in them, but can also send a message to those outside of them. A large body of literature has considered how carceral spaces come to represent society’s wider views on crime and punishment (e.g., they become a mechanism to justify criminalizing of the poor or minority groups). Examples include a prison’s influence on communities both local to and distant from it, and the impact of prison and prison privatization as part of a wider state economy. Further work in the sub-discipline has viewed spaces of incarceration as cultural landscapes, drawing on decades of work in human geography where landscapes become a way to view and/or imagine the world. In these arguments, all landscapes are representations and carceral landscapes can be viewed in a similar way. In a world where most ‘law-abiding’ individuals do not have first-hand experiences of carceral spaces, media representations of these spaces become important in creating impressions of such environments (see work on prison poetry and other first-hand narratives of carceral space; and on prison tourism – where former sites of incarceration have become sites for leisure).

In this respect, the carceral boundary between “inside” and “outside” and its social construction existing both within and separate from physical spaces of incarceration is a key

concern. In relation to tangible and intangible things that cross the prison wall, substantial work has been undertaken regarding in-between spaces of the prison: police cells, visiting rooms, and liminal spaces of prisoner transportation such as the convict ship. Scholars have explored prisoner possessions and contraband; highlighting their significance and movement in the prison setting. More widely, this research contributes to studies of the continuity of social relations beyond the prison wall, including, for example, the significance of the prison and detention systems as central components of the economic infrastructure of society.

Much work has been led by the scholarship of Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Jamie Peck that theorizes the political-economic ramifications of high-levels of imprisonment in the US. This work recognizes that the imprisonment system is critical to the successful economic functioning of certain states, such as California – where prison-building has increased in recent years – or to post-industrial areas, where prison siting presents an opportunity for employment and prosperity.

In creating debate around an assumed binary relationship between the “inside” and “outside” of spaces of imprisonment and detention, work in carceral geography has interrogated the notion of an absolute, fixed prison boundary. One might imagine that the prison boundary exists at the outermost limit of a prison, at the juncture between controlled and securitized space and public space. The prison might be considered a closed-off world that houses a group of individuals that members of law-abiding society do not see, do not hear from, nor with whom they have cause to interact. After all, prisons are places that people are purposefully sent: convicted by the courts to serve sentences “locked away” from the rest of “law-abiding” society. Yet, many academics from a variety of different disciplines have considered that the boundary between prison and society is not a hard and fast one. Prisons

have come to be seen as fulfilling a central societal function as they are linked to economies (as in the US where jobs are created around facilities located in rural areas with little other industry) or central to the political governance of a state (by helping to maintain law and order). In addition to the economic and political facets of the prison, carceral geographers have also examined the cultural components of this boundary. As carceral geographers expand their enquiry into this area, work considers the multitude of other things that might cross the prison boundary, from contraband, visitors, and employees to other everyday items or practices such as food, clothing, news, friendships, or even allegiance to a particular football team. In this way, the prison boundary is theorized as a messy, blurry, irregular entity that is far more complex than its concrete, territorial spatialization might suggest. The simplistic dualism of an “inside” and “outside” separated by a stark line is complicated further when we consider the variety of spaces that exist inside and outside of prison which demonstrate practices that we might term “carceral” – activities occurring in spaces of incarceration.

Blurring the carceral boundary

Building upon this interrogation of the complex and often blurred relationship between prison and society, work in carceral geography now makes significant headway in exploring carcerality across boundaries. This discussion has been substantially influenced by and is now difficult to separate from the influential work of Michel Foucault. In the final chapter of *Discipline and Punish* (1977) entitled “The carceral,” Michel Foucault described a “carceral system” with influence far beyond the physical space of the prison. By highlighting the example of Mettray – a 19th-Century French reformatory for young boys, Foucault outlined five models of organizational control: family, army, workshop, school, and judicial system. These, he suggested, entwine with wider society and radiate out in “carceral circles” from the

epicentral, most stringent of carceral spaces: the prison. Institutions he identified as being within the innermost circles included those with disciplinary ideologies such as poorhouses and institutions for abandoned children. Charities, housing associations, and societies for the moral improvement of individuals exist as more distant “ripples” where “carceral methods” that were employed to discipline focus more subtly upon surveillance of individuals. This societal spread of the carceral is termed the “carceral archipelago,” transporting the disciplinary techniques of the prison into the social body as a whole. Scholars have expanded upon this to outline “carceral circuitry” inherent in a carceral system involving a multitude of varying institutions at different scales with different roles.

Taking lead from this model, carceral geographers have increasingly described spaces beyond prisons as carceral. For example, although rates of incarceration vary globally, in the US there has been a massive expansion of the prison system, a strategy that is being emulated by other countries with large numbers of prisoners, such as China and the UK. It is therefore natural that the prison itself is a site for significant research focus. Yet, the processes of locking people up, and the segregation that it entails, have rendered incarceration a banal practice, with features that are common to spaces outside of prison. Small wonder that recent literature has called for a new focus upon mechanisms of socio-spatial exclusion, such as the methods used in urban spaces to channel social undesirables. These have included the fences, gates, walls, surveillance technologies, and armed security, which protect luxury areas in cities such as Sao Paulo, London, or Los Angeles. Although “banishment” is a term most commonly associated with historical mechanisms of criminal justice, such methods are being re-imagined as concepts in the contemporary world; they are re-emerging as hybrid tools to control populations. Seattle, for example, has witnessed the adoption of “civility codes” and “trespass admonishments” prohibiting activities such as panhandling, sitting on sidewalks,

and camping, which compel certain people to remain absent from certain places for a certain period of time. Similarly, “drug-free zones” and “prostitution-free zones” imposed in Portland, Oregon restrict individuals spatially and temporally – effectively banishing the homeless from public spaces. In the UK, examples can also be drawn from the labelling of individuals as a threat to society – as is the case with enforcing Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) or public house banning orders upon individuals who commit certain unwanted activities.

In a different register, carceral geographers have traced how the carceral apparatus has permeated into neighborhoods and communities outside of prison through exemplification of mechanisms relating to preventing juvenile delinquency, including restrictions upon access to public parks in hours after dark. Often these discussions highlight racial inequalities, such as in Loïc Wacquant’s exploration of the relationship between the ghetto and the prison, whereby racialized public culture of denigration of criminals and a criminalization of the poor allows the ghetto to be theorized as a kind of carceral space. Furthermore, ideas surrounding the wider treatment of borders – such as maintaining the security of a nation’s geographical boundaries from afar – lead us to question again where the prison boundary is. Alluding to a transnational and literally fluid conceptualization of carceral regimes via consideration of both onshore and offshore detention sites, carceral geographers have drawn upon the creation of “buffer zones” as an attempt to reinforce the distance between inside and outside in a world shaped by the prolific expansion of detention. An example is the practice of intercepting boats carrying migrants before they are able to arrive at the territorial border of the state. In this way, the so-called “buffer zone” places the de facto border both spatially and temporally dislocated from the territorial boundary.

Strategies aimed at spatial exclusion are proliferating across contemporary societies, which extend the concept of carcerality far beyond the walls of the prison. The metaphor of the prison has been extrapolated into other spaces, particularly through the principles of the Panopticon. The Panopticon is regularly understood as the “ideal” model for a prison: circular in shape with cells arranged around a central tower, from which prisoners could at all times be observed. This notion of the threat of omnipresent surveillance shaping behaviors has seen geographic work explore parallels such as behaviors on the streets or self-regulated behaviors in other institutional settings that exhibit carceral features such as homes and schools. Research focus has also been trained upon sites beyond the traditional, landed prison regarding islands or in historical research on the convict ship.

By extending carcerality far beyond the walls of the prison, carceral geographers have theorized, for example, how certain individuals in society have become criminalized, such as migrant detainees, who are often housed in former prisons or other secure spaces. This phenomenon is often labelled as “crimmigration,” or the criminalization of immigration. This sees illegal immigrants detained in ‘mainstream’ prisons and subjected to the same “corrective” regimes as ‘mainstream’ prisoners, regardless of whether they have committed the same kind of crimes. The events associated with the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington provide a blueprint to recent criminalization of migrants. In response to the attacks authorities questioned around 5,000 Middle Eastern men in the United States who matched the criteria of persons who might have knowledge of foreign-based terrorists according to their gender, age, and national origin. These state actions were based on stereotypes, and were called into question by civil liberties and immigrant rights groups who were concerned about racial profiling, mass detentions, and the targeting of immigrant communities in the post-9/11 security climate. In the wake of these activities, a substantial

body of work within the sub-discipline of carceral geography has focused upon the spaces, practices, and systems of detention more widely. These include in particular, the experiences of individuals and their families housed in facilities whilst awaiting immigration decisions and the geographies and (im)mobilities inherent in this experience. Such work draws upon systems of power and resistance exerted in spaces such as migrant camps and removal centers, interrogating associations with e.g. gender; wider societal economics; constructions of citizenship and identity; precarity of life; and more besides.

The carceral boundary is also complicated by the experiences of individuals who are bound up in carceral practice, although they are not themselves physically imprisoned. Whilst incarceration represents the removal and “punishment” of an individual who has committed a crime, it also results in the stigmatization of friends and family members who are often associated with the wrong-doing of the individuals that they may visit and/or are connected to. Significant work has considered the impacts upon, for example, the children of incarcerated parents in terms of their educational attainment and likelihood of their own offending. Further work has also recognized that this stigmatization may also extend to prison staff, who are also negatively viewed in relation to societal prejudice about the nature of the work they do.

Furthermore, technological innovations have drawn new attention to the blurring of the prison boundary. By way of another example, various forms of technology including in-cell television, rudimentary computer consoles, and “tablets” with access to internal internet-style networks have penetrated into prisons in the last decade. Subsequently, the notion that the prison wall is a hard and fast barrier to the outside world is eradicated through the transfer of media communications through that wall. Furthermore, the media are an exceptional agent

for challenging borders because mediated transmissions do not respect boundaries; they are fluid, and media can bring the prison into every home through its “one-to-many” form of communication. Cultural productions of prisons, such as television documentaries and drama series are instrumental in transmitting ideas and constructions about carceral spaces to those outside of prison. As such, the prison boundary may exist at the level of every home and every individual possessing a television or mobile device with which to consume media productions.

A question of carcerality”

Given the complexities of the research field and the malleability of the spatial boundary that unfolds carceral space, it is understandable that those aligned with the sub-discipline have entered into significant debate about the definition of the terminology that forms such a central component of their research agenda. In its dictionary definition, carceral is “*relating to, or of prison.*” The etymology has been traced by Domonique Moran, Jennifer Turner, and Anna Schliehe, who have paid attention to its usage from Latin and Old Norse through its deployment by Mike Davis and Michel Foucault. Their work also explains that whilst spaces of imprisonment are considered to be inherently carceral, spaces beyond prisons are sometimes denoted by prefixing carceral qualifiers apparently to differentiate them from the inherent prison model, and the use of such qualifiers suggests gradations of carcerality. Graduated incarceration; hyper-carceral; transcarceral; and quasi-carceral are all frequently deployed in discussions relating to spaces that exhibit carceral apparatus. Such phrases imply that certain spaces – whether that is the workplace of prisoners on day-release or the rooms used by family-members visiting loved ones in prison – are not wholly the same as, for example, the quintessential carceral institution of the prison (either in nature, function or

experience); however, few definitive explanations of what criteria or characteristics render a space, experience or institution inherently carceral exist. The challenge of answering questions of delineation has been introduced to every new sub-discipline in its developing stages. This challenge brings with it problematic tensions of the impact of either limiting terminology to adhere to particular spaces or practices; or diffusing it so widely that its application is moot. In an effort to theorize carcerality to a meaningful degree, Moran, Turner, and Schliehe outline three conditions that act as consideration to explore the nature or quality of carcerality (rather than stringently outline key inclusionary/exclusionary criteria). These conditions include:

- *Detriment* – a condition that evokes perceived harm to the lived experience of the individual (that is, experienced rather than intended harm)
- *Intention* – a condition that is purposefully enacted e.g. a state purposefully operating a mechanism of disciplinary power
- *Spatiality* – the condition through which carcerality is achieved, generally through containment or exclusion.

Together, these conditions enable the achievement of carcerality. Such conditions are, as mentioned, not envisaged as qualifying criteria. It is clear that academics may engage in considerable debate about how particular contexts – whether this is bullied schoolchildren; individuals with disabilities; or residents living in an area of poor housing quality – may adhere to all of these conditions. However, this is precisely the spirit in which these conditions are proffered – prompting fresh innovations within carceral geography and enabling the deployment of carcerality as a conceptual tool beyond the sub-discipline.

Conclusions: The carceral conundrum

The complexity of the relationships that go on across, beyond, and within the carceral boundary make it altogether extremely complicated when we think about with respect to where this boundary is located. Indeed, the notion that carcerality can also be extended to include spaces outside the traditionally-conceived space of the prison where the liberty of individuals is similarly restricted, means that it is therefore unsurprising that the notion of the ‘carceral’ or ‘carcerality’ has eluded concrete conceptual definition. Beyond this, carceral geographers also recognize that their individual ontological and epistemological considerations of carceral space has a significant bearing upon the outputs of their research, resulting in a widely-recognized carceral conundrum.

Some (although by no means all) carceral geographers are driven by recognition of the significant “pains of imprisonment” and punishment that their work frequently reports, and align with an abolitionist movement seeking eradication of the prison and the systems that support it and emerge from it. In the US context, Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag* is concerned with the extreme growth of state prisons in California in the late 20th century. She argues that prison building was organized by the state in crisis and was a geographical solution to systemic political economic problems. Cognizant of this use of prisons as political economic intervention, some carceral geographers are aligned to the anti-prison movement comprising a variety of grassroots organizations, lobby groups, activist collectives, prisoner associations, and student groups.

Many researchers in this sub-discipline are motivated by a desire to address the significant and numerous articulated “crises” of carcerality by influencing the function of carceral institutions (such as prisons and detention centers); however, the nature and performance of this function and the role of the research exploring these dilemmas has generated significant

debate. Scholars working in this area exhibit a range of opinions. On the one hand, work in carceral geography may take an explicitly abolitionist stance as noted above, where research serves the purpose of questioning the legitimacy of the carceral institution. This research often coincides with research methods that are purposefully enacted outside of institutions, such as with released prisoners or with non-governmental organizations and lobbyist collectives. For obvious reasons, this work is commonly aligned with studies that are focused in countries with proportionally high rates of incarceration, such as the United States. Other research relies upon gaining access to carceral institutions to collect data from prisoners and/or custodial professionals. Although not exactly directly opposed to the work by abolitionist scholars, this work often involves dissemination of research findings to institutions in the hope of improving conditions within that institution. Contra to the abolitionist stance, such scholarship that strives to work against the “pains of imprisonment” serves to further legitimize the institution. It is this dilemma that is sure to be of continued conversation – both in relation to the methodological and theoretical scope of carceral geography and its definitive terminology – as this now-firmly-established field of enquiry continues to evolve.

Glossary

Abolition: The action of officially ending or stopping a system, practice, or institution. In the context of carceral geography, this is associated with the prison abolition movement – a loose network of activists and groups seeking to reduce or eliminate a system of punitive institutions such as prisons, immigrant detention centers and secure juvenile facilities.

Abolitionists oppose the ideas that imprisoning someone is a form of justice and believe that certain groups of people are systematically target, such as poor people and people of colour.

Abolitionists outline various strategies to dismantle these institutions such as prohibiting the

construction of new prisons; decriminalizing (removing laws that target e.g. sex workers and drug users); improving health care and welfare services; community-based justice processes; and fighting against inequalities based on class, race, ability, gender and sexuality.

Crimmigration: The process that results in the criminalization of immigration, which sees illegal immigrants detained in ‘mainstream’ prisons and subjected to the same regimes as ‘mainstream’ prisoners, regardless of whether they have committed the same kind of crimes. This is often exacerbated by processes of globalization or evoked by law-changes.

Panopticon: The Panopticon is a type of institutional building designed by English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. The design consists of a circular structure with an “inspection house” at its centre, from which the managers or staff of the institution are able to watch or observe (-opticon) all (pan-) the inmates, who are stationed around the perimeter. Prisoners would not be able to tell whether or not they were being watched and so self-regulated their behavior. Bentham proposed his plan for all types of institution, including hospitals, schools, sanatoriums, and asylums, but it is the prison that is most widely understood by the term. Although Bentham’s Panopticon was never fully realized, some of the design ideas were replicated in nineteenth-century Europe and America, with particular influence upon the architecture of high security prisons, or those which we now term the “Supermax”. The Panopticon is now commonly used as a metaphor for the governance of behavior, which rationalizes the use of e.g. Closed Circuit Television Cameras (CCTV).

Further Reading

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Cross References

Activist Geographies; Borderlands; Buffer Zones; Defensible Space; Democracy; Forced Migration; Geopolitics; Ghettos; Governance; Human Rights; Immigration; Inequality; Ethical Issues in Research; Law and Law Enforcement; Mobility; Policing; Public Spaces,

Place; Race; Refugees and Asylum Seekers; Segregation, Urban; Social Class; Space I, Space II, State, Surveillance; Terrorism; Territory and Territoriality; Urban; Underclass;

Biography and Photo

Jennifer Turner is a Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Liverpool. Her research is concerned with spaces, practices, and representations of incarceration, past and present. Most recently, she has interrogated prison architecture, design, technology and their potential to impact upon rehabilitation. Jennifer has published widely in the fields of carceral geography and criminology. She is the author of *The Prison Boundary: Between Society and Carceral Space* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) which interrogates the notion of a hard and fast separation between the inside and outside of prison by presenting a variety of case studies that demonstrate a complex and changeable boundary relationship. Continuing focus on the everyday, performed, and practised experiences of carceral space, her other research interests include prisoner identities; conceptualizing carceral space; and the (im)mobilities inherent in incarceration; most recently explored in *Carceral Mobilities: Interrogating Movement in Incarceration* (co-edited with Kimberley Peters, Routledge, 2017).

