

Theorizing Embodied Carcerality: A Black Feminist Sociology of Punishment

Brittany Friedman, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, b.friedman@rutgers.edu,
www.brittanyfriedman.com, @curlyprofessor

Brittany Friedman is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Northwestern University. She is currently writing her first book, which is under contract with The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and listed in the special series Justice, Power, and Politics. Her work advances critical theory in the areas of punishment, incarceration, and prison order. She is an avid student of nature, loves writing poetry, and getting lost in music.

Brooklynn Hitchens, University of Maryland, College Park, hitchens@umd.edu,
www.brooklynnhitchens.com, @drhoodfeminist

Brooklynn Hitchens is a Postdoctoral Associate and incoming Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland, College Park. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Rutgers University, New Brunswick. As a scholar-activist, her work centers the marginalized experiences of low-income Black women and girls with violence and crime in urban communities. She advances critical discourse on urban trauma and victimization, female survivors of violence, and policing. She enjoys debating the State of Black America, mentoring women of color moving through the doctorate, and speaking truth to power whenever necessary.

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Song: Lauryn Hill, “Forgive Them Father,” *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998).

Carcerality is embodied across generations. Black feminists know and encounter a multitude of parasitic vines that fight tirelessly to remain attached to their hosts. Every breath, every furtive thought, Black feminists remain the innovators reaching outside the matrices of their time. We feel the vines even when others cannot see them. Even when the prison is far, but especially when it is near. Our knowledge is unshakable. Vines violently latch onto familiar, intersectional nooses, incapacitating Black women and girls prior to any physical death.

Embodied carcerality manifests the moment our birthed bodies are read and acted upon as Black.

In her work on criminal justice imagery, Brittany Friedman proposes embodied carcerality as a conceptual tool for understanding the production of carceral subjects through reifying one's physical representation as indistinguishable from a deviant object. She argues this reification process occurs through a series of interpersonal interactions, where a person's outward representation (movement, speech, appearance) is perceived as inherently dangerous and deserving of control, prior to any legally identifiable offense. Experiencing a continuous array of interactions representing one's physical attributes as synonymous with inherent danger is consequential because the process establishes the association as social fact. Such patterned relations can alter the cognitive and thus perceptual outlook of carceral subjects whereby external attempts to control people as objects can eventually feel normal. This interactive process produces embodied carcerality. It is the process that institutions use to both dispossess us and then convince everyone that our dispossession is the natural way of the world, rather than an injustice.

Much like our ancestors continued to feel the slavers reach even if they had successfully run to freedom, Black women and girls too feel imprisoned even without being confined to a metal cage. We are witnesses, dually ensnared by our own subjugation and the condition of those

we hold dear. Our embodied carcerality is further entrenched through intimate connections with friends, family, and communities similarly wading through the precarity of life and death. Black women and girls' intersectional bodies are objectified and surveilled, yet we remain the backbone bracing those around us who are trapped within the same punishment continuum. Interconnected subjectivity rings true across the everyday Black experience as emancipation remains elusive with the 13th Amendment wholly intact. The imprisonment of those networked closest to us, adds another layer of carcerality onto our already deep-seated, embodied pains. More vines to push through, more thorns to avoid, and more wounds that never fully heal. We are whiplashed with vicarious exposure, which Brooklynn Hitchens argues is its own form of racialized trauma and victimization, through the loss of family members, being spatially constrained to visit loved ones, and financially supporting our communities as its members are assembled in and out of the criminal justice system. These added layers of criminal justice contact deepen the already established web that is embodied carcerality.

Within these embedded layers of embodied carcerality, what happens then, when we become individually ensnared within the criminal justice system ourselves? Mass imprisonment (jails and prisons) fostered the exponential reinstatement of physical incapacitation. We have witnessed material chains blossom like a familiar weed, returning once again as the matrix of our time. The imprisonment of the United States Black population structures how we live and die: whether in the civil sphere (e.g. political rights), social sphere (e.g. dominant group acceptance), or physical sphere (e.g. the body), and the interdependence between all three. Rose Heyer and Peter Wagner's work on prison policy reveals that our communities are disappearing with such spatial concentration, that in 178 United States counties, half of the Black population counted in the 2000 census was incarcerated.

With each generation, we feel the matrices grip tighter. No longer wading through the vines, but instead we are snatched and relegated to a box at the root of the vine. Recent figures from the Sentencing Project and the Bureau of Justice Statistics reveal 1 in 18 Black women born in 2001 will likely spend time in a prison cage. Black women continue to be imprisoned at twice the rate of white women, and 1.3 times the rate of Latinx women—disproportionately for nonviolent drug offenses. Aleks Kajstura reports that in total 219,000 women are warehoused in local jails, state and federal penitentiaries, juvenile lockup, and immigrant detention, while another 1 million women are on probation and parole. Alexi Jones reports that as of 2018 1 in 37 adults are under some form of correctional supervision, including imprisonment, electronic monitoring, probation, and parole. But the reach of the carceral state stretches beyond imprisonment and supervision to extraction from the pocketbook. Jones' figure does not even include the surveillance of monetary sanctions that disproportionately punishes and generates revenue extracting from racial and ethnic minorities and those who are poor or low-income, as demonstrated in the scholarship of Alexes Harris, Mary Pattillo, Karin Martin, and Brittany Friedman.

We fill these cages and are subjected to violence, surveillance, and extraction more than all other women and girls. But as Shatema Theadcraft suggests, when we are harmed, few pay attention even if the harm leads to our death. Uncovering the reasons for these travesties, require us to see beyond a world that takes our carcerality for granted. By doing so, we can uncover the images that bind us and the requisite meanings mobilized to kill us. We turn to renowned feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins and use her typology of “controlling images” as theoretical foundation to understand how embodied carcerality infringes across different contexts. We argue the familiar, everyday controlling images used to reify our physical existence

with inherent danger are also weaponized to justify legally branding us with a criminal mark. This sociocultural and politicized branding is successful because those same interpersonal interactions that shape the cognitive makeup of the controlled, also shape the controllers, or penal actors. These agents of control are convinced that their perceptions of reality are correct because Black women and girls as deviant has become an established truth in our cultural imagination, which Regina Arnold argues reinforces the dual process of Black victimization and criminalization. We argue the production of embodied carcerality establishes our innate deviance as social fact. Hence, we propose a new controlling image, “The Criminal,” as the dominant image that structures all of the other controlling images in Collins’ typology. The controllers need little evidence suggesting that one or more controlling images are “real” depictions of Black women and girls in order to enact punishment, as *assumed criminality is the underlying yardstick* justifying the original production of each image.

Embodiment From Image to Control

Examined through the lens of embodiment, Black feminist contributions to the sociology of punishment are essential tools to understand how what Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve calls “racial degradation” is the intention, not the exception. Black people are positioned as deviant in everyday interactions, even beyond the courtrooms of the most crooked counties. As Marquis Bey teaches us, our bodies are categorized as fixed objects where onlookers presume to know us with a single gaze. This consequential presumption has both obvious and less apparent manifestations. Unpacking the concept of embodied carcerality allows us to operationalize the effect of embodiment on the process of punishment. We advance this exercise by first questioning how controlling images engender a state of embodied carcerality through informal

and formal means, and propose “The Criminal” as a dominant schema co-producing each controlling image. Second, we ask how “The Criminal” translates into the institutionalization of controlling images, and examine how they are *practiced* and enacted through criminal justice decision-making and thus further *inscribed* onto Black women and girls as reality.

The Criminal as Dominant Reference

Patricia Hill Collins’ seminal *Black Feminist Thought* gifted us with the language to articulate the negative, socially constructed stereotypes we as Black feminists encounter on a daily basis. The “controlling images” of Black womanhood—the mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and Jezebel—are debilitating caricatures designed to maintain Black women’s subordination to whiteness. Reified in media, popular culture, and academic scholarship, these images personify what Philomena Essed called the enduring “gendered racism” and intersectional oppression that are particular to the experiences of Black women and girls. Rooted in efforts to sustain the dominance of slavery on the backs of Black women, these controlling images are attacks to Black female sexuality, motherhood, fertility, dignity, and ultimately freedom. Alexander Weheliye’s work expands on these controlling images as “racialized assemblages,” or ways of categorizing human groups as a means of subjection.

As a conceptual tool, we believe embodied carcerality reveals how the relationship between controlling images and subjection is an interactive process that we experience in various contexts. Significantly, such controls not only initiate subjection but regulate a precarious existence in perpetuity. Informal interpersonal controls such as glares, harsh words, and outright being ignored are juxtaposed with formal systemic controls such as school discipline, stop and frisk, mandatory drug screenings, the imposition of fines and fees, or checking in with one’s

parole officer. The baseline image grounding this predicament is that of a dangerous, chaotic criminal where control is a treatment for natural deviance. As such, we extend the controlling images framework to highlight “The Criminal” as the dominant frame of reference, grounding the justification process for inscribing each controlling image onto bodies as everyday practice. The criminal image is rooted in the widely held belief that deviance is born, it is natural, and that it is just the way some are, which is a lasting remnant of early positivist criminology and its foundational backbone, biological racism.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, the *mammy* is the first of Collins’ controlling images and reinforces the economic exploitation of Black women through depictions of deference and servitude. The mammy figure is portrayed as the asexual, unattractive, faithful, and obedient domestic servant who acts as a surrogate mother devoted to the cultivation of white families, even at the expense of the nurturing of her own. Her worth is tied to her ability to support the development of whiteness, whether as a maid, wet nurse, or caretaker. Collins asserts that the mammy image typifies a “normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women’s behavior,” particularly the extent to which they can adhere to white ideals of Black submission and docility (p. 266). The mammy as the epitome of compliance is only possible because her perceived propensity for criminality is low, and her commitment to loyalty is perceived to outweigh her ‘deviant’ desires. Thus, the actual measurement by which Black women and girls are assigned images is determined by how likely they are to succumb to their supposed-deviant, criminal nature. Inherent danger and the perceived likelihood one will ‘give into’ one’s ‘nature’ is the true yardstick, with controlling images reified by their juxtaposition to ‘the criminal.’ Because the mammy is not entirely ‘pure,’ she is still closely watched by the white families she cares for just in case she ‘cannot help herself’ since she was ‘born that way.’

The second controlling image is the *matriarch*—the unfeminine, overly aggressive woman who emasculates her husband and neglects her children. Collins explains that where the mammy figure is used to depict Black mothers in white homes, the matriarch figure is used to portray Black mothers in Black homes. Disparaged as the “bad” Black mother who denigrates her lover or husband but cannot properly supervise her children, the matriarch archetype is used to stigmatize Black women for living in impoverished, female-headed homes and for the educational failure of Black children. The work of Black feminists like Dorothy Roberts reveals how this social stigma continues to contort the lives of low-income Black mothers, particularly those who live in urban communities and are most vulnerable to adverse justice contact. Beneath the matriarch archetype, Black mothers’ worth is tied to their inability to uphold traditional ideals about the Black family structure and fulfill their “traditional womanly duties” as wives and mothers. The matriarch is a powerful controlling image because of its proximity to inherent danger as seemingly unfit, neglectful, and thereby criminal. Her biggest offense is her perceived deviation from patriarchal norms as wife and mother, which suggests she has succumbed at least at the family level, to her criminal nature.

The *welfare mother* or *welfare queen* is the third controlling image and typifies the supposed laziness and deception of Black women. Portrayed as a woman who misuses or steals welfare payments through fraud or manipulation, the image of the welfare mother is used to stigmatize poor, often single, Black women who depend on government assistance. The welfare queen is perhaps the most vilified of the controlling images, and is most embedded in our cultural lexicon because she is antithetical to American values of hard work, individualism, and upward mobility. White sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan was integral in solidifying this mythical trope to symbolize a “tangle of pathology,” which helped to embolden the punitive

welfare state. The welfare queen archetype is measured as *that* much closer to the embodiment of the criminal because she is seen as a rational free rider, a leech who takes from the state but does not contribute, and thus a thief without regard for individual responsibility in a capitalist society.

The fourth controlling image is the *Jezebel*—the sassy, sexually aggressive and lascivious whore whose sexual appetite justified the rape of Black women during enslavement and repeated mistreatment in contemporary society. Jezebels are what K. Sue Jewell termed “bad black girls,” whose bodies are “always public, always exposed,” according to Carol Henderson, and “always troubling to dominant visual culture,” according to Nicole Fleetwood. The Jezebel is measured as the closest to inherent danger and thus the most poignant example of the criminal incarnate. This occurs because her existence challenges the patriarchal rendition of family, which is grounded in the liberal economic logic that Black women and girls cannot claim ownership of their own bodies.

Because the Criminal as a racialized and gendered trope uses innate danger or natural deviance as the dominant frame of reference, it emboldens the other controlling images with varying degrees of disciplinary power. During interpersonal interactions, Black women and girls are understood in relation to their perceived proximity to the Criminal controlling image. Depending upon where they fall on the spectrum, they are met with the informal and formal controls we have described that produce a state of carceral existence, or embodied carcerality. The consequence is death. Embodied carcerality guides us on this precarious journey, subjecting us to social, civil, and with ultimate finality, physical demise.

Organizing Against the Systemic Consequences of Controlling Images

Imagine deadly consequences as systemic vines, where social control occurs through embodiment. In this world, embodiment is the soil from which controlling images bloom as power. Expanding this approach to controlling images enriches our understanding of punishment as culturally practiced. It is through the process of reification between the read body as a racialized and gendered being, its proximity to “The Criminal,” and varying controlling images, that explain Black women and girls’ persistent entanglement within a criminal justice web. The penal actors tasked with determining their fates also embody their roles as disciplinarians and actively engage in reification as a function of their jobs.

Cyntoia Brown’s story illuminates the power of embodiment and controlling images for punishment outcomes. Her heavily publicized clemency revealed that as a young girl, Brown ran away from home and was eventually forced into prostitution. One night in particular sealed her fate. At sixteen years old, a 43-year-old real estate agent named Johnny Allen solicited Brown for sex and as the night continued, she would come to fear for her life and fatally shoot Allen. Prosecutors claimed she planned to rob him and the shooting was all part of an elaborate premeditated plot. However, Brown maintained her innocence even through her recent release, which came through gubernatorial clemency on August 7, 2019.

Black feminists fought tirelessly for Brown’s freedom, never letting the public forget what her original conviction represented. If we take Patricia Hill Collins at her word, then a fair trial for Brown was doomed from the start. As a young Black woman, her position as a sex worker would only serve as further evidence of her inherent sexual deviance and prowess as a Jezebel. It would never serve to vindicate her as a Black girl in peril who fought to survive. The victim image escaped the realm of possibility because before the court she was already assumed

to be guilty, her body read as a lascivious whore, a man-eater searching for her next victim. It would be this viscerally engrained trope that would prevent penal actors from seeing Brown as a teenager with the right to fight back when fearing for her life. When evaluating Brown, penal actors engaged in a process of comparison, reading her body and using their own embodied knowledge to assess her proximity to the criminal image. To them, Brown embodied the Jezebel as inscribed by her alleged actions, appearance as Black and female, and troubled life history—all of which placed her as close to the criminal as one can get. Brown was originally convicted and sentenced to mandatory life without parole. Caging in perpetuity—a civil, social, and physical death in one sweeping blow.

Seek relief and ye shall find control—inseparable from sensory experience and perception—in a punishment continuum designed to precede, ensure, and finally outlast any single conviction into infinity. As Black women and girls, carcerality is in our bones, entangling our ancestral spirits like poison ivy. In the words of Christina Sharpe, we remain “in the wake” of a past life that never truly died. Vines latch deep into roots, engulfing the body through intergenerational trauma.

Even still we thrive.

Black feminists have organized for centuries against controlling images and these embodied consequences. Alexis Gumbs reminds us the scenes of Black feminist fugitivity spill far and wide across time and space. When we look to our intergenerational efforts, we see there is freedom in the unknown. From Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells and Audre Lorde, to Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, and Dorothy Roberts, our intergenerational triumphs comfort us. They instill the will to fiercely identify, battle, and dismantle the systems that celebrate our demise and question our humanity.

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