



PART 3

**CREATING
A WORLD
WITHOUT
PRISONS**

CULTURE AND THE
CARCERAL STATE



Introduction

Kassandra L. Khalil

Kassandra L. Khalil is a visual artist and former codirector of Arts in a Changing America. Kassandra’s drawings and sculptures explore how movement and gestures evoke personal and cultural memory. Kassandra channels her interest in Caribbean communities and the culture of resistance into organizing arts programming for her Haitian diaspora in New York.

For the 2.3 million people incarcerated and detained in the United States and the millions more impacted by state-institutionalized violence, the 2020 uprisings for Black lives were a validation of what they already knew: the carceral system impacts us all.¹ Or as Critical Carceral Visualities’ director Ruby Tapia puts it, the carceral state is wider than the formal mechanisms of the criminal justice system. It includes the social and ideological structures that perpetuate the “tangible and sometimes intangible ways in punitive orientations to difference, to poverty, to struggles to social justice and to the crossers of constructed borders of all kinds.”²

As a country founded on controlled freedoms afforded only to a select few, the United States undeniably embodies the definition of a carceral state. Today we find ourselves pressed to understand its permeating impact on our freedom as well as on our relationships and responsibilities while we dream what other forms of corrective action might look like. We are gaining a more detailed popular understanding of the US prison-industrial complex as conversations on topics like surveillance, judicial prejudice, and discrimination take seats at our dinner tables and persist on our daily news feeds. But it’s complicated. Sentence commuting for elderly and health-vulnerable inmates has become a politicized position rather than an active solution, even amid prisons’ lethal inefficiency and lack of protocol oversight.³ We see United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement

(ICE)–detained individuals experiencing family separations, coerced sterilizations, and coronavirus positivity rates thirteen times higher than those of the rest of the US population.⁴ We nod our heads understandingly as young Black Instagramers share memories of getting the “cop talk” from their parents. Concurrently, we navigate mixed emotions when flicking through comments disbelieving or defending the victims of police violence as the media correlates morality and race with worthiness for life.⁵ We seem to wrestle with recognizing the humanity of those who’ve had a brush with the law rather than understanding ways that the under-resourced, disabled, and people of color have been targeted by our carceral system.

The work toward liberation is continually moving. We see it from the work to protect the disproportionate number of Native youth in the US federal prison system to the increasing practice of automatically expunging misdemeanors.⁶ We are seeing communities take hold of leading reforms through landmark ballot box wins like civilian-proposed Measures R and J in Los Angeles by prioritizing care over a cell.⁷ Many more recognize that a guilty verdict for Derek Chauvin is not justice for George Floyd; truthful accountability is only the beginning of saving lives from carceral violence. Change is happening. Key to this progress is that it has been led by those who have spent time inside, those whose daily existence is threatened by state violence, and the hard questions they ask. What do we imagine in a future where prison is abolished? What happens when we look to each other rather than our government to help us heal from violence? What part does artistic creativity play in this change?

Answering these questions between bars and across barriers, the organizers and artists included in this section are imagining a world without prisons. They center collective safety and healing through cultural knowledge, creative expression, and exchange.

A carceral state regularly attacks the fullness of our joy, inherited knowledge, and relationships to co-opt them within the state’s operative power. So it is on us, the People, to activate and connect our forces in resistance and for reimagining. Organizer and former codirector of Southerners on New Ground (SONG) **Mary Hooks** reminds us that “our lives do not belong to the State.” As such, an abolitionist future focused on healing and de-escalation must come from within our community. Hooks pushes us to recognize the tools used by our ancestors, elders, and neighbors by asking, “If you didn’t have to call the police, who would you want to be able to call for help?” Disability Justice activist **Lydia X. Z. Brown** asks us a similar question as they critique the panoptical nature of the US carceral

state, which does not differentiate between people in the criminal justice system and people seeking help but experiencing state control as a result of their ability status. They assert, “prisons and institutions do not keep us safe; they do not protect either the people outside them or the people in them.” In this way, abolition becomes “a natural extension of and kin to the work of Disability Justice,” as mutually aligned work challenges institutions that inhibit our ability to experience care, pleasure, and “justice without precondition.” Change for a more just future requires us to re-evaluate our connection to one another. In **Aydinaneth Ortiz’s** *HOGAR*, mental illness and cultural differences are seen as punishable offenses. Even still, as Brown extends, the institutions charged with reforming are under-resourced and focus on whittling down who is acceptable and worthy of care. In San Antonio, artist **Mark Menjivar** places us in a secret sanctuary room and poetically traces a network of friends in migration from the Northern Triangle who are experiencing isolation, separation, solidarity, and repatriation. Looking through time and space, Menjivar shows us how personal memory becomes knowledge and, together with others, becomes part of the movement for immigrant rights. **Tani Ikeda** takes account of the othering in the name of nationalism through her poetic response. Following the intersections of xenophobia and US identity, she sets a tempo of solidarity that goes unbroken in her generation.

Researcher and curator Nicole Fleetwood tunes us to the significance of carceral aesthetics as art produced “under the conditions of unfreedom.”⁸ With this lens, the significance of incarcerated artists’ approach to materials and content is imbued with dynamic social critique. **Spel’s** use of materials while serving life in prison weighs the use of contraband with expression, rather weighing the risk of further unfreedom with creative liberation. *I guess if you think about it we are all in it* provokes viewers to further contemplate the limits of un-free conditions while all people, inside and outside of carceral institutions, experience the consequence of the carceral state. In *Locked in a Dark Calm*, **Tameca Cole** refuses to reconcile the double consciousness of her self-portrait of metered calm and frustration, aiming to see herself as whole in her discontent but fragmented from truthful expression by systems of carceral control. The importance of looking within becomes more pointed when isolation is not a “new normal” reality. Truthworker Theatre Company’s founder and artistic director **Samara Gaev** artistically shares correspondence with writer and death row inmate **Jarvis Jay Masters** about the impact of twenty-one years in solitary confinement and how to purposely focus on life and hope in the face of uncertainty.

One of the most violent components of life inside a carceral institution is the severing from one's community. For **Dustina Gill**, from the Wahpekute band of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate of South Dakota, these connections to community and tradition are the singular path for healing Native incarcerated youth. Unpacking the legacy of the "3 As" (Annihilation, Assimilation, and Acculturation), Gill makes clear the deeply violent reality of incarceration on Native youth because of the ways it disrupts intergenerational relationships and systems of care. **Hinaleimoana Kwai Kong Wong-Kalu (Kumu Hina)** talks about the reckoning that ho'oponopono or making "something correct . . . to bring to balance" offers Kanaka Maoli and non-Native people in the Hawai'i prison system. Reconciling past action with future choices is central to the wholeness of a person as well as the stewarding of Hawai'i's land and its sovereignty, a system grounded in mutual care and accountability. In Philadelphia, **Faith Bartley, Courtney Bowles**, and **Mark Strandquist** of the People's Paper Co-op know that life after incarceration necessitates rebuilding families and futures. They show us that an effective arts-based, people-centered strategy responds to real-life needs by supporting counternarratives, direct aid, and policy change. **Kenyetta A. C. Hinkle's** #107 from *The Evanesced Series* (2016–) offers a mere slice of the gendered ways in which the carceral experience endangers and erases bodies. Part painting, part performance, *The Evanesced* body of work expresses the power of the #SayHerName call to protect, mourn, and heal the Black female body by refusing the ways it has been made invisible and disposable.⁹ In one moment during the performance, a woman's voice repeats a poem-chant in cycles. Hinkle stomps at each syllable: "Beauty walks beneath me, beauty be protecting me, for now and forevermore more more."¹⁰

Provoking the ways carceral institutions perceive some bodies as deserving incarceration, **Sherrill Roland's** *Jumpsuit Project* uses his experience of fighting to clear his name and the visual disruption of the orange jumpsuit to engage in intimate, direct conversations about the complex impact of incarceration. Those who have not experienced firsthand the cost of incarceration don't fully understand how a person's life after imprisonment is dramatically altered. Shifting these perspectives and dismantling a carceral system ultimately require change from within. This change is not limited to those who are incarcerated. As musicians, Street Symphony's **Vijay Gupta** and **Duane Robert Garcia** reflect on the power of sound to generate dialogue and center the creative humanity of LA's unhoused and formerly incarcerated communities. The interconnectedness of our life experiences reveals the finite nature of a lifetime. This urgency is expressed through language and image: **Kondwani Fidel** with photographer

Devin Allen present the stark reality of the Black experience in Baltimore and how Baltimore's young people encounter the tilted mirror of the US criminal justice system. Together they ask back, "How many times did we tell you we were hungry for love? How many times did we tell you we were hungry for a way out? How many times did we tell you we were hungry for something as simple as a fair chance?" They stand waiting for the answer and knowing the reasons why.

These artists and cultural workers are revealing exploitation at the hands of the US carceral state and setting new precedents for community-led justice. They represent the undoing of centuries of race- and difference-based policies that since their establishment have been used to control the movement of communities of color. The efforts named above and endless more are moving us toward an ecology of care and restorative justice. Simply, they are all working to get more free.

Notes

1. Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020," Prison Policy Initiative, March 24, 2020, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>.
2. Gabrielle French, Allie Goodman, and Chloe Carlson, "What Is the Carceral State?," U-M Carceral State Project, Documenting Criminalization and Confinement, May 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7ab5f5c3fbca46c38fob2496bcaa5abo>.
3. "Reducing Jail and Prison Populations during the Covid-19 Pandemic," Brennan Center for Justice, August 2, 2021, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/reducing-jail-and-prison-populations-during-covid-19-pandemic>.
4. Maya Manian, "Immigration Detention and Coerced Sterilization: History Tragically Repeats Itself," American Civil Liberties Union, September 29, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/immigration-detention-and-coerced-sterilization-history-tragically-repeats-itself>; Eamon N. Dreisbach, "COVID-19 Case Rates among ICE Detainees 13 Times Higher Than US Average," Infectious Disease News, Healio, November 4, 2020, <https://www.healio.com/news/infectious-disease/20201104/covid19-case-rates-among-ice-detainees-13-times-higher-than-us-average>.
5. Annie Waldman, "Michael Brown 'No Angel' Controversy," BBC News, August 25, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-echochambers-28929087>.
6. "Native Lives Matter report," Lakota People's Law Project, February 2015, <https://lakotalaw.org/resources/native-lives-matter>; "50-State Comparison: Marijuana Legalization, Decriminalization, Expungement, and Clemency," Restoration of Rights Project, June 2021, <https://ccresourcecenter.org/state-restoration-profiles/50-state-comparison-marijuana-legalization-expungement>.

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8. Nicole Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 25.
9. Kenyetta A. C. Hinkle, *The Evanesced Series*, KACH Studio, accessed December 2, 2022, <https://www.kachstudio.com/the-evanesced>.
10. Kenyetta A. C. Hinkle, *The Evanesced: Embodied Disappearance 2017*, KACH Studio, accessed December 2, 2022, <https://www.kachstudio.com/performance>.