



## **Carceral domesticities: an introduction**

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## Carceral domesticities: An introduction

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/aaf](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/aaf)**Sneha Krishnan** 

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We write this introduction at a grave moment in 2023, in which Israel is engaging in what has been widely described as genocide in Gaza (OHCHR, 2023), justified in geopolitical discourse as retribution for a Hamas attack that took many civilian Israeli lives. Palestinians' relationship with futurity is – as a rich scholarship has argued – one of rupture, and of temporal curtailment: the Nakba is, in this experience, continuous and ongoing (Abu Hatoum, 2021; El Shakry, 2021). For everyday life in Palestine, this means that the domestic is a site of perpetual anticipation – waiting for the next round of settler violence, which renders the home in the present unhomey (Griffiths and Joronen, 2021). Home, that is, becomes inextricable from the carceral condition of settler colonialism. The images that have emerged from Gaza's present bombardment are instructive of the terms on which the domestic is a powerful site of resistance to settler colonial temporality. In the midst of genocide in Gaza, mothers teach children how to read by writing on the walls of buildings where they shelter. Young people fetch water from the sea as supplies are cut off. Fathers queue for bread, flour, and gas canisters to sustain their families. Refusing elimination, that is, hinges here on the rituals of domesticity that act as signs of life in the barest of carceral conditions. Daily acts of making home rupture settler time, positing plausible indigenous futures beyond assimilation and elimination. In this special issue, we draw together the ways in which geographies of coloniality and anticolonial resistance undergird and knit together the domestic and the carceral.

Geographies of home, and those of carcerality are both well-developed fields within the discipline, to which feminist geographers have made key contributions. Feminist scholarship has widely acknowledged that 'home' can be a space of enforced confinement (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Gilman, 2002; Goldsack, 2002), while also recognising practices of dwelling and care that make homes of prisons, detention centres, and camps (Blunt and Dowling, 2006;

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Hammond, 2004; Pasquetti and Sanyal, 2021; Stoler, 2003). Further, scholarship in feminist geopolitics has drawn attention to entanglements between security and home in the disciplining of intimacy (Conlon and Hiemstra, 2017). In addition, scholars of carcerality have argued that the expansion of incarceration and policing often undergirds the construction of the white middle-class idyll of domestic safety (Gilmore, 2007; Wang, 2018). Building on this work, our special issue positions carcerality and domesticity as inextricably entangled within historical and contemporary geographies of imperialism, extraction, and racial capitalism.

The histories of colonialism, enslavement, and indenture, as well as the liberal ethic of reform that has underpinned the expansion of carcerality within regimes of racial capitalism, also shaped the making of bourgeois domesticity globally (Blunt, 2008; Davidoff and Hall, 2018; George, 2014). Even as liberal public culture in the 19th century celebrated the home as the pinnacle of autonomy, women, domestic labourers, and slaves lived under varying degrees of carceral control. Settler colonial projects centred on making modern homes and intimate life broke up indigenous families in North America and Australia – well into the mid-20th century – and took children into carceral boarding-schools. A colonial preoccupation with the sexual dangers of the phantasmic ‘harem’ made the carceral space of the residential hostel the centrepiece of domestic modernity in the Middle East and South Asia (de Alwis, 2002; Grewal, 1996). At the same time, incarcerated communities – on plantations, in prisons, in camps, and in homes – have long engaged in practices of resistance centred on creating and sustaining domesticity under conditions of oppression (hooks, 1990; McKittrick, 2006). Indeed, we might argue that making ‘home’ in the midst of carcerality is itself a site of “insurgent agency” (Greene, 2023) – of refusals of foreclosed futurity.

In the sections that follow, we locate our work within a conversation on abolition geographies, racial capitalism, and feminist conceptualisations of home. In this, we ask how carceral geographies might be reimagined if we centred imperial projects and the political imperative to abolition in critically rethinking liberal projects of confinement, punishment, and reform. Finally, we introduce the papers that make up this special issue, drawing attention to the ways in which they bring together a reading of the carceral domestic.

## **Abolition and domesticity**

Our work on carceral domesticities builds a much-needed dialogue between scholarship on the carceral, and the debate on the home as a site of containment and political potentiality. Scholarship on carceral geographies has, in the past couple of decades, developed a granular reading of the diverse spatialities of containment that come to be read as carceral – within and beyond prisons (Gill et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2018). Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault on compact and diffuse carceral systems, as well as pushing beyond it, this scholarship also shows that carcerality is not necessarily a space of immobility alone but of controlled and disciplined mobility (Moran et al., 2012, 2013; Turner and Peters, 2017).

Whilst we build on this debate, we move away from the liberal core of this scholarship, which has tended to see the question of carcerality as relational at best, rather than rooted in global systems of racial capitalism and state-driven projects of imperial containment (Hamlin and Speer, 2018). In this, it remains separate from abolitionist geographical thinking, from which we draw in centring imperial geographies and projects of anticolonial resistance in our work. We start therefore by seeing carceral logics as rooted in regimes that immobilise racialised bodies and shape the conditions on which futurity is available to them (Gilmore, 2022; Puar, 2021). In this reading, both the practice of carcerality and the work of abolition are necessarily intimate – racialised, gendered, and sexed bodies are

centrally implicated in the projects of racial capitalism that enact enclosure. The experience of home – of being at home, of being homely, and of being unhomed – are, in this reading, central to the diverse ways in which carcerality undergirds life under past and present conditions of coloniality. Conversely, the practices of private property ownership, racial capitalist labour migration, securitisation, and immobilisation that underpin carceral conditions shape projects of domesticity. The metaphorization of ‘home’ as a gloss for national security – in the UK a ‘home secretary’ is the cabinet member responsible for matters of internal order – is, as feminist scholars have shown, pertinent (Kaplan, 2003). Rather, the boundaries of home and that of nation-state resonate together, sometimes mapping onto each other, drawing their subjects into formations of modernity, civilisation, and development that seek to keep time with imperial geographies of capital.

While the practice and pursuit of abolition have a diverse history, contemporary scholarship often traces its academic lineage to the US and the writing of Du Bois. Coining the term ‘abolition democracy’, Du Bois (1935) argued that the dismantling of chattel slavery in the 1860s was not enough to realise a racially just society. Instead, he suggested that new institutions, practices, and social relations (that did not ultimately materialise) were necessary to achieve true racial justice. As eminent critical-race-theorists and activists have demonstrated, however, the US government imposed Jim Crow Laws and both expanded and entrenched systems of racial capitalism (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2005, 2011). Today, legalised racial discrimination is established in education, housing, employment, voting, benefit systems, and carceral practices in the US, as histories of enslavement continue to shape the present and future (Alexander, 2010; McKittrick, 2013). As McKittrick (2013: 9) explains, rather than being something entirely left behind, the plantation “moves through time, a cloaked anachronism, that calls forth the prison, the city, and so forth.”

Despite having broader and more radical aims and scope, abolition today is most often associated with the dismantling of the carceral state and prison industrial complex (PIC). As Angela Davis (2005: 95) writes, the very existence of the PIC is because of the failure “to enact abolition democracy.” Gilmore’s (2007) work has given important insights into the vast expansion of the PIC, as her seminal text, *Golden Gulag*, traces the ways in which economic crises, the weakening of labour, changing patterns of capital investment, and surpluses (of capital, workers, land, and state capacity) set the stage for ‘the prison fix’ in California. Given that racial capitalism requires racial inequalities, hierarchies, and unfreedoms for its reproduction, Gilmore (2022) explains that prisons have now become a key site from which extraction takes place. As such, and as Hamlin (2023: 2) notes, “[a]t the heart of PIC abolition, then, is both an anti-racist and anti-capitalist imperative”. Abolitionists work not only to destabilise or dismantle systems and institutions – like prisons – which centre violence and vulnerability to premature death, but they also work actively towards creating new ones, to imagining and building freedom as a place (Gilmore, 2022).

This Special Issue builds from Black vocabularies of abolition to ask how global racial capitalisms normalise enclosure – bringing it home, forcing the making of domestic life in conditions of carcerality, making homes into sites of containment. Writing as we are from Britain, we are conscious of a tendency within mainstream cultural discourse in the UK to locate questions of race and coloniality in an elsewhere, away from the metropole, within a rubric of benign liberal imperialism (Gopal, 2016). Recently, this has been evident in the backlash to antiracist movements, ranging from mobilisations around Rhodes Must Fall and the landscape of imperial statues in Britain, to debates on reparations (Bhambra, 2022; Drayton, 2019). The national home as a place of mythmaking is kept cleansed of the complicating histories of colonialism that keep returning to haunt it (Carby, 2021). Britain’s distance from its own colonial history is in many ways reflected in the lack of engagement

with questions of coloniality in the mainstream of the carceral geographies scholarship, much of which is produced by British scholars.

Yet, the growing significance of Britain's vexed relationship with its coloniality is evident from the scholarship on pre-emptive governmentalities and securitisation that draw our attention to the profusion of technologies that increasingly track and govern the lives of minoritized people and immigrants in the UK (Adey and Anderson, 2011; Amoore, 2009; Fernandez, 2018). Home, that is, becomes a site of surveillance and carceral governmentality. Simultaneously, reactionary groups like Gender Critical or Trans Exclusive Radical Feminists increasingly rely on police and carceral logics to immobilise gender transgressive bodies: sanitising 'safe' and 'home' spaces through the expulsion and incarceration of bodies deemed threatening to a natural order (Alexander, 2023). None of the papers in this Special Issue address Britain, but the long shadow of British imperialism shapes the arguments that many of them make about the normalisation of carceral conditions as necessary to the making of ordinary life at home.

### **Coloniality, capital, home**

Colonial relations are inextricably bound up with ideas of home. The project of urban planning and construction in the colonial world centred on the spatial articulation of difference, materialised through moral and social sanitation (Heath, 2009; Legg, 2007). Whilst this created enclaves for white and white-adjacent caste elites, pushing non-elite communities elsewhere, colonised and non-elite people have always been present in privileged domestic spaces as labourers, often performing the intimate work of caring for children, and the elderly, in addition to cleaning and cooking (Ray and Qayum, 2009; Stoler, 1995). Within these roles, as papers in this volume amongst others show, they have long been subject to carceral conditions: turning the domestic space of the home – the object of protection at the heart of a biopolitical fantasy of flourishing – into a prison-like zone of containment. Centring abolition here draws attention to the terms on which carcerality is not just contained in the margins of social life, in prisons, juvenile detention centres, and other explicitly carceral institutions. Rather, carceral logics flourish at the heart of the biopolitical project of making the good life: abandonment and flourishing are not necessarily spatially separate from each other. Indeed, white or upper caste domestic ideals are often contingent on the containment of its others, sometimes not in an elsewhere that is geographically distant from the home, whilst simultaneously requiring their labour.

The colonial securing of private domestic property also established hierarchies in the terms on which dwelling places allowed those who lived in them to make claims to the land they lived on, and to political sovereignty on the territories they inhabited. The logic of terra nullius or empty land that has justified settler colonial projects from Australia and the Americas to Israel iterates some communities as politically incapable of making claims on the lands they live in based on the non-permanence attributed to their homes (Allen, 2003; Kotef, 2020; Trubridge, 2013). As people who live in tents and huts, their claims to political sovereignty were, and continue to be, dismissed as immature and lacking the gravity of those who bring bulldozers and concrete to establish their ownership of territories. The myth of Israel as having made the desert bloom relies on this image of empty land, poorly used by indigenous communities cast as primitive and incapable of making lasting attachments to a homeland (Alqaisiya, 2020). Significantly, this colonial logic saw political maturity as contingent on the capacity for separation from and mastery of nature: homes that are too permeable by nature signalled an incapacity to manage land and assert political independence (Kotef, 2020). As imperial wars turn more and more people into refugees, a growing

geographical scholarship notes that camps are, for many, the only home they have known (Dudley, 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013; Ramadan, 2013). Yet, in their impermanence, the refugee camp is not a site from which political sovereignty or rights can be claimed as inhabitants of a territory – rather, as an impermanent home, dwelling in a camp keeps its inhabitants in a perpetual state of deferral (Feldman, 2015; Ramadan, 2013).

Conversely, however, as scholars particularly of the Middle East and South Asia have shown, homes perceived as overly impermeable were also often a justification for liberal imperialist intervention (Alloula, 1987; Booth, 2010; Grewal, 1996). The phantasm of *zenana* or the harem stretched in the travel writing of 18th and 19th century Europeans from Turkey to India, iterating a landscape of despotic enclosure (Booth, 2010). The project of saving brown women from brown men – to paraphrase Spivak (1988) – rested on this reading of Middle Eastern and South Asian homes as too enclosed, lacking the political freedoms of movement and assembly, as well as flows of air and light that colonial discourse associated with European homes. Liberal imperialist projects thus sought to relocate residents of such improper homes, often by putting them within other kinds of enclosures: for instance, red light districts that marked zones of prostitution, hostels where young women were educated into properly modern domesticity, and hospitals and asylums for the contagious and the mad (Hodges, 2005; Krishnan, 2017; Legg, 2014). This traffic between home and prison is evident particularly in the scholarship on colonial juvenile correctional centres. As Satadru Sen's work (2005) ably shows, juvenile correction worked as a zone of governmentality where ideas about political maturity and capacity for reform in the colony were tested out on the bodies of children, rehomed and to be reformed under the surveillant eyes of the colonial state.

## Mapping carceral domesticities

Writing from this context, the papers in this collection examine spaces of confinement and of home-making that range from designated prisons and domestic spaces to those that emerge from within a range of experiences of imperialism. Laura Antona (2023) and Stephen Legg's (2023) papers interrogate the shelter, a space that ostensibly provides refuge in the aftermath of the breakdown of other forms of domestic containment. In both papers, demographic projects shape the terms on which women come to be confined in shelters – rendering places of refuge into sites of carceral domesticity. These papers also resonate with Dalia Bhattacharjee's (2023) writing, which brings into focus the terms on which surrogacy is managed through containment in hostels, where surrogates' every movement is intensely surveilled. Racial capitalist geographies in these papers diagram the intimacy of a geopolitical discourse about population, labour mobility, and reproduction. This echoes Pain's (2015) discussion of 'intimate war' and the connection between home and geopolitics being not just one of scale, but a lens through which to make sense of the normalisation of violent containment beyond the exceptional site of war.

Antona's paper further draws attention to the ways in which Singapore's labour-migration regime and economic functioning hinge on the rendering of the middle-class home into a securitised space, in which the domestic worker is contained and confined: their labour extracted through this carcerality. In this, it shares an interest with Sneha Krishnan's (2023) work, which examines young Indian women's carceral containment at home and in the home-like spaces of hostels when they convert to Islam and marry Muslim men of their choosing. In these readings, the carceral is rendered domestic both in its ordinariness – it exists at the heart of the neoliberal fantasy of futurity, rather than at its margins – and in its disciplinary role in rendering its inhabitants into figures who reproduce racial

capitalist, nationalist, and global imperialist futurities. Angel Aedo's (2023) paper defines carceral domesticity as the embeddedness of carcerality in the everyday conditions of domestic life. This embeddedness, Aedo argues, functions as a form of governmental rationality that targets the families of the incarcerated as likely delinquents and enacts discipline on an intimate level – requiring subjects to police themselves and each other out of the dangerous potentials attributed to them.

In a panel discussion at the Royal Geographic Society's Annual International Conference earlier this year, with the same title as this special issue, Katherine Brickell importantly questioned if and why bringing together the themes of domesticity and carcerality was productive. Highlighting her work on debt-bonded brick workers in Cambodia, she spoke about the kilns in which these workers were required to both live and work. Like the people discussed in many of the papers within this issue, these workers were not locked into the kilns *per se*. Rather, they were rendered immobile in these sites of both dwelling and work by systems of debt and the threat of violence, confined in debilitating and dangerous conditions (Brickell et al., 2018; Parsons and Brickell, 2021). She queried, however, if thinking about this space as carceral was productive, and why it might be so. Rather than being a dismissive question, this was a welcome and important invitation for us to respond. The ideas put forward in the papers within this Special Issue allow us to reconceptualise the ways in which colonial, imperialist, and liberal political discourses, imaginations, and practices render the domestic carceral and the carceral domestic. As such, this allows us to lay the groundwork for an abolitionist reimagining of the domestic and of the home.

The conversation we begin to build through this special issue is, then, ultimately one about intimacy and its relationship with the political. 'Home' and metaphors of home are integral to liberal political thinking and its conceptions of freedom and subjectivity, and indeed to projects of carcerality. The domestic and carceral in this sense are two sides of the same coin – sites of enclosure, of containment, of reform, within a liberal paradigm of care. Whilst the contributors to this Special Issue do not provide an exhaustive elaboration of this, they draw attention to the profusion of geographies where the carceral and the domestic are intertwined – from communities living and working in prisons to, shelters, and middle-class homes. Colonialism haunts these geographies of carceral domesticity, whether in active and visible presence within settler colonial contexts, in the racial capitalist economies of domestic and intimate labour, or in the discourses of securitisation that draw on old imperial logics of minoritisation whilst plugging into contemporary Islamophobia.

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