

Editor's Preface to Special Issue on "The Carceral West"

It is a pleasure to offer our readers this special issue on the carceral state in the West edited by Kelly Lytle Hernández, perhaps the leading scholar on the topic in the United States. It is with some sadness that I read Hernández's introduction as it reminded me that history is not just an abstraction but rather something that impacts our lives on a daily basis.

The carceral state is something that U.S. Latinos (myself included) have an intimate knowledge of and understanding of as suspects, convicted criminals, and family bystanders. It is part of Latino family life. My earliest knowledge of the carceral state was via two of my uncles who, for a variety of minor and major infractions, spent time in county jails and federal prisons. As a mixed-ancestry person, I found that only my Latino family confronted the carceral state. My Anglo family, clinging to the coasts and solidly middle class, had very little interaction with the police at all.

By the time Latino young men are in their teens, they have often been arrested or "picked up" by the police. If they are lucky they are sent home with parents, but if they are not they wind up with municipal citations, which create the foundation for future charges later on. In my personal experience and that of my friends and family, it was often the case that if a mixed racial group was picked up for teenage boy behavior it was the Latino and African American teens who were charged while the Anglos were sent home after a "talking to." As I remember it, the Anglo "talking to" often included a warning to stay away from the Latino and African American kids. I was one of those Latino kids to stay away from. To be a Latino male is often to be seen by the police as a gang member or a criminal as soon as you are old enough to ride a bicycle. Women in my family were often spared most of these indignities, as it seemed that police and school officials saw them as having potential, however limited, to perhaps be trained as secretaries or teachers. But as mothers and sisters they had to deal with the impact the

carceral state and policing of minority youth had on their brothers, sons, boyfriends, and husbands. By the time many Latino men in my family were eighteen, they had already collected a number of citations, the beginning of a “record” that might haunt them for life.

For some men in my family the route out of these interactions with the police was going to college, enlisting in the U.S. military, or both. Of those of us who either attended college or entered the military, few continued to have serious interactions with the police past our late teens. Yet, even as veterans and college-educated members of society, we have been pulled over, held for a bit longer than makes sense, and received written warnings and sometimes tickets in situations where our Anglo friends and colleagues would most likely have been told to slow down or fix a tail light or put more air in the tires. As a law student driving around with two African American and Latino classmates in the early 2000s, I was pulled over three times in one day. Once the police realized we were law students, they let us go with verbal warnings; but it was rather eerie that the three of us, one from California, one from the Deep South, and one from the urban Midwest saw this pattern of harassment as part of being a minority in America.

For the men in my Latino family who did not enter the military or go to college, the story was quite different. Some of my relatives have spent years in prison from Texas to California, whereas others have spent quite a bit of the money they saved hiring attorneys to keep their sons or themselves out of jail. One relative’s family exhausted their life savings to keep a teenage son out of jail on charges that were later dropped. Another relative likewise faced a serious charge; his parents too nearly lost their house and their entire life savings defending him from charges that were also later downgraded and dropped. To be sure that their sons were treated like Anglos before the law, my relatives had to hire expensive lawyers and risk losing their homes. As a working-class Latino in the United States, one learns rather early in life that the justice system—from the police, to the prosecutors, to the jails—treats people differently based on their last name, where they live, and the color of their skin. Interacting with the carceral state is just part of being Latino in the United States.

My uncle Pablo died in prison in Texas recently. He had spent his life in and out of jail and coping with addiction. When I was working on my dissertation I spent quite a bit of time with him as we collected food and delivered it to the homeless people who were his friends in Fort Worth, Texas. Although Pedro was a convicted felon, he was perhaps one of my

favorite people in the world. When he was arrested for the last time and sent to state prison in Texas, he had a medical check up. His only healthcare was often that provided by free clinics and the Texas and federal prison system. In prison, he was feeling weak and sick and went to see the doctor and was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. He died soon after his diagnosis; and when my grandmother requested that the prison allow her to see his body and send it home, she was ignored. She received his cremated remains in a bag contained in a cardboard box with little notice. Even in death, the carceral state stripped away my uncle's dignity. He may have been a flawed person but he was someone's son, someone's brother, and someone's uncle. My uncle Pedro, a one-time Brown Beret, was certainly a troubled person, but perhaps if he had lived in a different world, like my Anglo relatives did, he might have lived a very different life.

When reading the articles in this special issue, I was reminded not only of the long history of race and incarceration in the West, but also of the very real and present problems our nation faces. It is a pleasure to feature a special issue that is both historically significant and presently resonant with many ongoing racial and justice struggles. ■

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