**Contextualizing the Carceral**

Hamlin and Speer’s commentary which emphasizes ‘the politics of conceptualizing the carceral’ provides a useful and timely context for our paper, ‘testing’ it against a reading of the US context and raising some important points of critique. Before addressing these, we offer some important clarifications.

At the outset, Hamlin and Speer convey our interpretation of “incarceration [as] the intentional imposition of harm through the use of space”. Whilst we understand the need to summarize, this précis is problematic. Rather than seeking to conceptualize ‘incarceration’, we argue that it is precisely the terminology of the ‘carceral’ that enables extended discussion. Further, their formulation overlooks the embrace of *both* the intentional imposition of detriment aligned with punishment *and* arguably unintended detriment, which is a key element of our argument. We posit intent as a point for critique, rather than a binary condition of carceral and non-carceral – such a binary is precisely *not* implied by our piece. And when Hamlin and Speer call in conclusion for a negotiation of the politics of the carceral, specifically “who is targeted and for what purpose”, this imperative is not one that we deny – indeed for us this is already intrinsically bound up in the condition of ‘intent’.

With further regard to intent, Hamlin and Speer argue that “[t]he non-specificity of “intent” allows for forms of incarceration that do not involve state actors, for example … when the state offloads its carceral authority onto private agencies…” (p2). Although intent, as we formulate it, does not just mean the direct actions of the state via the criminal justice system, such offloading would, in our view, still represent the intent of the state rather than the contracted providers.

Further, by referring to “Foucault’s binary analysis of compact versus diffuse” (p2) Hamlin and Speer present a quite different reading of Foucault from our own. Critically, we do not read Foucault as postulating the compact and the diffuse as binary or opposing, but rather as locating both *already* on a carceral continuum of the sort that they suggest as an alternative.

These clarifications aside, we share with Hamlin and Speer a deep concern for the politics of incarceration and for the ability of carceral geography to effectively engage with it – and as we noted, we appreciate that carceral geographers come in different ‘stripes’ in terms of their political or activist orientations. However, our starting points in our two works are necessarily divergent. The purpose of our piece was to provide a basis for conceptual discussion of the nature of the carceral, driven by a need to better understand the experiences of the many confined individuals with whom we have spoken during research within what we would term carceral spaces, in very different jurisdictions.

Hamlin and Speer argue that “how we conceptualize the carceral is, at its root, a political decision, with implications for how we view our academic project” (p3), articulating an ethical dilemma which we recognize to confront not just carceral geographers, but all scholars with a motivation to reduce harm in the political contexts in which they operate. However, the framing of this question shares that of their initial summary of our paper – around *incarceration –* whereas we intended in the paper to cast a wider net*.* When expressing concern for the implications of conceiving of the carceral as relative rather than absolute, their worry seems to be explicitly about “over-emphasis on the individual and relative aspects of *incarceration*” (p3, our emphasis) in a US context which implicitly underpins their critique. Gilmore’s (2002) concept of ‘violence’ (to which unfortunately neither the commentary nor this response have space to do justice) may indeed represent the way in which carceral conditions of detriment and intent play out in this particular political context, evolving as it does out of her extensive analysis of US state failure, state-building and the prison as a geographical solution to social and economic crises. However, that formulation may insufficiently represent the carceral as it takes form elsewhere.

In emphasizing the importance of the lived experience of the carceral, our paper urged carceral geographers to consider the diversity, rather than to pre-suppose the specificity, of what the carceral might be. We do not consider this position to necessarily undermine the effectiveness of activist stances. Whereas Hamlin and Speer take the view that “over-emphasis” on “the individual and relative aspects of incarceration could depoliticize the increasingly necessary contributions of carceral geographers” (p3), we would contend that it is precisely by paying attention to such individual and relative experience that we can deduce what our necessary contributions should be.

Gilmore RW (2002) Fatal couplings of power and difference: Notes on racism and geography. *The Professional Geographer* 54(1): 15–24.