

COLLECTIVE DISCUSSION

Colonial Lives of the Carceral Archipelago: Rethinking the Neoliberal Security State

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Mass incarceration, police brutality, and border controls are part and parcel of the everyday experiences of marginalized and racialized communities across the world. Recent scholarship in international relations, sociology, and geography has examined the prevalence of these coercive practices through the prism of “disciplinary,” “penal,” or “authoritarian” neoliberalism. In this collective discussion, we argue that although this literature has brought to the fore neoliberalism’s reliance on state violence, it has yet to interrogate how these carceral measures are linked to previous forms of global racial ordering. To rectify this moment of “colonial unknowing,” the collective discussion draws on decolonial approaches, Indigenous studies, and theories of racial capitalism. It demonstrates that “new” and “neoliberal” forms of domestic control must be situated within the global *longue durée* of racialized and colonial accumulation by dispossession. By mapping contemporary modes of policing, incarceration, migration control, and surveillance onto earlier forms of racial-colonial subjugation, we argue that countering the violence of neoliberalism requires more than nostalgic appeals for a return to Keynesianism. What is needed is abolition—not just of the carceral archipelago, but of the very system of racial capitalism that produces and depends on these global vectors of organized violence and abandonment.

L’incarcération de masse, la brutalité policière et les contrôles aux frontières constituent une partie intégrante des expériences quotidiennes des communautés marginalisées et racialisées du monde entier. Des études récentes en relations internationales, en sociologie et en géographie ont examiné la prévalence de ces pratiques coercitives par le prisme du néolibéralisme « disciplinaire », « pénal » ou « autoritaire ». Dans cet article, nous soutenons que bien que cette littérature ait mis en évidence la dépendance du néolibéralisme à la violence étatique, elle ne s’est pas encore interrogée sur le lien entre ces mesures carcérales et les formes

précédentes d'ordre racial mondial. Cet article s'appuie sur le féminisme noir, les approches décoloniales, les études indigènes et les théories de capitalisme racial pour rectifier cette « ignorance coloniale » marquante. Il démontre que les formes « nouvelles » et « néolibérales » de contrôle national doivent se situer dans la longue durée globale de l'accumulation racialisée et coloniale par dépossession. Nous associons les modes contemporains de maintien de l'ordre, d'incarcération, de contrôle migratoire et de surveillance à des formes antérieures d'assujettissement racial/colonial pour soutenir que contrer la violence du néolibéralisme exige davantage que des appels nostalgiques au retour du keynésianisme. Ce qu'il faut, c'est une abolition : non seulement de l'archipel carcéral, mais aussi du système de capitalisme racial en lui-même qui produit et dépend de ces vecteurs globaux de violence organisée et d'abandon.

El encarcelamiento masivo, la brutalidad policial y los controles fronterizos forman parte de las experiencias cotidianas de las comunidades marginadas y racializadas de todo el mundo. Estudios recientes en RI, Sociología y Geografía han examinado la prevalencia de estas prácticas coercitivas a través del prisma del neoliberalismo “disciplinario,” “penal” o “autoritario.” En este artículo, sostenemos que, si bien esta literatura puso en primer plano la dependencia del neoliberalismo de la violencia estatal, aún tiene que cuestionar la manera en que estas medidas carcelarias se vinculan a formas anteriores de ordenamiento racial global. Para rectificar este momento de “desconocimiento colonial,” el artículo recurre al feminismo negro, a los abordajes descoloniales, a los estudios indígenas y a las teorías del capitalismo racial. Demuestra que las formas “nuevas” y “neoliberales” de control interno se deben situar dentro de la longue durée global de la acumulación por desposesión racializada y colonial. Al trazar un mapa de los modos contemporáneos de vigilancia policial, encarcelamiento, control de la migración y vigilancia sobre las formas anteriores de subyugación racial-colonial, sostenemos que contrarrestar la violencia del neoliberalismo requiere algo más que apelaciones nostálgicas de retorno al keynesianismo. Lo que se necesita es la abolición, no solo del archipiélago carcelario, sino también del propio sistema de capitalismo racial que produce y depende de estos vectores globales de violencia y abandono organizados.

Introduction

Axster and Danewid: Mass incarceration, frequent targeting by police, internal and external restrictions of movement through immigration, and border controls are part and parcel of the everyday experiences of marginalized and racialized communities across the world. From London to Los Angeles, Cape Town to Calcutta, and São Paulo to Stockholm, a growing carceral archipelago operates to police, surveil, and pacify racialized and gendered minorities, activists, prisoners, and migrants, among others. Recent scholarship in international relations (IR), sociology, and geography has examined the global spread of these coercive practices through the prism of “disciplinary,” “penal,” or “authoritarian” neoliberalism (Wacquant 2009; Bruff 2014; Bruff and Tansel 2019). Highlighting the connection between capital accumulation and coercive state practices—including mass incarceration, police violence, immigration and border controls, and the erosion of democratic decision-making spaces—scholars have unraveled how the neoliberal era has also been a *carceral age*.

In this collective discussion, we seek to recontextualize this evolving interplay of neoliberalism and state violence by unearthing their racial and colonial constitution. While the aforementioned scholarship has shed new light on the global logics

of a range of coercive practices, it has not yet interrogated how these are linked to previous forms of racialized global violence. To rectify this pattern of “colonial unknowing” (Vimalassery, Hu Pegues, and Goldstein 2016, 2017), this collective discussion draws on post/decolonial approaches, Indigenous studies, and theories of racial capitalism. We argue that “new” and “neoliberal” forms of global control must be situated within the *longue durée* of racialized and colonial accumulation by dispossession. As Paula Chakravarty and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2012, 368) have shown, neoliberal globalization does not unfold in an empty vacuum but is “mapped onto previous racial and colonial (imperial) discourses and practices.” Taking up this insight, the collective discussion demonstrates that supposedly “new” and neoliberal forms of policing, incarceration, bordering, and surveillance are rooted in a set of geographically interlinked colonial and racial capitalist histories, from the enclosures in Europe to the (settler) colonies and slave plantations. In unearthing the global-colonial origins of what is often regarded as “domestic” forms of state violence, we ultimately show that neoliberalism itself—as ideology, practice, and discourse—must be rethought through the colonial matrix of racialized expropriation, exploitation, and extraction.¹

Tansel: This collective discussion brings together a group of scholars who variously work on racial capitalism, authoritarian neoliberalism, technosurveillance, migration control, and theories of international security and violence to examine the “colonial lives” (Bhandar 2018) and common transnational origins of the neoliberal security state. We argue that policing, incarceration, bordering, and surveillance—rather than being purely “domestic” forms of control—have historically been, and continue to operate as, interconnected and integral elements of *global* racial capitalism. In countering the colonial unknowing that continues to inform much of the literature on neoliberalism’s “carceral archipelago,”² our discussion not only joins cause with an emergent body of scholarship that examines the (settler) colonial roots of contemporary security practices and the racialized and colonial origins of neoliberal ideas and policies (see Slobodian 2018; Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019), but also brings together threads of scholarship that do not always speak to each other—particularly around questions of political economy and security. As such, we present this intervention as a contribution to the growing calls for recoupling the study of “security” and “the economy” (Elias 2015; Best 2017), as well as for taking race and racism seriously in the study of political economy (Inayatullah and Blaney 2018; Tilley and Shilliam 2018).

Axster and Danewid: Our conversation began at the “Political Economy of Control” workshop at the EISA conference in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 2019, and evolved over the spring and early summer of 2020 through frequent online group discussions and an iterative writing process. While we were writing, the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor revitalized the Black Lives Matter protests globally, and rekindled a wide-ranging public discussion on racialized state violence. As Minneapolis erupted, the statue of Edward Colston fell in the United Kingdom, and thousands took to the streets globally, connections were made between a variety of seemingly separate struggles, including struggles for housing, migrant justice, decolonization, Black liberation, and the dismantling of racial capitalism. This collective

¹ While our analysis mainly focuses on the racialized and racializing functions of the neoliberal security state, important work has shown that these dynamics must also be understood intersectionally and through the lens of gender and sexuality (Sudbury 2005; INCITE! Women of Color against Violence 2006; Stanley and Smith 2015; Ritchie 2017), disability (Ben-Moshe 2020), and class (Herivel and Wright 2002).

² In this collective discussion, we use the term “carceral archipelago” to refer to a set of interconnected carceral spaces and practices, including prisons, police, detention centers, segregated cities, reservations, and enclosures. While originally popularized by Foucault (1975) and used to refer to the spread of disciplinary techniques in Europe, we mobilize the term here to capture a wider set of disciplinary relations and practices that have emanated from empire and racial capitalism. As Ann Laura Stoler (2016, 108) has argued, in this conception, “carceral archipelago” allows us to capture how “a politics of security has figured centrally in the policing of imperial borderlands and ambiguous frontiers.”

discussion is informed by these ongoing abolitionist struggles. In highlighting the colonial, transnational, and deeply interconnected origins of the neoliberal security state, it is also an attempt to support these struggles by providing what Aimé Césaire (cited in [Martíneu 2016](#)) has called “discursive ammunition.”

Goldstein and Wilcox: Our conversation unfolds across four sections. We begin by examining the prevalence of “colonial unknowing” and methodological nationalism in the theoretical literature on disciplinary, penal, and authoritarian neoliberalism. Building on this, in the second section we trace the colonial and racial capitalist origins of policing and incarceration. Focusing on the colonial boomerang thesis, we argue that domestic policing and overseas colonial wars, counterinsurgencies, and occupations have been conceptually and practically linked from their inception until today. The third section extends this critique of methodological nationalism and colonial unknowing through a focus on the artificial separation between migration control and the criminal justice system. Tracing the colonial and transnational roots of borders and immigration restrictions, we argue that migration control and criminal justice are in fact different modalities of the same global system that sprung out of the logic of controlling the movement of the colonized rural and metropolitan poor. In the final section, we turn to the use of technology in “new” forms of e-carceration, which we show stem from much older histories of racial capitalism with surveillance as one of its key modalities of exerting control. Together, we conclude that countering the violence of the neoliberal security state requires more than nostalgic appeals for a return to the “golden age” *before* neoliberalism. As organizers across the world remind us, what is needed is abolition—not just of the carceral archipelago, but of the very system of racial capitalism that produces and depends on these global vectors of organized violence and abandonment ([Gilmore 2020](#)).

Unknowing Colonial Economies and Security

Tansel: Despite the wide-ranging scholarly and popular interpretations of the concept, it is undeniable that “neoliberalism” has become an effective shortcut to invoke a shared understanding of the recent historical past. Both in the scholarly literature and in the wider public imagination, neoliberalism has come to signify a neatly demarcated period in capitalism, in which the state “withdrew” from the management of the economy, and “market forces” became the central actors not only in the economy, but in the organization of social life in general.

Often employed within the context of globalization debates, the early conceptual parameters of neoliberalism were primarily defined by the prevalent “states versus markets” dichotomy of the broader international political economy (IPE) literature, and ended up prioritizing the impact of neoliberal restructuring on state capacity. [David Harvey](#) (2007, 2), perhaps most prominently, argued that neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” Other scholars such as Wendy Brown, meanwhile, have built on this to argue that neoliberalism also has to be understood as a mode of governance that produces forms of subjectivity, citizenship, and behavior. Brown’s conceptual parameters of neoliberalism are drawn explicitly from the work of [Michel Foucault](#) (1979) and the term is deployed in conjunction with other concepts and frameworks—such as governmentality, resilience, and biopolitics—to explore how neoliberal governance has invaded and come to dominate every sphere of human existence, ranging from “statecraft and the workplace ... [to] jurisprudence, education, culture, and a vast range of quotidian activity” ([Brown 2015](#), 17).

While some of the foundational analyses of neoliberalism emphasized the withdrawal of the state vis-à-vis the provision of common goods, an emerging

interdisciplinary scholarship spanning across sociology, geography, law, and IR has begun to trace the simultaneous strengthening of coercive and punitive state apparatuses. Neoliberalism, it is argued, has meant not so much a dismantling of the state as its restructuring, entailing a shift from the “soft bosom” of the welfare state to the “penal fist” of neoliberalism (Wacquant 2009). Under this schema, there has been a rollback of social provisions and a rollout of new forms of discipline and control (Hall et al. 1978), including mass incarceration (Davis 2003, 2005; Gilmore 2007), mass supervision (Phelps 2018), the expansion of the detention estate and deportation regime (De Genova and Peutz 2010; Smith 2019), and increasingly punitive forms of welfare governance (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

In IPE, the emergent literature on authoritarian neoliberalism has similarly theorized the coercive and punitive side of neoliberalism. This scholarship has been crucial for demonstrating that neoliberalism represents a deeply reactionary mode of governance that aims to shield capitalism from democracy, particularly from popular opposition and public accountability (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017; Bruff and Tansel 2019). In this reconfiguration of capitalist governance, states and international institutions have played a key role in instrumentalizing laws, notions of “security,” and narratives of economic necessity to enforce reforms that produced not only numerous forms of economic dispossession (e.g., wage stagnation, declining welfare provisions), but also the closure of democratic spaces in which to counter such policies (Kristal 2010; Boukalas 2015). Particularly after the 2007–2008 economic crisis, the declining ability of capitalist democracies to consolidate their legitimacy has been accompanied by an increasing reliance on the state’s coercive and punitive apparatuses, which some scholars have conceptualized with reference to the emergence of a neoliberal “security state” (Amar 2013; Kaygusuz 2018).

In highlighting the penal, disciplinary, and authoritarian character of neoliberalism, the above literatures have offered compelling analyses of the imbrications of “security” and “economy” in the neoliberal present. Nonetheless, since many of these scholars subscribe to a conjunctural understanding of neoliberalism—regarding it as a stage in, or an era of, capitalist development—they have sometimes been prone to overlook how contemporary practices of neoliberal security build on earlier forms of racial-colonial subjugation. As Siddhant Issar (2020, 16, emphasis added) insightfully notes in relation to the work of Harvey and Brown, “in focusing on the ways neoliberalism is *discontinuous* from earlier phases of capitalism,” the bifurcated treatments of neoliberalism “too often hide the presence of these longstanding racialized patterns in the history and functioning of capitalism” (see also Melamed 2006; Chakravarty and da Silva 2012; Connolly 2019). Similarly, this literature has sometimes tended to neglect the experience of the Global South, where neoliberalism primarily functioned, not as an attack on the welfare state, but as a development strategy premised on opening up the domestic vectors of accumulation to international capital (Connell and Dados 2014; Tansel 2019). Building on these important interventions, in what follows we argue that the neoliberal security state must be similarly theorized in relation to the colonial and racial history of capital accumulation and dispossession in the Global North and Global South. We ask: what practices, ideas, and narratives have penal, disciplinary, and authoritarian neoliberalism inherited from the broader lineage of racial and colonial capitalist development? What do these histories reveal about carceral regimes and the production of (in)security in the present? Ultimately, what—if anything—is novel about neoliberal governance?

Goldstein: To unearth these histories, together we challenge the practice of colonial unknowing that is evident in so much of the existing research on the linkages between neoliberalism and security. Our approach to colonial unknowing is indebted to the formulation elaborated by Vimalassery, Hu Pegues, and Goldstein (2016, 2017). They stress the fundamentally reactionary epistemology underpinning these forms of ignoring, disavowal, and epistemicide. As it pertains to our

focus here, these epistemologies of conquest are an essential element in marshalling consensus and enrolling complicity in the penal and supervisory norms of racialized order and commodification evident in historical and contemporary mass incarceration and supervision. This unknowing is actively produced in order to isolate and interrupt a relational mode of analysis that would hold in dynamic tension Indigenous persistence, the histories and afterlives of slavery, the imperial relocation of peoples, and the inculcation of gendered and sexual difference.

Wilcox: One way in which colonial unknowing operates is through assumptions of methodological nationalism. Methodological nationalism refers to “the naturalization of the nation-state by the social sciences” (Wimmer and Schiller 2003, 576) that can take the form of naturalizing nationalism, taking for granted the nation-state as a unit for analysis, and a territorial limitation for the study of social processes. In the field of IR in particular, the domestic/international divide has often worked to prevent scholars from recognizing the deep connections between colonialism, race, and various practices of policing, incarceration, surveillance, and bordering. Writing against colonial unknowing therefore also demands a critique of methodological nationalism and the separation of the inside and outside of the state.

Racialized Policing and the Colonial Boomerang

Axster and Danewid: In the United States, scholars of criminal justice have been at the forefront of theorizing the relationship between neoliberalism and mass incarceration. As prison abolitionists such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) and Angela Davis (2003, 2005) have shown, mass incarceration emerged as a solution to the problem of how to manage the consequences of neoliberal restructuring. In Gilmore’s (2007, 5) memorable phrase, prisons are the “catchall solutions to social problems” such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, mental illness, and drug addiction (Wacquant 2009; Harcourt 2011). As economic liberalization in the post-Fordist era changed the modes of production and forms of employment, increasing labor precarity, the need for “disciplinary control” disappeared and shifted toward a need for total control (de Giorgi 2006). The 2020 global Black Lives Matter protests yet again brought into sharp relief the structural racism inherent in this system of mass incarceration, which disproportionately targets Black, Latinx, Muslim, and Indigenous communities. The protests also, once again, ushered the historical underpinnings of racist policing and incarceration practices back into the spotlight. For example, in her study of prisons in the United States, Michelle Alexander (2012, 5) famously argues that mass incarceration in the United States is seemingly race-neutral when it in fact operates as “a comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow.” In tracing the roots of the prison and police to the plantation, abolition, and Jim Crow, Alexander provides the deeper historical analysis that so often is missing from existing scholarship on “penal” neoliberalism.³ Thus, similar to the preceding discussion put forward by Tansel, what we witness here is the neoliberal rollback of social provisions vis-à-vis the rollout of new forms of control, coupled with a strong recognition of the historical racial underpinnings of these practices. Yet for all its merits, this literature has so far focused fairly narrowly on the United States, and the plantation in particular. In thinking beyond and against colonial unknowing and methodological nationalism, as encouraged by Wilcox and Goldstein in the previous section, what other histories are there and what do they reveal about contemporary forms of policing and incarceration?

³ Scholars of criminal justice in the United States have identified the mechanisms that facilitated the rise of mass incarceration, looking at the interplay of conservative and liberal political actors (Weaver 2007; Murakawa 2014) and the racialization of crime (Muhammad 2010).

Wilcox: One example of how methodological nationalism and the erasure of colonial histories have facilitated a sanitized view of modern policing practices is the ongoing debate about “militarization.” In short, this debate, which is prominent in both policy and academic circles in the United States (Balko 2013; ACLU 2014; Coyne and Hall 2018), suggests that American policing has become increasingly militarized through the use of wartime tactics and equipment: “war has come home” (ACLU 2014). For example, the police use of armored utility vehicles to counter the protests in the wake of Michael Brown’s murder in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 brought the world’s attention to the ways in which Ferguson looked like a war zone. The similar spectacle of heavily armed police, National Guard, and even apparent “secret forces” using brutal violence toward peaceful protestors in the nationwide uprising following George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis in May 2020, opened many eyes to what had been apparent to many activists and scholars for generations: that domestic policing functions much like overseas colonial wars, counterinsurgencies, and occupations.

Recent work critiquing the language of the “militarization” of domestic politics has begun to address the ways in which the separation between wartime and peacetime operates as a form of colonial unknowing. Probing this unknowing, Alison Howell (2018, 120) argues “that those ‘civilian’ things that are claimed to be in danger of ‘militarisation’ have much deeper roots in warfare ... and colonial violence.” Derek Denman (2020) likewise draws on abolitionist work to critique “militarization” for the ways in which it obscures long-standing connections between military and police apparatuses. Mark Neocleous (2014, 13) further explains that the idea that war is becoming more like “policing” is inadequate, and instead pushes us to recognize that “war and police are *always already* together.” It is well known that even in times of so-called peace, British, French, and American empires engaged/engage in “small wars,” colonial wars, counterinsurgencies, and the like (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Barkawi 2016). This body of work thus shows that these domestic processes cannot be separated from the broader international dynamics of racialization, colonial and imperial conquest, and ongoing foreign intervention, and that the domestic peacetimes that we assume existed were a fiction. In short, war is not coming home; rather, and as Howell (2018, 122) puts it, “war has always been at home in America.”

The separation of these two spheres and resulting assumptions around violence is facilitated by methodological nationalism, which, as I discuss above and Axster and Danewid push us to take seriously in the context of policing and prisons, has generated a “domestic” versus “international” distinction that most prominently structures the field of IR but is also prevalent in other fields of scholarly inquiry. One way of rectifying these shortcomings is through the so-called boomerang theory of imperial warfare/counterinsurgency policing. Emerging from the anti-colonial literature, it centers around the idea that the colonies served as “imperial laboratories of governance” (Césaire 2000 [1955]; Barder 2015). Scholars and activists have traced the ways in which the tactics, technologies, and governance structures deployed in colonial wars and domination have rebounded “back” to the metropolises, including fingerprinting and panoptic prisons, as well as contemporary forms of community surveillance and stop-and-frisk practices (Camp and Heatherton 2016; Danewid 2020). Such technologies and tactics not only “boomerang,” but circulate between colonies of the same colonial power, from location to location and across time, often with certain focal points as origins or nodes of transmission, such as Palestine or Ireland (see Khalili 2010).

Two recent interventions underscoring the role of the colonial boomerang in contemporary policing practices have been made by Laleh Khalili (2013) and Stuart Schrader (2019). Focusing on the so-called war on terror, Khalili examines the distinctively colonial roots of counterinsurgency strategies and tactics. Contemporary forms of confinement and detention, she argues, can be traced back to the colonial

occupation of Algeria, India, and Palestine. Schrader, meanwhile, takes inspiration from the work of Black radicals such as George Jackson, who in the 1960s described policing as “internal colonization.” Building on such frameworks, Schrader details the ways in which the expansion of incarceration and policing in the United States during this period grew out of the simultaneous expansion of policing capacities around the world that were part of the United States’ global efforts to eradicate communism. What they show is that exhuming these transnational ties can help us better understand the historical and global underpinnings of the neoliberal “carceral age.”

To conclude, I would first like to emphasize that the American case cannot be understood in isolation from the broader workings of global processes of racialization. Foregrounding these histories of policing and “militarization” in the United States reveals the embeddedness of these practices in transnational dynamics of slavery, colonialism, and counterinsurgency in ways that exceed a solely “domestic” understanding of their origins. We must thus be attentive to the ways in which the US “case” is both a product of broader processes such as settler colonialism (see [Lytle Hernández 2017](#)), the slave trade, and labor relations that exceed the nation-state frame and the entanglements of what has previously been considered “domestic” policing and incarceration and “foreign” policies of colonial wars and counterinsurgencies.

Second, insights such as those of Khalili and Schrader—that treat “foreign” and “domestic,” not as ontologies, but as “contested outcomes of social, political, and economic processes” ([Schrader 2019](#), 15)—not only challenge the methodological nationalism that works to shield policing and incarceration from interrogation in IR, but also point to another problem, namely that of “methodological whiteness” ([Bhambra 2017](#)). “Methodological whiteness” is a way of taking white experience as standard, while denying its own identity practices (see also [Mills 2007](#); [Wekker 2016](#)). It is a practice of failing to acknowledge the work that race does to structure the world, as well as the ways in which knowledge is legitimated within the world. When we understand the world as structured not in territorial sovereignties, but by, in Du Bois’s famous phrase, a global “colour line” ([Du Bois 1982 \[1903\]](#)), a rich agenda for shifting our focus of the study of global politics, and particularly for international political sociology, is opened up (see [Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2015](#)). In such an agenda, the United States is no longer an exceptional site, regardless of the specificities of its histories and present dynamics of racial oppression, evident in current and ongoing manifestations of police brutality and mass incarceration. [Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s](#) (2007, 247) now oft-quoted statement that “racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” helps point us toward seeing the transnational and global ways in which racism functions, as well as to see how the prison, as a set of relationships rather than locally organized institutions or architectures, is a global structural process.

Axster and Danewid: Wilcox draws attention to the circular flows of policing techniques and technologies between colony and metropole. We would add that the colonial “boomerang” that she discusses also needs to be understood through the lens of racial capitalism ([Robinson 1983](#); [Lowe 2015](#); [Melamed 2015](#)). While Du Bois’s work has become central to post/decolonial approaches seeking to rethink global politics beyond state sovereignty, it is important to recall that Du Bois theorized the problem of the global color line as a question of political economy: indeed, for him the task was precisely one of revealing the “continuities between prewar colonial capitalism and postwar US global ascendancy and expanding transnational capitalism” ([Melamed 2006](#), 13; see also [Horne 1986](#); [Olsavsky 2018](#)). Ultimately, one reason why it is so important to excavate the colonial histories of prisons and police is precisely that it enables us to analyze and understand the *function* of penalty, not just in neoliberalism, but in racial capitalism writ large.

Marxist historians have traced the roots of policing to the enclosures and the creation of a highly mobile, masterless class consisting of vagabonds, beggars, vagrants, and “tramps” (Neocleous 2000, 2014; see also Linebaugh 1991; Roberts 2017). Within this context, policing emerged not to prevent crime, as is commonly argued, but to protect private property, quell social unrest, and discipline the poor: in short, to fabricate and maintain bourgeois order (Neocleous 2000). While there is a Eurocentric bias in some of this scholarship, these “local” articulations of policing are part of a wider system of extraction, expropriation, and exploitation.

Consider, by way of example, the history of the London Metropolitan Police. Founded in 1829 by Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel, the London Met is often invoked as the world’s first professional police force. As Philip Rawlings (2002, 1) explains, criminologists and historians of the police often depict the creation of the London Met as “one of the nineteenth-century inventions which underpinned modern civilization and democracy.” Yet this interpretation overlooks that Peel developed his ideas while managing the British colonial occupation of Ireland, where he concluded that a new, professional police force was needed to maintain “continued political and economic domination in the face of growing insurrections, riots, and political uprisings” (Vitale 2017, 31; see also Brogden 1987; Williams 2003). Peel’s experiments with policing eventually led to the creation of the Royal Irish Constabulary, which “for about a century was the main rural police force in Ireland.” These developments, in turn, both built on and extended techniques experimented with throughout the colonies. Martin Thomas (2012, 10) has documented how colonial policing was used to control labor and contain anti-colonial resistance, from “the mining industries in French Northern Africa and British West Africa, through Southeast Asia’s rubber plantations, to the sugar estates of Jamaica, the oilfields of southern Trinidad and Katanga’s copper-belt.”

The creation of the London Met in 1829 was in many ways the culmination of these developments. In 1822, Peel became Home Secretary, a position that he used to bring back “home” some of these methods and techniques. As in Ireland and other colonies, the main task of the new London Met—unofficially termed “Bobbies” after Sir Bob himself—was to “protect property, quell riots, put down strikes and other industrial actions, and produce a disciplined industrial work force” (Vitale 2017, 32). In the 1830s, this “London model” was exported to northern cities in the United States, where it fused with other methods of control developed through the distinct yet interconnected histories of the slave patrols, the policing of the colonial frontier, and, later, the colonial occupation of the Philippines (Graybill 2007; McCoy 2009; Ritchie 2017). Ultimately, what unites these histories and geographies of policing—from Ireland to London to the (settler) colonies—is the role of discipline and control in fabricating and upholding racial capitalism. Indeed, the police has historically been central to enabling racialized forms of exploitation, expropriation, and extraction—“here” as well as “there.” As Correia and Wall (2018, 6) put it, “capitalism and colonialism cannot exist without a state willing and able to defend colonial domination, private property, the wage relation, and the ongoing patterns of dispossession that characterize all of these. Ain’t no colonialism and ain’t no capitalism without cops.”

Wilcox: These logics today underpin the wider geography of policing across the world. In the Latin American region, for example, the police and military, which are organized on different terms than those of the “militarized police” in the United States, operate to produce and maintain racialized forms of dispossession, spatial segregation, and high levels of poverty, especially among favela dwellers. Wacquant (2008) earlier described this as a kind of Americanization of policing in the region, particularly in Brazil. Yet, as Denise Ferreira da Silva (2009) argues, the killing of Black and Brown youth from favelas—whether by police or criminal gangs, as part of what Denyer Willis (2015) refers to as a “killing consensus”—is a state practice of racial domination that renders the deaths of Black and Brown teenagers both a

matter of indifference to the state and a necessary practice for the Brazilian state's own self-justification and self-preservation. Those killed, da Silva argues, are "nobodies," racially marked as their bodies and territories of the favela always-already signify violence in structures that stem from a much longer history of race, violence, and exploitation than a spread of American neoliberalism would suggest. Segregation, economic exploitation, and killing by police thus should be understood as a form of necropolitics that produces Blackness as an index of death (Alves 2018, 10).

Goldstein: Taking Wilcox's above provocation to think policing and incarceration as practices of ongoing colonization and racialization, and Axster and Danewid's invitation to think the "local" within larger structures of extraction, I would like to point to a lacuna within current IR scholarship and offer an illustration of the international interconnections of this violence in the case of the contemporary colonial policing of Indigenous nations, specifically the Wet'suwet'en, whose territory is claimed by the Canadian state.⁴

Indigenous nations, as with other "inconvenient" units of analysis, for example, sub-national island jurisdictions, annexed minority regions, and transnational minority groups, have been sidelined in IR scholarship by a disproportionate focus on *interstate* relations at the expense of nations whose state has been occupied or otherwise unrealized (Trask 2000; Marshall Beier 2003; Androus and Greymorning 2016). Marshall Beier (2003, 109) argues that this neglect of Indigenous nations in the field of IR is a contemporary form of colonial unknowing, "to the extent that orthodox theoretical approaches to international relations exclude aboriginal knowledges and lifeways ... [IR is] ... constituted by and constitutive of racial ideologies." In the case of the Wet'suwet'en, the knowledge and lifeways being excluded here are claims to sovereignty in a place rooted in relations of care, responsibility, and hereditary forms of governance not co-opted by the settler state.

Alongside Indigenous communities all over the world, the Wet'suwet'en are on the frontlines of resistance to extractive development without local consent, and the violent repression that inevitably follows (Moore et al. 2015; Unist'ot'en 2020). Their campaign against TC Energy's Coastal GasLink pipeline across their territory illustrates the ongoing colonial relations that enroll transnational complicity and expose groups racialized as non-white and Indigenous to the kinds of systemic harms illustrated by Gilmore's definition of racism that Wilcox invokes above. While the supreme court of Canada has twice affirmed Indigenous title to their unceded territories in *Calder v. Attorney-General of British Columbia* and *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* (1973, 1997), the settler state has nevertheless fully committed to the realization of its plans to develop the pipeline and its export terminal, going so far as to double the lease to operators of the terminal to forty years, and to deploy the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in addition to Coastal GasLink's private security, to surveil, intimidate, and arrest members of the Wet'suwet'en and their supporters. Simultaneously, the public sector pension funds of South Korea and the neighboring province of Alberta together purchased a 65 percent equity stake in the pipeline, enrolling together their combined millions of members' complicity in the project, and the violence necessary to realize it (Pasternak 2020).

The exposure to harms for Wet'suwet'en communities includes increased risk of poisoning, chronic illness and toxification, elevated rates of gender-based violence due to the imposition of "man-camps" for outside laborers and private security for extractive infrastructure, and the decline of community life through terraforming and interruption of lifeways like fishing, trapping, and hunting (Dhillon and Parrish 2019; MMIWG 2019). Such threats of intimidation and criminalization are shared across a broad international horizon of Indigenous resistance subject to violently enforced processes of extraction under the guise of "critical infrastructure protection ... a misnomer for the real objective of protecting economic development

⁴For more information, see <http://unistoten.camp>.

and thwarting challenges to settler sovereignty” (Crosby and Monaghan 2018, 116). The violent enforcement of “development,” in this case carried out by the RCMP, has deep colonial and transnational resonance. Building on Axster and Danewid’s insights into the colonial origins of the Peel model, the RCMP (then the North-West Mounted Police) was precisely one of the imperial franchises of this model exported within the British empire *cum* Commonwealth. Founded in 1873, the organization was initially 60 percent British born, including many veterans of the Royal Irish Constabulary, and continued to recruit in large numbers outside of Canada until World War I (Marquis 1997, 2005). The force’s always-already international practice is illustrated by Bell and Schreiner (2018, 117), who detail the RCMP’s historic activity in enforcing “territorial acquisitions and Indigenous repression in the de facto constitution of Canada, as well as [serving as] candidates for wartime service beyond Canada in the Second Boer War and both World Wars.” Gouldhawke (2020) further emphasizes that this transnationalization continues in the RCMP’s present missions in Haiti, Mali, Palestine, and Iraq and in their enforcement of pipeline construction in Wet’suwet’en territory.

Through the triangulation of international complicity in violence in defense of investment and the criminalization of Indigenous resistance, the Wet’suwet’en case illustrates how policing and incarceration are imbricated with the underlying dynamics and broader context of ongoing colonization and dispossession. These dynamics are rooted in a colonial-industrial model of the privatization of profit and socialization of risk, where Indigenous communities bear the brunt of the risks taken by violently enforced extractive speculation (Pasternak 2020). Securing this development is a massive expansion and ongoing indigenization and feminization of incarceration in Canada, with Indigenous peoples accounting for 30 percent of those incarcerated federally, despite being only 5 percent of the population. This criminalization as ongoing colonialism is total in its assault on Indigenous lifeways and communities, with even more disproportionate rates of incarceration visible when taking an intersectional lens to account for provincial variation, gender, and the youth⁵ corrections pipeline (Chartrand 2019; OCI 2020). The breadth of scholarship on connections between Indigenous criminalization, transnational complicity in extractive projects, and the acceleration of these phenomena over time indicates that settler attempts to control Indigenous bodies and extinguish Indigenous sovereignties are not “new,” and therefore require an active unknowing to obscure the diverse forms of resistance underway (LaPrairie 1997; Smith 2015; John 2020).

Wilcox: The colonial and transnational histories discussed above by Axster, Danewid, and Goldstein push us to rethink some of the core categories and concepts in IR and international political sociology, including the foundational status of nation-states, territories, and borders. To understand policing and incarceration as historical and *ongoing* practices of colonization and racialization on a transnational—even global—scale is to challenge the artificial separation between forms of state violence otherwise studied in isolation from one another. Back in 2000, in a conversation with Angela Davis, Gina Dent reflected on how concepts inflected by methodological nationalism are undone when confronted by the afterlives of race, gender, colonialism, and capitalism. As Dent explained, “We continue to find that the prison is itself a border” (Davis and Dent 2001, 1236). Taking up this insight, in the next section we examine the historical connections between

⁵“Youth” in the Canadian criminal justice system are classified as twelve to seventeen years of age under the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) of 2002. However, many Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system are sentenced as adults, despite guidelines for accommodations in sentencing Indigenous offenders mandated in *R. v. Gladue* 1999 and elaborated in *R. v. Ipeelee* 2012. Nate Jackson (2015) has shown that the Indigenous youth proportion of incarcerated youth overall has grown since the adoption of the YCJA, keeping pace with, and exceeding, the “Indigenization” of incarceration in Canada, largely due to discretionary factors in various stages of the criminal-carceral process outside of ordinary judicial review. These include, among many factors, prosecutorial discretion, increased mandatory sentencing laws, and the presumption of guilt for those having previously entered a plea to avoid jail time.

(domestic) criminal justice, on the one hand, and (international) migration control, on the other hand. Focusing on the (settler) colonial and racial capitalist policing of mobility, we interrogate the historical co-constitution of prisons and borders.

“Prison as a Border”: Racial-Colonial Histories of Mobility Control

Axster and Danewid: Just like the increase in policing and incarceration, the neoliberal era has also been accompanied by heightened forms of migration control: along the shores of the Mediterranean to the US–Mexico border wall, the off-shore Australian detention centers on Nauru, the South Africa–Zimbabwe border, Kashmir, and the West Bank, states have poured billions of dollars into policing and controlling the movement of the poor and the paperless. Existing research has made important contributions to our understanding of these global processes (Andersson 2014; Hollifield, Martin, and Orenius 2014). Nonetheless, in focusing on what is novel in the present moment, they have often failed to engage with colonial histories of conquest, dispossession, exploitation, and extraction (cf. Mayblin and Turner 2021). This is problematic, not only because the risk of border-crossing death is disproportionately inflicted on migrants and refugees racialized as non-white (Saucier and Woods 2014; Sharpe 2016), but also because contemporary forms of migration control rely on techniques and technologies that emerge through histories of enslavement, (settler) colonialism, and racial capitalism (El-Enany 2019; Sharma 2020). In what follows, we argue that contemporary migration controls are a continuation and intensification of racial capitalism’s historical and ongoing search for cheap and disposable labor (Robinson 1983; Bhattacharyya 2018).

The history of mobility controls cuts across a variety of interconnected geographies, including the town and parish as well as the (settler) colony and “many middle passages” (Christopher, Pybus, and Rediker 2007) that built the modern/colonial world. For example, scholars working within historical materialist traditions have traced the roots of contemporary immigration controls to the vagrancy acts and poor laws that were introduced in Medieval Europe at the dawn of capitalism (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008; Anderson 2013). The sedentarization of the mobile poor—vagrants, vagabonds, and beggars—was, according to this literature, central to the creation of a disciplined, industrious, and low-paid working class. These measures were often racialized—designed to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor—and specifically targeted Romani and traveler communities, “Blackamoors,” “Egyptian,” Jews, and the Irish (Fryer 1984; Weber and Bowling 2008; Shilliam 2018). Beyond the British mainland, vagrancy laws were frequently applied as tools of colonial governance on a global scale. For example, racialized vagrancy legislation was used to coerce Indigenous communities into work. In the aftermath of the abolition of slavery, such measures were also deployed to tie the formerly enslaved to the plantation and ensure a continued steady supply of expendable labor (Beier and Ocobock 2008). Linking metropole and colony through a shared circuit of racialized mobility, vagrancy laws can thus be seen as a forerunner to contemporary mobility controls.

Alongside this scholarship on the transatlantic criminalization of vagrancy, an emergent post/decolonial literature has documented the distinctively (settler) colonial roots of contemporary immigration restrictions (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Mongia 2018; Sharma 2020). As Radhika Mongia (2018, 43) puts it, modern immigration controls have a “crucial colonial genealogy.” These controls emerged as a response to planters’ demands for a new system of cheap, super-exploitable labor after the phasing out of plantation slavery in British colonies after 1834. In response, millions of indentured servitude workers (“coolies”) were recruited from India and China, and shipped to plantations, mines, and sites of investment across the world (Mongia 2018; see also Potts 1990; Lowe 2015). Entry was granted on the basis of providing relevant documentation showing a contract of indenture. These

requirements set the stage for subsequent regimes of immigration control, which quickly spread throughout the (settler) colonies in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As [Nandita Sharma \(2020, 70\)](#) notes, “[b]y the end of coolieism in the early twentieth century, making people Migrants [had become] a well-established mechanism of labor and social control across the world.” In the twentieth century, these measures were gradually shipped back to the European metropolises, where they became central technologies for nationalizing and racializing postimperial sovereignty. The string of Citizenship Acts implemented in Europe from the 1950s onward may have been race-neutral on paper, but were designed “to close the door to dark-skinned potential migrants” ([Mason 2000, 29](#); [Tyler 2010](#); [El-Enany 2019](#)). In the United Kingdom, immigration restrictions were ultimately—and as the title of Paul Gilroy’s seminal study from 1987 puts it—introduced to create the illusion that “there ain’t no black in the Union Jack” ([Gilroy 1987](#)). Similar trends could be observed in other disappearing empires, including France ([Kozakowski 2014](#)), Portugal ([Gil 2014](#)), and Italy ([De Donno 2006](#)).

This racial-colonial history disrupts narratives of contemporary border control “exceptionalism” in at least three ways: First, it shows that migration control systems that are often regarded as new are in fact continuations and intensification of processes that, in various ways, have been integral to the history of (settler) colonialism and racial capitalism.

Second, it enables us to see that mobility controls historically have operated as tools of racialized dispossession and accumulation, and through that have been central to the making of the global proletariat ([Potts 1990](#); [Sharma 2020](#)). When analyzed through the historical lens of racial capitalism, migration controls emerge as a tool to subordinate migrant labor and keep them in a place of legal vulnerability and super-exploitability ([Rajaram 2018](#)). In fact, the global capitalist economy of today relies on the existence of precarious migrant labor and is unable to function without it ([Sassen 1989](#); [Walia 2013](#)).

Third and finally, this history undoes the conceptual distinction between the control of internal and external (or citizen and non-citizen) movement ([Parker 2015](#)). The inability to think beyond the categories of the nation-state ultimately clouds out these lines of historical continuity and obfuscates how older forms of mobility controls cut across an interconnected set of geographies and were never exclusively tied to the borders of the state.

Goldstein and Mahmoudi: Axster and Danewid underscore the importance of recognizing that the goal of border enforcement is not to halt migration completely, but rather to maintain a vulnerable workforce that is easily exploitable. Notably, and to expand on their argument, this process has led to a breakdown of any separation between labor, migration, and security policy spheres, producing what [Sarah Grayce Marsden \(2018\)](#) calls “multi-sited enforcement” of non-citizens and “failed citizens” or the mobile poor ([Anderson 2013](#)). Healthcare workers, social workers, and teachers, as well as employers and those in banking and housing, are deputized into guarding an always-already embodied and racialized border. These enforcement actors include national intelligence agencies, policing organizations, and transnational technology and security firms. When viewed in situ, this ecosystem of public and private actors acts to control social movements, resistance, and organizing, revealing a total-state approach to surveillance and enforcement ([Eubanks 2018](#)). Thus, we see a continuation of the ways in which migration control stems historically from policies to control domestic mobility, as identified by Axster and Danewid. In the contemporary period, this enforcement gaze is expressed in the imposition of workfare regimes that curtail access to social rights for both groups, thereby defining the community of value both from within and without, and surveilling and penalizing those deemed “outside” ([Anderson 2013, 178](#); see also [Wacquant 2009](#); [Burnett 2018](#)). Multi-sited enforcement to control mobility is an overarching practice of coordination and orchestration of violence—as exclusion, as neglect,

and as repression—through a broad array of actors to preserve a racial capitalist order.

Axster and Danewid: As noted by Goldstein and Mahmoudi, in the neoliberal present the distinction between migration control and criminal justice is increasingly blurred and broken down. In the literature, these are often regarded as two separate systems, which target insiders/citizens (criminal justice) and outsiders/non-citizens (migration control), respectively. Yet building on the insights put forward by Goldstein and Mahmoudi, border enforcement today is, and has historically been, integrated with criminal justice. This link has been extensively explored in the literature on “crimmigration” (Aliverti 2013; Aas 2014; Bosworth and Franko 2018; Chase 2019). However, the crime–migration nexus is not only not entirely new—as shown by this literature—but also in fact foundational to the emergence of these systems. The transnational, colonial, and racial capitalist history of migration control (which we discussed above) reveals that contemporary practices of bordering, on the one hand, and policing and incarceration, on the other hand, historically have been part of the *same* overarching system. Extending this analysis, in what follows we argue that Davis’s and Dent’s formulation of the “prison as a border” that Wilcox discussed should be seen as more than a pure metaphor: indeed, historically the prison *has* been a border, and vice versa.

To make sense of this historical co-constitution, it is imperative to again step outside of the parameters of colonial unknowing and methodological nationalism. Indeed, once we take seriously the idea of entangled or connected histories, it becomes clear that immigration control and incarceration share common transnational roots. Take, for example, the UK Vagrancy Act of 1597, which first legalized the banishment of “vagrants” to the colonies of Virginia and Maryland. Rather than two separate systems (of migration control *and* criminal justice), deportations, penalty, and the poor laws here acted *together* to punish the mobile poor (Walters 2002). This co-constitution can also be observed in the Aliens Act of 1793, which targeted French immigrants fleeing the French Revolution. Foreigners who did not comply with the Act’s registration and residence requirements could be detained, imprisoned, deported, or transported to the British colonies (Aliverti 2013). Conversely, and as Joanna Innes (1987) has shown, the history of prisons is closely linked to the policing of the mobile poor. Indeed, the first structures that embody the modern prison did not emerge in the late eighteenth century, as is commonly argued (Foucault 1975). Rather, prisons first arose as tools to punish and reform vagrants, the laboring poor, and those accused of petty crimes. Ultimately, and as these examples make clear, historically there has never been a clear-cut separation between criminal justice and mobility control: quite the opposite, deportations often functioned as forms of punishment, and criminal justice was used to sedentarize and discipline the mobile poor. Rather than invoking the idea of two separate (albeit increasingly entangled) systems, we would do well to speak of criminal justice and migration control as modalities of the *same* system.

(New) Frontiers of Incarceration

Goldstein and Mahmoudi: To complement Axster and Danewid’s preceding discussion of the fusion of two widely known control mechanisms—namely, policing and migration control—and the ways in which they target marginalized and racialized populations, we would like to extend this analysis through a focus on “new,” neoliberal forms of e-carceration. We argue that these practices build on the racialized dispossession and commodification documented above, while foreclosing possibilities of resistance through technological identification, surveillance, and containment. Michelle Alexander (2018) has been at the forefront of addressing this colonial continuity, writing that “digital prisons are to mass incarceration what Jim Crow was to slavery.” Ruha Benjamin (2019, 34) describes the dominant logics of

technology production in its entirety as the “New Jim Code,” a paradigm through which racial discrimination, in particular, is disaggregated and woven more deeply into “the sociotechnical infrastructure of everyday life.” As exemplified by the proliferation of ankle monitors and other forms of digital identification deployed in the entangled systems of migration enforcement and criminal justice, this technology production and deployment derives from anti-Blackness and aims to control mobilities. [Carolina Sanchez-Boe \(2019\)](#) documented the common scars that second-hand ankle shackles leave on their wearers and connected these embodied marks to earlier racialized forms of manacling unwanted mobility. In this closing intervention, we explore the connections between neoliberalism, racial capitalism, and control in the expanding use of “e-carceral” technologies and penal practices. E-carceration here refers to the deployment of information communication technologies, surveillance tools, and biometric identification whose primary functions are to categorize and control people, manage their movement, offer “alternatives” to incarceration, and generate risk assessments based on a variety of individualized and group-membership indicators ([Schenwar and Law 2020](#)). What we want to highlight is how these forms of e-carceration further fortify the technological frontiers of neoliberal governance transnationally and domestically, fueling global dynamics of social closure, or “e-gentrification” within broader logics of categorization and containment ([Alexander 2018](#); [Kilgore, Sanders, and Hayes 2018](#), 13). In other words, e-carceral technologies function to control and curb full social participation in the archipelagic walled spaces of the world.

The production and deployment of these technologies is intimately related to the individualized governance techniques of neoliberalism, such as punitive risk assessments, workfare regimes, and dispossession through indebtedness. They have responded to, and reinforced, an expanded framework of risk assessment in conjunction with a larger shift toward risk management and penalty ([Phelps 2018](#); [Taylor and Meissner 2020](#)). These technological shifts in racial capitalism, in response to the demands of neoliberalism, are applied in migration control, criminal justice procedures, lending practices, welfare determinations, and other areas in society, and serve to differentiate between the “deserving” and “undeserving”—moral assessments that, [Willen \(2011, 814\)](#) clarifies, are *always* relational and often conditional. Operating through algorithmic forms, these risk assessments are ultimately premised on a form of pre-emptive knowing of the “criminal” non- or failed citizen by “their behavioral patterns,” yet they do not aim “to understand the causes of their behavior” ([Mehozay and Fisher 2019](#), 536). For example, in 2009, the mechanism that determines eligibility for Indiana state’s welfare program was automated, outsourcing judgment and discretion away “from frontline social servants ... to engineers and private contractors [thus] supercharg[ing] discrimination” ([Eubanks 2018](#)). Needless to say, the system’s outcomes were devastating; beyond barring poor families from access to welfare on the basis of flawed and biased algorithmic decision making—or what [Joy Buolamwini \(2018\)](#) calls “the coded gaze”—it was also directly responsible for the removal of children based on computational risk calculations that determined them as falsely neglected. In migration control, the development of these technologies has given rise to industries in “pre-emptive mobility governance” to keep “unwanted travellers as far away from the border as possible” ([Broeders and Hampshire 2013](#); [Taylor and Meissner 2020](#)).

These developments are inextricably tied to Harsha Walia’s conception of “border imperialism,” bringing history back to the coloniality of power that roots how mobilities are governed today ([Walia 2013](#)). Border imperialism draws attention to the multiplicity of the “modes and networks of governance,” which determine the many ways in which bodies are controlled within and without the nation-state “and in conjunction with the dictates of global empire and transnational capitalism” ([Walia 2013](#), 14). While borders are absolutely about the physical demarcation of space, Walia suggests that border imperialism also includes

the “conceptual borders that keep us separated from one another” (Walia 2013, 10). Thinking with e-carceration, the body comes to be understood as a border that can be transgressed and fortified through invasive technology-driven interventions, particularly those based on algorithmic hashing encryption technologies such as blockchain, which, in combining biometric capture and distributed verification, produce potentially immutable forms of racialized containment (Stenum 2017).

E-carceration is fast becoming the most widespread form of global carcerality, where penal barriers to access to social rights can be maintained without the cumbersome costs of facilities, staffing, or duties of care (Kilgore 2013, 124; Baker 2019). These forms of datafication and their corresponding force of computation have been recently described in international political sociology as *algorithmic violence* (Bellanova et al. 2021). In inverting traditional carceral logics of counting and control, such systems paradoxically rely on counting and *discounting* those excluded from social rights in a distributed fashion, where ineligibility is confirmed digitally (Mbembe 2019, 10). Once labeled as such, the surveilled are contained in circular motion: temporary statuses, gig-contract work, and always recursive channeling into criminalization and illegality (Tazzioli 2019). This approach of selective non-recognition illustrates the mutually co-constitutive logics of organized abandonment and organized violence within contemporary neoliberalism (Gilmore 2020).

Axster and Danewid: Goldstein and Mahmoudi point to what, on appearance, is a relatively new phenomenon: namely the use of digital technologies in contemporary forms of surveillance and policing, and the way in which they turn the body into the border. Shoshana Zuboff (2019) has famously referred to the historical moment within which the datafication of human life becomes an industry in its own right as “surveillance capitalism”—a system based on capturing behavioral data and using it for commercial purposes. According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalism emerged in the early 2000s, with Google as the main driving force closely followed by other technological giants and smaller internet firms. Surveillance capitalism, Zuboff argues, is therefore unprecedented. In contrast, scholarship on colonialism, slavery, and plantation capitalism enables us to understand how racial surveillance capitalism has existed since the grid cities of sixteenth-century Spanish Mexico (Mirzoeff 2020). In short, and as Simone Browne (2015, 10) has shown, “surveillance is nothing new to black folks.” Here we build on these insights to argue that surveillance in the service of racial capitalism has historically aided three interconnected goals: (1) the control of movement of certain—predominantly racialized—bodies through means of identification; (2) the control of labor to increase productivity and output; and (3) the generation of knowledge about the colony and its native inhabitants in order to “maintain” the colonies and protectorates (Sa’di 2012).

Identification documents and practices can, like so many other surveillance technologies, be traced back to the Middle Passage (McKittrick 2013; Browne 2015). African captives were typically branded with numbers and letters, in order that particular ships could identify them as their property. Upon arrival in the Americas, the movement of captives was controlled through an intricate set of surveillance practices, including slave passes, slave patrols, and wanted posters for runaway slaves (Parenti 2003). Similar strategies of using wanted posters and passes were put in place to control the movement of indentured white laborers from England and Ireland. Other surveillance tools based on identification also emerged out of colonial practices. Fingerprinting, for example, was developed in India because colonial officials could not tell people apart (Mirzoeff 2020). In Algeria, the French dominated the colonized population by issuing internal passports, creating internal limits on movement for certain groups, and establishing camps for landless peasants (Sa’di 2012, 154). In South Africa, meanwhile, the movement of the Black population was controlled through the “pass laws”: an internal passport system

designed to confine Black South Africans into Bantustans and ensure a steady supply of super-exploitable labor (Savage 1986).⁶

On the plantation itself, two forms of surveillance emerged—both with the underlying aim of increasing productivity and output. One was in the form of daily note-taking by plantation and slave owners. “The surveillance infrastructure of colonial America began here, with the simple accounts of the slave master” (Parenti 2003, 15). Second, Edward E. Baptist (2016) has shown how a combination of surveillance, accounting, and violence was used to make slave labor in the cotton fields more “efficient.” Each enslaved person had to fill an individual daily quota that was incrementally increased over time. Those who did not meet their quota were punished through whipping or other brutal means. Baptist uses these examples to make two central arguments: first, that torture and surveillance are essential elements of the history of (racial) capitalism and, second, that similar logics of quotas and surveillance still reverberate in today’s labor management systems.

Finally, surveillance was also essential to the management of the colonies. It occurred through already discussed practices like fingerprinting and the passport, but also through taxation and accountancy. Ahmad H. Sa’di (2012) explains that Bentham’s panopticon was first built in India rather than in Europe and that photographs were used after colonial rebellions, in 1857 in India and in 1865 in Jamaica, to better identify the local population and identify “racial types.” To control different Indian communities deemed criminal and vagrant, the British instituted a system of registration where members of particular tribes were not allowed to sleep away from their villages without prior permission (Major 1999).

In sum, when thinking about so-called surveillance capitalism today, it is essential to recognize that the logics that underpin these technologies are not new, but were developed and tested in the management of racialized minorities during the colonial era with a similar end goal, namely to control, order, and undermine the poor, colonized, enslaved, and indentured; to create a vulnerable and super-exploitable workforce; and to increase efficiency in production and foster accumulation. Consequently, while the (digital) technologies used for surveillance might have changed, the logics underpinning them have not.

Goldstein and Mahmoudi: Our collective excavations with Axster and Danewid highlight how today’s biometric technologies inscribe colonial logics of quotas and surveillance into racialized identities and social mobilities. Yes, “surveillance capitalism” is a conceptually significant intervention; nevertheless, the four of us agree on the need to situate it within a longer history of colonial continuity, specifically where and how e-carceral structures, tactics, and technologies meet the criminalization of both social and transnational mobility. A race–crime nexus (Hall et al. 1978) is increasingly reimporting and adopting a crime–development nexus (Schlarek Mulinari 2017), where race is displaced via unknowing for the extraction of profit, and the expulsion of undesired precarious populations. This connection is underscored by the burgeoning industry in carceral-technological services, whose business model is based on identifying and commodifying stigmatized bodies, well at home among the more infamous historical forms of racial capital and colonial financial speculation of, for example, the international trade in slave-backed bonds (Baptist 2016; Kilgore, Sanders, and Hayes 2018; Baker 2019). At the core of this marking is the use of penal technologies to tag and extract quantifiable data from bodies, which

⁶The South African pass system was in part modeled on the Canadian Indigenous pass and reserve system—and thus constitutes another example of the imperial circulation of racial technologies of governance, as discussed earlier. Bélanger and Yoon (2018, 687) have documented how “native policy on both sides of the Atlantic was part of a sustained conversation facilitated by corporate philanthropic interests and bilateral economic relations, especially between settler economies.” This technical transfer was enabled by the knowledge-dissemination practices of the British imperial blue books and then later through the Carnegie Corporation’s Visitors Grants program within its Dominions and Colonies Fund and direct diplomatic contacts between the Canadian and Union of South Africa and subsequent Republic governments.

has created a market in monitoring, measuring, assessing, tracking, and containing these “risky bodies.” Energized by the recent refugee “crisis” and exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic, technology giants have been participating in a race to the bottom on surveillance, and biometric and digital identification systems. The allure for big tech consortiums like IBM-Salesforce’s digital health pass, the World Economic Forum–Amazon Common Trust/Pass, Gates’ Vaccine Initiative–Mastercard’s Trust Stamp (formerly COVI-PASS), and the World Bank ID4D (Identification for Development) is to create common, mutually intelligible, integrated digital identities for political, financial, health, and civil rights access and verification, under conditions less constrained by privacy and data protection. However, considering the structural constraints in jurisdictions targeted for the imposition of ID systems, for example, large informal sectors, digital regulatory capture, and reduced digital access, the risks of exacerbating pre-existing exclusion and marginalization while diminishing privacy are near assured. One such initiative, the West Africa Unique Identification for Regional Integration and Inclusion program for ECOWAS within the broader World Bank ID4D initiative, illustrates these risks. Considering examples of botched rollouts and low uptake in earlier digital identification initiatives in Chad ([Debos 2018](#)), or across the East African Community member states ([Jacobsen 2020](#)), and inequalities both within and across the participating states, a cautious skepticism is warranted. The use of such technologies to encode identities through extraction of biometric data forecloses possibilities of evasion, subversion, and refusal of racialized systems of control, and is rife with opportunities for abuse amid this “technosolutionism” ([Nwanta 2020](#)). Privatized, immutable digital marks in the absence of oversight that encode marginality, such as these, recast those marked as digital *others*. They weave into the fabric of mobility management, racialized Silicon Valley logics that frame technology as a solution to global inequalities and where data, once harvested, must be further “integrated and interoperable,” euphemistically building digital infrastructures that maintain global inequality under the guise of combatting it.

Axster and Danewid: The above discussion leaves us with an understanding of the symbiotic relationship between technology and racial capitalism. As [Ruha Benjamin \(2019, 5\)](#) explains, “antiblack racism, in this context, is not only a by-product, but a precondition for the fabrication of such technologies.” Identification technologies not only operate as sorting mechanisms, but also actively *produce* differences. They “fix” certain racial identities in place based on the construction of phenotypical differences and lead to what [Browne \(2009\)](#) calls “digital epidermalization.” Racialized differences and logics of categorization form the basis of these technologies and are reproduced through them; in essence, surveillance technologies are both racialized *and* racializing. This again demonstrates that we cannot restrict our analysis of these coercive methods to the neoliberal present. Rather than a recent or new tool to discipline and manage surplus populations, surveillance technology has historically been central to racial capitalism.

Conclusion

It is often argued that the last forty years have entailed a shift from the “soft bosom” of the welfare state to the “penal fist” of neoliberalism. In this collective discussion, we have shown that, although practices of policing, incarceration, bordering, and surveillance have undoubtedly intensified and accelerated in the neoliberal era, they are not new but rather continuations of the processes that have been historically central to racialized forms of extraction, expropriation, and exploitation. Not only has the “soft bosom” of the welfare state only ever been a reality for certain privileged groups ([Connell and Dados 2014](#); [Bassel and Emejulu 2017](#)), but equally the “penal fist” attributed to neoliberalism has been a constant element of racial and colonial capitalism, used to control marginalized populations throughout the

world. As Nathan Connolly (2019, 86) notes, “What we are experiencing today may simply be the black side of liberalism writ large ... Whatever it is, there is nothing ‘neo’ about it.”

How to explain, then, the disjuncture in contemporary scholarship’s periodization and focus? As a collective, we contend that a toxic triad of disciplinary compartmentalization, methodological nationalism, and reactionary structures of unknowing together contributes to obscuring a relational and contextual analysis of distributed forms of organized violence, (in)security, and incarceration. From this perspective, overcoming the violence of neoliberalism requires more than nostalgic and reactionary dreams of returning to the “golden age” of the Keynesian welfare state. As organizers continue to remind us—from Black Lives Matter to Windrush, #EndSARS to Assa Traoré, #NoDAPL, #NoTechforICE, and #ShutDownKKR, to the Fallist movements in South Africa and elsewhere—what is needed is abolition: not just of the carceral archipelago, but of racial capitalism writ large.

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