

# “From inside a cell, the night sky isn’t a measure”: Carceral Poetics and Disposable Bodies

SURG | Arts, Humanities, and Performance (AHP) | Tags: Literary/Compositional Analysis, Theory

*This cover page is meant to focus your reading of the sample proposal, summarizing important aspects of proposal writing that the author did well or could have improved. **Review the following sections before reading the sample.** The proposal is also annotated throughout to highlight key elements of the proposal’s structure and content.*



Proposal Strengths	Areas for Improvement
The gap in knowledge and justification for the research aims are clearly stated.	The first paragraph should be a big picture overview of the rest of the proposal. While this proposal does summarize the project/approach within the first paragraph, the use of citations makes it look like a part of the background.
The gap in knowledge and research questions are situated in a scholarly literature review appropriate to the particular field.	Sharper hypotheses would be helpful in order to connect all the elements mentioned in their proposal and justify the logic flow of the literature review and data collection.
Student’s plan for analysis is well thought out, and they go into detail about how the different stages of their research will inform one another.	
While perhaps the question could be more specific or better located at the end of the background section, the overall proposal is strengthened by the inclusion of an explicit research question.	



Other Key Features to Take Note Of

“Relational values change in relation to market sentiments // This is the danger of having too much access to illegal bodies // Let’s pretend the illegal bodies are bankers // Let’s stick all the bankers in cages,” writes Daniel Borzutzky in his poem *Managed Diversity* (2018), wherein he expounds upon the effects of border militarization, the prison industry, and capitalism [1]. In *Finding and Defining the Carceral State* (2019), Dan Berger writes: “identifying the object of inquiry as the ‘carceral state’ rather than, as some in criminology have done, ‘the penal state’ suggests a broader phalanx of institutions than just the prison” [2]. Berger among many other prominent abolitionist writers like Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Miriam Kaba have attempted to decipher, critique, and analyze the pervasiveness of the carceral state; that is, the agglomeration of institutions and individuals that uphold imprisonment and use punishment as the grounding framework for which to solve societal problems. While most work focuses on prisons, other institutions such as border detention centers, schools, juvenile correctional facilities, among others, are also sites of the carceral state. Some aspects and sites of the carceral state are rather abstract and theoretical, expanding beyond the scope of the criminal legal system; however, using poetry as an archive is useful in that it makes these concepts tangible and explicit. As such, one can see the literary expressions of the carceral state. It is through the direct encounter between reader and the poem’s subject, facilitated by Borzutzky’s use of apostrophe, where the reader can reattach the connections between the different sites of the carceral state.

Broadly, I ask, what does a direct encounter in poetry reveal about the nature of the carceral state? In my project, I grapple with this question by analyzing three literary texts, two of which are written by previously incarcerated people: *Felon: Poems* (2019) by Reginald Dwayne Betts, *Lake Michigan* (2018) by Daniel Borzutzky, and *Singing at the Gates: Selected Poems* by Jimmy Baca (2014).

Recent scholarship has expanded the definition of “the carceral state” beyond prisons. As author Elizabeth Hinton points out in an interview regarding her book *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime* (2016), the term is heavily influenced and/or synonymous with Michel Foucault’s term, “the carceral archipelago,” as articulated in the foundational text *Discipline and Punish* (1975) [3]. For Foucault, the archipelago represents the seemingly disparate networks of institutions, knowledge systems, individuals, and mechanisms that make up the foundations of the prison. For example, Hinton’s book attempts to analyze how social programs from the Kennedy administration to the present day “impose various forms of supervision and surveillance” [4]. While work surrounding the carceral state and carceral logics are largely grounded in a rich body of African American studies scholarship, the definition of the carceral has increasingly included detention centers at the border. Indeed, in their introduction to *Constructing the Carceral State* (2015), Hernández et al. write, “Immigrant detention—that is, the process of forcibly confining immigrants during deportation proceedings—is now the largest system of human caging operated by the U.S. government” [5]. As such, this project makes two key interventions. First, this project’s comparative intervention expands the comprehension of the carceral state beyond continental U.S. boundaries in order to encompass neoliberal economics and geopolitics. For example, it can show how immigration is part of the carceral state and how incarceration and border detention contribute to the larger neo-imperial U.S. economic project. Without collapsing key ideas across these fields and differences between these populations, the project seeks to further elucidate the interconnectedness of the violence of the carceral state upon racialized peoples, and it recognizes how the carceral state assumes its power by caging, containing, and policing

Despite the focus of the project being clear in the first paragraph, the citations present make it appear to be more of a literature review.

Identifies gap in knowledge.

Includes an explicit research question.

Background draws on work from other relevant fields with clear logic flow.

Justifies why this project is important and situates this importance in relevant literature.

Justifies the use of poetry as the medium of choice.



the “excess” of racialized bodies. Second, using poetry as an archive is useful for countenancing the more abstract and theoretical dimensions of the carceral state, making them visceral. Literary studies of incarceration literature has mostly focused on fiction and memoirs, but this detracts from other forms of writing, such as poems or epistolaries, that are more easily produced by incarcerated individuals.

The proposed research process has various stages that build upon each other. In the first stage, I will be gathering and reading texts directly focused on the carceral state, mass incarceration, border detention, and the prison industrial complex (see Appendix A). These readings have been carefully selected with the input of my adviser. I have read excerpts of some of the theoretical books in the Appendix, but I have not read them in their entirety. In re-reading certain selections, I will be more actively looking for how each author grounds their analysis of the carceral state. That is, how do they support their claims? What parts of these theories can I extrapolate from when reading my poetry collections? For each reading, I will focus on the authors’ arguments, the support or analysis that their work is grounded in, and most importantly, the key interpretations of *how* and *why* the carceral state functions as it does. This will ultimately provide me with the foundational criticism from which I can begin to do my literary analysis of my three chosen poetry collections. The second stage will involve my direct examination of these collections. In this stage I will be reading for *how* direct encounter shows up in the collections. Do the three authors utilize or approach direct encounter in different or similar ways? I also plan to read for their use of other rhetorical or literary choices when elaborating on the carceral state. Another important part of my reading will involve bridging these poetry collections with my theoretical texts. I will be looking for ways that the poets chose to represent the carceral state, and how that might be different or similar to the ways that scholars have approached this topic. The end goal is to have enough material, analysis, notes, and understanding of these concepts to where I can begin drafting the literature review portion of my senior honors thesis project in English.

I believe I am qualified to execute this project because I have taken a variety of courses in pertinent academic fields as well as classes that were interdisciplinary in nature. In my first year, I took an English seminar titled “Race and Representation” that surveyed contemporary Ethnic American literary texts with a grounding in seminal theoretical texts that I will be exploring, such as Foucault’s concept of the panopticon and Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Additionally, I have taken other courses in specific ethnic studies departments, such as African American Studies, Latinx Studies, and Asian American Studies. In “Black Insecurity,” I learned about imprisonment as a key locus of Black insecurity. The analysis that I did in this class, particularly my essay on prison abolition as it exists in Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* demonstrates my analytical skills as well as my ability to integrate theories and critiques into my close reading practice — something that will be crucial for this project. Additionally, I have directly tutored incarcerated students through my job at The Writing Place and have done legal work at previous internships for incarcerated individuals. This project will build upon this foundational knowledge and further show the academic community the pertinent need for literary analysis that is reflective of political, lived realities, as well as the need for more interdisciplinary approaches to literary research and analysis. Not only will this project lay the groundwork for my senior thesis on this same topic come fall quarter of 2021, but it will contribute to the growing field of abolitionist scholarship and will help me to develop an abolitionist legal praxis for my future law career that does not reify the violence of the carceral system.

Explains how the first stage of their research will inform the second stage.



Student has a plan of analysis and lays out specific details.



Explicitly states the output of the research: a senior thesis



The student could have benefited by including sharper hypotheses about the connections between prison, detention centers, and poetry.



Researcher lists clear preparation to undertake this project.



## Endnotes

- [1] Borzutzky, D. (2018, November 14). *Managed Diversity*. Academy of American Poets. <https://poets.org/poem/managed-diversity>
- [2] Berger, D. (2019). Finding and Defining the Carceral State. *Reviews in American History* 47(2), 279-285.
- [3] Shenk, T. (2016, August 30). *Booked: The Origins of the Carceral State*.
- [4] Ibid.,
- [5] Hernández, K.L., Muhammad, K., & Thompson, H. (2015). Introduction: Constructing the Carceral State. *The Journal of American History*, 102, 18-24

## Appendix A - Selected Bibliography

1. Alexander, M. (2020b). *The New Jim Crow (Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness - 10th Anniversary Edition)* (1st ed.). NEW PRESS.
2. Baca, J. S. (2015). *Singing at the Gates: Selected Poems* (Reprint ed.). Grove Press.
3. Berger, D. (2019). Finding and Defining the Carceral State. *Reviews in American History* 47(2), 279-285.
4. Betts, R. D. (2019). *Felon: Poems* (1st ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
5. Borzutzky, D. (2018). *Lake Michigan (Pitt Poetry Series)* (1st ed.). University of Pittsburgh Press.
6. Chase, R. T. (2019). *Caging Borders and Carceral States: Incarcerations, Immigration Detentions, and Resistance (Justice, Power, and Politics)* (Illustrated ed.). University of North Carolina Press.
7. Davis, A. Y. (2003). *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Seven Stories Press.
8. Fleetwood, N. R. (2020). *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. United States: Harvard University Press.
9. Foucault, M., & Sheridan, A. (1995). *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books.
10. Gilmore, R. W. (2007). *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. United States: University of California Press.
11. Hernández, K.L., Muhammad, K., & Thompson, H. (2015). Introduction: Constructing the Carceral State. *The Journal of American History*, 102, 18-24
12. Kaba, M. (2021). *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. Haymarket Books.
13. Paik, A. N. (2020). *Bans, Walls, Raids, Sanctuary (American Studies Now: Critical Histories of the Present) (Volume 12)* (First ed.). University of California Press.
14. Soto, C. (2017, September). *Poetry in the Age of Mass Incarceration: Challenging the dichotomy of innocence versus criminality*. Poetry Foundation.
15. Wacquant, L. (2001). Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh. *Punishment & Society*, 3(1), 95–133.
16. Wang, J. (2018). *Carceral Capitalism*. United States: MIT Press.