



# Theorizing Embodied Carcerality

## A Black Feminist Sociology of Punishment



### Introduction

Friedman and Hitchens describe embodied carcerality as a "continuous array of interactions representing one's physical attributes as synonymous with inherent danger" which specifically targets Black women (p. 267). Embodied carcerality also provides a framework for understanding the imprisonment of community members as it places one in proximity to imprisonment and vicariously exposes community members to racial trauma and violence (p. 268). To ground embodied carcerality, they formulate a new controlling image "The Criminal" as the basic deviancy found in Patricia Hill Collins' controlling image framework. By using a controlling image, they explain how embodied carcerality is linked to dominant imaginations of Black women.

The Criminal image establishes Black women's "innate deviance as a social fact" (p. 269). Criminality underscores Collin's typology of controlling images. The criminal image justifies viewing Black women's lives and actions as perpetually dangerous, disorderly, and necessitating control from dominant forces. Embodied carcerality follows the blueprint of the criminal as designed by a dominant gaze that typifies Black women as Collins' describes in her controlling images of the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen, and the Jezebel.

The **mammy** image adheres to white ideals of subservience while under close supervision by white families to ensure she doesn't "give in" to her (criminal) nature.

The **matriarch's** proximity to the criminal is "her perceived deviation from patriarchal norms" which render her a "seemingly unfit, neglectful" mother (p.271).

The **welfare mother/queen** is seen as "a leech who takes from the state but does not contribute and [is] thus a thief..." (p. 272).

The **Jezebel** challenges the patriarchal family and the ownership of women. As such, her use of her body is stigmatized and oversexualized.

### Conclusion



Friedman and Hitchens argue that social control is enacted based on understandings of controlling images -- deviance from or adherence to an image can exemplify embodied carcerality. There are more controlling images that claim to represent Black women's bodies, but the phenomena that stigmatizes these images is centralized upon ideas of Black women as dangerous criminals. Black feminism recognizes the oppressive and carceral systems that perpetuate harmful images of Black women. By investigating such systems and the communal and intergenerational trauma such system produce, we can facilitate dialogue and action to confront and dismantle the carceral system.

#### Citation: