

# Review of “Carceral Apartheid: How Lies and White Supremacists Run Our Prisons”

By Brittany Friedman

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**Reviewer:** Rahim Kurwa, *University of Illinois Chicago*

Edward Said (1994) once described how intellectuals end up censoring themselves. Fear of repression and desire for professional status, he warned, can induce scholars to write and teach in such a way that tells no lies but still manages not to convey the truth.

It is for this reason that Brittany Friedman’s “truth telling as method” is so vital. The author asks, What is the truth about the relationship between carcerality (systems of policing and punishment) and apartheid (racial separation and domination)? In contrast to scholars who might study these phenomena separately, Friedman carceral apartheid connotes the role of policing and punishment in managing, dividing, and decimating targeted racialized groups. For Friedman, this is how the state governs.

The book offers carceral apartheid as a framework for interpreting and analyzing broader processes of racial domination in the United States and around the globe, but it focuses its case study on prisons in the United States, and in particular, the trajectory of the Black Guerilla Family as it grew within California prisons after the murder of W.L. Nolen, Cleveland Edwards, and Alvin Miller, in Soledad State Prison in 1970. The executions were dismissed as justifiable by officials, and galvanized membership in the organization, which was seen as the best chance to survive imprisonment. What followed was George Jackson’s fatal escape attempt, and the increased repression of the organization’s members in response.

Friedman marshals an impressive range of sources for the work, from interviews to archival records, memoirs, and legal documents. Members of BGF describe experiences in prison and their motivations for joining the organization. Records of the prison doctor who experimented upon thousands of prisoners reveal the workings of San Quentin’s “adjustment centers,” while an interview with a former member of the Aryan Brotherhood traces its role in asserting carceral apartheid. The book shows how the use of indeterminate isolation, prison torture, procedural and legal stonewalling, violence, and more were used to hold back the freedom dreams of Black prisoners. A reader might be left wanting even more from the author’s data, but the book also pairs with work across the country, like Burton’s (2023) *Tip of the Spear*, that collectively drives a new critical history of prisons and resistance.

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Like the prisoners and activists who developed the slogan “From Palestine to Pelican Bay” to capture the international solidarity they felt during simultaneous hunger strikes in those places in 2013, Friedman describes carceral apartheid as a way of understanding processes not just within the United States, but around the world. Crucially, the author notes the role of imprisonment in sustaining apartheid in South Africa, and points to Palestine as a site of ongoing carceral apartheid. While the book does not set out to fully trace the international dimension of its framework, it’s an idea that readers can apply on their own. Scholars have traced the centrality of incarceration to denying Palestinian freedom, and in the same turn, the strategies of prisoners to resist their conditions (Ben-Natan, Boulus, and Le Penne 2024; Faraj 2024). These practices reverberate globally, as scholars of hunger strikes have shown (Shah 2022). In this sense, *Carceral Apartheid* advances critical thinking about the policing of the global and domestic color line.

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