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Abstract

This paper engages abolition feminist storytelling as a methodology for feminist criminologists to identify, reflect on, grapple with, and ultimately confront carceral logics in the stories we (re)tell about violence and punishment. Drawing on over a decade's worth of research, advocacy, and community organizing, we identify three carceral tensions that emerged within our own storytelling: the victim-offender binary, researcher complicity, and a survivor standpoint. Building on prior black feminist scholarship, we then illustrate how an abolition feminist approach to storytelling allows us to confront these tensions through relationality, an ethic of love, accountability, vulnerability, and commitment to justice.

Keywords

abolition feminism, violence, research methodology

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Introduction

Stories offer a lens through which researchers can interpret lived realities of violence and punishment (Presser & Sandberg, 2019). However, neither the stories we hear nor the stories we subsequently (re)tell are neutral, as stories can perpetuate harm or spur social change (Maruna & Liem, 2020; Presser et al., 2025). Feminist criminological storytelling has been generative and powerful in its attentive foregrounding of women's and girls' narratives as victims, criminalized survivors, and incarcerated people. We join emerging feminist criminological research that further compels us to confront carceral logics, "or the control and punishment mindset that suggests criminalization is the best paradigm to organize human life and to solve social problems" (Coyle & Nagel, 2022, p. xxi), in the stories we (re)tell (Derr et al., 2025; Ferguson, 2025). Carceral logics constrain liberatory storytelling by reinforcing victim hierarchies and binaries, individualizing harm, centering punishment, and encouraging researcher emotional distance (Heiner & Tyson, 2017; Yap, 2025). These preexisting narrative frames often dismiss, neglect, or altogether silence lived experiences that do not reflect dominant conceptualizations of violence and punishment (Malone Gonzalez, 2025; Presser & Sandberg, 2019; Threadcraft, 2025).

Thus, expanding upon feminist criminological calls to advance intersectional and social justice research (Belknap, 2015; Chesney-Lind & Morash, 2013; Potter, 2013), we engage with abolition feminist storytelling as a methodology, or orientation towards academic research, for feminist criminologists (and social scientists) to identify, reflect on, grapple with, and ultimately confront carceral tensions in the stories we (re) tell about violence and punishment. Rather than normalizing the carceral "logics, ideologies, practices and structures that invest in tangible and sometimes intangible ways in punitive orientations" (Tapia, 2018), abolition feminism proposes transforming the social conditions that facilitate interpersonal violence, while dismantling the carceral systems that reproduce structural violence (Davis et al., 2022). As black feminist criminologists who have collectively spent over a decade documenting and working to end the impacts of violence and punishment on our communities, we engage an abolition feminist praxis by illustrating how storytelling allows us to grapple with the both/and across multiple dimensions by bridging abolition and feminism in the research process; holding structural and interpersonal violence in the analysis; and situating ourselves as researchers within our scholarship and broader social justice projects, both as actors who are complicit in the reproduction of carceral logics and as people who have experienced harm (Guest & Seoighe, 2022; Hutchinson, 2024).

In the remainder of the paper, we first contextualize the history of abolition feminist praxis within research and its implications for researcher storytelling. Subsequently, we discuss how our positions as outsiders-within (Collins, 1989; Reyes, 2022) provide a catalyst for abolition feminist storytelling. Then, drawing from our collective fieldwork, advocacy, and community organizing, we tell pieces of our stories by offering individual reflections on abolition feminist tensions raised in our research. First, Brittany, situating her contribution in her abolition feminist community organizing and scholarship, outlines five emerging principles that guided us in identifying,

reflecting on, grappling with, and confronting carceral logics with and through our storytelling: (1) relationality, (2) ethic of love, (3) accountability, (4) vulnerability, and (5) commitment to justice. While these principles are informed by existing abolition feminist praxis (Benjamin, 2022; Davis et al., 2022; Ferguson, 2025), we expand upon this tradition by applying them to a criminological research context.

Next, Amber's analysis of life history interviews with formerly incarcerated survivors—some of whom had committed acts of violence—highlights the importance of disrupting the victim-offender binary that informs our notions of who is deserving of protection. Faith's ethnographic reflections as a former bail bonds intern then grapples with the nuance of state agent and researcher complicity in (re)producing institutional violence against the disproportionately women of color compelled to intervene on behalf of defendants, who were predominantly men. Lastly, Shannon offers a conceptualization of a survivor's standpoint, grappling with what it means to be a survivor of violence while researching black women's experiences of violence and policing. Different principles of our grappling with abolition feminist storytelling as methodology appear throughout our individual stories; principles may appear in some sections and not others, but all were valuable. We conclude our paper outlining the stakes of not confronting carceral logics within our storytelling practices.

Abolition Feminism & Storytelling

Since the 1970s, many women of color and queer feminist scholar-activists have critiqued feminist anti-violence alignment with “tough-on-crime” solutions (Goodmark, 2023). They argued that the anti-violence movement's gradual erasure of grassroots activism and increased reliance on punishment exacerbated carceral state violence through the revictimization of survivors, survivor criminalization, and mass incarceration of predominantly racialized communities (Kim, 2020; Whalley & Hackett, 2017). This consequent “carceral feminism,” or the “reliance on the carceral system of police, prosecutors, courts, parole, probation, jails, and prisons for the protection of women” (Kim, 2020, p. 310), continues to inform research design, methodology, and analyses. Feminist scholar-activists consequently offered abolition feminism, or “anti-carceral feminism,” as an intersectional, inclusive, and justice-centered alternative to violence intervention (Ferguson, 2025; Hutchinson, 2024; Palmer, 2025).

Davis and collaborators (2022) define abolition feminism as “a praxis—a politically informed practice—that demands intentional movement and insightful responses to the violence of systemic oppression” (pp. 2–3). On the ground, abolition feminist praxis involves the decarceration, decriminalization, delegitimization, and defunding of carceral systems (Guest & Seoighe, 2022; Pernell, 2021; Stahly-Butts & Akbar, 2022). While reforms such as mandatory arrests, no-drop prosecution, and the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) were initially touted as feminist achievements, abolition feminist scholars have shown how these reforms expand the carceral apparatus rather than promote women's safety and long-term healing (Goodmark, 2023; Kim, 2020). Importantly, abolition feminism simultaneously engages “world-building” by

mobilizing resources communities need to be safe from both interpersonal and carceral state violence (Battle & Powell, 2024; Benjamin, 2022; Ferguson, 2025; Malone Gonzalez, 2025). For this reason, abolition feminism recognizes the interconnectedness between abolitionist *and* feminist anti-violence movements (Richie et al., 2021). Rather than position these movements as inherently opposed, Davis and collaborators (2022) highlight their mutual constitution: “abolitionist theories and practices are most compelling when they are also feminist, and conversely, a feminism that is also abolitionist is the most inclusive and persuasive version of feminism” (p. 1). Simply put, when abolitionist scholarship remains silent on issues of gendered violence, and feminist research fails to acknowledge interlocking structures of oppression within punitive institutions, carceral fictions normalize punishment as *the* solution to violence (Davis et al., 2022). Thus, “feminist goals are not possible without abolition” (Davis et al., 2022, p. 47).

We argue that abolition feminist praxis echoes calls within feminist criminology to produce social change and justice (Belknap, 2015; Chesney-Lind & Morash, 2013; Potter, 2013). Its focus on examining systemic oppression through an intersectional lens compels researchers to confront carceral assumptions about punishment as effective violence intervention for communities harmed by racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of discrimination (Goodmark, 2023; Richie et al., 2021). Abolition feminist research thus explores people’s realities of intimate and communal violence, while also examining formal criminal legal agencies as sites of ongoing structural violence. By placing this matrix of physical and sexual violence within the home, community, and state institutions, abolition feminist research scholarship cultivates “world-building,” or the ways in which communities envision and create alternative resources for safety (Battle & Powell, 2024; Benjamin, 2022; Malone Gonzalez, 2025; Palmer, 2025; Richie, 2012).

Situating carceral feminism in conversation with narrative criminology allows researchers to identify the cultural narratives that constrain liberatory storytelling practices. These cultural narratives hinder liberatory possibilities by reinforcing victim-offender binaries, restricting people’s identities to illegal acts, legitimizing harsh punishment as true justice, and proposing carceral systems as effective forms of response to gendered violence (Guest & Seoighe, 2022; Heiner & Tyson, 2017). Moreover, such stories have historically focused on the experiences of white women (or black men) while neglecting violence against black women and women of color (Threadcraft, 2021). In doing so, carceral feminist storytelling practices may forgo theorizing from an “inclusive, intersectional, and anti-racist feminist praxis” (Rajah et al., 2022, p. 549). Abolition feminist frameworks allow researchers to theorize from the silences of those voices routinely neglected and provide space for shared meaning-making (Malone Gonzalez, 2025; Threadcraft, 2025).

Still, we acknowledge that individual journeys towards both abolition and feminism are often long, fraught, and non-linear (Kim, 2020; Palmer, 2025; Pernell, 2021). Rather than constrain carceral and abolition feminisms to mutually exclusive identities, we recognize these concepts as praxis—or the ways in which social theories are translated into social action (Davis et al., 2022; Rajah et al., 2022). Rephrased, carceral

feminism is not an identity flaw or an insult. Instead, carceral feminist praxis reflects “bounded creativity” (Bell, 2017, p. 2119), where social, political, and legal worlds suppress capacity to imagine safety through non-criminal justice means. For this reason, even people who have been harmed by carceral institutions may still rely upon the promise of punitive solutions to resolve immediate threats of violence (Bell, 2016; Derr et al., 2025; Powell & Phelps, 2021). Like many researchers and the communities they study, our personal and professional positionalities have often bound our own capacities to interrogate the carceral logics that pervade orthodox criminology. Yet, by turning a critical lens onto our (earnest but still imperfect) attempts to engage in anti-carceral storytelling, we mobilize abolition feminist praxis by resisting complicity in carceral narratives that have historically undermined safety, justice, and liberation (Palmer, 2025; Rajah et al., 2022; Richie et al., 2021).

Abolition Feminist Storytelling as Methodology

Our positionality as black women criminologists who have been directly and indirectly harmed by interpersonal, community, and state violence motivates us to illuminate how marginalized communities experience, resist, and narrate violence (Collins, 2019; Sweet, 2020). Yet, as tenure-track women criminologists in academies that have long profited from the study of punishment and violence, we remain “outsiders within,” whose narratives can and will perpetuate harm if we confine our storytelling to traditional disciplinary practices that forgo a deep engagement with reflexivity (Collins, 1989). Holding this tension, we “reaffirm human subjectivity and intentionality” by centering black women’s voices, including our own, in the analysis, conceptualization, and response to violence (Collins, 1986, p. S28). In this way, we strike a “balance between the strengths of [our] sociological [and criminological] training and the offerings of [our] personal and cultural experiences” (Collins, 1986, p. S29). This tension and balance were the impetus for collective grappling with questions of violence, abolition, and praxis together as outsiders within. For, as Davis and collaborators (2022, p. 8) note, “[abolition feminism] is never a solo project.”

Introducing Abolition Feminist Storytelling as Methodology - Brittany’s Story

Getting arrested during a Summer 2020 Uprising march after just completing my first year on the tenure track should have left me concerned about the repercussions for my career (according to many in positions of power). Instead, I immersed myself even deeper in abolition feminist community, co-founding an abolitionist grassroots organization (Triad Abolition Project [TAP]) that has been doing work in solidarity with and for criminalized communities for six years. Despite admonitions to “wait to do that stuff until after tenure,” I earned tenure through a body of work, in the ivory tower *and* in the community, that reflects my values. Far too often, academic norms to remain apolitical, objective, and neutral dissuade researchers from engaging in critical work *outside* the academy, pushing scholars to act against their own interests, commitments, and values. However, those warnings, even when coming from a benevolent place, (re)

produce carceral logics that we cannot change the world (or academia, or our university, or our department, or ourselves) as we know it, that we cannot imagine creating strategies to value scholars' work to transform our communities. To me, that is the risky thing—to be so trapped by the threat of academic recognition and rewards that I could turn my back on suffering in the name of neutrality to build a career while the world burns around us.

Resisting the recommendations to prioritize my career over my commitments to liberatory struggle, TAP's work to respond to the varied needs of our community, our own capacities, and shifting political landscapes, has included a 49-day occupation of a local park demanding policy changes after the police murder of John Neville, yearly political education workshop series, and annual book drives for incarcerated people, among other actions. While TAP's contributions are fluid, several lessons cut across our freedom work. None of what we do would have been possible in isolation without many hands making the (physical, intellectual, and financial) load light. We understand, as Angela Davis articulates, "[her] own sense of freedom has expanded and become more capricious as time has passed, as [she's] been involved in various struggles and as [she] witness[es] that in the process of struggling for freedom one becomes aware ... [that] freedom can't be contained within a paradigm that is individualistic... One can not be free alone: freedom is collective" (quoted in Sloan, 2021).

Further, in grassroots community, we have held onto Audre Lorde's (1988, p. 120) reflections that, "Sometimes we are blessed with being able to choose the time and the arena and the manner of our revolution, but more usually we must do battle wherever we are standing." If I understand my/our battle as resisting and working to dismantle carceral logics, wherever they exist, then it is not enough to study the impacts of the carceral state in academic life and separately fight those impacts in community work. I/ we must have a daily praxis of abolition feminism that connects real engagement with community and organizing to rigorous and principled social science scholarship to confront the logics that underpin the carceral state—that is, to do battle wherever we are standing.

But how do carceral logics impact how we do research? This question comes from many angles, especially from scholars and departments who understand themselves as critical and find it difficult to see their work as potentially upholding forces that they cognitively understand as harmful but do not necessarily understand how to practically resist. One way that carceral logics seep into our scholarship is that students/scholars/practitioners are encouraged to improve what we already have, rather than imagining what could exist to respond to harm and violence; "bounded creativity" (Bell, 2017, p. 2119) is the rule, not the exception to the rule. Even projects presented as critical center on doing punishment in a better way (think kinder and gentler) instead of doing something other than punishment completely. This bounded creativity means that we only frame projects with certain methodologies, we only conceptualize harm and violence in traditional and limited ways, we only ask certain questions (and hear certain answers), we only interpret participants' experiences through certain lenses, we very rarely respect what grassroots organizing can teach us about how to combat harmful

systems (including those systems in academia), and we do not take seriously work that engages abolition—in this way, we can only tell bounded stories.¹

Uncompromisingly bridging my community work with my scholarship has illuminated that abolition feminism gives us a roadmap for breaking free from the confines of bounded creativity and bounded stories, to build a new world and imagine what it would take for us to all get free (Benjamin, 2022). It gives us the perspective to see beyond punishment as a response to violence. It gives us the range to grapple with the messiness of responding to interpersonal harm, while also confronting structural violence (Derr et al., 2025). It values embodied praxis that does not cut us off from being in and feeling our work, including in reflecting on the ways that we get it wrong (Petillo & Hlavka, 2022). It creates space for us to unapologetically resist carcerality, wherever we are standing. And it affirms that this work cannot be done in isolation (Davis et al., 2022).

We have tried to follow this abolition feminist roadmap since our collective came together in 2022 at Shannon's invitation. While most of us had some level of individual relationships with each other, we each recognized the value in cultivating this collective dynamic. Meeting regularly, we not only engage around our work, but also hold space as we navigate life, as scholars at various points in our careers (grad students, new Assistant Professors, close-to-tenure Assistant Professors, and new Associate Professors), but also as daughters, sisters, partners, mothers, aunties, friends, and comrades. The collective is life-giving and edifying because we are committed to knowing each other, growing alongside each other, and being accountable to each other. The bonds we continue to grow in the collective—now more than three years after our first meeting—are the cornerstones for our conceptualization of abolition feminist storytelling as methodology.

Drawing from the foundations of abolition feminism, we suggest that abolition feminist storytelling as a methodology for confronting, reflecting on, grappling with, and resisting carceral logics consists of the following five principles: (1) relationality, (2) ethic of love, (3) accountability, (4) vulnerability, and (5) commitment to justice. Examining the intellectual merit and broader value of our research requires us to engage perspectives and challenges from diverse communities in real-time, not solely through reading texts or waiting for critiques/praises of our work post-dissemination. As the stories below will illustrate, we must ask and answer difficult questions, alongside the encouragement and support, which only evolves from being in *relationship* with not only academic communities, but also those most impacted by the systems of oppression we study. This relationality requires ethical praxis, specifically a *love ethic*, which “presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well” (hooks, 2001, p. 87). Without a commitment to those principles of freedom and flourishing for everyone, especially those facing the punishment and violence that we study, what are we really doing?

Moving from an ethic of love then encourages real *accountability* in our practice of abolition feminist storytelling as methodology. When we affirm that each of us have the right to be free and to flourish—in other words, when we affirm our full humanity—then our actions must be in service of that humanity. We must reflect on how the

decisions that we make (or do not make) contribute to getting all of us, but especially those most impacted by punishment and violence, more free than we were yesterday (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022). And when we do not act accordingly, then we must expect and sit with the implicit and explicit calling in that follows for the development of relationships and ethics necessary to practice real accountability. The former three principles of abolition feminist storytelling as methodology compel a deep *vulnerability*, both within ourselves and in our communities. The sharing of stories necessary for relationality, the heart work necessary for the love ethic, and the conflicts and agreements necessary for accountability cannot exist without unmasking, radical honesty, and willingness to deeply know ourselves and each other, despite the risks.

Abolition feminist storytelling as methodology further resists Western claims of researcher neutrality. Instead, abolition feminist storytelling foregrounds that our scholarship should aim to facilitate social justice. Importantly, a *commitment to justice* does not suggest that rigor is peripheral to our research. Rather, a commitment to justice compels academics to take seriously the consequences of punishment and violence, refuse to continue to build careers on the shoulders of suffering, and find ways of “bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile” to build a more just world (Walker, 1997, p. 14). One critical strategy in upholding a commitment to justice in our scholarship is to be intentional about combatting carceral logics in the stories we (re) tell about violence. In our work, we have maintained this intention in navigating three key tensions (among others) that arose during our fieldwork: (1) disrupting the victim-offender binary, (2) nuancing complicity, and (3) excavating a survivor’s standpoint. In the sections that follow, we provide empirical examples from our own work, as outsiders within, centered on these three approaches that underscore the power of abolition feminist storytelling in combating carceral logics. Using examples from our individual projects, spanning more than 1,500 hours of observation, hundreds of interviews, thousands of pieces of data, and countless connections to people experiencing interpersonal, community, and state violence, we discuss how we grapple with the five principles of abolition feminist storytelling as methodology outlined above and provide an example of what it means to do research situated in the ethics, commitments, and praxis of this approach for the social sciences and beyond (Petillo & Hlavka, 2022).

Disrupting the Victim-Offender Binary - Amber’s Story

As national conversations about policing, prisons, and the possibilities of abolition emerged in the summer of 2020, I was deep in the throes of conducting life history interviews with formerly incarcerated survivors about the sexual violence they experienced in US juvenile and adult detention facilities. Throughout these conversations, formerly incarcerated survivors recounted ongoing sexual advances by correctional staff and confined peers, invasive strip and body cavity searches, forced public nudity, and widespread surveillance that invaded their privacy and bodily autonomy. Additionally, the vast majority of survivors had also experienced sexual violence prior to their confinement. Yet, despite having experienced sexual violence

both within and outside of carceral institutions, their stories were largely peripheral in national campaigns (e.g., MeToo) about gendered violence. For years, cultural rape myths reinforced that prison sexual violence was simply part of the punishment. And while feminist criminologists have increasingly included criminalized survivors in their analyses of gender-based violence, these survivors are often neglected in broader mainstream feminist discourses that rely on the carceral state to punish perpetrators and secure justice for survivors (Guest & Seoighe, 2022). Guided by Black and women of color feminist scholar-activists, like Beth Richie, Angela Davis, and Mariame Kaba, I sought to disrupt cultural narratives of “good” and “bad” victims. Such myths inevitably reproduce a politics of deservingness that rewards some survivors with state protection and others—the “imperfect victims” (Goodmark, 2023)—with state punishment (Sweet, 2021).

For most participants, this wasn’t a particularly difficult task. While I acknowledged the erasure of criminalized survivors within mainstream feminist discourses, I had also internalized carceral logics that emphasized social change for the “non-non-nons,” or those who commit “nonviolent, non-serious, and non-sexual offenses” (Gottschalk, 2015, p. 17). In what I viewed as a feminist ethic of love, I sought to document their lives in ways that did not reduce them to victims or survivors of carceral sexual violence. Life history interviews conducted in various settings enabled me to view them as parents, siblings, partners, caretakers, friends, community leaders, professionals, mentors, activists, and other identities that were never made known throughout our interactions. This feminist ethic of love also informed lines of questions about joy, empowerment, safety, healing, and “world-building” beyond criminal justice (Benjamin, 2022).

However, abolition feminist storytelling compels us to write beyond the “non-non-nons” by confronting our own internalized carcerality and cultivating narratives that better reflect the layered realities and complexities of violence (Yap, 2025). I experienced this core tension when interviewing formerly incarcerated survivors who had committed acts of sexual violence. Though interviewing people with formal sex offense convictions was not the intent of this project, I quickly realized that in order to understand vulnerability to carceral sexual violence, it was crucial and necessary to speak with those who were perhaps most targeted precisely because of those offenses. Truthfully, I struggled to listen to, transcribe, analyze, and even now (re)tell their stories. Sitting with my own feminist discomfort (Rajah et al., 2022), at times I felt bound between abolition and feminism—as though these two movements required an opposing set of ethics. *What would it mean to simultaneously recognize someone’s victimization and perpetration of sexual harm? Could I engage in an anticarceral feminist ethic of care while also holding space for accountability?* The victim-offender binaries that often characterize research did not neatly map onto their stories. What this binary fails to reflect is that those who experience traumatic violence may also be the ones who later (or prior) inflict it. Recognizing this duality, I sought to cultivate an interview space that resisted dehumanizing narratives and instead situated their stories in the broader frame of interpersonal, community, and structural violence.

Perhaps the most memorable of these conversations was with Nico², a Black man in his mid-30s. For nearly 2 hours, Nico recounted multiple experiences of child sexual abuse. Later in adolescence, Nico committed sexual abuse. He was subsequently adjudicated and sent to a group home and several correctional facilities, where he experienced even more sexual abuse by both staff and peers. Despite Nico's initial attempts to seek help, his pleas were largely dismissed because of the stigmatizing "sex offender" label. In fact, he was explicitly told to expect this violence given his legal status. The criminal legal system not only reduced Nico's humanity to his legal status, but consequently perpetuated sexual violence against him precisely because of that status. Telling Nico's story through an abolition feminist lens allows us to write beyond criminal justice narratives of "violent" or "non-violent" and hold multiple truths. Nico was harmed *and* had harmed others. And yet the very treatment that was supposed to rehabilitate him, simply exposed him to further carceral violence.

Truthfully, I continue to grapple with the complexity around these stories. Yet, engaging an abolition feminist storytelling praxis better reflects the realities of the people who shared their stories with me. A common misconception of abolition feminist praxis is the belief that such approaches neglect sexual violence while emphasizing the harms of structural violence. Yet, as [Davis et al. \(2022\)](#) note, our commitment to anti-violence must include violence in all its forms: interpersonal, community, and structural alike. Ultimately, disrupting this binary and creating narrative space for the duality of violence prompts researchers to forgo hierarchical ideologies of "perfect victimhood" ([Goodmark, 2023](#)).

Nuancing Complicity - Faith's Story

Directing our analytic gaze toward those complicit in structural violence can similarly lead to a reductionist trap wherein individuals serving state interests are singularly labeled as villains, and when profit is involved, seen as primarily opportunists. This is undoubtedly the case with the commercial bail agents I interviewed and shadowed throughout their daily work of scrutinizing families for bond-worthiness and then charging those that pass their surface checks a discounted price for pretrial freedom. Given that most US jurisdictions require people to pay for their release from jail, families frequently have no other option but to rely upon and become ensnared in the predatory system of commercial bail. Mine did—we were all too desperate and grateful to turn to a local agency when we lacked the full bail amount required to bond out relatives. Yet, my family also experienced economic, social, and relational harm by entering contracts with these for-profit, legal adjacent entities. Such damages, particularly the disproportionate extraction of financial resources from women within low-income families of color, contribute to the negative and stigmatized perception of bail agents, the industry's frontline workers. Moreover, it informs an abolition feminist critique of commercial bail as a "reformist reform." While commercial bail systems may seem to help families avoid the hardships associated with incarceration, in practice, it simply moves confinement "somewhere else" ([Schenwar & Law, 2021](#)), reinforcing carceral ties within families, and especially among women relatives.

I carried that familial harm into my project on the inner workings of commercial bail, which was beneficial in many ways. It grounded my account within families, particularly the women of color who overwhelmingly take on the role of bail bond cosigner. It also informed my questions, the dynamics I latched onto, and the empathy and curiosity I extended toward defendants and cosigning family members. Yet, that harm, along with a negative view of agents, created vulnerable spots that I needed to work through in order to nuance the stories I would eventually tell about those complicit in institutional violence. Rephrased, I had to grapple with my inclination to exclude bail agents (and others serving state interests) from my practice of accountability, namely my acknowledgment of their full humanity within and outside of their state-serving roles.

Reflecting on my fieldnotes *while* engaging in storytelling (Jensen & Auyero, 2019), or attempting to tell the interlinked stories of bail agents and families, was crucial to uncovering my biases and to igniting a conviction to see and reconstruct agents holistically. Without question, my notes show instances of agents behaving in ways that fit the archetype of “villain.” However, they also reveal moments where agents defy this portrayal and wrestle with, or even reject, the demands of the legal system and their industry’s mandate to profit. Below, I offer a compilation of memos written after revisiting my fieldnotes. They capture how I, a black woman personally impacted by commercial bail, grappled with an accountability practice that acknowledges both complicity and the full spectrum of humanity. While bail agents were my initial focus, embracing accountability through the abolition feminist storytelling methodology means I must also ultimately hold myself up to the mirror. Doing so makes *my* complicity as a researcher abundantly clear, as well as the need to deeply consider how my actions (irrespective of intent) overlap with the objective of getting people more free:

The white-owned agency was arguably the most fruitful site for empirical variation, given its vast range of operations, clientele, and staff. Yet, it was also, without a doubt, the most challenging space of the three agencies I observed within. By the end of my 3-month tenure, I had developed a mantra of “Do it for the data,” which I now feel conflicted about.

...The male agents consistently overlooked me, and when direct interaction was necessary, they avoided making eye contact and treated me as if I were an unwelcome nuisance. I remember venting to Sheeba, the one black woman office worker, about this halfway through my internship, and she gave me a knowing expression with the following words, “I think they just finally accepted I was going to be around. Took them years with me...though one of them still tries me [to test someone’s patience, intelligence, and worth].” While deeply unsettling, the story I told myself to make it through was that, as a researcher and temporary presence, it wasn’t imperative for them to like or respect me. My subjugation was worth it for the data – a story that I can no longer tell myself without pause.

In hindsight, the unraveling of that narrative likely began with the difference I felt in my final field site. It was a black-owned agency, and being there felt like a safe haven for an emotionally exhausted and wounded ethnographer.

There was a mutual care and respect cultivated among the staff, and they extended that warmth to me, even if superficially...The atmosphere was also incredibly inviting, courtesy of the cozy couches for clients, the soothing R&B melodies playing softly in the background, and the quaint front office area.

I felt most at home at this location. Though personally gratifying, as a researcher, it came with a cost – I detected a bias in my field notes that I had to actively monitor throughout my research. The staff's personable and charming way of engaging, combined with my gratitude for being treated like a whole person again, initially made me less critical of their tactics and interactions with clients. In other words, I almost forgot that I was observing the same valuation and extraction as in the white-owned agency, and this bias showed in my writing...

I had to seriously contend with who I reconstructed as “nothing but” complicit and who as “anything but” complicit. The implications extend beyond the stories I share about agents; they bleed into the solutions I consider possible. Getting caught up in the notions of “bad apples” (nothing but complicit) or “good people” (anything but complicit) can limit my ability to acknowledge and critique interpersonal and structural harm. Consequently, I might mistakenly believe that simply changing the people involved can remedy an inherently flawed system.

Even more, this thought process circled back to me, as I had to come to terms with my own complicity. There were times when I convinced myself that I was not furthering harm. I did not have the authority to decide who got a bail bond, and the funds that families gathered to afford freedom were not what paid my bills. However, I *did* collect information from family members that informed bond decisions. I encountered people seeking bail assistance from behind the counter next to agents. And perhaps most piercing, a young black man—the same age as my brother when he was first arrested—thanked *me* for getting him out of jail. I struggled, and still do, with the uneasy acceptance that my efforts to get analytically close to those complicit in violence made me complicit too.

[Gonzalez Van Cleve \(2016\)](#) similarly describes grappling with complicity during her court ethnography in Cook County. In her case, speaking up did translate into more jail time for a convicted person in one case, a source of influence that she disclosed was difficult to navigate alone. Fortunately, being part of a collective prevents me from feeling alone now as I do the difficult post-hoc work of confronting my complicity and telling stories about people who are complicit in violence. They keep me honest, provide a communal space for reflexivity, and give me confidence and conviction in turning to black feminism and abolition for insight. I did not enter the field with this training or purposeful focus, and I still have much to learn about the paradigms. Yet, to date, I have learned that studying complicity entails confronting the complexities and contradictions of people—both those you study and your own. Recognizing this within

myself allows me to write the stories of people who perpetrate violence with greater empathy while preserving a critical outlook.

Excavating a Survivor's Standpoint – Shannon's Story

When I first proposed a study on police violence against black women and girls from different social classes, I was told by many in the academy that this was not a “real social problem.” From their perspective as mostly white, mostly men, and mostly middle-and upper-class researchers, black women, especially those in the middle-class, do not experience police violence or other forms of violence worthy of investigating on their own. Throughout numerous conversations in classrooms, workshops, and other meetings, I quickly came to understand that black women's stories about our own experiences of violence—and not just the ways we support, shield, or mother others—did not matter or were not legible to some inside the academy unless we could be juxtaposed against another group (i.e., white women or black men) to make some broader, generalizable point.

The project could have ended there.

But I, like others in our collective, was a survivor of childhood familial domestic abuse, interpersonal violence, and police violence, or what Beth Richie (2012) refers to as the violence matrix. The stories we carried—about violence in various domains and iterations—live(d) inside us, carving up our bodies and carving out our conscious and unconscious choices. Feminist standpoint theory grounds knowledge in lived experiences like these, those etched out by broader structures of oppression that form the material and political conditions of our everyday lives (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 2000; Smith, 1987; Sweet, 2021). Feminist scholars point to how these standpoints are relational, and thus, marginal experiences and standpoints become a critical site of social inquiry, a place where the dominant ideology of “the center” can be viewed and interrogated (Collins, 2000; Harding, 1992; hooks, 1984). And within black feminist traditions, a marginal standpoint has the capacity to produce emancipatory knowledge, or situated information that can clarify experiences of domination and inform social justice-oriented praxis in institutions as well as the intimate spaces of our daily lives (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984; Threadcraft, 2021, 2025).

Even knowing this, I must say that when I started my project, I could not fathom writing a sentence like the one that opened the previous paragraph.

Lying amongst my many reasons was that I had spent much of the prior two years being trained on research methods from a tradition that reflected “the center” of the discipline. In the process, I was encouraged to distance myself from subjects to obtain an “objective” status and truth. I heard discourses that leveraged “me-search” as a form of researcher bias, especially regarding scholars of color, women, and LGBTQ + people to delegitimize their work based on real or assumed shared lived experiences and connections with participants. By the time I found feminist classes, advisors, and mentors in graduate school that showed me otherwise, it was too late. I could already hear the narrative in my head forming about me being “too close” and somehow “tainting the research” if people knew I also was a survivor. Thus, while I was learning

to embrace the standpoint of an outsider-within, or relationally as a black queer woman in a white institution conducting a project on violence against black women in communities, I did not dare stake claim to a survivor's standpoint in my research.

Yet, my experiences of violence along with those of other black women survivors I knew are what birthed the project.

And in collective—grounded in an ethic of love and developing our relationships with an abolition feminist praxis—there was space for me to grapple with this, with what it meant to be a survivor doing research on/with other survivors of violence. During this time, I read Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie's (2022, p. 23) *No More Police: A Case for Abolition*, where I learned about how a black feminist abolitionist politic is one "focused on ending all forms of violence experienced by Black women—and all other people." Even more, I learned how abolition feminism is focused on: "listening to the stories of people harmed by violence about what they need" (p. 30). As such, it values and centers a survivor's standpoint in understanding the contours of violence, its meaning, and the resources needed to address it.

So, together, we started sifting through the ways shared experiences of harm, nested within a shared identity, impacted fieldwork.

For example, while I was often considered an insider based on my race and gender, that many times was not enough for black women survivors. They also asked several questions about my experiences of violence, such as when Kerry told me at the beginning of the interview "you can answer those," indicating that she wanted me to answer all the interview questions first before I asked about hers. These moments of mutual storytelling amongst survivors were critical for building trust, facilitating rapport, and legitimizing my role as a witness (see González-López, 2006, 2010). It eased some of the anxieties black women had about participating in the study. It helped create an earnest intimacy in interviews. It encouraged them as they vulnerably shared testimonies that had been delegitimized at some point in their lives.

In moments of fear and uncertainty about their stories reaching a broader audience, I tried to be honest about my experiences within the academy, of trying to propose a project where some concluded that our absence symbolized a non-existent social problem and that the differences amongst us were unworthy of study on their own. But I also let them know that to me, their stories mattered a great deal, and I imagine other black women survivors might feel the same. Thus, our shared experiences helped us navigate these precarious moments, with my story sometimes paving the way for black women to disclose theirs. One such case was when Joy stressed that she did not want to speak with someone where she had to explain her story while retelling it, stating: "Because I'm like, is everything I say [pause], am I going to have to overexplain, you know what I mean?" Others like her would say, "that's just the way things are" or "you know how it is." And I did. As I researched silence around black women's experiences of violence, I also intimately understood what it meant to live through things that have not or could not be said. Even more, so too did the collective. We knew how white heteropatriarchy and black heteropatriarchy both had written on/in our bodies: *words impressed on flesh through open palms and closed fists, punctuated by heated and endless lashes passed down from one generation to the next. Phrases wrung from*

bracing bodies wrapped and squeezed by unwanted hands. Tears left undried and phone calls for help left unanswered, turning words and phrases into sentences that construct meaning, the poetics of neglect. Cycles upon cycles creating pages and pages of memories untouched yet seared somehow in both the back and forefront of one's mind. Screams that fade over time as they go unheard, eventually numbed into a silence that many misrecognize as an absence and question, is there even a story here?

Yes, survivor stories.

Questions I had during my training and fieldwork that I felt I could not ask at the time were: *What are the contours of a survivor's standpoint and how does it fit into research on punishment and violence? Given the extractive nature of research, what are my ethical commitments to participants as a fellow survivor? And how do I navigate my complicity in the extractive logics of academia?* The collective has become the space for me to ask questions like these and work through research dilemmas in ways that do not have to quickly draw clear-cut or neat conclusions. Instead, the relationships allow for an ongoing process of inquiry and reflection grounded in a commitment to justice, to confronting carceral logics, to addressing both intimate and structural violence. Thus, I have no definitive answers at this time. I am still learning about abolition feminism. Or more specifically, I am still engaging, building, reading, listening, sharing stories, and grappling in community with what it all means. But so far, we have been able to talk about how, whether nestled in coffee shops, sunk deep into couches, or walking around park trails, mutual storytelling about silenced violence transported me and the black women I interviewed in time and wrapped us up in our own little world. As such, embracing a survivor standpoint supported my research instead of hindering it. And today, I am still sitting with how, while academic research is extractive, many of these black women signed up to speak to a stranger because they believed in the power of storytelling—that sharing their stories of violence could somehow provide a small bit of healing for themselves, and that making their stories visible to the broader world could somehow change the social conditions for other black women and girls.

Conclusion

We share our stories with the intention that doing so invites contemporary and future generations of feminist criminologists to understand the utility of—and consequently employ—an abolition feminist approach to the stories they tell. This is no easy feat. Abolition feminist labor involves a discomfort of grappling with the carceral logics that have long been embedded in our social and political worlds (Rajah et al., 2022). Carceral logics simply “make sense” in a world that solves violence through increased punishment. And yet, as we and other scholars have shown, carceral logics significantly impede our ability as feminist criminologists to engage in more liberatory storytelling practices. Whether interviewing formerly incarcerated survivors, working alongside bail bonds agents, or unearthing our own stories of harm in relation to our participants, abolition feminism allows us to reflect on, grapple with, and ultimately push back against carceral feminist assumptions embedded within the research

process. Rephrased, we would not have nuanced conversations about victim-offender binaries, we would not discuss our own complicity, and stories about the ways our personal experiences of violence and punishment impact our research would simply be hushed because of commitments to “neutrality.”

For our collective as a group of black feminist criminologists, centering principles of relationality, love, accountability, vulnerability, and justice allowed us to reflect on these moments and develop stories that more accurately reflected peoples’ experiences of violence and punishment. Importantly, these principles might be different for other collectives. We do not posit that we have always “gotten it right,” nor that we have achieved abolition feminist success in every facet of storytelling. These tensions and dilemmas remain ongoing. In fact, we hope that by highlighting moments of our own complicity in and tensions with carceral logics that other feminist scholars may be able to avoid some of the carceral pitfalls that we confronted throughout our fieldwork. As Patricia Hill Collins (1986, p. S30) notes, “What many Black feminists appear to be doing is embracing the creative potential of their outsider within status and using it wisely. In doing so, they move themselves and their disciplines closer to the humanist vision implicit in their work—namely, the freedom to both be different and part of the solidarity of humanity.” Importantly, this is the goal of abolition feminism—to remind us that abolitionist labor is not static, but instead must be flexible enough to respond to ever-changing political and social conditions.

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Notes

1. Term previously used in Shanahan and colleagues’ (2018) paper of the same title to clarify the distinction between frames and narratives in policy contexts. We use the term differently here

to underscore how carceral logics can limit creativity in social science, leading to storytelling that is constricted by a lack of imagination.

2. All participant names are pseudonyms.

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