



# Safety, Securitization and the Carceral Web: Who's Public?

**Ollie Rosser**

*Simon Fraser University, Burnaby*

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the implications and impacts of private security presence in the Vancouver Public Library. Historically situating local security culture demonstrates how punitive ideology creates populations predisposed to violence and exclusion, both physical and epistemic. Within the city of Vancouver Indigenous, Black and poor populations are the primary communities strategically pre-categorized as “bad” and pre-emptively subjected to increased surveillance and policing, entwining local communities within globalized practices of racial capitalism. The beliefs and practices of removal or violence as punishment form the backbone of the carceral web in Canada permeating settler colonial pedagogy. The securitization of the public library encroaches upon crucial access to pedagogy that reflects marginalized epistemologies. Methodologically, this paper aims to validate embodied knowledge and lived experience as resistance to the Western scientific research paradigm that tends to replicate pre-existing carceral and colonial norms.

**Keywords:** securitization, carceral web, trans studies, library studies, critical pedagogy

**T**HE SECURITIZATION OF MY LOCAL public library concerns me for a few reasons. Private security companies are not required to be explicit to the public in regards to their duties, ethics or values. While it is within the jurisdiction of private security personnel to “perform many police-like functions”, the primary roles assigned to the police are also not officially defined by the government of Canada. (Li, 2008; Public Safety Canada, 2016). An increase of private security presence within so-called universally accessible public space emerges as a modality through which the carceral web is expanded and thus reified. (Pitman, 2021; Axster et al., 2021; Schram, 2010; Kammersgaard, 2019).

Carcerality is the constellation of beliefs, practices, and systems rooted in *punitive ideology* which argues that harm happens within society because certain people are “bad” and that removal or violence as punishment will restore “justice” and prevent further harm (Raymond, 1979). Strategically pre-categorized as “bad”, Indigenous, Black and poor populations are the primary communities in Vancouver pre-emptively subjected to increased surveillance and policing; the globalized practices of racial capitalism connect communities across borders through tactics of control enacted on the local level (Pitman, 2021; Axster et al. 2021).

The history of policing in Canada can be traced right back to confederation where the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) — which later became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) — were established to enforce the new colonial borders and laws, and oversee the construction of the Canadian Pacific railway. Indigenous law and jurisdiction was explicitly ignored, and the treaties and colonial laws proposed by the Crown, broken. Indigenous resistance to this colonization, such as the Métis and Cree resistance of 1885, was so strong that the NWMP upped its militarization through help of the Canadian Army, doubling down on its violent tactics to remove Indigenous peoples, either from their lands, or from existence entirely (Gouldhawke, 2021). Epitomizing another manifestation of the white supremacist ideology and practices of violence endemic to Canadian law, Black people were legally subject to enslavement until 1834 (Public Service Alliance Canada, 2021). But the fundamentals of enslavement have not disappeared entirely: as of 2021 people in federal prisons earned a maximum of \$4.28 *a day* for their labour, after room and board deductions (Canada, 2021). Compounded with over-criminalization, institutional racism in the so-called criminal justice system is a continuation of colonial and racist practices. Racism in the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) manifests in the significant over-representation of both Black and Indigenous Peoples Vancouver statistics on arrests, chargeable incidences, mental-health related

incidences, and strip searches (Routley & Govender, 2021). Ongoing colonial processes of land dispossession by removal are revealed in the over-representation of Indigenous populations in federal prisons, making up 32% of the inmate population despite comprising between 3-5% of the population of Canada, or the states complicity in the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2Spirit (MMIWG2S) (Public Safety Canada, 2023).

The beliefs and practices of removal or violence as punishment which form the backbone of the carceral web in Canada permeate settler colonial pedagogy, epistemically excluding the knowledges of Indigenous, Black and people of colour, as well as queer/trans, poor and disabled people (Lynn, 2002; Galarte, 2014). This epistemic exclusion normalizes systems of violence and removal, teaching them instead as “justice” by silencing the voices of those who have been harmed, nurturing a carceral imagination for future generations. Access to the educational resources found in public libraries can provide self-understanding to members of marginalized groups whose lived/embodied experiences do not count as knowledge within settler colonial pedagogy. A *critical pedagogical perspective* is that which challenges “the production of social hierarchies, identities, and ideologies across local and national boundaries” empowering people to draw from the knowledge generated by their own embodied experiences (Galarte, 2014; Burkhart, 2003). Epistemic exclusion within educational institutions compounds the significance of the carceral practice of library security systems.

As a student researcher and in the world, I am simultaneously protected by my whiteness and made vulnerable by my transness. This vulnerability is because of the long history of criminalization and brutalization of queer and trans people in Canada (Spade, 2017). Through the eyes of colonial law, sexual and gender deviance was a crime punishable by death until 1869 and remained an imprisonable offence until 1969 (Levy, 2019). Given the patterns of treatment exemplified by the state, it follows that the legal status of trans people remains a constant political debate and campaign topic. In view of this history, the overlap and intersections of racism, classism, sanism and transphobia/heterosexism contribute to a broad gamut of risk for queer and trans people. Despite meaningful differences, minoritized communities in Vancouver are interconnected through common experiences of vulnerability.

Due to the carceral logic underlying predominant law and conceptions of justice, minoritized groups are excluded and removed from definitions of “public” through racist, classist, and cis-sexist

values implicit in policy and embodied through institutional actors — in this case, private security personnel (Axster, et. al, 2021; Kafer & Grinberg, 2019). The library can be a space providing folks low-barrier access to the tools to create their own critical pedagogies and ideally, as articulated by the Vancouver Public Library (VPL), exist as “[a] free place for everyone to discover, create and share ideas and information” (City of Vancouver, 2022). In creating such a space, I assert the necessity in centering Indigenous, Black and queer/trans perspectives on the question of what it means to be safe. I draw upon my lived experience as a white trans student, orienting myself to the social dynamics of racialization, class and normativity. Through the securitization of the public library, tensions within conflicting understandings of safety, “the public” and knowledge come to light. I seek to explore the implications and impacts of private security presence in the public institution of the library and observe how securitization manifests in the Vancouver Public Library, Central Branch.

## **Background information and literature review**

Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* traces the history of the European carceral system and strategic social control in service of power within a capitalist system. Carcerality is diffused throughout society through what Foucault calls the carceral archipelago, consisting of mechanisms, technology and knowledge systems which are decentralized and permeate the micro-macro continuum of social life (Foucault, 1995). Many theorists and academics from a breadth of disciplines reference Foucault’s work to understand how power operates within society, while others critique aspects of his work for lacking the critical axes that are integral to the structure of the carceral system in the West. Of the latter, one such scholar is Angela Davis, who draws attention to the absence of the reservation system, slavery, mission system and internment camps as situated within global capitalism in Foucault’s genealogy of the carceral system (Davis, 1998). Bearing this in mind, Foucauldian concepts and terms are best applied in conjunction to contemporary intersectional critical analysis. *Colonial Lives of the Carceral Archipelago: Rethinking the Neoliberal Security State* by Sabrina Axster et al., explores mechanistic examples of Foucault’s carceral archipelago, naming mass incarceration, border control and police brutality as central elements of a catch-all carceral *web*, further substantiating that racial capitalism relies on the “punishments” of violence and removal of the carceral system. The authors ultimately argue that the neoliberal reliance on state violence is not a new phenomenon, and that the exclusion/suppressing of Black, Indigenous and

people of colour's experiences is a weaponization of the power that is to not know of something; a colonial unknowing (Axster et al., 2021).

There is a considerable body of sociological analyses relating to private security guards, with a wealth of studies conducted in North-Western Europe. In his 2021 qualitative publication *Private Security Guards Policing Public Space: Using Soft Power in Place of Legal Authority* Tobias Kammergaard observed private security guards policing a public square in Denmark and found that guards demonstrated illegitimate acts of authority and garnered general public mistrust especially in response to people who use drugs (Kammergaard, 2021). In a review of census Canada statistics, Geoffrey Li reports the overlap within the roles of private security and police officers, comparatively drawing attention to disparities in employment rates and salaries for private security personnel (Li, 2008). There is a wealth of relevant discourse as a basis for the study of library securitization, but the unique intersection of the topics remains overall understudied.

## **Methodology**

To research modes of neoliberal securitization I conducted 10 hours of observation at the Central Branch of the Vancouver Public Library, located between downtown and Yaletown in the city of Vancouver, and one 40-minute interview with a library patron who attends the Semiahmoo Public Library in White Rock.

To conduct my field observations, I used a polymorphous engagement approach which involved multiple modalities (Mannick & McGarry, 2017). I interacted with the library, its patrons and security guards through participant observation, review of library and city policy documents, private security company websites, online Google and Yelp ratings; I conducted walking ethnography through the use of headnotes, jottings, sketches and diagrams, as well as photography. At times I was taking a participatory approach, as a patron of the library and a resident of Vancouver city, and other times I took an active approach, trying to understand the role and methods of security guards without being a part of their social group (Mannick & McGarry, 2017). I focused on the postures and behavior of the security guards, as well as my own body-mind experiences in the library and recorded what I thought to be notable occurrences within the space, be it among patrons or staff. I noted signage and design elements within the space, and correspondingly, sensory

experiences such as light, smells, temperature and sounds. I ensured in my field notes that I was not recording any incriminating, identifying information from the library staff, patrons, or security.

My interview methods followed the same critical pedagogical approach, wherein the interview process communicates knowledge through collaborative constructivism. I interviewed my friend, asking semi-structured questions with a focus on the interviewee's experiences, feelings, and knowledge, and then anonymized our conversation.

As a white university student, the power which I hold is much more than I have been taught to recognize. My research processes are informed by my experience of education and enculturation through the white-settler state where I have been protected by white supremacy and middle-class social security. This means that I have internalized racist and classist approaches to life and learning, which I am working to unlearn as I sit with the understanding that I have the power to do harm.

In the process of crafting a methodological toolkit to study “up”, or to look at the systems of governance which exert power over myself and others, I have had the tendency to ‘collect’ critical sociological frameworks, which has resulted in biases against institutions and certain roles within this society. My positionality as a prison abolitionist complicates my relationship to security guards, which has been a topic of ethical concern for me throughout this process. Of relevance, there are significant distinctions between security guards and police officers, and in the case of the former I empathize with how individuals within this society must work to make money under the continual threat of homelessness and starvation. My observation hours helped to counter this reductive tendency, as I grew familiar with various security guards and was pushed to multiply the nuances of my analysis and worldview in general. During my observation I was also aware of how I held power as an observing researcher at the same time as feeling vulnerable in proximity to security guards. My ethical integrity is contingent on conducting research that is of benefit to those who are most negatively impacted first.

My methodological aim is to validate embodied knowledge and lived experience as resistance to the Western scientific research paradigm which tends to replicate pre-existing carceral and colonial norms (Bernal, 2002; Waters & Burkhart, 2003). With an awareness of the university's influential power and cultural authority within mainstream knowledge production, I lean into how theory informs research design. I take an active autoethnographic role in data collection as an

enactment of the critical pedagogical approach, situating my personal reflections of autoethnographic embodiment as a trans embodiment of securitization and surveillance (Stine, 1991 in Madison, 2005; Galarte, 2015).

## **Autoethnographic embodiment**

After I had concluded my fieldwork, there was a necessary part of analysis that came to the fore, which was my own investment in the questions of surveillance and exclusion. With an awareness of the multifaceted manifestations of carceral logic, I ventured inwards towards some of my own lived experiences that had come up in the form of feelings throughout my time researching the library; discomfort, anger and grief, as well as determination and connection all brimmed at the threshold of my observations. Following the threads of exclusion and its various justifications within my own life I noticed surveillance and punishment throughout many stages of my life and aspects of my socialization.

Reflection, March 14th, 2023:

“Within the Foucauldian vein, conceptions of power and powerlessness have pulsed alongside me throughout the past four months; naturalizing themselves in my body-mind, informing my research questions and methodologies. The public library was my ideal public space to explore power, perhaps due to hearing the phrase “knowledge is power” during my schooling more times than I can count. Through the Western education system, seeking domination of others and power over one another is normalized. This type of power takes on new modalities but reproduces its essence within individuals, who are the basis from which ideology, the state and institution all arise.

The circumstantial and institutional constraints that many people face in pursuit of learning frustrates me, especially considering the expanse of perspective which has resulted from my own access to certain texts and materials. The critical works of Audre Lorde, Eli Clare, Judith Butler, just to name a few, have not only given me the knowledge to understand my own circumstances, but also have showed me worldviews far more empathetic to my own positionality than the dominant Eurocentric paternalistic “traditional” epistemologies.

Even when considering the skewed cultural production of knowledge, I imagine the *library*; a non-transactional site for learning, and for some, community. At the Central Branch library, the

warm hues and grand colosseum architecture spanning an entire city block invoked a nostalgic idealization of society wherein knowledge, among other resources, is universally available. In reality, underdressed, underfed and unsheltered people, relying on the toonies and dimes of fellow city-dwellers, hold their ground on the streets surrounding the library's perimeter, resisting displacement against city mandated "street sweeps" deployed to make the sidewalk and alleyways unlivable. *Dispossession by removal.* Even the types of knowledge that make it into the library are skewed towards the interest of the state, and how it wants to be imagined. Obviously, my envisioned ideal of the library is a dream yet to come.

Co-creating a resistance against this exclusionary, power-hungry white-dominant, settler colonial power is collective work. My experience in queer community, learning and generating knowledge as one life connected to many, colours my positionality as a student. I have learned how my transhood is inextricable from my selfhood. Eurocentric epistemology feeds a narrative that as a trans person I do not know myself, that I am wrong in who I am, and that I should be corrected or punished for my difference. So too, in progressive spaces, narratives of 'valid' transsexuality permeate my being; despite my struggle and resistance against gender norms, I feel as though my thoughts and feelings of self are being watched. Since the first gendering mechanism of categorizing my genitalia at birth to prescribe a set of roles to my personhood, all the way to the psychological assessment required to access gender affirming health care, surveillance has never meant safety to me. The context of power swells through my own powerlessness in the face of gender surveillance.

My audacity to watch who is watching the people has bloomed from grounded, supported, resistance. Maybe knowledge of the agents through which dominating power is maintained and enforced will contribute to the redistribution of power. That is my hope, that is my reason for writing, and my role as an academic-in-training. To me, safety extends far beyond physical space. Safety of body-mind *is power to the people*; power to resist domination, both internally and externally."

## **Thematic Analysis**

Thus far I have explored the ideological and internal aspects of the carceral web, as well as aspects of its historical origins and legacy in Canada. These are strands in the web of carcerality, as is the privatization and outsourcing of surveilling social actors. While security guards lack the legal power of the police, they invoke an authoritative presence through their uniforms, and collaboration

with local branches of law enforcement. Through strong security presence, the Central Branch of the VPL becomes another strand in the web.

The first time I stepped into the central branch of the library I immediately noticed how peaceful it was; upon entering through the building's large double doors, "the sounds of the rain, cars, pedestrians and construction outside is quickly muted. [...] the quiet is soft and noticeable. [...] Outside I still hear the sirens through the walls of the library". The quiet let me notice my thoughts, buzzing. Patrons would frequently walk out without checking out a book, through the security-scanner doors and past the security guard. The library can provide refuge; from home, work, school, the overstimulating effects of downtown Vancouver, and the cold, to name a few. I had the chance to talk to my friend, a university student, about her experiences with public libraries. Overall, she expressed that it had been a welcoming a third space where she could enjoy the quiet and focus while feeling the presence of community:

"All types of people go there; young, old uh, let's see, I wouldn't necessarily know by looking at anybody, but I'm assuming LGBTQ since *I* go there. But it's a very inclusive and open space, I see families there every single day, I see children there learning to read, getting used to being around literature and all that" (personal communications, 2023).

While I too noticed that there was a wide range of people, my attention is pulled towards who is excluded from so many spaces that their absence has become normalized? The priority was a regulated orderliness. No alarms sounded the entire time I was in the library, but there were usually about six guards strolling the nine stories of bookshelves. The guards wear coordinated black or black and yellow uniforms, sometimes with a Canadian flag on the sleeve, always printed with the word "SECURITY". They carry walkie-talkies, pace, and watch everything. There were many times while observing the guards that I felt nervous, aware of the power they had over me in that space, but also aware of the ways in which I was resisting said power through my continued observation, in addition to my generally deviant being-in-the-world. The library's "expectations of behavior" printed on one paper sign, taped to the blacked-out window of the security office, reminded me that the security guards are following the directions of Securigaurd, the private security company which was hired to follow the directions of the library (Li, 2008). Sometimes the presence of security is not helpful for individuals to feel safer in the library. In our interview conversation, I asked my

interlocutor about times that she had felt unsafe in the library she frequents, and she told me about how there was a particular youth who would hang around her and her friends while they studied. She recalled two instances where this person began to make hateful, targeted, and racially motivated comments towards her. In these moments, she told me that she felt as if she had to “just deal with it” especially because those around her at the time were acting as passive bystanders. I asked her if the intervention of an authority such as a security guard would make her feel safe, to which she responded, “I think I would have been a little bit more embarrassed than anything else, ‘cause, you know, especially back then I wasn't good with conflict or anything like that [quietly]”. While she expressed that she did not mind the presence of the security, she also did not perceive them as helpful to improving her feelings of safety after experiencing interpersonal racism. Most significant in recovering from these moments was a person she knew and trusted:

“I told [...] another friend of mine at the time, who would stand up for me, [...] but like, they weren't there when this happened. So they couldn't do it then. But they were a little bit like, you know, a little bit more protective of me whenever I went to the library with them. And that was kind of helpful. I felt a lot safer, and a lot more comfortable in their presence.” (personal communication, 2023).

Through connection arises the power to find safety and solidarity. They stabilize each other. A theme that emerged from the above section of our interview conversations in conjunction with my own field observations and auto-ethnography, is that feelings of safety are not solely determined by authoritative actors of securitization, but by the people with whom individuals share community and space. On the other hand, even singular people can wield systemic power through their words/actions and embody carcerality through the reproduction of oppressive beliefs by deeming racialized difference as the “*bad*” within punitive logic. Within the context of colonial unknowing, racism has a vested interest in the epistemic exclusion of Indigenous, Black and people of colour within educational institutions (Davis, 1998). The state weaponizes law for the advancement of their interests, particularly against racialized groups; punitive logic is then revealed to function bidirectionally in practice, as opposed to the formal conception of ‘bad person gets punished’. The colonial state enacts violence or removal first, *then* defines the victimized groups or populations as legally ‘bad’ and within this logic said punishment is warranted. Because the carceral archipelago is diffused throughout society and also imperative to the entire existence of Canada, the public education system is a mechanism for its reproduction; an epiphenomenon of this carceral education

being isolation and hyper individualism. Stark contradiction between stories crafted versus experiences lived creates distance between realities, lessening shared realities, decreasing solidarity. Furthermore, carceral logic replaces the tangible, soft skills needed to empower people to resolve conflicts in community.

Isolation and hyper individualism sing the refrain that everyone is separate from one another. My interlocutor would frequently express nostalgia for the communal aspects of the town where her family lives in Uganda. One such remembrance was in reference to the contrast in cultural values in regards to community:

“Everything is really like, communal like, even like my grandpa and my grandma's house is just right up the street from my uncle's house. [...] And most houses have like two of my relatives in them like my aunt and my uncle, living there, and it's just so nice because there's always somebody there you don't really feel lonely, [question/upwards inflection] per se. But here you do. Here you really do. Really ridiculously individualistic.”

Her articulation of Vancouver as individualistic brought me back to the contrast between the idealistic institution of the public library and the concurrent “street sweeps”. Attitudes surrounding homelessness and poverty as a social problem differ and can further the distance between realities. In isolation our vulnerability is exacerbated ideologically, institutionally, physically and socially. This isolation once again disproportionately impacts minoritized communities under the threat of violence and removal, both physically and epistemically.

The contradictions within the carceral web and punitive logic are endless. Exemplified in my field work, I discovered that the VPL is accountable to the municipal government and the federal libraries act, as well as their corporate sponsors such as BMO Financial Group, which funds pipeline projects such as Trans Mountain Expansion Project (TMX) and Coastal Gaslink (CGL) which directly displace Indigenous peoples from their land (City of Vancouver, 2021; Yunker, 2019). The primary priority of both racial capitalism and settler colonialism is the easy participation of a powerful minority in a globalized economy, to the detriment of the global majority (Axster et al., 2021; Schram, 2010). The priority of protecting profit, capital and the colonial state, is consistent; However, it is in the claim that the priority of the state institutions is the safety and wellbeing of the

general public that contradicts itself. Security guards have far more in common with me and with the most excluded, minoritized, members in our communities than with the state; yet their presence enacts the very maintenance of hyper-inequality. As I would witness the guards sharing words, smiles and conversation with some members of the community, while employed to enforce the exclusion and removal of other(ed) members, I felt unsettled by how these exchanges represented the naturalization of the carceral web. Many of us partake in the systems of our own dehumanization as if there is no other way. Seeing fragmented displays of community gathered around disembodied ideas of safety serves as an insight into the type of ideological and epistemological learning/unlearning we may need to embark upon as a collective.

### **Research contribution/goals**

There is a gap in literature at the intersections of critical legal studies, sociology and library and information studies. Libraries are an excellent site to discuss alternatives to securitization, especially in regard to claims of being a space for “everyone”. I agree with those who say that the library is a pillar of society. In reimagining a social system transformed to better suit the needs of the people, the library as a model is promising. I scrutinize it for this reason: unless a pedagogy is informed by the knowledges of those who have been oppressed and excluded it is no more than a reshuffling of hierarchies which allows different identities to steer the machine of oppression and divide.

Black, Indigenous and queer definitions of safety; social tensions surrounding conflicting notions of safety; the isolating effects of neoliberalism; 2SLGBTQIA+ interactions with public space; and the axiologies implicit within the structural design of buildings are all research topics that I hope to explore further from this body of data.

### **Conclusion**

At the very time that this paper is being written, mayor Ken Sim is deploying armies of VPD officers to “decamp” East Hastings Street. Decamping is forcible removal, and decamping is the banishment of those in poverty who are experiencing the effects of colonial violence, systemic racism, and absolute abandonment by the state. I see the maldistribution of “punishment” as violence and removal every time that someone, in my community or elsewhere, dies of an overdose or police brutality; is arrested or silenced; experiences isolation in the face of a system that is their

aggressor (Butler, 2021). Surveillance and carceral actors are inextricable from this reality. Furthermore, through the carceral web, mechanisms of securitization and policing serve the exclusionary functions of the state within a social system that protects the fabrication of cis white colonizing men. Some people are worried about seeing something that makes them feel uncomfortable, while others are worried about how they are going to survive another day; there is endless variation in between, and each perspective is important. I recall my own initial judgements of character towards the security guards working at the library, having almost forgotten our shared global context. To position myself in opposition to my fellow working-class citizens was counterproductive for the discourse I would like to engage in. Without a social safety net, the exhaustion and alienation resulting from a 40+ hour work week is involuntarily adopted under the coercive, looming, threat of houselessness and social abandonment (Wacquant in Schram, 2010). My research findings have shown the many constraints against minoritized communities' physical and epistemological participation within the neoliberal settler colonial "public". Security guards are not the biggest threat to the population's development of critical pedagogical tools. However, securitization is a facet of the carceral web, which in its archipelago of forms, must also be addressed at the ideological, behavioral and structural scales. As it is a subjective concept, safety will not be straightforward to negotiate. Widespread access to critical pedagogy may ratify rather than remove embodied knowledge which spotlight the contradictions within mainstream neoliberal and settler colonial operative definitions of safety. Decreasing rather than further pluralizing the carceral web would be synonymous with the prioritization of previously and presently excluded perspectives within the academy and all spaces of education.

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