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3 **Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline/Building**  
4 **Abolition Futures**

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6  
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8 **Abstract** Placing prison abolition on the horizon for scholars committed to  
9 interrupting the flow of young people toward prisons and jails, this article offers  
10 movement analysis, frameworks and associated questions surrounding advocacy and  
11 engagement. First, I offer a brief state of the field of research and advocacy sur-  
12 rounding school-to-prison work. Building from this assessment, I identify four  
13 ongoing tensions within this field that is, by definition, theoretically explicitly linked  
14 to advocacy for justice. Our challenges include exceptionality, specifically our  
15 desires to center children and youth in our analysis and organizing, and concurrently  
16 how carceral practices continue to change the face of the state and require us to  
17 track how alternatives to incarceration are defined and organized. We also struggle  
18 to build sustainable and viable decarceration initiatives and to develop ways to  
19 make schools and communities safer, without augmenting a carceral state, and to  
20 address state and interpersonal violence, while integrating an intersectional analysis  
21 that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer lives and feminist  
22 standpoints. Finally, I close with a push for scholars to continually evaluate pro-  
23 fessional investments, and invite readers to consider how our scholarly locations  
24 augment or constrain our ability to participate in building transformative schools  
25 and communities.

26  
27 **Keywords** Prison abolition · Educational justice · Anti-Racism ·  
28 Gender and sexuality · Scholar-activism

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30 **Departures**

31 Years ago, while at Stateville Prison in Illinois as a monitor with a local advocacy  
 32 organization, a man I was talking with about the quality of his food and his access to  
 33 educational programs asked me what I did for living. Overseen by a corrections  
 34 officer a few feet away, I said that I worked at a university, and he asked me what I  
 35 studied in. I said something vague—education, prisons and our nation’s ill-  
 36 conceived commitment to incarceration—and his response still sticks in my brain.  
 37 “So, you make a living being an expert about my situation.”

38 For over 10 years I have been working in anti-prison movements and in teacher  
 39 education programs. I have spoken, taught, written and organized around a  
 40 constellation of related issues: rights for those released from prisons and jails,  
 41 educational access inside and outside of prisons, the school-to-prison nexus (the  
 42 policies, ideologies and local practices that move a select group of young people  
 43 from schools to prisons), the need for paradigm changes and bigger visions—prison  
 44 abolition—and more. I have taught in many kinds of free community programs, but  
 45 I have also been paid to give talks. I even wrote a book, *Right to be hostile: schools*  
 46 *prisons and the making of public enemies* (Meiners 2007). For this scholarly work,  
 47 in part, I received tenure at my unionized university and now make a good salary  
 48 with health and dental benefits. While at times I still deny any association with this  
 49 label, I can be an “expert” on our nation’s commitment to incarceration and on the  
 50 school-to-prison pipeline.

51 After 10+ years of this work I am in two conflicting places. I am angry at the  
 52 waste in post-secondary institutions, or the seemingly careless ways in which we  
 53 dispense our many resources—time, labor, legitimacy, skills—and at the glacial  
 54 pace of change, except when the state apparatus morphs to appropriate our labors  
 55 and to move the goalposts. But, always, I am astonished at the ability of people, in  
 56 particular those most vulnerable, to work, to learn, to have love for themselves and  
 57 each other and to build change.

58 At the risk of appearing arrogant, as 10 years of labor is a hiccup in time when  
 59 other people work their lives for justice that they do not see, after a decade I need a  
 60 reality check. *Where is the movement to interrupt the school-to-prison nexus?* As  
 61 the university pays my rent, this is an important question for me to ask because my  
 62 aim is not simply to be a better expert in this area. I suspect this is true for all of us  
 63 who work on issues related to punishment, incarceration and education. I have yet to  
 64 meet the person who is *for* the school-to-prison pipeline, or is advocating *for* an  
 65 increase in school suspensions, or is conducting research to document why  
 66 education should *not* be offered in prisons, or is collecting data to demonstrate that  
 67 black female youth really *are* inherently more violent or dangerous than white  
 68 female youth, or is writing about why we *should* provide school security guards  
 69 tasers. Given that some form of collective liberation is our goal, where are we on  
 70 this path? If I return to Stateville Prison in a few years, to the same tier and the same  
 71 man, what can I say I am doing or my field has achieved?

72 Following this partially confessional preamble, this article has several aims: First,  
 73 I make a case for analysis, advocacy and engagement that places prison abolition on  
 74 the horizon for those invested in educational justice who are committed to



75 interrupting the flow of young people toward prisons and jails. Second, I offer a  
 76 somewhat unorthodox and very brief state of the field of research and advocacy  
 77 surrounding school-to-prison work. Finally, I identify four ongoing tensions within  
 78 this field of work that is, by definition, theoretically focused on social justice. I close  
 79 with a push for us to continually evaluate our professional investments, and invite us  
 80 to consider how they constrain our ability, as Angela Davis often says, “to ask  
 81 questions that see beyond the given” (2005, p. 23). And, for those of us with “safe”  
 82 gigs (tenure-track labor) who have the privilege of time and resources, what is our  
 83 responsibility to participate in building transformative schools and communities?

## 84 **The Carceral Nation and Why Abolition**

85 As many other papers in this special issue have outlined, the U.S. has the dubious  
 86 distinction of locking up more people than any other nation. With 5% of the world’s  
 87 population and 25% of the total prison population, the number of people incapacitated  
 88 in the U.S. has increased since the 1970s, not because of an increase in violence or  
 89 crime, but because of policies including *three strikes and you are out* legislation,  
 90 *mandatory minimum sentencing*, and the *war on drugs* (Alexander 2010; Davis 2003;  
 91 Gilmore 2007; Mauer 1999; Pew Center on the States, 2008). Who is harmed by this  
 92 expansion of our prison nation is not arbitrary: the over two million people locked up  
 93 and warehoused in prisons and jails across the U.S. are poor, mentally ill, under-  
 94 uneducated, non-gender conforming, non-citizens, and/or non-white.

95 Activists, organizers, academics and those directly impacted have popularized  
 96 the term “prison industrial complex” (PIC) refers to the creation of prisons and  
 97 detention centers as a perceived growth economy in an era of deindustrialization,  
 98 and as “a set of symbiotic relationships among correctional communities,  
 99 transnational corporations, media conglomerates, guards’ unions and legislative  
 100 and court agendas” (Davis 2003, p. 107). These economic and social changes shape  
 101 prison expansion, and subsequently naturalize prisons as inevitable. I also use the  
 102 term “carceral state” to highlight the multiple and intersecting state agencies and  
 103 institutions that have punishing functions and effectively regulate poor communi-  
 104 ties: child and family services, welfare/workfare agencies, public education,  
 105 immigration, health and human services, and more (Roberts 1997; Wacquant 2009).

106 While the term “PIC” typically refers to connections between jails, the economy  
 107 and the political sphere, research demonstrates that education must be included in  
 108 this definition. With the increased use of surveillance and incarceration tools—for  
 109 example metal detectors, surveillance cameras, school uniforms, armed security  
 110 guards, and on-site school police detachments—urban schools look and feel a lot  
 111 like detention centers. In addition, the growth of an incarceration nation clearly  
 112 impacts education, funneling the limited pool of tax dollars from social service  
 113 programs to the carceral state. Between 1984 and 2000, across all states and the  
 114 District of Columbia, state spending on prisons was six times the increase of  
 115 spending on higher education (Justice Policy Institute 2002). As budgets for  
 116 corrections expand and funding for higher education contracts, the state’s visions  
 117 about the future of select youth are clear.



118 The term “school-to-prison pipeline” aims to highlight a complex network of  
 119 relations that naturalize the movement of youth of color from our schools and  
 120 communities into under- or unemployment and permanent detention. This is not a  
 121 novel phenomenon. Public education in the United States has historically  
 122 aggressively framed particular populations as superfluous to our democracy yet  
 123 imperative for low wage work, or jobs available after full white employment. With  
 124 First Nations residential schools, apartheid segregation, and chronically inequitable  
 125 access to state resources, public education has, and continues, to funnel targeted  
 126 non-white and poor youth towards non-living wage work, participation in the street  
 127 or the permanent war economy and prison. While these educational outcomes are  
 128 not new, the expansion of our prison nation in the U.S. over the last three decades  
 129 has strengthened policy, practice and ideological linkages between schools and  
 130 prisons. White supremacy has always been central to our nation’s public education  
 131 system and to our carceral state.

132 As is the case with many pressing justice issues—healthcare, housing, food—  
 133 resisting on the carceral state requires that organizers and scholars practice the  
 134 “both/and”: social service and social change. Services are desperately needed for  
 135 young people who are locked up, and yet equally important are structural and  
 136 paradigmatic shifts that alter the contexts that produce such high levels of  
 137 incarceration in the U.S. I frame this tension between the need to provide services  
 138 and the need to make structural reforms as a reform/abolition tension. Or, short-term  
 139 reforms are needed to address the real conditions and real needs of actual people  
 140 caught up in the system, but this is not enough. Many, as Angela Davis writes, are  
 141 raising the question of abolition (*Are prisons obsolete?* 2003).

142 Critical Resistance, a national anti-prison organization, defines prison abolition  
 143 as “the creation of genuinely safe, healthy communities that respond to harm  
 144 without relying on prisons and punishment” (Critical Resistance, n.d.). Prison  
 145 abolition doesn’t mean that there will be no violence. Rather, it acknowledges that  
 146 prisons are not a just, efficient or moral solution to the problems that shape  
 147 violence in our communities. As we have reduced or eliminated social assistance  
 148 programs, and criminalized the options that poor people possess to cope with  
 149 untenable situations, the majority of those in prisons and jails *are* poor people. In  
 150 Illinois in 2002, 90% of women caught up in the system were locked up for non-  
 151 violent crimes, largely related to poverty and addiction (Clark and Kane-Willis  
 152 2006, p. 4). As California (CA) State Senator Gloria Romero stated (CA is the  
 153 state with the world’s two largest prisons for women) “California can’t build  
 154 [more prisons as] its way out of this problem” (Romero, as cited by Braz 2006,  
 155 p. 87).

156 While abolition is not a utopian dream but a necessity, simultaneously reform  
 157 work is required because there are real bodies in need of immediate resources.  
 158 For example, in schools students are under or over diagnosed with a “behavior  
 159 disorder,” there are grotesque disproportionalities in who gets suspended and  
 160 expelled, and police presence in select urban schools has been naturalized.  
 161 As longtime feminist anti-prison activist and scholar Karlene Faith writes,  
 162 this requires those invested in change to negotiate reform and structural change  
 163 work:

164 Every reform raises the question of whether, in Gramsci's terms, it is a  
 165 revolutionary reform, one that has liberatory potential to challenge the status  
 166 quo, or a reform reform, which may ease the problem temporarily or  
 167 superficially, but reinforces the status quo by validating the system through the  
 168 process of improving it. (Faith 2002, p. 165)

169 Faith reminds us of the necessity of doing the "both/and" where everyday local  
 170 work may involve engaging reforms, but it is also useful to place, understand and  
 171 connect these reforms to a larger movement. Or, if we are keeping our eyes on the  
 172 prize, what is the prize? Liberation and justice for all, including the young people in  
 173 juvenile detention centers, or cleaner prisons that have better due process? Better  
 174 school suspension and expulsion policies that just remove the "right" bad kids from  
 175 schools, or communities and school systems that do not prioritize identifying and  
 176 punishing "bad" kids?

177 Building for abolition is neither clean nor easy. It is by definition transformative  
 178 and multifaceted work as scholar and anti-violence worker Beth Richie identifies:

179 The work for prison abolition is at once a policy issue, a community  
 180 accountability issue, a family issue, and an issue that must be understood to be  
 181 deeply personal. It is about health, neighborhood, the environment, U.S.  
 182 position in global markets, youth empowerment, spirituality, the upcoming  
 183 election, interpersonal relationships, identity politics, and many more things.  
 184 (Richie 2008, p. 24).

185 As Richie outlines, and as this article documents, to build stronger communities we  
 186 must *transform* our conceptions of what makes us secure, and what makes our lives  
 187 and communities just. This has specific implications for educators.

## 188 A State of the Field

189 Over the last decade, there has been a growth in analysis and scholarship  
 190 surrounding the school-to-prison pipeline (Duncan 2000; Browne 2003; Meiners  
 191 2007; Simmons 2009; Winn 2010). Yet, as previously noted—and this merits  
 192 re-emphasizing—the targeted under or un-education of particular populations is  
 193 nothing new, and the U.S. has always tracked poor, non-white, non-able bodied,  
 194 non-citizens and/or queers<sup>1</sup> toward under or un-education, non-living wage work,  
 195 participation in a permanent war economy and/or permanent detention. *The School  
 196 to Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform* (Hewitt et al. 2010) identifies some of  
 197 the key components: special education, school discipline, criminalization of  
 198 students, monstrous resource disparities and unequal access to educational  
 199 opportunities in alternative schools. And these are interlocking: students with  
 200 select "soft" disability categories are targeted for suspension and expulsions, and  
 201 these same students are often pushed into alternative schools (because they have

1FL01 <sup>1</sup> Queer encompasses not just gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered, but all non-heteronormative and  
 1FL02 non-gender conforming identifications.

202 been suspended or expelled), or have been caught up in schools that are hyper  
203 policed.

204 Research has consistently documented how school suspension and expulsion and  
205 classification as “special education” are moderate to strong predictors of under  
206 education and future incarceration (Advancement Project 2010; Duncan 2000;  
207 Losen and Orfield 2002; Skiba et al. 2002). School suspension rates for African  
208 American male students are consistently significantly higher than their white and  
209 female counterparts, and scholarship documents the overrepresentation of youth of  
210 color in our nation’s juvenile justice systems and in school-based disciplinary  
211 actions, as early as pre-school (Ayers et al. 2001; Gilliam 2005; Gregory et al. 2010;  
212 Polakow 2000; Skiba and Knesting 2002); U.S. Department of Education). These  
213 gendered and racialized practices of removing students from an educational setting,  
214 the most dramatic educational sanction available, starts in pre-schools, as a 2005  
215 survey of 40 states pre-kindergarten programs indicates (Gilliam 2005, p. 3).

216 In addition to radical disproportionality in school suspension and expulsions,  
217 school-to-prison pipeline work highlights how students of color are overrepresented  
218 in “soft” disability categories (Harry and Klingner 2006; Losen and Orfield 2002;  
219 McNally 2003; Smith & Erelles 2004), warranting two formal investigations  
220 (1982 & 2002) by the National Academy of Sciences. In *Why Are There So Many*  
221 *Minority Students in Special Education?* (2005), Harry and Klingner document how  
222 “soft” categories—that is, categories reliant on assessment practices that are much  
223 more subjective—are differentially interpreted across states, and researchers have  
224 found that these categories are clearly not applied uniformly within schools and  
225 districts. The use of each of these categories also shifts across time, a further  
226 indication of “a sign of the instability and ambiguity of the categories themselves”  
227 (Harry and Klingner 2006, p. 4). Not unlike the subjectivity of school-based  
228 disciplinary actions, where *disrespect* or *acting out* move children into the category  
229 of a disciplinary problem, a number of subjective factors are responsible for placing  
230 largely male youth of color in these soft disability categories. Classification as  
231 special education masks segregation, and pathologizing “students of color as  
232 disabled allows their continued segregation under a seemingly natural and justifiable  
233 label” (Reid and Knight 2006, p. 19). An entire special issue of *Educational*  
234 *Researcher* (2006) examined racial (and gendered) disproportionality in special  
235 education and aimed to invite readers to think about how these flexible practices of  
236 classification educationally disqualify certain communities.

237 Building from critical work on how disability places students on tracks toward  
238 under-education, related work examines schools as punishing sites within larger  
239 economic and political structures (Anyon 1980; Saltman and Gabbard 2003;  
240 Robbins 2008). Scholarship also analyzes the linkages between capitalism, and  
241 more currently, neoliberal policies and education, creating punishing educational  
242 futures (Anyon 2005; Apple 2010; Kumashiro 2008; Lipman 2004). Numerous  
243 smaller ethnographic studies document the gendered and racialized production of  
244 disposable youth (Ferguson 2000; López 2003; Winn 2010) and this research is  
245 inextricably linked to work that outlines the foundational inequities of public  
246 education in the U.S. by many including James Anderson (1988), Jeannie Oakes  
247 (1985) and William Watkins (2001). Of course, my summary is woefully ahistoric.

248 Significant scholarship—from Carter G. Woodson to bell hooks—continues to  
 249 identify the complex roles of white supremacy in education, highlighting the old  
 250 story of tracking and unequal access to educational opportunity for African  
 251 American, First Nations, and Latino students.

252 Investigations in overlapping fields also identifies that incarceration and  
 253 education are directly linked. Decreases in education correlate with higher rates  
 254 of incarceration, most dramatically for African American males (Petit and Western  
 255 2004). Research suggests that just one more year of high school would significantly  
 256 reduce incarceration (and crime) rates, and raising the male high school graduation  
 257 rate by one percent would result in the nation saving, by one economist’s analysis,  
 258 \$1.4 billion (Lochner and Moretti 2004). Numerous studies demonstrate that  
 259 education, in particular higher education while locked up, reduces recidivism (Fine  
 260 et al. 2001; Steurer et al. 2001; Taylor 1992; U.S. Department of Education 1995),  
 261 yet Pell Grants were removed in 1994 for people incarcerated. The Illinois  
 262 Consortium on Drug Policies has calculated that, in 2002, if post-secondary  
 263 programs were offered to incarcerated men and women, then Illinois could have  
 264 saved “between \$11.8 and \$47.3 million” from the reduced recidivism rates (Kane-  
 265 Willis et al. 2006, p. 4).

266 Networks and organization have emerged to focus research and resources around  
 267 the school-to-prison pipeline, to convene high-profile meetings and to translate  
 268 research into more accessible materials for mainstream audiences: Advancement  
 269 Project (<http://www.advancementproject.org> <http://www.stopschoolstojails.org/>);  
 270 American Civil Liberties Union ([http://www.aclu.org/racial-justice/school-prison-](http://www.aclu.org/racial-justice/school-prison-pipeline)  
 271 [pipeline](http://www.aclu.org/racial-justice/school-prison-pipeline)); Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice ([http://www.](http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/Projects/Project.aspx?id=100005)  
 272 [charleshamiltonhouston.org/Projects/Project.aspx?id=100005](http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/Projects/Project.aspx?id=100005)); Civil Rights Project/  
 273 Proyecto Derechos Civiles (<http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/>); Dignity in  
 274 Schools (<http://www.dignityinschools.org/>); and Southern Poverty Law Center  
 275 (<http://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/children-at-risk>). Advocacy organizations  
 276 that work on juvenile and educational justice issues in many states have developed  
 277 initiatives, for example the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana’s *Schools First!*  
 278 Project ([http://jjpl.org/new/?page\\_id=19](http://jjpl.org/new/?page_id=19)) centering the school-to-prison pipeline as  
 279 an organizational focus.

280 Grassroots and youth-centered community groups across the U.S. have placed  
 281 interrupting the schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track on their advocacy agenda. Youth-led  
 282 projects including Chicago’s *Blocks Together*, teacher-facilitated journals such as  
 283 *Rethinking Schools* and smaller conferences such as *Educational for Liberation*  
 284 have all provided leadership, analysis and movement building around challenging  
 285 discriminatory educational policies at the local and state level that track youth to  
 286 prisons. Notably, the “schools not jails” movement was initially a staunchly youth-  
 287 led movement, with a fierce critique of the “status quo of schooling”—including  
 288 non-relevant curriculum and a sharp analysis of the unequal forms of schooling  
 289 available to urban youth—yet some of this analysis gets lost in more mainstream  
 290 scholarship on the relationships between education and incarceration that simply  
 291 posits schooling as the antidote to carceral expansion, without linking the two  
 292 structures (Acey 2000).



## 293 Tensions for Scholarship Within the Field

294 With this quick summary of the field, I turn to highlight four specific challenges  
 295 involved in interrupting the school-to-prison nexus and building abolition futures.  
 296 I write this for audiences with at least one or two limbs in educational spaces:  
 297 students and teachers. These are both movement strategy and research questions,  
 298 primarily based from my local and national work, reading and engagement. These  
 299 tensions are ones I struggle with myself, and they are offered here in the service of  
 300 building stronger collective movements and paradigms for justice work. More  
 301 importantly, I offer these as central concepts to track for those committed to ending  
 302 our nation's over-investment in a carceral state, and ending the school-to-prison  
 303 pipeline.

304 These tensions are intersecting theoretical and movement building questions. (1)  
 305 How do we negotiate work that often centers youth or juveniles as "exceptional"  
 306 within the larger mess of the criminal justice system? (2) How do we negotiate  
 307 shifting state structures capable of appropriating our justice work? (3) Why is it  
 308 important to also focus labor on how to change and build practices and paradigms of  
 309 public safety that are not reliant on punishment, isolation and stigma? And finally,  
 310 (4) How do we center an intersectional lens in our organizing and research? For  
 311 each, I offer a short theorized summary, with brief examples where possible, of  
 312 what these questions resemble in practice.

## 313 Exceptionality, or the *Difference Difference* Makes

314 Research and organizing within the framework of the school-to-prison pipeline  
 315 struggles with the tensions involved in working with and challenging *a portion* of a  
 316 system and a structure that is flawed; this becomes particularly troubling as this  
 317 labor and focus is reliant on prioritizing a category, "youth," that is also constructed  
 318 and flexible. Scholarship and advocacy in this field often starts with a shared  
 319 understanding that youth are different than adults. This a priori case for a kind of  
 320 exceptionalism creates problems for both wider justice movements, and for work  
 321 with youth as well.

322 These categories—childhood, youth, juvenile, adult—are anything but natural or  
 323 static. Debates about where to draw the chronological (and culpable) line repeatedly  
 324 surface in mainstream media; less visible yet equally important is the evidence used  
 325 to rationalize any boundary by the media, "child savers," psychological experts and  
 326 other parties across the political spectrum. For example, "emerging adulthood," the  
 327 new development category that elongates adolescence, surfaced in 2010 in  
 328 mainstream media at the same time the Supreme Court debated the constitutionality  
 329 of sentencing juveniles to life without parole (LWOP) for non-murder crimes (the  
 330 death penalty for juveniles was abolished in the U.S. in 2005). Science and  
 331 experience were used to scaffold both constructions. "Emerging adulthood,"  
 332 psychologists identify, is demarcated by delay of "common" adult experiences—  
 333 employment, leaving the parental home, marriage, childbirth—and other seemingly  
 334 naturalized life-stage markers. In writing the Court's 6-3 decision to render LWOP



335 unconstitutional for those who commit crimes under age 18, the *New York Times*  
 336 cites Justice Stephens's decision:

337 "Knowledge accumulates," he wrote. "We learn, sometimes, from our  
 338 mistakes" (as cited in Liptak 2010).

339 Neurological research was also circulated in material that supported efforts to render  
 340 the death penalty unconstitutional for juveniles by the American Bar Association  
 341 (2004). Psychology, experience and neurology legitimate "delay," and are  
 342 organized as evidence that juveniles need protection and should not receive the  
 343 death penalty, or that 26-year-olds ("emerging adults") should be able to continue  
 344 to access their parents' health insurance and remain dependent on state or parental  
 345 management and intervention.

346 In particular, for youth, experience becomes a double bind. Remaining innocent  
 347 (the defining category of childhood) requires the negation of experience (sexual, life  
 348 and other), and therefore knowledge becomes tricky for children. As McDermott  
 349 et al. (2006) aptly point out in their research on the construction and circulation of  
 350 "learning disability" within educational spaces, the child can be the unit of concern,  
 351 but not the unit of analysis (2006, p. 12). When the child becomes the unit of  
 352 analysis the contextual factors that shape and produce this artifact, the child, and her  
 353 condition as "disabled," are erased.

354 Exceptionality and youth are also circulated in other arenas. Innocence and safety  
 355 (for select children only) are repeatedly deployed to expand policing and  
 356 surveillance. How many times at a meeting having to do with education or  
 357 criminal justice is the good of the children, or children's futures, raised? While  
 358 "protection" of "innocence" (of course only available to the few) is used to expand  
 359 the carceral state, anxieties surrounding the laboring futures for "our children" are  
 360 also often a key plank of prison expansion.<sup>2</sup> Yet, these political and economic  
 361 futures are always predicated on a particular racialized, heteronormative, gendered  
 362 logic. Clearly, those interested in prison construction are imagining futures where  
 363 their sons are on the "right" side of the prison bars, and not futures where their  
 364 daughters work in an all male prison. Childhood is *at the heart of prison expansion*  
 365 as false promises of safety and employment, particularly for our most "innocent"  
 366 (children) are repeatedly used to expand a prison nation.

367 Interestingly, where I have observed and felt this tension around youth,  
 368 criminality and exceptionalism most directly in the last year has been in relation to  
 369 work in immigration justice organizing—specifically surrounding the Development,  
 370 Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act). Living in a community  
 371 and working at a university with a large number of undocumented people, and as a  
 372 legal resident alien myself, has educated me about the U.S. border, and I have  
 373 participated in legalization movements since I arrived in the U.S. on a tourist visa.  
 374 First introduced in 2001, the DREAM Act was created to offer undocumented youth  
 375 potential pathways for legalization in the absence of any comprehensive

2FL01 <sup>2</sup> For a more extensive discussion on the local economics of prison expansion, see Gilmore (2007).  
 2FL02 Gilmore documents how a small California town, Corcoran, lobbied for a prison, and providing local  
 2FL03 economic futures for young people was offered as the rationale for a prison (p. 171–172).

376 immigration reform proposal. As this article goes to press, the 2010 DREAM Act  
 377 (there have been many iterations over the last 10 years) permits undocumented  
 378 youth who finish two years of community service or two years in the military and  
 379 are of “good moral character” access to potential pathways for legalization. While I  
 380 support the advocates for the DREAM Act, I also persistently raise questions. The  
 381 DREAM Act trades on tropes of “innocence” and “merit,” directly linked to  
 382 student identity. These strategies reinforce the idea that there are “real” criminals  
 383 and undeserving or guilty immigrants who should legitimately be denied access to  
 384 pathways for legalization. The DREAM Act (the 2010 version is also a de facto  
 385 racial and economic draft) also separates a population that typically accrues the  
 386 most sympathy—students—and provides this limited group access to pathways for  
 387 legalization thus possibly making it difficult to pass a wider legalization, initiative  
 388 for other undocumented groups that are less “attractive” including day laborers,  
 389 domestic workers and those over 30.

390 Justice movements struggle with exceptionality, or what is the difference that  
 391 makes a difference? Motherhood continues to be circulated in efforts to push for  
 392 changes in sentencing and conditions for women who are locked up. Narratives and  
 393 images of transwomen in men’s prisons who are denied access to hormones or the  
 394 right to serve their sentence in women’s institutions are circulated to instigate  
 395 change. These are critical and vital issues. Exceptionality, as noted, is particularly  
 396 prevalent in work related to the school-to-prison pipeline. We love children, want to  
 397 center children and youth as different from adults and our entire body of  
 398 developmental literature reinforces developmental differences. Yet, there are costs  
 399 to the deploying and framing of populations as different, special. This use of  
 400 difference can also limit other ways of knowing/knowledge and organizing. If  
 401 juveniles are protected because of immature brain development, does this make the  
 402 rest of us culpable and can only access punishment?

403 The challenge for those of us with extra time who are paid to think is to ask what  
 404 the circulation of these identities makes visible and what is obscured. Yet, as I write  
 405 this I am daily reminded of the unequal ways in which state and interpersonal  
 406 violence is deployed in our own lives and communities. “Disproportionality” does  
 407 not capture the reality of who is actively targeted for state and interpersonal  
 408 violence: women, queers and those gender non-conforming, poor people, brown–  
 409 red–black people, people with disabilities and/or others on the margins.

410 Nancy Fraser addresses this challenge directly in her work, writing about when  
 411 our tactics result in recognition but not redistribution (of resources, state systems,  
 412 and more) (Fraser 1997). For Fraser, justice strategies all too often agitate for  
 413 recognition (a liberal multicultural model), thus inviting additive responses that are  
 414 not capable of transforming systems of power, oppression and privilege.<sup>3</sup> In  
 415 addition, recognition can often only be on a single axis (race, gender or sexuality).  
 416 Asking juveniles or children to be viewed as different than adults does not transform  
 417 the larger contexts that punish particular communities. This is also the reform/  
 418 abolition question—in a different outfit. Abolition visions can get translated into

3FL01 <sup>3</sup> For example, simply asking select “good” gays to be recognized as equals by the state does not  
 3FL02 redistribute access to all the important resources attached, for example, to marriage.

419 reformist strategies because organizing can be about compromise, and the tactics  
 420 deployed attempt to trigger public feelings (outrage, sympathy, pity) that can limit  
 421 and constrain work. Public and private affect (and corresponding campaigns) are  
 422 often produced through the “specialness” of particular populations.<sup>4</sup> Organizing and  
 423 research on the school-to-prison nexus, with a center on youth, is particularly  
 424 challenged by the very framings that make this work and these interventions possible.

## 425 The Shifting State

426 As prison reform organizations lobby—particularly for populations afforded  
 427 “exceptionality” status, including pregnant women and juveniles—for “alterna-  
 428 tives” to incarceration, it is important to trace how these alternatives are created,  
 429 developed and implemented and to track the relationships of these alternatives to  
 430 the carceral state. The construction of alternatives to incarceration also offers us the  
 431 opportunity to engage with the changing conceptions of the state and the  
 432 corresponding ways identities are sutured, often through affect, to these new state  
 433 practices/formations. As political scientist James Ferguson argues, the state is not a  
 434 static entity: “The state, in this conception, is not the name of an actor, it is the name  
 435 of a way of tying together, multiplying, and coordinating power relations, a kind of  
 436 knotting or congealing of power” (1994, p. 273).

437 By alternatives to incarceration and punishment, I refer to a range of programs  
 438 like the “culture of calm” in Chicago Public Schools (Huston 2010), and more  
 439 widely, the limited moves in some school systems to include forms of restorative  
 440 justice, and the extension in many states to include boot camps and military  
 441 programs into their menu of public educational options. I also include the growing  
 442 number of programs that are often mandated for “at risk” youth: anger management  
 443 (men) and self-esteem (women). Academics and those invested in prison reform (or  
 444 educational reform) are often called to support these alternatives, and we often  
 445 evaluate, grant write and endorse these options because these are “alternatives” to  
 446 prison or detention for young people (Haney 2010, Carr 2010).

447 Yet these alternatives, provided by community-based, non-profit entities that  
 448 wield considerable power, participate in forming a neoliberal state capable of  
 449 “government from a distance” (Rose 1999). It is not immediately clear whether  
 450 these programs extend or soften the carceral state, or if they are alternatives. The  
 451 relationships between these programs and the state are nuanced. These alternatives  
 452 form networks of power that remind us that the decentralization key to neoliberal  
 453 policies does not mean that the state withdraws; rather, the state’s relationships and  
 454 abilities to negotiate power, to “govern” from a distance, shift and potentially  
 455 expand. A key concern is whether young people are made more vulnerable by  
 456 supporting and implementing, for example, the proliferation of anger management  
 457 programs in lieu of in-school detentions.

4FL01 <sup>4</sup> And I believe that this is how, in anti-prison movements, those “too bruised by history” (Berlant, as  
 4FL02 cited in Rhodes 2005, p. 402) such as those convicted of sexual assault or child pornography, get dropped  
 4FL03 out of the movement.

458 I use the geographer Jennifer Wolch's term, "shadow state," to describe the  
 459 foundations, non-profit organizations, for-profit entities and other non-governmental  
 460 forces that essentially fulfill functions that were once identified as the purview of the  
 461 state (Wolch 1990). Instances of the shadow state include when tax exempt private  
 462 foundations and not-for-profit corporations fund and run schools that are still legally  
 463 framed as public school (for example charter schools where students must be  
 464 admitted via lottery). Men and women are paroled from prison and receive housing  
 465 from religious non-profit associations and are court-mandated to counseling services  
 466 conducted by "in-training apprentices" from the local for-profit colleges and  
 467 institutes. These "service agencies," often staffed by women in low-paying non-  
 468 union jobs, do not have to be accountable to any public, just to its unelected board  
 469 members, or the invisible or too visible big-ticket donors. The constellation of these  
 470 organizations forms a shadow state to deliver central services, and also participates  
 471 in changing what counts as the state.

472 In the realm of alternatives to incarceration or punishment, arenas of service  
 473 continue to emerge, often linked as forms of therapeutic self-governance: anger  
 474 management programs, self-esteem workshops, etc. In her study of women locked  
 475 up in community-based alternatives to incarceration, and staff members who work  
 476 in these programs, Haney (2010) documents the strength and growth of therapeutic  
 477 governance, or the augmentation of "recovery" programs and cultures within the  
 478 carceral state, particularly for populations, such as women, pregnant teens and  
 479 juveniles. These forms of therapeutic governance are predicated on the assumption  
 480 that the body at stake is not eligible for a rights-based discourse, but instead requires  
 481 forms of governance to manage an outlaw's desires and feelings. I am particularly  
 482 interested in how these new non-profit organizations—or hybrid or satellite states as  
 483 Haney terms them (2010)—manage affect. In Haney's work, the therapeutics of  
 484 carceral self-governance are explicitly gendered and racialized and naturalize a  
 485 correspondingly gendered, heteronormative and racialized dependency discourse.

486 Yet, it would be a mistake to ascribe too much power to these programs. And  
 487 while I am not romanticizing resistance of the oppressed, in my years of work  
 488 ventriloquation is a key skill to negotiate governmental structures, such as teachers,  
 489 social workers, welfare or workfare caseworkers, principals or truancy and parole  
 490 officers on a daily basis. But, simultaneously, when recovery culture (anger  
 491 management, self-esteem or twelve-step programs) is the only healing paradigm  
 492 available—these programs (sometimes) work. And by work I mean that youth have  
 493 a place to stay, some support to get clean and tools (largely from each other) to  
 494 negotiate the new punitive state practices.

495 Crucial questions remain as we move into this terrain: How do these programs  
 496 facilitate or advance our collective goals of liberation? How able is the state to  
 497 appropriate "do-gooder" desires to extend the state's reach, in particular those  
 498 targeted to juveniles? For example, when "community" programs such as Alcoholics  
 499 Anonymous become court mandated and/or state organized, potentially radical,  
 500 democratic and healing practices are transformed. When schools start to offer  
 501 restorative justice practices, and these practices are tied to juvenile justice systems,  
 502 there must be assessments about what is won and what is lost with these moves. These  
 503 should not be investigations that limit us but rather challenge and question our work.

504 **Building Safe Communities and Schools**

505 Parents want security guards and surveillance cameras in schools because they  
 506 perceive schools as unsafe spaces. Teachers want detention and a school discipline  
 507 officer because they don't know what to do with students in their classrooms who  
 508 harm themselves or their peers. People often want more police on the streets and  
 509 tougher laws because they want to feel safe. People want, need and deserve safe  
 510 schools and communities, but what makes these spaces *feel* and *be* safe or unsafe?

511 The prevailing contemporary carceral logic recycles the false notion that safety  
 512 can be achieved through essentially more of the same: more guards, fences,  
 513 surveillance, suspensions, punishment, etc. Inviting abolition futures pushes us to  
 514 name how this “more of the same”—building more youth detention centers and  
 515 prisons, funneling more youth into suspensions or expulsions, placing more police  
 516 and cameras in schools—will not make schools safer, or our communities stronger.  
 517 We must reclaim definitions of safety. Scholars that are invested in work that  
 518 interrupts and transforms the school-to-prison nexus must build other futures and  
 519 participate in rethinking safety.

520 Building safer schools requires challenging mass incarceration policies but also  
 521 grappling directly with questions and feelings of safety, and in particular, how a  
 522 gendered and often racialized fear (for example, of sexual assault of white women  
 523 and children) is publicly deployed to augment the prison system. Our classrooms are  
 524 not immune from these stereotypes and fears. Our schools receive and can  
 525 reproduce powerful mythologies: violent teenaged super-predators, crack babies,  
 526 “bad and lazy” parents and disordered and dangerous youth.

527 The work to challenge mass incarceration as a public safety strategy is also made  
 528 difficult by how “common sense” the ideas of both incarceration and exclusion  
 529 appear, as well as the real lived experiences of violence and unsafety of many. But  
 530 shifting from a punishment- and detention-based approach to a definition of safety  
 531 that incorporates relationships and community inside and outside our schools  
 532 requires engagement with the lived experience of being and feeling safe. This is  
 533 complicated and vital work. We need research and organizing that explores what  
 534 schools and communities are doing to create safe and strong communities without  
 535 relying on more detention rooms, truancy officers, surveillance cameras and school  
 536 security guards.<sup>5</sup>

537 Unpacking carceral logic from feelings and experiences of being unsafe or fearful  
 538 can demonstrate how punishment logic masks the real question: how do we build  
 539 stronger and safer communities? This is local and affective work, and we must do  
 540 this together. As many, from Audre Lorde (1984) to Feel Tank Chicago point out,  
 541 politics and political engagement is a “world of orchestrated feeling” (Feel Tank  
 542 2008, ¶3). Addressing questions of fear and safety in a landscape where sexual and  
 543 other forms of harm are endemic is difficult, because building responses to these

5FL01 <sup>5</sup> Formal and ad hoc groups are focused on this nationally and I track their work: Story Telling and  
 5FL02 Organizing Project/Creative Inventions and the Audre Lorde Project/Safe Outside the System. Locally,  
 5FL03 I am involved with Project Nia, a group providing transformative justice. Accountability is difficult. We  
 5FL04 don't have great tools but abolitionist organizations are at the forefront of trying to imagine and build new  
 5FL05 tools.



544 forms of state and interpersonal violence necessitates multifaceted labors. We must  
 545 consider how our responses mobilize disgust, defensiveness and pity, and to  
 546 subsequently use this thinking to shape our organizing efforts. In schools, these  
 547 practices are no different, and we need allies willing to focus research and other  
 548 labors on the fledgling restorative and transformative justice practices that are  
 549 happening in schools: peace circles, peer juries, motivational interviewing and many  
 550 other forms of building relationships and community. Ending the school-to-prison  
 551 pipeline requires building other sustainable frameworks for public safety.

## 552 **Negotiating Intersectionality**

553 An intricacy in my organizing, service providing and scholarship is the challenge to  
 554 practice and center intersectional work within a context where our labor and  
 555 analysis are often reactive, while juggling to make short-term reforms within a  
 556 landscape that requires longer-term structural and paradigm shifts. Legal theorist  
 557 Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the term “intersectionality” to refer to the multiple  
 558 ways that power and privilege intersect (Crenshaw 1994). Intersectionality  
 559 recognizes how identities—ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, race—are mutually  
 560 constitutive. For example, white supremacy is not an adequate frame to name the  
 561 oppression of black women because oppression is simultaneously experienced based  
 562 on class and gender. Thinking through white supremacy requires an understanding  
 563 of how heteronormativity and misogyny are central to animating and reconfiguring  
 564 white supremacy. An intersectional lens, in analysis or organizing, is tough as we  
 565 may understand ourselves and how we are embodied as intersectional—for  
 566 example, as a queer black transman or as a disabled woman—but this is not how our  
 567 civil rights and justice movements and our service organizations are typically  
 568 organized.

569 As an example, I point to the scarcity of intersectional work within the school-to-  
 570 prison pipeline, specifically work that includes gender and sexuality within an  
 571 analysis, or within organizing. This is particularly problematic when sexuality and  
 572 gender are central to the movement of youth, in particular youth of color, into  
 573 incarceration. Sexual and gender violence towards girls shapes school pushout, and  
 574 researchers have linked interpersonal sexual violence as a “powerful indicator” of  
 575 future incarceration for young girls (Simkins et al. 2004; Winn 2010). Sexually  
 576 righteous young women, including pregnant and parenting teens, are offered no  
 577 protection for their sexual lives in school and are punished if they exceed the state’s  
 578 impoverished expectations (Fine and McClelland 2006). Not surprisingly, research  
 579 identifies that gay, bisexual and lesbian youth are more likely to be punished by  
 580 courts and schools, even though they are less likely than straight peers to engage in  
 581 serious crimes, and “consensual same-sex acts more often trigger punishments than  
 582 equivalent opposite sex behaviors” (Himmelstein and Bruckner 2011, p. 50).<sup>6</sup>

6FL01 <sup>6</sup> This research by Himmelstein and Bruckner follows a decade of work by advocacy organizations  
 6FL02 including the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) that clearly outlines how LGBTQ  
 6FL03 and gender non-conforming youth are also disproportionately targeted for suspension and expulsions and  
 6FL04 also denied the right to an education (for example, see Kosciw and Diaz 2009).

583 For example, in 2006, K.K. Logan, a teenaged transwoman in Gary, Indiana, was  
 584 told she could not wear a dress to her prom, only a “nice ladies pantsuit,” and in  
 585 2010 Constance McMillen was told she could bring a same-sex date or wear a  
 586 tuxedo to her Mississippi high school prom (Advocate Editors 2011; Strom 2010).  
 587 While frequently erased from mainstream media or not viewed as substantive issues,  
 588 Logan and Constance offer us high-profile examples of lesbian, gay, bisexual,  
 589 transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) and non-gender conforming youth resisting the  
 590 gendered and sexualized forms of punishment in their schools. Scholarship and  
 591 organizing on the school-to-prison nexus must account for the myriad of ways in  
 592 which schools actively discriminate, and concurrently push out, LGBTQ and non-  
 593 gender conforming youth and how sexual violence targeted at women participates in  
 594 augmenting the school-to-prison nexus.

595 My goal is not to *add* queer lives and bodies, or to engage in a hierarchy of  
 596 categories or oppressions, or to advance homonormativity—but to stress how  
 597 gender and sexuality are always central to how we understand the school-to-prison  
 598 nexus. In many areas of educational justice work, gender and sexuality are still  
 599 ignored, viewed as superfluous or detractors to the real issue (race or class) or as  
 600 unnecessary research complications or variables (Meiners and Quinn 2009;  
 601 McCready 2004; Rofes 2005).

602 Understanding intersectionality is incredibly important as we think through our  
 603 strategies to respond to injustices in schools and communities. A failure to  
 604 encompass an intersectional lens in our analysis of the problems or in our  
 605 intervention strategies can result in the animation of significant and longer-term  
 606 structural problems. Or, short-term good intentions can lead to unintended  
 607 consequences down the line. For example, as anti-bullying legislation and policies  
 608 gain recent measures of success, specifically those that recognize the decades-long  
 609 failures to provide even a measure of “safety” for lesbian, gay, bisexual,  
 610 transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) and gender non-conforming youth in schools,  
 611 all too often these policies heavily sanction perpetrators. The turn to a criminal-  
 612 ization of perpetrators of this “anti-gay” violence in schools results in more school  
 613 sanctions, more punishment and potentially more pushout in an educational context  
 614 where school disciplinary actions disproportionately harm youth of color. Our  
 615 “remedies” have collateral damages. In part, this is also the limitation of tinkering  
 616 around the edges of paradigms, and the setback of small-scale reforms, rather than  
 617 structural and systemic transformations. Intervention in the movement of youth of  
 618 color from schools to prisons is intersectional work.

## 619 **Collectivizing for Abolition Futures**

620 I have attempted to describe some of the difficult places I see at this moment in anti-  
 621 prison scholarship and organizing, specifically the work linked to the school-to-  
 622 prison nexus. As this article summarizes, our weakness include tensions around  
 623 exceptionality, specifically our desires to center children and youth, and concur-  
 624 rently how carceral practices continue to change the face of the state and require  
 625 us to be vigilant and to track how alternatives to incarceration are organized.



626 We are also challenged to build sustainable and viable decarceration initiatives and  
 627 to develop ways to make schools and communities safer, without augmenting a  
 628 carceral state, and to address state and interpersonal violence, while integrating  
 629 LGBTQ lives and feminist standpoints.

630 The transformations required appear overwhelming. As articles in this special  
 631 issue highlight, there is a wide range of organizing and scholarship underway, but  
 632 the depth and breadth of the transformation needed is tremendous. In their survey of  
 633 legal reforms surrounding the school-to-prison pipeline, Hewitt et al. (2010)  
 634 repeatedly remind readers that neither the “right” analysis nor legal reform will  
 635 create just communities or schools, but rather movements and organizing might.  
 636 I find it helpful, when I think I am stuck and there is not much I can do, to think  
 637 about how social change works, and to consider the kinds of roles possible for  
 638 university-based workers.

639 Indigenous rights scholar and activist Andrea Smith invites activist scholars to  
 640 see ourselves as workers in justice movements before scholarship, and names the  
 641 importance of collectivizing and being able to recognize ourselves and build  
 642 cultures within universities:

643 The point is that if we are going to challenge the individualist system, we need  
 644 to engage in collective action through relationships built on mutual  
 645 responsibility and accountability. The system can handle thousands of  
 646 “oppositional” academics who do work on their own; it is not until these  
 647 thousands begin to act collectively that the system can be challenged (Smith  
 648 2009, p. 41)

649 I imagine Smith’s call for collectivizing could take many forms, because we  
 650 know that research is not confined to colleges and universities, nor is there a best or  
 651 only recipe for producing justice-mobilizing scholarship inside institutions (if only  
 652 it was hermeneutics or statistics that could snap away white supremacy). Instead,  
 653 Smith asks us to imagine and to practice collective models, and to build and  
 654 strengthen collective pathways for justice work in our institutions. These initiatives  
 655 could be framed methodologically, if, for example, instead of producing more  
 656 research on the experience of youth behind bars, or more reports on why young  
 657 people are locked up, we shifted our gaze to studying up (Nader 1972) and  
 658 organized to document how organizations and institutions work to naturalize  
 659 carceral outcomes for select youth.

660 Perhaps more importantly, Smith’s charge suggests the myriad of assets we  
 661 possess—not simply research skills but other labor, research and pedagogical  
 662 tools—and asks us who we hold ourselves accountable to at the end of the day—our  
 663 scholarship or justice movements? Generally, scholars are professionalized  
 664 to produce academic products to get and to keep our jobs, to build our expertise  
 665 and to advance our disciplines or the field. But what if we built networks that moved  
 666 us to ask—how am I accountable to movements? To a larger collective that is  
 667 struggling to make a way out of no way? If we are conducting work with human  
 668 subjects we must go through an Institutional Review Board (IRB) process (generally  
 669 to protect the institution from any liability). What if we developed processes that  
 670 asked the question—how is the work linked to other justice-mobilizing scholarship?



671 Or, how will this work redistribute resources or access to life pathways? Changing  
 672 to whom and how we are accountable can move us away from “research of  
 673 convenience” to research that responds to express material, political or historical  
 674 need(s). Our networks could develop pathways between organizations, people and  
 675 institutions to focus work. For example, these networks could channel resources,  
 676 graduate students who want experience doing research, with people and organiza-  
 677 tions that need this labor. Collectivizing moves against so much of what the  
 678 academy emphasizes—individual expertise and success (or failure)—but as  
 679 resources continue to diminish inside universities for justice work, pooling our  
 680 labors is a strength. This is how we build justice movements, abolition democracies  
 681 and end the school-to-prison nexus.

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