Educational Justice Work
Resisting Our Expanding Carceral State

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I start this discussion of the expanding role of incarceration in the U.S. landscape and the pedagogical power of prisons within neoliberalism with a description of one piece of my anti-prison work that embodies the failures of our public institutions at this political moment. For almost 10 years, I have been coordinating and teaching in an alternative high school for formerly incarcerated men and women. Several years ago, at St. Leonard’s Adult High School, where we offer adults a second chance at earning a high school diploma, we started a “college and career night” to provide students with information about accessing post-secondary education. Students, men and women with still raw, or in some cases old, histories of incarceration, usually want to hear from representatives of local community colleges, drug and alcohol-abuse counselor training programs, and truck driving schools, and are generally interested in trade apprenticeships and other job training initiatives. Our students make no requests for information about medical, law, dental, teaching, or business schools; if we had south-facing windows in our classroom, then the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) would be visible from our learning space, but we have no such window, and we receive no requests and do not schedule representatives from UIC, or Northwestern University, or the University of Chicago, or Loyola University, or any of the other public and private “elite” institutions in Chicago. Even though these schools sometimes provide their students as tutors for our students, the unspoken and tacit consensus among St. Leonard’s students (and those of us who organize the school) is that institutions like UIC are impenetrable fortresses. Even my public and relatively open access university, Northeastern Illinois University, seems out of reach; institutions outside of Chicago might as well not exist. For example, “going downstate” in Illinois, an expression that generally refers to upper middle-class families venturing south from the greater Chicago area to visit the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign or the Illinois State University in Normal, means something completely different to our students and their families and friends, for whom the phrase signifies being shipped down to prisons located in the state’s rural southern communities. Therefore, on the occasion of trying to support the hard-working students of St. Leonard’s Adult High School to exercise their right to access an education, we collide, again, with the reality that education in America often functions like what can only be called a caste system.

Despite these structural impediments, the representatives from the admissions or recruitment departments of colleges that attend our college night, and the many job developers who
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come as well, display patience and generosity. Year after year, I watch our participants anxiously press them with questions about programs for part-time students, access to financial aid and child-care, restrictions on services or programs for those with felony and other convictions, and their records on successful job placements. Even when supported by the contacts formed at these events, it will be extremely difficult for most of our students to consider even these “affordable” and/or open access job training and academic programs. For some, without stable and low-cost housing, they will not be able to maintain or regain custody of, let alone provide daycare for, their children, thus making night school a virtual impossibility. Their non-living-wage jobs, often physically exhausting, leave little time for school and provide barely enough cash to make rent, let alone plan for a better future. Others, because of the need to work, can only attend classes on a part-time basis and so are shut out of most financial aid. And, most infuriating to me, despite analytic brilliance, powerful poetry and art-making abilities, and/or sophisticated financial skills (incomprehensible to those of us who have never had to sleep for a week in a car while living on a twenty), many lack what Jesse Jackson has called the “cash language,” and so will fail to place on admissions tests into “regular” English or math classes, meaning instead that they must take, and pay for, two or three “remedial” classes (Jackson as cited in Christensen, 1990, p. 37). Ostensibly offered to help under-trained students make the leap to college-level work, these classes also cost money our students often do not have and often reinforce students’ anxieties that they are not college material, not competent.

I will confess that on our college nights (and, increasingly, other evenings as well), I do a bad job of tethering my rage that the stratospherically wealthy local universities— institutions that hoard resources and are seemingly unaccountable for the way they concentrate power and privilege along class and race lines—do not have to be present and respond to this audience. I also realize, however, that at the end of the day, my rage is self-indulgent and our students are better pragmatists than I: they do what they must to survive, even if that means long-term educational planning takes a back seat to short-term employment needs. Still, on my optimistic days, I think about the successes: out of every graduating class of 15–20 students, perhaps three women make the transition to community college immediately, and usually a couple of students make that leap a year or two later. During bleaker moments, I know that Malcolm X Community College, less than a half mile from our high school, might as well be on another planet.

I relate this story because, while colleges and universities are often inaccessible for my formerly incarcerated students, other public institutions are more receptive to this crowd and are much more generously endowed by the state. As of May 25, 2007 (the most recent data available from the Illinois Department of Corrections), Illinois housed over 45,472 adults in 36 prisons, work camps, and other centers of detention. These state facilities, the majority built and opened in the 1980s and 90s, are paid for by tax dollars and warehouse increasing numbers of our neighbors, lovers, sisters, brothers, and parents. Consider, for example, the Illinois “supermax” Tamms prison that opened in 1998, as the Illinois Department of Corrections (2002) states, to contain the “worst of the worst behavioral problems of the department” (¶ 20). Tamms is one of the priciest facilities in Illinois (a construction cost of $120,000 per bed), and even while critics have labeled supermaxes as literal factories of mental illness, in 2008 the state of Illinois paid roughly $59,000 per year for each prisoner condemned to Tamms (Parsons, 1998, 1999). The same state that will not invest in my students’ educational opportunities will not hesitate to spend $59,000 a year on sending them, allegedly the worst of the worst, to Tamms and other expensive penal facilities.

As fiscal restraint and accountability are the frequent responses to any demand for increased public educational expenditures, our extraordinary public investment in the prison-industrial complex, a term used to refer to the expanding economic and political contexts of the correc-
tions industry (increasing privatization of prisons and the contracting out of prison labor, the political and lobbying power of the corrections officers union, the framing of prisons and jails as a growth industry in the context of deindustrialization), is striking (Davis, 2003, 2005). These “savage ironies,” as Paul Street documents (2003, p. 34), of social welfare dis-investment and carceral augmentation, are in full display in Illinois, where, in the last 25 years, the state has built over 20 new prisons. According to the Illinois Consortium on Drug Policies (ICDP), between 1985 and 2000, state appropriations for higher education in Illinois increased 30% while corrections appropriations increased over 100% (Kane-Willis, Janichek, & Clark, 2006, p. 13). Between 1984 and 2000, across all states and the District of Columbia, state spending on prisons was six times the increase of spending on higher education (Justice Policy Institute, 2002). The discrepancies are also evident at the K-12 level. In Illinois, the cost of incarcerating one adult is about “four and a half times the cost of one child’s annual [K-12] education” (Kane-Willis et al., 2006, p. 13). The state is therefore increasingly shifting its burden of financial support away from its educational institutions and toward its penal institutions. Thus, “between 1970 and 2001, the Illinois prison population increased more than 500 percent, from 7,326 to 44,348 people,” placing Illinois among the top 10 states in terms of prison population in the United States (Kane-Willis et al., 2006, p. 13). And so, even while affirmative action is increasingly contested in the public arenas of education and employment, it is aggressively promoted in another public venue: corrections (Britton, 2003, pp. 204–208). In 1999, 992 African-American males were awarded undergraduate degrees in Illinois while approximately 7,000 were released from its prisons and jails, and in 2001, Illinois had approximately 20,000 more African American men in prison than in college or university (Kane-Willis et al., 2006, p. 13). These figures indicate how the state’s systematic investment in prisons is exacerbating long-standing inequalities by shifting resources from education to imprisonment, from empowerment to incarceration—hence literally building a punishing democracy.

This “savage irony” of investing state monies in punishment while refusing to invest in the educational programs and institutions that could lower crime runs counter to common sense, for research clearly documents that supporting students who choose to increase their educational levels reduces the need for prisons and jails, costing taxpayers less in the long-run than mass incarceration (Petit & Western, 2004; Taylor, 1992; Steurer, Smith, & Tracy, 2001). But since when has financial common sense shaped public policy? For example, while 1998 capped five years of marginal but steady increases in budgetary advances for higher education in Illinois, the 90s were also marked by heightened concerns about accountability and fiscal responsibly. Yet, in the rush to streamline academic offerings and be cost-effective, there was no thought to offer college courses in prison or to work to reinstate Pell Grants (removed in 1994) for people incarcerated, even when research documents that post-secondary education has the highest rate of reducing recidivism. Indeed, the ICDP has calculated that, in 2002, if post-secondary programs were offered to incarcerated men and women, then Illinois could have saved “between $11.8 and $47.3 million” from the reduced recidivism rates (Kane-Willis et al., 2006, p. 4). “Get Tough on Crime” rhetoric thus pushes counter-productive legislation and budget choices that, when combined, lead to dis-investment in the one life choice that we know actually reduces crime and recidivism: education.

Acknowledging this relationship between prisons and schools in turn obliges us to think about questions of our personal and institutional accountability. That is, I am interested in asking how those of us with positions and stakes in higher education (as students, staff, teachers, and leaders), participate in animating institutions that dehumanize others. This is not just the prisons, but our own colleges and universities. Thus I try below to explain the neoliberal economics of anti-development, or how the planning surrounding prison siting, construction, and
use tends to “further the under-development of regions” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 179) and how this devastates some communities while enriching others, and privatizes public spaces in the guise of promoting “safety.” I also want to encourage readers to recognize their own place within these questions. As Paul Street (2003) argues, those of us committed to social justice must seek “a general redistribution of resources from privileged and often fantastically wealthy persons to those most penalized from birth by America’s long and intertwined history of inherited class and race privilege” (p. 38). Following Street, and thinking again of my students at St. Leonard’s Adult High School, it is important to ask: if we take de-carceration movements seriously, how must our allegiances and relationships to our universities and colleges change? How can we re-distribute the resources and life-choices allocated to the supposed “best of the best” and “worst of the worst”? To begin answering those questions, I turn below to an analysis of how neoliberal economics interweave with the legacies of White supremacy and the prison-industrial complex.

From a Welfare to a Carceral State

Ever since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, bipartisan public sentiment has agitated to reduce the financial burden of government on the people, to have “smarter” government, to try, paraphrasing Reagan, to “get big government off the backs of the working people.” While this drive to shrink big government may, for some advocates, be motivated by an honest desire to lower taxes or to reduce the role and the cost of government in everyday life, hence supposedly opening the way for more efficient entrepreneurial development, for others these same claims amount to a useful lie, a persuasive bait-and-switch. For when some politicians and their supporters describe shrinking big government, they frequently mean cutting specific components of government services, typically social services for the poor and people of color, even while drastically inflating government spending in other areas. This economic and political reframing, advanced by government, involves public polices and also larger identity shifts.

This shift towards becoming a punishing democracy has not only transformed the budgets of many government agencies but has also changed the goals and functions of these agencies. For example, the enforcement arm of the INS has grown—it is now called Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and has been subsumed by the Department of Homeland Security—yet that agency’s service and assistance components have shrunk. Indeed, in their discussion of the reframing of the welfare state into a neoliberal state, Rebecca Bohrman and Naomi Murakawa (2005) argue that

welfare retrenchment and punishment expansion represent opposite trends in state spending, but they rely on the same ideology. This ideology holds that the liberal welfare state corrodes personal responsibility, divorces work from reward, and lets crime go without punishment; consequently the lenient welfare regime attracts opportunistic immigrants and cultivates criminal values. (p. 110)

To be anti-big government in this climate is to oppose offering welfare benefits to those with drug felony convictions, but not to oppose the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security. It means opposing spending tax dollars on inner-city schools, but not on the prisons that will house the children failed by our educational system (I exclude here “anti-big government” organizations such as Americans For Tax Reform, or certain civil libertarians, who tend to be remarkably consistent in wanting to de-fund police and the welfare state). These twin shifts are not coincidental or arbitrary; rather, they are the hallmarks of neoliberalism, which pursues the wholesale re-making of nation-states and economies through the intertwined practices of
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Deregulation and privatization, thus supposedly fueling the rise of a now un-encumbered free market—which of course leads to the decimation of the public sphere. In this sense, neoliberalism in the United States has been forged not through coups or military might, but, as David Harvey (2005) states, through the “long march” of corporations, media, think-tanks, and other powerful forces that have sought not only to change economic and political policies but the cultural understandings that ground our relationship to democracy and everyday life itself (p. 40). Indeed, from pursuing deregulation and privatization to waging imperial wars to supporting mass incarceration, these shifts in the economic and political spheres have prompted transformations in the “private” sphere as well, including how we understand our identities, families, emotions, and relations to the state (Duggan, 2003).

Demands to reduce big government have always been popular in the United States, but they possessed little traction after World War II, as White males took full advantage of public federal initiatives, especially the GI Bill and the federal subsidization of suburban housing. Because they benefited directly from such New Deal-influenced programs, millions of White men favored government programs that enabled educational opportunities and economic mobility. But the global economic changes of the 1970s, fueling what some observers have called a phase of de-industrialization in the United States, or what Elizabeth Blackmar (2005) has called “lagging capitalism,” provided an opening for those who favored neoliberalism rather than New Deal policies (p. 66). Entrenched in the middle class, the same White men who had once reaped the benefits of New Deal programs now turned against them, seeing the same assistance that helped them as unnecessary “handouts” to others. Coupled with these economic shifts, the debacles of Vietnam and Watergate fueled increasing distrust of the government, hence stimulating assaults on the welfare state. Trade union membership, environmental regulations, and welfare and social services, far from providing a common or a civil society, were constructed as limits on both individual rights and the “free” market. Government morphed into being antithetical to free individual progress, and the free market, framed as “naturally” superior to ineffective and artificial public bureaucracies, became a nameless entity that could not bear responsibility for social or economic inequities. Private was now superior to public; as Blackmar observes, neoliberals argued that “common property offered no incentives to labor, and without incentives to labor, society faced the problem of ‘free riders’ and ‘shirkers,’ two groups who turned the public domain itself into a wasteful commons by taking something for nothing” (p. 70). From this neoliberal perspective, government was taking freedom from individuals; personal responsibility thus became the watchword of those who sought to destroy social welfare policies. Economic restructuring was also a particular cultural politics that required and produced identity categories (Davis, 2005; Duggan, 2003).

To understand how these neoliberal transformations in the U.S. economy and culture impacted the prison-industrial complex, this desire to shrink big government must be approached through the larger context of the history of White supremacy and misogyny. Most people of color and women were specifically excluded from participation in the original structuring of the New Deal welfare state. Union membership, social security, and housing assistance either explicitly excluded most communities of color and women or did not apply to those categories of work that were available only to communities of color and women, thus impacting their ability to advance their careers, accumulate wealth, and participate in the public sphere. The Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s involved widespread challenges to White supremacy, in part by demanding that these programs (and other basic forms of civic life) be extended. For example, African Americans and their allies fought for access to the Federal Housing Authority’s resources, to equal public education, to the voting booth, and more. However, as these groups worked to remove formal barriers to equality, resistance emerged from many quarters;
deindustrialization thus coincided with a political backlash against the rights-based movement of “minority” groups. This combination of a backlash against the victories of the Civil Rights Movement, deindustrialization, and a rising culture of fear led to a new configuration where African Americans were increasingly targeted as opponents of the state and criminal monsters. The rise of neoliberalism therefore coincided with the production of a new racism based less on political disenfranchisement than on using an ascendant prison-industrial complex to enforce the gendered norms of White supremacy (Winant, 2004).

The historical transformations noted here do not indicate that the state is “withering,” or that a now-liberated market dominates, but that the state’s responsiveness to capital is strengthening (Gilmore, 2007). The so-called “downsizing” of big government has, in fact, resulted in various government agencies playing a greater role in the surveillance of the poor and marginalized. Far from reducing big government, these shifts in the role of the state, produced in tandem with global economic changes, have translated into dramatic increases in the government’s roles in the lives of the poor. For example, the Pew Center on the State’s “Public Safety Performance Project” documents that at the start of 2008, American prisons or jails held 2,319,258 adults, accounting for 1 prisoner for every 99.1 men and women (Pew Center on the States Public Safety Performance Project, 2008). This unprecedented ratio of incarceration indicates that government is not “down-sizing”; rather, it is increasingly regulating the lives of poor men and women, especially those of color, hence reinforcing long-standing gendered and racist stereotypes.

**Prisons as Public Pedagogy**

Global changes in the modes of production and in the domestic social welfare state produce new meanings attached to public and private spaces, including the feelings that accompany these shifts. This re-making of public emotions is a crucial consequence and pre-requisite of how prisons function as public pedagogy. For while Americans have been taught to fear crime and criminals, they have also been systematically denied information about the very people in question. Correctional facilities are frequently isolated from the public by their physical location—far from urban centers or public transportation. Prisons, jails, and other detention centers are extremely difficult or impossible to enter, and communication to and from prisons is regulated or controlled.

Indeed, as public institutions protected from public scrutiny, prisons are an “absent site,” a social institution that anthropologist Lorna Rhodes (2004) argues is represented through fetishized details and stereotypical fragments used to invoke racialized fears. The saturation of representations of violence in mainstream media, coupled with this absence of representations of the realities of life for those in prison, turns prisons into mythical places of terror:

Looming cellblocks, stone-faced guards, dangerous and deranged felons: these tropes tell us in advance what to expect of prison. Allen Feldman writes of what he calls “cultural anesthesia”: the fact that we are bombarded with images representing all kinds of violence but are also able, by means of these same images, to evade the disturbing physicality and immediacy of violence itself. Many aspects of the contemporary representation of crime and punishment carry the danger of this kind of anesthesia. One consequence is that prison becomes an “abstract site” in the public imagination precisely through the fetishization of its concrete details. (p. 8)

This absence and abstraction means that the public depends on mainstream media to supply information about prisons and those within prisons, yet corporate media offer audiences very particular images and tools to interpret these individuals and institutions (Rapping, 2003).
It is not just media representations of prisons that function pedagogically. From COPS to Law & Order, CSI, and Court TV, popular culture participates in the construction of public consciousness surrounding our criminal justice system. Rapping (2003), in Law and Justice as Seen on TV, writes that mass media has “chosen crime as the issue and criminals as the enemy against whom we as Americans can most readily and passionately unite against” (p. 264). Mainstream media create and define “crime” and represent “commonsense” about who should be feared. The techniques used are obvious and effective:

Among these are the construction of criminal stereotypes; presentation of opinion as fact, masking of opinion by seeking out expert sources who will agree with their preformed opinions; use of value loaded terminology; selective presentation of fact; management of information through framing and editing techniques; and vague references to unnamed officials or “those close to criminal justice theories and policies.” As a result, many Americans support the “War on Crime” with passion. They are determined to keep themselves safe in what they perceived as a social landscape filled with mass murderers run amok, with teenage “superpredators,” and with murder and mayhem around every corner. In reality, statistics show a dramatically declining crime rate. (pp. 72–73)

Mass media operate in part as pedagogue, maintaining a public culture of fear that supports public policies, or more conservatively, this fear maintains an active public indifference or ignorance around the establishment and the impact of regressive and punitive policies and laws. These representations also have wider consequences as they shape mainstream understandings about our justice system and its role in society. Typically, mainstream shows advance discourses around victims’ rights that naturalize the role of prisons and incarceration and solidify frameworks about innocence and evil, or, victim and perpetrator, that do nothing to address the violence of the crime or the realities of those impacted. Representations instruct us that public space is unsafe, that a sex offender is potentially lurking in every playground and school, that drug dealers stalk every corner, that crime is everywhere. In short, these images traffic in fear and enemies, and thus shape the public feelings needed to justify the maintenance and even augmentation of our punishing democracy.

The dismantling of social welfare programs and the expansion of the prison-industrial complex therefore depend upon the maintenance and reinvention of long-standing public tropes about race and gender. Downsizing of the welfare state is required because of all the free-loaders that take advantage of the state’s lax generosity; concurrently, the subsequent expansion of the punitive functions of the state is required to contain the threat of imminent violence launched by those individually irresponsible losers who are unable to climb the social ladder. The stereotypical characters driving such thinking represent very old stories in the United States, as Lubiano (1992) observes:

Categories like “black woman,” “black women,” or particular subsets of those categories, like “welfare mother/queen,” are not simply social taxonomies, they are recognized by the national public as stories that describe the world in particular and politically loaded ways—and that is exactly why they are constructed, reconstructed, manipulated, and contested. They are, like so many other social narratives and taxonomic social categories, part of the building blocks of “reality” for many people; they suggest something about the world; they provide simple, uncomplicated, and often wildly (and politically damaging) inaccurate information about what is “wrong” with some people, with the political economy of the United States. (pp. 330–331)
Welfare freeloaders manifest in the mass media as “lazy black mothers” or “illegal alien families,” although data consistently illustrates the same rates of welfare use across race at every socio-economic level (Hancock, 2004). Bohrman and Murakawa (2005) summarize that “less than 1 percent of surveyed immigrants move to the United States primarily for social services”; moreover, “fear of deportation” and confusion about eligibility mean that immigrants are less likely to use state resources (p. 119). The long-standing racial narratives that teach white Americans to fear certain others are therefore at odds with the facts, meaning that they resonate not because of their accuracy but because they echo gendered, heteronormative, and racialized stereotypes, what Lubiano (1992) calls “the building blocks of ‘reality’” (p. 330).

Mass media participate in the reproduction of an active public racialized ignorance about crime and prisons, and ignorance is not a benign force, it can be “harnessed, licensed, and regulated on a mass scale for striking reinforcements” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 5). Just as punitive welfare reform was ushered in through mass media representations of those who use welfare as lazy, irresponsible, and “overly fertile”—and these themes correlate to public opinion polls where those surveyed stated that welfare “doesn’t work” and it is an impediment (Hancock, 2004)—likewise, representations of prisons, and crime and criminals, work to shape public sentiment surrounding criminal policies. In this way, mass media are sutured to public policies, and form, as many theorists have outlined, a teaching machine (hooks, 1994; Duggan, 2003). Prisons, punishment, and crime shape our democracy. In particular, the spectacle of punishment is an instrumental component of our social order that shapes the everyday life of the majority of our institutions in the US: social services, schools, immigration services. Prisons function as the logical repository for the racialized surveillance practices in our schools (Meiners, 2007). Prisons also provide and naturalize value systems. Prisons, like detention in schools, provide a place for the “bad” people to go, thus extending a value system that isolation and punishment are “just” responses to outlaw emotions or acts of violence. These spectacles of punishment function pedagogically to regulate the lives of all people in the United States, not simply those that are housed in prisons and jails.

The pedagogical power of prisons also functions to erase the structural conditions that produce escalating incarceration rates. Rather than focusing on the causes of long-term economic shifts, looking at employers’ or corporations’ culpability and greed, or addressing the consequences of the government’s focus on expanding punitive and enforcement practices, blame is placed on communities and individuals that represent old anxieties about race, gender, and power. Seen from this perspective, the rise of the prison-industrial complex amounts to a massive re-shifting of cultural anxieties: in the face of de-industrialization, declining wages (relative to the cost of living), rising unemployment, a string of legal successes advancing the Civil Rights agenda, and the embarrassments of Vietnam and Watergate, many White Americans found solace in locating their troubles at the feet of poor people of color who would need to be imprisoned (Fine, 1997).

This culture of mass-produced fear has led to children and schools becoming highly policed bodies and public spaces. For example, almost every state has adopted “drug free zones” around schools, but as a 2006 Justice Policy Institute Report identified, these zones overwhelming blanket neighborhoods in urban areas where predominantly people of color reside, including “76 percent of Newark, and over half of Camden and Jersey City” (Greene, Pranis, & Ziedenberg, 2006, p. 26). These zones—ostensibly created in the name of safety—result in the targeting of communities of color by police, yet they fail to keep drugs away from schools. Along these same lines, the mobility and public space restrictions attached to sex offender registries, the most potent and current component of our expanding prison industrial complex, center around public places where children congregate: schools and parks. But with the Bureau of Justice Statistics
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acknowledging that over 70% of all reported sexual assaults against children are committed in a residence, usually the victim’s, this emphasis on policing public spaces is odd (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000, p. 6). Perhaps these policies have less to do with actually addressing the causes of crime and violence than with criminalizing certain spaces and classes of people, in essence operating as public pedagogy to shape public fears.

Because of this mass-produced fear of the public, private spaces have proliferated, for they are perceived as less dangerous and more controllable (Low, 2005). While neoliberalism thus shifts our understanding of what is public and what is private, the prison-industrial complex feeds a culture of resentment. In particular, the feelings of disgust, anger, and fear have been harnessed expertly by the right. The fear of terrorist violence in your neighborhood, of illegal aliens taking your job, of welfare freeloaders and prisoners using your hard earned dollars, of the “worst of the worst” deviant sex offender teaching your children; these feelings of disgust, fear, and anger help to justify expanding the punitive arm of the state and cutting its social services (Berlant, 2004).

More directly, these fears fuel support for the surveillance of those public spaces and institutions perceived as inhabited by the working poor. Fear fuels surveillance, which drives arrest patterns, which then feeds the fear again—it is a deadly cycle that distorts the reality of danger. Indeed, Allard (2002), in her research analyzing the impact of drug laws on women, offers a snapshot of one aspect of these discriminatory policies and practices:

Although African-Americans only represent 13% of all monthly drug users (consistent with their proportion of the population), they account for 35% of those arrested for drug possession, 55% of drug possession convictions and 74% of those sentenced to prison for drug possession. (p. 26)

These disproportionate arrest rates re-figure how people use public spaces, change how they think about their neighbors, and mean that communities of color are tracked into further state control and management.

Building an Abolition Democracy

I grew up on the edge of resource communities—land and lumber—in British Columbia, Canada. In the 70s and 80s, I moved through Mission, Whonnock, and Albion, a series of small towns that dot the Fraser River, where Douglas Firs and Western Red Cedars are still stripped and floated downstream to be milled into 2 × 4s. My high school classmates were neither the best nor the worst, except for the smattering of First Nations kids (mainly Sto:lo), who were often stigmatized as education failures before they arrived at school. Risking nostalgia, we were average kids of the lower-middle/working class, from an average B.C. town, with an average quality high school that had average expectations for the White kids at the school: maybe college or university for a few, but the kids from “good” families must graduate from high school. While my sister dropped out of school at 16, I persevered, certain that I did not want the gendered path of kids and a job at the local (at least, then, unionized) grocery store. I applied to a four-year “research” university by filling out a short form. Unless my memory is incorrect, there were no essays, no SATs, no reference letters, no interviews, no family financial disclosure statements. If there had been any of these requirements, odds are that I never would have applied.

I relate my own history in part because comparative analysis is always useful; how and why, for example, has de-industrialization impacted Canada and the United States so differently? How and why did the rust-belt facilitate the establishment of prisons throughout upstate New York, and yet, inversely shaped tourism, a wine industry, and expanded higher education across
the border in the Canadian Niagara peninsula? Why does the surplus of land, in conjunction with global economic shifts, create such different trajectories in the agricultural valleys of British Columbia and California? Beyond comparative economic analysis, perhaps the most disturbing vision from my history for my university and my high school students is the reality that other nations view and organize post-secondary education and other common social goods quite differently. While not without significant problems, at least in Canada universities were overwhelmingly public and, relative to the United States, very affordable. In other nations, it is free! In California and New York, the community colleges used to be free. In whatever class I teach, I mention these facts and it troubles my working-poor students. Our imaginations about what is possible get so constrained and beaten down by the naturalness of capitalism and White supremacy. Why do I, my colleagues, and our students, take for granted that St. Leonard’s students do not imagine themselves at UIC or UIUC?

Beyond the erasure of imagining and also creating other ways to organize our democracy, I offer this truncated personal history because development and anti-development, these exigencies of place, labor, capital and reproduction, are written on and in all of our bodies—best, worst, average—and are not simply descriptions of differential economic futures. Identities are internalized and the institutions, built around and for these identities, are naturalized. For example, by any standard measure, the students who have learned and worked through St. Leonard’s are, if not the mainstream’s perceptions of the so-called “worst,” fairly close to it: they are high school dropouts, convicted criminals, parents who have abandoned their kids or had them seized, addicts, dealers who have sold to children, sex workers, and so on. They are also competent, sometimes brilliant, driven, hard-working folks who deserve a chance to succeed. Indeed, my experiences at St. Leonard’s consistently remind me that the ways we are taught to view my students are not useful because the corresponding best and worst pathways of our culture often speak less to individuals than their situations within deep histories of structural inequities. These pathways are visible as early as pre-school, where youth of color are expelled and suspended at higher rates than White children (Gilliam, 2005). These best and worst identities are not just internalized, they form the foundation of so many of our public institutions: universities and prisons.

If we are invested in moving away from our punishing democracy, our schools-to-prisons pipeline, our incarceration nation, then we must challenge the prison-industrial complex by interrupting anti-developmental policies and refusing those manufactured fears that privatize our public spaces. In public, other institutions and practices across the spectrum must be challenged with anti-heteropatriarchal actions and cultural work that exposes and critiques the hegemonic public pedagogy of schools and media and prisons. De-carceration and dismantling the prison-industrial complex will not come from a one-sided movement; it is not enough to take down prisons, we must name how our democratic institutions continue to shut out millions from the “best of” pathways, and then remake these institutions. This has never been more vital. Horrified at the “downstate” trips to adult prison offered to Chicago’s 15-year-old youth of color? Reshape institutions to ensure that other downstate trips are not just imaginable but materially feasible and expected. Elite, tax exempt, institutions acquire their resources and privileges by participating in state practices that depoliticize how these universities “warehouse” and concentrate inherited class and race power. These institutions persistently shape and legitimate unequal access to resources. An abolition-democracy, to use the term of Angela Davis and W.E.B. DuBois, requires reconstructing the structures and traditions that safeguard power and privilege, just as much as taking down those that visibly punish and oppress. Prisons, Davis (2005) states, have
thrived over the last century precisely because of the absence of those resources and the persistence of some of the deep structures of slavery. They cannot be eliminated unless new institutions and resources are made available to those communities that provide, in large part, the human beings that make up the prison population. (pp. 96–97)

Challenging the prison-industrial complex therefore means opening up and reconfiguring other institutions that have shut their doors to the men and women who have been abandoned by our punishing democracy. And if the old structures are not able to change, then we shall build new ones; abolition therefore means remaking our democracy—nothing less is acceptable.

Notes

1. I am graced to work in community. I deeply benefit from the labor and smarts of many including: Ken Addison, Jitu Brown, Laurie Fuller, Stephen Hartnett, Jean Hughes, Kevin Kumashiro, Therese Quinn, Ajitha Reddy, Karen Reyes, the community at St. Leonard’s Adult School, and the folks organizing with Critical Resistance.

2. Supermax prisons, also called control units, were first initiated at the United States Penitentiary in Marion, Illinois, in 1972; they are prisons, or sometimes separate parts of a prison, that operate under a “super-maximum” or high-security regime wherein imprisoned men and women are locked in solitary confinement between 22 and 23 hours a day (Mears, 2006).

References


