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Fear and Loathing: Public Feelings in Antiprison Work

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For antiprison organizers, one potential source of hope in the current economic recession has been an increased willingness of budget-conscious state officials to reconsider mass incarceration. Starting in 2009, many states have tried to decrease prison-related expenses through the expansion of parole and the implementation of early release programs. These efforts to cut costs have inspired a national backlash, its core concern summarized in a 2010 *New York Times* headline, “Safety Is Issue as Budget Cuts Free Prisoners.” In response to a proposed early release initiative in Oregon, “an anticrime group aired radio advertisements portraying the outcomes in alarming tones. ‘A woman’s asleep in her own apartment,’ a narrator said. ‘Suddenly, she’s attacked by a registered sex offender and convicted burglar’” (Davey 2010, 2).

Politicians—unwilling to be perceived as soft on crime or emotionally out of tune with “victims” rights—backpedaled in Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, and other states. After less than 2 percent of the approximately seventeen hundred people released on a “meritorious good time push” were rearrested, the Illinois governor distanced himself from his administration’s actions, labeled the move to decrease prison populations as a “mistake” (Garcia 2009), and subsequently replaced the head of the Illinois Department of Corrections (Dai 2010).¹

The debate regarding early release programs or other attempts to reduce or reform the US criminal justice system demonstrates that challenging mass incarceration requires grappling directly with questions and feelings of safety, and in particular, how a gendered fear (of sexual assault of women by men) is publicly deployed to augment the prison system. For

antiprison organizers and thinkers, this work to challenge mass incarceration as a public safety strategy is made difficult by how “common sense” the ideas of both incarceration and exclusion appear, as well as how frightening the prospect of dismantling the current criminal justice system can seem. In this essay, we explore the connections between the private and public feelings of both fear and safety, and the construction of policing and incarceration as commonsense solutions to feelings of fear and disgust.

From our varied locations as organizers, educators, researchers, queers, caregivers, and community members, this essay explores the centrality of feelings to the carceral state, or the prison industrial complex (PIC), and the difficulty of making both structural and local shifts in public feelings.² First, we frame how feelings are central to the maintenance and expansion of the PIC. Second, we focus on safety to describe how all too often safety is framed in public and private discourses as an absence, rather than a positive value. Third, we offer some organizations that challenge popular constructions of safety as absence and suggest how these organizations engage in affect-oriented antiprison organizing.

Our work starts from two premises. First—by any measure—the tough-on-crime public safety project in the United States is a failure. More than 2.3 million people are now housed in prisons and jails across the United States, 1 in every 99.1 adults (Pew Center 2008). Compared with all other nations, the United States has the highest incarceration rate and the largest number of people (poor, African Americans, and Latinos) locked behind bars. This expanding punitive system harms low-income communities of color and is the direct result of public policy failures, including the war on drugs, mandatory minimum sentences, three-strikes-and-you’re-out laws, and immigration policies (Davis 2003; Mauer 1999; Rodriguez 2008). The impact of the PIC continues beyond life in prison: according to a 2007 report from the Sentencing Project, “5.3 million Americans, or one in forty-one adults, have currently or permanently lost their voting rights as a result of a felony conviction” (2007, 1). In addition to this diminishment of civil rights, the very state systems set up for promoting “safety” in communities of color expose their residents to increased risk of premature death (Gilmore 2007) through overcrowding in unhealthy facilities and substandard physical, dental, and mental health care (Human Rights Watch 2003; Von Zielbauer 2005).

Second, to effectively dismantle our investments in incarceration and not simply transfer those old fears (of the drug dealer, serial killer, or

home invader) to new bodies (fundamentalist terrorist, sex offender, welfare queen) requires more than structural policy work. Making real change requires rethinking how we are taught to feel safe and protected and excavating how white supremacy, heteronormativity, and other oppressions are central to our fears. While research documents how access to police and prisons does not make our communities safer, transforming this evidence of the failure of “tough on crime” policies into action is less than successful because the current system for ensuring public safety runs on emotion. A nuanced analysis of the criminal justice system does little to make anyone *feel* safer. Building a world without prisons requires creating frameworks that confront how public and private fears and feelings of safety are circulated, absorbed, and felt. Shifting the paradigm of public safety, moving from an arrest-and-incarceration-based approach, to a definition of safety that incorporates relationships and community, requires people engaging with and reframing what it means and feels like to be safe. Clarifying different approaches to safety allows antiprison activists to reclaim and redefine the concept of public safety.

Feeling Safe in a Carceral State

While sometimes framed as only private and individual, feelings are both created and transmitted publicly and socially (Brennan 2004; Berlant 2004). From the second Bush administration’s mobilization of grief, fear, and anger, declaring a “war on terror,” as well as further privatization of the social welfare state through Bush’s “compassionate conservatism,” to the Obama campaign’s evocation of hope, feelings are intimately linked to public practices and social policies. The US criminal justice system is no exception. Specifically, the massive expansion of prisons, policing, and surveillance in the past twenty-five years has been consented to, and at times demanded, by public sentiments.

Affect is the body’s response to the world—amorphous, outside conscious awareness, nondirectional, undefined, full of possibility. In this framing, affect is distinct from emotion, which is understood as the product of affect being marshaled into personal expressions of feeling, as shaped by social conventions. Brian Massumi’s definition of “emotion” is “the expression of affect in gesture and language, its conventional or coded expression” (2003, 232). Our use of the terms “affect,” “emotion,” and “feeling” is consonant with that of Massumi (2003), who distinguishes affect

from emotion. Influenced by Massumi, Deborah Gould defines “affect” as “nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body” (2009, 19). Like Gould, we use “sentiment” and “feelings” as overarching terms to encompass both affect and its expression through emotion.

The public feelings that drive prison expansion are varied, and range through disgust, fear, shame, anger, and pity. Fear is both reflected and reinforced by accounts of modern-day bogeymen, labeled as terrorists, criminals, sex offenders, gangsters, thugs, drug dealers, addicts, or psychos. Disgust (and at times pity) is also mobilized against perceptions of ignorance, “chosen” poverty, and out-of-control sexuality and fertility.

These emotions are evoked and reflected in headlines, such as “Protecting Your Child from Cyber-Monsters” (Hoffman 2010), and the mass public revulsion and anger expressed toward single mother Nadya Suleman, who was dubbed the “Octomom” in media accounts that stressed her reliance on public aid (“Octomom” 2009; Olshan 2009; “PR Firm Drops ‘Octomom’” 2009).

The production of these public feelings is linked to ongoing economic and political restructuring in the United States. Privatizing public spaces and institutions has long required the production of disposable identities as targets for anger and disgust. In dismantling welfare and public education, the targeting and dehumanizing of benefit recipients functions to question the legitimacy of a public institution or program and to assert the importance of market-driven regulation (Duggan 2003; Hancock 2004). Alyson M. Cole examines attacks on welfare and other state benefit recipients through the emergence of an “anti-victim discourse” that frames social inequity as being created through individual investments in a “victim identity” (2006, 8). While the claims of historically disadvantaged groups are dismissed, for example when naming racial discrimination is viewed as simply “playing the race card,” antivictim discourse functions to frame historically privileged (white, male) individuals as the “True Victims,” who are perhaps suffering from reverse discrimination (as a result of others’ claims to “victim status”) (Cole 2006). “Protection” also functions as another way to reconfigure public institutions, to erode human rights, or to attempt to reshape behaviors. Public spaces such as parks, libraries, schools, mass transit, and the Internet are framed as too dangerous for vulnerable citizens. The entire category of childhood, for example, is

predicated on a body that needs protection. Legally, childhood is a kind of “legal strangeness” (Stockton 2009, 16), as a child “is a body said to need protections more than freedoms. And it is a creature who cannot consent to its sexual pleasure, or divorce its parents, or design its education—at least not by law” (16). The state of childhood requires constant surveillance, monitoring, and protection from potential victimization.

Feelings of disgust and fear, instrumental to privatization and produced through the specter of the criminal (rapist, terrorist), continue to be used to remap public spaces. The fears of terrorist violence, “illegal aliens” taking jobs, welfare “freeloaders” and prisoners using hard-earned dollars, and deviant sex offenders interacting with children become rationalizations to expand the punitive arm of the state and withdraw social service functions. The state marshals these sentiments and heightens individualist responses, including through increased privatization and state punitive surveillance. Our fearful feelings invite the interventions of a defensive and protective “daddy” state, while the feelings of anger fuel more accountability from the public sphere and justify the dismantling of public programs (Berlant 2004). As Iris Marion Young has identified, the gendered logic of masculinist protection provided by the state informs us about how our private lives are regulated but, more important, from these discursive and material technologies of protection “we learn something about public life, specifically about the relation of a state to its citizens” (2003, 7).

Feelings about monstrous or out-of-control sexualities continue to wield significant power in public discourses. The fear and disgust toward sex offenders that expanded throughout the 1990s (Jenkins 1998; Levine 2002) occurred concurrently with the growth in the construction of supermax, or control unit, prisons. A 2006 study by the Urban Institute charts the relative scarcity of control unit prisons prior to 1986, yet by “2004, 44 states had supermax prisons” (Mears 2006, 1). These institutions keep men (and a few women) incarcerated in solitary confinement in cells between twenty-two and twenty-three hours a day, and were created through public discourses about the “worst of the worst” criminals who constituted such a public danger. Framing those who commit (or even are suspected of committing) sexual offenses as monsters has enabled communities to skirt questions of human and civil rights and to lock people in inhumane conditions.

Sex offender registries (SORs) with corresponding community noti-

fication components are a central component of a larger prison nation, yet there is no evidence that SORs or supermax prisons have reduced sexual violence against children or women. In fact, as legal scholar Mona Lynch examines, media and congressional debates about sex offenders and registries actually work to reinforce antifeminist ideologies. “By rhetorically linking “sex offenders” as a generic category to the components of disgust, these lawmakers help shape political discourse about a number of related social realms—gender roles, family, sexuality and sexual morality, purity, and decadence” (2002, 549). Lynch points out that an increased punitive focus on sex offenders often coincides with local and national legislative activity that attacks gay and lesbian rights, antiabortion activism, and state restrictions on abortion, as well as other backlashes to feminism and gender and sexual equity initiatives (549). Those who do not fit into patriarchal ideals of sexual morality suffer from the evocation of public disgust toward out-of-control or monstrous sexualities.

Of course, fear and disgust are not the only feelings produced in the context of the PIC. Emotions are complicated business, and prisons and crime pull a variety of responses, including feelings of excitement—the exhilaration of knowing that laws and taboos can be broken or the thrill of looking at monsters. Crime news, legal dramas, and reality television shows offer access to this thrill in the safety of the home while also reinforcing common stereotypes and fears of criminals and prisoners. The media techniques deployed are effective, as media scholar Elayne Rapping outlines in her analysis of media coverage of crime: “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’” (2003, 72–73).

This crime porn often presents a view of prisons and urban ghettos as “alternate universes” where the social order is drastically different, and the links between social structures and the production of these environments is conveniently ignored. In particular, although they are public institutions, prisons are removed from everyday US experience, and audiences depend heavily on popular media to offer meanings and representations of these facilities (Rhodes 2004; Rapping 2003). This allows audiences to

develop stores of commonsense knowledge and felt experience of prisons and crime without ever having to engage with the possibilities of an unmediated encounter with people who live in prisons.

In this analysis of political feelings and the PIC, we are careful to note how affect has also been used by justice movements with problematic consequences. Images of enslaved and beaten women (and children) were used by abolitionists as a strategy to challenge slavery, as the image of brutally beaten pregnant women would trigger more sympathy or pity than one of a man being attacked. Yet this often functioned to produce affect—pity—that would work in the long term to weaken demands for abolition. As Angela Davis most recently notes, we should not permit “emotions such as pity to foreclose possibilities of solidarity” (2010, 36). Even when deployed by “progressives,” emotions can be problematic and leave audiences “touched” but not moved (Morrison 1994, 211). The challenge for antiprison organizers is to address questions of fear and safety; to consider how these investigations might mobilize disgust, defensiveness, or pity; and to subsequently reshape organizing efforts.

Managing to Feel Safe

Safety is often defined, whether as a space or a feeling, by the absence of strong negative feelings such as disgust, anger, pain, and fear. When public disgust, anger, and fear are projected onto the bodies of poor people or people of color, public safety is approached through attempts to control or remove those bodies, in part through the expansion of prisons. This section explores the problem of control-based approaches to safety and the possibility of articulating an approach to safety that does not reinforce the expansion of prisons.

Dialogues about public safety often begin with the question of what needs to be done to address threats, and police, incarceration, or surveillance are often posited as solutions.³ For example, gated secure housing developments with fences and twenty-four-hour private security forces continue to expand across the United States (Low 2005). In urban cities, surveillance cameras continue to proliferate, despite evidence that they do not function as a deterrent (Welsh and Farrington 2002). Between 2000 and 2005, a new prison was built in the United States every twelve days (Stephan 2008). Rather than improving our feelings of safety, these increased technologies of surveillance and incarceration often heighten

feelings of vulnerability and reinforce social injustices by continuing to construct public space as dangerous and in need of continuous surveillance managed by private actors.

Yet the information we gather through surveillance feeds this cycle as it informs us of new potential risks. Visible surveillance technologies (far from a deterrent) communicate that the individuals or spaces being monitored should be feared and are “unsafe.” Increasing policing and incarceration creates more people in the category of “criminal” or “prisoner,” dehumanizing categories that imply that any contact with these populations is dangerous and should be avoided. For example, news reports highlight sex offenders who are noncompliant with certain aspects of monitoring, yet this “news” often conflates an administrative offense (failure to report) with violence (Wilmath 2010; Lichthblau 2006). General recidivism rates are so high (one study found that seven of ten men returned to prison [Langan and Levin 2002]) primarily because those on parole or probation either violate parole or fail to report, not because they have committed another offense.⁴ Any alleged youth crime wave is easily deconstructed with a closer examination of why young people are locked up. According to a 2009 Justice Policy Institute report, 66 percent of all juveniles are locked up for nonviolent offenses, including “drugs (8.6 percent), technical violations [breaking parole or probation regulations] (13.3 percent) and status offenses [something that is prohibited only for a juvenile] (6.6 percent)” (Petteruti, Walsh, and Velázquez 2009, 3).

Offered as a solution to threats, police are easily accessible and often the only structure publicly associated with safety. Dialing 911 does not connect people to crisis therapists, resources, housing, or mediators. Making police contact, even to report a crime, carries particular risk for poor people and people of color. Rather than resolving threats, when people of color have police contact they are more likely to be searched, detained, arrested, or have their children taken by the state (INCITE! 2006; Leinfelt 2006; Richie 1996; Roberts 2002; Sentencing Project 2008; Smith n.d.). However, even in poor communities of color, where people are intimately aware of the profiling and police harassment of their communities, individuals are often left with no one else to call in their moment of crisis. People call the police, because they don’t know what else to do as violence or chaos in their family or community escalates. The criminal justice system has a history of making itself available in moments of crisis, with the promise that the removal of threats will ensure individual safety.

The definition of what makes a place or community safe is most often shaped by absence: absence of violence and intimidation, or in some cases the absence of discomfort. Safety as absence is premised on the control of stimuli from the outside world influencing people's bodies—the control or elimination of affect. When a safe place is defined by absence, the logical route to public safety is one that builds physical or virtual walls around perceived challengers to that safety, what we provisionally term the “control approach” to safety. Access to power shapes how communities and individuals can control vulnerability. Economic resources and racial and other privileges enable people to buy land, move to inaccessible locations, ensure their right to privacy and to resist police surveillance, and hire private security and engage other surveillance structures. As the public sphere is increasingly associated with a lax “big government” and dangerous people and spaces, safety means fortifying one's own private domain. Compliance with ideological norms (for example, individualism, capitalism, and heteronormativity) improves the odds that individuals will be seen as deserving of state protections in the public sphere and not dismissed as complainers who exploit others by “playing the victim” (Cole 2006).

The control approach requires that every source of potential danger must be excluded to achieve safety, and this is an impossible task, especially inconceivable for those who experience multiple levels of violence (interpersonal, social, and structural). The control approach also doesn't acknowledge the difference between fears and actual threats, between imagined and real vulnerabilities. When exclusionary and aggressive practices are posited as solutions, fears can be heightened and reinforced. Judith Butler describes this cycle in the context of US aggression following the 9/11 attacks:

Revenge tries to solve the problem of vulnerability. If I strike back, then I am not vulnerable but rather the other person is. I transfer vulnerability from myself to the other. And yet by striking back I produce a world in which my vulnerability to injury is increased by the likelihood of another strike. So it seems as if I'm getting rid of my vulnerability and instead locating it with the other, but actually I'm heightening the vulnerability of everyone and I'm heightening the possibility of violence that happens between us (2003, par. 5).

If the only way to resolve vulnerability, to respond to grief, loss, or fear,

is through control and exclusion, we fall into a rabbit hole of continually expanding policing and militarization (Butler 2004).

The control approach doesn't work for dealing with the problem of vulnerability for several reasons. It provokes reaction and actually increases vulnerability. It doesn't reflect the reality of people's complicated lives. It reinforces fear and encourages people to project their fears outward rather than providing tools to address conflicts within groups, families, and relationships. It denies the fact that we are affective beings, embedded in contexts and relationships, which act upon us in ways we cannot wholly predict or discipline.

While the control approach promotes the expansion of a carceral state, an alternative approach to safety could promote the kinds of individual and public feelings that would aid in dismantling the PIC. A search for an alternative to the control-based approach to safety poses questions: Can safety be defined as a positive value, rather than an exclusion? Can safety be *felt*? Can it exist in conjunction with an affective experience of the world? If there is a way to actually *feel* safe, it contrasts with the paranoid tension of the control approach. It allows for a deep breath, muscles to relax, perhaps even a smile.

Moving beyond a control-based approach to safety requires shifting relationships to vulnerability. While the control-based approach posits safety as the absence of vulnerability, an alternative approach seeks to make vulnerability manageable. Vulnerability can be, perhaps not resolved, but reframed, in other ways: through relationships of mutual recognition (Butler 2004), by developing our capacity to live with uncertainty, and by organizing to name state violence and challenge the instability produced through state systems (INCITE! 2006).

At times, people establish definitions of safety that provide tools to help them feel safer without controlling others.⁵ This type of safety, rather than being based on control of threatening bodies, pays attention to the intersections between the physical and the emotional components of safety and relies on the recognition of positive affect through experiences of strong relational attachments, creative action, and other sources of pleasure. We provisionally term this "affective safety," a framing that recognizes that feelings of safety or fear are based on much more than the control of external threats. Rather, they are determined by the current state of body and mind within a web of histories, relationships, bodily experiences, and physical environments. Providing an alternative to reliance on a single

indicator of safety, feelings of affective safety are necessarily fluid and multidetermined.

To discuss relationships as a source of safety is not to romanticize all familial and romantic relationships or ignore the fact that these are often a source of real physical and emotional danger. Nor do we want to flatten all violence to the same plane, or focus specifically on interpersonal violence. Affective approaches also can recognize that safety is, at times, both constructed in and compromised by relationships. Building the capacity to address harmful relationships requires ensuring access to other sources of positive affect—economic resources, affirming relationships, care, healthy environments, free time, and opportunities for expression. By recognizing that feelings of safety can be promoted through multiple paths, affective approaches to safety suggest possibilities for people even as they engage with the process of responding to relational violence.

Safety in this context also requires working toward relationships of community accountability for harm, in which people are responsible for addressing harms they witness. This transforms the perpetrator/victim dichotomy by reinstating a third actor—the “innocent bystander”—and demanding that witnesses are not “innocent” and that all of us have a responsibility to respond to others’ pain. These approaches are relational and based on the recognition of others and not limited to interpersonal relations—rather these nod toward broader social relations—distribution of resources, structures of opportunity, and the field of representation.

Affective Safety in Community Organizing to Transform Justice

People working to challenge the PIC connect to affective safety in different ways. Shaped by the knowledge that the establishment of safety cannot happen solely on an intellectual level, because violence is also an emotional and a physical experience, an affective approach to the question of safety provides rich material and concrete tools for organizers seeking to redefine and improve public safety without relying on the police.

Communities benefit when discussions of public safety shift from control-based approaches. One benefit comes from constructing safety as a positive value—as something that can be defined positively rather than as an absence. For example, a safe area will often be defined by low rates of reported crimes. Alternately, safety in a community setting can be defined by the presence of neighborhood relationships, communication about

issues of concern, conflict-resolution processes, and sufficient resources for community residents. Often this is identified as social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Shifting from a definition of safety that equals simply freedom from fear toward a positive value—to be safe is to flourish—shifts the burden toward constructing safe worlds, rather than protecting from outside threats. This section looks toward how organizations are struggling to understand how safety can be practiced outside absence.

Community organizations have worked in recent years to create spaces of affective safety. Their work is useful in trying to understand new ways of seeking public safety, precisely because it searches for ways to expand public safety beyond oppositional politics. We briefly examine the way that strategies of claiming public space, restorative and transformative justice, and harm reduction are used to build affective public safety and to oppose the PIC.

One project specifically engages with building public community spaces to seek models for safety outside state systems. The Audre Lorde Project (ALP)'s Safe OUTside the System (SOS) campaign has worked to establish community-based mechanisms for ensuring safety, without involving criminal justice or department of child and family services state actors. As an organization for LGBT people of color, it advances a mission that explicitly identifies the state's role in creating violence in their community: "We are guided by the belief that strategies that increase the police presence and the criminalization of our communities do not create safety. Therefore we utilize strategies of community accountability to challenge violence" (SOS Collective 2010). Rather than focusing on increased policing, the SOS Collective works to identify, establish, and promote safe spaces in the community, ones that have dedicated themselves to being LGBT-affirming and antiracist. This campaign consists of asking spaces to commit themselves to challenging racist and anti-queer violence, and providing them with signs to display, visibly marking the space as "safe outside the system."

While it does not engage directly with the prison system, ALP's Safe OUTside the System campaign challenges the PIC by questioning the idea that safety is accessible only through engagement with coercive and punitive state actors and institutions. Rather, ALP promotes a model of safety based on spaces of recognition—challenging spaces to recognize and affirm queer lives and creating visible public markers that promote the idea of being "safe outside the [criminal justice] system." The promotion of

affirming environments, particularly ones in which queer people of color can *feel good*, is central to this campaign. In privileging this work, the SOS campaign models an affective approach to safety, one that resists the idea of safety as a simple absence of vulnerability.

This work led to a subsequent campaign to save one of the SOS-identified community safe spaces. The Starlite, an SOS-identified safe space and “the oldest black-owned, non-discriminating gay-friendly bar in Brooklyn” was served with eviction papers following the sale of its building to new owners (<http://starlitestays.wordpress.com>). The campaign works to challenge this eviction. ALP recognizes that community safety requires public and private spaces for community members to express themselves, build relationships, and live their lives. In working to save Starlite, ALP names the removal of these public spaces as the real danger to a safe environment.

But does a campaign to save a bar in Brooklyn really have anything to do with dismantling the PIC? The SOS campaign specifically outlines the link between public antiracist queer spaces and public safety. In doing so, ALP challenges a model of individualist and aggression-based safety (the control approach to safety) with a model of community-oriented and recognition-based (affective) safety. This campaign also suggests new avenues for antiprison activism, ones that build up community resources in ways that help people to cope with social vulnerabilities, while directly challenging a control approach to safety.

As community organizers, educators, and learners, including ourselves, look for alternatives to control-based approaches to safety, restorative and transformative justice models have emerged as another way to address violence. The contemporary justice system in the United States circulates around four central theories about “why people decide they should lock people up by locking them in”: retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, or incapacitation (Gilmore 2007, 14). Many community-based organizations that work with folks who live at the margins and are vulnerable to being locked up recognize that incapacitation and retribution, the existing models of justice in the United States, do not work. The restorative justice model asks a number of questions: How can the perpetrators of violence and harm be accountable to the communities and individuals affected? How can relationships and communities be restored? How can we build systems of community accountability? Rather than identifying and excluding sources of threats, restorative justice approaches often bring

together different parties in the aftermath of harm, seeking to find a way to restore safety in the presence of the person who has been identified as a “perpetrator” by demanding accountability from both the person who caused the harm and the community in which the damage occurred.

Shifting from the pedagogy of punishment in schools to restorative justice is possible. In Chicago the school district eliminated “zero tolerance” school discipline policies and placed “restorative justice” in the Chicago Public School Student Code of Conduct in 2007 (Bagget et al. 2007), yet the public school system provided almost no resources to support this practice in schools. Zero tolerance policies were responsible for disproportionately suspending and expelling youth of color from the school system. Restorative justice, with peer juries as well as youth- and community-led mediation, can open the door for alternative models of justice to flourish in our schools and to rebuild our communities. Transformative justice approaches use the relational and community-building focus of restorative justice, while expanding out the understanding of accountability to encompass the community and social injustices that perpetuate violence (Generation Five n.d.).

Chicago-based organization Project NIA has claimed public space and brought the transformative justice approach into one Chicago school through the creation of a “Peace Room” in Gale Academy in Chicago’s Rogers Park neighborhood. Instead of in-school or out-of-school suspension or expulsion, youth have the opportunity to attend the Peace Room and engage in restorative justice peace circles. Rather than seeking to promote school safety by removing “problem” students from the school, this approach engages students as capable of creating solutions, bringing them into a process that encourages individual accountability and change within the context of work toward larger social justice shifts.

Affective public safety can also be built through harm reduction. Summarized in the slogan “any positive change,” harm reduction works to build safety through encouraging small steps to decrease risk and promote health. Although most popular in the context of substance abuse, this approach has been applied to other areas. In Chicago, harm reduction approaches inform organizations that are organizing girls and trans-youth in the street economy and sex trade (Young Women’s Empowerment Project n.d.) and providing legal advocacy for transgender and gender-variant individuals (Transformative Justice Law Project n.d.). Harm reduction approaches build safety without necessarily excluding all sources of pos-

sible threat, recognizing that a control approach to safety isn't helpful in many situations. Rather, they work to promote access to a number of the various markers of affective safety: spaces for resting and community-building, information, health care, tools to mediate risk (such as condoms and clean needles), food, and supportive relationships. Harm reduction philosophies recognize that establishing safety cannot be accomplished outside the reality of how people and their bodies feel.

These examples of organizations are few among many, and we know work is happening in church and school basements, around kitchen tables, and in small storefront workspaces. By claiming public space, strengthening community relationships, or supporting people as they negotiate multiple vulnerabilities, this work provides a model for not just how a world without prisons could look, but, more important, how it could feel. This is necessary, as the massive expansion of the carceral state has been permitted, and at times demanded, by public sentiment. Any project to challenge the PIC needs to take into account and respond to the ways that fear, disgust, and excitement inform cultural understandings of and public complicity with incarceration and policing. One path that can generate new possibilities for action is engaging with the way that safety is defined and understood. Public safety is often understood as absence and is achieved through controlling bodies that are identified as sources of danger. In addition to disputing the ways that certain bodies are created as dangerous, activists can challenge this control approach to safety. An alternative approach to safety is one that seeks to define safety positively and that links it to access to public space, strong social relationships, and adequate resources. This approach to safety, which we term "affective safety," can be seen in some of the innovative work currently being done to challenge the PIC.

These frameworks offer an affective view of public safety that poses particular questions to organizing practices: How do they engage with the local, affective, and relational character of the work of reimagining safety? How do they respond to the immediate and felt needs of individual people/bodies? Antiprison movements cannot be sustained and strengthened without building sustainable alternatives. At the same time, it is essential to recognize the damage created through control-based approaches to safety, the need for organized challenges to the PIC, and the connection between public and private feelings. Antiprison movements are about taking down systems that oppress and target those most vulnerable, and

these movements must also be about building stronger communities and systems of accountability that address violence and transform democratic institutions. In doing so, we are building an abolition democracy.

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Notes

1. Of the seventeen hundred released in Illinois through the “meritorious good time push,” forty-eight out of the fifty-six people who are back in state custody were charged with status violations (parole or probation), not acts of violence (Garcia 2009).
2. “Prison industrial complex” (PIC) refers to a multifaceted structure in the United States that encompasses the expanding economic and political contexts of the corrections industry: the 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; the production, marketing and sales of technology and security required to maintain and expand the state of incarceration; the racialized and hyperbolic *war on drugs*; the legacy of white supremacy in the United States; and more (Davis 2003, Gilmore 2007). While we are supportive of Wacquant's analysis, specifically the role of a punishing workfare state as a “normal disorder” (2009, 310), we do not support his dismissal of the term “prison industrial complex” as representing a “wooly notion” (2008, 32) or an “activist myth” (2009, 4). We concur that terms can be used as a proxy to gloss over historic and political com-

plexities, and similar to other popularized conceptual tools (“ideology” or “hegemony”), these terms can be deployed ahistorically, but our reading of the substantial literature surrounding the PIC continues to demonstrate its complex use as an analytic and organizing tool that is not simply “obsessed by the apparent linkage between incarceration and profit” (Wacquant 2008, 30).

3. Risks, as many identify, are also not neutral (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983).
4. Acknowledgment of the structural factors that make reentry from prison difficult and ensure high rates of recidivism, including legal discrimination in housing, education, and employment, are rarely highlighted in media coverage.
5. Trauma therapists are one group that has focused on establishing safety as a positive value, in order to work with patients to construct a sense of safety that will aid them in the process of healing from trauma (Herman 1997). Scholarship by therapists in the trauma studies field emphasizes that fear is not entirely evidence based—our perception is not always directly correlated to environmental risk cues (Catherall 2003). This work also outlines that feelings of being safe or unsafe are not purely rational, but rather are informed by histories, relationships, and beliefs about the world.

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