

YOUTH IN A SUSPECT SOCIETY:
DEMOCRACY OR DISPOSABILITY?

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CHAPTER 2



LOCKED UP: EDUCATION AND THE YOUTH CRIME COMPLEX

[I]n a time when punitive crime control measures have drastically increased, youth of color experience this hypercriminalization not only from criminal justice institutions but also from non-criminal justice structures traditionally intended to nurture: the school, the family, and the community center. Ultimately, in the era of mass incarceration, a "youth control complex" created by a network of racialized criminalization and punishment deployed from various institutions of control and socialization has formed to manage, control, and incapacitate black and Latino youth.

—Victor M. Rios, "The Hypercriminalization of Black and Latino Male Youth in the Era of Mass Incarceration"¹

The voracious discourse and deformities of war as an organizer of collective experience took an ominous turn under the administration of George W. Bush. In response to the tragic attacks on September 11, the Bush administration not only made war and preemptive military strikes central to its foreign policy, but it also transformed the discourse of war into a regulatory principle for organizing everyday life. Against the threat of a terrorist attack, the Bush administration unleashed a Manichean imperative that short-circuited thought and gave free rein to the daily mobilization of mass-induced fear, rendering inessential the constitutive mechanisms of politics, particularly deliberative exchange based on reason and evidence, critical debate, shared responsibility, and ethical accountability. The discourse of the post-9/11 Bush administration was hypermasculine in tone and militaristic in response, legitimated in simplistic contrasts between good and evil.

Rather than invite deliberation and dialogue, abstract yet powerfully emotive language stifled thinking and squelched dissent. Bush-speak proved a profoundly antipolitical discourse, because it was incapable of imagining—and in fact disclaimed—a notion of politics based on judgment, meaningful criticism, and multiple public spheres.²

As the rhetoric and terrain of politics were emptied of any democratic substance and war became the primary organizing principle of society, the state aligned itself more closely with corporate power, which it further strengthened by making corporations “self regulatory” even as it rather ironically bound its own citizens more tightly in a web of surveillance and control. Under this corporate model of politics, contemporary *raison d'état* was no longer defined against economic, political, and social inequities: the state now restructured itself in the interests of finance capital, exercising authority through modes of governance that relied on fear, punishment, and the disciplinary organs of the punitive state.³ This shift toward the corporate state, according to David Theo Goldberg, can be traced back to the mid-1970s when managing populations and markets became “central to the structural shifts in state formation away from welfarism and the caretaker state.”⁴ Over the past three decades, favorable memories of the liberal welfare state providing a social safety net for its citizens while improving the quality of their lives have been the object of unrelenting propaganda, excised from public memory and recalled with scorn for the “dependencies” it was alleged to have generated. Restoring the meaning and purpose of the social state, so viciously attacked by market fundamentalists, especially under the former Bush administration, is important, not only because it creates the conditions for democracy to become thinkable—and so possible—again. At stake are nothing less than the lives and futures of our children—all of them—especially those children most disadvantaged by market forces and a corporate state. Goldberg provides a synopsis of the social state that is worth repeating. He writes:

From the 1930s through the 1970s, the liberal democratic state had offered a more or less robust site of institutional apparatuses concerned in principle at least to advance the welfare of its citizens. This was the period of advancing social security, welfare safety nets, various forms of national health systems, the expansion of and investment in public education, including higher education, in some states to the exclusion of private and religiously sponsored educational institutions. It saw the emergence of state bureaucracies as major employers especially in later years of historically excluded groups. And all this, in turn, offered optimism among a growing proportion of the populace for access to

middle-class amenities, including those previously racially excluded within the state and new immigrants from the global south.⁵

Under the emerging regime of neoliberalism, the modicum of social egalitarianism that was at the heart of the welfare state was both derided and dismantled, in spite of its partial successes. “Shock and awe,” the military-inspired aesthetic used to launch the televised invasion of Iraq, was redeployed as a series of precise assaults on constitutional rights, dissent, and justice itself.⁶ Torture, kidnapping, secret prisons, and the dissolution of habeas corpus—tacitly supported by a culture paralyzed by fear—became the protocol of the newly refashioned, repressive state, unapologetically engaged in illegal legalities abetted by a war culture that legitimated the expansion of state-sanctioned violence.⁷ Rather than simply being weakened by the growing power of transnational corporations and the globalization of finance capital, the state was transformed from an already weakened welfare state into an increasingly powerful racialized warfare state.⁸ As the war on terror was reconfigured and redeployed onto the domestic front, the mobilization of state violence required the recalibration of its racist logic, as those who increasingly became the objects of its power included people of color whose disposability was codified by their status as ghost detainees, administrative deportees, and enemy combatants, or in the curt label “collateral damage.”⁹ The dark threat of totalitarian power was bolstered by the regressive impulse to view anyone considered a potential or actual terrorist as beyond the register of moral concern, undeserving of legal protections or moral rights.⁹

While the rise of the carceral state under the Bush administration has been the subject of intense debate in the last few years, what has been largely ignored is how the war at home both militarized public life and refashioned the criminal justice system, prisons, and even the schools, as preeminent spaces of racialized violence.¹⁰ For many young people, the war at home has been transformed into a war against youth.¹¹ Historically, it has become commonplace for youth to be treated equivocally by adults as both a threat and a promise; the ambiguity that characterizes this mix of fear and hope has given way within the last 20 years to a much more one-sided and insidious view of young people as lazy, mindless, irresponsible, and even dangerous. Gone are the ideals, if not the utopian struggles, that promised young people a future that would exceed the limits and possibilities of the present. Dystopian fears about youth in the United States have intensified since the events of 9/11, as has the public’s understanding of youth as an unruly and unpredictable threat to law and order. This

tragedy is made obvious by the many "get tough" policies that render young people criminals and deprive them of basic health care and education, as state and federal funds for schools and child welfare services are cut back. Thus, the category of youth has been effectively eliminated from any discourse promoting the general welfare or the future of democracy. While the predicament of all youth under the regime of neoliberalism deepens in the midst of the current economic crisis, it does not affect all young people in the same way. More and more working-class and middle-class youth and poor youth of color either find themselves in a world with vastly diminishing opportunities or are fed into an ever-expanding system of disciplinary control that dehumanizes and criminalizes their behavior in multiple sites, extending from the home and school to the criminal justice system—not, of course, fed in order to be "absorbed" and "incorporated" into the system, but rather fed and vomited up, thus securing the permanence of their exclusion.

More and more youth have been defined and understood within a war on terror that provides an expansive, antidemocratic framework for referencing how they are represented, talked about, and inserted within a growing network of disciplinary relations that responds to the problems they face by criminalizing their behaviors and subjecting them to punitive modes of conduct. Youth in America have increasingly exhibited a series of disappearances, barely represented in humane terms in the public domain, and largely invisible in terms of their own needs. As the social state is reconfigured as a punishing state, youth become the enemy in hiding, dangerous bearers of unwanted memories. Progressively represented as troubling and a potential danger to society, they are scorned precisely because they offer a grim reminder of adult responsibility. Youth embody an ethical referent that *should* require adults to question the prevailing economic Darwinism and the future it emphatically denies in favor of an eternal present subject only to the market-driven laws of capital accumulation.

As the language of democracy is divested of concern for the future, adult obligations, and social responsibility in general, complex and productive representations of young people have gradually disappeared from public discourse only to reappear within the demonizing and punishing rhetoric of fear and crime. No longer inscribed in the metaphors of hope, youth—especially those marginalized by race and class—have now been cast into an ever-growing circle of groups targeted through the rhetoric of war and terrorism. Youth now occupy the status of what Bill Owens, the former conservative governor of Colorado, referred to as "a virus... let loose upon the culture."¹²

In an increasingly militarized society, the inventory of threats—inflected demographically through the taint of race and politically through the taint of socialism—have expanded to include not only immigrants, African Americans, Latinos, the government, high taxes, crime, godless sexual depravity, harassment, and acts of terror, but also youth in general and poor young minority males in particular. Fear, mistrust, and coercion are at the conceptual core of the war on terrorism. When these forces are aligned with the demonizing of youth by the media, scholars, politicians, and the general public, a lethal mix of hyperpunitive laws is produced that expands the circuits of repression and disposability designed to regulate the behavior of young people.¹³ As Jean and John Comaroff have concluded, "the way young people are perceived, named, and represented betrays a lot about the social and political constitution of a society."¹⁴

Rendering poor minority youth as dangerous and a threat to society no longer requires allusions to biological inferiority; the invocation of cultural difference is enough to both racialize and demonize "difference without explicitly marking it"¹⁵ in the post-civil rights era. This disparaging view of young people has promulgated the rise of a punishing and (in)security industry whose discourses, technologies, and practices have become visible across a wide range of spaces and institutions.¹⁶ As the protocols of governance become indistinguishable from military operations and crime-control missions, youth are more and more losing the protections, rights, security, or compassion they deserve in a viable democracy. Rather than dream of a future bright with visions of hope, young people, especially youth marginalized by race and color, face a coming-of-age crisis marked by mass incarceration and criminalization, one that is likely to be intensified in the midst of the global financial, housing, and credit crisis spawned by neoliberal capitalism. Central to such a future is what Victor Rios calls a "youth control complex... an ecology of interlinked institutional arrangements that manages and controls the everyday lives of inner-city youth of color"; this complex has "a devastating grip on the lives of many impoverished male youth of color" and continues to promote the hypercriminalization of black and Latino youth.¹⁷ One measure of this "youth control complex" is on full display in the state of Washington where 4th grade reading scores and graduation rates are used to determine how many prison cells will be built. As one teacher, Jesse Hagopian, points out, "So rest assured if your 9-year-old stumbles over syntax or has trouble sounding out the word 'priorities,' the state has readied the necessary cellblock accommodations."¹⁸ Equally disconcerting is the lack

of a public discourse—let alone outrage—capable of making a connection between this “youth control complex” and the broader structural forces that produce and sustain it. Angela Davis is instructive on this issue. She writes:

The incarceration of youth of color—and of increasing numbers of young women of color (women have constituted the fastest growing sector of the incarcerated population for some time now)—is *not* viewed as connected to the vast structural changes produced by deregulation, privatization, by the devaluation of the public good, and by the deterioration of community. Because there is no public vocabulary which allows us to place these developments within a historical context, individual deviancy is the overarching explanation for the grotesque rise in the numbers of people who are relegated to the country’s and the world’s prisons.¹⁹

With the election of Barack Obama, it has been argued that not only will the social state be renewed in the spirit and legacy of the New Deal but the punishing racial state will also come to an end.²⁰ From this perspective, Obama’s election not only represents a post-racial victory but also signals a new space of post-racial harmony. In assessing the Obama victory, *Time* magazine columnist Joe Kline wrote: “It is a place where the primacy of racial identity—and this includes the old Jesse Jackson version of black racial identity—has been replaced by the celebration of pluralism, of cross-racial synergy.”²¹ Obama won the 2008 election because he was able to mobilize 95 percent of African Americans, two-thirds of all Latinos, and a large proportion of young people under the age of 30. At the same time, what is generally forgotten in the exuberance of this assessment is that the majority of white Americans voted for the John McCain/Sarah Palin ticket. While “post-racial” may mean less overt racism, the idea that we have moved into a post-racial period in American history is not merely premature—it is an act of willful denial and ignorance. Paul Ortiz puts it well in his comments on the myth of post-racialism:

The idea that we’ve moved to a post-racial period in American social history is undermined by an avalanche of recent events: the U.S. Supreme Court’s dismantling of Brown vs. Board of Education and the resegregation of American schools; the Bush administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina; the Clash of Civilizations thesis that promotes the idea of a War against Islam; the backlash facing immigrant workers and a grotesque prison industrial complex. [Moreover]... [w]hile Americans were being robbed blind and primed for yet another bailout of the banks and investment sectors, they were treated to new evidence from Fox News and poverty experts that the great moral threats

facing the nation were greedy union workers, black single mothers, Latino gang bangers and illegal immigrants.²²

Missing from the exuberant claims that Americans are now living in a post-racial society is the historical legacy of a neoconservative revolution, officially launched in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan, and its ensuing racist attacks on the welfare “Queens”; Bill Clinton’s cheerful compliance in signing bills that expanded the punishing industries; and George W. Bush’s “willingness to make punishment his preferred response to social problems.”²³ In the last 30 years, we have witnessed the emergence of policies that have amplified the power of the racial state and expanded its mechanisms of punishment and mass incarceration, the consequences of which are deeply racist—even as the state and its legal apparatuses insist on their own race neutrality. These racially exclusionary policies and institutions are not poised to disappear with the election of President Barack Obama.

The discourse of the post-racial state also ignores how political and economic institutions, with their circuits of repression and disposability and their technologies of punishment, connect and condemn many impoverished youth of color in the inner cities to persisting structures of racism that “serve to keep [them] in a state of inferiority and oppression.”²⁴ Unfortunately, missing from the discourse of those who are arguing for the kind of progressive change the Obama administration should deliver is any mention of the crisis facing youth and the terrible toll it has taken on generations of poor white, black, and brown kids. Bringing this crisis to the forefront of the political and social agenda is crucial, particularly since Obama in a number of speeches prior to assuming the presidency refused to adopt the demonizing rhetoric often used by politicians when talking about youth. Instead, he pointedly called upon the American people to reclaim young people as an important symbol of the future and democracy itself.

[C]ome together and say, “Not this time.” This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are sealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can’t learn; that those kids who don’t look like us are somebody else’s problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids.²⁵

If Barack Obama’s call to address the crucial problems facing young people in this country is to be taken seriously, the political, economic, and institutional conditions that both legitimate and sustain a

shameful attack on youth have to be made visible, open to challenge, and transformed. This can happen only by refusing the somnambulance and social amnesia that coincide with the pretense of a post-racial politics and society, especially when the matter concerns young and poor people of color. To reclaim youth as part of a democratic imaginary and a crucial symbol of the future requires more than hope and a civics lesson: it necessitates transforming those power arrangements and market-driven values that have enabled the rise of the punishing state and have produced a polity that governs through the logic of crime and disposability—all the while disparaging the patriotism of critically engaged citizens who reject the role of either soldiers in the service of empire or consumers eager to boost the profits of corporate elites.

DEPOLITICIZING THE SOCIAL AND PUNISHING YOUTH IN A SUSPECT SOCIETY

Under the regime of neoliberalism, a more ruthless form of economic Darwinism has emerged that assumes a position of moral neutrality—as allegedly mirrored in the abstract workings of the market—and undermines the bonds of the social by collapsing them into the realm of the private. Any notion of shared humanity and responsibility gives way to a survival-of-the-fittest mentality and fear for oneself—often coinciding with an indifference to the plight of others and to public considerations. As selfish market-driven interests increasingly trump social needs, scorn and contempt replace compassion for those bearing the burden of collectively induced misfortunes, such as poverty, unemployment, mortgage forfeitures, and other social ills. Under such circumstances, an ethic of cutthroat individual competition prevails, and the language of the social is either devalued or ignored. As part of a frontal assault on the institutions and values that make up the social state, neoliberal zealots define public goods as a form of pathology or deficit (as in public schools, public transportation, public welfare), while modeling all dreams of the future around the narcissistic, privatized, and self-indulgent needs of consumer culture and the dictates of the allegedly free market. Stripped of its ethical and political importance, the public sphere has been largely reduced to a space where private interests are displayed—and the social order increasingly mimics a giant reality TV show where any concept of the public is reduced to a conglomeration of private woes, tasks, conversations, and confessionals.

As the social state is hollowed out, the call for self-reliance replaces collective struggles for social justice, and the public's ability to translate private problems into both public concerns and collective action diminishes. As the social is devalued, public discourse and democratic politics disappear, only to be replaced by a litany of individual misfortunes to be borne in isolation. In the hyperindividualized society, principles of communal responsibility are undercut, derided, or erased; "individuals are called upon to invent and deploy individual solutions to socially produced discomforts," relying exclusively upon their own resources, skills, and wits.²⁶ Within this neoliberal moral economy, responsibility to oneself takes priority, and the ethical duty to care for others is diminished in value when those in need are not openly derided. Not surprisingly, under such circumstances, individual suffering no longer registers as a social concern, as all notions of injustice are assumed to be the outcome of personal failings or deficits. Signs of this pathologizing of marginalized individuals and the social sphere as a whole can be found everywhere. Poverty is now imagined to be a problem of individual character. Racism is now understood as merely an act of individual discrimination (if not discretion), and homelessness is reduced to a choice made by lazy people. Not only has the concept of the social largely faded out of view during the last three decades, but politics itself was now mediated through a pervasive spectacle of terrorism in which fear and violence became the only modalities through which to grasp the meaning of the self and larger social relations.

As the modernist dream of infinite progress for each succeeding generation erodes even further under the current global meltdown, minority youth are increasingly excluded from decent jobs, health care, and social services, while being even more insistently subject to the terrors of the present economic crisis. And just as major problems such as racism, homelessness, and persistent poverty disappear from the inventory of public considerations, social investments are replaced by penal solutions, giving rise to a punishing state that removes from the social order those who have no market value, those who are fatally defined as flawed consumers, and those who are designated "other" through an often-groundless association with crime, redundancy, poverty, or simply disposability. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it,

Youth are now recast as collateral casualties of consumerism, the poor are now and for the first time in recorded history purely and simply a worry and a nuisance.... They have nothing to offer in exchange for the taxpayers' outlays.... While the poor are banished from the streets, they can also be

banished from the recognizably human community: from the world of ethical duties. This is done by rewriting their stories away from the language of deprivation to that of depravity. The poor are portrayed as lax, sinful, and devoid of moral standards. The media cheerfully cooperate with the police in presenting to the sensation-greedy public lurid pictures of the "criminal elements," infested by crime, drugs and sexual promiscuity, who seek shelter in the darkness of their forbidding haunts and mean streets. The poor provide the usual suspects to be round up, to the accompaniment of a public hue and cry, whenever a fault in the habitual order is detected and publicly disclosed.²⁷

The increasing privatization of public interests and the moral hardening of the social order, largely shaped by the biopolitical project of neoliberalism, have undermined the ethical and political fabric of public life. The result is the production of new strategies of governance, largely mediated through a combination of fear, the politics of (in)security, and the criminalization of social problems, leading to the spread of values, policies, practices, and technologies of the punishing state to public spheres traditionally removed from such influences.

While the rise of neoliberalism has undermined the most basic values and institutions of democracy in the United States, it has had a particularly devastating effect on youth, as the combined modalities of regulation, control, surveillance, and punishment radically alter the public spheres inhabited by minority youth. While all youth are now suspect, poor minority youth have become especially targeted by modes of social regulation, crime control, and disposability that have become the major prisms that now define many of the public institutions and spheres that govern their lives.²⁸ The model of policing that now governs all kinds of social behaviors constructs a narrow range of meaning through which young people define themselves. This rhetoric and practice of policing, surveillance, and punishment have little to do with the project of social investment and a great deal to do with increasingly powerful modes of biopolitical regulation, pacification, and control—together comprising a "youth control complex" whose prominence in American society points to a state of affairs in which democracy has lost its claim and the claiming of democracy goes unheard. The United States' claim to democracy, already weakened on a global level by the go-it-alone attitude that precipitated the war in Iraq, loses much more of its credibility as a democratic nation when one considers the degree to which militarized relations of war within its own borders now constitute how minority youth are understood and treated by much of adult society. The military character of the war waged against young people is best exemplified by the ascendancy

of the prison as a definitive model of disciplinary regulation and a primary element of governance in dealing with disposable populations on the domestic front.

The prison symbolizes not merely the failure of social reform and the emerging politics of a racially predicated logic of disposability, but also a prominent element in the war against poor youth who are no longer considered fit to be soldiers, consumers, or advertising billboards for corporate profits. Instead, they are viewed as an excess, a cancer on the body politic that must be removed to protect the safety and health of the larger society. Under such circumstances, the prison takes on a new purpose and meaning in American society, one that grants an afterlife to an authoritarianism that pushes beyond the boundaries of legitimate governmental practice.²⁹ Angela Davis extends this argument, insisting that the prison is the institution par excellence in the aftermath of the breakdown of the welfare state:

[The prison in] U.S. society has evolved into that of a default solution to the major social problems of our times.... [I]mprisonment is the punitive solution to a whole range of social problems that are not being addressed by those social institutions that might help people lead better, more satisfying lives. This is the logic of what has been called the imprisonment binge: Instead of building housing, throw the homeless in prison. Instead of developing the educational system, throw the illiterate in prison. Throw people in prison who lose jobs as the result of de-industrialization, globalization of capital, and the dismantling of the welfare state. Get rid of all of them. Remove these dispensable populations from society. According to this logic the prison becomes a way of disappearing people in the false hope of disappearing the underlying social problems they represent.³⁰

The centrality of the prison as a disciplinary, regulatory, and pedagogical model suggests that the carceral apparatuses of the twenty-first century may emerge in a distinctive and perhaps even more ruthless form than its predecessors, particularly as strategies of governance and modes of sovereign power increasingly mirror the savage brutalities of the market.³¹ In its language, practices, and policies, neoliberalism not only "extends the rationality of the market [into] domains that are not primarily economic"³² but also creates more punishing modes of governance. This is a mode of biopolitics that renders market interests invisible by insisting that its primary goal is to promote the security and welfare of a human life: an unregulated market is the best caretaker of people's needs. In actuality, its real purpose is to collapse the distinctions between crime and social problems, prison and school, and race and disposability, while constructing spaces that subject minority

youth and others rendered redundant to a form of punitive control, if not social death. Punishment and incarceration, long absolved of the pretense of rehabilitation, are now primarily contained within what Zygmunt Bauman has called "the human waste disposal industry."³³ At its center is a network of institutions "obsessed with surveillance, security, and punitive penal practices"³⁴ that not only reproduces racial inequality, social wretchedness, and individual suffering but also "serve[s] as a main socializing and controlling agent for black and Latino youth who have been labeled 'deviant.'"³⁵ There is more at stake here than a politics of fear, discipline, and control: a mode of governance is emerging that deprives many young people of a childhood and forecloses for them the possibility of a meaningful future.

GOVERNANCE, CRIME, AND THE PRISON-CONTROL COMPLEX

In the 1970s, as the regime of neoliberalism and the rationality of the market gradually came to dominate most aspects of American life, the war against the legacy of the New Deal and against the cultural revolution of the previous decade took on a new dimension. The political realm shifted from understanding the difficulties facing individuals within the context of surrounding structural constraints and socially inscribed forms of injustice to attributing personal responsibility to the individuals themselves. In conjunction with the dismantling of most remnants of the welfare state, the state intensified its more repressive modes of power and increasingly relied on appeals to fear to usher in a kind of politics in which the modalities of crime and punishment exercised a powerful influence on how Americans viewed themselves and their relations to others and the larger social order.³⁶ One consequence was that the war against poverty was replaced by the war against crime, just as the welfare state and its support for a social safety net were replaced by a punishing state and its call for criminalizing behaviors generally associated with the structured inequities of the social order. In addition, the shift to governing through the lens of crime and fear also inspired a massive redistribution of resources away from the welfare state to the punishing state. David Theo Goldberg's reflections on the transformation from the welfare state to the repressive neoliberal state are revealing and serve as a backdrop to the war against youth and the rise of a mode of governance through crime, exclusion, and disposability. Contrary to advocates of neoliberalism who claim their policies minimize "big government," Goldberg argues that the neoliberal state now exerts more power and control:

Where the prevailing social commitments for the liberal democratic state had to do with social well-being revealed in the registers of education, work, health care, and housing, the neoliberal state is concerned above all with issues of crime and corruption, controlling immigration and tax-cut-stimulated consumption, social control and securitization. So the contemporary slogan of neoliberalism might as well be "The state looks after your interests by encouraging you to choose to lock yourself into gated communities (while it locks up the undesirable in prisons) or locks out the externally threatening (by way of immigration restrictions)." Where the liberal democratic state was concerned in the final analysis with the welfare of its citizens, all the contradictions of its arrangement and application notwithstanding, the neoliberal state is concerned above all with their security. The "social security" state has morphed in meaning from prevalently economic significance to its more assertively disciplinary interventions. If the social welfare state could be seen as modestly paternalistic, the neoliberal state has proved invasively repressive.³⁷

Jonathan Simon has argued that since the 1980s, the public's desire for safety and its fear of crime have provided the impetus for "a new civil and political order structured around the problem of violent crime."³⁸ According to Simon, crime has not only become central to how authority is exercised in the United States but has also ushered in a new mode of politics that merges "the penal state and the security state."³⁹ For Simon, the discourse of crime and punishment has become both an axis for how Americans come to "know and act on ourselves, our families, and our communities" and a structuring principle for reworking how various institutions are perceived and organized under a repressive state apparatus.⁴⁰ As a pervasive and relentless war on terror elevated all citizens to the status of potential enemies of the state, new technologies of surveillance and control spread throughout the social order, while the practices of punishing, repressing, and exercising state power over people took on a new urgency as a matter of governance. Simon argues that this aggressive rhetoric of crime and punishment constitutes not only a crisis of politics but also a crisis of governance, one that he labels the new politics of "governing through crime." One consequence of governing through crime has been the development of "the imprisonment binge" of the last 30 years.⁴¹ While the imprisonment binge of the last few decades is central to this emphasis on crime, it has taken on a new importance and influence as crime has now become one of the major organizing principles through which "other problems are recognized, defined, and acted upon—and social relations constructed."⁴² In addition, crime now becomes an excuse not only to expand modes of security, surveillance, and control throughout society, but also to retool the inheritances

of racism through a mode of governance that takes as one of its objectives the punishing, if not removal from the social body, of poor black and brown youth who are viewed as excess and rendered disposable. What is important about Simon's concept of governing through crime is its recognition of the emergence of a more capacious model of criminalization that reached its apex under the George W. Bush administration, one that makes crime "the central tool for governing the everyday citizen, even if he or she has never committed a crime. Crime and punishment have been prioritized in the United States to influence the actions of the everyday citizen."⁴³ In what follows, I want to focus on how governing through crime and the politics of disposability have helped to shape the cultural politics of an economy of punishment and its devastating effects on poor black and brown youth in the United States.

At the center of the politics of social control through criminalization are a series of social relationships in which the prison has become a model to solve a wide range of social, economic, and political problems.⁴⁴ At the core of this approach is a steadfast principle of what can be called a racialized economic Darwinism, one that is central to the prevailing neoliberal logic of the free market. Under such conditions, as Zygmunt Bauman insists, collectively caused problems are now interpreted as "an individually committed sin or crime.... Prisons now deputize for the phased-out and fading welfare institutions, and in all probability will have to go on readjusting to the performance of this new function as welfare provisions continue to be thinned out."⁴⁵ As the politics of the social state gives way to the biopolitics of disposability, the prison becomes a preeminently valued institution whose disciplinary practices become a model for dealing with the increasing number of young people who are considered to be the waste products of a market-mediated society. As Simon points out, what is unique about the contemporary prison is that it unapologetically now functions as a warehouse and waste-disposal factory. He writes:

The distinctive new form and function of the prison today is a space of pure custody, a human warehouse or even a kind of social waste management facility, where adults and some juveniles distinctive only for their dangerousness to society are concentrated for purposes of protecting the wider community. The waste management prison promises no transformation of the prisoner through penitence, discipline, intimidation, or therapy. Instead, it promises to promote security in the community simply by creating a space physically separated from the community in which to hold people whose propensity for crime makes them appear an intolerable risk for society.⁴⁶

The institution of the prison is at the ideological center of the biopolitics of the punishing state dutifully inscribing its presence into the political and cultural landscape of everyday life. As Angela Davis reminds us, what is important to recognize is that the prison-industrial complex now embraces a vast set of institutions that constitute the disciplinary apparatuses at the heart of the punishing state. According to Davis, the network of institutions

includes state and federal prisons, county jails, jails in Indian country, detention centers run by the Department of Homeland Security, territorial prisons in areas the U.S. refuses to acknowledge as its colonies, and military prisons—both within the U.S. and outside of its borders. The population growth in domestic prisons, the emergence of new industries dependent on this growth, the retooling of old industries to accommodate and profit from imprisonment, the expansion of immigrant detention centers, and the use of military prisons as a major weapon in the so-called war on terror, the articulation of anti-crime rhetoric with anti-terrorism rhetoric—these are some of the new features of the prison-industrial-complex.⁴⁷

The institution of the prison symbolizes the power of the repressive state operating under the guise of the war on terror, while its growing presence and influence normalizes a racially predicated politics of disposability. Moreover, it extends its core values, modes of discipline, and parameters of control to a vast array of other institutions outside of the prison-industrial complex, creating what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls a "tale of fractured collectivities—economies, governments, cities, communities, and households."⁴⁸ As crime, imprisonment, and punishment become central features of the punishing state, the politics and practices of governing through crime are no longer limited to urban centers of deep poverty and social dislocation but now spread to those locations and "spatial sites where middle-class life is performed on an everyday basis: office buildings, universities, day-care centers, medical complexes, apartment buildings, factories, and airports."⁴⁹ The hard logic and raw impact of governing through a culture of fear and the power to punish can be grasped, in part, by the degree to which imprisonment, punishment, and detention have become both the preferred responses to social problems and a linchpin of the new political order and its disciplinary mode of punitive governance.

As the culture of control, punishment, and disposability become a central force in shaping the fabric of American life, it has found expression in policies and legislation at all levels of government that give more power to prosecutors and the police,⁵⁰ while limiting the

discretionary power of judges and the courts. Calls for the death penalty and harsher laws such as "three strikes" measures and other sentencing enhancements coupled with the demand for more prisons now dominate the rhetoric of politicians playing to media-induced moral panics about crime while undermining the possibilities of democratic modes of governance and justice. As governance is increasingly predicated on war as the primary logic for shaping daily life,⁵⁰ the ever-growing prison-industrial complex and its project of mass imprisonment have taken on a particularly toxic register. Since the 1970s, under the repressive state's biopolitical commitment to neoliberalism, building prisons has become America's housing policy for the poor, signaling an attack not only on those for whom class and race loom large, but also on a generation of young people who have few rights, and even less power, and have come to symbolize a drain on potential profits (given the cost of providing them with even a minimal level of quality education, health care, employment, housing, and income). What are we to make of the following shifts in carceral practices? According to a recent report released by the Pew Public Safety Performance Project,

Three decades of growth in America's prison population [have] quietly nudged the nation across a sobering threshold: for the first time, more than one in every 100 adults is now confined in an American jail or prison. . . . The United States incarcerates more people than any country in the world, including the far more populous nation of China. At the start of the new year, the American penal system held more than 2.3 million adults. China was second, with 1.5 million people behind bars, and Russia was a distant third with 890,000 inmates, according to the latest available figures. Beyond the sheer number of inmates, America also is the global leader in the rate at which it incarcerates its citizenry, outpacing nations like South Africa and Iran.⁵¹

As shocking as these figures are, they are particularly grave for people of color and reveal how the punishing state invests in the prison-industrial complex as a way of managing large populations of people of color who have been rendered disposable, shorn of their rights, and deemed unfit for state protection. As Angela Davis points out, "In 1985, there were fewer than 800,000 people behind bars. Today there are almost three times as many imprisoned people and the vast increase has been driven almost entirely by the practices of incarcerating young people of color."⁵² For instance, one in 36 Hispanic adults is behind bars, while "one in every 15 black males aged 18 or older is in prison or jail."⁵³ In fact, young black men between the ages of 20 and 34 are jailed at a rate of one in nine. Moreover, a full 60 percent of

black high school dropouts, by the time they reach their mid-thirties, will be prisoners or ex-cons.⁵⁴ This apartheid-based system of incarceration bodes especially ill for young black males. According to Paul Street:

It is worth noting that half of the nation's black male high school dropouts will be incarcerated—moving, often enough, from quasi-carceral lock-down high schools to the real "lock down" thing—at some point in their lives. These dropouts are overrepresented among the one in three African American males aged 16 to 20 years old who are under one form of supervision by the U.S. criminal justice system: parole, probation, jail, or prison.⁵⁵

As Loic Wacquant points out, racially targeted "get tough" crime policies produce their counterpart in racially skewed forms of mass imprisonment, legitimized, in part, by "the reigning public image of the criminal" as

that of a *black* monster, as young African American men from the "inner city" have come to personify the explosive mix of moral degeneracy and mayhem. The conflation of blackness and crime in collective representation and government policy (the other side of this equation being the conflation of blackness and welfare) thus re-activates "race" by giving a legitimate outlet to the expression of anti-black animus in the form of the public vituperation of criminals and prisoners.⁵⁶

Moreover, such policies both sanction and promote race-based drug arrests for drug sales and possession, filling prisons with young black men "who are nearly twelve times as likely to be imprisoned for drug convictions as adult white men," while promoting vast racial disparities in the nation's prisons.⁵⁷

The frontier mentality shaping punishment and mass imprisonment exacts a heavy price on impoverished youth of color, while eviscerating institutions designed to benefit the public good. The financial costs alone of maintaining this prison culture are extravagant, blowing a massive hole through tattered state budgets while undermining their most basic public services, including education and health care. And these trends will become more exacerbated as tax revenues decline and social services are stretched to the limits under the strain of the current financial and credit crisis. In 2008, "31 states had budget gaps totaling \$40 billion";⁵⁸ consequently, many states had to slash school financing, decrease the number of subsidized meals available for poor children, and reduce, in some cases, the number of days children attend school. Sadly, the situation will get worse before it gets better.

In the face of these cutbacks, states will continue to disperse huge amounts of money into a bloated and overextended prison system. According to the Pew report,

In 1987, the states collectively spent \$10.6 billion of their general funds—their primary pool of discretionary tax dollars—on corrections. [In 2007], they spent more than \$44 billion, a 315 percent jump, data from the National Association of State Budget Officers show. Adjusted to 2007 dollars, the increase was 127 percent. Over the same period, adjusted spending on higher education rose just 21 percent.... Total state spending on corrections—including bonds and federal contributions—topped \$49 billion last year, up from \$12 billion in 1987. By 2011, continued prison growth is expected to cost states an additional \$25 billion.⁵⁹

A more recent Pew Center study reports, “For all levels of government, total corrections spending has reached an estimated \$68 billion, and increase of 330 percent since 1986.... Only Medicaid spending grew faster than spending on corrections.”⁶⁰ Even as violent crime fell by 25 percent in the past 20 years, states increased their spending on corrections, with 13 states now spending more than one billion dollars a year in general funds on their corrections systems. Many states are spending more on corrections than they are on higher education, while jettisoning a range of important social programs that provide for people’s welfare.⁶¹ For example, James Sterngold reported in 2007 that “[b]ased on current spending trends, California’s prison budget will overtake spending on the state’s universities in five years.”⁶² In this particular instance, the shift to governing through crime makes a mockery of a state that lays claim to smart policymaking. While the average cost to imprison someone is \$23,876, some states such as Rhode Island pay out as much as \$45,000 per inmate. A number of states because of the economic recession are passing legislation to reduce prison sentences and the cost of the imprisonment binge. In many states, it costs far more to imprison people than it does to provide them with a decent education. What is so tragic about these figures is that 50 percent of the people who are behind bars are there for nonviolent crimes, while 70 percent of all inmates are people of color. Clearly, there is more at work here than a prison-industrial complex that amounts to the squandering of human and financial resources at massive taxpayer expense: what Loic Wacquant rightly calls “a de facto policy of carceral affirmative action towards African Americans”⁶³ is operating to produce largely ignored collateral effects that extend the impact of the punishment industry far beyond the walls of prison culture.

As Jason DeParle has argued, mass incarceration of poor men and youth of color “deepens the divides of race and class” by “walling off the disadvantaged, especially unskilled black men, from the promise of American life.”⁶⁴ Imprisonment makes black inmates poorer because they are not given the opportunity to learn a skill or get an education, and when they are released their chances of getting a job are slim, especially in an economy in which the rate of unemployment among blacks is twice that of whites. Though education is typically a prerequisite for employment, many former convicts are excluded from various forms of student aid because of certain previous crimes such as a drug conviction. Ex-prisoners are also excluded from even a modicum of social provision and income by being denied welfare payments, Medicaid, veterans’ benefits, food stamps, and in some cases public housing. Under such exclusionary practices, African American males suffer a number of indignities and restrictions on their rights that prevent them from integrating into mainstream society. Brent Staples provides a further snapshot of some of the inhuman forces at work in placing sanctions on black men once they enter the criminal justice system. He writes:

Ex-cons are marooned in the poor inner-city neighborhoods where legitimate jobs do not exist and the enterprises that led them to prison in the first place are ever present. These men and women are further cut off from the mainstream by sanctions that are largely invisible to those of us who have never been to prison. They are commonly denied the right to vote, parental rights, drivers’ licenses, student loans and residency in public housing—the only housing that marginal, jobless people can afford. The most severe sanctions are reserved for former drug offenders, who have been treated worse than murderers since the start of the so-called war on drugs. The Welfare Reform Act of 1996, for example, imposed a lifetime ban on food stamps and welfare eligibility for people convicted of even a single drug felony.⁶⁵

The racially defined nature of the punishing state is also evident in the grim facts that “the average state disenfranchises 2.4 percent of its voting-age population—but 8.4 percent of its voting-age blacks. In fourteen states, the share of blacks stripped of the vote exceeds 10 percent. And in five states (including Kentucky), it exceeds 20 percent. Focusing on black men... felony laws keep nearly one in seven from voting nationwide.”⁶⁶ The racialized aftereffects of the punishing state’s prison culture are also evident in the shattered families and fatherless children that populate many of America’s impoverished cities. DeParle argues that “[f]rom 1980 to 2000, the number of children with fathers behind bars rose sixfold to 2.1 million.

Among white kids, just over 1 percent have incarcerated fathers, while among black children the figure approaches 10 percent.³⁶⁷

Racially skewed crime policies do little to serve and protect the public, but can generate enormous profits for rich investors. As more and more prisons become privatized, the connection between mass incarceration and economic Darwinism takes on a foreboding register. Under the biopolitics of neoliberalism, criminalization produces black and brown bodies for a prison industry that pays high dividends to shareholders, promotes the growth of powerful prison guard unions, and attracts the support of varied special interests who view the prison-industrial complex as a low-risk investment with windfall profits. These special interests have become so powerful that they organized in 2008 to defeat Prop 5, a ballot initiative that sought to tackle many of the chronic problems facing a criminal justice system in California that is both deeply flawed and dysfunctional. In this case, prominent politicians across party lines joined with corporate interests and the powerful California prison guards' union, which provided \$1.8 million to the campaign, to defeat the measure. Not only would the bill have reduced prison overcrowding, enhanced public safety, decreased costs, expanded drug treatment programs inside state prisons, and started the first drug treatment program for at-risk youth,⁶⁸ it is estimated that Prop 5 would have saved California taxpayers "at least \$2.5 billion, according to the state's Legislative Analyst."⁶⁹

The marriage of economic Darwinism and the racialized punishing state is also on full display in East Carroll Parish in Louisiana, where inmates provide cheap or free labor at barbecues, funerals, service stations, and a host of other sites. According to Adam Nossiter, "the men of orange are everywhere" and people living in this Louisiana county "say they could not get by without their inmates, who make up more than 10 percent of its population and most of its labor force. They are dirt-cheap, sometimes free, always compliant, ever-ready and disposable . . . You just call up the sheriff, and presto, inmates are headed your way. They bring me warm bodies, 10 warm bodies in the morning," said Grady Brown, owner of the Panola Pepper Corporation. "They do anything you ask them to do. . . . You call them up, they drop them off, and they pick them up in the afternoon," said Paul Chapple, owner of a service station.⁷⁰ Nossiter claims that the system is jokingly referred to by many people who use it as "rent a convict" and is, to say the least, an "odd vestige of the abusive convict-lease system that began in the South around Reconstruction."⁷¹

Treating prisoners as commodities to be bought and sold like expendable goods suggests the degree to which the punishing state has divested itself of any moral responsibility with regard to those human

beings who in the market-driven logic of neoliberalism are considered either commodities or disposable waste products. At the same time, as the beginning of an era of post-racism is celebrated and racism is presumed to be an anachronistic vestige of the past in light of Barack Obama's election to the presidency, the workings of the punishing state are whitewashed and differentiated from racialized violence as the governing-through-crime complex is rendered invisible. Consequently, the American public becomes increasingly indifferent to the ways in which neoliberal rationality—with its practices of market deregulation, privatization, the hollowing out of the social state, and the disparaging of the public good—wages a devastating assault on African American and Latino communities, young people, and increasingly immigrants and other people of color who are relegated to the borders of American normalcy and patriotism. The punishing state not only produces vast amounts of inequality, suffering, and racism, but also propagates collective amnesia, cynicism, and moral indifference. Hence, there are few attempts in the dominant media to connect the problems in the prison system, particularly its deeply entrenched structures of racism, to the related crises of governance and the politics of the youth crime complex.

YOUTH AND THE POLITICS OF PRISON CULTURE

As the punishing state gains in power, the prison-industrial complex is nurtured and supported by broader economic, political, and social conditions; its deeply structured racist principles, politics of disposability, and modes of authoritarian governance become part of the fabric of common sense, an unquestioned element of effective governance. As a disciplinary model, the prison reinforces modes of violence and control that are now central to the efforts of the punishing state to align its values and practices with a number of other important commanding social institutions. The reach of prison culture and its punitive disciplinary practices now extend into the home, workplace, juvenile criminal services, the school, and the entertainment industry. Along with growing incarceration rates for youth of color, young people now have to endure drug tests, surveillance cameras, invasive monitoring, home visits by probation officers, security forces in schools, and a host of other militarizing and monitoring practices used to target potential criminals, terrorists, and other groups represented as a threat to the state. Of course, under the Bush administration those who disagreed with the administration's domestic and foreign policy goals or whose skin color was dark were with a few exceptions regarded as a high security risk and as potential

terrorists.⁷² Unfortunately, as the arm of prison culture continues to spread throughout the society, it increasingly reinforces and provides a model for other institutions that deeply influence the lives of young people, exacting a terrible toll especially on the lives and futures of poor black and brown youth.

As traditional supports and social safety nets provided by the liberal social contract disappear, the condition of American youth deteriorates most visibly in the register in which they are stereotyped, demonized, and removed from the register of social concerns. With the rise of a mode of governance mediated through an emphasis on crime and the politics of disposability, youth become the new targets of a suspect society. As the ideologies and disciplinary practices of prison culture are incorporated into the pedagogies of the school and the criminal justice system—celebrated in various modes of mainstream entertainment—youth are increasingly subject to policies and practices suggesting they are worthy of no other treatment than that accorded to criminals—and this judgment is rendered without the benefit of trial, or the presumption of innocence.

Social violence evokes a special kind of cruelty when applied to children, and yet it has gained widespread support both in the public mind and in the deeply rooted rituals of popular culture that thrive on an ideology of masculine hardness, humiliation, and violence, rendering its participants indifferent to the suffering of others. Zygmunt Bauman has argued that “[e]very [society] produces its own visions of the dangers that threaten its identity, visions made to the measure of the kind of social order it struggles to achieve or to retain. . . . [T]hreats are projections of a society’s own inner ambivalence, and anxieties born of that ambivalence, about its own ways and means, about the fashion in which that society lives and intends to live.”⁷³ As a symbol of ambivalence, rather than a social investment or a population in need of protection and support, youth are now perceived as a threat to the crumbling social order. One response to this perceived danger is the emergence of a neoliberal state that seeks to bolster its weakened sovereignty by recasting youth as a threat to society and to gain its legitimacy by dealing with that threat—or being seen to deal with it accordingly (typically through media spectacles). As Lawrence Grossberg puts it,

Over the past twenty-five years, there has been a significant transformation in the ways we talk and think about kids and, consequently, in the ways we treat them. We live, for at least part of the time, in a rhetorically constructed picture of kids out of control, an enemy hiding within our most intimate spaces. The responses—zero tolerance, criminalization and imprisonment, psychotropic

drugs and psychiatric confinement—suggest not only that we have abandoned the current generation of kids but that we think of them as a threat that has to be contained, punished, and only in some instances, recruited to our side. . . . [E]very second, a public high school student is suspended; every ten seconds, a public school student is corporally punished; every twenty seconds, a kid is arrested. Criminalization and medicalization are cheap (financially and emotionally) and expedient ways to deal with our fears and frustrations.⁷⁴

When youth occupy the larger screen culture, they are represented mostly through images that are degrading and demonizing. It is difficult to find in the dominant media any sympathetic representations of young people who experience difficult times as a result of the economic downturn, the simultaneous erosion of security (around health care, work, education), and the militarization of everyday life. Youth are no longer categorized as Generation X, Y, and Z. On the contrary, they are now defined rhetorically in mainstream corporate media as “Generation Kill” or “Killer Children.”⁷⁵ In the aftermath of the shooting rampages at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech, kids are largely defined through the world of frenzied media spectacles driven by sensationalist narratives and youth panics. Rather than being portrayed as victims of a “crisis of masculinity and male rage, an out-of-control gun culture, and a media that projects normative images of violent masculinity and makes celebrities out of murderers,”⁷⁶ youth are represented as psychologically unhinged, potentially indiscriminate killers (especially young returning veterans), gang rapists (falsely accused Duke University lacrosse players), school shooters, and desensitized domestic terrorists. Newspapers and other popular media offer an endless stream of alarming images and dehumanizing stories from the domestic war zone, allegedly created by rampaging young people. One typical newspaper account described how a group of third graders in south Georgia brought a knife, duct tape, and handcuffs to school as part of a plan to attack their teacher.⁷⁷ CNN’s Anderson Cooper hosted a special report on school shootings on April 27, 2007, with the title “Killers in Our Midst,” which not only capitalized on shocking and sensational imagery that swelled the network’s bottom line but also added fuel to a youth panic that insidiously portrays young people as pint-size nihilists, an ever-present threat to public order.

Scapegoated youth thus provide the means for turning public attention away from alarming instances of state violence against thousands of detainees held in various secret prisons around the world, the outsourcing of torture by the CIA to Syria and other authoritarian regimes, the illegal legalities of an imperial presidency including the world-record-shattering incarceration rates of people of color in

jails or prisons, and the endless abuses that young people suffer at the hands of adults in a geography of heightened poverty, racism, unemployment, and inequality.⁷⁸ And yet, while the public is flooded with reports of feral teenage boys poised to commit brutal, remorseless crimes, reinforcing the new common sense that the categories of “youth” and “super-predator” are synonymous, we hear little from the dominant media about either shocking rates of youth poverty and homelessness, or the 4 million youth “who are not in school and basically have no hope of finding work.”⁷⁹ Nor is there the slightest public concern about the sharp rise over the last decade in the use of potent antipsychotic prescription drugs, stimulants, and antidepressants to medicate children and adolescents for a multitude of heretofore normal “teen” behaviors, ranging from mood swings to “oppositional defiant disorder.”⁸⁰ Nor does the public hear much about the fate of young people in unregulated so-called “therapeutic schools whose ‘tough love’ treatments include having a bag placed over their head and a noose around their neck.”⁸¹ As Alex Koroknay-Palicz argues, “Powerful national forces such as the media, politicians and the medical community perpetuate the idea of youth as an inferior class of people responsible for society’s ills and deserving of harsh penalties.”⁸² While such negative and demeaning views have had disastrous consequences for young people, under the reign of a punishing society and the deep structural racism of the criminal justice system, the situation for a growing number of young people and youth of color is getting much worse.

The suffering and deprivation experienced by millions of children in the United States in 2009—bound to become worse in the midst of the current economic meltdown—not only testifies to a state of emergency and a burgeoning crisis regarding the health and welfare of many children, but also bears witness to—and indeed indicts—a model of market sovereignty and a mode of punitive governance that have failed both children and the promise of a substantive democracy. The Children’s Defense Fund in its 2008 annual report offers a range of statistics that provide a despairing glimpse of the current crisis facing too many children in America. What is one to make of a society marked by the following conditions:

- Almost 1 in 13 children in the United States live in poverty—5.8 million in extreme poverty.
- One in 6 children in America is poor. Black and Latino children are about 3 times as likely to be poor as white children.

- 4.2 million children under the age of 5 live in poverty.
- 35.3 percent of black children, 28.0 percent of Latino children, and 10.8 percent of white, non-Latino children live in poverty.
- There are 8.9 million uninsured children in America.
- One in 5 Latino children and 1 in 8 black children are uninsured, compared to 1 in 13 white children.
- Only 11 percent of black, 15 percent of Latino, and 41 percent of white eighth graders perform at grade level in math.
- Each year 800,000 children spend time in foster care.
- On any given night, 200,000 children are homeless, one out of every four of the homeless population.
- Every 36 seconds a child is abused or neglected, almost 900,000 children each year.
- Black males ages 15 to 19 are about eight times more likely to be gun homicide victims than white males.
- Although they represent 39 percent of the U.S. juvenile population, minority youth represent 60 percent of committed juveniles.
- A black boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime; a Latino boy has a one in six chance.
- Black juveniles are about four times as likely as their white peers to be incarcerated. Black youths are almost five times as likely and Latino youths about twice as likely to be incarcerated as white youths for drug offenses.⁸³

These figures suggest that young people in the United States are increasingly being constructed in relation to a future devoid of any hope. The notion that children should be treated as a crucial social resource and represent for any healthy society important ethical and political considerations about the quality of public life, the allocation of social provisions, and the role of the state as a guardian of public interests appears to be lost. The visual geographies and ever-expanding landscapes of violence young people inhabit provoke neither action nor ethical discrimination on the part of adult society, which might serve to prevent children from being relegated to our lowest national priority in the richest country in the world.

If prison is the ultimate expression of social exclusion for adults in the United States, managing and regulating youth through the lens of crime and repression represents its symbiotic underside. One consequence is that the most crucial institutions affecting the lives of young people are now under the influence of disciplinary apparatuses of control and repression that have become the most visible

indicator of the degree to which the protected space of childhood, if not democracy itself, is being destroyed. As minority youth are removed from the inventory of ethical and political concerns, they are treated as surplus populations, assigned to a form of social death. In a suspect society that governs through a ruthless economic Darwinism, a sensationalized culture of violence, and the topology of crime, youth become collateral damage, while democratic governance disappears along with the moral and political responsibilities necessary for creating a better and more just future for succeeding generations.

Under the reign of a punishing mode of sovereignty, a racialized criminal justice system, and a financial meltdown that is crippling the nation, the economic, political, and educational situation for a growing number of young people and youth of color has gone from bad to worse. As families are being forced out of their homes because of record-high mortgage foreclosures and many businesses declare bankruptcy, tax revenues are declining and effecting cutbacks in state budgets, further weakening public schools and social services. The results in human suffering are tragic and can be measured in the growing ranks of poor and homeless students, the gutting of state social services, and the sharp drop in employment opportunities for teens and young people in their twenties.⁸⁴ Within these grave economic conditions, children disappear, often into bad schools, prisons, foster care, and even into their graves. Under the biopolitics of neoliberalism, the punishing state has no vocabulary or stake in the future of poor minority youth, and increasingly in youth in general. Instead of being viewed as impoverished, minority youth are seen as lazy and shiftless; instead of being recognized as badly served by failing schools, they are labeled uneducable and pushed out of schools; instead of being provided with decent work skills and jobs, they are either sent to prison or conscripted to fight in wars abroad; instead of being given decent health care and a place to live, they are placed in foster care or pushed into the swelling ranks of the homeless. Instead of addressing the very real dangers that young people face, the punishing society treats them as suspects and disposable populations, subjecting them to disciplinary practices that close down any hope they might have for a decent future. Perhaps the most powerful site in which these disciplinary practices are at work and bear down daily on the lives of many young people, but especially on the lives of minority youth, is in U.S. public schools, which now prepare many students for entry *not* into universities or colleges but into the juvenile criminal justice system.

MILITARIZING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The shift to a society now governed through crime, market-driven values, and the politics of disposability has radically transformed the public school as a site for a civic and critical education. One major effect can be seen in the increasingly popular practice of organizing schools through disciplinary practices that closely resemble the culture of the prisons.⁸⁵ For instance, many public schools, traditionally viewed as nurturing, youth-friendly spaces dedicated to protecting and educating children, have become among the most punitive institutions young people now face—on a daily basis. Educating for citizenship, work, and the public good has been replaced with models of schooling in which students are viewed narrowly—on the one hand as threats or perpetrators of violence, or on the other as infantilized potential victims of crime (on the Internet, at school, and in other youth spheres) who must endure modes of governing that are demeaning and repressive. Jonathan Simon captures this transformation of schools from a public good to a security risk in the following comment:

Today, in the United States, it is crime that dominates the symbolic passageway to school and citizenship. And behind this surface, the pathways of knowledge and power within the school are increasingly being shaped by crime as the model problem, and tools of criminal justice as the dominant technologies. Through the introduction of police, probation officers, prosecutors, and a host of private security professionals into the schools, new forms of expertise now openly compete with pedagogic knowledge and authority for shaping routines and rituals of schools.... At its core, the implicit fallacy dominating many school policy debates today consists of a gross conflation of virtually all the vulnerabilities of children and youth into variations on the theme of crime. This may work to raise the salience of education on the public agenda, but at the cost to students of an education embedded with themes of "accountability," "zero tolerance," and "norm shaping."⁸⁶

The merging of the neoliberal state, in which kids appear as commodities or as a source of profits, and the punishing state, which harkens back to the old days of racial apartheid in its ongoing race to incarcerate, was made quite visible in a recent shocking account of two judges in Pennsylvania who took bribes as part of a scheme to fill up privately run juvenile detention centers with as many youths as possible, regardless of how minor the infraction they committed. One victim, Hillary Transue, appeared before a "kickback" judge for "building a spoof *MySpace* page mocking the assistant principal at her high school."⁸⁷ A top student who had never been in trouble,

she anticipated a stern lecture from the judge for her impropriety. Instead, he sentenced her "to three months at a juvenile detention center on a charge of harassment."⁸⁸ It has been estimated that the two judges, Mark A. Ciavarella Jr. and Michael T. Conahan, "made more than \$2.6 million in kickbacks to send teenagers to two privately run youth detention centers" and that over 5000 juveniles have gone to jail since the "scheme started in 2003. Many of them were first time offenders and some remain in detention."⁸⁹ While this incident received some mainstream news coverage, most of the response focused less on the suffering endured by the young victims than on the breach of professional ethics by the two judges. None of the coverage treated the incident as either symptomatic of the war being waged against youth marginalized by class and race or an issue that the Obama administration should give top priority in reversing.

As the *New York Times*' op-ed writer, Bob Herbert, points out, "school officials and the criminal justice system are criminalizing children and teenagers all over the country, arresting them and throwing them in jail for behavior that in years past would never have led to the intervention of law enforcement."⁹⁰ Young people are being ushered "into the bowels of police precincts and jail cells" for minor offenses, which Herbert argues "is a problem that has gotten out of control... especially as zero tolerance policies proliferate, children are being treated like criminals."⁹¹ The sociologist Randall Beeger has written that the new security culture in school comes with an emphasis on "barbed-wire security fences, banned book bags and pagers... 'lock down drills' and 'SWAT team' rehearsals."⁹² As the logic of the market and "the crime complex"⁹³ frame a number of social actions in schools, students are subjected to three particularly offensive policies, defended by school authorities and politicians under the rubric of school safety. First, students are increasingly subjected to zero tolerance laws that are used primarily to punish, repress, and exclude them. Second, they are increasingly subjected to a "crime complex" in which security staff using harsh disciplinary practices now displace the normative functions teachers once provided both in and outside of the classroom. Third, more and more schools are breaking down the space between education and juvenile delinquency, substituting penal pedagogies for critical learning and replacing a school culture that fosters a discourse of possibility with a culture of fear and social control. Consequently, many youth of color in urban school systems are not just being suspended or expelled from school but also have to bear the terrible burden of being ushered into the dark precincts of juvenile detention centers, adult courts, and prison.

Once seen as an invaluable public good and a laboratory for critical learning and engaged citizenship, public schools are increasingly viewed as sites of crime, warehouses, or containment centers. Consequently, students are also reconceived through the optic of crime as populations to be managed and controlled primarily by security forces. In accordance with this perception of students as potential criminals and the school as a site of disorder and delinquency, schools across the country since the 1980s have implemented zero tolerance policies that involve the automatic imposition of severe penalties for first offenses of a wide range of undesirable, but often harmless, behaviors.⁹⁴ Based on the assumption that schools are rife with crime, and fueled by the emergence of a number of state and federal laws such as the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, mandatory sentencing legislation, and the popular "three strikes and you're out" policy, many educators first invoked zero tolerance rules against kids who brought firearms to schools—this was exacerbated by the high-profile school shootings in the mid-1990s. But as the climate of fear increased, the assumption that schools were dealing with a new breed of student—violent, amoral, and apathetic—began to take hold in the public imagination. Moreover, as school safety became a top educational priority, zero tolerance policies were broadened and now include a range of behavioral infractions that encompass everything from possessing drugs or weapons to threatening other students—all broadly conceived. Under zero tolerance policies, forms of punishments that were once applied to adults now apply to first graders. Students who violate what appear to be the most minor rules—such as a dress code violation—are increasingly subjected to zero tolerance laws that have a disparate impact on students of color while being needlessly punitive. The punitive nature of the zero tolerance approach is on display in a number of cases where students have had to face harsh penalties that defy human compassion and reason. For example, an eight-year-old boy in the first grade at a Miami elementary school took a table knife to his school, using it to rob a classmate of \$1 in lunch money. School officials claimed he was facing "possible expulsion and charges of armed robbery."⁹⁵ In another instance that took place in December 2004, "Porsche, a fourth-grade student at a Philadelphia, PA, elementary school, was yanked out of class, handcuffed, taken to the police station and held for eight hours for bringing a pair of 8-inch scissors to school. She had been using the scissors to work on a school project at home. School district officials acknowledged that the young girl was not using the scissors as a weapon or threatening anyone with them, but scissors qualified as a potential weapon under state

law.⁹⁶ It gets worse. Adopting a rigidly authoritarian zero tolerance school discipline policy, the following incident in the Chicago public school system signals both bad faith and terrible judgment on the part of educators implementing these practices. According to the report

Education on Lockdown:

In February 2003, a 7-year-old boy was cuffed, shackled, and forced to lie face down for more than an hour while being restrained by a security officer at Parker Community Academy on the Southwest Side. Neither the principal nor the assistant principal came to the aid of the first grader, who was so traumatized by the event he was not able to return to school.⁹⁷

Traditionally, students who violated school rules and the rights of others were sent to the principal's office, guidance teacher, or another teacher. Corrective discipline in most cases was a matter of judgment and deliberation generally handled within the school by the appropriate administrator or teacher. Under such circumstances, young people could defend themselves, the context of their rule violation was explored (including underlying issues, such as problems at home, that may have triggered the behavior in the first place), and the discipline they received was suited to the nature of the offense. Today, as school districts link up with law enforcement agencies, young people find themselves not only being expelled or suspended at record rates but also being "subject to citations or arrests and referrals to juvenile or criminal courts."⁹⁸ Students who break even minor rules, such as pouring a glass of milk on another student or engaging in a schoolyard fight, have been removed from the normal school population, handed over to armed police, arrested, handcuffed, shoved into patrol cars, taken to jail, fingerprinted, and subjected to the harsh dictates of the juvenile and criminal justice systems. As Bernadine Dohrn points out:

Today, behaviors that were once punished or sanctioned by the school vice-principal, family members, a neighbor, or a coach are more likely to lead to an adolescent being arrested, referred to juvenile or criminal court, formally adjudicated, incarcerated in a detention center, waived or transferred to adult criminal court for trial, sentenced under mandatory sentencing guidelines, and incarcerated with adults.⁹⁹

How educators think about children through a discourse that has shifted from hope to punishment is evident in the effects of zero tolerance policies, which criminalize student behavior in ways that take an incalculable toll on their lives and their future. For example, between 2000 and 2004, the Denver public school system experienced a

71 percent increase in the number of student referrals to law enforcement, many for nonviolent behaviors. The Chicago school system in 2003 had over 8000 students arrested, often for trivial infractions such as pushing, tardiness, and using spitballs. As part of a human waste-management system, zero tolerance policies have been responsible for suspending and expelling black students in record-high numbers. For instance, "in 2000, Blacks were 17 percent of public school enrollment nationwide and 34 percent of suspensions."¹⁰⁰ And when poor black youth are not being suspended under the merger of school security and law-and-order policies, they are increasingly at risk of falling into the school-to-prison pipeline. As the Advancement Project points out, the racial disparities in school suspensions, expulsions, and arrests feeds and mirrors similar disparities in the juvenile and criminal justice systems:

[I]n 2002, Black youths made up 16% of the juvenile population but were 43% of juvenile arrests, while White youths were 78% of the juvenile population but 55% of juvenile arrests. Further, in 1999, minority youths accounted for 34% of the U.S. juvenile population but 62% of the youths in juvenile facilities. Because higher rates of suspensions and expulsions are likely to lead to higher rates of juvenile incarceration, it is not surprising that Black and Latino youths are disproportionately represented among young people held in juvenile prisons.¹⁰¹

The city of Chicago, which has a large black student population, implemented a take-no-prisoners approach in its use of zero tolerance policies, and the racially skewed consequences are visible in grim statistics, revealing that "every day, on average, more than 266 suspensions are doled out... during the school year." Moreover, the number of expulsions has "mushroomed from 32 in 1995 to 3000 in the school year 2003-2004,"¹⁰² most affecting poor black youth.

As the culture of fear, crime, and repression dominate American public schools, the culture of schooling is reconfigured through the allocation of resources used primarily to acquire more police, security staff, and technologies of control and surveillance. In some cases, schools such as those in the Palm Beach County system have established their own police departments. Saturating schools with police and security personnel has created a host of problems for schools, teachers, and students—not to mention that such policies tap into financial resources otherwise used for actually enhancing learning. In many cases, the police and security guards assigned to schools are not properly trained to deal with students and often use their authority in

ways that extend far beyond what is either reasonable or even legal. When Mayor Bloomberg in 1998 allowed control of school safety to be transferred to the New York Police Department, the effect was not only a boom in the number of police and school safety agents but also an intensification of abuse, harassment, and arrests of students throughout the school system.

One example of war-on-terror tactics used domestically and impacting schools can be seen in the use of the roving metal detector program in which the police arrive at a school unannounced and submit all students to metal detector scans. In *Criminalizing the Classroom*, Elora Mukherjee describes some of the disruptions caused by the program:

As soon as it was implemented, the program began to cause chaos and lost instructional time at targeted schools, each morning transforming an ordinary city school into a massive police encampment with dozens of police vehicles, as many as sixty SSAs [School Security Agents] and NYPD officers, and long lines of students waiting to pass through the detectors to get to class.¹⁰³

As she indicates, the program does more than delay classes and instructional time: it also fosters abuse and violence. The following incident at Wadleigh Secondary School on November 17, 2006, provides an example of how students are abused by some of the police and security guards. Mukherjee writes:

The officers did not limit their search to weapons and other illegal items. They confiscated cell phones, iPods, food, school supplies, and other personal items. Even students with very good reasons to carry a cell phone were given no exemption. A young girl with a pacemaker told an officer that she needed her cell phone in case of a medical emergency, but the phone was seized nonetheless. When a student wandered out of line, officers screamed, "Get the fuck back in line!" When a school counselor asked the officers to refrain from cursing, one officer retorted, "I can do and say whatever I want," and continued, with her colleagues, to curse.¹⁰⁴

Many students in New York City have claimed that the police are often disrespectful and verbally abusive, stating that "police curse at them, scream at them, treat them like criminals, and are on 'power trips'.... At Martin Luther King Jr. High School, one student reported, SSAs refer to students as 'baby Rikers,' implying that they are convicts-in-waiting. At Louis D. Brandeis High School, SSAs degrade students with comments like, 'That girl has no ass.'¹⁰⁵ In some cases, students who had severe health problems had their phones

taken away and when they protested were either arrested or assaulted. Mukherjee reports that "[a] school aide at Paul Robeson High School witnessed a Sergeant yell at, push, and then physically assault a child who would not turn over his cell phone. The Sergeant hit the child in the jaw, wrestled him to the ground, handcuffed him, removed him from school premises, and confined him at the local precinct."¹⁰⁶ There have also been cases of teachers and administrators being verbally abused, assaulted, and arrested while trying to protect students from overzealous security personnel or police officers.

Under such circumstances, schools begin to take on the obscene and violent contours one associates with maximum security prisons: unannounced locker searches, armed police patrolling the corridors, mandatory drug testing, and the ever-present phalanx of lock-down security devices such as metal detectors, X-ray machines, surveillance cameras, and other technologies of fear and control. Appreciated less for their capacity to be educated than for the threat they pose to adults, students are now treated as if they were inmates, often humiliated, detained, searched, and in some cases arrested. Randall Berger is right in suggesting that the new "security culture in public schools [has] turned them into 'learning prisons' where the students unwittingly become 'guinea pigs' to test the latest security devices."¹⁰⁷

Poor black and Latino male youth are particularly at risk in this mix of demonic representation and punitive modes of control as they are the primary object of not only racist stereotypes but also a range of disciplinary policies that criminalize their behavior.¹⁰⁸ Such youth, increasingly viewed as burdensome and dispensable, now bear the brunt of these assaults by being expelled from schools, tried in the criminal justice system as adults, and arrested and jailed at rates that far exceed their white counterparts.¹⁰⁹ While black children make up only 15 percent of the juvenile population in the United States, they account for 46 percent of those put behind bars and 52 percent of those whose cases end up in adult criminal courts. Shockingly, in the land of the free and the home of the brave, "[a] jail or detention cell after a child or youth gets into trouble is the only universally guaranteed child policy in America."¹¹⁰

When their behavior is not being criminalized, youth are often held in contempt and treated with cynical disrespect. For example, administrators at Gonzales High School in Texas decided that if students violated the school's highly conservative dress code, they would be treated like convicts and forced to wear prison-style jumpsuits, unless they procured another set of clothes from their parents. Larry Wehde, the superintendent, justified this obvious abuse of school authority

by simply restating his own (blind) faith in the reactionary ideology that produced the policy: "We're a conservative community, and we're just trying to make our students more reflective of that."¹¹¹ Indeed! With no irony intended, the school board president, Glenn Menking, said the purpose of the code was "to put students' attention on education, not clothes."¹¹² Neither administrator revealed doubts about establishing school disciplinary practices modeled on prison policies. The critical lesson for students in this instance is to be wary of adults who seem to believe that treating young people like prison inmates is effective training for their entry into the twenty-first century. Not surprisingly, some parents have voiced outrage over the policy, stating that their children should not be treated like "little prisoners."¹¹³

That students are being miseducated, criminalized, and arrested through a form of penal pedagogy in lock-down schools that resemble prisons is a cruel reminder of the degree to which mainstream politicians and the American public have turned their backs on young people in general and poor minority youth in particular. As schools are reconfigured around the model of the prison, crime becomes the central metaphor used to define the nature of schooling, while criminalizing the behavior of young people becomes the most valued strategy in mediating the relationship between educators and students. The consequences of these policies for young people suggest not only an egregious abdication of responsibility—as well as reason, judgment, and restraint—on the part of administrators, teachers, and parents but also a new role for schools as they become more prisonlike, eagerly adapting to their role as an adjunct of the punishing state.

As schools define themselves through the lens of crime and merge with the dictates of the penal system, they eliminate a critical and nurturing space in which to educate and protect children in accordance with the ideals of a democratic society. As central institutions in the youth disposability industry, public schools now serve to discipline and warehouse youth, while they also put in place a circuit of policies and practices to make it easier for minority youth to move from schools into the juvenile justice system and eventually into prison. The combination of school punishments and criminal penalties has proven a lethal mix for many poor minority youth and has transformed schools from spaces of youth advocacy, protection, hope, and equity to military fortresses, increasingly well positioned to mete out injustice and humiliation, transforming the once-nurturing landscapes that young people are compelled to inhabit. Rather than confront the war on youth, especially the increasing criminalization of their behavior, schools now adopt policies that both participate in and legitimate

the increasing absorption of young people into the juvenile and adult criminal justice system. Commenting on the role of schools as a major feeder of children into the adult criminal court system, Bernadine Dohn writes:

As youth service systems (schools, foster care, probation, mental health) are scaling back, shutting down, or transforming their purpose, one system has been expanding its outreach to youth at an accelerated rate: the adult criminal justice system. All across the nation, states have been expanding the jurisdiction of adult criminal court to include younger children by lowering the minimum age of criminal jurisdiction and expanding the types of offenses and mechanisms for transfer or waiver of juveniles into adult criminal court. Barriers between adult criminals and children are being removed in police stations, courthouses, holding cells, and correctional institutions. Simultaneously, juvenile jurisdiction has expanded to include both younger children and delinquency sentencing beyond the age of childhood, giving law enforcement multiple options for convicting and incarcerating youngsters.¹¹⁴

Although state repression aimed at children is not new, what is unique about the current historical moment is that the forces of domestic militarization are expanding, making it easier to put young people in jail rather than to provide them with the education, services, and care they need to face the growing problems characteristic of a democracy under siege. As minority youth increasingly become the objects of severe disciplinary practices in public schools, many often find themselves vulnerable and powerless as they are thrown into juvenile and adult courts, or even worse, into overcrowded and dangerous juvenile correctional institutions and sometimes adult prisons.¹¹⁵

There is a special level of danger and risk that young people face when they enter the criminal justice system in the United States, and the figures are staggering. For example, one recent report states, "These systems affect a wide swath of the U.S. youth population. Nationwide each year, police make 2.2 million juvenile arrests; 1.7 million cases are referred to juvenile courts; an estimated 400,000 youngsters cycle through juvenile detention centers; and nearly 100,000 youth are confined in juvenile jails, prisons, boot camps, and other residential facilities on any given night."¹¹⁶ The tragedy is that some of these youth are sentenced to die in prisons. For instance, a report issued by the Equal Justice Initiative in 2007 states, "In the United States, dozens of 13- and 14-year-old children have been sentenced to life imprisonment with no possibility of parole after being prosecuted as adults."¹¹⁷ In this case, the United States has the dubious distinction of being the only country in the world "where a

13-year-old is known to be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.¹¹⁸ What is to be said about a country that is willing to put young children behind bars until they die? These so-called criminals are not adults; they are immature and underdeveloped children who are too young to marry, drive a car, get a tattoo, or go to scary movies, but allegedly not too young to be put in prison for the rest of their lives. According to a recent Equal Justice Initiative report, "at least 2225 people are serving sentences of death in prison for crimes they committed under the age of 18," including "73 children who are either 13- or 14-years-old."¹¹⁹ Moreover, on any given day in the United States, "9500 juveniles under the age of 18 are locked up in adult penal institutions."¹²⁰ At the current time, 44 states and the District of Columbia can try 14-year-olds in the adult criminal system.¹²¹

Giving up on the idea of rehabilitation is bad enough when applied to incarcerated adults, but it is unforgivable when applied to children. Not only do young people who find themselves in adult prisons have few opportunities for acquiring meaningful work skills and getting a decent education, they are also at great risk for physical and sexual assault. As the Equal Justice Initiative report points out:

Juveniles placed in adult prisons are at heightened risk of physical and sexual assault by older, more mature prisoners. Many adolescents suffer horrific abuse for years when sentenced to die in prison. Young inmates are at particular risk of rape in prison. Children sentenced to adult prisons typically are victimized because they have "no prison experience, friends, companions or social support." Children are five times more likely to be sexually assaulted in adult prisons than in juvenile facilities.¹²²

And when they are removed from the adult prison population, youth are often placed in isolation, locked down "23 hours a day in small cells with no natural light."¹²³ One consequence of placing young people in these environments is that these punitive conditions "exacerbate existing mental disorders, and increase risk of suicide. In fact, youth have the highest suicide rates of all inmates in jails. Youth are 19 times more likely to commit suicide in jail than youth in the general population and 36 times more likely to commit suicide in an adult jail than in a juvenile detention facility. Jail staff are simply not equipped to protect youth from the dangers of adult jails."¹²⁴

Such cruel and unusual punishment is borne disproportionately by poor minority youth. In fact, "Of the 73 children between the ages of 13-14 years-old sentenced to die in prison, nearly half (36, or 49%) are African American. Seven (9.6%) are Latino. Twenty-two

(30%) are white.... [while] all of the children condemned to death in prison for non-homicide offenses are children of color. All but one of the children sentenced to life without the possibility of parole for offenses committed at age 13 are children of color."¹²⁵ Unfortunately, the children who increasingly inhabit juvenile courts, adult courts, and correctional facilities in the United States emerge from a public school system that has been severely undermined as a democratic public sphere. Subject to harsh market forces, cutbacks in already meager state budgets, the disdain of neoconservative policies, and the massive disempowerment of teachers by an audit-and-testing culture, the public schools in the United States have defaulted on their responsibility to young people. What is at stake in governance under the punishing state is made clear, once again, by Bernardine Dohrn. She writes:

Criminalizing youth behaviors, policing schools, punishing children by depriving them of an education, constricting social protections for abused and neglected youth, and subjecting youth to law enforcement as a "social service"—these trends smack of social injustice, racial inequity, dehumanization, and fear-filled demonization of youngsters, who are our prospective hope. At stake here is the civic will to invest in our common future by seeing other people's children as our own.

Clearly, any attempt to invest in a common and just future implies that educators bear some of the responsibility for the terrible injustices and extraordinary abuse minority youth are experiencing in the United States under a political and economic mode of governance that holds them in contempt while it simultaneously makes them disposable. Educators and others can work to reverse the kinds of policies and practices that emerge from the current war on kids by making visible the interlocking ideologies and practices in which incarceration and punishment become a substitute for "early intervention and sustained child investment."¹²⁶ Similarly, policies will have to be put into place that not only remove young people from jails but also vastly reduce the number of young people who enter the child welfare and juvenile and criminal justice systems. At the very least, such a task suggests reforming those primary institutions such as schools, the mainstream media, and the criminal justice system that not only demonize and punish youth but also play a pivotal role in pushing them into the disciplinary apparatuses of the punishing state, especially mass incarceration. Any viable politics aimed at improving the lives of young people will also have to address what it means to challenge those commanding institutions whose priorities for the last 30 years

suggest to poor and minority youth they are not worthy of the best future that the richest democracy in the world has to offer them. What must be challenged and reversed is the all-too-common assumption that American society is more willing to invest in sending them to jail than in providing them with high-quality schools, decent education, and the promise of a better life.

Such a task is formidable, and there is more at stake here than creating a society that provides a level playing field for all children and youth, a society in which matters of equality and justice trump the needs of markets and a rationality of excessive self-interest. As Lawrence Grossberg has argued, there is also the need for educators and others "to reimagine imagination itself—not only visions of an alternative future, but also new languages of possibility and new understandings of an act of envisioning a better future."¹²⁷ It is difficult to imagine what it means to fight for the rights of children, if we cannot at the same time imagine a different conception of the future, one vastly at odds with a present that can only portend a future as a repeat of itself. But living in the shadow of a vicious realignment of a punishing state and a ruthless mode of economic Darwinism also demands more than a commitment to justice, democratic values, and hope: it necessitates the hard work of building social movements willing to push dominant relations of power over the tipping point in order to make good for children the promise of a real democracy. Within this current moment of uncertainty and possibility, it is necessary for educators, artists, intellectuals, and others to raise questions and develop rigorous modes of analysis in order to explain how a culture of domestic militarization, with its policies of containment and brutalization, has been able to develop and gain consent from so many people in the United States during the last three decades. And, most importantly, such a challenge suggests rethinking the possibility of a new mode of politics and empowering forms of education, especially in light of the Obama victory, that work and struggle vigorously for a social order willing to expand and strengthen the ideals and social relations of a more just society, one in which a future of hope and imagination is inextricably connected to the fate of all young people, if not democracy itself. Although the Obama administration has pledged billions to early childhood education, Obama's appointment of Arne Duncan to the education cabinet position is a deep cause of worry for many educators. Given Duncan's track record in Chicago, where he was a staunch advocate for harsh zero tolerance policies, endorsed a now-discredited business model for schools, and supported data-driven instruction, merit pay, standardized testing, charter

schools, and most disturbingly paying students to consume digestible knowledge, educators and others can waste no time organizing social movements willing to struggle for democratic reforms that enable critical learning, produce access to quality schools for all students, and deepen democratic values, rather than close them down.¹²⁸

Under this insufferable climate of increased repression and unabated exploitation, young people and communities of color become the new casualties in an ongoing war against justice, freedom, social citizenship, and democracy. Given the switch in public policy from social investment to punishment—a policy that in education, for now, Obama seems willing to support—it is clear that young people for whom race and class loom large have become disposable. How much longer can a nation ignore those youth who lack the resources and opportunities that were available, in a partial and incomplete way, to previous generations? And what does it mean when a nation becomes frozen ethically and imaginatively in providing its youth with a future of hope and opportunity? Under such circumstances, it is time for intellectuals who inhabit a wider variety of public spheres to take a stand and to remind themselves that collective problems deserve collective solutions and that what is at risk is not only a generation of young people and adults now considered to be a generation of suspects, but the very possibility of deepening and expanding democracy itself.