



# Contesting the “Justice Campus”: Abolitionist Resistance to Liberal Carceral Expansion

JUDAH SCHEPT,  
EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

## INTRODUCTION: *SCENES OF DISJUNCTURE*

*I am sitting in the audience in a meeting room at the public library in the vibrant downtown center of Springfield, a Midwestern small city home to a large university.<sup>1</sup> I am one of perhaps 45 community residents who have gathered to hear current and campaigning county politicians speak about the local criminal justice system and recently announced plans for its expansion. Downtown Springfield is full of independent restaurants, cafes, boutiques, independent book and music stores, and a food cooperative, all pointing to the community’s politically progressive identity. Indeed, the elderly man about to speak at the podium in the meeting room is a long-time Democratic county politician and Quaker peace activist, who also frequently criticizes mass incarceration. As this man, Reuben Davison, began to speak to the public, he offered a line that I had heard him say in previous meetings and that I would come to hear him say several more times:*

*“The shame of this country in the 18th century was slavery.  
The shame of this county in the 19th century was Jim Crow.  
The shame of this country in the 20th and 21st centuries is the  
prison industrial complex.”*

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*On this and future evenings, Davison followed his oratory locating mass incarceration as part of a historical trajectory of racist institutions with a seemingly incongruous second point. Following his condemnation of the prison industrial complex, Davison would invariably offer an emphatic and passionate embrace of his and other county leaders' proposal to build a "justice campus," an 85 acre complex of new carceral facilities that would exponentially expand the county's ability to incarcerate adults and youth. Advocates of the justice campus imagined its constitutive institutions—a large new county jail, a juvenile facility, and a work release center—to be extensions of the community's progressive politics, model facilities that operated outside of history and dislocated from contemporary penal politics. Indeed, at the forum in the library and at many other community meetings I attended in Springfield, advocates of expansion articulated their vision of the campus through discourses of rehabilitation, education, therapeutic justice and human rights. That is, the discourse supporting massive carceral expansion was bereft of any invocation of punishment.*

It was the disjuncture between Davison's and many others' critical analysis of mass incarceration and their unabashed endorsement of local carceral expansion that brought me to the meeting and the ethnography of which it was a part. After more than a year as a community organizer with Decarcerate Lincoln County (DLC), a local organization challenging the justice campus, I formally began ethnographic study of the discourse and politics of carceral expansion and resistance to it. I spent the next two years immersed in the issues, conducting interviews and attending community meetings with county politicians, civic leaders, corrections officials, private consultants, social workers, and community activists. As someone who had been involved for many years prior in prison activism that focused on the punitive state, I was consistently struck by the incongruence of community leaders' condemnation of mass incarceration and advocacy for a massive, if benevolent, justice campus.

In this essay, it is this disjuncture—the embrace of liberal carcerality and the rejection of the carceral state and nation—that forms my starting point of examination and a point of departure for the central exploration of these pages: resistance to liberal carceral expansion. I draw on interviews and participant observation to illustrate the diverse ways in which community activists intervened in the narrative of carceral expansion.<sup>2</sup> I try to convey my observations through both "thick

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<sup>2</sup> All place, personal, and organizational names are pseudonyms.

description” (Geertz 1973) and through the critically important project of locating analysis of the “local” amidst the moving and implicating currents of mass incarceration and the broader political-economic and cultural flows of which it is a part (Appadurai 1996; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Smith 2001).

At times, local officials in favor of the campus were able to co-opt activists’ interventions and fold them back into the dominant narrative of the justice campus. Other times, however, activists succeeded in disrupting the dominant articulation of local carcerality. In exploring both abolitionist community organizing as well as covert and anonymous acts of property destruction targeting the machinery of expansion, this article offers ethnographic explorations of the ways in which communities contest some of the more insidious logics of carceral expansion.

### TRANS-LOCAL CARCERALITY

Towards the end of 2007, the county found itself under threat of a lawsuit because of conditions at the jail due to overcrowding. Built in 1986 to house 126 inmates and double bunked in 2006, the jail held well over 300 prisoners by the end 2007 and the beginning of 2008. The county hired Project Administration Results, Inc. (PARI), a private firm specializing in corrections construction, to research and plan a “justice campus.” The complex would sit on an 85 acre lot purchased by the county in 2002, and would include a new jail with double the capacity of the current one (between 400 and 500 beds), a new 72 bed juvenile facility, a 100 bed work release center, and various new offices for criminal justice professionals. Built into the proposal and the architectural rendering of the campus was the ability for each facility to double in size. The official price tag of the facility was estimated to be between \$50 and \$75 million dollars.

Mapped onto the decrepit 85 acre site of the proposed justice campus is a larger story that provides important historical-political context. The 85 acres, known colloquially as “the old TDA site,” once housed a multinational manufacturing company that was, for decades during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the largest employer in the county. The company, which I’ll call Technology Development of America, shed almost 10,000 local jobs en route to ultimately departing Springfield for Mexico at

the end of the 1990s. Thus, the concept of the justice campus would not have been possible without a particular historical trajectory, one that should sound familiar to those with some knowledge of the growth of mass incarceration. It is a story of the departure of capital and industry; of shady partnerships between private capital and politics; and of incarceration as the catchall—and, crucially, the inevitable—solution to problems raised by capital's departure.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, a county seeking to expand exponentially its ability to incarcerate is not a new story. Indeed, since the late 1990s, scholars, journalists, and activists have used the term *prison industrial complex* (PIC) to refer to the growth in size, scope and centrality of the correctional institution, as well as its interdependency with private economic interests. Scholarship has profiled the rise of the prison industrial complex through narratives that privilege political economy, in particular neoliberal globalization (Gilmore 2007; Hallett 2006), conservative cultural values and political ideologies (Garland 2001), punitive public policy (Currie 1998; Mauer 2000), and various combinations thereof (Austin & Irwin 2001; Donziger, [Ed.] 1996). Included in these and other analyses of mass incarceration are poignant observations of the racialized nature of mass incarceration, with scholars noting the historical criminalization of blackness (Muhammad, 2010), the contemporary disproportionate imprisonment of people of color (Gilmore 2007; James [Ed.] 2007, 2002; Loury 2008), and the collateral consequences of such racialized incarceration (Clear 2007; Mauer & Chesney-Lind 2002), including the extension of Jim Crow discrimination through incarceration (Alexander 2009).

What makes this story seemingly distinct is the overwhelming presence of people like Reuben Davison at the forefront of advocacy for the justice campus. That is, no one with whom I spoke disputed the findings, explanations and critiques of the above scholars. Often, advocates of the justice campus offered unprompted indictments of mass incarceration. In their words, the justice campus would embody and express the distinct nature of local progressive politics, eschewing punishment for rehabilitation and education, and in the process, reducing recidivism, healing drug addiction, and providing much needed edu-

<sup>3</sup> Readers interested in a more comprehensive account of the transnational movement of capital and the loss of jobs should see Jefferson Cowie's (1999) *Capital Moves*.

cation. Indeed, in the very name "justice campus", officials mapped the bucolic and collegiate identity of the town onto their proposal for the most drastic expansion of carceral control in county history. But in officials' refusal—or inability—to consider reducing community reliance on incarceration and in the myriad ways in which they marginalized important voices, local activists found critical entries into contesting the campus.

### DEFINING RESISTANCE

Describing the contestation of carceral expansion in this essay as "resistance" raises some challenges, both theoretical and empirical, because of the specific cultural-political context of my research site. Some respondents who *advocated* for carceral expansion identified that work as resisting mass incarceration. In the context of Lincoln County carceral politics, resistance is a contested term, devoid of essential meaning and utilized within diverse political contexts. This raises complicated questions. What is resistance and how does one observe it in the field? What distinguishes resistance from other political activity? Beyond these definitional issues the researcher faces larger, reflexive issues. Am I engaging in and perpetuating a "theoretical hegemony of resistance" (Brown 1996, 279) within ethnographic scholarship, undermining the analytical utility of the concept and, in Brown's (1996, 730) snarky but poignant words, "strongly skewing the project of cultural anthropology in the direction inspired by the work of Foucault: culture as prison, culture as insane asylum, culture as 'hegemonic domination of the [insert Other of choice]'"?

Moreover, as raised by Brown (1996) and others (Fletcher 2007), scholarship has increasingly turned toward "everyday acts" of resistance (Abu Lughod 1990; Scott 1990; 1985) and celebratory moments of transgression (Ferrell, Hayward and Young 2008; Ferrell 2007; Hall and Winlow 2007). Some scholarship has sought to warn against such a trend, noting, for example, that a consequence of the postmodern attention to decentralized and individualistic acts of resistance, at the expense of a focus on collective struggles and social movements, can be the disabling of a transformative politics (Handler 1993).

Crucially, some scholars, such as Jeff Ferrell, identify the moments observed in ethnographic study of resistance and

transgression as constitutive of larger, coordinated movements. In an article responding to criticism of cultural criminology's focus on such moments, Ferrell (2007, 94) rhetorically asks, "Can phenomena like 'subversive symbol inversion' and 'creative recoding' actually be found, and more importantly, found to constitute a significant opposition to capitalism's suffocations?"

Of course, this essay does not resolve these tensions (and does not attempt to). Ultimately, in the definition of resistance by which I abide—resistance seeks radical changes in power relations (McCann 2006)—I am able to acknowledge the diversity that exists in resistant articulations. In this standpoint, I do, in a way, take sides within the debates on resistance. I believe, contrary to Brown (1996), that resistance remains a crucial analytic. Indeed, against his criticism of the scholarly hegemony of resistance, I rather proudly align myself as attempting to further instantiate that particular hegemonic articulation.

Resistance to the carceral state—and, crucially, resistance to the diverse, decentralized, and distinctive articulations of the carceral state, such as municipal jail expansion—is of paramount importance both to scholars of resistance and to other readers interested and engaged in activism and community organizing. The nature of local resistance to the justice campus is nothing short of an attempt at social change through a radical destabilization of habitus (Schaeffer 2004, 123). Although DLC can be understood as engaging in a series of specific campaigns, some of which were modest in their demands and reformist in their orientations, there was an unmistakable and often explicit attempt to change the very dispositions with which local officials and others viewed such issues and concepts heavy with hegemonic inscription as crime, safety, police, and, of course, incarceration. In this way, McCann's definition of resistance applies well to the work of DMC and others in their contestations over carceral expansion, to which I now turn.

### **RESISTING LIBERAL CARCERILITY: DECARCERATE LINCOLN COUNTY**

Decarcerate Lincoln County (DLC) formed in the summer of 2008 after several months of conversations among a growing group of concerned residents. Beginning in the early spring of

that year, individuals met with growing regularity to discuss interventions into the justice campus conversation in the community. The initial conversations among four activists, including myself, quickly became larger meetings. In May of 2008, the small group organized a day of popular education about the prison industrial complex and the justice campus that drew over 70 participants, including several politicians and judges.

DLC included people with varying experiences of community organizing and activism and with different political orientations. Several people involved with DLC were concurrently engaged in eco-defense work against Interstate 69, the so-called NAFTA superhighway. To an extent, some of these activists attended DLC meetings to gain a better understanding of linkages between anti-jail and anti-globalization work. One DLC activist, Michaela Davis, astutely noted to me that incarceration is the common denominator linking struggles; as a locus of repression and control, prison is the site where seemingly disparate struggles converge.

Other people involved with DLC had longer histories of prison activism, most notably with Critical Resistance (CR), a national organization dedicated to the abolition of the prison industrial complex.<sup>4</sup> The connection to CR would prove important for a number of reasons. The organization at times served as a conduit for DLC's articulation of the justice campus as one site among many in the diverse manifestations of the prison industrial complex. CR also fostered DLC's understanding of itself as part of a broader, even transnational, network of resistance. Moreover, CR's explicitly abolitionist framework would prove to be invaluable for DLC's own identity formation and for their development of a local alternative framework through which to criticize the justice campus and its accompanying "progressive" discourses.

DLC's resistance focused on stopping the construction and implementation of the justice campus. But that goal was set in a broader discursive context of trying to intervene in and disrupt the liberal carceral narrative that identified a benevolent and curative justice campus as a human rights solution to the human rights problem of overcrowding at the current jail. This broader context would prove crucial for DLC to remain an active voice

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.criticalresistance.org>

in community discussions of social control, as the eventual defeat of the justice campus proposal simply meant that new initiatives for expansion surfaced. DLC's identification with abolitionist principles provided a consistent framework for offering indictments of liberal attempts to shape incarceration to fit the political context of the community.

Yet staking their claim in abolition also brought with it various internal and external challenges, including the negotiation within the group of different orientations to radical politics, the constant struggle to prioritize the voices and needs of the people most affected by incarceration, and the rather uncharted territory of organizing against incarceration when it's advocates were primarily members of the community's liberal and progressive establishment.

Indeed, in officials' embrace of therapeutic justice and rehabilitation and active critique of punishment, they presented a formidable challenge to organizers against jail expansion. Rather than relying on resistant discourses that critiqued state power and punishment, organizers had to articulate a coherent critique of local, benevolent carcerality.

Moreover, organizers encountered discursive and strategic challenges when county officials spoke not only of rehabilitation and human rights, but also of debate, consensus, and public opinion. Thus, community organizers faced campaigns for carceral expansion that relied on liberal discourses of incarceration to envision institutions and rhetoric of democratic process and community consensus to legitimate them.

As such, two larger themes characterized the resistant articulations of county activists. The first and most explicit was the attempt by activists to disrupt the liberal carceral narrative of county leaders. Activists attempted to point to the ways in which decarceration—the overall reduction of the county's reliance on incarceration—provided long term, sustainable solutions to the problems of the county. That is, activists pointed to mass incarceration as the root problem through which other problems manifested.

The second theme of resistor discourse was the contestation of county processes of knowledge production and political decision-making. Activists frequently questioned the formation and privileging of knowledge and the methods by which county of-



ficials discussed issues and formed policy. In addition to offering criticisms of these phenomena at county events, activists attempted to embody the structures of decision-making and knowledge production that they wished to see more broadly. For example, internal DLC meetings utilized consensus decision-making and followed a number of guidelines to facilitate non-hierarchical and anti-oppression processes. DLC utilized similar models at larger, community forums that the group organized, including orchestrating the geography of the meeting room to reflect egalitarian principles. In contrast to county-organized meetings where there was always some demarcation between officials and the public, DLC intentionally constructed circles at most meetings.<sup>5</sup>

**DISRUPTING DOXA:  
FROM CARCERAL NATURALIZATION  
TO ABOLITIONIST AWARENESS**

One way to understand the support for the justice campus in Lincoln County is through the idea that carcerality—the logic and practice of physical and coercive control—operates at the level of habitus. That is, the hegemony of mass incarceration inscribes into individual and organizational bodies a set of dispositions and practices that operate at the level of common sense, such that critics of incarceration still turn to forms of carcerality (the justice campus) to address problems of carcerality (jail overcrowding).

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977; 1990; 1991; 2005) work on the concept of habitus is instructive. Bourdieu notes that within habitus exist different dispositions, including *orthodoxy* and *doxa*. Bourdieu distinguishes the two by noting that doxa refers to the self-evidentiary appearance of the social world; in contrast to orthodox or heterodox beliefs that realize different or antagonistic belief structures, doxa occurs when there is unquestioned (and unquestionable) adherence to a “world of tradition experienced as a “natural world” and taken for granted” (1977, 164).

Local carcerality operated as both orthodoxy and doxa in Springfield. Officials in favor of the justice campus understood that they had choices when it came to planning for the future of

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<sup>5</sup> On utilizing Circles for community planning, see Ball, Caldwell and Pranis (2010)

incarceration and youth detention. In their informed and at times passionate denouncements of mass incarceration and simultaneous articulation of local carcerality, officials demonstrated their understanding of the diverse iterations of and beliefs about institutions. But this orthodoxy existed within a bounded universe of discourse in the community; carcerality, the control and detention embodied in not only the justice campus but also subsequent proposals and “alternatives”, made certain perspectives, such as abolitionist change, undiscussable. If one can understand culture as “the very material of...daily lives, the bricks and mortar of...most commonplace understandings” (Willis 1979, 184-5), then within the context of the community the *discursive* bricks and mortar that constructed and maintained local cultural understandings of carcerality also served to structure and limit the conversations about criminal justice, predicating any discussion of reform on the *physical* bricks and mortar of institutions.<sup>6</sup>

In this section I examine DLC’s significant interventions into the dominant county narrative, bringing the “undiscussable into discussion” and, for certain periods of time, enacting counter-hegemonic understandings of key issues. Critical interventions into the carceral discourse occurred through three thematic means: 1) direct challenges to benevolent carcerality, 2) direct challenges to the structure of meetings and the production of knowledge, and 3) the reframing of key issues that successfully inscribed counter-hegemonic understanding into the discourse, if only temporarily. In DLC’s work to bring abolition into discussion, the group contributed to what Bourdieu sees as the beginning of political consciousness (Bourdieu 1977, 170).

### **DIRECT CHALLENGES: CONFRONTING LIBERAL CARCERALITY**

In the fall of 2008, the local criminal justice advisory body, the Lincoln County Criminal Justice Coordinating Board (LC-CJCB), organized four public meetings whose official purpose was to obtain public input. The first three meetings focused on the three major constitutive parts of the justice campus—the juvenile facility, the work release center, and the jail—and the fourth examined the official master plan for the site. The LC-CJCB was comprised of officials who were active supporters of

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<sup>6</sup> See Sloop (1996) for important work on cultural and discursive constructs of prison

the campus and all four meetings featured the county's consultant for the campus, Project Administration Results, Inc. The spatial privilege afforded to officials and experts, and their location at the beginning of meeting agendas in order to present material and frame subsequent discussions, inevitably resulted in their ability to consistently restate their positions and respond to public criticism in ways that often reframed resistant articulations into endorsements of expansion. Activists and other community residents who attended the meetings reported to me that they were "farcical" and "scripted". One disaffected county politician who was a one-time outspoken proponent of the justice campus told me that the four meetings were "token attempts to 'checkbox' public process."

Interestingly, despite the scripted nature of the meetings and their imposing and formal spatial arrangements, some of Decarcerate Lincoln County's more powerful interventions occurred during public comment at the meetings. In these moments, activists often utilized direct and personal stories to explicitly criticize the county's perspective. In leveling devastating critiques through narrative accounts, activists no doubt found meaning in sharing their personal stories but also expressed an epistemological challenge to what the group saw as a depersonalized and disembodied official narrative.

At the third LCCJCB meeting about the justice campus, which focused on the jail, DLC member Emily Collins mapped a genealogy of alcoholism and incarceration in her family to illustrate the linkages between jail, poverty, and addiction:

My name is Emily Collins and I'm a member of a group called DLC. I joined that group for a number of reasons. My family has a long history of generational recidivism. My great-grandfather was an alcoholic, but a wealthy alcoholic, so he spent very little time in jail. My grandfather, his son, was a middle-class alcoholic and spent increasingly more time in jail. My uncles, his sons, were alcoholics and drug addicts but they were very poor so they spent years and years in jail. My cousins and brothers are already spending time in jail. I've witnessed firsthand that the fastest way to ensure that somebody is going to spend time in jail is to send them there in the first place or send their parents to jail. And I've seen this happen. It seems like the longer the problem goes down the generational line without somebody treating it, the younger it starts in the next generation. I've noticed that jail doesn't work yet other programs are not as heavily funded as jails are...you don't sentence people to treatment you sentence them to jail time. That doesn't work. I've no-

ticed first hand it's not effective. And the reason I've joined this group that is trying to stop this jail from happening is that I strongly believe in one of the demands that we must treat drug addiction not criminalize it. I'm not talking about simply reducing recidivism, but about not sending sick people to jail in the first place.

Collins's personal and passionate account of generational addiction and incarceration posited important arguments about the criminalization of addiction and the targeting of the poor.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, she shaped her account not only to share this important story, but also to wield it politically against the prevailing narrative that offered the justice campus as precisely the place where people like her family members could be treated. In what seemed to be anticipation of that response from the panel, Collins closed her statements by saying that treating addiction must mean not sending people to jail in the first place.

Most advocates of the justice campus pointed to poverty's overwhelming role in incarceration through softly pathologizing poor people, a construction of poverty that had the added bonus of granting legitimacy to the curative and benevolent facility they imagined as having a role in poor people's rehabilitation.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, DLC activists like Emily Collins worked hard to problematize normative definitions of crime, de-link criminality from poverty, push for non-institutional and non-punitive ways to approach social problems, and demonstrated the targeting of poor people by the criminal justice system. In this latter effort, DLC co-founder Michaela Davis pointed out the problematic structure of probation fees during the same meeting:

Currently, the fees of people who are on probation pay the salaries of probation officers. This creates a perverse incentive structure so that probation officers need to maintain high amounts of people on probation in order to be sure their salaries are paid. I think it's broadly recognized that this is a bad incentive structure, but there's no other funding that is coming through, and if we can't provide the funding to change that kind of incentive structure I'm curious how we will have the funding available after we build a larger jail. I think changing that probation funding is one of those small institutional steps that we could take to change the causes of overcrowding. I think there are lots of other ones.

<sup>7</sup> See Donziger, (Ed.) (1996), Irwin (1992), Mauer (2006), and Reiman (2000), for further discussion of the relationships between poverty, the war on drugs, and incarceration.

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad (2010) has called this the writing of crime into class.

In this statement, Michaela Davis revealed an insidious and problematic arrangement within the system: probationer fees funded the probation department's personnel costs. As Davis pointed out, this incentivized systemic growth.<sup>9</sup> She positioned her comments to subvert the very foundation on which the justice campus was predicated: to accommodate the size of the system. Davis pointed out to the panel how the system's structure produced the problems that required expansion. In proposing real, practical, and small steps to shrink the system and thus alleviate those problems, Davis artfully framed an abolitionist analysis to fit the reformist context of the meeting.

### DIRECT CHALLENGES: PROBLEMATIZING PROCESS

In addition to direct challenges to the articulation of liberal carcerality, DLC members also confronted the knowledge production and political processes that constructed and insulated the dominant narrative of expansion. DLC challenged the dominant subjectivity of meeting spaces and the committed epistemologies of practitioners and consultants during public meetings. At meetings hosted by DLC, the group prioritized the voices of counter-experts: the people and families most affected by carceral policies.

DLC's challenge to the epistemologies and politics of the justice campus was an important ideological contestation of the meaning of local carcerality. John Thompson's (1986) study of ideology, in particular his claim that “to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination” (131), provides important theoretical context for understanding DLC's ardent focus on challenging official process. Thompson writes that,

What may have seemed like a sphere of effective *consensus* must in many cases be seen as a realm of actual or potential *conflict*. Hence the meaning of what is said...is infused with forms of power; different individuals or groups have a differential capacity to *make a meaning stick* (Thompson 1986, 132).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Shelden (2010, p. 58) notes that this same arrangement defined jails from their beginnings. He writes, “It was ironic that the financing of local jails depended on fees paid to jailers by those confined there when the majority of jail prisoners were drawn from the poorest classes.” Summarizing McConville (1995), he continues, “Phrased another way, fees were extracted “from misery.””

## INVISIBILITY

Decarcerate Lincoln County had an organizational priority of integrating the people most affected by criminal justice policies into their campaigns. The group was highly concerned about the absence of marginalized county residents from the consultant's reports and during official meetings. In criticizing the processes of the justice campus, activists poignantly positioned the hiring of outside consultants against the exclusion of the local community.

Although the Lincoln County Criminal Justice Coordinate Board facilitated the justice campus process with the cooperation of a number of different individuals and agencies, DLC focused much of their criticism on the county's consultant, PARI. This made sense on both emotional and political grounds, with a prison and jail construction firm from outside of the community being a rather easy target for activists' derision. While criticizing PARI in a public meeting served the important purpose of intervening in a discourse that suggested the justice campus was the product of community consensus, it was not necessarily the best strategic choice. As the history of county carcerality demonstrated, consultants came and went but the county habitus that made the justice campus possible stayed. Had DLC challenged the local actors and local logics that made the hiring of PARI not only possible, but also inevitable, there may have been a more effective destabilization of the habitus.

At the LCCJCB meeting about the juvenile facility, DLC member Helen Bishop, who later would run for city council, challenged the panel:

I don't know why we have a company here that makes money from building these facilities. Why don't we have people who build YMCAs and youth centers at the table too, different perspectives from people who don't benefit from building [jails]? Why don't we have youth who have been through the system, who can present the challenges that they had? I know you guys said you've been working on this for years, but whom are you including in the conversation? How can we change this conversation to include everybody? Are you guys just having these meetings as a write-off, "OK, we've talked to the public now let's go build a facility?"

<sup>10</sup> See Paley (2004) for important ethnographic scholarship examining the ideological uses of democratic discourse by Chilean officials to limit the abilities of community groups to participate in political processes.

Helen Bishop’s testimony offered important analysis of the local conflict. In her suggestion that PARI shouldn’t be at the meetings and instead that other companies who build recreational facilities should be present, she offered a powerful rhetorical move that destabilized the popular narrative that jails and detention had to serve as the institutional homes for programs. Moreover, Bishop pushed the panel on who they considered to be an important part of the process and who was and should have been included in the conversation.

At the third LCCJCB meeting focused on the jail, DLC member Ruth Laurel addressed PARI founder and CEO Richard Kemp directly:

I heard you speaking a lot tonight about what “we” have told you that we want. You’ve said over and over “you want this” and “you want that” but I and a lot of people that I know have not talked to you and have not had an opportunity to have our interests known and it really bothers me to have someone tell me what I want when they have not talked to me. So that goes for a lot of people in Springfield and a lot of the people that those people know. It’s not clear to me who in the community—regular citizens—has been a part of that process.

Ruth Laurel pointed out that the “you” to whom PARI referred constituted a narrow segment of the local population, largely comprised of officials, civic leaders, and criminal justice professionals. Thus, the “consensus” to which Kemp had referred existed among institutionally positioned participants in the county criminal justice establishment. Themes that emerged from Kemp’s conversations with people were of a limited nature by design, and certainly did not reflect—at least not necessarily so—the wishes or analyses of the larger community.

In a similar comment, Dave Santiago questioned the very premise that PARI should be having conversations with anyone, regardless of how limited or inclusive they might have been:

I don’t think it’s appropriate either that when someone [comments to the panel] “we want to have dialogue with all these different kinds of people” then the response is “well, the PARI corporate representative who profits off of prisons and jails has talked to those people, so you know, rest easy.” *We* need to talk to those people; we don’t need to talk to [Richard Kemp]. He shouldn’t even be in the room until we, as a community, have decided what we want.

The county commissioners, the county's executive body, hired PARI. In the integral role PARI played in the official justice campus public meetings, it is clear that officials saw the company as part of the decision-making of the community. For Dave Santiago and other DLC activists, the presence of consultants delegitimized any claim by the county to objectivity. Moreover, the usage of consultants who profited off of jail expansion aided the attempts by DLC to locate county carcerality as part of mass incarceration.

One final example provides an especially poignant illustration of the different priorities between officials and activists regarding the visibility of people most affected by incarceration. DLC member Haley Ralston spoke to the panel at the third MCCJCC meeting, following Ruth Laurel. She was speaking about the ways in which the jail acted as a debtor's prison when she mentioned, almost offhand, that people most affected by jail policies were not part of the process. Tom Grady, a local attorney and one of two citizen appointees to the LCCJCB, then interrupted to ask her to clarify what she meant:

*Tom Grady:* And by that do you mean the inmates or the people who get arrested, or...what do you mean by the people most affected?

*Haley Ralston:* Yes and yes and the people on probation and the people who deal with day reporting and the people who have families who deal with those things and who are so obviously underrepresented in these forums that the focus of the questions about who knows anything about jail is phrased as a question of who has been on a tour. That's a problem for me. "Cause that really speaks to the fact that we aren't representative of the voices of the people who are intended to be affected by the systems you all are creating.

Haley Ralston astutely observed the implicit assumptions of the meeting's organizers: that meeting attendees would only know the jail through tours, as opposed to having been incarcerated or having a family member incarcerated. In their constructions of who has access to community meetings, who wants to attend, and who should care, officials excluded those people most affected by criminal justice policies. Moreover, in their exclusion, officials also rendered to the margins other ways of experiencing jail, including as a prisoner or as a loved one. In their construction of who should be and was in the room for the discussion of the jail, the only way one could know the jail was



through being a practitioner, a volunteer, or by going on a tour.<sup>11</sup>

### VISIBILITY AND EPISTEMOLOGY: THE FREE VOICES PROJECT

DLC employed different means to attempt to model the kind of visibility and accountability that the group claimed was lacking from official processes. This commitment took on various forms, including holding meetings in locations and at times more convenient to certain populations, such as family members of people incarcerated at the county jail; using consensus processes and horizontal decision-making, an attempt to embody a non-hierarchical structure;<sup>12</sup> and conducting community canvassing to organize people to attend community meetings. While the group had inconsistent successes with these attempts, the group did formalize some of these processual concerns into a formal campaign: The Free Voices Project.

The Free Voices Project began early in DLC's life, during the summer of 2008. The group modeled the Free Voices Project on a composite of other projects, including storytelling projects in various cities and the work of other incarceration-related organizations that utilized media to express the narratives of prisoners and their families. Out of a series of meetings focused on developing the project, DLC identified the following goals:

1. **Content:** Creating a community counter-narrative of the prison industrial complex in Springfield through a process that prioritizes people's experiences, articulates those experiences in peo-

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<sup>11</sup>But framing attainment of knowledge of a jail through participation in a tour has other implications as well. Whereas some noted sociologists (Wacquant, 2002) have embraced, and even advocated for, the carceral tour as an important tool of research and education, others have been critical of the tour's ability, even purpose, to enact specific knowledge that both protects and validates institutional practices (Goffman, 1961; Piche and Walby, 2010). In the present study, it appeared that the tour had a more complicated purpose. Given the mission of the panel to promote the construction of a new justice campus, it seems likely that the tour, in their minds at least, would have advanced that goal, likely demonstrating the various problems with institutional capacity and overcrowding. Thus, the tour would have transparently depicted the problems with the jail while also being wielded as a tool to promote institutional expansion.

<sup>12</sup>David Graeber (2007) has made the point that these practices are perhaps best described by the analytic term “democracy.”

ple's own words, and facilitates connections between folks traditionally separated by race and class barriers.

2. **Process:** Pursuing these goals through an organizing process that empowers participants, doesn't replicate traditional, hierarchical power dynamics, and which undermines problematic representations of people's voices and experiences.
3. **Political:** Remaining committed to a larger political vision that opposes jail construction, challenges problematic figures in the criminal justice system, promotes community decarceration, and advocates for alternative models of conflict resolution.

DLC members active in the Free Voices Project primarily attended the twice-a-week all-cell-block visiting hours at the jail. There, family members would gather in an alley on the west side of the building to sign in and then wait, sometime for many hours, for the cell block of their loved one to be called for visitation. This spatial and temporal liminality was to become a contested state in years to come. While waiting in the alley certainly placed a burden on families, it also created important ties and was a part of the process for families in order to see their loved ones in person. After the \$75 million dollar PARI proposal was defeated, the jail commander offered his own proposal to renovate the current jail for just under one million dollars. Included in the renovations was the complete shift from in-person visitation to video-conferencing.

The time in the alley proved conducive to the Free Voices Project. DLC members would arrive and spend hours talking with people waiting to visit. At various times, DLC members administered surveys and conducted in-depth interviews, using audio recorders when possible and when people consented. The time spent with visitors also served to complicate DLC's politics. Frequently, people in the alley cited police practices, arbitrary probation policies, and drug and alcohol problems, including the absence of diverse programming, as their central concerns. While DLC kept their overall focus on challenging jail expansion and promoting decarceration, conversations in the alley ultimately diversified DLC's focus. By recording visitors' testimonies, the group could relay their perspectives directly to people in power, challenging both official content and epistemology. In one especially powerful recording, two DLC members spoke with people in the alley about the proposed changes

to visitation. A local community radio station gave DLC digital audio recorders and then broadcast the edited recording. DLC members also went to county commissioner meetings and read excerpts of the testimonies to the commissioners.

### **RADICAL REFRAMING: FROM CARCERAL EXPANSION TO COMMUNITY SAFETY**

In addition to intervening in liberal carcerality and epistemology and attempting to model alternatives through the Free Voices Project, DLC reframed key concepts embedded in discourses of social control as another activist tactic to bring into discussion the previously undiscussable. In forcing the community, including politicians, to reflect on what brought about individual and community safety, DLC successfully disrupted a rather narrow linear narrative that connected safety to a robust, if benevolent, criminal justice system.

In moving from the direct confrontation I profiled in the previous sections to this section's focus on DLC's counter-hegemonic articulation of key concepts, I see a mapping out of the distinction that Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 189) call the “strategy of opposition” versus the “strategy of construction of a new order.” The authors write that,

In the case of the first, the element of negation of a certain social or political order predominates, but this element of negativity is not accompanied by any real attempt to establish different nodal points from which a process of different and positive reconstruction of the social fabric could be instituted—and as a result the strategy is condemned to marginality...In the case of the strategy of construction of a new order, in contrast, the element of social positivity predominates, but this very fact creates an unstable balance and a constant tension with the subversive logic of democracy.

DLC's first official event in the late spring of 2008 brought together over 70 people, including older activists from a local group providing jail programming, young anarchists involved in eco-defense work, local non-profit leaders, and several politicians and criminal justice officials. DLC framed the day as popular education about the prison industrial complex and the local justice campus. Not coincidentally, the county primary elections were just days later, and the group had compiled a list of candidate perspectives on the issues of carceral expansion. Sitting in chairs and on the floor in the backroom of a local inde-

pendent and radical book store, DLC organizers led attendees through several different exercises designed to both educate about local and national histories of incarceration and foster an open but radically situated discussion, one not confined by official discourses but, instead, encouraging of realms of possibilities beyond the immediately practical.

One of the day's first events was a short exercise that I facilitated. The question that DLC posed to attendees was "What Makes Our Community, and we as Individuals, Safe?" The response was rapid and enthusiastic, with comments ranging from liberal concerns of equality to radical challenges to liberal categories. Below is a partial list of what was said:

Knowing neighbors; keeping police out of my neighborhood; food access; green spaces; places to sleep; good paying jobs; social and economic equality; basic needs met; race, gender, and sexual orientation equality; mutuality; no culture of violence; reduce realm of unknown and unpredictable; communication between conflicting parties; transparency in government; well-lit communities; presumption of innocence; accountability; doing away with the callousness of systems; intentional communities; access to ombudsmen-type resources; strong families; challenging the concept of nuclear family and invisible violence; protection from harmful individuals; community conflict resolution; legal control over one's body; fewer weapons; community autonomy; strong infrastructure; intelligent organization of communities for bikes and walkers; access to clean water.

This exercise, and the context in which it occurred, offers a number of insights into local resistance. First, as would become increasingly clear over the years to follow, the nature of space and frame matter. That fall, when the LCCJCB hosted the four meetings in official county political chambers, DLC was forced to speak in confined segments, often responded to questions posed by county officials, and ceded both the opening and closing of the meeting, and thus the meeting's framing, to its organizers. In contrast, the May 3rd event occurred in a radical community space already aligned with community organizing and activism and followed the agenda and framing of its activist organizers. That is, conversations about what kept people safe did not become a rhetorical game of budgets and evidence-based practices. Instead, when officials and civic leaders participated, it was on the rhetorical ground set out by DLC.

Second, the framing of the conversation had implications beyond the actual meeting. As county council president Brian Mulvaney would confirm to me over a year later during our interview, it was that very conversation about safety that he credited with disrupting his own understandings of policing and incarceration. He found himself asking critical questions of whether and how the police bring safety and about whether more cells and more police necessarily equal a safer community. A one-time outspoken supporter for the justice campus, Mulvaney credited DLC's organizing with intervening into the problematic logic by which he had abided and ultimately mitigating his support for the campus.

In a conversation with DLC member Michaela Davis, she attributed Mulvaney's and other's changed perspectives to the ways in which DLC consistently placed the campus in the broader context of mass incarceration. In doing so, Davis argued, the organization made it possible for some officials, who previously had been ardent expansion supporters, to instead break from the narrative of community exceptionalism in which the justice campus was a logical outcome. In her experiences in county meetings, Davis noted to me, "the ways that people justified policy, and the rhetoric that they feel like they have to fit into in order to support a policy, really seems to have this intense Springfield pride and sense of exceptionalism and also doesn't allow for analysis of power or oppression." In centering power and oppression into their intervention, DLC offered a counter-discourse of the campus, which succeeded at times in replacing the discourse of exceptionalism.

Third, this exercise and the conversation it fostered brought DLC and the community into conversation with a transnational network of people fighting similar issues. The idea of reframing issues of safety in order to disrupt the narrative that equated safety with more police and prisons came from activist trainings that some DLC members had participated in with Critical Resistance, the Prison Moratorium Project,<sup>13</sup> and other national groups focused on abolition. Realizing that fighting jail expansion in a Midwestern and liberal community didn't isolate DLC, but rather connected them to communities around the country and beyond, proved to be a motivating and energizing

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<sup>13</sup>See <http://www.calipmp.org/>

factor for the group. On the night of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, after a full day of workshops, a national organizer with the prison abolitionist group Critical Resistance spoke to the remaining attendees. The large pads of paper from the day's discussions still lined the walls of the back room. During the organizer's talk that evening, she glanced around and noted that "I've been to Argentina, Brazil, and everywhere these conversations (about safety) are the same." Later that summer, ten DLC members traveled together to CR10, Critical Resistance's 10-year anniversary conference, to speak on a panel with groups from other communities about respective campaigns against jail expansion.

### **RESISTING RADICAL RESISTANCE: THE CASE OF THE "TIRE SLASH TASKFORCE"**

Decarcerate Lincoln County resisted the justice campus through direct challenges to constructions of local carceral practices and the processes of decision-making, as well as through counter-hegemonic constructions of certain key concepts on which carcerality was predicated, such as safety. But there were other ways in which people in the community made their opposition to the discourse and the political process known, including an action that occurred while many people were in county chambers for the fourth and final LCCJCB justice campus meeting in the late fall of 2008.

That same evening, perhaps just as PARI representative Richard Kemp was displaying to attendees his maps of the possibilities for carceral expansion, an anonymous group of individuals calling itself the Springfield Tire Slash Taskforce flattened eight tires on multiple vehicles belonging to Lincoln County Community Corrections. The timing of their strike was unmistakable: the group's act of sabotage was meant to display not only local resistance to the justice campus proposal and its contents but also defiance of the premise of the process. While DLC members opted to engage in debate, following the very scripted and proscribed ways in which the county accommodated dissent, other actors celebrated anonymous acts of rebellion at the same time, refusing to acquiesce to a process akin to Mitchell and Staeheli's (2005, 797) "permitted protests":

The tools [used to construct the contemporary landscape of permitted protest] are used not to silence dissent outright, but rather to regulate it in such a way that dissent can be fully incorporated into, and become part of, the liberal democratic state.

The action by the Tire Slash Taskforce communicated resistance to carcerality as it also rejected the façade of democratic process embodied in the meetings. In a post to an anarchist news website, an anonymous writer relayed the events and the group’s analysis:<sup>14</sup>

In the late hours of Thursday Dec. 11th, the Springfield Tire Slash Taskforce targeted a number of vehicles belonging to Lincoln County Community Corrections. Community Corrections in Lincoln County is responsible for, among many other things, extracting upwards of \$200,000 worth of slave labor out of over-policed and over-incarcerated communities of Lincoln County each year.

This action was taken on the night that the jail building consulting firm PARI presented its master plan to the County and the public for an expanded “justice campus”.

We hope that this action: a) ushered in a fun filled weekend of changing tires for the fascists at Community Corrections and b) sent a message to the county that their plans for expansion and imprisonment won’t be tolerated.

In targeting community corrections specifically, the group also resisted the specific carceral imagination of the county that frequently positioned community corrections, and a community corrections ethos, at the center of their plans for expansion. Indeed, even people critical of the overall justice campus plan often stated their enthusiastic support for work release and other community corrections programs. The Tire Slash Taskforce’s targeted resistance to “slave labor” extracted by “fascists at Community Corrections”, and their warning that expansion would not be tolerated, put forward an insurrectionary and defiant envisioning of the jail and the work release center as equally repressive carceral institutions.

Though infrequent, there have been other displays of more confrontational resistance against incarceration. In June 2008, an unpermitted march broke off from a gathering of activists to protest Interstate 69. Chanting, drumming and carrying torches through the streets of downtown Springfield, the march caught

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<sup>14</sup>See [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org)

the attention of the police. The marchers wound their way through downtown and ended up outside of the county jail. Another anonymous post to the same anarchist website relayed what occurred:<sup>15</sup>

Anti-I69 activists staged a raucous torch-lit march through the streets of downtown Springfield on Saturday evening to protest the arrest of two tree-sitters and six ground supporters at an I-69 construction site...Torches lit up the night sky at the Saturday action. Activists carried banners, banged drums and set off bottle rockets. Springfield police remained on the sidelines as activists took the streets...As they passed the jail, activists taunted the police with "no more roads, no more jails," "you can't put our friends in jail, we will drive the final nail," and "we will win!"

The demonstration offered a visible connection between seemingly disparate and unaffiliated campaigns and for the ways it challenged the physical boundaries between incarcerated and non-incarcerated spaces. In other words, in these two actions I read important insights into how resistance to local carcerality was, in some ways, a contest to dominant articulations of geographical and cultural boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS: CONTESTING CARCERAL CARTOGRAPHIES

One of the central points to emerge from my time in the field is that the hegemony of mass incarceration inscribed into the community habitus a set of bounded dispositions toward problems of carcerality. As I mentioned in the introduction to this essay, as far back as the late 1970s county officials and residents had been discussing, and practicing, carceral expansion. The institutions that occupied substantial *intellectual* space in the realm of possible solutions to questions of social control and treatment also would take up substantial *physical* space in the actual community. Of course, as long as carceral expansion has been discussed and enacted, community members have resisted.

The discursive and material reality (and their mutually constitutive nature) of the contest over county carcerality resonates

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> A different analysis focused on the geography of protest could also consider the ways in which this action resists the permitted protests analyzed in Mitchell and Staeheli (2005).



with Mitchell’s (2000, 5) descriptions of “culture wars” over public spaces:

Like other wars, wars over culture are territorial; they literally take place... Culture wars are about defining what is legitimate in a society, who is an “insider” and who is an “outsider.” They are about determining the social boundaries that govern our lives.

The dominant narrative of the justice campus existed only through the invocation of certain boundaries. Officials imagined a geographical-cultural boundary that distinguished the carceral capabilities of Lincoln County from other localities and the larger state and nation. County council member Reuben Davison specifically identified the prison industrial complex as something *out there*, as geographically outside of the boundaries of the county. Resistance to the campus pointed to its location as a part of the prison industrial complex, adopting, if reformulating, mass incarceration’s logics in its own articulations of carceral expansion.

The two actions I describe above contest dominant boundaries of both space and identity. In the march outside of the jail, community activists breached a boundary between incarcerated and free space; according to at least two respondents, the chanting outside of the jail that night elicited noticeable noise from the inside, most likely prisoners banging on the windows, one of the few ways they could communicate to the outside. This activity across the jail boundary raises important questions about the possibilities of reclaiming carceral space. If DLC’s presence in county chambers constituted an intervention into the discourse, but one perhaps ultimately muted by the political-spatial contours of the space, perhaps the action outside of the jail (or, for that matter, the action against community corrections vehicles) suggests other ways (albeit riskier, more confrontational, and perhaps ultimately too decentralized) to construct or occupy counter-hegemonic space.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Dylan Rodriguez (2001) provides some insight into understanding these capabilities in his moving account of the convergence of the New York Campaign to Free Angela Davis on the sidewalk outside the women’s house of detention where Davis was incarcerated. He writes that the protest disrupted and altered the geography of the prison, an act that has implications for “subversive collective agency in the face of the U.S. gulag” and which demonstrates, through politicizing both the jail and the sidewalk outside of it, “a form of resistance and radicalism that *occupied* a new political space while *constructing* it through physical and oral acts of disruption (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 54). Rodriguez goes on to suggest that the protest implicated the possibilities for convergences and solidarities between prisoners and non-prisoners in

Contests over space and spatial boundaries also can challenge normative definitions around identities.<sup>18</sup> In the actions against Community Corrections vehicles, which were undeniably illegal, activists demonstrated not only resistance to the justice campus proposal and the proceedings but also contested the boundary between criminal and non-criminal. With this action, the Taskforce perhaps articulated identification with the people inside the jail rather than the people inside county chambers who were discussing and debating the justice campus. In the second example of the march, the protesters at the jail had splintered off from an anti-I-69 gathering. In moving between eco-defense and anti-globalization organizing on the one hand to anti-jail resistance on the other, activists challenged the bounded nature of classifications and definitions as they also symbolically demonstrated the interconnectedness of issues.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, Mitchell's usage of "culture wars" as an analytic to examine contests over "social boundaries" offers a specific insight for efforts to destabilize the carceral habitus of Monroe County. One of the ways in which to contest the unquestioned nature of carceral institutions and to intervene in the multiple narratives that posit them as the only response to various questions of space, programs, violence, and safety, is to envision, propose and construct alternative physical landscapes to replace imagined carceral structures.

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a way that "denaturalizes" the physical space and "deconstructs the institutional integrity/authority of the prison, resulting in a fleeting formation of a strategic trench from which both imprisoned and free can sustain a Gramscian war of position *in concert with one another*" (Ibid, emphasis in the original).

<sup>18</sup> See Mitchell (2000, especially pages 57-76) for a poignant discussion of culture, space, and identity.

<sup>19</sup> Here, New Social Movement (NSM) theory and research illustrates how notions of power and constructions of group process may link groups with seemingly disparate political agendas. Schiffman (1991), in her study of peace activism, found that a group involved in direct action and heavily concerned with process might identify more strongly with a pro-choice movement that has similar "protest politics" than with another peace group focused on lobbying or consciousness-raising. Schiffman (1991, p. 76) articulates this tendency as being about power:

Movements are defined as much by their assumptions about power as by an issue like peace or feminism. Power is probably the central category for understanding NSMs. It enables us to distinguish NSMs from movements, like labor, that have more traditional understandings of power relations.

This diverse intermingling of the Left also fits within Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) adamancy that radical democracy must replace a universal political economy analysis as the Left's hegemonic articulation.

After the defeat of the justice campus proposal, members of DLC who were involved in other local campaigns around community sustainability participated in discussions with prominent local environmental design activists to imagine an alternative future for the 85-acre site. In the following email to activists, a prominent practitioner of permaculture, an ecological design practice for sustainable living, offered a preliminary analysis of the possibilities at the site:

The aim is to design the 85 acres to meet many of the community's needs...include[ing] the training and deployment of new urban garden farmers, increasing the number and scale of community garden plots, the creation of food processing and distribution hubs, more space for year around agriculture, space for business incubation, year around farmers market with roofed sales shelters, cold storage and root cellars, orchards, aquaculture, vineyards, myciculture, seedbanks and arboretum...The design I'm contemplating could add more resilience to our local food economics, train more farmer / growers, help to reskill our local culture and create jobs, manage runoff and catchment of millions of gallons of water high in the landscape (with gravity flow to growers and other users) along with a multitude of additional yields over time.

Thus, inscribed onto the old site was not only the political-economic history of industrialization and outsourcing; not only the varying iterations of liberal carcerality that political leaders envisioned and that may one day rise; but also a resistant imagining of local food security, sustainability education, water conservation, and even regenerative and green job growth.

This article has presented moments of resistance that permeated, disrupted, and occasionally rejected carceral discourses and projects. These moments occurred discursively, such as the challenges activists made to the rhetorics of the justice campus and community decision-making. Moments of resistance also reshaped the meaning of issues on which carcerality had been predicated, forcing carceral projects to lose momentum and legitimacy.

Perhaps most devastating to carceral expansion, resistance can take the form of re-imagining once-carceral space, disrupting incarceration's inevitability and offering a counter-hegemonic cartography. In Audre Lorde's terms, resistance can dismantle the carceral house with new tools. In the case of Lincoln County and the prospect for a permaculture-designed space, local activists re-imagined the bricks and mortar of the justice

campus as the rainwater catchment barrels, compost piles, and garden beds of a sustainable community landscape.

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