“Investing into a Fallacy”:
The Demand for an Abolitionist Critique and Restructuring of Safety

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Introduction[1]

> "So now let's create harm responses as opposed to, 'let's have these people with guns and tanks driving around—[*police sirens*]—contain, shoot, beat them up,' as opposed to addressing the collective, systemic issue." (Damon, *The #LetUsBreathe Collective*)

In 2016, Chicago Alderman Ed Burke sought to establish a city ordinance that would extend hate-crime protections to law enforcement officials. The result of similar laws in places such as New Orleans has been harsher penalties for crimes committed against a newly established "special victim" category of police officers (Chang, "What Does the 'Blue Lives Matter' Ordinance Really Mean?" *Chicago Magazine*, 2016). The ordinance—popularly referred to as the "Blue Lives Matter" ordinance, in reference to its affront to Black Lives Matter—is just one example among many that shows the entanglements of power, privilege, and vulnerability that inhere in group claims for legal protection from the state on the basis of marginalized status. Even legislation that is initially created under the guise of protecting those most vulnerable—rather than protecting policemen who wield power over such vulnerable groups---is often enforced by punitive state forces. This creates hierarchies of risk and violence as opposed to methods of harm prevention and response. The tendency to rely on harsher punishments to deter harm effectively results in an

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expansion of the system of law enforcement. This system disproportionately targets those who are most likely to experience violence, either at the hands of police or otherwise.

The fact that achieving a protected status by way of appealing to the law largely implies an increase in the state's deployment of punitive force exposes the legal system's limited capacity for harm reduction, and its thereby flawed nature as a response to interpersonal violence. While a legally protected status might temporarily succeed in providing protection to vulnerable groups, it remains unlikely that such laws will spur sustainable progress for *all* marginalized groups, given the increase in legally justifiable state violence that results from harsher punishments for hate-based crime. Indeed, the state justifies its own acts of violence by way of framing them as appropriate methods of providing what is perceived as safety from harm. This is especially alarming when viewing state-based conflict intervention as an institution whose existence is predicated on a monopoly over the use of legitimate violence and, moreover, has often been the avenue through which marginalized status itself has been codified. In other words, the legal system is viewed as the sole avenue through which wrongs may be remedied, yet its powers are disproportionately used against marginalized communities regardless of their own relationships to harm. This tension—between the state's purported role as protector, on the one hand, and *enforcer*, on the other—gives rise to a lack of options for marginalized groups seeking safety.

In fact, the counterproductive nature of using harsh punishment as a supposed solution for violence pervades the criminal legal system as a whole. From a prison abolitionist standpoint—which is one that seeks the elimination of the prison industrial complex, or the network of government and industry parties that utilize and reinforce prisons to serve their own interests—harm is not reduced, but rather multiplied by punishment-based responses. Moreover, the

existence of the prison as an institution functions to preclude strategies to address the actual social realities that engender violence. Angela Davis explains that

> The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers. This is the ideological work that the prison performs—it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism. (2003: 16)

An institution that aims to isolate those considered "undesirable" necessarily prioritizes the lives and wellbeing of socioeconomically dominant groups at the expense of marginalized ones. Meanwhile, privileged individuals are led to simultaneously take prisons for granted and view them as vastly separated from their own lives. In the context of hate crimes or otherwise, the communities that are routinely disadvantaged by a reliance on the legal system as a mode of conflict resolution are those from which political institutions have already divested.

Certain abolitionist and left-radical understandings of safety do not exclusively adopt individualized notions of responsibility and accountability, but rather acknowledge systemic realities that make harm more likely in certain contexts as opposed to others. The dominant, carceral understandings of safety—carcerality referring to the reliance on the penal system's methods of criminalization, punishment, and surveillance as a response to an individualized conception of harm (Sweet 2016: 202)—uniformly espouse a notion of protection that is inseparable from that of retribution. While retributive tendencies do not solely emanate from the law, they are perpetuated by the positioning of punishment and penalty as responses to interpersonal harm. Conversely, anti-carceral thought challenges the ties between healing and punishment, acknowledging the collective and complicated nature of harm that exists even in individual instances of violence. Given that carceral logics are inextricably tied to a legal system that

routinely subjects racial and sexual minorities to violence, it is uniquely troubling when they are reified within these marginalized communities. For example, "For many LGBT people, and particularly LGBT people of color, immigrants, youth, and criminalized queers, reliance on the police and criminal legal system for safety is simply not an option because of the risk of adverse consequences" (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 2011: 120). Despite the risk of neglect or even criminalization, many mainstream LGBT activist groups continue to appeal to the criminal legal system for hate-crime protections or other neighborhood safety measures. In fact, "The passage and enforcement of inclusive hate crime legislation continues to top the agendas of many mainstream LGBT organizations" (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 2011: 126). Abolitionist and radical queer efforts of resistance actively attempt to combat this reification through the construction of alternative modes of conflict resolution, harm reduction, and accountability.

What this calls for is an examination of alternatives to hate-crime laws and other fundamentally punitive measures as responses to interpersonal and state-based forms of violence. When we divert attention from a politics grounded in carceral logics, our focus shifts away from what obligations oppressed citizens might have towards the state and brings into view what obligations they might have to one another. In other words, de-centering the institution of the law allows us to interrogate how it is that individuals are accountable to one another and to their communities in ways that challenge the law's purported monopoly on adjudicating instances of social injustice.

In the context of policing and state control over public space—two of the primary ways in which marginalized people come into contact with the law—resistance against unjust systems of conflict resolution is crucial to emphasize a sense of duty to fellow members of society rather than to the law and associated avenues of material advantage (Shelby 2016: 99). The perceived danger

that is often associated with marginalized groups by mainstream media and socioeconomically privileged demographics can often be indicative of pervasive racial or sexual hierarchies rather than a tangibly increased likelihood of violence. Abolitionist groups in Chicago, for example, are creating environments and relationships that aim to reject these normative perceptions. While safe space is a culturally pervasive and nebulous term that will be discussed in further detail, some examples of related practices range from peace circles to community meeting spaces for Black and brown youth. Since this work is being done within a society that is structured around punitive responses to harm that disproportionately target marginalized groups, an analysis of processes of transformative imagination along with concrete practices is crucial (Law 2011: 85).

This work of transformative imagination paired with structural rejections of carceral systems is at the core of the agendas of many left-radical political groups. Given the relevance of safe space to queer and anti-carceral organizations today, it is necessary to examine *how safety itself is being reimagined in the creation of alternative avenues for protection and accountability within marginalized groups.*

This paper argues that the various ways in which conflict resolution is being practiced by abolitionist organizations exhibit a diverse yet fundamentally consistent understanding of safety as a necessary social good as well as a futile political project when it is conceived through the lens of the law. In order to actually address individual instances of harm, the analyses of anti-carceral activists and academics must simultaneously recognize the nature of violence as a result of unmet social needs as well as the fundamental unattainability of safety, when defined as the complete absence of harm.

After analyzing the existing literature surrounding extralegal responses to harm and criticisms of the punitive system, I introduce data from interviews with members of prominent

abolitionist organizations in Chicago to ground my analysis in current organizing work. This is in no small part due to the fact that several prominent abolitionist organizations have their roots in Chicago, rendering it a rich and diverse sample of groups with varying approaches to the same goal. The interview data serves to acknowledge abolitionist spaces and alternative accountability structures as an existing reality, especially in cities such as Chicago, which have a history of unreliable or hyper-violent police forces. While police targeting of people of color may indeed be a reality in the aggregate, it is also important to note that Chicago itself is not a monolith. Rather, it is comprised of various neighborhoods, especially on the South and West Sides, with different proximities to state power. These differences may give rise to various modes of resistance that are not focused on "speaking to power" or trying to reform state power, but rather on making state power obsolete.

Research Methods and Logic of Intervention

This project partially focuses on the limitations that arise when people from a marginalized status seek safety or protection from an inherently discriminatory apparatus. It also presents an alternative framework based on existing notions of transformative justice and underlying theories of safety that can be found in the conflict resolution, harm reduction, and power redistribution practices of queer and abolitionist organizations. These organizations are based largely in communities of color and led by queer feminists of color. The relevant sources for this part of the project will consist of secondary sources dealing with issues of secondary marginalization and an ethics of the oppressed. More precisely, this literature concerns the question of how mutual obligation can and must be engendered between marginalized groups and individuals without involving state apparatuses.

The overarching theoretical question draws from literature from a Black queer feminist standpoint and analyzes how dominant conceptions of safety legitimize and reproduce pervasive systems of sexual and racial oppression. In doing so, I analyze the relevance of the concept of safety itself to abolitionist goals. Underlying alternative conceptions of safety are the notions of self-respect and an appeal to dignity for individuals with limited agency, rather than a pathologizing approach to marginalized communities. Synthesizing these ideas with anti-carceral approaches to violence will aid in achieving the aim of identifying factors that are crucial to constructing a value of safety that prioritizes harm reduction and healing rather than punishment and isolation.

The other portion of this project will focus on how this alternative framework may already be functioning within current organizing spheres. Individuals in Chicago working in radical queer movement politics or abolitionist organizing—especially people of color and queer feminists of color—possess a unique perspective on how communities are affected by being the objects of false perceptions of danger and exploitative relationships with state institutions. Many of these organizations approach social issues from a Black feminist lens, which will be extensively explored in the literature review. With experience in issues of zoning laws and policing as well as an accompanying history of tensions within organizations themselves, Chicago's network of transformative justice advocates and abolitionist organizers offers a key perspective on the social conditions that must be acknowledged and begin to be addressed in order to conceive of safety as a value independent of punishment.

In line with this view, this project also makes use of semi-structured qualitative interviews, with the goal being to gather perspectives from organizers about the limits to dominant conceptions of safety and respectability as well as the potential they might see to refigure what safety consists of in an anti-carceral context. This method is particularly fitting for a project concerned with

experiences of harm, remedy, marginalization, and mutual obligation within organizing spaces. Interviews therefore aim to (1) illustrate the concrete structures that organizations have created for purposes of conflict resolution and survivor support, and (2) highlight the important work of envisioning and reimagining harm and safety given that this work still occurs within the constraints of a racialized, heterosexist society[2].

I conducted four in-depth interviews in total over the course of this project, two of which were conducted in person and two of which were conducted over video call. They were all around an hour long, and were conducted between December 2019 and April 2020. I selected a set of individuals to reach out to for interviews based on their participation in prevalent anti-carceral organizations in Chicago. Most of my contacts were people with whom I had worked and interacted previously in organizing spaces, to varying degrees. Additionally, I selected organizations that were each focused on a different set of issues and demographics. All of the interviews were voice recorded and transcribed. When offered the choice between the use of a first name or a pseudonym, all of my interviewees opted to use first names. Some, if not all, of the individuals interviewed also hold prominent positions in their relatively close-knit organizations, and would be identifiable by the information they shared regardless of the use of their real names.

The information gathered in these interviews is useful to abolitionist scholarship in a variety of ways. First, the content will most likely bolster the premise that the carceral state is an inherently unviable provider of safety from harm. Interview data may also reveal potential roadblocks faced by organizers in their efforts to create notions of safety that uphold each individual organization's abolitionist values, or may offer examples of how mutual obligation functions to create alternative

[2] A more detailed interview guide may be found in the Appendix (PAGE NUMBER).

understandings of community and harm reduction. Finally, this analysis will support a set of suggestions surrounding what concepts must be incorporated into an understanding of safety in order for it to serve radical queer and abolitionist goals.

Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

In this section, I explore existing concepts that I believe to be crucial to identifying a consistent, underlying understanding of safety within abolitionist thought. In order to fully examine what an anti-carceral approach entails, one must first understand questions of race and associated proximity to power. This is due to the extent to which race impacts relationships with police, as well as how racial privilege manifests itself in the ways individuals are perceived as threatening to various degrees. Black feminist literature as well as works of queer theory offer a robust understanding of topics such as carcerality and harm (Carruthers 2018). Additionally, certain political science studies reveal much about the problems that arise when marginalized groups seek safety from the state in a United States context (Quillian & Pager 2001). Existing accounts of organizing spaces and the promises and challenges surrounding efforts to reimagine safety offer an opportunity to evaluate the importance of this process in transformative justice work.

The analytic framework of intersectionality highlights how subjects who exist within several marginalized categories have differing levels of access to opportunity and mainstream respect, and is a necessary lens through which to analyze efforts of resistance by those at the margins. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) argues that the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, but that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. Importantly, Crenshaw stipulates that processes of social categorization are not unilateral; subordinated people participate in and sometimes subvert systems of power under which they are nevertheless disadvantaged (1991: 1297). Indeed, it is crucial to move past totalizing accounts of identity in the realm of social

and political thought, and to acknowledge intragroup differences as a way of highlighting multiply marginalized individuals (Cohen 1999).

In order to recognize the different ways in which harm and struggle are experienced within marginalized groups, issues of deviance and resistance (Cohen 2004), as well as those of self-respect and civic duty (Shelby 2016), must also be contended with. Cohen argues that individuals who are considered deviant, such as Black queer or gender nonconforming people, should be the focus of efforts of resistance rather than be dismissed due to their deviant status. Central to Cohen's argument are concepts falling under the umbrella of respectability, where respectability refers to the often deceiving demand that marginalized individuals assimilate to certain norms and behaviors in order to gain access to social capital or wellbeing. While respectability has historically successfully been leveraged as a tool for survival or upward mobility, its success in some instances has come at the expense of excluding certain individuals who are not considered respectable from even the most minimal benefits granted to others. Although community-based values of respect and reciprocity can be thought of as ways to create social cohesion external to the law, respectability often entails the state's framing of what ought to be thought of as necessary goods owed in equal measure to all as earned privileges instead. According to Cohen, it is a distancing from this framing that allows for a better understanding of resistance under an oppressive state. She explains that,

> after devoting so much of our energy to the unfulfilled promise of access through respectability, a politics of deviance, with a focus on the transformative potential found in deviant practice, might be a more viable strategy for radically improving the lives and possibilities of those most vulnerable in Black communities. (Cohen 2004: 30)

By centering the most vulnerable individuals within an already disadvantaged community—such as queer Black individuals or Black women—it becomes evident that a politics of deviance is

incredibly conducive to striking a balance between the reduction of harm and the legitimation of forms of deviance that may not directly result in increased social wellbeing on an individual basis. Through the process of secondary marginalization, "those members of marginal communities most in need and reportedly extreme in their 'nonconformist behavior' are defined as standing outside the norms and behavior agreed upon by the community" (Cohen 1999: 75). This kind of intragroup stratification diminishes the likelihood of robust group unity and coordination. While individuals within a community ought not to perpetuate harmful stigmatization against other members of that community, the fact that they sometimes do so does not represent a moral failing on their part as much as it reflects the conditions of the unjust social structure within which the obligation to conform to respectable behavior takes precedence over measures to ensure that basic needs are met.

Alternatively, Tommie Shelby offers a theory of self-respect, defined as a belief in self-worthiness despite a lack of imminent justice, and the obligations to which oppressed individuals can legitimately be held. Shelby argues that inhabitants of poor, predominantly Black neighborhoods are not simply passive victims of their circumstances, but rather moral agents functioning under conditions of injustice. He ultimately suggests that oppressed individuals ought to take advantage of low-cost opportunities to dissent when no other safe or accessible methods present themselves. Although Shelby identifies "reciprocity" as a necessary component of civic obligation and collective welfare, he stipulates that the way in which civic obligation is outlined under the current system "does not ensure genuine conditions of reciprocity for the most disadvantaged in the scheme" (Shelby 2016: 216). Given varying levels of blame and privilege, different individuals have varying levels of obligation to disrupt the basic structure of society and account for existing injustices. However, there still exists, in Shelby's view, a universal duty not to

inhibit others' efforts of resistance. While Shelby focuses on deviance within isolated, economically disadvantaged Black communities, Cohen focuses on subjects on the margins of society in a broader sense. Specifically, Cohen addresses questions of gender and sexuality, two identity categories to which Shelby's notion of self-respect is not directly applied. In making a connection between these two pieces of literature, the underlying framework of this project aims to examine the ways in which dominant notions of safety are tied to race, gender, and sexuality, and mobilized to suppress individuals who are secondarily marginalized (Cohen 1999). Additionally, as Threadcraft argues,

> We must purge the vestiges of atomistic individualism that informs notions of residents who have significant power to choose their interactions and control the nature of those interactions with civic peers and with police. In its place, we need to craft an account of justice that illuminates and addresses the injustice of racialized group based insecurities that have profound effects on individual subject formation. (2016: 124)

Thus, theories of justice must account for intragroup variance in capacities to engage in nonviolent behavior in order to be applicable to transformative, anti-carceral understandings of harm and safety.

Beyond the impact this has on understandings of power and privilege, similar concepts come into play when considering knowledge production and feelings of safety and immunity that are tied to facets of identity. For instance, Charles Mills describes the implications of the reduction of individuals to the social implications of their race. White memory has historically been edited and revised to serve certain purposes, which both allows for a cohesive self-representation of whiteness as well as a continued ability to reframe real events through a similar lens (Mills 2007: 31). An understanding of this distorted knowledge production must "be expansive enough to include both straightforward racist motivation and more impersonal social-structural causation,

which may be operative even if the cognizer in question is not racist" (Mills 2007: 21). Mills notes how all parties—not just white Americans—are incentivized to reproduce this system of group-based miscognition. For example, Black people often have to understand white people as a matter of adaptability, while white people have less of an incentive to do the same. This process produces a robust form of ignorance that results in white people's understandings of threat and danger to be determined more by racial categorization than by immediate empirical fact. Take, for example, the imperialist creation of the term "savage." The term did not refer to any distinguishing, essential feature possessed by colonialized groups of people, but rather was created as a reciprocal of the category of "civilian." This effectually abstracted racial and cultural realities from factual truth, placing them instead in the context of a politically driven myth (Mills 2007: 26). In the context of the criminal legal system, Mills' argument connects to the ways in which varying proximities to racial privilege shape both safety and *perceptions* of safety.

Moreover, perceptions of safety affect the ways in which harm is taken into account and processed through the legal system, a trend that is well-documented in various quantitative political science studies. Quillian and Pager's study on racial stereotypes and perceptions of crime (2001), for instance, found that the concentration of young black men in a given neighborhood was the largest predictor of widespread perceptions about neighborhood crime rates when controlling for actual crime levels. This speaks to the dominant understanding of safety as a racialized and gendered concept, informed by a fear of Black men and often justified by the protection of white women. Vesla M. Weaver (2007) similarly touches on the racial determinants of supposed responses to crime. Weaver argues that punitive crime policies functioned as a strategic response to neutralize the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Importantly, the paper establishes that racial disorder was presented in the media and in policy measures as a crime problem, leading to a de-

politicization of racial activism and a racialization of crime. This literature thus raises questions surrounding the perception of safety as dependent on proximity to whiteness, although it centers on broad identity categories while remaining less attuned to intragroup differences and multiple levels of marginalization.

The concept of intragroup differences is indeed quite important to questions of privilege and safety. In the context of queerness, Cohen (1997) writes about queer political activism and the conditions required for its culmination in transformative politics. Rather than focusing on a single axis of oppression, Cohen advocates for queer activism to radicalize and mobilize across several identity categories, challenging normative assumptions about all of them (Cohen 1999). This analysis is implicitly accompanied by the acknowledgement that queer politics, popularly understood, has been largely stripped of its association with disruptive challenges to existing power distributions. Hanhardt (2013) specifically addresses questions of public space and zoning laws, for example. She writes that homosexuality has become a regulatory category rather than a radical one, as oppressive state forms are appealed to by white, "respectable" queer people to gain access to social wellbeing. This can result in policies such as discriminatory zoning laws that target the racialized crime categories of loitering and lewdness in the name of public safety. Thus, safety as it is conceived of by these white LGBT individuals is pursued in a way that reinforces rigid identity categories and alienates those who are multiply marginalized. Hanhardt also presents safe space as a commonly employed term in the LGBT sphere, citing its utilization on college campuses to signal diversity or non-judgment practices. While she affirms the worth of seeking environments in which violence is less likely, she also notes that the pursuit of a fixed notion of safety adopts "protectionist" or "isolationist" values that conflict with the gay movement's touting of liberation (Hanhardt 2013: 30). Hanhardt caveats that a collective value of safety, as opposed to an

individualized one, may still prove a fruitful cause. In other words, she advocates a politics that ties self-interest to group-interest, one that does not define safety from harm as hurting those who commit the specific harmful acts that are deemed societally inacceptable. The requirements and implications of such a collective value are precisely what I seek to engage with in this paper.

A similar analysis can be drawn out from the example of the National Defense Authorization Act, which paired LGBT hate-crime legislation with a massive expansion of military power (Reddy 2011). Underlying this policy is the reality that pursuing recognition of full citizenship from the state for one marginalized group often raises complications of other groups becoming collateral damage. This expansion of military power ultimately compounded rather than minimized harm for vulnerable groups of people on a global scale (Reddy 2011: 9)—a consequence that is at odds with notions of queer liberation, defined in this paper as a rejection of forces of subjection that seek to devalue the lives of those considered deviant. The military and prison systems alike "generate huge profits from processes of social destruction. Precisely that which is advantageous to those corporations, elected officials, and government agents who have obvious stakes in the expansion of these systems begets grief and devastation for poor and racially dominated communities in the United States and throughout the world" (Davis 2003: 88). Moreover, anti-gay policies abroad are often cited by the U.S. government as justification for violent imperialism. The hate-crime classification of sexuality-based discrimination thus worked to uphold the pernicious notion that the law, rather than community care or equitable resource distribution, are the avenues through which protection can be obtained for marginalized groups.

The practical implications of this classification included an expansion of the militaristic forces often employed in the reproduction of racial and sexual hierarchies, standing in sharp contrast to the otherwise promising, largely symbolic victory for LGBT rights. Indeed, the politics

of anti-racist opposition to the militaristic institution that is policing "are very significant ones for queer and trans politics right now. Increasingly, queer and trans people are asked to measure our citizenship status on whether hate-crime legislation that includes sexual orientation and gender identity exists in the jurisdictions in which we live" (Spade 2017: 3). This example shows how certain queer identities are able to be incorporated into a protected status, yet the very construction of that status by state legislation necessarily locates others within the realm of threat and reifies harmful systems of control (Beam 2018: 83). In numerous cases such as this one, the elevation of the status of one vulnerable identity category in the eyes of the law comes at the cost of the further marginalization of another.

Additionally, mainstream LGBT organizations continue to prioritize the creation and enforcement of increasingly expansive hate-crime legislation, despite the reality that LGBT people of color are consistently profiled as perpetrators of hate crimes in predominantly white gay neighborhoods (Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock 2011: 128). While existing literature does not engage as robustly with the specifics of non-legal or anti-carceral understandings of violence and safety, there does exist a widespread recognition that mainstream LGBT activism falls victim to a reliance on institutions, such as the criminal legal system, that historically control and punish racial, sexual, and gender minorities in exchange for few to feel a sense of belonging and protection (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 2011: 140). Similarly, the feminist anti-violence movement, as a result of its reliance on a false sense of unity among all women, relied heavily on law enforcement to curb domestic violence. An externality of this reliance is the threat to the safety of queer woman and women of color due to the risks inherent in police intervention (Richie 2000: 1136). Specifically, these risks often involve the incarceration of these women or their partners. This set of literature acknowledges the issues and limits of petitioning state protection from groups and

communities commonly perceived to be threatening, demanding an investigation into alternative modes of conceiving of safety and community.

Indeed, there are several accounts of how deviance, respect, and safety are already being reimagined within social movements and organizing spaces. Given the richness of Chicago's activist network and history and this project's interest in current organizing spaces in Chicago, literature surrounding movements and organizations with a major presence in Chicago is central. In one sense, social and communal history and shared lived experience develop over long periods of time to create collective action motivated by a pattern of abuses and silences (Ransby 2018). The failure of the state to offer poor, Black, queer individuals even the most basic levels of security arguably necessitates the reimagining of safety and protection. In a more insular sense, the harmful interactions that can occur within movements and activist organizations—such as sexual assault, violence, or otherwise discriminatory behavior—raise questions of how to create counter-institutions that do not rely on dominant ideas of punitive or retributive recourses to harm (Carruthers 2018). Crucial to these more focused accounts are the ways in which Black queer feminism functions as a liberatory lens and site of transformative resistance in the face of multiple systems of oppression (Jackson 2019).

The theme of safety in the context of abolition and gender violence, while relatively undertheorized, has been acknowledged and analyzed to some extent in existing academic literature. One context in which it is more frequently employed is that of self-defense practices. Short of relying on state-based policing and prisons, there is an ongoing, documented history of women engaging in practices aimed at responding to gender violence (Law 2011). In the late 60s and early 70s, this frequently took the form of groups dedicated to teaching women self-defense strategies in order to better avoid harm at the hands of men (Law 2011: 86-87). As Beth Richie

explains, in East Harlem in the 80s, "safety watchers" were sent to houses with complaints of domestic violence with the goal of convincing the abuser to leave or simply remaining on the scene to curb any further violence or confrontation (Law 2011: 88). In such communities, where people fear police violence as much as, if not more than, interpersonal violence, community consciousness needs to be directed towards alternative responses to harm. While these forms of grassroots regulation are indeed prevalent, there are several other examples of community building as a response to harmful circumstances. For example, restorative projects such as peace circles, which focus on fostering dialogue that acknowledges past instances of harm and considers methods to curb future instances, exist throughout numerous organizations in Chicago. The creation of harm-free zones and spaces where community responses are utilized is not a new phenomenon, yet the literature often does not contend with the ways in which these pursuits directly inform communities' conceptions of safety both in and out of these spaces.

Building upon existing literature, this paper maps the ways in which the theoretical concepts of deviance, respect, and safety function within Chicago-based organizing spaces. As abolitionist work transcends state borders in many cases, I hope the findings will be relevant beyond the scope of Chicago. In cases where actors possess limited agency over aspects of their lives due to not having their basic needs met—for example, resorting to extra-legal modes of wealth production because of a lack of other viable opportunities—ethics and duties surrounding harm reduction and remedy must be conceived of in a way that rejects dominant norms of respectability. This is because respectability as a foundation of remedies for injustice inevitably results in the exclusion of those whose lives are most negatively impacted. Especially when the carceral state concurrently exists as a massive perpetrator of injustice, I posit that a successful framework of resistance is one that prioritizes intragroup respect and deprioritizes the state's punitive,

paternalistic intervention. This does not entail a lack of demands on the state entirely, but rather rejects a singular focus on appealing to political institutions and officials. Abolitionist work is not only highly complicated given the challenge of opposing deep-seated cultural logics and incentive structures, but also promises to give rise to innovative and constantly changing frameworks of relationships and conflict. Specifically, in the context of policing and state control over public space, this project explores the ways in which a reconstruction and re-imagination of concepts of harm and safety can formulate notions of protection and community that reject the use of the law and the carceral state as an arbiter.

Case Studies

While many abolitionist organizations share common methods and tactics, the focus of this project will be on organizations whose work is particularly illustrative of the overlap between police violence, safe space, and gender. One example of this is *The #LetUsBreathe Collective* and, more specifically, their Freedom Square occupation in the summer of 2016. The occupation lasted for 41 days and was held in opposition to Homan Square, which is where thousands of Chicagoans underwent illegal detainment and torture. An occupation of this sort represents a reclamation of physical space and a response to state violence that is simultaneously subversive and constructive. Freedom Square was launched in support of BYP100's blockade, which prevented police traffic from going in and out of the facility. Also relevant to this project and the associated commentary on the limits and pitfalls of hate-crime legislation, certain groups involved in the action were specifically opposing the previously mentioned "Blue Lives Matter" city ordinance.

The occupation itself became a kind of "community laboratory" that adopted abolitionist perspectives and argued for divestment from policing. They offered free food, clothes, tents, and arts programming for the North Lawndale neighborhood, contesting that safety did not entail

policing or surveillance, but rather an investment in structures that curb intra-community violence. According to *The #LetUsBreathe Collective*, crucial resources include "restorative justice, education, employment, housing, mental health & physical wellness, addiction treatment, access to nutritional food, and art"[3]. Their work, both in and out of the context of Freedom Square, places an emphasized importance on the practice of collectively imagining an abolitionist future. Thus, interview data from this organization focuses heavily on the political theory of abolition and the importance of world building to efforts of transformative resistance.

Assata's Daughters is another organization that provides similar political education to Black youth in Chicago. They are Black woman-led and center the voices of young people. Notably, *Assata's* frames state violence as a particular form of violence—and often gender-based violence—that ought to be eradicated. This line of reasoning follows the logic utilized in many structural, abolitionist understandings of interpersonal harm as a non-individualized, institutionalized phenomenon. In other words, violence is perpetuated by systemic factors and is derived from dominant systems of prejudice such as misogyny, racism, and transphobia. The organization follows in radical Black feminist traditions, and further recognizes the frequency with which Black women in domestic violence situations are criminalized for taking self-defense measures. *Assata's Daughters* views freedom as access to education, universal healthcare, a world without sexual violence, and the abolition of prisons and police[4]. My interview with a member of this organization primarily concerned how abolitionist organizations might curb the internal reification of systems like misogyny and elitism.

[3] "Imagining a World." The #LetUsBreathe Collective, https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/freedomsquare.
[4] "Our Politics: What We Believe." Assata's Daughters, https://www.assatasdaughters.org/our-politics-2019.

The third main case study is the Chicago branch of *Black and Pink,* an organization made up of LGBTQ+ incarcerated people and free world allies. *Black and Pink: Chicago* operates from an abolitionist standpoint and engages in advocacy for the rights of incarcerated people. Some examples of their work include campaigns to end solitary confinement and an ongoing program that matches LGBTQ+ incarcerated members with pen-pals[5]. Interview data from this organization involves discussions about the benefits and complexities of organizing from a queer standpoint as well as those of organizing with people from vastly different social strata.

The final case study I present pertains to *Dissenters*, a national anti-war movement organization[6]. While this organization has local teams of young people in various locations around the country, it has roots in Chicago and contributes significantly to the organizing landscape within the city. Their goals involve reclaiming resources from the war industry to be reinvested into communities and power-building efforts at the grassroots level. The member who I interviewed was also previously involved in *The Icarus Project*, which is a network of support for people who experience mental health issues. They also conduct workshops for other organizations, recognizing that mental health is an integral aspect of many other social justice issues. Data from this interview focuses on the connection between community building and questioning larger systems, as well as the role of identity in individuals' relationships to left-radical organizing work.

Although the interviews I conducted focus on my interviewees' experiences within these individual organization, it is important to note that they are all involved in multiple campaigns, all of which involve a concerted effort to reimagine safety, address the gendered nature of prolific forms of harm, and construct various iterations of safe space. There is no singular practice of

[5] Black and Pink. https://www.blackandpink.org/.
[6] "About Us." Dissenters, https://wearedissenters.org/about-us/

conflict resolution that can be applied to all situations, but a thorough examination of the different efforts being made in abolitionist organizations can uncover crucial commonalities in their analyses of harm and safety.

Interview Data and Analysis

The interviews for this project were semi-structured, and thematically informed the focus of my analysis. Each one involved questions surrounding personal involvement in organizing, relevant organizational structures or practices, and conceptual approaches to safety. There were four main themes that arose during these interviews that are particularly relevant to the question of abolitionist conceptions of safety: policing, space, marginalized identity, and imagination and envisioning. While my interviewees mentioned safety itself quite frequently, they did so in a wide variety of contexts. This is arguably due to the nebulous nature of the nonetheless frequently employed term, which is a significant part of what this paper seeks to address. Thus, rather than a separate section dedicated to the theme of safety, the analysis section will holistically inform my conclusions surrounding safety based on the themes of policing, space, identity, and imagination. Finally, it is important to note that there exists significant overlap between these four themes, and that this section in no way intends to treat them as isolated concepts. Rather, it acknowledges their entanglement while seeking to clarify the roles they play in abolitionist thought surrounding safety.

Policing

Policing is an institution that is often associated—both positively and negatively—with safety. This entrenched association is symbolically exemplified by what my interviewee from *The #LetUsBreathe Collective*, Damon, refers to as a kind of "doublespeak". He noted that "the Chicago Police Department's headquarters is not called the Chicago Police Department

Headquarters, it's called the Public Safety Headquarters. Which I think is like, vile. Our investment nationally and globally into militarism is not into 'militarism' it's into 'security'." This conflation of law enforcement with safety is particularly pernicious when taking into account the pervasive nature of police violence perpetrated against marginalized communities.

There are three main attributes of the mobilization of police under the guise of safety that were cited in the interviews as being central to these organizations' respective demands for anti-carceral approaches to harm. These are (1) the nature of policing as a white supremacist system of control, (2) vastly disparate experiences with law enforcement depending on one's positionality within the existing social structure, and (3) an effective distraction from more substantive approaches to harm prevention and response.

Indeed, the establishment of the institution of policing was directly tied to efforts to protect the property and social status of the ruling class (Sweet 2016). The increasing wellbeing of Black individuals and those considered to be external to norms of whiteness and heteronormativity was thereby perceived as a threat to the status quo that had to be subdued by force (Harris 1993). This history was summarized quite succinctly by Asha, who is a member of *Assata's Daughters* and the anti-militarism group called *Dissenters*:

> I believe the abolition of police and prisons is a necessity, because the police, they're a relatively new structure. They came out of controlling slaves, catching runaway slaves, and also to suppress labor movements. So their very purpose is to maintain an imperialist nation that has destroyed much of the world and contributes to ways that don't actually address harm. [...] Most people are in jail for bonds or for crimes of survival. Jails make people money.

Asha explained that senior members of the organizations she is involved with have shared their understanding of the police as a means of controlling those who pose a threat to established

hierarchies. This can take the form of the police subduing protesters and activists, or utilizing otherwise racialized criteria to justify the use of armed force and incarceration. Ultimately, the unchecked power of law enforcement is imbued with the ability to determine which groups and individuals are targeted so as to maintain the established arrangement of socioeconomic relations in the service of the ruling class.

The result of this is that one's positionality in relationship to state power or social norms of respectability both informs and is informed by policing and criminalization. State protection for certain privileged groups comes at the expense of violence perpetuated against marginalized ones when threat and danger exist as racialized concepts. In my interview with Emma, a coordinator of *Black and Pink: Chicago*'s research team, she noted that the accessibility of their meeting spaces is sometimes affected by police presence within their proximity.

> **Q:** How does that function when... especially when you're working with incarcerated folks, do you have a specific analysis of space and safe space that is informed by their lived experience?
>
> **A:** Hmm, gotcha. Yeah, well, I think that something we could be better at, and something that we're working on, is recognizing that a lot of the spaces we occupy are not safe for all of our members. So particularly, we had a [pen-pal] matching in the basement [...] But the... there was not super clear signs indicating where to go. And every month we always kind of laugh about how [...] like, we really gotta get more clear signs, it's kind of confusing. And then a Black person came to one of the matchings and you know, in kind of good faith made a joke about like, yeah, didn't look awesome, a Black person poking around a church in an incredibly wealthy white neighborhood in Chicago. And all of us were like, okay, fuck, yeah. Okay, good point. It is not just, like, funny and inconvenient, it actually puts people's safety at risk because somebody could have called the cops on that person. We're really dedicated to not calling the cops.

The story Emma recounts here reflects the ways in which race and positionality can be predictive of one's relationship to the law, both in terms of run-ins with law enforcement and the conditions necessary for feeling a sense of safety and belonging. Essentially, "criminal justice institutions have

come to play a socializing role in the lives of a substantial subset of Americans, fundamentally influencing how they come to conceptualize the democratic state and their place in it" (Weaver & Lerman 2014: 2). Emma also explained that COPA, the Civilian Office of Police Accountability, meets on one side of the church in which *Black and Pink: Chicago* meets. Their monthly meetings involve cops and, while they are presumably off duty, *Black and Pink* members make a concerted effort to ensure that those attending *Black and Pink*'s meetings are comfortable, and to engage people in conversations about how they feel regarding the police presence in their shared space. Even as someone who subscribes to abolitionist politics, Emma's experience as a white woman offers her a perspective of the police that likely resulted in her initial assessment of the cops in the church as ironic as opposed to threatening, or of the lack of signage as "inconvenient" rather than a more impactful obstacle to navigating the meeting space. There are similar obstacles in the broader context of Boystown, a neighborhood considered to be an LGBT hub where some pen-pal matching events take place. Indeed, demands for safety within the neighborhood often reinforce the reality that "Police profile LGBT people of color, particularly youth, as potential perpetrators of hate crimes in predominantly white, gay urban enclaves" (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock: 128). The work Emma is actively dedicated to doing—that of interrogating the ways in which *Black and Pink* is differentially accessible to different groups of people—is therefore both internal and structural. Evidently, even within abolitionist organizations, policing poses tangible barriers to participation that must intentionally be accounted for in order to avoid internally reifying the effects of the prison industrial complex as much as possible.

The third main way in which policing was presented in these interviews is effectively as a distraction from more productive avenues of change. In other words, policing offers a falsely universal promise of safety and, in doing so, stifles our ability to conceive of alternative manners of

conflict resolution or harm reduction. As a member of *The #LetUsBreathe Collective*, Damon was also involved in the Freedom Square occupation, which existed in direct opposition to police torture. Damon acknowledged several links between policing and the harms that are perpetuated against Black individuals, both in numerous individual instances and on a systemic or ideological scale. In doing so, he also acknowledged the government's and mainstream society's fallacious representation of the police as an adequate and beneficial solution for issues of public safety and wellbeing:

> So I think one of the issues with policing is that it's a flattening of power. That reifies violence, right? So instead of having people prepared to respond to all these very different, unique instances, we're just going to smoosh all of that power into a badge and a gun. So the same person who responds to a store getting robbed, the same person responds to domestic violence, and the same person responds to a protest, and the same person responds to somebody having a mental health episode, right? And what movement has taught me is that there are people who organize and learn and advocate and build strategy on all of those specific instances and harms, and police are not experts on any one of those things. And they don't have the tools, they're only equipped to fine, detain, or apply force, and that won't stop any of the addiction, abuse, hunger, mental health...

Damon acknowledges several different factors that contribute to the failure of policing to be a force for social wellbeing. He specifically cites the practice of placing unchecked power in the hands of police, tasking them with responding to situations ranging from violence and property damage to civil disobedience and mental health crises, and failing to equip them with the tools and understanding necessary to offer substantive aid. While an abolitionist analysis stipulates that an investment into police training is antithetical to anti-carceral work, it would seem that Damon is not so much suggesting otherwise as he is noting that the institution of policing is doubly flawed. It enforces and perpetuates violence against marginalized communities while also being unequipped to fulfill the needs it was purportedly created to address. A further complication is the way in which even members of marginalized communities are socialized to think that safety can only be granted

by the police, leading some to advocate for a greater police presence in their neighborhoods. Overall, the singular faith placed in policing to solve such societal issues precludes mainstream validation of transformative and innovative approaches to dealing with violence.

Indeed, this stifling of imagination is an indirect effect of the ways in which the prison industrial complex redistributes risk to subdue marginalized populations while bolstering itself as the sole viable system under which to achieve even minor recourse for those experiencing harm. Damon discussed this in the context of resource distribution and preemptive policing, noting,

> once you look up the definition [of safety], what it says is the absence of risk, which I don't think is a reality, right? So then, what I think it turns into is a reinforcement of privileged power that redistributes risk to those who are most marginalized. [...] And so, you know, you start thinking about gated communities and this idea of, I'm going to create safety here, and redistribute this risk elsewhere. So instead of us having a healthy education for all, we're gonna have a private school that's safe. Instead of addressing, you know, lack of access to resources, we're just gonna put a wall up, put a gate up, and that is our notion of safety. Or, we're going to do violence for preemptive reasons.

What Damon touches on is that part of the reason why policing is so widely accepted as the sole option for harm response is because of the myth that complete safety from harm is something that can be achieved. While this may appear to be true based on representations in popular media and politics, the safety of those who are valued by dominant society often comes at the expense of the subjugation of marginalized individuals. Creating so-called safe communities—like Damon's example of private schools—often entails divesting from less privileged ones and thereby creating conditions under which violence becomes more common.

So what does this understanding of the effect of policing mean for an abolitionist conceptualization of safety? In one sense, it claims that safety, when used to justify policing as an ongoing political project under a carceral system, is ultimately harmful. As Damon puts it, "the

investment in police is this investment in safety. And I believe safety is a fallacy. So if we keep investing into a fallacy, there is never a point where we can divest from it, right?" Hanhardt's suggestion that "Safety is commonly imagined as a condition of no challenge or stakes" similarly highlights the popular, unrealistic desire for safety as a state of infallible protection (Hanhardt 2013: 30). This notion is precisely the one from which the push for increasingly harsh law enforcement stems. Rather than pouring time and resources into the false hope that this ideal of complete safety is attainable, the logic of abolition focuses on measuring harm and creating space for people to be accountable for that harm. Any anti-carceral pursuit of safety must therefore at least acknowledge the inevitability of certain kinds of harm and the reality that punitive forces multiply those harms.

Space

In addition to being a punitive force, policing acts as a manner of creating and enforcing regulations, often in what seems to be a morally arbitrary manner that seeks to preserve the status quo distribution of wealth and power. These regulations largely concern the use and organization of space. For instance, public safety laws implicitly criminalize Blackness (Hanhardt 2013: 30), housing laws prioritize whiteness and wealth, and the majority of police violence that gets covered in the media occurs in the streets. In Damon's words, "Our oppression has been spatial. Mike Brown was killed on the street. Laquan McDonald was killed on the street. Eric Garner was killed on the street." Public space, local dynamics, and idealistic world building are all spatial *and* ideological concerns in the long-term pursuit of abolition. This set of interview data thus surrounds understandings of space and safe space within local and organizational contexts. In relation to abolitionist conceptions of safety, I propose that space is (1) an apparatus for regulation and risk

redistribution, (2) an object to be claimed or reclaimed as an act of resistance, and (3) a necessary tool for transformative politics and world building.

Regulation through the control of physical space is a key factor in the institutions of police and prisons, yet can also be invoked within abolitionist organizations with the intent to maintain a sense of accountability. In the context of prisons, the concept of placing supposedly disruptive members of society into cages is one that treats public space as a privilege and relegates people to extremely confined space as a punishment, often disturbingly presented as a form of rehabilitation. Not only is this characterization promoted by government parties, but it can also be reified amongst incarcerated individuals themselves. Emma touched on this in the context of currently and formerly incarcerated members of *Black and Pink*, who sometimes morally distance themselves from other incarcerated folks:

> I think many people have kind of the, like, holier-than-thou approach where they're like, 'some people in here are fucked up and did some dumb things and deserve to be here, and I don't'. And some people maintain that they're innocent, or some people say it was a mistake, or that they've learned or whatever. [...] And that's hard because it's like, I don't know, I don't know the dynamics. I'm not in there. But I do think that that's something that we want to talk about more in the work that we do, and I think that'll become a next step of it, is thinking about what is the alternative to this facility if we tear it down. Treatment is a big part of it. But if we strengthen the treatment that's being provided within the facility, then the facility will stay in place, because that's why... that's like how it gains funding, is because it's seen as, like, a beneficial thing.

Along with recognizing that her positionality limits her from a thorough understanding of the tendency to reify this standard of deservingness or respectability within prisons, Emma's response implies that the institution and location within which transformative responses to harm are pursued heavily impact the nature of the work itself. The example she offers is how lobbying for improved treatment and mental health services can counterintuitively increase a prison's funding and bolster widespread perceptions of the criminal legal system as a valid system of harm response. Rather,

this branch of abolitionist work ought to be done in communities and local organizations in a way that does not require the material fortification of carceral systems. Essentially, Emma presents the important consideration that prisons' use of space to regulate individuals is often reified by the individuals themselves, likely as a result of the practical and political conditions to which they are subjected in the carceral system.

Despite the project of abolition's opposition to all forms of prisons and policing, the relationship between space and social regulation does not entirely cease to exist within organizing spaces. As Asha explained,

> I would say, with processes like restorative or transformative justice, it's going to be a long process because it's really... because the person you want to hold accountable, you can't *make* them accountable, they have to create that accountability for themselves. That's like half the battle, is getting them to realize, hey, what I did was not beneficial. Like, say someone sexually harassed someone, and there needs to be, like, a reentry back into the community. Not in a jail but, like, if you're in an organizing space, you no longer have access to that space because you're causing harm. And then you have to work out a process of educating that person, also realizing what harm might have caused them to pass that harm onto someone else.

Indeed, while abolition does seek to challenge the ways in which space is used to prioritize the needs and wellbeing of dominant classes of people, Asha offers an abolitionist conception of safety that also entails a regulation of space and of who has access to it, though it does not involve the limitation of necessary resources or services. Rather, it promises a more collective process of accountability, the specifics of which may change in each unique scenario.

The claiming and reclaiming of physical space is also a crucial part of many social movements. For example, Freedom Square was an occupation in an abandoned lot near a building in which illegal detention and police torture was taking place. While it was not intended to be a sustained campaign at first, Damon explained that it was an acknowledgment that the community

was aware of what was taking place inside the building and an affirmation of people's experiences at the hands of the policemen involved. He summarized the purpose of Freedom Square, which included "spatially being the embodiment of, one, torture happens there, love happens here. And two, we were reminding folks of the harms of state violence and how militarized policing is destructive to community." In this manner, Freedom Square served a physical function (that of crafting a community that directly countered the nearby practice of torture and punishment with values of mutual care and restorative accountability) as well as a metaphysical function (engaging community members in ideological discussions and demonstrations about militarism and abolition). What the occupation became was "a creative, generative opposition to Homan Square. It was Freedom Square right across the street."

However, policing's relationship to space extends far beyond torture sites and illegal detainment. The police act as enforcers of zoning laws, evictions, and other racialized strategies to create wealth-based barriers to entry for neighborhoods and other valued physical spaces. Damon shared his analysis that it is precisely the divestment from "our spatial reality" that causes high levels of harm within predominantly Black neighborhoods, although they are often cited as the result of a "cultural deficiency". Such attitudes contribute to the fallacious narrative that the South Side and West Side of Chicago are dangerous environments where people act in disrespectable, toxic ways. This can also feed into the prevalent argument against abolition that the constant presence of police in these areas is necessary given how violent and unruly Chicago is. From Damon's perspective, Freedom Square was a rejection of these narratives as well as a space to begin creating "an egalitarian, utopian type of community with bare bones, minimal material resources... a spatial representation of our resistance. It goes a little bit further than marching or slogans, or clever signs and hashtags, which we had felt limited to at the origin of our emergence."

This use of space in response to unjust policing practices thus acts as one attempt among many to highlight violent modes of societal regulation as unnecessary.

Finally, the notion of space is also crucial to the abolitionist practice of transformative resistance and world building. Such spaces—whether they are framed as safe spaces, community spaces, or, in the case of *#LetUsBreathe*, "brave spaces"—do not simply offer temporary shelter from a violent, militarized world. They can also serve to create alternatives to the current system without directly engaging with the system itself. For instance, Asha explained that

> *Assata*'s has really created a safe space. Like we have a space for women, femmes, and gender non-conforming people on certain days. And on other days it's just for, like, the guys and men, like male-identifying people. And I feel like with that distance you get to really talk about what's going on. And then when you come back you kind of get to work on it. [...] So you can't avoid conflict, you need to learn how to work through it.

Asha makes a crucial point when she notes that the safe space she so deeply values does not function under the guise of perfection. Rather, she acknowledges that conflict is inevitable, and that the kind of safety offered by this space is the comfort with which people are able to call out mistakes and harmful behavior as well as take accountability for them. Emma shared a similar analysis of her organization's meeting spaces, albeit using different vocabulary. She explained that she does not consider their spaces to be "safe," but rather "*safer*". Emma said that the fact that she can openly speak to her experience as a queer person—the feeling of being part of an "inside joke"—does not so much speak to the organization's queer angle as it does to the way in which queerness is almost a default part of her organizing experience. This can offer many of their members a sense of relative safety: the feeling of being in a "safer space" compared to the other spaces they occupy.

Based upon these interviews, abolitionist organizations' utilization of space is both oppositional and generative. Occupations are, by their very nature, a claiming or reclaiming of space aimed at awareness or demands for a shift of power. Organizations are simultaneously creating spaces in which collectivity, cooperativity, and accountability reign as defining community values. Cultural expression and creativity are other factors that contribute to spaces such as *#LetUsBreathe*'s #BreathingRoom space[7]. While a safe space that is devoid of harm and conflict is unlikely to exist, it is clear that the pursuit of a "safer space" continues to be prolific in varying contexts within the abolitionist movement.

Marginalized Identity

If, as outlined by existing Black queer feminist literature, we are to challenge the existing distribution of power and strive towards collective wellbeing, it is necessary to center the perspectives of those at the margins of society. This is partially because these individuals and groups are disproportionately socioeconomically disadvantaged while often also posing a challenge to rules of respectability and conformity. Based on the interview data, taking marginalized status into account in harm response practices (1) helps create accountability structures that are non-punitive while also prioritizing the needs of those harmed, (2) highlights the difference between organizing around a specific identity group and through lenses of intersectionality or queerness, and (3) informs the language that ought to be used within abolitionist thought to productively acknowledge complicity.

The centering of victims or vulnerable individuals in restorative justice proceedings is often stressed by facilitators and activists. On a more abstract level, this practice stands in stark

[7] "The #BreathingRoom Space." The #LetUsBreathe Collective, https://www.letusbreathecollective.com/what-is-breathing-room.

opposition to the way in which marginalized individuals are deemed to be unwanted presences in so-called safe neighborhoods. As Damon put it, "once you hear, you know, the regular middle-class white person on the news when violence happens, they'll say, 'that's not supposed to happen here. This is a safe space.' They are then implying that this is supposed to happen somewhere else." As long as violence and harm occurs away from whiteness and/or wealth, people with access to privilege can continue to live in pursuit of the aspiration of complete safety. Damon explained that part of what *#LetUsBreathe* has in place to challenge these false perceptions is their idea of "brave space" as opposed to safe space, which is intended "to protect particularly the most marginalized":

> So I can respect [safety] as a personal, social need, but I don't see it as an effective collective political reality. You can never be safe. So with that there can always be this investment into violence. Because there's this psychological fear of just, like, life, and existence, and, like, our mortality, you know. I think it gets a little bit deeper. So that's where... so then the notion of bravery is that, that gives us something active to do. [...] we're trying to create better response systems, as opposed to just saying, no, that doesn't happen here, this needs to be excluded, right?

Along with Damon's observation that safety, when defined as the absence of harm, is unattainable, he also implied that an acknowledgement of its unattainability encourages those in a disadvantaged social position to adopt more of an active role in creating new systems of social relationships and harm response. This is not to say that harm, and especially *systemic* harm, ought not to be challenged, but rather that an acknowledgement of the fact that everyone harms and is harmed in various ways is crucial to forming transformative responses to it. In line with this, Damon described brave spaces as ones in which people were willing to have open discussions to confront their own implicit biases in an intentional but forgiving manner. This practice acknowledges the harms

people experience at the hands of others and seeks modes of collective growth rather than an attempt to artificially curate a safe space through exclusion.

Organizing in a way that centers those most marginalized does not entail organizing exclusively carried out by multiply marginalized individuals. Rather, it is crucial to draw a distinction between movements that serve specific identity groups and ones that employ a lens of intersectionality, for example. While both have served, and continue to serve, important purposes, there are instances in which certain identity groups are prioritized at the expense of others. Specifically, LGBT activism often refers to the mainstream gay movement that has tended to rely on the ability to assimilate and appeal to the government to be granted rights in return for upholding norms of respectability. Queerness, on the other hand, is a term used by certain organizations to encompass a more robust sense of collectivity based on non-normative identities and lived experiences as well as an inability or unwillingness to conform. As part of a self-described LGBTQ organization[8], Emma described queerness as a relationship to power and the state:

> I also think that the organizing that we do is inherently queer because I think queerness is about being anti-state, and I think that the state is inherently anti-queer. And so I would say that anytime you're thinking through, like, an abolitionist mentality, that is going to be in some way queer because the idea of thinking in a way that's transcendent of the systems in which we live in, and thinking in a way that identifies that the systems that we currently live in are not built to serve the majority of people, and serve the interests of a small group, I think is a very queer framework to operate under. So I guess I would say that our organizing, while not always explicitly about LGBT issues, is queer in its conception.

Although some of the work that *Black and Pink: Chicago* does may not directly be tied to LGBT individuals, it *always* arises from a "queer framework" that challenges existing authority. In other words, the abolitionist analysis that *Black and Pink* employs is aimed at transcending the carceral

[8] Black and Pink. https://www.blackandpink.org/.

systems in which we live and imagining a world in which the needs of the most marginalized individuals are met.

Another important distinction exists between exclusively identity-based organizing and issue-based organizing. The importance of recognizing the limits of identity as a singular factor around which to organize was a central theme in my interview with Byul, an organizer who started *Dissenters* and has a background in the student labor movement. Byul explained that, during college, she felt as though her experiences as a social justice organizer and as an Asian American organizer "very rarely overlapped," which she partially attributes to the routine de-politicization of Asian American identity. Byul also shared her perspective on the role of identity in activist organizing spaces:

> **Q:** How do differing identity categories like gender, race or sexuality tend to impact relationships within organizations, if at all? And, like, does that affect your relationship to organizing?
>
> **A:** Hmm, yeah. So I might have a little bit of a controversial opinion on this to be totally honest. [...] while I do think that [identity] really shapes everything that we do, I think that it can also limit us sometimes when we sort of approach organizing, like, with identity as the first... the first, I guess, like, filter. And I have at times felt a little bit like things can get a little reductive, that my identity shaped what I'm allowed to, like, sort of lead on, or what I can care about. I don't actually think that's the case, because I think that we all have different leverage depending on our position in society. I think that really everybody should be organizing, or like, you know, taking action on issues that, you know, they have, like, the ability to strategically impact, if that makes sense.

While Byul importantly notes that identity greatly impacts lived experience and individual types of leverage—and thereby the differing organizing strategies available to individuals from differing identity groups—she also mentioned during the interview that she strives to organize more around values than around exclusive identity groups. Byul noted that, "especially with *Dissenters*, we talk about centering young people of color and centering, you know, young working class people. And

at the same time, we're not exclusive to those people to be involved." Although there is worth in uplifting and centering marginalized voices within an organization, there is seemingly an ideological and strategic benefit to recognizing that people with shared values but varying lived experiences all have unique roles to play. While the abolitionist movement largely continues to be spearheaded by queer women of color, Byul's perspective also reflects the importance of making abolitionist spaces accessible to as many people as possible while staying true to its principles. In the context of *Dissenters*, one of Byul's initial goals with the organization was to be able to build bridges between various communities and issues. For example, the group works to highlight connections between domestic struggles against systems of policing and international resistance to the violence of the United States military. Rather than "diaspora organizing," Byul engages in organizing work that recognizes both a collective struggle against the United States Empire as well as her own positionality within it as a useful strategy in solidarity efforts with people overseas.

The third point that arose within the theme of marginalized identity was that of language and acknowledging complicity. Something that was frequently mentioned in relation to this was replacing the shame of taking accountability with responsibility and a commitment to do better. In addition to uplifting forgiveness as a core value, Damon offered the analogy of anti-violence versus non-violence. While anti-violence is an active opposition to societal violence, non-violence paternalistically expects peace as a response to it.

> And so similarly, particularly for Americans, to call yourself non-violent is ridiculous. Take our phones. Our phones are made by slaves. Our currency is inflated by blood. Our roads are covered with genocide. Our day-to-day life is informed and massaged and manicured through violence, even if we're not active applicants of the force.
>
> And so then being anti-violent is accounting for that, acknowledging that, and not panicking and crying over it, but just acknowledging that responsibility, the privilege that comes from it, the harm that others and ourselves experience from it, and then working to oppose or counteract it in as peaceful of a way as possible, but also not passively allowing it, which is embedded in how non-violence is propagated. It's not what the philosophy was and not

> how the practice actually happened in movement spaces. But particularly the way the media repackaged it was this fucked up, Christian, biblical, turn the other cheek, which is really offensive to say to someone who's getting hit in the face. Particularly if you're the one doing the swinging.

As opposed to the zero-position of "non-violence" or "non-racist" that is often the result of shame or guilt, Damon advocates for values like anti-racism, anti-patriarchy, and anti-homophobia. He noted that the intention to discriminate is irrelevant. Rather, those who benefit from hegemonic systems just by way of embodying certain identities ought to acknowledge that fact while actively working to counteract the systems themselves.

Marginalized status, and its effects on varying vulnerabilities and privileges, is a factor that must be accounted for in any abolitionist conception of safety, especially given the manner in which perceived deviance has historically been associated with socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, who are targeted and criminalized by the prison industrial complex (Spade 2017). More privileged people who occupy abolitionist spaces and who also inherently benefit from the systematic criminalization of others ought to actively examine their own positionalities and their implications both within and outside of such spaces. Based on these case studies, safety for those most marginalized does not simply mean the exclusion of those who act or speak in a discriminatory manner. In fact, even unintentionally discriminatory speech tends to arise in groups consisting of individuals with diverse lived experiences, especially prior to cultivating shared values and a non-hierarchical politics. Rather, safety at least in part entails nurturing an environment in which people feel supported enough to both point out harms and take accountability for their own wrongdoings and missteps.

Imagination and Envisioning

The final theme the interviews focused on was that of imagining a world without prisons and institutions that uphold an individualistic, punishment-based response to harm. Every organization who I either researched or spoke with in some capacity stressed the importance of collective envisioning as a way to transcend the limitations placed on our social imaginations by suppressive forces such as policing. This section outlines (1) how these organizations have created space for transformative imagination, (2) the role of creativity in abolition, and (3) what each of my interviewees envisions when they think of abolition.

While some may argue that imagination is an abstract mode of resistance against the carceral state that only yields lofty, unattainable goals, abolitionist organizations frequently create concrete structures that allow for a hopeful yet grounded collective vision. For example, Asha recounted how *Assata's Daughters'* community garden serves as a space in which people can have access to nutritious food within a food desert. In addition to meeting collective material needs, the community garden is a place where cooperation and comradery reign supreme. Asha finds hope in that environment, since it allows her to witness a real manifestation of what interpersonal relationships can be like absent forces such as racism and capitalism.

> I love Assata's, because they have given me, like, the freedom to imagine better. And, like, they never limited what we kind of say we can possibly do to create a world that we actually want to be in. We complain so much about this horrific system. But I think what keeps me going is the hope that we can actually get there. This is just a pathway to liberation. And this is our, like, little part that's part of a greater movement.

Asha notably mentioned how the work being done by *Assata's Daughters* does not exist in a vacuum. This points to the fact that there can be no all-encompassing practice of transformative, abolitionist resistance, partially because one of the flaws of the prison industrial complex is precisely that it purports to be a universally appropriate system. However, as Damon also posited,

the notion of bravery encourages self-protection and a constant striving for wellness. There may be multiple avenues through which that can be accomplished, but what is crucial is creating a space where marginalized people are allowed to theorize about a world in which they want to live.

This kind of theorizing often takes the form of art and other creative pursuits. It has a double effect of spurring innovative analyses of the political system and packaging a revolutionary message in a more broadly appealing form. Damon described this succinctly, saying that

> creativity is the exercise of imagination. So to be able to build that muscle, you have to have some type of practice. You know, some of it is historical, whether it's hip hop, whether it's the Black Arts Movement, there's always... whether it's spiritual and even some of the origins of gospel within the movement of resistance and liberation. There was always... that's what makes it complete, holistic. Also, you know, there's just, like, a sugar with the medicine component of, how do you popularize messaging and ideas and experience?

Not only does creativity contribute to a prolific message in his view, but it also directly opposes capitalistic tendencies. Damon explained that, since we are all trained—through schooling and capitalistic norms of success—to be skeptical, apathetic, and ambitious at the cost of others, art and mutual appreciation is an act of resistance. He also introduced another concept, "the philosophical notion of love, which I define as the interplay of nurturing, protecting, providing, acknowledging, and appreciating. [...] seeing the interconnections of our existence and our wellbeing, definitely our relationship to environment, the value of our work and labor, is an anti-exploitative framework." Abolition arguably *demands* creative imagination as part of an overall resistance against exploitation and punishment.

In addition to art, creativity in the context of abolition can arise from the often difficult practice of thinking beyond the premises offered by dominant institutions. Not only does this

foster a necessary tendency to question authority, but it also can result in innovative responses to issues that fail to be addressed through carceral avenues. Byul explained,

> I think that the number one way that people in power maintain power is by limiting our imagination and by making us think that we need certain system because it feels impossible to imagine anything outside of them. So I've learned a lot from prison abolitionists, and have been really challenged over the years to expand my imagination of what's possible. And I think that Chicago in particular plays an important role for me in that because the abolitionist community is so strong here, and it really shaped my understanding of militarism and war, because I think that I grew up really believing that, sure there's all these ideals, but in reality this is just how it is. [...] And so I think that, like, prison abolitionists being able to reshape what's possible and actually creating alternatives to demonstrate that it is possible to have healing without incarceration and without punishment really, like, radically pushed me to think about how that might apply on a global scale, and how, you know, we don't actually need to water down our values, and we can hold them all the way to their logical conclusion, which is abolishing prisons and police and the military.

In this sense, abolitionist creativity and imagination implies active resistance against roadblocks that have intentionally been placed in the way of our transformative imaginations by dominant, carceral ideologies. Institutions that the public is made to accept as necessary, such as the police and the military, are not truly indispensable. As mentioned in several interview excerpts, they are made to seem so in order to protect a status quo that systemically prioritizes certain people over others. As Angela Davis posits, "Prison abolitionists are dismissed as utopians and idealists [...] This is a measure of how difficult it is to envision a social order that does not rely on the threat of sequestering people in dreadful places designed to separate them from their communities and families. The prison is considered so 'natural' that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it" (2003: 10). Arriving at this perspective and moving beyond the constraints of carceral logics—as well as constantly building and improving alternatives—is a central pillar of abolitionist work.

Finally, I asked my interviewees what they envision safety to be from an abolitionist standpoint. Apart from what has been established throughout this section, they all mentioned

forgiveness, cooperation and community care, and a heightened respect for the land as crucial shared values. Byul noted the importance of material and mental wellbeing, saying that she "would define [safety] as access to life-affirming resources, and the absence of fear that those will be taken away from you." Emma shared her vision of abolitionist work as, in part, the daily practice of

> avoiding the kind of carceral nature of, like, canceling people or writing them off. And particularly, I think we have more leniency for formerly incarcerated people and currently incarcerated people. [...] I think that that kind of complexity, and kind of having different expectations for the way that people have been socialized [is important].

Essentially, Emma advocates for a less individualized approach to blame and a more concerted effort to understand how collective socialization and differing positionalities can affect the way in which people interact and deal with conflict. Additionally, she shared her appreciation for being in community with other abolitionists, describing it as working together with people who share her long-term vision of abolition despite perhaps taking different steps to get to that shared goal. This paired cooperation and diversity of thought offers an intellectually rich environment with shared foundational values. Damon echoed this sentiment as well, calling for an increased respect for one another. He suggested that "we are organized towards conflict and competition. And I think we need to subvert that in almost every realm that we can and try to figure out how to be as cooperative as possible." While this does not entail being fond of everyone or constantly sharing the same spaces, it does entail resisting the mindset of scarcity and tethering individual wellbeing to collective wellbeing.

Indeed, the importance of imagination and envisioning is not separated from the structural work of abolition, but rather directly informs it. Such practices of theorizing are profoundly grounded in the lived experiences of Black, queer, and low-income people who are hyperaware of the pitfalls of the carceral system. Disrupting power can entail many things aside from protest and

civil disobedience. Collective envisioning practices are just one method of beginning to build a better world within a non-ideal social structure.

Conclusion

The project of abolition in part arises from the observation that state violence is not the result of a flaw in our political system, but rather the product of its intended purpose—an observation that gives rise to a demand for alternatives rather than reforms. However, given the numerous communities impacted by law enforcement and the criminal legal system, it is crucial to highlight the unifying values of abolition without flattening out the diverse thought that exists in abolitionist spheres. As a frequently cited goal and concern of abolitionist organizations, safety is a concept that demands this level of analysis. As Hanhardt recounts, "James Baldwin often spoke about safety and its status as an 'illusion' on which the dominant society depends. I, too, am not convinced that safety or safe space in their most popular usages can or even should exist. [...] This is not to say that the ideal of finding or developing environments in which one might be free of violence should not be a goal" (2013: 30). While mainstream understandings of safety and safe space are evidently wrought with racist and otherwise oppressive or exclusionary politics, the pursuit of a violence-free space remains imperative. Ultimately, I reaffirm Hanhardt's recommendation for a collective view of safety that remains critical of societal conceptions of who and what are considered to be threats at any given point in history.

To this end, my interview data gives rise to essential observations regarding the consistencies among the various abolitionist approaches to cultivating safe—or rather, *safer*—communities and organizing spaces. First, an abolitionist analysis of policing as an institution is generative in ways that exceed a critique of the carceral state. Acknowledging complete safety from harm as a fallacy that has been weaponized by the criminal legal system leads many abolitionist

organizers to instead focus on harm reduction. An understanding of certain kinds of harm as inevitable is not fatalistic so much as it is empowering, since such an understanding gives rise to harm responses grounded in accountability and healing rather than punishment and isolation.

Similarly, abolitionist approaches to space as both a regulatory and transformative tool in Chicago organizations reflects the ways in which space can be a site of reclamation as well as community care. Indeed, space is frequently utilized as a site for oppositional resistance as well as a site of respite from discriminatory, hyper-regulated environments such as Chicago's over-policed streets on the South and West Sides. Safe spaces that are entirely devoid of harm may indeed be non-existent, yet this notion by no means diminishes the worth inherent in pursuing "safer space," particularly for marginalized individuals who so frequently experience physical and psychological violence under the carceral state.

Thirdly, marginalized status itself seems to be a universally agreed upon factor central to anti-carceral critiques of hierarchies of risk and safety. Not only is marginalization a predictive category for an individual's relationship to the law and other regulatory institutions, but its effects also inhere in relationships within organizing spaces. An abolitionist approach to safety within such spaces necessitates a robust awareness of differing positionalities and tendencies to internally reify carceral attitudes. What results is both a strategic understanding of the various kinds of societal leverage possessed by each individual organizer in addition to systems of accountability founded upon collective values that recognize differing vulnerabilities and levels of political consciousness. Examples of such systems include *Assata's Daughters'* practice of creating identity-based spaces for open conversation about the biases and worldviews that arise from unique lived experiences.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, my analysis rejects the notion that abolitionist imagination and envisioning practices are removed from reality. Abolition is, in one sense, the

result of holding values of care, healing, and accountability to their logical conclusions. Furthermore, it is a structural project that aims to deconstruct the prison industrial complex, a goal that would be unachievable absent an ongoing, concerted effort to theorize about social relations beyond what is possible within a carceral system. Paired with concurrent world building approaches, like *The #LetUsBreathe Collective's* #BreathingRoom space, such theorizing directly disrupts carceral systems while also aiming to highlight and accelerate their obsolescence.

A final note before concluding regards the recent spread of COVID-19 and its effects on anti-carceral work. As of the current date, Cook County Jail in Chicago is "the nation's largest-known source of coronavirus infections" (Williams and Ivory, "Chicago's Jail Is Top U.S. Hot Spot as Virus Spreads Behind Bars," *The New York Times*, 2020). The coronavirus outbreak has been treated in the media as a public health and safety crisis. The incredibly high rates of infection in jails and prisons has only emphasized the contradictions inherent in seeking safety by way of appealing to carceral institutions. Abolitionist groups across the nation are calling for the immediate release of individuals being held in prisons, jails, and immigrant detention centers, engaging in direct action such as "solidarity caravans" to demand mass decarceration while complying with social distancing measures (Wambsgans, "Protestors call for inmate release due to coronavirus threat," *Chicago Tribune*, 2020). My project largely predates these currently proliferating strategies and narratives, and I therefore did not take them into account in my analysis. However, it would appear that these current circumstances only emphasize the scope and urgency of organizing work related to abolitionist conceptions of safety.

The documenting and theorizing of abolitionist work that I present in this paper is a small part of an increasingly robust movement towards a world without prisons. Despite the richly diverse landscape of abolitionist thought, I conclude that there does exist a somewhat consistent,

albeit complex approach to safety. Notably, while safety as an absolute value may not serve anti-carceral ends, its pursuit is recognized within abolitionist groups as a worthy one. While for some it may indeed be easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine a world without prisons, illuminating the increasing obsolescence of the prison industrial complex and the endless possibilities for alternatives is precisely the objective of the abolitionist movement. The pursuit of safety is both oppositional and generative, material and nonphysical, and holds the potential to be an anti-carceral value that demands the conditions necessary for a truly reciprocal community.

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Appendix

I. Interview Guide

- The organizations I cited were selected based on the various ways in which their missions overlap with concepts of safety and abolition. Interviewees were selected based on involvement in the organizations, and some were contacted based on prior relationships through my own organizing experience.
- Out of my four interviews, two of them were conducted in person and two were conducted over video call (one was an interview with an out-of-state member of a Chicago organization, and the other was conducted during the social distancing circumstances that resulted from the spread of COVID-19).
- All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed shortly after. Once they were transcribed, the voice recordings were deleted.
- No cash incentives were offered.
- While all interviews were semi-structured and contained variations according to varying organizational experience and areas of expertise, the following is a basic list of questions that I used to guide these conversations:
    i. Can you introduce yourself and briefly describe your involvement with [organization(s)]?
    ii. How did you first get involved in abolitionist work?
    iii. What is your definition of abolition?
    iv. Are there aspects of your identity that either benefit or complicate your experience as an organizer?

v. How do differing identity categories—like gender, race, or sexuality—impact relationships within your organization, if at all?

vi. How does the work of imagining or envisioning alternatives fit into the projects you're involved in, if at all?

vii. What is your definition of safety, if you have one?

viii. Can we make sense of safety from an abolitionist standpoint? If so, how?

ix. What structures, if any, exist in your organization to engender safety?