

TOWARD AN ACCOUNT OF INTOLERANCE:
BETWEEN PRISON RESISTANCE AND
ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

Today, the word “intolerance” bears almost exclusively negative connotations. Intolerance refers to narrow-mindedness and petty provincialism, prejudice and bigotry. Intolerant people are anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, broadly xenophobic, racist, sexist, homophobic, cis-sexist, and/or eugenicist. Within the context of recent US politics, the term has also developed deep linguistic ties to the Anti-Americanism of Middle East terrorist groups. This hermeneutic trajectory, as Wendy Brown argues, capitalizes on a longstanding semantic alignment of tolerance with civilized societies and intolerance with barbarism.¹ Moreover, while there is growing debate within Western cosmopolitan culture over whether or not tolerance is a virtue—as opposed to more robust values like acceptance, affirmation, respect, solidarity, or celebration—intolerance is typically treated as a vice. Even when their actions fail to bear this out, it is rare for someone—citizen or senator, employee or employer, community member or leader—to want to be known as an intolerant individual. In fact, the appellation of intolerance is so vehemently disavowed, and justifications for such disavowals are so consistently absent as to suggest that the word’s monosignative character is an effect of ideology. This is to say that the supposition that “intolerance” is and ought to be restricted to one negative sense in common parlance is a

belief, so heavily repeated, reproduced, and reinscribed as to be taken for granted.

What would a rich, multivalent account of intolerance look like? What would it mean to reconceive of intolerance as a virtue²—or, at the very least, a positive affect? Luckily, one need not settle in for some armchair philosophizing to answer such a question. There are historical discourses and practices that have explored precisely the contours of a positive intolerance. In what follows, I analyze two such archives: the records of *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (the Prisons Information Group, the GIP) and the writings of one of its academic members: Michel Foucault. For the GIP, intolerance—as a militant refusal of intolerable material and political conditions—is essential to the prison activist effort. Relatedly, for Foucault, scholarship—as the creative and/or critical act of naming intolerable conditions and changing public awareness thereof—can be a mode of political intolerance against an oppressive state. When paired together, these two complementary archives trouble the easy severance of theory and practice, suggesting both that prison resistance efforts involve intellectual assessments of the intolerable and that engaged scholarship often doubles as intolerant activism. Both archives, moreover, agree that such intolerant activism is always rooted in personal investments and local struggles. This full analysis allows me to conclude that, if the struggle against forces of marginalization and exploitation mobilizes resistant intolerance as a political and intellectual strategy, then intolerance may very well be commendable. It might, in fact, be virtuous.

I. THE ARCHIVE

The paired archives of the Prisons Information Group and Michel Foucault provide one exemplary instance of a robust, positive account of intolerance. Once the essential elements of this account have been culled, the relevance of its substantive insights into intolerance for resistance efforts today can be evaluated.

The GIP was a French prison resistance network, active between 1970 and 1973. The GIP issued a clarion call to the French public, insisting that it become unapologetically intolerant of the intolerable conditions of prison specifically and a disciplinary society more generally. The GIP's archive, *Fond Groupe d'information sur les prisons*, is currently housed at the Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine in L'Abbaye d'Ardenne, just outside of Caen, France. A representative selection of these materials—which include interviews, pamphlets, leaflets, media statements, questionnaires, newspaper clippings, magazines, essays (and handwritten drafts), photographs, paintings, lists of demands, reports, chronologies, legal dossiers, and more—have been published in *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons: Archives d'une lutte 1970–1972, Intolérable*, and *La Révolte de la prison de Nancy*.³ It is across this archive and the scholarship circumnavigating it that I trace a rich sense of intolerance as a necessary affect and practice for the activist effort of prison resistance.

The choice to also consult the archive of writings by Michel Foucault warrants some explanation. I pair Foucault with the GIP not merely because he was a GIP member, a thinker of power and resistance, and an important theorist of criminality, deviancy, and incarceration. Foucault spearheaded

the GIP (at the behest of Daniel Defert) and served as its unofficial leader, albeit in a quiet, often behind-the-scenes way.⁴ It is therefore the case that the instances of “intolerance” in the GIP archive occur under his watch and, in many cases, by his own hand. It is also the case, however, that Foucault employed the concepts of the intolerable and intolerance across his scholarly career, both before and after his involvement with the GIP. These two facts do not provide adequate justification for crediting Foucault with the GIP’s account of intolerance. They do, however, establish Foucault’s scholarship as a complementary archive of intolerance. Today, that archive includes his published books, his lectures at the Collège de France, and his essays and interviews, most of which are collected in *Dits et écrits*.⁵ Taking into account the entirety of his work, I trace Foucault’s sense of intolerance as, perhaps unexpectedly, a commendable function of academic scholarship.

II. INTOLERANCE AND PRISON RESISTANCE

Let me begin with an analysis of the GIP and its use of intolerance in the work of prison resistance. At a press conference on February 8, 1971, Foucault announced the formation of Le Groupe d’information sur les prisons. It was to be a group that publicized information about the prisons from prisoners themselves, thereby raising public awareness and inciting transformative action. Quickly thereafter, on March 15, Foucault published a brief statement announcing the GIP’s first information-gathering project: a questionnaire by which prisoners were invited to speak for themselves about prison conditions, the justice system, and necessary reforms. Jettisoning a dispassionate affect in this piece, Foucault deployed a loaded

family of terms, dubbing the questionnaire an “intolerance-inquiry,” describing prison conditions as “intolerable,” and commending not merely awareness but “active intolerance” of the prison and its related disciplinary institutions. He writes,

Let what is intolerable—imposed, as it is, by force and by silence—cease to be accepted. We do not make our inquiry in order to accumulate knowledge, but to heighten our intolerance and make it an active intolerance. Let us become people intolerant of prisons, the legal system, the hospital system, psychiatric practice, military service, etc.⁶

These terms—intolerable and intolerance—would become distinctive of the GIP enterprise. As group members put it, the GIP mobilized people in and outside the prison to protest the “intolerable” realities of class exploitation and marginalization that undergird this institution.⁷ To register that protest, the GIP undertook a number of “intolerance-inquiries,”⁸ the results of which were published in its primary publication series: the *Intolerable* pamphlets. These works decried the “intolerable” conditions of prison,⁹ marking not only the quotidian realities of the cold, filth, violence, and malnutrition of incarceration, but more fundamental issues of egregious sentences¹⁰ and sexual repression.¹¹ For the GIP, the prison could not be understood or resisted in isolation; rather it was a node in a network of “intolerable” institutions, which included “courts, cops, hospital, asylums, school, military service, the press, TV, [and] the state.”¹² It is for this reason that the GIP aimed to make it possible not only for prisoners “to formulate what is intolerable and to no longer tolerate it,” but for any group of people suffering under intolerable conditions to do

so.¹³ Such a “collective intolerance” manifested itself in prison revolts, hunger strikes, work stoppages, and media statements, as well as a wave of prison suicides in 1972.¹⁴ As Foucault would reflect a few years later, the GIP’s task was quite simple: to say, “there is a problem here, there is something here people didn’t tolerate and is not tolerable.”¹⁵

A rich and growing strand of scholarship has been devoted to the GIP, excavating its historical context, philosophical import, and contemporary relevance. That scholarship has focused on a number of GIP figures (Daniel Defert, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean Genet, George Jackson, and Serge Livrozet), coterminous movements (the Black Panthers, Comité d’action des prisonniers, Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire, Lotta Continua, and Mouvement de libération des femmes), and related topics (activism, revolt, abolition, power, surveillance, hunger strikes, solitary confinement, care work, psychiatry, the public intellectual, the subaltern, speech, publicity, anonymity, racism, immigration, Maoism, and May ’68). Within this range of projects, however, there is not a single study of the GIP’s trilogy of concepts: the intolerable, intolerance, and active intolerance. Scholars have addressed the notion of intolerance, but only in passing.¹⁶ This is a surprising state of affairs, given the saturation of these terms in the GIP archive and their consequent centrality to any account of political resistance drawn from the GIP’s legacy.

Intolerance against the Intolerable

In what follows, I map all three terms—the intolerable, intolerance, and active intolerance—across secondary literature on the GIP, aiming to distill the GIP’s contribution to an

account of intolerance as a wellspring not only of prison activism but of political resistance writ large. Moreover, insofar as intolerance, and indeed an active intolerance, is aimed at the intolerable, I will begin with this more fundamental term and then work outward to intolerance and active intolerance.

First, for the GIP, the intolerable is a material, experiential, and judicative state—coincident with unbearable physical and political conditions—that is necessarily spoken and shared. To start, how is the intolerable a material, experiential, and judicative state? In GIP scholarship, the intolerable is often introduced lexically, as what cannot be tolerated, whatever is “unacceptable,”¹⁷ “unbearable,”¹⁸ and “insufferable.”¹⁹ The term refers, most basically, to a set of material conditions that cause egregious suffering. Although such conditions are possible anywhere, across the social fabric and within every institution,²⁰ the GIP applied the term primarily to prisons.²¹ The intolerable refers to the prison’s “quotidian” realities,²² its threats, as Michael Welch puts it, to the “*salut*” and “*santé*” (the health and safety) of prisoners.²³ But it also refers to the prison’s “mechanisms,”²⁴ including the production of illegality,²⁵ recidivism,²⁶ and other “failures.”²⁷ Not simply a conglomerate of material facts and forces, the intolerable is fundamentally phenomenological, an “experience” of what is insufferable, a felt sense [*ressenti*], Audrey Kiefer remarks, that something is unacceptable.²⁸ It includes, moreover, the “subjective reaction” provoked by that experience.²⁹ This is to say that the intolerable cannot be registered mechanically; it can and must seize one’s affective core. And yet, precisising this characterization one step further, Kevin Thompson argues that the intolerable cannot be “simply a subjective, felt condition”;³⁰ it

is also, inescapably, a “judgment.” It is an assessment of the unacceptability of “rigid and intransigent” relations that preclude “genuine projects of self-fashioning.”³¹ As such, to recognize, experience, and judge the intolerable, as GIP members did, is to exercise ethical and political critique. It is to struggle for self and social transformation.

But now how is the intolerable necessarily “spoken” and shared?³² In the GIP’s case, that it is spoken means that the intolerable, on a very practical level, is “propagated” by documents³³ and “formulated” through publicity.³⁴ However, beneath this, Kiefer argues, is something more basal: the intolerable “is to make known”³⁵ and to make known or “to inform is to speak the intolerable.”³⁶ This suggests that the intolerable is necessarily communicative, that it absolutely must be said—as if to register it is already to formulate it, and to formulate it is already to pronounce it. Compounding this is a relational element: the intolerable is shared. While it is certainly experienced “directly” by the targets of systemic oppression, it may equally be experienced “indirectly” through testimony.³⁷ As a vibrant collaboration between prisoners, ex-prisoners, family members, lawyers, doctors, academics, and activists, the GIP capitalized on the infectious nature of the intolerable. Experiences of it reverberated empathically from prison to prison and from the solitary individual to the wider public. Moving across an intricate system of relays, these experiences catalyzed the movement precisely because the force of the intolerable passed through each of its members. The GIP facilitated a space in which people voiced their own agonies and were, as Leonard Lawlor puts it, “forced to listen to the agony

of others,” “forced to become intolerant of the intolerable”; the GIP “communicated the feeling of intolerance.”³⁸

What then is intolerance? For GIP scholars, intolerance is a condition of militancy, produced by the intolerable and expressed in speech acts and political practices. For the GIP, intolerance is *prima facie* “political.”³⁹ It is an “act of resistance,”⁴⁰ part and parcel of an “anti-oppressive struggle.”⁴¹ As such, it cannot be “neutral, impartial, or unbiased,”⁴² embedded in desanguinated academic inquiry or expressive of scientific disinterest. In fact, as it appears in the GIP, intolerance is essentially confrontational. It “defies” the intolerable,⁴³ “rejects” it,⁴⁴ “refuses” the preclusion of possibility,⁴⁵ and ultimately “confronts” the carceral state and its globalizing power.⁴⁶ Intolerance is, therefore, wholly “militant.”⁴⁷ This political militancy manifests itself in speech acts and political practices. For the GIP, intolerance begins with speaking the intolerable. As Grégory Salle states, “*énoncer, c’est déjà dénoncer*”—or, to pronounce is already to denounce.⁴⁸ Commensurately, it is an intolerant act to “give the floor” to those who have been silenced⁴⁹ and to “echo,” “amplify,” and make their words “resound.”⁵⁰ It is the height of intolerance to “publicize,” “proliferate,” and “disseminate” information provided by the targets of an oppressive system.⁵¹ In addition to denunciative speech, moreover, intolerance also involves certain practices of cultivation. Those practices include general “strategies and tactics” of political transformation,⁵² as well as “intercorporeal solidarity” and what Lisa Guenther terms “creaturely politics.”⁵³ For her, it is creaturely needs, desires, and capacities that motivate and sustain resistant political life. By affirming creaturely politics, the GIP’s intolerance compro-

mises the binaries of the weighty and the insignificant, the public and the private, necessary and unnecessary evils that undergird oppressive ideologies and forces of marginalization.

Given the essential militancy of intolerance, coupled with its manifestation in speech and practice, intolerance appears to be inescapably active. How, then, does active intolerance differ from intolerance? And what does it mean to “make [intolerance] an active intolerance”? Active intolerance is perhaps best characterized as an accelerated and transmogrifying collective resistance to the intolerable. The French phrase *intolérance active* appears nowhere else in the published collections of GIP documents.⁵⁴ This creates some interpretive difficulty. From a linguistic standpoint, *intolérance active* might mean an energetic and dynamic intolerance. It might also mean an accelerated (*accélééré*) intolerance, given the GIP context of circulation and growth. From a hermeneutical standpoint, the meaning of active intolerance might best be derived from the achievements of the GIP itself, assuming it embodied active intolerance. In that case, the term would refer to the transitive growth of intolerant feeling, speaking, and practice built on an assessment of the intolerable. Looking to the GIP, Dylan Rodríguez defines active intolerance as “an insurgency of knowledge,”⁵⁵ which, Lisa Guenther adds, produces “the creation of new possibilities for inter-corporeal life.”⁵⁶ Moreover, focusing on the transitivity of insurgent knowledge and creaturely politics, Andrew Dilts and I have suggested active intolerance refers to a “collaborative abolitionist effort, trained on subjugated knowledges and generative beyond itself, both temporally and geographically.”⁵⁷ Active intolerance, here, is an increasing and transformative collective resistance to the intolerable. It carries with it

all the relational, communicative, judicative, experiential, and material elements of intolerance to the intolerable, but it deploys those elements on an accelerated scale, across geographical and institutional barriers, in the same service of refusal and creative transformation.

In sum, the GIP archive offers rich contributions to an account of intolerance. For its members, intolerance is an affect, a judgment, and a practice, brazenly endorsed as a political virtue in the fight against marginalization, structural oppression, violence, and silencing. That intolerance grows out of the intolerable and grows into active intolerance. Ultimately, it is the feeling of the intolerable that becomes the feeling of intolerance; it is the saying of the intolerable that becomes an intolerant denunciation; and it is the sharing of the intolerable that becomes acts of intolerance and active intolerance.⁵⁸ This account of intolerance places it at the heart of a specific prison activist effort. And, insofar as the failures of the prison system remain the same—dehumanization, violence, and injustice—the GIP commends intolerance to prison activist efforts today. More than this, however, this GIP-like intolerance to material conditions of suffering, to experiences of desubjectivation, and its conviction that things must not go on like this—that is the pulse of political resistance movements writ large. This kind of intolerance is their lifeblood.

III. INTOLERANCE AND ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

While intolerance may lie at the root of political resistance, it is not the exclusive purview of activism. I turn now, through the writings of Michel Foucault, to explore the modes of intoler-

erance that are at work in the archives as much as in the streets. Examining some of his most significant references to the term, I distill two key reflections on the nature of intolerance. First, thresholds of intolerance change according to shifting currents of power. They are not reflections of either natural law or structural necessity. Second, professional academics are integral to the construction and reproduction of these changing thresholds. As institutional deputies, scholars are then quite often part and parcel of the intolerable systems against which activist groups like the GIP labor. Nevertheless, due to their institutional function, scholars can also become intolerant agitators, capable of refusing oppressive systems and disrupting their determination of sensibilities, of what can and cannot be accepted or endured. Foucault himself aspired to become just such a scholar. From a GIP/Foucauldian perspective, then, resistant intolerance is commendable, not only as a wellspring of political activism but as a vibrant potentiality for scholarship.

Across *Dits et écrits*, Foucault attends carefully to shifts in public thresholds of intolerance. He repeatedly notes the relative “tolerance” exercised toward the mad before the mid-seventeenth century, followed by a more recent intolerance.⁵⁹ Likewise, he frequently remarks on the nineteenth century’s unique “intolerance” of homosexuals, followed by a more recent tolerance.⁶⁰ Perhaps most commonly, Foucault notes changes in the toleration of illegalities, changes that directly construct the social significance of criminality. In *The Punitive Society*, for example, Foucault locates a shift in intolerance toward delinquents at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁶¹ The bourgeoisie instigated a widespread crackdown on petty crime and rural misconduct. In so doing, they cultivated intolerance

to such illegalisms as a way to construct the figure of the delinquent and instantiate a new regime of work, property, and exploitation. Foucault then formally identified this shift, in *Discipline and Punish*, as foundational to the modern prison and carceral society in the West. Whether he is addressing the mad, the delinquent, or the homosexual, however, Foucault notes essential shifts in the nature and exercise of power, such that thresholds of both tolerance and intolerance take on specific configurations that solidify reigning hierarchies.⁶² Institutional forces cultivate public intolerances that serve dominant power formations.

Scholars play an integral role in changing thresholds of tolerance and intolerance. For instance, Foucault asserts that, at the end of the nineteenth century, scholars made incest no longer “tolerable,” through the construction of sexology, sociology, and other forms of discourse.⁶³ This theoretical construction then gained judicial function. “The great interdiction of incest,” he writes, “is an invention of intellectuals.”⁶⁴ In this moment, scholars served as the functionaries of power, binding more tightly together the forces of knowledge production and policing. Emphasizing the weight of this collusion, Foucault remarks, in *The Punitive Society*, that, “For a repressive State apparatus really to function, it must be tolerated. Now, two great mechanisms make this toleration possible”: 1) transfer tasks of control and repression from the state to various marginalized strata, or 2) ensure that the state apparatus, while kept within the ruling class and serving the dominant interests, also serves local interests from time to time.⁶⁵ On the first model of producing tolerance for a repressive or disciplinary state, that state must transfer control to substrata; these sub-

strata may include intellectuals and professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, magistrates, sociologists, educators, philosophers, et cetera. Intellectuals are mediators who may carry out the work of the state by solidifying public tolerance of power differentials and entrenching intolerable conditions. In a ruthless passage, Foucault states that many intellectuals have become dupes of bourgeois ideology and, subsequent to their professorships, they have further become investees of bourgeois power.⁶⁶ Whether as an expression of that investment or a formative force on that ideology, such intellectuals collude with judicial formations.

In sum, the vicissitudes of force and struggle alter the contours of public intolerance. One chief means of that alteration is academic industry, which generates new concepts and curiosities, whole discourses and regimes of veridiction. Scholars are, then, in a unique position to enhance tolerance of a repressive or disciplinary state, to preclude the recognition of intolerable conditions, and to support the reproduction of those very conditions. For Foucault, however, this is only one side of the story.

Transforming Thresholds of Tolerance and Intolerance

In several places, Foucault explores how scholars can resist the intolerable through the practice of intolerance. These explorations name at least two specific modes of scholarly work consonant with such intolerance: literature and critique. While political resistance is certainly to be found in activist endeavors, it also lives and breathes in art and theory. Creative and critical scholarship are powerful and yet perhaps underappreciated tools in the service of social transformation.

In “Lives of Infamous Men,” Foucault reflects on the history of documentation, moving from fabulous tales of royal or noble exploits, to the juridical and penal reports of quotidian life, and ending finally with administrative records of minutiae captured along a capillary network of diffuse power. The history of fiction, he suggests, tracks this development: fable was sufficient for the first era, while modern literature, with its emphasis on the quotidian, developed in tandem with the second.⁶⁷ Although modern literature is coincident with juridical and penal documentation systems, however, Foucault insists it is not copacetic with them. As he writes, literature is always inherently

searching for things hardest to perceive—the most hidden, hardest to tell and to show, and lastly most forbidden and scandalous. . . . [It is] determined [*acharnée*] to seek out the quotidian beneath the quotidian itself, to cross boundaries [*limites*], to ruthlessly or insidiously bring our secrets out in the open, to displace rules and codes, to compel the unmentionable [*inavouable*] to be told; it will thus tend to place itself outside the law, or at least to take on the burden of scandal, transgression, or revolt. More than any other form of language, it remains the discourse of “infamy”: it has the duty of saying what is most resistant to being said—the worst, the most secret, the most intolerable [*intolérable*], the shameless.⁶⁸

As the GIP insisted time and again, naming the intolerable is itself an act of intolerance.⁶⁹ By asserting that literature names the intolerable, Foucault suggests that certain works of creative scholarship are capable of the same resistant intolerance as

political protests, media insurgencies, and investigation commissions. It is literature's power to name, to depict the material and experiential reality of the intolerable, that makes it a tool of political intolerance.

Although Foucault sometimes claimed to be publishing works of fiction,⁷⁰ it was more common for him to characterize his scholarly work as a practice of critique. Critique, he writes, is the "historical analysis of the limits imposed on us" paired with "an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them."⁷¹ If "limits" can refer to thresholds of tolerance and intolerance, as he suggests in *History of Madness*,⁷² then critical scholarship must both illuminate and shift those thresholds. Foucault later states this explicitly. On the necessity of analyzing thresholds, he writes, "the thresholds of intolerance in a society merit great attention, as much from the point of view of historical reflection as that of political analysis. For this is not simply an issue of 'sensibility,' it is also an issue of resistance, of the capacity to refuse and the will to fight."⁷³ Analysis preconditions the insight and resolve requisite for political resistance. These thresholds, however, must not simply be analyzed; they must be changed. In a 1978 interview, in the context of fore-swearing overly ambitious scholarly endeavors, Foucault states:

My project is far from being of comparable scope. To give some assistance, in wearing away certain self-evidences and commonplaces about madness, normality, illness, crime and punishment; to bring it about, together with many others, that certain phrases can no longer be spoken so lightly, certain acts no longer, or at least no longer so unhesitatingly, performed; to contribute to changing certain things in people's way

of perceiving and doing things; to participate in this difficult displacement of forms of sensibility and thresholds of tolerance. . . . I hardly feel capable of attempting much more than that.⁷⁴

Foucault here admits to the critical work of “wearing away” what has become self-evident and commonplace, of displacing “thresholds of tolerance.” It is a deceptively modest claim. For, to effect these shifts is in fact to subvert established power structures and forces of control. Institutionalized thresholds of tolerance and intolerance become sedimented over time. When they have sunk so deeply into the social fabric as to be taken for granted and are no longer susceptible to change by the people subject to them, that itself is “intolerable.”⁷⁵ To make these frozen and crystallized power formations mobile and fluid again is the consummate Foucauldian act of resistance, opening the space for self and social transformation.⁷⁶ This is the work of critique.

Whether it be literature or critique, Foucault sees scholarship as a conduit of intolerance. Among more overt acts of political antagonisms, these forms of intellectual production can also effect transformation in the name of freedom. In his preface to Mireille Debard and Jean-Luc Hennig’s *Les Juges kaki*, an account of French military courts and tribunals, from 1975 to 1977, Foucault contextualizes scholarly work within the larger framework of political struggle. On the one hand, the battle is waged by direct defiance of state power itself; on the other, it is waged by sensitizing oneself, raising one’s consciousness and lowering the thresholds at which one tolerates violence, intimidation, and inequality. Debard and Hennig’s book, he asserts, “follows this [latter] path.”⁷⁷ He writes,

It is well known that the quiet strength of the state shrouds its violence; laws cover over its illegalism; and rules its injustice. The whole swarm of abuses, excesses, and irregularities forms not the inevitable deviation, but the essential and abiding life of the “rule of law.” The bad character of the prosecutor, the indigestion of the judge, or the torpor of the jury are not snags in the universality of law, instead they assure its well-ordered exercise. And these games, with all their uncertainties, risks, threats, and traps, facilitate not a violent political regime, really, but an average, everyday level of fear—what we might call a “state of fear” [*État de peur*], lived out by individuals beneath the rule of law [*État de droit*].

This, then, is the problem that must be posed in every society that functions on this model: how to extract this illegalism from the legality that shelters it? How to wrest this violence from the shadow and familiarity that render it nearly invisible? How to make these things stand out starkly against the greyness of the general mechanisms that lend them such an air of inevitability, and, ultimately, tolerability [*d’être tolérables*]?

We can defy hidden violence in such a way as to draw it out from the well-ordered apparatus within which it is ensconced. We can provoke it, instigating a reaction on its part so strong as to be immeasurable, rendering it so unacceptable that we cannot, in fact, accept it any longer. We can grate against the average state of fear

until it gets red hot. This is a strategy of war: the “rise to extremes.”

We can also work in the other direction: in lieu of rendering the mechanisms of power more menacing, we can lower the threshold at which we tolerate [*supporte*] them, work to make the skin more irritable and the sensibilities more recalcitrant, sharpen an intolerance [*intolérance*] to power’s effects and the habituations that muffle them, make more pronounced whatever about them is small, fragile, and consequently accessible; modify the balance of fear, not by an intensification that terrifies, but by an assessment of reality that, literally, “encourages.”⁷⁸

It is a sharp contrast Foucault here draws between defying the state or even provoking its brute power, on the one hand, and working to change sensibilities or more keenly sensitize them, on the other. For him, scholarship can “make the skin more irritable and the sensibilities more recalcitrant.” It can unmask the hidden machinations of power and throw off the repressive or disciplinary vestments of scholastic standing. From this perspective, the classic division between activism, art, and theory just cannot hold. Rather, they are capable together of raising intolerant voices against an intolerable society.

This is the promise of scholarship: to identify, name, experiment with, and change the intolerable limits produced by a long sedimentation of power relations. But of course, not every instance of scholarship is intolerant in this sense. What, then, are the conditions under which scholarship becomes so? In the GIP archive, the work of intolerance starts with an expe-

rience of the intolerable, a gripping, relentless experience of diminished possibilities and injustice judged to be so insufferable it must be collectively and progressively decried. This consistent theme in the GIP archive is reprised by Foucault. For him, the work of intolerance is rooted in personal investments and local struggles. In an interview in which Foucault and Deleuze reflect on their involvement in the GIP movement, Foucault says,

If the fight is directed against power, then all those on whom power is exercised to their detriment, all who find it intolerable, can begin the struggle on their own terrain and on the basis of their proper activity (or passivity). In engaging in a struggle that concerns their own interests, whose objectives they clearly understand and whose methods only they can determine, they enter into a revolutionary process.⁷⁹

This intolerance, whether through scholarship or activism, begins among people targeted by oppressive power structures and yet ready to generate their own resistance strategies.

Foucault claims that all of his research has in fact begun in this way.⁸⁰ Take *The Punitive Society* as a case in point. Frédéric Gros claims Foucault aimed in these lectures not “to deploy a rhetoric of exclusion, to denounce an intolerant society [*une société intolérante*], or to valorize the margins” but rather to systematically critique the framework of exclusion itself as insufficient to explain more subtle tactics of sanction such as sequestration, confinement, and eventually incarceration.⁸¹ While Foucault certainly does critique the framework of exclusion here, I propose that *The Punitive Society* is in fact a form

of denouncing—or of not tolerating—an intolerant society. Stemming from his involvement in the GIP, *The Punitive Society* develops from a felt sense of the intolerable, a sense that began with the incarceration of May '68 leaders and only intensified as he began communicating with prisoners, talking to their families, and meeting with ex-prisoners on the outside. As a work of scholarship, *The Punitive Society* lays the groundwork for a critical understanding of the modern prison and carceral society in the West. As such, it is exemplary of a scholar's resistance to merely replicating structures of a repressive, disciplinary, and biopolitical state and instead working to lower the tolerability of systems of penal as well as academic power, thereby practicing a resistant intolerance. Moreover, insofar as *The Punitive Society* houses the preliminary research for *Discipline and Punish*, which itself has fueled critical prison studies and prison resistance networks across the globe, these lectures form part of a collaborative effort—temporally and geographically extensive. *The Punitive Society* plays a part in the mobilization of active intolerance.

The GIP and Foucault archives agree that when political work is rooted in local knowledge, embodied struggle, and collective refusal, it is capable of rupturing thresholds of tolerance and intolerance. Scholarship is not inherently divorced from the world, confined to an ivory tower, and indifferent to the people with whom it is concerned. It is available for the work of intolerance, wherever the scholar experiences the intolerable, whether directly or indirectly. It is available, tooth and nail, for the project of world transformation and social justice.

IV. CONCLUSION

In a world saturated in xenophobic violence, the question is not, paradoxically, whether intolerance can be commended in good faith. The Prisons Information Group and Michel Foucault are part of a rich history of successfully practicing intolerance against the oppressive forces of marginalization and exclusion. In the spirit of these archives, the question to be asked today is a different one. Ought we to be more intolerant than we are? Folded within that question is a series of others: Where do we stand in relation to dominant systems of power? And how are we positioned differently? How do we buttress and replicate disciplinary thresholds of tolerance or repressive standards of intolerance? How do we disrupt them? And what is the scholar's role in this effort? Who among us is already doing this disruptive work and why? Does our own scholarly work replicate a certain tolerance of intolerable conditions? If so, which ones? Does it shift thresholds of intolerance? Is it linked to other people, projects, and public engagements as a form of active intolerance? Does it begin locally? Are we invested?

Some may be concerned by the tenor of these questions and, indeed, any call to practice intolerance. Surely the world needs less intolerance, not more. Even if it is the resistant intolerance of the GIP/Foucauldian archives, what safeguards its recommendation against cooptation by intolerance of another sort? I wish to underscore the significant schematic differences between the intolerance herein commended and that which is at work in xenophobic violence. To begin with, xenophobia is a response of disdain toward what is constructed as strange, foreign, or different: the other. Resistant intolerance, on the

other hand, is a response of refusal toward what is eminently familiar: the day in and day out experience of existential threat, the sense that one really cannot survive under these conditions. This intolerance begins with someone's suffering and judging it to be insufferable. It is fueled by a sense of injustice, rather than disdain, fear, or hatred.⁸² Moreover, while xenophobic intolerance involves a refusal to see or to acknowledge another person or group of persons, resistant intolerance involves a commitment to speak and to listen. Through this intolerance, the targets of oppressive systems name the intolerable, while others facilitate their ability to speak and to be heard. Such speech necessarily stems from the side of the marginalized. And yet, the force of resistant intolerance is not centripetal, merely local, or identitarian; rather, it reaches outward, connecting people together in an ever-expanding movement of collective passions and actions. In *Regulating Aversion*, Wendy Brown argues that at the heart of liberal tolerance lurks a hostility, repugnance, and regulation inherent in the settler colonial project. I would argue, conversely, that at the heart of resistant intolerance lives the sort of solidarity, courage, and hope necessary for deterritorial and decarceral struggles.

Today, assessments of the intolerable are pouring from our prisons, universities, and beyond. Prisoners decry malnutrition, physical and administrative violence, and the corporate monopoly governing jails, prisons, and detention centers.⁸³ In 2013, the Pelican Bay Hunger Strike specifically targeted indefinite solitary confinement. This year, in perhaps the largest prison strike in history, prisoners are protesting conditions of forced labor, whether through explicit or implicit coercion. On the other hand, university campuses are awash in student demand

for the diversification of curriculum and faculty representation, the expansion of mental health services, and justice for sexual assault survivors. In a growing awareness of class analysis, moreover, students are protesting the student debt and adjunct crises and demanding widespread unionization. Faculty are protesting frozen wages and ever increasing teaching and service loads, egregious layoffs, racially motivated tenure denials, departmental closures, and assaults on academic freedom. Many such protests target the corporatization of higher education, which has involved a growing allegiance to bureaucracy over pedagogy and statistics over reflective excellence. In the United States, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is arguably one of the most powerful and poignant contemporary acts of intolerance in an intolerable world. Against white supremacy, replete as it is with injustice, violence, and silencing, BLM vows to resist the many forms of state violence targeting Black people and (re)build the Black liberation movement, placing marginalized Black lives at its center.⁸⁴

Insofar as political inequality and xenophobic violence are germane to our current existence as human beings on this earth, intolerable realities seem to be inescapable. Whether those realities are the ones we live ourselves or experience through others, however, they have the potential to become active in us—to grip us with an unshakeable fury. To demand our response, at once raw and reflective. To incite us to collective art, activism, and scholarship in the service of freedom. That is, they have the potential to activate intolerance.⁸⁵

NOTES

- 1 Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6.
- 2 Consistent with this discussion of common parlance, I use this term in a nontechnical sense.
- 3 *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons: Archives d'une lutte, 1970–1972*, eds. Philippe Artières, Laurent Quérou, and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (Paris: Editions de l'IMEC, 2003). Hereafter cited as *Archives d'une lutte*.
- 4 Gilles Deleuze remarked that, despite his leadership role, Foucault “knew how not to behave like the boss” (Paris VIII seminar [January 28, 1986], French National Library sound archives); David Macey refers to his “tireless energy,” “commitment,” and dedication in the minutia of phone calls, letters, hosting meetings, etc. (*The Lives of Michel Foucault* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1993], 264).
- 5 Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits* I and II (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).
- 6 Michel Foucault, “(Sur les prisons)” (1971), *Dits et écrits* I, no. 87, 1044.
- 7 GIP, “Préface” (1971), *Intolérable 1: Enquête dans 20 prisons*, in *Intolérable* (Paris: Verticale, 2013), 17.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 GIP, “Du nouveau dans les prisons” (1971), *Archives d'une lutte*, 162. Cf. Michel Foucault and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Enquête sur les prisons” (1971), *Dits et écrits* I, no. 88, 1045; Michel Foucault, “La situation dans les prisons est intolérable” (1971), *Archives d'une lutte*, 50–51.
- 10 Michel Foucault, “Je perçois l'intolérable” (1971), *Dits et écrits* I, no. 94, 1073.
- 11 Foucault and Vidal-Naquet, “Enquête sur les prisons,” 1048.
- 12 GIP, Back Cover, *Intolérable 1*, 15.
- 13 GIP, “Préface,” *Intolérable 1*, 18. Cf. Back Cover: “We hope that the prisoners will be able to say what is intolerable” (15).
- 14 GIP, “Préface,” *Intolérable 4: Prison Suicides*, in *Intolérable*, 272.

- 15 Louis Appert, François Colcombert, and Antoine Lazarus, “Luttes autour des prisons” (1979), *Dits et écrits* II, no. 273, 813.
- 16 And there is only one study of the intolerable: Kevin Thompson’s “To Judge the Intolerable,” *Philosophy Today* 54 (2010): 169–76.
- 17 Audrey Kiéfer, “Michel Foucault: le G.I.P., l’histoire et l’action,” Doctoral Dissertation (Université de Picardie Jules Verne d’Amiens, 2003), 59.
- 18 Kevin Thompson, “Problematization and the Production of New Statements: Foucault and Deleuze on Le Groupe d’information sur les prisons,” *Carceral Notebooks* 12 (2017): this issue.
- 19 Falguni Sheth, “Unruliness without Rioting: Hunger Strikes in Contemporary Politics,” in *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, eds. Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 130.
- 20 For reference to immigration detention, deportation, and the structure of citizenship as intolerable, see Natalie Cisneros, “Resisting ‘Massive Elimination’: Foucault, Immigration, and the GIP,” in Zurn and Dilts, *Active Intolerance*, 243; for more on the press as intolerable, see Perry Zurn, “Publicity and Politics: Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Press,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 17.2 (2014): 412.
- 21 Perhaps the most powerful summary of these intolerable prison conditions is offered by Shannon Winnubst, in “The GIP as a Neoliberal Intervention: Trafficking in Illegible Concepts,” in Zurn and Dilts, *Active Intolerance*, 195–96. She writes,

The responses under each heading [of the first GIP questionnaire] are, generally and simply, intolerable: the visiting room is filthy, noisy, under capricious control and surveillance; letters are censored, drawings from children are confiscated, and Christmas packages are plundered; the question of rights or uniform rules is scoffed at and the caprice of (often intoxicated) guards is detailed; the cell is tiny, isolating, bug-infested, and, again, filthy; walks are crowded into small spaces and speech is largely forbidden; the food is bland, poorly cooked, sometimes rotten; the canteen is necessary to make the food edible; for leisure, one can smoke

cigarettes and study, but largely there is no television, radio, film or newspaper worth reading; work is long, monotonous, and virtually unpaid once all the “fees” are subtracted from the wage; medical appointments are consistently less than 2 minutes long and result in the prescription of aspirin; discipline is harsh, physically and psychologically, with most sentences beginning with 45–90 days of solitary confinement; all of prison life is vulnerable to surveillance, including the use of the chamber-pot or the prohibition of lying down during the day; the guards discipline and punish erratically, both in terms of the cause and intensity; suicides, both attempted and successful, are widespread, involving the swallowing of nails, razors, broken glass, metal buttons; and revolts are growing, involving actions such as prison-wide drumming and burning of mattresses. To read these, even forty years later, is most certainly to “perceive the intolerable.”

- 22 Kiéfer, “Michel Foucault: le G.I.P., l’histoire et l’action,” 57.
- 23 Michael Welch, “Pastoral Power as Penal Resistance: Foucault and the Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons,” *Punishment & Society* 12 (2010): 55.
- 24 Kiéfer, “Michel Foucault: le G.I.P., l’histoire et l’action,” 59.
- 25 Cisneros, “Resisting ‘Massive Elimination,’” 243.
- 26 Daniel Defert, *Une vie politique: Entretien avec Philippe Artières et Eric Favereau* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), 60.
- 27 Perry Zurn, “Work and Failure: Assessing the Prisons Information Group,” in Zurn and Dilts, *Active Intolerance*, 84.
- 28 Kiéfer, “Michel Foucault: le G.I.P., l’histoire et l’action,” 57.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Thompson, “To Judge the Intolerable,” 171.
- 31 Ibid., 169; cf. Zurn, “Publicity and Politics,” 407–8.
- 32 Kiéfer, “Michel Foucault: le G.I.P., l’histoire et l’action,” 81.
- 33 Grégory Salle, “Mettre la prison à l’épreuve. Le GIP en guerre contre l’Intolérable,” *Cultures & Conflits* 55 (2004): 85.

- 34 Zurn, "Publicity and Politics," 409–10.
- 35 Kiéfer, "Michel Foucault: le G.I.P., l'histoire et l'action," 189 (emphasis added).
- 36 *Ibid.*, 56 (emphasis added).
- 37 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 38 Leonard Lawlor and Andrea Janae Sholtz, "Speaking Out for Others: Philosophical Activity in Deleuze and Foucault (and Heidegger)," in *Between Deleuze and Foucault*, eds. Daniel Smith, Thomas Nail, and Nicolae Morar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 152. Cf. Leonard Lawlor, "Prisons Information Group (GIP)," *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 396.
- 39 Cecile Brich, "The Groupe d'information sur les prisons: The voice of prisoners? Or Foucault's?," *Foucault Studies* 5 (2008): 39. This fits with the GIP's alignment of the intolerance-inquiry as "a political act," "the first episode of a struggle," and "an attack front" ("Preface," *Intolerable* 1, 17-18).
- 40 Kiéfer, "Michel Foucault: le G.I.P., l'histoire et l'action," 65.
- 41 Brich, "The Groupe d'information sur les prisons," 39.
- 42 Marcelo Hoffman, "Investigations from Marx to Foucault," in Zurn and Dilts, *Active Intolerance*, 182; cf. Marcelo Hoffman, "Foucault and the 'Lesson' of the Prisoner Support Movement," *New Political Science* 34.1 (2012): 27.
- 43 Michael Hames-García, "Are Prisons Tolerable?," *Carceral Notebooks* 12 (2017): this issue.
- 44 Lisa Guenther, "Beyond Guilt and Innocence: The Creaturely Politics of Prisoner Resistance Movements," in Zurn and Dilts, *Active Intolerance*, 231.
- 45 Zurn, "Publicity and Politics," 408.
- 46 Danielle Rancière, "Brève histoire du Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons (GIP), 1971–1972," *MANA, revue de sociologie et d'anthropologie* 5 (1998): 223; Benedikte Zitouni, "Michel Foucault et le Groupe

- d'Information sur les Prisons: Comment faire exister et circuler le savoir des prisonniers," *Les Temps Modernes* 645–46 (2007): 286.
- 47 Rancière, "Brève histoire du Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons," 222.
- 48 Salle, "Mettre la prison à l'épreuve," 88.
- 49 Cisneros, "Resisting 'Massive Elimination,'" 243.
- 50 Lawlor and Sholtz, "Speaking Out for Others," 150–52; Lawlor, "Prisons Information Group (GIP)," 396.
- 51 Zurn, "Publicity and Politics," 408 and 410; Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts, "Active Intolerance—An Introduction," in Zurn and Dilts, *Active Intolerance*, 8.
- 52 Zurn and Dilts, "Active Intolerance—An Introduction," 2.
- 53 Guenther, "Beyond Guilt and Innocence," 226–27.
- 54 Nor, to my knowledge, in Foucault's major works or his *Dits et écrits*.
- 55 Dylan Rodríguez, "Disrupted Foucault: Los Angeles' Coalition Against Police Abuse (CAPA) and the Obsolescence of White Academic Raciality," in Zurn and Dilts, *Active Intolerance*, 153.
- 56 Guenther, "Beyond Guilt and Innocence," 231.
- 57 Zurn and Dilts, "Active Intolerance—An Introduction," 11.
- 58 Zurn, "Publicity and Politics," 407.
- 59 Foucault, *Dits et écrits* I, 976, 998, and 1002; *Dits et écrits* II, 368, 380, 493, and 494.
- 60 Foucault, *Dits et écrits* I, 416, and 1647; *Dits et écrits* II, 357, 937, 985–86, 1105–6, 1111, 1128, 1135, 1141, 1145, 1151, 1156, 1221, 1225, 1351, 1442, 1445, 1489, and 1555.
- 61 Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972–1973*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- 62 Of course, a thorough comparative study of these cases requires a full-length inquiry all its own.

- 63 Michel Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 154–55.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 125.
- 66 Ibid., 236, 165.
- 67 Foucault does not here offer a third literary genre to match the third documentary mode. It is possible that social media, however, is adequate to the task of narrating the minutia of today's data centers.
- 68 Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men" (1977), in *Power*, ed. James Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000), 174 (trans. modified), translated from *Dits et écrits* II, no. 198, 253.
- 69 See Foucault's reflections in "Luttes autour des prisons," 809–10. Or, to quote Salle again, "*énoncer, c'est déjà dénoncer*" ("Mettre la prison à l'épreuve," 88).
- 70 Specifically, he claimed that his scholarly works ought to be understood as fictions, fables, and even novels. See Foucault, "The History of Sexuality" (1977), in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 193; "How An Experience-Book is Born," in *Remarks on Marx*, ed. Duccio Trombadori (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext[e], 1991), 33; "Interview with Michel Foucault," in Faubion, *Power*, 242; "The Confession of the Flesh," in Gordon, *Power/Knowledge*, 212–14.
- 71 Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment" in Rabinow, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 319.
- 72 In his preface to *History of Madness* (1961; New York: Routledge, 2006), Foucault avows "not to write a chronicle of morality or tolerance" (xxx), but to "write a history of *limits*" (xxix), especially the limit of madness, which signifies a founding cultural division between reason and unreason. Writing a history of limits involves tracing how a specific balance of tolerance and intolerance—i.e., threshold—surrounding madness was institutionally orchestrated and culturally naturalized.
- 73 Michel Foucault, "Postface" to M. Perrot's *L'Impossible Prison* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980), *Dits et écrits* II, no. 279, 854 (my translation).

- 74 Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method" (1978), in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 82–83, translated from *Dits et écrits* II, no. 278. Is this genealogy? Cf. Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 84, 93.
- 75 Michel Foucault, "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual," *History of the Present* 4 (1988): 11; Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," 148. Cf. *The Punitive Society*: "social laws are made by people for whom they are not intended and applied to those who did not make them" (22, 24); cf. Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 289-302.
- 76 Foucault, "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual," 12.
- 77 Michel Foucault, "Préface" to *Les Juges kaki* (1977), *Dits et écrits* II, no.191, 140.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 139 (my translation).
- 79 Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and Power" (1972), in *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice*, ed. Donald Burchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1977), 216. *The Punitive Society* was researched at the height of Foucault's GIP activity. Perhaps this is why Foucault is so keen to remark in his preface to *Les Juges kaki* that Debarde formed an activist group against militarization in 1967 and Hennig was banned from teaching in May 1968. They, too, were personally invested in their intolerant work. Indeed, an analysis of intolerance adds an underappreciated valence to our understanding of the specific intellectual as it functions in the Foucauldian corpus.
- 80 Michel Foucault, "Interview with Michel Foucault," in Faubion, *Power*, 244.
- 81 Frédéric Gros, "Foucault et 'La société punitive,'" *La Prison* 135 (2010): 6 (my translation).
- 82 For a theory of a GIP-like sense of injustice, the normative evaluation of which is rooted in local engagement with the experience of suffering, resultant from material forms of oppression, see Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

*Toward an Account of Intolerance:
Between Prison Resistance and Engaged Scholarship*

83 Abu-Ali Abdur’Rahman, “Intolerable 1,” in Zurn and Dilts, *Active Intolerance*, 92; Derrick Quintero, “Intolerable 2,” in Zurn and Dilts, *Active Intolerance*, 141; Donald Middlebrooks, “Intolerable 3,” in Zurn and Dilts, *Active Intolerance*, 222.

84 Black Lives Matter, “About.” <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

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