



## **Prisons, Policing, and Pollution: Toward an Abolitionist Framework within Environmental Justice**

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### **Key Words**

Abolition  
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### **Abstract**

The Environmental Justice (EJ) Movement defines the environment as the spaces where we live, work, play, and pray, and has traditionally used this definition to organize against toxics in low-income communities of color. However, prisons and policing are rarely discussed in conversations of environmental health and justice. The approximately 2.2 million people that are incarcerated in the U.S. are largely overlooked in environmental and sustainability activism. This article explores the interconnection of prison abolition and environmental justice movements and their potential to collaborate in building safe, sustainable, and just communities. Based on interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals from San Antonio, Texas, and a case study of the Mira Loma Women's Detention Center in the Antelope Valley of California, this article expands the realm of EJ work to include and center the spaces of prisons and policing and complicates the definition of toxicity as it has been traditionally used and organized against in the EJ movement. I argue that policing and imprisonment are toxic systems to our communities and contradict and prevent the development of safe and sustainable communities. Thus, understanding prisons and policing as toxic to both people and to the environment, we should move toward abolishing these toxic systems and building alternatives to them.

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## **Introduction**

Who should care about abolition? Anyone interested in liberation and getting free. Anyone who desires more socially and environmentally just worlds. When is the right time? Now. Now more than ever we need to be learning about abolition (reading, having conversations, watching videos, joining abolitionist organizations), expanding our imaginations of what is possible in our families, communities, worlds, and exploring/practicing abolition in our day-to-day lives, in our communities, and spheres of work. Why? Human and non-human lives/bodies are at stake. Black and Indigenous peoples' bodies, lifeways, and communities are the most impacted and at stake. And the health of the environment (especially the places where low-income and Indigenous people live) and non-human beings are also at stake. From policing, incarceration, displacement, and state-sanctioned murders to water crises, oil pipelines, habitat destruction, and climate injustice, abolition is relevant to all of these issues. How do we create the communities and worlds we desire? How can we live on this planet in a better way? One start is by understanding how issues that we might have been conditioned to think are separate are interconnected.

How are prisons, policing, and pollution connected and why is this intersection critical to understand? The Environmental Justice (EJ) Movement defines the environment as the spaces where we live, work, play, and pray, and has traditionally used this definition to organize against toxics in low-income communities of color. However, prisons and policing are rarely discussed in conversations of environmental health and justice. The approximately 2.2 million people that are incarcerated in the U.S. are largely overlooked in environmental and sustainability activism.

I argue that policing and imprisonment are toxic systems to our communities and contradict and prevent the development of safe and sustainable communities. Thus, understanding prisons and policing as toxic to both people and to the environment, we should move toward abolishing these toxic systems and building alternatives to them. This is important because although there is a history of prison abolitionists using an EJ lens to organize against prisons and there is a growing number of scholars writing at the intersection of abolition and EJ/sustainability/environmentalism, environmental movements have still has not engaged thoughtfully enough with abolitionist discourse, and if combined these movements can work toward a common goal of building safe, sustainable, and just communities for everybody. At the intersection of policing, prisons, and pollution, prison abolition can help EJ and Sustainability theorize and act toward creating a broader sense of justice. Prison or prison-industrial-complex (PIC) abolition is the vision of a world without cages, a world where instead of punishment, policing, surveilling, and imprisonment being our predominant modes of dealing with problems, we are practicing alternative ways to dealing with issues impacting people.

Both EJ and abolition contend with issues of justice, but what does justice have to do with sustainability? Sustainability and mainstream environmentalism fails to include a strong analysis and consideration of justice, which is partly why EJ emerged to alternatively focus on issues of justice, equity, race, class, and gender. EJ comes from a bottom-up, local, grassroots approach to environmental threats that have been shown to disproportionately impact communities of color and low income communities; whereas, sustainability has a more exclusive, top-down policy approach that involves top-down government structures, international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and think tanks. Sustainability advocates tend to be more proactive in saying what kind of communities they want. Whereas, EJ activists have often been limited to decision-making processes that normalize reaction.<sup>1</sup> Much of EJ organizing has been reactive, responding to environmental harms that threaten a community by appealing to the state. EJ's focus on appealing to the state to achieve EJ has constrained what "justice" is/can be. Combining EJ with sustainability agendas could help bring EJ to the more formal policy-making arena from local to global scales, and an EJ framework could help transform how we approach sustainable development to more critically consider the issues of justice and equity (race, class, gender, disability).

Abolitionists aim to decarcerate, demilitarize, end policing and stop the construction of new prisons and better communities by improving access to resources and advocating alternatives to policing, imprisonment, and punishment. While some abolition strategy involves engaging with the state, the heart of the movement's strategy is to move beyond appeals to the state for justice as relied upon by the EJ movement because abolition critiques the state's ability to provide justice in the first place. Thus, we can use abolition as a framework in EJ to rethink how we should tackle issues of environmental injustice and more fundamentally, to rethink our ideas of justice. In many ways, abolitionism is about social sustainability, the component of sustainability that is least discussed in the environmental field. Abolitionists identify intra-community violence and police occupation and consequential over-incarceration as forces which deplete communities of color. Abolitionists identify affordable housing, good critical education, adequate and accessible healthcare, access to nutritious food, access to green spaces and recreational spaces for play, feeding each other, and holding each other accountable through radical love as the things that make communities just and sustainable.

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Agyeman, *Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Laura Pulido and Juan De Lara, "Reimagining 'Justice' in Environmental Justice: Radical Ecologies, Decolonial Thought, and the Black Radical Tradition," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, no. 1–2 (March 2018): 76–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618770363>; Laura Pulido, Ellen Kohl, and Nicole-Marie Cotton, "State Regulation and Environmental Justice: The Need for Strategy Reassessment," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27, no. 2 (April 2, 2016): 12–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2016.1146782>.

In this article, I will first turn to people in Texas who have intimate knowledge of incarceration and environmental injustice, and based on their experiences, uplift their ideas of what makes safe, sustainable, and more just communities. The voices of formerly incarcerated individuals from San Antonio, Texas will offer insight on this intersection and talk about their visions for safe and sustainable communities. I explore abolition as a theoretical and practical framework to offer an alternative approach to addressing EJ issues and (re)imagining EJ, and to offer an alternative praxis toward building safer, more sustainable, and more just communities. Then, I will turn to focus on California, to show how ecologists, critics of the prison-industrial complex, anti-racist organizers, advocates of sustainable development, and people interested in transportation, public health and energy have all used EJ to help frame those respective issues.

Texas' spending on incarceration has grown five times faster than its spending growth on elementary and secondary education over the past three decades.<sup>2</sup> The state's spending on incarceration is related to its harsh sentencing laws and the strict enforcement of non-violent offenses, quadrupling its incarceration rate.<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, the scale of climate change consequences and the risk of climate change disaster are great in Texas. According to a study by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) that examines billion-dollar weather and climate disasters in the U.S., Texas has spent the most money on disasters in the past 37 years.<sup>4</sup> This study found that since 1980, Texas experienced a total of 90 billion-dollar weather events.<sup>5</sup> This means that about 44 percent of all costly weather disasters in the U.S. since 1980 have been in Texas. Texas is especially impacted by storms, flooding, and droughts and heat waves. One might be wondering, how is climate change related to incarceration? Texas's geography sets up to have this discussion on climate change in the context of incarceration. My interviews reflect the importance of discussing the impacts of climate change on incarcerated people.

California has had one of the largest on-going prison-building projects in the world, and was in the midst of a jail boom when I analyzed community mobilizations against what had been deemed a "toxic jail." Since the early 1980s the California Department of Corrections built prisons at an unprecedented scale and rate.<sup>6</sup> Since 1980, California has built 23 prisons.<sup>7</sup> And jail construction has not

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<sup>2</sup> Khorri Atkinson, "Rate of Texas Prison Spending Growth Outpaces Schools," *The Texas Tribune*, July 14, 2016, <https://www.texastribune.org/2016/07/14/texas-spending-prison-and-jails-higher-any-other-s/>.

<sup>3</sup> Atkinson.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, "2016: A historic year for billion-dollar weather and climate disasters in U.S. | NOAA Climate.gov," January 9, 2017, <http://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2016-historic-year-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters-us>.

<sup>5</sup> Smith.

<sup>6</sup> Saki Knafo, "Prison-Industrial Complex? Maybe It's Time For A Schools-Industrial Complex," *HuffPost* (blog), August 30, 2013, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/california-prisons-schools\\_n\\_3839190](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/california-prisons-schools_n_3839190).

<sup>7</sup> Knafo.

ended. The state granted \$500 million to 15 counties seeking to improve and replace aging local jails in 2015. L.A. County decided to move forward with their \$2 billion plan to build a replacement for the downtown Men's Central Jail and the new women's jail in Lancaster.<sup>8</sup> The resistance to the construction of prisons in California has likewise been relentless. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag* traces both the state's prison-building project since 1982 and grassroots opposition to prison expansion. California has been an important place both for leading the U.S. prison boom, but also for leading the resistance to prison-building using an environmental justice lens.

## Methods

EJ is a field of research and a praxis that is always contending with issues and methodologies from different fields, social movements, and locations. I have conducted mixed methods of interviewing and secondary research to highlight cases of environmental injustice and abolitionist orientations toward prisons, policing, and pollution.

In Chapter 2, I highlight the voices of those most proximate to the intersection of prisons, policing, and pollution. I interviewed five formerly incarcerated individuals in San Antonio, Texas to offer insight on this intersection and talk about *their visions* for safe and sustainable communities. Using a Black Feminist methodological approach, interviewing formerly incarcerated individuals because of their insider knowledge of incarceration and environmental injustice, and rather than solely using so-called expert knowledge, I uphold the value of everyday knowledge from lived experience. I chose to interview formerly incarcerated people because their voices are often unheard in discourses around EJ and sustainability. I wanted to gain their insights on safety and sustainability and their visions for safer, more just, and more sustainable communities because I believe that those who are proximate to the problems are also proximate to the solutions.

Their identities remain anonymous to maintain confidentiality. To protect their identities, I used pseudonyms of their choice, or if they did not have a preference, I chose a name for them based on my knowledge of their character. Their experiences differed based on where they grew up, how much time they spent incarcerated, and gender. Lenny is a Black man, father of three, is unemployed, and spends most of his time at home. Alisha is a Black woman, mother of a 10 year-old, has worked as a cook for a hotel for nine years, and is going back to school to "elevate" herself and become a registered nurse before she turns 35. Chris is a black man, father of five, works as a youth football coach, and appreciates the small things like cooking for his kids. Latrice is a Black woman, single mother of five, and currently

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<sup>8</sup> Abby Sewell, "L.A. County Supervisors Move Ahead with \$2-Billion Jails Plan - Los Angeles Times," *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-supes-jail-vote-20150831-story.html>.

works for an organization to prevent community violence. Her “life’s goal is to one day be a key person in [her] community to really help bring about change for the better to right the wrongs that [she] did when [she] was younger.” Mr. Nobody is a Black man, father of two, who believes that positive change can occur when people in different positions can meet each other at the level of basic respect and see the other’s perspective. Part of my method in transcribing and including these interviews in my thesis was to stay as close as possible to the language of the interviews, which meant using their words in theorizing and maintaining Black vernacular and their specific ways of story-telling in the transcriptions.

In Chapter 3, I do a case study of Mira Loma Women’s Detention Center, where I provide an in-depth analysis of the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) of this new jail to look at the specific environmental justice issues and discuss the organizing strategies against the proposed jail. Here, I address how people are organizing against prisons using the concept of toxicity (which has been central in the EJ movement) as their organizing framework. Further, I explore the potential for coalition-building between abolitionists and EJ activists and the value and limitations of activist engagement with the EIR process.

## **Findings**

### *Envisioning Safe and Sustainable Communities with Formerly Incarcerated Folk from San Antonio, TX*

These interviews revealed common experiences of incarceration and environmental injustice, that emphasize elements of safe, sustainable, and more just communities. I organize this section by the themes that I identified in my interviews: Climate Change and Food Security, both of which draw from participants' own experiences of environmental injustice as well as visions of abolition.

#### *Climate Change*

##### *Climate change preparedness in prisons*

Climate change takes a big toll on people in Texas, and especially people in Texas prisons and jails. While interviewing my study participants about climate change and conditions in jails and prisons, they regularly mentioned instances of exposure to extreme temperatures and lack of emergency preparedness in prison.

Discussing the preparedness of Texas jails and prisons for climate change and describing the unbearable heat in prison, Lenny says:

On the scale from one to five, I'mma say five. Are they ready for climate change? No. Flood wise? No. Any kind of natural catastrophe on a climate scale, global scale, if you're in prison, you're considered dead. Because there's going to be no way out. There's going to be no safety precautions taken to ensure your likeliness of liveliness. Because I know when I was down there, you had—you see the roof across the street from us? You see the roof? The whole dorm is made from that. In the summertime, you wanna know something, it's a whole cut in the top of it, with a big fan in it. It's doing nothing but blowing hot air in there. You're closed in, it's not air conditioned. You're closed in!

Too often, Black people die state-sanctioned deaths to the point that it has become normalized and accepted. This deadly predicament that Lenny describes is a form of state-sanctioned violence.

Alisha speaks to the inadequacy of resources and mitigation efforts by prisons to protect inmates from the heat, explaining how little water and ice the prison staff gives to prisoners in her experience:

No [prisons and jails are not prepared for climate changes] ...I would hope that they done got AC for them cause it wasn't no AC. It was hot. And I worked Field Squad...I was in Field Squad 1 and we would go and get the igloos...the yellow jugs for water. But that's not big enough. That would start all kind of stuff...we would take [the water jugs] and fill them up with a lot of ice. For my dorm I would put a whole lot of ice in it. So the girls, they would take the top off and get ice. Some people didn't like that. They wanted to start some stuff, saying people's hands was dirty. Just stuff like that. But really, they just sticking their cup in there, getting ice. It's hot you know...everybody trying to stay cool. That wasn't enough. And the little cups. You know the snow cones like at the doctor. We had little snow cone cups....and that was another problem: on commissary, they had plastic cups, bigger cups.

The inadequacy of resources and mitigation measures fosters tensions between prisoners who can afford commissaries and prisoners who cannot. The prisoners with some money could buy larger plastic cups in the commissary, which they could use for ice water, and those who did not have the money could not. These tensions mimic inequality in society outside of the prison walls.

Chris reveals that while imprisoned he witnessed someone die of heat exhaustion:

It's horrible. I had people actually died because of heat exhaustion. While I was in prison, I think I was in Louisiana, cause Louisiana is kind of like Texas, it gets real humid and hot. So we was pretty much outside playing baseball and this dude was in his late forties. He's in the field and he

just literally collapsed in the middle of the game and literally died in front of everybody and they took their time to go get that dude. That was like the first time I literally seen a person die in front of me. And he just sat there sweating, his chest was pumping real fast. It was cause of heat exhaustion.

Since 1970, average summer temperatures in the South have risen by as much as 3.3 degrees Fahrenheit, with the fastest warming areas in Texas.<sup>9</sup> In the summer, this means being in conditions that regularly exceed 100 degrees, and then combine that with overcrowding in jails and prisons and the situation worsens. At least 10 TDCJ prisoners died due to the heat during Texas' 2011 heat wave.<sup>10</sup> These types of conditions constitute cruel and unusual punishment, violating prisoners' Eighth Amendment right.

### *Litigation as a response to climate change in Texas prisons*

The TDCJ has several ongoing lawsuits against them. There have been individual cases of wrongful death, and there is a separate lawsuit centering six inmates at the Wallace Pack Unit in Navasota, Texas, claiming that the conditions of being locked up in humidity and temperatures of 100 degrees are cruel and unusual punishment, infringing upon their Eighth Amendment right (Banks 2017). According to the TDCJ's court filing, retrofitting the Pack Unit, which was built in 1983, would be an "undue burden" on the state.<sup>11</sup> Judge Ellison ordered the prison to provide air conditioning for medically-sensitive inmates at the Pack Unit.<sup>12</sup> Judge Ellison responded in his ruling, "Even if the remedies ordered would be 'fiscally catastrophic' for TDCJ, as Defendants maintain they are, the Fifth Circuit has held that 'inadequate resources can never be an adequate justification for depriving any person of his constitutional rights.'" <sup>13</sup>

TDCJ's refusal to install air conditioning highlights how institutions use the neoliberal logic of austerity and fiscal solvency to prioritize the goals of finance at the detriment of marginalized people. Chris states:

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<sup>9</sup> Climate Central, "U.S. Summers Bringing More and More Heat," June 22, 2015, <https://www.climatecentral.org/news/summers-here-and-so-is-the-heat-19139>.

<sup>10</sup> Cole v. Collier, No. 4:14-cv-1698 (United States District Court, S.D. Texas, Houston Division. May 16, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Jolie McCullough, "Heat Is Part of Life at Texas Prisons, but Federal Judge Orders One to Cool It," *The Texas Tribune*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.texastribune.org/2017/07/20/texas-prison-heat-air-conditioning-lawsuit/>.

<sup>12</sup> Cole v. Collier, 3.

<sup>13</sup> McCullough, "Heat Is Part of Life at Texas Prisons, but Federal Judge Orders One to Cool It."



Oh no. Jails are not even worried about anything of that nature [preparedness for climate change]. They're just worried about putting people away. I can remember hearing people that went to state prison, cause they don't have AC so they're just sitting in a cell just sweating like it's nobody's business so they don't care about people. They're not worried about nobody but whatever money they're getting from a person, that's all they worried about.

Because of the prison system's profit-driven motives, Chris suggests that prisons and jails are not only not prepared, but they do not have any plans to become prepared for climate change either. This is precisely why more attention needs to be paid to jails and prisons in assessing the environmental conditions, policies, and practices, not just in Texas but across the country. The implications of Ellison's ruling are that prisoners can follow suit and fight their own exposure to extreme temperatures and that prisoners in other facilities can use these rulings to fight to improve their own conditions in the wake of climate change. A reform such as installing air conditioning in the prisoner's living areas would seem necessary to support prisoners' human rights. At the same time, installing air conditioning in prisons could simply make prisons seem more humane, thereby expanding the life of the prison. An abolitionist approach to the issue of climate change and climate change preparedness would mean reducing the prison population to decrease overcrowding, which worsens the conditions inside prisons and prisons' ability to respond to climate events. Reducing overcrowding is not abolitionist if people are merely being transferred to a different prison facility. Reducing overcrowding must be done through *decarceration* to be abolitionist.

### *Climate Change Preparedness in Texas Jails and Prisons*

During Hurricane Harvey, six Texas prisons had to be evacuated, but TDCJ did not make this decision until three days after the flooding. Sherrard Williams, a prisoner who weathered Harvey in a two-person cell in Connally Unit, a maximum-security prison in Kennedy, Texas said, "...if the storm comes through, I don't think they're gonna concentrate too much on you. They're gonna worry about the officers first. In Beaumont, a federal prison, they didn't evacuate the prisoners. I think that's the most frightening thing. That could have been us."

Like with heat in Texas prisons, this lack of preparedness during times of hurricanes also violates prisoners' Eighth Amendment rights, yet they are often subjected to cruel and unusual punishment by the state whose responsibility it is to provide their basic needs and protect them as prisoners of the state. This total disregard for the incarcerated is consistent and their subjection to floodwaters and extreme heat

among other environmental injustices are consistent because society at large deems incarcerated people disposable, and not worthy of environmental justice.

Latrice comments that beyond climate change, prisons are not prepared for anything:

I don't think jail is prepared for anything. Anything, anything. Overcrowding, diseases, drug addiction. Nothing. I don't think it's prepared for anything. Mental illness, definitely not mental illness...It's not prepared for anything. I think it's just to house, put you in a little box and be done with you.

Prison is a not a solution for any social problem. It is not a place for anyone. Prison dispossesses, displaces, and disappears people from their families and communities, and reproduces harm. Prisons do not make society safer; instead, they create more vulnerable populations and increase people's exposure to premature death. Prisons do not offer the function of safety or sustainability in our society. Indeed, they are toxic environments to the millions of people that they house. It is fundamentally toxic to treat and manage people as disposable.

### *Policing during environmental crises*

The vulnerability that the prison creates does not end at the infrastructure of the prisons or the poor management and preparation of prisons during extreme climate events, but policing also creates vulnerability to climate change. During Hurricane Harvey, district attorneys in Houston made sure that Houston residents knew that they would not tolerate looting. According to Montgomery County officials, state law “allows for enhanced punishment ranges for certain offenses committed during a declared natural disaster event.”<sup>14</sup> Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo said that he would lobby judges and prosecutors to secure the most severe punishment possible under Texas law for crimes committed during this time.<sup>15</sup> In times of disaster, the presence of police can be threatening to people who need help, making them less likely to utilize state resources available through the police, and more vulnerable to the natural disaster itself. As my interviewee Lenny said, “you don't have a safety of the police, you have a fear of the police.” Police become just as harmful as the environmental problem, or in some cases, the greater threat, during environmental crises.

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<sup>14</sup> “Montgomery County District Attorney's Office,” Facebook, August 28, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/MCTXDAO/posts/1766661950071092>.

<sup>15</sup> “Houston Combating Harvey Looters with Mandatory Jail Time | Fox News,” *Aftermath* (Fox News, September 25, 2017), <https://www.foxnews.com/us/houston-combating-harvey-looters-with-mandatory-jail-time>.

We must ask, who is being criminalized in times of environmental crises? Who is getting help and who is left out or discouraged from seeking help during crises? Why is it the state's response to deploy policing and incarceration to restore public safety during times of crisis?

### *Food Security*

#### *Unity and Fullness: Measures of sustainability and abolition*

If part of the abolition project is nourishing ourselves and creating ways to make our neighborhoods food secure, then we need to understand what makes us feel nourished and full. All of the interviewees identified parks as important landmarks in their communities, and indicated that parks are central to community safety. Parks help keep children safe by providing a space for them to play and by offering food security for children, as well as being public spaces that communities can use to come together and feed themselves (i.e. barbeques). As a sustainability indicator, parks and recreation and other social and public services like housing, education, and food access help make communities safer and more resilient in the face of climate change and environmental harm.

The stories and concerns of my interviewees reflect the issue of food insecurity in San Antonio, and they point to their neighborhood parks as the places where they felt more food secure, as many meals were distributed there and participants described being fed in park gatherings. Moreover, Bexar County (San Antonio-New Braunfels, TX metropolitan area) is one of 15 U.S. counties that has more than 100,000 food-insecure children and has a child food-insecurity rate of 25.6 percent.<sup>16</sup> Food insecurity is a problem that extends from neighborhoods to jails and prisons. The food available in prison is notorious for its substandard quality and meager quantity. Chris recalls: "Food from the county was horrible. Everything was pretty much processed, no budget. You're pretty much eating beans and rice or some kind of processed meat that you don't even know what it is. A lot of sandwiches, which never get you full. As far as food that you could buy, the only thing that you could actually buy that was more edible was ramen noodles, chips, beef jerky, cheese..."

Talking about the food he ate while incarcerated, Lenny explains the insidiousness of eating instant ramen noodles from childhood to jail: "I grew up on ramen noodle soups. I know a soup can fill me up. We was undernourished cause all we would eat was a soup and be alright with eating a soup. Just by eating that soup, we was alright with that." The insidious toxicity of eating instant ramen from childhood to jail complicates this idea of feeling full, as feeling full in jail meant eating instant ramen and

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<sup>16</sup> Feeding America, "Map The Meal Gap Highlights Of Findings For Overall And Child Food Insecurity Meal Gap 2015," 2015, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/research/map-the-meal-gap/2013/map-the-meal-gap-2013-exec-summm.pdf>. 34.

other junk foods to not feel like they were going to starve. Yet, instant ramen does not have substantial nutritional value, and thus still leaves people in relative food insecurity. This means that we cannot settle for the fullness that the prison and the structures that underlie the prison offer us. We must (re)imagine, remember, and reach toward an abolitionist fullness that is possible when we have access to nutritious foods and indigenous foodways. At the same time, I do not want to dismiss the creative resilience of foodways practices by prisoners.

Spreads are a meal constructed from ramen noodles and assorted snack foods, which satisfy the inmates' hunger and taste buds, and serve as an opportunity for building community. Lenny and his friends would share resources, each buying different ingredients to contribute to their spread, and then they would share the meal. Despite the fact that spreads are made up of toxic foods, this process of *spreading* as a creative foodway or practice of the prison is valuable in thinking about sustainable modes of eating.

The sense of unity cultivated in community parks and the sense of fullness when eating food with one's community can both be conceptualized as sustainability indicators at the intersection of abolition and EJ. These two indicators can guide social, economic, and environmental decisions within planning for healthy and safe communities.

Based on my interviews I found that: a) incarcerated folk are one of the most vulnerable populations to environmental injustice and are neglected because of the position they occupy outside of society and the lack of environmental oversight of prisons; b) formerly incarcerated people are aware of issues of sustainability and environmental justice; and c) incarcerated and formerly incarcerated folks have valuable insights that could provide solutions to the issues of safety, sustainability, and environmental injustice.

### *Fighting Prisons and Building Coalitions in Los Angeles*

#### *Community Group Assessments of Toxicity*

The proposed women's jail in Los Angeles County shows the contrast of how the state assesses toxicity versus how communities assess toxicity and shows the benefits and drawbacks of activist engagement with the EIR process. The construction of this jail in Lancaster would have cost more than \$120 million and solidified jails as the method of dealing with social problems in the county and in the state. Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) published a report which highlighted the social and environmental harms that were likely to unfold from the construction of this women's jail.

These concerns included valley fever, hazardous substances, and water supply, all of which constitute toxic issues for the people who will be held in the jail.

### *Air Quality and Valley Fever*

The proposed women's jail is located in the Antelope Valley within the city of Lancaster, approximately 75 miles north of downtown Los Angeles. Valley Fever is a serious issue in Antelope Valley, and the construction of a new jail will worsen problems with air quality and lead to more toxic exposure, namely in terms of Valley Fever. Valley Fever (Coccidioidomycosis) is a source of serious concern for people in the San Joaquin Valley and has been a problem for incarcerated people for more than a decade. Valley Fever is a non-contagious disease that affects the lungs and in severe cases, can spread to other parts of the body outside of the lungs and sometimes result in death.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, prisoners are one of the most vulnerable populations to Valley Fever exposure. In 2015, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that eight percent of California's incarcerated populations had contracted Valley Fever, whereas only one percent of California's general population contracted the disease, meaning that incarcerated people were eight times more likely to contract the disease than non-incarcerated people.<sup>18</sup> In addition, ethnicity is a risk factor for severe cases of Valley Fever, and California disproportionately incarcerates Black, Brown, and Indigenous people.<sup>19</sup> Findings from several studies of prisoner cases of Valley Fever and associate risk factors "contributed to a court decision mandating exclusion of Black inmates and inmates with diabetes from the two California prisons."<sup>20</sup>

Valley Fever comes from fungal spores that become airborne when the soil is disturbed by winds, construction, farming, and other activities.<sup>21</sup> A study of Valley Fever in Los Angeles County found that large scale construction of new residential buildings was the factor with the highest correlation to contraction of the disease, but that it is a long-term effect of construction rather than something that can be mitigated immediately.<sup>22</sup> The 2015 Draft EIR for the new women's jail indicated that no mitigation measures would be taken with regard to Valley Fever exposure, and there was no reference to the

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<sup>17</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "About Valley Fever | Coccidioidomycosis | Types of Fungal Diseases | Fungal | CDC," Fungal Diseases, January 13, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/fungal/diseases/coccidioidomycosis/definition.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Charlotte Wheeler, Kimberley D. Lucas, and Janet C. Mohle-Boetani, "Rates and Risk Factors for Coccidioidomycosis among Prison Inmates, California, USA, 2011," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 21, no. 1 (January 2015): 70–75, <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2101.140836>.

<sup>19</sup> Wheeler, Lucas, and Mohle-Boetani.

<sup>20</sup> Wheeler, Lucas, and Mohle-Boetani, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "About Valley Fever | Coccidioidomycosis | Types of Fungal Diseases | Fungal | CDC."

<sup>22</sup> David Ferry, "How the Government Put Tens of Thousands of People at Risk of a Deadly Disease," *Mother Jones*, January 2015, <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2015/01/valley-fever-california-central-valley-prison/>.

incarcerated people who would be exposed to the disrupted soil and spores after the construction of the new jail.<sup>23</sup>

### *Prison Conditions: Drought, wastewater, and toxic land*

California has been experiencing a historic drought—the worst drought in 500 years.<sup>24</sup> California has had extremely low rainfall and record high temperatures, which are impacting the state’s water reserves. California’s drought water restrictions have often limited the amount of water that prisoners have access to for drinking and bathing, which creates a toxic environment for incarcerated people. The 2015 Draft EIR notes the potentially significant impact of the proposed women’s jail on the water supply.<sup>25</sup> The water supply for the facility comes from two water wells at the site that pumps groundwater from the basin. The project will increase the demand for water with the already scarce water supply of the Antelope Valley groundwater basin.<sup>26</sup> Because of the increase in the number of incarcerated people and overcrowding in prisons, water becomes overused and deteriorated. This leads to harsh water restrictions for detainees and prevents proper sewage and water disposal, creating conditions conducive to the spread of disease.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, many prisons sewage problems create water pollution and toxic environments for the people and animals living outside of the prison, in addition to those who live inside. Since 2008, eight of the 33 state prisons in California have been cited for water pollution problems.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, there was also a history of toxic land-use at the site of the proposed Lancaster jail. The project site was a former military base, labeled as a hazardous waste generator, and hosts aboveground and underground fuel storage tanks.<sup>29</sup> The 2015 Draft EIR justifies the use of this land despite the various hazardous waste substances on and surrounding the site by stating the most areas will be covered with cement, therefore reducing soil exposure. The EIR holds the project to the remediation standards for industrial buildings, but the jail would not be an industrial facility, but *a residential facility housing about*

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<sup>23</sup> BonTerra Psomas, “Initial Study: Mira Loma Detention Center Women’s Facility Project,” 2014, [dpwftp.co.la.ca.us/pub/PMD/MiraLomaWomenFacility/Draft\\_EIR/EIR%20Tech%20Appendices/Appendix%20A-1/Mira%20Loma%20Initial%20Study\\_090214.pdf](http://dpwftp.co.la.ca.us/pub/PMD/MiraLomaWomenFacility/Draft_EIR/EIR%20Tech%20Appendices/Appendix%20A-1/Mira%20Loma%20Initial%20Study_090214.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Max Cherney, “It’s the Worst Drought in 500 Years and California Is Draining Its Reservoirs,” *Vice* (blog), January 26, 2015, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nemp8m/its-the-worst-drought-in-500-years-and-california-is-draining-its-reservoirs>.

<sup>25</sup> BonTerra Psomas, “Initial Study: Mira Loma Detention Center Women’s Facility Project.”

<sup>26</sup> Lizzie Buchen et al., “We Are Not Disposable: The Toxic Impact of Prisons and Jails” (Los Angeles, CA: Californians United for a Responsible Budget, October 2016), <http://curbprisonspending.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CURB-WeAreNotDisposableReport.pdf>. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Pier Giorgio Nembrini and Comité international de la Croix-Rouge, *Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Habitat in Prisons* (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> John E. Dannenberg, “Prison Drinking Water and Wastewater Pollution Threaten Environmental Safety Nationwide | Prison Legal News,” *Prison Legal News*, November 15, 2007, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2007/nov/15/prison-drinking-water-and-wastewater-pollution-threaten-environmental-safety-nationwide/>.

<sup>29</sup> Buchen et al., “We Are Not Disposable: The Toxic Impact of Prisons and Jails.” 15.

1,600 people. With Lancaster already being a toxic area based on the exposure to the various environmental harms, renovating and expanding the Mira Loma Detention Center would bring in prisoners and expose them to the toxicity. Not only do prisons tend to be built on toxic lands, but the construction and functioning of the prison itself contributes to the toxicity of the land and the people that are within and that surround the prison.

## Conclusion

### *Black Life and Abolition*

Black life must be in discourse with the struggle for EJ because Black people are disproportionately impacted by environmental injustices. When we value Black life, we can unearth environmental racism and can better ensure environmental justice for everyone. We are on a better trajectory to create EJ when we begin imagining a world that loves Black people.<sup>30</sup> What do our communities look like when they love Black people?

Contending with analyses of racial violence, Katherine McKittrick talks about the need to move away from primarily focusing on Black suffering, and instead, to produce analyses of race based on human life.<sup>31</sup> McKittrick argues that the limitation of analyses focused on Black suffering, regardless of good intention, is that Blackness always ends up associated with placelessness and degradation. This normative association of Blackness with placelessness and degradation makes it easy to justify and naturalize racialized violences such as imprisonment and pollution. One objective of abolition is to denaturalize the prison, and the idea that imprisonment should be the predominant response to social, political, and economic problems. In this process of denaturalizing our carceral geographies and systems that construct it, we also deconstruct the idea that certain people belong in prisons, that Blackness belongs to the violences of imprisonment.

In her talk on “Black Ecologies” Lindsey Dillon pointed out that EJ tends to focus on the harms and degradedness of places, but proposes that we start thinking about the potentiality of places.<sup>32</sup> By focusing our analyses on Black life as McKittrick suggests, the prison becomes a site in which a radical Black sense of place can be developed. Therefore, the prison is not only a site of environmental injustice and other violences, but the prison is also a site of potentiality because the people housed in prisons

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<sup>30</sup> The phrasing of “world that loves Black people” is inspired by work by Dr. Lisa Bates, who posed the question: “what does Portland look like, spatially, when it loves black people?” during a panel presentation at the first Black Geographies Conference at UC Berkeley. I expand Bate’s question to the scale of the world to ask what does a world that loves Black people look like, spatially?

<sup>31</sup> Katherine McKittrick, “On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 8 (December 2011): 947–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2011.624280>.

<sup>32</sup> Lindsey Dillon, “Black Ecologies” (Black Geographies: Insurgent Knowledge, Spatial Poetics, and the Politics of Blackness, UC Berkeley, 2017).

develop unique worldviews and modes of resistance within the space of the prison that are valuable to our movements for social and environmental justice. If we view the prison as a site of potentiality rather than a site of disposability, we affirm the humanity of incarcerated folk and can form alliances with incarcerated people to radically (re)imagine justice, space and place, and our visions for what constitutes safety and sustainability.

### *Bridging Abolition, EJ, Sustainability*

While EJ activists and abolitionists have come together on more than one occasion against the construction of a prison, it would be more powerful to form a longer-term coalition of EJ organizations and abolitionist organizations to fight against the prison industrial complex and to fight for EJ in our communities beyond the moments of local prison expansion projects. In recognizing how the environment is created through the EIR process, through prison construction and through opposition to prison expansion, we are better able to recognize ourselves as agents in environ-creating. The problem with organizing around the EIRs is that it is an appeal to the state and the entire process is on state terms, which means that it is an appeal for institutionalized environmental justice.

One of the reasons EJ should embrace abolition as a framework is because EJ needs to re-evaluate its relationship to the state and try strategies that move beyond the law. However, the framework established by the state also limits the capacity of EJ. Pulido, Kohl, and Cotton assess the failures of EJ, arguing that “EJ activists’ reliance on state regulation has inhibited their inability to achieve their goals”.<sup>33</sup> While the EJ Movement has had some success in blocking new projects and stopping the expansion of existing projects, EJ has not had much success in actually improving the environmental quality of vulnerable communities.<sup>34</sup>

Abolitionists view that state as perpetrators of violence, terror, and environmental injustice. In short, in many cases of abolitionist organizing, the state is the enemy. Although abolitionists may still engage with the state, they position the state as enemy rather than friend. Abolitionists are also using strategies outside the state to deal with both the ways we harm each other and the ways that the state harms us (e.g. education, restorative justice, building the capacity of our organizations to meet our community needs, feeding and caring for our communities).

Further, the EPA defines fair treatment as no group of people bearing a disproportionate share of negative environmental harms. This notion of distributive justice that underpins EPA regulation and the EJ movement’s organizing contrasts with abolitionist notions of justice. Abolitionists are working to

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<sup>33</sup> Pulido, Kohl, and Cotton, “State Regulation and Environmental Justice.” 12.

<sup>34</sup> Pulido, Kohl, and Cotton.



redefine common conceptions of justice and create alternative conceptions and models of justice, such as restorative and transformative justice models, which do not use the conception of justice offered and practiced by the state. In EJ, applying abolition as a framework, means shifting from distributive justice to abolitionist justice. This means working toward the abolition of pollution and other forms of harm in our communities rather than the mere fair distribution of harm. In identifying prisons as toxic, abolitionists make the bold assertion that prisons and the condition of being imprisoned are poisonous, to prisoners, to the communities that are over-policed and over-incarcerated, and to the communities where these incarceration facilities are located.

The system of mass incarceration is toxic to communities, both in the ways in which it degrades our environments and negatively impacts the health of people on the inside, and in the abolitionist view that the logic of imprisonment is fundamentally toxic to our communities. Applying abolition as a framework in EJ requires shifting from distributive justice to abolitionist justice. This means working toward the abolition of pollution and other forms of harm in our communities rather than the mere fair distribution of harm. I return to this question that an abolitionist framework in EJ leads us to ask, what do communities without toxicity look like and how do we arrive there? Looking at my interviews and case study to answer this question, communities without toxicity look like comm[unity] parks, increased access to nutritious foods, adequate housing, and better access to healthcare and critical, culturally relevant education. We get there by investing in those resources, by changing the way we distribute our state budgets, through mutual aid, by actively creating the kind of world we want to live in and not relying on the state to care for us. We get there by understanding our interdependence and building coalitions, by moving beyond the state and creating abolition in our everyday lives, asking ourselves how we can better care for one another as to not reproduce the toxic logics of racism, marginalization, and disposability that underpin the prison industrial complex.

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