



Political Prisoners and Environmental Justice

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Introduction

This paper considers the intersections of environmental justice concerns with the U.S. prison system through the experiences of political prisoners and politicized prisoners from high-profile revolutionary movements of the 20th and 21st centuries. I reflect on these populations' key leaders in what I call the prisoner-led environmental justice movement. I include prisoners across a range of revolutionary social movements—Black Power and Black Liberation, Indigenous and American Indian, Puerto Rican Independence, White/European American anti-imperialist, and radical ecology movements. I contend that each of these movements reflects an environmental justice-related orientation because among their primary concerns are combatting state and corporate power, racism, colonialism, and militarism and their effects on vulnerable peoples and ecosystems, in favor of community-based solutions that would result in peoples exercising democratic control over land, territory, and space. None of these movements has been typically framed as part of the environmental justice struggle, so this paper is an effort to offer that critical intervention. And just as Berger (2017) has argued that prisons and jails were important sites of political formation for the civil rights movement, I argue that spaces of incarceration serve a similar function for the environmental justice movement. To that end, in the following sections I connect the scholarship on environmental justice to the prison system and prisoner rights movements.

Literatures on Environmental Justice, Prisons, and Prisoners

The field of environmental justice studies has been primarily concerned with spatial inequalities linking marginalized populations and environmental hazards (Bullard 2000; Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009), specifically the extent to which people of color communities, indigenous, immigrant, and working class populations have been disproportionately subjected to environmental threats in the U.S. and globally (Bullard and Wright 2012; Grineski and Collins 2018; Harrison 2011; Walker 2010). A smaller but growing body of EJ studies explores the ways in which environmental injustices are rooted in and shaped by ideologies of gender and sexuality (Buckingham

and Kulcur 2009; Ducre 2018; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010; Stein 2004; Taylor 1997), which intersects with and builds on the scholarship on ecofeminism (Gaard 2017; Salleh 2017). Much of the literature is also concerned with grassroots responses to these patterns of environmental injustice/racism, with a particular emphasis on the environmental justice movement. Importantly, scholars have also grappled with how cultural politics, ideologies, and discourses of hierarchy and disposability have been ingrained in state and capitalist structures, which form the foundation for the driving forces that produce, reinforce, normalize, and even fail to recognize environmental injustices (Nixon 2011; Voyles 2015).

Recently, scholars have further pushed the boundaries of research on ecology and difference, developing and applying concepts like “critical environmental justice studies” (Pellow 2016, 2017), “abolition ecologies” (Heynen 2016), “racial ecologies” (Nishime and Williams 2018), “racial capitalism” (Pulido and De Lara 2018), and exploring important relationships among state power, militarization, racialization, settler colonialism and ecology (Dillon and Sze 2016; Pulido 2016; Pulido, Kohl, and Cotton 2016; Whyte 2017). Finally, some scholarship seeks to explore the ways in which the boundaries between humans, land, ecology, and nonhuman populations are interwoven and shape hierarchies, violence, and liberatory possibilities across species and space (Gaard 2017; Kim 2015). Collectively, these scholars are moving the field of environmental justice studies into conversation with ethnic studies, American studies, critical race theory, indigenous studies, gender and feminist studies, critical animal studies, queer theory, disability studies, and the environmental humanities. This series of advances is welcome because scholarship in those fields has tended to pay less attention to the interrelationships between ecology and social difference despite the core role that these dynamics have always played in shaping the primary subject matter of these disciplines. For example, the very ideas and human/social categories of race, sexuality, gender, ability, class etc.—and their accompanying systems of dominance, privilege, and inequality—are necessarily made possible by drawing on ideas and categories of the nonhuman animal, land, and other dimensions of the more-than-human world that are refracted through the human cultural imaginary (Kim 2015; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003; Salleh 2017). As Whyte (2017) has written, the European conquest of Native communities *is* an environmental injustice. Nishime and Williams (2018, 3–4) write in turn that “race is inextricable from our understandings of ecology, and vice versa,” and hence their use of the term “racial ecologies.” The point is not to only show how these seemingly disparate issues are “linked,” but to demonstrate that they cannot be *un*-linked.

Thus, the literature on environmental justice studies is well established, multi-disciplinary, and evolving in exciting directions. However, for all of its emphasis on structures of domination and differential risk, thus far,

with few exceptions, it has paid little attention to prisons (Braz and Gilmore 2006; Pellow 2017; Saed 2012). This is a gap in scholarship that is in need of urgent attention because prisons and jails in the U.S. constitute spaces where significant threats to human and ecological health are produced and experienced, and because the vast majority of prisoners are low income and/or people of color. For example, according to research conducted primarily by journalists, prisoners, and their allies, prisoners across the U.S. (including within immigrant prisons, county jails, juvenile prisons, male and female and mixed gender prisons of all security levels) are routinely exposed to: lead, manganese, and arsenic-infested water, extreme heat and cold, dangerous work assignments, proximity to hazardous industrial substances and waste, airborne toxins, low-quality and often negligent medical care, food injustices, sexual violence and other forms of bodily torture such as chemical attacks via pepper spray and forced injections of psychotropic drugs, risks from “natural disasters” like flooding associated with hurricanes and being “selected” to serve as firefighters in some of the most dangerous wildfires this nation has ever experienced (Bayles 2016; Bernd, Loftus-Ferren, and Mitra 2018; Kirchner 2015; Lurie 2015; Pellow 2017; Tsolkas and Todd 2016; Waters 2018). In an important intervention, Saed (2012) explores many of these environmental justice threats in relation to the PIC, arguing that they reflect the ways in which the system produces illness and violence within and outside prisons, among humans and within ecosystems, signaling the need to include prison abolition in struggles for ecosocialism because capitalism requires the promotion of contagion, disease, and misery among its multispecies subjects.

Critical Prison Studies and Prison Abolition

There is a well-developed literature on the prison industrial complex (PIC) as an architecture of racialized, gendered, sexualized, classed, and colonial oppression, with a particular attention to the ways in which that system seeks to contain efforts aimed at social justice, equity, mobility, and liberation (Alexander 2012; CR10 2008; Escobar 2016; Gilmore 2007; Loyd, Mitchelson, and Burridge 2012; McKittrick 2011). Much of that literature is also supportive of the vision and practice of prison abolition (Berger 2014, 2017; Davis 2003; James 2005). A number of activists and scholars in this tradition have reframed the criminal legal system as an infrastructure that seeks to address America’s “race problem” not by punishing illegal activity but by containing revolutionary activities within dissident, colonized communities (Davis 2003; Gilmore 2007; Rodríguez 2006). One implication of this claim is that the PIC is not just one of many institutions that form American society, but rather that it functions as its constitutive logic (Gilmore 2007; Rodríguez 2006), with a particular emphasis on criminalizing and controlling marginalized

populations such as people of color, indigenous peoples, women, LGBTQ folk and other gender non-conforming bodies and identities (Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock 2011). These punitive practices have a particular and unique impact on political and politicized prisoners because these prisoners have openly declared their opposition to the PIC and the broader systems of injustice and inequality that drive it and thrive on it. Many if not most of those prisoners come from these already criminalized populations, thus compounding the intensity and character of repression the state imposes upon them.

But, as with the literature on prisons and environmental justice, there is no well developed body of scholarship that links prisoners—political or otherwise—with environmental justice concerns, so this paper is an effort to achieve that aim.

Why Environmental Justice and Political/Politicized Prisoners?

There are several reasons why a focus on political and politicized prisoners and EJ is important:

- (1) Given the emphasis within EJ Studies on the relationships among race, space, (im)mobility, the regulatory state, and risks associated with capitalist development, focusing those concepts on the prison system deepens our understanding of how they are interconnected, how they relate to institutional violence, and how they suggest solutions that exceed the typically reformist orientations of EJ studies and the EJ movement, both of which tend to seek solutions through state regulation, policy-making, and the court system (for critiques see Benford 2005; Cole and Foster 2000; Harrison *forthcoming*; Pulido 2016; Pulido, Kohl, and Cotton 2016).
- (2) If we extend the EJ framework into the space of prisons, we find that prisoners are some of the most radical and influential EJ movement activists. Importantly, most political prisoners were already doing community-based social change work before going to prison, which is precisely what landed them there, *and* I would argue that much of that work was EJ-related because it was anti-racist, anti-colonial/imperialist, and focused on defending and reclaiming land and space against an imperial state. This would also mean that these activists are a part of political formations that predated the modern EJ movement, since most of these movements emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.
- (3) Extensive state repression via imprisonment is not something that the U.S. EJ movement has experienced, and it has therefore left it largely untheorized. Repression is a routine occurrence among EJ activists in the global South, however, and has always been directed at revolutionary movements in the U.S. Therefore, if we reframe revolutionary

movements in the U.S. as EJ-related, then we can more effectively connect state repression to those social formations to understand how movements are shaped and respond under such conditions, with a particular emphasis on how environmental justice politics are shaped by—and impact—state power. I would also argue that such a reframing would offer reason to hope that the U.S. EJ movement could experience a radical turn in the future.

Sources and evidence for this paper are drawn from anthologies, monographs, biographies, autobiographies, and media reports on some of the most highly regarded political and politicized prisoners from revolutionary movements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. I read each of these sources closely for evidence of a spectrum of environmental justice concerns, risks, and hazards. In the following section I present evidence and analysis of the ways in which political and politicized prisoners locate, uncover, acknowledge, publicize, and resist environmental injustices.

Political and Politicized Prisoners and Environmental Injustices

This paper focuses on activists from a sample of revolutionary movements active primarily from the 1950s through the early 2000s. This was an era in which there were waves of revolutionary movement building in communities of color, indigenous communities, and white allied communities around the United States in support of economic justice and anti-colonial struggles against militarism, capitalism, and ecocide. The U.S. government responded to these efforts with blunt force. The infamous Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), directed through the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, supported by many U.S. presidents, and often implemented through local law enforcement, was perhaps the most reviled of these repressive efforts (Boykoff 2007). State actions against these movements included infiltration, surveillance, wiretapping, break-ins, opening mail, harassment, grand jury subpoenas, conflict fabrication (via bogus letter writing and false threats from rival activists and organizations), imprisonment and assassination. And while Congress formally denounced COINTELPRO in 1976, the kind of state repression it meted out has continued through today (Pellow 2014). The stories in this section focus on the experiences that self-described revolutionary activists had while in the prison system, and on how they revealed linkages to environmental injustices.

Water

Former political prisoner and Black Liberation Army activist Dhoruba Bin-Wahad notes that at the U.S. prison at Marion, Illinois, there are numerous

political prisoners being subjected to the poisoning of the most basic element of life, water:

Investigations have shown that the water system in Marion, which the prisoners drink from, is infected by toxic waste, and the prisoners have been developing various degrees of blood cancer and other ailments, to the point where the prison guards and the prison officials don't drink the water from the prison system. The majority of political prisoners there are Black political prisoners and Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners. (Fletcher, Jones, and Lotringer 1993, 82)

Former earth liberation political prisoner Daniel McGowan spent time in one of the infamous CMUs—a federal Communication Management Unit—at USP Marion. CMUs are secretive, “self-contained” housing units inside prisons, designed to hold prisoners who “require increased monitoring of communication,” which has included many dissidents. As McGowan recalled,

I was arrested and went to prison for 6 years ... Everyone in prison knows that the water is messed up ... It's milky and disgusting. When I got out of prison I drank a lot of water and to this day that's all I need. (McGowan 2016)

There have been numerous claims and testimonials from prisoners at Marion regarding the poor water quality there, including from anti-imperialist activist and former political prisoner Ray Luc Levasseur, who was sentenced to 47 years for his involvement in a series of bombings of New York city offices of the apartheid South African government and certain corporate military facilities. He reported:

All Marion prisoners drink contaminated water. We eat food prepared in contaminated water. We shower and wash with contaminated water. Our clothing and bedding are washed with contaminated water. Of additional concern is the higher vulnerability of some individuals to the effects of toxins ... When THMs [the carcinogen trihalomethanes] invade the human body, it is on a mission to destroy. (Levasseur 1991)

Media and government reports corroborate these claims, revealing that THMs, PCBs, arsenic, and lead were found in the prison's water source—Crab Orchard Lake—as a result of decades of toxic waste dumping by the Sangamo Electric company, leading to the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) to declare the area a toxic Superfund site (Kurshan 2013).

Levasseur (1991) linked the struggle at Marion to the broader terrain of environmental justice politics: “We've seen it before: the Love Canals, uranium poisoning of Navajo miners, black and brown lung disease ... the insidious cover up of Agent Orange poisoning of Vietnam veterans, contamination from nuclear plants, etc.” Similarly, prison solidarity activist and author Kurshan (2013) explicitly linked the Marion case to the national conversation about environmental racism, citing the United Church of Christ

Commission on Racial Justice's groundbreaking report, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*.

Mumia Abu-Jamal has been serving time on death row for decades and is one of the world's most famous political prisoners. He is a former member of the Black Panther Party, an internationally renowned journalist and activist. In 1989 Abu-Jamal wrote an essay about contaminated water in the prison he was in. He noted that the water had a "gaseous odor" and left "a dark oily ring" that stained the cups inmates drank from. He then articulated a socioecological framing of the problem that reflected the borderless reality of pollution:

It appears that this water problem is more than prison-wide; civilian communities, sharing the same water source, are also affected ... Despite the legal illusions erected by the system to divide and separate life, we, the caged, share air, water, and hope with you, the not-yet-caged. We share your same breath. How many housewives in the surrounding township met sunrise this morning with sleep in their eyes, filled the pot with water for coffee, caught a whiff of gasoline rising from the cup, and gagged? The earth is but one great ball. The borders, the barriers, the cages, the cells, the prisons of our lives, all originate in the false imagination of the minds of men. (Abu-Jamal [1989]1995, 50–52)

Nearly three decades later, in February 2017, Abu-Jamal filed a formal grievance at SCI Frackville, Pennsylvania, where he was serving time, regarding the visibly discolored water coming out of the pipes in that facility. Part of that grievance reads: "Over the last several months, I have repeatedly complained of dirty, brackish, turbid, even black water in the infirmary's tub ... While the water appeared like tea in the beginning, it looked more like coffee after a 20-minute run" (Abu-Jamal quoted in Debrow 2017).

Access to safe water is widely viewed as a human right, and political prisoners like Dhoruba bin-Wahad, Daniel McGowan, Ray Luc Levasseur, and Mumia Abu-Jamal, and their allies like Nancy Kurshan, have resisted carceral environmental injustice by naming and publicizing this struggle.

Food

If clean, drinkable water is essential for life, so is healthy food. Unfortunately, the U.S. prison, jail, and detention system is legendary for its unappetizing, unhealthy, and often dangerous food, which should be viewed as an issue of food injustice and environmental injustice, since it reflects the power dynamics that link the undemocratic control that the state and a small group of corporations exercise over our food systems with policies and practices that tend to contribute to poor public health outcomes among vulnerable populations and harms to ecosystems through chemical-intensive industrial agriculture (Gottlieb and Joshi 2013; Sbicca 2018). In 1971, during the prison uprising at Attica, New York, the inmates penned a manifesto with dozens of demands, including the following: "#26. We demand that better

food be served to inmates. The food is a gastronomical disaster” (Attica Liberation Faction 1971).

Black Liberation Army political prisoner Assata Shakur served time in a workhouse prison during the 1970s and recalled how the poor-quality food sparked resistance by inmates:

The food in the workhouse was horrible ... I would sit and wait for lunch or dinner, hungry as hell, and they would bring me some greenish-brown iridescent chunks floating around in a water liquid (liver stew, they called it) or some lamb fat floating around in some water which was supposed to be lamb stew. And that nasty-looking, foul-smelling stuff tasted much worse than it looked. The place was infested with flies and so was the food ... Every single day for one whole week they brought us this nasty stuff that was supposed to be ravioli. Well, that was the last straw. We all decided to go on a food strike. I wrote a petition which everybody signed and we sent it down to the warden's office ... The food was better for a few days, and then it reverted to the same old nasty slop. (Shakur 1987, 56)

Author, scholar, and black liberation activist Angela Davis was revered as a political prisoner by activists, intellectuals, and civic leaders around the world. She was imprisoned in 1970 for allegedly owning the guns used by black liberationists in a courthouse shootout that year (Caldwell 1972). Davis was frustrated that she was being held in isolation in a New York jail and decided to protest in a fashion that many other prisoners have adopted: the hunger strike. She wrote,

It was not difficult to go on a hunger strike. If the food had looked palatable, it would have been hard; but the unsavory dishes they placed before me actually facilitated the strike. After taking a look at the food, I felt more like vomiting than eating. (Davis 1998, 42)

Access to nutritious, affordable, safe, and culturally appropriate food is a cornerstone demand of the food justice movement (Gottlieb and Joshi 2013; Sbicca 2018). When prison officials perpetrated food injustices against prisoners by serving substandard food or by withholding food altogether, prisoners have risen up and fought back through hunger strikes, issuing petitions and public demands for improved food, writing essays and giving interviews, and rebelling outright (Saed 2012). The Attica Liberation Faction, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur were political and politicized prisoners who articulated a vision of food and environmental justice through these means.

Chemical Warfare

There is an enormous volume of psychiatric drugs and pepper sprays used to pacify and punish prisoners for noncompliant behavior, with particular emphasis on mentally ill inmates (Human Rights Watch 2015). Recent reports have surfaced that immigrant children apprehended by federal authorities and

placed in prisons (“detention centers”) have been forcibly injected with psychotropic drugs, rendering them lethargic, dizzy, listless, incapacitated, afraid, and obese (Smith and Bogado 2018). I refer to such practices as chemical warfare because they are actions intended to harm, subdue, and incapacitate an individual and/or group for the purpose of controlling that population and their associated territory. Dictionary.com defines “chemical warfare” as “the use of chemical agents as a weapon of war or terror.” The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “tactical warfare using incendiary mixtures, smokes, or irritant, burning, poisonous, or asphyxiating gases.” According to that same source, a chemical weapon is defined simply as “a weapon used in chemical warfare.” I believe these definitions accurately and appropriately describe the practice of using chemicals on the bodies and populations of incarcerated persons, *as well as* the broader realities of environmental racism/injustice that affect communities beyond the prison walls around the world.

Angela Davis served time in a jail in New York state where she noticed that many of the women in the facility were being injected with Thorazine—a drug intended to control the moods of mentally ill persons, but reportedly overused in many prison settings:

After they took their seats, they became completely absorbed in themselves, blank stares telling me that no matter how much I wanted to talk, it would be futile to approach any of them. Later I learned that these women received Thorazine with their meals each day and, even if they were completely sane, the tranquilizers would always make them uncommunicative and detached from their surroundings. After a few hours of watching them gaze silently into space, I felt as though I had been thrown into a nightmare. (Davis 1998, 31–32)

There was resistance to this practice as well, Davis reported,

One morning in the day room, Barbara, the young Black woman from the cell directly across from mine, broke her habitual silence to tell me she had refused her daily dose of Thorazine. It was very simple: she was tired of feeling like a vegetable all the time. She was going to resist the Thorazine and was going to get out of 4b [a special section of the jail where mentally ill prisoners were held]. (Davis 1998, 35)

Ray Luc Levasseur noted the presence and power of chemical warfare in prisons:

I’m deeply cornered in their prison. My sight is diminished, but I maintain my vision. I see their hand in the use of four point ‘restraints’ to spread-eagle prisoners, something inherently abusive regardless of the excuse. I see forced feedings, cell extractions, mind medications, and *chemical weapons* used to incapacitate. (Levasseur 2005, 49, emphasis added)

Black liberation political prisoner Jalil Muntaqim is well versed in key dimensions of international human rights law and has advocated for the rights of

prisoners at that scale. He reported on the United Nations prisoner's petition campaign in the 1970s that was submitted by members of the Black Liberation Army on behalf of U.S. political prisoners, requesting that the U.N. Human Rights Commission adopt a number of recommendations. The campaign included demands to "investigate drug/behavior modification units; their uses, methods, prisoner selection, racial makeup, drug used, medication in food, resulting deaths and forced sterilizations ..." (Muntaqim 2010, 58), which are aspects of state violence that bear directly on questions of environmental justice because they reflect concerns about chemical warfare and population control used on people of color and other vulnerable groups, which have been well-documented in the prison system and elsewhere (Ellis, Hicken, and Ortega 2018; Human Rights Watch 2015; Pellow 2017).

Leadership and Activism among Radicals Before, During, and After Imprisonment

In what follows I focus on the leadership and activism of dissident prisoners prior to, during, and after imprisonment. My aim here is twofold. First, I want to underscore that all of these prisoners were politically active and contributing to social change and environmental justice work long before they arrived in prison, and that it was precisely because of that activism that they were imprisoned. Second, I want to emphasize the ways in which these individuals demonstrated a lifelong commitment to activism, revolution, and social change, which they continued to pursue even while under heightened scrutiny and repression *inside* prison, and that those who were lucky enough to make it out of prison continued their political work once they were on the outside as well. Those individuals who became politicized *after* they arrived in prison exhibited a similar enduring passion for environmental justice.

Indigenous Leadership for Decolonization and Environmental Justice

American Indian Movement political prisoner Leonard Peltier was a dedicated activist during the early 1970s, during which time he actively supported Native sovereignty and opposed predatory federal and corporate activities designed to extract mineral and ecological wealth from Native lands. He was a part of the cross-country march and demonstration called "The Trail of Broken Treaties," which brought indigenous nations' grievances to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) office in Washington, D.C. in an effort to demand that treaties between the U.S. and tribes be respected and upheld. After that action, Peltier moved to Milwaukee where he worked as an employment manager for a local AIM chapter, where he "found jobs for Native people in trade unions and worked in an alcohol rehab program" (Peltier 1999, 103).

Peltier has been at the forefront of organizing a range of progressive community initiatives from within his prison, including establishing a scholarship for Native law students at New York University, assisting with the funding of a newspaper by and for Indian children, sponsoring a food drive with Food Not Bombs to purchase food staples for indigenous communities in Chiapas, Mexico, and struggling to win religious rights for Native peoples in U.S. prisons (Peltier 1999, 37). Peltier's writings from prison also articulate a critique of U.S. colonialism and empire as environmental racism directed at indigenous peoples. He wrote (116), "... the uranium mining opposed at such high cost in the early 1970s has proceeded insidiously. Lakota people today drink contaminated water and experience a rate of miscarriage and spontaneous abortion seven times the national average." Moreover, he declared,

White society would now like to terminate us as peoples and push us off our reservations so they can steal our remaining mineral and oil resources. It's nothing new for them to steal from nonwhite peoples. When the oppressors succeed with their illegal thefts and depredations, it's called colonialism. When their efforts to colonize indigenous peoples are met with resistance or anything but abject surrender, it's called war. When the colonized peoples attempt to resist their oppression and defend themselves, we're called criminals. (44)

Black Liberation Activism for Environmental Justice, Public Health and Food Justice

Safiya Bukhari was radicalized during her time in college in New York City and joined the Black Panthers out of concerns about police brutality, soon to expand her emphasis to other fronts. Her biographer and former political prisoner Laura Whitehorn writes,

from 1969, she [Bukhari] was in the Harlem office of the Black Panther Party, working on all its projects—the Free Breakfast for Children Program, political education and outreach, and a health clinic to screen for sickle-cell anemia and other medical problems—and, of course, selling the Panther newspaper. (Whitehorn 2010, xxv)

As I and others have noted elsewhere, police brutality can be framed as an EJ issue because it is an example of how racist state violence is experienced and embodied within particular spaces and particular bodies and populations, resulting in harm and control over them (Dillon and Sze 2016; Pellow 2016, 2017). Thus, the BPP's campaigns against police brutality are clearly within the broader ambit of environmental justice. I would argue that the BPP's work to provide free health care and health information to marginalized communities was also EJ-related activism for the same reason—it was about countering the effects of racist state and institutional violence and the long-term effects of racism and environmental racism that result in higher rates of hypertension, asthma, lead poisoning, and other illnesses. Moreover, the

Free Breakfast for Children Program can be placed firmly within a long history of food justice movements, a social formation that, as a number of scholars have argued, is grounded within the realm of environmental justice as well because of the inseparable connections among food systems, ecosystems, and public health (Alkon and Agyeman 2011).

Bukhari was imprisoned for her involvement with the BPP and BLA, during which time she led efforts to improve conditions for female prisoners with children (Henry 2002). Soon after being released on parole in 1992, Bukhari helped found the New York chapter of the Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition and was instrumental in the founding of the Jericho Movement, which works to secure amnesty and freedom for political prisoners—an environmental justice aim since it would constitute amnesty for radical EJ movement activists and a blow against the environmentally unjust phenomenon that is the prison system itself.

Black Liberation Army activist and former political prisoner Herman Bell spent four decades in prison, serving time at the Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, New York, where he wrote numerous articles in support of Black liberation and taught Black history classes. In 1995 he and BLA political prisoner Jalil Muntaqim co-founded a food justice project called the Victory Gardens. Their colleagues who do the primary work on the ground are farmers in Athens, Maine:

This project enjoins folks from the cities, especially the youth, to come to Maine to work in the gardens—learning skills to grow their own food, helping with the harvest, and participating in the distribution of tons of free fresh produce back to their communities, along with information about the amnesty campaign for our most honored community activists, the U.S. political prisoners and pows. With the skills they'll learn in Maine, folks from the communities can start their own victory gardens in/on the outskirts of the cities, rooftops, anywhere there's a piece of available ground to grow on. This Victory Gardens Project ... has proved to be a wonderful model of self-determination for disenfranchised people. (CEML 2002, 139–140)

These food and environmental justice projects offer a powerful testament to the ways in which the prison walls are unable to sever the social and political ties between political prisoners and their allies on the outside.

Puerto Rican Activism for Environmental Justice, Health, Jobs, and Education

Oscar López Rivera spent 36 years in U.S. prisons for his role in the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación National Puertorriqueña (FALN), a paramilitary revolutionary group committed to Puerto Rican independence. He spent much of his early life in Chicago's Puerto Rican community. He helped found the Pedro Albizu Campos High School, an alternative school controlled

by Puerto Rican community members, and promoted bilingual education in other Chicago high schools. Rivera joined efforts to improve working conditions and employment opportunities for Puerto Ricans, which also involved challenging discrimination in the construction and utilities industries. Rivera helped organize the Spanish Coalition for Housing to improve housing conditions for Puerto Ricans

... and free them from the rat- and cockroach-infested basements in which many were living. This involved direct confrontation with the (often absentee) landlords who collected excessive rents while pocketing the money and refusing to make the pigsties they rented to Puerto Ricans even remotely inhabitable. Protests in luxurious neighborhoods, in front of the homes of the exploitative landlords, acquired a dramatic character when rats and cockroaches “collected” from the apartments the landlords refused to clean up were released in front of the landlords’ own mansions. (Falcón 2013, 25)

These are longstanding environmental justice concerns, as Bullard and Wright (1987, 170) wrote years ago:

Middle- and upper-class households can often shut out the fumes, noise, and odors with their air conditioning, grind up their garbage to keep out the rats and roaches, and buy bottled or distilled water for drinking ... However, many Black and lower-income household budgets can not allow for such “luxury” items; they are subsequently forced to live and adapt to a lower-quality physical environment.

All of Rivera’s political work was related to environmental justice, since it reflected a concern with threats to public and environmental health for low-income and people of color communities, and efforts to promote empowerment and democratization for members of those groups.

Euro-American Anti-Imperialist Solidarity and Activism for Environmental Justice, Health, and Education

Former political prisoner Laura Whitehorn defines “Euro-American political prisoners” as people who share the “belief that solidarity expresses the highest human values” (Whitehorn 2002, 185) and describes these activists as being

... moved to fight racism and support the democratic demands of Black people in the US for voting rights, civil rights, control of their own communities, *for land and independence*, and for simple equality and justice. As white people in this country, they chose to exercise their humanity over their privilege, confronting racism. That is why so many of their actions were directed against colonialism in Puerto Rico, apartheid in South Africa, and racism in the United States. (Whitehorn 2002, 186, emphasis added)

Sam Melville was a white anti-imperialist activist who, during the late 1960s, was part of a cell of revolutionaries who bombed several targets linked to imperialism and rapacious capitalism, including a U.S. Army office in

Manhattan. As Melville wrote, “This was an act of solidarity with our brother and sister revolutionaries all over the world and with black and brown communities in this country who are fighting to rid the world of American domination and exploitation” (Pickering 2007, 27). Melville and his colleagues also targeted the chemical conglomerate W.R. Grace for its environmental and human health harms committed across Latin America, and Standard Oil company, which was synonymous with U.S. imperial designs on the Middle East, corporate monopolies, and the ecological havoc that comes from oil production. After being captured, Melville served time at Attica prison in New York State, where he was one of the architects of the prisoner uprising in 1971. He was killed during the government’s bloody crackdown on the rebellion.

Marius Mason is a transgender environmental and social justice activist who has worked as a gardener, Earth First! organizer, musician, writer, and volunteer for a free herbal health care collective. He is serving a lengthy prison sentence for involvement in Earth Liberation Front arsons targeting a university-based genetic engineering laboratory and a logging company, the first of which “was done in response to the work being done to force developing nations in Asia, Latin America, and Africa to switch from natural crop plants to genetically engineered sweet potatoes, corn, bananas and pineapples.”

Mason is a prolific artist whose paintings from behind bars include a wide range of subjects, speaking to a radical intersectional politics that I have elsewhere called “total liberation” (Pellow 2014), which seeks to confront all forms of hierarchy, inequality, and domination. A sampling of Mason’s paintings includes: a series on transgender luminaries titled “Trans Hero/Heroine Series” that features trans people of color activists Sylvia Rivera, Cece McDonald, and Ashley Diamond; a number of paintings celebrating indigenous environmental justice activists (“Tara Houska of Honor the Earth” and “For Naelyn Pike [San Carlos Apache] standing with Standing Rock”); paintings honoring political prisoners (including Oscar Lopez Rivera while he was still incarcerated, titled “Free Oscar Lopez,” and “Pine Ridge Sundance Tree for Leonard Peltier”); the struggle against environmental racism in America’s cities (“The Trouble in Flint”) and many more.

Discussion and Conclusions

A focus on prisons and socioecological concerns advances the scholarship in environmental justice studies in several ways. First, the EJ studies and EJ movement reframing of the environment as those spaces where we “live, work, play, learn, and pray” is particularly true in the prison system, since, unlike “free persons,” prisoners do all of the above in a single place. We might expand that list so that it reads, “live, work, play, learn, pray ... and

do time.” Second, the question of space, race, and environment is much starker given the immobilizing effects of prison confinement (insofar as inmates’ mobility is almost entirely determined by prison authorities). This is particularly relevant considering the longstanding debate in EJ studies about the relative freedom of people of color to move into and out of contaminated neighborhoods. Scholars like Paul Mohai have presented evidence that the “minority move-in” hypothesis (Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009) is unsupported by empirical data, since the vast majority of cases of environmental racism occurred when polluting facilities followed residents of color, not the other way around. In the case of the prison system this is essentially a moot point, since prisoners have virtually no say in where they serve time and are therefore entirely at the mercy of prison authorities. Third, Wilson (2016) uses the term “environmental slavery” to underscore the violent and deeply historical and racist roots of environmental racism. Theorizing environmental racism in the prison system allows one to go much deeper on the question of environmental slavery because the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allows prison slavery as an exception to the Emancipation Proclamation. So, when prisoners face ecological risks, this is a literal example where enslavement and environmental racism come together.

Political prisoners from the movements discussed here have faced environmental injustices while incarcerated, and given the fact that health hazards in U.S. prisons and jails more generally are widespread and endemic (see Pellow 2017), this is a problem facing thousands of prisoners across the nation, regardless of their political status. The fact that political prisoners face environmental injustices is particularly ironic because they come from social movements that were fighting for environmental justice in the first place. These prisoners were activists before their incarceration and continued that work during their imprisonment, advocating for better conditions for themselves and others, both inside and outside of prison.

Building on Dan Berger’s book *Captive Nation*, I would argue that since prisoners are enslaved people, then the existence of the prison EJ movement means that part of the leading edge of the broader EJ movement is, in fact, a slave rebellion! This also means that the EJ movement can now be thought of more properly as part of the broader abolitionist movement (Saed 2012) because prisoners fighting for environmental justice are also fighting for their freedom and for the abolition of slavery. In his book, *Blood and Earth*, Bales (2016) demonstrates that linkage in today’s global economy where enslavement and ecocide go hand in hand, as some of the world’s most vulnerable peoples are enslaved and forced to work in some of the most ecologically destructive industries.

The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide in five ways: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

(c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. That is precisely what environmental racism is, whether through the poisoning of people in residential communities or killing them off behind bars (Muntaqim 2010, 58; Prison Environmental Justice Project 2018). Thus, the EJ movement in prisons can properly be described as a movement to combat genocide.

Critics may rightly wonder if linking paramilitary revolutionary activities to environmental justice implies an embrace of armed struggle and violent means of achieving social change. I would refer them to the longstanding consensus in the international legal community that “has repeatedly affirmed the right of colonized people to fight against colonialism and racism by any means necessary, including armed struggle” (Fujino 2005, 207).

Building on the insights of the political and politicized prisoners and a wide range of scholarship, I argue that prisoners face brutal environmental injustices every day, and that prisoner-led struggles for environmental justice are a particularly transformative path toward achieving prison abolition in particular and environmental justice throughout society more broadly.

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