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Let Us Be The Fish Who Grow Legs: A Curriculum Guide for Linking Prison Industrial Complex Abolition, Environmental Justice, and State Power

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LET US BE THE FISH WHO GROW LEGS: A CURRICULUM GUIDE FOR LINKING
PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX ABOLITION, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, AND
STATE POWER

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In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Environmental Analysis,
2022-23 academic year, Scripps College, Claremont, California

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Theoretical Introduction

Note on upcoming implementation of the curriculum guide

This curriculum guide will be utilized in Mark Golub's POLI148 course "Study/Struggle: Prison Education" in the Spring 2023 semester at Scripps College. The curriculum guide, therefore, is in some ways experimental, as it will be put to the test through implementation by Claremont Colleges students in a political education discourse/correspondence between incarcerated college students and other students at the Claremont Colleges. Texts in the syllabus will be accessed by students via a course site on the virtual Sakai platform and/or hard copies.

Background

As an undergraduate student of environmental analysis and politics, I have consistently found myself contemplating the twin consequences of our subjected relationships with state power; the political and economic forces that dictate our relationships with our environments also prescribe the available channels for treating harm and mending our relationships with one another. Many of the same structures that undercut the progress of climate change hold a vice grip on our conceptions of justice and criminality. With this curriculum guide, I hope to convey what I have learned in attempting to excavate the relationship between prison industrial complex abolition, environmental justice, and state power to other students interested in deconstructing and reconstructing these relationships.

This curriculum guide is designed to connect students' understandings of environmental problems and injustices to their understandings of prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition, with the ultimate intention of cultivating the knowledge and imaginative practices to develop

abolitionist-aligned solutions to environmental justice (EJ) problems outside of frameworks that rely upon state sanction. The guide does this by first introducing PIC abolition as a political stance as well as tangible vision for the future, and then introducing environmental justice as a field of practical study with its political applications and social implications. Moving through the curriculum, the guide next helps students thread together the themes presented throughout the beginning weeks. Purdam et al.'s *No Justice No Resilience: Prison Abolition as Disaster Mitigation in an Era of Climate Change* succinctly reviews some of the clearest connections in the argument for PIC abolition as an environmental justice prerogative. In *Joining Forces: Prisons and Environmental Justice in Recent California Organizing*, Braz and Gilmore detail the historic convergence of environmental justice and PIC abolition activism in the fight against the Delano II prison. The concept of the global metabolic rift, intrinsic to an anticapitalist understanding of environmental imperialism and its effects on Global North and South nations' development, is introduced to students in Clark and Foster's *Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift: Unequal Exchange and the Guano/Nitrates Trade*. Later in the curriculum, students explore "green" militarism and the carceral-environmental conflux that is border zones in selected chapters from Miller's *Sustainable National Security: Climate Adaptation For The Rich And Powerful*. The curriculum culminates with texts that address debates surrounding the solutions to the issues students have spent ten weeks exploring, as well as a look at Indigenous speculative fiction tales. Accompanying each week's reading list, the curriculum guide also features thematic questions for discussion and reflection. Students will connect the mutual causal forces of environmental injustices and the carceral state; explore intersections of environmental and carceral politics; and hopefully finish the course with

broadened understandings of humans' real and unrealized relationships with each other and the more-than-human¹ world.

My status as a young, able-bodied, wealthy, white, cis, queer college student born and raised in the United States is likely relevant to the audience of this curriculum guide. While much of the theory and knowledge that I have utilized in the creation of this guide comes from the work of Black, brown, and Indigenous femmes and women, nonbinary and queer people, my own background nevertheless informs my selection of texts and other in/exclusive choices. As such, I believe my own positionality, although backgrounded, remains relevant to readers as I channel these bodies of work to other students through the guide. Additionally, I have completed this project in an academic context at a private college institution, with support of college faculty; this context is necessary to note, because although my understanding of PIC abolition and environmental justice is greatly informed by my interactions and relationships with directly impacted people, this project is largely a product of my education about and exposure to others' lived experiences rather than my own.

As I began to review the existing literature on the intersection of environmental justice and PIC abolition movements, I quickly found a relative lack of academic material regarding this specific intersection. While some academic literature exists analyzing cases of convergence among environmental justice and abolitionist organizing, theoretical analyses of the overlapping political forces and interests between the academic and organizational movements are less available. Existing writing on their intersection is largely disaggregated among nonacademic (though valid) online publications. This is to say that this area of academic as well as social

¹ The term "more-than-human" has been adopted by many scholars of environmental and sociological studies to name the "non-human" world. As Probyn (2016) explains, "I prefer the term "more-than-human" to "posthuman" or "nonhuman." It is, as I argued about the term "gender," ontologically and materially relational, and opens up new epistemologies as it narrows the diverse and shifting relations between and among humans, and the many different aspects of that are so much more-than-human."

movement discourse is in great need of further inquiry and research. Consequently, this curriculum guide utilizes the existing academic and nonacademic literature I find relevant and valuable to students, and also serves as a contribution toward the larger body of literature on this intersection.

Theoretical Approach

In the following pages I provide an overview of the theoretical perspectives behind the creation of the curriculum guide and the selection of its textual materials. I discuss the principle political and organizational theories behind the guide's introduction to prison industrial complex abolition, as well as include insights into several texts selected for use in the curriculum guide's syllabus for student reading. On environmental justice, I lay out the primary frameworks utilized in the guide for critically conceptualizing environmental problems as problems of social injustice. Following this, I begin to delineate the relationships between problems of and movements for environmental justice and PIC abolition, especially as illuminated through analysis of our relationships with state power, as well as by the specific cases in Louisiana and the Delano II prison.

Note on Pedagogy

The pedagogical approach I employ in the design of this guide draws upon methods of critical pedagogy as articulated foremost by Freire, as well as others.² The dialectical recognition of the classroom as a site of "both domination and liberation" acknowledges that while education may enhance opportunities for radical (re)learning, students and teachers also engage in that process from within greater oppressive power dynamics (Darder et al., 2017, 57). I have

² See Freire, 1999. See also Darder et al., 2017.

attempted to create opportunities for emancipatory knowledge production for students of the curriculum guide through the facilitation of collaborative learning among students and an emphasis on critical discussion and personal reflection. However, constraints on the scope of this thesis project have not allowed for a fully sufficient inquiry into the methods of critical pedagogy and their potential implications for the contents of the curriculum guide. Readers are therefore encouraged to utilize the guide's content and resources as appropriate for one's unique student cohort.

Theoretical Frameworks: PIC Abolition

Many developed understandings of prison industrial complex abolition exist. Ask PIC abolitionists around the world their vision for an abolitionist future for the world's societies and you will receive varied descriptions, though threaded together by mutual goals: greater peace, interpersonally and among structures of power; evolved collective understandings of harm and justice; resourced community networks that strengthen our inherent mutuality; and individuals empowered by both positive and negative freedoms to engage collectively in the pursuit of their dreams. Abolition as understood in this curriculum guide is the conception of the PIC and the movement toward its end that is communicated principally by the works of Angela Davis, Andrea J. Ritchie, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, Critical Resistance, as well other people and organizations devoted to abolitionist work past and present (although differences in approach among these activists do exist). The movement(s) for abolition involves the simultaneous efforts to dismantle the PIC as we know it while building up the networks and institutions that promote wellbeing and peace now and in the abolitionist futures we envision. As Davis et al. (2022) define the movement, abolitionists ask, "What would we have to change in our existing societies in order to render them less dependent on the putative security associated

with carceral approaches to justice?” That is, how can we push forward the (re)creation of a world that recognizes the violence behind our current approaches to harm and that relies on restorative and transformative solutions for preventing and responding to harm when it inevitably occurs?

PIC abolition³ has never been a simple call for the release of every incarcerated person and the closure of every jail. Instead, the theory of abolitionist principles and practical application of abolitionist practices call for a radical reimagining of how our societies conceptualize justice, crime, harm, and community. As famously attributed to Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition is about presence, not absence. It’s about building life-affirming institutions” (“If You’re New,” 2020). Abolitionists assert that a world whose human institutions affirm the value of Black, brown, Indigenous, disabled, mentally ill, poor, and marginalized lives and operate in greater harmony with the systems of the nonhuman world are incompatible with our current system that cages people.

The theoretical frameworks for abolition emphasized in this guide are also deeply informed by Black feminism and women of color feminism traditions. The authors of the Combahee River Collective Statement, a founding document in the Black feminist tradition of knowledge, describe their “shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that [their] liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's may [*sic*] because of our need as human persons for autonomy” (Combahee River Collective, 1977). These analytical traditions prioritize intersectional lenses that foreground the liberation of Black femmes⁴ and women as a

³ PIC abolition is intentionally differentiated from prison abolition due to the recognition that abolition of the PIC calls for the dismantling of many interlocking systems beyond prisons alone; child “welfare,” policing, bail, pretrial incarceration, anti-welfare and anti-houseless policy, surveillance, gender norms, neoliberal capitalism, domestic and imperial militarization, and others are closely intertwined to work together to maintain hegemonic structures of oppression.

⁴ The Combahee River Collective Statement additionally centers the identity and liberation of Black lesbians specifically. Although the language of the Statement uses “Lesbian” and not “queer,” and therefore may seem to

means toward collective liberation,⁵ and the theoretical approach behind this curriculum guide asserts that frameworks for abolition are greatly strengthened by an embrace of Black feminist politics. The Black feminist notion of collective care asserts the effectiveness of systematically strengthened relationships and shared resources with one's community, and across scales, for solving social problems, especially when those solutions are tailored to the community and location-specific. Collective care in its diverse iterations is the backbone supporting the creation of a world that does not rely on the violence of the PIC and its supporting structures. The urgency and practicality of structured, resourced collective care strategies become especially apparent in the face of natural disasters spurred by the climate crisis, for which aid from Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and even private organizations like the American Red Cross usually comes too late and with not enough.

Like organizers with the women of color feminist organization INCITE!,⁶ this curriculum guide understands the state to be the “central organizer of gender-based violence” (Kaba et al., 2022). As can be understood from a PIC abolitionist perspective, particular extensions of the state⁷ are granted a monopoly on permissible violence. Police officers and prison guards engage in physical violence and murder with near impunity across the United States. The ultra-privatized US healthcare system is so profit-driven and politically entangled that people are regularly forced to make the impossible choice between physical and financial survival. Fence-line communities, where facilities producing hazardous waste stand across the street from people's

preclude other sexual and gender diversity in its assertions, I believe the Statement may be read authentically as a productive declaration for broader queer liberative politics (Combahee River Collective, 1977).

⁵ The idea that once Black women are free, we may all be free is also core to the Black feminist tradition: “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1977).

⁶ See the INCITE! website for more at <https://incite-national.org/>.

⁷ An operating definition of “state” is useful here: “States are sovereign, territorially bounded entities that monopolize certain functions (use of violence, creation of money, regulation, distribution of resources and information) within the territory they control and create bureaucracies to implement their objectives” (Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore as cited in Kaba et al., 2022).

homes, are causally linked to high rates of cancer and other illness – and Black US Americans are 75 percent more likely to live in these communities and are exposed to higher levels of particulate air pollution than white US Americans regardless of income level (Fleischman & Franklin, 2017; Méndez, 2010; Mikati et al., 2018). Inside prisons, disproportionately BIPOC and poor populations experience organized neglect as they are denied the social and material necessities to suffice human dignity. Abroad, the US military regularly executes state-sanctioned acts of political and economic terrorism. As a carceral state that sorts and distributes life chances (Spade, 2015), made possible by a vehement marriage to liberalism, the US state “requires the dispossession of Indigenous peoples’ lands and lives; it requires the destruction of Black people’s lives, [their] flesh, [their] personhood, [their] timelines of otherwise” (Maynard, 2017). A reframing of our conceptions of violence consistent with abolition allows us to incorporate these forms of state-enacted and -approved violence as existent, tangible, and meaningful.

If the state has a monopoly on violence, to what end does it utilize this power? While Gilmore argues for the abolition of all carceral arms of the state in conjunction with seizure of the state, others like fellow abolitionist activist and scholar Andrea J. Ritchie are not convinced a non-carceral iteration of the state is possible (Kaba et al., 2022). PIC abolitionists ask, are there some institutions of the state that we can and must fight for? It is clear that the state, as is, often fails at its purported purpose of providing housing, protection, and necessities for life to its constituents. In service of their long-term vision, PIC abolitionists discuss whether a continued reliance upon the state for these types of services is practical and necessary, and how the state should be restructured so as to fulfill its purposes adequately and fairly; on the other hand, is it realistic to hope for the state to provide as such without the carceral strings that, so far, have always come attached? When we acknowledge the fact that states often, through worship of

capitalism and neoliberal policy, perpetuate climate catastrophes, we may consider that states as we know them are not the answer (or maybe at all). Questions such as, “If we are able to peel back the racial capitalist state, would a non-carceral one exist beneath?” are some of which abolitionists converge around in collaborative struggle (Ritchie as cited in Kaba et al., 2022).

While questions regarding the role of the state in abolitionist futures are open (and fortunately, at that – the creation of new ways of being requires varied ideas and experiments), this curriculum guide has been designed with the recognition that the modern state’s primary goal is to protect capital. An environmental justice lens provides us with innumerable instances of our governing bodies’ and corporations’ prioritization of capital over people’s wellbeing, of which the case of Flint, Michigan is a famous example.⁸ Under capitalism, people become capital in that they are only valuable so long as their ability to produce further capital remains intact. The state’s treatment of incarcerated people in particular is emblematic of this dynamic, which affects all those living under a racial capitalist and carceral state. As this curriculum guide is being written, thousands of incarcerated people across the Alabama prison system are striking against brutal living and working conditions and a Department of Justice that has “shut down” on them (Czarnek, 2022). Across the state of Alabama, the response by the Department of Corrections has been to starve out the people inside, as well as beating and locking in solitary confinement a protester who spoke out about the violence they endure (Czarnek, 2022). The interlocking forms of violence utilized by the state for protecting capital – incarceration, physical violence, and free, forced labor in the above Alabama case – are key expressions of state power. It is this which abolition seeks to undermine.

The state as we experience it cannot be understood without the neoliberal project of the previous and current centuries. Instrumental to the current global capitalism system, neoliberal

⁸ The crisis in Flint and its relation to racial capitalism is further discussed on pages 17-18.

policy and attitudes render it a nonemergency when the American Lung Association declares that those living in the US now endure more “very unhealthy” and “hazardous” days of air particle pollution than any time within the last twenty years (*Key Findings*, 2022) – despite a massive expansion of “green” technological innovation. When local and state governments adopt supposedly better (reiterative) versions of carceral tools, such as meager bail reforms, electronic monitoring, predictive policing technologies, and heightened forms of surveillance, this is the neoliberal engine in action. Neoliberalism has sold the US people the ideological and material product of alt-prisons without any concession of the hegemonic power wielded by the US capitalist and carceral state. Neoliberalism shifts the responsibility for people’s suffering under capitalism to the individual: it is one’s own fault they are ill when they grew up breathing polluted air; are left homeless by a hurricane when they could not move away in time; cannot afford essential resources after paying for cancer treatment. As this curriculum guide understands neoliberalism, the movement for PIC abolition calls for the dismantling of the above types of reforms and an inherent opposition to a reliance on (neo)liberal policy.

To be in opposition to such hegemonic global structures as racial capitalism and neoliberalism feels overwhelming. In response, turning toward the historied and ongoing creation of alternative modes of being can offer the vision that illuminates a way through. Kaba frames the experiment of abolitionist world creation beautifully: “We need a million experiments. A bunch will fail. That’s good because we’ll have learned a lot that we can apply to the next ones” (Kaba, 2020).⁹ Rooted in the Black feminist politic of collective care, the practice of funding the commons is a basis for these experiments, providing the structural support of unpoliced spaces that provide the necessary sets of resources to fulfill people’s needs and can be

⁹ One Million Experiments is a virtual “curated collection of community-based safety projects and a podcast exploring how we define and create wellness and reduce harm in a world without police and prisons” created by Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie’s Interrupting Criminalization. See *One Million Experiments*, n.d..

accessed without commission (Kaba et al., 2022). Set in contrast to the prevailing hegemonic notion that we must predominantly fund security (or the protection of capital), a practice of “commoning against security” may allow us to create “a new order based on cooperation not competition, based on meeting human needs and not advancing the endless and infinite accumulation of private wealth” (McQuade as cited in Hayes, 2022). To many, such radical goals appear unrealistic; this response is an understandable but avoidable outcome of capitalism’s intentional and progressive practice of deskilling the people. As capitalism compartmentalizes every aspect of labor and atomizes workers into an interchangeable set of hands, “the basic needs of the population are increasingly separated from their capacity to provide for them” (McQuade as cited in Hayes, 2022). Within the confines of racial capitalism’s dictate on how we are able to invest our time and energy, we lose our skills in and capacity for caring for our neighbors, growing food, and de-escalation, among other skills necessary for being in community with each other.

Mijente has articulated the strategizing framework of Global South anti-neoliberalism organizers with a call for liberation work that occurs “Sin, Contra y Desde” the state (*Building Power*, 2022). By strategizing “without, against, and beyond” the state simultaneously, organizers may diversify our strategies and prepare our movements to respond to changing terrains. The development of the solutions required to support a world free of the PIC will involve many trials and experiments in new ways of relating to each other. Instead of a disadvantage, this is a crucial component of liberation work, for it is through action that we most effectively produce knowledge (Ritchie as cited in Kaba et al., 2022). It is not enough to merely discuss theory without the associated praxis, because it is the practice of new relationalities and institutional structures that produces the knowledge we require for building fulfilling solutions to

the PIC.¹⁰ “Liberation is the work and the work is liberation. There is no one answer to how we get free — there are one million” (*One Million Experiments*, n.d.). In the process of working toward liberation for all those impacted by the carceral state (and that is all of us), we unearth the answers through our implementation of diverse strategies. As Ritchie has articulated, let us be the fish who grow feet; while fish-like creatures evolved to crawl out of the oceans and eventually walk on land, their transforming bodies and brains could not comprehend their precise evolutionary destination (Ritchie as cited in Kaba et al., 2022). As an ancient creature growing legs, they could not imagine the evolution of humans, let alone societies, police, or states. Yet fish, and humans, have evolved. As we work collectively toward answering these questions of how we may better structure our societies and institutions to support us all, we should remember: It is a function of the prison industrial complex and capitalism to limit our imaginations of a world that does not rely upon them. Where the movement for abolition does not provide an immediately viable answer to our questions, we recognize it not as a sign of the PIC’s necessity but as a locus for our imaginative potential for a better world.

Theoretical Frameworks: Environmental Justice

During the research process for the development of this curriculum guide, I interviewed Keith Miyake, Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies at University of California, Riverside and researcher spanning environmental justice and governance, the carceral state, and abolition geographies. In conversation with Miyake, I gained new clarity about the significance of environmental literature education (a broad category encompassing various types of literature).

¹⁰ Transformative justice (TJ) is one approach for responding to harm that is often taken up by abolitionists, and can be realized interpersonally or institutionally depending on the infrastructure involved. Kaba defines TJ as “a community process developed by anti-violence activists of color ... who wanted to create responses to violence that do what criminal punishment systems fail to do: build support and more safety for the person harmed, figure out how the broader context was set up for this harm to happen, and how that context can be changed so that this harm is less likely to happen again” (Kaba, 2021, 59). See Kaba, 2021 for a deeper examination of TJ in practice.

As Miyake impressed upon me, the influence of environmental literature on one's life helps to reorient people's minds toward community and mutuality, group goals that are impossible without consideration of our environments (K. Miyake, personal communication, September 8, 2022). Miyake's assertion that literacy is about understanding core concepts and using those in our imaginations struck a chord in me. We all face a real need to imagine what transformed communities in a future with climate change might look like using the knowledge we have, and increased literacy gives us enhanced capabilities for imagination and creation. Any liberatory politic that ignores our relationships with our natural environments¹¹ is destined to fail, for it is through critical environmental analyses that we may form more expansive and imaginative group and personal ontologies about our roles within the world. What is a future with climate change in which people can thrive? We need to imagine and work toward its creation. This curriculum guide has been developed with this imperative in mind.

One of the theoretical approaches influencing this guide with respect to its environmental analyses is that of a critical environmental justice (CEJ) perspective, principally laid out by David Pellow. The theoretical field of CEJ is primarily structured around Pellow's four pillars of critical environmental justice, which represent the crucial nature of a theoretical approach to environmental justice that emphasizes: *intersectionality*, a concept borrowed from a women of color feminism framework; *scale* and its importance for linking interpersonal, regional, national, and international phenomena; looking *beyond the state* for solutions to environmental justice problems; and racial and socioecological *indispensability*, or the affirmation that the wellbeing of individual humans and nonhumans is reliant upon our collective wellbeing, and vice versa (Pellow, 2017).

¹¹ I use the phrase "natural environments" and those like it cautiously because I feel they connote a false human-nature binary. Humans and human systems *are* "nature," and much is to be gained by analyses that posit the built environment in close relationship with the rest of "nature."

Intersectional oppressions background every environmental justice problem. Likewise, every conversation around environmental injustice benefits from, indeed, is incomplete without, an analysis of the multitudes of intersections formed by race, class, gender, and other marginalized identities. An intersectional lens is essential when analyzing environmental injustices because it is intersectionality that allows us to connect “a police chokehold on Eric Garner’s neck to the air pollution choking communities of color suffering asthma epidemics related to toxic industrial operations allowed to function with near total impunity” (Pellow, 2017, 48). Intersectionality is a core tenet of the theoretical approach considered in the creation of and textually centered in this curriculum guide, which operates from the understanding that problems of environmental justice in the United States are felt most severely and frequently by Indigenous, Black, brown, undocumented, non-native English speaking, disabled, and financially poor people, and that this harm is the consequence of a racial environmental capitalist system.¹² Issues of environmental justice require a lens analyzing class, gender, and other identifiers in addition to race for them to be fully conceptualized and addressed. As Sarathy asserts on this point, “An expansive and intersectional approach to environmental justice can help us better understand the varying ways environmental harm affects different communities and also acknowledge the role of multi-racial and cross-class alliances in struggles for justice” (Sarathy, 2019, 28). We may also include nonhuman animals and other ecological entities as both subjects and actors in our study of environmental justice, as Pellow and other scholars of environmental justice do (Betasamosake Simpson, 2017; Chen, 2012; Pellow, 2017). This intention is echoed in the first of the seventeen Principles of Environmental Justice, as outlined at the historic 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit: “Environmental Justice affirms the

¹² Miyake proposes the extension of the concept of racial capitalism to “racial environmental capitalism,” further discussed on page 19. See Miyake, 2021.

sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction” (Lee & United Church of Christ, 1992). From this perspective, the intersectionality that grounds goals for environmental justice includes in its scope our interconnectedness as people with all of the planet’s life systems.

As another pillar of CEJ, the key concept of indispensability serves as a string with which to tie together movements for PIC abolition and environmental justice. By affirming the indispensability of all people in our framework for environmental justice, we counter the dualistic thinking inherent to the logic of white supremacy (Pellow, 2017). The assertion of racial and socioecological indispensability, referencing the essential nature of all people as well as “broader communities within and across the human/more-than-human spectrum” means we cannot discard any person or community in our movements for justice (Pellow, 2017, 60). Furthermore, this assertion is not simply idealist. In a movement that seeks to change worlds and sustain peaceful relations within them among the human and more-than-human, the notion that *all* are indispensable is also one of utility; we are strengthened in our imaginative potentials and productive capabilities by a diversity of ideas and approaches to problem-solving.

The political, economic, and social systems which background and shape the above frameworks of environmental justice are integral to understanding the formation of environmental justice problems and their solutions. In particular, a study of mass incarceration and the US carceral state at large which applies an analysis of racial capitalism can help identify the forces which propel both the carceral state and problems of environmental justice. As Gilmore details in her writing, the emergence of the project of mass incarceration in the US, involving the warehousing people of color and specifically Black people, inside prisons is a public policy attempt to remove populations from larger society whose agency and simple

existence creates a problem for a state¹³ that is committed to upholding white supremacy (Gilmore, 2007). Inside prisons, incarcerated people, as well as prison guards and staff to a lesser degree, face numerous threats to health that would be unacceptable and likely remediated in other state offices or federal buildings; contaminated drinking water, expired food and food determined fit only for animal consumption, severe air pollution, and toxicity exposure in prisons built atop Superfund sites make up the shortlist of environmental injustices faced daily by the people incarcerated inside US prisons (Bernd et al., 2018; *Investigation Reveals*, 2017). Pulido's exploration of the politics of abandonment is useful in attempting to answer how and why these human rights abuses, untolerated in whiter and wealthier environments across the US, occur in the first place and are subsequently left unresolved (Pulido, 2016). As Pulido asserts, neither racism nor capitalism alone can answer for these abuses. Instead, an analysis prioritizing the racial capitalist structure of the US and Western nations helps us understand the abandonment of poor, Black, and Indigenous people and people of color and their communities, both inside and outside prison walls.

Characterizing Robinson's seminal conception of racial capitalism,¹⁴ Melamed writes, "the term 'racial capitalism' requires its users to recognize that capitalism *is* racial capitalism. Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through severe inequality among human groups" (Melamed, 2015). It is this understanding of capitalism that allows us to see how state abandonment operates across scales, from the bureaucratic administrations of prisons to decisions regarding state and city resource distribution. Under racial capitalism, places like Flint, Michigan, for example, are abandoned by capital through consistent state divestment. The majority Black population of Flint, "surplus"

¹³ For an operating definition of "state," see footnote 7.

¹⁴ For a deeper exploration of racial capitalism, see Robinson, 1983.

under racial capitalism, was left to function under austerity politics as people were placed below the city's priority fiscal obligations – and in 2014, Flint residents' taps were consequently supplied with poisoned drinking water (Pulido, 2016). The choices by Flint city and state officials, together with eroding infrastructure, represent symptoms of the abandonment of poor and Black populations by the US state. Pulido describes this consequence:

Poor, segregated, people of color ... Their 'value,' if one can call it that, is in their general expendability. ... This disposability allows both capital and the state to pursue policies and practices that are catastrophic to the planet and its many life forms because much of that cost is borne by "surplus" people and places. (Pulido, 2016, 8)

Like in the case of Flint's residents, incarcerated populations are similarly abandoned by capital and simultaneously instruments in its accumulation.

Prisons operate under these same politics of abandonment; states' heavy financial investment in carceral facilities is an investment in security and not the people caged inside. Incarcerated people, disproportionately poor, Black, and Indigenous (Blumstein, 1993; Nellis, 2021; *The Growth of Incarceration*, 2014), are further subjected to the exercise of state control through work programs inside prisons which seek to turn their "surplus" into production of capital. Prison work programs are often compared to slavery due to their negligible or nonexistent wages (Chappell, 2021; Garcia & Rafieyan, 2020; Moritz-Rabson, 2018; Sawyer, 2017).¹⁵ No matter the level of state financial investment, symptoms of abandonment can be seen in particular places and spaces where racial capitalism operates, providing insight into how the state determines whose wellbeing is worth funding. Through an analysis conceiving of

¹⁵ It is an important but sometimes misconstrued point that prisons make money off of the people incarcerated inside. Although incarcerated people make negligible wages in state prisons as well as private prisons, private prisons hold only ~8% of prison 'beds' in the United States. As Kilgore, 2013 elaborates, "Although there is a special immorality about making profit from caging people, especially given the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans and Latinos, it is no less morally bankrupt to spend taxpayers' money for prisons and jails at the expense of jettisoning the country's social welfare system and self-identity as a caring society." See also Gilmore's commentary on why a focus on private prisons misses a broader analysis of the US prison system in Kushner, 2019.

capitalism as racial and identifying state abandonment, we can see that the bottom, uniting line between Flint and incarcerated populations across the US is the impact on poor people and people of color.

Taking this analysis a step further, Miyake's conceptual extension of racial capitalism to racial environmental capitalism sheds new light for investigating the relationships between state power, the environment, settler colonialism, and race. Drawing from Parenti's conception of territoriality as one of the state's defining features,¹⁶ Miyake argues that race and environment are ideological systems of knowledge and meaning which are fundamental to the state itself and which shape the state's capacity to reproduce racial capital (Miyake, 2021). Under this framework, racial and environmental relations form mutually constitutive systems that the state utilizes to form preconditions for capitalism and colonialism and their social formations. Beyond the foundational value of the environment to the state, Miyake's analysis highlights the ways in which the state employs environmental protections and institutionalized antiracism in order to gain (uninformed) consent from the masses to maintain hegemony over people and the environment, and ultimately to sustain racial capitalism (Miyake, 2021, 593). For example, "the racial environmental state requires policy mechanisms like the environmental review process to justify and legitimize the production of urban and rural carceral geographies through racist systems of criminalization, policing, and prisons" (Miyake, 2021, 596). Examples of such policy mechanisms include purportedly progressive mandates like the California Environmental Quality Act and environmental impact reports for prison construction proposals. While this process protects the state using the guise of democratic public participation, transparency, and liberal administrative practices, in reality the state cyclically legitimizes its own policies while "the

¹⁶ "Territoriality is an expression of state power over environment and is key to the state's relationship with capital in producing "bodies, labor power, and the use values of natural resources, all the crucial components of value" (Parenti, 2015 as cited in Miyake, 2021, 592).

state's maintenance of racial capitalism and its attendant social and environmental relations circumscribe the environmental review process" (Miyake, 2021, 597). Through its incorporation of carceral politics into this conception of state-environment relationality, the framework of racial environmental capitalism paints a fuller picture of how the state shapes our relations with our environments in order to further state goals of racial capital reproduction.

Historically and contemporarily, the United States's imperial objectives are inextricably entwined with environmental extractivism and other modes of interaction with varied ecologies around the globe. In specifying an analysis of US imperialism that centers the ecological, we can connect an analysis of racial capitalism to capitalist international policy and trade agreements which "are dependent upon further ecological exploitation and ecological unequal exchange" (Clark & Foster, 2009, 311-312). As a case study, Clark and Foster's analysis of the 19th century guano and nitrate trade highlights how the British empire was able to incur and fulfill an "environmental overdraft" through the extraction and trade of a Peruvian natural resource. As an economic and colonial power, Britain was (and remains) in a position to exploit the natural resources of Global South nations when its own were depleted, hence forming the impetus for one of many such ecological extensions of Britain's empire. To remediate its own weak soil, depleted of nutrients after decades of exhaustive agricultural practices charged by relentless precapitalist demand, Britain turned to outsourcing guano fertilizer from Peru, primarily from the Chincha Islands. Not only did guano industry workers, many migrants from China, endure slavery conditions, but the guano industry decimated the ecological landscapes of the islands sited for harvest while boosting British agriculture (Clark & Foster, 2009). The Peru-Britain guano trade exemplifies how "ecological imperialism has meant that the worst forms of ecological destruction, in terms of pillage of resources and the disruption of sustainable relations

to the earth, fall on the periphery rather than the center” (Clark & Foster, 2009, 330). It is further argued by some that capitalism itself, fueled by competition and the pursuit of never-ending growth, operates in opposition to the systems of the “natural world,”¹⁷ in which short- and long-term cycles commune to balance (often) self-sustaining ecosystems of inputs and outputs. In the formation of a “global metabolic rift,” the capitalist economic systems of global production and trade favor center nations while decimating the human and nonhuman ecologies on the periphery.¹⁸

From nearly every conversation about state power, capitalism, and imperialism, especially as they pertain to movements for environmental justice, come questions regarding the role of state collaboration within these movements. To this point, the CEJ pillar of seeking solutions “beyond the state” summarizes the theoretical perspective taken in this curriculum guide (Pellow, 2017, 34-66). As Pellow points out, from anarchist and women of color feminist perspectives, states by definition practice exclusion, control, and violence and manipulate residents’ existence and mobility regardless of their consent (Pellow, 2017, 58). Pellow elaborates:

...modern nation-states co-emerged with and made possible the modern categories of race, gender, class, sexuality, citizenship, and species, as well as their bases for inclusion/exclusion, manipulation and domination. So any social movement seeking to push for reforms may do so from within a statist tradition, but such visions and practices will generally be limited, since they tend to rely on and therefore reinforce state dominance rooted in the goals of control of knowledge, ideas, people, nonhuman populations, ecosystems, and territory. (Pellow, 2017, 58)

As such, in order to reach their goals, movements for both environmental justice and abolition must seek to build capacity, community, and resources beyond those which are reliant upon the

¹⁷ See footnote 11.

¹⁸ This perspective is generally aligned with the theory of Marx’s ecology. For a greater explication of the global metabolic rift, Marx’s ecology, and the debate surrounding it, see Saito, 2017.

state. While the state itself certainly offers reformist solutions to problems of environmental justice and incarceration, and at times even opportunities for nonreformist reforms via state collaboration, this curriculum guide takes the perspective that approaches which rely too heavily upon state collaboration will not succeed at any genuinely liberatory goals. Just as “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,”¹⁹ collaboration with state powers requires submission to state dominance, whether obvious or obscured, and state power will never be transformed to deconstruct itself. Environmental injustice is state-sanctioned violence that primarily targets poor and Black, brown, and Indigenous people, in which the state is deeply invested for its continuity of capital accumulation. The world which movements for environmental justice seek to build must not rely upon the same structures that are deeply invested in everything which that world refuses.

Connecting Movements for PIC Abolition & Environmental Justice

Specific case studies can assist in comprehending the mutual causal forces of the prison industrial complex and environmental justice problems. For one, media coverage of the economic conditions affecting Black communities in pre-Katrina New Orleans provides a clear angle from which to see these forces in action. Over the last few decades, the state of Louisiana and the petrochemical industries facilitated the targeted placement of toxic industry into Black communities near New Orleans, where facilities spew huge quantities of toxic emissions into the air and leach contaminants into the groundwater. The environmental and human health impacts have been covered fairly extensively with insignificant resolution to the core socio-environmental problems. Regarding the predominantly Black residents who were “lured” by affordable homes to the community of Convent, Louisiana and those surrounding it in Cancer

¹⁹ See Lorde, 2015.

Alley, a newspaper article from the time quotes, “These people are in prison and there’s poison loose” (“African American Churches,” 1998). Woods examines the Convent community nearly twenty years later, pointing to the continuous relevance of their struggle: quoting activist Vera Brooks, “by 2001 the predominantly Black towns of Convent, Diamond, Ella, Oakville, Mossville, Myrtle Grove, Morrisonville, New Sarpy, Norco, and Reveilletown had been turned into ‘toxic prisons’” (Woods, 2017, 227). The framing of these communities’ home environments as prisons, made toxic by unregulated, politically backed corporate interests and a disinvested state, is not just semantic but analytically relevant. Conceptualizing the “prison” of a community built atop the dumps sites of 150 toxic chemicals (“African American Churches,” 1998), home to mostly poor and Black families, does not cheapen the brutality of institutional prisons but constructively extends the concept of the carceral state beyond the cage itself and into the ways poor and BIPOC people are confined into toxic places spatially, economically, and politically. Importantly, those places/spaces are characterized by organized abandonment, suffering of individual and group health, and the waste of imperial industry. Yet, the affected communities around Convent have also formed hubs of resistance, as activists to come out of the area have been major contributors to the emergence of the national environmental justice movement (Woods, 2017, 228).

As the above case exemplifies, the racial capitalist and carceral state is a mutual enemy of environmental justice and PIC abolitionist movements. The PIC as well as widespread environmental injustices are predictable and intentional outcomes and instruments of such a state, characterized by redlining, Jim Crow era policy, historical Southern resistance to progressive policy, (neo)liberal economic reforms, and a lack of protections guaranteeing the right to an environmentally safe home, especially for those who cannot afford to live elsewhere.

Remediating this type of state, involving its restructure or demolition depending on your ideological strategy, is in the interest of anyone who seeks the goals of PIC abolition and environmental justice.

The organizers who rallied against the proposed prison construction in Delano, California recognized these mutual interests. The fight against the plan for a new prison in Delano, California between 1998 and 2005 brought together an unprecedented coalition of wide-ranging interest groups who jointly recognized their unique stakes in the prison's construction. Organizers against the prison employed multi-pronged strategies involving litigation, coalition building, media reports aimed at shifting public opinion and policy, and local grassroots organizing. The coalitions against Delano II (as the prison is known in reference to the previously existing prison in Delano) brought together traditionally disparate organizations including several major California chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Center on Race, Poverty, and the Environment, the Rainforest Action Network, the Ecology Center, the California chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, Critical Resistance, the National Lawyers Guild Prison Law Project, and Friends of the Kangaroo Rat. Municipal and state bodies also became invested in the legal fight once grassroots organizers were able to demonstrate the broad-reaching implications of the proposed prison and its faulty Environmental Impact Report; the Delano Joint Unified School District, State Department of Transportation, and Southern San Joaquin Municipal Utility District all signed onto the fight in the interest of protecting what they each saw as at stake, whether children and schools, air quality, the regional agricultural economy, or a number of other represented interests (Braz & Gilmore, 2006).

Although Delano II was ultimately approved for construction and built, it was this unrelenting grassroots effort that stopped California's decades-long prison-building boom in 2005, when organizers celebrated the first day in twenty years that the state did not have a prison in planning or construction. As demonstrated by Braz & Gilmore (2006), the story of Delano II articulates how the practice of abolition, through both literal prison closure as well as the principles behind the practice, can be a galvanizing path toward environmental justice goals. In fact, as I attempt to demonstrate through the curriculum guide, substantive, broad-reaching environmental justice in the US and globally depends upon the cumulative realization of abolition.

Conclusion

Recently, I sat outside with a friend and fellow student, deep in discussion. Our dinner plates had gone cold. However, our eyes were locked onto each other's while we shared the inspiration, awe, frustration, and sense of possibility we both find inside the realm of abolitionist approaches to environmental justice. As we shared resources and made plans for aligning our studies and work in the future, I thought of the communities and individuals that had ushered us toward this analysis. A deeply rooted affirmation of our intrinsic interconnectedness lies at the heart of this curriculum guide, in both its development and content. The guide is an accumulation of the work of countless organizers, formal and informal communities, thinkers, writers, and mentors to strategize for environmental justice and to explicate the urgent need for abolition now. This curriculum guide brings together these many people's ideas and calls to action with my own for an audience that is ready to reenvision a truer justice and join in the active creation of our many experiments toward our liberation, in study and struggle.

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Curriculum Guide

Note on use

This curriculum is intended to guide a ten-week course that meets at least once a week. Ideally, two hours will be spent during each weekly meeting for students to discuss and engage with each other. The intended audience is a student who is a young adult or older and has the capacity to learn from a variety of textual materials, from zines to denser academic literature. Because the curriculum guide has been designed with a primarily written student discourse in mind, it is a *guide* and not a script for moving through the curriculum. The guide is broken up by week, and each week contains content in the following categories:

- *Thematic questions* are included to guide students' reflection on that week's syllabus materials.
- *Passages* are included in quotes and are selected from that week's reading materials; students and facilitators should feel free to engage with the selected passages or others as seems relevant to individual learners.
- *Materials* and *optional materials* are included for each week. Those marked as optional are still encouraged for an even broader engagement with that week's themes, although those under "Materials" should be prioritized.
- *Activities* are included for a couple weeks. These may be more or less accessible depending on the type and level of interaction between students.

In the beginning of the course and as appropriate throughout, time should be made for personal introductions between students if possible. Introduction topics should include names and optionally pronouns. Topics may also include questions such as (to be personalized to the group),

- Why did you decide to take this course?
- What is your favorite way to spend time with people?
- Do you have any special skills or talents?
- What do you see as some of your own strengths?

As students progress through the curriculum, “inside” and “outside” students who are paired for correspondence with each other should ideally also have opportunities to discuss the material outside of their pairs and with other students in the cohort.

When syllabus materials can be easily accessed via the internet, links to those materials are included in the guide.

Week 1 – Introduction to PIC abolition

Thematic questions

- Why do we take prisons for granted?
- Do media’s depictions of prison differ from the realities of prison? How so?
- How would you characterize the attritional model of PIC abolition?
- What are some of the goals of the movement for PIC abolition?
- Reflect on your own and your communities’ direct and indirect interactions with the PIC.
Which arms of the PIC are present in your reflections? Have you seen the PIC help, hurt, or do both in those interactions?
- What do you think are the harmful effects of prisons on both their immediate environments of imprisoned people, as well as the prison’s surrounding environment?

Passages

- “Why do prisons tend to make people think that their own rights and liberties are more secure than they would be if prisons did not exist? What other reasons might there have been for the rapidity with which prisons began to colonize the California landscape?” (Davis, 14)
- “We take prisons for granted but are often afraid to face the realities they produce. After all, no one wants to go to prison. Because it would be too agonizing to cope with the possibility that anyone, including ourselves, could become a prisoner, we tend to think of the prison as disconnected from our own lives. This is even true for some of us, women as well as men, who have already experienced imprisonment.” (Davis, 15)
- ““Abolition is deliberately everything-ist; it’s about the entirety of human-environmental relations. ... Where life is precious, life is precious.”” (Gilmore quoted in Kushner, 2019)

Materials

- “Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind,” Rachel Kushner, The New York Times Magazine, [link](#)
- “Introduction: Prison Reform or Prison Abolition?,” Ch. 1 in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Davis
- “Diminishing/Dismantling the Prison System” in *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists*, Prison Research Education Action Project, [link](#)
- “America’s Toxic Prisons: The Environmental Injustices of Mass Incarceration,” Candice Bernd, Zoe Loftus-Farren, and Maureen Nandini Mitra, Prison Legal News, [link](#)

Optional material

- “What About the Rapists?” (zine), Mariame Kaba and Eva Nagao, Interrupting Criminalization, [link](#)

Activity

- Introduction to the PIC concentric circles activity, materials from Critical Resistance [link](#)

Week 2 – PIC abolition

Thematic questions

- What are some key distinctions between historical “official” approaches and transformative approaches to problems of violence? What might be the pros and cons of state-led versus community-led approaches to different kinds of social problems, violent or not?
- What do you think about the tension between reform and abolition? Do you see room for reform in a fight against the PIC (or parts of it)?
- How would you describe PIC abolition to someone who had never heard of it?
- What historical moves and actors do you see as having played a part in the formation of the current US prison system?
- How do the priorities of transformative justice approaches and punitive approaches to harm compare/contrast? Where might their goals overlap and diverge?
- Neoliberalism comes up in several of this week’s readings. What is your understanding of it based on anything you might already know? How does this fit into the context of the readings?

- How could the proposed practices in “Transformative Justice and Community Accountability” be expanded to apply to other types of harm?

Passages

- “In particular, we believe that there are two major features of the second half of the twentieth century that shaped the context in which the queer and trans movement developed: (1) the active resistance and challenge by radical movement to state violence, and subsequent systematic backlash, and (2) the massive turmoil and transformation of the global economy.” (Bassichis et al., 19)
- “Across the country, community police programs have been based on the idea that the ‘community’ should bring concerns of all kinds about neighborhood conditions to the police, who will work with them on developing solutions.” (Vitale, 13)

Materials

- “Imprisonment and Reform,” Ch. 3 in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Davis
- “Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We’ve Got” in *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, [link](#)
- “The Limits of Police Reform,” Ch. 1 in *The End of Policing*, Alex S. Vitale
- “Transformative Justice and Community Accountability,” Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, [link](#)
- “Community Response and Accountability” and “Transformation of Community and Social Conditions that Create and Perpetuate Violence” in *Ending Child Sexual Abuse: A Transformative Justice Handbook*, pages 56-61, [link](#)

Optional materials

- “The Tension Between Abolition and Reform” in *The End of Prisons: Reflections from the Decarceration Movement*, Liat Ben-Moshe, [link](#)
- “People’s Plan for Prison Closure,” Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB), [link](#) – especially pages 11-12 for the environmental focus

Week 3 – Introduction to environmental justice

Thematic questions

- How do you define the environment or your environment?
- How can we define environmental injustice to encompass the effects it has on health, economic prosperity, our relationship to land, and our relationship to the state as you understand it?
- What are Pellow’s four pillars of environmental justice?
- What do you think are the pros and cons of collaborating with state and federal governments in the fight for environmental justice? Do you see the best approach as with, without, or a blend?

Passages

- “government-sanctioned lead poisoning [in Flint, Michigan] is an example of racialized dispossession, inextricable from the working of liberalism and processes of ‘property making and property taking.’ Liberalism relies on the ‘moral primacy of individual freedoms, especially the freedom to own property.’ The alienation and dispossession from the land that settler colonialism demands is linked to the alienation of African

Americans in an economic and cultural system that political theorist Cedric Robinson calls ‘racial capitalism.’” (Sze, 7)

- “In her study of prisons, geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as ‘the state-sanctioned and extralegal exposure of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.’” (Sze, 10)
- “in the United States and abroad, activists in often overlapping movements for climate justice, indigenous rights, and poor people’s access to land embody a highly intersectional politics that is at once anti-racist, anti-colonial/imperial, and anti-oppression and framed within the broader context of global inequality and disproportionate impact.” (Sarathy, 45)

Materials

- *Dismantling Environmental Racism in the USA*, Robert Bullard, [link](#)
 - Note: Includes the letter from the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Justice Leadership Summit
- “‘This is environmental racism’: how a protest in a North Carolina farming town sparked a national movement,” Darryl Fears and Brady Dennis, Washington Post, [link](#)
- “African American Church Leaders Pledge Their Support to the Struggle Against Environmental Racism,” National Council of Churches News Archives, [link](#)
- “Critical Environmental Justice Studies,” Ch. 1 in *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*, David Pellow
- “Introduction: Environmental Justice at the Crossroads of Danger and Freedom” in *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger*, Julie Sze

- “An Intersectional Reappraisal of the Environmental Justice Movement,” Ch. 2 in *The Nature of Hope: Grassroots Organizing, Environmental Justice, and Political Change*, Brinda Sarathy

Optional material

- “Environmentalism and Social Justice,” Ch. 1 in *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, Robert Bullard

Week 4 – Environmental justice

Thematic questions

- How would you characterize the federal and state governments’ interests in the environmental problems posed by prisons and why?
- In what ways are different parts of the PIC interested in natural resources? How do they protect those interests?
- What examples can you come up with of “slow violence”? How does this violence affect humans as well as nonhuman species and ecologies?
- Pellow asserts that “Modern nation states claim a ‘monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force’” (Weber et al. quoted in Pellow, 58). How do you relate this to previous readings on state power and the role of police and prisons?

Passages

- “Slow violence: Suffering, degradation, and pain inflicted upon people and communities by impersonal, dispersed forces; spread across time and space, with no defined point of impact, but nevertheless the result of a perpetrator/s’ actions.” (Shread-Hewitt)

- “any social movement seeking to push for reforms may do so from within a statist tradition, but such visions and practices will generally be limited, since they tend to rely on and therefore reinforce state dominance rooted in the goals of control of knowledge, ideas, people, nonhuman populations, ecosystems, and territory.” (Pellow, 58)
- “home is not always a stable ground but can mean displacement, expulsion, or a space of violence and trauma. Solidarity thus depends on understanding history, power, and difference derived from settler colonialism.” (Sze, 27)

Materials

- “Black Lives Matter as an Environmental Justice Challenge,” Ch. 2 in *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*, David Pellow
- “Investigation Reveals Environmental Dangers in Toxic Prisons,” Equal Justice Initiative, [link](#)
- “How Decades of Racist Housing Policy Left Neighborhoods Sweltering,” Brad Plumer and Nadja Popovich, New York Times, [link](#)
- “Slow violence,” Ben Shread-Hewitt, Uneven Earth, [link](#)
- “This Movement of Movements,” Ch. 1 in *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger*, Julie Sze

Optional materials

- Prison Ecology Project (map), [link](#)
 - Note: Material requires internet access
- *Urban Heat Management and the Legacy of Redlining*, Bev Wilson, [link](#)

Week 5 – Prisons, environmental justice, and convergent organizing

Thematic questions

- How might we shift our understanding of our environment to include the forces exerted upon us by political, economic, and social systems? What advantages does a shift like this give us for understanding or relating to our environments, if any?
- Who are the stakeholders in the construction of the Delano II prison in *Joining Forces*? What do they have to gain or lose? Do those interests overlap, and if so, where?
- Where do you see political convergence/divergence between the interests of environmental justice and anti-prison movements? What do environmental justice and anti-prison movements have to gain or to lose in recognizing their mutual interests?
- Think about the relationship between governmental and community-based approaches to environmental justice issues as discussed by Méndez. Considering what we have read about similar relationships in the context of PIC abolition, what do you think about Méndez’s assessment?
- How might PIC abolitionists analyze or respond to the cases of environmental injustice you have read about?
- What questions, reservations, or criticisms do you have of anti-prison movements or the ideas behind them?

Passages

- “In this tiny community, the state has spent more than \$1 billion in construction and operations over the past ten years. The benefits are difficult to perceive. In the town, the number of people living below the poverty line has doubled to two thousand.” (Braz & Gilmore, 102)

- “These community-based collectives are inspiring local, state, and translocal coalitions to imagine various relationships among the atmosphere, economic inequalities, racial disparities, and climate policy. ... community-based forms of action have enormous political potential and are key to the passage and successful implementation of climate policies.” (Méndez, 9)

Materials

- *No Justice No Resilience: Prison Abolition as Disaster Mitigation in an Era of Climate Change*, Carlee Purdum et al, [link](#)
- *Joining Forces: Prisons and Environmental Justice in Recent California Organizing*, Rose Braz and Craig Gilmore, [link](#)
- “Prison Town: Paying the Price” (comic), Kevin Pyle and Craig Gilmore, The Real Cost of Prisons, [link](#)
- “Seeing Carbon Reductionism and Climate Change from the Streets,” Ch. 1 in *Climate Change from the Streets: How Conflict and Collaboration Strengthen the Environmental Justice Movement*, Michael Méndez

Optional materials

- *Reimagining ‘justice’ in environmental justice: Radical ecologies, decolonial thought, and the Black Radical Tradition*, Laura Pulido and Juan De Lara, [link](#)
- “In Debates Over Prison Closures, Don’t Prioritize ‘Economic Impact’ Over Lives,” Duane Palm & Timothy Peoples, Truthout, [link](#)

Week 6 – Approaches within anti/capitalism

Thematic questions

- What do you make of the alternate and often oppositional perspectives on sovereignty, place, and land that people, groups, governments, and states hold?
- How would you define “ecological sovereignty”?
- How do you characterize some of the “alternative” ways of relating to the environment as described by Betasamosake Simpson (alternative as in alternative to settler colonial conceptions)? How might the anticapitalism she describes relate to “alternative” conceptions of justice?
- What is radical ecology? Where do you think Smith and Betasamosake Simpson might agree or disagree with each other?

Passages

- “Because advocates’ notions of justice are rooted in local, embodied experience, a system that can potentially cause inequities in distant and very different locations meant environmental justice groups had to adopt new strategies.” (Méndez, 150)
- “We certainly had the technology and the wisdom to develop this kind of economy, or rather we had the ethics and knowledge within grounded normativity to *not develop* this system, because to do so would have violated our fundamental values and ethics regarding how we relate to each other and the natural world.” (Betasamosake Simpson, 78)
- “Moss, like pine trees, or maple trees, or geese, is an algorithm, a practice for solving a problem, and all of these Nishnaabeg algorithms are profoundly anticapitalist at their core.” (Betasamosake Simpson, 79)

- “The modern constitution and its overseer, the principle of ecological sovereignty, exemplify what Agamben (2004) refers to as the ‘anthropological machine’—the historically variable but constantly recurring manufacture of metaphysical distinctions to separate and elevate the properly human from the less-than-fully-human and the natural world.” (Smith, xii)
- “Radical ecology is all about providing a place to voice possible alternatives, to question, critique, and innovate. In particular, it challenges the view that there is no alternative to the growth-oriented capitalism that currently powers greenhouse gas production, species extinction, habitat destruction, and so on.” (Smith, xvii)

Materials

- “Cap and Trade-Offs,” Ch. 5 in *Climate Change from the Streets: How Conflict and Collaboration Strengthen the Environmental Justice Movement*, Michael Méndez
- “Climate beyond Borders,” Ch. 6 in *Climate Change from the Streets: How Conflict and Collaboration Strengthen the Environmental Justice Movement*, Michael Méndez
- “Nishnaabeg Anticapitalism,” Ch. 5 in *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson
- “Introduction: A Grain of Sand” in *Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World*, Mick Smith

Optional material

- *The racial environmental state and abolition geography in California’s Central Valley*, Keith Miyake, [link](#)

Week 7 – Neoliberalism and US imperialism

Thematic questions

- Why is it that some people call neoliberalism a “project”? What bodies had a stake in the beginning of this “project,” and what was at stake?
- How does a neoliberal framework position the individual and their role in influencing society?
- Who benefits most from the private operation of environmental charities/nonprofits?
- How did Britain incur an “environmental overdraft” as described by Clark & Foster?
How did this position Peru and Britain among the global economy?
- Marx suggests we view labor as ““a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature”” (Marx quoted in Clark & Foster, 313). Which frameworks for human relationships with nature that we have read about previously does this seem to align with or contradict?

Passages

- “Overall I think this period was defined by a broad movement across many fronts, ideological and political. And the only way you can explain that broad movement is by recognizing the relatively high degree of solidarity in the corporate capitalist class. Capital reorganized its power in a desperate attempt to recover its economic wealth and its influence, which had been seriously eroded from the end of the 1960s into the 1970s.” (Harvey quoted in Skærlund Risager)

- “The ‘market-based’ climate solutions favored by so many large foundations and adopted by many greens have provided an invaluable service to the fossil fuel sector as a whole. For one, they succeeded in taking what began as a straightforward debate about shifting away from fossil fuels and put it through a jargon generator so convoluted that the entire climate issue came to seem too complex and arcane for nonexperts to understand ...” (Klein, 199)
- “Central Appalachia has alternately been described as an internal colony, an internal periphery of the world capitalist system, and as a ‘national sacrifice zone’ ...” (Story, 82)
- “This global metabolic rift involved the decline of soil fertility in Britain, the transfer of Chinese labor to Peru to work the guano islands, the export of natural fertilizer to core nations, the degradation of the Peruvian/Chilean environment, the creation of debt-laden economies, and the War of the Pacific as Chile (backed covertly by Britain) and Peru fought against each other to control resources desired by Britain.” (Clark & Foster, 313)

Materials

- “Neoliberalism Is A Political Project: An Interview with David Harvey,” Bjarke Skærlund Risager, Jacobin, [link](#)
- “Fruits, Not Roots,” Ch. 6 in *This Changes Everything*, Naomi Klein
- “Rural Extractions: Work and Wages in the Appalachian Coalfields,” Ch. 3 in *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power Across Neoliberal America*, Brett Story
- *Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift: Unequal Exchange and the Guano/Nitrates Trade*, Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster, [link](#)

Optional materials

- “Capitalism Killed Our Climate Momentum, Not ‘Human Nature,’” Naomi Klein, The Intercept, [link](#)
- “Prisons and Class Warfare: An Interview with Ruthie Gilmore,” Clément Petitjean, Verso, [link](#)

Week 8 – Military imperialism

Thematic questions

- How would you define “green” militarism?
- From the perspective of US security interests, in what ways does mass migration threaten economic and political stability?
- How does the US go about utilizing “natural” borders in service of its national security interests? How might this implicate these environments with the PIC?
- What are some of the primary motivating factors for the US military’s concern about climate change?
- What are the differences between mitigation and adaptation as global policy responses?
- How should we think about the potential implications of future US military intervention in climate crises abroad?
- What does Miller mean by the “colossal intersection of climate upheavals and the expanding zones of exclusion” (34)?
- What do you think Honduras hopes to achieve in creating the ZEDEs? Who do you see as the primary stakeholders in their creation?

Passages

- “with the ‘Prevention Through Deterrence’ strategy, border zones became ‘spaces of exception—physical and political locations where an individual’s rights and protections can be stripped away upon entrance.’” (De León quoted in Miller, 24)
- “More dangerous than climate disruption was the climate migrant. More dangerous than the drought were the people who can’t farm because of the drought. More dangerous than the hurricane were the people displaced by the storm. The climate refugee was a threat to the very war planes required to enforce the financial and political order where 1 percent of the population wielded more economic power than the rest of the world combined.” (Miller, 29)
- “As such [climate] crises unfold, the military’s initial concern will be the much-noted risk of state collapse in developing countries, and the emergence of ‘ungoverned spaces’ containing well-armed insurgents and terrorist organizations.” (Klare, 118)

Materials

- “Introduction” in *All Hell Breaking Loose: The Pentagon’s Perspective on Climate Change*, Michael Klare
- “Global Shock Waves: Food Shortages, Energy Crises, Pandemics, and Mass Migrations,” Ch. 4 in *All Hell Breaking Loose: The Pentagon’s Perspective on Climate Change*, Michael Klare
- “Sustainable National Security: Climate Adaptation For The Rich And Powerful,” Ch. 2 in *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security*, Todd Miller
- “The 21st-Century Border,” Ch. 3 in *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security*, Todd Miller

- *Waves of destruction: Nuclear imperialism and anti-nuclear protest in the indigenous literatures of the Pacific*, Michelle Keown, [link](#)

Optional materials

- “Alternative Economies for Alternative Futures” in *The Value of Hawaii 2*, Dean Itsuji Saranillio
- *Agent Orange Bodies: Việt, Đức, and Transnational Narratives of Repair*, Natalia Duong
- “Threat Forecast: Where Climate Change Meets Science Fiction,” Ch. 4 in *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security*, Todd Miller

Week 9 – Case studies: Flint, Katrina, and the Pacific

Thematic questions

- How do Woods et al. substantiate the comparison of communities’ home environments in Cancer Alley to “toxic prisons” (227)?
- How does your understanding of neoliberal economic policy from previous weeks influence your reading of Woods et al.? Where do you see neoliberalism show up in the events described in the article, whether through actual policy or attitudes?
- What are some of the symptoms of organized abandonment as described by Pulido?
- What were the steps that allowed for the poisoning of Flint’s water to occur and continue? Which governmental and nongovernmental actors were involved, and what did they have at stake in their decisions?
- How does the notion of debility show up in the articles by Bahng and Pulido? In what ways does it overlap or intersect with the concept of disposability?

- Pulido alludes to the idea that the crisis in Flint serves to prepare broader society for future practices in state abandonment, while Bahng (48) describes the Marshall Islands as a ““living laboratory”” for nuclear weaponry. If both Flint and the Marshall Islands constitute sites of preparation, who is preparing and for what are they preparing? Does this seem like an accurate assessment to you?

Passages

- “The targeting of Black communities by the state and by petrochemical sectors severely compromised both the health and culture of those living in the towns and on the plantations along the Cancer Alley Chemical Corridor prior to the 1970s oil boom. By the late 1980s, the Cancer Alley Chemical Corridor of Louisiana had come to symbolize the very definition of environmental racism in the national imaginary.” (Woods et al., 227)
- “Karl argues that once the oil rentier state is established, private and public institutions become increasingly dependent on maintaining windfall profits. Additional governmental resources are devoted to preserving and expanding the petrochemical sector at the expense of other segments of society.” (Woods et al., 226)
- “Gilmore (2002), among others, has argued that the neoliberal state is characterized by heightened capacity in some arenas, such as security and policing, and reduced capacity in others, like welfare and social investment more generally. Infrastructure maintenance is a form of social investment. The decision to neglect infrastructure so that it becomes toxic must be seen as a form of violence against those who are considered disposable. This is the politics of abandonment.” (Pulido, 4-5)
- “Poor, segregated, people of color ... Their “value,” if one can call it that, is in their general expendability (Márquez 2013). This disposability allows both capital and the

state to pursue policies and practices that are catastrophic to the planet and its many life forms because much of the cost is borne by “surplus” people and places ...” (Pulido, 8)

- “‘The Underground’ refers to both human and nonhuman nature that perform services for capital but which are not recognized or valued. Examples include unpaid domestic work or ecosystem services (Collard and Dempsey, 2016). I argue that Flint is performing unpaid labor for capital by preparing the larger society for increased struggles over basic reproduction, including such necessities as water.” (Pulido, 11)

Materials

- “The Disaster before the Disaster: Oil Regimes, Plantation Economics, and the Southern Strategy, 1977–2005,” Ch. 7 in *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New Orleans*, Clyde Woods, Jordan T. Camp, and Laura Pulido
- *Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism*, Laura Pulido, [link](#)
- *The Pacific Proving Grounds and the Proliferation of Settler Environmentalism*, Aimee Bahng, [link](#)

Week 10 – Questions for the future

Thematic questions

- What does Ostrom mean by “polycentric systems” for collective action?
- How might a polycentric systems approach be applied to approaches for environmental policy change discussed in previous weeks?

- Where could localism, as described by Catney et al., enhance or cooperate with neoliberal environmental policy?
- What do you see as the pros and cons of localism and anti-localism approaches to better energy policy? How could the involvement of a racial capitalist and carceral state complicate Catney et al.'s argument?
- What does Indigenous speculative fiction, as discussed by Streeby, offer us in terms of imagining different possibilities for living in a future with climate change?

Passages

- “What we have learned from extensive research is that when individuals are well informed about the problem they face and about who else is involved, and can build settings where trust and reciprocity can emerge, grow, and be sustained over time, costly and positive actions are frequently taken without waiting for an external authority to impose rules, monitor compliance, and assess penalties.” (Ostrom, 555)
- “With a reduced role for the state, BS localism seeks to employ market-based instruments and competitive funding schemes to promote community renewable energy and fuel poverty reduction initiatives. We contend that there is too often little consideration given to the issues of distributional justice and limited recognition of groups and communities that are poorly positioned to take advantage of localist approaches which are predicated on “reactive” sources of funding.” (Catney et al., 716)
- “it becomes necessary to stand back and request a ‘reality check’ on the purported benefits of BS energy localism. How would an ex-coal mining community suffering from years of economic decline and dependence on the state ever begin to take up the Cameronian vision of community control over energy production? To what extent would

there be either the interest or the capacity to rise to the challenge of ‘re-energising [their] communities’ (Julian and Dobson 2012)?” (Catney et al., 724)

- “‘long before Western science came to these shores, there were Indigenous scientists here’: ‘Native astronomers, agronomists, geneticists, ecologists, engineers, botanists, zoologists, watershed hydrologists, pharmacologists, physicians and more—all engaged in the creation and application of knowledge which promoted the flourishing of both human societies and the beings with whom we share the planet.’” (“Let Our Indigenous Voices Be Heard” quoted in Streeby, 35)
- “For Allard this story of survival in the face of U.S. military violence in the service of white settlement and resource extraction is entangled with the Standing Rock struggle, as well as the 1950s moment when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers ‘dredged the mouth of the Cannonball River and flooded the area’ as ‘they finished the Oahe dam.’ ... it is the U.S. Army Corps that is allowing these sites to be destroyed.” (Allard quoted in Streeby, 39)

Materials

- “Introduction: Imagining the Future of Climate Change” in *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism*, Shelley Streeby
- “#NoDAPL: Native American and Indigenous Science, Fiction, and Futurisms,” Ch. 1 in *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism*, Shelley Streeby
- *Polycentric Systems for Coping with Collective Action and Global Environmental Change*, Elinor Ostrom, [link](#)

- *Big society, little justice? Community renewable energy and the politics of localism*, Catney et al., [link](#)

Additional Resources

The following are resources which may be helpful to students but are not included in the weekly curriculum guide. These resources are ideal for students looking to clarify or dive deeper into particular concepts.

Keywords for Environmental Studies, Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow

- Contains accessible definitions of common key terms in the field of environmental studies

“Introduction & Frequently Asked Questions” in *Creative Interventions Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence*, Creative Interventions Project, [link](#)

- Especially focus on “What is our bigger vision?,” pages 16-17
- Helpful resource for understanding transformative justice approaches to harm and addressing frequently asked questions about transformative justice

“Who's Left: Prison Abolition” (comic), [link](#)

- Easy-to-read, digestible, simplified overview for addressing the question, “Why abolition?”

Abolitionist Futures Reading List 2022, Abolitionist Futures, [link](#)

- Reading list of PIC abolitionist material with links, organized into six categories: Intro to Abolition; What’s Wrong With Reform?; Feminist, Queer, Anti-racist Abolition; Policing, Anti Racism & Abolition; Transformative Justice; Everyday Abolition

If You’re New to Abolition: Study Group Guide, abolitionjournal, [link](#)

- Reading list of PIC abolitionist materials, some links included, organized by category: Prisons and Policing in the U.S. as a History of anti-Blackness; The Prison Industrial

Complex; Policing and Imprisonment as Racial Violence; Reformist Reforms vs.
Abolitionist Steps; Feminist, Queer and Trans Abolitionism; Abolitionist Alternatives;
Abolitionist Actions; Further Investigation; Liberatory Study

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