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The Impact of Ecowomanism and African Cosmology on Carceral Anti-Ecology

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ABSTRACT: Carceral Anti-Ecology is an emerging field that explores how jails and prisons are huge environmental issues. These environmental issues largely and disproportionately affect peoples of color who are housed in carceral institutions. This essay will explore how ecowomanism and African cosmology could prove to be effective in dismantling carceral institutions.

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One of the fastest growing United States business sectors is the criminal justice system. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, there are over 2.3 million people in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 942 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,283 local jails, and 79 Indian country jails as well as military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, and prisons in United States territories.¹ What impacts have these carceral institutions had on the environment, land, and human beings? Rural farm communities serve as homes for federal and state prisons. These prisons house predominately poor Black and Brown people, with thousands of acres being cleared of natural habitats and resources to build and operate them. Carceral institutions also produce numerous toxins and wastes that pollute the air and contaminate nearby water sources and land, in addition to harming both staff and inmates.

¹ Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, "Reports, Prison Policy Initiative, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/-assessed>
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The operations of the for-profit business model, the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) exacerbates the problems that prisons bring to communities, destroying more rural farmland, further poisoning communities with toxins, and exploiting prison labor. Within the PIC, government entities and private corporations' partner with federal and state prisons for free or reduced-fee prison labor, with prisons being contracted to produce consumer goods and administer services. Environmentalists have identified the PIC as a substantial environmental justice issue, known as "Carceral Anti-Ecology."² Simply put, Carceral Anti-Ecology is a violation of the twelfth Environmental Justice principle, which states the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and provided fair access for all to the full range of resources.³ I argue that Eco-womanist ethics grounded in African cosmological practices will prove effective against Carceral Anti-Ecology because it provides resources that encourage reverence for human bodies, land, and the environment, all of which must be restored in order to organize and provide a foundation for dismantling the Prison Industrial Complex.

Eco-womanism

In her groundbreaking book, *Eco-womanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, Melanie L. Harris states that "Eco-womanism is an interdisciplinary approach and method that utilizes a race-class-gender analysis to doing environment work."⁴ Numerous in-depth studies highlight the psychological, sociological, and economic impact of the PIC on communities of color, making it an extension of structural racism and systemic oppression. Michelle Alexander has famously referred to this inhumane complex as the "New Jim Crow."⁵ Similarly to the Jim Crow segregations laws, the New Jim Crow laws (read: laws and policies) systemically funnel Black and Brown people into carceral institutions.

²Pellow, David N. "Struggles for Environmental Justice in US Prisons and Jails." *Antipode* (September 4, 2019). doi:10.1111/anti.12569.

³ First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. Principles of Environmental Justice.

⁴ Harris, Melanie, *Ecowomanism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2018), 9

⁵Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 43.

Present day clergy, activists, and concerned people must continue to organize to dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex, including advocating for legislation to halt the building of new carceral institutions and to create an oversight committee to hold these institutions accountable to environmental justice principles. Eco-womanist ethics can provide a framework on how to act against Carceral Anti-Ecology.

Sofia Betancourt adds that "eco-womanism seeks to build a new space of ethical engagement."⁶ Eco-womanism is a part of this third wave of womanism that embraces African cosmological beliefs and practices that ethically engage with fellow human beings and the earth. Harris emphasizes that, "noting the importance of the link between social justice and divine justice again, when it comes to earth justice, eco-womanism weaves into its structure, analysis, and conceptual frame an element that sometimes cannot be explained, but rather has to be experienced through engaging activist or spiritual activist community and activity."⁷ The adaptation of African cosmological principles could be a resource for those seeking to dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex. Within Nigeria's Ifa spiritual tradition, all living things possess a unique spirit and sacred name. Nature's elements including lakes, oceans, rivers, trees, wind, air, fire, animals, eggun (ancestors), and deities (orishas) are honored and revered. Harris states that "African cosmology also promotes a kind of innate ethical message to care for the planet. In addition to the ancestral spiritual connections that honor many African religious traditions, an ethical mandate to care for the earth is often communicated by African cosmologies because of interconnectedness. To care for the earth is to care for the self and vice versa."⁸ In Ifa tradition, religious and spiritual beliefs serve as points of inspiration and motivation to address social justice and environmental justice issues. Ifa principles acknowledge that the cycle of life and death, humans, earth, water, fire, air, earth, nature, land, and animals depend on each other for existence, growth, and sustainability. Therefore, Ifa practitioners adhere to strict principles in which reverence and homage to Mother Earth and its habitants are the norm. Womanist

⁶ Betancourt, Sofia, "Between Dishwater and the River: Toward an Ecowomanist Methodology," in *Ecowomanism, Religion, and Ecology* (Leiden: Brill 2017), 6.

⁷ Harris, *Ecowomanism* (2018) 26

⁸ Harris, *Ecowomanism* (2018) 70

theologian and ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon stated that we must “learn how to dispel the threat of death in order to seize the present life.”⁹ African cosmological practices recognize that death is pervasive, especially under White supremacist systems. All carceral institutions are a threat to the interconnectedness of the divine, human, and natural realm in the web of life. In this way, eco-womanist ethics provides a framework to help interrupt false ideologies and political domination, described by bell hooks as “interlocking axes of race, gender, species, and class oppression...belief in domination, and a belief in the notions of superior and inferior, which are components of all those systems.”¹⁰

Carceral Institutions

Systems of domination include racism, classism, sexism, animism, and ableism, all rooted in White supremacist ideology, one that continues to absolve Eurocentric men from their exploits of dominance through power, profit, and control. This worldview has shaped the Prison Industrial Complex and led to the increase of its damaging ecological footprint. Seven million acres of open space, wildlife habitat, and farmland have been corrupted by the Prison Industrial Complex. There is a prison opened somewhere in rural America every fifteen days.¹¹ The preservation and conservation of the Earth should serve as a motivator to end Carceral Anti-Ecology and the Prison Industrial Complex. A Yoruba proverb states that “The things that you do are the things that you worship.” This proverb rings true for the government and business profiteers of the Prison Industrial Complex. It would serve the PIC profiteers to avoid viewing nature as an empty impersonal object or phenomena; instead they could borrow and live by an eco-womanist ethic to do no harm.

Carceral institutions expose inmates and staff to harmful toxins and waste that cause illness, disease, and death. Inmates produce textiles and electronic commodities that result in water and air pollution. Unfortunately, these individuals have not received proper training and lack

⁹ Canon, Katie, *Womanism and the Soul* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 56.

¹⁰ bell hooks, *Essay* (1989), 175.

¹¹ Huling, Tracy, “Prisons as a Rural Growth Industry: An exploratory discussion of the effects on young African- American men in the inner-cities” (lecture, Consultation of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Washington, D.C. July 2000).

appropriate protective gear and clothing that protect them from the dangers of handling such materials. Numerous consumer goods were manufactured in these institutions, the inmates often receiving little to no pay in response while having to live with a high level of toxic exposure. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does not allocate resources to inspect prison factories and assembly lines systematically and carefully. Some of these carceral institutions infrastructures are declining, causing lead poisoning and industrial pollution. These carceral institutions have a strong need for an oversight environmental committee to establish safety protocols and protective mechanism for inmates and staff. It must be stated that carceral institutions are housed by a large population of Black and Brown people.

The Prison Industrial Complex is a form of slavery. Black and Brown people have been systemically forced into these carceral institutions and essentially made into new slaves. The mental, emotional, and physical abuse that these men and women endure is horrifying. They experience persistent psychological fear regarding their bodies. These men and women suffer greatly because of their "degraded status." Such carceral institutions are a form of environmental racism. The environmental activist Robert Bullard defined environment racism as "any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages, whether intended or unintended, individuals, groups, or communities because of color or race"¹². Preserving both nature and human dignity is important. When and where did human beings become viewed as a commodity? For those who have committed offenses against others or violated someone or something, where is the space for atonement, redemption, and salvation? The financial incentives to house and harm Black and Brown bodies remain at an all-time high. There are spiritual and organizing tools needed to bring attention to the PIC and to demonstrate its inhumane practices. Clergy, activists and concerned citizens should continue to resist, name, and construct a new way of being to tackle Carceral Anti-Ecology. Strengthening environmental justice principles, expanded and adapted to include an

¹² Bullard, Robert, *The Quest for Environmental Justice* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Book Club, 2005), 33.

inclusive eco-womanism ethical framework, would be a great starting point.

Eco-womanists stand on the shoulders of influential pioneer environmental justice activists, such as Hazel Johnson. Ms. Johnson became involved in environmental justice after learning that her Southside Chicago community had the highest rate of cancer compared to any other area in the city. She began "toxic tours" of the affected areas and organized conferences to bring attention to their plight. The moral agency of Ms. Johnson and other eco-womanists are rooted in an ethical consciousness of principles and values that affirms the activists' humanity and the humanity of those in their communities¹³. Like African cosmology, these women ground and center their activism in prayer, ritual, witness, and testimony. "The distinctive feature of traditional African religion lies in its being a way of life, the purpose of religion is to order our relationship with our fellow-men and with our environment, both spiritual and physical. At the roots of it is a quest for harmony between man, the spirit world, nature, and society."¹⁴ It is our divine assignment and responsibility to employ environment justice principles and eco-womanist ethics to work against Carceral Anti-Ecology and other social injustice issues.

One central environmental justice principle affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity, the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from environmental destruction. Like African cosmological principles and practices, the importance of life forms must be practiced and revered. There is also an environmental justice principle that redresses disproportionate impact by targeting action and resources. An organizing body should contact large companies and U.S. government contractors that profit from the Prison Industrial Complex to request funds to address the Carceral Anti-Ecology environmental injustices. The exploration and utilization of eco-womanist thought, and logics can "expand the sources of eco womanist reflection and analysis, helping to establish the development of new methods of analysis that connect theory with praxis and break new ground in interreligious dialogue about earth justice."¹⁵

¹³ Kaalund, Valerie Ann, *Witness to Truth* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 79.

¹⁴ Opoku, K.A., *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International, 1978), 13.

¹⁵ Harris, *Ecowomanism* (2018) 58

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