The Unsustainability of the Prison Industrial Complex

Christopher M. Tinson

Editors’ note: In this issue of DifferenTakes Africana Studies scholar and prison abolition activist Christopher Tinson provides a powerful case for making the unsustainability of the prison industrial complex central to environmental and sustainability politics. The article is based on his recent talk at the PopDev symposium “Is Militarism Sustainable?: The Environmental Consequences of War and the National Security State,” held on September 19, 2013 at Hampshire College.

Betsy Hartmann and Anne Hendrixson

Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. Prison expansion is a new iteration of this theme. Prisons and other locally unwanted land uses accelerate the mortality of modestly educated working people of all kinds in urban and rural settings and show how economic and environmental justice are central to antiracism.

— Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Golden Gulag

There’s a war going on outside
No man is safe from
You can run but you can’t hide forever
From these streets that we done took
You walkin’ with your head down
Scared to look, you shook
Cuz ain't no such thing as halfway crooks.

— Mobb Deep, “Survival of the Fittest”

Americans rarely think of militarism and the ravages of war as a challenge to sustainability. Even more rarely do they think of prisons as unsustainable. Though the U.S. imprisons more people than any other nation, few would consider prisons a threat to our environmental health. But not only are prisons unsustainable, they are anti-sustainability. The very existence of prisons is toxic. In this case, “toxic” is considered anything that promotes death, dis/ease, and or prolonged illness. Prisons are sites of multilayered ecological disaster. It’s no accident that most prisons are located in the boondocks somewhere, occupying old farm grounds or abandoned space, out there, out of sight, out of mind.

Numerous geographic markers help explain the unsustainability of U.S. prisons. Joy James uses
the term “archipelago” to describe the prison industrial complex as links in the chain of punitive logics reflecting state interests of control and discipline. These include private manufacturers offering up technological containment strategies and services running the gamut from brick and mortar to weaponry and body armor. Consider Angola Penitentiary, a former slave plantation. A prison built on a graveyard. Political prisoner Russell Maroon Shoatz calls prisons Death Camps. The very lands that prisons occupy are repurposed places of discipline and degradation, what Alexis Pauline Gumbs has named the combination of “blood and silence [representing] the theft of whole lifetimes into caged survival and exploited labor.”

Toxic work in the “largest sweatshop in America”

In the mid-to-late 1990s, the Federal Prison Industries (FPI) began opening e-waste facilities where they scrap old computer parts and resale them. The first such facility opened in 1994 in Marianna, Florida. Currently, there are a total of eight e-waste facilities owned by FPI. Just last year the New York Times reported that FPI was expanding operations: “F.P.I. has traditionally relied on office furniture, electronics and clothing manufacturing for the bulk of its business, but it has been moving into new industries like renewable energy. The company already has one factory each in New York and Oregon to build solar panels and is looking into making energy-efficient lighting and small wind turbines.” Long known as “the largest sweatshop in America,” paying incarcerated laborers from $0.23 to $1.15 an hour, FPI, also known by its trade name UNICOR, has been taken to task and to court for a range of safety violations directly related to hazardous working conditions. Ironically, many of these violations occurred in UNICOR’s eight different electronic recycling or e-waste facilities.

According to reports, over 120 million pounds of e-waste was processed by UNICOR between 2003-2005. Prison Legal News wrote that, “female prisoners [at Marianna Federal Correctional Institution] would unload truckloads of computers each day and break them down for parts that could be reused or sold, such as processors or Cathode Ray Tubes (or CRTs).” The process by which these parts were retrieved—usually through hammer blows, which produced clouds of toxic computer dust—became the source of many illnesses amongst the women who were hired for such work. Told to work without masks, gloves or protective gear, these inmates were exposed to lead dust and cadmium. “Cadmium and its compounds are highly toxic and exposure to this metal is known to cause cancer and targets the body’s cardiovascular, renal, gastrointestinal, neurological, reproductive, and respiratory systems.” So significant is this risk that there are four different OSHA policies specifically related to cadmium exposure. Female prisoners were also exposed to lead fumes. As of 2008, 26 current and former guards and inmates joined a suit against the U.S. Department of Justice, the Bureau of Prisons, and UNICOR in a case that is sure to spark a slew of other class action suits.

In that 2008 case, even former corrections officers reported being forced into retirement after experiencing random illnesses (including blood clots, kidney failure, and digestive problems) linked to toxins at the recycling site. Former employees of the institution have cited memory loss, temporary blindness, migraine headaches, and swollen uterus, as symptoms of their exposure.

In 2005, the ACLU National Prisons Project documented over 50 cases of “environmental hazards and toxic materials” related to imprisonment in its Know Your Rights pamphlet. As legal precedents, some of these cases date back to the 1970s and 1980s. These included lawsuits and rulings in cases related to inadequate ventilation, excessive heat or excessive cold, lack of drinkable water, toxic or noxious fumes, exposure to sewage, exposure to second hand tobacco smoke, excessive noise, inadequate lighting or constant lighting, exposure to insects, rodents, or other vermin, inadequate food or unsanitary food service, denial of adequate toilet facilities, and exposure to asbestos.

Striking against inhuman conditions

In addition to UNICOR’s violations at federal penitentiary recycling centers, a few examples at the state level emerge. In July 2013, the Coalition for Prisoners’ Rights Newsletter reported on the condition of Texas prison inmates housed in facilities without effective ventilation that reached up to 130 degrees Fahrenheit in summer months. Texas corrections officials, the lapel-poppin’ leaders in state sponsored executions of death row inmates, resisted requests for improved ventilation. In response, an independent group called Texas-Cure (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants) initiated a campaign that would send fans into the facilities.

In March 2013, hunger strikers housed in California’s Susanville prison’s administrative segregation (or solitary) unit petitioned the corrections administration
seeking “adequate and timely medical care” and the sanitizing of tiers and showers. They expressed the wish “to be treated as humans”. Other reports indicate spatial constraints, bunking, and double-bunking, placing cots in areas of the facilities that might otherwise be open or recreational space, and over-manning of cells as deteriorating conditions that register as unsustainability.

In California over 30,000 prisoners participated in a hunger strike that spanned 30 different penal facilities throughout the months of July and August, 2013, including Corcoran, San Quentin, Susanville, Salinas Valley, New Folsom and Pelican Bay, among others. Though the strike was recently suspended, their struggle is entering its next phase. Amongst their list of core demands, they prioritized: an elimination of group punishment and abuse (based on race, ethnic or community affiliation), a demand for prison compliance with the U.S. Commission on Safety and Abuse, especially calling for the end of the wanton use of solitary confinement for reasons that are purely punitive, and more nutritious food options.

Hunger strikes directly repudiate prison environments and the policies that support them. From Guantanamo Bay, Cuba to Georgia, prisoners defied policy with their bodies. In December 2010, the Georgia strikers listed demands that included decent health care, improved living conditions, and nutritional meals that contain vegetables and fruit. They directly evoked the Eighth Amendment, demanding an end to cruel and unusual punishment, especially for minor rules infractions.

As unsustainable as they are from a human and environmental health perspective, prisons, as Gumbs reminds us, actively sustain violence, trauma, insecurity, malnourishment, sickness, all sorts of harshness, corrupting, corruptible, and diseased performances of gender, and psychic, physical, emotional, and sexual scars. Prisons are spaces bereft of love. The prison is a coordination of violence rituals where all forms of interactions and human contact are contested and fraught with struggles over power. Preexisting problems are exacerbated rather than resolved in prisons. As present day extensions of centuries and acres of violence, prisons lack all capacity to heal. Paraphrasing Maroon Shoatz, in prisons we witness the regulation of death. Following Ruth Gilmore’s lead, understanding the unsustainability of imprisonment encourages the perception of racism as a sociopolitical-environmental issue that capitalizes from the toxic process of maintaining and managing those labeled disposable.

What rights do prisoners have?

The Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is supposed to protect against cruel and unusual punishment. How can sustainability concerns be considered under this? Though these protections provide some form of “cover” for the documented, what protections do undocumented immigrant detainees possess? Do no-contact visits constitute torture? Of course, in prisons any rights can be suspended at any given time, for the most arbitrary reason or no reason at all. In fact, the suspension of rights is a daily operation of the prison. The hunger strikes and the lawsuits against environmental toxicity defy the routine excesses of every day, hour, minute, and second forms of violence that can be exacted without a moment’s notice, revealing the “culture of torture” rooted in the history of racialized and gendered criminalization.

What about the unpredictable and often unnecessary use of solitary confinement? The New York Times recently documented that after 15 or so days, ICE detainees placed in solitary confinement begin showing signs of disequilibrium. Considering that, what damage might 30-plus years in such conditions do? We can also include the denial of medical treatment for inmates with preexisting ailments or abusing incarcerated persons who have become seriously ill while captive as part of the punitive prison ecology.

On October 1, 2013, Angola Three member, Herman Wallace, who spent the last 41 years of his life in solitary confinement, was ordered to be released from prison upon a ruling from Judge Brian Jackson. But the order came too late. Wallace, who died three days later at the age of 71, had been living with advanced liver cancer since being diagnosed in June. Wallace was accused and convicted in the 1972 stabbing death of Angola prison guard Brent Miller. An all-white, all-male jury, and prosecutors who withheld evidence of his innocence, obtained that conviction. Albert Woodfox, the third member of the Angola Three, is still in solitary confinement, subject to the humiliation of daily cavity and strip searches. It is no wonder that after prolonged exposure to the culture of violence carried out by state and private prison forces, compounding the social violence that led to imprisonment in the first place, most inmates have to cope with P.T.I.S.D. (Post-Traumatic Imprisonment Stress Disorder), as well as deteriorating health.

After we know what we know, and know what we didn’t want to know about these conditions, do we care? Instead of supporting prisoners’ efforts at justice and
redress, there is the tendency to rationalize these conditions. We imagine a reason they must exist rather than bear the responsibility of saying no one deserves the compounded violence of the state.

I relate these accounts to urge us to go further than court orders and lawsuits in our analysis and our actions. Unsustainability is a requirement of carceral capitalism. These are strategic punishments, demands of state reorganization under neoliberalism. Prisons represent examples of sustained unsustainability because they privilege violence and death, and traffic in all forms of human deterioration and lifelessness. Prisons reflect the logic of stigmatization and regulation of whole populations of people, be they Mexican, Muslim, African descendant, malnourished, maladjusted, or manically depressed. A concert of new forms and technologies adapted to a pre-existing archaic logic of control, violence, and ritualized punishment.

In this scenario, we have no choice but to view decarceration as central to any discussion of sustainability politics. Here, I want to return to Alexis Pauline Gumbs who has written eloquently, coupling the call for the abolition of prisons with a profound love for the possibility of a renewed environment, for the ground Trayvon didn’t have the right to stand on. She writes: “In order to respond to violence without reinforcing the prison industrial complex it is crucial to turn over the soil of our communities to see what [or who?] is buried and growing there.” What are we willing to uproot to ensure our future is sustainable?

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Notes

14. The Angola Three consist of Herman Wallace, Albert Woodfox, and Robert Hilary King. To date, only King has been released from prison.