

“America’s Trash Can”:
Toxic Prisons and Environmental Racism

You can’t escape the toxins that are in the water at State Correctional Institution Fayette. BP, who spent 10 years there, speaks of how you feel it every time you take a sip, when you brush your teeth, when you try to get clean in the shower. Almost everyone inside reports signs of water pollution such as discoloration and tasting and smelling of sulfur.¹ The guards avoid it at all cost, drinking from bottled water, which is considered contraband for the people incarcerated there.² Report after report from people on the inside describe a pervasive black dust everywhere you go, collecting in the prison yard, on window sills, on freshly fallen snow, building up around the vents inside cells.³ One person wrote, “You clean it, and about an hour later the dust is back.”⁴

Built on top of what was once one of the largest coal preparation plants in the world, where an estimated 40 million tons of coal refuse were dumped,⁵ and currently surrounded by a coal dumping site owned by Matt Canestrone Contracting (MCC), coal defines the landscape of SCI Fayette and the surrounding town of Labelle, PA. Since MCC began operating the site 23 years ago, they have consistently violated the Air Pollution control act, which is supposed to prohibit certain substances, such as coal ash, from leaving the dump site,⁶ hence the pervasive black dust that people at SCI Fayette have described. The Citizens Coal Council (CCC) carried out a series of tests at the Labelle site, which revealed the presence of high levels of toxic metals associated with coal ash in

¹ Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

² Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

³ Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

⁴ Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

⁵ Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

⁶ Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

the surface and groundwater. They collected samples at streams, wells, and drainage pipes, which contained levels of dissolved iron over 60 times greater than the Pennsylvania standard, 5 times the standard for manganese, which can cause permanent brain damage through long term exposure, irritate the nose, throat and lungs, causing coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath if inhaled, and may cause harm to the liver and decrease fertility in males⁷, and 10 times the standard for sulfate.⁸ Further testing by CCC also found levels exceeding state or federal standards for thallium, which is the main ingredient in rat poison and can cause nervous system damage and lung, heart, liver and kidney problems if ingested⁹, arsenic, which can cause nervous system damage, cardiovascular harm, and urinary tract cancers through ingestion, lung cancer through inhalation, and skin cancer through skin contact¹⁰, cobalt, boron, which can cause irritation of the eye, nose, and throat over short periods of time and damage to the testes, intestines, liver, kidneys, and brain, and can eventually lead to death if ingested in large quantities¹¹, aluminum, which can cause scarring of lungs with symptoms of cough and shortness of breath through long term exposure to it's dust, and may be linked to dementia¹², total dissolved solids, and both excessively high and low pH levels.¹³

One person incarcerated at SCI Fayette said, "I've never been to a prison that so many people were ill. Perhaps the most alarming thing was the age of those affected. It wasn't just the elderly...too many young people having issues they have no business

⁷ Earth Justice Initiative, "Harm to Human Health from Breathing and Ingesting Coal Ash Toxicants," published July 20, 2017.

⁸ Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

⁹ Earth Justice Initiative, "Harm to Human Health from Breathing and Ingesting Coal Ash Toxicants," published July 20, 2017.

¹⁰ Earth Justice Initiative, "Harm to Human Health from Breathing and Ingesting Coal Ash Toxicants," published July 20, 2017.

¹¹ Earth Justice Initiative, "Harm to Human Health from Breathing and Ingesting Coal Ash Toxicants," published July 20, 2017.

¹² Earth Justice Initiative, "Harm to Human Health from Breathing and Ingesting Coal Ash Toxicants," published July 20, 2017.

¹³ Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

having.”¹⁴ The most commonly reported health problems are respiratory, throat, and sinus related conditions, which include development of lymph nodes around the throat, cysts growing in the mouth, lung infections, difficulty breathing, etc....¹⁵ Another person wrote in saying that since being transferred from SCI Houtzdale to SCI Fayette in 2016, he has experienced throat irritation so bad that he has to clear his throat at least 50 times an hour in addition to discoloration of certain areas of his skin.¹⁶ Marcus Santos experiences swelling on his face, arms, and legs, so severe that a doctor confirmed it was life threatening. Marcus wrote, “I suffered almost everyday of the 15 months I was at that prison. I almost died due to throat swelling several times. Given tums for throat swelling and told that if I start choking there is nothing that he can do for me. At that point it became clear to me that I am being left for dead. With no other course to take or relief in sight I called my brother and told him that I don’t believe I’m going to make it through the rest of my time and to please take care of my son.”¹⁷ Other commonly reported medical issues at SCI Fayette include skin irritation, diarrhea, burning eyes, stomach pain, nausea, rashes, extreme itchiness, frequent headaches. One person wrote, “My whole entire body has broken out. The water is getting worse everyday. I have hives. I scratch all day. I have soares around my body. My face have so many bumps on it. My skin is irritated 24/7 throughout my sleep. I have stomach pains, diarrhea, painful rashes, etc. I literally itch while taking a shower. It’s sad because I’m locked up on this life threatening conditioning. This block I’m housed on effects me worst for some odd reason. I have big black spot on my back that looks like moles. My energy changed due to the water I believe. I feel very

¹⁴ (can’t include my citation as it would give away this person's identity. It is from a list of testimonies collected by the toxic prisons committee at the Human Rights Coalition)

¹⁵ Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

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¹⁷ Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

uncomfortable 24/7. I'm itching as I write this letter. I feel as though this jail itself is committing a crime. Attempted murder. This area is not for human consumption"¹⁸

When it comes to cancer and other illnesses that require a diagnosis, it is extremely difficult to get a true sense of the numbers. Numerous people at SCI Fayette have reported that medical staff will delay diagnostic testing until it seems that patients will not survive without emergency medical care.¹⁹ There is often a general attitude of hostility and pattern of neglect from the medical staff. One person reported that he's "seen guys literally vomiting, and nursing staff will say, 'oh he's just faking it.'"²⁰ An individual with brain cancer wrote, "I've been asking medical for some type of CT scan for years because I was having headaches everyday. They keep telling me it was my sinus but I knew it was more than that. They sent me out for a CT scan and when I return, the medical staff here told me nothing was on my CT scan and they did not see anything. The day after that I passed out and was rush to Allegheny Hospital. They took another CT scan and found the cancer, it was at stage four and went to my skull."²¹ The state of medical care at SCI Fayette, which is a pretty typical representation of prison health care, further complicates determining the cause of all the illnesses that people are facing, as it is difficult to determine which problems are due to lack of medical care and which stem from a possible reaction to coal ash. While lack of access to healthcare exacerbates the problems people at SCI Fayette face, the people writing from SCI Fayette much more frequently describe symptoms that they did not have before arriving at the prison than people writing from other prisons in Pennsylvania.²²

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²¹ Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

²² Abolitionist Law Center and the Human Rights Coalition. No escape: Exposure to Toxic Coal Waste at State Correctional Institution Fayette. Published September 2, 2014.

The fact that this prison is built on coal dumping grounds and nothing has been done about it paralleled with the treatment the people incarcerated there receive reflects the societal belief that incarcerated people don't matter. "Environmental quality and inequality depend on one's place in the world."²³ Those in society with less resources, who aren't granted the freedom to choose the space they will live in, whether that is because of poverty, deportation, colonialism, or incarceration, as I focus on here, can't escape the environmentally unsafe conditions that people in positions of power have created. Geographer and Abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as "the state-sanctioned and extralegal exposure of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."²⁴ Given the way incarceration disproportionately affects BIPOC, locking people up in toxic prisons and putting them at risk of death is a clear form of environmental racism, and this should be of utmost concern to anyone who considers themselves an environmentalist. Western capitalist ideologies have long looked upon colonized land and colonized people as "waste" that they can put to use.²⁵ When I had the privilege of interviewing BP, who, as I noted previously, spent 10 years at SCI Fayette, he spoke of how people have been inculturated and trained to believe that incarcerated people should be rejected, ignored, and thrown away, saying, "the prison in America is the trash can- it is where they send people that they no longer wish to be bothered with."

Voices of incarcerated people are silenced in every way- it is part of the isolation of prison- and therefore, have been left out of social movements relating to issues that they are most affected by, such as environmental issues. People in prison are not considered in

²³ ROBYN, LINDA M. "ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM: Contaminated Water in Indigenous and Minority Communities." In *Indigenous Environmental Justice*, (TUCSON: University of Arizona Press, 2020). Pg 20.

²⁴ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 28.

²⁵ REED, T. V. "NOVELS OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: TOXIC COLONIALISM AND THE NATURE OF CULTURE." In *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present*, pg 256. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

any of the EPA's policies.²⁶ Incarcerated people are dehumanized and ignored, making environmental issues in prisons a niche issue that many remain unaware of. BP says, "the incarcerated people's voices being stifled is the continual residue of what this nation was founded on from the very beginning: separation, segregation, classism, one upmanship, superiority, inferiority, identity conflicts, and tussles of worth and value." When the voices of incarcerated people are ignored, it perpetuates further ignorance. BP says, "there is a lack of value of the strength, courage, insights that certain incarcerated people can bring to any table. Once the voices of the incarcerated are heard, it will allow those who are functional in movements like the environmental movements, to broaden their view." The broadening of this view of who we think about when we think about environmental issues will help us break down social hierarchy and reclaim the commons.

²⁶ Bradshaw, "Tombstone Towns and Toxic Prisons." *Critical Criminology* 26, no. 3 (September 2018): 407–22

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