

Carve Out Living Space: Creativity, Counter-environments, and the Formation of Salvific Community in Prison

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ABSTRACT

In an era of mass incarceration and systematic social dismantling, US prisons function as death-dealing environments. Yet, people in a prison for women use their creativity to fashion communities that celebrate life in the face of death and welcome others into a space of being and belonging. Critical carceral creativity refers to this capacity of people incarcerated to generate new possibilities for life in the midst of suffering, to recognize and resist obstacles to living, and ultimately to create counter-environments in prison that make living more possible. I ultimately claim that healing counter-environments in prison are salvific, signifying God's life-affirming presence and preference in contexts of confinement.

A SCENE FROM INSIDE

The cake is *tres leches*, Morgan says, even though I have never heard of more than one form of milk in this place. Her hair is intricately braided, held together by elastic ribbons from worn-out clothing. "It smells like sticky buns, you know – the kind you used to trade your chips for in middle school." But this is not school, and these sticky buns have matriculated to a new form, reconstituted with what she says is a concoction of cream fillings from cookies collected from around the range.

"Can you sign this?" she asks, waving her manicured hands, nails painted with a mixture of eye shadow and floor wax, the bright magenta a pleasant contrast to the drab monotone

aesthetic of the prison. Morgan brings me an oversized, homemade card. Despite the lack of scissors here, there are no ragged edges. I open the pages glossed by packing tape to the sight of pop-up images torn from magazines with calligraphy that rivals Hallmark. Next to me, someone scribbling feverishly — lyrics for a new poem or maybe her theology homework — stops what she is doing to participate. We both add our names to the dozens of other greetings and well-wishes. This is how I am invited in, by name only, to a celebration my identity as a teacher precludes me from witnessing firsthand.

Painting a picture in words of what I will miss, Morgan begins the story: “After the cake, Dawn,” she signals to the one we all know as the resident singer, “is going to lead everyone in singing Happy Birthday.”

“The basic version and then the Black version,” Dawn interjects with a laugh before bellowing out Stevie Wonder’s rendition of the song.

“But here’s the most exciting part...” My narrator’s voice lowers as not to echo throughout the barren halls of the school building, “we’re going to do a drag show! And they’re going to be in it!” She points to two other students in the room, one laughing and the other folding into his chair in anticipation. “Don’t worry,” our storyteller says as she embraces the crumpled over colleague, pulling him up and into her arms. She rattles off names, some I know, others I do not, of those who will do hair and makeup and costumes. Interrupting a list of details that could have filled the next three hours, someone entered the class saying — “stop talking, they’re coming.” As quickly as the story began, it ended, as the story’s subject entered the school hall. Today was their birthday, and tonight, a community of people would gather in celebration of the life of a person surviving a life sentence without parole.

This scene is emblematic of any number of Fridays I spent teaching in this prison.¹ Creativity always abounds here. As a curator of theological learning experiences in prison, I was used to displays of ingenuity. The week prior, I offered feedback on final projects from the Biblical Foundations class: a self-made pop-up children’s book retelling the creation stories, a reimagined and enacted history of abuse and resilience from Bathsheba’s perspective (in costume), and a three-dimensional family “tree” focusing on Ishmael and highlighting the importance of communities whose histories are silenced. These students were used to producing in scarcity.² Contemporary research around prisons and prison-art continue to highlight creative practices in prison, marveling at what people can do and produce in scarcity. But there was something remarkable in how these students artfully transgressed prison conventions to collaborate, support, challenge, and ultimately affirm one another. In the crucible of incarceration, these students were using their creativity not only to produce works of their imagination but also to fashion communities to celebrate life in an environment that “feels like death,” and welcome others into a space

of being and belonging. In a prison regime that “punishes people who do not belong” and continues to punish and suppress attempts to create belonging, any place of healthy belonging that emerges in prison is extraordinary.³

In this prison, people create spaces where, despite the name of the institution (prison for women), there are shes, hes, and theys.⁴ Despite the barren walls, limited work and social activities, and monochromatic state-mandated attire, there are birthday parties for lifers and drag shows for recreation. Despite the threat of disciplinary action, there is hugging, singing, communal cooking, and creative writing. In a space equated with death, there is laughter and life. The people in this scene routinely transgress prison protocol to create possibilities for life for themselves and extend those possibilities to others. The space depicted in the opening scene *is* something other than the prison. It is a counter space to the death-dealing environment of incarceration. The creativity by which counter-environments emerge is what I call critical carceral creativity and is essential to carving out living spaces in prison.

Borrowing the phrase from Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon, “to carve out living space,” is to create one’s freedom in conditions of moral constraint; to activate a space of grace inside incarceration.⁵ This essay explores how people in a US prison for women use creativity critically to create spaces in prison where people can resist the death-dealing environment and generate possibilities for belonging and healing. As a Christian practical theologian, I ultimately claim that healing counter-environments created in prison are salvific, signifying God’s life-affirming presence and preference in contexts of confinement.

In what follows, I explain how prisons function as death-dealing environments that criminalize ways of being and belonging in a prison for women. Second, I explicate how carceral creativity functions to create freeing counter-environments in prison where being and belonging are (re)constructed. Moreover, I name carceral creativity as theologically significant. Finally, I reflect on the ethics of witnessing carceral creativity, how it challenges us to choose whether we will participate in the perpetuation of death-dealing environments or if we will actively participate in the carving out of life-affirming ones.

PRISONS AS DEATH-DEALING ENVIRONMENTS

Death has been and continues to be the dominant way humans think about remedying crime. In the history of criminal justice, physical death was a leading form of punishment. But a humanitarian movement shifted practices away from physical death to what scholars call social death, suggesting that human response to crime merely shifted from one form of physical termination to other insidious forms of social and psychological assault.⁶ According to the words of a nineteenth-century warden in a New York prison, prisons are designed to be an experience of death – an experience that ostracizes persons from broader social connections and removes them from the social order. According to one warden, convicts were to “receive no letter or intelligence from or concerning their friends, or any information on any subject out of prison.” Relatives were not permitted to visit with an inmate, and they, in turn, were not allowed to correspond with them. “The prisoner,” a Sing-Sing chaplain of this period recalled, “was taught to consider himself dead to all without the prison walls.” A warden reportedly told an incoming group of inmates that they were “to be literally buried from the world.”⁷ The prisons we have today descend from

this obsession with punishment as “systematic social dismantling.”⁸ To this end, social death is not just descriptive of what happens when someone becomes incarcerated; it describes the entire process and philosophy of punishment. Prisons are death-dealing environments.

Systematic social death by incarceration involves intentionally and continually erasing or distorting relational and environmental connections that give life meaning. Criminal justice scholars suggest that removing (and continuing to remove) social markers of meaning and identity is an essential precursor for agency and power to shift from the self to the prison.⁹ As such, social death practices intentionally disrupt attempts for people incarcerated to develop a sense of belonging—to themselves or one another. Prisons as death-dealing environments seek to diminish, degrade and ultimately destroy a sense of being and belonging; of selfhood and self-in-relationship that is rooted in an understanding of a person’s full human dignity and integrity. In this way, social death becomes necessary for the penal project to fulfill its purpose.

SOCIAL DEATH AND THE CRIMINALIZATION OF BEING AND BELONGING

Many scholars have written about the relationship between social death and imprisonment, even how people in prison resist the death-dealing effects.¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this essay to revisit the long history. However, I want to highlight how social death functions in this prison for women to criminalize being and belonging. I do so by drawing our attention to how prisons regulate identity and relationality by prescribing gender and sexual norms. Lisa Marie Cacho’s work on social death helps us understand how social death goes beyond the criminalization of actions to depraving bodies and being.

In her work *Social Death: Racialized Rightness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, Cacho describes social death as the dark side of social value. Social value refers to one’s worth and personhood. Social death conversely refers to the permanent ineligibility of personhood for specific populations, populations that do not fit respectable domesticity or heteronormative depictions of US norms and values. Bodies, thereby, become marked as disposable and legitimate targets of violence. Historically, Cacho argues, these are the bodies of poor people of color – Black, brown, and immigrant bodies. She maintains that US law has criminalized the recreational activities, survival economies, and intimate relationships of these people, the law reifying both their actions and their bodies as criminal. Today, in US prisons, protocols continue this history of criminalizing bodies and relational practices that do not fit so-called US white, heteronormative, Judeo-Christian values. As a result, one’s race, religion, gender expression, or sexual orientation can mark them as delinquent and sanction forms of violence and hyper-supervision, even without proof of an actual offense. To the prison, the performance of their body is offensive enough.

In the prison where I worked, death-loving prison practices maintain a system that punishes nonconformity by replacing opportunities for self-expression with demands for conformity and supplanting practices of belonging with calls for isolation. The goal is to create an infantilized subject that perpetually seeks its definition not from a community of peers but from a system designed to destroy possibilities for quality of life. For too many Black, brown, lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, Muslim, atheist, and immigrant bodies, attempts are futile to gain any recognition from the penal system of being anything other than a criminal.

Sociologist Dr. Lora Bex Lempert, in her research with women serving life sentences, frames practices

of regulating clothing and appearance as part of the process of becoming a prisoner. In departments of correction, the label “prisoner” is a definitional frame that distorts notions of identity. According to Lempert:

...for reasons of control and management, correctional systems work to ensure that placement in prison is coexistent with the identity ‘prisoner.’ Admission procedures convert a person into an object, “inmate,” that is subject to administrative routines, like replacing a woman’s name, a significant identity indicator, with a number, which also marks her as belonging to the institution, or by replacing her distinctive personal clothing with mandatory uniforms designed for men...[Uniforms] are the overt designation of imprisoned men and women as property of the State...¹¹

Lempert goes on to recount how even the tattooing of the body in prison can be sanctioned by the state as “destruction of state property.”¹² To take agency over the presentation of one’s own body can be a criminal act. Policies that remove control over one’s own body and promote the stripping away of identity are a form of psychological warfare, according to *Lauryn*, an agent in Lempert’s research. For *Lauryn*, these efforts “enforce conformity” in an effort to “suppress choices and impose organizational identities...to become what the environment dictates.”¹² What Lempert’s analysis shows, and what *Lauryn* signals, is that prison policies that control bodily presentation are experienced by many women as attempts of the prison to own their bodies and deny them control over their own bodily expression and identity. Some people, like a woman from the theology program named *Arabella*, resist relinquishing self-definition and self-expression to the prison. While prison policies attempt to regulate bodies and identity, *Arabella* explains her viewpoint this way: “I may be in prison but I’m still a woman, they can’t take that from me.” We may discern a similar oppositional stance from the narrator in our opening scene.

Recall Morgan, the manicured storyteller. She made nail art out of magazine cut-outs and floor wax, turned strips of cloth into ribbons for her hair, and turned a single pallet of eyeshadow into a makeup kit. Why such time and attention to the presentation of her body? Reading the scene against Lempert’s analysis and *Arabella*’s claim, this woman’s actions might be viewed as a form of aesthetic rebellion, her body becoming the text through which she voices her concerns and takes her body back from the institution’s deforming and objectifying hands. She uses her body as a critique, refusing to let an institution strip her of her desired self-expression. She re-members herself. An embodied practice of resistance, perhaps Morgan is speaking against, talking back to, and testifying about the degrading effects of prison culture, participating in her own search for justice, her own search for self-definition.

REFUSING TO BELONG TO THE STATE

Resisting the prison’s attempt to turn their bodies into property that belongs to the State happens in part through a practice of breaking silence. Patricia Hill Collins defines breaking silence as a pragmatic strategy used to reclaim humanity amid social systems that gain strength by objectifying and oppressing.¹⁴ Researching and writing about Black women in the US, Collins locates this strategic skill in the lives of

African American women, real and fictional, throughout history. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins relates breaking silence with the acquisition of one's voice, a crucial feature on the journey toward "self-definition, self-valuation, and an empowered self."¹⁵ For Collins, breaking silence is the first step toward healing. In later writings, she ultimately contends that breaking silence is always related to a search for justice, a political act that "not only captures human dignity but also constitutes a profound act of resistance."¹⁶ In this way, breaking silence recognizes and exposes the penal system's death-dealing practices and begins the work of carving out living spaces in prison.

The drag show is an example of breaking silence, drawing attention to how prison's gendered protocols seek to deform and inhibit being and belonging. The act of dressing in drag is a radical turn on its head of how prison tries to force people incarcerated to succumb to a prescribed construction of gender. In a different way from that of our storyteller, Morgan, the drag show pushes back against a prison culture that wants to define gender expression and sexual orientation toward a cisgender, heteronormative ideal. For example, I witnessed resistance among some prison staff and volunteers to respect forms of gender identity and expression that were not stereotypically feminine. "If you're in this prison, you're a woman and you need to act like one," is a refrain I heard reverberate from an employee throughout a corridor filled with incarcerated people. By exaggerating femininity in a drag show, those who identify as male in a US prison for women mock the prison's desired ideal. The drag show functions as a liberating play that "protest[s] against the evil plays of the oppressor and the exploiter."¹⁷ Political and playful, both the adorned body and the drag show demonstrate how embodied creativity are ways of breaking silence; mechanisms for survival when access to resources may depend on the ability to play or perform identities acceptable to the prison.

Performing a normative ideal of an obedient woman is not the only means of resistance. Again, Arabella offers perspective. Explaining how she "demand[s] humanity" in prison, she states matter-of-factly, "I cry." Affirming Arabella's confession, a colleague adds, "Sometimes, you have to throw a tantrum" before admitting, "I think it wouldn't work as well if we were men." These women understand how gender stereotypes work in this prison, and they use them to "work the system." In a way different from the drag show, these women exaggerate feminine characteristics to get what they need from the administration. They knowingly play into a different but acceptable prison identity: that of an emotionally erratic and infantile woman. "But we're doing it to get an education...or new pants, or hot water...or to get [our] toilet plunged!"¹⁸ For these women, performing the prison ideal, obedient or infantile, but never self-assured, are only pragmatic means of resisting the death-dealing environment of incarceration.

To summarize, prisons are death-dealing environments that effectively criminalize incarcerated persons' attempts to resist the definitional frame of "prisoner" and (re)construct ways of being and belonging in prison. Because a prisoner is "not an immutable identity," people in prison can and do exercise creativity to construct spaces where identity and community can form apart from the prison.¹⁹ Critical carceral creativity is central to how these spaces are formed.

CONCEPTUALIZING CRITICAL CARCERAL CREATIVITY

Theologian Dr. Courtney Goto defines creativity as "the capacity to make what exists into something

new or enlivening to oneself”²⁰ For Goto, creativity thrives in freedom, making the idea of carceral creativity a seeming contradiction. Carceral creativity is defined simply as the creative capacity, practices, and productions of people surviving incarceration. Goto suggests that while creativity flourishes in contexts of freedom and peace, it can also assist “in survival and resistance because it summons possibilities, grants agency, and fosters hope.”²¹ Here lies the dialectical tension in creativity. On the one hand, creativity thrives in freedom. On the other, it assists and persists in times of oppression, disenfranchisement, and confinement. Creativity can both thrive in freedom and create freedom where there is little to none. Goto calls this dual capacity of creativity the greatest hope for transformation. The type of creativity that assists in survival and resistance in prison, which is enlivening to oneself and one’s community and summons possibilities, grants agency, and fosters hope, is *critical* carceral creativity.

Critical carceral creativity is the capacity of people incarcerated to survive – to recognize and resist obstacles to living in order to generate new possibilities for life in the midst of suffering. It is the capacity to resist carceral forces that deny life and simultaneously construct spaces that affirm life. As a capacity, it encompasses many categories of creative expression toward the construction of living spaces in prison. I have already discussed aesthetic creativity and how it creates temporal freedom for the body. Now, I highlight two additional types of creativity used to construct freedom in unfreedom: erotic and economic creativity.

Erotic creativity refers to the relational imagination employed by people incarcerated to be with and belong to self, others, and the Divine. Erotic creativity is most noticeable in how people create families, find intimate partner love, care for one another, and join together in prison. I can recount numerous stories from women who entered prison before having children. They would tell me about their “babies” – about the younger women they mentor and help raise while in prison. These same women speak fondly of their “sisters.” One woman said it this way, “I have never felt sisterhood like I felt in prison.” While some scholars call these relationships fictive kin or pseudo-families, for the women I encountered, their babies, sisters, brothers, husbands, and wives in prison are a *real* family. Erotic creativity generates opportunities for belonging that cross lines of racial, sexual, and religious difference, assisting people in creating relational bonds with people they may never have considered.

My use of erotic is shaped by Dr. Willie James Jennings’s use of the term in his book *After Whiteness, An Education in Belonging*. There, Jennings uses erotic to refer to the joining together of peoples in communion, intimacy, and belonging. Moreover, he contends that the erotic desire to commune and to belong is more than a desire for social gathering but rather is a deep desire of belonging, an intimacy I suspect is made difficult but not impossible in carceral spaces. Drawing from a long history of feminist scholarship on the erotic as that which “draws us toward one another,” Jennings identifies erotic power as that which “finds its home in the divine ecstasy in which God relentlessly gives Godself to us, joyfully opening the divine life as our habitation.”²² In Christian tradition, the erotic power that draws creation together is witnessed in the life and work of Jesus Christ. For Jennings, the erotic impulse toward communion is God’s vision, God’s dream for creation.

The erotic impulse toward communion, intimacy, and belonging persists and expands in the face of incarceration. God’s dream for creation does not cease with a prison sentence, even one of life without

parole. In a system that seeks division and dominion over human relationality, people creatively enact new ways of belonging. Through erotic power, people create communities of belonging and inclusion in prison and *participate* in the power of God to gather together.²³ Counter-environments that support, heal, and value life in prison are present-day iterations of the erotic creativity Jesus demonstrated between Mary and the disciple at the foot of the cross. At the site of death, Jesus redefined and recreated relationships to promote healing and inclusion. As people creatively reconstitute and reconstruct relationships in prison, they exercise erotic creativity and create a form of relational and erotic freedom.

Economic creativity is the second type of carceral creativity used to construct freeing spaces in prison. Prison practices rooted in social death isolationist philosophy forbid and restrict incarcerated persons from sharing resources. The rationale for this is unclear, but according to people in prison, it is “against policy” to collect goods for others. Let me share a story from the students in the theology program to illustrate this point. During a class on Theologies and Practices of Care, students related a story about how complicated it could be to practice caring for others in prison. The story was about a woman in one of the dorms who decided to collect goods so that everyone would have something for Christmas, especially those without family on the outside. Eventually, most of the people who had something to offer participated in the collection. This display of coordinated, communal care and concern, they said, was technically “illegal.” To help us understand the impact, a student interjected, “If the officers found out, they could have taken everything and sent us to lockdown.” In what I suggest is a display of economic creativity, these people collected goods anyway.

Economic carceral creativity is how incarcerated people redefine the inner workings of the prison. While there are countless stories about destructive forms of the prison economy’s inner workings, this story offers another perspective of how economic creativity can be a source of good toward collective well-being and quality of life. Risking punishment, the people in that dorm resisted the isolationism of the prison. Instead, they focused on communal care and responsibility through sharing resources – reminding this Christian theologian of *koinonia* and the image of the early church in Acts.

CREATING COUNTER-ENVIRONMENTS FOR LIVING

The ultimate goal or purpose of critical carceral creativity is the creation of freeing counter-environments in prison that make living more possible. To define counter-environments, I turn again to the work of Dr. Courtney Goto. Drawing on the work of Jürgen Moltmann, Goto defines counter-environments as sites where people “feel, see, and know newness from the living of it.”²⁴ The newness in counter-environments is what beckons a sense of aliveness. Goto suggests that “[w]hen human beings exercise their creativity, it fosters a sense of aliveness in them, as being creative leads to a sense of feeling real...[and] Feeling real, which means having a sense of self and of being, is essential to health.”²⁵

As counter-environments in prison create spaces for aliveness, they simultaneously function to critique the institution itself, exposing the prison as a death-dealing space. Philosopher Marshall McLuhan was a scholar of media theory and one who influenced Moltmann’s use of counter-environment. McLuhan suggests that “[e]nvironments are not just containers, but are processes that change the content totally... antienvironments, or counterenvironments (sic)...are indispensable means of becoming aware of the

environment in which we live and of the environments we create for ourselves technically.”²⁶ For McLuhan, counter-environments are revelatory, enabling us to see the environment and to understand it more clearly. Critical carceral creativity used to form counter-environments functions as a revelatory practice, exposing the reality of the prison as a death-dealing environment even as it simultaneously constructs spaces for living. Engaging critical carceral creativity, people in prison carve out living spaces for themselves.

Using Goto and McLuhan’s definitions, we can name the theology classroom and the birthday gathering site in prison as possible counter-environments. Students describe the theological classroom, for example, as a place where “I don’t feel like I’m in prison” and “I feel like myself.” Describing scenes like the birthday party, students disclose, “you forget for a moment where you are, and you feel normal again.” These testimonies suggest feelings of newness and aliveness and reconnect people in these counter-environments with a sense of self and being. This, according to Goto, is essential to health. As such, counter-environments in prison provide space for people to reunite with themselves and to (re)member themselves. This is a healing act.

In stark contrast to the death-dealing environment of prison, living spaces refer to environments that are not only healing but also *freeing*. This freedom is the type Dr. Emilie Townes describes as a temporary state with moments of release, triumph, and hope.²⁷ The experience of freedom in unfreedom creates a quality of life, burdened and imperfect as it may be, beyond that which is determined by the death-loving institution. Through pragmatic visioning, people find ways to create temporary states of release and hopefulness in prison. As such, the constructive promise of carceral creativity lies in its ability to (re) create spaces where living can occur — to *create* freedom for bodies to be self-defined and to belong. Yet again, both the theological classroom and the birthday party are examples of freeing spaces created in incarceration. Freeing spaces are creatively constructed sites to imagine, construct, embody, and extend freedom in unfreedom, where people employ different forms of creative agency to construct new models of living.

By using erotic and economic creativity to transform death-loving spaces into life-affirming ones, people in prison can make a type of freeing environment for themselves. Countering the death-loving logic of the prison, life-affirming and life-sustaining logics attempt to govern these counter-environments to form temporal and imperfect communities. These are communities where life triumphs in, over, and against the death-dealing environment. These are communities that save.

A THEOLOGY OF CRITICAL CARCERAL CREATIVITY

To say that critical carceral creativity aids in creating healing and freeing counter-environments in prison that are salvific is to make a theological claim about God’s presence and preference in an era of mass incarceration. I maintain that when spaces of life emerge in death-dealing environments, God is present saving, and affirming life in a preferential way. I make this claim in the vein of womanist and other liberationist theologians throughout history — that God has been and is present in times of constrained agency and suffering, that God is particularly and intentionally found saving in the midst of oppression; and that not just behind barbed wire but especially there, God is present making a way out of no way.

Making a way out of no way is a salvific claim — a womanist claim with universal applicability about

God's presence and human possibility in contexts of oppression, suffering, and confinement. Building on the work of womanists before her, theologian Dr. Monica Coleman writes that making a way out of no way "is the way of life that appears in situations that threaten death...when Black women rebel against death-dealing situations and God offers possibilities that were previously unforeseen, a way is made out of no way."²⁸ Coleman goes on to explain "making a way out of no way" as a constructive womanist concept of salvation that comes from the new vision God gives to Black women, "who then have significant agency in moving toward a just and participatory society. By operating in life threatening situations, this vision actually does struggle against the death dealing powers that threaten us."²⁹ When people in prison resist and rebel against death-dealing practices and participate in new visions for their lives, they enact their agency to create an environment more just than the one offered to them by the prison.

I contend that critical carceral creativity and the healing counter-environments it creates signal claims about God's preferential presence in prison. The claim is this: God is present in prison, calling people to new forms of life and into communities that help make that life possible. According to Coleman, God calls each of us to this ideal vision:

God's constant calling is to address, among other things, the evil of the world. God calls us, knowing who we are and what our situations are, and God tailors God's calling to us for our life situations. God calls us in every moment, so we always have the opportunity to do something new, to create again, to get rid of the bad, to be reborn. God does not give up on us, but calls each and every one of us to Godself, to relationship, to community, and to God's ideal vision.³⁰

For Coleman, God's ideal vision is one of justice, well-being, and quality of life for all of creation, regardless of one's past (making Coleman's theological claims fitting for the prison environment). Coleman adds, "Without God, we are completely determined by our past. Because God contains the possibilities that are available to the world, God is the source of novelty. It is because of God that we can become something new, something not available within our past alone."³¹ In God's vision that Coleman describes, we sense the erotic impulse Jennings describes, and the newness and aliveness Goto writes about.

Inspired by the work of Coleman, Goto, and Jennings, I maintain that counter-environments are sites for experiencing new possibilities for living amid death-dealing environments, and they come from God. People in prison are overwhelmingly judged by and held captive to their past in a pervasive culture of perpetual punishment. Living spaces in prison suggest these people can and do receive new visions and new possibilities for living from a God that continues to call them despite their conviction. Crime and conviction, theologically speaking, are never fundamentally determinative of one's future. God still provides visions for a new life, giving possibilities for something new to emerge. In God, these visions can contribute to improved quality of life and communal common good even in death-dealing incarceration.

The creativity that carves out living space in death-loving carceral contexts is a sign of God's presence in prison. Though a distorted and degrading human system, prison cannot terminate the call of God toward communion, well-being, and quality of life—a call felt most intimately in the community. Theologians like Coleman, Goto, and Jennings have long argued that community is the site of salvation. It is where and how

salvation is enfleshed and mediated, especially in contexts of domination. Salvation is found in the process of building and participating in “a community of diverse, disenfranchised people with a common yearning for a better life.”³²

Salvific communities, like Coleman describes, are the counter-environments I witnessed in my time teaching in prison. In death-dealing domination, these communities in prison are examples of the “cooperative working together of the divine and creation.”³³ These communities enable people to survive, to make a way of life out of no way. While survival is short of full liberation from the death-dealing system of incarceration, the tradition of womanist scholarship reminds us that “surviving with integrity” is still a way God saves.³⁴ The construction of counter-environments that promote and affirm healing, inclusion, and self-definition in prison are ways that people survive prison, claiming their own dignity and integrity in the process.

THE ETHICS OF WITNESSING CARCERAL CREATIVITY

Reflecting theologically on carceral creativity, I have claimed that in prison, God saves from (social) death, calls to new life, and provides visions for new living that people enact in the construction of living spaces for themselves and others in prison. We might be tempted to stop here and celebrate the resilience of people who respond to God’s vision for a new life. Perhaps, we stop in thanks to a God who keeps calling despite a prison sentence. But I do not think that admiration and thanksgiving alone are the reactions that carceral creativity should elicit. We are not primarily called to venerate or look in awe at the creativity of those who survive contexts of death-dealing suffering. The creativity of the confined should move us instead (or also) to remedy the causes of suffering, not just marvel at what is possible in its midst.

Recounting his own experience of incarceration, theologian Jürgen Moltmann believes that God is “present even behind the barbed wire—no, most of all behind the barbed wire.”³⁵ Moltmann is a former graduation speaker to the students I taught in prison and a pen pal to a previously incarcerated woman there. To him, God is present not incidentally in prison but intentionally and purposefully. In contexts of domination and degradation that deny life, healing counter-environments that affirm life, according to Moltmann, affirm the “creative, life-giving Spirit of God [who] brings us this eternally living life even now, before death...”³⁶ The mission of God, therefore, is “nothing other than the *movement of life and of healing*; spreading consolation and courage and lifting up whatever wants to die.”³⁷ God’s mission today is a mission of life that rejects prison’s death-loving social practices and calls all creatures to life, even in prison – no, especially in prison.

I appreciate Moltmann’s use of the word mission. It reminds us that admiration, sincere or patronizing, is not the only or most appropriate response to witnessing critical carceral creativity. The appropriate response for those of us who witness it firsthand, as I did, or secondhand as you are through this essay, is to commit to participating in this movement of life and healing, extending living, healing, and freeing spaces in prison. When we accept this responsibility, we become co-laborers and holy conspirators with a God who brings about freedom and transformation in the darkest places for the most afflicted, even for those who have caused affliction themselves.

In this age of mass incarceration, God is found in the everydayness of the prison, creating spaces for living that resist the death-loving impulses of our culture of punishment. As long as prisons remain unjust death-dealing spaces, people who participate in prison education, ministry, or service must challenge death-loving practices and create and protect living spaces in prison. We must also construct and maintain living spaces outside of prison for those who are released, who hear God's call to survive and live, and are desperately seeking communities to affirm and support this new vision of life.

CONCLUSION

Growing up in a Black Missionary Baptist Church in the Midwest, I often heard it said that human creativity is a sign of God's Spirit – a feature of God's activity in the world. Heeding the wisdom of that tradition, I maintain that carceral creativity reveals to us glimpses of how God operates and is experienced in spaces of death-dealing incarceration. It reveals God's saving presence in the crucible of suffering that is a US prison for women. In the long tradition of Christian theology that recognizes the revelatory power of aesthetic and embodied creative expressions, I claim that the carceral creativity I have written about, which creates living spaces in contexts of death, is God's new creation appearing even if only temporarily in prison.

A theology classroom, a birthday party for a lifer, a clandestine Christmas collection – all counter-environments where living spaces are creatively constructed in prison. Explored theologically, I have demonstrated both the salvific significance of life-affirming counter-environments and the responsibility of those of us who witness them. While I was never able to see with my own eyes the birthday party I was told so excitedly about, I believe it was a glimpse of God's ideal vision breaking forth and becoming enfleshed inside a prison. In that carceral communal celebration, perhaps God was present, salvation was enfleshed, and for a moment, freedom was created – a momentary embodiment of the gospel.

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NOTES

1 All stories and examples from the prison are from my time teaching and researching in a prison for women in the southern part of the United States. Names of incarcerated people in this paper are pseudonyms. Details in the stories are factual though identifying details and timelines have been changed as necessary to protect confidentiality. I offer this scene less as an exact retelling of any particular Friday and more as a condensed vignette into the creative and complicated reality of a women's prison. Some details have been rearranged and altered to promote anonymity.

2 See Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020) and Sharon Luk, *The Life of Paper: Letters and a Poetics of Living Beyond Captivity*, First Edition (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017).

3 A. Elizabeth Stearns, Rick Swanson, and Stephanie Etie, "The Walking Dead? Assessing Social Death among Long-Term Prisoners," *Corrections*, November 21, 2017, 2.

4 I use gender-specific pronouns to reflect desired gender identification of the person I am discussing. Some of the students in the Theology program identify as "she/her," others as "he/him," and still others as "they." For some, this definition is fluid, flexible, and prone to change. My use of respective pronouns throughout is to acknowledge and respect this self-definition.

5 Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 62.

6 One of the more influential conceptualizations of social death comes from sociologist Orlando Patterson. In his work *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), Patterson describes social death as both a state of being and a process. As a state of being, social death is defined as "a state of existential non-personhood; a condition of being in existence and non-existence simultaneously." Exploring social death in slavery, Patterson describes how African people were removed from their home contexts and systematically stripped of markers of identity such as language, clothing, kinship, and status. With markers of identity devalued or removed, African people were forcibly placed into a context governed by rules they had no agency in forming or reforming. Patterson maintained that separated from society, people now enslaved existed socially and legally only through their masters and were given the status of nonbeings. Scholars of prison studies and mass incarceration see similarities between Patterson's portrayal of the process of social death in slavery and that same process in incarceration. For a full treatment of Patterson's argument, see *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982. For more on the similarities between social death in slavery and incarceration, see Price, Joshua M. *Prison and Social Death. Critical Issues in Crime and Society*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

7 David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 95.

8 Sharon Luk describes the process or purpose of incarceration as "systematic social dismantling." See *The Life of Paper: Letters and a Poetics of Living Beyond Captivity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

9 Stearns, Swanson, and Etie, “The Walking Dead?”

10 For qualitative analysis on how men studying theology in prison resist the effects of social death, See: Stern, Kaia. *Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education and Healing*. London: Routledge, 2014.

11 Lora Bex Lempert, *Women Doing Life: Gender, Punishment and the Struggle for Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 60.

12 Lempert, 60.

13 Lempert, 61.

14 Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 47.

15 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 119.

16 Hill Collins, *Fighting Words*, 238.

17 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 113.

18 These statements are from September 2018 and are direct quotes from an IRB-approved qualitative research project on incarcerated women’s understanding of a good life and theological education in prison.

19 Lempert, *Women Doing Life*, 59.

20 Courtney Goto, “Asian American Practical Theologies,” in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 32.

21 Goto, 32.

22 Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Theological Education Between the Times (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2020), 149.

23 I believe the erotic impulse is one reason people in prison choose to participate in a theological learning community – to participate in the co-creation of a living, freeing space where intimacy with self, others, and importantly their understandings of God, Spirit, or the Transcendent is cultivated and encouraged.

24 Courtney T. Goto, *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Learning into God’s New Creation* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 46.

25 Goto, 77.

26 Marshall McLuhan, *The Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, 1st Edition (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1996), 225.

27 Emilie M. Townes, “Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A*

Reader (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 41.

28 Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 35.

29 Coleman, 93.

30 Coleman, 77.

31 Coleman, 63.

32 Coleman, 147.

33 Coleman, 170.

34 In this essay, I understand survival as more than bodily existence, but as a way of living with self-defined integrity in death-dealing environments. I am indebted to the womanist scholarship for how it encourages us to pay attention to and name how agents possess and enact human dignity, resilience, and integrity while surviving oppressive systems. For an example, see Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988). Using Zora Neale Hurston's life and work, Dr. Cannon conceptualizes survival with an eye not only for how Black women survive but for how they "prevail with integrity against the cruel systems of triple oppression" (101). This prevailing with integrity is what I see occurring in freeing counter-environments. I want to thank the peer reviewers of this essay for encouraging me to name how I understand survival in this context and to name why womanist theological conceptions of survival and salvation resonate so strongly with my experiences with incarcerated people.

35 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/september/20.120.html> (accessed Sept 3, 2020)

36 Jürgen Moltmann, "Come, Creator Spirit, and Renew Life: A Theological Meditation on the Lire-Giving Spirit," *Louvain Studies* 22, no. 1 (Spr 1997): 9.

37 Moltmann, 9.