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An Ethical, Empathetic Jesus Is a Radical Jesus:  
Womanist Theological Methods for Addressing Police Brutality and the Prison Industrial  
Complex

Maggie Talbott

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## Introduction

### *Evil as a Cultural Production*

The last thing twenty-year-old Daunte Wright discussed with his mother was insurance information. Minutes later he was shot by Kim Potter, a twenty-six year veteran of the Brooklyn Center police force, who claims to have mistaken her gun for a taser. His one-year-old son, Daunte Wright Jr, will grow up fatherless. Daunte's mother lost her child, a gut-wrenching pain that no one can begin to understand unless they've stood in her shoes.<sup>1</sup> African Americans are incarcerated at a rate of 5.1 times higher than that of white Americans. In some states, the rate is 10.1.<sup>2</sup> Police brutality and the Prison Industrial Complex (hereafter PIC) are systemic, racial issues, meaning that they are embedded into the very organization and laws of American society.<sup>3</sup> Womanist Christian ethicist Emilie Townes writes that, "Exploring evil as a cultural production highlights the systematic construction... [that is] designed to support and perpetuate structural inequities and forms of social oppression."<sup>4</sup> I build upon Townes's insight to argue that police brutality and the PIC are contemporary forms of exploitative plantation economics, or slavery.

What is an adequate solution to help combat structural injustice within the American correctional system? It should be noted that problems regarding structural evil are like Rubix Cubes: to solve the whole problem, it is important to work on all sides of an issue. Solving one side will not be sufficient. In this paper, I will argue that socialism is an empathetic alternative to

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<sup>1</sup>The New York Times, "What To Know About the Death of Daunte Wright," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/daunte-wright-death-minnesota.html>

<sup>2</sup>Ashley Wells, "The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons," *The Sentencing Project*, June 14, 2016, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/>

<sup>3</sup>Dictionary.com, "Systematic vs. Systemic: There's a System To the Difference," *Dictionary.com*, 2021, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/systematic-vs-systemic/>

<sup>4</sup>Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4.

capitalism, which profits from the dehumanization and exploitation of Black people. Using Emilie Townes's *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, I begin by diagnosing the problem of police brutality and the prison industrial complex as rooted in capitalism. Next, I examine Mitizi Smith's *Womanist Sass and Talk Back* in order to understand the use of the Bible for and against prisons. Lastly, I turn to Marcia Riggs's understanding of empathy to conclude that prisons, as they currently exist in the United States, should be abolished. I will be using womanist methods to assess the systemic injustice within the prison industrial complex that perpetuates police brutality, then arguing that socialism is a potential solution.

### *Womanism: Definitions and Methodology*

Womanism is a term coined by Alice Walker in her novel *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, published in 1983. She defines womanism in four key parts. First, Walker notes that she has derived the term from the concept *womanish*, which concerns audacity, willfulness, and courage. Second, womanists recognize the concept of the whole and community, while also being committed to the survival of all people. Third, a womanist must be rooted in love: a love for themselves, the Spirit, and love of creativity. Finally, Walker defines womanism as "being to feminist as purple is to lavender."<sup>5</sup> Womanism's original definition is important, because it is what theological ethicists use to debate social issues such as policing and incarceration.

Womanism has become popular in circles of theological disciplines for its use as "both [a] challenge to and a confessional statement for their own work... [womanist thought] provides a fertile ground for religious reflection and practical application."<sup>6</sup> Townes writes that womanism

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<sup>5</sup>Khalia Jelks Williams, "Engaging Womanist Spirituality in African American Christian Worship," *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy*, August (2013), 98, <http://proxy.augustana.edu:2059/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=90145376&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>6</sup>Emilie M. Townes, "Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have," in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Emilie M. Townes, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 35.

begins with particularities instead of universals. Womanist ethics focus on particularities because it understands that universalities often grow out of dominant communities and ideologies.

Particularities are important when discussing the PIC and police brutality because they allow us to focus on specific instances of systemic injustice which disproportionately affect Black people.

### *The Case Study of Quintin Jones*

Stacey Floyd-Thomas's method of case study analysis allows womanist ethicists to analyze particularities. According to Floyd-Thomas, "A case study is a snapshot of a real-life event that captures a perennial communal concern expressed through the story of one individual's unique moral dilemma."<sup>7</sup> The goal of case study analysis is to provide an account of lived situations and to "explore the moral crises" that situation creates through ethical issues inside the case.<sup>8</sup>

Floyd-Thomas's method of case study analysis allows us to analyze the execution of Quintin Jones, a man formerly on death row in Texas.

The case study of Quintin Jones allows us to diagnose an immense problem within our prison and justice system through the lens of one individual's experience. In a New York Times opinion piece, Suleika Jaouad writes about Jones's life. She says that "In 1999, when Quin was 20 years old and on heroin and cocaine, he killed his great-aunt Bertha Byrant for \$30 to buy more drugs."<sup>9</sup> Jones admitted to his wrongdoing and showed great remorse for his actions. He, according to Suleika Jaouad, found a way to live a meaningful life through prayer, sobriety, family reconciliation, and pen-pal correspondence. His family forgave him for murdering his aunt and pleaded for his removal from death row.<sup>10</sup> Jones's actions after being in prison display

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<sup>7</sup>Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, "A Sociology of Black Liberation as a Source for Constructive Womanist Ethics," in *Mining the Motherlode*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 70.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Suleika Jaouad, "Quintin Jones Is Not Innocent. But He Doesn't Deserve To Die," *New York Times*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/10/opinion/quintin-jones-texas-death-row-clemency.html>

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

true growth and repentance for killing his aunt. If his own family, which is the family of the victim, is willing to forgive him, then it is logical that our justice system should as well.

Womanist ethics recognizes that universalities grow out of dominant groups in society.<sup>11</sup> Emilie Townes notes that dominant claims are seen as neutral, neither bad nor good. Through a dominant lens, Quintin Jones's execution is seen as just. However, womanism refutes this idea. Womanist ethics ask us to focus on the particularities of Jones's execution and how we are complicit in contributing to a society that enabled his homicidal behavior.

Jones's lawyers have outlined how the American criminal justice system has failed him in the clemency plea. According to Jaouad, "[Jones's] state-appointed legal representation missed filing deadlines and failed to challenge critical problems in the state's case... the state's argument hinged on discredited science and a flawed methodology... [there are] glaring conflicts of interest have tainted the procedure for setting Quin's execution date... [and there are] disparities in treatment based on race."<sup>12</sup> Quintin's execution date was set for May 19, 2021. Tens of thousands of people asked for Jones's sentence to be changed to life without the possibility of parole. Jaouad begged to make Jones an example of reconciliation, mercy, and grace.<sup>13</sup>

Edgar Sandoval of *The New York Times* reports that the media was not present at Jones's execution. Sandoval writes, "Reporters traditionally cover executions to provide accountability to the public about the process; they have sometimes brought details of problems to light, including a faulty lethal injection in Oklahoma in 2014."<sup>14</sup> Critics are condemning Texas for the lack of transparency and accountability, saying that it will become an example for the

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<sup>11</sup>Emilie M. Townes, "Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have," in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Emilie M. Townes, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 37.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Edgar Sandoval, "Texas' First Execution in Nearly a Year Had No Reporters Present," *New York Times*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/20/us/texas-execution-quintin-jones-reporter.html>

wrongdoings in the U.S. execution process. Jones showed remorse, bettered himself in prison, and thousands of people asked for him not to be killed. Regarding his situation, the death penalty seems extreme and cruel.

Townes argues that this type of discourse is ingrained in class, or socio-economic status, so the discourse will always be biased. Class is important because it can control who is speaking and who is silenced in specific issues. Those who are a part of the dominant community are more likely to speak on issues and be listened to, as their opinions are widely accepted. Non-dominant communities are silenced. Townes goes on to say that the “task of womanist ethics is to recognize the biases... and work with them to explore the rootedness of social location.”<sup>15</sup> Jones’s case represents a major bias of America’s, which is that criminals cannot grow or change. According to Sandoval, Jones’s last words were: “Love all my friends and all the friendships that I have made. They are like the sky. It is all part of life, like a big full plate of food for the soul. I hope I left everyone a plate of food full of happy memories, happiness and no sadness.”<sup>16</sup> He was pronounced dead at 6:40 pm.<sup>17</sup> Quintin Jones’s execution is an example of the cruelty in the American prison system. Womanist methods allow us to identify and redeem our criminal correctional program. Using womanist ethics alongside leftist ideology can help begin to dismantle structural evil within the United States.

### *Capitalism Against Socialism*

Using womanist methods such as empathy in case studies and a critique of capitalism, allows leftist ideology to be used by minority groups like Black women, who have not had control in a capitalist system. However, it is important to understand these terms comprehensively. Leftist is

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

the term used to describe any ideology that leans left of liberalism or is anti-capitalist.

Communism and socialism are two main examples of leftist ideology that are specifically anti-capitalist. Under socialism, individuals own property, but it is industrial production that is communally owned and managed by a democratically elected government. Communism is when the state owns everything and gives out resources based on need. Proponents of both systems tend to disagree on whether a revolution is required or if change can be achieved through democratic processes.<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of this paper, socialism is the leftist ideology that I will focus on when discussing structural evil and reforms in the United States. It is an empathetic alternative to capitalism, in which profits are a motivating factor to justify the dehumanization of others.

Capitalism depends on the private sector and the accumulation of wealth and income through the market. This results in economic inequalities that contribute to a lack of true freedom for those who are not directly benefited by the market and its wealth.<sup>19</sup> Because the world has a finite amount of resources, worker exploitation is required for capitalism to be successful. Workers under capitalism do not own the means of production, which means that they will sell their labor power to capitalists for less worth than the goods they produce. Capitalists do not have to produce anything, but instead can live off of the worker's production. The worker's production creates a surplus value which becomes the profit of capitalism, which the capitalist gains, not the workers.<sup>20</sup> Socialism attempts to get rid of worker exploitation by removing inequities and giving people agency against commodification. Emilie Townes argues that "With the rise of massive global market capitalism, human lives and their cultures have become

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<sup>18</sup>Sarah Pruitt, "How Are Socialism and Communism Different?," HISTORY, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/socialism-communism-differences>

<sup>19</sup>Erik Olin Wright, "But At Least Capitalism Is Free and Democratic, Right?," in *The ABCs of Socialism*, ed. Bhaskar Sunkara (Brooklyn: Verso, Jacobin Foundation Ltd, 2016), 25-27.

<sup>20</sup>Matt Zwolinski and Alan Wertheimer, "Exploitation," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2001).

commodities that are marketed and consumed in the global marketplace.”<sup>21</sup> Human lives are commodities through the neo-slavery of the prison system in the United States. The neo-slavery of the prison system is demonstrated through Quintin Jones’s case, in which the government executed a black man who had rectified his ways, and then did not allow media coverage of the event. An ethical issue is created within the United States, that of human lives and labor as merchandise. Human exploitation through the PIC is demonstrated later in this paper through concepts such as slave labor, privatization of prisons, inhumane living conditions, profit incentives, and the legalization of slavery under the thirteenth amendment.

To the modern American, terms like “leftist ideology”, “socialism”, and “communism” might invoke fear. This fear is intentional. Government propaganda throughout the Cold War ensured terror at anything anti-capitalist. The Ad Council, according to Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy, was created during World War 2 to promote war efforts. By the Cold War, the Ad Council used those same war effort techniques to spread propaganda demonizing socialism, while promoting capitalism and free enterprise. It portrayed the USSR as “godless, tyrannical, and antithetical to individual freedoms.”<sup>22</sup> America became everything the USSR was not. Capitalism became conflated with American identity through a corporate propaganda campaign.<sup>23</sup> To be against capitalism was to be against America at its core. At the 2020 Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, former President Donald Trump framed the entire event as ‘America vs Socialism.’<sup>24</sup> Event coordinator Matt Schlapp even spoke to

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<sup>21</sup>Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 8.

<sup>22</sup>Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy, “The Forgotten Story of Why Americans Are So Afraid of Bernie’s Socialism,” *The National Interest*, February 27, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/forgotten-story-why-americans-are-so-afraid-bernies-socialism-127682>

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>David Smith, “America v Socialism: Conservatives Rage Against the Left and Plot New Red Scare,” *The Guardian*, March 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/01/trump-conservatives-socialism-bernie-sanders-politics>

attendants of the 2020 CPAC, saying that “America versus socialism: it’s a very intended theme. Our view is it’s not capitalism versus socialism because socialism isn’t just about economics. Socialism, we believe, gets to the very core of violating the dignity of the individual human being that has God given rights. And that’s got us pretty fired up.”<sup>25</sup> While many Americans may have similar views to Matt Schlapp, the goal of this paper is to exemplify the empathy of socialism through womanist methods. Americans are not immune to propaganda, especially that which conflates capitalism with a national identity.

## **Police Brutality**

### *The Racialized Murdering of Children*

In 2020, 991 people were killed by the police across America. Since 2015, roughly 1,000 people have been killed by the police each year. Black Americans account for roughly thirteen percent of the population but are killed at twice the rate of white Americans.<sup>26</sup> Seventeen year old Trayvon Martin lost his life in 2012. Eighteen year old Michael Brown was killed in 2014. Twelve year old Tamir Rice was murdered in 2015.<sup>27</sup> And, most recently, twenty year old Daunte Wright, was killed Sunday, April 11, 2021.<sup>28</sup> These names barely scrape the surface of Black people who have been murdered by the police. Officers who commit these crimes are not likely to get punished by the American legal system.

Mitzi Smith discusses police violence in her book *Womanist Sass and Talk Back*.

Despite the fact that many of the deadly encounters were captured by cell phone cameras and body cameras, primarily white juries have refused to find police

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Julie Tate, Jennifer Jenkins, and Steven Rich, “Fatal Force: Police Shooting Database,” The Washington Post, April 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

<sup>27</sup>Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 95.

<sup>28</sup>The New York Times, “What To Know About the Death of Daunte Wright,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/daunte-wright-death-minnesota.html>

officers (and a community watch person) that violently took black and brown lives guilty. And too often a simple defense that the officer or civilian feared for his or her life, regardless of whether the victim had a gun or other deadly weapon, was running away, or had committed no crime, is sufficient for such juries to deliver a not-guilty verdict.<sup>29</sup>

When a dominant, hegemonic systemic evil is held up by the ruling white class, it becomes easy to make excuses for those in power that are responsible for protecting the white citizen, who is presumed to be good and non-deviant based on skin color alone. Minority lives are “sacrificed in order to uphold or protect the perspective of the dominant group.”<sup>30</sup> When Black and Brown Americans are murdered by the police, respectability politics comes to the white defense. If a child of color is not completely submissive, obedient, and “demonstrating unmitigated respect,”<sup>31</sup> then they are thought of as disrespectful and threatening. Then, respectability politics, an “elitist ideology requiring [children] to quietly lift themselves up, acquiescing and genuflecting to unjust laws and practices,”<sup>32</sup> argues that these children deserved the consequences.

### *Patrolling Black Bodies*

A majority of white Americans view the idea of police brutality as a few rotten apples in the barrel or as an individual problem. Since the murder of George Floyd, there has been nationwide attention and criticism of the American police. A common acronym which shows the populace’s distaste for police is ACAB, meaning ‘All Cops Are Bastards.’ It is important to note that this phrase does not mean that every person who is a police officer is inherently evil. ACAB means that all cops work for a bastardized system, and that the system shapes them into bastards.

Bastardized, in this sense, refers to the systemic and structural evil surrounding police officers’

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<sup>29</sup>Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 95.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 97.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 71.

disregard for and implicit bias against Black and Brown bodies. The problem of police brutality is not individual. It is institutional, and damaging to everyone, not just Black people, though they bear the brunt of the suffering. There is not one specific area or precinct that kills Black and Brown people. It is nationwide.

The Washington Post has created a database of police shootings since 2015 which corroborate police brutality is a systemic problem.<sup>33</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, notes that America's violent institution of policing is a descendant of American chattel slavery. The constant patrolling of Black and Brown bodies today mimics the "concentrated patrolling of enslaved bodies on and off plantations."<sup>34</sup> Kendi notes that American state and local governments spend a combined \$118.8 billion on policing, and that only the United States and China invest more on their militaries than the United States spends on policing. However this excessive spending on American police forces has not done its job. According to Kendi, "The U.S. is in the middle of the global pack of nations on crime and homicide rates; several nations in Africa and Latin America have both far less police and far less crime."<sup>35</sup>

### *Defunding the Police*

The police should be defunded. Paige Fernandez writes that, "Out of the 10.3 million arrests made per year, only 5 percent are for the most serious offenses, including murder, rape, and aggravated assault."<sup>36</sup> False arrests are also an issue. According to Tom Jackman, it is nearly impossible to come up with a clear statistic of wrongful convictions due to no centralized

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<sup>33</sup>Julie Tate, Jennifer Jenkins, and Steven Rich, "Fatal Force: Police Shooting Database," The Washington Post, April 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

<sup>34</sup>Ibram X. Kendi, "Compliance Will Not Save Me," *The Atlantic*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/04/compliance-will-not-save-my-body/618637/>

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Paige Fernandez, "Defunding the Police Will Actually Make Us Safer," *ACLU*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/defunding-the-police-will-actually-make-us-safer/>

national database of criminals at the state and local levels. However, nearly fifty-four percent of those wrongly convicted are victimized by official misconduct.<sup>37</sup> Ninety-five percent of arrests are for things like traffic violations, marijuana possession, and unlawful assembly. These types of crimes do not represent a danger to everyday life, but do contribute to the mass incarceration of Black and Brown people. Defunding the police means that the astronomical budget that the United States government designates to the police will be reinvested in communities.

Since the 1980s, spending on law enforcement and our criminal legal system has dramatically outpaced that in community services such as housing, education, and violence prevention programs. Those are the institutions that help build stable, safe, and healthy communities. By shrinking their massive budgets, we can help end decades of racially driven social control and oppression as well as address social problems at their root instead of investing in an institution that further oppresses and terrorizes communities.<sup>38</sup>

Money should be put into job training programs, public education, counseling, violence prevention programs, accessible housing, and health care. America has little evidence to show that increased policing leads to safer and healthier communities. If anything, the surge in police presence just reinforces cycles of trauma and harm against Black and Brown bodies.<sup>39</sup>

Along with defunding the police, Paige Fernandez suggests five steps to attempt to remove systemic problems regarding police brutality. First, they suggest decriminalizing minor offenses such as marijuana possession. Second, they call for the removal of police presence in schools. Third, they want to develop crisis lines to support people who are having mental, emotional, or behavioral crises. Fourth, they call for a ban on stop and searches. Finally, they want laws in place to criminally and civilly punish police officers who enact unnecessary force

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<sup>37</sup>Tom Jackman, "More Than Half of All Wrongful Convictions Are Caused by Government Misconduct, Study Finds," *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/crime-law/2020/09/16/more-than-half-all-wrongful-criminal-convictions-caused-by-government-misconduct-study-finds/>

<sup>38</sup>Paige Fernandez, "Defunding the Police Will Actually Make Us Safer," *ACLU*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/defunding-the-police-will-actually-make-us-safer/>

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

on civilians. These five steps would rethink the role of police in modern society, while also attempting to reduce the “social control and oppression” of systemic police brutality.<sup>40</sup> Paige Fernandez’s five steps connect to womanism through recognizing the biases of police in particular instances, and then advocating for justice and wholeness as a society.<sup>41</sup>

While David Brooks, a contributing writer at The Atlantic, agrees that there are problems with police at both the systemic and individual levels, he brings up a third area of critique: the organizational culture of police forces. Brooks specifically notes the “us versus the world” mentality and the dehumanization that results from seeing another person as “the other.” Emilie Townes connects the idea of “the other” to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Baby Suggs gives a sermon in the woods about the healing of the Black body. Townes discusses Baby’s sermon as an example of womanist ontology, which is the “radical concern for is-ness in the context of African American life.”<sup>42</sup>

Womanist ontology pushes back against the idea of “the other” and the constant dehumanization of Black people through “a unified relationship between body, soul, and creation.”<sup>43</sup> Womanist ontology notes that categories of otherness, like those demonstrated inside the American policing system, can become tools for hegemony.<sup>44</sup> Police training programs remove potential police officers from civilian life and deposits them in a boot camp-like atmosphere. The continuing theme of a threatening world and violent “others” who will attack at less than a moment’s notice permeate police’s mentality. Brooks writes that seventy percent of police officers claim to have never fired their gun on the job, but that an average of seventy-one

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Emilie M. Townes, “Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Emilie M. Townes, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 37.

<sup>42</sup>Emilie M. Townes, “To Be Called Beloved,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Emilie M. Townes, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 184.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid, 185.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

training hours are spent on firearm skills. Sixty hours are delegated for self-defense. Only a scant forty-three hours are spent on things such as cultural-diversity training, mediation, conflict management, and human relations.<sup>45</sup>

When officers work in a high-stress and hyper-vigilant area, they are less likely to see the person on the other side of their gun as a human being. They see a perpetrator. They see a faceless “other.” These organizational pressures create a lens of dehumanization, a removal of the “natural sympathy between one person and another.”<sup>46</sup> The critique of organizational structures shows that dehumanization and lack of training in civilian-police interactions allows for the structural evil of police brutality to continue throughout America. However, it is important to remember that through womanism, we are all complicit in contributing to police violence, even though we may not be the person pulling the trigger.

Mitzi J. Smith argues against the normalization of violence, especially police brutality, from a biblical interpretive standpoint. She notes that violence tends to be normalized when the dominant group minimizes the impact of violence on the oppressed group, or begins to regard the violence as what is an appropriate consequence. Smith writes that “Violence is normalized when we rationalize its existence, blame the victims, excuse... the perpetrators, [and] codify it and/or sacralize it... the attribution of violence to the divine contributes to the normalization of violence.”<sup>47</sup> To defend her point, Smith uses the story of the prophet Elisha who encounters two boys who ridicule him. Elisha curses them, and the boys are subsequently mauled by female bears. Smith poses Elisha as a member of the dominant group, who proceeds to curse boys who represent an insignificant threat, thereby normalizing violence.<sup>48</sup> When Emilie Townes discusses

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<sup>45</sup>David Brooks, “The Culture of Policing Is Broken,” *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/how-police-brutality-gets-made/613030/>

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 116.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

hierarchy in her book, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, she notes that the dominant group keeps hierarchy in place through violence, fear, and ignorance.<sup>49</sup> Violence and fear are used in the story of Elisha, just as they are used within the system of police brutality to keep Black and Brown people oppressed and submissive.

## **The Prison Industrial Complex**

### *Privatization of Prisons*

The prison industrial complex began as a bureaucratic interest, and allowed for increased spending on prisons after the war on crime began. It encouraged spending regardless of the country's true need for prisons. This can be attributed to the privatization of prisons, which allowed the government to have a hands-off approach to punishment. In fact, according to Eric Schlosser, private prisons create a need for crime. He compares private prisons to hotels, who have an incentive to book every room for a higher profit margin. If the occupancy in a private prison is higher, the profit will be too. The PIC is the combined special interests of politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, who have used fear of crime to gain political favor and constituent votes.<sup>50</sup> The Reagan and Bush administrations both greeted the idea of private prisons and helped create this alarming reality. It would lead to a more decentralized government, and competition among contracts would lead to the government paying less overall. However, the Clinton administration did much more than its conservative predecessors to legitimize the use of private prisons by, “[encouraging] the Justice Department to place illegal aliens and minimum-security inmates in private correctional facilities, as part of a drive to reduce the

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<sup>49</sup>Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), 159.

<sup>50</sup>Eric Schlosser, “The Prison Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, December, 1998, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/the-prison-industrial-complex/304669/>

federal workforce.”<sup>51</sup> The bureaucratic interest in private prisons is problematic because it creates a need for increasing crime in order to gain profit under the guise of reducing crime.

During their introduction into the prison system, specifically using data found in 1998, privately-run prisons tended to be newer, cleaner, and less likely to house violent offenders than government-run prisons.<sup>52</sup> However, as of 2018, that data had radically changed. Between 2000 and 2016, the federal private prison population has increased by one-hundred and twenty percent. The state private prison population has increased by thirty-one percent.<sup>53</sup> This is no surprise, considering that private prisons exist to make a profit. In fact, for-profit and private prison companies have often joined forces with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) to create legislation that directly benefits them. ALEC worked with members to promote policies that included mandatory minimum sentencing, three-strike laws, and truth-in sentencing, which all contribute to higher prison populations.

Ethical issues such as the PIC and human exploitation start with capitalism. Capitalist governments tend to use their power to benefit corporations, rather than their constituents. Specifically, state legislatures work with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a conservative and corporation-based lobbying group. Nancy Scola, an Atlantic journalist, writes about ALEC and its shady dealings in legislation:

To its critics, [ALEC] is a shadowy back-room arrangement where corporations pay good money to get friendly legislators to introduce pre-packaged bills in state houses across the country... if it's voter ID, it's ALEC. If it's anti-immigration bills written hand-in-glove with private prison corporations, it's ALEC. If it's working with the N.R.A. on 'Shoot to Kill' laws, it's ALEC. When you start

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Kara Gotsch and Vinay Basti, “Capitalizing on Mass Incarceration: U.S. Growth in Private Prisons,” The Sentencing Project, August 2, 2018, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/capitalizing-on-mass-incarceration-u-s-growth-in-private-prisons/>

peeling back state efforts to opt out of the regional greenhouse gas initiative, it's ALEC.<sup>54</sup>

Politicians who work with organizations like ALEC help facilitate private control over the American government. Private control creates a constant pressure on political authorities to enact laws favorable in the eyes of capitalists. Threats of disinvestment, capital mobility, and a good business climate force politicians to enact in a corporation's favor, not their constituents.<sup>55</sup> Privatization of prisons also has put pressure on judges to incarcerate people for longer periods due to the incentive of profit. An example of this is New York's "fee system," which allowed county sheriffs to charge inmates for their stay in jail in the early 1900s. This system was harshly criticized by the Correctional Association of New York, which addressed the fact that judges may be more inclined to order a longer sentence to give revenue to their local sheriff.<sup>56</sup>

### *Womanism: Theology of the Penal Movement*

Womanist ethics work to shift our attention to systemic injustice instead of supposed bad apples. The argument for increasing prisons tends to be that "there are too many prisoners because there are too many criminals committing too many crimes."<sup>57</sup> Prison supporters tend to view incarceration as a simple solution to removing deviant people off the streets. Even within anti-prison organizations, there is still the dichotomy between good and bad prisoners. Jason Lydon states that "particular prisoners... have to bear the burden of carrying all of our society's

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<sup>54</sup>Nancy Scola, "Exposing ALEC: How Conservative-Backed State Laws Are All Connected," *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/04/exposing-alec-how-conservative-backed-state-laws-are-all-connected/255869/>

<sup>55</sup>Erik Olin Wright, "But At Least Capitalism Is Free and Democratic, Right?," in *The ABCs of Socialism*, ed. Bhaskar Sunkara (Brooklyn: Verso, Jacobin Foundation Ltd, 2016), 25-27.

<sup>56</sup>Eric Schlosser, "The Prison Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, December, 1998, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/the-prison-industrial-complex/304669/>

<sup>57</sup>Eric Schlosser, "The Prison Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, December, 1998, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/the-prison-industrial-complex/304669/>

sins and being disciplined or crucified for our communal redemption.”<sup>58</sup> These ‘bad apples’ become scapegoats for society’s violence through the media’s dehumanization campaigns, when in fact, these perpetrators “have less access to expensive attorneys or who a primarily white, class-privileged jury will see as ‘criminal’.”<sup>59</sup> As the media portrays a case against a specific abuser, rapist, or terrorist, Lydon notes that victims will see the face of their personal abuser within the trial, even when said victim has not seen any true justice for themselves. Therefore, this singular event can eliminate evil within society’s communal mind. Emilie Townes counters that “[eradicating] evil is a process, not an event.”<sup>60</sup>

Lydon also notes theology must play a role in prison abolition and in addressing the realities of the PIC, we can call “humanity back to our potential for love and life.”<sup>61</sup> A Christian liberation theology must focus on the lived experiences of Black people, specifically Black women. Womanism aids this focus. Lydon writes that “the fundamental connecting point of all liberation theologies is the prioritization of the experience of the particular theologian’s oppressed community as the subject of theological discourse.”<sup>62</sup> Womanism notes that we are all responsible for the problems and injustices in our society. Stacey Floyd-Thomas’s case study analysis illuminates the researcher as “morally committed and socially linked to the identifiable group... such participatory learning is distinctive in highlighting the ethic of responsibility that is the mark of the traditional communalism of womanist ethical discourse.”<sup>63</sup> Understanding that we cannot separate ourselves from problems within our society is a step in attempting to resolve issues such as the PIC and police brutality.

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<sup>58</sup>Jason Lydon, “A Theology for the Penal Abolition Movement,” *Peace Review* 23, no. 3 (2011): 298-9.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid, 299.

<sup>60</sup>Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 5.

<sup>61</sup>Jason Lydon, “A Theology for the Penal Abolition Movement,” *Peace Review* 23, no. 3 (2011): 298.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, “A Sociology of Black Liberation as a Source for Constructive Womanist Ethics,” in *Mining the Motherlode*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 74.

Townes introduces her concept of countermemory for the task of dismantling structural evil. Countermemory is an attempt to find microhistories in the past and reconsider the dominant, widely taught history. It creates an understanding of how dominant narratives come to be universal by focusing on particular experiences of oppression.<sup>64</sup> According to Townes, “Countermemory can open up subversive spaces within dominant discourses that expand our sense of who we are and, possibly, create a more whole and just society in defiance of structural evil.”<sup>65</sup> This connects back to policing and the PIC by looking through the lense of Black experiences, like Quintin Jones. We must open up spaces that push against the dominant idea of harsh punishment and murdering as ways to solve deviance within society.

### *Privatization Means Profit*

Private prisons also have a main goal of profits for shareholders, which leads to attempts to control and minimize spending wherever possible. For-profit prisons will often cut employee benefits and salary in an effort to generate a larger profit. It is possible that this goal of profits leads to unsafe conditions. Studies have shown that the rate of assaults in private prisons are double that in public prisons. The assaults can possibly be attributed to the lack of payment to correctional officers, who on average are paid about \$23,850 less than those who work in the public sector.<sup>66</sup> Gotsch and Basti also note that “privately-operated prisons appear to have systemic problems in maintaining secure facilities.”<sup>67</sup> In their quest for profits, private prisons have diminished the living conditions for inmates to a point that is inhumane. This disregard for

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<sup>64</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), 8.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid, 23.

<sup>66</sup>Kara Gotsch and Vinay Basti, “Capitalizing on Mass Incarceration: U.S. Growth in Private Prisons,” The Sentencing Project, August 2, 2018,

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/capitalizing-on-mass-incarceration-u-s-growth-in-private-prisons/>

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

human life is what womanism actively combats. As Khalia Jelks Williams states, “Womanist thought is not separated from the whole community; it is rooted in the depths of the community.”<sup>68</sup> Womanism works for the entire community, not just those that the dominant ideology sees as non-deviant.

Prison labor is another factor which contributes to the profits of the PIC. Dominique Morgan was sentenced eight to sixteen years in prison and ended up working in the kitchens. They made two dollars and twenty-five cents a day.<sup>69</sup> Two dollars and twenty-five cents is not close to any state mandated minimum wage, and well away from the current Nebraska minimum wage of nine dollars, where Morgan was imprisoned.<sup>70</sup> The majority of inmates' wages are eaten up by simple services, with the revenue being split between the for-profit companies and the prison itself. In fact, the prison normally charges inmates room and board, which destroys their already meager paychecks. Rafieyan notes, “It's actually fairly common for prisons to charge working inmates for their own incarceration. Prison administrators say it's a way to defray the costs of incarceration. Critics say it's a way for prisons to profit off the labor of incarcerated people.”<sup>71</sup> Paying inmates a scant wage and then continuing to profit off of their labor is reminiscent of slavery. The NAACP reports that African Americans and Hispanics make up thirty-two percent of the United States population, but they make up fifty-six percent of the incarcerated population. If African Americans and Hispanics were incarcerated at the same rate

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<sup>68</sup>Khalia Jelks Williams, “Engaging Womanist Spirituality in African American Christian Worship,” *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy*, August (2013), 98,

<http://proxy.augustana.edu:2059/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=90145376&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>69</sup>Dominique Morgan, “The Uncounted Workforce,” interview by Cardiff Garcia and Darius Rafieyan, *The Indicator from Planet Money*, NPR, June 29, 2020, transcript, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/884989263>

<sup>70</sup>Wage and Hour Division of the U.S. Department of Labor, “State Minimum Wage Laws,” U.S. Department of Labor, January 1, 2021, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/state#ne>

<sup>71</sup>Dominique Morgan, “The Uncounted Workforce,” interview by Cardiff Garcia and Darius Rafieyan, *The Indicator from Planet Money*, NPR, June 29, 2020, transcript, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/884989263>

as white people, the entire prison population of the United States would go down by forty percent.<sup>72</sup>

### *Contemporary Plantation Economics*

Prison labor is modern slavery. While there may be an attempt at the argument that slavery ended in 1865, in reality, the 13th amendment never abolished slavery. It merely reformed it.<sup>73</sup> Slavery and involuntary servitude are not entirely outlawed; it is permissible when a person has been convicted of a crime.<sup>74</sup> The picture of deviant people in America is inherently racialized as well. Amey Adkins writes that “as far as the American prison system is concerned, the face of the criminal is materially and decidedly black.”<sup>75</sup> According to Whitney Bennis, a writer for *The Atlantic*, “Incarcerated persons have no constitutional rights in this arena; they can be forced to work as punishment for their crimes.”<sup>76</sup> Kevin Rashid Johnson says that private corporations are to blame.

Anybody convicted of a crime after 1865 could be leased out by the state to private corporations who would extract their labor for little or no pay. In some ways that created worse conditions than under the days of slavery, as private corporations were under no obligation to care for their forced laborers—they provided no healthcare, nutritious food or clothing to the individuals they were exploiting.<sup>77</sup>

Rashid Johnson also discusses the extreme labor in Texas and Florida, where prisoners are involuntarily thrown into chain gangs and must work the fields for free. They are forced to grow

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<sup>72</sup>NAACP, “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet,” NAACP, 2021, <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

<sup>73</sup>Kevin Rashid Johnson, “Prison Labor is Modern Slavery. I’ve Been Sent To Solitary For Speaking Out,” *The Guardian*, August 23, 2018,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/23/prisoner-speak-out-american-slave-labor-strike>

<sup>74</sup>Whitney Bennis, “American Slavery, Reinvented,” *The Atlantic*, September 21, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/prison-labor-in-america/406177/>

<sup>75</sup>Amey Adkins, “From Crib to Cage: The Theological Calculus of Solitary Confinement,” *The Muslim World* 103, no. 2 (April 2013): 217.

<sup>76</sup>Whitney Bennis, “American Slavery, Reinvented,” *The Atlantic*, September 21, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/prison-labor-in-america/406177/>

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

the food the inmates eat, and those who do not agree with the call back to slavery are forced into solitary confinement. Rashid Johnson has been in solitary confinement since 1994. Virginia, the state that currently imprisons him, has a general population of nineteen percent African American, but fifty-eight percent of its prisoners are African American.<sup>78</sup> This imbalance of the general population to the prison population demonstrates the dominant and racist idea that Black people are deviant to society and prison is a way of keeping ‘bad apples’ off the streets.

While solitary confinement might not seem like abuse, it is “practice the United Nations and human rights groups call a form of torture.”<sup>79</sup> Those in solitary confinement are not allowed to attend programs, activities, religious services, and cannot work. Amey Adkins calls solitary confinement “an asphyxiating world of sensory deprivation, the ultimate paradox of an institutionalized gestation chamber that breeds lethal psychotic fracture.”<sup>80</sup> On top of the fact that thirty to fifty percent of solitary confinement inmates have a mental illness—compared to the little under four percent of general population inmates—solitary confinement also has a racial bias. Adkins argues that solitary confinement is a metamorphosis of the auction block.

Black bodies are *via negativa*: not human, not valuable, not worthy, not dignified, not trustworthy, degenerate and disposable. And, if white bodies are anything at all, they are definitively *not* black bodies. The gaze towards the auction block is a mimetic one that produces blackness in such... [a] way to secure the ideals of whiteness... The practice of solitary confinement is a modulation of the organizing sociality produced on the auction block.<sup>81</sup>

Adkins stresses that solitary confinement is meant to protect a specific social order: that of white bodies above black bodies.<sup>82</sup> Adkin first notes that “slavery is theologically

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Patrick O’Neill, “Duke Divinity Conference Explores Solitary Confinement as Form of Torture,” *Indy Week*, March 30, 2011,

<https://indyweek.com/news/northcarolina/duke-divinity-conference-explores-solitary-confinement-form-torture/>

<sup>80</sup>Amey Adkins, “From Crib to Cage: The Theological Calculus of Solitary Confinement,” *The Muslim World* 103, no. 2 (April 2013): 210.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid, 216.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

justified incarceration.”<sup>83</sup> Solitary confinement is racialized torture and control, and an attempt to be the “caste within the caste... [it] is meant to concretize an anthropological and moral distinction between a people that surveils, polices and sanctions a form of violence that protects a particular social order.”<sup>84</sup> Even within the prison system, which is a caste in American society, a “social order” is created to control the populace and keep troublemakers complacent, like in chattel slavery. Adkin’s ideas connect back to Kevin Rashid Johnson’s experience and how solitary confinement was used in an attempt to silence and control him.

Emilie Townes’ fantastic hegemonic imagination dissects what allows Americans to believe that slavery is truly gone and that people in prison deserve horrible treatment. In her book, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes considers how this concept plays with history and memory in order to support evil as a cultural production.<sup>85</sup> According to Townes, “Like [in] chattel slavery, property and commodity are combined.”<sup>86</sup> Prisoners are property of the state and commoditized by private corporations. White people imagine themselves as in a country that no longer tolerates “*de jure* slavery,”<sup>87</sup> which allows systems like the PIC to stay in place because we believe it is not as bad as slavery itself, even when we are told differently.

### *Christianity and the Carceral State*

Christianity is partially responsible for aiding and sustaining a carceral state. Therefore, Christianity has a duty to help dismantle the systems, like the PIC, that it created. According to

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid, 216-17.

<sup>85</sup>Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 7.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid, 40.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid, 48.

Katie Geneva Cannon, the strategies of Christian missionaries were legitimized through biblical urgency and cultural reasoning.<sup>88</sup>

European expansionists who perpetrated human trafficking synchronized the Christian understanding of parousia—the quickly approaching, expected hope of the return of Christ as judge to terminate this world order, with the early church’s confession of a universal christophany, commonly referred to as “the great commission” based on Matthew 28:18-20. Thus, for three centuries the missiologic of imminent parousia served as the standard European false justification with vicious consequences for more than 12 million Africans who embarked on hellish voyages to the Americas in wretched, suffocating, demeaning conditions, shackled and chained as marketable commodities.<sup>89</sup>

Parousia allowed Christian missionaries to validate their imperialism overseas, and consequently led to American chattel slavery. Cannon supplements talk of parousia with the logic of Christian imperialists. They believed that a large goal of Christianity was to go into nations and baptize new disciples for Jesus. Because the timing of the Second Coming of Jesus was unknown, Christians also used this guise of spreading religion to “enhance their nation’s economic, political, and spiritual health.”<sup>90</sup> Included in imperialist Christianity was the idea of a hierarchy of human beings, which led to the viewing of Black people as “creatures of a separate and inferior species.”<sup>91</sup> Emilie Townes notes, “Black bodies were considered property for the better part of the history of the Americas.”<sup>92</sup> The commodification of Black bodies evolved into the commodification of Black identity. According to Townes, when Black identity becomes property, it means that Black life is caricatured and sold in the form of merging race with myths and stereotypes to make Black life palatable to white buyers. Black bodies and identities as

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<sup>88</sup>Katie Geneva Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 1, 128, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20487919>.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid, 128-9.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid, 129.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid, 131.

<sup>92</sup>Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 44.

commodities continue into the PIC; Black people are the primary targets because they are viewed as deviant through racial stereotypes.

Issues within the PIC are partially due to a lack of empathy for our fellow human beings. Our lack of empathy as Americans allows our fellow humans to waste away in a carceral state or be gunned down in the streets. Again, it must be noted that we cannot separate ourselves from the problems in our society just because they do not directly affect us. Womanism calls us to understand our participatory nature in issues such as the PIC and police brutality. Womanist Marcia Riggs outlines her idea of empathy in “Living As Religious Ethical Mediation.” Riggs argues that ethics are intrinsic to our humanity and our creation in God’s image. If we do not see other people as “*imago Dei*,” or in God’s image, then we do them harm. Riggs notes whether physiological, emotional, or physical, harm is always violent. By lacking empathy, Riggs claims that we don a mask and lack the ability to incarnate the true image of God. If people of faith do not view others as *imago Dei*, then we do not have the virtue of empathy and therefore become deceitful people.<sup>93</sup> We need to see Jesus in other people. In Matthew 25:31-40, Jesus praises his followers, saying “I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”<sup>94</sup> His followers question him, asking when they did the things he recited. Jesus replies, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers, you did it to me.”<sup>95</sup> Reverend Hana Johnson Elliot discusses seeing Jesus in others in her Easter Sunday sermon, where she calls her congregation to find Jesus in other human beings.

God picked up the shattered pieces of Good Friday and created a holy disruption out of them. A disruption that calls us to leave “normal” behind and go forward to better, to more just, more loving, more true. A disruption that invites us to see Jesus where we least expect to—in the gardener, in the criminal, in the immigrant,

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<sup>93</sup>Marcia Riggs, “Living As Religious Ethical Mediators,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Emilie M. Townes, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 249-52.

<sup>94</sup>Matthew 25:36, English Standard Version.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid, 25:40.

in the homeless, in the blue-collar worker, in the child, in the tortured, in the friend—for Jesus was all of these.<sup>96</sup>

Abolishing prisons and the PIC comes down to empathy for fellow humans. We need to see others in *imago Dei*, and remember that God created all of us in His image. It is radical to care for other people. It is radical to care for a stranger’s well-being. It is radical to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Empathy for our fellow human beings allows us to help solve systemic injustices such as the PIC.

Oppressive structures aid in people not seeing each other in *imago Dei*. However, using womanist ethics and biblical interpretation allows us to refute oppressive structures such as the prison industrial complex. Mitzi J. Smith, in her book *Womanist Sass and Talk Back*, argues against oppressive structures. Smith notes that these structures “are often adjusted to accommodate the changing fears and desires of the . . . dominant oppressors.”<sup>97</sup> These oppressive structures are embedded in sacred texts, and biblical text specifically can sometimes be in support of said structures in America. Smith calls back to slavery, and points out that the Bible was not perverted to be in support of the inhumane treatment during chattel slavery. She notes the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 and discusses the reinscription of oppressive structures, stereotypes, and torture that are used to keep the ten virgins in their place. Smith argues that this systematic creation of a “metaphorical relationship” between slave-master interactions and the kingdom of Heaven allows the book of Matthew to contribute to a normalization of violence and oppression, while also failing to aid oppressed people in their journey to heal from their own experience with oppressive systems.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>Reverend Hana Johnson Elliot, “Holy Disruption,” (Sermon, First Presbyterian Church, Bloomfield, Indiana, April 4, 2021).

<sup>97</sup>Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 70.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid, 90.

Regarding Matthew as a whole, Smith believes it puts more emphasis on small acts of social justice rather than large acts of changing the systems in order to destroy injustice. Because the PIC is an oppressive structure that targets mostly poor Black and Brown people, it can be connected to the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew. This story in the Bible gives modern day oppressors a defense against criticism through five of the ten virgins' lack of preparedness, which was simply not bringing contingency oil in case the bridegroom arrives late. The five virgins who did not prepare then leave to gather more oil, but are refused entry back into the room. Smith notes that this parable reinscribes oppressive structures and tactics of torture, specifically sleep deprivation. Smith pushes back against this narrative and argues that, "I don't believe that we love a God who encourages the normalization of violence. God is emotionally vulnerable towards love and justice."<sup>99</sup>

In line with Smith's idea that God is concerned with love and justice is the Mosaic Law of jubilee. According to David A. Skeel Jr. and Tremper Longman, every seventh year is to be a year of Sabbath for the land, and every fiftieth year is to be the year of jubilee.

In the fiftieth year, debtors must be released from their servitude, and land that an original owner has sold must be returned to its owner. This last requirement ensured that Israelite families retained the land of their original inheritance and that it did not all end up in the hands of a few giant landowners.<sup>100</sup>

This radical, cyclical forgiveness is continued by Jesus even as he transforms the Mosaic Laws. Jesus proclaims a jubilee when he announces a year of the Lord's favor. He offers salvation in the form of freedom from debt, slavery, and returns property to the original owners. Skeel and Longman assert that jubilee was created in order to restore a balance that was skewed due to extreme differences in family fortunes. They note that jubilee should be used on the basis of

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid, 92-3.

<sup>100</sup>David A. Skeel Jr. and Tremper Longman, *The Mosaic Law in Christian Perspective*, Faculty Scholarship at Penn Law, June 30, 2011, 14, [https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1366&context=faculty\\_scholarship](https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1366&context=faculty_scholarship).

individuals, not nations. The concern is that alleviating an entire national debt would further benefit elites or oppressive regimes. Jubilee for individuals and families is meant to release people from the oppressive chains of debt. By placing jubilee in 50 year cycles, it allowed generational relief and ensured that this happened at least once in everyone’s life span.<sup>101</sup> There is distinct empathy for the poor and underprivileged in the idea of jubilee. It connects back to womanism in understanding generational problems and attempting to correct them through systemic change.

### *Abolishing the PIC*

When it comes to the abolition of prisons, it can mean different things. According to Bill Keller, “abolition is an ideal—like, say, ‘repeal and replace’. The real debate is what should replace the current institutions.”<sup>102</sup> Abolition conversation generally focuses on two topics. The first is called “civilianizing safety” by experts. New York City has been successful in slashing their incarceration rates and crime rates while also pulling back on the overreach of law enforcement in the city through civilianizing safety. New York was able to do this by creating a large non-profit network on the ground, which combats violence and aims to help the formerly incarcerated reenter society safely.<sup>103</sup> There are numerous non-profit organizations across New York City which aim to aid the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated and help at-risk children stay out of prison. Avenues for Justice, Black and Pink, Books Through Bars, Women’s Prison Association, and Critical Resistance are a few of these projects which are built on empathy for those at-risk for imprisonment.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid, 15-7.

<sup>102</sup>Bill Keller, “What Do Prison Abolitionists Really Want?,” *The Marshall Project*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/06/13/what-do-abolitionists-really-want>

<sup>103</sup>Ibid.

<sup>104</sup>Jeanne Heifetz, Mimi Doan, and Josh Dean, “Criminal-Justice Reform,” *We Are New York Values*, 2021, <https://www.wearenewyorkvalues.org/criminal-justice-reform>

The second aim for abolitionists is redistributing government spending from police and prisons into the community—namely housing, education, jobs, childcare, and health. However, this goal is bleak in the current American political climate due to capitalist pressure to serve corporations that profit off of private prisons. It is important to note that a majority of abolitionists understand that prisons cannot be eradicated in their entirety. Former New York state parole director Martin Horn notes that “There is always going to be a role for prisons, but maybe ten percent of what we do now.”<sup>105</sup> The important piece of prison abolition is reducing the corporate control of prisons and eradicating the use of private prisons across the country.

## **Conclusion**

The prison industrial complex and police brutality are two structural evils that permeate American society. By using socialism and womanist tactics, I have shown theological answers to both problems. To truly affect change, we must, as Mitzi Smith does, put a larger emphasis on changing these systemic evils rather than creating small moments of social justice that enact no real change. Relying on Marcia Riggs’s concept of empathy allows us to refute dehumanization. Leaning into Emilie M. Townes’s critique of capitalism allows us to see the other structural options for American society. Womanism is key to understanding and dismantling the structural evils of the PIC and police brutality. As Mitzi Smith says, “Womanism as a political movement seeks, promotes, and embodies the well-being of black women and men, the wholeness of entire communities of color, and a global neighbor-love.”<sup>106</sup> By dismantling the PIC and defunding the police, we can promote the well-being of everyone in a way that we have not done before.

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<sup>105</sup>Bill Keller, “What Do Prison Abolitionists Really Want?,” *The Marshall Project*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/06/13/what-do-abolitionists-really-want>

<sup>106</sup>Ibid, 3.

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