

Climate Justice Essay

What can a Landfill and Prison in Bogotá, Colombia

teach us for a Unitarian Universalist collective soil renewal?

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*Everything conspires to silence us
Partly with shame,
Partly with unspeakable hope.¹
Rainer Maria Rilke, Second Elegy*

A future reimagined in a spirit-filled way... I am at the monastery of the Society of St. John in Cambridge, MA. I see an icon, a lamp, facial tissues, towels, a chair and the bed where I am spending my Christian Holy Week. If I am writing about the future, I wonder, seated, if I need all this. Maybe, in the future, lamps will float and follow us, listening to our voices, recharged by sunlight, printing 3D protein that simulates meat for our breakfasts.

But as I stepped away from these objects, I imagined a future where I could doubt what I have considered as normal. It was a matter of time before I took away this draft page, disposed of it, rolled it and threw it to the corner: to the garbage can. What can this white, plastic, five-liter capacity square, surrounded with a transparent plastic bag, tell me about our futures?

I believe “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity”² but, how much of my attention do I give to my relationship with waste³, its disposal and treatment? Imagining a future more connected to the soil, interdependent, then, what practices should I consider that are normalizing my residues as waste? How can I expand this to my collectives as a UU?

¹ Selections from Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy. 41.

² Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace.

³ I interchangeably use the word waste with residue, as it is often a negative term. I have considered to use it to neutralize its meaning. This comes out of reading *Matters of Care* by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017).

I. What can your room teach you?

In Christian monasticism monks called their rooms: cell⁴. Monks vow willingly to stay within a monastery cell for the rest of their life. To Benedictine monks, this is their vow of stability; nonetheless it has a penitentiary connotation. In the sayings of the Fathers and Mothers of the desert, Abba Moses the Black said: “Sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.”⁵ I realized, in my retreat, that in any small space we inhabit, as simple as it may be, that I needed a trash can. Through my cell, I felt challenged to imagine a future where I understand the connections between my room and what I produce, after I wrap it up in a plastic bag.

When I migrated to the US from Columbia, I had to let go of what I knew about garbage. Here, in Boston, I have to dispose of paper napkins in the toilet, but not the wipes. My new relationship with garbage reminds me how little I care about my residues. I learned through migration that even in the smallest space I was connected to waste and its disposal reminded me I wasn't welcome. As I was seeking stability and safety, focused on survival, I understood that, as migrants, I wasn't interested to know where garbage goes, because I was being distracted with hunger, fear and anxiety.

Back to East Boston⁶, when I had my first months sleeping on a sofa, I remembered trash and plastic bags accumulated on the streets, with rats passing by. I normalized this treatment. While I was sleeping with five other people and two cats, outside, I was surrounded by waste and rats. It was expected we learned the rules to dispose of waste, taking the trash on schedule, buying the flushable wipes, while the police enforce that we keep the streets clean. To start in my room, learning from Moses the Black, I had to explore the ways prison and landfill were affecting my

⁴ Its etymology means little space.

⁵ Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1975), 139.

⁶ East Boston is a neighborhood located in Boston and known for its majority of migrant population from Colombia, El Salvador and other countries of Latin America.

room and my perception of the future, one were my people are no longer being treated like trash by local policies. I want to start with my room, as I imagine in this monastic room going back to the waste disposal of my city, Bogotá, to reconnect with my *basura*.

I. Doña Juana / Miss Juana

Where I come from, Doña Juana is Bogotá's landfill. A feminine name. It used to be agricultural land and, in the 80's, it became the main landfill that ended smaller landfills⁷ around the city plans of expansion. Doña Juana is located in the southern part of the city, locality of Ciudad Bolívar, near Tunjuelo River, in the lands inhabited by the Muisca confederation.

A year after I was born, in September of 1997, this landfill experienced one of its worst environmental catastrophes. One million and two hundred thousand tons of waste caused an avalanche that contaminated the river, air, and the nearby population of Mochuelo.

I remember, after passing one day in the car, my mother telling us: "*Vamos a pasar por el basurero, suban las ventanas, rápido, rápido, pa que el olor no se entre*"⁸. That was my first encounter with Doña Juana: Disgust and fear. While my father kept driving, I looked at the sign over a toll. Garbage trucks were coming in and out, *chulos*⁹ surrounded its sky... My relationships with the soil were whitewashed with a grammar of waste and rejection..

In a news report, people like Sixta Cangrejo has been affected by Doña Juana's contamination. She calls this smell like "rotten dog"¹⁰. One of her eyes lost vision, and she barely can see with conjunctivitis. In her community headaches, intestinal and respiratory problems like

⁷ Gibraltar, Protecho and Cortijo.

⁸ "We are going to pass through the landfill, up the windows, quickly, quickly, so that the smell won't enter"

⁹ Scavenging birds.

¹⁰ "Perro podrido" Carolay Morales José David Rodríguez Este es el drama que viven los vecinos de Doña Juana RCN Radio. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zab3V7OFmcs>. 2020.

asthma, coughing, bronchitis, or difficulty breathing are part of their visits to the doctor. Rats and flies have been more frequent and they fear another environmental catastrophe.

After years of trials and legal process, in 2012, a judge sentenced that 174,000 people affected by this disaster were entitled to compensation. This relationship was not isolated. While Sixta's vision was affected, there was another source of contamination that I need to acknowledge, one related to my fear and disgust: jail.

II. La Picota

If you look on Google maps the Southern part of Bogotá, mostly inhabited by low-income citizens, you may realize how close Doña Juana is to the biggest jail, the COMEB¹¹ La Picota, one of the maximum-security facilities in the country. I started to tie knots with how these two places have a sense of disposal, that there was a bigger power behind their making.

I have learned from Derecka Purnell¹² that abolitionism is my way of saying enough. I am making a boundary, one between what “has always been like this” and the conditions that reduced my imagination to a reward/punishment system. It became more evident to me that “When police make arrests in the wake of environmental and climate destruction, they put people in jails and prisons that are also sites of environmental devastation and climate violence.”¹³ It’s a loop, a circularity to perpetuate our hopelessness. When we consider that incarcerated being and garbage are toxic waste, this jail and landfill are deeply connected.

¹¹ Complejo Carcelario y Penitenciario Metropolitano de Bogotá or Carcelary Complex and Penitentiary Metropolitano of Bogotá

¹² “Abolition, I have learned, is a bigger idea than firing cops and closing prisons; it includes eliminating the reasons people think they need cops and prisons in the first place.” *Becoming Abolitionists*, 13.

¹³ Derecka Purnell *Becoming Abolitionist*, 297.

Jails and prisons commonly have many negative connotations, but in my mind I didn't connect them to their ecological impact.¹⁴ *La Picota* -the prison- is as toxic as *Doña Juana* -the landfill- and they are just twenty six minutes away by car. What made me think these two places were not related? *La Picota* and *Doña Juana* both receive what we consider as waste. Organic material, and those who have been sentenced to spend their time in prison. Both produce in its surroundings a container so that we can avoid them, one to flush, like a toilet, out of our imagination.

I imagine that my fear depends on places where I can deposit them and forget they even exist. *La Picota* and *Doña Juana* are possible because I avoid facing my feces (mindful of this word sound), just as much as I avoid facing a criminal, knowing what that person did. I say our fear of imprisonment has become a prison itself, to preclude what makes us uncomfortable. This needs to change, it is unsustainable.

III. *Hacinamiento* / Overcrowding

Once I started writing, I couldn't stop finding parallels between the *hacinamiento* / overcrowding of the waste at *Doña Juana* and overcrowding of the inmates at *La Picota*. This high-security prison is operating at 167.4% of its maximum capacity. Many of those who should have been located in jail are waiting for their transportation in police stations, or in the URI Unity of Immediate Reaction (*Unidad de Reacción Inmediata*), due to the prison's over capacity . These

¹⁴ “A 2016 report, *We are not disposable: The Toxic Impact of Prisons and Jails*, generally describes prisons and jails as ‘environmental health disasters . . . unhealthy for those locked inside them, for those who work there, for those living in the neighborhoods where the facility is located...’ As the Report exposes, as jails and prisons ‘produce toxins that spread into the wider environment, they ultimately harm us all.’” Derecka Purcell.

places of incarceration were designed to hold 1,200 people, but 3,200 people are imprisoned at La Picota.¹⁵ When I learned this, I had to stop and pray, breathe, and come back.

In 2020 Doña Juana had 26 pieces of equipment to treat the waste and only five were working.¹⁶ In 2023, an institution that surveys public servers, raised the alarms that Doña Juana's life occupancy was going to end by 2025, that they were breaking 17 of 30 indicators related to their environmental license¹⁷. Due to this mismanagement, the landfill produces significant carbon emissions. "From 2023, the production of methane in Doña Juana landfill has the potential of warming as the average emissions of almost seventeen million cars in a year."¹⁸ I wonder if there is a connection between this landfill, working below permissions, and the overcrowding in the high-security prison. If this represents a bigger picture of neglect and abandonment.

Being an abolitionist, if you ask me, is to discern the players and the play, interdependent, in a big picture we inherited out of fear. Reading Purnell¹⁹ I can conclude that we risk criticizing the big picture, without paying attention to the smallness of our practices, languages and the ways we are present in our own neighborhoods. Expressions like "keeping the streets clean" reminds me of the intersection of trash and crime. A system that "cleans" with police, and violence.

Contamination out of a landfill and prison is also condemning white supremacy. One that does not mean the same in Colombia, but that takes the shape of North and South. "Policing was,

¹⁵ Personería Bogotá. *Aumenta Hacinamiento en estaciones de policía y URI en Bogotá: ya supera el 167%* 9 July 2024. <https://www.personeriabogota.gov.co/sala-de-prensa/notas-de-prensa/item/1229-aumenta-hacinamiento-en-estaciones-de-policia-y-uri-en-bogota-ya-supera-el-167>.

¹⁶ Kelly Valentina Cubillos Pineda. Juana: más allá de la basura. <https://dona-juana.netlify.app/> Personería de Bogotá 2022.

¹⁷ "La Procuraduría también precisó que, es preocupante el incumplimiento de 17 de los 30 indicadores de seguimiento a la licencia ambiental y de los parámetros de vertimientos"

¹⁸ "A partir de 2023, la generación de metano del relleno de Doña Juana tiene un potencial de calentamiento equivalente a las emisiones promedio de más de 17 millones de automóviles durante un año completo." Estimación de la generación, captura y emisiones de metano del relleno sanitario Doña Juana en Bogotá, Colombia. Greenpeace Colombia. August, 2024. 11.

¹⁹ "our thinking had developed into condemning the system of policing as a vestige of slavery, colonialism, and capitalism." *Becoming abolitionists*, 113.

and is, deeply connected to the control of land, labor, and people who threatened white supremacy.”²⁰ The mountains to the East shaped a city that left its South as a poor periferia, excluded, like waste; while the North received the flux of upper classes, and built greener spaces for these neighborhoods. Contamination was left to the South.

My city is just one example, but it reflects a wider reality: people are being treated as disposable. The way we control and hide waste —through policing and exclusion— feels uncomfortably close to how we treat one another. What should we decolonize in our bodies and soils that can lead us into a future, one free from the limitations of technology and scientific “progress”?

IV. Guilt as Fertilizer

Imagining a future where landfills are no longer necessary is a future that requires a push to end a system that produces things that are not meant to last, to end punishments to individuals while a multinational is allowed to violate environmental licenses in other countries, to end a system that was meant to deny and expel to the outsides of the city their waste human or organic, to end the perpetuation of private property and the lack of information about the soil we share.

I don’t tend to agree with guilt, but Joanna Macy says that: “People don’t want to look too far into the future because doing so can bring up despair and guilt. Retreating into the “home” of a familiar timescape brings short-term relief but also undermines the motivation to act for our world; this adds to the feeling that we are culpable.”²¹ I consider better to start with guilt, to acknowledge it, rather than to assume the next generations will do the job to “save” our future.

²⁰ *Becoming Abolitionists*, 40.

²¹ *Active Hope*,

Let us as Unitarian Universalist honor guilt²² Let us explore it, as we figure out what is coming after in ourselves. My guilt is enriching and nourishing my rage and anger. This soil, that welcomed my migration, together with the rupture I feel from the soil I left, reminds me of the lack of awareness I had on my own territory, Bogotá, and the guilt I feel being far away. I could have done something. Now that I feel, therefore I know, and I can take action.

Guilt with hope means that there is always a chance. I did what I could. What about generational guilt, could it be capable of wider actions of reparation and restoration? If we could explore guilt in community, as a collective of beings, one more than human, what practices could help us address this emotion?

V. Compost time in Community

I remember doing compost in my house. I used to take the leftovers that my mother collected from the kitchen, then on a bench, I was cutting, mixing them, and throwing them all into our garden of mint, arugula, spinach, and albahaca. Garden built with plastic containers. But I was doing this alone, while my mother went upstairs to have a nap with my father. I imagine a more conversational practice. Let us sit, have a coffee (a Colombian tradition after lunch) and share some stories, grounded in community, together, as we keep our connection between what we just ate and soil.

Joanna Macy says that “When the Haudenosaunee meet in council to consider major decisions, their practice is to ask, “How will this affect the seventh generation?”²³ I ask myself, “Could I have done better compost practice if I had this question in mind?” Seeking a definition

²² “The way out of this trap is to recognize the important function guilt can serve and to honor this emotion as an expression of our pain for the world. Guilt is the uncomfortable awareness that our actions are out of step with our values.” Active Hope, 142.

²³ Joanna May, Active Hope, 137.

of collective, I find that composting with my community is also to learn a different conception of time where we learn that the soil rests. Cutting a banana peel into pieces takes longer than expected... What about the time it took to reach my hands, how much to grow, and how much does it take to come to my table?

Our theologies of “be in the present”, “mindfulness” or “the power of now” tend to forget that there are multiple presents that already incorporate the future. That future can be now. Composting with the physical sensation of cutting with scissors demands a sense of attention to what is being cut, it could be a meditation, a practice of care that our congregations could include on their own. And we could have a conversation in a community where we reflect what is being cut, if possible outside, in a sunny day, with soil around us, including the more-than-human in our collective, when we care we don’t get distracted.

VI. Compost Practice: Denouncing Landfill and Prison System

After I started in my retreat cell, I wanted to think about our possibilities when we are we. In Bellacasa: “The ‘collective’ here does not only include humans but the plants we cultivate, the animals we raise and eat (or rather not), and Earth’s energetic resources: air, water... And as such, humans exist only in a web of living co-vulnerabilities.”²⁴ Our collective as Unitarian Universalists, understood as We, stops centering reason and places vulnerability as its peak. We belong to this collective, sharing space and time with microbes that we also need in this web. Our faith, through composting, can include in this collective the angels and the invisible beings of microbial life. Waste is a perspective of residues, it is not fixed. Composting together as a community, in a circle, we could reflect: What senses are awakened?

²⁴ Matters of Care, 145.

I learned that monks listen to a reader or music while they eat in silence. Could I bring this practice to our compost circle? We could listen to:

- Interviews that honor the voices of inmates
- The Church of the Larger Fellowship work with prison abolitionism.
- Music that has been historically sung by people deprived of liberty.
- Sing or to be in silence as a memorial.

We could also name a list of those who have lost their lives in execution or on death row mixed with the names of environmental leaders who have lost their lives. Allow the community to bring their own names and let it be circular. What if we can hold a worm in our hands?

While there is a tendency from activists and academics to imagine composting food as a start, I don't want to rush. Let us move slowly, like soil. Don't think about the bigger picture yet. Because a collective, one more than human, as expansive as it can reach, should start cutting small. This is not a metaphor, but the willingness to make space for the small pieces, in compost, remembering those who are imprisoned while sitting in a circle, being vulnerable one unto another, composting through our fellowship what is accumulated, residues, and only we can decompose as we process it into words...

For example, meditate on privilege with quotes like: “Unlike free-world climate migrants who can attempt to leave dangerous conditions, incarcerated people obviously face considerable obstacles and punishment if they attempt to make demands, and especially if they attempt to leave prison.”²⁵

Include in your theologies a prayer for the inmates, worship or art made by them. Invite your congregants to hold vigils outside prisons and ICE facilities, just as much as to ask questions

²⁵ Derecka Purcell Becoming abolitionist

about where their trash is going every week. Compost is one way you can honor that nothing is empty waste, that we remember those forgotten by the system, that soil can benefit from our generosity when we learn that love is a collective practice.

When love is at the center we start small. Bellacasa said that “What counts is the “interweaving” of living things that holds together worlds as we know them, that allows their perpetuation and renewal—and even that which helps to their decay as we have seen with the example of worms’ labor of composting.”²⁶ And I want to finish with a provocation of renewal, a soil renewal for our religious denomination. I am calling you to learn from worms and compost rather than from Hosea Ballou, Channing, or Margaret Fuller. To focus on the soil and not in our 1700s religious foundation. I won't deny their importance, but soil didn't come from books, it came from the interweaving of the living process of beings we cannot see. Let us center love in our smallest, not our purest, forms of attention. Let us dream of a liberated future where we move like worms, free bodies, small in planning but powerful in our collective work. May the anonymous presence of worms, marginalized and monastic communities remind you that abolitionism is not a formula or a promise, it is a spirit-filled way of what this system cannot take away from us: our imagination.

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²⁶ *Matters of Care*, 161.