

ALISON ROSE REED —

# Against Conspiracies of the Inevitable; or, A Review of *Abolition Geography*

A GEOGRAPHICAL IMPERATIVE LIES AT THE HEART OF EVERY STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE.[1]

Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, edited by Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, demonstrates with astonishing precision the material and ideological terrain on which the prison-industrial complex (PIC) confines possibilities for social life.[2] The PIC, as Gilmore makes clear, is a geographical solution to social, economic, and political problems.[3] Refusing oversimplified sound bites that pulse through each news cycle, her work lays out in no uncertain terms how the PIC is born of "surpluses of finance capital, land, labor, and state capacity that have accumulated from a series of overlapping and interlocking crises stretched across three decades,"[4] including, significantly, counterrevolution against the radical decolonial movements of the mid-twentieth century. In so doing, Gilmore refutes ahistorical narratives of the PIC that distract from the ongoing work of organizers who have been actively challenging the supposed inevitability of human caging for well over half a century—long before the word "abolition" gained mainstream traction during the protests that erupted after the murder of George Floyd in spring 2020.

Gilmore, working in the Black Radical Tradition of abolition, seeks to denaturalize the carceral logics that portray the PIC as a permanent fixture of our social landscape. Despite some key distinctions in scope and strategy, the animating spirit of this contemporary movement finds parallels in the abolition of chattel slavery, an institution that, at the time, was considered a given in the natural order of things. Today's system of policing and punishment is also widely viewed as indelible, but, like slavery, it had to be built, legitimized, and reinforced to maintain its status as such. *Abolition Geography* challenges the inexorability of cops and cages, just as activists historically worked to uproot presumptions of slavery's permanence.

Amid the pandemic and the latest wave of mass protests against ongoing police murder, abolition became a household idea almost overnight. Possibilities, of course, emerged out of this conjuncture, but so did the risks that attend popularization, such as warping "abolition" into the sexy new placeholder for a sanitized form of antiracism absent an abolitionist analysis.

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[1] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (London and Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2022), 137.

[2] I would like to express my gratitude to the contributing editors, Joanna Joseph and Isabelle Kirkham-Lewitt, whose brilliant feedback much improved the piece. I would also like to thank Kristie Soares and Shannon Brennan for their generative commentary, as well as Felice Blake and Felipe De Jesús Hernández for the deep conversations about abolition over the years that undoubtedly made an imprint on this review.

[3] While the modern PIC, like the carceral state more broadly, describes the networked institutions that comprise the vast US system of criminalization, surveillance, policing, and imprisonment, both terms are expansive in that they center the cognitive and cultural—as well as economic and political—dimensions of punishment. Coined by Mike Davis, the term PIC continues to be useful in its explicit connection to the military-industrial complex; at the same time, abolitionists, including Gilmore and other members of Critical Resistance, often lament the overdetermined emphasis on private corporations that sometimes attends its evocation.

[4] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 121.

[5] Gilmore’s work offers a necessary corrective to this incorporative modality of antiracism, which repackages the deep, necessarily complex analysis of radical movement histories as performative activism—the kind that ultimately reinforces the status quo and forecloses the creative capacity for reimagining collective social life. As opposed to the racially coded moral panics around uprisings and the state violence that criminalizes and prosecutes rebellious people and feelings, performative activism lends itself to overly simplistic origin stories, statistical recitations, corporate sloganeering, and certain forms of sanctioned protest legitimized by the state. It also guides the formation of DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) committees and offices that do little to restructure institutions, instead demanding tokenized labor in the service of white liberal affects of, as Felice Blake often says, “feeling good about feeling bad.”[6] Such recourse to mundane exploitation and spectacularized suffering points to Saidiya Hartman’s observation that, in the wake of Black Lives Matter uprisings from 2013 to 2020, “what we see now is a translation of Black suffering into white pedagogy.”[7] As antidote, Gilmore urges scholars and activists to remain oriented *toward* that which abolition geography makes possible, not that which threatens to annihilate relationships constituted in struggle.

Gilmore—a longtime organizer and former student activist who studied drama at Yale before earning her PhD in geography from Rutgers University and becoming a preeminent scholar of abolition and carceral geographies—rejects the premise and pervasiveness of performative activism in the academy, as well as the sadistic pleasure for some of playing anti-Black violence on an endless loop, which also attempts to normalize its ubiquity. [8] Rather, Gilmore is invested in amplifying alternatives to state-sanctioned premature death; these alternatives are articulated in and on space, through “novel practices of place-making that revise understandings and produce new senses of purpose.”[9] In the discipline of geography, Gilmore found the materialist analysis that grounds her indispensable critique. But it is her active participation in struggles against the PIC that offers something beyond critique—the vital imagination of alternative ways of organizing social life.

Gilmore’s robust body of scholarship on social movements and political economy has fundamentally shaped the knowledge and practice of carceral abolition in the twenty-first century. In 1997, she cofounded the national abolitionist organization Critical Resistance, which held its first conference a year later in Berkeley; its local chapters across the country have continued to shape theory and strategy through collective action ever since this initial convening, demonstrating the necessary grounding of scholar-activism in praxis. As Gilmore says, “abolition is a fleshly and material presence of life lived differently.”[10] Her scholarship is deeply informed by her organizing and vice versa, indicating how abolition, as a “theory of social life,” is intimately linked to its practice.[11] Abolitionist organizers have also gleaned the insights of Gilmore’s landmark study of prison expansion projects, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2007). Her twenty collected essays in *Abolition Geography* reflect and expand on this contribution to understand not just how the PIC works but how to dismantle it. Gilmore attends to the texture of local spaces while cultivating an internationalist perspective rooted in the practical work of abolition, which she underlines is not a far-fetched fantasy. Victories are possible; they happen in everyday

[5] Self-styled abolitionist initiatives have become highly fashionable and funded in academia, unsurprisingly absent a revolutionary ethos. Take, for instance, the fact that the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded Columbia University a \$5 million grant to develop a curriculum on “Racial Justice and Abolition Democracy.” Yet senior fellows of the Columbia Justice Lab supported in written testimony the construction of a so-called feminist jail in Queens as a purportedly abolitionist response to the infamous Rikers Island jail complex in New York City. This co-optation of abolition not only obscures its organizing approach but actively sabotages it. For more, see “Racial Justice and Abolition Democracy Curriculum Project Established at Columbia University,” Giving to Columbia, [link](#); Tamar Sarai, “Abolitionists Push Back against New York City’s Proposed Plan for a ‘Feminist Jail,’” *Prism*, July 7, 2022, [link](#).

[6] Blake quoted in George Lipsitz, “‘Standing at the Crossroads’: Why Race, State Violence and Radical Movements Matter Now,” in *The Rising Tide of Color: Race, State Violence and Radical Movements*, edited by Moon-Ho Jung (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 61–62.

[7] Hartman quoted in “Saidiya Hartman on Insurgent Histories and the Abolitionist Imaginary,” *Artforum.com*, July 14, 2020, [link](#).

[8] For example, Gilmore refused to display the fatal beating of Rodney King during a talk presented at UC Berkeley on March 6, 1992, before the April 29, 1992, verdict and ensuing rebellion. See “Terror Austerity Race Gender Excess Theater,” in Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 154–175.

[9] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 93.

[10] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 351.

[11] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 351.

contexts that often elude academia. As Gilmore declares, “*Prepare to win means be ready for the morning after.*”[12] Gilmore’s generative analysis is informed by her organizing with, for example, [Critical Resistance](#), [Mothers Reclaiming Our Children \(Mothers ROC\)](#), and the [CA Prison Moratorium Project](#). Her scholar-activism therefore unseats the armchair intellectualism that pejoratively refers to abolition as utopian at best. While anti-abolitionist liberal advocates of prison reform such as Roger Lancaster argue that the “punitive turn” transformed the carceral state into a “rogue institution,”[13] abolitionist organizers understand that the system is brutal by design. As Angela Y. Davis explains, the words “‘prison’ and ‘reform’ have been inextricably linked since the beginning of the use of imprisonment as the main means of punishing those who violate social norms.”[14] The history of the prison, then, is the history of prison reform, which has naturalized and expanded its life and scope. That is to say, in the words of Dylan Rodríguez, “reformism isn’t liberation, it’s counterinsurgency.”[15] Reform further legitimates the prison as a structuring logic and defining feature of modern life.

As Gilmore makes clear, there is no alternative to imagining other ways of organizing social life when the practical work of abolition is a matter of life and death. Racism is, after all, to cite her widely circulated definition, “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”[16] Gilmore’s research, as it spans three decades, elucidates the problems leading to global human catastrophe, entrenched in the spatial and symbolic territoriality of power, or forms of “organized abandonment and organized violence” contested by movements against racial capitalist processes of separation and accumulation in the “age of human sacrifice.”[17] She also points to potential solutions, or an otherwise and elsewhere, born of these movements. Abolition extends far beyond prison walls, since carcerality saturates the US racial state as a violent totality but never wholly totalizing force. Against the grain of popular trends toward the romanticization of individual agency or the overdetermination of structure, Gilmore’s *Abolition Geography* is grounded in real relationships that continually remake the world.

### A Note on Terms

WE NEED THEORIES THAT WORK: WE NEED GUIDES TO ACTION.  
WE NEED TO TAKE APART—TO *DIS*ARTICULATE—THEORY FROM  
DECORATIVE IMITATION IF WE ARE TO REARTICULATE ITS  
EPISTEMOLOGICAL POWER IN POLITICAL PRAXIS.[18]

*Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* is organized into four sections. This review focuses on “Part I: What Is to Be Done? Scholarship as Activism, Activism as Scholarship,” particularly its engagement with questions of abolitionist reading, teaching, and organizing in the academy. Elsewhere, Felice Blake and I have written on the incorporation of antiracism as a response to crisis; more specifically, we look to how, amid white liberal co-optation of insurgent forms of study in the Black Radical Tradition, readers, teachers, and organizers continue to reimagine the terms of collective social life.[19]

[12] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 453.

[13] Roger Lancaster, “How to End Mass Incarceration,” *Jacobin*, August 18, 2017, [link](#).

[14] See Davis, “Imprisonment and Reform,” *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 40–59.

[15] Dylan Rodríguez, “The Magical Thinking of Reformism,” *Medium*, October 20, 2020, [link](#).

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

[17] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 134, 306.

[18] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 75.

[19] See Felice Blake and Alison Rose Reed, “Imagination or Regulation? Challenging Antiracist Incorporation as a Response to Crisis,” *Public Books*, November 10, 2021, [link](#). See also Felice Blake, Paula Ioanide, and Alison Reed, eds., *Antiracism Inc.: Why the Way We Talk about Racial Justice Matters* (Goleta, CA: Punctum Books, 2019).

We reflect on the possibilities of radical reading practices as bringing into focus abolitionist imaginaries, or what Gilmore often characterizes as “life in rehearsal,” as well as the pitfalls of how the academy commodifies and depoliticizes the work of Black Studies. Gilmore’s warning about these displacements in “Decorative Beasts: Dogging the Academy in the Late 20th Century” anticipates the College Board’s revision for its AP (Advanced Placement) African American Studies course, as well as reactionary attempts to quell Critical Race Theory in the academy despite the proliferation of effectively anodyne antiracism reading groups that serve white interests, making the backlash all the more clownish. That is to say, the zealous right-wing witch hunt around Black Studies and Critical Race Theory misses the point entirely, absenting the radical student movements in the discipline of law and the university as such from popular understanding and consideration.

Central to these concerns around scholar-activist praxis are keywords from the book’s title. First, *Abolition* is not simply oriented toward the absence of prisons and jails. This “failure of the imagination” cannot register that abolition is about presence, or “figuring out how to work with people to make something rather than figuring out how to erase something.”[20] *Geography* signals Gilmore’s materialist analysis of race, space, and place-making. She offers the term “infrastructure of feeling” to complement Raymond Williams’s famous “structure of feeling” as “material too, in the sense that ideology becomes material as do the actions that feelings enable or constrain.”[21] Whereas *structure* indicates the attempt to order something—namely, symbolic arrangements of people and power—*infrastructure* emphasizes the somatic and spatial dimensions of social organization. Gilmore takes seriously the work of feelings to both inhibit and inhabit emergent cultural practices. As she writes,

ABOLITION GEOGRAPHY TAKES FEELING AND AGENCY TO BE CONSTITUTIVE OF, NO LESS THAN CONSTRAINED BY, STRUCTURE. IN OTHER WORDS, IT’S A WAY OF STUDYING, AND OF DOING POLITICAL ORGANIZING, AND OF BEING IN THE WORLD, AND OF WORLDING OURSELVES.[22]

This infrastructure of feeling in revolutionary epistemologies, such as, centrally, the Black Radical Tradition, is capacious and formed “by energetically expectant consciousness of and direction toward unboundedness.”[23] Gilmore’s use of “infrastructure” here foregrounds how intangible structures of feeling (vis-à-vis Williams) shape and are shaped by the physical systems within and across which they exist.

*Towards* is a spatial orientation away from that which is disproportionately killing “us,” not as a universal category but requiring critical solidarities and likely alliances. Gilmore’s analysis centers “fatal couplings of power and difference” (to summon Stuart Hall) in vectors of identity such as race, gender, and class.[24] She is not concerned with a narrow, individualized version of identity politics but with institutions that produce social, physical, and spiritual death. Finally, *Liberation* for Gilmore is summarized by her assertion that “freedom is a place.”[25] This place is not a messianic rupture but a pragmatic approach to dismantling the constitutive unfreedoms of racial capitalism and building a world premised on the principle of social life as opposed to differential death.

[20] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 350–51.

[21] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 490.

[22] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 491.

[23] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 491.

[24] See Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 134. See also Stuart Hall, “Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies,” *Rethinking Marxism* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 10–18.

[25] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 93, 474.

## Carceral Geography

PRISONS AND JAILS ARE CENTRAL INDEFENSIBLE SPACES: POLITICALLY, SOCIALLY, ECONOMICALLY, MORALLY, AND IDEOLOGICALLY THEY ARE WHAT THE GROWING NEOLIBERAL STATE IS MADE OF. THEY'RE BIG. THEY'RE HORRIBLE. THEY'RE TENTACULAR. AND THEY'RE NOT INEVITABLE.[26]

[26] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 262.

Part I of *Abolition Geography* meditates on the university as a site of struggle where the political, broadly defined, is often severed from the cultural. The university celebrates itself as an arbiter of social justice, now fashionably tied to “abolition” as the latest expression of its liberal humanism. Liberal humanist gestures of antiracism have triggered massive conservative backlash, such as from the right-wing advocacy group Turning Point USA, which has active student chapters with faculty advisors on college campuses across the country. The organization, founded by Charlie Kirk, launched Professor Watchlist in 2016.[27] The website provides a catalogue (complete with pictures and bios) of professors across the country who are supposedly oppressing conservative students with their liberal propaganda. Reported professors, guilty of using scary terms like “institutional racism,” have become targets for death threats and hate speech. Turning Point acolytes appear to believe oppression is possible if and only if it affects them. At the same time, conservative organizations confuse gestures of inclusion with the project of abolition, which critiques the same liberalism they abhor. Right-wing activists are here responding to the preponderance of the university as a key site for channeling resources toward incorporative modalities of antiracism.[28]

[27] I do not care to link Turning Point USA's Professor Watchlist website, but for more, see Adam Gabbatt, “US Rightwing Group Targets Academics with Professor Watchlist,” *Guardian*, September 17, 2021, [link](#).

Since the university is also, more specifically, a prime venue for the misappropriation of abolitionist discourses toward liberal ends, scholar-activism like Gilmore's—that is, work that actively challenges the logics of reformism—remains as urgent as ever. In emphasizing abolition as presence, not absence, Gilmore reorients scholar-activism away from endless critique and toward mobilizing that critique in the spirit not of putatively ameliorative reform but of broad-based social transformation. As Gilmore said in her 2011 American Studies Association Presidential Address, published as the first chapter of the book, “Make unions, not task forces.”[29] She is interested in material change, not symbolic gestures that amount to putting lipstick on a pig. To follow the metaphor, gussied-up swine are dangerous in that they attempt to personify the beastly, which is to say, “humanize” the prison as an engine for producing premature death. Gilmore's scholarship refutes conspiracies that see racism as an effect/affect of capitalism, as if it could be reformed out of late capital—the logic of most antiracist representational strategies and university DEI trainings. The antiracism industry largely ignores how racism shifts to meet the current demands of capital, which will always reinvent itself.

[28] In this sense, no one really won the culture wars—except for, as usual, white men across the political spectrum and the women who champion (and replicate) them.

[29] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 48.

Gilmore's interventions propose alternatives to Band-Aid solutions that don't address, and in fact often reinforce, the root of the problem. Rather than fetishizing the prison itself, Gilmore elaborates carceral geography as a dense network of capital and warfare, as well as its cost—human sacrifice. While liberals often mischaracterize the PIC as a simple extension of chattel slavery by another name, as opposed to a renovation of racism, Gilmore

explains how globalization reduced the demand for captive labor, largely incapacitating imprisoned people. Thus, what she calls “the prison fix” emerges out of the counterrevolution against social movements, moral panics around crime (largely a discursive shift that does not correlate to statistical realities), and an economic crisis produced by an excess of capital. The PIC consolidates and justifies state spending on the warehousing of surplus populations in jails and prisons, as opposed to investing in the things people require to meet their basic survival and safety needs. This carceral infrastructure expands with each reform.

The university, like the prison, functions in part to curb revolutionary movements and the insurgent feelings that animate them. As Eli Meyerhoff writes: “Prisons and universities complement each other as two sides of the same coin. They are institutions for producing obedient, governable subjects—shaped in an accounting mode with incarceration for ‘debts to society’ and education for ‘credits.’”[30] Part of what yokes these institutions is their attempt to control the relationship between time and freedom. For example, as Gilmore argues, prisons today are primarily extractive not because they exploit captive labor but because they “enable money to move because of the enforced *inactivity* of people locked in them. . . . What’s extracted from the extracted is the resource of life—time.”[31] The temporality of state power—with *doing time* as an expression of that violence—attempts to repress life and curtail possibilities for freedom. And as Martin Luther King Jr. writes in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” (1963), the white moderate lives according to a mythical sense of temporality enshrined by the state and “paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom.”[32] While the university re/produces this paternalism, abolitionist advocacy disrupts liberal progress narratives, which move at a snail’s pace but nonetheless preemptively declare victories that can soon become defeats. For instance, James Baldwin ends “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” with the epistolary plea: “You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free.”[33] Requiring critical solidarities and concrete actions, organizing for abolition as opposed to reforming carceral geography is a daily praxis full of contradictions and complexity; the work is ongoing.

Amid an ahistorical critical trend in the academy of either romanticizing agency or conceiving of power as totalizing, Gilmore sees state violence not as a linear series of events but as an imposed structure. This structure mediates the recursive process of power, which shifts according to emergent conditions and the demands made on it. In Gilmore’s words,

IF UNFINISHED LIBERATION IS THE STILL-TO-BE-ACHIEVED WORK OF ABOLITION, THEN AT BOTTOM WHAT IS TO BE ABOLISHED ISN’T THE PAST OR ITS PRESENT GHOST, BUT RATHER THE PROCESSES OF HIERARCHY, DISPOSSESSION, AND EXCLUSION THAT CONGEAL IN AND AS GROUP-DIFFERENTIATED VULNERABILITY TO PREMATURE DEATH.[34]

[30] Eli Meyerhoff, “Prisons and Universities Are Two Sides of the Same Coin,” *Abolition: A Journal of Insurgent Politics*, June 24, 2015, [link](#).

[31] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 474.

[32] Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington (New York: HarperOne, 2003), 295.

[33] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993 [1963]), 10.

[34] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 475.

Gilmore's materialist analysis of the prison fix unpacks facile narratives and in so doing debunks some central misunderstandings about the PIC, such as: the profit motive myth, the confused relationship between labor and capital in the epoch of human sacrifice, and the danger of demands for "innocence" that reinforce the hierarchy of those deemed fit for social death. She stresses the spiritual obligation to not reproduce the damaging divide of violent as disposable and nonviolent as redeemable, as abolitionists are centrally concerned with redressing harm without relying on or reproducing the carceral state. This includes scholar-activism that challenges the presumption of a relationship between incarceration and so-called rehabilitation that maintains the façade of policing as a public good or necessary component of social organization, and *doing time* as a requisite step to pass Go in the state monopoly on literal forms of freedom.

Likewise, politicians have a vested interest in absolving the state of any responsibility to support collective well-being. What Gilmore describes as the "shadow state," that is, the private organizations made responsible for providing social services, takes on this role as it nonetheless relies on the state for organizational longevity. Gilmore's "In the Shadow of the Shadow State" explores the ramifications of the nonprofit-industrial complex and the reliance on foundation gifts as opposed to membership dues, in turn bolstering what Stuart Schrader calls "the humanitarian hinge" of global racial capitalism.

[35] In other words, the repressive function of the state exists alongside and is authorized through the incorporation of antiracism into the shadow state, which re/produces carceral logics in its limited distribution of justice.[36]

While carceral liberals and conservatives alike would have the public believe in legitimate state violence as a means of redressing social ills, Gilmore's work urges activists to recognize the power of organized resistance to the prison-industrial complex, as well as the impossibility of humane cages. Contrary to the liberal myth that the violence of institutions is aberrational rather than constitutive, an abolitionist analysis grasps that a country founded on the racial capitalism imported from Europe is built on the violence reformists want to depict as exceptional. As Gilmore's essential *Golden Gulag* demonstrates, massive prison expansion projects emerged out of a post-World War II economic boom followed by a crisis of capitalism, more specifically an excess of capital that could not be reinvested in modes of production, all of which resulted in the capitalist class investing in the magical world of finance (e.g., the real estate market and prison construction, bought through bonds from banks) instead of in jobs. Therefore, the rise of the PIC was a response to this crisis—by building prisons while expelling massive chunks of the population from the workforce (i.e., making them permanently surplus, unnecessary, and unassimilable into the profit-making process).

Throughout *Abolition Geography*, as in *Golden Gulag*, Gilmore reminds readers that prisons protect the operation of racial capitalism in no small part by warehousing surplus populations. At the same time, joblessness born of neoliberal globalization coalesced with social movements calling for self-determination and the reorganization of power. Popular culture, media, and political leaders were also talking about law and order to criminalize poverty, radical organizers of color, and mass protest. The idea of an altruistic prison is

[35] Stuart Schrader, "The Crises of Prisons," panel commentary, Annual Cultural Studies Association Conference, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 5, 2016.

[36] Many thanks to Isabelle Kirkham-Lewitt, who in reviewing this piece drew a link between Gilmore's "shadow state" and Naomi Murakawa and Katherine Beckett's "shadow carceral state," the latter of which examines how civil and administrative authorities impose and expand punishment alongside the criminal legal system. As Kirkham-Lewitt points out, the shadows of the (carceral) state inversely correspond to the notion of abolition as presence, which is to say, as an antidote to the various hauntings of these caliginous absences. For more, see Katherine Beckett and Naomi Murakawa, "Mapping the Shadow Carceral State: Toward an Institutionally Capacious Approach to Punishment," *Theoretical Criminology* 16, no. 2 (2012): 221–244.

therefore as absurd to abolitionists as the notion of slavery as a “benevolent” institution. Just as chattel slavery attempted to enforce social death through the denial of humanity via the legal reduction of people to property, the PIC operates effectively by way of the overdetermined and racialized concept of criminality.

The popularization of abolition as a term goes hand-in-hand with the university’s incorporation of it. Since the academy whitewashes the content of radical social movements to produce defanged gestures of antiracism, Gilmore’s work provides an urgent rejoinder to sanitized or simplified accounts of the prison. This makes Gilmore’s scholarship, which debunks the profit motive myth of “mass incarceration” (the discourse of which tends to emphasize numbers as opposed to naming carcerality as a defining feature of modern life), all the more vital. Oversimplified narratives about the carceral state, popularized by increasingly widespread conversations, obfuscate the largely public infrastructure of prisons. Misleading statistics and sound bites about private prisons perpetuate myths and prevent meaningful concerted action. Private prisons cage only about 5 percent of folks locked up in jails and prisons. As Gilmore’s “The Worrying State of the Anti-Prison Movement” (in “Part IV: Organizing for Abolition”) explains, huge amounts of money slosh through and are extracted from the public infrastructure that warehouses about 95 percent of people in prisons and jails. Although prisons (and prison labor) are profitable for private companies, the system as a whole does not produce wealth. It consumes the wealth that could be used to actually address communal harm, redress structural oppression, and sustain communities. No doubt private prisons are profit-driven, that is, they are about making money as opposed to providing basic and necessary services to incarcerated people. But private companies are not the driving force of mass incarceration—they are opportunistic parasites on the carceral state.

The state isn’t profiting, as corrections budgets are always among the most enormous areas of spending; it hemorrhages resources through revenue bonds that won’t regenerate resources to mitigate a crisis of its own design. As the Prison Policy Initiative reports, the carceral state costs the government as well as system-impacted people and their loved ones more than \$182 billion per year.[37] While it is awfully expensive for the communities it impacts, the system of surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as a whole does not exist as a conspiracy to generate profits.[38] The government is paying the few private prison companies through contracts, so the companies make the profit. The focus on private prisons also obscures that the corrections budget money and public infrastructure of prisons and jails would still be intact without them. What’s more, the focus of collective outrage should be not on parasitic profits but on the fact that the violent racial capitalist project of the carceral state exists in the first place.

In short, Gilmore’s scholar-activism debunks seductive but misguided stories of the relationship between racial capitalism and the PIC. While private prison companies indeed profit through contracts they make with the public government, and no doubt comprise part of the PIC, as a small percentage of the US carceral infrastructure, they do not drive it. An economic analysis of the PIC focuses on the overall profit-making process of capitalism and its need to warehouse those deemed disposable to protect this process. Almost

[37] Peter Wagner and Bernadette Rabuy, “Following the Money of Mass Incarceration,” Prison Policy Initiative, January 25, 2017, [link](#).

[38] Consider, for example, commissary and telephone calls, as well as the video visitation and electronic messaging industries, not to mention court costs, bail, and so on.

half the states in the country do not have private prisons, including some of the states with the highest incarceration rates. The abolition of private prisons would not diminish the exorbitant amounts of corrections budget money and infrastructure the government spends to cage people.

Gilmore asserts that in order to dismantle the system, organizers must study where the money comes from and where it goes, tracing in their local context the complicated nexus of federal, state, county, and city funding, revenue, and expenditure—alongside corrections budgets, municipal bonds, TIF (tax increment financing) districts, and tax abatements that help the rich and hurt the poor. Revenue extraction from working-class Black communities, municipal bonds and court fines and fees, government protection of low property taxes that further entrench legacies (and ongoing realities) of housing discrimination, and the racist policing of segregated space all work to subsidize unearned white wealth, greedy corporations, and the carceral state. Again, the heavy social price of banishing millions of people to cages should weigh on the collective conscience far more than parasitic profits on a system of dispossession, abjection, and violence. Simply put, the PIC is a component of the economic system. Whether it generates profits for specific private prison corporations is secondary to its functioning as a channel for the circulation of capital and control of bodies and labor. Our attention should be focused on what it means for our social organization in the US to be predicated on a racist, genocidal, and suicidal death economy.

Organizers informed by Gilmore's work do not want racially equitable carceral violence; they want to end carceral violence, which includes but is not limited to imprisonment as such. More white people ensnared in a system that disproportionately targets people of color does not mean justice, just as increased representation of people of color in institutions founded on white supremacy does not change the whiteness of institutions. As Cheryl Harris argues, whiteness is a kind of property invested with unearned power that can be accessed in radically uneven ways by people of color.[39] Rather than maintaining faith in existing institutions, abolitionist organizers look to each other, nurturing collectives of care and mutual aid while fighting to eliminate a society rooted in criminalization, coercion, and control. Abolitionist campaigns are as empty as corporate pride celebrations if not attached to a broader vision of social transformation that knows the system is not "broken" and populated by "bad apples" but functions violently by design; the presence of historically excluded groups represents the perfection of a system of plunder rather than its overturning. If the public mistakes increased visibility of people of color as progress, then the racist foundations of institutions—such as the university—remain unchecked. The narrow misinterpretation of identity politics as a matter of representation rather than a foundational restructuring of society presents very real dangers to substantive change.

In defiance of neoliberal logics of tokenized assimilation, organizers and scholars working in the Black Radical Tradition actively refuse a partial freedom based on the disposability of those not deemed "exceptional,"[40] seeking the sweeping redistribution of resources for all. In our current era of mass incarceration, even those who seek to disrupt its ideological premises often reify the prison as an aesthetic feature of modern life. Over and against the soullessness of the carceral state, the Black Radical Tradition remains

[39] Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–1791.

[40] George Lipsitz writes of this refusal, building on Chandan Reddy's concept of illogical opposition, which describes how the state constructs a narrative of exceptionality and disposability that demands people of color's abandonment of their communities in order to partially assimilate into the violent social order. Yet, as Lipsitz notes, "at the grassroots, social movement groups recognize and reject the terms of this bargain." See George Lipsitz, "The Logic of 'Illogical' Opposition: Tools and Tactics for Tough Times," in Blake et al., *Antiracism Inc.*, 274–275.

dedicated to collective study and sociality. This is not to ignore the state's constitutive violences, but to insist on the freedom dreams that resound in spite of it. An antagonist of carceral sensibilities and spaces, abolition geography draws from histories of decolonial and anti-slavery revolt for inspiration as daily organizing tools; it also looks to sites of pleasure, joy, and communion that reimagine intimate relationships without recourse to punishment, fear, and cruelty.

### Abolition as Presence

WHERE LIFE IS PRECIOUS, LIFE IS PRECIOUS.[41]

Consider in closing James Baldwin's analysis of policing as an institution that sanctions social death: "It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: *Whoever debases others is debasing himself*. That is not a mystical statement but a most realistic one, which is proved by the eyes of any Alabama sheriff—and I would not like to see Negroes ever arrive at so wretched a condition." [42] While Black police officers have worked in law enforcement since the late nineteenth century, today they represent how "multicultural" reforms gloss over structural violence in favor of an abstract equality that does not fundamentally change institutions but allows selective access to their collective destruction. People of color are still subjected to state violence even as the agents of state violence, but the point is that Baldwin warns of the psychic dangers of participating in a soulless system, which is not of their making but can be—in complicated ways—of their choosing.

In the tradition of Baldwin and other Black radical thinkers, Gilmore focuses not just on identities but on investments that deepen when they are internationalist in scope. In her words, "activists must move beyond place-based identities toward identification across space." [43] Rather than being distracted by the latest crisis, Gilmore urges scholar-activists and community organizers to make moves armed with the knowledge of how racial capitalism will constantly reinvent itself to serve the interests of the state (or the "anti-state state," to use Gilmore's term, which grows on the promise of shrinking). Volunteerism and the nonprofit-industrial complex cannot sustain long-term victories. Organizers draw on their deepest creative capacities to envision how a specific struggle can provide the preconditions for sustained movement-building work. Abolition geography reimagines, tangibly in space, how collectives can reconstitute themselves away from carceral solutions to harm. Gilmore makes clear that when people prioritize social life over and against social death, individual and interpersonal harms diminish as do psychic and physical investments in connected institutions—such as universities and prisons—that replicate those harms on a mass scale. Incarcerating one in four prisoners and with one in four COVID-19 deaths in the world, the US has a long way to go in prioritizing care over cages. The daily, practical work of abolition exists within and against the institutions organizers hope to render obsolete.

Because the theory of abolition, as Gilmore reminds us, is lived and practiced, it does not necessitate a purist politics or a perfected place; it navigates the violence of the world we live in *now*. Academics, artists, and

[41] Gilmore quoted in Rachel Kushner, "Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind," *New York Times*, April 17, 2019, [link](#).

[42] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 83.

[43] Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 256.

activists envision both abolitionist futures and short-term strategies toward that goal, fighting to reduce harm in the present while being careful not to grant more funding or legitimacy to the PIC. Thus, movement-building work cannot simply be reduced to two types: paid and incorporated, or unpaid and unsustainable. Gilmore gets us to the third option, which moves strategically within existing structures but generates something new, a messy space of possibility where people not only demand something different but implement those transformative demands in their own lives and in their communities. Recalling Baldwin's premonition over half a century ago, producing new hierarchies is not the goal; what matters is dissolving all hierarchy. Gilmore's work holds people accountable to a deeply historicized and layered materialist analysis of carceral orientations. Most importantly, *Abolition Geography* testifies to the power of not letting the seeming permanence of prisons constrain the collective capacity to reimagine social life.