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Freedom was not an End but an indispensable means to the beginning.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935)

The precision with which Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes the intricate roots and devastating consequences of the modern carceral state is unparalleled. *Abolition Geographies: Essays towards Liberation*, a collection of Gilmore's essays and interviews, provides a window into the remarkable breadth of her work and her method of laying bare complex truths about why prisons persist, who creates the illusion of their permanence, and how we unravel them anyway. Gilmore is a geographer, so it is fitting that her stunning body of scholarship has established a foundational map that has guided generations of scholars, organizers, and artists around the world—inside and outside prisons—toward a collective practice of defining what abolition is and what we need it to mean. Gilmore's research, teaching, and political work have been a catalyst moving the political and spiritual project of abolition forward, grounding us with incisive, tangible analysis and moving us to action through her concept of freedom as a thing you *make* and a thing you *do*. In this reflection on *Abolition Geographies* and the broader contributions Gilmore has made to abolition as both a political movement and a freedom dream,¹ I consider two themes that thread through her body of work: scale and change. These themes challenge the notion that prisons are *inevitable*, a deliberate fiction created to naturalize prisons and one that Gilmore's work methodically disassembles.

Algorithms for Abolition

Gilmore deploys a haunting rhetorical tool when she describes what we are talking about when we talk about prisons. She writes that the US political economy “repurposed acres, redirected the social wage, used public debt, and serially removed thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of people from households and communities.”² The first time I heard her articulate this phrase—“thousands and thousands and thousands . . .”—in a public lecture,

I realized that, during her iterations, I had been holding my breath. Attempts at describing the sheer *scale* of carceral devastation with statistics and theory can sometimes have the effect of making prisons harder to viscerally conceptualize. Two million people caged is an astounding number, but what that number means in terms of the cost to human life can become lost in a nation where astounding violence is a daily headline. Sometimes, the more profound the scale, the more cognitive distance one seeks from it. Yet Gilmore breaks through by teaching us to approach the puzzle of scale by turning it into a site of deliberate strategy—strategy for organizing, pedagogy, art, and analytic method—to help us intentionally contend with the multilayered scales and scopes of carceral control. Abolitionist strategy that aspires to *teach* requires rigor in two things: its truth and its capacity to produce an opening for others to meaningfully connect with that truth.

Creatively attending to the breadth and depth of carceral regimes strengthens the capacity of abolitionists to do some strategic scaling up of our own. As an example, consider participatory defense campaigns organized to free criminalized survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Mariame Kaba, a cofounder of the feminist abolitionist organization Survived & Punished, whose members have helped develop this organizing model, explains, “The #FreeBresha and #FreeMarissaNow campaigns, like the Free Joan Little defense campaign that came before it, have taken great pains to underscore that each survivor is one among thousands [and thousands and thousands and thousands . . .] of Black women and girls who have been and continue to be criminalized for trying to survive.”³ Organizers use campaigns as a pedagogical tool and an organizing strategy that, at their best, open a window into the details of devastation behind abstract figures, and build a bridge for people to channel the experience of rage and powerlessness toward specific short-term action. These short-term actions (such as donating, petition signing, rallies, and teach-ins) can increase the impact of grassroots pressure as well as help sustain the survivor and their loved ones by establishing an active presence of supporters in their fight for freedom. However, these short-term actions also aim to have a long-term reach through providing a platform for people to develop and repeatedly engage a freedom *praxis*, a sustained practice of making and doing. If freedom is a place, as Gilmore memorably asserts, then abolition must be a dynamic practice of mapmaking to get us there.

Gilmore reveals a political geography of punishment that unfolds across multiple scales of punitive experience, from sites of intimacy to sites of industry, tasking organizers to determine what resistance strategies could possibly

meet that level of complexity and the aura of impenetrability it provokes. She chronicles the political praxis of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC), a Los Angeles–based grassroots group of mothers organizing to free their incarcerated children, providing us with an instructive model of organizing that uses the “technique of mothering” to travel across sites and scales of punitive control.⁴ Mothers ROC’s approach began at the place where Gilmore and feminist abolitionists assert is the heart of abolition: they established radical *presence*. Specifically, they attended the trials and hearings for one another’s families, doing so both as collective support and as an opportunity to observe and learn about the system; they leafleted at jails, prisons, police stations, and courthouses; and they organized workshops to ensure that people were skilled in collaborating with their defense attorneys. In other words, they came into being by occupying sites where they could connect with people whose lives had been marked by the depletion and heartbreak produced by criminalization.

With this approach, Mothers ROC members built a base of people across difference of identity, social positionality, and experience that created a dialectic between political analysis and intentional practices of care. Within this dialectic, difference was not obscured but productively refigured. Gilmore describes analytic insights the members developed through debate about political tensions, such as how to understand the complex racialization of law while constructing their analysis from a position of interconnectedness. The mothers’ working analysis of the law that emerged from this process—“You have to be white to be prosecuted under White law, but you do not have to be Black to be prosecuted under Black law”⁵—sharply clarified a complex racialized scale: the US carceral state exists through a historical and entrenched will to subjugate black people specifically, and, therefore, black people are targeted by the brunt of its violence, *and* the antiblack system of power that animates carceral violence also devastates communities across different racialized contexts of punitivity. Perhaps most critically, Gilmore’s discussion shows us that this analytic insight was forged through the members’ complex commitments to one another across their differences. Their combination of coalition, care, and political principle as a throughway for analysis echoes Audre Lorde’s meditation on the politics of difference: “We have chosen each other / and the edge of each others battles.”⁶

Temporal Property

Assessing the carceral economy through the connected scales of the individual and the structural, Gilmore writes,

Today's prisons are extractive. . . . What's extracted from the extracted is the resource of life—time. If we think about this dynamic through the politics of scale, understanding bodies as places, then criminalization transforms individuals into tiny territories primed for extractive activity to unfold—extracting and extracting again *time* from the territories of selves.⁷

Prisons consume people as their reason for being because time itself is the commodity. By being forced into *doing* time, incarcerated people are made into *being* time. This ontological-economic system is particularly acute given the accelerated growth of long-term and permanent-term sentences. People who have been sentenced to life without the possibility of parole call it a living death, their entire remaining life-time officially seized by prison.⁸ If prison extracts time from human life as a product, as Gilmore argues, then incarceration transforms people into a form of *temporal property* to which public and private capital become legally entitled to keep the prison economy going.

Survived & Punished recently published “Defending Self-Defense,” a research report analyzing the criminalization of survivor self-defense.⁹ Robbie Hall, a black woman from Los Angeles, contributed to this report as a member of this project’s Survivor Advisory Council. Hall defended her life from a man who attacked and raped her, he died, and she was prosecuted and sentenced to fourteen-years-to-life. Prison time has a way of stretching far beyond quantitative measure, persisting even after a sentence has been “served.” After Hall had been in prison for over fourteen years, she was further imprisoned for nearly an additional twenty-three years by California’s parole board, which kept denying her parole. Why? She explains, “My attorney said they sentenced me to 14-and-a-half years, but I did 36-and-a-half years. . . . The parole board said that, because I wouldn’t say that [the man who raped me] was the victim, that I have no remorse and no insight. Another commissioner at another parole board hearing said, you’re not a victim, so stop trying to play like you’re a victim.”¹⁰

Each time Hall had a parole hearing, the parole board demanded that she retract her testimony that she was sexually assaulted and acted in self-defense. Each time, she refused and reiterated that she had defended herself from sexual and lethal violence. Each time, she was sent back to prison. When the pandemic unfolded behind bars, incarcerated organizers recommended her as a source to the *LA Times* where she exposed the prisons’ deadly labor practices, such as coercing incarcerated people to make masks without providing them with masks.¹¹ When interviewed, Hall also explained *why* she was in prison—that she was being repeatedly punished for defending her life. Organizing provided Hall with a platform, and her radical noncompliance created a pathway for her to secure advocates and a new attorney, leading to her release in 2021.

The parole board's attempt to incarcerate Hall in perpetuity was anchored by a punitive premise that black women have "no selves to defend," to quote Kaba.¹² Indeed, for the court, Hall's crime was defending her life, and for the parole board, her crime was defending her defense of her life. However, Hall also teaches us that the parole board's retaliatory interest in extending her punishment because she defended the *fact* of her defensible self is enmeshed with the prison's economic interest in keeping her caged because of her value as temporal property. Hall states it clearly: the prisons "keep us as a money tree."¹³

Hall's unyielding truth-telling and fight for freedom and Gilmore's piercing analysis also converge at a key abolitionist lesson: though pervasive, prisons and police are not fated. They are a consequence of specific choices made by specific people for specific reasons, and, like any formation of power created and sustained by people, they too are vulnerable.

Changing Everything

We learn, teach, and organize while navigating intersecting scales of ongoing and pending catastrophes, figuring out how to engage a future that can be beyond conceptualization. Gilmore's method of intentional *specificity* in her descriptions of how carceral regimes come to be and how people resist that carceral beingness demonstrates the impact of bringing structures of violence within conceptual reach, even when they seem impossibly consuming and complicated. In other words, to dismantle prisons, we must demystify prisons. For example, Gilmore notes that few people asked why California prison growth came to a halt in 2011 after over twenty years of expansion. She explains, "The answer is all that grassroots organizing I described earlier. We stopped them [from] building new prisons. We made it too difficult."¹⁴ Let us continue to make their efforts too difficult by *being* too difficult. As long as we remember that we have some hand in our future, I believe that freedom is within reach and it will bridge us to other beginnings. As Lorde affirms, "if we win / there is no telling."

Notes

1. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002).
2. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," in *Abolition Geography: Essays towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London: Verso, 2022), 476.

3. Mariame Kaba, "Free Us All," *The New Inquiry*, May 8, 2017, <https://thenewinquiry.com/free-us-all/>. Bresha Meadows and Marissa Alexander are black survivors of gender-based violence who were prosecuted for defending themselves from that violence in 2016 and 2012, respectively. In 1974, Joan Little killed a guard who sexually assaulted her while she was incarcerated, which led to her murder trial in which prosecutors sought the death penalty. All three survivors were subjects of broad-based national participatory defense campaigns, which helped enable either their acquittal or their release via plea deals (see Mariame Kaba and Colby Lenz, "Bresha Meadows Returns Home after Collective Organizing Efforts," *Teen Vogue*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/bresha-meadows-returns-home-after-collective-organizing-efforts>; Free Marissa Now Mobilization Campaign, "Free Marissa Now Statement on Marissa Alexander's Freedom," Free Marissa Now, January 27, 2017, <https://www.freemarissanow.org/jan-27th-freedom.html>; and Emily L. Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019]).
4. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Mothers Reclaiming Our Children," in *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 181–240; Gilmore, "Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals: Apartheid USA," in *Abolition Geography*, 78–91; Gilmore, "You Have Dislodged a Boulder: Mothers and Prisoners in the Post Keynesian California Landscape," in *Abolition Geography*, 355–409.
5. Gilmore, "You Have Dislodged a Boulder," 387.
6. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 114–23.
7. Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," 474.
8. Alice Kim et al., eds., *The Long Term: Resisting Life Sentences Working toward Freedom* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018); Colby Lenz, "Organizing in the Impossible: The Movement to End Life without Parole in California" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2022).
9. Survived & Punished, "Defending Self-Defense: A Call to Action by Survived & Punished," ed. Alisa Bierria and Colby Lenz (Los Angeles: Survived & Punished, 2022), <https://survivedandpunished.org/defending-self-defense-report/>.
10. Survived & Punished.
11. Kiera Feldman, "California Kept Prison Factories Open. Inmates Worked for Pennies an Hour as COVID-19 Spread," *LA Times*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-10-11/california-prison-factories-inmates-covid-19>.
12. Mariame Kaba, ed., *No Selves to Defend: A Legacy of Criminalizing Women of Color for Self-Defense* (Chicago: Chicago Alliance to Free Marissa Alexander, 2014).
13. Feldman, "California Kept Prison Factories Open."
14. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Prisons and Class Warfare: An Interview with Clément Petitjean," in *Abolition Geography*, 348.