



Abolition geography: essays towards liberation

by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, New York, Verso Books, 2022, 512 pp., \$29.95 (hardback), ISBN 9781839761706

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BOOK REVIEW

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It had come as a surprise to learn that not much theology – *any* theology? including political theology – has come into any serious engagement with the work of leading prison abolitionist scholar and activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore. When I came to her work, I had not realized how much she had given. I read *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (UC Press, 2007) when I began studying not just the prison, but also California’s troubling cultural history after the boosterism, progressive politics, and innovative spirit. I’d also known of Gilmore’s activism, and how her disciples’ (often former students’) work mimics hers, often in simpler ways and lacking the rigor, creativity, or punk found in Gilmore’s work uncut.

That’s what is found in this collection, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*. Its eight articles, nine essays from prior-published work, and three interviews were literary pieces one would be hard-pressed to find elsewhere. In light of this and her own story of coming into academia (ch. 1) it seems clear to say she wasn’t following the traditional mode of academic career advancement; put another way, she did not really give a damn about peer review, as long as she did good work that really mattered. And the beautiful introductory chapter (pp. 1–22) from the volume’s editors Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano helpfully locates her massive contribution.

As a social theorist, cultural historian, and trained theologian, I take my task in this review of her book to offer a reading as a formerly-incarcerated theological interpreter. Coming from an ecclesial tradition I have described elsewhere as “*ecclesia* incarcerate,” and having cut my theological teeth on the inside of the California Youth Authority of the 1990s, I welcome every word of Gilmore’s careful analysis of that moment, and the wider situation.

While I agree that she describes the situation with great analytical accuracy, the book also showcases the coherence of Gilmore’s thought, where the parts fit together with the whole. With the coherence, this collection highlights her insightful and probing vision, along with its particular forms of development (e.g., the dissatisfaction with the idea and term, “Prison Industrial Complex,” ch. 10). As such, the collection constitutes a vision as well as a journey into what someone might describe as a netherworld created by human hands.

Akin to Dante’s Virgil, then, Gilmore leads her readers on a descent into a kind of hell in the book’s first three parts, and it is difficult to interpret the terrain as much besides. Leading her readers, she recounts the infernal flames as they licked Los Angeles, from Rodney King to Bill Bratton, interpreted whilst on-the-scene as an activist, although not unaware of democracy’s delusional myth that “more local is somehow more participatory” (p. 486). She exemplifies an engaged scholarship and an accountable activism (p. 447) that therein finds yet deeper roots to the problem her work addresses.

Gilmore takes readers into California’s interior, and the particularities don’t skip her analytic survey of the terrain, leading deeper into the abyss – the place where operates “the processes of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (p. 475) in this twentieth-century era she calls “the age of human sacrifice” (p. 134). This includes various abstractions of violence and extraction that so many groups knowingly and unknowingly contribute to, as do our academic departments and

institutions, nobody unaffected by the current condition. Equally, none are beyond the process of being enclosed where all are expected to be, compelled to remain fixed in our lot and knowing our stations so that a war can be properly waged in this hell.



Gilmore sees what's happening to bodies-as-capital in ways that Yale theologian Willie James Jennings has also recounted, with racial identity and private property comprising two sides of the same coin. Jennings' explanation of the rationale behind this describes how a "hermeneutics of possession" marks this era of body removal, relocation/incarceration, and erasure as the mode of modern capitalist state building. For this enterprise, Gilmore underscores what Kathryn Yusoff recounts in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), the geographic and geological extraction of resources that built the modern world – with its comforts and advances for some – as essentially inextricably linked with the extraction of Black and Indigenous bodies, a plight Stephanie Pincetl has argued can never merely be undone or corrected without more radical political visions of time and space that move beyond adaptation/incorporation to more radical embodiments of justice and the virtues. In the same way, Gilmore demonstrates that the racial-carceral-capital juggernaut impacts everyone (p. 469), landing everyone in the inferno, for which all peddled capitalist frameworks, including "the fiction of race projects" (p. 495), provide no ladder of escape.

For Gilmore's exposition, while leading readers into what I am describing poetically as the abyss, she doesn't leave them there, but finds hope in collective organizing (Section 4), willing at every point to turn to work with anyone – not just those of good will, but even willing to persuade the demons! – helping folks open to new possibilities with unlikely allies. She acknowledges groups outpacing her own (p. 469), embodying "the spirit of abolition" sans the label – a strange phenomenon amid capitalist structures that everyone has an "ontological priority" to not be harmed by (p. 183). She admits that her vision is "utopian," not in the sense promised by late capitalism with its violent abstraction of abandonment (p. 174), but in the sense of "looking forward to a world in which prisons are not necessary" (pp. 468–9).

Her prescription remains: critical forms of resistance through what she calls an enmeshed "infrastructure of feeling" (p. 490). Something like compassion, or what James Baldwin and Augustine call "love." Not merely martyrological, but part of a conversation James Cone argues must be revolutionary throughout: embodied, enfleshed, incarnated. In skin, as Gilmore strikingly reminds us (ch. 20), and with arms stretched wide as the world, with bowels of compassion that give the kind of hope to keep walking through hell, together, until the better day, the better world, comes into being.

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