

Lévi-Strauss's response to Rodin may be a rather empty self-defence, but it nonetheless points towards a distinction between truth and its conditions which is more delicate. With regard to Geoghegan's text we might reverse his question and ask about conditions for 'scientific findings' rather than 'uses' to which they are put: should scientific findings be distinguished from the political and ideological imperatives associated with funders in the US and elsewhere? Can this distinction be made

at all? Geoghegan's text is rich in its analysis of the political conditions for research and convincing in its presentation of the apolitical and technocratic hue of cybernetics and information theory of the period. One is left wondering, though, to what extent all of this research or its 'findings' lacked science, and without a connection rigorously identified between the two, what to make of Lévi Strauss' distinction between politics and science.

Gus Hewlett

Uncaged optimism

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, edited by Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London/Brooklyn: Verso, 2022), 506 pp. £12.99 pb., 978 1 83976 170 6.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore is a dialectician who embodies optimism without naivete, demonstrates dexterity in moving between universal, particular and individual dimensions, and describes contemporary conditions and past history with an eye to revolutionising the future, while contextualising everything with care and urgency. She is already justly famous for her massive contributions to the Prison Abolition movement, and these essays enrich our understanding of how her mind radiates outward to the whole world. Confining her brilliance to a single issue would obfuscate her dialectic prowess and far-ranging intellect. The essays and interviews collected in *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* reveal, both individually and in their totality, how Gilmore holds together a material analysis of contemporary capitalism, a geographer's sense of place, and her continued optimism for transformation rooted in resistance.

Abolition Geography occupies a particular space and time. The pieces date from between 1991-2018; this time span includes Gilmore's career as an activist and teacher prior to her PhD in Geography, through her writing of *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* in 2007, extending up to the opening years of the Trump presidency. It does mean that the book does not contain the seismic shifts of 2020 – COVID, the response to George Floyd's murder by the police, the disputed election. As frustrating as it can be to lack Gilmore's commentary on each of our current crises,

the essays as a collection enable the astute reader to see how her dialectical approach holds prognosticatory power.

'Abolition geography starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place'. In this book, the places in question are primarily in California, in particular Los Angeles and the Central Valley. She notes how communities that 'appear to lack the power to resist toxic incinerators or prisons' are the ones that get them (e.g. California's Central Valley). That specific geography then connects to how 'people from the hyperpoliced poorest urban areas are locked away in rural prisons' precisely because 'they appear to lack the power to resist mass incarceration that they are arrested and imprisoned'. Thus she forms a grounded, living connection between the environmental movements and prison abolition movements, asking what might happen if the differences created and exploited by late capitalism to divide people – like race/citizenship, innocence/guilt – could dissolve in our imaginations 'in favor of other things, like the right to water, the right to air, the right to the countryside, the right to the city'. Opposition to environmental destruction and the carceral state are both opposition to callous disregard for life, and the resistance embodied in the anti-prison and environmental movements call for 'and use and local democracy' as imperative.

The localisation and specificity in her dialectic does not mean that Gilmore's viewpoint is ever parochial. She

announces that her 'interest is in proliferating, rather than concentrating, ways of thinking'. She establishes a few touchstone categories in regards to our age – the forces of 'organized abandonment' that deem 'some people as parasitic and unnecessary', with racism playing a key role in this abdication of any pretense of shared human community. Late capitalism is thus in her now famous phrase 'a machine for producing and exploiting group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.'

Compromise with a death-dealing machine doesn't alter the fundamental purpose of its destructive intent. Thus she disposes of the use of 'innocence' as a gradualist method for dismantling prisons, because arguing that some types of people (like mothers, or 'people who didn't hurt anyone') shouldn't be in cages, we 'establish as a hard fact that some people should be in cages'. Instead the questions should be what does it mean to put any person, ever, in a cage, and why are more people being put in cages than ever before, on a massively unprecedented scale? The dialectical answers to those questions can be found in the larger political economy, where, as she writes in an article co-written with Craig Gilmore, 'the "free trade" of the globalization era' brought 'with it massive increases in cages for the unfree'. The answer can also be found in reframing the question from one of 'innocence' to a more graphic synonym for 'organized abandonment':

Human sacrifice rather than innocence is the central problem that organizes the carceral geographies of the prison-industrial complex. Indeed, for abolition, to insist on innocence is to surrender politically because "innocence" evades a problem abolition is compelled to confront: how to diminish and remedy harm as against finding better forms of punishment.

The 'anti-state state' is another key category in Gilmore's analysis, particularly important in her 2007 article 'In the Shadow of the Shadow State'. The 'anti-state state' describes the phenomenon of those ideologues who want to shrink the state to facilitate the free movement of capital, but once these 'anti-state state actors...gain state power by denouncing state power...they spend a lot of money even as they claim they're 'shrinking government', especially on 'prisons, policing, court and the military' until it seems normal and natural to be 'locking people in cages or bombing civilians or sending generation after generation off to kill somebody else's

children'. If these destructive actions become the central priorities for government in the hands of anti-state state actors, then the non-profit sector's attempts at amelioration of these anti-human policies are co-opted in a sleight-of-hand, in which anti-state actors with state power use non-profits to facilitate the 'organized abandonment' of those they deem to be expendable people. Non-profit groups find themselves increasingly taking 'responsibility for persons who are in the throes of abandonment rather than responsibility for persons progressing toward full incorporation' into society. The 'anti-state state actors welcome nonprofits under the rhetoric of efficiency (read: meager budgets) and accountability (read: contracts could be pulled if anybody stepped out of line),' which leads to nonprofits having 'become highly professionalized by their relationship with the state'. Those groups that are more grassroots are hemmed in to a 'mission impossible' if they seek grants, due to funders 'sternly specific funding rubrics' and the fact that grant money is almost always project-specific rather than assisting with 'core operations'. But rather than be wholly discouraging, Gilmore ends the article reminding those working in grassroots organizations that 'the purpose of the work is to gain liberation, not to guarantee the organization's longevity,' such that 'grassroots organizations can be the voices of history and the future to assemble the disparate and sometimes desperate nonprofits who labor in the shadow of the shadow state'.

An example of her dialectic feminism comes in the earlier article from 1993, 'Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals: Apartheid USA'. Gilmore's blend of a wry optimism and clear-sighted analysis emerges in the opening statement that 'capitalism hasn't won, but not for lack of trying'. She analyses these attempts at total victory for capitalism as an unequal partnership of state and business:

through production of public enemies, the state safeguards the unequal distribution of resources and reinforces the logic of scarcity by deflecting attention from the real thieves and criminals—the transnationals that are making off with profits which even the state can no longer lay significant partial claim to through tax tribute.

Uncovering these structures takes her back to Audre Lorde's poetically prismatic insight: 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. Gilmore unpacks Lorde's quote as a commentary on capitalism, ra-

cism, the means of production, and the goals of liberation. 'Tools' points us to consider 'fundamental orderings in political economy' and understand that if the master loses control of the his 'tools' – the means of production – he remains a human being, but he is no longer the 'master.' The metaphor of the house, meanwhile, 'guides our attention' to think about 'institutions and luxury', the master's house being, by definition, a well-apportioned dwelling that remains ostentatiously present over generations. It is these luxuries and institutions that 'must be dismantled so that we can recycle the materials...to produce new and liberating work'. What makes this analysis compelling emerges from both its inherent logic (poets like Lorde don't pick words like 'tools' and 'house' accidentally, after all) and the fact that Gilmore was not just talking about this, but was also 'walking the talk' of Oppositional work. As she notes (and details elegantly in later essays in this collection), she sees Oppositional work '[e]verywhere I turn in Los Angeles today, Salvadoran garment workers, African American and Chicana Mothers ROC, ex-gangsters trying to maintain the truce against the unwavering interests of the police for it to fail'. Can we intellectuals who are also trying to be on the side of liberation, be ready to assist these struggles – then and now? If we are teachers, is our teaching up to that challenge? Are we preparing students to comprehend what is at stake? She rejects the 'dour' and defeatist logic of the Frankfurt School, and the 'pampered and paternalized' hijacking of a cultural movement like the Harlem Renaissance, both of which have proved wanting to answer the depth of the transformation needed. We have to find our own way out.

One important theme throughout these essays is Gilmore's self-conscious understanding of her own positionality and family history as part of the dialectic, or, to invoke Gramsci, how she posits herself 'as an element of the contradictions and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action.' The oldest article in the collection, 1991's 'Decorative Beasts: Dogging the Academy in the Late 20th Century', references her father, 'lifelong New Haven activist Courtland Seymour Wilson' for his perspicacity and persistence. She also highlights a horrifying yet instructive retelling of the 1969 murder of her cousin John Higgins along with another Black Panther comrade at an early meeting for the UCLA Black Studies program. The implicit question

was whether or not Black Studies would become 'decorative displacement' or whether this newest branch of the university might take up the totality, seeing race and capitalism as connected, and thus forward the real concern of liberation. To my eye as a reader, there is a red thread from this piece to the most recent in the collection, the concluding 2018 'Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,' understanding the personal as the political, and the individual and particular as also being part of the universal:

The Black Radical Tradition is a constantly evolving accumulation of structures of feeling whose individual and collective narrative arcs persistently tend toward freedom. It is a way of mindful action that is constantly renewed and refreshed over time but maintains strength, speed, stamina, agility, flexibility, balance...If, then, the structures of feeling for the Black Radical Tradition are, age upon age, shaped by energetically expectant consciousness of and direction toward unboundedness, then the tradition is, inexactly, movement away from partition and exclusion—indeed, its inverse.

Here we see what she means when describing the project of Abolition Geography as taking 'feeling and agency to be constitutive of, no less than constrained by, structure' – people are making history, and making our lives more possible, under circumstances not of our own choosing, but if we can 'tend toward freedom' we can pivot from despair to a grounded and gritty sense of confidence with 'stamina, agility, flexibility.'



Indeed, in her stubbornly ontological understanding of the term "Abolition" Gilmore specifically says that abolitionists (of all eras) 'are, first and foremost, committed to the possibility of full and rich lives for everybody'.

Thus, 'Abolition is a totality and it is ontological...but it is not struggle's *form*. To have *form*, we have to organize'. Understood this way, Abolition is a potent example of the negation of the negation, 'abolition is a fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently...figuring out how to work with people to make something rather than figuring out how to erase something. It's about making things'. Her insistence that there are more human possible futures is rooted in what 'dialectics requires us to recognize[:] that the negation of the negation is always abundantly possible *and* hasn't a fixed direction or secure end. It can change direction, and thereby not revive old history but calibrate power differentials anew'.

There is no easy way to summarise Ruth Wilson Gilmore's thought, and that is why volumes like this, that enable us to follow her train of thought, are so valuable. The book's co-editors – Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano – have done a tremendous favour for activists and thinkers worldwide by uniting these pieces, previously scattered across an array of journals and media. The editors' thematic arrangement of the essays is nearly made superfluous by the connective threads weaving through Gilmore's thought, yet there are some especially instructive editorial choices, such as opening with 'What Is To Be Done' from 2011, and the placement of the sparkling transcribed interviews near the end, after a reader has gained familiarity with Gilmore's patterns of thought and theoretical categories. The editors' introduction contains a strong outline of Gilmore's work and themes, and could be read before, during, and after contemplating

Gilmore's own words. The index, while good, is incomplete on some key entries, and it would help with the dialectic specificity of the essays to have printed the year of their initial publication somewhere on each entry's initial page. But these are minor complaints. The editors' labor is too often invisible and thankless, but deserves to be made visible and applauded.

One lesson that I have learned from reading, studying, and listening to Ruth Wilson Gilmore, is that a world and life of scarcity is not our fate, but a construct foisted on us by those who are hoarding the resources. The fact that those same hoarders would put us in cages, or murderously attack enemies to be 'hurled into eternity' became the central theme of her work. But what emerges in *Abolition Geography* is that the opposite, the negation of the negation, a world in which life and creativity are valued, is 'always abundantly possible,' and we can catch glimpses of it in our own activity. It is her 'stamina, agility, flexibility' that lead me to conclude that Gilmore is the Steph Curry of dialectics. I can watch a highlight reel of Curry three-pointers, analyze them, see how he did it and understand it. But what is astounding is not the physics itself, but the actual doing of it, in real time. Gilmore does this in analyzing contemporary movements for freedom, as the currents and flows shift around us, at great speed. It inspires more than awe – it leads to the shock of recognition in our own lives, bodies, and places, as we ask what are the transformations in which we participate. Read the book, think and make change.

Jennifer Rycenga

Feminist snap

Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (London: Penguin, 2023). 336pp., £10.99, 978 0 24161 953 7

For a few years I taught an undergraduate module called Feminist Killjoys, a title I took from the work of theorist Sara Ahmed. The figure of the 'feminist killjoy' has since come to define Ahmed's intellectual project and gives her name to Ahmed's latest work, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*. The feminist killjoy is a willing troublemaker who refuses to let social norms or institutional pressures get in the way of doing what is right. Ahmed repurposes

this insult as a badge of honour, mirroring earlier reclamations of queer and crip. Each year my students adopted the name with pride, finding in Ahmed's words a new way to reframe difficult and painful experiences, and delighting in telling their horrified families what they were studying at university. They found the appeal of the killjoy hard to resist.

As a fellow killjoy, but more importantly, as an over-