

FEATURE

Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind

In three decades of advocating for prison abolition, the activist and scholar has helped transform how people think about criminal justice.

By Rachel Kushner

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There's an anecdote that Ruth Wilson Gilmore likes to share about being at an environmental-justice conference in Fresno in 2003. People from all over California's Central Valley had gathered to talk about the serious environmental hazards their communities faced, mostly as a result of decades of industrial farming, conditions that still have not changed. (The air quality in the Central Valley is the worst in the nation, and one million of its residents drink tap water more poisoned than the water in Flint, Mich.) There was a "youth track" at the conference, in which children were meant to talk about their worries and then decide as a group what was most important to be done in the name of environmental justice. Gilmore, a renowned geography professor (then at University of California, Berkeley, now at the CUNY Graduate Center in Manhattan) and an influential figure in the prison-abolition movement, was a keynote speaker.

She was preparing her talk when someone told her that the kids wanted to speak with her. She went into the room where they were gathered. The children were primarily Latino, many of them the sons and daughters of farmworkers or other people in the agriculture industry. They ranged in age, but most were middle schoolers: old enough to have strong opinions and to distrust adults. They were frowning at her with their shoulders up and their arms crossed. She didn't know these kids, but she understood that they were against her.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"We hear you're a prison abolitionist," one said. "You want to *close* prisons?"

Gilmore said that was right; she did want to close prisons.

But why, they asked. And before she could answer, one said, “But what about the people who do something seriously wrong?” Others chimed in. “What about people who hurt other people?” “What about if someone kills someone?”

Whether from tiny farm towns or from public housing around Fresno and Bakersfield, these children, it was obvious to Gilmore, understood innately the harshness of the world and were not going to be easily persuaded.

“I get where you’re coming from,” she said. “But how about this: Instead of asking whether anyone should be locked up or go free, why don’t we think about why we solve problems by repeating the kind of behavior that brought us the problem in the first place?” She was asking them to consider why, as a society, we would choose to model cruelty and vengeance.

As she spoke, she felt the kids icing her out, as if she were a new teacher who had come to proffer some bogus argument and tell them it was for their own good. But Gilmore pressed on, determined. She told them that in Spain, where it’s really quite rare for one person to kill another, the average time you might serve for murdering someone is seven years.

“What? Seven years!” The kids were in such disbelief about a seven-year sentence for murder that they relaxed a little bit. They could be outraged about that, instead of about Gilmore’s ideas.

Gilmore told them that in the unusual event that someone in Spain thinks he is going to solve a problem by killing another person, the response is that the person loses seven years of his life to think about what he has done, and to figure out how to live when released. “What this policy tells me,” she said, “is that where life is precious, life is precious.” Which is to say, she went on, in Spain people have decided that life has enough value that they are not going to behave in a punitive and violent and life-annihilating way toward people who hurt people. “And what this demonstrates is that for people trying to solve their everyday problems, behaving in a violent and life-annihilating way is not a solution.”

The children showed Gilmore no emotion except guarded doubt, expressed in side eye. She kept talking. She believed her own arguments and had given them many years of thought as an activist and a scholar, but the kids were a tough sell. They told Gilmore that they would think about what she said and dismissed her. As she left the room, she felt totally defeated.

At the end of the day, the kids made a presentation to the broader conference,

announcing, to Gilmore's surprise, that in their workshop they had come to the conclusion that there were three environmental hazards that affected their lives most pressingly as children growing up in the Central Valley. Those hazards were pesticides, the police and prisons.

"Sitting there listening to the kids stopped my heart," Gilmore told me. "Why? Abolition is deliberately everything-ist; it's about the entirety of human-environmental relations. So, when I gave the kids an example from a different place, I worried they might conclude that some people elsewhere were just better or kinder than people in the South San Joaquin Valley — in other words, they'd decide what happened elsewhere was irrelevant to their lives. But judging from their presentation, the kids lifted up the larger point of what I'd tried to share: Where life is precious, life is precious. They asked themselves, 'Why do we feel every day that life here is *not* precious?' In trying to answer, they identified what makes them vulnerable."



Gilmore in Lisbon, Portugal, where she lives for part of the year. Amaal Said for The New York Times

Prison abolition, as a movement, sounds provocative and absolute, but what it is as a practice requires subtler understanding. For Gilmore, who has been active in the

movement for more than 30 years, it's both a long-term goal and a practical policy program, calling for government investment in jobs, education, housing, health care — all the elements that are required for a productive and violence-free life. Abolition means not just the closing of prisons but the presence, instead, of vital systems of support that many communities lack. Instead of asking how, in a future without prisons, we will deal with so-called violent people, abolitionists ask how we resolve inequalities and get people the resources they need long before the hypothetical moment when, as Gilmore puts it, they “mess up.”

“Every age has had its hopes,” William Morris wrote in 1885, “hopes that look to something beyond the life of the age itself, hopes that try to pierce into the future.” Morris was a proto-abolitionist: In his utopian novel “News From Nowhere,” there are no prisons, and this is treated as an obvious, necessary condition for a happy society.

In Morris's era, the prison was relatively new as the most common form of punishment. In England, historically, people were incarcerated for only a short time, before being dragged out and whipped in the street. As Angela Davis narrates in her 2003 book, “Are Prisons Obsolete?” while early English common law deemed the crime of petty treason punishable by being burned alive, by 1790 this punishment was reformed to death by hanging. In the wake of the Enlightenment, European reformers gradually moved away from corporal punishment *tout court*; people would go to prison for a set period of time, rather than to wait for the punishment to come. The penitentiary movement in both England and the United States in the early 19th century was motivated in part by the demand for more humanitarian punishment. Prison was the reform.

If prison, in its philosophical origin, was meant as a humane alternative to beatings or torture or death, it has transformed into a fixed feature of modern life, one that is not known, even by its supporters and administrators, for its humanity. In the United States, we now have more than two million incarcerated people, a majority of them black or brown, virtually all of them from poor communities. Prisons not only have violated human rights and failed at rehabilitation; it's not even clear that prisons deter crime or increase public safety.

Following an incarceration boom that began all over the United States around 1980 and only recently started to level off, reform has become politically popular. But abolitionists argue that many reforms have done little more than reinforce the system. In every state where the death penalty has been abolished, for example, it has been replaced by the sentence of life without parole — to many people a death sentence by other, more protracted means. Another product of good intentions: campaigns to reform indeterminate sentencing, resulting in three-strike programs and mandatory-minimum

sentencing, which traded one cruelty for another. Over all, reforms have not significantly reduced incarceration numbers, and no recent reform legislation has even aspired to do so.

[Read about an ex-convict who wanted to become an attorney.]

For instance, the first federal prison reform in almost 10 years, the bipartisan First Step Act, which President Trump signed into law late last year, will result in the release of only some 7,000 of the 2.3 million people currently locked up when it goes into effect. Federal legislation pertains only to federal prisons, which hold less than 10 percent of the nation's prison population, and of those, First Step applies to only a slim subset. As Gilmore said to me, noting an outsize public enthusiasm after the act passed the Senate, "There are people who behave as though the origin and cure are federal. So many are unaware of how the country is juridically organized, and that there are at least 52 criminal-legal jurisdictions in the U.S."

Which isn't to say that Gilmore and other abolitionists are opposed to all reforms. "It's obvious that the system won't disappear overnight," Gilmore told me. "No abolitionist thinks that will be the case." But she finds First Step, like many state reforms it mimics, not just minor but exclusionary, on account of wording in the bill that will make it even harder for some to get relief. (Those convicted of most higher-level offenses, for example, are ineligible for earned-time credits, a new category created under First Step.) "So many of these proposed remedies don't end up diminishing the system. They regard the system as something that can be fixed by removing and replacing a few elements." For Gilmore, debates over *which* individuals to let out of prison accept prison as a given. To her, this is not just a moral error but a practical one, if the goal is to actually end mass incarceration. Instead of trying to fix the carceral system, she is focused on policy work to reduce its scope and footprint by stopping new prison construction and closing prisons and jails one facility at a time, with painstaking grass-roots organizing and demands that state funding benefit, rather than punish, vulnerable communities.

"What I love about abolition," the legal scholar and author James Forman Jr. told me, "and now use in my own thinking — and when I identify myself as an abolitionist, this is what I have in mind — is the idea that you imagine a world without prisons, and then you work to try to build that world." Forman came late, he said, to abolitionist thinking. He was on tour for his 2017 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Locking Up Our Own," which documents the history of mass incarceration and the inadvertent roles that black political leaders played, when a woman asked him why he didn't use the word "abolition" in his arguments, which, to her, sounded so abolitionist. The question led Forman to engage seriously with the concept. "I feel like a movement to end mass incarceration and replace

it with a system that actually restores and protects communities will never succeed without abolitionists. Because people will make compromises and sacrifices, and they'll lose the vision. They'll start to think things are huge victories, when they're tiny. And so, to me, abolition is essential."

The A.C.L.U.'s Smart Justice campaign, the largest in the organization's history, has been started with a goal of reducing the prison population by 50 percent through local, state and federal initiatives to reform bail, prosecution, sentencing, parole and re-entry.

"Incarceration does not work," said the A.C.L.U. campaign director Udi Ofer. The A.C.L.U., he told me, wants to "defund the prison system and reinvest in communities." In our conversation, I found myself wondering if Ofer, and the A.C.L.U., had been influenced by abolitionist thinking and Gilmore. Ofer even seemed to quote Gilmore's mantra that "prisons are catchall solutions to social problems." When I asked him, Ofer said, "There's no question. She's made tremendous contributions, even just in helping to bring about a conversation on what this work really is, and the constant struggle not to replace one oppressive system with another."

Of the A.C.L.U.'s objectives, Gilmore is both hopeful and cautious. "I look forward to seeing how they revise their approach from the exclusionary First Step Act," she told me, "and to seeing how their ambitions, working in multiple jurisdictions, play out." In the last decade, prison populations nationally have shrunk by only 7 percent, and according to the Vera Institute of Justice, 40 percent of this reduction can be attributed to California, which in 2011 was mandated by the Supreme Court to solve overcrowding. Ofer conceded that the greatest challenge is to stop sorting who receives relief based on a divide between violent and nonviolent offenses. "To genuinely end mass incarceration in America, we have to transform how the justice system responds to *all* offenses," Ofer said. "Politically, this is a hard conversation. But morally, it's clear what the direction must be: dismantling the system."

Critics have been asking whether prisons themselves were the best solutions to social problems since the birth of the penitentiary system. In 1902, the famous trial lawyer Clarence Darrow told men held in Chicago's Cook County Jail: "There should be no jails. They do not accomplish what they pretend to accomplish." By the late 1960s and early 1970s, an abolition movement had gained traction among a diverse range of people, including scholars, policymakers (even centrist ones), legislators and religious leaders in the United States. In Scandinavia, a prison-abolition movement led to, if not the eradication of prisons, a shift to "open prisons" that emphasize reintegrating people into society and have had very low recidivism rates. After the 1971 uprising at the Attica Correctional Facility outside Buffalo, N.Y., resulting in the deaths of 43 people, there was

growing sentiment in the United States that drastic changes were needed. In 1976, a Quaker prison minister named Fay Honey Knopp and a group of activists published the booklet “Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists,” which outlined three main goals: to establish a moratorium on all new prison building, to decarcerate those currently in prison and to “excarcerate” — i.e., move away from criminalization and from the use of incarceration altogether. The path that abolitionists called for to achieve these goals seemed strikingly similar to the original (if ultimately failed) goals of the Great Society and “war on crime” laid out by Lyndon B. Johnson in the mid to late 1960s: to generate millions of new jobs, combat employment discrimination, desegregate schools, broaden the social safety net and build new housing. But the ravaging impact of deindustrialization on urban communities had already begun, and it was addressed not with vast social programs but with new and harsh forms of criminalization.

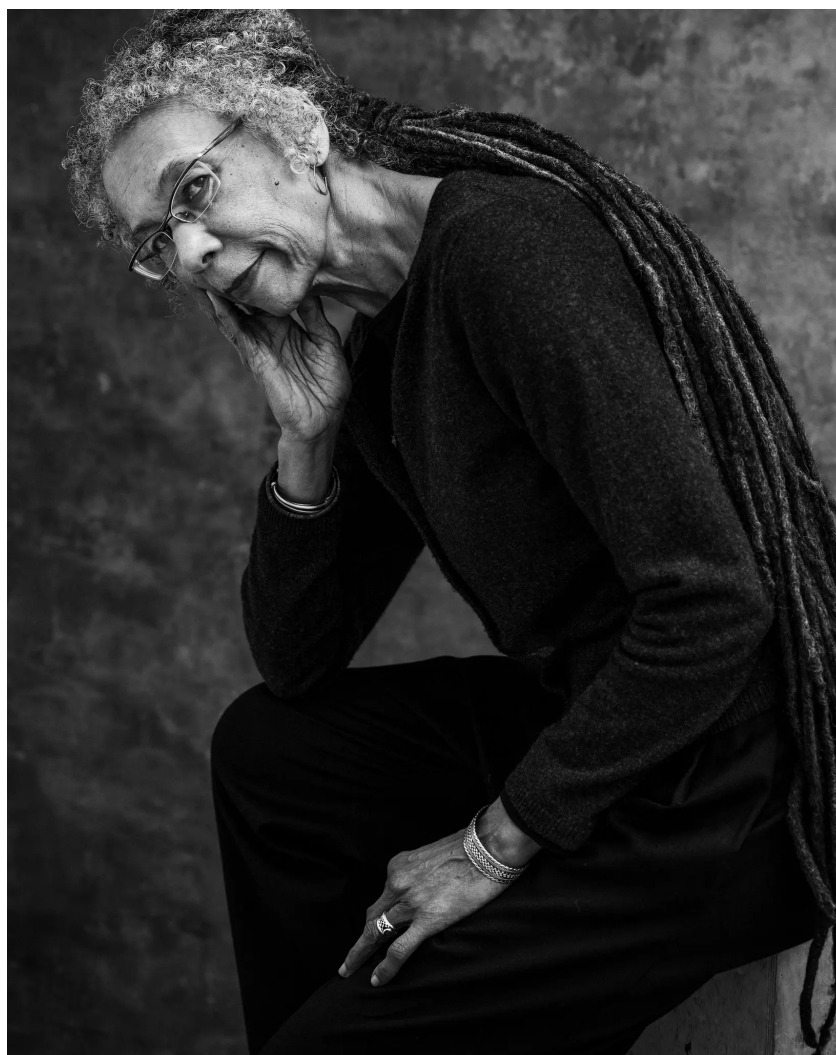
By the late 1990s, as prisons and prison populations expanded significantly, a new call emerged to try to stop states from building more prisons, centered in California and led by, among others, Gilmore and Angela Davis, with the formation of groups like the California Prison Moratorium Project, which Gilmore helped found. In 1998, Davis and Gilmore, along with a group of people in the Bay Area, founded Critical Resistance, a national anti-prison organization that made abolition its central tenet — a goal dismissed by many as utopian and naïve. Five years later, Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB), of which Gilmore is a board member, was formed to fight jail and prison construction. CURB quickly rose to prominence for its successful campaigns, which, at last count, have prevented over 140,000 new jail and prison beds (in a state where 200,000 are currently held in prisons and jails). CURB just recently succeeded in halting construction of a huge new women’s jail in Los Angeles County, in coordination with several local groups.

[If prisons don’t work, what will?]

Each of the many campaigns Gilmore worked on over the years was built from a different coalition of people who could be negatively affected by a new jail or prison. Her strategy was not to simply fight prisons directly and hope others joined in but rather to seek out groups that were already mobilized. Whether environmentalists who could be made to realize that a new prison would harm biodiversity, or local community members worried about a prison’s impact on the water table or undeliverable promises of local employment, “whatever is already there, in terms of people who are organized, that is how to direct the work,” Gilmore told me. “You have to talk to people and see what they want.” In 2004, for example, there was a measure on the Los Angeles County ballot to hire 5,000 new police officers and deputy sheriffs and to start expanding the city’s jail. Gilmore helped organize

a campaign in South Central and East Los Angeles, meeting and talking to people, getting them to ask questions and to express their needs. Did the needs of neighborhood residents coincide with the needs of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's and Police Departments? Did they want more police officers in their communities? The answer was no. The measure failed. "It was plodding work — organizing, and organizing, and organizing — but we won. We beat them back."

When the state wanted to build what it was calling new "gender-responsive" prisons, abolitionists organized with people in California women's prisons. The organization Justice Now circulated a petition that 3,300 incarcerated people signed, to protest the new facilities intended to house them. A list of the incarcerated signatories — a 25-foot scroll — was presented at the State Capitol, to audible gasps from the Senate Budget Subcommittee on Prisons. The proposal by the state's Gender Responsive Strategies Commission was defeated. "It's not that everybody who was organized on these campaigns was themselves an abolitionist," Gilmore told me, "but instead that abolitionists engaged in a certain kind of organizing that made all different kinds of people, in all different kinds of situations, decide for themselves that it was not a good idea to have another prison."



"If you just say 'prison abolition' on CNN, you're going to have a lot of people shaking their heads. But Ruthie has always been very clear that prison abolition is not just about closing prisons. It's a theory of change." Dana Scruggs for The New York Times

By the time Gilmore began graduate studies at Rutgers University, in 1994 at the age of 43, she was a seasoned activist who had benefited from an extensive informal education with scholars like Cedric Robinson, Barbara Smith and Mike Davis, the author of "City of Quartz," who popularized the term "prison-industrial complex." Gilmore originally thought to pursue a Ph.D. in planning at Rutgers, which seemed the closest to what she wanted to do: parse social problems in relation to the world we've built. Then she encountered the work of the influential Marxist geographer Neil Smith and quickly decided to mail her application to the geography department instead. Geography, she discovered, allowed her to examine urban-rural connections and to think broadly about how life is organized into competing and cooperating systems.

Gilmore received her Ph.D. four years later and was hired the next year as an assistant professor at Berkeley. She wanted to call the first course she taught there "Carceral

Geography.” The head of the department disapproved. “Can’t you call it ‘Race and Crime’?” he asked. She replied that her course was not about race and crime. (The department head has a different recollection.) She got her way and has been developing the concept of carceral geography ever since, a category of scholarship she more or less single-handedly invented, which examines the complex interrelationships among landscape, natural resources, political economy, infrastructure and the policing, jailing, caging and controlling of populations. In the years since, Gilmore has shaped the thinking of many geographers, as well as generations of graduate students and activists.

I saw her ability to situate the problem of prison in a much larger political and economic landscape when Davis and Gilmore engaged in a conversation moderated by Beth Richie, a law and African-American studies professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, in a large church in the city, the three of them — black, radical, feminist intellectuals — seated in huge and ornate bishops’ chairs. The event, organized by Critical Resistance, was crowded with South Side organizers, the youngest of whom were invited onstage to offer tributes to Davis, the most famous person in the room. It was all feel-good vibes, and then Davis turned to Gilmore and brought up the topic of private prisons. The tone in the room grew tense.

By now it has become almost conventional wisdom to think that private prisons are the “real” problem with mass incarceration. But anyone seriously engaged with the subject knows that this is not the case. Even a cursory glance at numbers proves it: Ninety-two percent of people locked inside American prisons are held in publicly run, publicly funded facilities, and 99 percent of those in jail are in public jails. Every private prison could close tomorrow, and not a single person would go home. But the ideas that private prisons are the culprit, and that profit is the motive behind all prisons, have a firm grip on the popular imagination. (Incidentally, it isn’t just liberals who focus their outrage on private prisons; as Gilmore points out, so do law-enforcement agencies and guards’ unions, for whom private prisons draw off resources they want for themselves.)

Davis noted the “mistake,” as she put it, in the film “13th,” by Ava DuVernay, in sending a message that the main struggle should be against private prisons. But, she said to Gilmore, she saw the popular emphasis on privatization as useful in demonstrating the ways in which prisons are part of the global capitalist system.

Gilmore replied to her longtime comrade that private prisons are not driving mass incarceration. “They are parasites on it. Which doesn’t make them good. Which doesn’t make them not culpable for the things of which they are culpable. They are parasites.” And then she began a sermon on the difference between the profit motive for a company and how public institutions are funded and run. In her fluency on these subjects, a certain

gulf opened between the two women. If Davis's charisma could be described as unflappable eloquence, Gilmore's derives from a fierce and precise analysis, an intolerance of vagaries, and it was Gilmore who commanded the room.

Government agencies don't make profits; instead, they need revenue. State agencies must compete for this revenue, Gilmore explained. Under austerity, the social-welfare function shrinks; the agencies that receive the money are the police, firefighters and corrections. So other agencies start to copy what the police do: The education department, for instance, learns that it can receive money for metal detectors much more easily than it can for other kinds of facility upgrades. And prisons can access funds that traditionally went elsewhere — for example, money goes to county jails and state prisons for “mental health services” rather than into public health generally. “If you follow the money, you don't have to find the company that's profiting,” Gilmore explained to me later. “You can find all the people who are dependent on wages paid out by the Department of Corrections. The most powerful lobby group in California are the guards. It's a single trade, with one employer, and it couldn't be easier for them to organize. They can elect everyone from D.A.s up to the governor. They gave Gray Davis a couple million dollars, and he gave them a prison.”

The explicit function of prison is to separate people from society, and this costs money. Fifteen and a half billion dollars of the proposed budget for the coming year will go to corrections, and 40 percent of that goes to staff salaries alone, not including benefits and generous pensions. This is state-subsidized employment, not a profit venture.

Between 1982 and 2000, California built 23 new prisons and, Gilmore found, increased the state's prison population by 500 percent. If prison scholars tend to focus on one angle or another of incarceration trends, Gilmore provides the most structurally comprehensive explanations, using California as a case study. In her 2007 book, “Golden Gulag,” she draws upon her vast knowledge of political economy and geography to put together a portrait of significant historical change and the drive to embark upon what, as two California state analysts called it, “the largest prison building project in the history of the world.” Were prisons a response to rising crime? As Gilmore writes, “Crime went up; crime went down; we cracked down.” This sequence, and how crime rates are measured, have been heavily debated, but if this noncausal order is really the case, what was going on? Gilmore outlines four categories of “surplus” to explain the prison-building boom. There was “surplus land,” because farmers didn't have enough water to irrigate crops, and economic stagnation meant the land was no longer as valuable. As the California government faced lean years, it was left with what she calls “surplus state capacity” — government agencies that had lost their political mandate to use funding and expertise

for social welfare benefits (like schools, housing and hospitals). In the wake of this austerity, investors specializing in public finance found themselves with no market for projects like schools and housing and instead used this “surplus capital” to make a market in prison bonds. And finally, there was “surplus labor,” resulting from a population of people who, whether from deindustrialized urban centers or languishing rural areas, had been excluded from the economy — in other words, the people from which prison populations nationwide are drawn.

Prisons are not a result of a desire by “bad” people, Gilmore says, to lock up poor people and people of color. “The state did not wake up one morning and say, ‘Let’s be mean to black people.’ All these other things had to happen that made it turn out like this. It didn’t have to turn out like this.” Her narrative involves a broad array of players and facts, some direct, some indirect, some coordinated, many not: for instance, farmers who leased or sold land to the state for the building of prisons; the very powerful correctional officers’ union, state policymakers, city governments, cycles of drought, economic crisis and huge deindustrialized urban centers; and the lives and fates of the descendants of those who migrated to Southern California for factory work during World War II and after. Her fundamental point is that prison was not inevitable — not for individuals and not for California. But the more prisons the state built, the better the state became at filling them, even despite falling crime rates.

“Golden Gulag” has seminal status among Gilmore’s academic peers and activist network, and also more widely — Jay-Z praised it in Time magazine — but certain sections of the book can be intimidatingly technical. Even Gilmore suspects that some who name-check it haven’t actually sat down to read it. “The situation — causes, effects — are complicated,” she told me, “and people want something that’s easy.” And yet when Gilmore interacts with people, whether one on one or with an audience, she is direct and accessible. She has a warm and effusive demeanor and is quick to laugh with people and bond with them. She speaks plainly and yet refuses to oversimplify. She gets people thinking about interconnections among larger structures that lead to the creation of prisons, and also interconnections among groups of people that might work together to resist the building of prisons — like environmental activists and teachers’ unions.

It is in this manner that she organized in 1999 with both farmworkers and farmers (“in capitalist terms, natural antagonists,” as she pointed out to me) to stop a proposed prison in Tulare County, and successfully persuaded the California State Employees Association (CSEA) — then a union of more than 80,000 members — to support a campaign to oppose a new prison in Delano. “The guards could not believe that these public-service employees would go up against other public-service employees,” she told me. “Even we

were surprised.” CSEA came to the understanding, as Gilmore recalls, that a guard is a state worker who has to have a prison to have a job, while state-employed locksmiths, secretaries, janitors and so forth didn’t *need* to work in prisons but might have to, if the guards’ union got all the resources.

Despite a lawsuit initiated by a coalition of legal and human rights groups, including Critical Resistance, and environmental concerns raised by a state senator, the prison in Delano did eventually open in 2005, but according to Gilmore it took many years longer than it would have without abolitionists’ campaigning against it. “It got to the point where in Sacramento, they were saying, ‘Just let us build this one, and we won’t build any more.’ That’s how they talked to us, because they got so tired of us. ‘Just let us do this, this will be our last one.’ Before the ribbon cutting, the secretary of corrections said, ‘This is probably the last prison we’re going to open in this state.’ He did not say ‘because the abolitionists got in our way,’ or ‘the abolitionists organized all these people that got in our way,’ but the implication was there.”



Clockwise from top right: Gilmore in 1986; with her brother Jon (second from left) and two friends; Gilmore's father in the late 1960s, in the office where he worked to desegregate the Yale School of Medicine. Amaal Said for The New York Times

“To understand Ruthie, you have to understand where she came from, what her family was like,” Mike Davis told me. Gilmore was born in 1950 and grew up in New Haven, Conn., with three brothers in a household that she calls “decidedly Afro-Saxon,” quoting the term that one of her mentors, the political theorist Cedric Robinson, used to describe the family of W.E.B. Du Bois. “Puritan determination was our thing,” she told me. “I could not fail, because everything I did was for black people.” Gilmore’s family attended what was then Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church, which was heavily involved in the civil rights movement. “There was an ethos in my little church,” she said. “Everyone needs to learn as much as they can.” They had black-history lessons in Sunday school, where they were encouraged to wonder and ask questions. “If you made a claim, the rule was, you had to be able to tell someone *how* you knew it.”

As a child, Gilmore secretly wanted to be a preacher. On Sundays, in the pew, she would imagine herself in the pulpit in preacher’s robes. “Which is strange because I could barely open my mouth with strangers. So why I could imagine myself scolding and encouraging the masses, I don’t know.”

Gilmore’s father, Courtland Seymour Wilson, a tool-and-die maker for the firearm manufacturer Winchester, played a central role in organizing Winchester’s machinists. The only time in her childhood that white people came to the house was for labor meetings. She would sit on the stairs and listen to the men, who smoked and argued late into the night. As they left, she would peek through a window to watch them leave. “There was always a car outside that people had not gotten out of. It left when the others left.” When she learned about Pinkertons, who spied on mineworkers, Gilmore realized the men who parked outside her house were company spies, the equivalent of Pinkertons.

Gilmore’s father had inherited a tradition of labor organizing from his own father, a janitor

at Yale who helped to organize the first blue-collar workers' union at the university. Eventually Gilmore's father also ended up employed by Yale, where he worked to desegregate its medical school. "He was without question the leader of the civil rights struggle in New Haven," Davis told me.

While Gilmore's father was not college-educated, he was intellectually driven and encouraged Gilmore, a daddy's girl who showed much academic promise. In 1960, a local private school decided to desegregate before it was legally forced to, and sent letters to respected black churches asking about girls who might be "appropriate." Gilmore took the school's entrance exam, which was the same test it gave white girls, and passed. ("It was an easy exam. Like, for [expletive]'s sake, what was all the fuss?") Gilmore was the school's first and, for much of her time there, only black student, and one of a small number of working-class students. She was miserable, but she learned a lot.

In 1968, she enrolled at Swarthmore College, where she got involved in campus politics. It was the year of occupations. She and a group of other black students, among them Angela Davis's younger sister, Fania, wanted to persuade the administration to enroll more black students, and Davis, on a visit to Swarthmore, gave the students advice. "She seemed so amazingly mature and knowledgeable to me," Gilmore said. "I was 19, and she was 24. She had the Alabama style, talked slowly and deliberately, wore a miniskirt." Davis told them: "Figure out what you want, and stick with it. Make a demand."

In January, Gilmore, Fania and a handful of other black students took over the admissions office. Gilmore invited her parents to come down from New Haven and offer political guidance. It was decided that Gilmore and her father, representing the group, would approach Swarthmore's president, Courtney Smith. When they found him, Gilmore, who was raised with formal manners, said, "President Smith, I'd like to introduce you to my father." Smith turned his back and walked away. Gilmore was outraged, but her father was casual. "He knew how to keep his eyes on the prize. What's it about? It's definitely not about *that*."

Gilmore's parents left, and the occupation continued. Eight days into the occupation, Smith had a heart attack at 52 and died at his desk. White students spread a rumor that Gilmore and her cohort were in the president's office, yelling at him when he died (in reality, they were nowhere near his office), and there were rumors that they had threatened to get revenge.

At the time, Swarthmore, just like Yale, had a large number of black employees who performed the necessary if less visible jobs around campus, and these people, it turned out, had been observing events from a distance. "They decided to save us," Gilmore told

me. “Cars pulled into the circular drive, and these black men got out and stood looking up at us, in the windows. We left with them. It all seemed magical to me. It was ontology put into action, that made it possible for folks to pull up in these cars and silently wait to rescue us, and we knew to be rescued.”

The men drove them to a house where they bedded down for the night. The next morning, some people went out for supplies and returned with food and a copy of that morning’s paper. In the paper was a picture of Gilmore’s cousin, John Huggins. He had served in Vietnam and been radicalized upon his return, becoming a founding member of the Southern California chapter of the Black Panthers. Now he and another Panther, Bunchy Carter, had been murdered on the U.C.L.A. campus by a rival political group.

Her cousin’s murder was a personal devastation, if also a symptom of the politics of the time (as later came to light, the F.B.I. had infiltrated these organizations, in order to create the divisions that most likely contributed to this fatal encounter). Gilmore left Swarthmore and moved home. Later that year, she enrolled at Yale and got deeply involved with her studies.

“Every year I had one teacher who was really good to me, interested in what I thought about and wrote,” she said. One of them was George Steiner. Another was the film and drama critic Stanley Kauffmann. Gilmore graduated with a degree in drama before vagabonding across the country. She ended up in Southern California, where she met her husband, Craig Gilmore, and embarked on organizing work they’ve participated in together since 1976.

Gilmore has come to understand that there are certain narratives people cling to that are not only false but that allow for policy positions aimed at minor or misdirected — rather than fundamental and meaningful — reforms. Gilmore takes apart these narratives: that a significant number of people are in prison for nonviolent drug convictions; that prison is a modified continuation of slavery, and, by extension, that most everyone in prison is black; and, as she explained in Chicago, that corporate profit motive is the primary engine of incarceration.

For Gilmore, and for a growing number of scholars and activists, the idea that prisons are filled with nonviolent offenders is particularly problematic. Less than one in five nationally are in prisons or jail for drug offenses, but this notion proliferated in the wake of the overwhelming popularity of Michelle Alexander’s “The New Jim Crow,” which focuses on the devastating effects of the war on drugs, cases that are primarily handled by the (relatively small) federal prison system. It’s easy to feel outrage about draconian laws that punish nonviolent drug offenders, and about racial bias, each of which

Alexander catalogs in a riveting and persuasive manner. But a majority of people in state and federal prisons have been convicted of what are defined as violent offenses, which can include everything from possession of a gun to murder. This statistical reality can be uncomfortable for some people, but instead of grappling with it, many focus on the “relatively innocent,” as Gilmore calls them, the addicts or the falsely accused — never mind that they can only ever represent a small percentage of those in prison. When I asked Michelle Alexander about this, she responded: “I think the failure of some academics like myself to squarely respond to the question of violence in our work has created a situation in which it almost seems like we’re approving of mass incarceration for violent people. Those of us who are committed to ending the system of mass criminalization have to begin talking more about violence. Not only the harm it causes, but the fact that building more cages will never solve it.”

But in the United States, it’s difficult for people to talk about prison without assuming there is a population that must stay there. “When people are looking for the relative innocence line,” Gilmore told me, “in order to show how sad it is that the relatively innocent are being subjected to the forces of state-organized violence as though they were criminals, they are missing something that they *could* see. It isn’t that hard. They could be asking whether people who have been criminalized should be subjected to the forces of organized violence. They could ask if we *need* organized violence.”

Another widely held misconception Gilmore points to is that prison is majority black. Not only is it a false and harmful stereotype to overassociate black people with prison, she argues, but by not acknowledging racial demographics and how they shift from one state to another, and over time, the scope and crisis of mass incarceration can’t be fully comprehended. In terms of racial demographics, black people are the population most affected by mass incarceration — roughly 33 percent of those in prison are black, while only 12 percent of the United States population is — but Latinos still make up 23 percent of the prison population and white people 30 percent, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. (Gilmore has heard people argue that drug laws will change because the opioid epidemic hurts rural whites, a myth that drives her crazy. “People say, ‘God knows they’re not going to lock up white people,’ ” she told me, “and it’s like, Yes, they *do* lock up white people.”) Once you believe prisons are predominately black, it’s also easier to believe that prisons are a conspiracy to re-enslave black people — a narrative, Gilmore acknowledges, that offers two crucial truths: that the struggles and suffering of black people are central to the story of mass incarceration, and that prison, like slavery, is a human rights catastrophe. But prison as a modern version of Jim Crow mostly serves to allow people to worry about a population they might otherwise ignore. “The guilty are worthy of being ignored, and yet mass incarceration is so phenomenal that people are

trying to find a way to care about those who are guilty of crimes. So, in order to care about them, they have to have some category to which they become worthy of worry. And the category is slavery.”

A person who eventually either steals something or assaults someone goes to prison, where he is offered no job training, no redress of his own traumas and issues, no rehabilitation. “The reality of prison, and of black suffering, is just as harrowing as the myth of slave labor,” Gilmore says. “Why do we need that misconception to see the horror of it?” Slaves were compelled to work in order to make profits for plantation owners. The business of slavery was cotton, sugar and rice. Prison, Gilmore notes, is a government institution. It is not a business and does not function on a profit motive. This may seem technical, but the technical distinction matters, because you can’t resist prisons by arguing against slavery if prisons don’t engage in slavery. The activist and researcher James Kilgore, himself formerly incarcerated, has said, “The overwhelming problem for people inside prison is not that their labor is super exploited; it’s that they’re being warehoused with very little to do and not being given any kind of programs or resources that enable them to succeed once they do get out of prison.”

The National Employment Law Project estimates that about 70 million people have a record of arrest or conviction, which often makes employment difficult. Many end up in the informal economy, which has been absorbing a huge share of labor over the last 20 years. “Gardener, home health care, sweatshops, you name it,” Gilmore told me. “These people have a place in the economy, but they have no control over that place.” She continued: “The key point here, about half of the work force, is to think not only about the enormity of the problem, but the enormity of the possibilities! That so many people could benefit from being organized into solid formations, could make certain kinds of demands, on the people who pay their wages, on the communities where they live. On the schools their children go to. This is part of what abolitionist thinking should lead us to.”

“Abolition,” as a word, is an intentional echo of the movement to abolish slavery. “This work will take generations, and I’m not going to be alive to see the changes,” the activist Mariame Kaba told me. “Similarly I know that our ancestors, who were slaves, could not have imagined my life.” And as Kaba and Davis and Richie and Gilmore all told me, unsolicited and in almost identical phrasing, it is not serendipity that the movement of prison abolition is being led by black women. Davis and Richie each used the term “abolition feminism.” “Historically, black feminists have had visions to change the structure of society in ways that would benefit not just black women but everyone,” Davis said. She also talked about Du Bois and the lessons drawn from his conception of what was needed: not merely a lack of slavery but a new society, utterly transformed. “I think

the fact that so many people now do call themselves prison abolitionists,” Michelle Alexander told me, “is a testament to the fact that an enormous amount of work has been done, in academic circles and in grass-root circles. Still, if you just say ‘prison abolition’ on CNN, you’re going to have a lot of people shaking their heads. But Ruthie has always been very clear that prison abolition is not just about closing prisons. It’s a theory of change.”

When Gilmore encounters an audience that is hostile to prison abolition, an audience that supposes she’s naïvely suggesting that those in prison are there for smoking weed, and wants to tell her who’s really locked up, what terrible things they’ve done, she tells them she’s had a loved one murdered and isn’t there to talk about people who smoke weed. But as she acknowledged to me, “Part of the whole story that can’t be denied is that people are tired of harm, they are tired of grief and they are tired of anxiety.” She described to me conversations she’d had with people who are glad their abusive husband or father has been removed from their home, and would not want it any other way. Of her own encounter with murder, she’s more philosophical, even if the loss still seems raw.

“I had this heart-to-heart with my aunt, the mother of my murdered cousin, John. On the surface, we were talking about something else, but we were really talking about him. I said, ‘Forgive and forget.’ And she replied, ‘Forgive, but *never* forget.’ She was right: The conditions under which the atrocity occurred must change, so that they can’t occur again.”

For Gilmore, to “never forget” means you don’t solve a problem with state violence or with personal violence. Instead, you change the conditions under which violence prevailed. Among liberals, a kind of quasi-Christian idea about empathy circulates, the idea that we have to find a way to care about the people who’ve done bad. To Gilmore this is unconvincing. When she encountered the kids in Fresno who hassled her about prison abolition, she did not ask them to empathize with the people who might hurt them, or had. She instead asked them why, as individuals, and as a society, we believe that the way to solve a problem is by “killing it.” She was asking if punishment is logical, and if it works. She let the kids find their own way to answer.

Corrected on April 17, 2019: Because of a transcription error, an earlier version of this article misquoted the activist Mariame Kaba. The quote is: “Similarly I know that our ancestors, who were slaves, could not have imagined my life,” not “Similarly I know that my ancestors, who were slaves, could not have imagined my life.”

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