

Abolition Geography



Monica Trinidad, *Abolition Now*, microopen and paper, 2015

“Put simply, capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it. Thus, criminalization and mass incarceration are class war.”

Note: The essays in this collection are dense and sometimes require multiple readings and group discussion to better understand their arguments. As Wilson Gilmore emphasizes, “the point is not that reading must always seem transparent and require neither dictionary nor sustained contemplation. Nor is it that complexity is itself bad, nonproductive, or coopted by definition.”

In order to facilitate some of that sustained contemplation, we have signaled areas where your group might consider *unpacking* a phrase or concept, or *defining* a term. They are marked throughout our questions. We’ve also **bolded** and put a definition at the bottom.

By *unpack*, we mean analyze something into its component elements and then reconstitute it as a whole.

By *define*, we mean determining the essential or foundational meaning in a word or phrase, as the author is using it. For example, an often-cited definition of racism by Wilson Gilmore is “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”

Part I. *What is to be done?*

1. What Is to be Done?

1. Ruth Wilson Gilmore begins her presidential speech to the American Studies Association with the following questions: “Why this? Why this, here? Why this, here, now?”(26). Try applying this to the work your group is doing. You could experiment by answering these questions individually on a piece of paper and then share your responses and see where there is overlap and shared vision among the collective.
2. What does Wilson Gilmore mean “by mixing our labor with the earth, we change the external world and thereby change our own nature?” (28). Are there other instances in readings or discussions where you have come across this dialectical relationship between self and society?
3. Instead of interpreting her intergenerational family story—“Yale janitor grandfather, Yale machinist father, Yale graduate daughter”—as one of aspiration, assimilation, and achievement, Wilson Gilmore suggests it is a story of “political and cultural becoming” (36). What does she mean by this? What is different about the story she tells instead and why is it important?
4. On page 44, Wilson Gilmore tells the story of a young professor, Jenna Loyd (shout out to Dr. Loyd, who is part of our SAS family and has helped with our curriculum in the past!). Loyd was struggling to get her students to do the readings and instead of asking “Why don’t you want to study these things with me?” she asked: “Why doesn’t the government of California want people like you to study in institutions designed and built by and for the state of California?” What is the lesson in this story? Have you encountered similar difficulties in your group that you could reframe?
5. Define: What does Wilson Gilmore mean by the “anti-state state” (35)? See also: Essay 20: Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence; See also below in this discussion guide
6. Unpack: “Objectively, structural adjustment policies are designed to put the most possible weight on the backs of the most vulnerable people, who are vulnerable by definition of not having the political clout expressed through votes, contributions, ownership of the means of production, control of vital territory, or organization to refuse their own vulnerability to premature death” (34).
7. Unpack: “The immediate cause—what they were fighting about at UCLA—what made them dangerous men was not that they were men with guns—because everybody had guns. The Panther bull restricting arms in California had just barely been passed. Rather, they were men who were

fighting for a particular curriculum. It was a curriculum battle that killed them. The Black Panther Party was a party of students” (44).

8. *Unpack*: Unpack the story of Angela Davis visiting a prison in California and being mobbed by Black women prison guards who thanked her for the opportunities they had because of her. What does Wilson Gilmore mean when she says: “I doubt they understood the deeper truth of their observation”? (38).

3. Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals: Apartheid USA

1. Wilson Gilmore writes that although the “need for oppositional work is unquestioned . . . what is oppositional work?” (80-81). Can you think of some work that claims to be “oppositional” but is actually a part of reinforcing systems of oppression?
 - a. What are the four areas of “oppositional studies” that she outlines within the university/academia? What are the characteristics that define each of these? Can you see any of these tendencies in other places such as the prison or communities outside that aren’t the university/academia?
2. How might we map her critique of “private intellectuals” onto other prevalent ideas in our society that privatize and individualize what should be collective and public? (90).
3. *Unpack*: Unpack the 2-part framework that Wilson Gilmore provides for understanding Audre Lorde’s caution that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house (79). Had you heard this phrase before? How did you interpret it? Does what she offers differ? What does she mean that “without both parts of the strategy at work, nothing much is different at the end of the day”?

Part II. Race and Space

5. Race and Globalization

1. As a geographer, Gilmore often thinks spatially. In other words, she’s using a framework that considers the intersections of *where* things are happening to give additional clarity to *what* is happening. What are some ways that you’ve experienced race operating across different spaces and places?
2. “At its relational best the social construction approach considers how racialization is based in the (until recently) under-analyzed production of both masculinity and whiteness (foundation and byproduct of global European **hegemony**), and, how, therefore, race and space are mutually constituted.” What is Gilmore pointing out about the production of whiteness and masculinity? How do you see these two concepts in their relationship to power? (111-112)

3. What does Gilmore argue is a driving force for prison expansion? (124-125)
4. Define: How does Wilson Gilmore define racism? (107)
5. Unpack: Gilmore lines out one way to understand to think about the scales of domination in a society is to “think about all the components - or institutions - of a society at any scale, and then ask about differences of power within and between them.” What are some common threads that you see in the questions she’s asking? What is she lining out about the differences of power across societies? What questions come to mind about power from the place you’re in that would help other people see the imbalance? (112)

Part III. Prisons, Militarism, and the Anti-State State

12. “Restating the Obvious (with Craig Gilmore)”

1. What do the Gilmores argue is the connection between the rise of the nation-state and the rise of the prison? (263-264)
2. How do the Gilmores answer the question, “Why prisons now?” (273-275) How does this connect to question #2 from the Race and Globalization chapter above? (i.e. what relationships of power are created through the existence of the prison?)
3. Define: How do the Gilmores define a state? (262)
4. Define: How do the Gilmore’s define the modern nation-state? (263)
5. Unpack: “Many activists in Critical Resistance warn us not to think of the prison system as broken. Rather, they insist, we should imagine it is working and think about what that means.” The Gilmores spent this chapter lining out how the prison is working. Who and what benefits from the prison-industrial-complex, according to the Gilmores?

14. “From the Military-Industrial Complex to Prison-Industrial Complex: An Interview with Trevor Paglen”

1. What became the “all-purpose explanation for the struggles and disorder” that were happening throughout the 1950s and 1960s? (325-326)
2. Unpack: How did you grow up thinking about “crime?” Did you have a childhood where you were “taught to get as quickly as they can to someone in uniform” ?(328) How did the grown-ups in your life talk about it, if at all? How has your idea of crime changed over time?
3. Unpack: What does Gilmore mean “racism has been renovated?” (332)

Part IV. *Organizing for Abolition*

16. “You Have Dislodged a Boulder”

1. What is Mothers ROC? How did the group come into being and what are its core people, principles, and aims? What are some of the challenges the group faced as it developed? Are any of these familiar to those you’ve encountered in your group? If so, how did you resolve them and are there lessons here you could apply/have applied?
2. Wilson Gilmore writes that “three major conditions of existence—and categories of analysis—form the heart of the group’s specific response to crisis” (390). What are they? How are they similar/distinct from those your group faces?
3. How does class, race, and gender play out in the group? (404-405).
4. Wilson Gilmore ends by noting that that magnitude of mass imprisonment also materializes a “magnitude of possibility” (407). On what grounds does she make this argument? What ways can your group use the scale and vastness of the problems posed by incarceration and criminalization to identify expansive possibilities?
5. Define: “welfare-warfare state” (361)
6. Unpack: “The state still systematizes relations between capital and labor” (361).
7. Unpack: “The state’s attempt to produce a geographical solution (incarceration) to political-economic crisis is informed by racialized contradictions that are also gendered” (364).
8. Unpack: “Arrest is the political art of individualizing disorder” (401).

20. “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence”

1. What is carceral geography? What is its “antagonistic contradiction”, abolition geography? (480)
2. What does Wilson Gilmore see as “the problem of innocence”? (484-491). How can the arguments we make about the *what* and *why* of the problem change the *how* of the work we do and the world we are trying to create?
3. Wilson Gilmore writes that “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 process of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (475). Many people understand prisons to be a legacy/vestige/echo of slavery. How does her formulation shift or change that relationship?

4. Unpack: Wilson Gilmore reframes the idea of prisons as simply profit generators, explaining that while they are extractive, “what’s extracted from the extracted is the resource of life–time” (474). She explains that bodies are places, and criminalization turns these territories into sites for extracting time again and again. “This process opens a hole in a life, furthering, perhaps to our surprise, the annihilation of space by time.”
5. Unpack: “Freedom is not simply the absence of enslavement as a legal and property form. Rather, the undoing of bondage–abolition–is quite literally to change places: to destroy the geography of slavery by mixing their labor with the external world to change the world and thereby themselves” (481).
6. Define: “racial capitalism” (472-473)
7. Define: “anti-state state” (486). See also: Essay 1: What Is to be Done?
8. How does Wilson Gilmore define criminalization? (476). Do you agree? How might you change or build upon this definition? How does her definition of criminalization inform her arguments about innocence later in the essay?

Helpful Definition(s)

1. **Hegemony** - In his prison notebooks, Antonio Gramsci defines **hegemony** as the exercise of “intellectual and moral leadership” to the end of maintaining class supremacy. **Hegemony** is achieved as the intellectuals of the dominant social group, through the power of attraction, subjugate the intellectuals of other social groups, depriving them of the possibility of achieving domination except through sheer force.