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# On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place

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*The complexities of black geographies—shaped by histories of colonialism, transatlantic slavery, contemporary practices of racism, and resistances to white supremacy—shed light on how slave and post-slave struggles in the Americas form a unique sense of place. Rather than simply identifying black suffering and naming racism (and opposition to it) as the sole conceptual schemas through which to ‘understand’ or ‘know’ blackness or race, it is emphasized that a black sense of place, black histories, and communities are not only integral to production of space, but also that the analytical interconnectedness of race, practices of domination, and geography undoubtedly put pressure on how we presently study and assess racial violence.*

**Key words:** black geographies, plantation, prison, racial violence.

## Introduction

There is something organic to black positionality that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society. There is nothing wilful or speculative in this statement, for one could just as well state the claim the other way around: there is something organic to civil society that makes *it* essential to the destruction of the black body. (Wilderson 2007: 23).

In such inhospitable places, everybody isolates. (Gilmore 2007: 17)

This article addresses blackness, place, and violence in order to consider the ways in which slave and post-slave black geographies in the Americas are connected to practices of domination and deliberate attempts to destroy a black sense of place. A black sense of place

draws attention to the longstanding links between blackness and geography. It brings into focus the ways in which racial violences (concrete and epistemic actions and structural patterns intended harm, kill, or coerce a particular grouping of people) shape, but do not wholly define, black worlds.<sup>1</sup> The discussion centralizes the plantation, practices of place annihilation (urbicide), and the prison in order to identify the possibilities and limitations embedded in analyzing and theorizing black geographies. The work concludes by briefly working through Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*, which stands out as a text that addresses racial violence and geography vis-à-vis an analysis that unsettles colonality. My concerns

for this article are primarily conceptual. I attend to the ways *analyses* of racial violence are stalled by a paradoxical preoccupation with the suffering/violated black body and the stubborn denial of a black sense of place. While the circuitousness of this argument is deliberate, and meant to invite debate, discussion, and additional contributions on the interconnectedness of race, place, and violence, four interlocking questions stand as signal-guides that frame my thinking:

- (a) What is a black sense of place in the Americas?
- (b) In what ways are the historical precedents of anti-black violence in the Americas spatial and linked to our present geographic organization?
- (c) What analytical and conceptual struggles do we face when addressing the wilful violence against/toward a black sense of place?
- (d) Can these questions unsettle the coloniality of race, violence, and place?

A range of studies in social and cultural geography have impacted upon and complement this discussion, specifically scholarly inquiries of geography, race, racism, and difference (Peake and Ray 2001; Mahtani 2002; Browne 2009; Veninga 2009), black geographies, (McKittrick 2000; McKittrick 2006; Carter 2006; Inwood 2009), willful geographic violence (Hewitt 1983; Mbembe 2003; Campbell, Graham, and Monk 2007a; Graham 2002; Graham 2004; Goonewardena and Kipfer, 2006) and the connections between colonialism, academic analyses and race (Mohanty 1991; Holloway 2000; Wynter 2003; Gilmore 2007; Roberts and Mahtani 2010). These different texts and analyses, together, underscore to the ways in which the history of transatlantic slavery and racism in

the Americas has adversely shaped the geographies of black diasporic communities, not only demonstrating the spatial contours of racial violence and dispossession but also identifying the ways in which analyses of blackness can reify racial-colonial categories and, consequently, discursively overtax the suffering black body. The underlying intention of this article is not only to notice the analytical currency of bifurcated racial categories (black = dispossessed, white = freedom), but also to insist that our racial pasts can uncover a collective history of encounter—a difficult interrelatedness—that promises an ethical analytics of race based not on suffering, but on human life.

### A black sense of place

Black diasporic histories and geographies are difficult to track and cartographically map. Transatlantic slavery, from the slave ship and beyond, was predicated on various practices of spatialized violence that targeted black bodies and profited from erasing a black sense of place. Geographically, at the centre are the slave plantation and its attendant geographies (the auction block, the big house, the fields and crops, the slave quarters, the transportation ways leading to and from the plantation, and so on). The plantation evidences an uneven colonial-racial economy that, while differently articulated across time and place, legalized black servitude while simultaneously sanctioning black placelessness and constraint. In the Americas, free labour under bondage thus marked black working bodies as those ‘without’—without legible-Eurocentric history narratives, without land or home, without ownership of self—as this system forcibly secured black peoples to the geographic mechanics of the plantation economy.<sup>2</sup> This

paradox—an economized and enforced placelessness that demanded the enslaved work and thus be chained to the land—normalized black dispossession, white supremacy, and other colonial–racial geographies, while naturalizing the racist underpinnings of land exploitation as accumulation *and* emancipation. Those ‘without’, while cultivating the plantation economy, were ‘identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)’ (Mbembe 2003: 21).

The conditions of bondage did not foreclose black geographies but rather incited alternative mapping practices during and after transatlantic slavery, many of which were/are produced outside the official tenets of cartography: fugitive and maroon maps, literacy maps, food-nourishment maps, family maps, music maps were assembled alongside ‘real’ maps (those produced by black cartographers and explorers who document landmasses, roads, routes, boundaries, and so forth).<sup>3</sup> These ways of understanding and writing the world identify the significant racial contours of modernity. This is to say that the racial underpinnings of modernity, of which transatlantic slavery and colonialism are salient features, situate black people and places outside modernity *just as* black people and places serve as the unspoken labourers of modernity, *just as* black people and places fully participate in the intellectual narrative of modernity. With this in mind, a black sense of place can be understood as the process of materially and imaginatively *situating* historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination *and* the difficult entanglements of racial encounter. Racism and resistance to racism are therefore not the sole defining features of a black sense of place, but rather indicate how the relational violences of modernity produce a condition of being black in the Americas that is predicated on struggle.

A black sense of place can also be understood alongside Massey’s (1994: 149) ‘sense of place’, which is ‘about what one might call the *power geometry* of it all; the power geometry of time–space compression ... This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn’t ... it is also about power in relation *to* the flows and movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated movement: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don’t; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.’<sup>4</sup> With a black sense of place in mind, the plantation notably stands at the centre of modernity. It fostered complex black and non-black geographies in the Americas and provided the blueprint for future sites of racial entanglement. Diverse spatial practices—wherein the structural workings of racism kept black cultures *in place* and tagged them as *placeless*, as these communities innovatively worked within, across, and outside commonsense cartographic and topographical texts—help form a black sense of place. Thus, that which ‘structures’ a black sense of place are the knotted diasporic tenets of coloniality, dehumanization, and resistance; this is a sense of place wherein the violence of displacement and bondage, produced within a plantation economy, extends and is given a geographic future. Practical activities, specifically resistance to persistent anti-black violence and negotiating uneven power geometries of white supremacy, lend a depth to these ongoing geographies of difference. In this context, racial violence is not unchanging; rather, the plantation serves as one (not the only) meaningful geographic locus through which race is made known (and bodies are therefore differently disciplined) across time and space.

A black sense of place is therefore tied to fluctuating geographic and historical contexts.

Indeed we all respond to the ongoing brutalities and various time-space particularities of racial violence differently. It is therefore important to keep in mind that as the plantation provides the future through which contemporary racial geographies and violences make themselves known, it is precisely within our collective plantation futures that fractured and multiple (black and non-black) perspectives on place and belonging are fostered and debated. A black sense of place is not a steady, focused, and homogeneous way of seeing and being in place, but rather a set of changing and differential perspectives that are illustrative of, and therefore remark upon, legacies of normalized racial violence that calcify, but do not guarantee, the denigration of black geographies and their inhabitants.

Our long history of racial–sexual condemnation reveals a system of knowledge that cannot bear to embrace the ways in which blackness (and therefore the plantation) has produced untidy historically present geographies that are predicated on difficult encounters and our entangled and common histories (Walcott 2000; McKittrick 2006). Instead of encounter, in fact, our present system knowledge, inherited from enlightened colonialism and Eurocentric modernity, repetitively constitutes blackness as a discreet (and hostile) racial category that routinely ‘troubles’ an already settled whiteness (Morrison 1992). This paradigmatic perspective on race and blackness, in its denial of an entangled racial history produced through geographies of encounter, normalizes practices of colonization as it naturalizes overdevelopment, accumulation, and land ownership as identifiable–seeable locales of emancipation. Put differently, a differentiated bifurcated–segregated social system prevails, analytically, as the *precedent* to contemporary racial violences. This stance reinforces a singular analytical strand of the

plantation economy and plantation pasts: that which profits from chained and unfettered blackness ‘troubling’ stable whiteness. In this formulation, liberation can *only* be conceptualized within a framework that honours *one* side of the bifurcation–segregation system. That side which is honoured is, of course, that which profits from being ‘with’. Being ‘with’ under this system *requires* land exploitation, colonialism, and racial condemnation while being ‘with’ is, paradoxically, cast as the ontological condition of liberty. In this commonsense formulation, slave and post-slave black geographies are rendered extraneous and unfree sites of violence and danger.

What if bifurcation–segregation is not, in fact, the sole way to conceptualize the ways in which the brutalities of violence and terror have shaped our collective geographies in the Americas? What if the plantation and other forms of racial violence are not conceptualized as the sole precedents to racial differentiation? What if bifurcation–segregation does not anticipate our present struggles against racism and other forms of marginalization? What if our analytical questions did not demand answers that replicate racial violence? With this in mind, a black sense of place might not to be read as an authentication of blackness, or a truth-telling conceptual device, or an offering of a ‘better’ place; rather a black sense of place locates the ways in which anti-black violences in the Americas evidence protean plantation futures *as* spaces of encounter that hold in them useful anti-colonial practices and narratives.

## Urbicide

If the history of colonial and anti-black violence is conceptualized within and beyond the plantation, the tightly knotted tenets of race, difference, and geography in the Americas

are clarified. Indeed, blackness in the Americas is deeply connected to sites of environmental, social, and infrastructural decay and geographic surveillance: the flooding of ninth ward/New Orleans, state sanctioned police violence in São Paulo, industrially polluted residential areas, increased incarceration, deportations, urban crises, declining property values, riots, and more (Costa Vargas and Alves 2009; Woods 2005; Pulido 2000; Browne 2009; Gooding-Williams 1993). These black geographies, while certainly not solely inhabited by black bodies, are classified as imperiled and dangerous, or spaces ‘without’/spaces of exclusion, even as those who have *always* struggled against racial violence and containment populate them (Heynen 2009; James 2007). Indeed, empirical evidence shows that the death of a black sense of place and the attendant descriptors of decay, incarceration, deportation, pollution, and displacement are reminiscent, but certainly do not twin, a plantation logic that spatialized the complementary workings of modernity, land exploitation, and anti-black violence. To be clear, I am not suggesting that maroon resistances to slavery and the Detroit riots are one in the same, that the big house closely resembles gated communities, or that the auction block replicates contemporary staged presentations of blackness. I am not claiming that the plantation and contemporary geographies in the Americas are indistinguishable or identical. Rather I am positioning the plantation as a very meaningful geographic prototype that not only housed and normalized (*vis-à-vis* enforced placelessness) racial violence in the Americas but also naturalized a plantation logic that anticipated (but did not twin) the empirical decay and death of a very complex black sense of place.

It follows that the complexity of a black sense of place—questions of encounter, practices of resistance—can be, at least *conceptually*,

swallowed up by the very death and decay that is bolstered by the hard empirical evidence of black geographic peril. With this in mind, urbicide—the deliberate death of the city and wilful place annihilation—can stand in as a viable explanation for the ongoing destruction of a black sense of place in the Americas. Urbicide, which has been defined as ‘the murder of the city’ and the ‘deliberate denial or killing of the city’ (Berman 1987: 8; Graham 2004), draws attention to the aforementioned sites of environmental, social, and infrastructural deterioration and geographic surveillance that demarcate many black geographies and their inhabitants. Put differently, urbicide is one sensible conceptual tool that can make sense of the interlocking and connective tenets of place, poverty, and racial violence in the Americas.

A black sense of place and the plantation are not explicitly taken up in many studies of urbicide; instead, many discussions are primarily concerned with the militarization of, and damages to, urban space in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> Yet blackness and black geographies in the Americas are not wholly absent from analyses of place annihilation. Indeed, references within urbicide literatures to the ‘global south’, ‘planet of slums’, gentrification, white flight, the inner city, uprisings of the 1960s, and the ‘wretched of the earth’ provide a glimpse of how black cultures in the Americas are both embedded within analyses of urbicide and shaped by urbicidal acts (Campbell, Graham, Monk 2007a; Goonewardena and Kipfer 2006). Related, the annihilation of black geographies in the Americas is deeply connected to an economy of race, and thus capitalism, wherein the process of uneven development calcifies the seemingly natural links between blackness, underdevelopment, poverty, and place within differing global contexts. An overview of urbicide literatures demonstrates that the

term itself can be understood alongside very uneven, heterogeneous, and distinct processes of place annihilation. With this in mind, the brutal violences enacted by Western militaries outside the Americas cannot be easily disentangled from blackness, black soldiers, or black poverty, just as urbicidal acts within the continent of Africa cannot be contained to particular regions or absent from the diasporic imagination. Anti-black violence *within* the Americas is, of course, bound up in a range of death-dealing activities: the subtleties of slow bloodless genocides, imprisonment, racial profiling and police brutalities, poverty, environmental racism, and community bloodshed all tally slave and post-slave death in black communities. With this, one can also track incontrovertible urbicidal practices through the razing of specific black communities, homes, buildings, and sacred sites—Africville, the African Burial Ground, the ninth ward in New Orleans, and more.

We can, collectively, imagine the material consequences of urbicide in the Americas—burned up, bombed out, flooded, crumbling buildings, and infrastructural decomposition. While the term, urbicide, seemingly depersonalizes acts of violence—the term inadvertently erases the genocidal contours of city-death by drawing attention to the violence against and the destruction of urban infrastructure—it is a very human, and therefore specifically racialized, activity. The deliberate destruction of the city goes hand in hand with imperialism, violence, and economic, racial, and ethnic terror, while also hinging on specificities: scale, region, economy, place, and how each destructive force is delivered, all matter. While place annihilation certainly differs according to time and place, the devastation, so clearly pointed to in the term urbicide—the deliberate killing of the city—brings into sharp focus how violence functions

to render specific human lives, and thus their communities, as waste (see also Davis 2006; Sundberg 2008; Sundberg and Kaserman 2007). This is to say that multitudinous urbicidal acts—the ‘cleaning up’ of slums, the forceful displacement of economically disadvantaged communities, the deliberate destruction of city buildings, bridges, houses, shops, roads, and parks—are always inhabited with disposable ‘enemies’, impoverished dwellers, those ‘without’.

Theorists of urbicide are interested in who lives and who dies, and thus who kills and who is killed; the overarching implication of urbicide in the Americas, as I see it, rests on what Achille Mbembe calls ‘necropolitics’—the place of the wounded or slain body in the manifestation of colonial geo-political power (Mbembe 2003: 11–12). Put more simply, racist and colonial practices wipe out different facets of geographic life, buildings fall and people are put to death, and the execution of place and people is bound up in the corpse, the displaced survivors, the perpetually lifeless and disposable. These massacred bodies disclose the ways in which ‘terror is a defining feature of both slave and late-modern colonial regimes’ (Mbembe 2003: 39), and therefore reify the normalization of ‘premature death’ (Gilmore 2007: 244). Or, as noted above, these ongoing acts of violence against particular cultures and communities are disturbingly familiar acts; the slain and displaced bodies are (vaguely or distinctly, depending on perspective) reminiscent of those working to death for a plantation economy that thrived on the interlocking workings of violence, black dispossession, and land exploitation.

The specificities of urbicide matter. As in my discussion above regarding the uneven time–space workings of plantation logics, my use of urbicide is not meant to conflate very different social–spatial deaths and present the

racial violences of New Orleans, Zimbabwe, and historical black geographies as one in the same (although we can, as I argue elsewhere, envision the plantation a viable *blueprint* for the modern city and black diasporic claims to space, McKittrick, 2010). Related, I am not intending to erase that which haunts urbicide: rural violence and other non-urban scales of trans-local bloodshed that complement the death of the city (prisons being poignant example, discussed later; see also Cowen 2007). Rather, I am drawing attention to the concept in order to identify the ways in which urbicide inadvertently uncovers the ways in which blackness is an unspeakably intelligible trait within the practice of geographic violence in the Americas, how it knits together destructive force and human life through the prism of coloniality, and how the geographic management of blackness, race, and racial difference (and thus non-blackness) hinges on a long-standing but unacknowledged plantation past.

At the centre of these observations stands the less-than-human-as-waste category, which also functions as the unspeakably intelligible, often dead and dying, 'black' presence within analyses of violence. Indeed, the dead and dying black body, which haunts a range of studies that link race to violence, brings into focus the dangerous analytically teleological linearity of our intellectual work and spatial politics (Wynter 2003; McKittrick 2006). More specifically, when racial violence is the central analytical query (in the humanities and social sciences), the dead and dying black/non-white body becomes the conceptual tool that will undoubtedly complete, and thus empirically prove, the brutalities of racism. This analytical logic can *only* 'end' with black death which, interestingly, reifies the very colonial structures that research on racial violence is (seemingly) working against: that bifurcated—segregated social systems and thus

biological differences rooted in race and phenotype result in the real/empirical and analytical death of blackness that is walled in by decay. This is to say that analyses of racial violence require the *conceptual* and thus *material* subordination of the black/non-white human to extra-human violence which positions the ontological stakes of liberty as decidedly oppositional to black sense of place.

### A cautionary tale

With these geographic and racial narratives of violence in mind, a cautionary tale is necessary. While slave and post-slave anti-black violence in the Americas are, as noted, underpinning the racial contours of emancipation, it is this very anti-black violence that, I suggest, brings into focus the human and dehumanizing racial elements of geographic thought. Indeed, very real instances of black geographic *life* are illuminated through the deliberate annihilation of place, as are questions of encounter and coloniality; thus, life, violence, encounter, and coloniality, together, point to practical strategies of resistance (from poetics to activism) that complicate otherwise mundane and discreet racial categories. The intellectual work of honouring complex racial narratives that name struggles against death and a black sense of place can be, paradoxically, undermined by the analytical framing of racial violence. Specifically, there is something eerie about urbicide, not simply because the term inadvertently abstracts humans from violence against the city, but also because it brings into focus how the right to kill targets those 'without' by reifying that to be 'without' is to embody savagery or other characteristically non-white-impooverished traits. Analyses that seek to document the deliberate violence *against*—even when



seeking to denaturalize, critique, and/or assertively oppose violence and thus end suffering—*need* the enemy to be present in order for the urbicidal conceptual frame to move forward towards the end-of-suffering horizon. More clearly, uricide—the idea—can only *descriptively* replicate acts of racial violence which end in the death of the targeted ‘savage’ without. In terms of the wilful destruction of a black sense of place, then, a limited conception of race, and a limited conception of the plantation prevails: blackness is recognizably placeless and degraded and therefore justifiably without, which is not only the commonsense outcome of our analytical queries but also evidence of a myopic plantation past.

The eeriness is therefore connected to the ways in which the term uricide puts forward, in terms of blackness, a *conceptualization* of racial and geographic violence that is bound up in narratives and codes that honour a cycle of life, wherein particular communities and their geographies are condemned to death over and over again. Many analyses of racial and spatial violence (not just studies of uricide) rely heavily on describing and re-describing spaces of absolute otherness (slums, sites of man-made-natural disaster, prisons, inner-city poverty, and death) as well as the inhabitants of these spaces of otherness (black and other non-white men, impoverished and uneducated mothers, the criminalized and poor, the hungry and the ill, those who occupy the ‘third world’ category).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, a large part of the eeriness is disclosed upon reflection that the geographies of dead and dying communities, and those who inhabit spaces of otherness, are actually *not* connected to us (those ‘with’ who study those ‘without’), precisely because they are dead and dying, because they live in slums and prisons, and thus are radically outside the conceptual boundaries of emancipation, humanness,

and global citizenry and, in most cases, disconnected from the land itself. Thus, the analytical difficulty lies in the ways in which *descriptions* of uricide and racial violence actually contribute to the ongoing fragmentation of human relationships rather than identifying what is really at stake when place is massacred: our collective replication of, and thus implication in, descriptive statements that profit from racial violence.

It seems to me that many analyses of racial violence leave little room to attend to human life, and consequently disregard narratives that bring into sharp focus practices that politicize place–life and place–death differently. This is to say that linking uricide to a black sense of place can foster a linear progression towards death, thus keeping firmly in place our already existing knowledge system that calcifies the racial codes attached to black and poor and marginalized communities and spaces of absolute otherness. This empirically evidences the unsurvival of the weakest and tabulates those who belong to what Clyde Woods calls the ‘endangered species’ (Woods 2002: 62). Following Wynter (2003), I am suggesting that the overriding conceptual analytical pathway for racial deaths and other spaces of absolute otherness are grounded in a linear biological narrative. While biological narratives such as this have certainly been contested—social construction, socio-cultural practices, nonlinear time-space experiences, and performativity are just some ways our biocentric world has been challenged—the language and process of explicating racial violence tend to fall back on an axiomatic frame of survival, wherein the suffering body and the dying have always been the racial Other to the white Western-liberated human norm, precisely because *black death proceeds and is necessary to the conceptual frame*. This means that the

analytical stakes of urbicide, in particular black urbicides, can only provide us with a story that corresponds within our existing system of knowledge, one that has *already* posited blackness and a black sense of place as dead and dying. Put differently, the urbicide story replicates an old story—a linear tale of white survival—even as it struggles against it. Or, some live and some die because this is what nature intended, and there are good cities and bad cities, spaces for us, and spaces for them.

It logically follows, because they are dead and dying, the condemned and ‘without’ apparently have nothing to contribute to our broader intellectual project of ethically re-imagining our ecocidal and genocidal world. Put differently, it seems eerily natural that those rendered less than human are also deemed too destroyed or too subjugated or too poor to write, imagine, want, or have a new lease on life. Here we would do well to revisit Mohanty’s (1991) research: the inhabitants of spaces of absolute otherness can be, quite easily, discursively colonized by our intellectual investigations. There is a tendency to focus on a certain mode of appropriation and codification within mainstream academic questions that profit from simultaneously devaluing and damning racial–sexual intellectual narratives as they empirically collect their wretched bodies. Within this framework we can apparently ‘fix’ (repair) the plight of the other by producing knowledge about the other that renders them less than human. No one moves. This is what is at stake in all of our intellectual pursuits, as much as it is at stake in urbicide and other analyses of racial violence. It is therefore worth thinking about the ways in which the cyclical and death-dealing spatialization of the condemned and those ‘without’ remains analytically intact, at least in part, because thinking otherwise demands attending to a whole new system of knowledge

wherein the brutalities of racial violence are not descriptively rehearsed, but always already demand practical activities of resistance, encounter, and anti-colonial thinking.

### **Prison life**

The questions that began this piece of writing—which queried a black sense of place, the history of black geographies and anti-black violence, and the links between race and violence—addressed how race, geography, and analytical frameworks, together, can replicate discursive anti-black violence within some academic studies and geographic research. This focus also led to highlighting the need to undo the familiar analytical naturalization of violence, blackness, and death and draw attention to what I describe as plantation futures—the insistence that spaces of encounter, rather than transparent and completed spaces of racism and racist violence, hold in them useful anti-colonial practices and narratives. These insights lead to the prison, as well as the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, in order to exemplify an analytical pathway that pays attention to geographies of relationality and human life without dismissing the brutalities of isolation and marginalization.

The logical extension of the plantation and acts of racial violence, as well as urbicide, is the prison industrial complex. A rapidly expanding, taken for granted, and familiar institution, contemporary prisons mimic, but do not twin, the plantation. Indeed, practices such as racial punishment, the criminalization of non-white bodies, and the legal codification of servitude can be found across the differential space-times of plantations and prisons (Davis 2003: 22–39). As sites that house the slow death of inmates, racial violence, and the spatial management of race, prisons can also

be conceptualized as abstracted urbicidal geographies that deliberately harm a particular population. The specificities of prison life and plantation life differ greatly: the kind of labour performed while locked up, the ‘intent’ of the containment, the racial–legal scripts of criminality, all lead to very different contexts through which articulations of violence and race take place. Yet the generalized traits of both institutions (displacement, surveillance, and enforced slow death) draw attention to the ongoing racialized workings of spatial violence. The prison–plantation connection thus provides us with an almost perfect, and thus disturbing, conceptual pathway, poised for analytic profit: as the blueprint for the prison industrial complex, the plantation anticipates—and empirically maps—the logic that some live, and some die, because this is what nature intended and therefore that the practice of incarceration is the commonsense underside to the teleological *evolution* towards normalized white emancipation.

In *Golden Gulag*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore unravels the complex workings of prison expansion in California in a much more meaningful way. In this work, Gilmore discloses the conditions that make those stories of racial violence with which we are all familiar with possible. These stories include, but are not limited to, the increased number of people in US prisons despite the decreased crime rate, the gendered and racial underpinnings of incarceration, the socio-spatial work of the three-strikes law, the youths and communities who are targeted, and the political economy of incarceration and land-use. These stories cannot be understood without the map of California state adult prisons included at the beginning of the text (Gilmore 2007: 10) (see Figure 1). With these facilities generously peppered across the landscape, both close to and far from major California cities, the material and infrastructural

*saturation* of prisons in the state is writ large. It is a visual complement to the knowledge that it is black, brown, and poor bodies, mostly men in the prime of their life, who inhabit these spaces. Indeed, the intellectual challenge posed by Gilmore is the confluence of material space and human life as this human life endures and negotiates spaces of excess, surplus, and crisis. I therefore employ the term ‘prison life’ to point to the everyday workings of incarceration as they are necessarily lived and experienced, as a form of human life and struggle, inside and outside prisons. Thus underlines, as Gilmore (2007: 222) puts it, the ‘material context of spiritual hope realized through human action’. Importantly, *Golden Gulag* is not just about spaces of isolation and the racist incarceration of particular communities and the state mechanisms that make this happen; it is about noticing how practices of dehumanization tune us into the relational workings of human life and prison life.

I suggest that Gilmore challenges us to imagine the prison industrial complex outside our present analytical order—an order which relegates the prison and prison life to the realm of absolute otherness and justifies incarceration. In this present order, being ‘with’ and being ‘without’ are racial categories; those ‘without’ are naturally condemned. Within this framework, incarceration and rapid prison expansion are cast as the *natural* solution to social ills and human relationships are delineated as differential rather than connective. Gilmore (2007: 109) refers to this as ‘the prison fix’: different kinds and types of crises culminate to identify and isolate wrongdoers, which conceptually and geographically conceals the complex workings of prison life and brings into clear focus the less-than-human, perpetually condemned, jobless, criminal.

The stories shared by Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (ROC) are instructive. A group of

## California State Adult Prisons

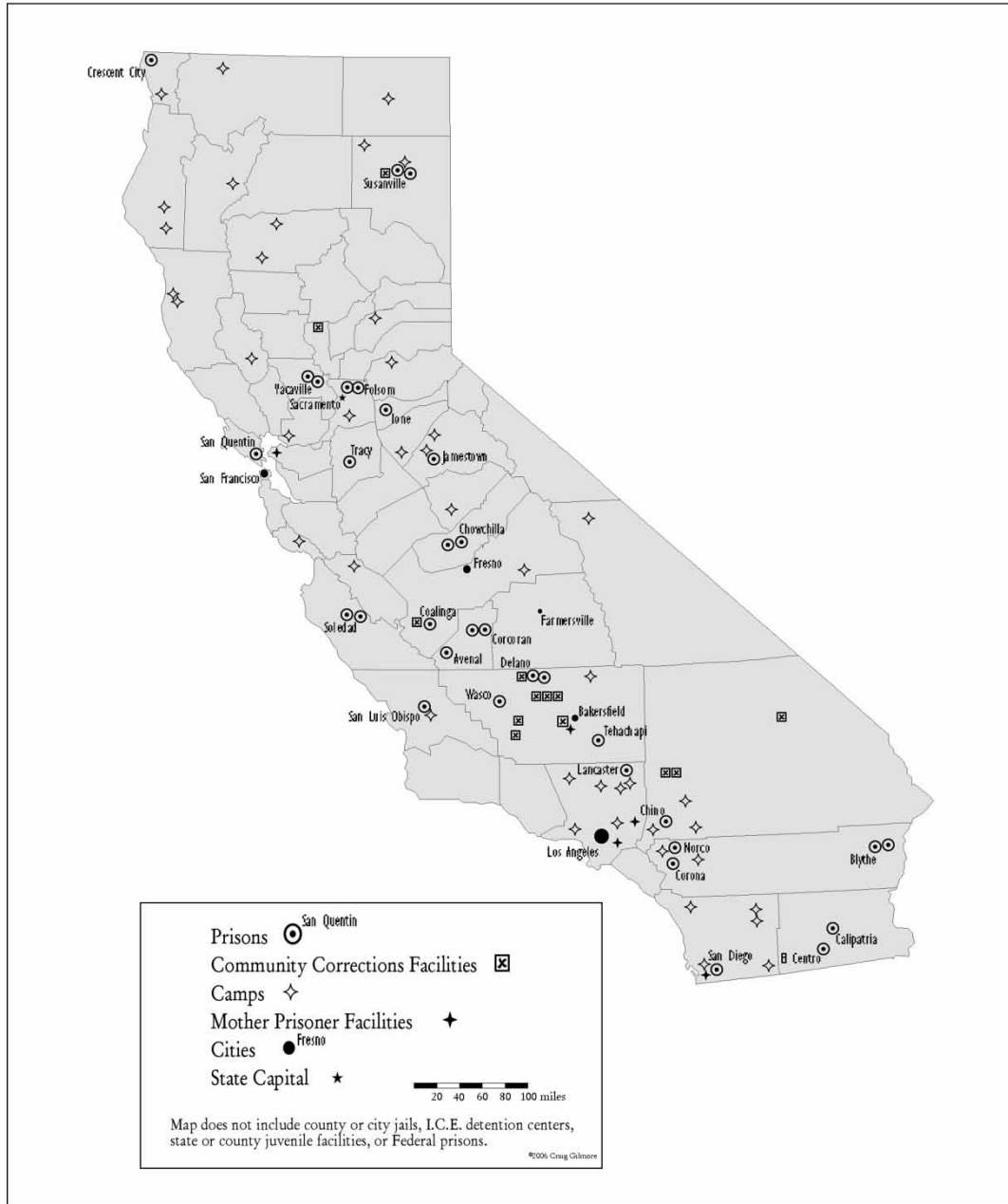


Figure 1 Map of California Adult Prisons by Craig Gilmore. Reproduced with Permission of Craig Gilmore.

mostly black American mothers and activists, these women oppose the increased incarceration of their children and prison expansion; they uncover the normalized workings of the death of George Noyes, the incarceration of Gilbert Jones, Harry Daye, and Stick Hatfield, and more. Outside or without Gilmore's book, the deathly criminalization of these men, within our present socio-spatial order, is commonsense. As she notes, it is easy to assert 'the common view that prisons sit on the edge—at the margins of social spaces' (Gilmore 2007: 10–11). It follows that the marginalized naturally inhabit the margins of social spaces. Relegating prison life to the margins naturally condemns the incarcerated while providing those outside and/or seemingly disconnected from this system to point to the dispossessed without touching the dispossessed, or, more dangerously, simply view incarceration as indicative of a 'natural' life cycle and the unsurvival of the weakest. Or, it is commonsense, ordinary, far away, and natural that Harry Daye 'faced the death of freedom' (Gilmore 2007: 223). Here, I am pointing to two intertwining processes and approaches to racial violence and segregation, which Gilmore points to and are outlined above: the naturalization of the incarcerated and dispossessed and the seduction of *conceptualizing* this naturalization within our present order of human life. This is another familiar analytically restrictive story: provable 'inferior' man/person is identified, he is produced and read as criminal, jobless; he is dispossessed, both symbolically and materially, and we respond with horror by returning to and visually brandishing his body in order to attest to racism. Gilmore, in my view, denaturalizes this narrative.

Refusing the commonsense codes that underwrite discreet racial and spatial categories, Gilmore presents us with a meaningful intellectual and activist challenge that circumvents the analyses of injustice that

re-isolate the dispossessed. I suggest that the spatial politics of the *Golden Gulag*, the place and the book, present us with a different analytical pathway, and that it is Gilmore's attention to human life that posits both a flesh-and-blood perspective on incarceration and the unexpected alliances that might be forged in the face of dispossessed isolation. A different pathway is made possible through Gilmore's (2007: 244, 251) reference to premature death and mortal urgency, both of which inform the relationality of human life. Through *Golden Gulag*, human life is necessarily and radically connective in a world that profits from socio-spatial displacement. Premature death and mortal urgency are mentioned explicitly at both the beginning and end of the text, guideposts that reveal the violent workings of incarceration. It is human life—identified through death and mortality—that discloses the difficult knowledge that the human is a biological mechanism that struggles to live in a world wherein the death of black men, as well as other poor and non-white communities, inside and outside the context of California prison expansion, is naturalized. This points to an epistemological organization through which some bodies are damned, and others are not. Or, within our present analytical world, prison life—past and present—is normalized, cast as the unsurvival of the weakest which hides the brutality of racism by coding community death as all natural and implicit to the 'cycle of life'. In this sense, prison life, and thus human life, moves towards, or achieves, prison death through a seemingly natural progression.

Gilmore's 'premature death' necessarily disrupts the 'cycle of life', insisting that 'facing the death of freedom' is an unnatural preventable process that informs and thus brings to life what is otherwise considered to be absolute otherness. This is to say that from the outset, the text

references rely on, and infuse prison expansion with human life, kinship, and survival: being locked in and being locked out are two sides of the same coin, edges are interfaces, borders connect places into relationships, powerful alignments begin to shake ground (Gilmore 2007: 230, 10, 11, 248). Gilmore's insistence on human relationality, rather than bifurcated systems of dispossession and possession, provides an important pathway into thinking through and with prison expansion, for it is relationality that humanizes, and populates, labour shortage, idle land, unemployment, activism, political manoeuvres, reproduction, households, work, legal documents, capital, as these spaces and social processes underwrite the making of prison life. This is to say that structural processes, the racialization of space, the political economy of expansion cannot be understood without particular life forces, be it politicians and workers, or townspeople and activists. The chapter on Kings County, then, might revolve around the regional negotiation of crisis, unemployment, and poverty, but these social forces are identified by Gilmore as a terrain of human struggle: the 'ordinary people' and their children, who collectively *live* crisis are brought to the fore. What I am emphasizing here is the organization of the text, and the ways in which the languaging of human life is analytically understood as both ordinary and underwritten by mortal urgency. This analytical frame does not posit a Western bourgeoisie conception of the human as the marker of emancipation, with everyone else, those 'without', starving and striving to accumulate and be 'with'.

This is a radical conception of human life, then, because it connects ordinary human life and prison life with the 'rules of the social order' without positing that the white, wealthy, masculine mythical norm (Lorde 1984: 116) naturally conveys freedom and therefore demarcates the measuring stick of the human.

More clearly, in *Golden Gulag*, human relationality and a flesh-and-blood worldview take the place of a top-down conception of human life, hopefully reorienting prison life to an expansive ontological project. I emphasize here that relationality in the text is not a symbolic gesture or a catch phrase that asks 'why we can't all just get along' or 'aren't we all the same on the inside' precisely because it is inflected with a mortal urgency that identifies the death-dealing work of the racial state. Gilmore's conception of flesh-and-blood worldview and human relationality, instead, thinks about the unevenness of political and activist labour as well as the social division of labour required of mothers. This is not an easy conception of humanness, or a simple activist plan—as the chapter on Mothers ROC makes clear. Keeping in mind the map of California state adult prisons, with facilities peppered across the landscape, the activist work of Mothers ROC mobilizes around the premature death of their children and loved ones, with a persistent negotiation of ethnic, economic, and other differences. Central to the activist work, then, is the transformation of the 'cycle of life' away from commonsense racial–sexual categories that profit from isolation and difference, towards 'solidarities based in recognition of the life-threatening harms that new and old racist structures produce in all kinds of households of all races and ethnicities' (Gilmore 2007: 247). Prison life, then, is extended to the streets, homes, courts, the department of justice, and across the state, as activists worked and work to share knowledge; it is inside and outside the prison walls that the labour of these women, their loved ones, and their children invokes relational and connective life-force in the face of gendered and racial apartheid and thus produce the conditions through which a radical black sense of place can be lived and imagined.

We might think hard about the meaningful challenge that intellectuals such as Gilmore have put in front of us, and think about how we can and will re-evaluate the commonsense workings of violence and death *and* re-think analyses of injustice that re-isolate the dispossessed. Instead of pointing to those ‘without’ and citing injustice, we might imagine how we are intimately tied to broader conceptions of human and planetary life and which demonstrate our common and difficult histories of encounter. Put differently, we might re-imagine geographies of dispossession and racial violence not through the comfortable lenses of insides/outside or us/them, which repeat what Gilmore (2007: 241) calls ‘doomed methods of analysis and action’, but as sites through which ‘co-operative human efforts’ can take place and have a place.

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### Notes

1 Thus, racial violence—acts and structural patterns intended to or designed to inflict harm—includes a

range of activities, from institutional racism and hate-speech to lynching and economic exploitation, from biologically determinist assumptions to formal and informal segregations, from containment and militarism to policing and surveillance.

- 2 While my discussion here specifically draws attention to the geographies of transatlantic slavery, I am indebted to Achille Mbembe’s analysis of the ways in which the plantation indicates and materializes modern terror and biopolitical experimentation as well as his extended discussion of necropolitics. However, unlike Mbembe (2003: 21)—who explains that ‘the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a “home”, loss of rights over his or her own body, loss of political status’—I have posited that the slave is, instead, one ‘without’ (loss, to me, implies that one had a prior possession of home, their selfhood and body, and political status). In some cases, of course, the enslaved did have prior possession but the logic of transatlantic slavery, as I see it, erased and reframed this prior possession in the negative as it made it a future impossibility.
- 3 The wide range of intellectuals, musicians, writers, activists, and poets who evidence a black sense of place are too many to list. Explorers and cartographers include but are not limited to Matthew A. Henson, Olayinka Balogun, Mathieu de Costa, Olaudah Equiano, Estevanico, and Grafton Tyler Brown. On ‘alternative’ black maps and geographies see examples throughout McKittrick (2006) and McKittrick and Woods (2007).
- 4 Emphasis in the original.
- 5 This commentary draws on, but does not comprehensively rehearse, studies that are concerned with militarization of, and damages to, urban space in order to draw attention to some key themes in studies of urbicide which have assisted my research on black geographies. Urbicide, despite its unwieldy global reach, can draw attention to some of the broad, not explicitly urban, analytical themes and struggles we face when thinking about race, place, and violence. Bundling these diverse places and their attendant analyses together, admittedly, risks losing sight of the depth and particularity implicit in many studies of urbicide, black geographies, and violence—which is why my discussion is primarily concerned with the destruction of a black sense of space within the context of the Americas. For this commentary I looked specifically to the essays collected by Campbell, Graham and Monk (2007b), Graham (2002, 2004), Hewitt (1983) and Goonewardena and Kipfer (2006).

6 This is to say that the interlocking workings of geography (the discipline) and geography (the spaces and places) naturalize the dispossessed (black subjects) and render the spaces of the dispossessed (black geographies) always already violent and violated. If we review the ways in which black spaces are explored across key human geography journals since about 2005, an interesting pattern emerges. Most investigations focus on Africa—or more specifically cities in South Africa and development—or the unsettling presence of African migrants in parts of Europe or North America. While there are a few discussions that attend to post-Katrina struggles in New Orleans, race and residential segregation in USA and the UK, and the ongoing relevance of 1960s black urban activism, the most explicit and conspicuous analytical pattern reveals that blackness is, worryingly, either stationary or migratory. Terms such as pathology, risk, fear, crime, racial health disparities, differentiated experiences, development, fitting in, a plight of freedom, and zones of exclusion prevail, with the implicit suggestion that simply being black is equated with violence, death, and displacement. I am not suggesting that these analyses are wrong, and to specify the articles would displace what these analyses offer and undermine my point. What I am suggesting is that some analyses articulate that black geographies are, from the outset, the lowest of the low and lifeless. Put differently, these are all timely post-apartheid, post-Katrina, post-Civil rights pieces that uncover the ways geographic practices replicate the racist underpinnings of modernity which are then *described* by researchers. These insights are based on a review of human geography articles written between 2005 and 2010 from the following journals: *Antipode*, *Environment and Planning A*, *Cultural Geographies*, *Gender, Place and Culture*, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *Social & Cultural Geography*, and *Progress in Human Geography*. Again, this argument is not intended to name and remark on the authors of these pieces but rather to draw attention to a generalized pattern of theoretical analyses. Thus, while the choice of which human geography journals to review was intentional—I looked to human journals that are well cited, produced in overdeveloped locations by well-known presses, and tend to include themes of ‘social justice’ and/or ‘difference’ and/or ‘critical’ and/or ‘radical’ in their intellectual aims and scope—my observations are not meant to provide conclusive and transparent data.

7 J'utilise « noir » comme traduction de « black » comme il est normalement compris aux EU, c'est-à-dire comme catégorie culturelle et communauté historiquement constituée.

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## Abstract translations

### *A propos des plantations, des prisons, et un sens de lieu noir*

Etant formées par les histoires de colonialisme, l'esclavage transatlantique, la pratique contemporaine du racisme, et les résistances à la suprématie blanche, les complexités des géographies « noires »<sup>7</sup> éclaircissent un sens de lieu unique résultant des luttes esclavagistes et post-esclavagistes dans les Amériques. Plutôt qu'identifier la souffrance noire et le racisme (ainsi que son opposition) comme les

seuls dispositifs à travers lesquels on peut comprendre ou connaître le négritude ou la race, j'insiste sur le fait qu'un sens de lieu spécifiquement noir aussi bien que les histoires noires et les communautés noires sont intrinsèque à la production de l'espace. Je maintiens aussi que l'entrelacement de la race, les pratiques de la domination, et la géographie fait sans doute pression sur notre compréhension actuelle de la violence raciale.

**Mots-clefs:** géographies noires, plantation, prison, violence raciale.

*Sobre plantaciones, cárceles, y un negro sentido de lugar*

Las complejidades de geografías negras – determinados por historias de colonialismo, esclavitud

transatlántico, prácticas contemporáneas de racismo, y resistencias de supremacía blanca – arrojan luz en como luchas de esclavitud y posesclavitud en las Américas se forman un sentido de lugar único. Más que simplemente identificar el sufrimiento de los negros y identificar racismo (y su oposición) como los esquemas únicos para “entender” o “conocer” negrura o raza, se enfatiza que un sentido negro de lugar, historias negras y comunidades no son solamente integrales a la producción de espacio, también como la interconexión analítico de raza, prácticas de dominación, y geografía sin duda ejercer presión en como estudiamos y calculamos violencia racial en el presente.

**Palabras claves:** geografías negras, plantación, cárcel, violencia racial.