



Futures of Black Radicalism

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that “rises up and mellows almost instantly as a lyrical bass melody says its piece and fades away.”⁴⁶ Yet even in silence it is not gone. It remains as a faint vibration that we carry into the next encounter, the next challenge, the next dream. All these notes we keep and consolidate as evidence of our knowing and as a resource in the composition of our next magnificent song.

Chapter 14

Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence

*Ruth Wilson Gilmore*¹

We were trying to find language to make sense of a time before whatever came after.
—China Miéville, *Embassytown*²

1. MONEY

Loot. Pay. Wage. Profit. Interest. Tax. Rent. Accumulation. Extraction. Colonialism. Imperialism.

The modern prison is a central but by no means singularly defining institution of carceral geographies in the United States and beyond, geographies that signify regional accumulation strategies and upheavals, immensities and fragmentations, that reconstitute in space-time (even if geometrically the coordinates are unchanged) to run another round of accumulation.

Prison rose in tandem with a world-historical transition in the role of money in everyday life. In retrospect, the transformation looks just like a flip. From having been, as for most people it continues to be, a *means* to move stored energy between sellers and buyers of desired objects, money became the desirable *end*, not for hoarders' and misers' erotic caresses, but to touch differently and not for too long—to enliven through pressing into imperative motion irregular but perpetual cycles of transformation to make money more. Capitalism: never not racial, including in rural England, or anywhere in Europe for that matter, where, as Cedric Robinson teaches us, hierarchies among people whose descendants might all have become white depended for their structure on group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death, exploited by elites, as part of all equally exploitable nature-as-other, to justify inequality at the end of the day, and next morning as well.

Racial capitalism: a mode of production developed in agriculture, improved by enclosure in the Old World, and captive land and labor in the Americas,

¹ Versions of this lecture were delivered at the twenty-ninth annual Sojourner Truth Lecture for the Department of Africana Studies of the Claremont Colleges (September 2014); Confronting Racial Capitalism: A Conference in Honor of Cedric Robinson at the CUNY Graduate Center (November 2014); the Antipode Institute for Geographies of Justice, Women's Gaol, Johannesburg (July 2015); the American Studies Association (October 2015); and the biannual conference of the Center for American Studies and Research at the American University of Beirut (January 2016). The author is grateful to the editors of this volume and to many interlocutors for encouraging criticism.

² China Miéville, *Embassytown* (New York: Del Rey, 2011), 191.

⁴⁶ Philip Sherburne, “Thundercat: ‘Paris,’” *Pitchfork* (November 18, 2015), available at pitchfork.com.

perfected in slavery's time-motion field-factory choreography, its imperative forged on the anvils of imperial war-making monarchs, and the peers who had to ante up taxes—in cash not kind—so the sovereign might arm increasingly centralized and regularized militaries who became less able to pay themselves, as they had in the past, by looting at each battle's end. Not that they stopped looting later or now.

Nor did the pay packet come all at once: in the United States many nineteenth-century citizen-soldiers went to their graves still waiting to be paid for having killed or agreed to kill Native Americans or French or their proxies. The compensation took the form of something that could be transformed into something else: either title to looted land—an honor for the vast "herrenvolk peerage" of enfranchised white men—land, a good that can't be moved though a deed can be pocketed or sold or borrowed against or seized for a lien—in other words turned into money; and if not a title a pension, an entitlement paid out regularly as money to ease one's golden years.

Indeed, modern prisons were born alongside, and grew up with, the United States of America. Penitentiaries established state-making at the margin of the early republic, whose every founding document recapitulated free as against other, imported as against immigrated, to clarify that sweeping ideals of defense and general welfare, long before the Thirteenth Amendment, had no universal remit but rather defined in the earliest pages who was in and who out.

Then, as now, competing concepts of freedom shaped planetary movement of people and relationships. Like lives, early sentences were short, absorbing one by one people who wouldn't toe their assigned or presumed line, play their part, hit their mark, in racial capitalism's dramatically scaled cycles of place-making—including all of chattel slavery, imperialism, settler colonialism, resource extraction, infrastructural coordination, urban industrialization, regional development, and the financialization of everything.

Racial capitalism's extensive and intensive animating force, its contradictory consciousness, its means to turn objects and desires into money is people in the prime of life or younger, people who make, move, grow, and care for things and other people.

Who then was or is out of place? Unfree people who sold things they made or grew on the side, hiding the money in an emancipation pot. People who couldn't say where they work, or prove that they are free, or show a ticket or a pass, a document to save their skin, or save themselves from the narrative that their skin, stretched in particular ways across muscles and bones, seemed or seems to suggest something about where they shouldn't be—caught.

Racial capitalism's imperative requires all kinds of scheming, including hard work by elites and their compradors in the overlapping and interlocking space-economies of the planet's surface. They build and dismantle and refigure states, moving capacity into and out of the public realm. And they think very hard about money on the move. In the contemporary world, when product and

profit cycles turn faster and faster, with racial capitalism ever less patient with any friction on money-flow, sticking resources in prisons whence they might not emerge on time and of the quality required isn't all that attractive, even though the cages are full of millions of people in the prime of life.

We used to think that in the United States, contemporary mass un-freedom, racially organized, must be a recapitulation of slavery's money-making scheme. But if these massive carceral institutions, weighted like cities, are not factories and service centers, then where's the profit, the surplus money at the end of the day? Today's prisons are extractive. What does that mean? It means prisons enable money to move because of the enforced *inactivity* of people locked in them. It means people extracted from communities, and people returned to communities but not entitled to be of them, enable the circulation of money on rapid cycles. What's extracted from the extracted is *the* resource of life—time.

If we think about this dynamic through the politics of scale, understanding bodies as places, then criminalization transforms individuals into tiny territories primed for extractive activity to unfold—extracting and extracting again *time* from the territories of selves. This process opens a hole in a life, furthering, perhaps to our surprise, the annihilation of space by time. A stolen and corrupted social wage flies through that time-hole to prison employees' paychecks. To vendors. To utility companies. To contractors. To debt service. The cash takes many final forms: wages, interest, rent, and sometimes profit. But more to the point, the extractive process brings the mechanics of contemporary imperialism to mind: extraction, in money form, from direct producers whose communities are destabilized too. But money, too, gives us some insight into the enormity of the possible inhabitants and makers of abolition geographies—abolition geography, the antagonistic contradiction of carceral geographies, forms an interlocking pattern across the terrain of racial capitalism. We see it.

2. ABOLITION GEOGRAPHY

Abolition geography starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place. Place-making is normal human activity: we figure out how to combine people, and land, and other resources with our social capacity to organize ourselves in a variety of ways, whether to stay put or to go wandering. Each of these factors—people, land, other resources, social capacity—comes in a number of types, all of which determine but do not define what can or should be done. Working outward and downward from this basic premise, abolitionist *critique* concerns itself with the greatest and least detail of these arrangements of people and resources and land over time. It shows how relationships of un-freedom consolidate and stretch, but not for the purpose of documenting misery. Rather, the point is not only to identify central contradictions—inherent vices—in regimes of dispossession, but also, urgently, to show how radical consciousness in action

resolves into liberated life-ways, however provisional, present and past. Indeed, the radical tradition from which abolition geography draws meaning and method goes back in time-space not in order to abolish history, but rather to find alternatives to the despairing sense that so much change, in retrospect, seems only ever to have been displacement and redistribution of human sacrifice. 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 processes of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.

Everyone was surprised in May 2011 when the notoriously *pro-states'-rights* Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) upheld a lower court order that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation reduce the number of people held in then-current stock of adult prisons and camps. SCOTUS affirmed a lower court's opinion that the Golden State could not "build its way out" of constitutional violations so severe they could be measured in premature, which is to say preventable, death: averaging one per week, every week, for decades, due to well-documented medical neglect.

The decision, although a victory, did not mark a clear turn away from nearly forty years of life-shortening mass criminalization, even though five judges recognized the accumulated catastrophe of premature death happening to the people whom most Americans of all races, genders, and ages have learned to abhor and ignore. And yet, in the context of the global war on terror coupled with domestic wars on vulnerable people, we know that challenges to murderous outrage (torture, drone strikes, police killings, poisoned water) readily dissolve into frenzied analytical activity that produces fresh justification, canceling out prohibitions by the combined force of applied violence, revised legal reasoning, and lengthy commission reports. In the wake of scandal and demand for prison reform, the ruthless principles and procedures of criminalization remain intact, noisily tweaked at the margin but ever hardening at the center where most people in prison languish: average sentences, average conditions, average cages, average charges, average misery. In other words, against the scandal of documented deliberate neglect, criminalization remains a complicated means and process to achieve a simple thing: to enclose people in situations where they are expected, and in many ways compelled, to sicken and so die.

The processes contributing to both the development and epochal ordinariness of mass criminalization have been the focus of research, action, advocacy, and other forms of study trying to make sense of experience. A general but not exhaustive summary goes like this: In the United States, the multi-decade crisis-riven political economy threw off surpluses that became prison expansion's basic factors: land, people, money-capital, and state capacity. The elements of "the prison fix" neither automatically nor necessarily combined into extensive carceral geographies. Rather, an enormously complicated people-, income-, and asset-rich political economy made a relatively sudden turn and repurposed

acres, redirected the social wage, used public debt, and serially removed thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of modestly educated people from households and communities.

As we can see, something changed. Therefore, instead of imagining the persistent reiteration of static relations, it might be more powerful to analyze relationship dynamics that extend beyond obvious conceptual or spatial boundaries, and then decide what a particular form, old or new, is made of, by trying to make it into something else. This—making something into something else—is what negation is. To do so is to wonder about a form's present, future-shaping design—something we can discern from the evidence of its constitutive patterns, without being beguiled or distracted by social ancestors we perceive, reasonably or emotionally, in the form's features. (I'll come back to ancestors in a few pages.) To think this way is to think deductively (there are forms) and inductively (interlocking patterns reveal generalities which might or might not be structural). I suppose I became a geographer because this kind of back and forth is what we do, trying to see and explain the formalities and improvisations of place-making, which are shaped by human/environmental relationships of dependency—the coupling or connection of power with difference—and sometimes but not inevitably interrupted by preventable fatalities. Deliberately propagated fatalities, and the forms and patterns that coalesce into premature death, reveal human sacrifice as an organizing principle, or perhaps more precisely as an unprincipled form of organizing, which returns us to racial capitalism and the role of criminalization in it.

The prolific advocacy-shaping efforts to foster anti-prison awareness and action partially reveals, campaign by campaign, bits of mass incarceration's breath-taking structure. The selection and arrangement of categories inspiring sustained action ironically tends to legitimize the system as such by focusing on how it's specifically harmful to youth, women, parents, mothers, men, gender nonconforming people, the aged or infirm, or how it's the outcome of the war on drugs, stop and frisk, racism, privatization, and so forth. And yet, the extraction of time from each territory-body specifically and viscerally changes lives elsewhere—partners, children, communities, movements, the possibility of freedom. At the same time, the particular also implies entire historical geographies in constant churn. For some examples think: gentrification. Auto or steel manufacturing. Coal mining. Gold mining. Conflict minerals. Fracking. New shipping technologies. Robotics. Commodity chains. Finance capital. The challenge is to keep the entirety of carceral geographies—rather than only their prison or even law-enforcement aspects—connected, without collapsing or reducing various aspects into each other. Any category or system has many dimensions, necessitating analytical stretch in order to perceive the material world in a variety of overlapping and interlocking totalities. This basic imperative requires more in the way of self-critical consciousness than additional data

(we already have too much): although what's real matters absolutely, the experience of it will never automatically reveal how and why negation (the thorough reworking of materiality and consciousness) sometimes succeeds.

Worldwide today, wherever inequality is deepest, the use of prison as a catchall solution to social problems prevails—nowhere as extensively as in the United States, led by California. Ideologically, which is to say in thought and everyday culture, the expression and normalization of the twin processes of centralization and devolution—patterned as they are by the sensibility of permanent crisis—shape structures of feeling and therefore, to a great extent, socially determine the apparent range of available oppositional options. In other words, the doctrine of devolution results in a constantly fragmenting array of centers of struggle and objects of antagonism for people who seek equal protection, to say nothing of opportunity. In crisis, in resistance, in opposition: To whom, at whom, against whom does one carry one's petition or raise one's fist?

Devolution is partition, sometimes provisional, sometimes more secure. Its normalizing capacities are profound, patterning political imagination and thus contouring attacks on the carceral form. As a result, many such attacks exhibit trends which, not surprisingly, coalesce tightly around specific categories: policing, immigration, terrorism, budget activism, injunctions, sexuality, gender, age, premature death, parenthood, privatization, formerly and currently incarcerated people, public sector unions, devalued labor, and (relative) innocence. Racism both connects and differentiates how these categories cohere in both radical and reformist policy prescriptions—in other words, how people, and here I cite Peter Linebaugh's exquisite phrase, "pierce the future for hope." Insofar as policies are a script for the future, they must be sharp, a quality often confused with excessive narrowness—something devolution's inherent patterning encourages to a fault. As A. Sivanandan teaches, while economics determine, the politics of race define techniques and understanding, even though racial categories and hierarchies—at any moment solid—are not set in concrete. If, as Stuart Hall argued back in the late 1970s, race is the modality through which class is lived, then mass incarceration is *class war*.

And yet, breadth carries analytical and organizational challenges as well. It's not news that we find the answers to the questions we ask. What then might the most adequate general term or terms be that usefully gather together for scrutiny and action such a disparate yet connected range of categories, relationships, and processes as those conjoined by mass criminalization and incarceration? Twenty years ago, the abolitionist organization Critical Resistance came into being, taking as its surname "Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex." The experimental purpose of the term "prison industrial complex" was to provoke as wide as possible a range of understandings of the socio-spatial relationships out of which mass incarceration is made by using as a flexible template the military industrial complex—its whole historical geography, and political economy, and demography, and intellectual and technical practitioners, theorists, policy

wonks, boosters, and parasites, all who participated in, benefitted from, or were passed over or disorganized by the Department of War's transformative restructuring into the Pentagon.

In other words, we meant prison industrial complex (PIC) to be as conceptually expansive as our object of analysis and struggle. But I think in too many cases its effect has been to shrivel—atrophy, really, rather than to spread out—imaginative understanding of the system's apparently boundless boundary-making. As a result, researchers spend too much time either proving trivial things or beating back hostile critiques, and activists devote immense resources to fighting scandals rather than sources. And yet there is a PIC. So it has occurred to me, as a remedial project, to provisionally call the PIC by another name—one I gave to a course I developed in 1999 and taught for half a decade at Berkeley—the somewhat more generic "carceral geographies." The purpose here is to renovate and make critical what *abolition* is all about. Indeed, abolition geography is carceral geography's antagonistic contradiction.

I will return to this point at the end, but here—as you who know me will expect—I will remind us that, in the archival record of self-organization and world-making activity among the Black people of the South under Reconstruction, the great communist W. E. B. Du Bois *saw* places people made—abolition geographies—under the participatory political umbrella of what he called "abolition democracy." (Thulani Davis has most recently and exquisitely elaborated this work through tracing its expansion and contraction across space-time.) People didn't make what they made from nothing—destitute though the millions were as a result of the great effort to strike, free themselves, and establish a new social order. They brought things with them—sensibilities, dependencies, talents, indeed a complement of consciousness and capacity Cedric Robinson termed an "ontological totality"—to make where they were into places they wished to be. And yet they left abundant evidence showing how 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—as it were, habitation as nature—even if geometrically speaking they hadn't moved far at all.

Such Reconstruction place-making negated the negation constituted as and by bondage, and while nobody fully inhabits its direct socio-spatial lineage because of the counterrevolution of property, the consciousness remains in political, expressive, and organizational culture if we look and listen. (Indeed, 2015 is the 100th anniversary of *The Birth of a Nation*—a tale that made the wages of whiteness not only desirable but in many senses obligatory.) What particularly concerns us here is a general point: to enhance their ability to extract value from labor and land, elites fashion political, economic, and cultural institutions using ideologies and methods acquired locally, nationally, and internationally. They build states. Tweak them. Aggrandize and devolve them.

Promote and deflate explanatory and justificatory explanations of why things should either be otherwise or as they are. But even in the throes of periodic abandonment, elites rely on structures of order and significance that the anarchy of racial capitalism can never guarantee. Further, as the actual experience of the Negro during the Civil War and Reconstruction shows, non-elites are never passive pawns. Ordinary people, in changing diversity, figure out how to stretch or diminish social and spatial forms to create room for their lives. Signs and traces of abolition geographies abound, even in their fragility.

Gaza and the West Bank: During the first intifada (1987–93) popular committees throughout the territories organized an astonishing array of institutions that would constitute the outline of an infrastructure for postcolonial Palestine. The projects included health clinics, schools, shops, food growing and processing capacities, and clothing factories. The people who organized and worked in these places discussed the work as partial although necessary to liberation, and requiring persistent work on consciousness through imaginative education, training, and other programs. For example, some of the women who worked in food processing discussed how the revolution-in-progress could not be sustained unless patriarchy and paternalism became as unacceptable and unthinkable as occupation. The work in popular education depended on stretching awareness from the particular (an inoculation, an irrigation ditch, an electrically powered machine) to the general requirements for the ad hoc abolition geographies of that time-space to become and become again sustained through conscious action.

Domestic Violence: Carceral feminism has failed to end violence against women or domestic violence in general, although sometimes law enforcement intervention makes time and space for people to figure out alternatives. So, INCITE! Women of Color against Violence and many other people organized in a variety of ways around the world have tried to figure out how to make that time-space in the context of household or community building rather than criminalization. The idea here is rather than punish violence better or faster, to end violence by changing the social relationships in which it occurs. As a result, as the Story Telling Organizing Project demonstrates, people around the world have devised many approaches to stopping the central problem—violence—without using violence to achieve successful change, involving friends, neighbors, wider communities, and different strategies.

Decolonial education: Sónia Vaz Borges's 2016 PhD thesis on the liberation schools established by the anticolonial forces during the Guinea-Bissau thirteen-year liberation war shows the intricate interrelation of place-making, space-changing activities. Educated to be a member of the Portuguese state's overseas professional managerial class, Amílcar Cabral's role in the

development of revolutionary consciousness drew in part from his training as an agronomist. Having walked the land of G-B and CV to evaluate problems and solutions for soil productivity, he also got to know the people who lived on and worked that land. The PAIGC created a curriculum for alphabetical, practical, and political literacy, wrote textbooks, and trained soldiers to become teachers. The schools, built and staffed as soon as possible after expulsion of the colonial military in each region of the country, articulated possible futures for localities and beyond, with particular emphasis on Pan-African and Third World connection.

Oakland anti-gang injunctions: The range of concrete control exercised by the criminal justice system doesn't stop at the system's border. Rather, local administrators can use civil law to extend prison's total-institution regime to households and communities, while employers can discriminate at will against the 65 million or more people in the United States who are documented not to work because of felony convictions. In Oakland, a coalition of formerly incarcerated people, several social and economic justice organizations, family members, and others launched a campaign to compel the city government to cancel an established injunction zone and not establish more planned zones. In a zone, people named in the injunction and the places they live and frequent have no barriers to police questioning and searches. Further, household members become involuntary deputies, expected to enforce injunction terms or get into trouble themselves. Transforming the zone into an abolition geography required transforming consciousness, as officially and locally mocked and reviled individuals had to develop their persuasive power both at city hall and in the streets and empty lots where they built community and trust through extraordinary commitment to ordinary things: creating a garden and a mural. Being the first to respond in times of trouble. Leading by following. Curiously, people not afraid to die had to demonstrate in altogether novel contexts their fearlessness anew.

3. THE PROBLEM OF INNOCENCE

I noted earlier that many advocates for people in prison and the communities they come from have taken a perilous route by arguing why certain kinds of people or places suffer in special ways when it comes to criminalization or the cage. Thus, the argument goes, prisons are designed for men, and are therefore bad for women. Prisons are designed for healthy young men, and are therefore bad for the aged and the infirm. Prisons are designed for adults and are therefore bad for youth. Prisons separate people from their families and are therefore bad for mothers who have frontline responsibility for family cohesion and reproductive labor. Prisons are based in a rigid two-gender system and are therefore bad for people who are transgender and gender nonconforming. Prisons are cages and people who didn't hurt anybody should not be in cages.

Now this does not exhaust the litany of who shouldn't be in prison, but what it does do is two things. First, it establishes as a hard fact that some people should be in cages, and only against this desirability or inevitability might some change occur. And it does so by distinguishing degrees of innocence such that there are people, inevitably, who will become permanently not innocent, no matter what they do or say. The structure of feeling that shapes the innocence defense narrative is not hard to understand: after all, if criminalization is all about identifying the guilty, within *its* prevailing logic it's reasonable to imagine the path to undoing it must be to discover the wrongly condemned.

The insistence on finding innocents among the convicted or killed both projects and derives energy from all the various "should not be in cages" categories, such as those I listed above. But it also invokes, with stupefying historical imprecision, a cavalcade of other innocents to emphasize the wrongness of some aspect of mass incarceration. In particular, many carry on as if mass incarceration were the means to assign inherited duty for some set of uncompensated tasks because of what our ancestors were violently compelled to do. It's a reasonable belief given the historical facts of convict leasing and chain gangs that once upon a time were widespread. However, since half of the people locked up are not, or not obviously, descendants of racial chattel slavery, the problem demands a different explanation and therefore different politics. This does not mean that the lineage of abolition extending through chattel slavery is not robust enough to form at least part of the platform for ending mass incarceration in general. However, as it stands, to achieve significance, the uncritical extension of a partial past to explain a different present demands a sentimental political assertion that depends on the figure of a laboring victim whose narrative arc—whose structure of feeling—is fixed, and therefore susceptible to rehabilitation—or expungement—into relative innocence. The turn to innocence frightens in its desperate effort to replenish the void left by various assaults, calculated and cynical, on universalism on the one hand and rights on the other. If there are no universal rights, then what differentiated category might provide some canopy for the vulnerable? In my view, the proponents of innocence are trying to make such a shelter, but its shadow line or curtilage—like that "legally" demarcating people drone-murdered or renditioned by the United States abroad—can and does move, expunging the very innocence earlier achieved through expungement. In other words, dialectics requires us to recognize that the negation of the negation is always abundantly possible *and* hasn't a fixed direction or secure end. It can change direction, and thereby not revive old history but calibrate power differentials anew.

Consider this: a contemporary development in the relative innocence patrol, highlighted by the Supreme Court decision but not born of it, is toward the phenomenal spread of both saturation policing (stop and frisk; broken windows; and various types of so-called "community policing"), and its new formation (which echoes some Second Klan practices): carceral or police

humanitarianism. One of the results of contemporary racial capitalism's relentlessly restructured state-institutional capacities, and the discourses and practices that combine to enliven them, is "the anti-state state"—governmental capacity dominated by mainstream parties and policies that achieve power on the platform that states are bad and should shrink. Mass incarceration might seem inconsistent with something named the anti-state state. I think, to the contrary, mass incarceration is its bedrock. In other words, the dominant trend that goes hand-in-hand with mass incarceration is devolution—the off-loading to increasingly local state and non-state institutions of the responsibility for thinning social welfare provision. At the same time, increased centralization (the strong executive) belies one of democracy's contemporary delusions—the notion that more local is somehow more participatory.

Carceral/police humanitarianism is a domestic counterinsurgency program spreading rapidly throughout the United States and abroad. Like mass incarceration, this humanitarianism is a feature of what I've long called the anti-state state: a dynamic pattern among the patterns shifting and reconsolidating the anti-state state form, dispensing, to riff on Du Bois, the wages of relative innocence to achieve a new round of anti-state state building. It's not new, but now altogether notable in the general landscape of exclude and define, capture and reward. This too is part of devolution, and more aggrandizing of police organizations coupled with not-for-profit and state-linked partners to identify and attend to the (relatively) innocent victims of too much policing and prison—sometimes formerly incarcerated people, sometimes their families, sometimes their neighborhoods. Police humanitarianism targets vulnerable people with goods and services that in fact everybody needs—especially everybody who is poor. But the door opens only by way of collaboration with the very practices that sustain carceral geographies, thereby undermining and destroying so many lives across generations, in the first place.

We have already seen that innocence is not secure, and it's a mystery why it ever seemed reliable. And while nothing in this life is secure, sitting down to make common cause with the intellectual authors and social agents who unleashed and manage the scourge of organized abandonment—highlighting for the present discussion the organized violence on which it depends—puts into starkest terms the peril of the innocence defense.

Let's think about this problem in another way: While all those who benefited from chattel slavery on both sides of the Atlantic, and from all the forms of slavery that preceded and intersected with and since have followed it, are responsible for vicious injustices against individuals and humanity, to prove the innocence of those who have been or are enslaved for any purpose ought to play no role in the redress of slavery. In his controversial but indispensable *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson notes that the power to kill is a precondition for the power of "violent domination, natal alienation, and general dishonor." The power to put humans in cages also derives from the power to

kill—not only by way of the ritualized punishment of the death penalty, but also by life sentences, as well as the ritual of serially excused police killings that transformed #BlackLivesMatter from a lament to a movement. Patterson gives us the elegant turn of phrase that helps us, sadly, wrap our minds around the continuum of killing to keeping: “One fell because he was the enemy; the other became the enemy because he had fallen.” Human sacrifice rather than innocence is the central problem that organizes the carceral geographies of the prison industrial complex. Indeed, for abolition, to insist on innocence is to surrender politically because “innocence” evades a problem abolition is compelled to confront: how to diminish and remedy harm as against finding better forms of punishment. To make what I’m discussing a bit more explicit, I turn to the words of the great armed thief and spy Harriet Tubman. She told this story:

I knew of a man who was sent to the State Prison for twenty-five years. All these years he was always thinking of his home, and counting the time till he should be free. The years roll on, the time of imprisonment is over, the man is free. He leaves the prison gates, he makes his way to the old home, but his old home is not there. The house in which he had dwelt in his childhood had been torn down, and a new one had been put in its place; his family were gone, their very name was forgotten, there was no one to take him by the hand to welcome him back to life.

So it was with me. I had crossed the line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free, but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom, I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in the old cabin quarter, with the old folks and my brothers and sisters. But to this solemn resolution I came; I was free, and they should be free also; I would make a home for them.

4. INFRASTRUCTURE OF FEELING

W. E. B. Du Bois interviewed Harriet Tubman late in her life. For a while in the mid-twentieth century, a small but rather raucous scholarly competition developed to “prove” how many (which is to say how *few*) people Tubman helped “keep moving” along the Underground Railroad. By contrast, Harvard- and Humboldt-trained historian and sociologist Du Bois, a numbers guy if ever there was one, said hundreds. Then thousands! Why? Did he just get sloppy? Or did he begin to see how abolition geographies are made, on the ground, everywhere along the route—the time-route as well as the space-route. Indeed, was he able to redo in *Black Reconstruction in America* his earlier research on the Freedman’s Bureau because of the insights—truly visionary—he gained from talking with the ancient Tubman? It’s here that I think the concept “infrastructure of feeling” might help us think about the development and perpetuation of abolition geographies, and how such geographies tend toward, even if they don’t

wholly achieve, the negation of the negation of the overlapping and interlocking carceral geographies of which the PIC is an exemplar while absolutely non-exhaustive, as the examples of abolition geographies show.

Raymond Williams argued more than fifty years ago that each age has its own “structure of feeling,” a narrative structure for understanding the dynamic material limits to the possibility of change. Paul Gilroy and many others have engaged Williams’s thinking, and shown that necessarily ages and places have multiple structures of feeling, which are dialectical rather than merely contemporaneous. Williams went on to explain how we might best understand tradition as an accumulation of structures of feeling—that gather not by chance, nor through a natural process that would seem like a drift or tide, but rather by way of what he calls “the selection and reselection of ancestors.” In this, Williams disavows the fixity of either culture or biology, discovering in perpetuation how even the least coherent aspects of human consciousness—feelings—have dynamically substantive shape.

The Black Radical Tradition is a constantly evolving accumulation of structures of feeling whose individual and collective narrative arcs persistently tend toward freedom. It is a way of mindful action that is constantly renewed and refreshed over time but maintains strength, speed, stamina, agility, flexibility, balance. The great explosions and distortions of modernity put into motion—and constant interaction—already existing as well as novel understandings of difference, possession, dependence, abundance. As a result, the selection and reselection of ancestors is itself part of the radical process of finding anywhere—if not everywhere—in political practice and analytical habit, lived expressions (including opacities) of unbounded participatory openness.

What underlies such accumulation? What is the productive capacity of visionary or crisis-driven or even exhaustion-provoked reselection? The best I can offer, until something better comes along, is what I’ve called for many years the “infrastructure of feeling.” In the material world, infrastructure underlies productivity—it speeds some processes and slows down others, setting agendas, producing isolation, enabling cooperation. The infrastructure of feeling is material too, in the sense that ideology becomes material as do the actions that feelings enable or constrain. The infrastructure of feeling is then consciousness-foundation, sturdy but not static, that viscerally underlies our capacity to select, to recognize possibility as we select and reselect liberatory lineages—in a lifetime, as Du Bois and Tubman exemplify, as well as between and across generations. What matters—what materializes—are lively re-articulations and surprising combinations. If, then, the structures of feeling for the Black Radical Tradition are, age upon age, shaped by energetically expectant consciousness of and direction toward unboundedness, then the tradition is, inexactly, movement away from partition and exclusion—indeed, its inverse.

5. UNBOUNDEDNESS, AGAINST CONCLUSION

Thus, abolition geography—how and to what end people make freedom provisionally, imperatively, as they imagine *home* against the disintegrating grind of partition and repartition through which racial capitalism perpetuates the means of its own valorization. Abolition geography and the methods adequate to it (for making, finding, and understanding) elaborate the spatial—which is to say the human-environment processes—of Du Bois's and Davis's abolition democracy. Abolition geography is capacious (it isn't only by, for, or about Black people) and specific (it's a guide to action for both understanding and rethinking how we combine our labor with each other and the earth). Abolition geography takes feeling and agency to be constitutive of, no less than constrained by, structure. In other words, it's a way of studying, and of doing political organizing, and of being in the world, and of worlding ourselves.

Put another way, abolition geography requires challenging the normative presumption that territory and liberation are at once alienable and exclusive—that they should be partitionable by sales, documents, or walls. Rather, by seizing the particular capacities we have, and repeating ourselves—trying, as C. L. R. James wrote about the run-up to revolutions, trying every little thing, going and going again—we will, because we do, change ourselves and the external world. Even under extreme constraint.

A last story: in the 1970s, the California Department of Corrections (CDC) decided to reorganize the social and spatial world of people in prison in response to both reformist and radical mobilization. Evidence shows that the CDC experimented with a variety of disruptive schemes to end the solidarity that had arisen among its diverse (although then mostly white) population in the prisons for men. Cooperation, forged in study groups and other consciousness-raising activities, had resulted in both significant victories in federal courts over conditions of confinement, and deadly retaliation against guards who had been killing prisoners with impunity. In spite of twenty years of Washington, DC, rule-making forbidding, among other things, segregation, failure to advise of rights, lack of due process, and extrajudicial punishment, the CDC decided to segregate prisoners into racial, ethnic, and regional groups labeled gangs, to remand some of them to indefinite solitary confinement, and to restrict the end of punishment to three actions: snitch, parole, or die. To reify the system as the built environment, the CDC created two prisons for men and one for women with high-tech Security Housing Units (SHU—a prison within a prison). The history of SHUs has yet to be fully told; it is indisputable that they induce mental and physical illness, which can lead to suicide or other forms of premature, preventable death. Indeed, the United Nations defines solitary confinement in excess of fourteen days as torture.

The people locked in the Pelican Bay State Prison SHU, some from the day it opened, on December 10, 1989, might or might not have done what they were

convicted of in court; their innocence doesn't matter. For many years lawyers and others have worked with people in the SHU trying to discover the way out, not picking and choosing whom to aid, but interviewing any willing subject about conditions of confinement and struggling to devise a general plan. Activists created handbooks and websites, lobbied the legislature, testified to administrative law judges, devised lawsuits, held workshops, organized with family members, and otherwise sought to bring the SHU scourge to light. (In 1998, at a hearing into the cover-up of seven SHU prisoners shot dead by guards, a producer for Mike Wallace's *60 Minutes* asked: "Tell me why to care about these guys." "Do you care about justice?" "Of course. But the audience needs to care about people. Why should they care?")

The department absolves itself of breaking laws and violating court decrees by insisting that the gangs it fostered run the prisons and the streets. After almost forty years of people churning through the expanded CDC, it's impossible that there's no stretch or resonance across the prison walls. SHU placement mixes people from ascriptive (what the CDC says) and assertive (what the prisoners themselves say) free-world social geographies in order to minimize the possibility of solidarity among people who, the circular logic goes, are enemies or they wouldn't be in the SHU. They can't see or touch one another, but across the din of television sets and the machine-noise of prisons they can talk, debate, discuss. And while race is not the SHU's only organizing factor, race is the summary term that ordinary people, inside and out, use to name the divisions. For many years some of the most active SHU residents debated racism versus racialism, first embracing and then challenging a variety of supremacies, while for years continuing to accept the structure of feeling that keeps race constant as naturally endowed or culturally preferable.

People make abolition geographies from what they have; changing awareness can radically revise understanding of what can be done with available materials. It's clear that the SHU, in calculated opposition to 1970s Soledad or San Quentin or Attica, thins social resources to the breaking point. But what breaks? In many cases the persons locked up. But consciousness can break into a different dimension, shedding commonsense understandings of being and solidarity, identity and change. A negation of violence through violence is possible, which returns us to the territory of selves invoked in the opening pages of this discussion. Even in a total institution sovereignty is contradictory, as resistance to torture demonstrates. The regime—its intellectual authors and social agents, its buildings and rules—tortures captives one by one. They can turn on the regime through shifting the object of torture into the subject of history by way of hunger strikes. Participating individuals turn the violence of torture against itself, not by making it not-violent but rather by intentionally repurposing vulnerability to premature death as a totality to be reckoned with, held together by skin.

The first strike, whose organizers represented all of the alleged prison gangs, sent its demands upward to the CDC, asking for modest

improvements for all SHU dwellers' experience and fate: better food, improved visitation, and some way to contest SHU sentences based in evidence rather than system-aggrandizement. People in many non-SHU prisons joined the strike in solidarity, and one died. The CDC offered to negotiate; the strike ended. Nothing changed.

A second strike erupted, well-covered both by the ever-active in-prison grapevine, and the organizing collective's free world support infrastructure. In the context of the Supreme Court decision concerning medical neglect, and uprisings in many parts of the planet—North Africa, West Asia, South Africa, the streets of the United States—the demands took a new direction, against the partitions that, especially in the contemporary era, normalize devolved imaginations and shrunken affinities when expansiveness seems absolutely necessary. The collective sent its demands out, horizontally as it were, to their constituent communities inside and out, calling for an end to the hostilities among the races. Although some people interpret the call as “Black-brown solidarity,” the collective's documents are radical and all-encompassing, leaving no group out. The call has a history as old as modernity, however anachronistic contemporary labels might be.

The racial in racial capitalism isn't secondary, nor did it originate in color or intercontinental conflict, but rather always group-differentiation to premature death. Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it. The PBSP collective, hidden from each other, experiencing at once the torture of isolation and the extraction of time, refigured their world, however tentatively, into an abolition geography by finding an infrastructure of feeling on which they could rework their experience and understanding of possibility by way of renovated consciousness. The fiction of race projects a peculiar animation of the human body, and people take to the streets in opposition to its real and deadly effects. And in the end, as the relations of racial capitalism take it out of people's hides, the contradiction of skin becomes clearer. Skin, our largest organ, vulnerable to all ambient toxins, at the end, is all we have to hold us together, no matter how much it seems to keep us apart.

Chapter 15

An Interview on the Futures of Black Radicalism

*Angela Davis, interview by Gaye Theresa Johnson
and Alex Lubin*

In your scholarship you have focused on prison abolitionism, Black feminism, popular culture and the blues, and Black internationalism with a focus on Palestine. Taken together, how does this work draw inspiration from, and perhaps move forward, the Black Radical Tradition?

Cedric Robinson challenged us to think about the role of Black radical theorists and activists in shaping social and cultural histories that inspire us to link our ideas and our political practices to deep critiques of racial capitalism. I am glad that he lived long enough to get a sense of how younger generations of scholars and activists have begun to take up his notion of a Black Radical Tradition. In *Black Marxism*, he developed an important genealogy that pivoted around the work of C. L. R. James, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright. If one looks at his work as a whole, including *Black Movements in America* and *The Anthropology of Marxism*, as H. L. T. Quan has pointed out, we cannot fail to apprehend how central women have been to the forging of a Black Radical Tradition. Quan writes that when asked about why there is such an enormous focus on the role of women and resistance in his body of work, Robinson replies, “Why not? All resistance, in effect, manifests in gender, manifests as gender. Gender is indeed both a language of oppression [and] a language of resistance.”¹

I have learned a great deal from Cedric Robinson regarding the uses of history: ways of theorizing history—or allowing it to theorize itself—that are crucial to our understanding of the present and to our ability to collectively envisage a more habitable future. Cedric has argued that his remarkable excavations of history emanate from the positing of political objectives in the present. I have felt a kinship with his approach since I first read *Black Marxism*. My first published article—written while I was in jail—which focused on Black women and slavery was, in fact, an effort to refute the damaging, yet increasingly popular, discourse of the Black matriarchy, as represented through official government reports as well as through generalized masculinist ideas (such as the necessity of gender-based leadership hierarchies designed to guarantee Black male dominance) circulating within the Black movement in the late 1960s and

1 Interview with Cedric Robinson by H. L. T. Quan, quoted in Quan, “Geniuses of Resistance: Feminist Consciousness and the Black Radical Tradition,” *Race and Class* 47, no. 2 (October 2005): 47.

early 1970s. Although this is not how I was thinking about my work at that time, I certainly would not hesitate today to link that research to the effort to make a Black radical, thus feminist, tradition more visible.

The new field formation—critical prison studies and its explicitly abolitionist framework—situates itself within the Black Radical Tradition, both through its acknowledged genealogical relation to the period in US history we refer to as Radical Reconstruction and, of course, through its relation both to the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and to historical Black feminism. The work of Sarah Haley, Kelly Lytle Hernandez, and an exciting new generation of scholars, by linking their valuable research with their principled activism, is helping to revitalize the Black Radical Tradition.

With every generation of antiracist activism, it seems, narrow Black nationalism returns phoenix-like to claim our movements' allegiance. Cedric's work was inspired, in part, by his desire to respond to the narrow Black nationalism of the era of his (and my) youth. It is, of course, extremely frustrating to witness the resurgence of modes of nationalism that are not only counterproductive, but contravene what should be our goal: Black, and thus human, flourishing. At the same time it is thoroughly exciting to witness the ways new youth formations—Black Lives Matter, BYP100, the Dream Defenders—are helping to shape a new Black feminist-inflected internationalism that highlights the value of queer theories and practices.

What is your assessment of the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly in light of your participation in the Black Panther Party during the 1970s? Does Black Lives Matter, in your view, have a sufficient analysis and theory of freedom? Do you see any similarities between the BPP and BLM movement?

As we consider the relation between the Black Panther Party and the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, it feels like the decades and generations that separate one from the other create a certain incommensurability that is a consequence of all the economic, political, cultural, and technological changes that make this contemporary moment so different in many important respects from the late 1960s. But perhaps we should seek connections between the two movements that are revealed not so much in the similarities, but rather in their radical differences.

The BPP emerged as a response to the police occupation of Oakland, California, and Black urban communities across the country. It was an absolutely brilliant move on the part of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale to patrol the neighborhood with guns and law books, in other words, to “police the police.” At the same time this strategy—admittedly also inspired by the emergence of guerrilla struggles in Cuba, liberation armies in southern Africa and the Middle East, and the successful resistance offered by the National Liberation Front in

Vietnam—in retrospect, reflected a failure to recognize, as Audre Lorde put it, that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” In other words, the use of guns—even though primarily as symbols of resistance—conveyed the message that the police could be challenged effectively by relying on explicit policing strategies.

A hashtag developed by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi in the aftermath of the vigilante killing of Trayvon Martin, #BlackLivesMatter began to transform into a network as a direct response to the rising protests in Ferguson, Missouri, which manifested a collective desire to demand justice for Mike Brown and for all of the Black lives sacrificed on the altar of racist police terror. In asking us to radically resist the racist violence at the very heart of policing structures and strategies, Black Lives Matter early on recognized that we would have to place the demand to demilitarize the police at the center of our efforts to move toward a more critical and more collective mode of justice. Ultimately linked to an approach that calls for the abolition of policing as we know and experience it, demilitarization also contested the way in which police strategies have been transnationalized within circuits that link small US police departments to Israel, which dominates the arena of militarized policing associated with the occupation of Palestine.

I appreciate the more complicated analysis that is embraced by many BLM activists, because it precisely reflects a historical-mindedness that is able to build upon, embrace, and radically critique activism and antiracist theories of the past. As the BPP attempted—sometimes unsuccessfully—to embrace emergent feminisms and what was then referred to as the gay liberation movement, BLM leader and activists have developed approaches that more productively take up feminist and queer theories and practices. But theories of freedom are always tentative. I have learned from Cedric Robinson that any theory or political strategy that pretends to possess a total theory of freedom, or one that can be categorically understood, has failed to account for the multiplicity of possibilities, which can, perhaps, only be evocatively represented in the realm of culture.

Your most recent scholarship is focused on the question of Palestine, and its connection to the Black freedom movement. When did this connection become obvious to you and what circumstances, or conjunctures, made this insight possible?

Actually my most recent collection of lectures and interviews reflects an increasingly popular understanding of the need for an internationalist framework within which the ongoing work to dismantle structures of racism, heteropatriarchy, and economic injustice inside the United States can become more enduring and more meaningful. In my own political history, Palestine has always occupied a pivotal place, precisely because of the similarities between Israel and the United States—their foundational settler colonialism and their ethnic

cleansing processes with respect to indigenous people, their systems of segregation, their use of legal systems to enact systematic repression, and so forth. I often point out that my consciousness of the predicament of Palestine dates back to my undergraduate years at Brandeis University, which was founded in the same year as the State of Israel. Moreover, during my own incarceration, I received support from Palestinian political prisoners as well as from Israeli attorneys defending Palestinians.

In 1973, when I attended the World Festival of Youth and Students in Berlin (in the German Democratic Republic), I had the opportunity to meet Yasir Arafat, who always acknowledged the kinship of the Palestinian struggle and the Black freedom struggle in the United States, and who, like Che, Fidel, Patrice Lumumba, and Amilcar Cabral, was a revered figure within the movement for Black liberation. This was a time when communist internationalism—in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Asia, Australia, South America, and the Caribbean—was a powerful force. If I might speak about my own story, it would have almost certainly led to a different conclusion had not this internationalism played such a pivotal role.

The encounters between Black liberation struggles in the United States and movements against the Israeli occupation of Palestine have a very long history. Alex Lubin's *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary* attempts to chart important aspects of this history. Oftentimes, however, it is not in the explicitly political realm that one discovers moments of contact. As Cedric Robinson emphasized, it is in the cultural realm. Of course Robin Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Making of the Black Radical Imagination* accentuates the arena of surrealism as an especially generative contact zone. In the latter twentieth century, it was Black feminist poet June Jordan who pushed the issue of the occupation of Palestine to the fore. Despite the Zionist attacks she suffered, and despite the temporary loss of a very important friendship with Adrienne Rich (who later also became a critic of the occupation), June became a powerful witness for Palestine. In her poetry she felt impelled to embody the juncture of Black and Palestine liberation. "I was born a Black woman / and now / I am become a Palestinian / against the relentless laughter of evil / there is less and less living room / and where are my loved ones / It is time to make our way home."² At a time when feminists of color were attempting to fashion strategies of what we now refer to as intersectionality, June, who represents the best of the Black Radical Tradition, taught us about the capacity of political affinities across national, cultural, and supposedly racial boundaries to help us imagine more habitable futures. I miss her deeply and am so sorry that she did not live long enough to experience Black Lives Matter activists across this continent raising banners of resistance to the occupation of Palestine.

As I have remarked on many occasions, when I joined a delegation in 2011 of indigenous and women of color feminist scholar activists to the West Bank

2 June Jordan, "Moving Towards Home," in *Living Room*.

and East Jerusalem, I was under the impression that I thoroughly understood the occupation. Although all of us were already linked, to one extent or another, to the solidarity movement, we were all thoroughly shocked by how little we really knew about the quotidian violence of the occupation. At the conclusion of our visit, we collectively decided to devote our energies to participating in BDS and to help elevate the consciousness of our various constituencies with respect to the US role—over \$8 million—in sustaining the military occupation. So I remain deeply connected in this project to Chandra Mohanty, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Barbara Ransby, Gina Dent, and the other members of the delegation.³

In the five years following our trip, many other delegations of academics and activists have visited Palestine and have helped to accelerate, broaden, and intensify the Palestine solidarity movement. As the architects of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement have modeled their work on the anti-apartheid campaign against South Africa, US activists have attempted to point out that there are profound lessons to be gleaned from earlier boycott politics. Many organizations and movements within the United States have considered how the incorporation of anti-apartheid strategies into their agendas would radically transform their own work. Not only did the anti-apartheid campaign help to strengthen international efforts to take down the apartheid state, it also revived and enriched many domestic movements against racism, misogyny, and economic justice.

In the same way, solidarity with Palestine has the potential to further transform and render more capacious the political consciousness of our contemporary movements. BLM activists and others associated with this very important historical moment of a surging collective consciousness calling for recognition of the persisting structures of racism can play an important role in compelling other areas of social justice activism to take up the cause of Palestine solidarity—specifically the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. Alliances on university campuses that bring together Black student organizations, Students for Justice in Palestine, and campus chapters of Jewish Voice for Peace are reminding us of the profound need to unite antiracist efforts with strong challenges to Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, and with the global resistance to the apartheid policies and practices of the State of Israel.

Theoretically and ideologically, Palestine has also helped us to broaden our vision of abolition, which we have characterized in this era as the abolition of imprisonment and policing. The experience of Palestine pushes us to revisit

3 The members of the delegation were: Rabab Abdulhadi, San Francisco State University; Ayoka Chenzira, artist and filmmaker, Atlanta, GA; Angela Y. Davis, University of California, Santa Cruz; Gina Dent, University of California, Santa Cruz; G. Melissa Garcia, Dickinson College; Anna Romina Guevarra, author and sociologist, Chicago, IL; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, author, Atlanta, GA; Premilla Nadasen, author, New York, NY; Barbara Ransby, author and historian, Chicago, IL; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Syracuse University; and Waziyatawin, University of Victoria.

concepts such as “the prison nation” or “the carceral state” in order to seriously understand the quotidian carceralities of the occupation and the ubiquitous policing by not only Israeli forces but also the Palestinian Authority. This, in turn, has stimulated other research directions on the uses of incarceration and its role, for example, in perpetrating notions of a permanent binarism with respect to gender⁴ and in naturalizing segregation based on physical, mental, and intellectual ability.⁵

What sort of social movements can, or should, exist at the present conjuncture, given the ascendance of American global hegemony, neoliberal economic relations, militarized counterinsurgency at home, and racial “color blindness”?

At a time when popular discourse is rapidly shifting as a direct response to pressures emanating from sustained protests against state violence, and from representational practices linked to new technologies of communication, I suggest that we need movements that pay as much attention to popular political education as they pay to the mobilizations that have succeeded in placing police violence and mass incarceration on the national political agenda. What this means, I think, is that we try to forge an analysis of the current conjuncture that draws important lessons from the relatively recent campaigns that have pushed our collective consciousness beyond previous limits. In other words, we need movements that are prepared to resist the inevitable seductions of assimilation. The Occupy campaign enabled us to develop an anti-capitalist vocabulary: the 99 percent versus the 1 percent is a concept that has entered into popular parlance. The question is not only how to preserve this vocabulary—as, for example, in the analysis offered by the Bernie Sanders platform leading up to the selection of the 2016 Democratic candidate for president—but rather how to build upon this, or complicate it with the idea of racial capitalism, which cannot be so neatly expressed in quantitative terms that assume the homogeneity that always undergirds racism.

Cedric Robinson never stopped excavating ideas, cultural products, and political movements from the past. He attempted to understand why trajectories of assimilation and of resistance in Black freedom movements in the United States co-existed, and his insights—in *Black Movements in America*, for example—continue to be valuable. Assimilationist strategies that leave intact the circumstances and structures that perpetuate exclusion and marginalization have always been offered as the more reasonable alternative to abolition, which,

4 See Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, eds., *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Oakland, CA, and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2015).

5 See Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey, *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

of course, not only requires resistance and dismantling, but also radical reimagining and radical reconstructions.

Perhaps this is the time to create the groundwork for a new political party, one that will speak to a far greater number of people than traditional progressive political parties have proved capable of doing. This party would have to be organically linked to the range of radical movements that have emerged in the aftermath of the rise of global capitalism. As I reflect on the value of Cedric Robinson’s work in relation to contemporary radical activism, it seems to me that this party would have to be anchored in the idea of racial capitalism—it would be antiracist, anti-capitalist, feminist, and abolitionist. But most important of all, it would have to acknowledge the priority of movements on the ground, movements that acknowledge the intersectionality of current issues—movements that are sufficiently open to allowing for the future emergence of issues, ideas, and movements that we cannot even begin to imagine today.

Do you make a distinction, in your scholarship and activism, between Marxism and “Black Marxism”?

I have spent most of my life studying Marxist ideas and have identified with groups that have not only embraced Marxist-inspired critiques of the dominant socioeconomic order, but have also struggled to understand the co-constitutive relationship of racism and capitalism. Having especially followed the theories and practices of Black communists and anti-imperialists in the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the world, and having worked inside the Communist Party for a number of years with a Black formation that took the names of Che Guevara and Patrice Lumumba, Marxism, from my perspective, has always been both a method and an object of criticism. Consequently, I don’t necessarily see the terms “Marxism” and “Black Marxism” as oppositional.

I take Cedric Robinson’s arguments in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* very seriously. If we assume the unquestioned centrality of the West and its economic, philosophical, and cultural development, then the economic modes, intellectual histories, religions, and cultures associated with Africa, Asia, and indigenous peoples will not be acknowledged as significant dimensions of humanity. The very concept of humanity will always conceal an internal, clandestine racialization, forever foreclosing possibilities of racial equality. Needless to say, Marxism is firmly anchored in this tradition of the Enlightenment. Cedric’s brilliant analyses revealed new ways of thinking and acting generated precisely through the encounters between Marxism and Black intellectuals/activists who helped to constitute the Black Radical Tradition.

The concept associated with *Black Marxism* that I find most productive and most potentially transformative is the concept of racial capitalism. Even though Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* was published in 1944, scholarly efforts exploring this relationship have remained relatively marginal. Hopefully the

new research on capitalism and slavery will help to further legitimate the notion of racial capitalism. While it is important to acknowledge the pivotal part slavery played in the historical consolidation of capitalism, more recent developments linked to global capitalism cannot be adequately comprehended if the racial dimension of capitalism is ignored.

Part Four

Afterwords