A Postscript to ‘Ashes Ashes’
Carcerality of COVID-19: Lockdown, Abolitionist

A Postscript to ‘Ashes Ashes’

An interview with Ruth Wilson Gilmore

Lockdown, Abolitionist

Consciousness, and the Carcerality of COVID-19:

Ricardo de Medeiros and Ashley Hunt

‘Ashes Ashes’ saw its post-production interrupted by the spread, stoppages and shutdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. As prisons, jails and detention centers, including Rikers Island itself, were vacated at the intersection of the virus and the institutional neglect that characterizes imprisonment, this follow-up interview with Ruth Wilson Gilmore was conducted May 26th via Zoom between Los Angeles and Lisbon.

A Postscript to ‘Ashes Ashes’

Ashes Ashes

words by Ruth Wilson Gilmore	Shira Agn	Djalal Fatemian	Sophia Giardil	Pilar Maquil	Allert Santt Jean, with the voice of Alix Ali

On the occasion of the announced closure of Rikers Island as a jail complex:
A meditation on its past, present, and its future demise through an abolitionist imagination by organizers and thinkers.

Music by Cirilu Montenegro-I Hunt and Ashley Hunt
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much of how people experience space in place in the world. So, the kinds of things that interrupt the ability to move around include things like international borders, the inability to pay for transportation costs, or the way police police using certain kinds of optics and other habits to impede the movement of some individuals, while enabling the movement of others. But similarly, the ability to stay put has everything to do with whether or not one needs to show some kind of identification to be in a particular territory, or whether one is allowed to sleep in the subway at night when one has nowhere else to sleep, or whether one can sit outside of a supermarket and keep panhandling and hoping to get a bite to eat — all of these things are intertwined.

So, international borders, the way that people's skin appears to certain kinds of observers tells them that that arrangement of skin over muscles and flesh can proceed or may not proceed. Everyone can tell the story about being snatched on the street or at the airport, or at the train station or in the subway, or riding on the freeway; people have these stories that they tell, and they all resolve in one way or another into how we can understand what underlies carcerality in the first place. And what underlies carcerality in the first place is not at all crime and punishment, but rather it is the ability of individuals, households, institutions, including states, to control how people move and to prevent other people from moving. So over the last, you know, half a millennium, or so the concept of “freedom” has become a cry of entitlement, a cry of desire, a cry of appropriation, a cry of atonement. If you read and you study, you see “freedom” keeps coming up, under the aegis of Emancipation, and the prison factories, the prisons, and the jails.

For while Emancipation abolished a marketplace, it didn’t abolish the social world that fell off that market, that’s what underlies carcerality. And the prisoners freed to build up Rikers’ Island from 90 to 400 acres-wide knew this as well as anyone.

II

Rikers first prisoners were captive-made-slaves. Not in the jails that would come to be built on the island, but in the slave pens and auction blocks of Richard Riker and his business partners.

Two centuries after the Ryder family put their Dutch name on this island of the Lenape, Maltese and Wappinger peoples, who would survive their removal, massacre, and mass imprisonment in military reservations as far away as Oklahoma, Richard Riker became the first District Attorney of New York County. Known as one of the “Kidnappers Club” with his business partners, they were nicknamed by the original abolitionists before the Civil War, for using the U.S. Fugitive Slave Act to kidnap free black New Yorkers, impress and sell them to slave traders.

Casting one person’s freedom as a crime, their liberty as lawlessness, their bodies as recaptured out of their place, guilty of possessing humanity, this frame-up set the template for the criminalization to come, which would later feed people into a system of personification, prison, and as such, slavery.

And the prisoners freed to build up Rikers’ Island from 90 to 400 acres-wide knew this as well as anyone.

This is helping to distribute resources that, in a fully formed abolitionist vision, ought to go through the structure of the state, making it a state that exists for the wellbeing of people, not for organized, violent control of people. As rehearsals of that vision of wellbeing, people are doing all kinds of projects that bring together activists, organizers, artists, and so forth to see how the world is actually already being remade. And it’s the hardest to see it now, because things are so dire, but it might also be that now is the time to look as well as we can and as profoundly as we can, because things are so dire.

So we have to ask ourselves a question about how, and to what extent, a tendency toward human sacrifice connects with the carceral logic through which people make sense of the world today and ask ourselves what we should say, other than that people are going to die, “because that apparently is not news.”

The fact that people are going to die hasn’t changed any policy. So we’re not saying the right thing to enough people, and I’m not sure what to do with that. But I do know that a complaint doesn’t make political consciousness, even if it might open space for something so that political consciousness comes in. All kinds of other things have to happen too. Art is essential, and you’ve been talking lately as rebellion is also essential, asking, “what can we do with it?”

And going back to New York city, and the fact that Rikers Island is such a deadly place, so many people fought for such a long time to close Rikers, but unfortunately that struggle diverged into two streams. One stream was an abolitionist stream. Close it and do other things. And the second stream was not abolitionist: Close it and keep doing the same thing, but somewhere else.

“We’re going to say we’ll close Rikers, but we’ll spend $11 billion to build four new jails that are going to be just so wonderfully luxurious that people won’t mind that they’re in jail, that they’re in prison, that they’re in jail now.” And here the dynamic triangle that connects policing and organized violence is shown in a case study of the budget of the city’s budget, which is to say the city’s social wage, gives us further insight into the difficulty of breaking the common sense of carceral — that we all shut out that “the police are bad” and “we need to be nursing young black and brown men,” that’s not news.

So we have to ask ourselves a question about how, and to what extent, a tendency toward human sacrifice connects with the carceral logic through which people make sense of the world today and ask ourselves what we should say, other than that people are going to die, “because that apparently is not news.”

So the problem that we encounter is that, if abolition is, and by your own words, “is as nice as the prison there,” the prisons they tour are, or what kind of society “humanization” need to spend a few minutes reading Sylvia Wynter, or reading some of her students who explain to us really beautifully what Wynter’s category of “human means” — which is not the “Enlightenment human” toward which “non-enlightened humans” have supposedly been creeping for membership for over a millennium. They could read Katherine McKittrick, Paul Gilroy, about planetaryhumanism, or the tens of thinkers and writers and artists who have thought about the wondrous of Scandinavia flourish in the city of New York.

And they’re encouraged in this by a lot of people who talk endlessly about “dehumanization” and “humanization,” and not about social relations and those larger fundamentals of social life into which they’ll be dropped. Those discussing “humanization” need to spend a few minutes reading Sylvia Wynter, or reading some of her students who explain to us really beautifully what Wynter’s category of “human means” — which is not the “Enlightenment human” toward which “non-enlightened humans” have supposedly been creeping for membership for over a millennium. They could read Katherine McKittrick, Paul Gilroy, about planetary humanism, or the tens of thinkers and writers and artists who have thought about...
This new data reveals racial disparities in the broader impact of COVID-19. At rates over 81% of People of Color account for the disproportionate loss of lives during the pandemic. Black and Latinx lives are being disproportionately impacted. The New York State prison system is a direct reflection of systemic racism in our country as a whole. This racial disparity is deeply rooted in the legacy of slavery and a paradigm that continues to thrive in the depths of our criminal justice system.

For decades, Black and Latinx people have been dying in New York State prisons behind bars amidst the COVID-19 outbreak. Our data analysis shows that at least 15 incarcerated people have died of COVID-19 in eight prisons since March 30. Those eight prisons include the 15 incarcerated Latinx individuals. DOCCS Acting Commissioner Annucci must provide us all with answers. For months, we've been calling for mass testing and medical care to people in his confinement. BYO Testing, and provide proper medical treatment.

Governor Cuomo and State Prison Commissioner Annucci have an obligation to tell the truth about how COVID-19 is compounding the scourge of racism in New York State. DOCCS has granted zero clemencies to People of Color since March 30. At least one person has died of COVID-19 from Sing Sing and at least one person has died of COVID-19 from Attica. The System is hell-bent on watching us die, with or without formal death sentences. That is why the legislature must demand that DOCCS Commissioner Annucci to testify at the legislative hearing on COVID-19's Impact on Communities of Color.

As Gov. Cuomo Fails to Demand Legislature Call Acting Prison Commissioner Annucci To Testify at State Prison Commissioner Hearing on COVID-19, Advocates Point to FOIL showing 81% of people who died since March 30 were older adults—especially those at age 55 and older (compared to a median age of 52 years prior to this date). The oldest person who died was 83 years old (compared to a median age of 60 years prior to this date). The rate at which people have died since March 30 is higher since March 30 than for the period from March 30 to May 5. The rate at which people have died in the first three months of 2020 was willing to sweep under the rug. The same system that was willing to sweep under the rug is hell-bent on watching us die, with or without formal death sentences. That is why the legislature must demand that DOCCS Commissioner Annucci to testify. On March 30, the State Legislature will hold a hearing on the impacts of COVID-19 by weakening immunity, by forcing contact infection rates. Experts warn that solitary confinement to parole officers and the system as a whole.

The same system that was willing to sweep under the rug the disproportionate loss of people of color is hell-bent on watching us die, with or without formal death sentences. That is why the legislature must demand that DOCCS Commissioner Annucci to testify. On March 30, the State Legislature will hold a hearing on the impacts of COVID-19 by weakening immunity, by forcing contact infection rates. Experts warn that solitary confinement to parole officers and the system as a whole.

Legislative Hearing on COVID-19's Impact on Communities of Color Account for 81% of NY State, Advocates Point to FOIL showing 81% of people who died behind bars amidst COVID-19. Our data analysis shows that at least 15 incarcerated People of Color--59% of whom were People of Color who died of COVID-19 in Sing Sing and at least one person has died of COVID-19 at Sing Sing and at least one person has died of COVID-19 at Attica. The System is hell-bent on watching us die, with or without formal death sentences. That is why the legislature must demand that DOCCS Commissioner Annucci to testify. On March 30, the State Legislature will hold a hearing on the impacts of COVID-19 by weakening immunity, by forcing contact infection rates. Experts warn that solitary confinement to parole officers and the system as a whole.

Aubrey is just as cavalier with the lives of Black and Brown lives in this system as Gov. Cuomo Fails to Demand Legislature Call Acting Prison Commissioner Annucci To Testify at State Prison Commissioner Hearing on COVID-19, Advocates Point to FOIL showing 81% of people who died since March 30 were older adults—especially those at age 55 and older (compared to a median age of 52 years prior to this date). The rate at which people have died since March 30 is higher since March 30 than for the period from March 30 to May 5. The rate at which people have died in the first three months of 2020 was willing to sweep under the rug. The same system that was willing to sweep under the rug is hell-bent on watching us die, with or without formal death sentences. That is why the legislature must demand that DOCCS Commissioner Annucci to testify. On March 30, the State Legislature will hold a hearing on the impacts of COVID-19 by weakening immunity, by forcing contact infection rates. Experts warn that solitary confinement to parole officers and the system as a whole.

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The way to fix the social order of capitalism — which is to say racial capitalism, or all of capitalism and colonization, and what Stuart Hall called the global allocation of material and symbolic resources — is to understand what are the social relations that we are rehearsing into being by building new jails, as opposed to the ones we rehearse into being by refusing jails! Let’s consider the ones that the movement of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence have rehearsed into being by making interventions so that people don’t get hurt, rather than calling 911 after somebody’s hurt to make sure that people don’t get hurt, so that people don’t get hurt, we make interventions that we are rehearsing into being by refusing jails, as opposed to the ones we rehearse into being by building new jails. It leaves the social order in — what Stuart Hall called the global allocation of material and symbolic resources — which will have a long life, into ruins of life to be capitalized upon, just as the city’s debris itself became material for more growth.

Alongside the trash was the rubble dug up for subway tunnels; earth dug out for skyscraper foundations; the demolition of old buildings; and even the rubble of walled Europe; shipped back to the U.S. on emplaced ships needling ballast; each a displacement of life and land built into new territory — Ellis Island, Battery Park, Riker’s Island and more, as New York unfurled its map onto the world.

And this all goes to underscore, again, how carceral logic shapes this mistake, believing that people who get locked up can “become human” if we just apply to them the right combination of real estate design and guard duty, or what is now getting called “wraparound services.”

AH: So if it is social relations and not merely things that need to be changed, can you explain more what you see as those social relations being? Obviously we’re not talking about the relations between retrained guards and imprisoned people, but a larger vision at stake for the society within which all these prisons and jails sit.

RWG: The first is this: The most human way of being in the world is for us to be dependent, not independent. So I was talking about autonomy earlier, but dependence, radical dependence is a good thing, not a bad thing. So we should depend on each other. And that’s what we see with mutual aid (not only the mutual aid that’s arisen in this time of crisis but across time), which is the radical dependency — the notion that people have an obligation to each other and that we ought to create enough institutional infrastructure for our needs, so that obligation doesn’t require voluntarism to perpetuate. So I don’t have to volunteer to help you, Ashley, for you to get the help you need when you need it. And yet, I should feel that because I could volunteer to help you, that our dependency on each other is a precious thing, which I would like to always keep alive.

So that’s the rehearsal we need, a rehearsal that makes us think about the co-construction of agency and structure so that we don’t think that structures are over there and agency is what we’ve got, but rather that through rehearsal, that we’re making this world. And a part of making it is making ourselves aware — conscientization — aware of what we need in order to perpetuate the possibility of welfare for ourselves and the planet.
When Riker's Island was covered in cages, the fiction of these artificial landscapes settled into reality, and Riker's Island was seeded with a life that cared little about its fortifications, its laws and limits that sought to set this island apart.

Between the lockdowns and the policing of its captives, the regime policed its natural life as well — plant life shaved close to the ground, bird life shooed away, fish repelled by toxic leaks, and animals burrowed beneath the traps that'd been set for them.

Despite its captivity, life thrived: it digested the land, feeding upon the debris of histories, the sediment of memories, and ruins becoming compost for growth.

Inch-by-inch, year-by-year, Riker’s territory was surrendered, accidentally, to a new life that thrives upon waste, composting garbage into soil and binding it with roots, converting its poison into nutrient and air.

While this new life made the island’s growth appear natural, concealing the toxicity of each new cage, the more toxicity it exuded, the more this new life flourished, spread and, eventually, took over.

A rebellion of leaf, flower, stem and root, they vined their way into Riker’s foundations, opened its roofs, rusted its bars and short-circuited its cameras. A takeover, an overturning, a re-rooting, re-purposing revolt, they breathed off oxygen that fed the flames of Riker’s collapse, tumbling back down into ash.
And with Riker's death, so died one dream of capital, its erasure of “human” from what people mean: 1. to racialize and re-value, so that you can exploit 2, then as you exploit, to imprison the people who refuse, first to force their labor, and then to turn their captivity, their imprisonment itself, into more capital. Like money that gains interest in a bank, or a parking meter that collects on a car sitting still, it was a dream of capital upon the labor and then upon the warehousing of bodies. Through an alchemy of meanings, by marking bodies as “without value” and as “criminal,” their human value is exchanged into finance value, into market value and price.

It was a dream where the debt of what has been stolen from people is blamed on those same people, refashioned and mortgaged, bundled and packaged into new fiscal instruments. Not to destroy, but to erase the fingerprints of capital from the poverty it has created. From the labor it shortens and the communities it breaks — calling it “progress,” “order,” and “safety.” What abolition required was not just Riker’s death or that of similar islands along the archipelago of cages, but the death of this dream and what it permitted: the re-concealing of slavery as a carceral foundation of society, but in plain, normal, everyday sight.

Now there would be two futures: One a shell game, moving this debt of justice out from beneath one shell and under a new one. The other, the ending of that game altogether, lifting all the shells at once and revealing the ruse, calling in all debts; returning what was taken, in its entirety, to the people they stole from.

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WHY: People in prison are particularly vulnerable to harm and death by COVID-19. Social distancing in crowded, controlled, and closed prisons is impossible. Prisons are hotbeds for viruses and diseases. All public health experts and medical professionals agree that the only way to stop the spread of COVID-19 in prisons is to release large numbers of incarcerated people, especially those who are older and/or have underlying health conditions. We Demand the Immediate Release of People in New York State Prisons.

WE DEMAND SAFE AND JUST SUPERVISION
Lift all travel restrictions for people on parole so they may travel to their preferred location for self-isolation. Remove electronic monitoring systems from the bodies/homes of people on supervision.
Suspend all programming requirements for people on supervision.
Suspend all remaining technical violations immediately and indefinitely.
Terminate all parole and probation supervision for people who have successfully completed one year of supervision.
Train parole and probation staff in current healthcare practices and statewide orders.

WE DEMAND IMPROVED CONDITIONS INSIDE NEW YORK STATE CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES
Testing and Prevention: Testing must be readily available to all incarcerated people and staff, and DOCCS must immediately implement measures to prevent the spread of the virus within state correctional facilities.
Treatment and Care: DOCCS must immediately develop a medical quarantine and treatment plan to prevent a catastrophic loss of life in our state prisons.

Communication and Visits: Free and unlimited access to phone calls, emails and letters will ensure incarcerated people can stay in touch with family members and loved ones during the pandemic. Unlimited access to legal counsel and the courts is a fundamental right and must not be compromised.

Confinement and Movement: Freedom of movement and access to the outdoors is essential to the dignity, physical health and mental well-being of all people, especially those incarcerated. DOCCS must institute facility-wide policies that curb the spread of COVID-19, while ensuring that measures do not deprive anyone of their basic liberties. Especially in this moment, DOCCS must end the use of solitary confinement, lifting any keeplock mandates and remove all people from solitary confinement and return them to individual cells.

Access to Services: Regular and uninterrupted access to supportive services ensures that incarcerated people can meet their basic needs and survive a pandemic.
Prison Labor: Incarcerated workers must be protected and justly compensated if they chose to provide invaluable labor to the state.

WE DEMAND HEALTHY REENTRY
Expedite field investigations of residences and residential treatment programs to ensure swift release of incarcerated people.
Develop a comprehensive housing and healthcare plan for all returning people.
Partner with existing reentry and community-based organizations who are ready to support people released during the pandemic.
Instruct the city and state housing authorities to lift the current ban on formerly incarcerated people living in public housing.

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NEW YORK CITY TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE HUB: VALUES, PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

THE NYC TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE HUB SERVES THREE PRIMARY PURPOSES:

1. Provide political education for anyone interested in transformative justice and community accountability.
2. Provide a space for people actively engaged in the work to process, and get consultations and support.
3. Provide more connectivity and visibility across groups doing TJ and CA work. The NYCTJH orient all of our work from the following shared values, principles, and practices. We relied on ideas developed by BATIC and Creative Interventions to establish values, principles and practices for our formation:

VALUES
Interdependence
Integrity and authentic connection
Trust
Compassion
Humility and courage
Healing
Responsibility and accountability
Sharing and sustainability
Transformation and growth
Liberation and possibility
Safety and risk taking (recognizing that safety sometimes requires risk-taking)
Holism (taking into account potential well-being of all people involved)

PRINCIPLES
Value-based work
Personal and systemic transformation
Building through relationship and trust
Taking accountability
Showing up for each other out of duty and choice
People who have caused harm can change, and also need to be included in changing structures and systems
We recognize that accountability is an ongoing process and is not imposed from the outside

PRACTICES
Proactively taking accountability
Prioritizing our relationships with ourselves and each other over actions or goals
Encouraging decentralized growth
Holding the humanity and dignity of everyone
Holding contradictions and complexity
Engaging in personal growth and healing work outside of group
Collective action and collective leadership
Challenging oppressive dynamics in the service of connection and trust
Engaging in conflict openly and honestly
Putting the work first, keeping it moving forward
Individual and collective reflection and adaptation
Expressing gratitude and appreciation
Prioritize the self-determination of the survivor
We see safety as relative and a constant negotiation
We do not believe in never uncomfortable space - safety and discomfort are not the same thing
We center ourselves in work to end sexual violence because we believe it is important enough to stand on its own as an area of focus. Our survival demands this. However, we know that the daily violence of racism/white supremacy, sexism/transphobia/patriarchy/classism/capitalism, and homophobia/heterosexism are the intersecting sources of sexual violence, the reasons it happens. If we want to end sexual violence, we must end these belief systems and the institutions that support them. We work to transform ourselves and our society along the way to clear a path for healthy, affirming cultures and communities.

Produced to accompany Ashes Ashes, by Ashley Hunt, 2020.

Images from front to back: Randall’s Island Tree, New York (Rikers Island), by Ashley Hunt • Day of Action to End Life Imprisonment and Reunite Families at New York State Capitol, April 21, 2020, by Walter Herget, RAPP • Two-day Vigil and Graveside Sit at Fishkill Correctional Facility to honor those who have died of coronavirus behind bars and fight for NOT ONE MORE DEATH, by Walter Herget, RAPP • Shorehaven Tree, The Bronx (Rikers Island), by Ashley Hunt • Day of Action to End Life Imprisonment and Reunite Families at New York State Capitol, April 21, 2020, by Walter Herget, RAPP • Queer Liberation March, by Leandro Justen • Free Them All, by Shana Agid • Justice for Jamel Floyd Noise Demo, RAPP Campaign • Hunt’s Point Tree, The Bronx (Rikers Island), by Ashley Hunt