

Ruth Wilson Gilmore  
*Freedom is a place.* Ruth  
Wilson Gilmore and Abolition  
Geography

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# Ruth Wilson Gilmore

## *Freedom is a place.* Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Abolition Geography

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, an US geographer, is the director of the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics (CPCP) and a professor in the department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, Africana Studies, and American Studies at the City University of New York (CUNY– The Graduate Center).

She is recognized as one of the most prominent intellectuals of our time. She dedicates her thought and activism to understanding and rejecting racial capitalism, proposing everyday paths towards liberatory futures. Through rigorous work committed to the Black Radical Tradition, she structures her research-activism and relies on worldviews that enable the formation and transformation of consciousness.

This interview<sup>1</sup> is the result of a long and collective effort, focusing energies on bringing the movement of her radical thinking to readers. It stems from the encounter between Gilmore and the interviewers between 2022 and 2023, when they served as Visiting Scholars at the Graduate Center (CUNY). While Livia Cangiano Antipon<sup>2</sup> and Cristiano Nunes Alves<sup>3</sup> were supervised by the professor at CPCP in their doctoral and postdoctoral research, respectively, Maria Fernanda Novo<sup>4</sup>, in her postdoctoral work, was part of the Department of Philosophy.

Themes such as Abolitionist Geography, Political Geography of Race, carceral capitalism, the unification of anti-racist struggles, and the role of universities as significant spaces for political organization are deeply articulated in her works and seminars. Hence, they justify the analytical path of our conversation.

Considering the scope and reach of the *Geosp Journal*, we aim to present an overview of the Geography conducted by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, undoubtedly a path (or paths) toward freedom as a place.

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1 Conducted in December 2023, the interview was entirely held in English. It was transcribed and translated by Milena Durante, with funding from the Graduate Program in Geography (PPGEO) at the State University of Maranhão.

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**Interviewers:** You have contributed to establishing a perspective of critical, theoretical and geographical theory based on tools, concepts and categories which helped us to think of abolitionism as a horizon that guides your theory. Both *Golden Gulag* (Gilmore, 2007), now translated into Portuguese (Gilmore, 2024), and more recently, *Abolition Geography* (Gilmore, 2022), operationalize these concepts and categories in the sense of producing a radical and abolitionist geography. Thus, it seems that both space and its theorization can be interpretative keys for abolitionist organizing. Could you talk about abolition geography and its method?

**Ruth Gilmore:** I'm very happy to talk about this, these are great questions. One of the things that studying political economy in the interdiscipline of geography allowed me to see very clearly is how connected everything is, and when I say it's connected it's not in some mystical way, but rather actively, dynamically connected to contradictions. Social life and social-environmental relations are all organized through contradictions and that means: one, if you study anything closely enough you will not only understand that thing but also how it connects to other things. And if, by extension, we think about the kinds of struggles that present themselves to the world as struggles against police, prisons and militarism, we're then able to think about those struggles as not only against those forces of organized violence but also through the processes of organized abandonment that made people vulnerable to violence in the first place, in the second or in the third place. It's not always immediately abandoned police or abandoned prison or abandoned militarism, but those things together. So in studying, for example, the origins and growth of mass incarceration in California, in the context of capitalist crisis – I could only ever understand it as the crisis of racial capitalism which is all of it. All of capitalism is racial – I had the opportunity to think really hard about all these aspects of the social reality in which people struggle whether through abandonment by losing jobs, by not having housing, by having their children taken, or by not being able to maintain a vibrant economy and a rural place in the countryside and all the other things I studied in my first book. We are able see elements of what people are likely to organize to remedy. In my book, the mothers organized themselves to reclaim their children and while some of them might have woken up every morning saying "I want to make the world better" most of them didn't move to political organizing and action until something bit into their existence that they could not stand. Therefore, they brought their energy together to do something about it. And even that didn't start out as a fully planned thought through program of political activism but, rather, it started out as mothers helping mothers to take care of their kids. Mothers helping mothers to figure out why their kids were arrested. Mothers helping mothers to figure out what they could do next. It became overtly political but what I and other people noticed was, obviously, it was already political because people were doing something to make their lives better. Which is always a political act. So, taking these details and then extending them more generally to abolition... One way I've been thinking about abolition lately is as emancipation in rehearsal. People act on their own emancipation and then do it again, and they do it a little differently. They do it with other people. Other people might watch and notice what they're doing, and might join in. There's this constant unfolding emancipation in rehearsal that frequently but does not always become a huge change in people's consciousness and way of life. Building from there, and understanding

abolition – for many other people, not just me – an understanding that in order to achieve abolition we only have to change one thing, which is everything. But that doesn't mean erase everything, that doesn't mean burn everything down. It means wherever you're at, whatever you're doing, whatever bites into your existence, by working the energy that you, that I, that we, and others bring together to remedy that problem is part of changing everything. So all aspects of the social reality are part of what has to change. We can say this in concrete terms. Housing. There has to be adequate housing for everybody. All the utilities and benefits of housing, that it's adequate, that it's secure, that it has water... That's an example. Another one is healthcare. Everybody needs healthcare and people who fight on that front to organize it are doing abolition work. It means figuring out in the context of communities and households where people, because of all kinds of situations, have become accustomed to using violence as speech. I may be angry with you this is how I speak to you. I hurt you. That is also an area in which those who have been organizing – and this is true all over the planet – to intervene in situations where domestic violence happens without growing the prison industrial complex by calling the police are also doing abolition work. We can use these examples and then go through all kinds of other examples that include people... – I frequently think about people who work in healthcare, particularly nurses, but this could be anybody. In some instances, nurses are extremely radical in how they have come to understand that their effort to organize themselves into unions to fight for fair wages for themselves against their employers is connected to the demand their patients have, to have free and good healthcare provided by the social order. Those are some examples. So there are possibilities even in what seems like ordinarily only reformist areas, like making trade unions stronger, where we can see abolition possibly and frequently actually happening as well.

**Interviewers:** In your book *Abolition Geography* we understand abolition in its practical everyday and spatial essence, a product of the history of collective resistance, and attribute of the present in the face of persistent racial violence. In the first part of the book you reflect on what university and public education are and should be, as well as on the role of professors as actors to change the world. When we read the sentence “We can organize through teaching and curriculum”, we interpret that you are also a radical defender of intellectual work. What would radical intellectual work be for you?

**Ruth Gilmore:** First of all, I've said many times to many people, I just said it in my seminar today “Universities are crossroads”. People meet in universities who might never meet each other anywhere else. Not only in universities, but it's a place where certain kinds of encounters are possible and people come together with a lot of intellectual energy. Our obligation and responsibility as teachers is to liberate that energy to think really hard about the world, how it works, and how it should work. For me, what curriculum should be is an opportunity for people to think very hard with writers and people who have made their work in other forms, it could be films, it could be anything. Think very hard with them about how they do what they do, so that we, who are studying them, can think about the dynamic of their work and about how we can maybe use some aspect of that dynamic to do something else. That's a longish way of saying that I have no patience for people who think that being an intellectual is saying what is wrong with

something. And, believe me, years ago, I was that person. I would say “Oh, this is no good...”. I was so unhappy. I would leave a seminar depressed. Because all we did was complain. And then on top of that, sort of compounding the complaint, is that so many of the things we read, because we are militant scholars, is about the struggles of the world. So we read complaints and then we complain about them. Where is the life in that? It’s a very negative way of approaching which should be an extremely exciting and energy producing activity. For me, curriculum should give people who are studying together the opportunity, as Paulo Freire says, to think together, by thinking with the writer, and when I say thinking with the writer, I don’t mean becoming that writer, but, rather, thinking the analytical dynamics of a piece of work and considering how that energy could be put together with our own research concerns or writing projects to make something, to achieve something, to notice something we otherwise wouldn’t notice. That’s what intellectual work is all about. And it doesn’t only happen, of course, in universities. It happens everywhere. If we bring ourselves away from thinking about writing for a moment and think about how people make all different kinds of things, there’s frequently a recognition on the part of somebody who knows that somebody else, who was making something similar, does it differently. And they become curious about it, and that making becomes something else. Now, whether they’re making an organization, or a piece of their house, some music, some art, or anything else, there is that kind of noticing things differently that can lead to really exciting and enlivening combinations. So it’s not competition. But it can be combinations of energy and insight and enthusiasm or technique, whatever you want to call it.

**Interviewers:** You are critical of intellectuals who abandon the task of accompanying, collaborating and intervening in movements for transformation because they have been thinking in an economic grammar, with individualism as their principle, resulting in a conservative approach that is visible in the rejection of the curricular changes. But at the same time you defend university as a place where political ecology takes place allowing new ways of questioning reality and understanding how to connect different struggles to be creative. So, does this kind of positive function of the institution connects with what you advocate when you say that politics is the new theory?

**Ruth Gilmore:** And policy is the new spirit. Yes, yes! I hadn’t thought about it that way. That’s really interesting. The first thing I want to say is: contrary to all of my enthusiasm about what is possible in university settings, I commit very little of my energy trying to persuade my more conservative colleagues to do things differently. I will help my students who encounter those colleagues to have a different attitude about that work. Most of my energy, however, goes to my students and to the CPCP, but most of my energy goes to my students. And what I found is being able to show them by examples, and not lecture them, but to show them by example, a different way of being intellectual in the world that enables them both to do the kinds of things I was describing in my response to the earlier question, to notice things, to use dynamics differently and so forth. And also to have a stronger sense of themselves when in the context of those other professors, so they don’t get destroyed by them. And I tell you, one of the concepts I use a lot in thinking about this is Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness. I think it’s really a wonderful thing. Whether Du Bois thought when he wrote that so many hundred twenty

years ago, whether he thought double consciousness was a wonderful thing... I think he didn't at the time. I love the idea of having the capacity to be conscious of your own alienation while not being alienated. That's what double consciousness is. You can be aware of your alienation and not be alienated. At once. So, it's kind of a gift, I think, instead of a curse, which is what I think a lot of people thought. I'm not altogether sure of what Du Bois made out of it over his life and his career. I can give a very specific example from my friend Sónia Vaz Borges' work in the PAIGC, and their education program<sup>5</sup>. One of the things that she taught me, she taught all of us through her work, was: not only did the party develop its own curriculum for teaching adult and children learners in the liberated zones of Guinea Bissau during the revolution – they did all of that – but they developed their own curriculum. They wrote their own books, school manuals. They trained their teachers. Their teachers all had at least two roles: they were a teacher and a soldier, a teacher and a medic, or a teacher and something else. And this was part of the revolution, but was also part of the preparation for the revolution. It's also true that in the early years of the revolution, as the zones were liberated, the school manuals the party had written were not available yet. They had not been printed yet. They were printed by comrades in Sweden and it took a long time... Imagine how long it took for something to get from Sweden to Guinea-Bissau. It was hard. What Sónia teaches us is that teachers used what was available. These were the colonial textbooks, but with a different way of understanding what the textbooks said. They used them to open consciousness by enabling people to encounter these all colonial texts and to consider why would anybody write this book. So, not just to complain, but to get a structural analysis of their own illiteracy and their own coming to literacy. And I think that story with the necessary adjustments is the kind of story so many people today who are, like you were telling me about, first generation university. That is, in a way, what affirmative action has done, officially, in a very capital L liberal way, as it expanded reality just enough to take in a few people who used to be excluded. That is objectively true but that's not the whole story any more than the colonial textbook is the whole story. Then, what happens, or what we had the opportunity to do is, through our courses, whatever our courses are, help people understand the nature of social totality, that it seems that it's been stretched a little bit, so that people can be aware of what its shape is and how we can change it in a more radical fashion.

**Interviewers:** We have two questions in one. Knowing that the world is organized in different social-spatial formations, and that both, race and racism are also social-spatial categories, and therefore they change between places and different geographical scales, could you talk about what you define as a Political Geography of Race? And how can we unify anti-racist struggles between different places today?

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Gilmore refers to the professor of African Studies in the Department of History at Drexel University (Philadelphia, United States) who, among other things, studied the pedagogical actions of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), which was active as an anti-colonial resistance movement between the 1950s and 1970s, until it became a political party in Guinea-Bissau.

**Ruth Gilmore:** The political geography of race, as I understand it, as I have tried to explain it, has to do with how the fatal couplings of power and difference unfold in a territory over time and that unfolding reinforces certain kinds of exclusions, vulnerabilities and so forth. Political geography indicates that there are power differentials attached to or expressed through groups that matter. Let us use nations and States not because it's a natural unit of analysis but it's an easy and usual unit of analysis. So, Brazil is the biggest Black country in this hemisphere. If I tell you how many people in the Unites States of America – I mean Black people – are completely unaware of that, you'd be amazed. Then, you go somewhere like Jamaica, which is not an altogether Black country, but it's a country in which many of the people who are at all levels of the social and economic hierarchy are what we, in the United States, might call Black. Then you can go from country to country and have these thoughts and think about "What's happening here?" The political geography of race is an analytical way of thinking about what kinds of processes and forces called for a particular social order together and also how that changes over time. Whether it's a liberal inclusion or something else and we can say again, just to remind people, that race does not equal Black, we can go somewhere like Peru, for instance, where so much of the struggle is about indigenous people who are in number great and in power generally without the capacity to determine their own futures and think about what the combination of settler colonial and other forces over time have amounted to that produces that particular hierarchy in Peru, even if the person at the top might be or might have been of indigenous origin. Political geography gives us a guide through the ability to think about an object, a social-spatial object, and consider how it works. And then to ask themselves a question: "If it works this way there, does it work that way evenly everywhere? Or is there a lot of differentiation and difference between and among regions of let us say, an ancient state, which I know it's true". And those questions, we can talk about them for a while but I want to get to your second question because that's the one that really excites me, thinking about unifying between spaces. I just used nation-states as examples, but need not be that. It can be regions, regions larger than nation-states, regions smaller than nation-states. It can be combinations of people who are dotted around as members of diaspora who are struggling in one way or another. One of the really strong aspirational and also practical ways that people talked about Black solidarity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century into the 21<sup>st</sup> has been through the concept of Pan-Africanism. Pan-Africanism in its revolutionary way of being in the world, didn't just say "All Black people are related to all Black people in struggle" but rather "What does this mean in terms of joining our struggles?" We can come up with some examples of that. The best way of summarizing those examples is: They're all internationalist. They're all struggles that presume the only way we emancipate ourselves is through not surrendering to what Fanon calls the pitfalls of nationalism. But then we can think of other more recent examples of how people have organized to create the possibility for their own emancipation and, in so doing so, have joined forces across really vast social and spatial distances. An example I've used a bunch of times in recent years is the connection, and it's not simple, between what the MST has been doing in Brazil for now forty years, I guess, and their relation to what the shack dwellers movement, particularly

that aspect of the shack dwellers movement called Abahlali has been doing in South Africa<sup>6</sup> over the last eighteen years. So, completely different struggles. What unites them are the struggles over land. That's a common denominator. They're struggles over land and land use. And a good deal of the MST activity has been working in groups to do land occupations in order to become productive agricultural communities and everything it entails. Also the MST because it's a pretty big movement, made up of these smaller few agricultural communities, doing things like producing organic rice and it not only feeds the people who grow it, but also becomes available for people faraway, including those behind the blockade in Venezuela, where there is a lot of hunger. It has spread around the entire hemisphere. All of that to say that, in addition to all the things they're doing, they're all studying, by the way, and fighting and figuring out how to do things better. They're also in solidarity with people in South Africa who are part of the Abahlali movement who are doing land occupations, building their own houses or doing building occupations, and transforming places like hospitals into living spaces, and in a lot of their settlements or villages, doing a certain amount of agricultural work both to feed the people who live there, who work the land, but also to make food available to communities around them. The MST and Abahlali have been like this, doing work together, teaching each other, so it's not a one way thing. Abahlali has become a sort of central movement for Southern Africa, people come from around the continent, and there's connection that way, around the continent of Africa, at this point, so there are struggles over land and are not only about where people can live and what people do with the land in terms of agriculture, but also about controlling the mineral resources beneath the land. That is an area of extreme contention at the moment, with neo-imperialism doing what it does there, in terms of the experience of ordinary people on the ground indistinguishable from what neo-imperialism and financialization do with respect to agricultural land in Brazil. There are other ways these struggles have been joined through via peasantry and other initiatives. These are just some examples of unifying between spaces and I guess the last thing I want to say is about what these movements are doing is: They're combining every possible weapon to be able to achieve abundance for themselves for their futures. In some cases they will use the federal state or the local state or the municipal government and they'll do land occupation. "We're going to take it' and all kinds of things in between. They produce things they sell but they're not capitalists, confusing markets and capitalism is a terrible thing. Understanding this difference is also essential to thinking about how we unify between spaces. That's a long answer to a great question.

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<sup>6</sup> This is the Abahlali BaseMjondolo (AbM) movement, which emerged in the South African city of Durban in 2005, and which in Zulu language means "shack dwellers". Despite a history of violent repression against their actions, AbM is today one of the major references in the struggle for housing in South Africa, with around 115,000 members. For more information, see: <https://abahlali.org>.

**Interviewers:** We would like you to comment on the meeting you had with Milton Santos.

**Ruth Gilmore:** I think it was 30 years ago. Milton Santos came through Rutgers [University] where I was enrolled in my Graduate Program. And I had the great fortune of Neil Smith, my advisor, being extremely generous to me and my partner and inviting us although I was merely a student. We got invited to his house all the time when visitors came and we got to hang out. Milton Santos came and gave a talk in the geography department. It was so incredible to me, because I didn't know anything about him before. I was just new in geography, had just started. And here's this brother from Brazil who laid all this stuff out in this incredibly lyrical language. His theoretical work was very lyrical. And you could just sink into the beauty of the words before you understood their meaning. That's what it was like. We would listen to the talk and then we went to Neil's house and had dinner. It was just a small group. And, man, Milton Santos, he was so kind, and so caring. And he was very curious about us, about me and my partner "Who are you? You've just come to geography!" One of the things he talked about which I really enjoyed was how different academic customs are in different places in the world. He had just had a happy experience of coming to New Brunswick, and giving his talk at Rutgers, in the geography department, where people were just excited he was there and curious about what he had to say. They were not about to start fighting with him about what he didn't say. We didn't even know enough to fight. But he told me the story about the first time he ever gave a talk in Paris. I think it was Paris, but anyway, it was in France. He went there and he had written out his talk and I don't recall if he did it in French or English, probably French. But he had written out his talk, and his host, the individual who had invited him, demanded to see the talk before he gave it. And he was "Maybe he'll correct my French or whatever". So he gave him the talk. And the host went through it and said "You can't do this. If you talk about *this*, you must cite these five people. If you talk about *this other thing*, you must reference these four people". There all these people in the French Geography Pantheon who must be mentioned or nobody will take what you say seriously. So, the host corrected Milton's talk and I asked "And what did you do?" "I gave the talk he told me to give but I didn't really worry about it". This goes back to us talking about the colonial textbooks and so forth. "It was just a curiosity for me that me coming all these thousands of miles to Paris to give a talk only mattered if my talk fit what they thought they already knew. And that was a curiosity to me. I knew better than to reproduce it in my own work or to demand that my students reproduce it. Our entire purpose is not to make our knowledge fit", he said. One of the things that's really beautiful about this story is that his experience must have been thirty years before I met him, when he went to Paris, and now I am telling you this story thirty years later. He is our ancestor, obviously. And it's really very beautiful and heartening to know that and Milton Santos, like all of us... We use whatever we can use. So, my view is, I don't reject things because they came by way of the colonial. I just use what I can use and dispense with the rest.

**Interviewers:** Milton Santos, as you do, teaches us to think about the future all the time. The conversation, the research is about the future. So we have the last question for you. And maybe this question is related to the future. How and where do we find the place of freedom?

**Ruth Gilmore:** We make it. That's the easiest question you could have ever asked me. We make it, we make it, we make it and we make it. I used that word, rehearsal, I am using it in the way you prepare to do a presentation, a musical or dramatic presentation. That's the sense of rehearsal. Not repetition but rehearsal. Making freedom. Freedom is a place that means we make it, and we make it again, we make it in all these different configurations. And sometimes they join up. I love that we're talking, we are talking this way, between where you are and where I am and you see that blackboard on the wall and we have made this provisional place that isn't going to be permanent but you three are going to make something of our encounter that then enables other people to make things themselves. And that's the beautiful thing. I wanted to say something about places that are not permanent. A long time ago, before I actually realized that I was going to study geography, but I was thinking about, it was very clear in my head I was going to go back to school. I went to this big international conference on Cultural Studies and the biggest of the big people, as in well known, that I really wanted to hear, who was going to be there, was Stuart Hall. I had just met him briefly the year before and he said "We should meet" at this conference. So I was there with all these really fantastic people giving wonderful talks – and then there were people giving not wonderful talks, but that's what a conference is: the good talks and the not so good talks. One of the people who got up to give a talk, I did not understand anything she was talking about and it wasn't because her vocabulary was too specialized or abstract. It was because, I realized afterward, she was trained as a geographer and she took for granted that her objects of analysis would resonate with people in this big auditorium. So, I didn't get it, but I listened anyway, because you never know... She was talking about temporary places that become really meaningful to people. She was talking about fairs, including musical fairs, the sorts of places that happen because people come together for a limited time but they do things in such a concentrated way that they not only use energy, but they produce energy, and it goes with them elsewhere. So that's what I feel like we have done here. We are like a little fair for people, which I could finally understand that's what she was talking about all these years to come.

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