RUTH WILSON GILMORE MAKES THE CASE FOR ABOLITION

Guest host Chenjerai Kumanyika speaks with abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore in a special two-part episode.

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The movement to defund the police in the United States is gaining unprecedented momentum as protests continue across the globe. This week on Intercepted: Chenjerai Kumanyika, assistant professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University, hosts a special two-part discussion. Kumanyika is co-host of the podcasts "Uncivil" and "Scene on Radio." He is an organizer with 215 People's Alliance and the Debt Collective. He is joined for this episode of Intercepted by the iconic geographer and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore, author of "Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California." Gilmore is one of the world's preeminent scholars on prisons and the machinery of carceral punishment and policing. In this discussion, she offers a sweeping and detailed analysis of the relentless expansion and funding of police and prisons, and how locking people in cages has become central to the American project. Gilmore offers a comprehensive road map for understanding how we have arrived at the present political moment of brutality and rebellion, and she lays out the need for prison abolition and defunding police forces.

A special thanks to Zeal & Ardor for the song, "Devil is Fine."

Part One: Where Life is Precious, Life is Precious

["Devil is Fine" by Zeal & Ardor plays.]

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: The thing that set in motion the events that resulted in Mr. Floyd's brutal murder was that an employee at a convenience store thought that they had been handed a counterfeit bill. This young person — I assume is young — who's probably making minimum wage, who works for somebody who I understand to be a very decent human being who hires people in the community, a Palestinian American convenience store owner, did their job to keep their job. But we have to ask ourselves, why couldn't it be, they take this suspect looking bill, complete the transaction, and then deal with it afterward. Right? They had been deputized. Why is somebody working in a convenience store a deputy cop? This is a question.

[Music interlude.]

Jeremy Scahill: This is Intercepted.

[Music interlude.]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I'm Chenjerai Kumanyika. I'm an assistant professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University. I'm the co-host and creator of the Uncivil podcast, coming to you from my home in Philadelphia. I'm taking over the show from Jeremy Scahill for this week, and this is episode 134 of Intercepted.

[Music interlude.]

Ruthie Wilson Gilmore: So many public agencies — education, healthcare, and so forth — have absorbed policing functions. Where, at the same time, many of the agencies of organized violence, such as jails and prisons and police, are absorbing social work functions, mental health care functions, things that they actually can't do.

CK: That's our guest, geographer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore. In part one of our two-part conversation, we speak about police killings, the Black Lives Matter movement, and abolition organizing, as police brutality in America has inspired a national uprising with global solidarity.

[Protest ambiance comes in: No justice, no peace, no racist police. No justice, no peace, no racist police. Don't shoot. Don't shoot.]

CK: As cases of Covid-19 continue to escalate, people across our entire country, from rural towns to major cities, are retaking the streets to rebel. Police and National Guard forces have responded with even more violence.

[Protest ambiance.]

CK: The killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis cops was another horrific and needless death, another unarmed Black man killed by police and recorded for all the world to see. It was another spectacle of violence at the hands of the state.

And we've seen this before. Like literally, we've seen it. Black men choked by police in broad daylight, uprisings against the carceral state — police and prisons — and pictures that prove that torture is going on in the institutions of criminal punishment. And we see the police are mostly not held accountable. They don't get fired. They don't get charged. And in the few cases where they do get charged, it's extremely rare for them to be convicted.

But what is right before our eyes and on our cameras is not the entire picture of the change that needs to happen.

If we look off-camera and back just a little bit into history, we can see the conclusive failure of the kinds of reforms that established Democrats are proposing right now. Yes, use of force legislation is crucial. But remember, a judge found officer [Daniel] Pantaleo guilty of using a banned chokehold when he killed Eric Garner. Pantaleo is free today.

Also, as African-American studies professor Naomi Murakawa has pointed out, the concept of community policing was at the heart of the two largest crime reform legislative efforts of the 20th century. The first one was sponsored by Lyndon B. Johnson: the 1968 Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Street Act, which created the Law Enforcement [Assistance] Administration. What did that result in? $10 billion was doled out to police departments, often in the name of improving police and community relations. This didn't mean treating people differently. It meant taxpayer money was spent on police public relations campaigns.

The second major criminal reform effort was the Clinton's 1994 crime bill. This established the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services within the Justice Department. And what did that result in? $9 billion given to police departments over six years. And yet, here we are.

What we have to grapple with is this: These images are showing us a violence that's so clear, that we've stopped being able to see beyond it. The spectacle of violence is only the tip of the spear. It's only the most acute manifestation of a 150 years of racist state violence, punishing the poor, and failed reform. More training workshops for cops or another Black police chief is not going to fix this. Cops who kneel with protesters and then stand up and tear gas them is not going to fix this. What would it look like to try something else, to defund and dismantle police departments, and yes, to abolish the police? What would it look like to abolish prisons? And when I say abolish, what do I mean?

At this incendiary moment of crisis and possibility, we are deeply honored to hear from an experienced organizer and tremendous thinker on prisons, police, and how these systems of violence organize our lives, and what we must do about it.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Professor of Geography and Director of the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics at the CUNY Graduate Center, is co-founder of several abolitionist organizations including Critical Resistance. She is author of the prize-winning book, "Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California." She's also finishing a couple of new books, including, "Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition," forthcoming from Haymarket.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, welcome to Intercepted.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: Thanks for having me on today. I'm glad to be here.

CK: Ruth Wilson Gilmore shared a broad range of her thinking on the issues we are facing right now. But the first thing I was curious about was where she came from and who she was before she came to prison abolition.

RWG: Ruthie was a, and continues to be, the child and grandchild, and probably multiple generations of freedom fighters. We are Black people of the North. I grew up in a working-class household. My father was a tool and die maker. My mother worked as a lab technician. My father's father was a janitor and a steward for a fraternity at Yale. My father's mother was a seamstress and took laundry into her house. My other grandmother cleaned white people's houses. This is, like, where I came from.

Everybody, every generation I know about fought for freedom. What was the freedom we fought for? My grandfather was one of the people who helped to organize the first blue-collar union at an Ivy League school. This was during World War II — the double victory: victory against fascism abroad, victory against Jim Crow at home.

My father organized the machinists at Winchester's repeating firearms factory in the mid-1950s. Again, a labor struggle. He was also a leader in organizing for the well-being of the Black community of New Haven and, in so doing, made certain that all kinds of people's lives would get better. So he was somebody who, long before Black Lives Matter, saw that when Black lives matter, everybody lives better. And he's kind of known in my hometown to this day — tool and die maker became quite a fighter for freedom.

So that's who Ruthie was. I was raised by these people, in this tradition. Born 70 years ago, so in the waning years of Jim Crow, in 1950. So I came to an anti-capitalist position quite young, and I never left that.

I learned from reading and studying with people like Cedric Robinson, Stuart Hall, Angela Davis, Claudia Jones, so many people from around the world, how it is that we can make freedom out of what we have — not by yielding or sacrificing some of our comrades — but by trying to live the principle where life is precious, life is precious.

CK: Like so many other people, I opened Ruthie's 2007 book "Golden Gulag" looking to understand why prisons and policing have become the answer to so many of society's problems. And why now? But in the book's first pages, Ruthie gives us the image of a bus filled with people pulling onto a road.

RWG: First of all, I'm a geographer. That is my discipline. And it might be interesting to listeners to understand that geographers don't make maps. Rather, we think about, we ask ourselves: Why do things happen where they do? Why do things happen where they do?

What I did in figuring out how to frame or introduce my book was to give the readers a sense of the expansive ground on which the prison industrial complex rose; to give the readers an understanding that there were urban and rural dimensions to it; to give the readers an understanding that there is a constant shift in the kinds of relationships people have with each other, with the means of production, with where they can and can't be in the world, and also how to struggle. And finally, I used that metaphor so that we could see, riding with those people in the bus, that there were so many different points of entry for various people to fight against the abandonment that had resulted in, among other things, mass incarceration, but also austerity, outsourcing, underemployment, environmental degradation, and the capture of the state government by those who are only ever enhancing the ability of the well-to-do to get richer.

CK: In the book, Ruthie describes the people on the bus as a dream crowd — dream riders — whose different entry points into struggle had to do with race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and religion. But they were drawn together by their sameness. As Ruthie puts it, they were "employed, disabled, or retired working people with little or no discretionary income, whose goal was freedom for their relatives serving long sentences behind bars." This struck me as so much more sophisticated than some of our mainstream discussions about who has a stake in this fight and why.

RWG: My friend the fantastic historian, Darrell Scott, always warns against trying to summon outrage and political consciousness through appeals that result in pity or contempt. Instead, what we can see in following the story in my book and the empirical data that I use to make that book happen, and the ethnographic information that I managed to put together by working with people closely on the ground is this: as the Black Lives

Matter people said so poignantly some years ago in the last uprisings, “When Black lives matter, everybody lives better.”

Now that’s different from saying only Black people know what this suffering is. Rather, what we see in police killings, for example, in the United States, is that behind the sturdy curtain of racism that makes killing after killing after killing of Black people newsworthy, noteworthy, and yet not change anything, the police are killing lots of other people too. If we can stop the police from killing Black people, other people won’t be killed. Because that’s the killing that’s so acceptable, continually is justified, and argued off as something police had no choice but to do.

So in my book, and in the research that I did, and in the political work that I have done in California, around the United States, and also internationally, I find that people can take from the multiple struggles that come together against police brutality, against police killings, against mass incarceration, against austerity, and imagine for themselves through their work how the struggle is class struggle, always, always, always.

CK: The knee jerk rejection of the concept of police and prison abolition by most mainstream politicians is based on the totally uninformed idea that what abolitionists are recommending is simply removing the police, de-carcerating, and letting the chips fall where they may. Of course, this is an incorrect and reductionist description. Instead, abolitionists have been the main ones calling attention to the relentless new investment in police and prisons.

U.S. Attorney General William Barr recently commented that he thinks calls to defund the police and reduce police budgets are “dangerous.” I asked Ruthie to talk about some of the weaknesses of the most popular explanations for the relentless expansion of the carceral state.

RWG: The first weakness is the one that says, well, the reason there are so many people in prison is crime. Do I, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, say there aren’t people who harm other people or people who engage in reprehensible acts? Of course, I don’t, I’m not a fool. I, like many abolitionists, came to abolition because we were tired of harm and we wanted to see something else happening in our communities and in the world. We didn’t come idealistically thinking that there was no such thing as harm. Rather, we looked at the political category of crime and wanted to take it apart.

[Music interlude.]

The main reason that abolitionists in the movement don’t use the word crime in a straightforward way is that it’s not a straightforward category. What gets lumped into that word, and certainly what appears in the front of people’s minds in their everyday common

sense, people who are listening to us talk are immediately rushing to understand is: Why are they talking as though people don't hurt and rob other people? That's what people think crime is.

So one question that we abolitionists ask ourselves is: What are the conditions under which it is more likely that people will resort to using violence and harm to solve problems? This is a question we ask ourselves. What can we do about it so that there is less harm? And one thing that we have learned is where life is precious, life is precious. So there are all kinds of people throughout the abolitionist world, in the United States and beyond who, for example, have tried to figure out how to reduce, if not completely do away with, the kinds of relationships that make people vulnerable to interpersonal violence, particularly of the domestic or intimate sort. So there is a huge amount of work on that. And I don't mean work that people have written up in esoteric academic journals. I mean the work that people do on the ground every day to keep themselves and their communities safe and well.

Two, the kinds of responses that the criminal system has put into effect over the last 40 years, approximately, has been to lengthen and lengthen and lengthen sentences, even though there's no evidence that a long sentence for one person who has committed some harm interrupts another person from committing some harm. Right? The only thing that we know seems to be the case is when the person who gets a long sentence is locked up, they're not committing another harm on the outside. We don't know what they're doing on the inside, but they're not committing another harm on the outside. That's a wordy way of saying: The purpose of locking people up today has pretty much been incapacitation. If you're locked up, you can't do what you were doing.

CK: Another reason to look critically at how the carceral state defines crime is the irrationality of the solutions that it presents us with. Ruthie says that incapacitation is one of four ways we are told that prisons will produce stability in our society. The other ways are through rehabilitation, deterrence, or retribution., But there is also another way that these systems of organized violence colonize more and more of our lives.

RWG: More and more kinds of behaviors — some of it antisocial, some of it not — has been criminalized over time. So there've been new crimes added to the books, as well as extended sentences and sentence enhancements — that is to say a sentence on top of the sentence — for already existing wrongdoing.

So you put all of that together and then you can see how it is that in the United States crime went up, crime went down, but then they cracked down. That the rising prison lags behind the rise and fall of crime.

That's another reason we don't talk about crime as much. What we're trying to do is get people to understand the kinds of relationships that have normalized a sense that what prisons do is natural, normal, and inevitable.

CK: One way to dig even deeper into the category and meaning of crime is to look at it historically. When I asked Ruthie about this she told me about a place in New Jersey.

RWG: In fact, in the late 18th century, one of the first prisons built in the United States, the one in Trenton — the oldest one — in downtown Trenton, New Jersey, has etched in stone above the door: "That those who are feared for their crime may learn fear of the law and be useful."

CK: One of the earliest American prisons claimed that it incarcerated people to make sure they were useful. But what did it mean to be useful for the masses of working people in the 18th century United States? To understand this, Ruthie takes us away from the United States.

RWG: So the middle of the 18th century is a time when in England, but not necessarily between and among English people, all kinds of workers were becoming disciplined to the wage. What does that mean? And this is what I've learned from the fabulous historian Peter Linebaugh. What it means is that up until this time, workers' compensation took the form of a mix of things. They would get some money pay — the wage — but also they could get some of the stuff that they were working with. So for example, a stevedore who took barrels of tobacco off a ship that had just arrived from the other side of the Atlantic could put the barrel down on the wharf, pry it open, take a handful of tobacco, put it in his pocket. And that would be part of his pay. That became outlawed because what the owners wanted to do was to make all workers accept only the money wage they got without any other kind of compensation. So then that meant also that people who worked building buildings could no longer take the bits of wood that they had sawed off home to do something else, whether it was warm their house or make something. Or people who worked making clothing in sewing shops couldn't take the remnants of fabric that they cut off the thing that they were making home to make their own things. The disciplining of those people to the wage was enforced by using the death penalty against the theft that they were convicted of — theft of the tobacco, theft of the remnants of fabric. So Linebaugh, in his fabulous book "The London Hanged," tells this story.

So we come up to the 19th century in the American project and we can use the kind of thinking that, you know, even Michel Foucault offered to us when he talked about how surveillance and punishment were key to the institutional infrastructure of control for what he called "a society of strangers" on the move, a society of strangers on the move.

So there is a disciplining intention to prisons. In the early days, sentences tended to be very short, as were lives. And we also know, if we follow very carefully, that unfree people were very rarely locked up. Unfree people who existed for their labor to be exploited, that is to say, African descended chattel slaves, were rarely locked up because it was not useful for those who owned the fruits of their labor to have them locked away. So prisons were for free people, generally white people, usually people who would check the box male if they had to check a box.

In the latter part of the 19th century, in the wake of the Civil War, as we know, prison expanded and rationalized in a number of ways in the South. We know about chain gangs, which were largely, but not exclusively, people of African descent. In the North and the South, both, all kinds of prisons grew up, around, and through these struggles over wage, over the right to live, the right to stay still, the right to move around. These were all contributing factors to the expansion and rationalization of prison in the United States so that by the end of the 19th century, under the capital "P" Progressive Movement, we saw institutions arising that regularized prisons for men, prisons for children, women, things that hadn't existed quite so starkly before as part of the expansion of large-scale governmental institutions that were designed by Progressive Era people to guarantee the ability to extract value from labor and land, right? That's what the Progressive Era was all about, in my view. So Khalil Muhammad has written about this, Estelle Freedman — a lot of people have written fantastically about the distinctions and the differentiations that shaped the Progressive Era — Nayan Shah, so many people have written really fine work.

CK: Let's be clear. Police and other systems of organized violence do not arise out of any concern for public safety. Instead, these institutions became fixtures in our society so that the powerful could guarantee their right to exploit labor and enforce social hierarchy as modern society became more complex. But Ruthie says we can't fully understand why so many people are in cages today without also exploring the geography of divestment.

RWG: In the United States, where organized abandonment has happened throughout the country, in urban and rural contexts, for more than 40 years, we see that as people have lost the ability to keep their individual selves, their households, and their communities together with adequate income, clean water, reasonable air, reliable shelter, and transportation and communication infrastructure, as those things have gone away, what's risen up in the crevices of this cracked foundation of security has been policing and prison.

Now it's not that surprising when we stop and think that if in an organized way, state and capital abandon people, something is going to arise to shape and direct what those people do who are not absorbed back into the political economy in other ways. It's really not that surprising, though it is frightening.

[Music interlude.]

So if we look then more specifically at what has happened in state and municipal budgets, we see the expansion of budgets devoted to mass incarceration, to jails, and to police. We see not only that but, in agencies that are supposed to be working toward other ends — education, health, and so forth — a rise in police functions.

One thing that we see happening, for example, is that police in schools has spread across the United States in this period. Or we can look at something as relatively technical and one would imagine benign as a student financial aid, and we see that student financial aid officers in colleges and universities have a policing function as well. Or the fact that the United States Department of Education has a SWAT team. So we see that the policing function has risen not only in the traditional agencies of the police, that is to say, police jail in prison, but also in social welfare agencies. And so it's that twinned growth that shows us that we've been so thoroughly abandoned that we have to take back, we have to take back, which is to change, transform, and move to something new.

CK: As government and corporate leaders across the United States facilitate divestment that is sanitized in the deceptive language of cost-savings and shared sacrifice, Ruthie understands why some communities also begin to look to prisons for other reasons.

California Assemblyman Jim Costa used these false promises about prisons as a way to supercharge his political career. He put three prisons in his district in the 1980s and sponsored three more in the 1990s. Ruthie describes this by saying that he "climbed the punishment ladder into the California State Senate."

RWG: When we were fighting for many, many years to stop California from building and opening its, I think it would have been the 24th new prison it would have constructed and opened over about a 23-year period, we did enormous outreach to the city of Delano, the town where that prison was to have been built.

CK: Delano provided a stark example of the difference in priorities between two different kinds of solutions. Costa responded to unemployment with the promise of jobs which would ostensibly be created by locking people in cages. Another solution, grounded in Delano's history, responded to exploitation with solidarity and collective struggle.

RWG: Delano is a central place in the imagination of agricultural workers throughout the United States because it's where the headquarters of the United Farm Workers was. The United Farm Workers that came out of organizing, that was mostly dominated in the early days by Filipino migrant workers, but eventually became strongly associated with Mexican-American — which is to say Chicano workers — and Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta are the names most strongly associated with that organization, that union, and that movement.

The UFW's headquarters was at a place in Delano called Forty Acres. Why was it called Forty Acres?

Forty Acres was named in solidarity and honor with the agricultural workers of the U.S. South, the freed people, to whom General Sherman had in his field order promised they would be granted 40 acres and a mule so that they could be self-sufficient in the wake of the U.S. Civil War.

So imagine this: in the small place, small town, city of Delano, there was already one mega-prison — thousands of people — a small prison with about 500, and the plan for a new mega-prison designed for 5,160 people slated to be built.

I did research — combed through every possible document — to try to figure out how many of the projected 1,800 jobs would likely go to residents of the city of Delano and the biggest number I could come up with was 72, out of 1,800 jobs. Seventy-two. So I told a reporter for the New York Times, a woman called Evelyn Nieves, what I had found in my research, and she repeated this to the then-mayor of Delano. This was 20 years ago. She repeated what I had said to him. And he said, well, you gotta understand, things here are so bad, I cannot, as the mayor of this town, say we don't need those 72 jobs.

Some people tried to tell us that this was peculiar somehow to California and other places, towns, and other parts of the United States were, just, benefiting enormously by having lockups in their communities.

But the more that I and some of my colleagues and comrades studied the problem, going to places like North Carolina and Minnesota and Pennsylvania, to Texas and Oklahoma, to Oregon and beyond was: It wasn't true. It wasn't true that the lockups provided what people wanted, even if the lockups provided something that people were afraid of letting go. Those are two different things.

That's what organized abandonment has done to our political imagination, to our expectation of what kinds of opportunities and protection should be available and accessible to people, modestly educated people in the prime of life. Modestly educated people in the prime of life are the people who are locked in prison and they are the people who work in prison. They are two sides of the same coin: those who have suffered organized abandonment and those who labor in the area of organized violence to keep steady the otherwise explosive conditions that people are living through.

And that kind of brings us to today. Nobody predicted the pandemic. I mean, in general, people like Mike Davis say, it's coming, it's coming. But nobody knew that eventually something was going to happen that would unsettle all of the uneasy relations between and among people who experience abandonment and those whose job it is to control the

effects of that abandonment until the pandemic. And I do think it's that objective condition — the condition of people having been told to stay home; the condition of at least 20 percent unemployment, which means it's higher throughout the United States; people tired of the ongoing, relentless assaults on people going about their everyday lives by police; sick of police killings, sick, sick, sick — that has produced the conditions that caused us to be invited by Jeremy Scahill to have this conversation.

CK: That was Ruth Wilson Gilmore in this special episode of Intercepted. We'll get back to the interview in a moment, but first I wanted to take some time for a grounding exercise. A grounding exercise is a technique that helps us to use our five senses to become present and move through states of distress or mounting anxiety. The following poem, by Greensboro artist and organizer Demetrius Noble, is entitled "Poverty, Policing, Pandemic: A #BlackLivesMatter Grounding Exercise."

Demetrius Noble: In hell. Smell that righteous rage permeating from police precincts, propane with protests. I know we're in the middle of a pandemic but I need you to pull your face mask down and smell the swell of 100,000 yells. No justice, no peace!

You can literally smell the fire of our legitimate political desires whenever wind blows. You try to hide inside but the revolutionary aroma rode in through busted windows. They found some rich rappin' negroes to denigrate the dark denizens who dared to remind Atlanta's Black mayor that they too are citizens and are tired of living in poverty in the city that leads the nation in income inequality.

With Black Lives Matter on their minds and a radical inflection point within reach, these outcasts hit the streets and told Mayor Bottoms, "Fuck your New Atlanta Compromise speech."

In hell. Can you smell the fear of orange monsters cringing in bunkers? See the actions of neo-fascists dispatching troops on unruly youngsters. Tear gassing our children 'cause they have the audacity to believe that another world is possible and won't stop until it's achieved. Smell the winds of change riding in on this new breeze. Not even your offensive line can block freedom's fragrance, Drew Brees.

See established budgets crumbling from our rumblings as we demand: "Defund the police!" See charges being filed as brilliant red fires glow. Hear the chant "Black lives matter!" as global protests grow. Hear essential workers on a picket line scream, "No, we won't go!" Feel this mighty movement from below. Witness that this powder keg is about to blow.

Take off your face mask, open your mouth and belt suppressed screams in hell and smell the city's on fire 'til you taste the kerosene.

Say their names until you can taste our pain, then join us on the frontlines as we struggle for change. Don't let these embers cool, young'un. Feed the flames .

CK: [Sigh.] Last week, after police officers in Minneapolis were charged, some people wondered why protestors and organizers were still in the streets. Of course, many different kinds of folks are in the streets for many different reasons. Princeton professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has pointed out that although Black folks are oppressed in many different areas of our lives, such as housing, healthcare, food security, police brutality and state violence are consistently the match that lights the fire of broader rebellion.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore takes up similar issues as she discusses the events leading up to the Watts rebellion in 1965.

RWG: From the mid-1960s until now, if we look at, kind of, grand indicators, one of the things that we see is a decline in union membership in the manufacturing trades. In public-sector unions, a little bit less so. And in fact, a certain amount of success up until the early nineties. We see that, at the moment that the Civil Rights movement — or what some of us like to call Second Reconstruction — was reaching its apogee with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of '64 and '65 — both of which the current United States Supreme court is gutting — we see that the economic well-being already of vulnerable communities in urban and rural contexts were already under fire.

In the Watts context, I do not dispute that people came out in the streets because one too many people had been dragged out of his car and brutalized by the cops in Watts. That is true. But it is also true that Watts was already experiencing — Watts writ large — was already experiencing what became much more the norm 10 years later, which is what I have been terming, "the organized abandonment of vulnerable communities." That jobs were leaving, that protections were leaving, that opportunities for advancement and protections from calamity were going away.

So in the early, mid-1970s, we see in the long wind-down of the Vietnam War, in the big build-up of "law and order" under Nixon, before Nixon's own lawbreaking ran him out of office, we see what the political economists Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone called "the great U-turn." And "the great U-turn" is the turn away from expanded unionization, expanded jobs, benefits, workplace protections, and the removal, bit by bit, of especially, but not exclusively, manufacturing jobs from high wage, high union states in the United States to either low wage "right to work" states or overseas. And both of those movements happen, and they call that "the great U-turn."

So the Watts riots was an expression of frustration and abandonment. And at the same time — I want to talk about schools for a moment — the school discipline policy in Los

Angeles had shifted quite dramatically from what it had been up until the passage of Brown v. Board of Education in the mid-fifties, in which school principals decided on discipline — and suspension, much less expulsion, were very rare — to a centralized school discipline policy that required suspension and expulsion. Required it.

So there were all kinds of destabilization of already struggling communities throughout the levels of age, education, and so forth, including school discipline policies that then, you know, resulted in young people's frustration with every aspect of their lives, short-term and perspective as well.

CK: The multifaceted rebellions that explode from long histories of exploitation and domestic colonialism raise an important issue. As Cathy Cohen put it in a recent episode of The Dig podcast, "What does justice for George Floyd really mean?" Ruthie offered some insight into that question.

RWG: The last story I want to leave you with is a story of the amazing late great Michael Zinzun, who was a member of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense who fought against cops and cop brutality throughout Southern California, where he was quite the organizer and political leader. Michael Zinzun in a brutal attack on him by, I think it was Pasadena police force, lost an eye and quite amazingly, in those days, he brought suit and was compensated for this harm that happened to him.

And he took those resources and founded an organization that he then ran through the rest of his life: the Coalition Against Police Abuse, CAPA. Now running the coalition out of a little tiny office with uncomfortable folding chairs in South Central L.A., Michael paid attention to all of the things that were going on around him. He didn't only look at the cops. He asked himself questions that I asked myself and I've been encouraging people who are listening to us today to ask themselves: What is it that makes people's lives vulnerable? What is it that makes people's lives vulnerable? And as you might know, I, Ruthie, have defined racism as "the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." It's a mouthful, but I'm going to make it clear in the next few minutes.

Michael Zinzun thought very hard about the fact that so many young people who are growing up in housing projects in Los Angeles were suffering from really bad asthma — very bad asthma. And in fact, kids were dying of asthma. Nobody should die of asthma. It's eminently treatable, and they were suffering and dying of asthma. And so he looked into what it was that was creating the conditions for such relentless rates of asthma in the public housing projects and in regions of low income, working-class people in Southern California. And he saw that one of the problems that people were facing was that since the

maintenance of that public housing was so dismal, the incidence of vermin infestation — mice, rats, and roaches, and also mold — was creating it, literally, an atmosphere conducive to asthma because of the roach droppings, mouse droppings, and the occasional or regular use of pesticides to deal with roaches, that all of this was contributing to the incidence of asthma.

That means that Michael Zinzun became an environmental justice activist because he was an anti-police activist, right? He was against the police because police were shortening lives. He became an environmental justice activist because the environment within the living spaces for these young people was literally killing them. And so he became, as it were, a model for what I imagine abolition to be today.

[Music interlude.]

That is to say, abolition has to be "green." It has to take seriously the problem of environmental harm, environmental racism, and environmental degradation. To be "green" it has to be "red." It has to figure out ways to generalize the resources needed for well-being for the most vulnerable people in our community, which then will extend to all people. And to do that, to be "green" and "red," it has to be international. It has to stretch across borders so that we can consolidate our strength, our experience, and our vision for a better world. So that's what I came to say to you about abolition today.

CK: Whoo! Oh my god. Thank you, Ruth Wilson Gilmore.

RWG: It's great to have been in conversation with you today.

CK: That was part one of our conversation with legendary geographer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Part two will include her reflections on how contemporary defunding campaigns connect to the broader abolition struggle. And she'll also explore some of the obstacles to police accountability. You don't want to miss it.

And that does it for this week's show. You can follow us on Twitter @Intercepted and on Instagram @InterceptedPodcast. Intercepted is a production of First Look Media and The Intercept. For this program, our executive producer is Jeremy Scahill. Our lead producer is Jack D'Isidoro. Our producer is Laura Flynn. Elise Swain is our associate producer and graphic designer. Betsy Reed is editor in chief of The Intercept. Rick Kwan mixed the show. Transcription is done by Lucie Kroening. Our music, as always, was composed by DJ Spooky. And the song in the intro was by Zeal & Ardor. Thanks to Tarpley Hitt for putting me on to that. Until next time, I'm Chenjerai Kumanyika. Stay tuned for part two with Ruth Wilson Gilmore.

Part Two: From Carceral Divestment to Community Reinvestment

[Music interlude.]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I'm Chenjerai Kumanyika and this is Intercepted.

["Talking Ghosts" by A.D. Carson featuring Bad Dreams plays.]

That was "Talking to Ghosts," by my man A.D. Carson and myself. Welcome to part two of our two-part interview with iconic geographer, organizer, and legendary prison abolitionist, Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Ruthie is professor of geography and Director of the Center for Place, Culture and Politics at the CUNY graduate center. She's co-founder of several abolitionist organizations, including Critical Resistance. And she's author of the prize-winning book, "Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California." She's also finishing up a couple of new books, including "Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition," forthcoming from Haymarket.

This is part two our conversation with Ruthie. If you missed part one, I would strongly encourage you to go check that out and then return to this episode.

As listeners will recall, in part one, Ruthie dissects and debunks the claim that systems of organized violence produce public safety. She traces the ideological nature of the concept of crime and how prisons and policing have expanded and absorbed the function of other institutions of social welfare.

The point Ruthie makes about police taking over work in many areas of life, such as school counseling, mental health, and social work, reminds me of a point that Professor Micol Seigel makes in her book "Violence Work." Seigel says that when you take away the role that the police have stolen from other areas and look at what's left, it quickly becomes clear that the police don't really have a specific job of their own, at least not one that improves the lives of working-class people.

On the question of whether police are effective at preventing harm, I'm still reeling from a much better question that Ruthie asks, which is this: "Under what kinds of social relations and relationships are people more likely to do harm to each other?"

But even under our current arrangement, other countries have proven that other kinds of workers are better than heavily armed police at dealing with those who may intend to hurt people.

Other kinds of workers can march alongside parades and assist people in health emergencies. Other kinds of workers are better equipped to investigate sexual assault and domestic violence and support survivors.

Seigel says the only real job the police have, and the real reason they're hired is to perform violence work. The graphic displays of violence that we're seeing on our television screens and in our streets are not a departure from their work. Police are hired to produce spectacular dominance that forces us to submit to an unequal status quo.

Of course, the violence that police enact is only the surface of their misconduct and toxic effect on the lives of those who wind up in their hands.

But I think the language of violence can help us to understand why police are given so much latitude in this area.

Over the past several weeks, one thing that has made the concept of prison abolition more accessible to the mainstream is the torrent of images of police blocking in protesters with their shields, and tear-gassing, choking and running over people. But against this massive visible archive of state violence is the almost insurmountable challenge of achieving any accountability. In her reflections on this, Ruthie suggests that the physical repression we see on camera is upheld by a different, less obvious site of police power.

RWG: How it is police in the United States can do what they do with impunity. Now, we know that police brutality and the impunity police have enjoyed in so many instances for so long — especially, although not exclusively when it comes to harming and killing Black people — goes back a long time. But here's the part where we could focus on today in our discussion that I think our audience ought to understand. And that is that police combine their warfare against vulnerable communities with lawfare that covers them when the blue thread, or code of silence, that stitches warfare and lawfare together comes undone.

What am I talking about? Since 1989, police have been able, under a Supreme Court ruling called Graham v. Connor, to say, "I killed this person because I feared for my life." That is the standard, which is very low, that the police use to walk — and they walk and they walk and they walk. The standard is, they say that they were afraid. And the use of fear, when you think about the fact that the people who claim to have been afraid are the ones who are armed and able to kill people and do, gives us some insight into the way that violence in the United States tends to justify and explain everything, which is to say that the political culture of America, of the United States, is one that is based on the presumption of a perpetual enemy who must always be fought, but who can never be vanquished. And this is what the police use.

Graham v. Connor is a bulwark for the police when their blue line and code of silence doesn't protect them, when the warfare that they commit becomes exposed, as it has been now with the George Floyd killing, with the Breonna Taylor killing, and with so many other killings. And the fact that police in the United States kill three people a day every day —

which is to say every eight hours, or if we think of it another way, all in a day's work — then we can understand why the call to abolish police is so fundamental to the call to restore or to create, in our society systems and structures that enhance life as precious, rather than only punish after something terrible has been done.

CK: Listening to Ruthie offer these insights, I became curious about what in her own life experience informed her analysis.

RWG: Like many people who came to the abolitionist movement that launched in the '90s, which was a reiteration of an earlier movement — or I should say an iteration — of earlier movements of prison abolition, were tired not only of the kinds of harms that we knew our communities experienced but we had, first-hand, suffered premature death of beloveds at the hands of people who shouldn't have killed them.

CK: As a journalist, I've been taught to steer into difficult questions, like these questions of trauma and loss. But I learned quickly that in my effort to get more specificity, I had played into a common trope.

RWG: You want to know the story of the death in my family? OK. All right. I'm going to say all of this and when you edit it, leave this part in, please.

It always pisses me off that I have to authorize myself to speak about crime by telling people that my beloved cousin, who is close enough to me that he was more like a brother than a cousin, was shot down in cold blood when he was 23 years old. But I tell this story so that people will open their ears and listen to me.

My cousin was a member of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. He was the minister of, I think, education for the Los Angeles chapter and he and Bunchy Carter were mowed down by bullets in a fight in Campbell Hall on the UCLA campus in January of 1969.

What he and Bunchy and other people had been fighting for that day and the reason they died, was they were students as well as Panthers, and what they were trying to do was persuade other students that the kind of curriculum the Black Studies Department at UCLA should pursue is a curriculum that would be anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-war. For the reasons that they, those two and the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, became at the top of J. Edgar Hoover's targets for destruction was that they would work with white people and other people who were not Black, that they were anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-war. That they were committed to education, breakfast programs, and other things that would realize, as the Panthers used to say, "survival pending revolution." That's why they died. And the fight in which they died was one that was instigated by the FBI under COINTELPRO, in conjunction with L.A.P.D. and other counterinsurgency forces.

Some people might say, “Well, gosh, Ruthie, why wouldn’t you want the people who killed your cousin to be locked up?” The answer is that wouldn’t bring my cousin back. If they were locked up forever, that would mean that their families would suffer as my family has suffered. And it wouldn’t solve the problems that the Black Panther Party, that other parties striving for liberation, were trying to realize in the world. All of that made me an abolitionist.

Other abolitionists can tell you their stories. We all came together, not because we thought that people in prison were innocent, but because we knew that prison wasn’t solving the problems that we in our communities were struggling to resolve.

All of them could see how the vulnerability — everyday vulnerability for modestly educated people in the prime of their life — could not be addressed in a meaningful way as long as the forces of organized violence and prison expansion took the place of solving the problems that people actually experienced.

CK: I can’t count the number of times that I have used the word “freedom” in protests here in Philadelphia, and places like Ferguson, Missouri, New York, and elsewhere.

“Back up, back up. We want freedom.” It’s a cry we use to back down the advance of police and the carceral state.

But in the introduction to Ruthie’s 2007 book “Golden Gulag,” she said something that is both disturbing and clarifying, and I’m going to quote this: “The practice of putting people in cages, for all or part of their lives, is a central feature in the development of secular states, participatory democracy, individual rights and contemporary notions of freedom.”

RWG: Concepts of freedom are constantly struggled over, circulated the planet over the last 500 years, and didn’t begin, you know, with the expansion of European colonialism and imperialism. But certainly these concepts, concepts of freedom, central to the struggle of how we make life.

So, the American project has the word “freedom” written large across every document, although “liberty” kind of more strongly than “freedom” in some places. And for some people, perhaps people for whom a reformist reform is adequate, freedom to participate in all of these institutions and agencies of opportunity and control is adequate. For others of us, that freedom isn’t enough. That freedom actually doesn’t make possible the flourishing of life as it should be, in part because it rests on an unspoken, or not spoken enough, foundation of colonialism, as well as an unspoken problem of the redress for slavery and displacement and dislocation that has characterized so much of the last 500 years.

That said, what we’re trying to do in thinking with so many people in so many places about abolition, is how can it be possible to realize a new way of being, given what it is we already

know how to do. We can look back through history or around the world now and see, for example, as Du Bois taught us in "Black Reconstruction in America," that post-Civil War communities in the South developed all kinds of institutions for well-being and opportunity and safety that did not rely on organized violence, but rather we're opening up to the possibility of greater and greater freedom through the institution of such things as public education, and so on.

We know from talking with and working with colleagues and comrades who are fighting against land grabbing, whether it's from Black farmers in Mississippi or landless peasants in Brazil or Mozambique that, given the fact that 70 percent of all the food that's consumed on this planet is still produced by small producers, that we have already there the opportunity to free ourselves from the deprivation and degradation that agribusiness produces. So this is another way of thinking about freedom. So these are, you know, some of the large ways that abolitionists are trying to think, but think concretely, about what it is people already do or already know how to do or already should be able to do if they only felt empowered, if you will, to do it.

CK: While abolitionists recognize the oppressive contradiction built into American notions of freedom that make it so difficult to gain accountability from police, they go beyond reformers, who simply want to limit the project of justice to convictions. Across the country, we've seen the emergence of campaigns to dismantle police departments and defund the police. I wanted to get Ruthie's perspective on the mainstreaming of these demands.

RWG: No abolitionist who is a true abolitionist wants to save money. What we want is for the money to be spent, to enhance, and support human life so that it can flourish in a way that doesn't destroy the planet. We're not about cost-savings. Although every so often, abolitionists will line up with people who are about cost-savings and sometimes we'll travel in the same direction for a few minutes and then generally part company.

What, therefore, we're talking about is divest from police, prisons, courts, and so forth and put those money and human resources into schools, social work, a Green New Deal or Red Green New Deal, economic activity — things that communities, municipalities, states can do. As we saw five or six weeks ago, the Congress of the United States, in connection with the administration of the United States, 45's administration, printed, which is to say created out of thin air, something on the order of a trillion dollars — a trillion dollars. Most people who are listening to this have no idea how many zeros to write down to indicate a trillion dollars as a written number. So much money. Where's that money going? If that money was loaded into helicopters and those helicopters zoomed over the United States and the money were thrown out the windows of the helicopters and it floated to the ground,

people picked it up, most people would spend what they picked up and that would make the economy hum. That's not what's happening with that trillion dollars. Most of it's going into large corporations and firms or to investment banks who will then decide the allocation. And some of it will dribble down eventually into the pockets and the hands of people who will spend it. But it's actually the spending of the money that will revive economic activity that is so harmed by Covid, and all of the effects that Covid and high unemployment are wreaking in the country.

It could be that, for some abolitionists, calling for this massive divestment-reinvestment will be the frontline demand, whereas for some people who are going in the same direction as abolitionists, the call will be for those four cops in Minneapolis to feel, to experience the full brunt of the laws that currently exist. Insofar as at the moment, we're going in the same direction, those two things can be called for at the same time. However, those four cops experiencing the full brunt of the law will not, in and of itself, change the larger structural issue that abolitionists are constantly trying to help people see, imagine, and shift.

CK: Ruthie is discussing an issue that's painful for us to talk about right now, but crucial for us to confront. If our movement is really about transforming systems of criminal punishment into something else, can we really rely on these organized systems of violence to get justice for our loved ones that have been killed by the police?

I mean, do you have thoughts about how to negotiate that in movements where there seem to be these conflicting ideas around punitiveness?

RWG: One way to talk about it is for people to think through — which is to say, talk through, feel, explore, and experience in interactions with other people — what we want to get out of punishment as against what we want the world to be like. So you'll recall that when I was talking to you in my irritation about the personal experience I had with losing a loved one, I said that what I, as well as others I've worked with closely over the years, realized was that the thirst to punish someone who hurt you is a real feeling. But the society that we want to bring into being won't come into being through a better system of punishment. Rather, it's punishment that leads people to the conclusion in the first instance that the way you deal with a problem is by killing it.

In other words, the people who killed my cousin were laying the ultimate punishment on him, weren't they? So I'm not saying they shouldn't be accountable, responsible, make some kind of restitution to my then bereaved aunt and uncle and cousins, and the community that my cousin was part of. Of course those things should happen in the way that will make the society we want to live in then and subsequently, rather than punish and then pretend that punishment fixes things. Punish then pretend that punishment fixes

things. So that is one aspect of the problem that we try to address and that many people who, for example, have turned away from carceral feminism in the effort to reduce, and try to eliminate, instances of violence against women and domestic violence. They are trying to figure out how to achieve the society we want rather than to punish more swiftly and surely the people who punish people for being alive.

The threat of violence and actual expression of violence — interpersonal — only produces more of itself. This is the knot we're trying to untangle: knowing how difficult it is to let go of the feeling — which is real, I'm not saying it's not real — to let go of the feeling that you want to hurt somebody who hurt you. We can't make a life that way. Not for your 11-month old daughter. Not for all my little nieces and nephews and grand-nieces and nephews and all of the children on the Earth. There are billions more people on this planet than there were when I was born. Billions, billions. What can we do together as humans living well on the planet instead of living poorly and destroying the planet? Those are the questions we ask ourselves.

Now, some number of people have gathered periodically over the last 20 or 25 years who have insisted there is a "bipartisan" way to reform the excesses of the criminal system in the United States. In my view, bipartisan criminal justice reform is nonsense. It's nonsense for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it's nonsense because it purports to be able to identify the people who should not be punished and set aside all those who should be punished. To label those who should be punished, the people "we are afraid of," those are new Gingrich's words, and leave them aside in perpetual punishment. While a few people, who we might call the low-hanging fruit, get some kind of relief, whether that relief is decriminalization or something like house arrest or E-carceration, that kind of thing. Meanwhile, the people who are participating in these bipartisan reforms are very busily and somewhat effectively, as Kay Whitlock has shown in her fantastic writing, trying to relieve white-collar business type wrongdoing of any kind of accountability in a court of law.

CK: Ruthie and I discussed the sophisticated, but deceptive and harmful way that the myth of a bipartisan coalition allows conservatives and libertarians to exploit the experience of the most vulnerable as a way to reduce accountability for the most powerful.

RWG: Many of the kinds of rules or constraints that they are trying to bust down — and some of the "they" in this instance are people like from Olin Foundation or the Koch Brothers or the Manhattan Institute, you know, the right-wing think tanks — what they are trying to bust down is anything that gets between them and their ability to extract value from labor and land. And, furthermore, what they're trying to get around is being responsible for any bad effects of their business decisions and practices if it can't be proved that they engaged in these business practices knowing and intending to harm

people. Therefore, if they do some kind of work, let's say in a city called Flint, that poisons the water that the people of Flint will drink, the capitalist firm — the establishment or establishments responsible for poisoning the water that humans rely on — can't be held responsible if they didn't intend to poison the water knowing that humans would die.

CK: Oh, wow.

RWG: Do you understand what I'm saying?

CK: The way in which this links to the kind of, what you called, "lawfare" that has emerged to protect police officers.

RWG: Thank you. You made my day.

CK: And that does it for this week's show. You can follow us on Twitter @Intercepted and on Instagram @Interceptedpodcast. Intercepted is a production of First Look Media and The Intercept. For this program, our executive producer is Jeremy Scahill. Our lead producer is Jack D'Isidoro. Our producer is Laura Flynn. Elise Swain is our associate producer and graphic designer. Betsy Reed is editor in chief of The Intercept. Rick Kwan mixed the show. Transcription is done by Lucie Kroening. I'm Chenjerai Kumanyika.