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Slow Violence and Racial Capitalism: Understanding Mass Incarceration Through a Case Study of the California Prison System

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SLOW VIOLENCE AND RACIAL CAPITALISM: UNDERSTANDING MASS INCARCERATION
THROUGH A CASE STUDY OF THE CALIFORNIA PRISON SYSTEM

By

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Thesis Summary

This thesis will analyze the growth of the California prison system, situating it in the national context of mass incarceration in the United States. In Ruth Wilson Gilmore's book *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Gilmore utilizes the theory of racial capitalism to explain the history and development of the California prison system. By analyzing Gilmore's arguments about racial capitalism and integrating them with Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence from his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, this thesis provides a new perspective in the current discourse around mass incarceration. This thesis will demonstrate that, when used in conjunction, racial capitalism and slow violence provide a more thorough understanding of mass incarceration in the United States and the ways in which it disproportionately harms two major groups: racial minorities and the poor.

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Introduction

Mass incarceration is a significant problem in the United States, and it is important to have a complete understanding of what it is, how it developed, and the impacts that it has on people and society. This thesis starts with a brief overview of mass incarceration and the traditional understanding of how incarceration and the prison system expanded through the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. This will be followed by an introduction of racial capitalism and slow violence, the two theories through which mass incarceration will be analyzed. An analysis of Ruth Wilson Gilmore's book *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* will follow in five sections. The first section will provide an alternate interpretation of prisons and their function, and the second section will examine California's growth through the twentieth century as a "racial capitalist state" (Gilmore 34). The third section details the physical expansion and siting of new prisons in California, and that will be followed by a case study of Corcoran, a small California town where a new prison was built in the 1980s. The fifth section introduces Mothers ROC, a Los Angeles-based organization started by mothers opposed to the treatment of youth by the criminal justice system. Throughout this analysis of *Golden Gulag*, this thesis will incorporate Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, putting it in dialogue with Gilmore's theories. The thesis concludes with an examination of a broader system of slow violence that California's prison system is part of, identifying the need for further interdisciplinary study.

Traditional Understanding of Mass Incarceration

The term mass incarceration describes the state of the United States criminal justice system, which incarcerates people at a higher rate than any other country in the world. Even though the U.S. only makes up around 5 percent of the global population, it imprisons almost 25 percent of the world's prison population (NAACP 2022). There are also racial disparities in the U.S. correctional system, within which Black Americans are incarcerated at a rate over five times as high as the rate of white Americans (NAACP 2022). The number of people incarcerated in the U.S. in 2015 was over four times as high as the number from 1980, and even though crime rates have been falling over the past several decades, the number of people in prison continued to climb through the beginning of the twenty-first century (NAACP 2022).

The traditional narrative around the growth of mass incarceration in the United States involves policy changes that arose in the late twentieth century, which were designed to fight the perceived notion that there was widespread crime endangering communities. While social movements like the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s brought about significant change and worked to undo institutional racism, segregation, and disenfranchisement in the United States, their underlying views about reform and equality did not reach the criminal justice system. One of the first significant policy shifts started with the War on Poverty campaign under President Lyndon B. Johnson. This campaign aimed to address what was seen as one of the primary social issues of the time, and it established a variety of welfare programs, including Medicare, Medicaid, and a federal food stamp program. While Johnson's fight against poverty was progressive in nature, it reinforced institutional racism through a focus on "crime and delinquency in urban areas," which was associated with the rise of radical Black politics through organizations like the Black Panther Party. This focus on crime culminated in the Omnibus

Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, a piece of legislation signed by Johnson in 1968 that shifted the balance of law enforcement and initiated a movement towards more federal crime policy (Brown 221). Federal law enforcement had more influence over local law enforcement, leading to a larger, more uniform, and more militarized police force, particularly in urban areas (Brown 221). These new policies had bipartisan support throughout the country, reflecting the changing beliefs of the American people concerning criminal justice and crime control.

As general crime and violent crime rates rose throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, Richard Nixon pushed an agenda of law and order, asserting in his 1970 State of the Union address that the government “must declare and win the war against the criminal elements which increasingly threaten our cities, our homes, and our lives” (Nixon, “Annual Message”). In an address to Congress, he identified drug abuse as one of his targets, effectively starting the period known as the War on Drugs: “Within the last decade, the abuse of drugs has grown from essentially a local police problem into a serious national threat to the personal health and safety of millions of Americans” (Nixon, “Special Message”). Between 1969 and 1973, the federal law enforcement budget tripled, and federal aid to state and local law enforcement increased from \$60 million to nearly \$800 million (Kilgore 29). Even with this strategy, the crime rate continued to increase through Nixon’s presidency, and he did not gain strong public support for his approach. While Jimmy Carter attempted to reverse some of the changes that Nixon made during his presidency, inflation and unemployment rates rose in the late 1970s. Advocates for Nixon’s law and order policies argued that the economic decline was a result of the Civil Rights movement and other social movements of the past two decades, “laying the groundwork for a revival of a tougher approach to lawbreaking” (Kilgore 31).

While Johnson and Nixon initiated the political processes that started the country on the path to mass incarceration, the most significant changes occurred during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. Reagan revitalized Nixon's "warlike approach to crime" after Carter shifted the federal focus away from it, and the incarcerated population in the U.S. more than doubled during his two-term presidency, due in part to the passage of the 1984 Federal Sentencing Guidelines that allowed for a greater number of prosecutions and longer sentences (Kilgore 31). Bill after bill was passed under the Reagan and Clinton administrations, making changes like increasing mandatory minimum prison sentences and designating offenses as more severe crimes, and they continuously received bipartisan support in Congress. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, also referred to as the 1994 Crime Bill, allotted \$9.7 billion of the federal budget to prison construction (Kilgore 31). By the time Clinton left office in 2001, "federal, state, and local corrections expenditures had reached a total of \$57 billion a year, more than eight times the level of 1980" (Kilgore 32). The national push towards prison expansion and the 'tough on crime' narrative was felt throughout the country, impacting decisions made on local and state levels throughout the late twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first century.

Racial Capitalism and Slow Violence

While the above explanation for mass incarceration and the growth of the U.S. correctional system is the most common and traditionally accepted, there are alternative theories, including the idea of racial capitalism that geographer and prison scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore explores in her book *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Racial capitalism does not have one standard definition, but the variations on its

definition always involve the interconnected nature of racism and capitalism, which Gilmore argues are inseparable. She asserts that racial capitalism is “all of capitalism,” because capitalism “will continue to depend on racial practice and racial hierarchy no matter what” (“Geographies of Racial Capitalism”). In *Golden Gulag*, Gilmore only uses the term “racial capitalist” once, but she continuously analyzes the relationship between capital and race, demonstrating how they interact and contribute to the growth of the prison system in California.

Slow violence, a term coined by Rob Nixon in his 2011 book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, is also a lens through which mass incarceration in the United States can be examined. Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). He describes a kind of violence that he applies to phenomena such as climate change, acidification of oceans, or deforestation, which cause environmental and human damage over long periods of time. This violence is “neither spectacular nor instantaneous” like genocide or war, but rather “incremental and accretive,” making it more difficult to clearly identify as violence under its traditional definition (Nixon 2). While slow violence has primarily been used in environmental studies in the past decade, many of the characteristics that define slow violence can be applied to mass incarceration and its effects on communities, particularly those with high concentrations of Black residents and those heavily impacted by poverty.

Slow violence was not a term that was used when Ruth Wilson Gilmore wrote *Golden Gulag* in 2007, but elements from Nixon’s analysis in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* can be seen in Gilmore’s discussion of California’s period of prison growth in the late twentieth century. In addition, Gilmore’s detailed analysis of racial capitalism is mostly

contained to the causes of prison growth and mass incarceration, and though there are moments where she addresses some of the effects of these changes, her primary focus is on the causes. Slow violence is a valuable theory for understanding mass incarceration and prison growth, and it adds to racial capitalism through the ways in which it reflects the effects that these structures have on people impacted by the U.S. correctional system. This thesis will demonstrate that, when used in conjunction, racial capitalism and slow violence provide a more thorough understanding of mass incarceration in the United States and the ways in which it disproportionately harms two major groups: racial minorities and the poor.

Rethinking Prisons: Crisis and Control

Ruth Wilson Gilmore starts *Golden Gulag* by describing the changes that occurred in the California prison system in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Between 1984 and 2005, California constructed twenty-three major prisons and thirteen smaller community corrections facilities, which are almost entirely state-owned, state-operated, and state-funded. Along with the physical prison growth, the state prisoner population grew by almost 500 percent from 1982 to 2000. Around two-thirds of this prisoner population was made up of Black Americans and Latinos (Gilmore 7). Most of the prisoners in California come from urban areas, and over 80 percent were represented by state-appointed lawyers, reflecting that, “as a class, convicts are deindustrialized cities’ working or workless poor” (Gilmore 7). While not explicitly linked yet, race and income are two significant indicators for who ends up in prison. Gilmore immediately makes the connection between race, income, and incarceration, creating the initial framework for her arguments about racial capitalism.

In order to see how mass incarceration through the perspective of racial capitalism differs from the traditional narrative, it is important to differentiate between the different purposes that a prison can be understood to have. Gilmore addresses four common theories that attempt to explain why people are locked away in prisons: retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, and incapacitation (14). Retribution involves the belief that, because of the loss of freedom that they experienced in prison, former prisoners will not repeat the same mistake that sent them there in the first place. The theory of deterrence stops people from making those same mistakes the first time since they can imagine themselves in prison, and they similarly fear that loss of freedom. Rehabilitation involves the belief that prisons are designed to help inmates acquire skills and overcome the issues that had pulled them into the criminal world, and the incapacitation argument contends that prisoners cannot cause problems outside of prison if they are incarcerated.

Gilmore asserts that incapacitation is the basis of California's prison growth. She emphasizes the importance of place in her analysis:

Incapacitation doesn't pretend to change anything about people except where they are. It is in a simpleminded way, then, a geographical solution that purports to solve social problems by extensively and repeatedly removing people from disordered, deindustrialized milieus and depositing them somewhere else. (14)

She argues that prisons are a means for "the government-organized and -funded dispersal of marginalized people from urban to rural locations" (11), continuing to imply a relationship between prisons and marginalization. Gilmore sees incarceration as a means of pushing social problems to the periphery, rather than addressing the structures that cause them. By displacing people from urban to rural locations, they are moved out of sight, a key element of Rob Nixon's

theory of slow violence. When the social problems that are being sidestepped are rooted in demographic characteristics like race and income, this process exacerbates already existing inequalities.

Gilmore differentiates her analysis from the traditional history of mass incarceration through her descriptions of law and crime:

Defined in the simple terms of the secular state, crime means a violation of the law. Laws change, depending on what, in a social order, counts as stability, and who, in a social order, needs to be controlled. (12)

The explanation that mass incarceration developed as a result of the political War on Crime is dependent on the idea that crime is the driving problem in society that needs to be fixed. Even though crime rates were decreasing by the end of the twentieth century, the public perception, influenced by politicians and the media, was that crime was still something to fear, and incarceration rates continued to rise. Gilmore identifies and uses this societal perception in her analysis of crime, arguing that changes in the social order define how laws are created and enforced, which in turn affects what is treated as crime. The key part of this analysis is the “who” that “needs to be controlled” (Gilmore 12), which will show how race and capital interact to create mass incarceration.

Growth of California as a “Racial Capitalist State”

California was a rapidly developing state throughout the twentieth century, with an economy that was initially centered around agriculture and a dominant cotton industry. As the state went through quick urbanization and industrialization, it also became a center of military production during World War II, drawing in millions of new residents, many of whom were

Black. Federal military investment continued for decades following the conclusion of the war, and the state continued to grow in terms of both the economy and the population, which doubled from 1950 to 1970 (Gilmore 37-8). Even though the economy was growing, the number of military production jobs shrunk following the end of World War II, and many Black Americans were pushed out of the industry into lower-paying job sectors. Poverty was concentrated in areas with high Black populations, and this economic inequality was exacerbated by a recession from 1969-70. The recession led to significant cuts in military spending, causing the California economy to plummet and the unemployment rate to nearly double. The economic conditions caused by the recession “set the stage for California’s restructuring” (Gilmore 40) alongside President Nixon’s push for law and order as “the appropriate response to domestic insecurity” (Gilmore 40).

While the economy of California was struggling due to the recession, the demographics of the state were also changing. Immigration, especially of Central American agricultural workers, continued during this period, and as Gilmore notes, “the social structure as a whole began to come apart because of the raw, numerical threat to white supremacy represented by unorganized, but densely concentrated, new and old Californians of color” (42). To white Californians, and most significantly those with political power, the declining economy was linked inextricably to the changing racial makeup of the state.

As California started to restructure and shift away from military production, the economic focus of the state shifted from labor to capital, essentially placing greater value on profit and less on the people and welfare. Public opinion changed alongside these state ideals, and Californians elected government officials who doubled down on the national narrative that crime was the root of the economic problems that Americans were suffering from. Ruth Wilson

Gilmore argues that California's economic and political state constituted a crisis, which she defines as something that is "spatially and sectorally uneven, leading to different outcomes for different kinds of people in different kinds of places" (55). Instead of just a response to crime, she argues that this crisis comes from surplus, and that the "problems arising from overaccumulation—what makes surplus crisis—are not only economic, but also political, and therefore social" (56). She identifies four surpluses – finance capital, land, labor, and state capacity – that "were key to the size and strength of the California prison expansion project" (57), creating social and economic incentives for greater incarceration in the state.

California had wealth despite the economic crises many of its people were facing, and since it was not investing a lot of money into infrastructure and public institutions in the 1970s, it had a surplus of capital and state capacity. These two surpluses allowed the state to invest in an expansion of the prison system and enact policy changes that would fund and support increased incarceration. In addition, a combination of "drought, debt, and development" led to farmland being taken out of production, and while some of it was used for suburban development, there was an excess of unused land that could be used as prison sites (Gilmore 68). Surplus labor also played a role in California's prison expansion, particularly in the number of people incarcerated. As labor force growth exceeded employment growth in the early 1980s, the incarcerated population significantly increased (Gilmore 72). In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon describes the "'surplus people' who were deemed superfluous to the labor market", people who are "designated expendable and driven... out of sight" (151). The same phenomenon was seen in California as surplus people, disproportionately poor and non-white, were forcibly removed through incarceration and pushed out of sight as the prison system grew.

Amidst the large-scale economic changes that California was undergoing, the economic and social relationships between the residents of California were also becoming more strained and more divided:

Poverty more than doubled. Racist and nationalist confrontations heightened, driven by the widely held—if incorrect—perception that the state’s public and private resources were too scarce to support the growing population, and that some people therefore had to go. (Gilmore 70)

Between 1979 and 1989, Black men were 30 percent more likely to lose their permanent jobs than white men, and the percentage of Black men with steady employment had dropped dramatically from just two decades earlier (Gilmore 75). Around the same time, Mexican American income had dropped below the level it used to be at a couple decades earlier, and unemployment rates among racial minorities were increasing at much higher rates than the rates for white workers (Gilmore 76). The economic struggles of the state clearly impacted people differently depending on their race, and these trends only continued as California “[re]built itself in part by building prisons” (Gilmore 85).

Developing New Prisons

The four surpluses that Ruth Wilson Gilmore identified contributed to the prison boom in California, but they were part of a broader context involving changes in state laws, the perception of crime, and the economic impacts of expanding a major industry. State prisons were seen as a means of producing jobs, expanding the state economy, and addressing crime, which was still being promoted as *the* national issue that needed to be fixed in order for Americans to achieve safety and prosperity. As part of the state’s embrace of the ‘tough on crime’ approach to

law enforcement, it began to pass a wide array of new laws that shifted focus away from rehabilitation. One of the first laws was the 1977 Uniform Determinate Sentencing Act, which “was California’s formal abdication of any responsibility to rehabilitate, stating neatly: ‘[T]he purpose of imprisonment for crime is punishment’” (Gilmore 91). Given its plans to significantly expand the state prison system, California also needed to incarcerate more people in order to fill these prisons. The increase in incarceration started with numerous changes to the criminal justice system, including new drug laws with mandatory minimums, harsher classifications of certain offenses, and a new State Task Force on Youth Gang Violence to address “street terrorism” (Gilmore 96), a catch-all term for offenses that could be loosely interpreted as gang-related activities.

These new prisons also had to be funded somehow, and “the new prison construction program, in its infancy in 1983, constituted an excellent long-term opportunity for capital investment” (Gilmore 99). California’s initial source of funding, general obligation bonds, required approval from the state’s voters, but a transition to lease revenue bonds enabled the state to work around the electorate and fund the prison expansion project with approval from only the state legislature. This source of capital enabled California to pursue a new approach, spearheaded by the California Department of Corrections (CDC), to build as many new prisons as possible. Once the financial problem was solved and the legal means for incarcerating more people were in place, the only question that needed to be addressed was where to put the new prisons.

There are a lot of negative associations with prisons, and one of the primary ones that emerges through resistance to prison construction is the fear that people have about the safety of their community. California and the CDC needed public approval of where the new prisons were going to be constructed, and they had to campaign on the promise of economic growth in the

communities surrounding these new prisons. The best sites for new prisons were typically more rural, agricultural areas because of the availability of land and water, which are necessary for such a large-scale development. These locations were also typically poorer areas, often majority Mexican American. State officials “presumed that the promise of jobs would offset the hesitancy of a working-class community of color to have a prison located in its midst.” (Gilmore 103). In an area where there were not many employers, a new prison development could be framed as an opportunity for economic development and job growth, something that could be difficult for a community to pass up. California, in other words, took advantage of the economic vulnerability of racial minorities in order to build their new prisons. Prison expansion provided California with a needed economic boost, which was seen as justification for any harm that would be inflicted on the local community by the presence of new prisons. This principle is an element of slow violence, where economic incentives for the state or country outweigh the violence that underprivileged people endure as a result. Resource extraction or the dumping of toxic waste in the global South, for example, tend to benefit Western countries as they transfer the negative effects to places that are less visible. This concept can be seen within California with the development of a new prison in Corcoran.

Racial Capitalism in Corcoran

Ruth Wilson Gilmore introduces Corcoran as a town that is representative of sites where new prisons are constructed:

Long dominated by a few firms in a single industrial sector, the town is majority Latino, unemployment and poverty are two to five times the statewide averages, and the land converted to prison use was formerly irrigated cropland. (129)

Corcoran had developed as part of an agricultural region that was dominated by large cotton-producing farms. As a result of a long drought followed by consecutive flood years in the 1970s, farms struggled to grow and produce, and in turn, the labor force was severely impacted. Going into the 1980s, property values dropped, unemployment for seasonal farm workers was between 30 and 50 percent, and as a result, child poverty rates ran at over 30 percent (Gilmore 146-8). While the people of Corcoran were “stuck in space” due to their financial difficulties, they also felt a deep connection to their town that, “while organized in a race and class hierarchy, was also a place proud of its small-town ethic of care” where “Mexicano/Chicano and African American subcultures flourished in the interstices of the dominant paternalistic Anglo social structure” (Gilmore 146). These characteristics are similar to those of the victims of slow violence, people who do not have the freedom to leave their homes due to economic circumstances, but also because of ties to ancestral land. The CDC promised short-term and long-term benefits to the people of Corcoran, including temporary construction jobs, permanent prison jobs, a boost to the local economy when the CDC buys goods for the facility, and donated labor from future inmates.

While there was some local resistance to building a new prison in Corcoran, this primarily came from white residents who were worried about living so close to dangerous people and their families. In the debate around the prison, “poverty and joblessness were constant subjects of discussion, [but] race and class were not” (Gilmore 155), although the two were inherently linked in a town where a disproportionate number of people living in poverty were from racial minorities. Race was used, though, as a critique against the prison opponents, who were portrayed as having “careless or willful disregard of underemployed Chicano and Black workers who desperately needed jobs” (Gilmore 154). The supporters of building a new prison won out in the end, but the economic benefits that the residents of Corcoran expected did not

come to fruition. Fewer than 10 percent of the jobs at the Corcoran prison were given to Corcoran residents, and the vast majority of other employees moved to larger towns nearby and commuted to work (Gilmore 158-9). Poverty rates continued to rise in Corcoran, even after the prison was built, and the local economic crisis was largely in the same place as it was before.

Corcoran is a prime example of the ways in which the concept of racial capitalism explains the growth of prisons and mass incarceration in the United States. There was no crime wave that could justify the expansion of the state's prison capacity, so the decision had to be primarily an economic one to persuade the public (Gilmore 174). While the residents of Corcoran were promised economic growth and tangible benefits from the construction of a new prison, they received very little:

Corcoran's experience is in key ways typical: when measured by jobs for current residents, residential development, locally sited related industries and services, or consumer retail, prisons have not delivered even on the modest employment and growth projections derived from the CDC's categorical assurances. (Gilmore 175)

When a town suffers from high unemployment and poverty rates, "a single new job is a benefit" (Gilmore 176), and the residents are left with little choice when it comes to supporting a new development that brings with it the potential of new job opportunities. Similarly, victims of slow violence from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* – economically and politically vulnerable – do not typically have a choice when it comes to the environmental degradation that harms them and their homes. In California, the towns that were typically chosen as sites for these new prisons often had high Black or Mexican American populations, and these residents were also the people that were disproportionately affected by increased incarceration rates:

African American prisoners surpassed all other groups in 1988, but by 1995, they had been overtaken by Latinos; however, Black people have the highest rate of incarceration of any racial/ethnic grouping in California, or, for that matter, in the United States.

(Gilmore 111)

The expansion of the prison system was driven by capital, and it was a way for California to handle some of the surpluses that it experienced due to the economic restructuring that started in the 1970s. The physical space of prisons occupied the surplus land that had lost its agricultural value, and prisons functioned by “round[ing] up persons who correspond[ed] demographically to those squeezed out of restructured labor markets” (Gilmore 114), persons who were disproportionately racial minorities. Race and capital are intertwined, and their inseparable relationship was crucial to the growth of California prison system.

Mothers Reclaiming Our Children: Slow Violence in Los Angeles

This relationship between race, capital, and prisons is evident in urban California, as well as in rural towns like Corcoran. Ruth Wilson Gilmore shifts her focus in *Golden Gulag*, turning her attention to Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC), an organization started in Los Angeles in 1992 in response to “the intensity with which the state was locking their children, of all ages, into the criminal justice system” (181). Mothers ROC began as a small group of mothers who would pass out pamphlets, give talks at community spaces, and make occasional media appearances, but they grew into a larger, not-for-profit organization over the course of a few years. Through Mothers ROC, Gilmore examines the impacts that mass incarceration has on people impacted by the justice system, as well as their communities as a whole. Her ideas about racial capitalism intersect with Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence, reflecting some of the

ways in which these two theories can fit together and lead towards a better understanding of mass incarceration.

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, one of Rob Nixon's central tenets of slow violence is that the main victims of slow violence are the poor. They are an "out-of-sight" (2) population, and "their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of the slow violence that permeates so many of their lives" (4). Violence is typically a concept that is linked to a specific event at a specific time – something that can be measured in casualties and physical destruction. Nixon challenges this idea of violence, arguing that violence can be invisible, harming people and communities over long periods of time. The growth of mass incarceration and the United States prison system has damaged communities in terms of economic status, health, and social and family relationships, but these effects happen over periods of time that are often too large to intuitively connect them back to the prisons and incarceration. Slow violence is a way to understand how this happens, situating Mothers ROC and *Golden Gulag* within a broader framework of inequality and violence across time and space.

After its formation, Mothers ROC initially appealed most strongly to Black mothers and other mothers of color, a demographic that corresponded to the trends in the state economy and prison system:

California's deep political-economic restructuring reconfigured the social reproductive landscape, as well as the world of work. The condition of surplus labor falls most heavily on modestly educated men in the prime of life from Black and other households of color in Los Angeles; such men are also overrepresented among CDC prisoners. Fully 40 percent of state prisoners come from Los Angeles County, and 70 percent from the Southland. (Gilmore 184-5)

Unemployment and race were both factors that influenced how likely it was that a person would end up in prison, where poor people of color were disproportionately incarcerated. In a rural town like Corcoran or in a major city like Los Angeles, the same patterns emerged. Even with different demographics, different industries and job opportunities, and different locations, poverty was a constant indicator for who would be most impacted by incarceration.

Gilmore cites one of Mothers ROC's beliefs about the relationship between poverty and prison: "We are not poor because our loved ones are in prison; rather, our loved ones are in prison because we are poor" (237). While Gilmore demonstrates how poverty, primarily through its role in a capitalist system, was a major contributor to prison growth and mass incarceration in California, her views and the views of Mothers ROC focused solely on the causes of incarceration and not the effects. In reality, it goes both ways: people are in prison because they are poor, and people are also poor because they, or their family members, are in prison. Economic inequalities directly influence who gets incarcerated, and incarceration in turn intensifies those inequalities, inflicting slow violence as the economic effects are felt over long periods of time. Mothers ROC saw that they were restricted in the labor market, stuck with low-paying jobs and little opportunity for growth:

The women reported from experience what scholars prove again and again: in the United States, certain types of people have access to certain types of jobs. For Black people looking out from the jail-like complex of Imperial Courts, the landscape of legitimate work was bleak: an expanse of big, empty factories, minimum-wage service jobs in retail or home health care, unreliable, slow, and expensive public transportation, and bad schools leading nowhere in terms of education and skills. (Gilmore 200)

Working minimum-wage jobs keeps people in poverty, and when a family member is incarcerated, the issue is only exacerbated. If an incarcerated person was previously employed, their family loses that income, which they may have been relying on to afford necessities like food, rent or mortgage, and car payments. Visiting family in prison also has a financial cost; a study of a California state prison found that the average monthly cost for visiting, calling, and sending packages was nearly \$300 (Grinstead et al. 64). Women in the lowest income category of the study spent an average of 26 percent of their income on prison visits, demonstrating the significant cost to the spouses and families of incarcerated people (Grinstead et al. 66).

Incarceration often leads to additional costs related to housing, as well, as people move to be closer to the prison where their family member is being held. Other housing costs arise from evictions, which often result from a family member's incarceration and the subsequent loss of a portion of their household income. Formerly incarcerated people also face discrimination in the job market, making it more difficult for them to find a steady source of income and perpetuating the conditions of poverty that may have contributed to their imprisonment. The detrimental effects of incarceration extend beyond incarceration itself, and as long as formerly incarcerated people have criminal records, they can feel these effects for the rest of their life. The economic damage that is inflicted over time on incarcerated people and their families occurs on a temporal scale that is difficult to observe and measure, demonstrating characteristics of slow violence.

In addition to the financial toll that incarceration takes on those incarcerated and their families, there is an emotional and physical toll that can be detrimental to their health. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon shows how a variety of different events from resource extraction to the construction of “megadams” result in “declining barometers of quality of life: nutrition, health, infant mortality, [and] life expectancy,” along with additional

environmental measures (152). The health effects that result from slow violence are inflicted on marginalized people in a way that is viewed differently than when it happens to people who are more privileged. Nixon references a memo from Lawrence Summers, the former president of the World Bank, in which he argues in favor of dumping toxic waste from the U.S. and Europe in Africa because pollution is not a significant issue there. In the U.S. and Europe, the toxic waste is seen as a health concern and an environmental hazard, but in order to protect the health of Americans and Europeans, the health of Africans is put at risk. The same beliefs that underlie this proposal, which would inflict slow violence on the African people and endanger their health over time as the toxic waste seeps into the land and water, are reflected in the prison system in the United States. People who are deemed to be criminals are incarcerated to protect the perceived well-being of society as a whole, but this comes at a heavy cost to those incarcerated and those close to them.

While health is not a topic that Gilmore analyzes in detail, she identifies several of the health implications that can arise from interactions with the prison system. The women of Mothers ROC consistently experienced what they saw as injustices through contact with law enforcement and the court system, with family members being arrested, convicted for crimes, and given severe prison sentences in cases where there was not strong evidence against them. These experiences brought up questions about the purpose of incarceration and the effects it has on people that are forced to interact with the system:

Does the state's discipline work? Does it terrorize everyone into silence, by dividing the "good" from the "bad," by intensifying anxieties that lead to premature deaths due to alcoholism and drug addictions (including cigarettes), heart disease, suicide, crimes of

passion, and other killers that relentlessly stalk the urban working and workless poor.

(Gilmore 197)

Having an incarcerated family member typically increases stress levels, results in less time for health-related activities, and can lead to less social support, which are all factors that can contribute to poorer mental health (Wildeman and Wang 1469). For children, incarceration of a parent is associated with behavioral and mental health problems, as well as increased risks for developing anxiety and depression (Wildeman and Wang 1469). Additionally, incarcerated people themselves have higher prevalence of infectious diseases, chronic medical conditions, substance abuse disorders, and mental health disorders when compared to the non-incarcerated population (Wildeman and Wang 1467).

Racial disparities are also evident in these health outcomes, which is almost inevitable due to the high incarceration rates of people of color, and particularly Black Americans:

Because men who experience incarceration are connected to families, their incarceration can have implications for the health and wellbeing of women and children as well.

Furthermore, because of the vast racial disparities in the risk of experiencing incarceration, the spillover effects of incarceration for family members could have implications not only among men but also among whole communities, divided along racial and ethnic lines. (Wildeman and Wang 1466)

Many of these health effects are not evident on the surface level, and they are only visible through specific public health research. They are invisible and not eye-catching, and as a result, they are often overlooked. Nixon writes in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* that “in the long arc between the emergence of slow violence and its delayed effects, both the causes and the memory of catastrophe readily fade from view as the casualties incurred typically

pass untallied and unremembered” (8-9). The act of incarceration only affects a single person at a time, but the effects spread beyond the incarcerated in often unseen ways. These effects are felt on multiple scales, harming individuals, families, and whole communities over long periods of time, but they are not often connected back to where they started with mass incarceration and the prison system.

A System of Slow Violence

When the effects of violence are not immediately felt and observed, they are “decoupled from [their] original causes by the workings of time” (Rob Nixon 11). The impacts of mass incarceration on individuals, families, and communities may not be felt for years, decades, or even generations, but that does not mean they are any less significant. In the epilogue of *Golden Gulag*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes a group of anti-prison activists, laying out their reasoning for why so many children were ending up in prison:

Kids who miss a lot of school generally do not graduate, and young people without high school diplomas are more likely than those with credentials to wind up in cages. She and her friends asked why their kids were more likely to miss school, and through observation, arrived at a cause: They were sick a lot. What kind of illnesses? Asthma. Why would kids in East Los Angeles have higher than normal rates of asthma; in other words, why is asthma a disease of the poor? Their reasoning took them further, and in studying about the breathing disorder, they discovered that restricted airway disease is caused by certain environmental contaminants—toxic substances that are common in their area, which abuts on LA’s mini-steel-mill district. (250)

This passage reflects how the slow violence of mass incarceration is part of a larger system: a system that encompasses all parts of society, from education to health to politics to the environment. Fully understanding the impact of mass incarceration and the growth of the prison system, both at the state and national level, would require research into many different areas of study over long periods of time. There are likely additional outcomes of mass incarceration that have not been felt yet, and it is important not to forget their origin point, even after long periods of time have passed.

Nixon describes casualties of slow violence as “the casualties most likely not to be seen, not to be counted” (13). In the case of California, these casualties are more often than not the poor, working-class people of racial minorities that live in the state and experienced the social, political, and economic changes that came along with the growth of its prison system. The development of the new prisons was driven by capitalism, a system inseparable from its own racial disparities, and the desire to make use of idle land and get excess workers off the streets, as well as by a broader national narrative to crack down on crime. Adding Rob Nixon’s theory of slow violence to Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s analysis of racial capitalism broadens the scope of mass incarceration and the growth of the prison system, incorporating both causes and effects, and allows for further research and understanding.

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