

Ruth Wilson Gilmore -- Keynote

These words, these remarks are in memory of Rose Braz and for all the ancestors present. We can see across the terrain of racial capitalism, how carceral geographies organized or disorganized all kinds of communities involved in many kinds of struggles, often all at once. Decolonization, struggles against environmental harms, struggles for the right to stay put and the right to move. Struggles for adequate income, protections from calamity, opportunities to flourish. Struggles for education, against illness, for care, against organized abandonment, against organized violence -- the things that constitute both colonization and criminalization. Abolition geography is the antagonistic contradiction to a carceral geography that we can see. And as we look across places and through times at provisional abolition geographies, we find the dialectics of space and place at work in the practical, immediate and normative dimensions of what people do.

Abolition is presence, which means abolition is life in rehearsal. Not a recitation of rules, much less relentless lament. Although the surface of contradictions, the dynamics of those contradictions in their dominant meeting, propose carceral displacement or spatial fix as necessary, natural and inevitable. So in order for the contradiction to ripen, we know the stage itself must tell a story. Or, as Professor Sepulveda said, "give us back our land." The stage tells the story. So I'm going to share this morning with you three stories to enliven this provocation that I hope you will join me in thinking through. The first starts with the story of the late Michael Zinzun.

Michael Zinzun, as many of you might know, was a member of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Whatever we thought we would be talking about today, it's impossible not to talk about police. So let's start there. So we can start with the origin of modern police in about the end of the 18th century in the London Docklands, where the earliest precursors of the uniformed forces of organized violence, whose descendants we encounter today, were hired in order to make sure that the wrong people didn't help themselves to the products of plantation slavery, mineral extraction, stolen land and industrial manufacture that gathered there as they were moving through commodity chains from production and out to markets. So we'll start there with police.

And when we talk about police in the United States, we have to also talk obviously about the people whose names are on everybody's lips throughout the world today, people like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. So we talked about Minneapolis and Louisville, and also Tony McDade and so many other people. Also, if we pay attention to police, we are talking about the city of Albuquerque, where to this day approximately one in five killings that happens in that city is a police officer killing a Native American person, an indigenous person. So in the context of the things that we must talk about, I invite you to think with me about Michael Zinzun.

And as I said, he was a member of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, based mostly in greater Los Angeles and Pasadena, as well as South Central there on Tongva land. And he fought the police. He fought the police in every way that he could. There were street fights, there were legal fights. And in the course of one of the street fights, the police blinded Michael in one of his eyes. He lost his eyesight. Amazingly -- but this was now more than 50 years ago -- Michael Zinzun brought suit against the Pasadena police officers who blinded him and won. And the settlement that Michael Zinzun got from that legal case was used by Michael to establish an organization that lasted throughout his life called the Coalition Against Police Abuse.

That coalition, which had its offices down in South Central Los Angeles throughout Michael's lifetime, and as far as I know might still be flourishing today, spent time not only trying to help people organize against police brutality and police violence. But it also took a step back from that work and said: If, as it seems to be the case, poor people, people of color, and particularly in Michael Zinzun's experience, Black people, suffer extreme vulnerability to premature death -- what produces that death? We know it's not only the police. They're one force of organized violence, but they're not the entire force of organized violence. So Michael studied this question as a community organizer, as somebody with a very straightforward relationship to his community, to the people around him, but also with a large ambition to realize the promise that the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense offered to the world in which it organized -- the promise which was "survival pending revolution."

Michael started to study the fact that so many people in Black and brown and poor communities suffered premature death because their lives were shortened as a result of asthma -- asthma! Asthma shouldn't kill anybody. It is a major killer of poor

people in the United States and beyond. And as he studied what the causes of this plague of asthma were, he discovered perhaps not uniquely, that a good deal of asthma suffered especially by school children in Los Angeles's substandard housing, was a result of the combination of the kids' developing lungs coming into contact with the affluent, if you will, of rodent feces, roach feces and pesticides.

So the things that produced the feces that would then produce asthma were fought by ordinary people in their households doing the best that they could using pesticides. I won't say any brand names, but you know what I'm talking about. So the combination of those things, the natural and chemical forces, produced vulnerability to asthma and increased it. As Michael Zinzun did the work to try to work with people in public housing and other substandard housing to stop using pesticides and to demand that the organized abandonment of that housing be redressed by the Public Housing Authority or by private landlords, Michael's work came to the attention of many people throughout the Americas.

Although in the first instance, people were drawn to him because of his long-standing relationship to the radical, indeed revolutionary politics of the Black Panther Party, what they learned from him -- what they learned about "survival pending revolution" -- came to fruition for many communities through their understanding of his understanding of the environmental consequences in human life. Terms for the kind of neglect, the kind of organized abandonment of the communities he worked with in the US as well as Brazil and beyond were confronting. So in concluding this vignette, I propose to everybody that abolition must be green. It must be green.

Of course, in talking about the vulnerability to asthma and other chronic and life-shortening conditions, the kinds of conditions that interrupt people's ability to lead full lives, to go to school, to get through a complete school program and have a life that is relatively protected from the forces of organized violence that we know as the police, means that people must have adequate access to health care, to nurses and other health care givers. So let's talk about health care workers for the next few minutes. Let's examine health care workers, because health care workers give us the opportunity to think about how in U.S. life the word work -- suggesting always working for a wage -- not doing something that's reproductive or socially productive, but working for a wage, is central to USA life and well-being.

It means, as we all know, that the way that people can have adequate health insurance is by having a job, and without a job there is no adequate health insurance. We know in the U.S. case that for people to have some adequate sense that in their years when they are no longer able to work, they will have an adequate pension, means they have to have had a job. They have to have had a job. There is no pension without a job for wages. And we know in the current moment where there are tens of millions of people in the United States who are out of work that for people to be eligible for unemployment insurance, or eligible to some modest funds, to keep the wolf from the door, to keep a roof overhead, and to keep food on the table means they have to have had a job.

So let's think about health care workers. On the one hand, many, many, many health care workers, nurses, for example -- I addressed a gathering of a thousand or more nurses a few weeks ago, along with Angela Davis, Thenjiwe McHarris and Cathy Kennedy -- many, many nurses working in the United States are people who fit the profile of essential workers during the pandemic. They are working with inadequate protections and yet they are reassuring the suffering and trying to mend people who are broken by the pandemic and other illnesses, and keep them from further harm.

We know that the nursing profession is largely, not exclusively, but largely populated by long-distance migrants, people from throughout the Pacific, as well as people from throughout the Atlantic. We know that, very heavily, people of color are represented in the health care professions, including nurses. That it's a profession that's very much dominated by women, although there are many, many, many people who check the box male who are nurses, and that it is a highly skilled working class profession. It's a skilled trade and a beautiful one.

Many nurses in the United States are working in a very centralized situation in hospitals, and the biggest employer of nurses on a world scale is a single firm, HCA. So when the nurse's union, the California Nurses Association or the National Nurses Organizing Committee organizes a strike -- if they're striking, they're striking a particular hospital, one of the establishments -- but they're going up against one of the behemoths of global capitalism, HCA. So that is health care on the centralized side. On the decentralized side, we have as well hundreds of thousands of people who provide in-

home health care support services throughout the United States. Those workers are extremely atomized. They're sprinkled around, they might work for one or two or three or five clients, but they don't have a central place where they work. They're very difficult, therefore, to organize.

And yet one of the locals based in San Diego has managed to organize one hundred and twenty five thousand such workers, who recently endorsed a call -- put forward by California's United for a Responsible Budget -- to support a piece of California state legislation demanding that racial disparity in criminalization, conviction and sentencing be lifted from people in the state of California. That law passed and it was signed by the governor. But let me point out to people who are listening that all that stuff was already illegal. We didn't actually need a new law to say once again, that what was already illegal is still illegal. But that law passed and it was good because it galvanized a lot of people and brought people's attention to the problems of criminalization and unequal application of the laws.

But the same day that Governor Newsom signed that law approving it, he vetoed another one: another piece of legislation that had gotten through the legislature that extended the right of unemployment compensation to that one hundred and twenty five thousand in-home support service workers organized by that local. Those people are exactly like the people who are criminalized and sent to prison. Those people and their households and communities are the ones that bear the weight of criminalization the most. Those people are the very people for whom the first piece of legislation would have more meaning if their right to unemployment compensation had been approved by the governor.

So I've described to you in this section of my talk, health care workers who work for enormous global firms, who organize through their union to protect themselves for wages and benefits and working conditions, especially working conditions that are appropriate to their skilled trade. And I've talked about in-home support service workers, many of whom are working in health care and health care allied fields, who have been refused the opportunity even though they, too, are organized in a union to have protections from calamity in the form of unemployment compensation.

And if we put all of this together, we think about the vulnerability of the people whose job it is to reassure and remedy the vulnerability of the rest of us when we fall ill, we can get a view into some of the many essential workers whose actual practical and immediate normative work is right there in the dynamic contradiction of social and spatial struggle. That health care workers, like social workers, like cultural workers including educators, are all in this same dynamic contradiction.

So that when we say "defund the police," what abolition is a rehearsal for is not to create a new category of unemployed people or go after people who make the same or less than I do and take away their salary -- but rather, change what we do. Change what we do as a society using the social wage, which is to say all of the revenue that goes through state and local treasuries that is skimmed in one way or another from workers in the form of income and use tax. So to conclude this section, I'd like to propose that if abolition must be green, it has to be red. To be green, it has to be red.

So now to turn to the third part of my presentation, and we're going to talk about Amazon and essential workers. The U.S. stock market, as everybody here today knows, has generally boomed throughout the pandemic. One reason for that is that in the U.S. employment is at will, at the will of the employer. Few workers have the protection that I have, for example. I have relatively secure employment, what's called tenure. It's a rare thing, as we all know. The fact that employers in the United States in general can hire and fire at will means that the variable capital that they are working with is under their control. They can reduce costs easily and they do.

I will also add at this point in a long parenthetical remark that in the United States today about half of the entire labor force -- which is to say around 80 million people -- half the entire U.S. Labor force has some kind of disqualifying document: arrest or conviction. They may not have been locked up, but has some kind of disqualifying document in the form of an arrest or conviction. Or they lack qualifying documents, papers that say they may work, which makes those workers particularly vulnerable to disemployment and produces downward pressure on everybody's wages, especially the wages of modestly educated people in the prime of life who make, grow, care for or move things and other people.

And in fact, thinking about the fact that half of the labor force in the United States carries this burden at all times, which is really what the force of privatization does, is it drops this burden on their shoulders and then that burden spreads to their households and communities. Thinking about half the labor force reminds us about the last time that robber barons ruled the world, and that's about one hundred years ago when Jay Gould said, "I can hire half the working class to kill the other half of the working class." He was right about half, but I'm not going to concede any more right to him. Let's go back to the stock market now. The other reason the markets bounce and aggrandize is that the stock market indices for the U.S. based businesses are dragged upward by a small number of huge tech stocks. Very small number, very huge stocks: Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, Google, Amazon.

Amazon's essential workers have been in the news these days, and I'm not going to repeat that much of the kinds of struggles they have had in terms of workplace protection, efforts to unionize, protective gear, hours worked and benefits -- benefits that are so thin that my colleagues at the economic roundtable show that Amazon, no less than other enormous employers like Wal-Mart, depend on their workers having access to food stamps and other income supports in order to make ends meet. But let's think also about this. The largesse of today's plutocrats, their philanthropic largesse hardly mitigates the crises that racial capitalism's plutocratic tendencies, like monopoly, enable. This generation's philanthropists, like Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos and Jeff Bezos's ex-wife and others, join with the mid 20th century philanthropists, most notably the behemoth foundation Ford and early 20th century philanthropists, Carnegie and Mellon, and the late 19th century philanthropist Cecil Rhodes, as though philanthropy were not what it is, which is: the private allocation of stolen social wage. So we sit today and look at each other today on stolen land, considering how we've come to this moment because of the stolen wage.

The contradiction is embedded in Amazon's planetary weight. The contradiction is embedded in Amazon's planetary weight. The firm indeed defines the geographer's task by combining people, places and things. It shows how those combinations require further combinations of people, places and things. Logistics, roads and other infrastructure and tariffs, environmental air, water degradation. Amazon could not be, and we could not be talking, if Bolivia were not constantly in crisis because of the store of lithium under the Earth's surface there. Amazon could not be, and we could not be

talking with each other, if it were not for the copper and other conflict minerals mined from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Amazon would not be the weight it is on the planet, if it were not for the cotton that's produced from anywhere from the south San Joaquin Valley of California to Tanzania -- shipped to be produced into textiles or clothing to East and Southeast Asia and beyond, and then shipped again across for Amazon to deliver to our doorsteps.

These considerations compel us to consider the eponymous Amazon, the place that's mostly in the contemporary nation-state of Brazil. That Amazon is the planet's lungs. It is the planet's central place for biodiversity. It is stolen land that is constantly struggled over. It is a place that has been in flames a lot of late, in part because those who are stealing and re-stealing the land are clearing the forest and its biodiversity in order to grow there either crops to produce ethanol to be able to fuel the machines that enabled the other Amazon to do its global distribution, or to clear land in order to graze cattle to raise beef for McDonald's so that working class people have access to fast, affordable calories. That Amazon, and the other Amazon, we must think together in order to think of abolition as life rehearsal rather than a recitation of rules and wrongs.

One last thing I want to say and then I'll close out, the Amazon might also be the origin of one of the most delicious things ever on the planet, which is chocolate. And thinking about chocolate reminds us that, as is the case in cacao production, 70 percent of food that's consumed on this planet is produced by small producers -- whether they are producing cacao beans for chocolate or palm oil that becomes an ingredient in all kinds of foods or producing finished or more finished foods like organic rice or something else. Small producers produce most food. So then this compels us to come to the conclusion that if abolition must be green, it must be read. And if abolition must be red, it must be international. Abolition is an elaboration of what I call very small sea communism without a party, although I wish some days we had party discipline. I do believe we can prevail with the combination of groupings organized to redistribute and secure material and symbolic resources in which "secure" means "make reproducible." That means giving back stolen land. It means making private property inland an impossibility. It means following The Red Nation statement. It means paying attention to a forthcoming statement on international abolition that will be published soon. It means many things, and I look forward to our conversation. Thank you.