Poultry and Prisons

Toward a General Strike for Abolition

CARRIE FRESHOUR

Racial Capitalism and COVID-19

On April 28, 2020, Donald Trump utilized the Defense Production Act to keep meat-processing plants open. As of this writing, twenty-two plants have closed, if only temporarily, after large numbers of workers tested positive for COVID-19. Yet, the number of worker deaths across the industry, including four workers at a Tyson chicken-processing plant in Camilla, Georgia, continues to rise. Black workers, who make up a majority of the Tyson plant’s workforce, live in neighboring Dougherty county. This county was once central to the cotton-producing region of the Black Belt, constructed through the violence of plantation slavery entwined with the productivity of the soil. The legacy of these entanglements continues to shape the regional infrastructures of racial capitalism evident in the dominance of the poultry industry.

COVID-19 illuminates the stark inequalities along class-race-gender lines, shaping whose lives are considered valuable and whose are not. Newly recognized as “essential,” people working in grocery stores, processing plants, day care centers, and hospitals must physically traverse cities and small towns to ensure “life’s work.” Incarcerated and detained loved ones stolen from our communities mobilize against premature death by Departments of Corrections, drawing attention to their shared humanity and calling for freedom.

The present historical moment provides an urgent opening for scholars and activists to trace the knots of connectivity across movements as we work for the present and prepare for the future. This is the work of abolition, as thinkers and doers in the Black radical tradition remind us. I draw specifically on the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who argues that abolition is not just about closing prisons, but also about “refusing organized abandonment. It is refusing austerity. It is demanding a future that has some sense of voluptuous beauty that life should hold.” Demands for

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this kind of future are in the making across the country, connecting spontaneous actions and coordinated organization toward a general strike.7

Drawing on scholars in the Black radical tradition, I trace the lines of racial capitalism to carceral and abolition geographies through a focus on poultry-processing work in the U.S. South. Poultry-processing work lies within a larger web of carceral geographies that extend beyond the prison walls into factory floors, neighborhoods, and schools. These geographies depend on and are produced through racism, as the production of unequal vulnerability to premature death.8 Yet, the point is to trace the ways in which racial capitalism connects the poultry plant to the prison alongside the movement for abolition beyond the prison.

My argument emerges from over two years of ethnographic research in the poultry region of Northeast Georgia and more recent movement work with others for abolition.9 Poultry-processing plants are critical sites of racial capitalist accumulation produced through an unequal valuation of people and places, which simultaneously robs the worker and the soil.10

**Racial Capitalism, the Black Radical Tradition, and Abolition**

I draw on the late Cedric Robinson’s intervention in *Black Marxism*, alongside others developing his work, that capitalism was never not racial. Capitalism is racial capitalism.11 By tracing the forms of racialism that preexisted capitalism, forms rooted in Western civilization, Robinson shows how racism, as a process of differentiation, was foundational to the emergence of capitalism in Western Europe in the sixteenth century. Importantly, he notes that racialism was “rooted not in a particular era but in the civilization itself.” In this sense, racialism imbued meaning to the mode of production but also “the very values and traditions of consciousness through which the peoples of these ages came to understand their worlds and their experiences.”12 As postcolonial, Black radical, and Indigenous scholars argue, these ways of knowing and being in the world enabled a modern world system of racial capitalism dependent on the violence and genocide of the transatlantic slave trade, settler colonialism, and global imperialism.13 This violence, according to Karl Marx, occurred through the process of primary accumulation, first through English enclosures, as the original sin of capital accumulation.14 Here, “capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”15 Racial differentiation enabled dispossession, as foundational to, rather than simply the outcome of, capitalism.

Robinson makes this argument by focusing on the treatment and colonization of the Irish, a population that would become white, reminding us of the sociohistorical specificity of racial formations.16 This starting point
enables Robinson to show how racial differentiation and ordering are integral to capital accumulation, and to address how we might overcome and live otherwise. For this, the *how to live otherwise*, Robinson draws from the Black radical tradition, which not only resists but refuses the ontological and epistemological bases of Western civilization.

But, what is the Black radical tradition? As racial capitalism expanded globally, built upon plantation slavery and settler colonialism, there emerged an “essentially African response” as the “negation of Western civilization.” Black radicalism enabled a shared consciousness that fostered fugitive activity, slave revolts, the building of maroon communities, and other acts of collective resistance against slavery and for emancipation. This revolutionary consciousness preceded and exceeded these conditions. Out of the Black radical tradition emerged an “abolition democracy,” whereby the “general strike” of the Civil War expressed a desire by enslaved peoples not only against work, but “against the conditions of work.” Abolition democracy countered the economic calculus that commodified human life, before conception and even after death. The brief life of the Freedmen’s Bureau served as an experiment in democracy that sought emancipation through the creation of institutions for Black people, by providing schools, housing, and a redistribution of land. This tradition forms the basis for abolition geographies, a framework that ties movements over land, labor, and social reproduction together in the process.

**The Poultry Capital of the World**

Last year, the U.S. poultry industry produced forty-two billion pounds of chicken, more than any other country in the world. Although chicken is produced across thirty states, this industry is firmly rooted in the South, and Georgia produces more poultry than any other state. Forty-three plants operate across the state, processing 1.2 million live chickens a week through the labor of over forty-thousand workers, contributing $42 billion to the state’s economy. The largest companies, Tyson, Pilgrim’s Pride, and Cargill, have even expanded production and increased employment as other U.S. manufacturing industries have been automated and outsourced. Yet, this industry is not bounded by the South, despite most of its production occurring there. This region was produced as the “poultry capital of the world” through the extraction of wealth from people and places in the South, a process intimately tied to the decisions and demand for cheap chicken and profit-making elsewhere.

This industry has notoriously relied on antilabor tactics and dynamic racial regimes to keep wages low and profits high. Today, the largest
plants in Georgia depend on a majority-Black workforce, one predominantly held up by women in the most repetitive and debilitating positions. For these reasons, this industry illuminates critical processes of racial capitalism. Undocumented-immigrant recruitment, on the part of the largest poultry industries, Tyson and JBS/Pilgrim’s Pride, was a means of disorganizing Black-led worker movements. Yet, Georgia’s anti-immigration movement, which led to the passage of several anti-immigrant laws in the mid to late 2000s, did nothing to protect or provide for Black workers who returned to the plants. New forms of labor discipline at the point of production work alongside extensions of the carceral state into workers’ lives beyond work, across spaces of life’s work, to construct an ideal, cheap workforce. In this sense, racial capitalism extracts value through space (organized abandonment) and by dictating time (stealing time while speeding up lives), connecting the poultry plant to the prison.

**Organized Abandonment and the Poultry Industry**

Racial capitalism, rooted in Western civilization’s ways of knowing and being, shapes our relationship to external nature, expressed most concretely in our relations to land. Drawing on Marx’s analysis of primary accumulation, many scholars have documented the spatiality of value extraction. This process divorces people from land, and therefore the means of production, producing the metabolic rift. This process was always racial and continues to take racialized forms today, visible in the persistence of settler colonialism, race-based determinants of citizenship and property rights, and ongoing rounds of dispossession. Dispossession extracts people not only from the means of production, but also from, as Jodi Melamed reminds us, “other (and other possible) relations to land, resources, activity, community, and other possible social wholes that have been broken up for capital.” How does dispossession make way for the circulation of capital through poultry plants and prisons across the rural United States?

In *The Limits of Capital*, David Harvey develops the concept of organized abandonment as a way of understanding how private and public partnerships produce advantageous conditions for capital mobility (disinvestment and revaluation) through the built environment. Gilmore links organized abandonment to the “anti-state-state” in the production of an ongoing “prison fix” across rural-urban California. Here, the devolution of the state, as responsibility moves from national to local scales, enables a retreat from social welfare provisioning while simultaneously aiding capital in the production of profit by removing protections against workers’ premature death. The pervasive reality of organized abandonment
allows us to see the relationality of “forgotten places,” coproduced although spatially discontinuous. In Gilmore’s work, these are “the places where prisoners come from to the places where prisons are built.”

Temporally and spatially, organized abandonment occurs unevenly across the globe. Through a regional focus on the U.S. South, we see multiple rounds of organized abandonment long predating Harvey’s temporal frame. As W. E. B. Du Bois argues in *Black Reconstruction*, political contestations over the future of the postemancipation South devolved from a place of national concern after the Civil War to one held up by regional blocs dominated by plantation power. While cotton production waned in the mid- and lower South, regions where chattel slavery violently upheld entire economies, the general strike led by enslaved peoples fighting for abolition democracy devastated the foundations of racial capitalism across the region.

These struggles, including the repression that followed Reconstruction, led to intensified sociolegal structures of racial domination and redistributed agricultural production to other regions. Anti-Blackness expressed through the “color line” became key to the consolidation of white land ownership and the dominance of agricultural institutions like the Cotton Producers Association. Through a mix of legal and extralegal means, the Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and practices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) enforced racial hierarchy in attempts to tie Black people to land as workers or sharecroppers, never as owners.

Cotton production dominated the region up until the postwar period. During this time, poultry production remained small scale, localized, and was considered “women’s work,” a common practice among white and Black households. Yet, in the crisis of the Great Depression, white landowning farmers and merchants in Northeast Georgia took over the industry and its profits. This takeover was structured along the preexisting crop lien system used in the overproduction of cotton that previously dominated the region. Racially discriminatory state interventions under the Agricultural Adjustment Act worked together with an agricultural credit system and the consolidation of white-only farmer cooperatives to create structural barriers to commercial poultry production for Black and poor white sharecroppers and tenant farmers. These programs subsidized cotton farmers to idle land and displace farm labor. In some cases, this quite literally meant replacing the tenant house with the chicken house.

Cotton capital, built on the labor of enslaved people in the South, was mobilized directly and indirectly into the growing poultry industry, with cotton farmer cooperatives collectively shifting to poultry production. Af-
ter this initial takeoff, the Second World War offered up a second major boost in 1944 when the War Food Administration reserved all the chicken produced from seven counties in north Georgia. This guaranteed capital allowed new forms of vertical integration, led by poultry industry innovators John W. Tyson, Jesse Jewell, and D. W. Brooks. This model of ownership, reliant on bigger farms and highly industrialized agriculture, restructured the rural South for the creation of cheap food. Cotton’s transformation, coupled with poultry’s takeoff, enabled the “selling of the South” primed for low-wage, antilabor industrial growth. The poultry industry thrived off the movement of farmworkers into processing plants. Organized abandonment produced the poultry capital of the world through racialized forms of dispossession and displacement, exclusionary federal loans, purchasing guarantees, and private industry integration at home, bolstered through war imperialism abroad.

Contested Time-Sense

Racial capitalism extracts value through the production of dispossession and organized abandonment, as well as by stealing time and speeding up lives. Time is not only an instrument, but also an ideology, necessary to the devaluation of people and places. As Rahsaan Mahadeo argues, time is not neutral. Time is racialized and race is temporalized. “The cold, perfunctory, impersonal character of modern or progressive time is conducive to individualism, competition, and capitalism, all key ingredients to a ‘possessive investment in whiteness.’ These conceptions of time are embedded in Western ways of knowing and being in the world that enabled racial capitalist expansion through “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force.”

Thus, the story goes, those who did not “make it” according to these standards were blamed for both “their own past expropriability and present precarity.” Racial capitalism is not only about economic domination, but also about propping up the belief system of the ruling class. As E. P. Thompson argues, workers’ time-sense had to be historically and culturally produced through mechanisms of control. For Thompson, those exhibiting an “imperfect sense of time,” namely women and colonial others, resisted the totalizing time-sense of the working day. Through the lens of Western civilization, these societies merely needed to “catch up” to European notions of modernity and progress, and thus were forced through disciplining forms of criminalization to internalize and abide by this time-sense. Yet, struggles over, and alternative visions for, time persist.

When I entered the poultry plant, Black workers had returned, largely replacing undocumented Latinx workers on the lines. Yet, Black work-
ers rarely expressed anti-immigrant sentiment and, while supportive, often refused to enact the same time-sense. Kurwana, a 24-year-old Black woman, commented on this distinction:

The Mexican women be working extra hard, I don’t see how they do it, like for real. They just be focused. They don’t even turn around and smile until the end they be like, “Hey,” I be like, “Girl, I notice you doing!” I be like, “Slow down mama, slow down. It ain’t that serious.” For real! [laughing] I feel like the Mexican women, I’m a Black woman myself, I feel like the Mexican women come in there and outshine everybody. They’ll work. You know some people now like, “They shouldn’t be living, Mexicans in our country, this and this.” They’re coming over here doing good. I feel like, everybody needs an opportunity. I feel like they’re coming in and do their work.50

Kurwana in some ways respects the “Mexican” work ethic, which mirrors comments made by white managers and in liberal media outlets around immigrant “deservingness.” Yet, Kurwana also urges “slow down mama,” to take it easy, as a tactic not only to protect one’s body, but also because the work, processing chicken for a giant agribusiness, “ain’t that serious.”51

Throughout my “little time” at the plant, I repeatedly faced contested visions over time. At the beginning, I held onto a disciplined and dominant vision of time, complicit with management and aiding corporate profitability. I first confronted this issue after several weeks of work in evisceration. Nikki, a “floater” who replaced workers for mandatory bathroom breaks, noticed me struggling to keep up. As she came up on my right, she laughed and offered some advice, “relax Carrie. Draw the birds good when the inspector comes, but after she leaves you draw however you want! You don’t have to feel in for the membrane every time, just when they come by. It helps you not be so tired all the time.”52 Nikki emphasized surviving the day by controlling one’s pace of work over meeting the company’s demands, a mismatched time-sense.

Another observation came after working for months at the plant. After working for the third consecutive Saturday in a row, everyone was feeling exhausted and frustrated. We heard that we had three more Saturdays to work. Reggie, a Black maintenance worker in his twenties, came into the dressing room and asked how I was doing. I said, begrudgingly, “Okay, but I’m not ready to work on Saturday.” He laughed and claimed, “I might have to miss this one!” Mrs. Bonnie entered and Reggie asked her the same question. She answered, exasperated, “I’m ready to go home!” He proclaimed, “You are home, this is your home! I’m gonna get my mail transferred here!” Bonnie laughed and replied, “I know that’s right! All we need is a bed and a TV and we’re at home!”53
In this brief conversation, we shared contested visions of time, from my powerlessness to refuse work and unwilling compliance to Reggie’s critique of exploitation by performing an alternative sense of time, despite the lure of overtime pay and threat of termination. In this exchange, contested visions of time also shaped visions of space, where the distinction of inside/outside felt blurred. Yet, even when time and space outside belonged to Reggie and Mrs. Bonnie, they were relegated to the consumption of “TV” and basic necessities like “a bed.” Both presented a reflection of premature disability, as well as the ways in which racial capitalism ignores human needs and in turn offers up distraction and the bare minimum to keep us alive and breathing. A world in which other human needs like respect, dignity, self-worth, love, and care feel foreclosed. My argument here is not to say that these visions directly constitute a particular political will or imagination, but to consider how this challenge to time-sense might hold the seeds of refusal against the very notion of labor under racial capitalism.

Lines and Lives Sped Up

Throughout the history of the poultry industry, attempts to speed up production have been met with worker-led resistances, including walkouts, individual and collective foot dragging, and other, often invisible, acts to slow down the pace of work and control time. Yet, over the last three decades, the poultry industry has rapidly increased the pace of production. In the United States, workers slaughter and process poultry around the clock, with three shifts and so-called antisocial hours, forcing employees to work overtime, while sick, during machine breakdowns, and over federal holidays, while requiring new technologies to grow birds and facilitate unnatural cycles in the hen house. Most visibly, through automation coupled with the anti-state state, the poultry industry steals time from workers in the production of what I call premature disability through a relentless push for faster line speeds. These mechanisms of control extend from the plantation to the poultry plants, as speedups maintain surveillance and discipline in the service of productivity at the expense of workers’ bodies.

For the poultry industry, large-scale federal inspection was not established until 1957 through the Poultry Processing Inspection Act. This coincided with a rise in both production and consumption, and facilitated the consolidation and vertical integration of the industry. Shortly thereafter, the USDA established its relationship to industry through time-and-motion studies with the goal of improving efficiency and profits. The USDA considered efficiency a desirable sign of progress that
could be improved to increase line speeds and production, while reducing labor costs. The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Services (FSIS) replaced the Poultry Processing Inspection Act in 1977. This agency tied modernization of federal inspection to speedups for the poultry companies. Here, the USDA FSIS joins Tyson, Pilgrim’s Pride, and Cargill in the production of the anti-state-state.

James Boggs, organic intellectual and Detroit autoworker, analyzes the political nature of technological change in *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook*. He writes that “the great bulk of the capital invested in automation today comes from the government and is paid for by every member of the American population…. This is all done in the name of research and defense, but, whatever it is called, the benefits are as great to the capitalists as if they had put out the capital themselves.” For the poultry industry, federally mandated speedups on the line represent a speeding up of both life and work for the few workers who withstand decades of life in the plants.

Recently, poultry-processing line speeds have been hotly debated. In fall 2017, the National Chicken Council petitioned to increase the allowable maximum number of birds slaughtered per minute, from what they call “arbitrary line speed limitations” of 140 to 175 birds per minute, or preferably removing the cap altogether. Industry advocates and some USDA representatives have pushed for an increase to 175 birds per minute since as early as 1997. Each attempt to increase line speeds has been smartly packaged as a response to improved technology and a more “modernized” scientific approach to biological hazards, food safety, and inspection, while ignoring worker safety and organizing.

The USDA FSIS initially denied the petition due to organized pushback from a coalition of consumer, environmental, animal rights, and worker organizations. Opponents of the increase cite a host of studies, governmental and advocacy-led, that connect current line speeds to high rates of injury and illness, particularly carpal tunnel syndrome and other musculoskeletal disorders. Despite pushback, the USDA, led by former Georgia governor Sonny Perdue, allowed line speeds to increase to 175 birds per minute in fall 2018. Speedups in production effectively steal time from workers while breaking down their bodies in order to give more time to consumers and profits to the largest poultry companies.

Don Tyson, CEO of Tyson Foods during the industry’s takeoff in the 1990s, embodied this business model. In a *New York Times* interview in 1994, Tyson promoted further processing as “selling time.” In this interview, he also unapologetically discussed “testing” gizzard burgers on residents of the Watts neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles, not long after Los
Angeles police brutally beat Rodney King, when the Watts neighborhood was 50/50 Black/Latinx. When his burgers flopped, he tried selling them to prisoners in Arkansas. This was a time when the state’s prison population had grown by over 90 percent since the previous decade, locking up a disproportionate number of Black men (56 percent, over three times the total population of just 15 percent). Tyson’s business model reflects the racial capitalist logic underlying an unequal valuation of time, people, and places, used to justify speedups and profitability over peoples’ lives.

As Tyson sells time, line speeds discipline workers within the walls of the plant. Even after their shifts end, workers’ “free time” is hardly free, it is spent recuperating for the next day. Their very lives are sped up, with a majority of workers experiencing premature disability. Out of the fifty-six oral histories I recorded with poultry-processing workers, twenty-one had been on short-term disability, were on disability, or were in the process of applying for disability. Evelyn, a 60-year-old Black woman who worked across two plants for nine years, now pieces together life on a meager disability check of about $722/month. One evening, as I recorded her experiences over cookies and Kool-Aid at her kitchen table, she told me: “You don’t think about your health when you need money. You live with daily pain and sickness. There are not too many breaks, before you’re back on that line. There’s no time to get your stuff off, use the bathroom, and digest your food. It will break your body down.”

Here, Evelyn connected the speed and demands of the line to the pain and sickness of her body, even to the scale of digestion. If we are to understand “bodies as places,” then poultry plants, like prisons, extract from the scale of the body in ways directly and intimately tied to the criminalization of bodies as territories, primed for extraction. In this sense, USDA FSIS inspection aids the extraction of value by stealing time from majority-Black, Latinx, and refugee workers, resulting for most in premature disability. As we look beyond the plant’s walls, time is taken through the extension of the working day and the effects of numbingly fast line speeds inside, bolstered by carceral geographies shaping Black workers’ lives outside.

**Extracting Lives and Stealing Time**

“Today’s prisons are extractive. What does that mean? It means prisons enable money to move because of the enforced inactivity of people locked in them. It means people extracted from communities, and people returned to communities but not entitled to be of them, enable the circulation of money on rapid cycles. What’s extracted from the extracted is the resource of life – time.”
Throughout my research, I was reminded of the carceral geographies shaping poultry-plant life and work. From day one, in bulk interviews at the Department of Labor, the plant’s Human Resources representative reminded a room of over a hundred hopeful applicants that “the poultry” is one of very few places that hires ex-felons. She named a few others, Home Depot, Lowe’s, but the poultry is the best, especially for women. Women today come to work in the poultry for a variety of other reasons, but for most women I spoke with, they came to the poultry because it is one of the few places that hire people “with a record.” From formal segregation back in the day to criminalization today, the poultry remains a last, and sometimes an only, resort for Black workers.

One day in early February, while still working at the plant, I sat with Marcus, whose mother and sister worked in two of the nearby plants. I asked him, “What do you think about this saying, if you’re Black in Athens you know somebody that’s worked in the poultry?” He responded, “Yeah, coz the poultry, the thing is, the poultry will hire people no matter what, even if you’ve been in jail or whatever they’ll hire you. If you’re a felon, you’ll probably look to work at the poultry.” In this commonsense understanding of the industry, Marcus conflated being Black with work at the poultry by way of criminalization. This view is supported across interviews, as the poultry takes you no matter what your background. Takeya started working at the poultry in 2006. She explained this process to me as her family prepared for dinner in the background:

Especially here that’s all that they have that will hire, mostly Blacks, I’m gonna be honest, they will hire you. I will say it like this, they’re lenient. If you have a criminal background, and you can’t go nowhere else you can go get a job at a poultry processing plant. A lot of times you get people who got backgrounds, you get what I’m saying? They hire just about anybody.

These conversations make visible the extensions of carceral geographies from the prison to the extractive low-wage work of the poultry. If prisons steal time by extracting people from their communities, their families, and their lives, the tethers of carceral geographies never fully leave a person after they are released. Yet, most people return to the forgotten places from which they came. These are places produced through organized abandonment and premature disability and death for the profit-making of the Don Tysons of the world. Here, we may trace competing visions of time from the racial capitalist logic of the plantation to speed-ups enacted by the USDA. In envisioning life otherwise, we might draw on refusals of this extractive time-sense made evident in the bluesmen and women of the Mississippi Delta, in the farmhands of Dougherty County,
and through poultry workers like Kurwana and Reggie as a necessary part of the struggle for abolition.

**Toward a General Strike and the Making of Abolition**

“We’re up here risking our life for chicken.”

— Kendaliyn Granville, Kathleen, Georgia, March 23, 2020

In the Black radical tradition, thinkers and doers working to upend racial capitalism draw on Black life as survival, resistance, and world making. This includes the kinds of everyday actions by Black communists in rural Alabama, by fugitive communities in southern Florida, and by poultry-processing workers walking off the line in southern Georgia when enough is enough! And these acts might be connected back to revolts and riots among Thompson’s working-class, vagabonds traversing Peter Linebaugh’s eighteenth-century London, and witches refusing expropriation in Silvia Federici’s rural Europe. These groups have resisted ruling-class control of time, bodies, and relations of land, momentary refusals of racial capitalism. They are connected through their differentiation and thus their shared vulnerability to premature death. While vulnerability may create a shared experience, this does not equate easily to shared consciousness necessary for the political solidarity required for movement building. Du Bois’s critique remains. Many of these groups came to give themselves, as a group, to Western civilization, expressed in “whiteness,” for the false promises of capitalist flourishing and individual gain. This contributed to the inverse of flourishing, enabling premature death for other racialized populations generally and Black workers particularly. We must see the dominance of Western civilization in the structure of racial capitalism. Today, these structures continue.

I have made loose connections here only by learning from and thinking with poultry-processing workers and their families, prison abolitionists, and people currently and formerly incarcerated. If the work of abolition is not only about stopping prisons, but also about imagining a future in which we win, then people cannot be released from prisons only to be put on the streets or to premature disability at the poultry. Today, in what feels like the most hopeless of conditions, people organize across these struggles, linking to one another and movements. This is the work of resistance not only to racial capitalism’s dogma but a refusal to a life based solely on individualistic and profit-making conceptions of time, land, and one another. Instead, let us imagine a people-centered state emerging from the forms of mutual aid taking place across the country and world.
Predating COVID-19, a group of antiprison activists and abolitionists organized at the state capitol in Jackson, Mississippi. The large group that gathered to protest the conditions at Parchman called for the Mississippi Department of Corrections to shut it down! Rallying calls demanded “Free the Land!” reaching back to the Republic of New Afrika, across to Cooperation Jackson, and forward to a utopian future. For these organizers, the land, prison abolition, and self-determination are inextricably linked. Today, groups like Cooperation Jackson continue this struggle, sharing a call to action toward a general strike, one that began on May 1, in celebration of International Workers’ Day, but continues long after as we fight for the world we want. As we struggle to #FreeThemAll, to challenge the very structure of work, to resist the disciplining effects of racial capitalism’s organized abandonment, and to build relationships of care for all, let us do so with these connections in mind. Here’s to imagining a utopian future and organizing to win. I will end by lifting up the call to action by Cooperation Jackson: “We have an opportunity to take control now, and we are ready to fight for a society in which all people can live with full autonomy without having to worry about survival.”

Postscript

This essay was written before the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and George Floyd, as well as the rebellions that have erupted across the country and world since. I hope that what is outlined here might help us trace these connections, to understand carceral and abolition geographies as they connect to food and work under racial capitalism and the underlying logic of Western civilization that we see expressed in these murders, whether directly by and/or sanctioned by the state. Justice for Ahmaud Arbery, for Breonna Taylor, for Tony McDade, for George Floyd, and abolition now!

Notes

1. Across the country, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union estimates that at least 6,500 processing workers have been infected or quarantined. Jennifer Jacobs and Lydia Mulvany, “Trump Orders Meat Plants to Stay Open in Move Unions Slam,” Bloomberg, April 28, 2020.
2. The first, Elise Willis, passed on April 1 at the age of 56. She worked at the plant for thirty-five years. The second, Mary Holt, 56, who worked at the plant for twenty-seven years, died just a few days later. The third, Annie Grant, 55, worked at the company for fifteen years. Miriam Jordan and Caitlin Dickerson, “Poultry Worker’s Death Highlights Spread of Coronavirus in Meat Plants,” New York Times, April 9, 2020.
5. In a recent online forum for Haymarket Books, Ruth Wilson Gilmore posed this question: “What do people who are already organized do? Is it possible for what they’re already doing to be connected to this radical vision of a future for all of us? How would that connection happen? What knots those things together and how can we trace the knot?” Ruth Wilson Gilmore in “Covid 19, Decarceration, and Abolition (Full),” YouTube video, posted by Haymarket Books, April 28, 2020.
6. Gilmore in “Covid 19, Decarceration, and Abolition (Full).”

9. To understand the production of cheap chicken, I prioritize the perspectives of its workforce, including intergenerational poultry families. I also center those who strategically move between jobs and who have been prematurely disabled, part of what radical geographer Bill Bunge calls the non-working, working class. These perspectives are best illuminated in the fifty-six recorded oral histories I conducted with poultry-processing workers, seven across multiple-generation poultry families. I also spent eighteen months working with alternative labor, race-based, and immigrant rights organizations surrounding the plant. William Bunge, Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).


12. “The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones.” Robinson, Black Marxism, 27, 29, 82.


In the preface to Futures of Black Radicalism, coauthored with Elizabeth P. Robinson, Robinson elaborates on this decision, saying, “I’m trying to give a great deal of our audience a purchase point. There’s no possibility of really telling a Black story without telling other peoples’ stories.” Johnson and Lubin, eds., Futures of Black Radicalism, 7.

17. See George Lipsitz, “What Is This Black in the Black Radical Tradition?” in Futures of Black Radicalism.

18. Robinson, Black Marxism, 96.


20. In an article written in the wake of Cedric Robinson’s passing, Robin D. G. Kelley ends with a discussion of Robinson’s address at the Critical Ethnic Studies Conference in Chicago in 2013. In it, Robinson outlines his work from the vantage point of slaves, not as the recipients of social death, but instead, he argues: “They were something more than what was expected of them, they could invent, manufacture, conspire, and organize way beyond the possibilities.” Robin D. G. Kelley, “Cedric J. Robinson: The Making of a Black Radical Intellectual,” CounterPunch, June 17, 2016.


28. Glen Sean Coulthard, Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014);


37. Between 1935 and 1940, the number of tenant farmers in the region dropped by almost 25 percent as landowners destroyed cotton crops in exchange for Agricultural Adjustment Act allotment checks (Gisolfi, *The Takeover*, 13). This was not a complete nor totalizing transformation as people fought for life and livelihoods that did not “fit” such a neat teleology. For example, in Mississippi, Clyde Woods highlights the importance of Black cooperative development and alternative traditions of sustainable development which were not reducible to resistance against exploitation. Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (1998; repr. New York: Verso, 2017).


44. Marx, *Capital*, 874.


47. Thompson traces this devaluation as a secondary process of time related to work-discipline for European waged workers. Silvia Federici takes this further, documenting the long process whereby women’s bodies, and their reproductive labor in particular, had to be devalued and controlled, in contradistinction to waged work, creating a sexual division of labor. The witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provided a site of primitive accumulation as necessary for the development of capital as the colonization and the expropriation of the European peasantry from its land. Through this analysis, Federici treats gender not as a “purely cultural reality,” but as “a specification of class relations.” While focusing on the violence of the witch hunts, she makes connections to other forms of violent primary accumulation through the slave trade and European colonialism across the Global South. Primary accumulation, for Federici, is an ongoing process necessary to the subordination of life to the production of profit. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004).

48. Thompson discusses the difficulties of imposing European time-sense through secondary studies of “non-industrial societies” in Mexico, Cameroon, the Middle East, and Latin America. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” 91–93.


50. Kurwana and Dominique, interview with the author, April 27, 2016.

51. See also Du Bois’s discussion in chapter 8 of *The Souls of Black Folk*, “Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece.” In this chapter, he argues: “To the car-window sociologist, to the man who seeks to understand and know the South by devoting the few leisure hours of a holiday trip to unravelling the snarl of centuries—to such men very often the whole trouble with the black field-hand may be summed up by Aunt Ophelia’s word, ‘Shiftless!’” Yet, he argues instead that these Black fieldhands are “careless because they have not found that it pays to be careful; they are improvident because the improvident ones of their acquaintance get on about as well as the provident. Above all, they cannot see why they should take unusual pains to make the white man’s land better, or
to fatten his mule or save his corn."


53. Mrs. Bonnie and Reggie, fieldnotes, March 5, 2015.

54. This mirrors a conversation between Big Bill Broonzy and Memphis Slim documented by Alan Lomax in his study of the Delta Blues. Memphis Slim: "I axed Mister Charley / What time of day / He looked at me / Threw his watch away." Big Bill Broonzy: "He the man originated the old-time eight-hour shift down here. Know what I mean? Eight hours in the morning and eight more in the afternoon.... You couldn’t tell um you was tired.... They’d crack you cross the head with a stick or maybe kill you. One of those things. You just had to keep on workin’.... From what they call ‘can to can’t’.... You start to work early in the mornin, and work right on till you can’t see no more at night." Woods, Development Arrested; Alan Lomax, The Land Where the Blues Began (New York: New Press, 2002).

55. Here, I am drawing on geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s work on the political economy of mass incarceration, which she argues depends on racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." Gilmore, Golden Gulag, 28.

56. Bryant Simon traces this transformation in The Hamlet Fire: "In 1928, it took 112 days to raise a 2.8 pound chicken that ate roughly 12.5 pounds of food as it grew to maturity. Forty years later, it took half that time for the grow-out, the industry term for the amount of time it takes for a chick to reach its full weight as a broiler. Ten years after that (1978) broilers raised on animal farms were 25% bigger than their predecessors and ate only half as much feed. In 1995, the average industrial chicken hit the scales at six-plus pounds. It took forty-seven days for the animals to get that big, and, along the way, they consumed only ten pounds of feed." Bryant Simon, The Hamlet Fire (New York: New Press, 2017), 84-85.


The main objective of the Poultry Processing Inspection Act was "to protect the consumer and the worker in the plant from unfit and diseased poultry and to protect the producer and processor from an unworkable inspection program that might drive them out of business." Additionally, by banning unviscерated chicken for interstate commerce, the act subsequently aided mechanization and further processing within the industry. 103 Cong. Rec. 2744 (1957) (Rep. Leonor Sullivan), quoted in Marc Linder, "I Gave My Employer a Chicken That Had No Bone: Joint Firm-State Responsibility for Line-Speed-Related Occupational Injuries," Case Western Reserve Law Review 46 (1995): 64.

58. FSIS regulation also increased industry concentration based on firms’ ability to invest in modernization techniques. In 1960, the nineteen largest plants slaughtered 30 percent of USDA inspected poultry. Only four years later, the same share was held by only nine firms. Productivity per worker also tripled from 1960 to 1987, while profits increased fourteen-fold from 1980 to 1990. Schwartzman, The Chicken Trail.

59. For example, in 1962, the USDA published its Marketing Research Report no. 549, Methods and Equipment for Eviscerating Chickens. This study followed workers with a 35 mm camera to determine the most efficient cutting techniques, with the goal of aiding increased line speeds. Methods and Equipment for Eviscerating Chickens, Marketing Research Report no. 549 (Washington DC: USDA, 1962).


61. This is not the first time such collaborations have occurred. Don Tyson was notoriously charged with bribing Mike Espy during his term as secretary of the USDA under Bill Clinton. (Schmidt, 1997). There were also several allegations of Tyson’s collusion with the Clintons through insider trading and around environmental regulations. Susan Schmidt, "Tyson Foods Admits Illegal Gifts to Espy," Washington Post, December 30, 1997; Bruce Ingersoll, "With a Friend in the White House, Tyson Foods Gets Gentle Treatment," Wall Street Journal, March 17, 1994.


63. In 1991, chicken surpassed beef as the most highly consumed animal protein in the United States. This shift was based on Tyson’s production model. By 1995, 95 percent of Tyson poultry was further processed chicken products rather than the whole broiler. Douglas Frantz, "How Tyson Became the Chicken King," New York Times, August 28, 1994.

64. While I rely on workers’ use of social security disability insurance and supplemental security income, many more workers left because their bodies were exhausted and the daily pain was too much without being able to "prove" or wait for the lengthy process of qualifying for either program.

65. Evelyn T., interview with the author, April 6, 2016.


69. In an interview, Ericka, whose mother worked in the plant for thirty-five years, distinguishes the meaning of the poultry for an older generation of Black workers. For them, "the poultry was the place, back in the day, for Black people." She goes on to say, "if you couldn’t find any other work they’d say, ‘go to the poultry, they’ll give you a job.’" Ericka, interview with the author, December 28, 2016.

70. Marcus, fieldnotes, February 1, 2015.

71. Takeya, interview with the author, June 3, 2016.