

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## ‘Immersed in Beauty and Barred from Seeing It’: San Francisco, Gentrification, and Incarceration in Rachel Kushner’s *The Mars Room*

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### Abstract:

This paper analyzes Rachel Kushner’s 2018 novel, *The Mars Room*, in relation to the work of critical geographers including Neil Smith and Ruth Wilson Gilmore in order to trace a connection between processes of urban gentrification and mass incarceration in an American context. Kushner’s novel follows Romy Hall, a former exotic dancer and sex worker who is serving a life sentence after murdering an abusive client. The novel cycles between two distinct timeframes and details Hall’s experience in – and eventual temporary escape from – the fictional Stanville Women’s Correctional Facility, as well as the events leading up to her incarceration. Kushner dedicates particular focus in these flashback scenes to the rapid gentrification of San Francisco beginning in the early 1990s and the resultant precarity of Romy’s life in the increasingly expensive city. By drawing a distinct relationship between the hostile socio-economic conditions of San Francisco and Hall’s decision to begin taking clients, Kushner equally gestures towards the interrelation between the processes of gentrification and incarceration which is exacerbated by the retrenchment of the social welfare state. This paper seeks to demonstrate how *The Mars Room* accurately depicts the real-life gentrification of San Francisco at the time in which the novel is set, and in the process will refer to a range of scholarship which establishes that such processes correspond to a higher rate of arrests in effected areas. Given that Kushner is a committed advocate for the abolition of the prison system as it currently exists, it will ultimately be argued that works of socially-engaged fiction like *The Mars Room* can be instrumental in the imaging of alternatives to the current carceral order.

**Keywords:** Gentrification; incarceration; prison abolition; contemporary fiction; American literature.

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In the acknowledgements section of her 2018 novel, *The Mars Room*, author Rachel Kushner expresses gratitude to both Don DeLillo and Ruth Wilson Gilmore for their help in the drafting of the project. At first glance, it may appear strange to see DeLillo, the preeminent American writer of postmodern fiction, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the geographer and celebrated prison abolition activist, mentioned in the same sentence. Yet upon further consideration, the reference to both figures highlights the fact that Kushner simultaneously maintains social, political, and literary commitments. In addition to being a leading contemporary American writer with a prose style compared to DeLillo (Goodyear 2018), Kushner is also, like Gilmore, a dedicated advocate for the abolition of the prison system. In many ways, *The Mars Room* is an amalgam of both endeavors. A work of literary realism, the novel follows Romy Hall, a former exotic dancer at the titular Mars Room, who takes up sex work in order to support herself and her son, Jackson, in an increasingly-gentrified San Francisco. Romy begins seeing a regular at the club, Kurt Kennedy, but after Kurt becomes abusive and begins to stalk Romy, she is forced to flee with Jackson to the anonymity of Los Angeles. When Kurt eventually tracks them down, Romy kills him in both panic and rage. Unable to afford an attorney, Romy is assigned an overworked and incompetent public attorney and subsequently receives a life sentence.

The novel cycles between two distinct timeframes and details Romy's experience in – and eventual temporary escape from – the fictional Stanville Women's Correctional Facility, as well as the events leading up to her incarceration. Through a reading of these flashback sequences, I will argue that Kushner documents the rapid gentrification of San Francisco beginning in the early 1990s, which she links to the precarity of Romy's life in the increasingly expensive city. I will then situate the novel in relation to the broader history of uneven development in San Francisco in order to demonstrate how Kushner accurately maps out process of gentrification which occurred in the city at the time in which the novel is set. Finally, I will contend that by drawing a distinct connection between the hostile socio-economic conditions of San Francisco and Romy's need to take on Kurt as a client, Kushner gestures towards the interrelation between the processes of gentrification and incarceration. With reference to studies on so-called 'order-maintenance policing' and the retrenchment of the American social welfare state, it becomes evident that the so-called 'gentrification-to-prison pipeline' which Kushner depicts but does not name in *The Mars Room* is anything but fictional (McElroy 2020: 704).

Before any analysis can be taken undertaken, it is first necessary to address the ethics of representation in the novel. In recent times, the practice of writing across social difference has rightfully come under increased scrutiny in tandem with broader

conversations about cultural appropriation (de Waal 2018; Hampton 2020). Given that Kushner has never served a prison sentence, her decision to write about incarcerated individuals – particularly transgender individuals and people of colour – might appear dubious, if not plainly problematic. Kushner’s representation of the prison system, however, is well-informed by her involvement in the prison abolition movement. As she explains in a 2015 interview, she began this work by attending an ‘extensive week-long tour of California prisons with criminal-justice students’ (Treisman 2015: par. 4). From there, she developed ongoing relationships with several prisoners serving life sentences and became involved in Justice Now, a prison abolition organization based in Oakland, California. In 2019, she wrote a profile of Ruth Wilson Gilmore for *New York Times Magazine* in which she chronicles Gilmore’s life and work while explaining the aims of the prison-abolition movement in which Gilmore is a leading figure. In this way, Kushner has used her public platform to argue that ‘the whole system should be dismantled’. Her fictional representations of incarceration—first in her 2015 short story ‘Fifty-Seven’ published in the *New Yorker*, and later in *The Mars Room*—thus emerge out of both a detailed understanding of academic work on the American carceral system as well as an ongoing engagement with the lived experience of incarcerated individuals, including with her friend Theresa Booboo Martinez, who is included in the acknowledgements to the book. So, while a work of fiction can never be coequal to the cruel reality of the carceral system, *The Mars Room* can nevertheless be read—and indeed, valued—as an important contribution to the prison abolition movement.

### **‘The Sunset was transformed’: The Gentrification of San Francisco in *The Mars Room***

*The Mars Room* begins on a bus transferring inmates between prisons in inland California. Here, Kushner may be nodding to Gilmore’s (2007: 1) seminal study of the California carceral system, *The Golden Gulag*, which also begins on a bus trip along a similar route; however, while the passengers in *The Golden Gulag* are traveling to advocate on behalf of prisoners, the passengers in *The Mars Room* are prisoners themselves. Amongst these passengers are several characters who will assume central positions in the novel. In addition to Romy, there is Laura Lipp, a woman with bipolar disorder who is incarcerated after killing her baby, and Conan, a black transgender man unable to receive an assignment to a men’s prison, who, under California’s three-strikes law, is serving a life sentence for writing a fraudulent cheque. While some prisoners chat between themselves to pass the time, Romy takes the rare opportunity ‘to try to see the world’ (Kushner 2018: 3). As the bus passes both the Magic Mountain amusement park and a men’s correctional facility, Romy poignantly notes that ‘the world had split into good and bad, bound together. Amusement park and county jail’ (11).

As the bus travels north up the Central Valley, Romy is prompted to remember her life prior to her incarceration. As the first-person speaker of the novel, Romy’s thoughts and memories are made available to the reader. In particular, Romy thinks back to her childhood in the Sunset District of San Francisco in both geographic and descriptive detail. For example, she describes living ‘on Tenth Avenue at Moraga...[where] you could see

Golden Gate Park, then Presidio, the matte red points of the Golden Gate Bridge, and behind it the steep, green-crinkled folds of the Marin Headlands' (Kushner 2018:10). Yet having been raised by a single, largely absent alcoholic mother, Romy is also quick to dispel the romanticism that so often hovers around San Francisco. As she comments, the San Francisco she experienced was 'an alternate one to the one you might know: it was not about rainbow flags or Beat poetry or steep crooked streets but fog and Irish bars and liquor stores all the way to the Great Highway, where a sea of broken glass glittered along the endless parking strip of Ocean Beach' (33). In this urban setting, Romy's childhood, as with many of the other characters in the novel, was characterized by violence, neglect, and a profound lack of privilege. Indeed, she relates a selection of memories which include watching her best friend getting punched until 'her cheeks had turned to hard shiny lumps' and taking "something called a Delcourt, which was acid and PCP mixed together...in the summer after sixth grade' (38; 41). Additionally, she describes an experience she had at the age of eleven, in which she was caught in the rain while walking home from a punk show and subsequently propositioned by a man who 'looked like someone's father, a respectable businessman, dressed in a suit' (27). While she does not narrate what happens after this encounter, she later comments, 'you would have been safe and dry and asleep, at home with your mother and your father who cared about you and had rules, curfews expectations...but if you were me, you would have done what I did' (28). In this way, Kushner directly prompts the reader to acknowledge their positionality and consider how either their privilege or their general life circumstances have most likely prevented them from experiencing the same fate as Romy.

As Romy continues to scan through her memories, which she refers to as 'the very real images that grip me from my erased past, and won't let go', she also offers an account of her young adulthood (Kushner 2018: 43). Although she does not provide specifics about her age or the dates, she does describe 'hustling [her] income as a lap dancer at the Mars Room on Market Street' and spending it on heroin (11). Romy also routinely thinks of the first years of the life of her son Jackson, whose father had died of an overdose, and who was taken into her mother's custody following her arrest. In particular, Romy's memories from this period are marked by references to the changing nature, and increasing unaffordability, of San Francisco. Shortly after Jackson's birth, for example, Romy was living in the Avenues district when her apartment building was sold and 'new management cleared the tenants to raise the rents' (84). By this time, she observes that 'the Sunset was transformed... people who looked like frat boys crowded the streets, wearing college sweatshirts and sipping health drinks out of giant styrofoam containers... [and] everything got converted by money' (46). As she lists all of the landmarks from her childhood that have since been removed, it is made obvious that the process of urban development has not only displaced Romy economically but also socially and culturally. Unable to afford rent anywhere else, Romy finally moves with Jackson to the Tenderloin, where, as she remembers, 'you could still get an affordable studio, if you could tolerate the atmosphere in those buildings' (84). Thus, it is with good reason that Keeble (2022: 5) contends that the flashbacks in the novel 'suggest the discursive currents of memory and traumatic circularity'. Understood this way, the very composition of the novel's narrative can be seen

to result from trauma Romy sustained both in her childhood and in her continual displacement within the city.

Although Kushner never uses the term throughout the novel, it is clear that Kushner is portraying the experience of the negative effects of the gentrification of San Francisco. Here, it is necessary to provide some brief definitional specification, for as Neil Smith notes in his seminal 1996 book, *The New Urban Frontier*, 'gentrification means different things to different people' (28). Nonetheless, in the book Smith provides a definition of gentrification as 'the process...by which poor and working-class neighborhoods in the inner city are refurbished via an influx of private capital and middle-class homebuyers and renters—neighborhoods that had previously experienced disinvestment and middle-class exodus' (30). Smith further contends that the factors which contributed to the rapid increase in gentrification from the 1960s onwards include 'deregulation, privatizations of housing and urban services, [and] the dismantling of welfare services' (37). Integral to the operation of gentrification is also a process of selective erasure, similar to that which is documented in *The Mars Room*. In Smith's words, 'the new urban pioneers seek to scrub the city clean of its working-class geography and history... [therefore] by remaking the geography of the city they simultaneously rewrite its social history as a preemptive justification for a new urban future' (25). Writing about San Francisco during the period in which the novel is set, Mirabel (2009: 12) concurs that it was a 'heady time when the past meant nothing and the future was everything'. Romy directly relates this assertion to her own life when she reveals that 'the trouble with San Francisco was that [she] could never have a future in that city, only a past' (Kushner 2018: 33).

Since the publication of *The New Urban Frontier*, there has been a proliferation of academic studies on the topic of gentrification. Notable works such as *Gentrification in a Global Context* (2005) edited by Rowland Atkinson and Gary Bridge, *Planetary Gentrification* (2016) edited by Loretta Lees et al., and the *Handbook of Gentrification Studies* (2019) edited by Lees and Martin Phillips have assessed recent trends in urban development and have expanded their scope of analysis to a global scale. As Elvin Wyly (2015: 2515), helpfully observes, 'theories and experiences that have anchored the reference points of gentrification in the Global North for half a century are now rapidly evolving into more cosmopolitan, dynamic world urban systems of variegated gentrifications'. Moreover, as Nelson et al. (2015: 344) observe, gentrification is not solely an urban process but has also taken place in rural areas 'in many postindustrial economies from the United States to Spain and from Germany to Australia'. So, while the gentrification depicted in *The Mars Room* occurs in an urban area in the Global North, these critical interventions serve as reminders of what Hackworth (2018: 48) refers to as 'the issue of generalisability' in the study of gentrification. Therefore, in order to further analyze the depiction of gentrification as it appears in *The Mars Room*, it is also necessary to situate the novel within the particular historical context of San Francisco.

### **A History of Uneven Development in San Francisco**

In his 2002 book *City for Sale: The Transformation of San Francisco*, progressive urban planner and academic Chester Hartman argues, 'the city has always experienced a tension between

the forces of rapid change and continuation of tradition—from the Gold Rush days through the 1906 earthquake and World War II and on into the modern period’ (2). This tension, however, has increased dramatically as a result of the rapid development of the city in the post-war period. A selection of statistics can help illustrate the pace and scale at which the city developed during this period. For example, Robinson (1995: 487) notes that ‘between 1960 and 1981, 30-million square feet of office space was constructed’ in the city, while ‘between 1959 and 1974, 28 new skyscrapers were added in only a few downtown blocks’. This development operated in tandem with the increasing prominence of the city as an economic and cultural center, such that ‘by the mid-1970s, San Francisco was second only to New York City among U.S. cities as a center of international commerce and banking’ (Hartman 2002: 3).

It should be of little surprise that the benefits of postwar urban development in San Francisco were experienced by members of the business class at the expense of those such as the ‘middle- and lower-middle-class Chinese Americans and working-class Irish Catholics’ around whom Romy grew up around in *The Mars Room* (Hartman 2002; Kushner 2018: 33). As geographer Brian J. Godfrey (1997: 317) observes, the so-called ‘Manhattanization’ of San Francisco brought about ‘escalating rents and property values, traffic congestion, disruption of scenic views, and displacement of poor and even middle-class residents’. While displacement of populations has been an outcome of the modern gentrification of San Francisco, forced displacements have occurred throughout the entirety of the development process itself. With a finite amount of land to develop, and a rapidly growing downtown business district, a consortium of planners and business interests beginning in the 1950s deemed it necessary to ‘take a massive parcel of downtown land, evict its occupants, demolish the existing structures, and convert the land to desired uses (Hartman 2002: 8). To be more specific, Robinson (1995: 488) documents that ‘between the 1950s and the 1980s, the SFRA [San Francisco Redevelopment Agency] acquired, by eminent domain and condemnation, 1,302 acres of blighted land, most of it in the central city and occupied by 39,217 mostly low-income residents’. Instead of building more affordable rental options to house those who had been displaced in these efforts, the city actually demolished over fifteen thousand such units between the years 1975-1985 (Hartman 2002: 327). It is also important to note that these urban development efforts affected different populations to varying extents. As Mirabel (2009: 14) documents, the Latina/o population was particularly impacted, with ten percent of the population being priced out of the city between 2000 and 2005, thus making San Francisco the only large American city to experience a decline in the number of Latina/o citizens residents during this time.

For this reason, Robinson (1995) contends that the Tenderloin District, one of the final affordable areas in the city, had attracted many of those who had been displaced from elsewhere in the city. In this sense, *The Mars Room* can be seen to map the process of gentrification which occurred in the city at the time in which the novel was set. Thus, Romy’s relocation from the Sunset District, north to the Avenues, and finally to the Tenderloin district evidences the increasing uninhabitability of a city frequently ranked amongst the most expensive in the country (Mack 2020). In the two decades since Romy’s fictional arrest, however, even the Tenderloin has fallen prey to the influx of capital

investment, first in the conversion of formerly long-term hotel dwellings into short-term dwellings for tourists (Hartman 2002: 366), and more recently with tech companies establishing offices in the area to the extent that geographer John Stehlin (2018: 476) has rebranded the district as the ‘Twitterloin’. Given this fact, the flashback sequences in the novel can be read as a testament to the incredible pace of gentrification in the city and to the fact that a more affordable livable San Francisco exists well within human memory.

### **Maintenance-Order Policing and the ‘Gentrification-to-Prison Pipeline’**

It remains to be demonstrated how, or indeed *if*, the processes of gentrification and incarceration are interrelated. In recent years, a number of geographers have sought to investigate this very question. Laniyou (2017: 920) provides strong empirical evidence from a study conducted in New York City to reinforce his claim that ‘gentrification in a tract does not necessarily induce heightened policing in the tract that experienced it, but significant policing in adjacent or neighboring tracts’. Building off the work of Mike Davis (2006), he observes that displacements caused as a result of gentrification frequently push populations into areas that are the subject of more focused police attention, as exemplified in the so-called Skid Row in Los Angeles (920). Subsequent studies have drawn similar, albeit slightly contrasting, conclusions. For example, in his study of data collected in New York between 2009 and 2015, Beck (2020: 248) concludes that ‘every 5 percent growth in the typical eligible-to-gentrify neighborhood’s real estate value was associated with 0.2 percent more order-maintenance arrests and 0.3 percent more proactive arrests, net of crime’. Collins et al. (2021: 14) extend the work of both Laniyou (2018) and Beck (2020) in their study of policing and neighborhood change in census tracts across Los Angeles, and, as they determine, ‘specifically, police citations were higher in Low-income Displacement (i.e. gentrifying) tracts compared to Low-income Concentration tracts and Stable tracts’.

All three works direct specific attention to the rates of order-maintenance policing, which, according to Beck (2020: 247), ‘focuses on making arrests for quality-of-life offenses like disorderly conduct, property damage, or trespassing’. As the three works also establish, the practice of order-maintenance policing is premised on the ‘broken windows theory’ of criminology. Developed by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling and brought to prominence in a cover story for a 1982 issue of *The Atlantic*, the ‘broken windows theory’ proposed the efficacy of foot policing that prioritized so-called ‘public order’ in communities (par. 6). As Kelling and Wilson (1982: par. 51) provocatively argue, ‘public drunkenness, street prostitution, and pornographic displays can destroy a community more quickly than any team of professional burglars’. From this perspective, according to and Kelling and Wilson, it is imperative to regulate the behavior and movement of ‘disreputable or obstreperous or unpredictable people: panhandlers, drunks, addicts, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers, the mentally ill’, and order-maintenance policing became the mechanism by which to do this.<sup>1</sup> This theory most infamously manifested as the ‘Stop and Frisk’ policy which was adopted during the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations in New York City, and which sanctioned policing that targeted Black and Hispanic individuals in vastly disproportionate numbers (Newberry 2017). While the practice of ‘Stop and Frisk’

policing was deemed unconstitutional in 2013, similar forms of order-maintenance policing are, as previously argued, still practiced in relation to the process of gentrification (Goldstein 2013). Indeed, it is hardly incidental that the targeted policing of so-called 'disreputable or obstreperous or unpredictable people' creates more favorable conditions for capital investment as well as for the relocation of more privileged citizens. To this point, Maharawal (2017: 341, 352) argues, 'in the San Francisco Bay Area, practices of policing the poor have proceeded hand in hand with gentrification and the restructuring of the regional economy' in what terms a 'violent nexus of policing and gentrification'.

While it is clear that the statistics on order-maintenance arrests indicate a connection between the process of gentrification and increased policing, it is also true that such a formulation does not neatly apply to the situation depicted in *The Mars Room*. After all, Romy was not arrested for squatting in a building slated for demolition nor for a 'public order' offense such as loitering. Even though Romy's killing of Kurt can reasonably be conceived of as an act of self-defense, it still complicates her relation to what has been termed 'the gentrification-to-prison pipeline' (McElroy 2018: 704). This is not to disavow the connection between the gentrification and Romy's eventual incarceration, however. Rather, Kushner subtly and skillfully couches her commentary on gentrification and the rise of the American carceral apparatus within a larger critique of the retrenchment of social welfare spending.

### **The Retrenchment of the American Social Welfare State and the "Prison Fix"**

In a comprehensive article on the history of the relationship between welfare spending and the carceral apparatus in the post-war period, Kohler-Hausmann (2015: 91) contends that between 1980 and 2000, 'when the welfare programs serving the most marginalized groups in society sustained the most substantial cuts, the penal system expanded exponentially'. As she clarifies further, during this period 'social problems' which were traditionally addressed by welfare programs were handed over to the authority of law enforcement (91). Beck and Goldstein (2018: 1185) corroborate this assertion and propose that although crime rates have fallen since the 1990s, rates of incarceration expanded considerably after 'cities adopted more punitive approaches to social problems that had formerly been addressed through social services channels'. Thus, as sociologist L  ic Wacquant (2010: 203) has influentially argued, 'the misery of American welfare and the grandeur of American prison-fare at century's turn are the two sides of the same political coin. The generosity of the latter is in direct proportion to the stinginess of the former'. In Wacquant's (218) estimation, the replacement of welfare with what he terms 'prisonfare' has been an integral facet in the crafting of the neoliberal state. In implementation, this has amounted to a 315 per cent increase in spending on the justice system in the three decades between 1982 and 2012 (Widra 2017), as well as a concomitant tripling of the average number of incarcerated individuals since 1980 (Pettit and Gutierrez 2018: 1154). As Schoenfeld (2018: 4) documents, the State of California, amongst other states, spends more of the state budget on corrections facilities than on higher education funding. A host of additional dramatic statistics cumulatively figure into what De Lissovoy (2012: 740) aptly terms the 'carceral turn within neoliberalism'. As has been well documented, this 'carceral



turn' has disproportionately impacted racialized individuals, such that as Mauer and King (2007: 3) tabulate, African-American individuals 'are incarcerated at nearly six (5.6) times the rates of whites' whereas Hispanic individuals "are incarcerated at nearly double (1.8) times the rate of whites." Drawing on statistics such as this, Michelle Alexander (2010) has influentially argued that the contemporary American carceral system constitutes a 'new Jim Crow' in what Kushner (2013: par. 1) has referred to as 'an excellent and very important book'.

Returning again to the *Mars Room*, it must be said that while Romy does not experience racial injustice, she is nonetheless subject to the consequences of an all but absent social welfare system. During Romy's childhood, it is evident that there were no measures of support to assist with her education or general upbringing. In adulthood, her life is also characterized by precarity. Romy receives no assistance with the raising of her child, which could come, to use one example, in the form of state-subsidized childcare, and she must instead pay her neighbor, also a single mother, to look after Jackson. As has been argued, the gentrification of San Francisco is paradigmatic of the broader neoliberal turn and the destruction of thousands of affordable rental units, as well as the lack of state-subsidized housing options, greatly exacerbates Romy's state of precarity. Romy's turn to sex work can therefore be directly associated with the lack of social assistance afforded to her; however, given that sex work is both criminalized and stigmatized in the American context, Romy is unable to access legal recourse when Kurt begins to stalk and harass her. To this point, a recent survey conducted by Crago et al. (2021) with a sample of two hundred sex workers in five Canadian cities found that while nearly sixty per cent of respondents had been the victim of violence within the last year, only under twenty per cent had sought the assistance of the police afterwards. Kushner's decision to have Romy relay her memories in the form of an interior monologue, as opposed to dialogue with, for example, a prison counselor, signals the very extent to which Romy has been isolated by this legal and economic system.

The paucity of social services is further exhibited in the novel when Romy is unable to afford a lawyer for her trial and is assigned an 'incompetent and overworked old man' as a public defender (Kushner 2018: 63). After the public defender significantly mishandles the case and makes the evidence of Kurt's abusiveness inadmissible, Romy is handed two life sentences (56). Romy's experience closely mirrors the actual situation in the American justice system, in which, as Lee et al. (2013: par. 7) note, 'in 2008 for every dollar spent on public defense, taxpayers spent nearly \$14 on corrections' in the state of California. As a result, public defenders are chronically overburdened, and it has been demonstrated that privately retained legal counsel statistically achieves more favorable outcomes for their clients than public defenders (Hoffman et al. 2003). In this sense, one's relationship to the law and their likelihood of incarceration is predicated upon their economic position, which leads Gilmore (2007: 7) to state that 'as a class, convicts are deindustrialized cities' working or workless poor'. Therefore, while Kushner is cautious not to absolve Romy entirely, she also gestures toward the dubiousness of claims like that of the prison counselor who accosts Romy and declares, 'your situation is due one hundred percent to choices you made and actions you took' (157). As Kushner (2018: 262) more compassionately articulates, 'the word violence...still meant something, but multiple things. There were stark acts of it:

beating a person to death. And there were more abstract forms, depriving people of jobs, safe housing, adequate schools’.

Throughout the novel, Kushner also stages a critique of the retrenched social welfare system by granting narrative space to Romy’s fellow inmates. In so doing, she reveals that each character has been failed by the social welfare system in a different way. Laura Lipp, for example, was unable to access treatment for her bipolar disorder before killing her child (29). Conan, in addition to being unable to afford gender-affirming procedures, was the victim of repeated physical and sexual abuse as a young child (251). Romy also notes that many of her fellow inmates have received inadequate primary education, such that many ‘in prison cannot read, and some cannot tell time’ but, as she clarifies, ‘that doesn’t mean they are not shrewd and superior individuals who can outsmart any egghead’ (80). Of course, this is not to suggest that untreated mood disorders, childhood abuse, or a lack of formal education somehow naturally translate into criminality, but rather to reinforce Beck and Goldstein’s (2018: 1204) argument that the American state has funneled ‘ever more resources into their punitive capacities and neglected their care capacities’. This imbalance is succinctly but devastatingly evidenced by a statistic provided by Kohler-Hausmann (2015: 91) that as of 2005, ‘almost five hundred thousand people with mental illness were confined in prisons and jails in the United State, compared to fifty thousand in psychiatric hospitals’. Kushner thus makes it clear that these people are not imprisoned ‘due one hundred percent to choices [they] made’ but rather because of a state apparatus that funds a carceral system at the expense of meaningful social welfare programs (Kushner 2018: 157).

While Kushner primarily focuses her attention on the circumstances of the inmates, she also attends to the general economic precarity which compels people to work in the carceral system. For example, Gordon Hauser, who teaches literacy in the prison, is forced to take the job because he had a large amount of student debt and was about to lose his fellowship at the university where he is completing his graduate studies. Likewise, it is revealed that Stanville, the fictional rural town in which the prison is located, has the ‘highest-percentage of minimum-wage workers in the state’, which prompts Hauser to aver that ‘if a person got outside their own bubble they would see that prison guards were poor people without reasonable options’ (Kushner 2018: 91; 220). Here, the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007: 22) becomes an integral reference, for as she theorizes in *The Golden Gulag*, ‘there are more people in prison in order for “the state” to help rural areas hungry for jobs; in this explanation of prison expansion, prisoners of color presumably provide employment opportunities for white guards’.

Circling back to the connection between incarceration and gentrification, then, it can be argued that at one end, the carceral system has expanded to facilitate the process of gentrification within urban space while at the same time serving as what Gilmore (2007: 26) terms ‘partial geographical solutions to political economic crises’ in predominantly rural areas. This ‘solution’ can take form in the construction of new prison facilities which function as forms of rural stimulus programs. Over 1100 such facilities were built in the United States in the years between 1970 and 2006 and nearly three quarters of these were in rural locations (Eason 2016). In the Californian context, Gilmore (2007) uses the example of Corcoran—a city that Kushner (2018: 91) compares to her fictional Stanville in

the novel—to demonstrate how a surplus of unused agricultural land and labor power produced by a variety of factors including a prolonged drought effectively propelled the expansion of the state carceral system throughout the 1980s. Then-Governor George Deukmejian was particularly approving of this approach, and he collaborated personally with a former county sheriff, Senator Robert Presley, to ensure the construction of more prisons (Hagan et al. 2015). As a result, thirteen new prisons were built in the state and both Gilmore (2007) and Hagan et al. (2015) document how the enactment of stricter criminal sentencing standards, such as a 'three-strike' law passed by the state legislature in 1994, helped to fill the increased space created with the carceral system. Yet while these prisons were promised to return a sense of prosperity to their surrounding environs, Gilmore (2007) observes that the facility built in Corcoran in 1985 failed to produce the growth in income that was expected and even cites studies that suggest that the local rate of poverty actually increased in the years following the completion of the project (160). The situation is even more dire in the novel's Stanville, where 'the water is poisoned...[and] most of the business are boarded' (Kushner 2018: 74). Evidently, the 'prison fix' that the construction of new facilities offers fails to deliver the local residents from the same sort of precarity that Romy and her fellow inmates experienced prior to their incarceration (Gilmore 2007: 87). In fact, according to census data collected in 2020, the poverty rate in Corcoran, California now stands at roughly twenty-nine per cent (United States Census Bureau 2021).

### **Conclusion: Imagining Abolitionist Alternatives**

By the novel's conclusion, Romy manages to escape from the prison during a riot in the yard. In short order, she replaces her prison uniform with clothing off a nearby laundry line, steals a truck from a man at a gas station, and drives up to hide in the wooded mountains. The following morning, Romy awakes to the sound of a police helicopter, and she is spotted by its searchlights soon after. Although she is ordered by the police to 'step out slowly with [her] hands where we can see them', she instead runs 'towards them, toward the light' (Kushner 2018: 336). While Romy's exact fate is left unclear, it is plausible to suggest that she will be subject to what is commonly referred to as 'suicide by cop'. As Kushner demonstrates through this bleak conclusion, freedom for those incarcerated will not come through a hole in an electric fence. Rather, it will be achieved through the tireless efforts of the activists like those whom Gilmore depicts in the introduction to *The Golden Gulag*, through the work of scholar-activists like Gilmore herself, and perhaps even through compassionate, socially-engaged works of fiction like *The Mars Room*.

Recently, the widespread protests following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 brought increased public attention to the prison abolition movement and re-emphasized the urgent need for reforms in the American carceral system. While being cautious not to assume an outsized role in this process for a work of fictional like *The Mars Room*, it was nevertheless argued that Kushner effectively uses the novel to illustrate a connection between gentrification in San Francisco—as well as the broader decline of social welfare provision—and the massive increase in the American prison population. In so doing, she maps out some potential abolitionist alternatives to the current predominance of

carcerality. In brief, Kushner (2018: 118) indicates that ‘an apartment, financial stability, and proof of gainful employment’ are necessary to receive the assent of a parole board, then the process of incarceration can be circumvented entirely if such resources are assured before one is driven into the carceral system in the first place. This might seem an altogether wishful, or even fanciful proposition, but as Rinaldo Walcott (2021: 32) asserts, ‘imagination is so central to the abolitionist project: the first foundational step to embracing a newfound freedom is embracing the freedom to imagine it’. In addition to forwarding the voices of the people who have been most harmed by the forms of institutionalized injustice instantiated in the carceral system, it is evident that works of fiction like *The Mars Room* can also play an impactful role in this process of radical imagination.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Kurt worked as a security guard at the Warfield Theatre prior to his patronage at The Mars Room. When a run of shows by the Jerry Garcia Band lead to a group of ‘pathetic hippies’ congregating outside the theatre, Kurt and the security team ‘keep clearing out their encampment [to] *maintain order*’ (Kushner 2018: 238, own emphasis added).

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