

Sylvia Ryerson, *Calls from Home*, Whitesburg, Kentucky: Working Films/Appalshop, 2023.

<https://www.callsfromhomefilm.com>

### **Abolitionist Media in Carceral Geographies: *Calls from Home* and the Fight to Stop a Prison**

The first thing we should know about *Calls from Home* (hereafter *CFH*) is it is a film being used to fight a prison. It is part of an ongoing effort to stop construction on what would be the fifth federal prison—and the nation’s most expensive—in Eastern Kentucky, Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) Letcher. Since the 1990s, 16 prisons have been built in the Central Appalachian region, making it one of the most concentrated areas of rural prison growth in the nation. Eight of them form a ring around WMMT-FM, a community radio station in Whitesburg, Kentucky, where every Monday night for over two decades the station has recorded and broadcast messages to those incarcerated within its local listening area. The station is part of the nationally recognized media arts and education center, Appalshop, which has generated participatory and community-based media projects in the region for decades. So *CFH* is a *film* about a *radio show* at a *cultural organizing center* in a *region* where people have organized for over 100 years to fight coal companies, economic disaster, crude stereotypes, and now, prisons. The technology and infrastructure of place matter in the war between carceral and abolitionist geographies—and media are at the heart of these campaigns.

To think about media and media making as direct attacks on the carceral state is important. It forces us to think differently, to visualize deeply, to distill our working lexicon as abolitionist and carceral scholars—to engage in what Kaba and Hayes (2018) call “a jailbreak of the imagination”. *CFH* builds from abolitionist geographies (Gilmore 2022), countervisual (Mirzoeff 2011; Schept 2014) and conjunctural analyses (Camp 2016), and core work on carceral Appalachia (Kirby 2024; Norton et al. 2024; Pelot-Hobbs 2018, Ryerson 2010; Schept 2022) that foreground methods grounded in struggle. Like Ryerson’s film, these approaches pose questions anchored in abolitionist strategy. As Craig Gilmore (2024), one of *CFH*’s advisors, asks in his analysis of the fight against FCI Letcher: What do we need to know to put the carceral state in crisis? To delay and ultimately ruin carceral projects? To reclaim the land, the commons, and the

infrastructure of Appalachia, and, by extension, everywhere? In making *CFH*, Ryerson and the people she worked and organized with, followed this organizing principle. They asked key questions: What would it take to create a visual narrative of where people come from into these remote mountain prisons? How would they show how prisons wage war against families and communities, without visually reproducing and perpetuating this violence? How could they meaningfully engage and counter a community's desperate desire for a prison? How would they work, ultimately, to shift us away from carceral common sense? Ryerson and her team did not have to do this work alone—their work was grounded in some of the nation's most important participatory media and abolitionist struggles, right at home.

### **The Legacy of Abolitionist Filmmaking and the Crisis of Carceral Reproduction in Appalachia**

The story of *Calls from Home* is inseparable from the larger story of the region—its histories of extraction and external forces, from the moment of settler colonialist contact moving forward, and also the story of one institution, Appalshop, and its historic role as a cultural front in Appalachia. Founded in 1969, Appalshop itself began out of an external vision of the region's oppression, as one of nine community film workshops, funded through the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) during the War on Poverty (Schept 2022). Originally an OEO jobs training program designed to route underserved youth into jobs in the mainstream media industry, participants reshaped that mission through a community-based lens; they would (and still do) teach young Appalachians how to make films about their home, from home, using countervisual practices. Those efforts centered upon problematizing the image of Appalachia as the stereotypical poster child for American poverty.

The region has an incredible number of landmark films, many by women whose documentary practice is anchored in movement struggles. In 1975, one of Appalshop's first major films, *Buffalo Creek Flood: An Act of Man*<sup>1</sup> by Mimi Pickering, who is a co-producer of *CFH*, captured the angry refusal of countervisuality in its title. The film follows the catastrophic

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://appalshop.org/shop/buffalo-creek-flood-an-act-of-man> (last accessed 1 October 2024).

flooding of several West Virginia coal communities and the coal company's "Act of God" corporate legal excuses. The footage, to this day, is devastating to watch, not simply because of the deluge that decimates the coal towns that make up Buffalo Creek but because the deluge itself is the debris and detritus—the black sludge water—created by the Pittston Coal Company who positioned a dam at the head of a holler<sup>2</sup>—and knew it promised impending doom. Right around the same time, another director, Barbara Kopple, was making a film about nearby *Harlan County, USA* (1976) which would win an Academy Award for its gritty, haunting account of a 13-month miners' strike and the miners' often violent struggles with strikebreakers, police, and company thugs as the community fought to survive.<sup>3</sup> In *Stranger with a Camera* (2000), a required film for all incoming students in the Appalachian Justice Research Center, that I co-direct, director Elizabeth Barret returns to the exploitative images that have defined the region from the 1960s War on Poverty forward, and the flood of filmmakers who came to the region, however humanistically, to capture this destitution.<sup>4</sup> *Stranger* follows the tragic case of how this kind of media-making convergence led to the tragic shooting and killing of Canadian filmmaker Hugh O'Conner by Eastern Kentuckian landowner Hobart Ison. Settler colonial capitalist constructs of land as property and poverty as tourism, guns as patriarchal lifeways, humanistic journalistic "drop ins" to the region, and community desires for more complex forms of accountability and representation all intersect at what, in mainstream accounts, would be just another "true crime" procedural set in a "poverty-stricken" region. Instead, we see how forms of resilience and repair might take shape, through a singular case. Lifelong Eastern Kentucky resident Barret states explicitly that the film is her own way of making sense of her complicity in and responsibility for the region and its struggles, internally and externally, as a filmmaker.

These countervisual records, grounded in the importance of centering those with lived experience in coalmining communities, survivor and witness accounts, and visual documentation, stand as powerful affective and analytical convergences of law, corporate power,

---

<sup>2</sup> "Holler" is the Appalachian colloquial term for hollows, small mountain valleys.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074605/> (last accessed 1 October 2024).

<sup>4</sup> <https://appalshop.org/shop/stranger-with-a-camera> (last accessed 1 October 2024).

extraction, and community protest and demands. As commitments to counter-archives and counter-narratives, the films themselves offer strategies for our current movements, through visual echoes that carry forward. Enter Amelia Kirby and Nick Szuberla's *Up the Ridge* (2006),<sup>5</sup> the direct predecessor to Ryerson's *Calls from Home*. This film follows the early rise of the carceral state in Appalachia through the construction of Wallens Ridge State Prison (WRSP) in Wise County, Virginia, and the horrifying movement of razor wire, guard towers, prison walls, and Black people into a white-regulated and -staffed prison built on top of a razed mountain. Through the accounts of people imprisoned in the region and their families as well as community activists, local political elites, prison industry boosters, and working-class guards, we see, retrospectively, the awful merge of the War on Drugs and law-and-order politics in communities struggling for economic lifelines in the face of their abandonment by the coal industry. As Schept (2022: 17) writes, one of the real horrors of this kind of boosterism is "that it threatens to deputize hundreds of people into one of the central sites of racialized class war" and follows a crisis of "surplus masculinities" (Cowen and Siciliano 2011) making would-be white men miners into white men guards. Kirby, who is from Wise County, watched this unfold firsthand, as her high school classmates went on to work in the prison. In a recent public hearing held by the Federal Bureau of Prisons on the proposed FCI Letcher prison, Kirby brought this haunting history into the present, where she movingly told her neighbors about what the effects of carcerality would be on their working lives: divorce, stress, mental health issues, addiction, suicide, domestic violence... a terrible legacy for their children and the region (Kirby 2024).

It is in this cinematic environment, amid the rise of prisons in Central Appalachia in the late 1990s, that a late-night blues, R&B, and hip hop show on Appalshop's community radio station WMMT-FM, took on new meaning. Host Virgil Prinkleton Jr., AKA DJ VIP, had grown up in Harlan County in the predominantly Black community of Lynch, KY. His grandparents were part of the Great Migration to the coal fields, and in the late 1990s, he was the only Black radio programmer on air for miles around. His show, *The Quiet Storm*, started getting letters and calls from people who were incarcerated in the region. As it turns out, his show was the only

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://appalshop.org/shop/up-the-ridge> (last accessed 1 October 2024).

Black broadcast they could access, and Prinkleton Jr. started accepting their collect calls. All counties that host prisons in Central Appalachia today are over 95% white, with Black incarceration rates averaging up to five times higher than rates for white people across the boom of mass incarceration (Prison Policy Initiative, 2024). In this new penal landscape, WMMT-FM realized its airwaves had become a lifeline to and from the prisons, as a way for families to circumvent exorbitantly expensive prison phone rates. At the time, a 20-minute prison phone call cost up to seven dollars, with families getting \$300 monthly phone bills for basic communication. WMMT's station manager Jim Webb told Prinkleton Jr. to keep accepting the collect calls—what is a community radio station for, he determined, if not to reflect on-air *all* the people within its community? And so, people inside and outside the prisons continued sharing the radio station's number and giving shout outs to each other during Prinkleton Jr.'s show. After Prinkleton Jr. (and his co-host DJ Eight Ball) moved on, Kirby and Szuburla formalized the call-in structure of the show in the early 2000s, first named "Holler to the Hood". After a series of iterations, the show was renamed *Calls from Home* in 2011 and has continued since.

Ryerson arrived in the region as an intern at Appalshop in 2008, and went on to write her undergraduate thesis (Ryerson 2010) on the three federal prisons that were built in Eastern Kentucky in rapid succession in 1992, 2003, and 2004. Examining local newspaper archives, talking with formerly incarcerated folks, their families, as well as local political elites and community organizers, Ryerson's findings revealed the lies about jobs and economic growth that local, state, and federal officials had touted to these communities during the site selection processes, as well as their accompanying social, economic, and environmental harms. Her much-cited undergraduate thesis (proof that undergraduates can make important research contributions that lay the groundwork for future work) made clear that prison building in the region works to uphold hierarchies of racialized wealth, further dispossessing the most vulnerable, while consuming funding that is desperately needed in community investments (Ryerson 2010). After graduating from college, Ryerson returned to Appalshop and turned her thesis research into a three-part radio documentary, titled *Economies of Incarceration*, that aired on WMMT-FM (it included interviews with Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Anne Bonds, and Gregory Hooks, experts nationally debunking the myth of prisons as economic growth). In such ways, WMMT's

airwaves were a crucial outlet for opposition, bringing national analyses of the prison-industrial complex to local audiences and providing a space to counter pro-prison narratives with leading experts in the emergent field of critical carceral studies. This work allowed, as Schept (2022: 206) writes, “for an alternative political imaginary that included those incarcerated within WMMT’s broadcast area as a part of the community”.

From the beginning for Ryerson, prison building in the region was dependent on its racialized incarceration of people *not from* the region, thus, the weaponization of insider/outsider discourses that have long permeated Appalachia. Ryerson soon found herself ensnared in these same discourses, as pro-prison local elites used her own “outsider status” to question her research and local reporting on plans for yet another prison, this time in Letcher County, the home of WMMT-FM and the *Calls from Home* radio show. Frustrated with the limits of the pro- vs. anti-prison debate in the local papers, Ryerson turned her attention to a different medium and began co-creating longform soundscapes—audio postcards—with family members who had loved ones incarcerated in the region, another precursor to her film. In Appalachia’s legacy of participatory media, the Restorative Radio Audio Postcard Project<sup>6</sup> (Ryerson 2016; The Takeaway 2016) aimed to use WMMT’s airwaves to attune people to what rural prison building means for the families torn apart by it, and to their visions for a future beyond it. Digital recorders in hand, people from across Virginia and Washington D.C. recorded themselves for months at a time—their thoughts, their daily activities, their hopes and dreams—co-creating longform, immersive soundscapes of home to broadcast to their imprisoned loved ones far away. Excerpts from the series were rebroadcast on WNYC Studios/NPR’s *The Takeaway* and the BBC.

Ryerson began to wonder, how do we *show* the work these airwaves are doing to connect families across the vast distances of the carceral state, to move toward coalitional organizing against prisons? These histories—and their questions—were urgent: the fight was at Letcher County’s door. Yet another federal prison project loomed, and rural jails had quietly become the new overlooked centers of mass incarceration (Norton et al. 2024).

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/feature/envision-yourself-being-a-free-man> (last accessed 1 October 2024).

In 2016, US Congressman Harold “Hal” Rogers (KY-5), through his powerful role on the House Appropriations Committee, secured \$444 million in the congressional budget to build a fifth federal prison in his home district of Eastern Kentucky. With this allocation, the proposed United States Penitentiary (USP) Letcher was poised to become the most expensive federal prison in U.S. history, and was sited just ten miles away from Appalshop and WMMT-FM, catalyzing local opposition. The Letcher Governance Project, founded by DJs from the CFH radio show, became a significant organizing presence against the prison. Along with national abolitionist activists, lawyers, local landowners, and people incarcerated, they launched a campaign with the hashtag #our444million and countered pro-prison economic innovation arguments with the slogan “Prisons Are Not Innovation”. Fight Toxic Prisons, the Abolitionist Law Center, and other organizations were now actively supporting the fight. Together, their efforts would significantly delay the prison’s construction. This momentum eventually resulted in a lawsuit against the prison’s construction, leading the BOP to withdraw its proposal in 2019, ending a 15-year attempt to build a prison in Letcher County. It was a massive win.<sup>7</sup>

But USP Letcher, like the carceral state, would not die easily. In September 2022, the BOP launched a new effort to build the prison, just two months after epic rains culminated in catastrophic flooding to 14 Eastern Kentucky counties, killing 45 people and displacing thousands (Ryerson and Schept 2023). Appalshop’s archives and WMMT’s broadcast studio were decimated. With echoes of Buffalo Creek, communities were in desperate need of housing and recovery efforts. Instead, Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) Letcher (renamed from USP Letcher due to its lower medium-level security status), at the price tag of half a billion dollars, rose again, a shadowy haunting legislative figure, with promises of jobs, economic growth, and new career pathways into carceral work, through regional public schools. This time both sides were better organized, caught in a prolonged conjunctural crisis (Camp 2016). Political elites and the BOP had developed justifications to offset abolitionists. Organizing against the prison had also grown and people were flying in from all over the country to strategize on how to defeat the

---

<sup>7</sup> For more on this organizing and strategic win, see *Coal, Cages, Crisis: The Rise of the Prison Economy in Central Appalachia* by Judah Schept (2022).

prison. They formed a new front, Building Community Not Prisons (BCNP)—a coalition committed to stopping the prison from being built in Letcher County or anywhere else, securing better community investments, and working directly with communities of color most impacted by prisons. This time there was a film to go with the campaign; Ryerson was taking *CFH* anywhere in the region where screenings could be organized.

With only one federally required public meeting to discuss the prison, Ryerson’s film became an essential way to create public forums to bring people into the fight. During the federally required environment review process in the spring of 2024, BCNP worked to flood the Bureau of Prisons with comments from across Appalachia and the entire US opposing FCI Letcher, given that the comment record had served as a crucial delay tactic that helped defeat the prison before. In the previous fight, the public comment record created standing for future litigation and remains a powerful historical archive of dissent against the prison—a people’s history. The spring 2024 screening tour for *Calls from Home* was central to getting these comments submitted again and embodied abolitionist principles. Ryerson and participants in the film traveled to communities most impacted by mass incarceration in the region. In packed community theaters, like mine in Knoxville, the projector rolled to standing room only crowds. At the end, the audience, visibly moved, was asked to write comments—addressed to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, from their seats, right then. It was exhilarating to participate: to be prompted to write the federal government about why we do not want prisons, what we would rather have instead—a practice (and it is a *practice*) we are rarely afforded. We see ourselves and the possibilities of an otherwise.

### **Calls from Home**

Appalachia as a critical global conjuncture for both carceral and abolitionist geographies, and these historical and material contexts, make a film like *CFH* possible. We come to see how the film itself *is* cultural organizing: a documentary record of the region’s historic and historical crises on screen, a reflection of community values, a tool being used to stop a prison from being built.



Short, running at just over 30 minutes, the film has a surprisingly epic quality. The sweeping aerial shot that opens the film, moving from the station's radio tower high atop a mountain ridge out across the sky as you hear recordings of people leaving messages for their incarcerated loved ones, is an intentional form of distancing. The shot completes as it zooms in on a flattened mountaintop that is capped by...a prison, a mountaintop that was removed specifically to build Wallens Ridge State Prison (WRSP). This prison is something that had to be imagined in place of a multitude of other possibilities and is now something that organizes people's lives for hundreds and hundreds of miles. The scene ends in Essie Jeanette Delaney Manns' living room in Roanoke, Virginia, as she leaves a message for her grandson, who is incarcerated over 200 miles away. "You are worthy of being loved ... still here fighting for peace and justice", she says. Her words are followed by an animated map of prisons appearing across Appalachia. The messages themselves offer love, updates, memories, laughter, children reciting their ABCs, thinking about you, shared songs, missingness—they are raw in their quotidianness. And they are poetic, familiar, singular voices that do the work of holding the relationships to someone in prison. An act of faith that their loved one is out there, that they will find a way. Ordinary soliloquies, they are overlaid, across the film, to images of daily life as family members leave work, drive home, or look out across the mountains: "When I look up into the mountains, I think of all the grace and the mercy that you have brought us just being *you*." One ends poignantly: "I leave you with this thing until I can find you again." Together, in combination, they are multitude—as we hear in the final scene, a cacophony of *Calls from Home* messages overlay the mountains, against the prison. We cannot help but wonder what would happen if ALL these voices were organized to end the prison.

Ryerson's aim with the film was to show the three points of the *Calls from Home* radio show in action, a triangle connected by soundwaves: the experience of listening to it from prison, the radio station recording the messages, and the homes/lives/living rooms/porch stoops of loved ones calling in. How to film the experiences of those in prison posed a perennial problem. There is no real way to film inside prisons without reproducing its violence (Brown 2014) and limited access makes any kind of collaboration immensely challenging. *CFH's* full design however is a result of Ryerson's conversations and collaborative work with comrades in prison. Their

dialogues created something wildly new and beautiful. First, Ryerson discussed the project over the phone with longtime currently incarcerated listeners of the radio show, many of whom she had come to know through her time as a DJ for the show. How would they describe and represent their experience of listening to the show? She then worked closely with animation artist Javier Barbosa, who built scenes from their descriptions and drawings, creating a production style built upon his background as a graffiti artist and from the aesthetic of letter artwork sent into the radio station from incarcerated listeners. This collaborative animation delivers some of the film's most moving moments, as it enables us to imagine what is happening inside prisons, to see how loved ones connect, and the significance of outlets for creative expression. We hear William "C Walk" Griffin, incarcerated at Wallens Ridge State Prison, give his account of what it is like hearing his wife Michelle's messages from inside his cell through a scene that finds him lifted, soaring high above the prison into the night skies, free for a moment. A montage sequence shows us an amazing series of artworks by Peter "PITT" Kamau Mukuria, incarcerated at Red Onion State Prison, including a self-portrait, commissioned for the film project, of himself, listening to the radio show from inside his prison cell. He describes—and we see—how everyone on the cell block listens to the show through the prison's vent system, animated as airwaves moving through the walls of isolated cells out through the mountains—an amplification that spans the region's distance, subversive in its very existence. Scenes like this give breathing room to experience representational strategies and visual aesthetics that interrupt the ways that police and prisons shape our lives, our communities. It is also about how to imagine powerfully in places of confinement that are killing spaces of imagination. The film works to connect what has been severed, through voice, image, sonic qualities, art, and music. The visual language is tightly connected to the acoustemologies (Hemsworth 2015) of the film, with Ryerson herself a producer of sound and a musician.

The film works the muscle of imagination in relation to social needs, social problems, and the social movements that challenge the prison-industrial complex and the carceral state. It creates abolitionist visuals and aesthetics born out of years of participatory media and community-based filmmaking. It allows for nonlinear, amorphous forms that hit us, move us, organize us. It treats as strange—and unacceptable—carceral aesthetics. It positions us to ask

new and different questions. And solidarity is the dramatic arc. Griffin, incarcerated for over 27 years, describes the prison like being on another planet, one that he escapes when he puts on his headphones—through connection. Lovers leave messages that say “meet me under the moon” where we can “love on each other”. Another animated scene imagines the prison visits—unfilmable because of prison regulations—through mothers’ accounts shared during a daylong van ride to the prison. Their voices are then overlaid to animations of them seeing, holding their missing sons and loved ones, yellow and red orbs of joy and love emanating out as they find each other in the visiting room. One mother describes how she can’t touch or hold her son’s hand, “but they can’t stop me from watching him”. Another states, “I traveled over 400 miles to visit my son. He’s been locked up since 1995. I’ve only seen him, maybe twice ... When I seen him coming through the door, I still knew him, I know my baby”, as eyes overlay the map of Central Appalachia, holding our gaze through space and time, distance and presence.

This inclusive structure of storytelling makes this much more than one family’s story; rather than simply individuating experience, it multiplies out, making visible the terrible work incarceration does and laying the groundwork for something else. *CFH* is a film that takes shape in communities radically reorganized around the carceral state in specific, localized ways. It makes powerfully evident the violence of prisons—how they disappear people and relationships, even entire communities. It does this by showing how intimate connections—how life and loves—are lived against the prison. There is little interest in “inside looks” or crime or categories of guilt and innocence, which often go unremarked upon. These are stories of what holds us together against and despite the carceral worlds we’ve been given. As the prison visitation ends, a mother sadly comments: “We never know when we are going to see him again.” Abolition’s core demands take shape, including the right to look, to take in a loved one fully, freely: *Let me see my child*. The women carry photos from their visits, invoking Nicole Fleetwood’s (2020) gorgeous analysis of prison vernacular photography, including her own family’s albums. For Fleetwood, prison photos are a significant visual and haptic counterpoint to arrest photos and criminal profiling but they also “mark time” in a carceral society where the massive number of family prison photos serve witness to how familial and intimate relations are navigated across the porous boundaries of the carceral. They, at once, serve as a “family narrative of crisis, disruption,

structural inequality, dreams deferred, anticipation of a future moment, a temporal coming together under the strictures of carcerality” that documents the state’s continued restructuring and disarticulation of Black families (Fleetwood 2015: 499).

Importantly, the film ultimately does not use this emotional intimacy as a humanistic ploy. It is about creating solidarity, not empathy—it builds the political education necessary to work for and with people organizing and mobilizing for political change. Families bring filmmakers and us into their living rooms, backyards, streets, and porch stoops not just to talk about how they have suffered incarceration but to allow us to join with them in the fight. There is an emphasis on how strategies of exchange work: we see how these intimacies of resilience verge on something bigger—how families hold each other across radio waves and shared van rides. They refuse to let the carceral state dictate their connections, their loves, and their lives. There are concrete demands. At the end of *Calls from Home*, we are given next steps: join organizing efforts to stop FCI Letcher. Bring back parole in Virginia. Abolish solitary confinement. *CFH* asks the unaskable questions of the carceral state in the most accessible forms possible. Where do we need to be to take back and communicate, design, build, and demand the world we need? What do we need as an alternate reinvestment strategy and how do we follow its demand through federal bureaucracy (Pelot-Hobbs 2018)? How do we link our movements? How do we communicate the crises that have brought us here (Camp 2016; Gilmore 2022; Schept 2022)? Viewing the film brings us together to fight carceral Appalachia and to gain abolitionist Appalachia.

### **Conclusion: Fire in the Hole**

*CFH* brings people together. That is its whole design. As do the films that are its predecessors: they focus, with love, on complex communities, often pitted against one another. There is a gorgeous beauty to them, to the land they bring into focus, where people have lived with such resilience against an abiding, deep, dull, and numbing pain—economically, psychologically, and socially.

Abolitionist media, at their best, are the antagonist contradictions of carceral aesthetics and imaginaries (Brown 2024): they are quite simply about making things out of what we have in

ways that build freedom. They foreground and model the political analysis necessary to confront the carceral state while also showing us what it looks like to retake our infrastructure and build the worlds we want, and desperately need, now. In Ryerson's film, it is the technology of the region—the infrastructure that already exists, a community radio station in the mountains—that does the counter-carceral work. And it models how anyone can do the same with their community media infrastructure. It digs deep in the land we are on, the historical relations to captivity and freedom that come out of it, the conjunctures we must strategically leverage.

When miners organized in 1891 against the Tennessee Coal Company, the company closed the mine and reopened it with convict leasing workers. In what came to be known as the Coal Creek War, thousands of miners marched on the mines, freeing convict workers and burning down guard offices, stockades, and office buildings across a series of rebellions. To resolve these multi-racial, coalitional working-class uprisings, Tennessee built a prison, Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary. This fortress built into the mountainside is now closed and serves as a tourist distillery site with its own “End of the Line” brand of whiskey. The conjuncture never fully recedes—we are always organizing for the next fight. Films like *CFH* continue to connect struggles across time and space. In one of my conversations with Ryerson, who is also a world-class fiddle player, she explained, wittily and with a smile, why *CFH* ends with her performing the classic Appalachian protest song “Fire in the Hole”, to the accompaniment of a contemporary hip hop beat. The song is a labor organizing jewel about the battles for unionization in the coalfields; the chorus calls for the miners to go on strike:

*Stand up boys, let the bosses know  
Turn your buckets over, turn your lanterns low  
There's fire in our hearts and fire in our soul  
but there ain't gonna be no fire in the hole!*

If the miners go on strike, there will be no fire in the hole—that is, no dynamite thrown into the belly of the mine to blast out the coal. But, as Ryerson notes, being sent to “the hole” is also how people describe the horror of being put in solitary confinement. The fiddle track with the hip hop

beat underneath is an invitation to consider: what would it take to build a world where *no one* is sent to the hole—be it the dark and dangerous hole of the coal mine, or the terrifying hole of solitary confinement? This is what abolition is all about, and we need abolitionist media like *CFH* to help us build the fire in our hearts to get there.

## References

- Brown M (2014) Visual criminology and carceral studies: Counter-images in the carceral age. *Theoretical Criminology* 18(2):176-197
- Brown M (2024) Big-screen abolition. *Inquest* 13 June <https://inquest.org/big-screen-abolition/> (last accessed 1 October 2024)
- Camp J T (2016) *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Cowen D and Siciliano A (2011) Surplus masculinities and security. *Antipode* 43(5):1516-1541
- Fleetwood N R (2015) Posing in prison: Family photographs, emotional labor, and carceral intimacy. *Public Culture* 27(3):487-511
- Fleetwood N R (2020) *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Gilmore C (2024) Reproduction in crisis: On Schept's "Coal, Cages, Crisis". *Society+Space* 29 January <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/reproduction-in-crisis-on-schepts-coal-cages-crisis> (last accessed 1 October 2024)
- Gilmore R W (2022) *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (eds B Bhandar and A Toscano). New York: Verso
- Hemsworth K (2015) Carceral acoustemologies: Historical geographies of sound in a Canadian prison. In K M Morin and D Moran (eds) *Historical Geographies of Prisons: Unlocking the Usable Carceral Past* (pp17-33). London: Routledge
- Kaba M and Hayes K (2018) A jailbreak of the imagination: Seeing prisons for what they are and demanding transformation. *Truthout* 3 May <https://truthout.org/articles/a-jailbreak-of-the-imagination-seeing-prisons-for-what-they-are-and-demanding-transformation/> (last accessed 1 October 2024)
- Kirby A (2024) Carceral communities: Local resistance to the prison-industrial complex in the Mountain South. In J Norton, L Pelot-Hobbs and J Schept (eds) *The Jail is Everywhere: Fighting the New Geography of Mass Incarceration* (pp96-105). New York: Verso
- Mirzoeff N (2011) The right to look. *Critical Inquiry* 37(3):473-496
- Norton J, Pelot-Hobbs L and Schept J (eds) (2024) *The Jail is Everywhere: Fighting the New*

- Geography of Mass Incarceration*. New York: Verso
- Pelot-Hobbs L (2018) Scaling up or scaling back? The pitfalls and possibilities of leveraging federal interventions for abolition. *Critical Criminology* 26(3):423-441
- Prison Policy Initiative (2024) “State Profiles.” <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/> (last accessed 1 October 2024)
- Ryerson S (2010) “Prison Progress... Neocolonialism as a Relocation Project in ‘Post Racial’ America: An Appalachian Case, or, Listening to the Canaries in the Coal Mine.” Unpublished BA thesis, Wesleyan University  
<https://digitalcollections.wesleyan.edu/object/ir-164> (last accessed 1 October 2024)
- Ryerson S (2016) Restorative Radio. *Transom* 27 September  
<https://transom.org/2016/restorative-radio/> (last accessed 1 October 2024)
- Ryerson S and Schept J (2023) Eastern Kentucky needs flood relief, not another federal prison. *The New York Times* 29 March <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/29/opinion/kentucky-prison-flood.html> (last accessed 1 October 2024)
- Schept J (2014) (Un) seeing like a prison: Counter-visual ethnography of the carceral state. *Theoretical Criminology* 18(2):198-223
- Schept J (2022) *Coal, Cages, Crisis: The Rise of the Prison Economy in Central Appalachia*. New York: New York University Press
- The Takeaway (2016) Restorative Radio project transports prisoners home. 16 May  
<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/takeaway/segments/calls-home-over-radio> (last accessed 1 October 2024)

*Michelle Brown*

*Professor of Sociology & Co-Director of the Appalachian Justice Research Center*

*University of Tennessee*

*mbrow121@utk.edu*

*October 2024*