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The Abolitionist Spectator: Resistant Readings of Punishment, Rehabilitation, and Reform at the Louisiana State Penitentiary

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**THE ABOLITIONIST SPECTATOR:
RESISTANT READINGS OF PUNISHMENT,
REHABILITATION, AND REFORM AT THE LOUISIANA
STATE PENITENTIARY**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Theatre

by
Kathryn Marie Morris
B.A., State University of New York at Oswego, 2014
May 2023

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The Graduate School's Dissertation Handbook instructs us to keep this section brief, which I absolutely will not do. This dissertation would not have been possible without the love and support of many people who are very dear to me and who I will now thank at length.

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blackface controversies cut out of *Opera News* kept me going; they helped me afford conference travel, kept me updated on the theatre they enjoyed recently, and shared joke writing advice. My mother's sense of justice is written on every page of this dissertation; my dad's love of theatre and ear for beautiful music made the writing possible. I am truly grateful.

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Abstract

For the majority of the twenty-first century, Louisiana has been the global leader in rates of incarceration. Despite its prevalence, many people encounter prisons and punishment only through representations in movies, television, and the news, remaining distant from the actual processes of punishment and prisons built in remote areas. The Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, however, is unique in the number of opportunities it presents for the public to enter the prison for large-scale events like the famous Angola Prison Rodeo, select drama club performances, or to visit the Angola Prison Museum. These opportunities are often read cynically, as moments for indifferent crowds to gawk at prisoners or for the prison administration to produce spectacles of punishment.

In opposition to these readings and in the tradition of active and resistant theatre spectatorship practices, I theorize the position of the abolitionist spectator. The abolitionist spectator's gaze is mediated not by film and television representations, but by abolitionist analyses of institutions of punishment. I apply this abolitionist spectatorial lens to performance events held at Angola, examining their orientation toward questions of justice, safety, and community, exploring how the institution performs itself and its history, and how prisoners perform a more liberatory vision of the future.

Introduction

I first noticed it on one of my earliest weekends as a graduate student in Louisiana. It was the day after a home football game, and campus was completely overrun with garbage from the previous day's tailgating. Garbage cans were spaced every few feet from each other, and each one was filled, some with garbage piled several feet upwards from their lids in marvels of engineering that could only be achieved by the excessively drunk. Every grassy area was a sea of cans and paper plates. And methodically picking it all up, disposing of the bags, and collecting the extra cans, were men marked as prisoners from the Dixon Correctional Institute.

Since 1997, LSU has relied on prison labor to clean up after football games, do landscaping work, and even tend to mascot Mike the Tiger's enclosure, and it is not the only state institution to do so.¹ Prisoners staff the Governor's mansion and the capitol building. Prisoners manufacture all the street and highway signs used in the state. They build office furniture, sew clothing, and grow food that is used in prisons and other state-owned buildings. Imprisonment in Louisiana is literally part of the scenery, a normal and expected part of life.

Louisiana's incarceration rate has been the highest in the United States for most of the twenty-first century, temporarily dipping below Oklahoma and Mississippi at times. But it is also home to a strong network of advocates for prison reform who have made significant gains in legislative action and shifting public opinion in the past several years. This work, frequently led by former prisoners, encompasses a variety of approaches on a political continuum ranging from reform to abolition. One of the major questions posed by abolitionists concerns how to break what Angela Davis calls the conceptual link between crime and punishment in order to imagine

¹ Anna Jones and Nick Frewin, "LSU Professor Speaks Out Against University's Prison Inmate Labor Practices," *The Reveille* (Baton Rouge, LA), Nov. 20, 2019.

what other possible responses to crime we might take up.² Performance and punishment have long associations, from executions and torture as public spectacles, to chain gangs working in view of the public to act as warnings to those who might commit crimes or otherwise disrupt the social order, to mug shots printed in newspapers. Dwight Conquergood argued that theatre and performance scholars have an ethical obligation to study punishment, steeped as it is in ritual and spectacle.³

In this dissertation, I examine how performance has been used at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola as a tool to intervene in the state's conversation about incarceration. I apply an abolitionist lens to three performance events held at Angola: the prison museum's curation practices and educational tours, their drama club's production of *The Life of Jesus Christ*, and the annual rodeo and craft fair. An abolitionist lens reveals that each performance has two competing narratives. One is put forward by the prison staff touting the power of individual rehabilitation and seeking to strengthen Angola's position as a partner in reform. The other is the narrative told by the prisoners themselves through their work, with performance as a tool to build the future they want, today.

Angola: Punishment and Performance

This project deals specifically with performances at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola (colloquially known as "Angola"). Prisons are typically built in remote areas that are difficult to access, and this one is no different. What is different about Angola is the frequency with which it opens its gates to the public for performance events like the rodeo or select drama

² Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 112.

³ Dwight Conquergood, "Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty," *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 3 (2002): 342.

club performances. These opportunities for the public to access the prison are imperfect, implemented from a posture of authenticity despite being carefully managed and controlled. They are, however, popular, and present opportunities for spectators to encounter prisoners and examine the mechanisms of punishment that are normally hidden by distance. To understand the context of the performances I study, some background on Angola and its position in the Louisiana prison system is necessary.

The Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola is the largest maximum-security prison in the country, occupying 18,000 acres of land. The grounds have no perimeter fence but are surrounded by the Mississippi River on three sides and the Tunica Hills on the fourth. Prisoners are held in outcamps that are dispersed throughout the grounds, each run by its own assistant warden. As of July 2022, 4,487 men were imprisoned at Angola. Of those, 3,615 are serving life sentences. Although the state does not release demographic breakdowns separated by facility, 70% of state prisoners are Black, as are 72.5% of prisoners serving life sentences.⁴

The history of the land is a lineage of racial subjugation. Originally a plantation run on enslaved labor, the owners turned to convict leasing to work the land after Emancipation. Major Samuel James purchased the convict lease in 1869 and the land itself in 1880, and many men who had been confined in Baton Rouge (then the site of the state's only prison) were transported there to work the land under brutal conditions.⁵ When James died in 1894, the state took possession of the land and the prisoners who labored there in 1901, but little changed in terms of

⁴ Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, "Statistics Briefing Book," July 2022. Accessible at <https://doc.louisiana.gov/about-the-dpsc/annual-statistics/>.

⁵ Burk Foster, "Plantation Days at Angola: Major Samuel James and Modern Corrections in Louisiana," in *The Wall is Strong: Corrections in Louisiana*, eds. Burk Foster, Wilbert Rideau, and Douglas Dennis (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2014), 26.

management style (and in fact the state kept many of James's employees on).⁶ The state attempted to run the prison as a business that could make a profit without relying on tax revenue, hiring a series of wardens with business rather than prison experience who administered a period of (state-sanctioned) horrific violence; prison records show that under governor Huey Long's appointees, guards performed over 10,000 "official" floggings between 1928 and 1940. "Unofficial" violence certainly also took place.⁷ Long appointee R.R. "Tighty" Himes oversaw the construction of the notorious Red Hat Cellblock, the most restrictive cellblock with the cruelest conditions. The Red Hat was built to house prisoners the staff considered dangerous, with thirty 6- by-3-foot cells that had only a cement slab for a bed and a tiny window insufficient for ventilation. During periods of unrest or after escape attempts, ten or more men would be held in one of those cells at once.⁸

When Edwin Edwards was elected to his first term as governor in 1972, he appointed reformer Elayn Hunt to oversee corrections. Several of her reforms had immediate effects: she ended the practice of using prisoners as guards, closed the Red Hat Cellblock, and worked with warden C. Murray Henderson to facilitate rehabilitation programs.⁹ Hunt had other long-term plans for decentralizing the prison system, building smaller prisons closer to cities with the eventual goal of closing Angola all together. Although she did usher in a period of new prison construction, Angola remained. As law-and-order policies of the 1970s and 1980s took effect,

⁶ Foster, "Plantation Days at Angola," 28.

⁷ Wilbert Rideau, "Angola's History," in *Life Sentences: Rage and Survival Behind Bars*, eds. Wilbert Rideau and Ron Wikberg (New York: Times Books, 1992), 38.

⁸ Rideau, "Angola's History," 39.

⁹ Rideau, "Angola's History," 41.

with prison sentences lengthening and criteria for parole becoming more and more narrow, Angola became the central site for prisoners serving long sentences.¹⁰

The conditions at Angola combined with the lengthy sentences most prisoners are serving contributed to feelings of hopelessness and despair, but prisoners at Angola have been finding new ways to work toward their own freedom for decades. The most famous act of rebellion at Angola was a 1951 protest in which men held at the Red Hat Cellblock cut their Achilles tendons with a razor blade. They heard rumors that guards planned to shoot them under the guise of foiling an escape attempt and could think of no other way to save their own lives than to hospitalize themselves. After word of their injuries and its cause spread throughout the prison, a total of 37 prisoners in two other camps cut their own heels in solidarity over the following week.¹¹ The shocking nature of the protest garnered media attention and increased public scrutiny of the violence and corruption at Angola.

This is the most famous but it is by no means the only act of resistance men imprisoned at Angola have performed. In 1971, prisoner Hayes Williams filed a lawsuit against the prison administration for the harsh conditions and unchecked violence. In 1975, federal judge Gordon West signed a court order requiring that the state hire more guards, reduce overcrowding,

¹⁰ Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, “Organized Inside and Out: The Angola Special Civics Project and the Crisis of Mass Incarceration,” *Souls* 15, no. 3 (2013): 203. For more on the attempted decentralization process and Hunt’s work at reform, see Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, “The Contested Terrain of the Louisiana Carceral State: Dialectics of Southern Penal Expansion, 1971-2016,” (doctoral dissertation, The City University of New York, 2019).

¹¹ Douglas Dennis, “The last Heel-Stringer,” in *The Wall is Strong: Corrections in Louisiana*, eds. Burk Foster, Wilbert Rideau, and Douglas Dennis (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2014), 35.

increase access to medical care, and renovate all prison buildings to meet fire safety standards.¹²

Although this lawsuit did bring attention to the conditions at Angola, the solutions all involved reinvestment in the prison rather than efforts at decarceration; the limited state funds put towards meeting the court-ordered reforms were used to build new facilities and hire more employees.

Lydia Pelot-Hobbs documents the work of the Angola Special Civics Project, an organization that advocated for prison reform from inside the prison. Most active during the 1980s and 1990s, many of the men involved in this project were serving life sentences and had seen their chances for parole being stripped away through tough on crime legislation passed by the Republican legislature. They organized a campaign that encouraged their friends, relatives, and allies to vote for Edwin Edwards, a pro-reform candidate for governor, in the 1987 election in hopes that he would continue the reform work he began in his first term. Although they were not successful (Edwards dropped out of the race before the run-off election), they had built a foundation for future work. Their next project was to advocate for meaningful sentencing reform; not content to merely improve prison conditions, they wanted to actively work toward freedom. After extensive research and networking with staff at prisons in neighboring states, they discovered that Louisiana had a much higher population of prisoners serving life sentences. In partnership with free activists, they drafted legislation proposing an alternative sentencing system. Although their bill did not pass as written, they were successful in negotiating a deal that made people eligible for parole after serving 20 years of their sentence and reaching 45 years of age.¹³

¹² Burk Foster, "Angola in the Seventies," in *The Wall is Strong: Corrections in Louisiana*, eds. Burk Foster, Wilbert Rideau, and Douglas Dennis (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2014), 48.

¹³ Pelot-Hobbs, "Organized Inside and Out," 213.

Although Angola's history is one of injustice and victimization, it is also true that prisoners have been working toward their own freedom in coalition with committed free activists for as long as Angola has existed. Different political climates and prison administrative regimes have placed limits on what they can achieve and how they can organize, but this work has still produced meaningful results. It is my contention that performance is one arena in which prisoners can continue this work; however, any performance by or representation of prisoners enters a saturated field. In the next section, I triangulate my focus in this dissertation in relationship to these other vectors of study.

Performances about Prisons

Although the United States currently imprisons almost 2 million people, most people have not personally experienced incarceration and instead form their impressions of imprisonment from television or movies that depict it. Many media studies scholars have studied what messages audiences receive from those representations, some focusing on a single television show or movie, like *Law & Order: SVU*, *Orange is the New Black*, or *The Shawshank Redemption*,¹⁴ and others focusing on broad patterns across multiple media types or genres, like how gender is constructed in prison media or how movies about serial killers stoke fears of crime.¹⁵

¹⁴ For scholarship on individual pieces of media, see Sujata Moorti and Lisa Cuklanz, *All-American TV Crime Drama: Feminism and Identity Politics in Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2017); Suzanne M. Enck & Megan E. Morrissey, "If *Orange Is the New Black*, I Must Be Color Blind: Comic Framings of Post-Racism in the Prison-Industrial Complex," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 32, no.5,(2015):303-317; A. Schwan, "Postfeminism Meets the Women in Prison Genre: Privilege and Spectatorship in *Orange Is the New Black*," *Television & New Media*, 17, no. 6 (2016): 473–490.

¹⁵ For scholarship on themes across multiple media types, see Nicole Rafter, "Crime, Film and Criminology: Recent Sex Crime Movies," *Theoretical Criminology* 11, no. 3 (2007): 403–420.; David Wilson and Sean O'Sullivan, *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama* (Winchester, UK: Waterside Press, 2004); Thomas Fahy

In *Prime Time Prisons on U.S. TV: Representation of Incarceration*, Bill Yousman looks at television news broadcasts and fictional dramas across the 1990s, arguing that those representations created fertile ground for the rapid prison expansion of that decade. He found that news programs were more likely to report on crimes and trials than on prisons, leaving a vacuum of information about prison life that is filled with fictional representations. This imbalance is partially due to issues of access, with government restrictions making it difficult for journalists to interview prisoners, but it also demonstrates a bias as to who is considered a reliable source; prison staff were more likely to be interviewed and were more likely to be portrayed in a positive light for their work rehabilitating prisoners or offering educational programs.¹⁶ In the fictional dramas Yousman studies, such as *Law & Order* and *NYPD Blue*, prisoners were depicted, but the daily life of imprisonment was not, with their scenes taking place in courtrooms or visiting rooms. When television shows did depict imprisonment, as in *Oz*, they were portrayed as hyperviolent and terrifying spaces, brutal because the people imprisoned there were brutal and cruel people. Across all of the shows he studies, Yousman found that television shows depicting prisoners were likely to reproduce stereotypes that associate criminality and violence with Blackness, and depict any problems in the prison system as individual rather than systemic.¹⁷

and Kimball King, eds, *Captive Audience: Prison and Captivity in Contemporary Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, *TV Cops: The Contemporary American Television Police Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁶ Bill Yousman, *Prime Time Prisons on U.S. TV: Representations of Incarceration* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 105.

¹⁷ Yousman, *Prime Time Prisons*, 176.

Yousman's case studies, for the most part, concern pieces of media that uphold the status quo or are intended for entertainment rather than political value. However, even when authors of representations of prisoners intend to make anti-prison arguments, they may still circulate arguments that rely on carceral logic. Katy Ryan describes how theatre can make a powerful political impact while also setting the frame for a debate in ways that can be harmful. She examines the creation process of *The Exonerated*, a 2000 documentary play written by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen based on their interviews with former death row prisoners who had been exonerated. Politicians who attended productions of the play remarked on its emotional power and those responses seem to have translated to action: George Ryan, the governor of Illinois, commuted the sentences of every prisoner on death row in the state weeks after seeing the play.¹⁸ However, in their effort to maximize the play's emotional impact, the playwrights made dramaturgical choices that painted an incomplete picture of the death penalty. Their selection process for the exonerees included in the play required that many more were excluded and these exclusions revealed who they found relatable (or at least thought audiences would find relatable). They cut, for example, the story of a man with a mental disability they thought might be too difficult to understand. Ryan points out that people with mental disabilities are more likely to be coerced into false confessions than people with average IQs; the death penalty is not handed down equitably but is disproportionately applied to defendants who are Black or poor than white or rich, and more likely to be used in cases where a white person was murdered than a person of color.¹⁹ Rather than provide a challenging but representative set of stories that acknowledged the

¹⁸ Katy Ryan, "State Killing, the Stage of Innocence, and *The Exonerated*," in *Demands of the Dead: Executions, Storytelling, and Activism in the United States*, ed. Katy Ryan (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012): 258.

¹⁹ Ryan, "State Killing," 260.

antiblackness and classism that motivate the unequal application of the death penalty, Ryan observes, the playwrights picked stories that would not challenge the (presumably white and privileged) audience too far. Ultimately, by filtering its argument against the death penalty through the lens of innocence rather than their basic human dignity, the play avoids challenging its audience to critique the criminal legal system as it stands. After all, Ryan argues, the phrase “wrongful convictions” in death penalty cases itself implies that there are rightful convictions.²⁰

Performances by Prisoners

Theatre programs in prisons provide prisoners with opportunities for more control over their own representations by creating performances that speak more authentically to their experiences than what audiences may have seen in movies or on television. Scholarship on prison theatre is typically instructive in nature, providing useful guides for other theatre practitioners who are interested in doing similar work, following a formula of process descriptions accompanied by prisoner testimonials.²¹ These projects are typically categorized into two primary methodological approaches: theatre education and applied theatre.

Prison education programs focus very directly on teaching prisoners how to put on a play, from the audition and casting process, to the design process, through character development and rehearsals, ending with performance for an audience. Plays selected are often classics in the Western canon and chosen for their literary significance; some of the most high-profile prison

²⁰ Ryan, “State Killing,” 268.

²¹ For example, see Jonathan Shailor, ed., *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2011); Clark Bain, Sally Brookes, and Alun Mountford, *The Geese Theatre Handbook: Drama with Offenders and People at Risk* (Hook, UK: Waterside, 2002); Michael Balfour, ed., *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice* (Bristol: Intellect, 2004); James Thompson, ed., *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1998); and Jean Trounstone, *Shakespeare Behind Bars: One Teacher’s Story of the Power of Drama in Women’s Prison* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

theatre programs are those that focus on performing Shakespeare, including Curt L. Tofteland's work with Shakespeare Behind Bars in Kentucky, Agnes Wilcox's work with Prison Performing Arts in St. Louis, and Jonathan Shailor's Shakespeare Prison Project in Michigan.²² Although these programs are not specifically designed to be therapeutic, prisoners involved often express a strong sense of achievement from their participation. Elizabeth Charlebois, a dramaturg with Prison Performing Arts, reports that her students appreciated being taken seriously as artists who can understand and interpret classic texts from the Western canon. They also appreciate that the theatre classes provide a sense of community and purpose that is in direct opposition to the isolating, regimented, dehumanizing environment of the prison.²³

The second model of prison theatre programs falls under the umbrella of applied theatre, a term used to describe a wide variety of theatrical practices that generally aim to develop theatre projects that explore issues or problems their participants experience in their lives.²⁴ Although theatre education projects can at times fit under this umbrella, the term applied theatre highlights their orientation toward transformation or change – whether in the performers, audiences, or the relationship between them. In a prison setting, these issues often relate to the behaviors or actions that led to their incarceration, as well as to interpersonal and structural problems they face while in prison. Although the programs usually culminate in a performance (either for other

²² For full descriptions of each of these programs, see each of these artists' contributions in Jonathan Shailor's edited collection *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre* (2011).

²³ Elizabeth Charlebois, "'Their Minds Transfigured So Together': Imaginative Transformation and Transcendence in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" in *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre*, edited by Jonathan Shailor (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011): 263.

²⁴ For more about applied theatre, see Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, *The Applied Theatre Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2009); James Thompson, *Applied Theatre: Bewilderment and Beyond* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008).

prisoners or a free audience), the emphasis is more on process than on the final product. This process usually involves discussions and workshops in which prisoners use theatrical techniques to work out ideas as a group, role-play, and try out alternative behaviors. For some programs, theatre is used as a tool for understanding actions and their consequences in order to develop a sense of personal responsibility. In Jonathan Shailor's Theatre of Empowerment program in Michigan, for example, prisoners devised scenes that staged conflicts they experienced in their lives. They would then role-play healthier ways of dealing with those situations.²⁵ In other programs, like Rhodessa Jones's Medea Project in San Francisco, performance is used to build a sense of power and self-determination that can drive accountability in prisoners but also their audiences. Jones often uses questions posed by classical myths as a jumping off point for prisoners to self-reflect and write, then uses their storytelling to create an emotional connection with audiences at public performances.²⁶

There are a few notable articles that are written from the standpoint of a spectator or that perform dramaturgical analysis of a prison theatre performance. Nina Billone analyzes her work with the Medea Project in the San Francisco County Jail. Citing a variety of sources from Foucault to current prison psychologists, Billone identifies a discourse of dependency that is used to characterize the modern criminal. This dependency contrasts with the discourses of self-responsibility, transformation, and independence that drive neoliberal subject formation, and have also been used to justify the dismantling of welfare programs and the rise of incarceration

²⁵ Jonathan Shailor, "Humanizing Education behind Bars: Shakespeare and the Theater of Empowerment," in *Challenging the Prison-Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives*, ed. Stephen John Hartnett (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 229-251.

²⁶ Sara Warner, "The Medea Project: Mythic Theatre for Incarcerated Women," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 483-509.

rates in the United States. Billone navigates the conflict between the goals of prison administrators (whose approval is a requirement of engaging in any prison arts work) and the artists who work with the Medea Project by distinguishing between the scripted content of their performance and their context and aesthetics. Billone demonstrates that the artists facilitating the Medea Project fully recognize their complicity in the carceral system, but that their cooperation is a necessity if they want to retain their ability to foster any change in it. Although their words describe individual acts of transformation or rehabilitation, their staging choices emphasize their performance as an ensemble and new-found community. In this way, they resist definitions of citizenship based in independence and personal responsibility in favor of one that relies on coalition-building and shared power.²⁷

Dani Snyder-Young describes a performance by Storycatchers Theatre, a program that creates original musicals with girls incarcerated at Illinois Youth Center-Warrenville. For *Mom in the Moon*, they played characters who had been neglected, abused, or abandoned by their mothers, singing songs about those damaging relationships that reflected the experiences of many of the girls in the facility. They also sang songs about the mothers they wished they had instead, who would make them feel safe, loved, and supported. The prison staff were put forth instead in the performance as the mothers they never had, working with their best interests at heart and providing loving correction when needed. Although performing these stories possessed therapeutic value, Snyder-Young argues that the songs upheld hegemonic narratives of ideal motherhood, ultimately blaming the girls' incarceration on their mothers' failure to live up to

²⁷ Nina Billone, "Performing Civil Death: The Medea Project and Theater for Incarcerated Women," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2009): 260-275.

those narratives. Snyder-Young acknowledges that as an audience member she did not witness any of the potentially therapeutic aspects of the devising and rehearsal process. She argues that when theatre is performed for a public audience as this was, consideration needs to be given to what cultural narratives are being challenged or reinforced if theatre artists truly believe that representation matters.²⁸

If prison theatre projects pose challenges to the institutions in which they are set, it is more often through the spaces and relationships they make possible than through direct anti-prison messages. This is partly by necessity, since prison programming is typically controlled by the warden and subject to his goals and ideals. Shailor's Theatre of Empowerment program was successful in developing conflict management and interpersonal skills, but was cancelled when the warden decided to focus more on job skills training. These sudden cancellations are always a possibility and there is no recourse or higher authority to hear an appeal, leaving prison theatre practitioners to carefully balance their personal political investments with the prison's metrics of success.²⁹ The institutional control over prison theatre programs points to the fact that prisons, and not just prisoners, are performing for the public.

Performances of/by Prisons

I align my approach in this dissertation most closely with scholars operating in a third mode of prison performance, studying performances by the institution itself. Justin Piché and Kevin Walby, for example, have analyzed prison tours as a type of performance enacted by the prison that hosts them; they are heavily scripted to paint the prison in the best light, they have out

²⁸ Dani Snyder-Young, *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²⁹ Shailor, "Humanizing Education behind Bars," 249.

of reach backstage areas where prisoners can be hidden, and the spectators consume images of incarceration that have been produced for them.³⁰ This type of institutional performance is meticulously staged to give the impression that not only is the prison running smoothly, but that prisons in general are worthy of support. This mode of scholarship investigates the methods by which these performances are staged, analyzing their form and organization, the physical structures and how spectators are encouraged to move through them, and the presentation of bodies or their absence. They begin from the assumption that the entire experience is a performance, a consciously crafted and staged piece of expressive communication for an audience.

Dwight Conquergood's 2002 essay "Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty," is a foundational article that examines the ritual elements of the criminal justice system. Conquergood revisits Foucault's argument that the state has advanced its modes of punishment beyond physical force, made at a time when it seemed capital punishment was rarely used and all but abolished.³¹ By tracing changes in the dramaturgy of executions in the United States, from public spectacles to private executions to mourning events, Conquergood notes differences between historical expectations of identification between spectators and the condemned compared to the more retributive contemporary uses of execution. He uses Timothy McVeigh and Juan Raul Garza as exemplars of the current phase of punishment, in which criminals are transformed into "worst of the worst" effigies with no human complexity, existing only as racialized and gendered symbols of broader threats to the social order. He also describes

³⁰ Justin Piché and Kevin Walby, "Problematizing Carceral Tours," *The British Journal of Criminology* 50, no. 3 (2010): 571.

³¹ Dwight Conquergood, "Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty," *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 3 (2002): 341.

the social meanings attached to witnessing executions, which has become an acceptable part of the mourning process for victims' families. Conquergood demonstrates how rituals of punishment and rituals of grief become conflated in ways that contradict the professed purposes of incarceration. Ultimately, he engages in this study because he believes that theatre and performance studies have an ethical obligation to study the death penalty, because it cannot be understood without accounting for its performance and ritual meanings.³²

In his article "Live, Virtual, Spectral: Being Present at the Prison (Tour)," Bryan McCann describes his experience of taking students on a prison tour, narrating his observations of the interplay between the institutional performance put on for their benefit and the meaning his students make of the experience.³³ He argues that as a performance, there are three registers of presence at work on the prison tour. The first is the live, or the physical bodies present on the tour, including students, prison staff, prisoners, and tour guides. The second is the virtual, or the media representations of crime and punishment that visitors are already familiar with from television, movies, the news, and other sources, and most likely have in mind on the tour. The third is the spectral, or the absences that haunt the tour. Visitors are aware of the prisoners who are invisible or go unacknowledged, as well as the "ghosts" of the prison's own history that haunt the space. McCann pulls from his students' post-tour reflection essays to identify the ways they read against the grain of the tour and how it alters their political convictions in regard to prison issues.³⁴ Although the prison he visits advertises the tour as a chance to "experience"

³² Conquergood, "Lethal Theatre," 342.

³³ Bryan McCann, "Live, Virtual, Spectral: Being Present at the Prison (Tour)," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2019): 95.

³⁴ McCann, "Live, Virtual, Spectral," 108.

prison authentically, with the right scaffolding students still treat the tour with skepticism, finding moments for connection and learning through encounters with prisoners.

The Abolitionist Spectator

Work like that by Conquergood and McCann points to a turn in scholarship from studying the messages circulated by prison performances toward engaging with how those messages are received, asking what it means to be a spectator of punishment. Michelle Brown addresses this question in her book *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle*, the first full-length study that examines practices of spectatorship in relation to prisons and punishment. She describes a subject position she calls “penal spectatorship.” The penal spectator is defined by their distance from the act of punishment. Privileged enough to have avoided any direct encounters with the criminal legal system or imprisonment, the penal spectator’s understanding of punishment is instead built on abstractions and fantasies fed to them by culture: fantasies of the cruelty of criminals, of the cruelty of the world in general, and that they are not themselves complicit in the project of punishment. They voyeuristically consume images of punishment in movies and on television for entertainment but are absolved from grappling with how punishment shapes the real world. Whether they are disturbed or titillated, the penal spectator is “enthralled in a manner that is not easily conducive to analysis or self-reflection.”³⁵ The penal spectator is passive, politically disengaged, and lacks any impulse toward introspection.

Brown chooses her case studies for their cultural appeal or popularity, arguing that this abundant supply of popular, widely circulated, representations of prisons and punishment is at

³⁵ Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 5.

least partially responsible for the rise of the prison system as it exists now and act as justifications for its continued existence.³⁶ She studies a wide range of media representations, from things specifically about the prison experience like *The Shawshank Redemption*, to episodes of television shows that may deal with imprisonment only glancingly, as in episodes of *The Office*. She also examines tourism practices at prison museums, where she argues visitors seek novelty over ideological challenges. Outside of objects of entertainment, she looks at how images in the news of prisoners of the War on Terror at Guantánamo Bay or Abu Ghraib contribute to the penal spectator's understanding of pain in relation to a landscape of greater terror and insecurity, where global connections are formed only through acts of cruelty. She ends by discussing the role of academic disciplinary conventions in producing researchers as penal spectators, distant from the prisoners and prisons that are their objects of study in the name of developing expertise.

In each of these sites, Brown investigates how the spectator avoids responsibility for the pain that punishment produces. Their distance from the prison itself and the act of punishment “affords spectators a space in which they need not do many things, including engage the complexities, contradictions, and tragic qualities of punishment nor reflect upon their own role in its formation.”³⁷ Because the penal spectator has no reason to encounter actual imprisonment, and therefore challenges to these representations, their unwillingness to engage critically with these representations is notable. The penal spectator is instead “simply a voyeur, yet in a context where her experience carries profound privilege, authority, and moral justification.”³⁸

³⁶ Brown, *Culture of Punishment*, 18.

³⁷ Brown, *Culture of Punishment*, 193.

³⁸ Brown, *Culture of Punishment*, 13.

Although her theorization of penal spectatorship is a bit bleak, Brown's points are well-taken; it is easy to take prisons and punishment for granted when fictional representations are so ubiquitous and the real thing so hidden from our view. She ends with a somewhat hopeful gesture toward the possibility that direct encounters with prisoners through education or volunteering, in which the penal spectator sees the true results of inflicting punishment, could pose a challenge to public investment in imprisonment as the natural consequence of crime. I, however, see possibilities for challenging our current regime of punishment still within the realm of spectatorship. The penal spectator's gaze is passive and voyeuristic, but what might an abolitionist spectator see in those same sites? Theatre and performance scholars have theorized modes of not only active but resistant spectatorship. I draw from their work to theorize the position of the abolitionist spectator.

In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Jill Dolan argues for the use of feminist critical practices that challenge and denaturalize the "ideal spectator," the white, straight, cisgender male to whom a majority of theatre is addressed. The overabundance of representations of active male heroes and passive female objects create a difficult position for female spectators, whose identification with female characters make them complicit in their own objectification, while identification with male characters contributes to their own invisibility. She puts forward the feminist spectator as an identity position that motivates a theoretical lens, less concerned with thumbs up/thumbs down assessments of performances in favor of examining how they challenge or reproduce patriarchal values:

The feminist critic can be seen as a "resistant reader," who analyzes a performance's meaning by reading against the grain of stereotypes and resisting the manipulation of both the performance text and the cultural text that it helps to shape. By exposing the ways in which dominant ideology is naturalized by the

performance's address to the ideal spectator, feminist performance criticism works as political intervention in an effort toward cultural change.³⁹

The feminist spectator is an “outsider’s critical position,” taken up by those who are alienated and excluded from a performance’s mode of address.⁴⁰ These spectators are then more able to enact a critique and more personally invested in doing so, hoping for a more open performance landscape that speaks to and reaches a more diverse audience.

Stacy Wolf expands the scope of the feminist spectatorial lens in her book *A Problem like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*, in which she reads famous Broadway actresses and their characters as “lesbian.” By reading these characters and actresses *as* lesbian (rather than arguing they *are* lesbian), Wolf demonstrates the imaginative possibilities that come by reading against the grain of the text and finding lesbians “where none officially exist.”⁴¹ Although her case studies are presumably straight, reassessing them through a lesbian lens reveals how musicals pushed back against restrictive gender and sexuality norms. The composers and lyricists may have written these characters into heteronormative relationships, but Wolf is interested in the actresses’ performances and how spectators made use of them through queer readings, finding ways to identify with and push the limits of representations of gender and sexuality.

³⁹ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 2.

⁴⁰ Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 2.

⁴¹ Stacy Wolf, *A Problem like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 4.

In her essay “The Oppositional Gaze,” bell hooks argues that “there is power in looking.”⁴² Black people’s right to look has historically been repressed and policed, activating a “rebellious desire” to not only look, but to critique and interrogate the object of the gaze. Black spectators, aware of how television and film representations uphold white supremacist power structures through stereotypical representations of Black characters or total erasure, could engage with popular media either by choosing to ignore these exclusions, or from a position of opposition and critique. hooks notes that although this opposition encouraged the Black film movement of the early twentieth century, it still privileged Black male experiences and the Black male gaze and Black women were still left out. Because of this, she roots her theorization of the oppositional gaze in Black women’s spectatorship practices, as white women’s film theory does nothing to challenge white supremacy, and the Black male gaze does nothing to challenge patriarchy. For hooks and many Black women filmmakers and artists, the oppositional gaze offers not only a critical lens for representations of race and gender, but a way to provide care and protection for themselves; refusing to identify with the white female object of desire or take on a possessive phallogentric gaze, and interrogating these spectator positions instead, provides agency and power over harmful representations.

Each of these scholars theorize spectatorship practices that are drawn from their identity positions other than that of the “ideal spectator.” They recognize that they are not the subject most often being addressed and find ways to read against the grain, asking critical questions that the text may not invite but that their positions compel them to interrogate. They also each emphasize that developing these practices required an intentional commitment to reading

⁴² bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115.

critically and creatively, acknowledging how easy it can be to be swept along by the emotional pull of the performances. They also argue, however, that doing the work of reading performances oppositionally, or through a feminist lens, or *as* lesbian, carries its own pleasure through offering new perspectives on how the world might be otherwise.

Reading performances through an abolitionist spectatorial lens requires that same work but offers those same pleasures. The abolitionist spectator's gaze is not mediated by true crime podcasts or episodes of *Law & Order* (or at least not *only* by them), but by abolitionist analyses of institutions of punishment. Abolitionist scholars critique the United States' reliance on incarceration, examining how prisons are put forth as solutions to a myriad of other social problems by focusing attention on individuals who commit crimes, and how they obscure the social forces that create the conditions for criminality. These scholars also often critique the premises of current prison reform measures in favor of the more transformative approaches offered by prison abolitionists.

Abolitionist scholars approach their work from a variety of disciplinary lenses. Geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore examines land and resource use;⁴³ legal scholar Michelle Alexander traces how anti-Black racism was codified into law;⁴⁴ political scientist Naomi Murakawa studies how Democratic policies strengthened the state's reliance on prisons that was then exploited on by the right;⁴⁵ social movement scholar Dylan Rodríguez examines how

⁴³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, The New Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

imprisoned intellectuals' cultural production operates not just as literature but as its own intellectual and social movement.⁴⁶ Each of these scholars uses their own disciplinary tools to critique the United States' carceral system from the perspective of abolition.

The abolitionist spectator, then, draws from the tools of resistant spectatorship modeled by hooks, Dolan, and Wolf and combines them with the insights and analytical tools of abolition movements. The term prison abolition suggests drastic and immediate (and alarming) change, but most of its advocates are more interested in improving social conditions and quality of life in ways that will eventually make prisons unnecessary.

The prison abolition movement is connected to anti-slavery abolition movements of the 19th century through more than just vocabulary. In *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. Du Bois argued that the total abolition of slavery would have required new democratic institutions to be established and upheld; with that creative work undermined or ignored, it was possible for the white supremacist power structures of slavery to be adapted into the convict-lease system made possible by the 13th amendment, Jim Crow laws, and eventually mass incarceration. This understanding of abolition as primarily a creative rather than destructive act is one that influences contemporary movements that work to build a society that would have no need for prisons, rather than replacing prisons with a new, slightly improved and yet still prison-like institution.⁴⁷ Abolitionists recognize prisons as one element of a larger carceral culture that is shaped by surveillance, policing, and state violence, which impacts all social relations whether inside or outside of prisons, and disproportionately affects Black communities and other

⁴⁶ Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

⁴⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. 1935. Reprint., New York: Free Press, 1992.

communities of color. Rather than strengthening prisons through the process of reform, abolitionists take a variety of approaches that aim to improve overall quality of life, remove economic hardships that create crime, and develop new ways of addressing violence and harm when they occur. Proposed methods of achieving these broad goals vary widely, and organizations that cite abolition as one of their ultimate goals approach it with a variety of strategies and social investments.⁴⁸ Abolitionists also participate in movements that strengthen education, healthcare, and labor rights that would improve the well-being of communities but do not directly address prison abolition.

Prison abolition and prison reform represent two points on a spectrum of orientations toward the justice system, with a wide range of varying positions in between, rather than being in total opposition to each other. Although abolitionists can at times agree with reformists on specific goals and actions, their overall work is animated by different conceptions of crime and safety. Reformists are more likely to believe crime is a permanent and consistent fact that can be addressed with prisons operating under ideal conditions, while abolitionists theorize crime as a response to social inequality and lack of access to resources that is then punished through the inherently unjust institution of the prison. Abolitionist projects do, however, involve what Ruth Wilson Gilmore labels “nonreformist reforms” that “unravel rather than widen the net of social control through criminalization.”⁴⁹ Reforms that require reinvestment in prisons, such as

⁴⁸ For organizations that do abolitionist work, see Critical Resistance on decarceration efforts at <http://www.criticalresistance.org>, INCITE! for anti-violence activism at <http://www.incite-national.org>, Survived and Punished for domestic violence survivor support and anti-prison activism at <http://www.survivedandpunished.org>, and BYP100 for Black youth organizing around abolition at <http://www.byp100.org>.

⁴⁹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso Books, 2017): 225-240.

increased funding for training or renovation, or that defer prison sentences through probation, parole, or house arrest rather than actual decriminalization, would be rejected by abolitionists in favor of reforms that reduce the power of the carceral system over the lives of its citizens, and therefore reduce the ability of the state to impose harm.⁵⁰

An abolitionist spectator, then, would explore a performance's orientation toward justice by exploring the sources of harm and subsequent responses. How is harm depicted and dealt with? How are hierarchies of race, class and gender upheld or challenged in conceptions of "dangerous" individuals? How are systems of state authority called on, weaponized, or challenged? The endpoint of this work is not just to identify or uncover how deeply symbols of carceral logic have permeated our culture, but to identify how those logics are being creatively questioned or rejected in performance and how we might in the future pose a greater threat to the institution.

Prison abolition is often criticized as extreme, impractical, or poorly theorized; although detractors who ask what a world without prisons would look like fear it to be a violent and cruel one, abolitionists view this openness as an opportunity rather than a disadvantage. Critical Resistance describes their view of an abolitionist future as one that requires imagination and hope:

From where we are now, sometimes we can't really imagine what abolition is going to look like. Abolition isn't just about getting rid of buildings full of cages. It's also about undoing the society we live in because the [prison-industrial complex] both feeds on and maintains oppression and inequalities through punishment, violence, and controls millions of people. An abolitionist vision

⁵⁰ For in depth challenges to the premises of prison reform, see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso Books, 2017): 225-240.; Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); and Dean Spade, "Their Laws Will Never Make Us Safer," in *Against Equality: Prisons Will Not Protect You*, ed. Ryan Conrad (Lewiston, ME: Against Equality Press, 2012).

means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives.⁵¹

Although abolitionists are criticized for not having all the answers, they argue that they don't need comprehensive solutions to be able to enact a critique of the current system and want to halt our reliance on it. Instead, solutions and possibilities for the future are something that require collective input and engagement.

The abolitionist spectator, then, has an eye toward the future. Performance is a useful tool for experimenting with other ways of living and being in the world, and for connecting with others in a collaborative environment. In addition to identifying carceral logics and how they operate, the abolitionist spectator also looks for moments of care. How are the vulnerable protected? How is safety defined, envisioned, and maintained? How are community bonds built and strengthened? The abolitionist spectator finds ways to identify with and build themselves into the performance in ways that, rather than affirming their authority over prisoners, enact those moments of care and continue that work after the performance has ended, acknowledging their role in creating a more just future. In this dissertation, I follow the performance studies methods of scholars like Conquergood and McCann who analyze how institutions perform themselves for a public audience, combining them with the abolitionist spectatorial lens.

Case Studies

As many legal scholars argue, crime and punishment are local rather than national endeavors. Per capita imprisonment rates can also vary wildly from state to state and even within

⁵¹ Critical Resistance, "About," CriticalResistance.org. Accessed June 15, 2020. <http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/>.

states from county to county. Although large-scale federal reform efforts can be a good gauge of public opinion, they affect a small portion of the prison population: of the approximately 2.3 million people confined while awaiting trial and after conviction, only 10% of those are held in federal prisons and jails and subject to federal reforms, while 57% of prisoners are held in state facilities or local jails.⁵²

With this local focus in mind, my case studies are limited to performances that occur at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Louisiana had the highest per capita incarceration rate of any state for most of the twenty-first century. In the past ten years there has been widespread recognition that the state must act in order to correct this, and recent reforms have the support of a majority of Louisiana residents. There is a strong network of advocacy organizations that support prisoners and prison reform, many of which are led by former prisoners. In short, the work being done to undo Louisiana's reliance on incarceration is robust and encompasses a variety of approaches and political orientations.

The Louisiana prison system is also unique in the availability of opportunities it presents for free citizens to visit and interact with prisoners at large public events. Although prisons are generally built in secluded areas that are difficult to access even for routine family visits, the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola (the largest maximum-security prison in the United States), opens its gates to the public for its semi-annual prison rodeo, educational tours for church and school groups, and select drama club performances. Each of these performances has

⁵² For a full breakdown of national prison population statistics, see Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner's "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie, 2022" compiled for the Prison Policy Initiative, accessible at <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022.html>. For Louisiana statistics, see the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections' most recent "Statistics Briefing Book" published in July 2022, accessible at <https://doc.louisiana.gov/about-the-dpsc/annual-statistics/>.

an institutional reading, a narrative the prison wants to impress upon its audiences, but there are also possibilities for a resistant abolitionist reading that can be found in the performances of prisoners or by reading against the grain of the institutional messaging. These chapters are ordered by the level of institutional control exerted over the performance.

In the first chapter, I describe my experiences at the Angola Prison Museum and Cultural Center and on their educational tours. The museum does not try to present a mythologized or sanitized version of its history, declaring instead an intention to remember its brutal past so that it can avoid repeating it. The museum staff believes they take their responsibility to treat prisoners' lives with dignity seriously. Although some exhibits focus on more sensational or violent elements, like a display of confiscated weapons that show off prisoners' ingenuity as well as cunning, many others treat their lives and memories with care, honoring their achievements in art, sports, and their service work. The museum performs a narrative of progress. This narrative, unfortunately, is in service of establishing Angola as a cultural leader at the forefront of prison reform, building itself into the future rather than working toward its own obsolescence.

Chapter two focuses on the Angola Drama Club's production of the passion play *The Life of Jesus Christ* in 2012 and 2013. This play was suggested to the drama club by prison staff and supported by then-warden Burl Cain because of its alignment with his mission of faith-based rehabilitation, and news coverage of the play furthered a reading of the production that focused on how the actors were rehabilitated through their participation in the play and their Christian faith more broadly. Actors reported that their faith was an important element in helping them understand how their actions caused harm and led to their incarceration, while also providing the tools to seek atonement and be accountable and responsible for others during their incarceration. Their statements about the changes they've undergone are sincere and meaningful, but an

abolitionist lens reveals more at work in this performance than individual rehabilitation. I contextualize this production in the history of passion plays and evangelical performance to examine how prisoners used this play to speak to their Christian audience using performance tools tailored to them, intervening in ongoing debates within Christian communities about what role prisons should play in a society that seeks to center justice and redemption.

In the final chapter, I examine the notorious Angola Prison Rodeo. The rodeo has been a popular site of study for performance scholars and is typically analyzed as a spectacle of punishment and a remnant of past punishment regimes. It has been used as a metonymy for the violence and exploitation that are rampant in prisons, as well as the presumed Southern backwardness that maintains them. I draw from my own experiences of being a spectator at the rodeo to push back against the interpretation that it is evidence that Angola is stuck in the past, but that it is instead used as an opportunity to demonstrate a capacity and willingness to change and align themselves with the ongoing reform efforts in Louisiana. The prison staff revise the event every year, removing elements that have received criticism and adding more opportunities for families to reconnect, for prisoners' work to be honored, and for visitors to come and consider what role prisons should play in our society. Angola rodeo scholarship identifies the event as the sign of Angola's worst abuses, but I argue that, sadly, the rodeo is an example of the best that prisons have to offer. The fact that it falls short, that this performance of prison reform is unconvincing, is not a sign that Angola remains the "worst of the worst," but that incremental reform is not a sufficient strategy for correcting or repairing the violence and inequality perpetuated through the criminal legal system.

In the conclusion I look at some of the results of Louisiana's prison reform efforts and some of the backlash they have faced. I also chart some future courses for application of an

abolitionist lens. In addition to other prison performance sites, the abolitionist lens can speak to performances in other carceral spaces. The case studies I examine illustrate how easily and effectively performance has been used by prison staff as a counterinsurgency tool against more radical ideas; an abolitionist lens can also be used to understand how theatre of any kind can be a starting point to build a different future rather than reproduce the status quo.

My understanding of the abolitionist potential of these performance sites, and of theatre in general, is influenced by my own identity position. As an educated, young-ish white woman, I am the type of person whose safety seems to weigh heavily on the imaginations of those around me. I have been gifted rape whistles and personal alarms by friends, relatives, partners, and employers; I've been given instructions on where to buy the cutest easily concealed weapons and bedazzled mace cartridges; I've received memos from bosses about how I should dress and wear my hair to avoid getting raped or murdered in the parking lot after work. Each of these people loved me and meant well, but the cumulative effect of this type of perpetual warning is that I (and many of my demographic) have been raised to expect to be a victim of a violent crime. I am encouraged to live in a state of constant vigilance. Whom is that fear serving? Certainly not me. But it's that fear that narrows our political imaginations, propping up a system of incarceration that, were I actually a victim of violent crime, would statistically not actually be that likely to find the perpetrator or prosecute them, if they took the allegations seriously at all. In the meantime, it is used to justify ensnaring countless others in the criminal legal system, surveilling already vulnerable communities, and imprisoning thousands of Louisianans.

None of this is intended to downplay the fear of interpersonal violence, only to comment that, based on these experiences, a lot more energy goes into preparing people to be victims or punishing people after crime has occurred than toward creating conditions of actual safety. In the

years since the uprisings in Ferguson after the murder of Mike Brown, it has become increasingly clear that the systems of policing and punishment exist to enact violence rather than prevent it, and that people who are vulnerable to crime have more reason to fear the police than to seek help from them. Calls to defund police and reform prisons have shifted from a fringe position into a mainstream (if still heavily debated) one, but what defunding entails and how far its implications extend are still uncertain. Without prisons, what would accountability look like? There is no pat response to these questions. They can only be answered by trying new strategies, together.

The performances I examine are often evaluated in relation to the goals set by theatre practitioners or prison staff (check! they are rehabilitated) but they have more to tell us. Examining work by current and former prisoners can also uncover ways that the assumptions of prison culture have been naturalized, how they are being contested, and give space to consider contradictions between our ideals and what we believe to be practical, in order to understand how we might continue to work to undo them.

Chapter 1. “We Don’t Want the Circle of Cruelty to Come Back Around”: Performing Reform at the Angola Prison Museum

At an event commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Angola Prison Museum and Cultural Center, former museum directors held a panel in which they described their individual contributions to the museum and how they built on each other’s work. Nadine Tanner, the founding director, was known for her connections with staff and prisoners alike that were vital when first pulling together items to build their collection. Marsha Lindsey created events that honored people who had made contributions to the field of criminal justice. Everyone agreed that Jenny Borders made an especially strong impact by bringing marketing savvy to the museum; she was responsible for professionalizing the appearance and, most importantly, adding on the gift shop, for which she designed its signature souvenir: the t-shirt that reads “Angola: A Gated Community” across an image of a watchtower and the prison gates. It comes in a variety of colors including standards of black, navy, gray, and pink, but also purple with gold print for LSU fans. You can also buy it on hoodies, koozies, and mugs.

The audience, familiar with the logo, chuckled as Borders spoke of how they tried to “have some fun with it” while also taking the museum and its exhibits seriously. Since many visitors may be there to visit incarcerated loved ones, or may have been incarcerated themselves, it was important to Borders to treat the exhibits with respect and the prisoners with dignity. “You never know who’s coming in,” she said, as she narrated one of her favorite successes: when Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban placed an order with the gift shop. They hadn’t visited the museum themselves, but a friend of theirs had been in the area and picked up a souvenir. Kidman and Urban saw it and ordered a case of t-shirts for themselves. Borders was delighted that they wanted to support the work being done at Angola and that her contribution to the museum had such a long reach.

I was taken aback by the combination of good intentions and appalling insensitivity on display when Borders shared her anecdote. She and the others on the panel seemed sincere in their mission to treat prisoners with dignity in the exhibits, but the t-shirt is not fun or funny unless you are laughing at their experience of imprisonment. This tension speaks to the confused relationship the Angola staff has to its own present, one that is on display at the Angola Museum and Cultural Center and in its educational tours.

Anti-prison activists and scholars have expressed concern that prison museums are not doing enough to further abolitionist goals, or that spectators are not able to fully take in those messages if they are presented. As I note later in this chapter, the practice of offering educational prison tours has also been critiqued for their careful staging, with prison staff offering students the impression of an authentic experience while obscuring or suppressing evidence of suffering or injustice at work.

The Angola Museum stands out from other local heritage tourism sites, which can often skew towards nostalgic interpretations of history, mythologizing a local past or neglecting stories that reveal division. Jessica Adams, for instance, examines how former plantations in Louisiana have been repackaged as sites of leisure, converted into bed and breakfasts, museums, and wedding venues.⁵³ Lisa B.Y. Calvente and Guadalupe García argue that Louisiana's plantation sites and tours are organized around practices of Black absence, erasing the histories of terror against Black citizens that structured these spaces when they were still working plantations.⁵⁴

⁵³ Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 59.

⁵⁴ Lisa B.Y. Calvente and Guadalupe García, "A Haunting Presence: Archiving Black Absence and Racialized Mappings in Louisiana Plantation Sites," *Cultural Studies* 36, no. 1 (2022): 21-40.

Their work attempts to make those absences, and therefore the white supremacist ideologies that enforced them, visible.

In contrast to other Louisiana plantation sites, Angola's violent history does not need to be uncovered or exposed: it is displayed at the Angola Prison Museum. Their educational tours expound on that history and visit key sites on the grounds where violence occurred. They also host annual symposia where local experts present on topics related to injustice, like non-unanimous juries as a legacy of Jim Crow, what steps need to be taken to improve the experience of re-entry after incarceration, and research on the impact of the recent criminal justice reform legislation.

Anti-prison scholarship on prison museums and prison tours have focused on what messages spectators receive about a prison's history or its current operation. In analyzing Angola's museum and tours through an abolitionist spectatorial lens, I recognize these sites as the purest distillation of how Angola's administration would like the prison to be seen and interpreted and how they perceive its past. Most importantly, they are sites where the prison can perform its vision of the future, casting Angola in a key role as a model of smooth prison operations.

I argue that through this work, the museum plays a key role in Angola's attempts to establish itself as a cultural leader rather than a remnant of the past. The museum and its events are tools to reinforce its continued relevance as a site of historical significance, of artistic production, and of humanitarian reform that other institutions can learn from. Angola's administration uses its museum as an opportunity to present themselves as leaders in the fight for the dignity of prisoners and the enactment of reform.

Performing the Carceral Past in Prison Museums

Scholars have written about the relationship between museums and performance, with curation as a form of storytelling that orders and disciplines bodies, space, and time. In *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes how museums “perform the knowledge they create,”⁵⁵ instilling significance in otherwise mundane objects and creating relationships between them through the act of displaying them. Although the objects displayed are ostensibly telling stories about the past, she argues that museums are also producing something new in the form of “heritage.” Heritage is distinct from history, functioning as a “mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past.”⁵⁶ Heritage is enacted and re-enacted, presented as authentic representations of a place, its people, and their way of life, of vital importance to the community while also being unsustainable such that they are in danger of being lost. Heritage status adds value to these places and practices that are no longer viable, giving “dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves.”⁵⁷ She cites the example of Colonial Williamsburg. As a tourist attraction and heritage site, it is more profitable than it might have been when it was just a regular city. It re-enacts ways of living that are not of use to us now, while glossing over unsavory histories of the town during the colonial period, because heritage by definition is worth preserving.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3.

⁵⁶ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 7.

⁵⁷ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 7.

⁵⁸ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 8.

Scholarship on prison museums has been preoccupied with concerns that the new heritage they produce instead introduces opportunities for sensationalism, with prison histories treated lightly by curators or by spectators. In their work on Alcatraz and Robben Island, Carolyn Strange and Michael Kempa analyze prisons as sites of dark tourism: places of death or disaster repackaged as tourism products that walk the line between memorialization and exploitation. Sites like Auschwitz or the Cambodian Killing Fields attract visitors interested in mourning or commemorating loss, learning about events directly from artifacts of the historical record, or (most troubling to researchers) in voyeuristically participating in suffering they did not personally experience.⁵⁹ In identifying prison tourism as a practice of dark tourism, Strange and Kempa identify differences in spectator response between these historic prisons and other famous sites of tragedy with tourists, with former prisons offering more opportunities for novelty and sensationalism rather than somber appreciation. Park rangers at Alcatraz, for example, initially intended to tell a more expansive history of the island with the prison as just one brief moment. They were interested in building exhibits on its indigenous history and the Native American occupation protesting government abuses in the late sixties, as well as exhibits on its lighthouse (the first on the West Coast) and its time as a military fort. The public was more drawn to the prison, excited to take their picture in Al Capone's cell and hear about escape attempts, leaving other exhibits mostly empty. Disputes with the Federal Bureau of Prisons over the rangers' support of penal reform also led to governmental pressure to frame Alcatraz's

⁵⁹ For more on dark tourism, see Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon, "JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2, no. 4 (1996): 198-211.; Richard Sharpley and Philip R. Stone, editors, *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism* (Bristol, UK: Channel View Publications, 2009).

abuses as unique rather than systemic, creating a sanitized yet sensationalized view of prison life.⁶⁰

The Eastern State Penitentiary Museum in Philadelphia has also received a lot of attention due to its significance in the development of American imprisonment in a city that already has a steady historical tourism economy. Eastern State emphasizes the systemic injustices of the contemporary prison system through art works like “The Big Graph,” a bar graph sculpture that charts the number of people imprisoned by every country in the world. The bar for the United States is sixteen feet tall, towering over the others and casting an imposing shadow over the entire prison yard. They also dedicate several cellblocks throughout the grounds to art installations commissioned specifically to be housed in cells that comment on the experience of incarceration and its impact. Despite this work, scholars have argued that visitors to the museum are intrigued by the museum’s novelty and cultural prestige but ultimately do not take in these messages. Seth Bruggeman describes how the surrounding community was excited at the idea of the museum and of supporting its message of decarceration. However, the presence of a unique cultural site contributed to the gentrification of the neighborhood. New white residents, attracted by the area’s renewed investment in historic preservation, pushed out the Black residents who had contributed to the initial preservation movement and then began pushing for an increased police presence in the neighborhood.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Carolyn Strange and Michael Kempa, “Shades of Dark Tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 30, no. 2 (2003): 386-405.

⁶¹ Seth C. Bruggeman, “Reforming the Carceral Past: Eastern State Penitentiary and the Challenge of the Twenty-First Century Prison Museum,” *Radical History Review* 113 (2012): 171-188.

Michelle Brown also describes some of the tensions at work in the curation of Eastern State and the difficulty of balancing the educational and artistic work the staff is interested in doing with the novel events that attract public interest. Like many prison museums, Eastern State hosts Halloween-themed nights in October that treat the museum as a type of haunted house where visitors are free to explore the grounds with frightening scenes built in. Brown's interviews with the museum director indicate that these events are seen as a regrettable trade off, bringing in the revenue they need but requiring that they lean into sensationalism they otherwise work to avoid.⁶²

As I discussed in the introduction, Brown identifies a danger in the style of spectatorship events like this produce. For Brown, penal spectatorship is defined by the distance between the actual processes of punishment and the spectator, whose understanding of those processes is mediated through representations they perceive as authentic. Scholarship on tours of actual working prisons revolves around the ethical concerns of such tours for those same concerns of spectatorship. Justin Piché and Kevin Walby argue that it is wholly unethical to organize or attend a prison tour.⁶³ Because they are scripted and staged by prison staff to support the work of incarceration, there is little educational value to be gained by the student or the researcher. They also argue that, simply, taking a prison tour makes prisoners' days worse. To contribute to the appearance of order, many prisons are placed on lockdown during a tour to prevent disruptions to the tourists' experience.⁶⁴ This leaves prisoners confined to their cell for a full day without

⁶² Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

⁶³ Justin Piché and Kevin Walby, "Problematizing Carceral Tours," *The British Journal of Criminology* 50, no. 3 (2010): 575-6.

⁶⁴ Piché and Walby, "Problematizing Carceral Tours," 572.

access to their normal leisure or educational opportunities, while also being put on display for gawking visitors, reducing their already low quality of life. They firmly reject the argument that a prison tour is better than not gaining access to a prison at all:

Whether scripted or not, tours are, by definition, brief, usually lasting no longer than a few hours. Thus, an attempt to understand the relational dynamics and the experiences of prisoners or staff on a carceral tour is not possible. To understand how prisoners experience incarceration, researchers not only need to spend a considerable amount of time in prison, but must also develop relationships with those whose experiences they wish to comprehend. By design, carceral tours do not provide this type of access.⁶⁵

Prison tours, in other words, grant too much narrative authority to the institution by allowing them to control access through the prison tour. Understanding of the prison should instead be obtained through genuine relationship-building with the prisoners who would otherwise have no agency over the process.

For these scholars, the tourist's gaze is uncritical at best and harmful at worst. In performance studies, however, the tourist is recognized as a participant in the meaning-making process at historical sites rather than a credulous recipient of the knowledge presented there. Michael S. Bowman and Phaedra C. Pezzullo argue that tourists "already get a bad name, partly from the inscrutability of their motives, and that problem is exacerbated when tourists visit sites of death."⁶⁶ When scholars assume those motives to be "vulgar, base, or superficial," they miss out on opportunities to understand what and how interpretations of these sites are being formed. In his analysis of dark tourism, Michael S. Bowman argues for the importance of starting from a position of ambivalence rather than condescension towards the tourist:

⁶⁵ Piché and Walby, "Problematizing Carceral Tours," 575-6.

⁶⁶ Michael S. Bowman and Phaedra C. Pezzullo. "What's so 'Dark' about 'Dark Tourism'?: Death, Tours, and Performance." *Tourist Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 190.

Like good cultural critics everywhere, tourists often proceed by staring long and hard at the people, places, objects, and activities they encounter, and not infrequently they become absorbed in or enchanted by the sights they see. But tourism also permits the possibility of rejecting what is seen; it includes moments of sharpened focus, narrowed gaze – of skeptical assessment as well as wide-eyed wonder.⁶⁷

Although spectatorship is a fraught practice in prison museums and tours, there are scholars who (despite sharing those concerns) see the potential for tourists to make this type of resistant reading. In Eric Knackmuhs' study of visitor responses to the Eastern State Penitentiary Museum, he interviewed people two years after their visit to the museum to find out what (if any) impact it had on their thinking about prisons and the criminal legal system. He found that for the majority of people who responded, the museum was "a catalyst for continued engagement" with criminal justice issues and that they continued to think about what they learned, seek out more information, and share it with friends long after. These visitors were more likely to pay attention to criminal justice issues in politics and to have empathy for people who are currently imprisoned more generally.⁶⁸ In his examination of his experience taking students on a prison tour over several years, Bryan McCann describes how although it is advertised as a chance to "experience" prison, with the right scaffolding students still treat the tour with skepticism and find moments for connection and learning through encounters with prisoners. The students' understanding of the tour is not based solely on the information the prison shares, but on layered (and potentially conflicting) registers of meaning that build on and speak to each other rather than overwrite each other. These layers include the live, or the physical bodies

⁶⁷ Michael S. Bowman, "Performing Southern History for the Tourist Gaze," in *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*, ed. Della Pollack (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998): 155.

⁶⁸ Eric Knackmuhs, "Long-term Memories from Visiting a Prison Museum," *Visitor Studies* 25, no. 2 (2002): 159.

present on the tour, the virtual, or the media representations students are already familiar with from television, movies, the news, and other sources, and the spectral, or the absences that haunt the tour of prisoners who are invisible or go unacknowledged. Rather than taking these absences for granted, students are aware of what and who is being hidden in favor of the model prisoners who are put on display.⁶⁹

The Angola Museum

The spectator's orientation to the tourist site has so far been the primary concern of prison tourism scholarship. Are they getting the "right" message, or are they uncritically accepting the prison staff's narrative? Are they taking that message with them into the world? How does their experience shape their values and their future actions? These are all vital questions. I share Knackmuhs's sense that scholarship "recounts more missed opportunities than examples of engagement."⁷⁰ Scholarship on prison tours also takes it as a given that the institutional narrative is very straightforward: prisons are good, actually, and they are necessary to protect the safety of all of us, and this one is functioning smoothly. This construction in turn makes the scholar's posture of suspicion toward the tour something to be congratulated as morally correct, and their ability to find the hidden violence at work admirable. It does not, however, require scholars to allow for the possibility that prisons will engage with their work in complex ways. With the Angola Museum and its corresponding tour, then, I am interested not only in how spectators make sense of what they see, but with the narrative that is being presented

⁶⁹ Bryan McCann, "Live, Virtual, and Spectral: Being Present at the Prison (Tour)," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2019): 95-115.

⁷⁰ Knackmuhs, "Long-term Memories," 158.

to them and how it makes room for complexity in depicting the prison's history and its current operations.

Prison museums and prison tours are usually separate entities for the simple reason that prison museums are typically not built at working prisons. Alcatraz is closed. Eastern State Penitentiary is closed. These museums can at least attempt to depict a complete and objective history of their sites because they are no longer functioning. Tours of working prisons are common but they typically stand on their own, without the emphasis on a prison's history as part of the local cultural heritage and without any monuments to their narrative of progress. Angola, meanwhile, is one of the largest operating prisons in the country, making it a unique example of this kind of tourist experience. It's worth taking a closer look at the image it presents of itself and its history and understanding the light in which it would like to be seen. Information in the news about Angola is often framed as an exposé – revealing a hidden history, the underbelly of the punishment meted out so freely in Louisiana.

I've toured Angola twice as part of a class trip and visited the museum several more times during special events like the semi-annual rodeo or their 20th anniversary celebration. At that event, a line repeated many times – by each former director, by former warden Burl Cain, and by several of the research consultants present – was that the museum is important because Angola's history is so horrific, and we have to remember where we've been so we don't return there. So how is that story being told? What future are they hoping to avoid? What future does Angola envision for itself and for Louisiana's criminal legal system as a whole? How does this focus on Angola's past and future work to obscure its present?

The museum is not a tourist destination on its own; it is not on the way to anywhere, and it's an hour outside of Baton Rouge and two from New Orleans. Tourists would not otherwise be

in the area (although there are a few popular hiking spots nearby), and the museum is too small to justify a trip just to visit it. Its visitors are mostly tour groups – high school and college students, church groups, and service organizations – from which they claim to receive more than 2,000 visitors a month.⁷¹ It also opens for visitors during the semi-annual prison rodeo, where they also sell their gift shop souvenirs at the craft fair.

The museum is made up of repurposed leftovers. The building itself used to belong to a local bank that served guards and other staff living on the prison grounds, but when the bank closed the prison staff wasn't sure what to do with the space. Former warden Burl Cain claims credit for the idea to build a museum, putting together a group of history-minded employees and their families to take charge of gathering a collection of objects that would be suitably unique and possess some level of significance.⁷² The objects that eventually became exhibits were mostly everyday items owned by employees, like old uniforms or tools for notetaking, or oddities they held onto, like makeshift weapons confiscated from prisoners.

Like many small, local museums, the Angola museum's organizational scheme has been improvised over time. There are areas where you can tell that they kept filling a display case until they ran out of room, continuing to put out objects as they were found or donated instead of restructuring completely. After filling the former bank building, the museum expanded into a neighboring administrative building that only adds to its haphazard appearance. Although the additional building is nearby, it can only be accessed by crossing through a barbed wire fence that marks the prison's perimeter wall. Some exhibits are carefully organized using lit display cases and typed informational placards like you would see in a professional museum, while other

⁷¹ John Corley, "Milestones and Memories," *The Angolite* March/April 2018, 38.

⁷² Corley, "Milestones and Memories," 32.

displays are kind of a mystery. There was a showcase with a framed photograph of a man, perhaps his professional head shot, that was displayed next to a silver yoyo. There were no labels and no context provided. Who was this man? What is his connection to this yoyo (if any)? I have no idea, and none of the volunteers present that day were able to offer insight.

The main museum building encourages freeform roaming rather than charting a recommended path through its three rooms. The exhibits do not necessarily build on each other in ways that would require they be viewed in a certain order. Instead they depict different aspects of prison life that accumulate into a general impression of what life at Angola must be like, or has been like in the past. The building is packed, with display cases lining the walls and arranged in the center to maximize the area that can be used for displays.

Several exhibits are built around objects that are weird, novel, or unexpected. There is a display case filled with makeshift weapons that, at least according to a sign, have been confiscated from prisoners. Everything in this case is meticulously labeled with the length of the blade and the materials used to construct it. There are dozens of varieties of knives, ranging from tiny blades that could be easily hidden in your pocket or the palm of your hand to giant blades displayed with the mechanisms for their concealment – there are several Bibles with compartments cut into them to hide knives, *Shawshank Redemption*-style. The materials include copper wire, a typewriter return carriage, sharpened screws, toothbrushes, and ink pens, and there is a shotgun made of metal pipes. Many of the labels name the guards who donated the weapons. The overwhelming number of knives seems designed to illustrate prisoners' potential for dangerousness, but there's also a sense that the museum staff expects us to be impressed with their ingenuity. It's not clear, for example, how a few metal pipes could function as a shotgun, so its placard explains the science behind how it works. If they were truly afraid or threatened by

these weapons they surely would not provide an instruction manual. But as an abolitionist spectator, I have to wonder: even if the museum may be celebrating prisoner ingenuity in this exhibit, what punishment did prisoners face for possessing each of these weapons when they were first confiscated? Why did prisoners feel they needed them? A penal spectator would see the individual's inherent potential for dangerousness, but the abolitionist spectator recognizes prisons as a dangerous system that produces violence rather than preventing it.

Figure 1. "Inmate Weapons." A glass showcase displays an array of makeshift weapons. More than 20 types of blades and 5 improvised guns and projectiles are mounted on the wall, labeled with the length of the blade and the materials used to make them. On the bottom shelf of the display case are books with compartments carved into them for concealing weapons and a whiskey still. Photograph by author.

The exhibit on movies filmed on the grounds is similarly comprised of items that prison staff held onto and later donated. Movies like *Out of Sight*, *Monster's Ball*, and *Dead Man Walking* filmed scenes at Angola, and there are posters and copies of shooting scripts decorating the wall.⁷³ Display cases hold odds and ends from filming. There are costume pieces like prison uniforms worn by George Clooney and guard badges used by Billy Bob Thornton. Thornton also donated two signed photographs, and there are candid photographs of filming that are labeled with the location of the cellblocks where they were staged.

Among the more polished exhibits is the one on the prison rodeo. There are framed programs and promotional art from early rodeos on the wall, with photographs of the packed arenas from the time when visitors were still sitting on makeshift bleachers and on apple crates. There is a mounted bull's head on the wall from the most famous of the bulls who participated in the "Guts and Glory" event, in which prisoners try to get a \$500 poker chip from between his horns. The bull's head (a placard explains) was donated by the family of Dan Klein, who was a livestock contractor for the rodeo for over 30 years.

⁷³ *Dead Man Walking*, directed by Tim Robbins (1995; Universal City, CA: Gramercy Pictures), DVD.; *Out of Sight*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (1998; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures), DVD.; *Monster's Ball*, directed by Marc Forster (2001; Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Films), DVD.



Figure 2. "The Wildest Show in the South." A display of objects associated with the Angola Prison Rodeo behind a rope fence that mimics a livestock pen, including a mannequin dressed in a black and teal leather vest and matching chaps; decorative signs from past rodeos, and a mounted bull's head on the wall. Photograph by author.

More than any other exhibit, the rodeo display honors the contributions of prisoners both to the museum and the rodeo event. In addition to the candid photos, they showcase a series of art photographs by Deborah Luster, a photographer known for her work with prisoners, that were

published in her book *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*.⁷⁴ As Nicole Fleetwood has argued, portraits are one of the most meaningful and personal genres of prison photography, where prisoners have a rare opportunity to be seen as they would like to be seen.⁷⁵ These black and white photographs feature the rodeo competitors in the required uniform – the black and white striped shirt – but you can also see signs of their individual character and the accomplishments they want the viewer to notice. Although they all wear the same shirt, some add on their own cowboy hats, show off the belt buckle they won in a previous rodeo, or pose seated to have a better view of their chaps or boots. One subject poses in front of a Texas state flag. Some smile directly at the camera, while others take on a classic cowboy affect with their thumbs hooked in their belt loops.

There are also displays of prisoners' artwork, with a placard thanking several prison clubs for their contributions. There are intricate sculptures constructed from matchsticks, turned wooden vases, and a pair of hand-tooled leather cowboy boots arranged in display cases against one wall. Although there aren't any paintings, they have several photographs of prisoners with their work or in the process of painting. There is also a hand-tooled leather saddle that was used by the Rough Riders, the prisoners who work with livestock and do an exhibition at the start of every rodeo.

⁷⁴ Deborah Luster, *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishing, 2003).

⁷⁵ Nicole Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

One corner of the exhibit is dedicated to Johnny Brooks, a prisoner who gained a bit of fame for being a regular rodeo contestant.⁷⁶ He was known for his showmanship and charisma that can be seen in his signature competition outfit, a set of teal and black leather chaps with a matching fringed vest made for him by a prisoner who specialized in leathercrafting. The outfit is displayed prominently along with the all-around cowboy awards he won over the years. When he died of a heart attack, he was buried in the cemetery on the prison grounds and his obituary published in *The Angolite* is framed on the wall, reporting that his was “the largest funeral ever at Angola,” with 300 prisoners and 100 unimprisoned attendees.

Death plays a role in many exhibits at the museum. There is a sign that honors the prisoner-run hospice program and explains the work they do to help prisoners die with dignity. Photographs of hospice volunteers at work depict how “large and burly convicted violent offenders turn tender and compassionate taking care of the men in the hospice beds.” Prisoners who don’t have families to arrange burial services, or whose families cannot afford to do so, are buried in the Point Lookout Cemetery on the grounds in coffins built by prisoners who work in the woodshop, one of which is on display in the museum.⁷⁷ The suit worn by the prisoner who drives the horse-drawn hearse is displayed in another showcase with his picture.

The adjacent administrative building houses an exhibit on the history of the death penalty in Louisiana. Many of the objects are expected: a list of every prisoner executed in the state, with

⁷⁶ Johnny Brooks was a major character in Daniel Bergner’s journalistic account of the prison rodeo. See Daniel Bergner, *God of the Rodeo: The Quest for Redemption in Louisiana’s Angola Prison* (New York: Random House, 2011).

⁷⁷ The prisoner-made coffins gained national attention when Billy Graham and his wife were both buried in coffins made at Angola. They learned about the coffins on a visit to Angola and were inspired by the care and faith that went into their construction. See “Billy Graham’s Casket was Made by Prisoners at Angola,” *WAFB* (Baton Rouge, LA), Feb. 21, 2018.

mugshots of those executed since 1983. There is a replica of the electric chair “Gruesome Gertie” that was used until 1991.⁷⁸ A showcase displays objects used to prepare for executions and describes the processes used. There is a copy of the death warrant that would be signed by the governor. One showcase has a shaving brush and hair scissors along with a modern electric razor that would be used to shave the heads and faces of men who would be sent to the electric chair. Another showcase has different styles of handcuffs and leg shackles that have been used for prisoners on death row.

⁷⁸ It was a common practice for prisons to name their electric chairs. Angola’s was not the only Gruesome Gertie; the electric chair at Sing Sing shared the name. Other common choices included “Old Sparky” or “Old Smokey.” For more on electric chairs, see Craig Brandon, *The Electric Chair: An Unnatural American History*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999.



Figure 3. "Gruesome Gertie." A wooden electric chair labelled as "Gruesome Gertie." Leather restraints are attached to the arms and legs of the chair. It is surrounded by a wooden fence to prevent visitors from touching the exhibit. Photograph by author.

What is less expected, at least for me, is the willingness to include anti-death penalty sentiment into the exhibit, although it is incorporated in the form of a debate. There is biographical information provided about Sister Helen Prejean, the nun who gained national attention as the spiritual advisor to many men on death row and whose experiences were depicted in the film *Dead Man Walking*.⁷⁹ A photograph of Prejean in the lethal injection

⁷⁹ Prejean's book about her experiences with death row inmates was a bestseller that was later adapted into a film of the same name. See *Sister Helen Prejean, Dead Man Walking: The*

chamber hangs above a quote from her: “People are worth more than the worst thing they have ever done in their lives.”



Figure 4. “Sister Helen Prejean.” A mounted photograph of Sister Helen Prejean standing behind the lethal injection table, a padded gurney with arm rests and restraints attached. Underneath the photograph is a quote attributed to Prejean, saying “People are worth more than the worst thing they have ever done in their lives.” Photograph by author.

The rest of that wall is devoted to quotes from public figures that either support or condemn the death penalty. Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan is quoted as saying “Perhaps the bleakest fact of all is that the death penalty is imposed not only in a freakish and

Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty that Sparked a National Debate (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

discriminatory manner, but also some cases upon defendants who are actually innocent.” It is displayed side by side with George W. Bush: “I don’t think you should support the death penalty to seek revenge. I don’t think that’s right. I think the reason to support the death penalty is because it saves other people’s lives.” A few feet away is Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall with “Capital punishment violates the Eighth Amendment because it is morally unacceptable to the people of the United States at this time in their history,” displayed with former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura asking “How come life in prison doesn’t mean life? Until it does, we’re not ready to do away with the death penalty. Stop thinking in terms of ‘punishment’ for a minute and think in terms of safeguarding innocent people from incorrigible murderers.”

Visitors are not given instructions in how to receive these messages or how to engage in this debate; competing quotes are side by side, but no one viewpoint is given particular prominence over the other. That Prejean’s work is covered nearby (when no competing local figures known for pro-death penalty advocacy are represented) does mean more space is devoted to anti-death penalty sentiments, but it is also only one wall in a room filled with instruments of death involved in successfully carrying out a century of executions. This exhibit is designed to appeal to the penal spectator, to allow visitors to avoid taking a moral stance by presenting it as a debate of equal ideas. The abolitionist spectator recognizes that framing the death penalty as a debate is a deflection strategy that allows not just the visitor, but the prison itself, to absolve themselves of their complicity in this injustice. As a person who is anti-death penalty, I experienced this room as sobering as well as maddening. The pro-death penalty quotes seemed so flimsy, so unfeeling, in comparison to the opposing appeals to basic human dignity. But I am not sure that this meaning was the result of anything other than the beliefs I brought with me into

the exhibit. Although the death penalty hasn't been used in Louisiana since 2010, it is still legal, and 59 men and one woman currently sit on death row.⁸⁰ In this case, the museum may present two sides of a debate, but their unwillingness to take a position is a position in itself.

The Prison Tour

I have toured the prison twice as part of a class trip, and the tour and the museum supplement each other in unexpected ways. Logistical concerns related to bad weather and administration changes affected the amount of access the tour guide and prison staff granted my group on my first visit. Recent storms made some of the usual bus routes impassable, and in 2015 longtime warden Burl Cain resigned in the face of corruption allegations.⁸¹ We were told that his successor had decided that although the tour could continue, we were not allowed to exit the bus. My second visit was closer to a typical prison tour; we were allowed off the bus and taken through some of the office buildings and historic spaces, introduced to the prison's specially-bred horses, and met a few prisoners who had been selected to speak with us. We were required to turn over our phones at the start of the tour.

Our tour guide identified himself as a former corrections employee who had also assisted former prisoners with re-entry. He had his own loudspeaker system that he brought on the bus (a yellow school bus rented by our professor), directing the driver while delivering his clearly oft-repeated spiel and answering questions in a very straightforward and factual manner. He did not gloss over any facts or shy away from telling us the brutal history about the prison that we

⁸⁰ Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, "Briefing Book," July 2022.

⁸¹ For news coverage of the corruption allegations against Cain and his resignation, see Gordon Russell and Maya Lau, "The Fall of Burl Cain: How One Last Side Deal Led to Longtime Angola Warden's Undoing," *The Times Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), Dec. 15, 2015; Kiran Chawla, "The Investigators: Longtime Angola Prison Warden Burl Cain Says He is Resigning," *WAFB* (Baton Rouge, LA), Dec. 9, 2015.

already knew to be true: that the majority of prisoners at Angola are Black men convicted of unfairly long sentences at a young age or for a first offense, that there are innocent people imprisoned there who hadn't been lucky enough to be exonerated yet, or that suicide rates among prisoners are uncommonly high.⁸² His honesty is intended to be read as surprising, and it is. After all, shouldn't the representative of the prison be trying to paint it in the best light? That surprise, however, is meant to elicit admiration that Angola's staff recognizes racial bias and mental health as problems prisoners face. But whose responsibility is it to fix those problems? His candor does not extend that far.

The tour takes a loop around the prison grounds, stopping at historic places in the prison and sites of their current achievements. We started in a residential area near the entrance gate where prison employees live with their families, paying low rent to the prison as a tradeoff for their proximity in case they are needed at unexpected times. We visited one outcamp that housed a prisoner-built Catholic chapel, as well as offices for *The Angolite* and the prison radio station.

One of the main stops on the tour is to see the Red Hat Cellblock, which was the most restrictive cell block at Angola from the 1930s until 1972 when the reformist Secretary of Corrections Elayn Hunt officially closed it due to its inhumane conditions.⁸³ It was named for the

⁸² Although individual prisons may keep track of deaths that occur in their facilities, the state of Louisiana does not collect this data. Loyola University law professor Andrea Armstrong was the first to collect each prison's recent data, finding that 6.23% of deaths that occurred in prisons that participated in her study during that time were suicides. See Andrea Armstrong, Louisiana: Death Behind Bars, 2015-2019, *Incarceration Transparency*, 2021. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3980931>

⁸³ For more information on the Red Hat Cellblock, see Burk Foster, "Angola in the Seventies," In *The Wall is Strong: Corrections in Louisiana*, edited by Burk Foster, Wilbert Rideau, and Douglas Dennis, 45-60 (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2014); Wilbert Rideau, "Angola's History," in *Life Sentences: Rage and Survival Behind Bars*, edited by Wilbert Rideau and Ron Wikberg, 35-42 (New York: Times Books, 1992).; Lydia

red hats worn by the prisoners confined there, that marked them as the most dangerous prisoners and made them easier to spot outdoors. Today the concrete building is somewhat dilapidated with peeling paint, dirty floors, and rusted window screens. Our tour guide described the conditions at the time of its use: 30 cells, each with a cement slab bed with no mattress, and a bucket to use as a toilet. He described years when prison overcrowding was at its worst meant that the tiny cells could be used to hold a dozen people. At the end of the walkway is a room that once housed the electric chair (Gruesome Gertie) when the Red Hat Cellblock was used for prisoners on death row. The Red Hat Cellblock was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2003, and Cain held a ceremony to commemorate this recognition.⁸⁴

In one of many examples of emotional whiplash, after we exited the building and returned to the bus, the guide pointed out the mill on the neighboring field where prisoners make syrup from sugar cane. He spent several minutes detailing the process and discussing the popularity of their syrup with consumers.

If the Red Hat Cellblock is the exemplar of Angola's violent history, many of the rest of the stops on the tour are meant to represent how far the prison has come since the 1970s. At the offices of *The Angolite* and the prison's radio station, we met with the men who ran them. In addition to telling us what a typical day was like in their jobs, they also spoke of how meaningful they feel their work is. The *Angolite* has subscribers in all fifty states and internationally, the revenue from which allows them to distribute it for free to prisoners. The radio station DJ told us he was getting a degree from the Baptist seminary with a concentration in music and ministry.

Pelot-Hobbs, "The Contested Terrain of the Louisiana Carceral State: Dialectics of Southern Penal Expansion, 1971-2016," doctoral dissertation, The City University of New York, 2019.

⁸⁴ Kerry Myers, "Infamous Cellblock Selected as National Historical Landmark," *The Angolite*, March/April 2003.

He believed that music could play a huge role in improving the daily lives of his listeners, and he took that responsibility seriously. We also drove by other workplaces, like the vegetable processing plant and the metal working shop, as our guide told us about their contributions: how Angola produces a good portion of the food for the rest of the prison system and manufactures all the street signs used in Louisiana.

The last stop on the tour is the lethal injection chamber. Dwight Conquergood has described the theatricality involved in executions through their role as rituals that perform the state's monopoly on violence. He traces changes in the dramaturgy of executions, from public spectacles to the mourning events they have become with victims' families now invited to attend executions in a ritual of grieving.⁸⁵ The lethal injection chamber at Angola is shaped by performance in still more ways: the room has been repainted what our tour guide referred to as "Barbara Walters beige," a color the tour guide told us was requested by Walters's crew before she filmed a segment there and that would show up better on camera. The room itself has also been used to film the execution scenes in *Dead Man Walking* and *Monster's Ball*. According to our guide, for the latter movie, the room needed to be modified so that the lethal injection table could be taken out and substituted with an electric chair.

Our guide went over the history of execution methods used in Louisiana and the process of sending a prisoner to death. He cited complications, such as the possibility that things can go wrong, that the drugs used can take several hours to work during which the prisoner is in incredible pain. As of this writing (Mach 2023), 8 people have been executed in the United

⁸⁵ Dwight Conquergood, "Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty," *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 3 (2002): 339-367.

States so far this year, and although there haven't been any executions at Angola since 2010, there are 60 people currently on death row in Louisiana.⁸⁶

I don't really have words to describe the experience at being in the lethal injection chamber. It was sickening and nauseating. One wall of the chamber itself was taken up with a giant window into a seating area, with a large curtain that could be used to cover it. I couldn't imagine what circumstances I would have had to face to want to be part of that audience, to consider it justice being done, much less what it would feel like to be on the other side.

This room is in an administrative building near the entrance to the grounds and was the last stop on the tour before we returned to the museum. My sense was that this was both out of convenience (it was the endpoint of a loop around the grounds) and as a way to end the tour on a serious note. Throughout the day we had been shown pieces of prison life that made it seem like a normal, perhaps even recognizable, community; prison staff live and work there, men have opportunities for creative and challenging work, there are churches and classrooms and sports. Whether it was purposeful or not, ending the tour in the lethal injection chamber was a necessary reminder that, no matter what trappings of normalcy exist, the state's ability to enact violence hangs over life at Angola in ways I would never be able to understand.

Legacy Building and the Future of Incarceration

The emotional whiplash I experienced again and again on the tour and in the museum makes it hard to reckon with intellectually for me. Together the two experiences are designed to build a general impression that Angola is far better than it used to be, but "better than slavery"

⁸⁶ For death row statistics and prisoner demographics, see Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, "Statistics Briefing Book," July 2022. For up-to-date information on application of the death penalty in the United States, see the Death Penalty Information Center, "Outcomes of Death Penalty Warrants in 2023," <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/stories/outcomes-of-death-warrants-in-2023>.

and “better than torture” are not really admirable bars to clear. With a roster of curators and volunteers pulled from the families and friends of prison staff (some are former corrections officers themselves), I expected the museum to paint the prison in the best possible light. But what exactly is that light? How do they see the work they do?

It’s clear that the museum exists at least in part to burnish Burl Cain’s legacy in both subtle and gross ways. In the exhibit on movies filmed on the grounds, for instance, many of the featured photographs are of Burl Cain on the film set, speaking with directors or shaking actors’ hands. There’s a display with a director’s chair that has Cain’s name embroidered on it. There are also framed copies of news articles that speak positively of Cain’s impact, like “The Deadly Prison that Dared to Pray: Infamous Angola Used Faith, Family to Stem Violence” in *The Washington Times*.⁸⁷ The official 1998 court ruling⁸⁸ that declared Angola was no longer under federal supervision was also framed alongside a handwritten letter from Secretary of Public Safety and Corrections Richard Stalder to Cain telling him he “should be very proud of this accomplishment.” Cain’s influence and reputation remain strong enough that he was an honored guest at the museum’s 20th anniversary celebration despite having resigned in disgrace due to corruption allegations two years before.

In addition to Cain’s corruption, there are things we know to be true about Angola today, claims that have been exposed by prisoners and confirmed by investigators, journalists, and courts that would not find their way into the museum: that non-Christians face discrimination

⁸⁷ Ralph Z. Hallow, “The Deadly Prison that Dared to Pray: Infamous Angola Used Faith, Family to Stem Violence,” *The Washington Times* (Washington, D.C.) July 14, 2015.

⁸⁸ Hayes Williams, et al. v. John McKeithen, et al., Civil No. 71-98-B (Middle District of LA 1998).

and are prevented from practicing their religions,⁸⁹ that prisoners on death row are confined in dangerously hot cells and that the prison staff attempted to cover that up when investigators came,⁹⁰ that Burl Cain admits to assigning prisoners harsh field labor in retaliation for speaking out against him,⁹¹ that prison employees have been convicted of embezzling over a hundred thousand dollars from recreation funds.⁹² These individual bad actors and cases of continued mistreatment (rightly) get a lot of attention, but it's also worth paying attention to the pieces of the system that are working as intended in the best way we can expect of them right now.

The museum isn't all about escape attempts and confiscated weapons, instead taking great care to honor prisoners and praise their achievements. Their art is displayed for its beauty and craftsmanship, the mundane objects of their daily lives are displayed as important and meaningful artifacts, and their deaths are considered worthy of being mourned. Many exhibits include issues of *The Angolite* in them just to demonstrate that their journalists are the sources of a lot of the history on display and that prisoner-led research drives the exhibits.

Anti-prison scholarship on prison museums would interpret exhibits like these as smokescreens designed to reassure visitors that prisoners are safe and fulfilled, while obscuring the violent practices that persist. As an abolitionist spectator, I instead ask how the museum's

⁸⁹ Laura Maggi, "Inmate Wins Right to Buy Texts on Religion," *Times-Picayune*, March 28, 2007; Tim Morris, "ACLU Sues for Religious Rights at Angola," *Times-Picayune*, Feb. 5, 2009.

⁹⁰ Joe Gyan, Jr., "5th Circuit Court of Appeals Panel Decides No Air-conditioning for Most of Louisiana's Death Row Inmates," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), July 9, 2015.

⁹¹ Gordon Russell and Maya Lau, "The Fall of Burl Cain: How One Last Side Deal Led to Longtime Angola Warden's Undoing," *The Times Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), Dec. 15, 2015.

⁹² Gordon Russell, "Ex-Angola Officials Charged with Theft of \$140K in Rodeo, Other Funds for Employee Recreation," *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA), Dec. 7, 2016.

transformation of prisoners' cultural production as well as Angola's own history into "heritage" contributes to their vision of the future of imprisonment.

Heritage exists to be preserved; for instance, the prison and museum staff are proud that a piece of Angola is displayed in the Smithsonian. A decommissioned guard tower from Angola is in the Museum of African American History and Culture, one of the key artifacts in placing imprisonment as part of a lineage of racial subjugation in the United States. Instead of taking that as a sign to examine how that lineage manifests today at Angola, they are proud that the prison is recognized in such an important museum as part of history and that they played a role in its preservation.⁹³ Similarly, during the rodeo the museum staff posts "did you know" style informational placards with "fun facts" about the prison and its history for you to read as you wait in the line of cars. I saw one placard that read "the award-winning documentary 'The Farm' was filmed here." What the placard left unsaid was that this 1998 documentary (*The Farm: Angola, USA*)⁹⁴ tracks the damaging impact of incarceration in the lives of individual prisoners; instead of reckoning with the purpose of the film, the prison staff attempts to ride the coattails of its artistic recognition.

The ultimate goal of prison abolition is to end prisons as we know them currently, improving social and economic conditions such that prisons would become obsolete. Heritage is produced and exploited at Angola as a method to add value to an institution that no longer serves us; rather than celebrating or even just accepting their potential obsolescence, through the museum Angola continues to find new ways to construct itself as both requiring and deserving

⁹³ Kerry Myers, "A Smithsonian Connection," *The Angolite*, Sep/Oct 2013.

⁹⁴ *The Farm: Angola, USA*, directed by Liz Garbus, Wilbert Rideau, and Jonathan Stack (1998; Los Angeles: Seventh Art Releasing), DVD.

preservation. Although prisoner contributions are present in the form of their art and their labor, prisoner voices are absent from the museum and closely monitored on the prison tour. In the next chapter, I explore how to apply an abolitionist spectatorial lens to a performance in which prisoners are present but perhaps not always free to speak.

Chapter 2. Moral Rehabilitation for Who: Planting the Seeds of Abolition in Angola's *The Life of Jesus Christ*

The Angola museum formalizes the institutional narrative of the prison's history, but they have staged other performances that speak to their present in which prisoners participate in more meaningful ways. Although prisoners and prison staff work together, prisoner contributions have the potential to complement, challenge, and think beyond the institutional narrative in ways that open new avenues for the abolitionist spectatorial lens. In the summers of 2012 and 2013, the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola opened its gates to the public for their drama club's production of *The Life of Jesus Christ*, a three-hour passion play they spent over two years rehearsing. With audiences made up mostly of other prisoners, family members, and local church groups, the production was billed by prison staff as an opportunity to witness the participants' rehabilitation through religious devotion.

Although news coverage of the event presented the idea of a prison passion play as an ironic novelty, theatre and religious programming in prisons serve complementary functions. From the perspective of administrators, they provide the means for prisoners to understand and reflect on their crimes to become productive members of society. From a prisoner perspective, they offer a sense of peace and freedom in a place of confinement. The scholarship on prison theatre as well as studies of faith in prison focus similarly on outcomes: how these disciplines reduce recidivism and build soft skills like collaboration and conflict management, as well as how they foster better mental health in their participants.

In this chapter, I use the abolitionist spectatorial lens to look beyond the rehabilitative mission espoused by Angola's staff and to resist assumptions about the political convictions of the play's audience. I first trace the central role Christian leaders have played in designing and managing prisons in the United States since the eighteenth century. Although that influence has

waned in the twentieth century, Angola renewed its orientation toward religious modes of rehabilitation under Burl Cain's leadership from 1995-2015. *The Life of Jesus Christ* was performed as part of his mission to enact "moral rehabilitation," a goal supported by mainstream news coverage that emphasized prisoner statements about how the play helped them understand and take responsibility for the crimes that led to their incarceration.

This account of the play reflects a social expectation that prisoners continually account for their crimes and assumes that the sole purpose of this production was to transform prisoners. I argue that these prisoners used the play to speak to intervene in ongoing debates within Christianity about what roles Christians should play in prison administration and how questions of justice, mercy, and redemption in the gospel can be interpreted from an abolitionist standpoint. I contend that by speaking to their audience of evangelical Christians in a performance language tailored to them, the production plants the seeds for an abolitionist stance.

Angola's Drama Club

The drama club at Angola was founded in 1976 and, unlike most prison theatre programs, has been entirely prisoner-run since then. They primarily perform short comic sketches, both improvised and scripted, that are intended to entertain other prisoners. They have occasionally performed original dramatic pieces, but overall, their performances have been designed to provide relief from prison life rather than to criticize it. They also organize social outreach projects that are unrelated to performance as part of their overall mission to create a welcoming environment to other prisoners more generally. Wanting the club to be a source of support that fills the gaps left by the prison administrative structure, former club president Gary Tyler

spearheaded programs to collect donations to assist prisoners with families in need and to offer English and GED classes to non-English speaking prisoners.⁹⁵

The script for *The Life of Jesus Christ* is based on the gospel of Luke (who serves as the narrator). As the title indicates, the play begins with Jesus's birth and presents moments throughout his life, including his baptism by John, his temptation in the desert, the calling of his first disciples, and his journey to Jerusalem. It then moves into the events of the passion narrative, including the Last Supper, his betrayal by Judas, and his multiple interrogations before he is eventually sentenced to death, crucified, and resurrected. Interspersed throughout are also contemporary songs – the shepherds present at Jesus's birth sing “Mary, Did You Know?” – and the play's runtime clocks in at just over three hours.⁹⁶ In this section I will go over the inspiration for the play, the production process, and factors that delayed its performance, relying primarily on reporting by the imprisoned journalists at *The Angolite*. Although the play was covered in national news, *The Angolite* coverage was more concerned with the production process while national news was concerned with the play's rehabilitative effects and the performers' understanding of their characters.

My reading of the play is based on the version filmed for broadcast on a local Christian television channel rather than as a member of the live audience. In many ways, the production feels like a normal community theatre production. Like much community theatre, the costumes and props were simple but creative; the actors each wore very similar robes made of draped

⁹⁵ Ronald Walker, “On Stage with the Drama Club,” *The Angolite*, January/February 2006, 45.

⁹⁶ One performance was filmed by a prison ministry organization and can be viewed in full online. My reading of the play is based on this video as a primary source: Mike Barber Ministries, “Angola Life of Christ,” Vimeo video, 190 minutes, May 1, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/65260847>.

cotton fabric, but they had been dyed and painted in ways that helped differentiate characters from each other. I recognized the space as the rodeo arena, but they divided it into multiple playing areas with different landscapes and made good use of their outdoor setting. John the Baptist used an actual pond that was surrounded by greenery. Roman centurions enter scenes on horseback and at one point they bring a live camel into the arena, which was genuinely exciting. And as with community theatre, there was a mix of actors who had never performed before and actors with more experience. The audience was included in parts of the video, especially in scenes with audience participation and during the curtain call when they were invited to sing gospel songs with the cast. Although the video of the audience did reveal some bored kids with their arms crossed or adults who looked like they might be nodding off, the crowd seemed overall engaged and enthusiastic. Even when you couldn't see the audience, you could hear them. Many moments in the play turned into call and response, with many of Jesus's lines met with audible "amens" in the audience. The play seemed to be working for them as a piece of Christian performance. And although I'm not necessarily their target audience in that regard, the play worked for me too. I found the actors' performances to be earnest and heartfelt and their production design to be creative. A three-hour runtime is a little long for me, but if I had been in the arena with access to concessions and the communal experience, I think I would have thought it was an exciting day.

The Life of Jesus Christ involved many more participants and was intended to be performed at a much grander scale than any play the drama club had taken on before. Assistant Warden for Programming Cathy Fontenot proposed the play in 2009 after she attended the original production in Scotland while on a business trip. Performed at multiple sites around the grounds of Dundas Castle in Edinburgh, Fontenot saw similarities between the picturesque

setting and the landscape at Angola, as well as a message that resonated with the work she and then-warden Burl Cain were trying to do:

We were touring the grounds and she [director Suzanne Lofthus] was showing me the old barn where they held the manger scene. And the more we walked around, the hills, the green, the landscape, the more it reminded me of Angola and the things we do about moral rehabilitation and it hit me, we can do this at Angola.⁹⁷

Angola's production was originally intended to copy the Scottish production's use of a more immersive format, in which audience members would walk from one scene to another at different locations on the grounds, but bad weather and a lack of infrastructure combined to thwart that plan. After their original site choices were flooded out and the costs of building seating proved to be unexpectedly expensive, the play was moved to the rodeo arena, which had its own sound system, a playing space large enough for the variety of large set pieces they were constructing, and could already accommodate large audiences.⁹⁸ Although the move required staging adjustments, Fontenot saw it as a positive because the arena itself was built by prisoners and provided another opportunity to show off their work.

Despite being proposed by the prison administration, the rest of the production, including the directing, acting, and design choices, were left to the drama club and director Gary Tyler. They aimed to create a production whose cast would truly reflect the prison population and whose design choices would reflect local character. The prison did not purchase any new materials, leaving the designers to rely on fabric and lumber donations from local businesses and nonprofits (mostly religious organizations) and whatever other supplies they could gather themselves. Peter Rubens, a sculptor and owner of an art gallery in New Orleans before his

⁹⁷ Larry Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," *The Angolite*, May/June 2012, 53.

⁹⁸ Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 53.

incarceration, painted many of the backdrops and designed the costumes by repurposing materials he could easily access:

Certain elements, such as the Roman soldiers' outfits, I began to consider how to make the helmets, the swords, the shields...I asked the recreation department about getting some football helmets that were going to be discarded and I took a saw to them. I pulled old brooms out of the garbage and glued the bristles to the top of the helmets for plumes. Their shields were cut out of old plastic 55-gallon drums. Warden [Joe] Lamartiniere donated a bunch of old baseball caps to make all the priests' hats. I cut the bills off, sewed some old foam rubber to what was left, and wrapped them in muslin.⁹⁹

Finding appropriate materials was not the only logistical concern. The club had permission from the warden to cast women from the Louisiana Correction Institute for Women (LCIW) in the play, which made rehearsals difficult to coordinate and required sacrifice from the LCIW prisoners. With rehearsals held at Angola, the travel was an ordeal:

To rehearse at Angola, they had to get up early, as early as 2 a.m., and after rehearsal make the 2-hour trip back to LCIW. In the last days leading up to the performances they made the trip every day, returning to shower, eat and get up to do it all over again. And despite most being trustys, they were shackled hand and foot for the trips. "While it has been a great opportunity, sometimes doing things in prison can become a hassle," Kung said. "Getting up early, getting shook down, shackled and transported twice a day can get frustrating."¹⁰⁰

The participation of women prisoners also meant rules prohibiting touching became an issue; rehearsals were interrupted by guards enforcing no touching rules until prisoners successfully argued their case with the warden that they could be trusted to behave appropriately.

The first performance was for an audience of more than 800 prisoners and 150 paid audience members; the next year they recreated the production for an audience three times the

⁹⁹ Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 58.

¹⁰⁰ Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 57.

size.¹⁰¹ The prison administration interpreted this as a sign of support for Angola's rehabilitative mission and for the prisoners who were demonstrating they had changed. Fontenot said, "it's not what the Department of Corrections, or even Angola, is telling you is working in our system. It's the inmates showing you that they can be creative in positive ways and really live this and be excited about it."¹⁰²

Time is a Flat Circle when it Comes to Religious Rehabilitation in Prisons

Although prisoners performing a passion play sounds incongruous (and was presented as such in news coverage),¹⁰³ Christian religious leaders have been the primary drivers of the design, maintenance, and reform of prisons in the United States for as long as there have been prisons. Part of developing a new society after the revolution was to follow a more humane vision of punishment for crimes, a project in which most legislators and reformers agreed religious leaders should be involved. Their primary goal was the redemption of prisoners' souls through Christian influence, but the direction of that influence was debated by all involved; whether God wanted leniency or discipline was an open question and each perspective inspired opposing prison management strategies.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Larry Sharp, "Reprising the Passion," *The Angolite*, Jan/Feb 2013, 40.

¹⁰² Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 56.

¹⁰³ News coverage emphasized the distance between the performers' criminal acts and the holiness of their characters. The lede in the *New York Times* coverage stated, "On a December night in 1991, the man who would later play Jesus committed a string of armed robberies in New Orleans. Ten years later, the woman who would play the Virgin Mary robbed a Mexican restaurant across town. A month after that, a teenager killed his girlfriend and infant daughter. He would go on to play Joseph."

¹⁰⁴ For more on religion's influence on prison administration, see Christopher Adamson, "Evangelical Quakerism and the Early American Penitentiary Revisited: The Contributions of Thomas Eddy, Roberts Vaux, John Griscom, Stephen Grellet, Elisha Bates, and Isaac Hopper," *Quaker History* 90, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 35-57 and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009);

Quakers were on the side of lenience and were responsible for early prisons in New York and Pennsylvania. Their ideal designs, intended to create kinder, more tranquil environments that would facilitate reflection and repentance, were demonstrations that one generation's humanitarian reform is understood by the next as cruel and unusual punishment. Newgate prison, built in Greenwich Village in 1796, was run by the Quaker Thomas Eddy and intended to offer a more compassionate alternative to imprisonment by banning beatings and whippings and providing prisoners with the structure he thought they would find comforting in comparison to the poverty and disease they faced in city life. He believed in the power of hard work, and that the structure provided by labor would "cure the moral and physical diseases that plagued criminals."¹⁰⁵ Eddy was surprised that rather than considering the labor to be a relief, prisoners resented their lack of pay, long hours, and the absence of any real training for the tasks they were assigned. Work stoppages and other protests became common as overcrowding increased. Eddy was eventually removed from prison leadership and replaced with John Stanford, a Baptist minister, who used his religious convictions to support the return of corporal punishment.¹⁰⁶

Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia was also designed by Quakers with the intention of creating an environment in which prisoners could spend their time reflecting on their crimes, build a relationship with God, and come to repent. The architecture, with high, vaulted ceilings and single occupancy rooms, was intended to resemble a monastery in its peacefulness

Tanya Erzen, *God in Captivity: The Rise of Faith-based Prison Ministries in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017).

¹⁰⁵ Jennifer Graber, *The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons & Religion in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 33.

¹⁰⁶ Ashley Rubin, "Three Waves of American Prison Development, 1790-1920," *Sociology of Crime, Law and Deviance* 19 (2014): 139-18.

and solitude; instead, they had invented solitary confinement with all its harmful psychological consequences.¹⁰⁷ A similar emphasis on solitude and silence was used at Auburn Prison in Auburn, New York by Elam Lynds, whose system required laboring in silence during the day, then reflecting at night in a solitary cell; any interruption to the silence was cause for corporal punishment. This system was admired by Quakers and Baptists alike for making space for reflection and allowing time for profitable laboring, all while maintaining order. The Auburn model took hold and was copied by most prisons in the United States built afterwards.¹⁰⁸

These designs, although ostensibly rooted in the hope for the rehabilitation of prisoners, were critiqued in their time by men who had been released and were protested by those who remained imprisoned. Corporal punishment increased in response to protests, leading to more protests and subsequent corporal punishment; former prisoners like William Coffey published pamphlets arguing that these prisons were not and could not be sites of spiritual reformation as well as a book critiquing Newgate, *Inside Out; An Interior View of the New-York State Prison*.¹⁰⁹ Historian Jennifer Graber describes the public response to these protests, which bears a striking resemblance to contemporary responses to prison reform:

The public remained both ambiguous and dissatisfied. It relied on prisons as the primary solution for getting criminals off the streets. It wanted firm discipline that deterred potential offenders. Most citizens, however, seemed uncomfortable with the idea that prisons simply warehoused criminals. They wanted institutions to reform offenders and believed religion was vital to any reformative program. Yet they never offered serious and sustained protest against episodes of inmate brutality. Politicians echoed these sentiments, with Democrats focusing on the

¹⁰⁷ Jacqueline Thibaut, “‘To Pave the Way to Penitence’: Prisoners and Discipline at the Eastern State Penitentiary,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 10, no. 2 (April 1982): 187-222.

¹⁰⁸ Dan Berger and Toussaint Loussier, *Rethinking the American Prison Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 21.

¹⁰⁹ Graber, *Furnace of Affliction*, 68.

need for institutional order and Whigs and Republicans emphasizing prison's reforming mandate.¹¹⁰

With a public that was hesitant to punish but not sure what else to do, prisons continued to alternate between regimes that relied on physical punishment or attempted rehabilitation and redemption. Finding neither "worked," they would start the cycle again.

Although religious leaders do not typically play such central roles in prison design today, religious programming is still a major part of prison life. The scholarly conversation about religion in prisons was dominated for many years by investigations of whether participating in these programs could create order within the prison and reduce recidivism after release, but there is more interest recently in the variety of functions religious programming can serve in prisoners' lives outside of rehabilitative effects.

In 2002, Todd R. Clear and Melvina T. Sumter investigated whether participating in religious programming led to fewer disciplinary infractions and an increased ability to adjust to prison life.¹¹¹ Thomas P. O'Connor studied the methods by which religious programs can rehabilitate prisoners, as well as how to determine which prisoners would benefit most and steer them toward participation.¹¹² T. David Evans et al. studied what levels of religious participation affected crime rates in all adults, concluding that strong religious social networks inhibited crime both generally and for prisoners who converted and remained active in religious groups after

¹¹⁰ Graber, *Furnace of Affliction*, 175.

¹¹¹ Todd R. Clear and Melvina T. Sumter, "Prisoners, Prison, and Religion: Religion and Adjustment to Prison," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 35, no. 3/4 (2002): 148.

¹¹² Thomas P. O'Connor, "What Works, Religion as a Correctional Intervention: Part II," *Journal of Community Corrections* 14, no. 2 (Winter 2004-2005): 4-26.

their release.¹¹³ Studies like these on the effects of religious programming on prisoners face methodological difficulties in measuring something as subjective as religious belief as well as controlling for other factors that create criminality, and recent scholarship by Byron R. Johnson, Colin J. Baier and Bradley R. E. Wright, and Scott D. Camp et al. has focused on how to improve methodologies for measuring religious participation and recidivism rates after release.¹¹⁴

More recent scholarship has investigated how religious programming impacts not just the behavior of prisoners but their mental well-being and is more careful to include non-Christian religious practices. Clear et al. looked at how participating in religious programming was associated with general mood, with religious prisoners reporting lower levels of depression and higher self-esteem. They also found that faith helped prisoners deal with feelings of guilt and shame over their imprisonment and provided direction in their efforts to redeem themselves:

Rather than being exculpatory for these inmates, religion was a way to atone for the wrong that they had done and to receive the forgiveness that they needed to reestablish their personal self-worth. The teachings of Islam and of Christianity provide ways for the believer to admit guilt without experiencing guilt as a dead end. Instead, guilt can be experienced as a doorway to a better life. By adopting a

¹¹³ T. David Evans, Francis T. Cullen, R. Gregory Dunaway, and Velmer S. Burton, Jr., "Religion and Crime Reexamined: The Impact of Religion, Secular Controls, and Social Ecology on Adult Criminality," *Criminology* 33, no. 2 (1995): 195-224.

¹¹⁴ Byron R. Johnson, "Religious Programs and Recidivism Among Former Inmates in Prison Fellowship Programs: A Long-Term Follow-Up Study," *Justice Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2004): 329-354; Colin J. Baier and Bradley R. E. Wright, "'If You Love Me, Keep My Commandments': A Meta-Analysis of the Effect of Religion on Crime," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 38, no. 1 (February 2001): 3-21; Scott D. Camp, Jody Klein-Saffran, Okyun (Karl) Kwon, Dawn M. Daggett, and Victoria Joseph, "An Exploration into Participation in a Faith-Based Prison Program," *Criminology & Public Policy* 5, no. 3 (2006): 529-550.

religious identity, the inmate aligns with a logic that allows guilt but also surpasses it with a stronger self-image intact.¹¹⁵

The impact of religious programming on identity formation is considered one of the most compelling benefits. Shadd Maruna, Louise Wilson, and Kathryn Curran likewise found that one of the most psychologically difficult things for prisoners was “the loss of one’s identity as an individual and the transformation into a ‘type’ or a member of larger, undifferentiated group: prisoner, offender, criminal, or murderer” and that participation in religious programming could help foster new identities outside of those socially enforced roles, building the foundations for renewed self-worth.¹¹⁶

Because of these positive impacts on self-worth, scholars have described religious programming as possessing the power to oppose the carceral logic governing the prison. It facilitates friendly social connections both between prisoners and with unimprisoned volunteers, with chapels providing a space to eat snacks and hang out, and also to meet other material needs like stamps or the ability to make phone calls. Chapels provide an escape, offering a “safe haven, a place where an inmate can go where the safety threats of prison life are excluded.”¹¹⁷ Irene Becci and Joshua Dubler describe how the architecture and design of the chapel space also disrupts the institutional prison environment; by providing the only area in a prison with

¹¹⁵ Todd R. Clear, Patricia L. Hardyman, Bruce Stout, Karol Lucken, and Harry R. Dammer, “The Value of Religion in Prison: An Inmate Perspective,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 16, no. 1 (February 2000): 60.

¹¹⁶ Shadd Maruna, Louise Wilson, and Kathryn Curran, “Why God is Often Found Behind Bars: Prison Conversions and the Crisis of Self-Narrative,” *Research in Human Development* 3, nos. 2&3 (2006): 172.

¹¹⁷ Clear, et. al., “An Inmate Perspective,” 65.

“decorations – flowers, plants, colorful pictures, and candles – and affects – smiling staff and the smell of coffee and cookies – chapels refuse and transcend the carceral order.”¹¹⁸

These positive effects are typically enough for scholars to interpret religious programming as a net good for prisoners despite any personal discomfort they acknowledge with the outsized role of Christian programming compared to other religious or nonsectarian educational programs. However, some scholars have analyzed the ways religious programming extends the reach of carceral logic by providing another avenue to circulate narratives of prisoners as unfit for society or deserving of suffering. Based on her study of religious belief in a women’s prison, Rachel Ellis observes that “Protestant narratives were bound up within the normative regimes of the prison that sought to govern women’s bodies, emotions, and behaviors,” as women began to report each other’s infractions to the chaplain for punishment and police each other’s behavior when outside of church.¹¹⁹ Although she believes religious belief was a meaningful force in the lives of many prisoners she interviewed, it provided “meaningful redemption while supporting punitive aims” demonstrating how the two are not mutually exclusive in prison programming.¹²⁰

Warden Burl Cain and “Moral Rehabilitation”

Prison religious programming is put forward by its advocates as a rehabilitative tool that will help prevent prisoners from re-offending when they are released. In the context of Angola, where most prisoners are serving life sentences with no possibility for parole barring some kind

¹¹⁸ Irene Becci and Joshua Dubler, “Religion and Religions in Prisons: Observations from the United States and Europe,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 2 (2017): 245.

¹¹⁹ Rachel Ellis, “Redemption and Reproach: Religion and Carceral Control in Action Among Women in Prison,” *Criminology* 58 (2020): 765-66.

¹²⁰ Ellis, “Redemption and Reproach,” 767.

of legislative intervention, this rehabilitative function takes on a different meaning. It is also unusual for a prison to have a warden who was as public-facing as Burl Cain was at Angola from 1995-2015, and who was as outspoken about his belief in Christianity as a rehabilitative force.

Cain's regime emphasized what he called a doctrine of "moral rehabilitation" that he believed was only possible through belief in God. For him, such a philosophy meant helping "prisoners accept they're in prison and that it's God's will that maybe they don't get out – and that while you're here you do your best for him."¹²¹ Only moral rehabilitation could address the root cause of crime, which (he argued) was an individual's criminal nature:

"I had come to realize that criminals are very selfish people," Cain says. "They take your money, your property, anything they want for themselves. They sneak around, lie, steal, kill and do whatever they want. I could teach them to read and write and help them learn skills and a trade, but without moral rehabilitation I would only be creating a smarter criminal." Unless something changes in an inmate's heart, he was likely to remain angry and bitter at the world that rejected him, Cain realized. He wondered how to reach those bitter, discarded human fragments.¹²²

Moral rehabilitation was necessary to Cain for several reasons: to create more order in the prison, which could not be achieved as long as prisoners carried resentment or anger at their imprisonment, and the greater purpose of saving prisoners' souls, giving them a sense of hope tied to the afterlife while making peace with their lives on earth. He credits his regime of moral rehabilitation with the reduction of violence in the prison, although critics say this is actually the result of previous wardens' policies and was already at a historic low when Cain arrived.¹²³

¹²¹ Chris Frink, "Breaking into Prison," *Christianity Today*, May 2004, 37.

¹²² Dennis Shere, "Warden Saw Only One Answer for Troubled LA Prison: Christ," *Baptist Press*, Jan. 2008.

¹²³ Maya Lau, "Burl Cain Claims Angola Transformation, but Prison's Violent Era Preceded Him by Decades," *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA), Jan. 3, 2016.

Despite the legal implications, Cain saw his evangelical mission to be essential to his position as warden and called for Christian prisoners to join him in that effort, arguing that “[a]s Christians we have a great commission – ‘Go ye forth in all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.’ We should have 700 missionaries out there witnessing to the rest of the population. We have to do that, and we can never quit. This is our purpose in life.”¹²⁴ To that end, Cain was responsible for forming a partnership with the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. After the passage of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act made prisoners ineligible for Pell Grants and advanced degrees became less accessible, the seminary was willing to offer classes to prisoners at Angola for free and opened a satellite campus on the prison grounds that graduated their first class in 2002.¹²⁵ Seminary students receive not just religious education but training in grief and trauma counseling and conflict management in order to better meet the emotional needs of their fellow prisoners. Inmates who graduate receive additional privileges: graduates get less physically demanding work assignments with the chaplain’s office or otherwise related to their ministry, in the hospice as orderlies, in education programs that help prisoners get their GEDs, or in the seminary itself as tutors. They are also occasionally transferred to other prisons to participate in other prisoner-led ministry efforts.¹²⁶

Publicly, Cain has said that although belief in God was the key ingredient of moral rehabilitation, it didn’t matter which religion a prisoner followed as long as they believed in something. Unsurprisingly, prisoners tell a different story. There have been several successful

¹²⁴ Michael Glover, “The Christian Warden,” *The Angolite*, March/April 1995, 27.

¹²⁵ Michael Hallett, “Confronting Christian Penal Charity: Neoliberalism and the Rebirth of Religious Penitentiaries,” *Social Justice* 45, no. 1 (2018): 109.

¹²⁶ Hallett, “Confronting Christian Penal Charity,” 112.

lawsuits filed on behalf of men imprisoned at Angola against Cain and the prison stating that he discriminated against prisoners on religious grounds. In 2005, a prisoner sued for the right to access Mormon religious texts, saying that new restrictions on book vendors prohibited materials from Mormon bookstores.¹²⁷ A death row prisoner filed suit in 2009, stating that televisions were locked to broadcasts of Baptist church services on Sunday mornings; as a Catholic, he requested that his television channel be changed to a broadcast of Catholic mass and had been denied. The same year, a prisoner filed suit arguing that in addition to being denied access to Muslim publications, he and other imprisoned Muslims had been forbidden from gathering to worship together.¹²⁸

Cain has argued that his moral rehabilitation regime teaches prisoners “how to be compassionate and most of all, they learn the importance of every single life.”¹²⁹ Prisoners argue that their faith is what helps them hold onto their own self-worth when their lives are otherwise treated as meaningless by the state. In an issue of *The Angolite* on Religion in Prison, editors Wilbert Rideau and Billy Sinclair described church services’ ability to provide them with a temporary sense of freedom where they can enter “a world where their keepers cannot follow, a world in which they know no pain. They have escaped into a euphoria that will carry them for a time longer once they depart and return to the madness of their dormitories and the routine of

¹²⁷ Laura Maggi, “Inmate Wins Right to Buy Texts on Religion,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), March 28, 2007.

¹²⁸ Tim Morris, “ACLU Sues for Religious Rights at Angola,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), Feb. 5, 2009.

¹²⁹ Burl Cain and Cathy Fontenot, “Angola’s Long-Term Inmates,” *Corrections Today*, August 2001, 119-120.

prison life.”¹³⁰ Cain treats the church as an institution that unites prisoners and prison staff in their faith and their desire to build a strong community within the prison; prisoners seem to recognize it as the only place where they are safe from the prison, building a community and a new sense of self not because of the prison but in spite of it, in order to survive the experience.

Identity vs. Action: Accounting for Criminal Natures through Theatre and Religion

As recent scholarship in criminology and sociology has argued, religious programs help prisoners create a narrative by which they can account for their crimes and potentially move forward, psychologically and spiritually if not physically, and this understanding functions as an essential step in the rehabilitation process. Michel Foucault describes this process in his 1978 lecture “About the Concept of the ‘Dangerous Individual’ in 19th-Century Legal Psychiatry.” For Foucault, the process of creating an account has less to do with confessing to an action – “I committed this crime” – and more to do with narrating an identity – “I am this type of person who has committed this crime for these reasons.” With this account in place, the legal system can then determine a sentence or punishment designed for the criminal rather than the crime:

All this implies that punishment bears on the criminal himself rather than on the crime, that is on what makes him a criminal, on his reasons, his motives, his inner will, his tendencies, his instincts. In the older systems, the horror of the punishment had to reflect the enormity of the crime; henceforth, the attempt was made to adapt the modalities of punishment to the nature of the criminal.¹³¹

In this way the legal system relies on the account not to distinguish between the guilty and the innocent, but between “absolutely and definitively dangerous subjects and those who can cease

¹³⁰ Wilbert Rideau and Billy Sinclair, “Religion in Prison,” *The Angolite*, January/February 1981, 33-34.

¹³¹ Michel Foucault, “About the Concept of the ‘Dangerous Individual’ in 19th-Century Legal Psychiatry,” *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 1 (1978): 9.

to be dangerous provided they receive certain treatment.”¹³² The prisoners’ ability to produce the account of their crime is part of what marks them as having completed the type of rehabilitation prisons claim to enact, revolving around the individual and their transformation.

Foucault argues that although we describe rehabilitation primarily through its impacts on the prisoner, who transforms from a criminal into a person suitable to rejoin society, this account is actually created for the benefit of the public that needs a way to make sense of the crime. A crime with an author and a confession but without an account is illegible, and a prisoner who cannot or will not perform their account remains a dangerous subject who poses too much of a threat to be released.

This Foucauldian lens highlights how theatrical and religious programming in prisons have been complimentary tools utilized by prison staff to help prisoners produce and perform the account Foucault describes. It is typical for prison theatre programs to involve discussions and workshops in which prisoners use theatrical techniques to work out ideas as a group and try out alternative behaviors through role-play. The goals of these projects are for prisoners to develop better conflict management and coping skills, to better understand and control their emotions, and to foster collaborative skills. The performances they create are often at least partially autobiographical and address issues or behaviors that led to their incarceration, or interpersonal and structural problems they face while in prison and demonstrate a new ability to deal with those issues or correct those behaviors. In this way, prison theatre programs tend to enact their focus on rehabilitation through an understanding of personal responsibility.¹³³

¹³² Foucault, “Dangerous Individual,” 13.

¹³³ For more on the rehabilitative function of prison theatre and critiques, see Lorraine Moller, “Project Slam: Rehabilitation through Theatre at Sing Sing Correctional Facility,” *International Journal of the Arts in Society* 5, no. 5 (2011): 9-29; Jonathan Shailor, ed., *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010); Dani

Because of the unique performance conditions, the Angola passion play was covered in local and national news with a heavy focus on how the play was both a path to and evidence of the participants' rehabilitation. Many of the performers spoke about how their crimes informed their performances and what they learned about themselves from the play and their characters. Levelle Tolliver, described by the *New York Times* as "a talented actor who shot a man in the head in 1993 and now plays Judas,"¹³⁴ spoke with NPR about how his past informed his understanding of the character:

"I was a murderer, I was a thief, I was a conniver. I was all those things, I've committed all kinds of sins...and that's how I relate to the character which I'm playing," Tolliver says. "Because that's what Judas was – Judas was a conniver." He says to get into character, he thinks about "a lot of the wrong things I did, a lot of the hurt I've caused a lot of people."¹³⁵

Tolliver's confession highlights the type of admission common in the news coverage – he didn't just commit a murder or a robbery, he was a type of person who by nature was dangerous and inclined toward crime. His identity as a "conniver" was expressed through crime, but the implication is that his time in prison and his work on this play were opportunities to understand his nature and begin to change. This kind of resonance between the actors and their characters was common. Terrence Williams, who played a Roman centurion, was quoted by NPR discussing his motivations for participating in the play:

I was involved with a large drug trade, things went haywire, people wound up dead, I got charged with murder, you know, more than once...I left with my

Snyder-Young, *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change* (London: Palgrave, 2013); and James Thompson, ed., *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998).

¹³⁴ Campbell Robertson, "In Prison, Play with Trial at Its Heart Resonates," *New York Times*, May 6, 2012.

¹³⁵ John Burnett, "On this Stage, Jesus is a Robber; The Devil's a Rapist," *NPR*, June 23, 2012.

hands bloody...But here I am, in prison, playing a character in *The Life of Jesus Christ*, so who's to say we can't change? And I think what me and the guys are doing, this is a way to say that we're making amends for the crimes that brought us to the situation in our lives at this point.¹³⁶

As portrayed in coverage like NPR's, the play offered two things to the performers: the religious content provided a way to prove their rehabilitation through their belief in Christian values, and the performance itself was a rare opportunity to perform those values publicly.

The news coverage also captured the prison staff's belief that although prisons are typically used as warehouses for dangerous people, they can also be effective spaces for rehabilitation. Warden Cain believed the play could demonstrate to the audience that the performers had changed as a result of their imprisonment:

It has reflected the morality of the inmates and that male and female inmates can work together without any chaos, be successful, and produce a quality performance. It reflects the change in the prison and helps the public to realize that we have an air of rehabilitation which means less victims of violent crimes. Hopefully, the victims and their families can see that the men and women at Angola and LCIW can change.¹³⁷

For some of the performers, part of their accounts involved describing prison time as a positive part of their narrative as well. Bobby Wallace, who played Jesus, is a graduate of Angola's Baptist seminary and described the impact his time at Angola had on him:

A close friend told me that God's plan to save me was to rescue me from myself. I now see what he was talking about. Prison has been good for me. It was a university for me and literally saved my life. I now have a revelation like Paul did and I am no longer running from God like Jonah did.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Burnett, "On this Stage."

¹³⁷ Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 65.

¹³⁸ Sharp, "Reprising the Passion," 53.

Taking the role because he felt called to it as a Christian and as a minister, Wallace felt the play was an opportunity to save other prisoners the way he had been saved. He also felt the role played a part in his practice as a minister; knowing that it would lead to greater scrutiny of his behavior, he felt a responsibility to be a good example to other prisoners.

Suzanne Lofthus, a director from the original production of the play in Scotland who assisted with Angola's production, echoed this idea, hoping the audience would realize that "something good can come out of Angola and LCIW, if only people would come and see."¹³⁹ This idea sums up one understanding of the performers' orientation towards the audience: that the ideal outcome was for the audience to walk away from the play believing not just that prisoners can become suitable to reenter society through rehabilitation, but that prison is an appropriate place for that transformation and growth to occur.

Although the coverage in the prisoner-run magazine *The Angolite* included many similar confessions to those featured in national news, it also spoke to a different kind of transformation that had less to do with atoning for harm they had done and more to do with healing and peace the performers found through the play. Patricia Williams, the actress who played Mary as an adult, only appeared onstage during and after the crucifixion to cry at her son's death. Although she didn't have any lines, Williams drew from pieces of her own experience of loss, pain, and hope to access the emotion of these scenes:

"I cried for my children that are lost to me," she said. "I cried for the pain I caused others. I cried about the pain inflicted on me. I cried because I was so unworthy of anything good. Then I cried because I was forgiven, because I could start over, and I cried because I knew I was loved by God and the people he sent to me." Being in the play also gave Williams the opportunity to form strong bonds with members of the cast, both the men and women, whom she said had a significant

¹³⁹ Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 65.

impact on her life. “They renewed my faith in humankind in ways I’m unable to express in words.”¹⁴⁰

Like many of the prisoners involved in the play, Williams dealt with extreme pain in her life before and during her imprisonment, and the performance helped her find a sense of peace and a way to live with herself and her circumstances.

The theatre fan in me is moved and heartened that working on this play could have such a profound impact on the lives of these actors and that performing could prove so meaningful to them. But the abolitionist in me wonders what else they may have said about the impact they hoped to have on their audience if they were truly free to speak.

Foucault’s point in describing the process of creating an account for one’s crime is not that the account produced is not genuine, or that it should be treated with suspicion, or that the prisoner producing it is not benefitting from their ability to narrate a new identity for themselves, but that the account is ultimately being produced for the benefit of its audience. The emphasis on the internal project of transformation obscures the other work the play can do and the other impacts it may have had on the audience. There’s a hint of this from Gary Tyler, the director, who was consistent in not using the play as an opportunity for confession or atonement. The *New York Times* singled him out as the one person who wasn’t willing to discuss his past but “will talk about the themes of the play. ‘Jesus was executed because of an allegation,’ he said. ‘People vented their hatred on him.’”¹⁴¹ Tyler points at an alternate lens through which to interpret the play, one that critiques the narrative of rehabilitation while remaining consistent with the conventions and goals of religious performances.

¹⁴⁰ Sharp, “A Passion for the Play,” 61.

¹⁴¹ Robertson, “Play with Trial at Its Heart Resonates.”

Passion Playing and Audience Response

The discourse circulated by prison staff surrounding Angola's passion play assumes that for those involved, Christianity was a delivery system for the moral principles they lacked before being imprisoned and that would keep them from committing crimes again once released; in this interpretation, the performance itself operated as a test of their understanding of those principles and their ability to apply them by reflecting on their crimes. This discourse offers free people a sense that these prisoners have learned their lesson at the expense of flattening their experience of their faith, which offered these performers more than just moral laws just as it does for unimprisoned believers. It assumes that the best potential result of the play would be for the audience to see that prison can effectively rehabilitate people, and that religious performance exists only to preach to the converted, to perform adherence to a uniformly shared set of values and beliefs.

Recent theatre scholarship has studied religious performances, their affective power, and the strategies they use to transform audiences and produce belief rather than simply reflect it. John Fletcher argues that evangelical performance is a type of activist performance that aims to preach the gospel and convert audiences to Christianity. The variety of performance strategies used to pursue this goal reveals that evangelicals are a more diverse group than the left (or the public at large) admits, willing to understand differences of belief and attempt to reach across them, shaping their methods to an increasingly secular world.¹⁴² Jill Stevenson describes how performance can function as devotional experiences that “foster embodied beliefs that respond to specific devotional needs and priorities” by effectively wielding affective power. Blending

¹⁴² John Fletcher, *Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

phenomenology and cognitive theory, Stevenson analyzes passion plays, the Creation Museum, and megachurch services as sensual, rhythmic experiences that allow audiences to feel the performance and thus their faith through their bodies, speaking to the evangelical belief in lived experience as an ultimate source of knowledge and Truth.¹⁴³

In her study of passion plays in the United States, Dorothy Chansky argues that the local flavor of production and casting choices can reveal unspoken and unexamined exclusionary values held by the communities that produce them. These production choices speak to the ways performance can construct (rather than simply reflect) insider and outsider identities, especially by way of race and religion, by uncritically reproducing existing exclusionary Christian iconography; with their majority white casts and the accidental circulation of antisemitic stereotypes, she argues that passion plays offer important insight into values that impact United States politics.¹⁴⁴ Seokhun Choi argues that while passion plays have been used to reflect conservative values that are dominant in evangelical culture, they also provide evidence of the ways those values have been contested and challenged within evangelical communities; as ritual performances, they are by nature intended to transform their audiences.¹⁴⁵

This scholarship all speaks to the fact that evangelical audiences are not a monolith and religious performances do much more than affirm values already held by its audience. Audience engagement is a central concern, and performance is a tool to reconsider how faith should be

¹⁴³ Jill Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

¹⁴⁴ Dorothy Chansky, "North American Passion Plays: 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' in the New Millennium," *TDR* 50, no. 4 (2006): 120-145.

¹⁴⁵ Seokhun Choi, "Performing the Passion of Christ in Postmodernity: American Passion/passion Plays as Ritual and Postmodern theatre," (doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, 2012).

brought to bear in daily life on questions of justice and redemption. Stevenson describes how devotional performances certainly operate to affirm the audience's faith, but still leave room for new understandings of how that faith is interpreted:

Such an encounter with scripture is meant to affirm and generate belief simultaneously and connectively; evangelicals certainly bring a system of beliefs to the Bible that shapes how they interpret scripture, but their mode of reading is also very creative and dynamic since it aims to construct new, previously unrecognized, networks of relevant meaning and, ultimately, embodied belief.¹⁴⁶

The conversation surrounding Angola's passion play emphasized the transformation undergone by the participants, with religion examined only through its utility in helping them produce an account explaining their crimes. Passion plays, however, hold deep ideological meaning for their spectators, possessing the potential for them to transform and deepen their understanding of and emotional connection to the gospel through the experience of the play. So what moments in the production point to the possibility that they are hoping to challenge the beliefs of their audience? What choices might help the audience become more open to the possibility of abolition?

Implicating the Audience

On its face, the passion narrative is a story of a trial and execution that features all the representatives of a legal system that ranges from indifferent to corrupt. There are multiple governing bodies more interested in maintaining power and order than protecting the public good, with leaders who target Jesus for disrupting the status quo and questioning their authority. There is Pontius Pilate, the representative of an occupying force presiding as judge over an unfair trial whose outcome is already determined, handing down a sentence he considers unreasonable but politically necessary in the face of public fervor for the death penalty. And in Jesus there is a man considered dangerous who at trial is unwilling to account for his actions or speak to the

¹⁴⁶ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 5.

charges against him, and is then executed in a gruesomely-staged example of cruel and unusual punishment.

Although prison administrators have relied on Christian programming to maintain order and encourage atonement, there is a rich tradition in Christian scholarship to examine the critiques of punishment furthered by the passion narrative and use it as a jumping off point in anti-prison organizing. In his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone draws explicit comparisons between Jesus's crucifixion and lynchings in the United States that reenact his suffering, arguing that they must be read together to make sense:

The lynching tree reveals the true religious meaning of the cross for American Christians today. The cross needs the lynching tree to remind Americans of the reality of suffering—to keep the cross from becoming a symbol of abstract, sentimental piety. Before the spectacle of this cross we are called to more than contemplation and adoration. We are faced with a clear challenge: as Latin American liberation theologian Jon Sobrino has put it, “to take the crucified down from the cross.”¹⁴⁷

Reading these moments of suffering together and against each other illuminates a responsibility we have to the oppressed, offering a path out of despair and towards hope in the face of that suffering by reading for the call to action that is present in the crucifixion to work in solidarity with others.

Scholarship on Christian prison programming also reveals this as a site of debate, that Christians actively work to counter their complicity in propping up the prison system through ministry programs. In her book *God in Captivity: The Rise of Faith-Based Ministry in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, Tanya Erzen traces the history of Christian complicity in incarceration and

¹⁴⁷ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 279.

uses that as a starting point to argue that Christians' responsibility to seek justice did not align with the contemporary carceral system that is incapable of providing justice in any sense:

If we consider people in and outside prison as citizens, can we justify the way we warehouse and treat them? If prisoners' lives truly mattered, would we send them to places where youth barter sex for food; where people go blind and die of medical neglect; where someone will be raped; where women are separated from their children forever; where a woman is shackled during childbirth; where a transgender, gay, or gender-nonconforming person is subject to unthinkable abuse; where people are moved hundreds of miles from their families; and where they are driven mad in solitary confinement cells for years?¹⁴⁸

In addition to arguments like these from Christian scholars, Christian activists engage in anti-prison organizing efforts. Groups like Christians for Abolition, Abolition Apostles, Abolitionist Sanctuary, and Underground Ministries work in their own communities to teach a gospel-based approach to prison abolition, interrogating the criminal justice system in relation to the theorization of justice Jesus inspired.¹⁴⁹

These Christian scholars and organizations have demonstrated how the passion narrative reflects abolitionist values. How does abolitionist spectatorship look beyond the rehabilitative mission of Cain's religious programming to find resonances of abolitionist values in the performance of this passion play? I examine some of the specific staging choices of this production that were designed to bridge the divide between the performers and their audience, implicating them in the action in ways that encouraged them to reinterpret how their faith speaks to questions of justice, mercy, and community. There are several moments when, in line with

¹⁴⁸ Tanya Erzen, *God in Captivity: The Rise of Faith-Based Ministry in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 181.

¹⁴⁹ For explications of these organizations' work, see Christians for Abolition at <https://christiansforabolition.org/>, Abolition Apostles at <https://www.abolitionapostles.com>, Abolitionist Sanctuary at <https://nikiasrobert.com/services/abolitionist-sanctuary/>, and Underground Ministries at <https://undergroundministries.org/>.

common performance conventions of passion plays, the audience is brought into the narrative, as both members of the community of believers and as part of the crowds hungry for punishment.

In contrast to the parallels between Biblical and contemporary miscarriages of justice depicted in the play, the performers highlight moments of kindness, community, and solidarity that incorporate the audience and allow for interactions between imprisoned and free spectators. When Jesus performs the miracle of feeding the 5,000, he directs his fellow performers to spread their bounty among all in attendance and share their snacks while keeping nothing for themselves. The ensemble members walk through the audience, distribute their bread in celebration of the miracle, and shake audience members' hands as they go. Once this is complete, Jesus tells his disciples and the audience, "All are filled and we have more food than when we started. If only it was as easy to fill their hearts." By pulling the audience into this scene, they make it clear that this message is meant to apply to more than just the prisoners performing. All in the audience must open their hearts, even to those confined at Angola.

The audience is again brought into the action during Jesus's trial, where implicating the audience is typical for passion plays. It is usually intended to remind the audience that the responsibility for Jesus's death lies with them, that his innocence enabled him to take on the sins of humanity as well as the punishment for them, and that this sacrifice is what allows for their salvation. It is a moment that sparks self-reflection and consideration of the guilt we all share. What is less typical about this scene is that the audience is yelling for the punishment of an imprisoned performer, in the place where real punishment occurs. If an essential justification for the criminal legal system is its supposed impartiality, the audience in this scene is called to unpack what it truly means to demand punishment and account for their own participation in it. Participating in this scene requires the visceral experience of chanting for the harshest sentence

possible, embodying the angry crowd while themselves holding an understanding of the cruelty and suffering of that punishment, and knowing the responsibility for the cruelty he faces lies with them.

These staging choices are not innovative or unique to this production, as these scenes are common moments for audience participation in passion plays. What is unusual is the way these choices read when performed by imprisoned actors for an audience made up of both free and imprisoned spectators. The audience is invited to try out two different, conflicting roles that represent different orientations toward the imprisoned performers: they could be equal members of a community with prisoners, or they could call for harsher and more violent punishment. Which felt more familiar to them? In which role did they feel more at home, more aligned with their values?

By focusing on how the play was meant to rehabilitate the prisoners involved, prison staff conceived of the audience as only witnesses to that rehabilitation. It is certainly the case that for many of these performers the play was a transformative experience, that their faith was something they were excited to demonstrate and share with a receptive crowd. But the performance itself reveals other intentions and other questions they hoped to leave with their audience. Gail Willars, an incarcerated journalist at LCIW, wrote for *The Angolite* about the messages she found in the play:

Can we, as a society, conceive the true meaning of mercy? Are we, as a people, merciful? Or are we more like the crowd who shouts, ‘Stone her!’ ...Some 2,000 years later, we still struggle with issues concerning women, children, the poor and destitute, the sick and infirm, criminals and the elite. We’re better in some areas, but many still eagerly stand ready to cast stones.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Gail Willars, “Breaking New Ground,” *The Angolite*, May/June 2012, 60.

Opportunities for encounters between prisoners and free visitors are uncommon and are heavily policed and surveilled when they do occur, with strict restrictions placed on touching and gift giving; confronting a visitor about the nature of mercy or their participation in punishment would not be met with kindness and reflection. This play offered an opportunity for the usual rules governing encounters between prisoners and free visitors to be suspended, for the performers to draw from an understanding of spectatorship that is not just active, but emotionally and spiritually engaged.

Conclusion

Prisons and policing have been quintessential culture war issues for decades, as leftist activists protest police abuses and a legal system rooted in white supremacy, while conservatives stoke fears of rising crime rates and offer prison expansion as the only solution. This divide can, to me, at least, feel unbridgeable; when protests against police violence are met with continued unchecked police violence and even the most toothless prison reform efforts meet immense conservative pushback, it is easy to lean into nihilism or despair.

What is most striking about this production to me, then, is the way these performers attempted to change the hearts and minds of an audience that would be assumed to be unreachable by the left, who were invited because of their evangelical beliefs and who, in Louisiana, could safely be assumed to be politically conservative. These prisoners reached out to this audience from a place of shared faith – not yelling across a partisan political divide of leftist abolitionists against conservative evangelicals, but speaking as members of a community of believers trying to interrogate questions central to how they live those beliefs and find answers together. What is justice? What does redemption look like? How do we show mercy?

Establishing the efficacy of their work is difficult. The prison staff's ideal outcome was that their audiences would see the performers had been rehabilitated, but meeting some ambiguous standard of rehabilitation will not lead to release from prison for the majority of these prisoners, who are serving life sentences – only sentencing reform can do that. Did those who attended go home and call their elected officials to advocate for prisoners? Or did they move on with a renewed faith in Angola and Cain's program of moral rehabilitation to control prisoners' criminal natures?

It certainly isn't fair for the burden of persuasion to rest on the marginalized, who are required to prove their own humanity, but a world without prisons is something most people have a hard time imagining no matter their political ideals. Fletcher describes the evangelical understanding that their intervention is likely one of many required to lead a person to convert, if they ever do. Likewise, although some people can come to abolition all at once, for those who have been insulated from the harsher effects of the legal system, it can instead take a series of encounters – noticing enough news stories, listening to those who have been affected – to loosen support for the criminal justice status quo, to see injustice as the result of systems rather than individual bad actors, to come to an understanding that those the system negatively impacts are their neighbors. In this instance the audience for that message may have been unlikely, but there is the possibility that these prisoners offered one encounter that could make their audience more open to the next when it arrives. Although the passion play was selected to align with the institutional mandate for moral rehabilitation, the prisoners involved used the opportunity to create a performance that was meaningful for them. In the next chapter, I discuss how prisoners again push the boundaries of the institution when given the opportunity for direct encounters with free spectators.

Chapter 3. The Unexceptional South: Histories of Punishment and the Limits of Reform at the Angola Prison Rodeo

Angola's passion play drew large audiences during its brief performance period, but theatre conventions dictated that direct interactions between prisoners and spectators were limited. This divide, between imprisoned and free, and performer and spectator, is broken every Sunday in October and for one weekend in April when the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola hosts its notorious prison rodeo. The details are rich with symbolism too obvious to ignore: the prison is at the literal end of the road (twenty miles after the last turnoff on Route 66), on former plantation land that became the largest maximum-security prison in the country after Emancipation, that now sponsors a semi-annual violent sporting event as a major tourist attraction. Comparisons to Roman gladiatorial contests practically write themselves and seem to be compulsory in the myriad of national news coverage, think pieces, photography spreads, documentaries, and academic scholarship on the prison's history. Angola's historical significance and uncommon willingness to open itself to the public has made the rodeo a popular attraction that draws crowds of up to 75,000 people a year.

Scholars have read the Angola rodeo as a spectacle of punishment performed for the entertainment of a public audience, but that understanding doesn't seem consistent with the current level of public support for prison reform or my own experiences of attending the rodeo over the past seven years. If you go looking for horrors in a prison setting, you are certain to find them, but you may miss other meanings. Although scholarship on the Angola rodeo has certainly been written from an anti-prison perspective, analyzing the rodeo through an abolitionist spectatorial lens requires that we ask a different set of questions and grapple with the potentially complicated answers. Instead of reading prisoners solely through their victimhood, I examine the range of roles offered to them at the event. Rather than assuming the rodeo spectator is invested

in reinforcing their authority over prisoners, I look at what other relationships and connections the rodeo makes possible and on what terms. In this chapter, I ask why the “public punishment” narrative is so appealing, and what it would mean to instead take seriously some of the (less sinister) stated motives for the rodeo: that it’s a chance to have fun, to show off the prison’s good work rehabilitating prisoners, and to demonstrate that the prison has learned from its notorious past and grown from it. I argue that the rodeo is not an event created for an audience that simply wants to witness and celebrate punishment, but rather a place where spectators come to figure out what role prisons should play in our society.

It is not my intention in this chapter to argue that the rodeo is good, actually, or that Angola as a whole is not as bad as its reputation suggests. Taking the prison staff’s stated motives seriously does not mean taking them credulously, nor does it foreclose the possibility that they work to reinforce a broken system. Instead, I hope to demonstrate that while previous scholarship has done valuable work locating Angola as part of a lineage of racialized regimes of domination, continuing to use the rodeo as a metaphor for the backwardness of Southern punishment systems does not capture how Angola’s operations have changed over time to align with contemporary reform efforts and made it an exemplar of modern prison operations rather than just an excessively brutal remnant of the past. The rodeo may be a one-of-a-kind event, but it is not representative of what makes Angola unjust.

Rodeos, Cowboys, and National Belonging

Rodeos first emerged in the United States in the late nineteenth century as informal contests between working cowboys designed to show off roping and riding skills. Inspired by similar contests in Mexico, early rodeos were performed for local audiences as part of larger community gatherings that celebrated local traditions. As rodeo formalized in the 1930s into a

professional event, it also picked up characteristics of other popular entertainments of the time that were also drawing on romanticized versions of cowboy or frontier identity. Rodeos opened with a procession similar to those found in Wild West shows called the Grand Entry, in which the competitors, clowns, performers, and local dignitaries entered the arena and waved to the cheering crowd as they were introduced. In addition to the safety function they perform, rodeo clowns would perform novelty acts with trained animals (monkey “cowboys” trained to ride dogs, for example) similar to those found in the circus.¹⁵¹

Rodeos reached the height of their popularity in the 1950s, at a time when nostalgia for the now obsolete “cowboy way of life” was also high. Rodeos became big business, bringing romanticized versions of frontier folk heroes to urban arenas eager to recapture fantasies of the old West; competitors went from amateur local cowboys to trained professional athletes, organizing professional rodeo associations to standardize event rules, safety standards, and prize money payouts and protect themselves from exploitation by event promoters.¹⁵²

At any scale, an important element of rodeo is the folk history it performs. Rodeo cowboys represented characteristics associated with a mythic West populated by independent and free men driving cattle, the “last of an old breed”¹⁵³ who were brave, independent, stoic, and, above all, free from the constraints of modern life. As the national popularity of rodeo grew, the

¹⁵¹ For more on rodeo genre conventions, see Michael Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys in the American Imagination* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998), Kristine Fredriksson, *American Rodeo: From Buffalo Bill to Big Business* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), Beverly J. Stoeltje, “Power and the Ritual Genres: American Rodeo,” *Western Folklore* 52, no. 2/4 (Apr.-Oct. 1993).

¹⁵² Beverly J. Stoeltje, “Paredes and the Hero: The North American Cowboy Revisited,” *Journal of American Folklore* 125, no. 495 (Winter 2012): 65.

¹⁵³ Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys*, 26.

cowboy identity coalesced around masculine white men until whiteness and masculinity became essential qualities of the cowboy as well. Women and Black cowboys were forced out of national rodeo associations or, if they were allowed to compete, were relegated to events considered less dangerous and given less support (from the crowd and from corporate sponsors) than white male competitors enjoyed.¹⁵⁴

These exclusions led to the creation of a variety of niche rodeos that adhered to typical traditions while also creating new events that spoke to the identities of their competitors. Rebecca Scofield describes how niche rodeos were a space for people who were excluded from standard rodeo competitions to belong to the “imagined past and national mythology” performed at the rodeo, using it as “a set of rhetorical and bodily strategies to imagine themselves into a culturally valued past.”¹⁵⁵ At the same time, they renegotiated the terms of that belonging: women’s rodeos resisted feminine gender expectations by proving they could hold their own in dangerous events, Black rodeos rejected whitewashed histories of the frontier and reasserted their place in the history of range labor, and gay rodeos pushed back against hegemonic masculinity by performing it as a type of drag.¹⁵⁶

Prison rodeos were a popular type of niche rodeo in the 1970s at prisons across the South and Southwest in rural areas that already had rodeo traditions.¹⁵⁷ Although its location and

¹⁵⁴ Tracy Owens Patton and Sally M. Schedlock, “Let’s Go, Let’s Show, Let’s Rodeo: African Americans and the History of the Rodeo,” *Journal of African American History* 96, no. 4 (2011): 513.

¹⁵⁵ Rebecca Scofield, *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 13-14.

¹⁵⁶ Scofield, *Outriders*, 22.

¹⁵⁷ For more on prison rodeos, see Mitchel P. Roth, *Convict Cowboys: The Untold History of the Texas Prison Rodeo* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2016); Rebecca Scofield, “Violence and Social Salvation at the Texas Prison Rodeo,” *Journal of*

participants make it a novelty, the Angola Prison Rodeo is typical of the form in most other ways. The first rodeo was held in 1965 for an audience of prisoners and prison staff in an arena built from donated scrap metal. In 1968 the rodeo was opened to locals, with enough demand to justify upgrading from hay bale seating to a new 4,500 seat grandstand in 1970. More seating was added throughout the 1990s until the arena reached its current size of 10,500 seats.¹⁵⁸

There have been other attractions added to the rodeo weekends to increase opportunities for participation and contribute to the family-friendly carnival feel of the event. In 1997, Warden Burl Cain made a craft fair part of the annual event. On 20 acres of land surrounding the rodeo arena, prisoners can sell paintings, leatherwork, jewelry, woodworking, plants, and other items for money they can use in the commissary and for necessary personal items, with a percentage of each sale going to the Inmate Welfare Fund. Live music is now a big part of the event, with prisoner-led bands performing throughout the day. There are also concession stands offering standard carnival foods like funnel cake, barbecue, and tacos, as well as Louisiana specialties like crawfish and alligator. In the early 2000s they added more child-friendly activities, building a playground area and a small Ferris wheel. Although the rodeo doesn't begin until 2:00pm, the rodeo grounds open for visitors at 9:00am and there is enough to do that the majority of spectators come for the entire day.¹⁵⁹

When I first attended the rodeo with friends in the spring of 2015, I was expecting to enter a strikingly sinister environment of rampant, obvious exploitation and violence. I had only

American Studies 54, no. 1 (2018): 105-130; *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo*, directed by Bradley Beesley (2009; McAlester, OK: HBO Documentary Films).

¹⁵⁸ Kerry Myers, "50 Years Later: From Hay Bales and Pickup Trucks to the 'Wildest Show in the South,'" *The Angolite*, Nov/Dec 2014, 34.

¹⁵⁹ Myers, "50 Years Later," 34.

been to one traditional rodeo before and remembered having a hard time watching animals so much as fall over, so I thought the Angola rodeo might prove unbearable for me. Instead, I had some nice conversations about woodworking and painting and paid five dollars to eat something called “Fried Coke” (similar to funnel cake but with Coke mixed into the batter). My friends and I spent so many hours browsing the art tents that we missed the rodeo itself that first time (we thought it would be longer!); subsequent conversations have confirmed that the paintings we bought on that trip are still some of our favorites on our walls, and jewelry we purchased there is some of our most frequently worn. Many artists were excited to talk about their process with us, to tell us about what inspired their work and what materials they liked to use, to negotiate deals or arrange commissions for future work. Although the rodeo felt like a small-town carnival to me, that is not the atmosphere I was expecting based on the scholarship I had read.

Prison Rodeo Scholarship and Narratives of Spectacular Punishment

As the only remaining prison rodeo in the country, the Angola Prison Rodeo continues to be a popular site of study. Although the meaning of the event and how it is read by spectators has been somewhat contested, the overall picture in scholarship remains consistent: the rodeo is an event where the state can perform its authority over prisoners and enact punishment for the entertainment of free spectators. While there may be moments when prisoners can attempt to disrupt that performance through individual, face-to-face encounters with spectators, scholars tend to believe the audience is not willing or able to engage critically enough to pick that up.

Jessica Adams focuses on the hierarchy at play in the rodeo, arguing that part of the rodeo’s novelty comes from its destabilization of the categories of imprisoned and free; with imprisoned artists at the craft fair dressed in white button-down shirts that label them only as “rodeo workers,” it can sometimes be difficult to recognize who is imprisoned and who is a free

spectator. There is a deceptive feeling of normalcy at the craft fair – without fences between them or other visual markers of imprisonment, the small talk, negotiations over prices, and general camaraderie take on the character of any average craft fair. For Adams, this normalcy becomes a jarring illusion that fuels increasing discomfort until spectators feel the need to perform their own “escape” from the grounds by the end of the day:

Freedom is always unrecognizable without the specter – and the spectacle – of its absence. Perhaps sensing this abstract truth, tourists at the rodeo appeared overcome by the end of the day with a desire to leave the prison grounds. Even before the final event had officially concluded and with only scattered applause, audience members began to throng the exits.¹⁶⁰

This escape is the necessary end to a confusing day, as the audience attempts to “reclaim its place in the outside world,” driving recklessly through the unpaved parking areas to make it to one of the dirt roads leading back to the outermost prison gates.¹⁶¹

Adams’ analysis of the social hierarchy is based on how the audience interacts with the event and the imprisoned participants, but other scholars have argued that an essential characteristic of the rodeo is the way the prison staff uses it to reinforce the social hierarchy. Melissa Schrift argues that although participants in the craft fair are dressed more casually, participants in the rodeo itself are dressed in black and white striped shirts intended to be reminiscent of chain-gang uniforms that prisoners will find humiliating to wear.¹⁶² At the time of Schrift’s research in 2004, participants’ names were announced alongside their crimes and the

¹⁶⁰ Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 158.

¹⁶¹ Adams, *Wounds of Returning*, 158.

¹⁶² Melissa Schrift, “The Angola Prison Rodeo: Cowboys and Institutional Tourism,” *Ethnology* 43, no. 4 (2004): 338.

lengths of their sentences, ensuring constant reminders of the violence the participants enacted and their lowered status in relation to their audience.¹⁶³

Although scholars have pointed to potential positives of the rodeo and craft fair, they find that those positives are ultimately undermined by the broader carceral logic that guides the event and spectator response. For example, Schrift identifies the opportunity for prisoners to perform pieces of their identities that have nothing to do with being imprisoned; on those six weekends a year, they are talented artists whose work is in demand and heroic cowboys competing in front of a cheering audience. They can socialize as part of a community where they are supported rather than condemned. Despite the potential of these efforts, Schrift still describes their performances of these identities as unconvincing to the audience, citing the participants' lack of skill with animals as a source of mockery from a crowd that will never see them as anything other than criminals.¹⁶⁴ Adams adds that while some cowboys succeed in their events, "more often we see them made vulnerable, falling victim to brute forces beyond their control, as we may imagine their victims did."¹⁶⁵

Adams also discusses how the craft fair makes prison labor visible as a potential positive outcome of the event. Men imprisoned at Angola are responsible for manufacturing street signs, license plates, and other goods used by the state, but many free citizens are not aware of the degree to which their environment is made possible by prison labor. The rodeo puts spectators back in touch with the men creating the products that are for sale and allows the artists to be

¹⁶³ Schrift, "Cowboys and Institutional Tourism," 338.

¹⁶⁴ Schrift, "Cowboys and Institutional Tourism," 339.

¹⁶⁵ Jessica Adams, "'The Wildest Show in the South': Tourism and Incarceration at Angola," *TDR* 45, no. 2 (2001): 99.

recognized for their work. Schrift, however, argues that this is not as positive as it appears; to link a prisoner's fitness to reenter society with their ability to make money at the craft fair is to play into carceral logics that privilege the ability to contribute productively to capitalism when making release and reentry decisions.

One area on which scholars agree is that the rodeo functions as a modern-day spectacle of punishment. Adams writes that the rodeo is "officially intended as a recreational form of subjugation," and that "the impulse toward the visible enactment of punishment that is evident here almost reinvents public torture."¹⁶⁶ Schrift describes audience response to the prisoners' failures in certain events, and the ridicule and laughter she saw from the free spectators over "their mental equation of the inmate's almost primal vulnerability and what we can only imagine to be the similar state of his victim at one time."¹⁶⁷ Mary Rachel Gould narrates the opening procession as ending "with Warden Cain riding into the stadium in a chariot. The warden, a latter-day Caesar has entered the Coliseum," and the rodeo as a whole as "a modern variation of the public scaffold."¹⁶⁸

With these images of the rodeo as a tool for brutal punishment in mind, there's also a question of why people go to the rodeo at all. The common conclusion in current scholarship is that the audience finds the potential for violence pleasurable – that seeing people get hurt is fun, especially when their imprisoned status removes any obligation for sympathy. Scholars have assumed that as participants in the spectacle of punishment, the audience isn't interested in

¹⁶⁶ Adams, "Wildest Show in the South," 99.

¹⁶⁷ Schrift, "Cowboys and Institutional Tourism," 339.

¹⁶⁸ Mary Rachel Gould, "Performance of Punishment," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 7, no. 4 (Dec. 2011): 24.

reflecting on why they are there or engaging in any critique of the event. Elissa Marek concludes that spectators “seek the chance to participate from afar – watching unskilled imprisoned people attempt dangerous feats, bargaining with confined individuals from behind the fence and listening to incarcerated people play music – without truly engaging with or complicating current debates about incarceration.”¹⁶⁹ Gould, the only scholar to interview spectators, argues that although the rodeo could hypothetically offer a chance for positive face to face encounters between prisoners and free spectators, they are thwarted by the lack of spectator engagement:

The opportunity to listen, and perhaps relate across differences, is not recognized at the Angola Rodeo and Crafts Fair, because human connection and humanizing the prison population is not the purpose of the event. The Rodeo and Crafts Fair were designed as entertainment, not education. Whether intended or not, the outcome of the event is that non-incarcerated citizens are reassured of the success of the prison system and are absolved of the guilt associated with not acknowledging the complexity of the prison system as an inhumane and unhealthy political institution.¹⁷⁰

By opening up to the public for a sporting event, Gould argues that the prison staff is able to enact violence against prisoners for the pleasure of an audience that is not engaging critically with the site of their entertainment. They can avoid acknowledging their enjoyment of these public punishments because they are “couched in a language of sport and entertainment,” and any time spent interacting directly with prisoners is not enough to overcome their desire to believe the prison is functioning appropriately.

Critical consensus argues that the rodeo collapses time for spectators in ways that also represent what prisons do and what they are for. The rodeo is a return to Jim Crow, or

¹⁶⁹ Elissa Underwood Marek, “Sport, Spectacle, and Carceral Othering: The Angola Prison Rodeo and the Prison View Golf Course,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*, eds. Jacqueline Z. Wilson, Sarah Hodgkinson, Justin Piché, and Kevin Walby (London: Palgrave, 2016), 1019.

¹⁷⁰ Gould, “Performance of Punishment,” 30.

antebellum slavery, or Roman blood spectacles; it is in line with the popular narrative that mass incarceration is the result of backwards momentum, of a return to a past characterized by subjugation, or of an unwillingness to keep up with changing times. Adams believes this to be part of the rodeo's appeal as spectators "enter a living history of antebellum plantations that maintains a link between the Middle Passage and postslavery society. It is hard to resist the idea that this literalness, an embodied history of violence, must be on some level what draws the general public here."¹⁷¹ Gould draws similar comparisons to historical violence enacted for a public audience:

Like the public executions of 17th century Europe, masses of spectators participate in the collective act of public discipline during the rodeo. The rodeo depicts a classic representation of the prison system where the violent offender in need of punishment is publicly beaten and subdued under the supervision of a stern, yet loving warden/father figure, all to the cheers of an adoring, and approving crowd.¹⁷²

During my own five years of rodeo-going, I've certainly had conflicted feelings about my own attendance and found the violence discomfiting. I have not personally witnessed any serious injuries that competitors didn't walk off, and some events seemed far less spectacular than they had been described in scholarship. For example, Guts and Glory, the rodeo's signature event in which a bull charges around the arena with a poker chip between his horns, has produced some of the most spectacular images of prisoners being tossed in the air; I have only ever personally seen a bull who disinterestedly trots along as prisoners cautiously approached it. Even though my experience has not matched up with the descriptions of grotesque injury, the potential is always there. Watching men put their bodies on the line for prize money who have no other ability to

¹⁷¹ Adams, *Wounds of Returning*, 140.

¹⁷² Gould, "Performance of Punishment," 25.

earn an income is disturbing, especially considering the lack of adequate medical care prisoners describe. These are all real concerns and motivate important questions about prisoner exploitation. However, drawing comparisons between what is in many ways a fairly standard amateur rodeo and actual public executions does more to sensationalize than illuminate, sparking questions about what assumptions are motivating this type of analysis.

Southern Exceptionalism

“Southern-ness” has been key to making sense of the Angola Prison Rodeo, with scholars placing it as part of a lineage of a regional history of white supremacist violence, but the emphasis on region has worked to flatten analysis rather than provide nuance. There has been a turn in Southern studies scholarship from identifying and analyzing the South’s regional distinctiveness to examining how narratives of that distinctiveness distort understandings of national progress. In what Lassiter and Crespino dubbed the “myth of southern exceptionalism,” the country’s social ills are compartmentalized and attributed to the backwards South, with the horrors that happen there as not only unique but in fact the only thing standing in the way of the United States’ quest for liberal reform and march towards progress.

Historian Edward Ayers describes how the South has been defined as backwards-facing and outside of time. The South is “where modern life has not fully arrived”¹⁷³ whether that manifests in seemingly positive ways, as through folksy politeness or deep respect for tradition, or in negative ways; as perpetually resistant to change, the South is thought of as resisting urban development, opposing civil rights, and coming last in every major metric of economic or educational success. As such, the South acts as a foil to the nation at large. Rather than being

¹⁷³ Edward L. Ayers, “What We Talk about When We Talk about the South,” in *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, eds. Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 65.

understood as a site of struggle where national values are being challenged and renegotiated, the South “plays a key role in the nation’s self-image: as the role of evil tendencies overcome, mistakes atoned for, progress yet to be made.”¹⁷⁴ In order to effectively play this role, the South has been made to “bear a lot of metaphorical baggage”¹⁷⁵ as it is continually reinforced in the public imagination as somehow behind the rest of the country.

Geographer David Jansson describes how perceptions of Southern backwardness can then be used to inoculate the North from accusations of social injustice in ways that influence scholarship. By spatially locating that injustice – whether it be white supremacy, misogyny, mass incarceration – in the South, it is implied that “the rest of the country is free from the problems being discussed or that the problem is inherent in the social fabric of ‘the South.’”¹⁷⁶ Understanding scholarship as a representational practice, he argues that scholars produce Southern identity while attempting to define it, resulting in a definition that stands in opposition to a default American identity that “stands for such desirable values as tolerance and justice.”¹⁷⁷

Lassiter and Crespino stress that the point of highlighting the overemphasis on Southern injustices and the lack of attention to Northern ones “is not to absolve the South but to implicate the nation,”¹⁷⁸ to understand them not as unique but as regional manifestations of national

¹⁷⁴ Ayers, “What We Talk About,” 65.

¹⁷⁵ Ayers, “What We Talk About,” 70.

¹⁷⁶ David Jansson, “The Work of Southering: ‘Southern Justice’ and the Moral Landscape of Uneven Racism,” *Southeastern Geographer* 57, no. 2 (2017): 145.

¹⁷⁷ Jansson, “The Work of Southering,” 138.

¹⁷⁸ Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, “Introduction: The End of Southern History,” in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, ed. Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7.

problems. In the case of mass incarceration, narratives of Southern exceptionalism have had stakes for public opinion and at times have impeded national reform efforts. With the regional lens influencing the perceived scale of the problem and limiting the cause to Southern backwardness, the modernization of Southern prisons became the legislative priority and they were brought in line with Northern standards (which were assumed to be fine). Penal historian Heather Ann Thompson traces how Northern prisons have nearly identical histories of neglect, labor exploitation, and violence to those cited as proof of Southern prisons' particular barbarity. Despite these similarities, Northern prison reform movements of the 1960s concentrated their efforts in the South under the assumption that Southern prisons were uniquely violent; Northern prisoners were assumed to be treated fairly and their pleas for relief were more likely to be met with suspicion from reformers or brutal repression from prison officials, as they were after lockdowns at Bridgeport Correction Center in Connecticut in 1969, hunger strikes at Holmesburg Prison in Philadelphia the same year, or most notoriously at the 1971 uprising at Attica State Correctional Facility in New York.¹⁷⁹

Thompson's work demonstrates that the desire to enact punishment is not regionally bound; in the case of Angola, the continued repetition of titles like "the bloodiest prison in the South" and "America's worst prison"¹⁸⁰ are used to signify that it has always been an exceptional case, rather than what it is: an exemplar of modern prison operations. The rodeo is used as

¹⁷⁹ Heather Ann Thompson, "Blinded by a 'Barbaric' South: Prison Horrors, Inmate Abuse, and the Irony of American Penal Reform", in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, ed. Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 74-98.

¹⁸⁰ This first appeared in a Collier's magazine article in 1952 and has been repeated in almost every piece of writing about Angola since then. Edward W. Stagg and John Lear, "America's Worst Prison," *Collier's* 22 (1952): 13-16.

evidence it is stuck in the past, along with the South itself, having never moved beyond the plantation history that scholars have argued is re-enacted twice a year for a public audience. However, the rodeo is not a static event; it has run every year since the 1960s and many changes have been made over that time to make it more palatable to visitors and rewarding for participants.

Rather than asking the rodeo to continue to carry the “metaphorical baggage” of the South as Ayers described, what would it mean to take seriously the idea that the prison staff believes their work to be part of a narrative of progress? If instead of seeking to expose the unconsciously sinister intentions of spectators, we approach their attendance in good faith using a more performance-oriented understanding of spectatorship practices? What other motives for attendance exist than wanting to display full-throated support for prisons and a secret desire to witness brutal punishment? I argue that taking these motives seriously has implications for understanding the public orientation toward punishment during a period when the idea of reform has public support in Louisiana but the methods to achieving it are still being negotiated.

Prison Tourism and Models of Spectatorship

The first time I attended the rodeo in the spring of 2015, I went in prepared to spot injustices and call them out as they occurred. I had read the scholarship describing the bloodthirsty spectators and I was on the lookout for people who needed to be confronted for their cruelty. I was also primed to critique some of the other ominous details I had read about; Schrift and Adams described the difference between “trustys,” the prisoners who are allowed to walk among the crowds at the rodeo, and the prisoners who were separated from spectators and kept behind a chain-link fence. The fence was assumed to invite gawking, by either side; who were these men and what had they done that they needed to be kept behind a fence? Alternately, every

prison movie has a scene of men in the prison yard leaning against a fence staring at women on the other side of it. My experience, again, was much more dull, and I was surprised at how quickly I stopped noticing the fence and how little it interfered with my interactions with the men behind it. No one was gawking, and my interactions were just as jovial as those with trustys. Although I was prepared by my reading and my entertainment habits to be uncomfortable when faced with the fenced area, no difficulties in fact materialized.

As I explain in my introduction, Michelle Brown's model of penal spectatorship has influenced recent scholarship on prison tourism and reflects past scholarly interpretations of spectator response to the Angola Prison Rodeo. She defines penal spectatorship as a structuring condition of modernity under which citizens voyeuristically consume narratives of punishment designed for their entertainment while simultaneously being distanced from actual acts of punishment by the state. This distance reinforces faith in the criminal legal system by allowing fantasies about the innate cruelty of criminals, or the inevitability of our current carceral system, to take precedence over facts concerning the social context of crime and other possibilities for addressing them. The penal spectator's "imagining of punishment is haunted by abstract potentialities of danger and insecurity"¹⁸¹ that absolve them of any complicity in state punishment.

For Brown, the penal spectator's gaze is both passive and authoritative; it is disengaged and compliant in its investment in the current criminal legal system, while reinforcing the authority of citizens who have not been personally impacted by incarceration over those who have through their ability to look. Their authority goes unchallenged because their ability to look

¹⁸¹ Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 10.

faces “no real danger or challenge in looking or of that look returned.”¹⁸² It is in this light that scholarship has understood spectatorship at the Angola Prison Rodeo, assuming that attendance equates to support for the prison that is maintained unwaveringly throughout the event and a gaze that is voyeuristically pointed downward.

There is an assumption that rodeo patrons are all gawking outsiders, and certainly some are (a look at license plates across the parking lot can confirm the presence of out of state tourists), but many are not. With Louisiana’s high rate of imprisonment, it is not only statistically improbable that a majority of spectators have remained unaffected by incarceration but also demonstrably false. On my visits to the rodeo, I have witnessed countless moments of connection between prisoners and spectators throughout the event. Couples hold hands while working at the craft fair, and families visit with their imprisoned loved ones in an environment that is more pleasant than the standard visiting room. There are basketball courts where I’ve seen prisoners playing with their kids, lifting them up so they could dunk the ball. On one notable visit, I saw a prisoner selling wooden roses – a staple at the craft fair, with each artist putting their own unique spin on the design – who was sitting at his tent holding hands with a woman sitting next to him. She told every potential customer that these were the best roses at the fair and that we wouldn’t find any better roses than these. She was proud of his work, and he was clearly basking in her praise. It was a very sweet, normal moment – a couple holding hands on a nice fall day, enjoying each other’s company. Spectators at the rodeo should not be assumed to be voyeuristic outsiders but instead understood as potential stakeholders invested in the well-being of prisoners.

Theorizing spectatorship as a more active process not only creates room to understand a wider range of spectator response, but to understand the rodeo itself as a site under which

¹⁸² Brown, *The Culture of Punishment*, 107.

Louisiana reform efforts are tested and negotiated. Jeffrey Green challenges conceptions of spectatorship as politically passive and argues that it is instead the primary method by which most citizens engage with politics. Where penal spectatorship describes a type of looking used as a tool of domination serving our current system of incarceration and punishment, Green describes spectatorship as a practice of democracy used to surveil those with power:

Popular empowerment under the ocular model does not involve the crystallization of the People's voice into an authoritative decision, but rather refers to the elevation of the People's spectatorship into the status of a gaze. It is the gaze – that hierarchical form of visualization that inspects, observes, and achieves surveillance – that functions as the chief organ of popular empowerment under the ocular model.¹⁸³

Most people are not activists or elected officials, which leaves voting as the only opportunity to use their political “voice” and exert decision-making power. By acknowledging the “passive, nonparticipatory, *spectatorial* nature of everyday political life,” Green identifies spectatorship as a position of power over the powerful who are subject to their gaze.¹⁸⁴

Green argues that candor is essential to ocular empowerment, as staged events or preplanned speeches reveal nothing but what leaders are interested in showing. Live events or unrehearsed questioning that leave room for “risk and uncertainty” rather than perfect control over the conditions of publicity create opportunities for surveillance and critique.¹⁸⁵ The Angola Prison Rodeo is not fully staged or fully candid; although its liveness leaves plenty of room for the unexpected to occur, prison staff is still in control of the event and has constructed it to show the prison in the best possible light. It is still worth examining, then, what exactly they have

¹⁸³ Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9.

¹⁸⁴ Green, *The Eyes of the People*, 17.

¹⁸⁵ Green, *The Eyes of the People*, 13.

constructed as it offers insight into what they believe spectators hope to see and what they believe is socially desirable.

Prison Staff and Attempts at Reform

Geographer Lydia Pelot-Hobbs has argued that “Louisiana did not hold the title of the most incarcerated place in the world for 18 years because it was stuck in the past but because it was innovative in its incorporation of a range of new punitive technologies into its carceral infrastructure.”¹⁸⁶ Although scholarship on the rodeo has tended to assume the staff at Angola is either oblivious to or supportive of the parallels between imprisonment and enslavement, they in fact appear invested in understanding and overcoming that history with the rodeo serving as a (perhaps misguided) opportunity to demonstrate progress and align their work with contemporary reform efforts. When the “Red Hat Cellblock,” a cellblock so notorious for its unlivable conditions that it was closed in 1974, was named a historic place in 2003, Warden Burl Cain stated the importance of preserving the building: “We don’t want the circle of hate and cruelty to come back around. We don’t want to go back to the days of the Red Hat just because of tight money and budget cuts. Saving this building means something, it means we can learn from mistakes of the past.”¹⁸⁷

Prison staff are aware that the rodeo is perceived as another example of a pattern of cruel practices that produced the Red Hat Cellblock. As such, it’s hard not to read the small changes made from year to year as attempts to revamp the rodeo’s image. They’ve little by little

¹⁸⁶ Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, “The Contested Terrain of the Louisiana Carceral State: Dialectics of Southern Penal Expansion, 1971-2016” (doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, 2019), 6.

¹⁸⁷ Kerry Myers, “Inside Angola: Lessons from the Past,” *The Angolite*, April/May/June 2004, 11-12.

transformed it, removing elements that caused visible suffering, and try to give evidence that this is an environment where prisoners have been able to flourish, whether as artists, athletes, or musicians. They've turned the rodeo into a family friendly event with respect for prisoners built into it: the rodeo now begins with an honor guard of imprisoned veterans during which the audience stands in what I perceive as a genuine display of appreciation for their service. They bring in judges to award prizes in different art categories; when browsing the craft fair, I've seen blue ribbons hanging from the winning work, adding to their value. One artist I spoke with was not willing to part with his award-winning painting, instead displaying it next to the others that were for sale because he was proud of his work and the recognition he had received.

The staff emphasizes the necessity of the rodeo money when discussing the event in ways that at times can put them in opposition to the state legislature. In Warden Cain's welcome messages to spectators, he thanks them for spending money that will "go to worthy projects not funded by the state"¹⁸⁸ in the form of funding for prisoner-led clubs, recreation equipment, and educational programs, and during his tenure Cain was outspoken about the state legislature's unwillingness to provide money for programs that would keep prisoners from becoming hopeless and isolated. Past wardens have similarly understood the social necessity of events like the rodeo. In an interview with then-warden Frank Blackburn, the 1979 rodeo program describes his insistence that the value of having something to look forward to should not be dismissed:

The major objective of his administration is to bring hope to many who have none and, in this effort, he faces the greatest challenge ever faced by any warden to ever rule Angola. The prison is fast filling with prisoners serving sentences too long for them to see or hope for anything other than death in prison. The conversion of this place into a human graveyard populated by thousands of hopeless men condemned to spend the remainder of their natural lives there is creating a situation that is fraught with danger, for hopeless men are desperate men, and desperate men are dangerous men. Blackburn, seeing the dark clouds of

¹⁸⁸ "Welcome!" *The Angolite*: 33rd Annual Angola Prison Rodeo, October 1997, 38.

despair gathering in the horizon and aware of the terrible potential they hide, has directed his administrative efforts at giving the prisoners something to live for, trying to inject some hope into what is perhaps fast-becoming a hopeless situation.¹⁸⁹

The rodeo began as an attempt to give prisoners something to look forward to every year, to have an event that could structure prisoners' lives and make time pass more easily. Whether that was motivated by a genuine care for prisoners' mental health or a fear of how desperation might cause them to behave, it does seem in this case that cruelty was not, in fact, the point.

Financial Support and Networks of Care at the Rodeo

After missing the rodeo on our first visit, my friends and I returned the next fall fully ready to watch the rodeo itself this time. As we wandered the art stalls beforehand, we were surprised at how many prisoners recognized us from six months before and were happy to see us again, some even remembering what we had purchased from them. Over the next few visits, we developed favorite artists whose work we particularly enjoyed, but that enjoyment was always tempered by uneasiness or sadness. On the drive up we would talk about how we hoped that one jewelry maker would have the sea glass pendants again this time, or that one painter was out of his orange phase and was using blue again, or that one earring maker would have options in a particular type of wood. We would almost immediately realize that what we actually hoped for was that these prisoners had been released instead.

Scholars have noted that the rodeo is an opportunity for prisoners to perform their own rehabilitation and perhaps garner sympathy for prison reform from spectators who believe them ready to be released, but there are other ways that prisoners use the rodeo as an opportunity to

¹⁸⁹ "Angola: Its History," *The Angolite: 15th Annual Angola Prison Rodeo*, October 1979, 60.

demonstrate respect for prisoners and build connections with spectators, teaching them how to interpret what they are seeing.

Printed programs for the rodeo have been produced by the staff of *The Angolite*, the award-winning prisoner-run magazine. In addition to providing information about the events and the competitors, they also include essays on topics related to the rodeo and prison life in general. Wardens since the 1970s have expressed pride in *The Angolite*'s work and have insisted that they do not interfere with their investigative work or control what they are able to write and publish. Although this claim seems a bit dubious – scholars of prison writing like Dylan Rodríguez argue that prisoners are subject to many different forms of coercion that ensure they are never simply “free” to write – *The Angolite* does manage to publish work that is critical of prison operations and the politicians who support and enact laws that keep them in prison.

If the prison staff has designed the event to give a sanitized and welcoming performance of the prison environment, prisoners are using the programs to inform spectators of the conditions of their day-to-day life. Each year they print a detailed history of Angola, starting with its roots in enslavement and convict-leasing, and covering notable moments of crisis and protest over poor living conditions. They also provide insight into how the rodeo fits into prison life more broadly. Spectators are most likely aware in a general sense that the money they spend at the rodeo for tickets, concessions, and prisoner-made art goes to the Inmate Welfare Fund, but the programs detail exactly what that support has meant through spotlights on different clubs, their services, and their future needs. Depending on their focus, most clubs need money for routine items like office supplies, stamps, and recreational equipment. Others need money to provide specialized services in line with their mission, as demonstrated by Vets Incarcerated:

In 1974 the multitude of existing pressures caused a small group of incarcerated vets and non-vets to band together and form an agency to fight for their rights and

dignity as veterans and men...The agency has serviced the needs of over 7,230 cases since its inception covering areas from medical problems, educational-vocational assistance, welfare referrals, pre-release, legislative proposals, discharge upgrading, information distribution, pardon and parole assistance, and crisis intervention within the prison...REMEMBER YOUR LOCAL VETS – THEY FOUGHT A WAR FOR YOU.¹⁹⁰

Appealing to an audience likely to have respect for military service, articles like this paint a picture of clubs who need financial assistance because they have been abandoned by their government and their neighbors. Prisoners themselves have taken over that duty of care but are not provided with the resources of a government-run veterans association; funds brought in at the rodeo are their primary source of funding.

They also have features on the community services provided by prisoners and staff at Angola. The prison has its own Emergency Medical Services unit with six ambulances and four fire engines, run by prisoner and staff EMTs and firefighters. Because of Angola's isolation, they respond to emergencies on the prison grounds as well as in parts of the surrounding region that are too remote to be reached quickly by neighboring town-run services.¹⁹¹ Angola also has a nationally recognized hospice care facility founded and run by prisoners and its coverage in the rodeo program describes the purpose of that care:

Angola's hospice program, opened in 1998 under the stewardship of Warden Burl Cain, has become a centerpiece of the prison community; a community holding 5,103 prisoners, 90 percent of whom are destined never to be released. Its purpose – dying with dignity – inspires the 38 professionally trained inmate volunteer care givers to offer love, compassion and patient care at a time it's most needed.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ "Vets Incarcerated: A Full Service Self-Help Program," *The Angolite: 19th Annual Angola Prison Rodeo*, October 1984, 83.

¹⁹¹ "Behind the Scene: EMS Unit," *The Angolite: 33rd Annual Angola Prison Rodeo*, October 1997, 29.

¹⁹² "Angola Hospice Program," *The Angolite: 40th Annual Prison Rodeo*, October 2004, 15.

Again the program is painting a picture of Angola as a community that has been left behind by the state legislature. Hospice care is necessary because of the combination of the overwhelming number of life sentences handed down in Louisiana and the refusal to grant compassionate end of life release for elderly prisoners; prisoners have filled that gap and provided care for each other instead.

The prisoners at Angola are the definition of forgotten: of the 4,885 men currently imprisoned at Angola, 75% of them are serving life sentences with no chance for parole.¹⁹³ The majority of those will not benefit from any of the reforms the state has passed, making Angola their home for the rest of their lives. Scholarship has focused on how their individual performances of rehabilitation at the rodeo might enable them to foster increased sympathy from spectators and build support for prison reforms that could someday lead to their release. But the rodeo also provides an (albeit incredibly flawed) opportunity for them to be seen, and for them to make the system that controls their daily lives available for public examination, revealing a community that has been purposely abandoned and, in the absence of outside intervention, has had to build their own systems of care from scratch.

Conclusion

To recognize Angola as largely unexceptional is, as Lassiter and Crespino argue, not to absolve them of doing harm but rather to implicate the United States' prison system as a whole. Examined under a skewed lens of regional distinctiveness, the rodeo-typical violence has been used to paint Angola as the worst of the worst, a prison stuck in an antebellum past that spectators and staff are invested in maintaining.

¹⁹³ Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, "Briefing Book," July 2022.

When I started writing this chapter, I was motivated by the suspicion that if I couldn't see myself and my own reasons for attending the rodeo in the existing scholarship, it was doubtful that other regular rodeo spectators or even corrections officers would recognize themselves either. Would other rodeo-goers agree they attend because of their thirst for blood, or their repressed love of enslavement? And would guards, familiar as they are with violence, agree to place the rodeo on a spectrum of state violence alongside the executions that are also performed on the prison grounds? On its face the rodeo appears to be a genuine attempt to provide a pleasant experience for all involved and to show off the prison's work to a large audience, so I was interested in understanding the ways in which people who think they are doing good work can also perpetuate harm.

The prison staff has demonstrated that they understand the rodeo performs a vital social need for prisoners; it's a chance for human contact and feelings of belonging and accomplishment that are rare while imprisoned. Although the rodeo is a one-of-a-kind event, the social and financial pressures that incentivize and coerce participation are not unique to Angola but are in fact the defining characteristics of imprisonment across the United States. As prisons across the country adopt new technologies that allow them to restrict in person visits in favor of video calls, or replace physical mail with scanned copies of letters, the continued in-person rodeo seems especially significant.

With the majority of its participants unlikely to ever be released from prison, the Angola Prison Rodeo is less a spectacle of punishment than a performance of the maximum level of care that outsiders can figure out how to show to those who are imprisoned; the obvious ways this performance falls short speaks to the necessity of working towards abolition rather than continuing to invest in minor reforms. The rodeo reveals a system that theorizes incarceration as

an individual problem solved through rehabilitation and reform, and in turn has set boundaries around the form that support for prisoners can take. For spectators seeking ways to show their support for prison reform and the idea of rehabilitation over punishment, the rodeo is a chance to offer financial support to prisoners individually and through the Inmate Welfare Fund. It may even convince them to advocate for increased funding from the state to support Angola and the rehabilitative programs it offers. But those solutions are individual rather than systemic ways of approaching change and require the further investment of resources into prisons rather than finding ways to decarcerate.

Conclusion

In November of 2017, Louisiana’s Justice Reinvestment legislation package went into effect with the goal of decreasing the incarcerated population by 10% over the next decade. A month before that, Caddo Parish Sheriff Steve Prator made national news when he held a press conference in which he discussed what he saw as the dangers and pitfalls of that legislation. Some of his arguments were what you would expect from a law enforcement officer: the prisoners being granted early parole were dangerous, the vetting process was insufficient, and the result would be decreased public safety and higher crime rates. His remarks received so much attention, however, because of his opinions on the prisoners who he acknowledged did not necessarily pose any danger, saying that “In addition to the bad ones – and I call these bad – in addition to them, they’re releasing some good ones that we use every day to wash cars, to change oil in our cars, to cook in the kitchen, to do all that, where we save money. Well, they’re going to let them out.”¹⁹⁴

These statements were interpreted as a moment when the mask slipped and the true motivations for incarceration were revealed, with public safety as a cover for upholding systems of racial subjugation and labor exploitation. Local newspapers published mocking opinion pieces (“So We’re Just Gonna Let a Louisiana Sheriff Lose His Good Prisoners?!”), the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* headlines both drew comparisons to slavery.¹⁹⁵ While this

¹⁹⁴ Julia O’Donoghue, “Gov. Edwards: Sheriff Worried about Losing ‘Good Ones’ from Jail Misunderstood New Laws,” *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), Oct 15, 2017.

¹⁹⁵ Jarvis DeBarry, “So We’re Just Gonna Let a Louisiana Sheriff Lose His Good Prisoners?!” *The Times Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), Oct. 13, 2017; “Louisiana Sheriff Argues Against Releasing Prisoners ‘You Can Work’ Drawing Slavery Comparisons,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 12, 2017.

dissertation has focused on the men imprisoned at Angola, more than half of the state's prisoners are held in parish jails overseen by local sheriffs like Prator. The Caddo Parish sheriff's office receives a significant portion of its budget from the prisoners in its jail through money from the state for each person imprisoned there. If prisoners are on work release programs, the sheriff also gets a portion of the wages they earn in addition to the state funds. In a later statement intended to clarify his remarks, Prator's office claimed this revenue was not a profit but instead necessary money that paid for the care and supervision of prisoners.¹⁹⁶

Prator would not cede that Louisiana needs to reduce its reliance on incarceration or that reform was a worthwhile goal, saying instead that he "wasn't elected to rehabilitate people," and indeed he wasn't. Jails are designed for the short-term confinement of those who are awaiting or standing trial, not for prisoners serving out long sentences. State prisoners held in jails have typically been convicted of lower-level, nonviolent crimes and are serving sentences of a few years. They don't provide the educational or leisure programs that a prison like Angola does, despite many Louisiana jails building additions to their facilities to accommodate more state prisoners. Most of the intended decrease in Louisiana's prison population would come from jails. Despite his disinterest in and inability to provide rehabilitative services, Prator argued that the best path forward "would be to put the brakes on a little, to make sure the people we are letting out have been rehabilitated."¹⁹⁷

Although Prator's remarks were met with near universal condemnation, with supporters only going so far as to say he had been misunderstood or taken out of context, his call to "put on

¹⁹⁶ Lex Talamo, "Caddo Sheriff, Louisiana's Governor Spar Over Training," *Shreveport Times* (Shreveport, LA), Oct. 5, 2017.

¹⁹⁷ Talamo, "Caddo Sheriff."

the brakes” speaks to a common response to any prison reform. When reforms are made, they have to be incremental, measured, and guaranteed risk free, but without doing too much to upset the system as it stands. For Prator, a future with even just 10% fewer prisoners is unimaginable, much less a future without prisons at all.

In the years since I started graduate school at LSU, a lot has changed but a lot has stayed the same. The state has already exceeded its goal of decreasing the prison population by 10%. As of July 2022, the state reported a total 24% decrease since the Justice Reinvestment package was passed, with that change attributed to reduced sentences for those convicted of nonviolent crimes. And yet despite this significant reduction, Louisiana continues to imprison more people per capita than any other state (occasionally falling to number 2 behind Oklahoma and Mississippi). The racial makeup of the prison population has also not changed – 67% of prisoners are Black, a rate consistent with the pre-reform population, despite being only 33% of the total state population.¹⁹⁸

As with all struggles for social justice, there has been a combination of gains and losses as progress is met with backlash. New Orleans elected Jason Williams, a prosecutor who ran on a platform of reforming an office notorious for evidence tampering and Brady violations against Black defendants. He has so far fulfilled his promises to open a civil rights division that would investigate past cases where prosecutors violated defendants’ civil rights, or where they were convicted by non-unanimous juries, and either retry the cases or have the convictions vacated. At the same time, he has been willing to try juveniles as adults and to use habitual offender laws to

¹⁹⁸ These statistics are from the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections July 2022 Statistics Briefing Book, the last date information was available. Available at <https://doc.louisiana.gov/about-the-dpsc/annual-statistics/>

seek harsher sentences.¹⁹⁹ The New Orleans Police Department is relying more and more on surveillance cameras and faulty facial recognition software.²⁰⁰ The city's once-cancelled plans to expand the Orleans Justice Center were ordered to be restarted by the U.S. District Court judge overseeing the jail's consent decree, despite the wishes of city officials and local activists.²⁰¹ The state's total incarcerated population has decreased, but the conditions of incarceration remain poor; the state has also allowed juvenile facilities to send prisoners they consider too difficult to Angola.

In this dissertation I wanted to explore how the insights of abolitionist scholars and activists could be combined with theatre and performances scholars' theorizations of resistant practices of spectatorship. I applied this abolitionist spectatorial lens to performance practices at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola in order to examine how they are shaping the public's imagination about the future of criminal justice. Theatre in prisons is often understood through the lens of rehabilitation – how did prisoners use theatre to prove they are suitable to re-enter society? – but at Angola, where a majority of prisoners are serving life sentences without the possibility of parole, the stakes are different. A good performance will not impact their release from prison, but their encounters with spectators are all opportunities to expand their imaginations of what our shared future could be.

¹⁹⁹ See Oliver Laughland, "Inside the Division: How a Small Team of US Prosecutor Fight Decades of Shocking Injustice," *The Guardian* (London), May 6, 2022; Jillian Kramer, "In Reversal, Orleans Parish DA Jason Williams to Use Law that Extends Prison Terms for Major Crimes," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), March 7, 2023.

²⁰⁰ "Facial Recognition Tool Led to Mistaken Arrest, Lawyer Says," *AP*, Jan. 2, 2023.

²⁰¹ Matt Sledge, "New Orleans Must Follow Judge's Order to Build Controversial Jail Expansion, Court Says," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), June 30, 2022.

Each of these performances enacted two conflicting visions of that future; the prison administration pursues reform, seeking to demonstrate that they run an orderly institution that can be trusted to rehabilitate prisoners by providing educational, recreational, and artistic opportunities for them. For people who recognize that Louisiana's reliance on prisons is harmful but aren't quite sure what to do about that, visits to the Angola rodeo or the prison museum may paint a pretty convincing picture of a kinder, gentler prison aware of its history and reputation but actively working on reforming itself. While he was in power, Burl Cain was outspoken about the fact that the state sends too many people to Angola, going as far as to publicly debate Harry Connick, the notoriously harsh New Orleans District Attorney, about his office's policies of pursuing long sentences and relentlessly prosecuting nonviolent crimes.²⁰² The prison administration's willingness to publicly critique the legal system as it currently operates is unexpected and encouraging, but some of the worst ideas in criminal justice come from reformers. The judge ordering the expansion of the Orleans Parish Prison did so in the name of creating a better environment for prisoners by reducing overcrowding and making more space for prisoners in mental distress. The result will be extra space that allows more people to be imprisoned there, paid for with money drawn from other necessary city services. Recently in the news was the story of Massachusetts Democrats who proposed taking time off prisoners' sentences if they voluntarily participated in organ donation programs (though I would challenge the idea that such participation could ever be considered voluntary).²⁰³ That people who intend to help are actually contributing to harm sometimes is not a new insight, but it sometimes feels

²⁰² Michael Glover, "The Christian Warden," *The Angolite*, March/April 1995, 24.

²⁰³ Judith Levine, "No, Trading Flesh for Prison Time is not 'Bodily Autonomy,'" *The Intercept*, Feb 19, 2023.

especially pervasive in prison reform conversations. The abolitionist spectator reveals how this type of thinking and these performances stage-managed by prison staff can be a powerful and effective counterinsurgency tactic against more radical solutions when used by the prison administration.

The prisoners at Angola, meanwhile, are performing in pursuit of their own freedom. Although the prison is isolated in a remote area, their frequent opportunities to encounter public audiences are unique and they use them to perform the world they want to build. Spectators are invited into that world, one in which prisoners are valued members of a community, at the center of networks of care despite being abandoned by many of us on the outside as disposable. They have skills that are worthy of attention and respect as actors, musicians, artists, athletes, writers, landscapers. These use each performance as a chance to chip away at their audience's impression that the men imprisoned at Angola deserve to die there, and to create more fertile ground for abolitionist ideals.

Spectators at Angola are often treated cynically, assumed to be visiting the rodeo to gawk at prisoners, to attend their Passion play to assess the strength of prisoners' religious commitments, to tour the prison and its museum to buy a mocking t-shirt. Analyzing these performances through the lens of abolition allows for the understanding of multiple modes of spectatorship. Performance theories of spectatorship acknowledge the power of the gaze, of looking directly at the mechanisms of power, and the ability to critique rather than just accept what they see. Of the two visions of the future being performed at Angola, one has the full weight of the institution behind it – but that doesn't mean spectators aren't receiving both messages.

Expanding the Abolitionist Lens

The lens of abolition spectatorship opens new avenues to explore how prison theatre programs are functioning in communities nationwide and how those performances are being read by spectators. The three performances I examined demonstrate how regional identity and history inflect the performance traditions used in prisons and how they speak to their local audiences. Angola's history as a plantation, then a site of convict leasing, and now a working prison farm haunts the performances that are enacted there. The regional prevalence of evangelical Christianity has influenced the plays they perform and attracted audiences who might otherwise have never visited the prison. The prison rodeo is a uniquely Southern event. These performances draw in audiences partly due to the novelty of being held at a prison, but also because they are speaking to local interests.

A future study could look at how other regional identities and performance traditions speak to abolitionist goals or infuse abolitionist theatre practice. What uniquely Northeastern, or Midwestern, or Pacific Northwestern, or Mid-Atlantic traditions find their way into performances by prisoners? How do those local histories inform their understanding of what a future without prisons would look like? How do they affect what types of audiences are drawn to their performances, and what are those spectators hoping or expecting to see?

There are also many opportunities to apply an abolitionist lens to performances in institutions other than prisons. There is a growing public understanding that carceral logic is involved in many more aspects of society than just the criminal legal system and that carceral spaces encompass more than just prisons. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault famously asked "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all

resemble prisons?”²⁰⁴ An abolitionist lens helps illuminate how struggles against coercive and punitive power structures are connected, and how deeply the fates of incarcerated people are wrapped up with everyone else’s.

bell hooks describes how the oppositional gaze has inspired Black women directors to make films that Black women spectators will not need to resist.²⁰⁵ Jill Dolan has similarly described her experience of seeing the musical *Fun Home* for the first time; seeing lesbian desire as the text rather than subtext was “almost startling – and more wonderful than I can even begin to describe.”²⁰⁶ In a future project, I would ask what other performances the abolitionist spectator inspires.

The rise of Court Watch programs, for example, have created an already resistant spectator whose attention is directed at the inner workings of power structures rather than the person on trial.²⁰⁷ Court Watchers do exactly what the name implies: their volunteers attend as many court proceedings, often focusing specifically on arraignments, as they can and take notes on what they see. They monitor behavior by judges, prosecutors, public defenders, and law enforcement to assess their performance and notice any patterns of racial or gender bias in their

²⁰⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 228.

²⁰⁵ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 128.

²⁰⁶ Jill Dolan, “Fun Home,” *Feminist Spectator* (blog), October 22, 2013, <http://feministspectator.princeton.edu/2013/10/22/fun-home/>.

²⁰⁷ For more information on Court Watch programs, see Legal Momentum, “Legal Resource Kit: A Guide to Court Watching in Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Cases,” 2005; as well as websites for the New York City Court Watch <https://www.courtwatchnyc.org>, the Baltimore Court Watch <https://baltimorecourtwatch.org>, and the New Orleans Court Watch <https://www.courtwatchnola.org>.

legal arguments or decisions. Rather than taking the court system's claims to objectivity at face value, Court Watchers use their observations to hold legal authorities to account. Their research destabilizes the grounds on which courtrooms get their authority, in addition to improving outcomes for individuals who appear in these courts.

There is also a growing movement of formerly incarcerated artists creating performances that both critique their experiences in prison and use theatre as a tool for healing the trauma they experienced there. These would be rich sites to explore how theatre and performance can incorporate abolitionist values not just through their politics but by fostering practices of collaboration, imagination, and community. *The Box*, a play written by Sarah Shourd in collaboration with survivors of solitary confinement, toured the United States in 2022 under the title *The End of Isolation Tour*.²⁰⁸ In each city where they performed, they worked with organizations working to end the use of solitary confinement in their area in advance to make sure that people impacted by the criminal legal system would be aware of the performance. They made significant efforts to remove barriers to attendance and designed the play so that they could participate in it if they chose. They also used post-show talkbacks to connect audiences with local organizations where they could learn about and contribute to their ongoing work. Through all of these strategies they hoped to produce “the opposite of isolation,” offering survivors resources and an outlet for their experiences and providing audiences with ways to continue this work after the play had moved on.

In Louisiana, the theatre group The Graduates, whose members were in the drama club at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, perform autobiographical pieces that narrate their experiences with the criminal legal system. They recognize that often it is good luck and

²⁰⁸ See “End of Isolation Tour,” <https://endofisolationtour.org> .

perseverance, rather than merit or good behavior, that leads to their release from prison. With their good luck they feel a responsibility to those still in prison who have not yet been so lucky. Theatre offers tools they can use to fight for those they've left behind, by bringing visibility to the social and legal conditions that made release and re-entry difficult. In addition to their own performances, they hold creative workshops for other formerly incarcerated women. Like the performers behind *The Box* using theatre to produce the opposite of isolation, The Graduates recognize theatre and a variety of other artistic practices, from music to sculpture to collage to cooking, as providing the emotional sustenance they need to get past the loneliness and isolation that is socially enforced after release from prison. Into each of these projects, they build moments to acknowledge those they've left behind, and their absence from the rooms where their fates are determined.²⁰⁹

When asked what a world without prisons looks like, the abolitionist Mariame Kaba writes “We’ll figure it out by working to get there.” This work is not limited to the realm of politics by passing legislation. These performances and many others demonstrate how we can work toward abolition locally, using whatever tools are available to us, and currently and formerly incarcerated artists demonstrate how theatre has potential to be a powerful tool to build the future abolitionists want. Working as part of a performance ensemble requires building networks of care and trust, being accountable to and responsible for others in a group that is working together toward a common goal. Sheriff Prator wanted to “put the brakes” on reform, but we can start building the future now. What are we waiting for?

²⁰⁹ See “The Graduates Rising,” <https://graduatesrising.org/>.

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