

## Angola Penitentiary

### The Once and Future Slave Plantation

*We charge genocide—not only of the past, but of the future.*

—Ossie Davis, Preface to *We Charge Genocide*

*The whip itself did not make slavery what it was. It was a legal system, it was a system of legality. . . . Slavery only took on another form: in prisons.*

—Robert Hillary King

JOHN MCELROY IS UNKNOWN TO HISTORY. His name does not register among the ranks of black liberation fighters, musicians, and athletes whose images filled places like my college dormitory room in the early 1990s—when, like many of my peers in California’s pre-2009 era,<sup>1</sup> I placed posters of those such as Malcolm X, Billie Holiday, and The Coup on my walls, jigsaw style, in order to assert a budding political and social consciousness and to counter the historical erasure that barred even the icons of black political and artistic life from any serious consideration within U.S. mass media and educational curricula. Not even by the time that I began working on this book project in earnest, years later, and found myself being pulled northward along U.S. Highway 61 from Baton Rouge to Angola, Louisiana, did I have any notion of who John McElroy was, and how my ghostly encounters with him during this research trip would become so fundamental to my attempt at unearthing something of the untold and largely unrecoverable experiences of countless prison slaves who have been obliterated from memory once disappeared into domains of racial state terror such as Angola, Sugarland (Texas), Parchman (Mississippi), and Cummins (Arkansas). What was clear to me when I began the hour-long drive from the state capitol to the heart of West Feliciana Parish was that I had an irrepressible pitlike feeling in my stomach, a literal nausea

that grew stronger the closer I came to the front gates of the fully operational eighteen-thousand-acre slave plantation—a place that first began converting black men, women, and children into chattel in the early nineteenth century—and a geography that to this day continues to perform such mass (in)human conversion under its official name, Louisiana State Penitentiary (LSP).

The pit in my stomach had a great deal to do with my recognition that as I was heading toward the prison plantation, I was retracing a well-worn groove in a road designated most often for young criminally branded black men from places like the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. I knew that for them this ride must feel more like a plummeting to death as they sit handcuffed in the back of countless prison buses and shuttled in modern-day coffles through the picturesque Louisiana countryside, and added to more than five thousand already entombed bodies—75 percent to 80 percent of whom are black—and many of whom can be found at the moment I am writing these words, bent at the waist, picking cotton, soybeans, and corn under armed guards on horseback, toiling as “two-cent men” in the same fields in which black prisoners have been slaving for well over two centuries (Figure 5).<sup>2</sup>

I asked myself how different a twenty-five-year-old from the Lower Ninth Ward, or New Orleans East, or Shreveport, could feel while being driven to “Angola” under a sentence of “natural life,” than those such as Olaudah Equiano, or countless (and nameless) others from Africa’s west coast and hinterland, who, as they approached the slave ship were sure they were to be devoured by the crew or those awaiting them on the other side of the Atlantic. Are not the innumerable blues soundings and stories that have been passed down for generations within black communities about the fate of those sent to the prison plantation disarmingly similar to the horror tales shared among African commoners of what was to befall them should they be coffled to the barracoon, shelved within the bowels of the slave ship, and transported as fungible commodities to places such as the very plantation I was steadily approaching on a beautiful summer’s day in the early twenty-first century?

*Don’t come to Angola, this is murder’s home . . .* This was the cautionary refrain of the living dead testifying to America’s seemingly interminable Middle Passage that I heard echoing in my mind as I continued ineluctably toward what is the largest expanse of official prison land in the country (if not the world)—a revenant sound first emitted by black captives in the

early to mid-twentieth century, when they were still producing as much as twelve million pounds of refined sugarcane at Angola in a given year—a “hell factory in the fields” of West Feliciana Parish, which is greater in total area than the island of Manhattan.<sup>3</sup>

As I turned off the 61 and headed northwest along the “Tunica Trace,” a road that begins some twenty-two miles from the front gates of the prison, I was struck by a nagging thought that had remained with me since the first time I wrote about Angola plantation, or “The Farm” (as the prison is euphemistically nicknamed). That is, I considered the absolute imponderability



Figure 5. “King Cotton,” Angola Prison Plantation, 1999. Photograph by Wilbert Rideau. Courtesy of the artist.

of the fact that I could be driving toward more than five thousand bodies warehoused on an undead slave plantation—even if that mass captivity was performed under the national racialized and narcoticizing discourses of “corrections,” “public safety,” and state-sanctioned retribution. Another way to think of this is in the form of a hypothetical: What if, in modern-day Germany or Poland, a Jewish person convicted of a crime was sent to a fully operational Auschwitz or Buchenwald to pay his “debt to society”? What would the world’s response be to such a scenario? Would the branding of a Jewish (or for that matter a Roma, Sinti, or communist) subject as “criminal” rationalize his disappearance onto a renovated concentration camp for the remainder of his “natural life”?<sup>4</sup> What is it about the social and ontological position of the black subject in the United States that makes his disappearance onto a modernized slave plantation both socially tolerable and experientially normal? Where was the outcry against this national atrocity? Why wasn’t the twenty-two-mile stretch of road from St. Francisville to Angola riddled with banners and throngs of protestors from around the United States and the globe attempting to block the seemingly infinite procession of black, brown, and poor white bodies into an American prison slave camp that has never once been closed for business since the early nineteenth century, not even for a day? If there was no mass public outrage at the existence of a literal prison plantation, then what were the possibilities for inciting mass mobilizations against the entire prison–industrial complex that currently warehouses and terrorizes more than 2.3 million people, not just in the South but within northern and international spaces of U.S. neoslavery such as Chowchilla (California), Pelican Bay (California), Florence ADX (Colorado), Jackson (Michigan), Attica (New York), and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba?

At issue here is the transtemporal white supremacist social investment in blackness as uncivil, undishonorable, and uninjurable being, and how the liberal humanitarian allotments of public outrage and atrocity recognition are always already disqualified in respect to a collectivity whose penal slavery and civil death have been as central to the postbellum vision of white civil belonging as the African’s chattel enslavement and social death were to white civil personhood before 1865.<sup>5</sup> When viewed in this manner, the sight of the black neoslave laboring in the plantation field at Angola becomes less of an exceptional scene of southern barbarism than a spectacular representation of a banal process of socially acceptable (and pleasurable) racial capitalist carceral genocide that continues to stretch across

the mythological borderline of slavery and freedom. Indeed, as I discussed in chapter 2 in reference to the future haunting of the late nineteenth-century public spectacle of black prisoners auctioned as slaves on courthouse steps in states such as Maryland and Illinois, to view Angola as an exception to the large-scale human cargo taking place in the current stage of America's centuries-old complex of chattelized imprisonment would be to disengage from the reality that this structural *modus operandi* of American empire is defined not so much by the form in which mass racialized incarceration occurs but by the fact of mass racialized incarceration itself. Read in this light, Angola becomes less of a southern anachronism and more of a dubiously instructive living monument to the timeless national practices of human entombment and enslavement—a point reflected by Mumia Abu Jamal in his assessment of Louisiana's prison plantation: "If there ever was a question of *the slave parentage of the American prison system*, one glance at the massive penitentiary known as Angola . . . removes all doubt."<sup>6</sup>

However, as I continued along the road to Angola, there were no liberation banners or would-be neoslave liberators. What I did see was an assortment of highway billboards advertising romantic plantation bed-and-breakfast getaways aimed at capitalizing on tourists' well-ingrained visions of a pastoral, gallant, and "intriguing" antebellum South (Figure 6). With these visual emblems of the national tendency to screen the genocidal operation of the antebellum slave plantation as an idyllic country romance and a playground for national white supremacist fantasy and nostalgia, I was given unsettling evidence of a racist cultural order that allows for no prison plantation protestors (and that produces an immediate disqualification of those who have indeed stood defiantly at the gates of Angola and other U.S. prisons). In fact, the other main explanation for the nauseous feeling I had during the entirety of the journey from Baton Rouge was my knowledge that, aside from a smattering of family members coming to visit their loved ones, the only other civilian "freepersons" I was likely to encounter as I pulled up to the penitentiary would be a subset of the thousands of tourists that visit Angola every year from all over the United States and Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Like many other antebellum slave plantation sites in Louisiana and elsewhere in the South, LSP has successfully transformed itself into a tourist attraction that treats the (un)hallowed ground of racial genocide as an occasion for fun, relaxation, and the reproduction of white supremacist



Figure 6. Billboard along the road to Angola. Photograph by the author.

historical mythology—except in the case of Angola plantation, the horrors of slavery are successfully evacuated, muted, and contorted in spite of and through the ever-presence of prison slaves.<sup>8</sup> Instead of being recognized as embodiments of the accretion of slavery into the present, the imprisoned body on the living plantation is deployed as a resource for public amusement, white self-definition, and the normalization of racial capitalist atrocity, a fact symbolized most infamously by the prison’s annual rodeo and hobby-craft fair—otherwise known as “The Wildest Show in the South”—in which tens of thousands of people converge on Angola during two months of the year to witness untrained prisoner “rodeo cowboys” perform in events such as “Convict Poker” and “Guts and Glory.” In the first event, a clown places a card table in the middle of the six-thousand-person rodeo arena, around which four prisoners sit and pretend to play a game of cards. A modest monetary prize is awarded to the man who remains seated the longest as a bull attempts to gorge all four contestants. For the second event, a large number of stripe-clad men attempt to remove a poker chip tied between the horns of a bull. Prisoners are regularly tossed over twenty

feet in the air by the two-thousand-pound animals. They also routinely suffer from broken bones, deep lacerations, and concussions as a result of this spectacle. One prisoner is known to have ultimately died from a heart attack resulting from his participation in one of the events.

Those who have engaged critically with such scenes of perverse amusement, performative dehumanization, and spectatorial punishment at Angola have correctly drawn allusion to their similarity with the ancient Roman practice of forcing slaves to fight with animals and one another in the gladiatorial arena.<sup>9</sup> That recent opening ceremonies of the rodeo have culminated with the prison's current warden entering Angola's arena in a horse-drawn chariot driven around its perimeter by prisoners does much to corroborate this comparison. However, upon my arrival at the prison museum parking lot situated just outside the penitentiary's front gate and directly across the road from the visitor's parking area, I was focused on the connection between the rodeo and formations of chattel entertainment that are much closer to home, both temporally and geographically, than ancient Rome. Indeed, the main reason for my visit to Angola was to try to locate a set of photographs in a box at the museum that ranged as far back as the early to mid-twentieth century—a period when plantation entertainments such as the prison-sponsored blackface minstrel show were being held on Angola's grounds and in various "free" communities in and around West Feliciana.<sup>10</sup> In fact, I hoped that I might come across an image of one of these blackface troupes, a visual representation of the degree to which spectacles of neoslavery such as the prison rodeo draw upon a long history of prison plantation entertainment. The modern genealogical roots of these spectacles go as far back as the Middle Passage and antebellum plantation, when, as Saidiya Hartman suggests, slaves were forced to simulate consent to bondage through song, dance, and other less public forms of ritualized "unproductive" travail that were as essential to the formation of white mastery as their "productive" labor in cotton, rice, tobacco, and sugarcane fields.<sup>11</sup>

Immediately upon entering the prison plantation museum, the dread I had felt during the entire drive to Angola was confirmed. I was confronted with the patently absurd nature of attempting to conduct "archival work" in a space of mass living death—namely, one that doubles as a staging ground of amusement and identificatory fantasy for the free civil subject. On my way to find the staff member who was to help me locate the photographs, I walked through the gift shop, which is the first room one sees

upon entering the museum site. Here, in easily the largest area within what is generally a rather small building, one can choose between an array of prison-plantation-themed objects intended to elicit chuckles and dollars from patrons, including handcuff key chains, replicas of the striped shirts that Angola prisoners were made to wear until the mid-twentieth century, sweatshirts emblazoned with the words “Angola: A Gated Community,” stuffed animals in the likeness of the bloodhounds that have been used to terrorize fugitive prisoners at Angola since (at least) the late nineteenth century, and a fruit spread called “Strawberry Fields,” which is made with produce that current prisoners have planted and picked in slave plantation fields. I looked on as dozens of visitors nonchalantly perused these items, and while one mother took advantage of a photo opportunity in a section of the museum adjacent to the gift shop that involved placing her two young children—the older of whom was wearing his brand-new prison-striped shirt—into a mock prison cell. The scene of white tourists indulging in comedic recreation, consumptive pleasure, and familial bonding through what, after its sadistic Roman counterpart, might be called a *prison plantation holiday*, stood in stark contrast to the feelings of dispossession, brokenness, and injury expressed on the faces of the mournful procession of black people I saw on the other side of the road leading to Angola’s front gate—those who had made long treks from Louisiana’s urban centers in order to visit their disappeared sons, fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, and friends, and who did not, for a moment, look across the Tunica Trace toward the museum before crossing the threshold of the neoplantation.

The disparity between the scene of gothic amusement and consumer fulfillment inside the museum and the scene of mourning and natal alienation just across the road was exacerbated by my knowledge that, as I walked through the “historical site” in search of the living dead of Angola’s past, there were more than five thousand living dead of the plantation’s present just across the razor-wire gates that separated me from the prison. This reality worked at odds with the museum’s narrative framing as a space wherein the abject violence of Angola’s past has been successfully artifacted as an emblem of the modern, “reformatory” nature of the current penal order. The museum’s brochure encapsulates its narrative of the obsolescence of repressive plantation management and the prison’s supposed completed passage into the oxymoronic liberal repressive echelon of “humane” mass entombment: “Once known as the ‘bloodiest prison in America,’ the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola has emerged as one of the most



progressive and well managed prisons in the country. In order to fully appreciate the accomplishments of this prison, one must first visit its past.” While walking through the museum space one is asked to bear witness to the veracity of the state’s claims to progressive modernization, to the death of “old Angola,” and the prison’s conversion into an arena of “well-managed” human cargoing. This conjuration is performed by way of exhibits displaying various torture devices that have been used against prisoners over the years, including whips, guns, bats, and ax handles. Juxtaposed with these exhibitions of the putatively embalmed practice of repressive punishment at the prison are displays intended to show the ostensibly humane, rehabilitative, and recreational brand of modern imprisonment at Angola, such as rodeo posters, a seemingly infinite variety of evangelical reeducation programs, and memorabilia from the many films that have been shot at the plantation, including an actor’s chair autographed by Billy Bob Thornton when Angola was used as a set for the filming of *Monster’s Ball*.

Conspicuously absent from the museum’s installations dedicated to the theme of penal progress are some of LSP’s most prototypically modern and postmodern architectural and repressive apparatuses. To invoke Aimé Césaire once again, penological advancement at the prison plantation has translated into a system of “progressive dehumanization” whereby the real measure of the facility’s ascension to “northern” standards of mass human disappearance is the degree to which it has successfully exchanged putatively anachronistic brutalization techniques, such as the whip, “bat,” and “sweatbox,” for more “humane” ones, such as four-point restraint tables, the “body sheet,” tear gas, “black box” handcuffs, and modernized punishment units in which prisoners are subjected to indefinite solitary confinement and other forms of legally sanctioned torture.<sup>12</sup> The importation and sedimentation of such state-of-the-art mechanisms of entombment and physical/psychic terror marks the prison plantation as an illuminating spatial symbol of the mutually constitutive and cross-fertilizing relationship of southern and northern white supremacist penal law. And as I will discuss below, the easy cohabitability and effective indistinguishability of past, present, and futuristic modes of terror at the neoplantation expose the degree to which the progressive path of penal modernity has remained tightly bound to its moorings in chattel slavery.

Aerial photographs of the largest maximum-security prison in the country offer stark evidence of the dynamic and interdependent fusion of “old” and “new” at the prison plantation through views of LSP’s assortment of

postmodern “telephone-pole”-style cell-block camps as they have been grafted onto its thousands of acres of slave plantation fields.<sup>13</sup> As I sat outside the front gates, I considered that perhaps the most horrifying aspects of imprisonment at Angola occur not in its cotton, corn, and soybean rows but inside its most modern, and supposedly postslavery, punitive architectures—spaces such as the CCR “dungeon” and Camp J punishment cells, wherein Albert Woodfox and the late Herman Wallace of the Angola 3 (have) spent more than forty-one years, or about fifteen thousand days, in solitary confinement.<sup>14</sup> If the experience of eight years of political imprisonment and indefinite solitary confinement in Soledad and San Quentin made their fellow Black Panther George Jackson feel that he had been shuttled into a permanent Middle Passage with “cotton and corn growing out of [his] chest,” then, as two of the longest-standing political prisoners in the world, Woodfox and Wallace must feel (and have felt) as if they have been buried even further within the bowels of the land-based slave ship, especially given the literal cotton and corn crops that continue to be grown and picked by their fellow prison slaves just outside their “modern” solitary cells.

Wallace attempts to give words to the unspeakable treatment that “freemen” levied against political prisoners, the mentally ill, and those branded as “gang members” or “the worst of the worst” within what is euphemistically described as *administrative segregation*:

I have witnessed guards from 2002 to 2004 while I was in Angola’s . . . [most] restrictive punishment unit, who have thrown buckets of ice water (in winter) on men who were on 4-point restraint, wearing only paper gowns. I’ve seen guards snatch food trays out of [a] prisoner’s cell bars and throw the tray against the wall, then call SWAT teams to gas and beat the prisoner for throwing the food. After SWAT team is done with the prisoner, they take him to the infirmary and then the prisoner goes to [internal prison] court, is found guilty, sentenced to begin the punitive program from the beginning . . . as well as pay for his medical treatment and restitution for damaging the paint on the wall.<sup>15</sup>

Given the quotidian occurrence of such modernized terror methodologies at the neoplantation, the museum’s narrative of progressivism actually serves to throw the undead nature of its regressive “past” into more palpable

relief. Far from successfully disassembling its rootedness in chattel slavery, the convict lease system, and the early prison plantation, the state's framing of penal progress through the lenses of punitive performance, public enjoyment, and repressive lenience actually serves to express the impossible severance of the *now* of "modern" penal entombment from the *then* of "premodern" carceral enslavement. When read in combination with LSP's more apparently overt repressive practices, punitive spectacles such as the rodeo, the use of the prison plantation as movie studio, and the ritual of tourists donning stripes and posing for photos in mock prison cells suggest how the history and present of state terror at Angola (and throughout the rest of America's archipelago of neoslavery) are written both in corporeal rupture and terror-ridden pleasure. That rodeos, film crews, and museum visitors function to convert the site of neo-enslavement into a staging ground for public enjoyment and *criminal minstrelsy*<sup>16</sup>—with the burnt cork of the minstrel show being replaced by the faux handcuffs, bars, and prison stripes of the neoplantation tour—expresses the degree to which racial terror, living death, and chattelized imprisonment have most often been accompanied by and performed through painfully fraught amusement, the ruse of enslaved prisoner contentment, the instrumental bestowal of punitive "privilege," and the obscene public display and spectatorial consumption of human state property.

While waiting at a table in a corner of one of the museum's rooms for the photographs that I hoped would contain evidence of Angola's blackface troupe of the early to mid-twentieth century, I considered how the sight of twenty-first-century plantation tourists modeling striped shirts and laughing as they took photos of one another inside mock prison cells represented a disturbingly fitting contemporary accompaniment for my attempt at a counter-historical unburial of the practice of punitive performance at the plantation. The tableau of free civil bodies immersing themselves in "convict" drag at the very site wherein mass civil death was being simultaneously visited upon thousands of prisoners represented a grotesque modern-day analogue of the long-standing intimacies of (neo)slave abjection and public pleasure, prisoner dehumanization and free white self-definition, and captive performance and the enactment of racialized violence within sites of chattel carcerality.<sup>17</sup> As the only other black man present in the museum approached me, dressed in all white, with a dolly holding four dusty boxes he had plucked from one of the museum's closets, I was further disabused of any notion that what I was conducting at the

plantation that day could in any way be mistaken for a backward looking “archival” journey into a completed or dead history. As I stood up to greet this man and he quickly shook my hand and then rather nervously attempted to refuse my aid in moving the boxes to the table, I was immediately hit with a shudder of awareness as to his station. This man was not a “worker” at the museum: he was in fact a prisoner, a man whose laboring presence signified his status as “trustee,” that is, one whose officially recognized adherence to the penal sovereign’s decrees of proper captive comportment allowed him a channel away from plantation fields and the solitary cell while affording him the “privilege” of performing the role of all-purpose servant to the museum staff.

The trustee’s presence at the site of my attempted encounter with the past was suggestive of the extreme difficulty, or absolute inapplicability, of the word “archive” in reference to the study of Angola and other political geographies of neoslavery. The word “archive” pronounces and reenacts the death of the object of analysis—namely, when that “object” is actually a human being who has been literally objectified by the law.<sup>18</sup> Beholding this man as he was ordered to perform a seemingly endless litany of tasks (including serving my needs as researcher), and mindful of the infinite routines of labor, pain, and rupture being suffered at that very moment by thousands of other plantation captives not afforded the privilege of working as museum servant, I asked myself how I could properly engage with a past that has never died. When I began to look through the boxes, I knew that I was embarking on a process of mnemonic encounter with present-day racial genocide as much as an archival search for subterranean elements of a forgotten or grossly distorted past. This again is the epistemic and experiential purchase of Toni Morrison’s concept of rememory; it is also what Jamaica Kincaid meant in describing the black subaltern’s position as being caught by and in history, whereby the past is experienced not as an object of intellectual inquiry but is felt as an “open wound” that keeps reopening with every breath.<sup>19</sup> In this light, the question is not simply what historical antecedents have led us to our current perilous predicament, but why the “now” is so reminiscent, reflective, and painfully resonant with the genocidal “then.”

From this perspective, the ubiquitous and unavoidable presences that emit from the historical and continued manufacture of the civilly, natally, and socially dead at the American neoplantation represent dubious and unspeakable resolution to what, in *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman presents as

the nearly impossible task of recovering the ghosts of chattel slavery within the barracoon-like enclosures of the master archive and the desolate and long inoperative slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast Castles in Ghana. As I sat down to work at the precipice of America's "Angola," and what stands as the longest operating slave fortress in the Western hemisphere, if not the world, my frustration was not that there were no dead "revenants lurking in the dungeon" to reclaim, it was with the reality that among the modern-day barracoons of the prison-industrial complex there are far too many living revenants to count. Indeed, the living plantation represents an all-too-literal embodiment of Hartman's contention that if "the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison."<sup>20</sup>

### Minstrel Show at Camp A: The Excesses of Neoplantation Management

*The photograph . . . takes its place in this contest of haunting.*

—Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*

It did not take long at all. After stealing a surreptitious bit of conversation with the Angola "trustee," who had unearthed four boxes from a backroom in the museum—a hushed exchange in which he let me know with his eyes as much as his words that his body and soul knew more than I could ever conceive in my mind about neoslavery—I had only to flip through three photos before I saw John McElroy without knowing that I was seeing him and that he was also (literally) seeing me. There he was/is, standing on crutches, with a dismembered right leg, in a prison-striped version of a tuxedo jacket, positioned front and center of the prison plantation's "Negro orchestra" and eighteen fellow members of Angola's blackface minstrel troupe (Figures 7 and 8). Before I discovered that it was Camp A prisoner number "37708" staring out resolutely from the center of a photograph intended to stage black contentment with and inurement to the predicament of penal chattelhood, and days prior to the moment that he would reach out directly from the grave and make me aware of what he had to tell me (and everyone else within striking distance of these words), I was fully convinced that in snatching this *unhistorical event* from the well-fortified oblivion of official history, I had completed a research task of my own choosing.<sup>21</sup>



*Figure 7. Camp A minstrel troupe, Angola Prison Plantation, c. 1947. John McElroy, the troupe leader, is shown front and center with crutches. Courtesy Angola Museum, Louisiana State Penitentiary.*



*Figure 8. Close-up of John McElroy, the minstrel troupe leader at Angola.*

The haunting quality of the photograph was not lost on me before I was approached by its most prominent unquiet presence. For instance, I knew that the costumed prison uniforms worn in the shot—including the tuxedo jackets, the vertically striped pants and shirts, the striped hat bands, and the horizontally striped socks worn by one of the three performers in drag—had been patterned and sewn by black women at “the Willows,” the mellifluous “Sweet Home”-sounding name given to the section of Angola’s eighteen thousand acres allotted to the entombment of women, the overwhelming majority of whom were black. I knew that, along with slaving in the plantation’s cotton fields under armed guard, working as nannies to children of white prison employees, and other traditionally unspoken forms of rupturous labor, they most certainly would have suffered as domestic neoslaves in the homes of white men, these women were tasked with making all of Louisiana’s prison uniforms from the early twentieth century until they were eventually transported to a women’s penal “farm” at St. Gabriel in 1962.<sup>22</sup>

With the absent presence of these women in mind, I first sat looking at the group of blackfaced, cross-dressed, and prison-striped men posing on a plantation house concrete porch made to double as a minstrel stage with what Fred Moten describes as a sonic “interior exteriority of the photograph” emanating in my ears in the form of the voice of Odea Mathews.<sup>23</sup> The image emitted a ghostly reverb of a sorrow/survival song that this particular black woman prisoner once delivered into the microphone of a white folkloric tourist to the neoplantation while she sat, her hands and feet bound to their daily manipulation of a sewing machine, positioned in physical proximity to the place I was now sitting and on a day not far removed from the one upon which the photograph was taken.

There’s somethin’ within me, Oh Lord,  
 That holds in the rain (yes it is).  
 Somethin’ within me,  
 Oh child I cannot explain (yes it is).  
 Somethin’ within me,  
 Oh Lord I cannot explain (oh yes),  
 All I can say, praise God, somethin’ within.

Have you somethin’ within you (Oh yes),  
 That’s burnin’ inside? (Yes it is),  
 Somethin’ within you, Oh child, you know it never gets tired.

Somethin' within you, Oh Lord it never gets tired,  
And all I can say, praise God, somethin' within.<sup>24</sup>

With an enthralling vibrato that sounds eerily similar to the Dinah Washington of "This Bitter Earth," Mathews gestures toward, longs for, and produces an unnamable, unlocatable, and inexplicable loophole of (dis)embodied retreat that is situated deep within her reified, ruptured, and ruled body.<sup>25</sup> Through an act of spiritual marronage that could just as easily have been rendered during Angola's birth-time as an antebellum plantation more than 120 years before the recording, the incarcerated, natively alienated, and chattelized subject testifies to and re-creates an unfungible somethin' within and beyond the publicly owned and physically exhausted corporeal self that has been mechanized, criminalized, and colonized by the state. However, insofar as her attempted self-reclamation depends on and is performed through the detachment of her "tireless" spirit from her imprisoned body, Mathews's act of sonic redress expresses the burdened, dispossessed, and terrorized collective predicament of the living dead through the very act of sounding claim to a modicum of individual freedom. After all, what is the necessary severance of the would-be-free spirit from the physically tortured body if not a nearly exact simulation of the untimely termination of life?<sup>26</sup>

*Somethin' within me, Oh Lord, that holds in the rain*—The redressive disintegration of the spiritual self from the pained black body, bound in the rain (or reign) of a literal hell on earth, seemed a fitting sonic accompaniment for my first contact with a photograph in which the bodies of Mathews's fellow prisoners are captured in a moment of prison plantation "downtime," performing in the quintessential white supremacist cultural modality of spectatorial dehumanization and black disfigurement. The grotesque penal resurfacing of the blackface mask beckons us to the photo's centrally positioned subject and the historically voided captive experiences registered by his carceral dismemberment. Indeed, nothing shown in the minstrel troupe photograph more clearly signifies the punitive dimensions of black captive performance and the terroristic terms under which the prison slave would have elected to perform in blackface more than the redolent onstage absent presence of his amputation. As I sat at the foot of the very place where the photograph was shot, with Mathews's haunting refrain reverberating in my ears, I considered how the black prisoner's missing right leg signals the fact that the redressive spirit-body detachment of the neoslave is most often coupled with and deployed in response



to what Hortense Spillers describes as the ritualized tearing apart or mortification of black captive flesh—a routine of sadistic state violence that in this instance has more than likely led to the permanent detachment of the imprisoned body from one of its main parts.<sup>27</sup>

As I pulled away from Angola's front gate, I knew that I would return to this anonymous figure (and his disappeared limb) when I returned home from Louisiana. But I also knew that, in doing so, I would have to conduct an act of counter-historical imagination since the leader of Angola's minstrel troupe had been obliterated from history, along with countless other black prisoners who had been enslaved on the plantation since the early nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> There was no pathway for recovering this particular buried story—or so I thought. Three days after I returned to Baton Rouge, I found myself sitting at the Louisiana State Archives, scanning a rather unforthcoming microform reel of correspondence pertaining to the Louisiana State Penitentiary. I had hoped that the file of letters written to and from the State Attorney General's office from the late 1940s to the 1950s would contain clemency statements written by Angola prisoners—testimony that, however mediated, would at least give a measure of “blood to the scraps” that I had been able to recover to that point.<sup>29</sup> As I heard the voice of one of the archive's staff address patrons over the intercom informing us that the facility would soon be closing, I had found next to nothing.

On a whim, I decided to scan the reel again, turning the advance knob clockwise as far as it would go. With the images flashing over the screen at the highest speed, I stopped the reel and landed squarely on the following letter:

Angola LA Camp A

March 3—49

Dear Sir Mr Kimp,

I hav recive a few Letters from you. And as yet I haven't got any one to help me as you have sent word for them to help me. As I have already told you that I have life here. On sircumstance everdence I am a one leg man. And I do not have any one to help me at all. But you. So will you try to Get Some one to Get me out on a pertinal pardon are they serch law as that So if you will please sir write me at once

Yours Truly Sir

From John McElroy 37708

Camp A Angola La

Answer Soon.<sup>30</sup>

I knew the words were significant. But I also knew that there was no way I could possibly be hearing the voice of the same “one leg man” I had first seen at Angola three days before in the minstrel show photograph. No way. I was not prepared to receive the spectral summons contained in the desperate refrain, *help me . . . sent word . . . to help me . . . I am a one leg man . . . I don't have anyone to help me at all. But you.* I quickly printed the letter and moved on to the next image (Figure 9):

John McElroy is unknown to history. Indeed, he was imprisoned, enslaved, and dis(re)membered by a living history that kills—that con torts, disqualifies, and annihilates the experiences and the truths uttered by the untold millions who make up the desecrated and unquiet dead of American racial genocide. Both his name and his life were to have been forever eradicated through the legal stigmata of black criminalization and neo-enslavement. They were to have been stenciled over by the punitive mark of “37708”—a branding that represents a twentieth-century penal reinscription of the very dis-naming and cataloguing practices that began in Euro-American modernity's original racial capitalist misogynist prisons: the barracoons, “factories,” holds, pens, and plantations of the Middle Passage and antebellum chattel slavery.<sup>31</sup>

But there he was/is. The very “one leg man” I thought I had found buried in a box at Angola had actually found me. At this moment I had to reckon not only with a literal ghost, or zombie, of the master archive but also with the fact that the task I thought I had been engineering on my own, of searching out the remnants of punitive performance at the prison plantation, had actually been conducted all along by one of its living revenants—the leader of Camp A's “colored” minstrel troupe—a man whose repeated call for liberation had been muted for decades within Angola's slave plantation fields (and performance stages) and by the enclosures of the master archive, but who nonetheless had continued wailing an incarcerated blues refrain that had finally been heard: *Help me . . . help me . . . I am a one leg man . . . I don't have anyone to help me at all. But you. I am. John McElroy . . .* And there I was. He was calling out to me (and everyone within striking distance of these words) from an unlocatable grave to un-desecrate his death, to remember his stolen and dishonored name and body, and to listen to his unaccounted-for ghostly encounter with a structure of necropolitical terror that continues to denigrate his memory and that of his fellow captives through the mass production and consumption of neoslaves, such as the “natural lifer” who had delivered the minstrel

Angola La  
Camp A  
Aug 12 - 1951

Dear attorney General. Mr Boliver E Kimp  
I am the same one leg man who was writing  
you in 1948 Trying to get you to get me out  
But at this time, I have a different problem  
To set before you. I am the leader of  
The Colord Minstral Show here. and we have  
A real good Show. and why I am writing  
you Sir, wee would like for you to Book  
The Show at some place at your Home  
Hammond La now Dear Sir. dont think  
Hard of me by asking of this favor Sir.  
Just Write Back to Captain Johnnie Spilman  
% Camp A Angola La That is if you  
See fit to Book the Show at your Date.  
My Wife is working in Hammond. at Rt 2 Box 813, Beulah

Yours very truly Sir.  
Sam. John McElroy

#37708 Camp A

Angola La

Figure 9. John McElroy to Louisiana Attorney General, Bolivar Kemp Jr., Louisiana State Penitentiary, General Correspondence (microform), 1951-52. Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge.

show image to me in a box three days before at Angola. Indeed this was the very sort of moment Avery Gordon, in conversation with Derrida, had spoken of in suggesting that if “the ghost is alive,” we “are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice*. Out of a concern for justice would be the only reason to bother.”<sup>32</sup>

However, as I began the work of respectfully and hospitably attending to one who, out of his own posthumous concern for a counter-judicial variety of justice, had literally reached out from the inhospitable tomb of official history, I was aware that, in many respects, my task was as impossible as it was necessary. The first and most obvious thing that must be said along these lines is that no amount of attentive engagement with John McElroy’s spectral presence will do anything to repair the breach inflicted upon his life, that of his entire family, and those of other racially and criminally stigmatized persons who have been subjected to neoslavery in mass numbers at places such as Angola, Parchman, Sugarland, Cummins, Banner Mine, and Attica since the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Aside from this, one must respectfully acknowledge the chasm between our desire to welcome one such as McElroy into rememory and the epistemic erasure and seizure that constitute the unhistorical positionality of the neoslave. Indeed there was enough in the way of unavailable and inaccessible knowledge accompanying the ghostly resurfacing of the Angola black-face minstrel photograph, and two last-ditch missives from the troupe’s “one leg” leader, as to make the imperative duty of careful listening seem vexing at best. For instance, what exactly was the alleged crime for which John McElroy received a life term of civil death? Were his mother and father still alive when he attempted to convince Attorney General Bolivar Kemp Jr. to allow his minstrel troupe the “favor” of resurrecting the antebellum “darky” for the citizens of Hammond, Louisiana? By what surreptitious and surprisingly bold expressive means did he and his fellow black prison slaves incorporate the blues voice that inhabits his letters into their stage performances of neoslave joviality, subhumanity, and contentment? How many children did he and his wife, “Bertha,” have before he was disappeared to the neoslave plantation, and how many of these children would ultimately find themselves imprisoned at Angola, a local “County Farm,” a chain gang, or a northern penitentiary? Just how long had McElroy been enslaved in West Feliciana before writing his first letters to Kemp (he

mentions that correspondence began in 1948)? Do these unrecoverable letters contain details of the exact manner by which he became dispossessed of his right leg?

But here we are met with an equally important question: How can one enter into a reckoning with the ghostly presences of neoslavery with any expectation of historical, experiential, or expressive transparency on the part of one of its revenants, even one that approaches us with the head-on (and leg-off) intensity of John McElroy? As Hartman (following Edouard Glissant) advises us, anyone taking on such a task must respect “the right to obscurity” of those who have endured the unsayable, the unthinkable, and the irreparable.<sup>33</sup> A desire for transparency, clarity, and full semantic disclosure on the part of even the most unquiet revenant of the chattelized carceral disrespects and disregards the magnitude of the very unavowed atrocity we are attempting to honor through our careful listening. As Sethe’s “crawling already” baby and ghostly survivor of the Middle Passage reminds us throughout *Beloved*—but with most arresting intensity in the antigrammatical monologue I discussed in chapter 1—those who emerge from oblivion hungry for rememory do not and cannot speak, write, sing, wail, or scream in complete sentences (or sounds). Rather, it is the very incomplete, cut-off, broken, and incomprehensible nature of the aural, written, and visual remainders of the socially and civilly dead that qualify their semantic depth and social urgency, and that signal the counter-historical, counter-epistemological, and counter-pedagogical value of their muzzled and submerged transmissions from the many unmarked graves of American racial genocide. Here we might think of the ellipses and silences of both the Angola minstrel show photograph and McElroy’s two “kites” from Camp A as bearing a gravity akin to the echo-laden silences and caesuras that accompany John Coltrane’s tenor saxophone in “Alabama” (his dirge to Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley); or what Frederick Douglass describes as the incomprehensible but inestimably “deep meaning” of the slave songs he first heard in boyhood, whose mere mnemonic recurrence was enough to bring tears to his eyes as he wrote his autobiography of 1845; or the unspeakable thing that Stamp Paid felt in his hand and spirit during the travestied “freedom” time of 1874, when he reached into the Ohio River and pulled out what he thought was a cardinal feather but was actually a “red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet wooly hair, clinging still to a bit of [a black girl’s] scalp.”<sup>34</sup>

Like a ribboned bit of hair and scalp retrieved from the watery grave cutting Kentucky from Ohio, the muted, fragmented, and subterranean transmissions of the neoslave are resoundingly clear in their expression of the terror, dispossession, and rupture that have underpinned the predicament of liberal *de jure* freedom for black people in the United States. And, like a vestige of an anonymously murdered black girl in 1874 (or a publicly slain black boy in 2012),<sup>35</sup> John McElroy's phantom right leg—or rather his phantasmal reassertion of it—disassembles dominant historical, cultural, and legal truths that have attended the cross-generational punitive violation of the criminalized, dehumanized, and dishonored black subject from chattel slavery to prison slavery. McElroy's spectralized counter-deployment of his dismembered body both in his letters and on the neoplantation stage suggests how at the zero degree of chattelized entombment the only acts of “resistance” often made available to the captive involve an embrace, exhibition, and even a furtherance of one's very condition of brokenness, rupture, and dispossession.<sup>36</sup> In other words, when keeping in mind that he likely never achieved freedom, and that his only method of getting beyond Angola's gates may have been through the perverse privilege of performing the “darky's” cheerful acceptance of the very condition of enslavement that he tried so desperately to escape, McElroy's apparitional body and voice present less of a claim for reparation than a demand for attuned acknowledgment of the enormity of the unhistorical crime of state slavery and the irreparable pain associated with unachieved liberation.

Here we might think of the historically anonymous neoslave's performative and written redeployment of his captive body as an unrecognized and unromantic analogue of other embodied acts of injurious resistance, such as the hunger strike, that have been performed by “radical” or “political” prisoners. By openly declaring the reality of his punitive rupture, brandishing it onstage, and discursively fusing it to his identity under civil death in his repeated letters to the state's preeminent purveyor of the law (and to us)—*I am a one leg man . . . I am the same one leg man*—the undead social and political presence who is John McElroy transmutes the dismembered part of his body into a painfully eloquent and “radical” absence that disenchants the white supremacist mythos surrounding the torturous spectacle of black captive performance, including the minstrel show that he sought to book to a space *anywhere* outside the confines of the prison plantation after his repeated calls for actual deliverance received no answer.

Indeed, whereas none of prisoner number 37708's letters imploring the state's attorney general to offer him a pardon from "life" at Angola received any real attention, his presentation of the idea of directing a prison-striped blackface show in the official's hometown elicited an immediate and congenial response.

Dear John—I was very glad to get your letter and to learn that activities such as minstrel shows, etc. are being organized and carried on by the inmates. Things of this kind not only make a stay at the institution more bearable but are bound to be a help in preparing you for the ordeals of life when you are discharged. Right at the present I do not know how booking of your minstrel show could be accomplished, but I expect to be at Angola shortly and will discuss your letter with the officials there.

With Regards, I am  
Sincerely Yours,  
Bolivar E. Kemp, Jr.  
Attorney General<sup>37</sup>

For Kemp, the "gladness"-inspiring image of black prisoners performing the resurrection of the contented-to-be-enslaved "darky" at the prison plantation must have seemed like a well-timed and normalizing palliative for the momentous public relations problem the state was facing in respect to Angola at the very moment he received "John's" bid to bring Camp A's minstrel troupe to Hammond, Louisiana, in August 1951. In fact, the upcoming visit to the plantation he mentions in his letter more than likely had to do with another collective prisoner performance that had occurred in February of the same year, an act of desperate and injurious resistance taken by a group of prisoners from Angola's only white "dormitory," Camp E, who became known as the "Heel-String Gang." In an action that led to the biggest prison scandal in state history, and that gave Angola the dubious distinction of "bloodiest prison in America," thirty-seven white men used razor blades to sever their Achilles tendons in protest against LSP's ritualized violence and "can't to can't see" field labor<sup>38</sup>—the very domineering regime that countless black prisoners had endured without an iota of public outrage since Louisiana reclaimed its privately leased "Negro" prison slaves from the estate of Samuel Lawrence James in 1901.

By the time of the heel-string incident, Angola's black captives had long resorted to acts of last-ditch protest and bodily endangerment that received scarce coverage in local or national newspapers. These actions included but were not limited to self-mutilation, violent self-defense, the destruction of tools, poisoning guard families' food, and escape attempts whose least horrifying conclusion often consisted of an encounter with the plantation's bloodhounds followed by a hiding from a five-foot club or black-snake whip.<sup>39</sup> But a reading of this history in concert with the unheeded call that continues to emanate from McElroy's letters and an unburied photograph of the Camp A minstrel ensemble forces some important questions into view. For instance, does not the black captive's last-resort effort at securing a tenuous and always already incomplete reprieve from the penitentiary's innumerable other staging grounds of punitive terror through painting on the mask of black self-immolation represent an act as desperate, injurious, and vexing as self-mutilation? Can we not discern the state of legalized exception as readily in the outline of the prison minstrel's smile as in the contours of the whip-scars, bite marks, knife wounds, and bullet holes that covered many of the troupe members' bodies?<sup>40</sup> Such questions force into view those who are present at the minstrel show but who are not caught within the frame of the photograph—the penitentiary employees and visitors who are situated at the windows of the plantation house and on the other side of the plantation surveillance camera. The harrowing unseen dimensions of the photograph leave us wondering just how many members of the Angola minstrel troupe were forcibly removed from slaving in the fields or the plantation house and made to perform in front of employee families and white visitors under the pain of being whipped, bludgeoned with the “line pusher,” or killed by a gun-toting prisoner trusty;<sup>41</sup> or how many of them had previously been shot with bullets issuing from the shotgun of the same “Captain” or “Sergeant” who was in charge of shooting the minstrel photo. From Kemp's perspective, however, such realities were imponderable, or at least unactionable. The urgent plea that he confronted in McElroy's earlier letters was always already muzzled and shuttled through the comforting image of Sambo's return, even if the conjuration of that image depended on the interested elision of prisoner number 37708's previous communications from memory and a willful suspension of acknowledgment of the fact that this particular criminally branded “Sambo” was appearing on the neplantation stage not as a contented prison slave but as a *one-leg man* whose apparent smile screamed out for *help*.



From the perspective of Kemp, and those free white people who did have the opportunity to reap enjoyment from interested mis-hearings of the “reels,” blues, jazz, “work songs,” and spirituals of those such as McElroy and Mathews over the years, the spectacle of picaresque “niggers” playing the “happy-go-lucky” slave represented stark visual opposition to the unruly white prisoner’s enactment of pained resistance and overt defiance in the face of civil death—a dichotomy that secured the ontological partitioning of whiteness and blackness notwithstanding the criminal stigmatization of the white prisoner. The ontological, pedagogical, and literal currency that attached to the prison slave’s performative and domestic neoslave labor at Angola functioned in dialectical interface with the economic returns associated with his use as “productive” laborer in plantation fields.<sup>42</sup> For many white working-class employees and their families who resided in the de facto free municipality that grew within the borders of the prison, the sense of racial superiority derived from the fungible black body served as a critical psychological and material supplement for the relatively modest monetary wages offered to many prison guards and administrators of an industrialized public neoslavery concern that operated at a technical loss through most years of its existence. Patsy Dreher, the daughter of an Angola guard captain, expresses this dynamic through a nostalgic recall of an idyllic childhood at the neoplantation when a steady supply of *all-purpose black men* were placed at the disposal of her family and those of other white employees: “Angola was a pleasant place to live back then. A vegetable cart came by every morning. What you didn’t get in pay, you got in benefits. You . . . could get inmates as cooks, yard boys, house boys; you could have two or three of them if you wanted. We had an old cook named Leon who cried like a baby when he got paroled; he said ours was the only home he had known in a long time.”<sup>43</sup> The seemingly limitless public/private utility and status-augmenting efficacy of the trustworthy and faithfully imprisoned “Negro boy” was also enjoyed within the socially incarcerating structures of Angola’s surrounding communities, not simply through occasional free-world concerts such as the one McElroy hoped to book to Hammond but also through an informal convict lend/lease system whereby black trusties were dispensed to local white families as field-, house-, and *musical slaves*: “The adjacent parishes and few small communities in the area greatly benefited from the labor and talents of the inmates. Inmates were unofficially ‘loaned as skilled laborers, skilled workers, and even entertainers.’”<sup>44</sup>

The liberal utilization and public dissemination of the postbellum “Negro” prisoner as either field slave, house slave, or musical slave underlines the inseparability of “productive” forms of market-oriented labor and “unproductive” forms of labor, terror, and dishonor within spaces of neoslavery, and the degree to which geographies such as Angola plantation have been built as much on the reproduction of white supremacist pleasure and domination as on the production of cash crops and monetary profits. Here we are reminded of William Goodell’s earlier statement from the early 1850s regarding the fungibility, or seemingly limitless economic and social utility, of the black captive—that “Slaves, as Property, may be *used*, absolutely by their owners at will, for their own profit or pleasure.”<sup>45</sup> Read in this light, what I have described above as the “unhistorical” aspect of captive performance at Angola not only refers to the occlusion of those such as John McElroy and Odea Mathews from the master archive, but to the virtual absence of their experiences of neoslavery within liberal and “radical” historiographic treatments of the subject of postbellum convict labor—many of which either downplay the connection between that dominative system and chattel slavery or describe penal neoslavery as something that only happened “down there” or “back then.”<sup>46</sup> Such discussions have tended to reduce the repressive scope of racialized imprisonment either to the liberal humanitarian terms of relative death rates, or to the “radical” economic terms of production and labor exploitation without accounting for the ways in which (1) black postbellum imprisonment is itself a formation of mass civil and living death grounded in the mass social death of chattel slavery; (2) how, far from operating simply as an “economic” system, racialized incarceration (and by this term I am again referring to the necropolitical order of gendered, economic, spatial, and racial terror that began under the Middle Passage) has represented a mode of “cultural imposition,” ontological subordination, and legal domination fundamental to free/white collective self-imagining and to the overall material structuring of American empire.<sup>47</sup> The atrocities of slavery and neoslavery cannot be fully contemplated within the narrow economic indices of production and labor exploitation, namely when we attempt to approach them from the nearly impossible-to-recover position of the corporeally and psychically terrorized black captive. In other words, the unhistorical experiences of those such as McElroy and Mathews unveil how chattel carcerality is not simply a mode of economic production: it is also a process of ontological, corporeal, spatial, legal, and cultural domination residing in the DNA of occidental modernity.

Along with registering the unhistorical import of black neoslave performance as a modality of white supremacist cultural reproduction and communal self-fabrication, Kemp's allusion to the way in which the recreational privilege of minstrelsy successfully made the black neoslave's experience of plantation imprisonment "more bearable" represents a mid-twentieth-century redeployment of the racialized carceral discourses of natural "Negro" contentment, submissiveness, and slave-worthiness that had been part and parcel of the chattelization of black being and the consolidation of whiteness since the Middle Passage. From its beginnings on the decks of slave ships, the coffles that herded Africans to the auction block, and with the weekend and holiday "frolics" of the antebellum slave plantation, the staging of captive amusement had been implemented as a primary mechanism of managing the enslaved and imprisoned black body, of cultivating the psychic well-being, social dominion, and pleasure-drives of the white civil subject, and of normalizing the collective rupture, terror, and abjection black captives faced under centuries of chattelized incarceration.<sup>48</sup> As Hartman suggests in her seminal theorization of the instrumental deployment of the black performative body in the antebellum period, the orchestration of captive gaiety, musicality, and docility during ostensibly "unproductive" off-times laid at the fulcrum of plantation relations, registering the degree to which the "hours of sundown to sunup were as important as those spent in the field in cultivating the productivity of the plantation household and maintaining social control." She adds that during the mid-nineteenth century,

such diversions were an important element in plantation management, as the internalization of discipline and reward was considered essential to the good order of the plantation. . . . Prizewinning essays on the ideals of management held that 'industry and good conduct should be encouraged [and] the taste for innocent amusements gratified.' These designs for mastery *troubled the distinctions between leisure and labor* and employed an extensive notion of discipline that included everything from the task system to the modes of singing allowed. . . . According to the planter, the whip used sparingly, the fiddle, and the Bible formed the holy trinity.

As if copying its design for state mastery directly from one of these prize-winning antebellum essays, Angola's administration of the early 1940s

described its ideal philosophy for managing “Negro” prison slaves as a perfectly balanced apportionment of *physical* repression and *spiritual* hegemony:

To keep the convict separate from society is partly a physical and partly a spiritual problem. As a physical problem it involves iron fences, bars of steel, leather straps, clubs, and guns. As a spiritual problem it involves humane treatment; a friendly attitude, tasks suited to the strength and talents, trusts and loyalties, work and recreation. The spiritual factors are the most promising and reliable though the physical factors are a necessary last resort. Therefore we rely on kind and just treatment of the prisoners . . . [their] life should be made as happy as possible.<sup>49</sup>

That black prisoners are known to have suffered from well over ten thousand *reported* whippings during the decade leading up to this statement represents the quotidian functionality of so-called last-resort terror apparatuses within the pseudohegemonic arena of racialized civil death and the degree to which labor, leisure, and terror have been as virtually indistinguishable and mutually constitutive under the slavery of prison as during the prison of slavery.<sup>50</sup> Far from representing an anachronistic remnant of premodern mechanisms of terror, dishonor, and perverse captor pleasure, the “fun” side of the Middle Passage model of imprisonment came to represent a foundational element of carceral modernity as a whole—not only in the American chain gang, prison plantation, and penitentiary but in other racialized necropolitical spaces such as Auschwitz and Birkenau wherein certain prison slaves were allotted the “privilege” of acting as musical and athletic entertainers in the concentration camp version of the afore-mentioned *plantation holiday*.<sup>51</sup> If the teleology of antebellum mastery called for the creation of a kind of genocidal equilibrium based upon the calibrated application and fusion of “productive” and “unproductive” forms of captive travail ranging from field/house work, to corporeal rupture, to “innocent” and/or “spiritual” diversions such as singing, dancing, and the Bible, then the practice of captive performance at Angola and other U.S. prisons, County Farms, and chain gangs registers the degree to which this terroristic matrix of chattel incarceration haunted its way into the experiential reality of black people for generations after the Civil War.

The centrality of weapons of recreational diversion and ostensibly unproductive forms of labor to the project of neo-enslavement can be gleaned even among the most apparently prosaic descriptions of black captive “work” on the “state penal farm.” For instance, in an article that appeared in the *Louisiana Municipal Review* in 1943, what is intended to be a straightforward cataloguing of Angola’s industrial capacities ends up producing a neoplantation pastoral scene in which the time-honored southern planter and northern “romantic racist” mythos of master-slave harmony and reciprocity is resuscitated through the evocation of the plantation holiday and the euphemistic introduction of the World War II edition of the Camp A minstrels:

A combination of mule and tractor power is used. Forty miles of railroad traverse the cane fields, from which two trains transport cane to the sugar refinery which can handle 1,400 tons of cane



Figure 10. The terror/labor of neoslave “leisure.” Atchafalaya River Levee Camp section of Louisiana State Penitentiary, c. 1900—just four years after the camp death rate had reached 20 percent. The original caption for the photograph, which appeared in the annual report of the Board of Control for the state penitentiary for 1901, read, “Fun in levee camp.” Henry L. Fuqua Jr. Lytle Photograph Collection and Papers, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge.

daily. The 30 miles of gravel roads intersecting the plantation make it convenient to supplement the hauling of cane with tractors and cane buggies. The refinery is operated continuously on a 24-hour basis through the cane season, which in 1942 lasted 65 days.

The men work through the harvest regardless of weather, for much of the success of a cane crop depends upon the speed with which it is gathered. After the harvest, there is a celebration period during which turkeys raised on the farm and other delicacies grown at the penitentiary are combined for festive dinners at the camp. The prisoners are allowed the privilege of putting on a vaudevill [*sic*] show with a cast composed exclusively of inmates. With their pent-up emotions released in healthy laughter, they usually enjoy one night and two afternoon performances of the show. Warden Bazer is generously helpful in making provisions for and directing the show.

The sugar refinery is supplemented by a railroad shop and foundry, light plant, and a machine electrical shop. There [is] also a leather shop.<sup>52</sup>

The intrusion of the prison plantation harvest festival and “vaudevill[e] show” into an otherwise routine outline of sugarcane production and other forms of industrialized neoslavery at Angola illustrates the degree to which the round-the-clock labor regiment of the neoplantation was in no way limited to the sixty-five-day cane-processing season—how the painful “work” of prison slavery was felt on a twenty-four-hour basis even in moments of apparent reprieve. Nothing signals the imbrications of penal recreation and corporeal repression—of managerial lenience and carceral surveillance—more than the warden’s tripartite role as industrial plantation field commander, bestower of performative privilege, and “director” of the very break from productive slave labor that he grants the black prisoner. Accordingly, the narrative bears striking resonance with numerous accounts offered by former slaves that expose the vital function of such “celebration periods” in the attempted scientific management of the chattelized body, psyche, and spirit before 1865. Compare the perverse notion proffered here that the prison master’s benevolent conferral and directorial orchestration of punitive privilege in the form of the blackface show offered the state slave a moment in which the “emotions” associated with bondage could be “released in healthy laughter” to Douglass’s deconstruction of

similar holiday entertainments he personally experienced while incarcerated as a chattel slave in Maryland: “From what I know of the effect of these holidays upon the slave, I believe them to be among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection. . . . These holidays serve as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity.”<sup>53</sup>

While Douglass’s recollection of the plantation holiday offers an integral demystification of the malevolent designs that underpinned the staging of prison master benevolence and captive performance, it does so without accounting for the ways in which “the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity” often maneuvered its way into the very festive events the master attempted to employ as weapons of punitive pacification and perverse pleasure. However, as discussed above in reference to McElroy’s spectral image and voice, the rupturous lower-frequency practices of resistance employed by the prison slave will most often leave one grossly unsatisfied if in considering them one implements a framing of the “insurrectionary” similar to that which Douglass himself offers immediately prior to his description of the plantation holiday—that is, his epic, exceptional, and “manly” overcoming of Edward Covey.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, before closing this chapter, I want to introduce how the critical suspension of a presupposed normative manliness and a self-possessed heroic model of resistance in respect to the hyper-circumscribed positionality of the dominated represents an apposite point of entry into another spectral element of the Camp A minstrel photograph.

If we return for a moment to the close-up of the photograph, we see a person standing to John McElroy’s far right, clapping her hands, wearing a floral print skirt and blouse and a neatly tied scarf on her head. In drawing attention to this unknown subject, I want to be clear that my usage of the gender-specific pronoun “her” represents an act of (un)historically informed imagination rather than a desire to “narrow down” or reify this person’s gender or sexual identity. The prisoner could just as easily have identified as a gay man, as bi or questioning, or as a hetero male who happened to perform on the plantation minstrel stage in drag.<sup>55</sup> Any discernment of the prison slave’s gender or sexual identity is made all the more vexing when posed in relation to a chattelized punitive apparatus in which sexual violence and domination have always represented *de facto* elements of the prison sentence and wherein many are coerced into assuming certain gender and sexual roles as a means of avoiding an intensification of corporeal rupture or of preserving their biological life.<sup>56</sup> The reified, fungible,

and object status of the slave of the state exposes the limits of the concept of self-identification within spaces of legalized rape, torture, and civil murder of the “self.” Moreover, the historical mediations I have spoken of in reference to McElroy and other neoslaves are that much more prohibitive in respect to this imprisoned figure and others captured in the photograph—persons for whom we have no unburied letters to offer us even a peripheral glimpse into their personal biography or their particular experience of neo-enslavement. Fully aware of these crucial concerns, I have chosen to enact the imaginative leap of isolating this tall and slender “woman” out of a strong feeling that this could quite possibly be a pictorial vestige of an Angola trusty named James Bruce, a person who would have featured regularly as a drag queen in McElroy’s minstrel troupe in the mid- to late 1940s, and who, as a longtime domestic and performative neoslave at Angola, represents a haunting internal extremity of the photograph made no less powerful by our inability to verify if s/he is indeed the one standing behind McElroy in the image. Furthermore, I do so with the conviction that even if the person is not who I think s/he may be, that my uncovering of a sliver of Bruce’s story via the channeling accompaniment of the Camp A minstrel troupe image may limn important aspects of the unspeakable, unspoken, and unclaimed ordeals of chattelized captivity, incarcerated performance, and neoslave resistance specific to the experience of the legally disappeared and historically anonymous black queer/trans prison slave.<sup>57</sup>

McElroy actually enables our reckoning with Bruce’s apparitional presence within the minstrel photograph in his second letter to Kemp, in which he identifies Captain “Johnnie” Spillman as the “care of” addressee for what he hopes will be the attorney general’s affirmative response to his bid to book the Camp A show to Hammond, Louisiana. John Spillman was a second-generation Angola guard who began his apprenticeship in the overseeing, driving, and virtual ownership of criminalized black bodies at the prison plantation in 1916 as a teenager, and who, by the time of McElroy’s initial clemency letters in 1948, would have long been in charge of Camp A, one of three sectors of the sprawling penitentiary that were known in the local white supremacist parlance as “Jungle Camps.” For McElroy, Bruce, and their fellow prison slaves, a more appropriate name for this space of racialized living death and others like it on the neoslave plantation would have been—to resound George Jackson’s terminology, an *American concentration camp*—one in which what I defined earlier as the Middle Passage carceral model was executed in a manner that represented a state-level



simulation of the hyperconstricted, suffocating, and scatological spatial arrangements of the county chain-gang's portable cage.

One of the more clear-cut examples of the "land-based slave ship" model of human entombment at Angola came in the form of Camp A's "sweat-box," an architecture Spillman and other administrators deployed to punish, segregate, and torture those deemed "unruly" or "lazy" for decades leading up to the heel-string incident, and one reserved exclusively for the black neoslave. Indeed, as in the case of the sepulcher-fashioned boxcars in which chain-gang prisoners throughout the southern United States were long-chained and stacked atop one another, the sweatbox represented a dubious actuation of the "box" within which Paul D and his forty-five fellow chain-gang prisoners were buried underground in *Beloved*. Edward Stagg offered this description of the Camp A isolation/punishment unit after he and a group of fellow journalists conducted a surprise visit to Angola following the Camp E heel-string action:

One of the peculiarities we came upon appeared to be a solid block of concrete. Three iron pipes stuck up from the top like periscopes.

On closer examination, we discovered three steel doors on one side of the block. Each was of solid metal, except for a small louvered rectangle near the bottom, similar to the draft vent beneath the grate of a furnace.

We banged on the door with our fists. A man's voice answered from within! We saw that the door was locked, and that there was no one around who could open it. We asked the man inside if he was all right, and he said he was. We saw that the second door was locked, and we assumed there was a man behind it, too. When we came to the third door, we found it to be unlocked and swung it open.

The walls and ceiling were painted black. There were no windows. The only sources of light or air were seven-inch wide, down-tilted slits in the bottom of the door and a two-inch hole in the ceiling. The hole led into a pipe on the roof that was bent in the opposite direction of the prevailing wind.

A bed stood along the wall. In an opposite corner was a concrete box for a toilet. The entire cubicle was the size of a small clothes closet. Into this stifling space as many as seven men were jammed at a time. At least one man had been removed in a state just short of roasting.<sup>58</sup>

Those of Captain Spillman's "Negroes" who managed to avoid being buried alive and roasted within the sweatbox were subjected to *can't to can't see* field labor under rifle, whip, and bat—and were then herded into a wooden shack in which they were stacked on top of one another in triple-bunk formation, and where no more than four toilets were allocated to nearly three hundred men. It was in the same article from 1952 that an indirectly quoted and anonymous prisoner from Camp A captured in a single truncated phrase what volumes of history on the subject of imprisonment in the United States had not: according to him, the "dormitory" in which he was held emitted a "*stink like the hold of a slave ship*."<sup>59</sup>

Angola's implementation of the Middle Passage carceral model represented an essential contributing factor to the neoslave's desperate attempts at securing any channel of possible reprieve from the most physically brutal conditions found at the prison plantation. Indeed, the home of Captain "Johnnie" Spillman himself—like those of other guard captains and numerous white men and women outside Angola who were given the opportunity to rent or borrow its domestic neoslaves—represented one such zone of relative and rupturous respite from the zero-degree death rehearsals found in the sugarcane and cotton fields, the neofeudal stocks, the Camp A stockade, and the sweatbox. It therefore comes as no surprise that shortly following his disappearance into Camp A in 1935 on a burglary conviction, a young black New Orleanian named James Bruce seized upon the chance of working for Spillman as a domestic neoslave. S/he would end up doing so for approximately thirteen years, functioning variously as cook, "yard-boy," and "houseboy"—positions that, along with the more often discussed role of convict guard, represented the most common stations occupied by those prisoners who were branded as *Trusty Negroes*. Here the state's use of the letter "y" instead of today's more familiar "ee" at the end of the signifier denoting a captive of putative privilege, illustrates the degree to which in spaces such as Angola, Parchman, Cummins, and Sugarland, the "trusty" neoslave was conceived of as a post-1865 reincarnation of the ever-faithful, ever-dutiful, antebellum "house slave"—the "Mammies" and "Uncles" of the white supremacist cultural imaginary who were cast as maintaining an unbreachable fidelity to the master, a selfless and boundless loyalty, that was offered as evidence of the paternal benevolence of the plantation, and the infantilism, atavism, and natural slave-worthiness of the collectivity of "niggers" held prisoner within it.<sup>60</sup>

The dubiously literal possessive investment in such stock images by white residents of Angola's free township is rendered graphically in the photo albums of Spillman and other guard captains, which are replete with portraits of "trusty" black prisoners captured in chattelized pastoral tableau alongside head of cattle, horses, dogs, various crops produced at the neoplantation, and young white children for whom the trusties acted as "Uncles," "Mammies," and atavised playmates (Figure 11).<sup>61</sup> In fact, it was through the childhood remembrance of Spillman's own daughter, JoAn, who was raised at the penitentiary from birth, that I was first made aware of James Bruce. Much of what the guard captain's daughter has to say in respect to the "sort of chocolate colored . . . tall, skinny, mulatto man"<sup>62</sup> she recalls from her childhood at Angola reads like a perfectly synchronized narrative accompaniment for the portraiture of domestic tranquillity, (un)productive abundance, and black subservience on the neoplantation. Bruce is described as having acted as a perfectly domesticated prison slave who went about his interminable duties with a joyful exuberance. Whether he was busy



Figure 11. Black prison slave with white child standing on a load of seed cotton, Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola Prison Plantation, c. 1901. Henry L. Fuqua Jr. Lytle Photograph Collection and Papers, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge.

cooking the family's meals, "moving their dirt from one place to the other,"<sup>63</sup> tending to (other) livestock, or cranking the handle of a homemade ice-cream maker in preparation for one of JoAn's yearly backyard birthday celebrations she hosted for neighboring white children, Bruce is remembered as a happy-go-lucky sort of trusty Negro. According to JoAn, he was "a very good worker, kept the house immaculate, cooked good food and everything" and was "always whistling or singing; you'd have thought he was the happiest person in the world." The state's gothic transmutation of Bruce and other black incarcerated subjects into the personal accoutrement, or *human produce*, of white guard families gave JoAn the sense that time had frozen, or plunged backward, during her plantation upbringing—that, along with her mother and father, she had lived a real-world production of an idyllic and aristocratic country romance: "It was wonderful. I was the princess and my daddy and mother were the king and queen, and we had servants, and we didn't want for anything. And I was Little Miss Jo, or [the trustees] called me Curly or Shirley Temple, because I had curly hair. And it was just a storybook childhood."<sup>64</sup>

If the youngest member of the Spillman household was envisioned as Angola's version of America's "little curly top"—Shirley Temple—then James Bruce functioned as an incarcerated double for Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, whose famous staircase dance performance with Temple in *The Little Colonel* (1935) appeared in U.S. movie houses in the very same year that Bruce was first entombed at Camp A. Indeed, as in the case of Robinson's character in the depression-era romanticized and sanitized portrayal of 1870s Kentucky plantation life, Bruce's all-too-real role as mid-twentieth-century imprisoned "houseboy" was not restricted to cooking, butlering, and cleaning for the Spillmans. He, like many other black men and women at Angola, also served in the capacity of musical slave; specifically, as mentioned above, Bruce was one of the featured performers in McElroy's minstrel troupe during most of his thirteen years at the penitentiary. Furthermore, while Warden D. D. Bazer was credited in the piece from the *Louisiana Municipal Review* as being the troupe's administrative sponsor and director, it was in fact JoAn's father, Captain "Johnnie," who acted as de facto manager of the Camp A minstrels. Not only did Spillman oversee those of his neoslaves who performed for fellow inmates, honored guests, and tourists to the state plantation, but he also supervised the transportation of McElroy, Bruce, and other members of the troupe well beyond Angola's borders where they performed for white audiences in towns such

as Jackson and Pineville, Louisiana, the latter of which is situated more than 120 miles from the front gates of the prison. While these tours likely generated a bit of unofficial revenue for Spillman and other members of Angola's administration, they also served as family outings for the guard captain and his young daughter, whom he often brought along so that she could witness the family's collection of musical Negro trustees perform in distant "free-world" environments.<sup>65</sup>

We have no way of knowing what specific song-and-dance numbers the Camp A minstrel ensemble used as temporary tickets outside Angola's grounds. However, a deep recess in the historical archive does inform us that Bruce did not don the "burnt cork" for these shows as did many of his fellow troupe members—that as one of the stars of McElroy's ensemble s/he performed exclusively in drag. Again, as stated above, the fact that s/he performed at Angola and surrounding towns as an imprisoned drag queen does nothing to clarify how Bruce actually lived in terms of gender or sexuality. The severely circumscribed range of information that we are offered in respect to the experiences of the neoslave most often precludes definitive assessment of any aspect of "selfhood," let alone her gender identity and chosen bonds of intimacy. Even on the rare occasions in which we are allowed thin strands of detail in respect to Bruce's "personal" or "social" world, such information is rendered vexing at best when read in relation to the objectified, ventriloquized, and violated postsocial position of those whom the law has morphed into fungible state property. This problematic is that much more salient in respect to racialized bodies also labeled abnormal in respect to gender and/or sexuality, and whose carceral subjection thereby includes zero-degree vulnerability to the "invisible punishments" associated with sexually and gendered civil death.<sup>66</sup> Whether instigated by state actors or other slaves of the state, such predations include but are not limited to rape, sexual auctioning, the punitive severance of any *relatively* consensual intimate attachment, and homophobic and transphobic brutality.<sup>67</sup>

Along with the elision of the prison slave's terror-ridden experience after being disappeared to a place like Angola, racial capitalist patriarchal criminalization also works to produce a retroactive erasure of the neoslave's personal history before conviction, especially when targeting one such as Bruce whose official imprisonment was predicated on the socially incarcerating structure of Jim Crow apartheid—and who, upon legalized disappearance, was subjected to a predicament of state-borne natal alienation that forestalls any systematic gathering of "facts" as to personal or

familial history. In fact, if Bruce was indeed a transgender or gay black person, then the historical enclosures I referenced earlier in respect to the carceral experience of those such as John McElroy and Odea Mathews are even more insurmountable given the nearly total absence of any substantive discussion of black queer/trans bodies within histories of Jim Crow “convict labor” and neoslavery. This context of historical erasure certainly leaves us with more in the way of interested questions than clarifying answers vis-à-vis the experience of the criminalized and invisible black trans/queer subject. For instance, what can an (un)historically informed engagement with the social context in which s/he was arrested in New Orleans in the early 1940s tell us about the conditions of possibility for Bruce’s domestic and musical enslavement? If Bruce did see herself as a trans black woman or gay black male, then was her incarceration a direct outcome of the social isolation and economic dispossession that would have befallen a body branded as both “Negro” and sexually “freakish”?<sup>68</sup> Does this combination of racial, gender, and “sexual eccentricity” help explain why Bruce had to resort to breaking the terms of her initial parole from Angola by stealing \$200 from her roommate in a New Orleans housing project in 1945?<sup>69</sup>

If s/he did indeed hone the performative talents that made her one of the stars of McElroy’s minstrels before s/he was disappeared for a second time onto the prison plantation, then Bruce’s final arrest could well have occurred in the Magnolia Housing Project—a structure of urban apartheid that sat directly across from Lasalle Street’s famous Dew Drop Inn.<sup>70</sup> As a regular audience member and/or performer at this uptown cabaret, Bruce would have been able to develop an expansive repertoire of black vaudeville, tent show, minstrel, and rhythm and blues numbers by watching the likes of Irving Ale, aka Patsy Valdalia, the well-known drag queen who sang, danced, and emceed at the venue and who also hosted its annual “Gay Ball”—the interracial and thereby illegal affair that began to take place between Bruce’s first and second terms at the prison plantation.<sup>71</sup> In fact, if s/he did have regular opportunities to watch stage shows at the Dew Drop, Bruce also would have been able to enhance her apprenticeship in drag performance by taking note of the incomparable technique of another talented drag artist named Princess Lavonne, who, just before her discovery at the Dew Drop, changed her name to “Little Richard.”<sup>72</sup> Finally, and most important, if Bruce was a regular performer and/or audience member in this relatively trans/queer friendly space, s/he would have experienced

repeated violent encounters with the law that went unreported on her official criminal record. Specifically, s/he would have been among those targeted and arrested in the regular police raids that occurred at the club—a systematic profiling that occurred as a result of the city’s adherence to the national practice of gendered racial apartheid calling for the restriction of *public* race-mixing and *public* displays of nonheteronormative behavior to black neighborhoods, or “vice districts.”<sup>73</sup>

Conjectural assertions of Bruce’s possible social incarceration and criminalization as a black trans or gay subject before her second disappearance to Angola represent a great deal more than trivial speculation. At the risk of belaboring the point, it must be repeated that the stakes involved in reclaiming the “woman” shown standing at McElroy’s far right in the Camp A minstrel show image are extremely high given the near complete silence of even the most self-consciously radical and culturally attentive historical and literary scholarship in respect to the black queer/trans subject’s experience of slavery and Jim Crow prison slavery.<sup>74</sup> In fact, it is this very archival and historiographic silence in respect to the black queer (neo)slave experience that forces upon us the responsibility of engaging the ghostly traces of that experience with a kind of politically interested unhistorical imagination. Moreover, even if Bruce did not identify as a transgender person, one of the other two other cross-dressed troupe performers captured in the photograph may well have; and, at the least, even if none of the bodies shown in drag behind that of McElroy were actually trans or queer, then the black male’s deployment of performative gender-transgression on the porch of a neoplantation house offers symbolically illuminating expression of the importance of attending to the stigmatized, criminalized, and historically disqualified predicament of the queer/trans black captive—unhistorical experiences that most certainly *did* (and *do*) *happen* even if they remain unclaimed, unaccounted for, and historically unavailable. In Bruce’s case, her possible sexual and/or gender alterity would have certainly marked her as a prime target for the sort of ritualized physical trauma and sexual predation that is associated with the imprisonment of queer/trans bodies. In fact, the black neoslave’s vulnerability to such violent encounters with guards and other slaves of the state in places like the Camp A stockade further elucidates the horrifying terms under which Bruce would have chosen to avoid contact with Angola’s general population as much as possible by submitting herself to the peculiar terrors associated with acting as the Spillman’s yard-boy, houseboy, and musical “boy.”

If, as I have suggested, Bruce is indeed the apparently trans black person to McElroy's far right in the minstrel photograph, then the fact that s/he is shown wearing a floral print skirt and blouse on the Spillman house porch represents a haunting visual signal of why this historically invisible subject enters into the archive at all beyond the small number of legal documents pertaining to her arrests in 1935 in Baton Rouge for burglary, and for her alleged theft of \$200 in New Orleans. It was just this sort of flowered print that JoAn's mother, Rubye Spillman, was known to have been fond of wearing in and around the family home and while attending formal social gatherings outside Angola.<sup>75</sup> Bruce would have known of this penchant for floral prints on the part of the "Queen" of Camp A. In fact, over the course of thirteen years of domestic neoslavery, the trusty would have developed an acute awareness of most of Rubye's personal preferences, particularly those relating to plantation household management. Bruce's knowledge in this vein would have ranged from the more general, such as the manner in which Mrs. Spillman's trusties were expected to conduct the laundering, babysitting, housekeeping, and meal preparation, to the more minute, such as which doors they were allowed to walk through (and at what time of day); exactly which songs she asked her house prisoners to perform for houseguests on muggy summer evenings before they had to hurriedly trace the wafting scent of shit back to the Camp A stockade in time for the 8 p.m. head count; and the precise amount of water she liked her "niggers" to pour onto the sweet-smelling gladiolas and chrysanthemums she regularly carried to market in Baton Rouge in order to make extra spending money.<sup>76</sup>

In a manner akin to his fellow neoslaves who toiled daily under armed guard in Angola's cane and cotton fields, Bruce's keen awareness of Rubye Spillman's specific requirements for her workday was honed through a liberal application of what the above-quoted Angola administrator euphemistically describes as the "physical factor" of neoslave management. Along with being shot, beaten, and tortured by the prison's official staff and administrators during her time at LSP, Bruce was subjected to quotidian physical and psychic terror by the "Queen," or de facto "mistress," of the Spillman house. In a moment that undercuts her overall portrayal of life at Angola as an edenic pastoral scene in which her family and its "whistling and singing" domestic neoslaves coexisted in picturesque white supremacist harmony, JoAn discusses how she ultimately learned details of Bruce's horrifying treatment under her mother from other white subjects at *The*



*Farm*: "From what I gather from other people and family members, she was mean to him. . . . I don't have any first-hand knowledge of it, because all I know was how she treated me. . . . But she used to hit him with a broomstick when he didn't do something that she wanted."<sup>77</sup>

Notwithstanding its hypermediated form, such statements regarding the predicament of domestic neoslavery at Angola signal how, as in the case of its chattel slavery counterpart, the white supremacist order of the neo-plantation household was predicated on a repressive pedagogy that linked grueling physical labor, psychological terror, and serialized corporeal rupture. Bruce's experience in this regard recalls that of Mary Prince, who, in her autobiographical rendering of her ordeals as a domestic slave in Barbados in the early 1800s, speaks in graphic detail about the dubious epistemology of chattel domesticity. In one such instance, the nineteenth-century slave gives voice to Bruce's submerged, sanitized, and ventriloquized experience of twentieth-century neoslavery through recollection of her first full day of *hands-on instruction* under one of her own white mistresses:

The next morning [she] set about instructing me in my tasks. She taught me to do all sorts of household work; to wash and bake, pick cotton and wool, and wash floors, and cook. And she taught me (how can I ever forget it!) more things than these; she caused me to know the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand. And there was scarcely any punishment more dreadful than the blows I received on my face and head from her hard heavy fist. She was a fearful woman, and a savage mistress to her slaves.<sup>78</sup>

Such testimony disturbs any attempt at delineating a clear line of separation between the private/unproductive sphere of captive "privilege" and the public/productive domain of captive terror on the plantation; and, insofar as they give language to experiences that Bruce was never able to utter in public, Prince's words offer an instructive counter-narrative to the discourses of savagery, incorrigibility, and sexual monstrosity that would surround the circumstances of Bruce's final escape from Angola on the first day of cane cutting, October 19, 1948.

When s/he awakened at sunrise on that clear autumn day to the putrid smell of shit, sweat, semen, and blood, the Spillman houseboy felt for the

brush that rested within a little braided straw basket s/he had tied beside her vermin-filled mattress. After leaping down from her slot in one of the innumerable triple-bunks old-time neoslaves had been forced to wedge inside the Camp A stockade, Bruce hurriedly ran her hands over her short-cropped hair as s/he did every other day before s/he was expected at that lady's house. And, as always, s/he could feel the brush bristles slide easily over the steel plate situated just above her right temple—a piece of metal that had been implanted (just in time) two days after they had first tried to murder her some years back.<sup>79</sup> Bruce replaced the brush, exited the stockade (because s/he never attempted to use *that* “toilet” unless s/he could not help it), and began retracing the well-worn groove s/he and countless other houseboys had trudged into the long dirt trail leading directly from the Jungle Camp to Captain Johnnie's house. Adjusting her neatly tied head scarf, s/he dragged her right leg behind the rest of her body as fast as s/he could, passing a line of “Big Stripe” sugarcane men whose whistles accompanied her entrance onto the path leading to her designated starting position on that lady's back porch. S/he was made even more breathless than usual by the effort because it was imperative that s/he arrived at her post a little early on that particular Tuesday morning.

According to Baton Rouge newspapers, the houseboy did not need to employ the Spillmans' ice pick after she had fallen. In paraphrasing the deputy coroner's autopsy, the reports indicated that she had already died from a broken neck sustained from a severe blow to the chin before her “trusty” Negro raised the weapon. The half-dozen stab wounds were believed to have been inflicted postmortem because of the “comparative lack of blood” found at the scene at which Rubye Spillman's body was found slumped over, in her nightgown, hidden behind an armoire in her daughter's bedroom, at 2:30 a.m., Wednesday, October 20, 1948.<sup>80</sup> Over the next eleven days, the newspapers would offer daily coverage of the killing along with updates on the three-hundred-person manhunt that ensued once the guard captain's wife was found dead in JoAn's room. We are informed that Camp A guards became alarmed several hours before the discovery of Rubye's corpse by the fact that the family's “prison houseboy” did not show up at the stockade for head-count and lockdown the night of the killing—that they searched for Bruce throughout the penitentiary grounds until they arrived at the Spillman residence and located Rubye's body. We are also made aware that much of what occurred on the day of the incident seemed to fit into the banal routine of domestic slavery and mastery that had taken

place for decades at the Camp A plantation house—that Bruce busied himself preparing morning breakfast for the family, answering phone calls, offering JoAn assistance as she prepared for an overnight stay at the home of a young cousin who resided at Camp H, and preparing late afternoon dinner for John Spillman after he had returned from overseeing the first day of the sugarcane harvest.<sup>81</sup> For her part, the guard captain's wife spent her time early that day giving her trusty neoslave *detailed instruction* as to the tasks she wanted completed ahead of her departure for one of the most important social engagements of that calendar year in Louisiana. The local coverage chronicles how she and other Angola wives were scheduled to attend an “afternoon tea” in honor of Mrs. Earl K. Long, the wife of the state's governor—a society-page function held at “Afton Villa,” a forty-room French-Gothic mansion on the outskirts of St. Francesville that was originally built by the hands of slaves in 1849.<sup>82</sup>

The local reports then relate how, after killing the neoplantation mistress (and somehow managing to conceal her dead body from her husband for a number of hours), Bruce shed her “bloody prison uniform,” disguised herself in the high-heeled shoes, white gloves, and new *dark-colored dress with big flowers* Rubye had planned to wear to Afton Villa, and escaped through the Angola cane fields toward the Mississippi River under cover of darkness. In reading the accounts of the “female impersonating” trusty, one is immediately reminded of a parallel use of fugitive cross-dressing in William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom* (1860), in which a slave woman, Craft's wife, Ellen, uses the fact of her light complexion to disguise herself as a white “invalid gentleman” traveling with a slave attendant (William), and successfully shuttles herself and her husband away from Georgia to the “free” city of Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, as in the case of the Crafts' theft of their own bodies in the late 1850s, rebellious agency on the part of the Spillmans' domestic and musical neoslave could only be cast as culpability within the racist cultural and legal imagination of the late 1940s.

However, the similarities between the acts of radical black fugitivity on the part of Ellen Craft and James Bruce evacuate almost as quickly as they arise. The first thing that must be said here is that, unlike her “passing” counterpart from the nineteenth century, no amount of cross-dressing could have disguised the phenotypical blackness that marked Bruce and every other black body in Louisiana and surrounding states as both naturally suspect and (extra)legally disposable—namely, when this legalized

branding and hunting process was invoked in response to the unimaginable occurrence of a white “lady” being killed by her “Negro houseboy.” Second, given the dual nature of Bruce’s transgression of her status as slave of the state—that is, her theft of her own body and its accompanying act of violence against the body of the guard captain’s wife—the escaped black neoslave would have been devoid of any social equivalent to the white abolitionist community of the late nineteenth century that helped the Crafts reach the relatively safe physical geography of the northern United States. In other words, given the broad-based social consensus in post-bellum America regarding both the ostensible denouement of slavery and the “natural” criminality of the freed black subject—as well as Bruce’s radical violation of the national taboo against violent self-defense and self-reclamation on the part of the imprisoned—there would have been no modern equivalent to the Underground Railroad for the neoslave fugitive to seek out as s/he made her way through the woods surrounding Angola plantation.<sup>84</sup> Nor would there have been a relatively secure physical space anywhere in the United States to which her socially and legally stigmatized body could be spirited away in the event that such a network did indeed exist. The final and most important distinction to be made between Bruce’s fugitive action and that of Ellen Craft has to do with our knowledge that the act of male impersonation on the part of the nineteenth-century black woman represented a temporary moment of gender-bending in the service of an attempt at laying claim to something of the heteronormative prerogative of legal marriage between a “man and a woman”—a racialized patriarchal status that was precluded by fiat for chattelized bodies, and that subsequently represented a comforting image of normative conjugal aspiration befitting the expectations of the white liberal Christian audience to which the slave narrative was directed.

While we are given nothing in the way of personal testimony or reliable documentation in respect to James Bruce’s gender or sexual identity, the hypermediated and demonizing perspectives offered by white Angola residents and in newspaper accounts following Rubye Spillman’s death underline the degree to which the escaped “houseboy” was publicly interpellated as the very antithesis of white heteronormative masculinity. While the first report describes Bruce’s utilization of Spillman’s flower-print dress as a “clumsy but apparently successful disguise attempt,” subsequent coverage would use the fact of her regular performances in drag as proof-positive that the escaped neoslave’s tactical outward disguise was actually

expressive of a perverse inner ontological reality. In the language of one such piece, Bruce came to be defined as a “feminine type”—one who had not simply worn women’s clothing in an isolated instance of desperate rebellion, but who actually “*delighted in playing female parts* in amateur theatricals at the prison.”<sup>85</sup> The projection of ontological aberrance onto the neoslave’s apparent queerness is also registered in the childhood recollections of JoAn Spillman, who, while defining Bruce as a happy-go-lucky houseboy, also recalled that s/he was both “a little strange” and “a little prissy.”<sup>86</sup> Even if s/he did actually identify as a straight man at the time of her desperate attempt at escaping the prison plantation, the interpellating voices of white Angola residents and local media classified Bruce as among the collectivity of criminalized subjects banished to LSP and other U.S. prisons whose criminalization and predicament of civil death had been accentuated with and exacerbated by the stigmatic tags of sexual *perversion* and *degeneracy*. Offered in lieu of any discussion of her actual motives for killing the guard captain’s wife (or any official evidentiary proceeding or trial), Bruce’s imputed gender and sexual aberrance served to ascribe a second level of alterity and abnormality onto a body that had already been preappointed as expendable due to the biometaphysical affliction of blackness.<sup>87</sup> When deployed in combination with her racial difference, Bruce’s imputed gender/sexual deviance represented a priori social adjudication of the unquestionable guilt of the erstwhile “Trusty” Negro, and her utter disposability as the target of the three-hundred-man “posse” that hunted her with bloodhounds, guns, shackles, and (legal lynch) ropes through Louisiana’s woods and urban centers after the discovery of Spillman’s dead body.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, her unseemly “prissiness” was repeatedly asserted in the last appearance Bruce would make in the local press, on October 31, 1948—a day after her dead body was allegedly discovered floating facedown in the Mississippi River with buzzards circling overhead. “Those seeing the body immediately suspected it was Bruce’s because of the female clothing. Bruce was wearing women’s undergarments, silk hosiery, a blue dress, a green sweater and a woman’s wig. The wig, it was said, belonged to the prison. Bruce had used it when playing the part of a woman in prison theatricals.” In an attempt to dispel the notion that immediately circulated among the prisoner population at Angola that the “feminine type” fugitive had been lynched by John Spillman or another of the three hundred prison slave catchers that stalked her along the river’s path, officials asserted that Bruce’s death was the result of an “accidental drowning.” To legitimize this

narrative, Angola officials and state police ordered that the medical inquest be performed at an unquestionably “Negro” site. “The jury, impaneled in a negro [*sic*] funeral home, brought in a verdict of death by accidental drowning. Dr. Roberts declared that Bruce definitely drowned. ‘I examined him from tip to tip,’ he said, ‘and there was not a single mark of violence or a perforation on the body.’” Claims to the unviolated and “un-perforated” state of the neoslave’s corpse are immediately subverted in the very next section of the article in which a local sheriff nonchalantly explains why he was able to offer positive identification of the partially decomposed and supposedly drowned prisoner: “Martin stated that he could identify the body by a bullet wound he himself had inflicted in 1936 when Bruce had tried to escape [from Angola] but was found two days later.”<sup>89</sup> The contradictory nature of official claims to a lack of violent encounter with Bruce’s chronically ruptured body had already been made clear in earlier coverage of her escape when officials were quoted as having found the fugitive’s tracks based on a disability s/he had incurred on the neoplantation; they intimated how the main reason Angola’s trusty “Negro dog-boy” and his pack of Cuban and English bloodhounds were able to overcome Bruce’s use of a scent-covering mixture of turpentine and garlic was the definitive nature of the tracks left by a “convict [who] dragged one foot as he walked.”<sup>90</sup> Unmentioned in any of the reports, however, was the other permanent disfigurement Bruce likely suffered as a house slave—the skull fracture that led to the insertion of a metal plate into her head.

Notwithstanding the factual murkiness that surrounds her ultimate loss of biological life, the declared and undeclared state-inflicted injuries to her entombed and preyed-upon body underscore how the predicament of racialized, gendered, and sexualized neoslavery was the substantive cause of James Bruce’s (and Rubye Spillman’s) premature death. Indeed, given the patent absurdity of the state’s claims of innocence in respect to a subject whom it had transmuted into a fungible public/private object, one can imagine that John McElroy would have been incredulous as to the official narrative that accompanied the loss of one of the stars of his Camp A minstrel show. The necessary opacity of the unhistorical experience of neo-enslavement forces us to speculate regarding what ran through the mind of the “one-legged man” when he heard the news of the horrifying conclusion to Bruce’s freedom bid from within the camp stockade, a guard captain’s kitchen, or while offering musical entertainment to one of the neoplantation’s young white children. Did the prison grapevine offer

him a clear vision of the specific ordeals that his leading performer faced in her last hours as s/he was stalked by members of nearly every sector of Louisiana's law-and-order apparatus? More specifically, did McElroy or one of his fellow black prison slaves work as a domestic in the home of the Angola guard who was known to openly display a set of photographs of Bruce's corpse for the pleasure of white houseguests—images depicting her hunted and tortured body as it rested prone on a Mississippi River sandbar after s/he had purportedly “drowned”?<sup>91</sup> What significant details appear in these images that were never allowed to reach the daily news? Did they show some of Louisiana's neoslave patrollers posing behind Bruce's remains after their fugitive hunt had reached successful climax? If so, what looks appeared on their faces? And were these photos taken with the very surveillance camera that had once captured McElroy, Bruce(?), and their fellow imprisoned minstrels performing on the steps of Captain Johnnie Spillman's plantation house? Were any of Bruce's fellow prisoners forced to act as grave diggers for her corpse when no family member or loved one would or could show up at the front gates of “murder's home” to claim her body? And, finally, what sort of blues-laden notes could be heard emanating through the Tunica hills as the Camp A minstrel troupe appeared at the Angola sugarcane harvest “celebration” of 1948? Was one of those onstage or in attendance actually a lover still in mourning?

The fact is that we will likely never be allowed to attain definitive answers to most of our questions concerning Bruce's death. However, the pain of what we do know in respect to the quotidian horrors that s/he, John McElroy, Odea Mathews, the Angola 3, and an incalculable number of others have faced while enduring “life” at LSP allows us to recognize how thirteen years of domestic and musical slavery was enough to drive the star of the Camp A minstrel troupe to a last-ditch act of radical black suicide. In fact, as stated above in reference to the one-legged leader of the troupe, Bruce's desperate attempt at securing freedom registers the fact that the mask of black contentment and happy-go-lucky “trusty-ness” often contained a militant desire for self-possession—a cloaked neoslave insurrectionist impulse that, in Bruce's case, found expression in a form of individualized radical violence that recalls the collectivized revolutionary black abolitionism of Nat Turner. But even as her desperate act of self-reclamation may be read as “heroic” on a certain level, Bruce's embodied awareness that her escape attempt would most certainly end in more bullet scars and bite marks, if not the complete cessation of her life, suggests how

this heretofore untold story of prison slavery can in no way be mistaken for the sort of triumphalist, exceptional, and morally admissible model of resistance and freedom acquisition offered in many nineteenth-century slave narratives. In fact, Bruce's hypercriminalization as an apparently transgender black person who was said to have committed a grisly act of violence against a white woman's body would have precluded attainment of "hero" status even were s/he to have eluded her human and canine pursuers along the Mississippi River and achieved "successful" fugitivity within the socially incarcerating landscape of post-World War II America. Nor has a story such as Bruce's yet been allowed entry into the current register of black prison narratives or prison-centered "neo-slave narratives"—generic spaces that have generally been reserved for publicly acknowledged "radical" political prisoners of the post-civil rights era.<sup>92</sup> In fact, the historical present of U.S. racial genocide continues to disallow academic, social, or legal recognition of neoslavery as an actual lived experience, let alone any kind of celebratory consideration of the resistive capacities of a long-buried and unknown prison "houseboy" from uptown New Orleans who had been poly-stigmatized as a "feminine type," "Negro," "killer," "convict."

However, it is the very unheroic, "immoral," and inassimilable aspect of Bruce's experience of civil, living, and premature death that demands that we finally bring our attentive focus to her experience of neoslavery and to that of people such as Mathews, McElroy, the Angola 3, and the anonymous twenty-first-century black "museum trusty" who handed me a box containing a long-forgotten photograph while I sat bearing witness at the site of neoplantation tourism and terrorism. Indeed, it is the very failure of the freedom bids of McElroy and Bruce that qualify their experiences as dubiously representative of past ordeals of neoplantation incarceration and the unspeakable present-day realities faced by the more than 2.3 million bodies currently held captive in the generalized slavery of U.S. domestic and global imprisonment. The very fact that the living plantation continues to feed on millions of human bodies—whether in a bend of Louisiana's section of the Mississippi, the "hell-factory" fields of California's Central Valley, or a "Salt Pit" just outside Kabul, Afghanistan<sup>93</sup>—demands that we do much more than "attend" to the civilly dead predicament of the millions and more of today's prison-industrial genocide. In the spirit of prisoner number 37708 and his most talented troupe member, we must write, sing, wail, organize (and more) for complete abolition even when unhistorical failure seems to be the only foreseeable reward.