MORAL REHABILITATION: RELIGION, RACE, AND REFORM IN AMERICA'S INCARCERATION CAPITAL

Stephanie Gaskill

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Approved by:

Yaakov Ariel

Laurie Maffly-Kipp

Jerma Jackson

Lauren Leve

Ashley Lucas

Grant Wacker

ABSTRACT

Stephanie Gaskill: Moral Rehabilitation: Religion, Race, and Reform in America's Incarceration Capital
(Under the direction of Laurie Maffly-Kipp)

This dissertation explores differing understandings of rehabilitation emerging from Louisiana's Angola Prison, notorious for its history of racial oppression and, more recently, religious revival. Scholars such as Angela Davis and Khalil Gibran Muhammad have asserted that the increasing proportion of African Americans in U.S. prisons diminished public support for rehabilitation and fueled more punitive criminal justice policies. However, beginning in the mid-1990s, the height of the "tough on crime" era, Warden Burl Cain's "moral rehabilitation" signaled increasing interest in reform among Angola's majority-black population. Cain gained widespread acclaim for encouraging religious activity and personal morality to curb violence and hopelessness inside the prison. Critics have charged that Cain's efforts violate the separation between church and state and the religious freedom of incarcerated people. Nevertheless, he expressed faith in the rehabilitative ideal even as racialized calls for "law and order" continued to resound.

Drawing on archival and ethnographic research, this study uses moral rehabilitation as a means to examine how race shapes reform. Cain contends that faith-based rehabilitation should motivate the public to reconsider its negative perceptions of people in prison and the laws that keep them there. Yet religious tropes have been just as likely to provoke scorn as elicit sympathy for African Americans. Similarly, rehabilitation offers the possibility of social acceptance, but often emphasizes individual responsibility rather than systemic racism in the criminal justice

system. Still, incarcerated African Americans have reinterpreted rehabilitation in ways that challenge traditional understandings of how this concept should function in prison environments. This dissertation examines how race reconfigures reform in four unique "sites**."** Popular documentaries about Angola redefine rehabilitation as a means for the prison's majority-black population to find purpose inside prison rather than prepare for life on the outside. Media produced by incarcerated people themselves, however, reinterpret rehabilitation as a mode of structural critique as well as individual redemption. This more expansive understanding of rehabilitation is subject to considerable limitation in Louisiana's legislative arena, where racialized understandings of victimization re-frame rehabilitation as a cost-saving measure. In short, race—as well as religious worldviews--shape approaches to rehabilitation in fundamental ways.

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write before I ever entered a school building and instilling in me the values that guide my work. Their unconditional love and support have made all my accomplishments possible.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

When I first travelled to Louisiana's Angola Prison in 2012, a billboard on the interstate caught my eye. It depicted a group of denim-clad men, most of them African Americans, picking vegetables in a lush green field. A mounted guard, a white man, loomed in the foreground, shotgun at the ready. The caption read: "Crime Pays: Ten Cents an Hour: Paid for the by the Prisoners of Angola." This billboard sent a disturbing message: men sent to the maximum-security prison deserve not only to perform backbreaking labor, but to surrender their paltry pay for a retributive advertisement. The image also clearly evoked the history of racialized punishment in Louisiana, from the brutal convict lease system that disproportionately preyed upon the state's newly emancipated black population beginning in 1868, to today's era of the mass incarceration of African Americans.[1] African Americans comprise a little over 30 percent of Louisiana's total population, but almost 75 percent of Angola's. The prison itself was once a slave plantation. Sentenced to life without parole or a number of years beyond their natural life

[1] Louisiana had leased its incarcerated population prior to the Civil War as well. Establishing a northern-style penitentiary in Baton Rouge in 1835, the state began leasing imprisoned laborers to private enterprises shortly thereafter. At this time, Louisiana was unique in the extent to which it imprisoned slaves for a variety of offenses, including murder, arson, insurrection, poisoning or wounding whites. During the antebellum era, slaves and free people of color comprised 47 percent of Louisiana's inhabitants, but only around 30 percent of the prison population. Nevertheless, while incarcerated whites remained within penitentiary walls, slaves and free people of color were sent to perform dangerous labor on public works, especially road construction. This racialized division of labor laid the foundation for the kind of work (swamp drainage and levee construction) the majority-black prison population would perform from 1868 to 1901, under lessee Major Samuel James and his heirs. See Jeff Foret, "Before Angola: Enslaved Prisoners in the Louisiana State Penitentiary," *Louisiana History*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring 2013):133-171.

span, most people who enter Angola's gates will never leave.[2] The servitude depicted on the billboard is, effectively, perpetual. The image thus evoked another of Angola's nicknames: the Last Slave Plantation.

It is difficult to imagine that this billboard could have been erected without the approval of Burl Cain, the warden of Angola from 1995 to 2015. In many ways, the imagery is in keeping with his presentation of the prison. The prison museum Cain established greets visitors with a blown-up picture of black men headed to the fields, hoes slung over their shoulders; an exhibit of "inmate weapons;" and a life-size replica of a prison cell. Eager to evoke the antebellum ethos of popular plantation tours, the former warden also reintroduced mule- and horse-drawn wagons to transport crops from the prison's agricultural operations. "He (Cain) likes it to look like slavery times," prisoners mused to journalist Daniel Bergner when he covered Angola's annual rodeo.[3] The warden brought newfound popularity to the rodeo, which was established in the 1960s, by "aggressive[ly] marketing" the event, seeking out more "inexperienced contestants,"and dressing them in black-and-white striped shirts reminiscent of the prison uniforms once regarded as a bygone symbol of demoralizing stigmatization.[4] Like the billboard, the rodeo offers the public an opportunity to enjoy a "visible enactment of punishment"[5] and indulge in its "deepest and

[2] As of March 21, 2017, 67 percent of Angola's population, or 4,062 people, were serving life sentences. The average sentence length is 83.5 years. See Louisiana State Penitentiary Demographics Unit, Daily Report, March 21, 2017.

[3] Daniel Bergner, *God of the Rodeo: The Quest for Redemption in Louisiana's Angola Prison* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 20.

[4] Kerry Myers, "Wildest Show in the South," *The Angolite,* Vol. 22, No. 5 (November/December 1997): 18. John R. Pleasant, Jr., "Ruffin G. Pleasant and Huey P. Long on the Prisoner Stripe Controversy," *Louisiana History,* Vol. 15, No. 4 (Autumn 1974): 357-366.

[5] Jessica Adams, "'The Wildest Show in the South': Tourism and Incarceration at Angola." *The Drama Review.* Vol. 45, No.2 (Summer, 2001): 100.

darkest fantasies about the animalistic nature of inmates."[6] "This is the hardest core prison as it gets," Cain boasts in *Louisiana Lockdown,* a recent reality show about the rodeo that aired on Animal Planet. "One out of every two inmates you saw murdered somebody," he tells the television crew.[7] These "murderers," he contends, could erupt at any moment, necessitating a strict disciplinary regime. Cain directly evokes historical images of racialized punishment and casts prisoners as dangerous men requiring close supervision and deserving of humiliation and possible bodily injury.

Cain's presentation of Angola seems to reflect the scholarly consensus about the racialized "punitive turn" that defined the latter half of the twentieth century. Conservative white backlash against black liberation movements ushered in the "law and order" and "tough on crime" era, resulting in the increasingly disproportionate incarceration of African Americans for the next four decades.[8] As prison populations became majority-black, support for rehabilitation

[6] Melissa Schrift, "The Angola Prison Rodeo: Inmate Cowboys and Institutional Tourism." *Ethnology.* Vol. 43, No. 4 (Autumn 2004): 341.

[7] Burl Cain, "Killer Roadtrip," *Louisiana Lockdown, Season 1.* Prod. Jess Beck, Lisa Bloch. Animal Planet. Bell Media Television. Ontario. June 1, 2012. Statistics from Angola's demographic unit support Cain's statement; approximately 50 percent the population is serving time for homicide.

[8] Numerous scholars attribute the "tough on crime" era to the "southern strategy," in which conservatives engaged in race-baiting under the guise of a commitment to 'law and order' to successfully gain support in both the South and the North. George Wallace and Richard Nixon subsumed civil rights protests and urban rebellions under the term "crime in the streets," and Ronald Reagan used "colorblind" rhetoric to garner support for the War on Drugs. See Katherine Beckett, *Making Crime Pay: Law and Order in Contemporary American* Politics(New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in American Democracy* (New York: Russell Sage Foudnation, 2006); Mark Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 52-53; Robert Perkinson, *Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire* (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 287-299; Vesla M. Weaver, "Frontlash: Race and the Development of Punitive Crime Policy," *Studies in American Political Development* 21 (Fall 2007): 242; Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012). Recognizing the centrality of race, others have also argued that the hyperincarceration of African Americans constitutes a response to shifts in global capitalism, which produced a black surplus labor force to contain. See Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2007); Loic Wacquant, "The New 'Peculiar Institution': On the Prison as Surrogate Ghetto," *Theoretical Criminology* 4 (2000): 377-389.Still others counter the emphasis on conservative politics, rooting the rise of the penal state in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society, both of which expanded federal powers to prosecute crime. See Jonathan

withered. Especially in the wake of the Attica uprising in 1971, leading sociologists dismissed the concept of rehabilitation, contending that "nothing works" and the purpose of prisons was to punish rather than reform.[9] As politicians on both sides of the aisle voted for truth in sentencing, three strikes laws, and expansion of the death penalty throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they also severely curtailed rehabilitative programming, most notably eliminating federal Pell Grants for incarcerated students in 1994.[10] Such policies gained widespread support through nightly news reports and popular television shows that portrayed African Americans as the primary

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Simon, *Governing through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Heather Ann Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History," *Journal of American History* (December 2010): 703-734.

[9] Though scholars debate whether the rehabilitative ideal has ever been fully implemented, the idea that prisons could successfully rehabilitate people enjoyed scholarly and popular support throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, in the late 1960s and 1970s, skepticism about rehabilitation arose from both the left and the right. Liberals denounced rehabilitation as a form of coercion that inherently effaced individuality and conservatives claimed that rehabilitation simply did not work. Robert Martinson's 1974 article, "What Works in Prison Reform?" was especially influential. Martinson concluded that "the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism," fueling a popular consensus that "nothing works" with regard to rehabilitation. Political scientist James Q. Wilson lent further credence to these claims, asserting in his widely read *Thinking about Crime* not only that rehabilitative programming was ineffective, but that the primary purpose of prisons was to incapacitate, not reform, people convicted of crime. By 1978, Francis Allen lamented "the decline of the rehabilitative ideal." See Robert Martinson, "What Works in Prison Reform?" *The Public Interest* (Spring 1974): 22-54; James Q. Wilson, *Thinking About Crime,* (New York: Random House, 1975), 222-223; Francis Allen, *The Decline of the Rehabilitative Ideal: Penal Policy and Social Purpose* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 16; David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Francis T. Cullen and Karen E. Gilbert, *Reaffirming Rehabilitation* (Waltham, MA: Anderson Press, 2013), 55-90. Angela Davis sees in supermax prisons a direct link between racism and the decline of the rehabilitative ideal. Established in large part to prevent black radicals from spreading their ideology, supermax prisons keep individuals in long-term solitary confinement, emphasizing incapacitation rather than the possibility of reform. See Angela Davis, "Race, Gender, and Prison History: From the Convict Lease System to the Supermax Prison." In *Prison Masculinities.* Edited by Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 35-45.

[10] President Bill Clinton eliminated Pell Grants for incarcerated people as part of his 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. Bernie Sanders' support for the crime bill, as well as Hillary Clinton's 1996 statement about "superpredators" beyond the possibility of rehabilitation became a major issue in the 2016 presidential campaign. See Vanessa Williams, "1994 crime bill haunts Clinton and Sanders as criminal justice reform rises to top in Democratic contest," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/02/12/1994-crime-bill-haunts-clinton-and-sanders-as-criminal-justice-reform-rises-to-top-in-democratic-contest/?utm_term=.9173751a2c87.

perpetrators of crime.[11] Anti-black animus fueled public skepticism that rehabilitation was possible, or even desirable.

However, at the height of this racially charged punitive turn, Warden Cain began to publicize his efforts to implement what he calls "moral rehabilitation" among Angola's majority-black population, the majority of which is serving time for "violent crimes."[12] Arguing that religious convictions make people less likely to engage in criminal behavior, the former warden established a seminary ("the Bible College"), welcomed evangelists, and built chapels inside the

[11] For instance, a 2001 study by Building Blocks for Youth found that particularly with regard to violent crimes, news reports overrepresented African Americans and underrepresented whites in reference to both groups' actual rates of crime. See Ian Marsh and Gaynor Melville, *Crime, Justice, and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 98. Two of the best-known examples of how media reinforced the perceived connection between blackness and criminality are George H.W. Bush's infamous Willie Horton commercial and the "superpredator" scare. During the 1988 presidential race, Bush's campaign ran an attack ad against the Democratic candidate, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, for supporting a weekend furlough program for his state's prisoners. The commercial featured Horton, a black man serving life without parole for murder, who raped and murdered a white woman while on furlough. In the 1990s, political scientist John DiIulio and former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett introduced the fear of "superpredators," criminal youth so recalcitrant that their incapacitation was the only means to protect the public. In fact, DiIulio and Bennett maintained that rehabilitative programs were counterproductive, rewarding than deterring criminal behavior. News media popularized DiIulio and Bennett's "superpredator," associating the type with black and brown youth. Negative portrayals of African Americans were crucial in discrediting rehabilitative methods like furloughs and juvenile justice interventions. See Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 54; Victor M. Rios, "The Racial Politics of Youth Crime," in *Behind Bars: Latino/as and Prison in the United States*, edited by Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 97-112.For more on racialized perceptions of crime, see Mark Peffley, Jon Hurwitz, and Paul Sniderman, "Racial Stereotypes and Whites' Political Views of Blacks in the Context of Welfare and Crime," *American Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 1 (1997): 30—60; Martin Gilens, "Racial Attitudes and Opposition to Welfare," *Journal of Politics* 57, no. 4 (1995): 994-1014; Kathlyn Taylor Gaubatz, *Crime in the Public Mind* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); and John Hurwitz and Mark Peffley, "Public Perceptions of Race and Crime: The Role of Racial Stereotypes," *American Journal of Political Science* 41, 2 (1997): 375-401; T.L. Dixon, "Teaching you to love fear: Television news and racial stereotypes in a punishing democracy," in *Challenging the Prison Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives*, edited by SJ Hartnett (Urbana, IL:University of Illinois Press, 2010), 106-123; F. Gilliam and S. Iyengar, "Prime suspects: The impact of local television news on attitudes about crime and race," *American Journal of Political Science*, 44, 3, 560-573.

[12] According to a 2012 Louisiana Department of Corrections report, just over 90 percent Angola's population has been convicted of "violent crimes," including homicide. See Louisiana Department of Corrections, "Demographic Profiles of Adult Offenders in Louisiana State Penitentiary," April 30, 2012. Even as there is a bi-partisan push to reconsider the policies under which "nonviolent drug offenders" are subject to lengthy incarceration, politicians show few signs of leniency toward those convicted of "violent crimes." For instance, in a 2015 press conference in which he addressed Republican and Democratic interest in criminal justice reform, President Barack Obama focused on relief for people convicted of "nonviolent," not "violent" crimes. "I think people recognize that there are violent criminals out there and they've got to be locked up," he told the press. "I tend not to have a lot of sympathy when it comes to violent crime." Barack Obama, White House Press Conference, July 15, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/15/press-conference-president.

prison. He exemplifies the shift from "nothing works" to the increasingly popular "what works" ideology, which evaluates methods of rehabilitation statistically proven to prevent individuals from recidivating. [13] According to Cain, moral rehabilitation "worked" in that violent incidents inside Angola dramatically declined shortly after he brought religious revival to the prison. Though it was once described as "the bloodiest prison in the country" and still imprisons individuals considered to be the "worst of the worst," Cain claims Angola is now remarkably peaceful because of his religious programming.[14] And he wants everyone to know. Notwithstanding the spectacle of the rodeo, Cain hopes that when they witness the effects of

[13] Figures like John DiIulio, who once framed incapacitation as the only effective response to an influx of remorseless "superpredators," have come to embrace faith-based rehabilitation as a principled and pragmatic approach to reforming incarcerated people. A 2014 *New York Times* "Retro Report" addresses John DiIulio's shifting mindset on his concept of "superpedators." DiIulio describes how he simultaneously "lost faith in social science prediction and "gained faith of a traditional religious kind." He began to advocate for faith-based initiatives in "needy communities. DiIulio also signed an amicus brief debunking his own conclusions about youth crime in the *Miller v. Alabama* Supreme Court case banning mandatory life sentences for juveniles. John DiIulio, "The 'Superpredator' Scare," *New York Times* video, 8:09-10:20, April 6, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/07/us/politics/killing-on-bus-recalls-superpredator-threat-of-90s.html?_r=0.

[14] In the mid-1970s, Angola became known as "the bloodiest prison in the country" due to the high number of violent deaths inside the penitentiary. Racial tensions inside the still-segregated prison ran high. In 1972, Angola's most prominent Black Panthers, Herman Wallace, Albert Woodfox, and Robert King, were convicted of murdering white prison guard Brent Miller. (Each of the three men has always steadfastly maintained his innocence). Miller's murder occurred one day after two black prisoners set fire to a guard shack, having sent a letter to a local newspaper claiming the arson was an act of retaliation for the "extreme racism" of Angola's administration. See Ann Butler and C. Murray Henderson, "Racist Pigs Who Hold Us Captive," *Dying to Tell: Angola: Crime, Consequences, Conclusion at the Louisiana State Penitentiary* (Lafayette, LA: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1992), 6. The previous year, Hayes Williams, along with three other incarcerated plaintiffs, filed a federal civil suit charging that conditions inside Angola were both unjust and unsafe. Though Williams was branded as a "black militant," his suit encouraged reform-minded officials like Director of Corrections Elayn Hunt and Angola Warden C. Murray Henderson to consult with a federal judge, Frank Polozola, and incarcerated leaders about how to improve the prison. These negotiations led to the desegregation of Angola and the elimination of armed "inmate guards," who served in the place of paid corrections officers and were often responsible for the violent deaths of fellow incarcerated people. Such reforms eventually culminated in a 1983 consent decree, under which Judge Polozola oversaw a litany of other reforms that drastically reduced violence at Angola. When his conviction for attempted armed robbery and murder was overturned in 1997, *The Angolite*, Angola's prison newsmagazine, called Hayes Williams "the catalyst that turned Angola from a slaughterhouse into the safest maximum-security prison in the nation." Douglas Dennis, "The Catalyst," *The Angolite,* Vol. 22, No. 2 (March/April 1997): 24-25, 28-29. This history challenges Warden Cain's claim that Angola was still "the bloodiest prison in the country" when he arrived and that the Bible College and other religious initiatives transformed the penitentiary. For recent local reporting highlighting the misleading nature of Cain's assertions, see Maya Lau, "Burl Cain claims Angola transformation, but prison's violent era preceded him by decades," *The Advocate*, January 3, 2016, http://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/crime_police/article_c2c84230-f700-5c00-936c-85933b4b73be.html.

moral rehabilitation, people will begin to see prisoners as transformed human beings worthy of a second chance, not animals deserving only of harsh punishment. Perhaps then they will reconsider Louisiana's draconian sentencing laws.

This narrative has made Cain has a popular figure among both religious conservatives as well as liberals. Evangelical stalwarts including Franklin Graham, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Joyce Meyers, and TD Jakes have come to preach at Angola. Until recently students from Wheaton College, a Christian liberal arts college in Illinois, could stay overnight at the prison for an alternative spring break. Prisons in states throughout the South, including South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas, have adopted seminary programs of their own, and the warden regularly hosted prison officials from across the country (and the world) eager to emulate his religious model. Likewise, journalists who have covered the program, from Barbara Walters, Charlie Rose, and Oprah, has publicly born witness to Cain's "miracle." The "liberal media" characterizes this evangelical conservative as unexpectedly progressive. Through the Bible College, Cain restored access to higher (albeit Christian) education after a Democratic president cut off prisoners' access to Pell Grants. More generally, he advocated for rehabilitation at a time when figures on both sides of the political aisle still regarded it as a lost cause.

How, then, does moral rehabilitation fit into the history of racialized apathy toward reform, both in Louisiana and in the United States more broadly? Does it represent a means to overcome the anti-black prejudice that fomented skepticism about rehabilitation in the first place? Does it encourage the public to reconsider Louisiana's draconian sentencing laws? If so, on what terms does this reconsideration occur? Is it significant that religion plays such a prominent role in Cain's vision of rehabilitation for a majority-black prison population? How do people currently and formerly incarcerated at Angola interpret moral rehabilitation? Addressing

these questions, I contend moral rehabilitation reveals that, beyond questions of public support or opposition to reform, rehabilitation is a pliable term that can be put to use for a variety of different ends depending on who interprets, imagines, and implements the concept. Cain's understanding of rehabilitation illuminates the ways reform can be a particularly contentious means through which African Americans render their humanity legible.

In part, the contested nature of rehabilitation for incarcerated African Americans reflects the conflicting roles of religion in black history. Revivalists in the Great Awakenings condemned slavery and proclaimed spiritual equality regardless of race or gender. However, they ultimately abandoned abolition to secure slave owners' permission to bring enslaved blacks eternal salvation. Black religiosity has evoked sympathy for victims of racialized oppression and violence, but has also cast African Americans as intellectually inferior, pathologically emotional, and perpetually marginal within American society. The Christian underpinnings, of moral rehabilitation, then, do not guarantee a favorable outcome. Religious reform could foster more sympathy for incarcerated African Americans without altering their social or legal standing.

More generally, rehabilitation itself can effectively reinforce established racial hierarchies by mandating that incarcerated people should conform to existing norms and societal structures. Arising from Protestant notions of individualized sin and redemption, rehabilitation is often a process that requires people in prison to confess their guilt and transform their lives.. Consequently, rehabilitation often neglects the systemic factors that target African Americans in particular for incarceration**.** In this light, some incarcerated African Americans have rejected the concept altogether. Others, however, have embraced and redefined rehabilitation in ways that simultaneously affirm its emphasis on individual redemption and allow for broader structural critique. I use moral rehabilitation as a lens through which to examine how rehabilitation and

related religious ideas shape attitudes and actions toward incarcerated African Americans, as well as how incarcerated African Americans interpret these concepts for their own ends.

What is moral rehabilitation?

As warden of Louisiana's Dixon Correctional Institute (DCI) from 1981 to 1995, Cain implemented Bible studies and regularly invited evangelists to the prison. Angola brought new challenges, as Cain now had to preside over Death Row. Initially approaching executions with bravado, the warden began to offer condemned men spiritual counseling before they faced the lethal injection gurney. His "unique" approach to carrying out the death penalty was his first claim to fame.[15] However, Cain's more enduring legacy has been establishing a satellite campus of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary inside Angola. Known more commonly as "the Bible College," the seminary has graduated over 250 men with degrees in Christian Ministry. These graduates then serve as "missionaries" to the rest of Angola's population. A self-described "Bapti-costal," the former warden's motives were partly evangelistic. "If you don't see that those prisoners have a chance to know [Jesus]," his mother told him, "He will hold you accountable for their souls."[16] However, Cain views his efforts not only as his "Christian duty," but also as "just plain good sense."[17] In Cain's mind, people commit crimes not because they lack resources or opportunities, but because they care only about their own self-gratification and do not respect the difference between right and wrong**.** Therefore, he maintains, rehabilitation has to begin with a fundamental change in individuals' moral compasses, their orientation toward

[15] See James Minton, "Ward's execution low-key, but affects observers," *The Advocate,* May 17, 1995, 1-B, S; Dennis Shere, *Cain's Redemption: A Story of Hope and Transformation in America's Bloodiest Prison* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2005), 20.

[16] Shere, *Cain's Redemption*, 31, 43.

[17] Michael Glover, "The Christian Warden," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 2 (March/April 1995): 27.

themselves and others. “I can teach you skills and trades,” he asserted in a 2010 documentary, “but I just make a smarter criminal unless we get something in our heart, unless we become moral.”[18]

What about the separation of church and state?

Cain’s language of “the heart” clearly evokes particular Christian understandings of sanctification, in which the Holy Spirit is imagined to dwell in believers’ hearts, helping them to live righteously. Yet Cain assures civil libertarians that moral rehabilitation is not exclusively Christian, nor even necessarily religious. “An atheist can be moral,” Cain contends.[19] Still, he asserts that religion is the surest way to instill morality. While participation in the seminary and church services is voluntary, these religious, and often specifically Christian, programs are the most readily available and most clearly favored means to demonstrate one’s rehabilitation. Most notably, the seminary is the only means to obtain higher education in Angola. Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists have graduated from the Bible College without converting to Christianity, but Southern Baptist theology is the core of the curriculum. Most major donations also come from Christian organizations, such as the Judson Baptist Association and the Louisiana Prison Chapel Foundation. Conservative evangelicals are prominent among Angola’s visitors. And until a suit brought by Louisiana’s branch of the American Civil Liberties Union forced the administration to remove the citation, a large stone monument featuring a verse from

[18] Burl Cain, *Serving Life*, DVD, directed by Lisa Cohen, Oprah Winfrey Network, 2011. Jerome Morgan, who was exonerated in 2014 after serving twenty years at Angola for a murder he did not commit, finds the assumption that “prisoners don't have any moral ethics” to be insulting. He explains that individuals can end up in prison precisely because they followed their moral compass. “You may find,” he insists, “that someone went to that extreme in which they're convicted of because of what they felt was right and wrong.” In this light, the basic premise of moral rehabilitation appears simplistic and condescending. Jerome Morgan, interview with the author, June 19, 2014.

[19] Burl Cain, *The Farm: 10 Down*, DVD, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2009.

the New Testament (Philippians 3:13) greeted visitors as they entered Angola's front gates.[20] (The quotation itself remains: "I've learned to forgive and forget about the things that are behind me…I am pressing forth and reaching for the things that are before me"). For some critics, then, moral rehabilitation is thinly veiled Christian evangelism. They submit that prisoners at Angola should have access to a variety of rehabilitative programs, including non-religious ones.

Rehabilitation: a contested term

Such critics oppose the means by which Cain seeks to reform incarcerated people. But do they also reject the former warden's assumption that rehabilitation entails changing individuals' attitudes about themselves and others? In her study of a major lawsuit against Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM), religious studies scholar and law professor Winnifred Sullivan suggests that religious conservatives and secular liberals have more in common than they think when it comes to explaining crime and rehabilitation. From 1999 to 2008, PFM's InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI) operated an entire unit in an Iowa state prison as a comprehensive, Bible-based rehabilitation program for prisoners. In response to concerns about state establishment of religion, IFI claimed that though its programs were specifically Christian, its primary purpose was to teach prisoners universal, "practical morality." Sullivan sees in this argument a throwback to liberal Protestantism, especially the Social Gospel, which equated civilization with Christianity. Whether or not they think of themselves as religious, liberals continue to support reforming individuals in accordance with Protestant norms of personal responsibility for

[20] Ed Anderson, "La. Prison Agrees to Strip Monument of Bible Reference," *Christianity Today*, February 14, 2009, accessed February 9, 2017, http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2009/february/la-prison-agrees-to-strip-monument-of-bible-reference.html.

wrongdoing and commitment to self-improvement.[21] Indeed, Sullivan reveals that the prisoners who sued PFM wanted to "remake their lives" and "learn how to be better persons;" they simply wanted access to non-Christian and non-religious options in order to do so.[22]

Perhaps these shared assumptions about rehabilitation explain why media outlets typically considered liberal and secular have expressed such favorable interest in a conservative Christian warden**.** Reporters and talk show hosts do sometimes allude to concerns about a state-funded institution promoting a particular form of religion. Yet in most every instance, they conclude that the net result of Cain's efforts is positive. For instance, in his piece on the Bible College for *The New York Times,* Erik Eckholm refers to past Louisiana ACLU lawsuits against Cain's administration, including one to grant a Muslim graduate of the Bible College access to literature from the Nation of Islam. However, Eckholm quotes the executive director of the Louisiana ACLU, Majorie R. Esman, offering begrudging support for the Bible College. Though she believes moral rehabilitation is "religious doctrine" and wishes there were other forms of higher education available inside Angola, Esman insists "the fact that a college is there at all is important."[23] Even if they do not agree with Cain's religious methods, liberals can appreciate that his seminary allows incarcerated people to improve themselves through education.

This rapprochement does not mean conservative and liberal differences over rehabilitation have entirely dissolved. While they have often affirmed personal responsibility and self-improvement, liberals have also argued since the mid-nineteenth century that individuals

[21] Winnifred Sullivan, *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 174.

[22] Sullivan, *Prison Religion,* 236.

[23] Erik Eckholm, "Bible College helps some at Louisiana Prison find peace," *The New York Times,* Sunday, October 6, 2013.

commit crimes as a result of external factors, such as poverty or a lack of education, rather than simple moral deficiency. The mid-seventeenth century "classical" school of penal philosophy held that individuals should be held accountable for their actions and that prison discipline should transform individuals' souls to prevent them from committing future crimes. However, the "positivist" school of the mid-1800s suggested criminal behavior was a product of environmental factors more than free will, prescribing psychological and medical treatment as the preferred methods of rehabilitation.[24]

Historian Jennifer Graber demonstrates that American Protestants have embraced both assumptions about rehabilitation. When they established the first penitentiaries in eighteenth century Pennsylvania, Quakers held that solitary, silent contemplation could bring wayward sinners to repentance and redemption. Reformers in early nineteenth century New York rejected solitary confinement in favor of silent, communal labor (the Auburn system), but the same basic notions of sin and redemption remained.[25] Over the course of the nineteenth century, Protestant chaplains adopted increasingly popular social scientific understandings of crime and reform.[26] Similarly, some religious organizations today emphasize mental health care, not salvation, as the preferred form of rehabilitation. The United Church of Christ, for example, holds that prisons are full at least in part because "our country is failing to provide basic mental health services to those who need them most." [27] In other words, the UCC submits that people often commit crimes

[24] Cullen and Gilbert, *Reaffirming Rehabilitation*, 21. The "neo-classical" school did allow for some circumstances that mitigated personal responsibility for crime, but not to the same extent at the positivist school.

[25] Graber links the Auburn model with a Calvinist theological shift from communal to individual ideas of sin and responsibility. See Jennifer Graber, *The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons & Religion in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 109.

[26] See also Andrew Skotnicki, *Religion and the Development of the American Penal System.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000.

because they are mentally ill, not because they are morally depraved. Rehabilitation, then, would entail treatment rather than moral realignment.

Rehabilitation and black radicals

In contrast to both the conservative and liberal perspectives, radical approaches question the fundamental assumptions upon which the concept of rehabilitation is based. Providing a major pillar of the theoretical foundation for scholarship on prisons, Michel Foucault asserts that penitentiaries were not an inevitable response to criminal behavior, but rather that this disciplinary model itself created the idea of the individual criminal who could be reformed. Most notably, he describes how the shift from public executions to private confinement fostered the notion that criminal behavior emanated from a soul, which in turn could be transformed through manipulation of the body in a prison environment. Similarly, prisons created definitions of criminality in that disciplinary procedures set the standard for "normal" behavior.[28] According to Foucault, then, crime, criminality, and rehabilitation are not self-evident, but rather socially determined categories.

One of Foucault's major shortcomings is that *Discipline and Punish*, published in the wake of the Black Power movement, neglects the theoretical critiques of rehabilitation posited by incarcerated black radicals. Black Panthers like George Jackson and Huey Newton, along with their close associate Angela Davis argued that African Americans were necessarily political prisoners, consciously or unconsciously rebelling against a capitalist system that continually, and violently, marginalized them. Rehabilitation programs, which presumed to correct individuals'

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[27] See United Church of Christ, "Mental Illness and Incarceration," *Advocate for Justice: Crimnal Justice*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.ucc.org/justice_criminal-justice_mental-illness.

[28] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

failure to conform to established norms, were therefore suspect. African Americans committed crimes not because they lacked morals, but because the values of the society in which they lived were corrupt. They were supposed to challenge the social and economic order that denied them access to wealth and democratic participation.[29]

Black radicals' perspectives on rehabilitation highlight a concept that challenges traditional models of reform: innocence. A recent study from the National Registry of Exonerations indicates that African Americans are multiple times more likely than whites to be convicted of crimes they did not commit.[30] In such cases, requiring confession of guilt as a precursor to transformation seems perverse. However, political scientist and law professor Melynda Price proposes expanding definitions of innocence beyond the question of whether people committed the acts for which they were convicted. Black communities, she argues, often characterize capital punishment as "legal lynching," anti-black violence carried out by the state rather white vigilantes. African Americans on Death Row can claim innocence by denying they perpetrated crimes for which they were sentenced to death and simultaneously framing themselves as victims of a form of punishment disproportionately enacted against black defendants.[31] Black radicals, too, expanded understandings of innocence. Even those who had committed the acts for which they were incarcerated were not guilty because the entire society in which they lived was inherently unjust. Systemic racism denied African Americans any social

[29] See George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 218; Huey Newton, "Prison, where is thy victory?" in *The Huey P. Newton Reader,* edited by David Hilliard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 154-156. Similarly, Angela Davis writes that prisons are reserved for those who violate society's norms, but that those norms are suspect. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?,* 40.

[30] See Samuel R. Gross, Maurice Possley, and Klara Stephens, "Race and Wrongful Convictions in the United States," *National Registry of Exonerations,* March 7, 2017. The authors conclude that, in comparison to innocent whites, innocent African Americans are seven times more likely to be convicted of murder; three and a half times more likely to be convicted of sexual assault, and twelve times more likely to be convicted of drug crimes.

[31] Melynda J. Price, *At the Cross: Race, Religion, & Citizenship in the Politics of the Death Penalty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 35-37.

standing to which they could be restored, rendering concepts like rehabilitation meaningless. Communication studies scholar John Sloop argues that this kind of skepticism fueled popular perceptions that disassociated African Americans from the rehabilitative ideal. In the 1950s, popular culture portrayed the prototypical prisoner as "humorous, patriotic, Caucasian, and hapless," redeemable within a properly administered prison.[32] Even rebellion was attributable to substandard prison conditions rather than the violent nature of prisoners. However, if incarcerated African Americans were mentioned at all in the popular media of the 1950s, they were described as violent. And when they became increasingly visible in the 1960s, black prisoners were always coded as violent. Sloop identifies two stock types of black prisoners prevalent in news media from the late 1960s through the 1990s: the apolitical, inherently violent black criminal and the imprisoned black revolutionary fighting the racial injustice inherent in the system. Some authors intended the latter image to be sympathetic. However, Sloop argues that both types depicted black prisoners as angry and violent, leading the general public to express skepticism about the possibility that incarcerated African Americans could reform and reintegrate into mainstream American society.

Far from a recent phenomenon, this relationship is rooted in the very foundations of American prisons. Early penal reformers intended penitentiaries to reform and restore fallen individuals to a state of self-mastery and full participation in American society. As property, slaves were categorically excluded from such a possibility.[33] After the Civil War, vagrancy statutes and other laws specifically targeting freed people shifted prison populations from

[32] John M. Sloop, *The Cultural Prison: Discourse, Prisoners, and Punishment* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996), 15.

[33] Mark E. Kann. "Penitence for the Privileged: Manhood, Race, and Penitentiaries in Early America." In *Prison Masculinities.* Edited by Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001; Davis, "Race, Gender, and Prison History," 35-45.

majority-white to majority-black. But while African Americans were legally recognized as free citizens, assumptions about race and reform cultivated under slavery still prevailed. Southern states implemented the system of convict lease, allowing private contractors to work black prisoners under conditions akin to slavery.[34] At the same time, northern Progressive reformers focused their energies on poor white immigrants, arguing that African Americans were morally and mentally incapable of reform.[35] And, as mentioned earlier, a similar mentality has pervaded prisons during the highly racialized "tough on crime" and "law and order" era.

The history of Angola fits within this narrative. Initially established in Baton Rouge in 1835, the Louisiana State Penitentiary followed the Auburn plan, combining daily silent labor and nightly solitary confinement as the method of reform.[36] Louisiana was unique in that, while white men were still the majority of prisoners, free people of color and slaves at various times during the antebellum era constituted up to a third of the imprisoned population.[37] Racial divisions with regard to rehabilitation were clear. Whites and free people of color had relatively brief sentences and would be restored to society shortly; slaves were subject to lengthier sentences, harsher labor on public works, and perpetual enslavement.[38] As in other southern

[34] See, for example, Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 1996); David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997); Angela Davis, "From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System." In *The Angela Y. Davis Reader.* Edited by Joy James. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998. 74-95. Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009).

[35] Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); James A. Morone. *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003.

[36] Foret, "Before Angola," 140.

[37] For an explanation of Louisiana's tripartite racial system, see Mary Gehman, *The Free People of Color of New Orleans: An Introduction* (Donaldsonville, LA: Margaret Media, 1994).

[38] Foret, "Before Angola," 142.

states, freed people became the majority of prisoners after the Civil War. But African Americans were not subject to rehabilitative penitentiary discipline in Baton Rouge; they were leased to a private contractor named Samuel James to labor on outlying plantations under brutal conditions. Angola was one of these plantations; it became the central location for the state penitentiary in the early twentieth century, shortly after Louisiana abolished its convict lease system.[39]

Conditions at Angola were deplorable throughout the early 1900s. Public support for reform prevailed only in 1952, after thirty-seven prisoners cut their Achilles' tendons to protest the circumstances under which they worked and lived. Leading citizens pushed for improvements to prison infrastructure and greater access to rehabilitative programming for prisoners. [40] At this time, Angola's population was still predominantly black, but the prisoners who participated in the heel slashing were white.[41] Notably, earlier that same year, a brief uprising by African American prisoners earlier that year garnered scant public attention and was quickly repressed.[42] Reform was ultimately short-lived; Governor Jimmie Davis cut funding for rehabilitative programming in 1962. It is true that Angola's white population began to grow after World War II, and by 1960, Angola's black population had declined to 32 percent. Still, only four years later, it had risen to 55 percent. Today, 76 percent of the prisoners at Angola are African Americans. [43] This resurgence in the proportion of black prisoners coincided with increasingly punitive criminal justice policies in Louisiana. Most notably, beginning in the early

[39] Mark T. Carleton, *Politics and Punishment: The History of the Louisiana State Penal System* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 17-84.

[40] Carleton, *Politics and Punishment,* 150-166.

[41] *Ibid,* 150.

[42] Robert Perkinson, "Angola and the Agony of Prison Reform," *Radical Philosophy Review,* Vol. 3, No. 1, 14-15

[43] Perkinson, "Angola," 12, Carleton, *Politics and Punishment,* 170, 190, footnote 78.

1970s, life without parole (LWOP) became an increasingly common sentence, applicable to an ever-widening array of crimes. And whereas most prisoners had traditionally served only ten and a half years of a life sentence, by 1980, people sentenced to life could expect to spend the rest of their days behind bars.[44] Consequently, 90 percent of the men currently imprisoned at Angola will die there.[45] Today, Louisiana is the most punitive state in the nation, with the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world.[46] This history suggests that, as elsewhere, commitment to rehabilitation in Louisiana did indeed fall by the wayside when the prison population became majority-black.

How do faith-based programs fit in?

In this light, Cain's decision to publicly emphasize rehabilitation among Angola's majority-black population appears to challenge racially charged public skepticism about rehabilitation. At the same time, scholarship on evangelical prison ministries suggests that while faith-based reform can include black individuals among the redeemed, programs like moral rehabilitation can also implicitly validate the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans. It is important to note that recent prison studies work suggests that rehabilitation endured, and even thrived, even as African Americans constituted an ever greater proportion of the prison population. While the Attica prison uprising did result in a general turn against

[44] Louisiana created its life without parole statutes in the wake of the 1972 *Furmin v. Georgia* Supreme Court decision, which placed a temporary moratorium on the capital punishment because juries applied the death penalty so arbitrarily, disproportionately sentencing African Americans to death. Fearing people sentenced to death would be released after ten –and-a-half years, the Louisiana legislature passed a series of life sentence statutes, mandating individuals serve a mandatory twenty years in 1973, stipulating a mandatory 40 years in 1976, and finally creating life without the possibility of parole in 1979. See Wilbert Rideau, "Life: No Rhyme, No Reason," *The Angolite,* Vol. 7, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1982):31-46.

[45] James Ridgeway, "God's Own Warden," *Mother Jones*, July/August 2011, http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/07/burl-cain-angola-prison.

[46] Cindy Chang, "Louisiana is the World's Prison Capital," *The Times-Picayune*, May 13, 2012, updated April 6, 2016, http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2012/05/louisiana_is_the_worlds_prison.html..

rehabilitation, the uprising also actually prompted a number of penal institutions to improve rehabilitative programming. State-funded and nonprofit entities provided opportunities for education and artistic expression.[47] At the same time, some evangelicals interpreted the events at Attica as a call to devote renewed attention to prison ministry.[48] Bill Glass's Champions for Life, Ray Hockstra's International Prison Ministry, Frank Constantino's Christian Prison Ministry, and especially Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship Ministry became prominent in US prisons in the early 1970s.[49] In contrast to experts who claimed that any efforts toward reform were futile, these prison ministries claimed that conversion could rehabilitate prisoners, even as the prison population was becoming predominantly African American.

Yet as historian Kendrick Oliver suggests, evangelical prison ministries also emphasized individual redemption to the extent that systemic critique fell by the wayside. According to Oliver, during his own prison sentence, Colson expressed "a strikingly radical critique of the criminal justice system." He condemned deplorable prison conditions, advocated alternatives to incarceration for the overwhelming majority of people in prison, and assisted fellow prisoners with their appeals and parole applications. However, after his release, his criticisms became less strident, in part because he sought to secure access for ministries from skeptical prison officials. More broadly, Colson's theological commitments held that "the rule of law" was a necessary precursor to "achieving God's order on earth." According to Oliver, then, prison ministries like Colson's "bear a measure of responsibility for obscuring the relationship between the imperative

[47] Lee Bernstein, *America is the Prison: Art and Politics in the Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 75-98.

[48] Kendrick Oliver, "Attica, Watergate, and the Origin of Evangelical Prison Ministry, 1969-75," in *American Evangelicals and the 1960s*, edited by Axel R. Schaefer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 121-138. See also Tanya Erzen, "Testimonial Politics: The Christian Right's Faith-Based Approach to Marriage and Imprisonment," *American Quarterly* 59 (September 2007): 992

[49] Oliver, "Attica," 130.

of ministry and the imperative of reform." [50] Moreover, Oliver and Tanya Erzen also argue that evangelical prison ministries emphasize individual sin and redemption to the exclusion of structural explanations for mass incarceration. In other words, they imply without directly stating that these ministries simply ignore the significance of race in the criminal justice system. Even as they suggest that incarcerated African Americans can be rehabilitated, faith-based programs can unintentionally reinforce the idea that black communities are overrepresented in prisons simply because they are more prone to criminal activity. Similar dynamics shape Cain's moral rehabilitation. Like Colson, the former warden has expressed support for systemic reform of the criminal justice system, most notably with regard to release mechanisms. Daniel Bergner writes of Cain that he wished people who visited Angola would urge their elected representatives to "cut these life no parole sentences and give a man the chance to get out, the chance for a hearing, once he's at least forty and has served twenty years."[51] Again, he has repeatedly asserted that opening the prison to the public for tours and special events will help fuel the shift in public opinion necessary to revise Louisiana's tough sentencing laws. If people can observe evidence of their dramatic transformations firsthand, Cain contends, they may come to see the state's lifers and long-termers as worthy of a second chance to rejoin society.

Yet Cain also implicitly eschews critiques that highlight structural racism endemic in Louisiana's criminal justice system. Implying that moral rehabilitation has eliminated racial tensions at Angola, the warden has also invoked the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. to assert that colorblind equality now prevails.[52] Those who argue racism still permeates American

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[50] *Ibid,* 132-134.

[51] Bergner, *God of the Rodeo,* 20.

society are stuck in the past. [53] Moreover, Cain admits his primary concern is keeping peace inside the prison. He believes rehabilitation has occurred when incarcerated individuals refrain from violence because they have found meaning, purpose, and contentment in their lives within prison walls. In other words, people can be redeemed, through religious means or otherwise, even if they are never released. Cain's view leads critics to charge that moral rehabilitation is merely a means of controlling the incarcerated populations, but it also raises questions specific to prisons in which people are serving life without parole sentences: if the public assents to certain standards of rehabilitation, and if incarcerated people demonstrate that they meet those standards, is society under any moral, social, or legal obligation to set them free? Do people in prison possess a right to have their rehabilitation recognized and rewarded, or is such recompense dependent on the mercy of lawmakers and the public?

Relevance for African American religious history

These questions about rehabilitation resonate with some prominent themes in African American religious history. Just as there are questions about whether rehabilitation should entail release, so there were questions as to whether slave owners were under legal obligation to emancipate enslaved Africans who converted to Christianity.[54] In the late seventeenth century,

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[52] John Corley, "Out of the shadows: National advocacy, legislation attack prison rape," *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, No. 3 (May/June 2007), 21; "Keeping the dream alive: Guest ministers and Louisiana senator honor Dr. King with Angola prisoners," *The Angolite*, Vol. 31 (2006), No. 1, 54; Burl Cain, *The Farm: 10 Down.* DVD, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2009.

[53] Shirley Hoogstra, "Inner Compass: Bringing Hope to Prisoners," YouTube video, posted by Calvin College, April 7, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyTfNN8d27k.

[54] See Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865.* Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975; Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, 98; Richard A. Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Sylvester Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 129.

colonial governments passed laws decoupling Christianity and freedom, and missionaries had to assure slave owners that Christianity would make slaves more obedient.[55] During the Great Awakenings of the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth century, evangelicals who had once called for the abolition of slavery began to frame equality in spiritual rather than social terms, promising freedom only in the afterlife. Slave owners forced slaves to listen to sermons that justified slavery as a divinely mandated institution.[56] Nevertheless, enslaved Africans who converted to Christianity often emphasized its more subversive characteristics, creating their own invisible institution of interpretations and worship practices.[57] Spirituals not only extolled spiritual liberty, but contained coded messages explaining how to obtain freedom from slavery through the Underground Railroad. Enslaved African Americans associated Christianity with freedom in this life as well as the next. Similarly, African Americans incarcerated at Angola have expected that their rehabilitation should be a legally recognized key to their release from prison.

Arguing that public showcases of moral rehabilitation will sway public opinion, Cain assumes that religious activity is a particularly appealing, legible medium through which the public can determine whether Angola's majority-black population is truly rehabilitated. However, even when it evokes sympathy, religiosity has not always functioned as a key to social equality for African Americans. Historian Curtis Evans reveals that by the nineteenth century,

[55] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 99.

[56] Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

[57] "African Christians," writes Sylvester Johnson, "thus, exploited structures of imposition to eke out subtle but nonetheless significant spaces of power." Johnson, *African American Religions*, 138. Similarly, Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood argue that alaves were not passive receptacles of Christianity, but rather "always critically appropriated that message to meet their own specific requirements." Frey and Wood demonstrate how black women, who constituted the majority of slave converts, converted to protect their children from witchcraft and themselves from sexual abuse. Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

African Americans were regarded as inherently religious, but intellectually inferior to whites. White abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe depicted slaves as Christ figures, but simple-minded ones. Similarly, in the 1930s, artists like playwright Mark Connelly characterized African Americans' "childlike" understandings of religion as an antidote to overly intellectualized white society.[58] Just after the Civil War, however, northern black missionaries expressed concern that the enthusiastic worship practices of former slaves would make African Americans appear unassimilable to whites.[59] Indeed, social scientists of the late nineteenth century characterized black religious practice as overly embodied and pathologically emotional, a catalyst for criminal behavior and a barrier to full integration into white society.[60]

By the 1940s, sociologists regarded black churches as a buffer against criminal activity, a place where African Americans could release their frustrations in "emotional worship." In this light, black churches were a stop-gap coping mechanism, not a "healthy orientation to living."[61] Historian Earl Lewis maintains that during the "classical" Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, religious institutions like black churches played a significant role in rendering African Americans "socially innocent," as "citizens…whose injuries required remedy."[62] The images of Alabama state troopers beating marchers on Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge as they fled back to Brown Chapel AME Church evoked the sympathy of white liberals, in many ways

[58] Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17-64, 203-222.

[59] Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 83-85; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Woman's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[60]Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*, 65-140.

[61] *Ibid*, 233, 226.

[62] Earl Lewis, "Constructing African Americans as Minorities," in *The Construction of Minorities: Cases for Comparison across Time and around the World*, ed. Andre Burguiere and Raymond Grew (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

recalling white abolitionists' efforts to cast slaves as sacrificial Christ figures. However, Evans maintains that the black uprisings of the mid- to late-1960s reinforced white assumptions that "the urban North" was the domain of "godless and violent blacks."[63] Elements of this history inform current sociological studies of religion and crime. Most notably, Byron Johnson of the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion characterizes urban black communities as hotbeds of crime and religiosity. Yet, like his 1940s counterparts, Johnson frames black churches as an "invisible institution" whose "buffering" effects on criminal activity among African American women and youths are too often "overlooked."[64] When it comes to African Americans, religiosity and criminality always intertwine, with religion either fomenting or preventing criminal behavior.

Like most literature on religion and prisons, Sullivan's study of the Prison Fellowship Ministry case focuses on relationships between the religious and the secular. Such works most often address questions about the separation of church and stated, religious freedom, and religious diversity in prisons.[65] However, while she compares faith-based rehabilitation to the

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[63] Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion,* 15.

[64] See Byron Johnson, Sung Joon Jang, Spencer De Li, and David Larson, "The 'Invisible Institution' and Black Youth Crime: The Church as an Agency of Local Social Control," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence,* Vol. 29, No. 4 (August 2000): 479-498; Sung Joon Jang and Byron Johnson, "Gender, Religiosity, and Reactions to Strain among African Americans," *The Sociological Quarterly,* Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 2005): 323-357; Johnson, *More God, Less Crime,* 15, 76, 179.

[65] See, for example, James A. Beckford and Sophie Gilliat, *Religion in Prison: Equal Rites in a Multi-Faith Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Patrick B. Cates, "Faith-based Prisons and the Establishment Cause: The Constitutionality of Employing Religion as an Engine of Correctional Policy," *Williamette Law Review* 41 (2005): 777-826; Richard R.W. Field, "Punishment and Crime: Perks for Prisoners Who Pray: Using the Coercion Test to Decide Establishment Clause Challenges to Faith-Based Prison Units," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (2005): 541-67; Kent R. Kerley, Todd L. Matthews, and Troy C. Blanchard, "Religiosity, Religious Participation, and Negative Prison Behaviors," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44 (2005): 443-57; Charles McDaniel, Derek H. Davis, and Sabrina A. Neff, "Charitable Choice and Prison Ministries: Constitutional Challenges to Rehabilitating the American Penal System," *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 16 (2005): 164-89; Tim Eicher, "Scaling the Wall: Faith-Based Prison Programs and the Establishment Clause." *Georgetown Journal of Law and Public Policy 5* (2007): 221-40; Douglas Roy, "Doin' Time in God's House: Why Faith-Based Rehabilitation Programs Violate the Establishment Clause." *Southern California Law Review* 78 (2005): 795-834.

Social Gospel conflation of Christianity and civilization, Sullivan does not explain that this conflation was particularly apparent in the context of colonialism.[66] European settlers maintained that they were bringing both religion and civilization to African peoples who possessed neither.[67] Similarly, missionaries justified the slave trade as a means to convert enslaved Africans to Christianity.[68] In fact, some African Americans interpreted slavery as "the fortunate fall," part of a divine plan to introduce Christianity to Africa.[69]

Tracy Fessenden's work is helpful here, as she highlights how the secular in America is not only fundamentally Protestant, but also implicitly racialized as well. Fessenden suggests that by Catholicizing slavery, abolitionists implied that both slaveholders and slaves were equally subject to Catholic hegemony. Thus, sins once associated with Catholics, including "rape, violence, imprisonment, undisciplined fertility, mismanaged homes, failures in education, and failures of self-government," were now imputed to African Americans after emancipation. Fessenden shows how secular concepts like "civilization" were not only inherently religious, but implicitly racialized as well.[70]

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[66] In his recent ethnography of a week at the chapel of Pennsylvania's Graterford Prison, Joshua Dubler does address the racial composition of prisons. He notes that it is "truly bizarre how unremarkable it has become that for so many…black men…the practice of religion takes place in [prisons]" (xiv). But Dubler is more interested in accounting for the diversity of African American practices within prisons rather than racial assumptions inherent in prisons themselves. See Joshua Dubler, *Down at the Chapel: Religious Life in an American Prison*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

[67] David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

[68] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 97.

[69] Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Tunde Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998); Sylvester Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 150

[70] Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Conclusion and chapter summary

How do black religiosity and rehabilitation intersect at Angola, and to what effect? Critics characterize Cain's moral rehabilitation as something akin to slave owner Christianity. His narrative of pacifying a majority-black population through Christian hope for the afterlife bears striking similarities to the promises missionaries made to slave holders. He promotes a conception of rehabilitation that prioritizes redemption over release and emphasizes subservient behavior as evidence of reform. This understanding of rehabilitation is especially evident in his attitude toward the Angola Three, a trio of Black Panthers placed in solitary confinement on April 17, 1972 for the murder of prison guard Brent Miller. Albert Woodfox, Herman Wallace, and Robert Wilkerson each maintained their innocence, arguing that their placement in solitary confinement came as a result of their political organizing inside the prison. The Angola Three had been in solitary for over twenty years by the time Cain took over the prison, but Wilkerson described him as "the most vindictive warden I've ever seen."[71] According to Cain, the Angola Three could not be released because of their own intransigence and continued disobedience that made them a threat to prison order. [72] But more recently, Cain revealed that the Three's political beliefs were the primary impediment to their release. In a 2009 deposition, Cain objected to specific tenets of the Black Panther Party Ten Point Platform. He took particular issue with the statement, "we want to end the robbery by the capitalists of our black community." Cain responded, "When he said "our people" he's talking about black people, so they robbed

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[71] James Minton, "'Camp J' conditions protested—Angola disciplinary unit called a 'torture camp,'" *The Advocate,* December 8, 2002, 1-B.

[72] Brett Barrouquere, "Judge weighs inmates' suit over isolation," *The Advocate,* April 14, 2001, 1B, 2B; Gwen Filosa, "Two of 'Angola Three' counting days still—Guard's killing brings 3 decades of lockdown," *Times-Picayune,* May 2, 2002, 01.

everybody, me too. We've got to get away from this race stuff."[73] In a hearing for Woodfox the previous year, Cain argued that Woodfox "is not a rehabilitated prisoner," primarily because "he has Black Pantherism." [74]

However, the very year that Cain arrived at Angola, Woodfox described himself to *The Angolite,* Angola's prison newsmagazine, as a "spiritual, just not religious" man. Admitting that his years of solitary confinement had made him angry and bitter, he nevertheless maintained that he had also become "a well-educated, well-disciplined, highly moral man." Woodfox considered himself to be a political prisoner in that he ended up in prison because of a discriminatory political system. "Being an African-American pretty much determined where I'd wind up," Woodfox told *The Angolite.* "It's sad to say that I had to come to prison to find out there were great African Americans in this country and in this world, and to find role models that probably contribute more now to my moral principles and social values, when I should have had these things available to me in school."[75] While he characterized himself as a political prisoner, Woodfox still suggested he had intellectually and morally transformed himself during his time in prison, not to conform to the standards of the white society that had always rejected him, but to live up to the morals and values of black role models.

Woodfox's understanding of rehabilitation parallels that of other incarcerated African Americans. Historian Donald Tibbs writes that for George Jackson, "His rehabilitation was his

[73] James Ridgeway and Jean Casella, "Torturous Milestone: 40 Years in Solitary: Constitutional claim may be the last chance for aging Angola 3 inmates," *Mother Jones,* April 17, 2012.

[74] Gwen Filosa, "Angola 3 inmate is ordered freed—Woodfox awaiting third murder trial," *Times-Picayune,* November 26, 2008, 01; Melissa Block, "Despite Legal Win, Inmate Back in Solitary," *All Things Considered,* December 17, 2008.

[75] Lane Nelson, "The Planted," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1995): 37.

politicization."[76] Similarly, Robert Dannin and Hamid Reza Kusha suggest that Islam offers black prisoners an opportunity to both appropriate and challenge the rehabilitative model established by the Quakers. Islamic education, sartorial prescriptions, worship practices, and sacred spaces constitute a "counterdiscipline" to the dehumanizing regime of prison life. Through this counterdiscipline, incarcerated Muslims are connected to a global Islamic community, framing transformation as a communal rather than strictly individual process. The end goal is still "to lead a law-abiding life back on the street," but through a distinct rehabilitative process.[77]

With its history of racialized punishment and recent reputation as a beacon of reform, Angola presents a particularly rich site in which to further study how rehabilitation is defined, and to what ends for incarcerated African Americans. Through four "sites" related to Angola, I examine how the concept of rehabilitation functions for African Americans. Each of these sites has a slightly different audience, and each successive site more directly involves the public. In chapter two, I examine major documentaries and news features about Angola produced during Cain's tenure. Most Americans form their opinions about prisons and incarcerated people not through direct experience, but through media coverage. Thus, it matters a great deal the way that films, television dramas, reality shows, and nightly news present penal institutions and the people locked inside them. Much of the scholarship on media representations of prisons suggests that these representations demonize African Americans as especially violent, incorrigible criminals. The major documentaries about Angola, however, feature black characters as prime

[76] See Donald F. Tibbs, *From Black Power to Prison Power*: *The Making of Jones v. North Carolina Prisoners' Labor Union* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 93, 98.

[77] Robert Dannin, "Island in a Sea of Ignorance: Dimensions of a Prison Mosque," in *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe,* ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 131-146; Hamid Reza Kusha, *Islam in American Prisons: Black Muslims' Challenge to American Penology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009).

examples of rehabilitation in the traditional sense of confessing guilt, repenting, and changing behavior. Yet, these individuals also become a justification for continuing to incarcerate black men who refuse to adhere to this rehabilitative model and frame their incarceration as the product of systemic racism. And even when black men do adhere to the norms of redemption, their transformations primarily serve to enrich whites and reinforce racialized assumptions about the causes and consequences of crime.

In chapters three and four, I examine how incarcerated African Americans define rehabilitation through two media in which they communicate more directly with the public: *The Angolite,* Angola's prisoner-produced newsmagazine, and *The Life of Jesus Christ,* a passion play performed by incarcerated members of Angola's Drama Club, along with actresses from the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women (LCIW). Writing and dramatic performance are particularly suited for the kind of introspection and self-exploration through which early penitentiary founders intended to reform individuals. Critics, therefore, have warned that these forms of rehabilitation necessarily reinforce normative understandings of crime and punishment. However, contributors to *The Angolite* and participants in *The Life of Jesus Christ* present subversive understandings of rehabilitation. "Sounding off" in *The Angolite'*s editorial section, incarcerated writers have often defined rehabilitation as self-transformation recognized by benevolent prison officials, but also an objectively measured outcome rewarded by right and recognized through an adversarial legal process. *Angolite* contributors have framed religion as both an impediment to and a catalyst for this kind of rehabilitation. Similarly, actors in the passion play perform the story of Jesus to display their contrition and redemption, but also to question individualized understandings of guilt that undergird the concept of rehabilitation. Casting choices and directorial decisions challenge the audience to confront their biases about

the color of Christ, rethink their interpretations of traditionally reviled biblical characters, and consider how the political context of the gospel story resonates with that of incarcerated African Americans. The play calls on spectators to engage in collective self-examination, reconfiguring and reversing the typical direction of the rehabilitative process.

Finally, in chapter five, I explore how formerly incarcerated activists and their advocates define and employ rehabilitation in the state legislative arena. Cain expresses the hope that when visitors witness the impact of moral rehabilitation, they will convince their legislators to revise Louisiana's tough sentencing laws. This is the arena, then, in which moral rehabilitation is supposed to culminate. Prison ministry volunteers do, in fact, appear before the legislature, testifying on behalf of reform bills alongside formerly incarcerated people. However, the legislative context shifts the way these advocates talk about rehabilitation. Most notably, rehabilitation becomes a means by which lawmakers can safely justify reducing the prison population, thereby saving the state money. Advocates hope that by using the language of cost and savings they can attract the white conservative legislators who will grant their cause legitimacy, as well as, overcome the emotional testimony of crime victims and the district attorneys who claim to represent them.

In conclusion, I use moral rehabilitation at Angola a means to illuminate how rehabilitation and related religious ideas frame perceptions of incarcerated African Americans, as well as how incarcerated African Americans use these concepts to frame themselves. Drawing on archival research as well as ethnographic fieldwork, this dissertation asserts that race reconfigures reform in unique ways, depending on the environment**.**

Methodology

This dissertation draws upon both archival and ethnographic research. To contextualize the documentaries about Angola, I sifted through over 1000 newspaper items about the prison during Burl Cain's tenure using the *America's News* database. During the summer of 2013 and the spring of 2015, I spent several weeks poring over back copies of *The Angolite* at the Special Collections at Louisiana State University's Hill Memorial Library and the State Library of Louisiana in Baton Rouge. Though I ultimately only included material from the 1970s onward, I examined the full range of *Angolite*s, from the 1950s to the present. In these early issues, I found fascinating precursors to Warden Cain's moral rehabilitation, including what appears to have been an all-African American class of incarcerated students who took correspondence courses through the Moody Bible Institute in the early 1960s. *The Angolite* described these classes as "one of the chief weapons used in this fight against sin" in Angola and reported that one of the graduates, William Jackson, was "active in church work in New Orleans" upon his release.[78]

I began the ethnographic portion of dissertation research by attending *The Life of Jesus Christ* in May 2012. Initially, Cain's administration offered me access to interview men and women acting in the play. I had planned to do more extensive ethnographic work inside the prison. However, when I requested to collaborate with Gary Tyler, the play's incarcerated director, the officials with whom I had been communicating rescinded their offer of access. I can only speculate as to why they did so (I suspect Tyler's status as a famous political prisoner, which I discuss in chapter three, had something to do with it). Still, I was allowed to attend both the March 2013 and November 2013 performances of *The Life of Jesus Christ* and to interview non-incarcerated members of the audience. Moreover, this seeming setback shifted my focus to

[78] R.D. Davis, "The Demolition of Sin," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 13, April 6, 1963, p. 8.

the important topic of moral rehabilitation's impact in the legislative arena. Through generous fellowships from the Center for the Study of the American South and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Graduate School, I was able to spend the summers of 2013 and 2014, as well as six months of 2015, in Baton Rouge and New Orleans attending criminal justice reform meetings and legislative workshops, state senate and house hearings, and other associated events, interviewing reform advocates, legislators and other interested parties. In 2016, I made periodic trips back to the state to conduct further interviews and keep abreast of new developments in criminal justice reform there.

CHAPTER TWO:

DOCUMENTING REDEMPTION: MORAL REHABILITATION IN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

When director Jonathan Stack screened his documentary, *The Farm: 10 Down,* at Angola in 2009, Warden Burl Cain framed two of the men featured film as exemplars of rehabilitation. *10 Down* is the sequel to *The Farm* (1998), the critically acclaimed documentary about life inside the notorious prison. Of the six whose lives Stack had chronicled in *The Farm,* four men, all African Americans, were still alive ten years later: Bishop Eugene Tanniehill, Ashante Witherspoon, Vincent Simmons, and George Crawford. Tanniehill received an executive pardon in 2007 after serving 47 years of a life sentence for murder. Witherspoon paroled in 1999 after serving 28 years of a 75-year sentence for armed robbery. Simmons continues to serve a 100-year sentence for rape, and Crawford is serving a life sentence for first-degree murder. Both Tanniehill and Witherspoon returned to Angola for the screening. Neither Simmons nor Crawford attended the event. It is not clear why Crawford was absent, but Simmons was locked down in the prison's disciplinary unit at the time. *The Angolite,* Angola's prison newsmagazine, reported that during the post-screening talkback for *10 Down,* Cain presented Tanniehill as "a miracle of perseverance" and Witherspoon as "an example of preparation for the opportunity of freedom." The warden suggested Crawford was on the road to transformation, but Simmons

could only emerge from lockdown when he decided to "help himself" like Tanniehill and Witherspoon had.[79]

This episode complicates the scholarly consensus about African Americans and the rehabilitative ideal. Historians agree that the eighteenth century Quakers intended penitentiaries to temporarily deprive white men of their status to reform and restore them to their place in society. Because they had no social standing, black women and men were categorically excluded from the possibility of rehabilitation. Moreover, Quakers perceived black men in particular as driven by sexual passions rather than rationality, impervious to the reformative effects of silent, solitary contemplation.[80] These early racialized assumptions have had remarkable staying power throughout the history of American prisons. As mentioned in the introduction, popular depictions suggesting that violent, rebellious African Americans populated prisons fueled scholarly and public suspicion of the rehabilitative ideal. In contrast to images of intransigence and violence, however, Warden Cain's interpretation of *10 Down* casts some black men as not only capable of reform, but as models for others. But what are the implications of such an interpretation? Over the past twenty years, many depictions of Angola have included black men undergoing the process of reform traditionally reserved for white men. Incarcerated African American men are eventually rewarded with release when they repent of their crimes, affirm the values of mainstream society, and transform their lives accordingly.

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[79] Larry Sharp, "Déjà vu: The Farm—Ten Down," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 4 (July/August 2009): 25.

[80] Mark E. Kann, "Penitence for the Privileged: Manhood, Race, and Penitentiaries in Early America," in *Prison Masculinities,* edited by Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 21-34; Angela Davis, "Race, Gender, and Prison History: From the Convict Lease System to the Supermax Prison," in *Prison Masculinities,* edited by Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 35-45; John M. Sloop, *The Cultural Prison: Discourse, Prisoners, and Punishment* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1996), 34-45.

However, these individuals also become a justification for continuing to incarcerate black men who refuse to follow to this rehabilitative model and frame their incarceration as the product of systemic racism. Even when black men do adhere to the norms of redemption, their transformations primarily serve to enrich whites and reinforce racialized assumptions about the causes and consequences of crime. Scholarly consensus implies that depictions of redeemable African Americans might encourage more humane criminal justice policies. Ultimately, however, even depictions of penitent black men can reinforce the same policies that portrayals of violent predators have. Just as romanticized images of black religion have often reinforced stereotypes and hierarchies, so even seemingly sympathetic depictions of redemption at Angola can implicitly reinforce capital punishment and indefinite incarceration.

In this chapter, I focus on four of the most well-known depictions of Angola: *Judgment at Midnight,* a documentary about the execution of Antonio James that aired as an episode of *Prime Time Live* in 1996; *The Farm,* Jonathan Stack's 1998 documentary about life inside Angola; *The Farm: 10 Down,* Stack's 2009 sequel to *The Farm;* and *Serving Life,* the 2011 documentary about Angola's hospice program produced by the Oprah Winfrey Network. Each of these depictions is significant in its own right. *Judgment at Midnight* was one of the first major portrayals of Cain's Angola, bringing the warden fame for his personal approach to executions. *The Farm* is probably the most widely known depiction of Angola. Incarcerated journalist Wilbert Rideau, longtime editor of Angola's prison newsmagazine, *The Angolite,* co-directed the film, which was ultimately nominated for an Oscar. And *Serving Life* was the first film in the Oprah Winfrey Network's short-lived original documentary series. It was also screened at the 2015 American Academy of Religion conference. I supplement analysis of these depictions with

national news coverage of two of Angola's more recent initiatives: Malachi Dads and the Returning Hearts Celebration.

Documentaries about Angola are important source material for two reasons. First, in the absence of personal experience with incarceration, most Americans gain their knowledge about prisons and the people inside them through popular representations in film and television.[81] Second, because they purport to be authentic representations of reality, documentaries are especially influential in shaping not only perceptions of, but actions toward people in prison. Non-fiction films about the criminal justice system in particular have been known to facilitate incarcerated individuals' release and prompt reforms.[82] I chose the aforementioned representations because they are the most well-known and widely viewed portrayals of Angola, appealing to both religious and non-religious audiences, conservatives and liberals. In this light, as with all representations, these documentaries raise questions about the diversity and limitation of audience interpretation. Viewers can interpret these films very differently depending on their context. Some have cast *The Farm,* for example, as a radical critique of the criminal justice system, while the Louisiana Department of Corrections recommended the film as a training video for their corrections officers. However, scholars remind us that interpretation is necessarily limited by "the economic interests of the media" and "the pervading, prescribing influence of

[81] See, for example, Erving Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959); D.A. Graber, *Crime News and the Public* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980); D. Cheatwood, "Prison movies: Films about adult, male, civilian prisons, 1929-1995," in *Popular Culture, Crime, and Justice*, edited by F. Bailey and D. Hale (Belmont, CA: West/Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998); C.L. McNeeley, "Perceptions of the Criminal Justice System: Television Imagery and Public Knowledge in the United States," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 3, 1: 1-20; Bruce Shapiro, "The Ghosts of Attica," *The Nation,* January 31, 2000; Bill Yousman, *Prime time prisons on US TV: Representation of Incarceration* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); "Revisiting Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model: Ex-Prisoners Respond to Television Representations of Incarceration," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 35, no. 3 (2013): 197-216.

[82] See, for example, Charles Musser, "Film truth, documentary, and the law: justice at the margins," *USFL Review* 30 (1995): 963-984; Taunya Lovell Banks, "What Documentary Films Teach us About the Criminal Justice System—Introduction," *University of Maryland Law Journal of Race, Religion, Gender, and Class* Vol. 8, No. 1 (2008): 1-6; Kristen Fuhs, "The Legal Trial And/In Documentary Film," *Cultural Studies*, 28, 5-6, 781-808.

corporate structures."[83] Put another way, some people's interpretations are more influential than others. In the context of Angola, for example, Warden Cain's interpretation of *10 Down* has more sway than Vincent Simmons' does. Depictions of Angola are necessarily constrained by their context.

Ultimately, I argue that depictions of redemption are a double-edged sword for incarcerated African Americans. These portrayals often emphasize the individual to the exclusion of structural critique or context. Scholars addressing the history of evangelical prison ministries often note that these "colorblind" initiatives implicitly deemphasize the systemic racism inherent in the criminal justice system.[84] However, I also argue that stories about moral rehabilitation at Angola actively perpetuate racial stereotypes in which the redemption of African Americans serves others more than themselves and reinforces the idea that crime is endemic to black communities even as preventative measures must be implemented at the individual level.

"Put on a new life": black men embody and espouse the rehabilitative ideal

Of all the depictions of Angola, *The Farm* most clearly portrays African American men undergoing the process of contrition and redemption Quaker reformers envisioned when they established the first penitentiaries. The filmmakers present Eugene "Bishop" Tanniehill, an elderly black man who has served nearly four decades of a life sentence for murder, as the quintessential exemplar of reform. Ordained as a Pentecostal minister, Tanniehill earned his nickname "Bishop" for his prominent position in Angola's religious community. Delivering an

[83] Sloop, *The Cultural Prison*, 11; Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 16-17.

[84] Tanya Erzen, "Testimonial Politics: The Christian Right's Faith-Based Approach to Marriage and Imprisonment," *American Quarterly* 59 (September 2007): 992. For a discussion of white evangelicals' emphasis on racial reconciliation between individuals rather than policies to address systemic racism, see Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

enthusiastic sermon to a lively congregation in the prison, “Bishop” uses his own life story as an illustration of how God rewards those who repent. In the midst of his message, he confesses his crime: “[I] met a man, innocent man, a good man,” he exclaims, “and with a clap of my hand, I took that man life!” He insists that the police “rescued” him by arresting him because his imprisonment led him to God. In a moment of despair, he expressed sorrow and shame for what he had done, asking God to “cleanse” him of his sins. Alone with the filmmakers, Tanniehill explains that Angola helped him to discover himself, to overcome his ignorance. In this way, he insists, prison helps individuals "become transformed,” “change clothes,” or “put on a new life.”

The Farm, then, depicts a black man transforming in much the way Quakers would have hoped. Tanniehill is a black Pentecostal preacher rather than one of the white men for whom early reformers intended penitentiaries. He sweats, shouts, and jumps as he tells his story to a lively congregation rather than silently contemplating his sins in a solitary cell. Yet h**e** describes how his incarceration forced him to recognize and repent of his sins and change his life. He publicly confesses his guilt and encourages others to do the same, promising that their lives will be blessed like his if they do. Tanniehill embodies rehabilitation differently than Quakers would have expected, but he follows their basic template of reflection, contrition, and transformation.

The Farm presents Ashante Witherspoon, a middle-aged African American man serving 75 years for armed robbery, in a similar light. Witherspoon reveals that initially, his determination to survive the prison’s violent environment landed him in Angola’s disciplinary cellblocks. There he realized the futility of rebellion, repented of his ways, and decided to “redevelop [his] life.” Though *The Farm* at one point depicts him praying in Christ’s name, Witherspoon does not use Tanniehill’s language of instantaneous salvation and sanctification. The film focuses on his service as a paralegal and his work as a CPR trainer rather than his

participation in overtly religious programs. Still, Witherspoon points back to a moment of introspection that led him to change his behavior, to prove through his actions that he was worthy of release. Citing his leadership of clubs and involvement in numerous self-help and service organization Witherspoon asserts that he is a "totally different person" than when he first came to Angola. Like Tanniehill, he is a black man adhering to the Quaker template of reform, recognizing his personal responsibility for his current circumstances and crediting prison discipline as the impetus for his transformation.

"We seek refuge with Allah": including Muslims in the redemptive vision

An early reviewer concluded that *The Farm* implicitly reinforced Warden Cain's "biblical vision" and ultimately delivered a "Christian message," in part because no Muslims appeared in the film.[85] Indeed, most stories about Angola use images of charismatic preachers and congregations clapping and shouting along with gospel choirs as shorthand for the prison's religious transformation. The 2011 documentary *Serving Life*, however, suggests that incarcerated Muslims can fit into Cain's "biblical vision" as well as Christians. ***Serving Life*** is the most well-known portrayal of Angola's famous hospice program. Produced by Lisa Cohen and narrated by actor Forest Whittaker, the film was the first entry in Oprah's short-lived documentary club and "carrie[d] the editorial judgment of Oprah Inc."[86] *Serving Life* follows four new volunteers as they begin the process of becoming hospice caregivers: Justin, a 28 year-old white man serving a life sentence for second-degree murder; Charles "Boston" Rodgers, a 31year-old black man serving 35 years for armed robbery; Ronald Ratliff, a middle-aged black

[85] Danny Heitman, "The Farm: A&E documentary films emotional year at Angola penitentiary," *The Advocate,* Sunday, September 20, 1998, 1-H.

[86] Ginia Bellafante, "Oprah's Network Goes to the Movies," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/02/arts/television/oprah-winfrey-introduces-documentary-club.html?_r=0.

man serving a life sentence for a drug charge under Louisiana's three strikes law; and Anthony "Shaheed" Middlebrooks, a 37 year-old African American man serving 40 years for first-degree robbery.

Though Boston briefly describes the process by which he became a Christian minister in Angola's cellblocks, Shaheed is the most recognizably religious of the new hospice volunteers. A tall, lanky, light-skinned Black man, Shaheed is a devout Muslim. The filmmakers intentionally highlight evidence of his Muslim identity. Footage of the young man rolling out a rug and kneeling to pray rolls as Middlebrooks explains that he is serving a forty year sentence for first degree robbery. The camera pans over a copy of *Leadership in an Islamic Perspective* resting on his bunk. A brief shot of a letter to Middlebrooks' mother focuses on the phrase "in the name of Allah the Most Merciful." The narrator reveals that he serves as an imam inside the prison, as the film cuts to a prayer service. Wearing a knit prayer cap, Shaheed delivers a sermon before men kneel, faces and palms to the ground, murmuring "Allahu Akbar" in unison. Later, when he reveals that his twin boys drowned six months into his sentence, the camera cuts to Shaheed repeating the ritual alone, removing his work shoes and intoning "Allahu Akbar" as he bends to the floor.

Incarcerated Muslims are burdened with a contentious history. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, prison wardens and chaplains regarded the Nation of Islam in particular as a threat to security. Teachings about black separatism were especially troubling to authorities. The ameliorating role of incarcerated Muslims during the 1971 Attica uprising and the increasing popularity of Sunni Islam in American prisons did soften attitudes toward incarcerated

Muslims.[87] But after the 9/11 attacks, politicians and journalists increasingly voiced fears of "radicalization" inside U.S. prisons.[88] Chuck Colson of Prison Fellowship Ministry argued that incarcerated African Americans, perceiving themselves to be victims of systemic injustice, were particularly susceptible to "radicalization," eager to "strike back at [their] oppressors."[89] *Serving Life*, however, portrays Middlebrooks' Islam as compatible with the filmmakers' own understanding of redemption. Describing himself as a drug dealer before he came to Angola, Middlebrooks reveals that he "reached out to God" in a moment of personal crisis, after his sons died. He attributes his incarceration to his own mistakes, admitting that he deliberately decided to follow "the bad road," despite his parents' guidance. The film's brief snippet of his sermon conveys a similar message of individual accountability. "We seek refuge with Allah," he tells the congregation, "from the evil of ourselves and our own sinful deeds." Though he is Muslim, his story of transformation adheres to the Quaker template of redemption. Middlebrooks recognizes and repents of his life as a drug dealer, accepts personal responsibility for his incarceration, and turns to God to save him from his sins. His Muslim identity does not conflict with the apparently universal ideals of reform.

[87] See, for example, Robert Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[88] Sohail Daulatzai, "Protect Ya Neck (Remix): Muslims and the Carceral Imagination in the Age of Guantanamo," in *Black Routes to Islam,* eds. Manning Marable and Hishaam D. Aidi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 207-223.

[89] Charles W. Colson, "Terrorists Behind Bars," *First Things,* November 2002. http://www.firstthings.com/article/2002/11/terrorists-behind-bars.

"Radical outrage and old-fashioned redemption": complicating rehabilitation

When *The Farm* premiered in 1998, one reviewer concluded that the film "sends mixed signals of radical outrage and old-fashioned redemption."[90] On one hand, the documentary characterizes Angola as an extension of slavery, the most recent manifestation of a long history of racialized oppression. Within the first five minutes of *The Farm,* the narrator reveals that 77 percent of the 900 men sentenced to Angola in 1997 were African Americans**.** In interviews with the filmmakers, *Angolite* editor Wilbert Rideau highlights the continuity between Angola's origins as a slave plantation and its present reality. Noting that the prison population is majority-black and the administration all-white, Rideau concludes: "Nothing has changed in the past two hundred years. It's the same people." He characterizes Angola as a "corporate plantation." Worked by a captive, unpaid labor force, it is what antebellum slavery would resemble if it had continued into the twentieth century.

Tanniehill and Witherspoon's stories are largely disconnected from this broader narrative. Neither refers to the continuing legacy of slavery at Angola. They assume sole responsibility for their crimes without any indication that their imprisonment is unjust or connected to their racial identity. Similarly, in *Serving Life,* which largely lacks *The Farm's* historical context, Shaheed Middlebrooks assuages Chuck Colson's fears of radicalization among incarcerated African American Muslims. He does not cast himself as a "victim of systemic injustice."

If "violent criminals" and "superpredators" are the prevailing images of incarcerated Black men, *The Farm's* "radicalized outrage and old-fashioned redemption" are not at odds. In

[90] Bill Stamets, "Moral ambiguities rob 'Farm' of fruitful discussion," *Chicago Sun-Times,* Friday, September 4, 1998, 33.

this context, even if they are disconnected from an understanding of anti-black discrimination inherent in the criminal justice system, the films' sympathetic depictions of black men's transformations are radical in and of themselves. As depicted on camera, Tanniehill, Witherspoon, and Middlebrooks' testimonies directly challenge the "nothing works" mentality with regard to rehabilitation fostered by racial prejudice as prison populations shifted from majority-white to majority-black.

Moreover, these African American men are redeemed alongside white men, and in a similar fashion. In *The Farm,* for example, Logan "Bones" Theriot, an elderly white man dying in Angola's hospice unit, admits to having killed his wife. He recognized immediately that he had "messed up," he tells a group of incarcerated friends gathered at his bedside. He prayed to God for more time "to get to know him." Like Tanniehill, Theriot insists that Angola is not the place of despair some people think it is. "You can still have a life inside," he says, citing educational and service opportunities in the prison. And while he highlights his own class status, he does not frame incarceration as a fate largely reserved for the people without financial resources. He explains to the men holding vigil around his bed that he had not submitted to God earlier in his life because he resented being poor. But he suggests being in prison dissolved his discontent, showing him that life is not about getting more, but about getting to know God. Theriot's process of redemption is no different than that of Tanniehill or Witherspoon; he recognizes his guilt in an instant and vows to get right with God and serve others. He accepts personal responsibility for his incarceration, regardless of the structural realities that allow wealthier whites to avoid prison time. Together, Witherspoon, Tanniehill, and Theriot suggest that the process of rehabilitation is universal, represented by black and white men in equal measure.

Other stories, however, suggest more clearly that structural factors like race and class do shape the process of redemption. One of the most obvious examples is the story of Antonio James, a 41 year-old black man sentenced to death for murder and armed robbery of two men. In the 1996 *Prime Time Live* special, *Judgment at Midnight,* ABC reporter Cynthia McFadden chronicled James' final days at the invitation of Warden Cain. James always maintained his innocence, insisting that while he was present at both murders, it was his accomplices who actually pulled the trigger. Initially, he was bitter that he had been sentenced to death for crimes he did not commit. But while on Death Row, he determined that he would "become a better person" and "free myself from all this anger and hate." James attributed his transformation to prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit. "All that hate, anger and bitterness just disappeared," he recalled.[91] Like Tanniehill, Witherspoon, and Middlebrooks, James experiences a transformative moment. However, because he maintains his innocence, he frames his redemption as a decision not to be bitter about his wrongful imprisonment, not unconditional repentance for the crimes of which he is accused.

Cynthia McFadden highlights James' alternative understanding of redemption when she repeatedly seeks to elicit a satisfying confession from James. She does address the systemic factors that contributed to his conviction, raising questions about the legal process through which James was convicted. She notes that James's own attorney admitted his defense strategy was "so bad" that he believes James "didn't get a fair trial." And she tells *Primetime Live* host Diane Sawyer that James is "typical" of people on Death Row in that he was young, poor, uneducated, and "ha[d] few resources to defend [himself]." McFadden does not suggest these factors

[91] Lane Nelson, "Death Watch: Down to the Wire," *The Angolite*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (May/June 1995): 10.

disproportionately impact African Americans, but she does suggest that structural inequities contributed to James' death sentence.[92]

Nevertheless, McFadden actively seeks to make James' story conform to the traditional template of repentance and redemption. "He's at least guilty of murder in the second degree," she tells James' attorney, Nick Trenticosta. "So we're not really talking about innocence in the way that people think about innocence." She suggests that though he may not have pulled the trigger, he was still complicit in a murder, as though the lesser degree of his role in the crime should not obviate his death sentence. Consequently, McFadden pushes James to clearly state his guilt. "Have you accepted responsibility for what you've done?" she asks James. When he owns to participating in armed robbery, McFadden presses further, asking whether he takes responsibility for the murders as well. "Well no," he responds, "I feel like that I'm on Death Row for murders that I didn't commit." McFadden does not let the matter rest, revisiting the question in a final conversation with James through the bars of his cell on Death Row.

> McFadden: [*voiceover*] Until the end, Antonio James continues to maintain he never shot either victim. [*to James*] We've talked a lot about what you're innocent of, and I want to ask you, what are you guilty of?
>
> James: Armed robbery. Armed robbery.
>
> McFadden: When you talk to God about your sins—

[92] The film also does not linger on the fact that juries overwhelmingly impose the death penalty on those accused of killing whites, not African Americans. While James was sentenced to death for the murder of Henry Silver, an elderly white man, he was sentenced to life in prison for the death of Elvin Adams, an elderly black man. So while Adams' son insists that James must die for his crimes, it is not actually his father's death for which James is to be executed. Nevertheless, Adams did hope that James' execution would correct the racial disparity inherent in capital punishment with regard to victims. "And let's hope," he told *The Advocate,* "that we can put all this here, 'It's OK for the black man to kill the black man, but don't kill the white man.' Hey, a man is a man regardless of what color." See James Minton, "Son of victim prayed for James," *The Advocate,* March 2, 1996.

James: I ask for forgiveness.

McFadden: That doesn't include their deaths?

James: It includes their deaths, for being present.

McFadden is clearly unsatisfied with James' understanding of his role in the murders. She continually presses him for a full confession, an unambiguous statement of his personal responsibility for the deaths of two men. Even as she recognizes the structural factors that contributed to his conviction, she seeks to push him toward an unmitigated admission of guilt. James refuses, asserting that he is both innocent and redeemed, subverting the traditional rehabilitative model of confession, repentance, and salvation. Filmmakers simply present the stories of Tanniehill, Witherspoon, and Middlebrooks without connecting them to Angola's history of racialized punishment. But *Judgment at Midnight* portrays a white reporter actively seeking to shape a black man's redemption story into a narrative of guilt and reform rather than wrongful conviction and racial injustice.

Who is guilty?: redemption and forgiveness in *The Farm* and *10 Down*

While Cynthia McFadden openly expresses skepticism about James' innocence, *The Farm* takes seriously Vincent Simmon's claim that he has been wrongfully convicted. However, his efforts to challenge the standard redemptive framework are similarly ill-fated. Viewers first encounter Simmons on the eve of his first parole hearing. After years of legal work on his own behalf, he has finally obtained evidence that the district attorney withheld at the time of his trial. Simmons expresses hope that this new evidence will help him "accomplish [his] freedom." The film implies his hopes are doomed from the start. Prior to the hearing, the two sisters for whose

rape Simmons was convicted appear before the parole board to argue against his release. One board member assures the sisters that the board will "do its duty," suggesting Simmons' newly discovered evidence will be irrelevant. From the beginning the board seeks to fit Simmons' case into the redemptive model. Board member Irv Magri, a prominent victim's rights advocate, asks Simmons whether he committed the rapes. He scoffs when Simmons denies the charge. Simmons presents the board members with the evidence he hopes will prove his innocence: a medical examination concluding one of the two girls was still a virgin after the alleged rape; a line-up photo in which Simmons is the only man in handcuffs; a statement by one of the victims indicating she could not identify the perpetrator because "all black people look alike."

Indeed, during Simmons' hearing, one of the sisters revealed that she had developed a fear of all black men since the alleged rape, openly admitting that she would not be alone with the African American man sitting on the parole board. But instead of concluding that this admission of racial prejudice invalidates her testimony, the black board member makes clear that his sympathies lie with her. He compares her to his own granddaughters, shuddering to imagine what he would do if they were sexually assaulted. After he hears her testimony, he insists he does not even need to hear what Simmons has to say. He and the other board members perform only a perfunctory examination of the evidence Simmons presents. When Simmons leaves the room, they quickly agree to deny him parole. Despite substantial evidence of the anti-black bias pervading his case, Simmons' pleas fall on deaf ears because he refuses to confess his guilt and seek forgiveness.[93]

[93] The narrator in *10 Down* reiterates this point: "Accepting responsibility for one's crime and expressing remorse are preconditions for receiving parole. But Vincent came in ready to plead his case for innocence."

10 Down reveals that Simmons' unwillingness to adhere to the standard redemptive model is still a roadblock to his release. Though *The Farm* brought renewed attention to his case, his efforts to secure a new trial have been largely unsuccessful. His last hope is to convince Karen and Sharon Sanders, the women who accused him of rape, that they were mistaken when they identified him as their attacker. But the twins are only interested in reaffirming Simmons' guilt by offering him their forgiveness. *10 Down* depicts a 1999 victim-offender reconciliation meeting between Simmons and the Sanders sisters. The sisters read prepared statements in which they accuse Simmons of inflicting great pain upon them, but insist that their faith in God gives them the strength to forgive him and hope he finds redemption.

Simmons, however, has his own religious reading of the situation: he is a righteous man whose faithfulness God will reward if the twins acknowledge their accusations were false. He opens his remarks with a Bible verse: "Commit your ways to the Lord…and he shall bring it to pass, Psalm 37:5." Presiding over the meeting, Warden Cain interrupts Simmons, immediately suspicious of his intent. The Psalm he cites affirms that God will champion the righteous and eventually thwart the evil who scheme against them. God, Simmons implies, will reveal his innocence and end the injustice perpetrated by those who put him in prison. Indeed, when Sharon asks why he quoted the scripture, Simmons explains that he had hoped to review the facts of the case with the sisters, to question their testimonies, to demonstrate his righteousness. When they refuse, he still seeks to characterize the women as the guilty party in need of forgiveness. He assures them that even though they helped put him in prison, he does not hate or hold a grudge against them. Simmons refuses to conform to the standard model of redemption, asserting his innocence rather than confessing his guilt and framing himself as a victim of a racially biased process.

The sisters, however, seek to reassert the familiar redemptive narrative. Incensed that Simmons implies they are the guilty ones, the sisters storm out. Outside the prison, Karen expresses frustration, asserting that Simmons would experience relief only if he would confess his guilt. In a later interview included in *10 Down* , Karen expresses more sympathy for Simmons, but continues to insist that he must take responsibility for his crimes. She suggests that if Simmons would simply "admit [he] screwed up," she and her sister might speak in favor of his release. Karen believes that there is some good inside Simmons and prays she and her sister might help him find it. As she speaks, the camera cuts to Simmons, who is watching this clip of Sanders' statement with a slight smile, tears streaming down his face. When the clip ends, he looks up, thanking the filmmakers for sharing it with him and revealing that he prays for the sisters as well. Still, Simmons will not agree to their terms, even though he knows "life might be easier" if he did. Directing the filmmakers how to dispose of his body, he acknowledges that his refusal to confess means he will most likely die in Angola. As a black man accused of raping two white women, Simmons' fate depends on affirming their interpretation of the past. He knows that conforming to the traditional model might result in his release, but admitting guilt would negate the compelling evidence that his conviction was based on anti-black prejudice.

Collateral damage: incarcerated whites challenge the redemptive model

In contrast to *Judgment at Midnight* and *The Farm*, it is a white character who frames himself as a victim of the justice system in *Serving Life.* Like Antonio James, Justin Granier also argues that while he was present when a murder occurred, he was not the man who pulled the trigger. He implies Louisiana's second degree murder statutes are unfair, revealing that he continues to pursue his case in the courts. Unlike McFadden in *Judgment at Midnight*, the filmmakers do not push Justin for a more satisfying confession on camera, but he does later

express regret that a young man died in his presence and wonders if he could have prevented his death somehow. Like Antonio James, Justin confesses his guilt even as he frames his sentence as unjust.

Justin exemplifies the concept of "collateral damage" of mass incarceration, the idea that criminal justice policies designed to target African Americans nevertheless impact some whites.[94] In fact, by pairing his story with that of his hospice partner, Boston, *Serving Life* subtly suggests young white men in Angola come from different contexts than young black men. Boston describes his as "the typical story": an incarcerated father, a drug-addicted mother, an unstable childhood in foster care and the homes of "thieving" relatives. As a teenager, he was in and out of jail, until at the age of twenty he was sentenced to 35 years for armed robbery. But Justin was pursuing a college education in the medical field and imagined a bright future for himself before his arrest. "By now I shoulda done graduated," he tells the filmmakers, "probably started a family, living a normal life. But instead I'm living the most abnormal life possible." He wants to become a hospice volunteer because the work "would kinda be a resemblance of what my life could have been had I not come to prison." For Boston, ending up in prison was almost an expectation; for Justin, it is a shock.

Justin, too, must adhere to the norms of the standard redemptive model. *Serving Life* does not directly evaluate his claim that his second degree murder charge is unjust. By including Justin's later reflection that he might have done something to prevent his friend from killing the victim in his case, the filmmakers suggest he is guilty, in as much need of redemption as all the other hospice volunteers. Unlike Antonio James, Justin is not bullied into an unmitigated

[94] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010, 2012), 205.

confession. However, the filmmakers also do not frame his case as a blatant injustice, as the directors of *The Farm* do for Vincent Simmons. The fact that Justin pursues his freedom through the courts is incidental to the filmmakers' story about his redemption through Angola's hospice program.

"Miracles happen": redemption and release in *The Farm* and *10 Down*

While the filmmakers express sympathy for Simmons, *The Farm* and *10 Down* ultimately highlight the futility of subverting the traditional redemptive model. On the other hand, these films directly contrast his fate with that of those who do adhere to the standard redemption narrative, namely Bishop Tanniehill and Ashante Witherspoon. Throughout *The Farm,* Tanniehill distinguishes between physical and spiritual freedom and suggests that the governor has not signed his pardon because Tanniehill himself is not "ready from within" for the outside world. Still, he suggests he would be overjoyed if he were to be released. The rolling script at the end of *The Farm* indicates Tanniehill did not receive a pardon. The muted, mournful trumpet music suggests that the audience should be dismayed that an obviously reformed man must remain in prison.

But *10 Down* reveals that in 2007, Governor Kathleen Blanco finally signed Tanniehill's pardon. The film does not explain the process by which this occurred. After *The Farm's* release, Tanniehill received renewed attention from evangelists and politicians. Most pivotal was his introduction to influential businessman Terry Van Der Aa through evangelist Manny Mill. With the help of Mill and Van Der Aa, Tanniehill secured another pardon board hearing in 2007. [95] Considering testimony from Warden Cain and state Senator Charles D. Jones (D-Monroe), the

[95] Lane Nelson, "Freedom! Released from prison after 47 years, the bishop of Angola keeps the old faith alive in a new world", *The Angolite,* July/Aug 2007, 18-21.

pardon board recommended Tanniehill for release, emphasizing his religious activity. Senator Jones credited Tanniehill equally alongside Cain with fostering an unprecedented "spiritual movement" within Angola. One of Cain's security guards spoke for Tanniehill as well, testifying that Bishop had taught him how to pray.[96] Swayed by these testimonies, Governor Kathleen Blanco signed Tanniehill's pardon. Ultimately, Tanniehill became a youth minister at Jim Cymbala's Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York City (he had met Cymbala through Van Der Aa). Van Der Aa had set up a sizeable fund so that Tanniehill would not have to bear the burden of supporting his own ministry.[97]

10 Down does not explain this complicated process. Instead, the film presents Tanniehill's release as a straightforward result of his redemption. When the filmmakers visit him in New York, Tanniehill insists that while he was still in prison, God had revealed that he would have a ministry upon his release. He had "sowed the good seed" as a minister at Angola and could now "reap the harvest." *10 Down* depicts the tangible manifestations of Tanniehill's reward. In *The Farm,* Bishop was missing several of his front teeth and preached in a denim jacket and blue jeans. *10 Down* shows Tanniehill with gleaming dentures and dressed in colorful suits. When the filmmakers notice Tanniehill's garments hanging on a rack in his bedroom, Tanniehill reveals that he has eighteen different suits. "I don't mean Salvation Army suits neither," he boasts. He simply chuckles with delight when the filmmakers ask him how it feels to get dressed every day. Similarly, when Tanniehill visits Angola, Cain immediately remarks upon his suit and gold watch. Wearing a bright purple, well-tailored suit, he greets an audience of incarcerated men in a spacious, pristine chapel rather than a crowded classroom in Angola's

[96] James Minton, "Board favors sentence reduction for murderer," *The Advocate,* February 27, 2007.

[97] Nelson, "Freedom!," 18-21.

education building. Through his faith, Tanniehill has not only been released from prison, but materially blessed beyond what most formerly incarcerated people can often expect.

In *10 Down,* the filmmakers reveal that Ashante Witherspoon has also been rewarded with release as a result of his personal transformation. At the end of *The Farm,* Witherspoon recognizes that Louisiana's political climate make his chances for freedom slim. However, like Tanniehill, he has faith that parole is still possible because God could sway parole board members in his favor. **"**God touches a person's heart, and miracles happen," he concludes. Indeed, *The Farm: 10 Down* suggests that Witherspoon's faith was well-founded. Re-introducing him to the audience, the narrator reveals that the parole board finally granted Witherspoon a hearing in 1999. [98] Witherspoon's hearing is strikingly different from Simmons' encounter with the parole board. Whereas Simmons appeared alone, we see Warden Cain speaking on Witherspoon's behalf, praising him in particular for confessing and repenting of his crime. Witherspoon reiterates his remorse, focusing on his transformation rather than any discrepancies in his conviction. "I was wrong for anything that I've ever done in my life that was wrong," he tells the board. He prays that God has helped the board appreciate the evidence of his rehabilitation, promising that if he is released "the spirit of God" will continue to work through him. On camera, and with Witherspoon in the room, all the members vote in favor of his parole. The board chair reinforces his identity as a reformed transgressor. "In the words of our savior,"

[98] In his 2005 monograph about Angola, Dennis Shere, a senior officer with the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, frames Witherspoon's release as the result of divine intervention rather than diligent legal work. Shere writes that it was when Witherspoon became "content to stay at Angola if that was what God had in mind for him" that "a series of miracles" (appearing in *The Farm,* obtaining Cain's recommendation) led to his release. See Dennis Shere, *Cain's Redemption: A Story of Hope and Transformation in America's Bloodiest Prison* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2005), 189.

he tells Witherspoon, "go and sin no more."[99] Witherspoon gets his miracle. Affirmed by Warden Cain, his confession, repentance, and redemption are the key to his release. Whereas the parole board rebuffs Simmons for maintaining his innocence, the same body rewards Witherspoon for accepting responsibility for his crime, presenting evidence of his transformation, and vowing to do God's work upon his release.

While their stories were largely disconnected from Cain in *The Farm*, in *10 Down*, Tanniehill and Witherspoon become exemplars of the warden's religious agenda. *The Farm* portrayed Cain as a compassionate warden, but *10 Down* directly credits the warden with dramatically reducing violence inside the prison by instituting religious programming to instill morality among Angola's population. As the narrator briefly describes the prison's Bible College, viewers see images of black men worshipping inside a prison chapel, waving their hands to slow-tempo gospel music. In this context, Tanniehill and Witherspoon become evidence of Cain's success. In *10 Down*, Cain explicitly identifies Tanniehill and Witherspoon as exemplars of moral rehabilitation who should be released to make room for more dangerous criminals. As footage of Cain presenting Tanniehill with his pardon certificate rolls, the warden suggests there are hundreds just like him who are no longer a threat to public safety and should be offered a second chance in society. His words imply that Witherspoon and Tanniehill are not unique; others should be rewarded with release for having undergone moral transformations.

However, the filmmakers also make clear that redemption is not always rewarded with release. In *10 Down*, Cain specifies that a couple hundred are worthy of release; in Angola's

[99] John 8: 1-11. A group of Pharisees accuses a woman accused of adultery to Jesus for his judgment. Knowing that the penalty for adultery is stoning, Jesus tells the people in the crowd that anyone who has never sinned should be the one to cast the first stone. When no one rises to the challenge, Jesus tells the woman that he does not condemn her either, telling her, "Go and sin no more."

population of over 6000, this means thousands more are not. *The Farm* makes clear that this is not necessarily because the remaining thousands are unreformed. Rather, Cain suggests in the film that most of the rehabilitated can only expect their reward in the hereafter. The context in which the warden expresses these sentiments is significant. Near the end of *The Farm,* Vincent Simmons discusses his case with *Angolite* editor Wilbert Rideau. Rideau informs him that his African American alibi witnesses will not stand up against two white women accusing him of rape. Simmons refuses to relent, hoping that the Supreme Court will consider his case. "You're a brave man, to entertain hope at that level today," Rideau responds. Immediately following this exchange, the filmmakers cut to Burl Cain, driving across Angola and expounding on the idea of hope. "Well I don't think we ever give up hope," he tells the filmmakers. "And that's where God comes to play in it, because when we give up hope of being free here, we have to pick up and say, 'Well, we're gonna be free when we die.' So thank God we can believe in heaven, thank God we can believe it's not over when it's over. It's just over here." Similarly, in *10 Down,* the narrator frames the increasingly prominent role of religion at Angola as a direct response to Louisiana's harsh sentencing laws. The camera captures Cain addressing men in one of Angola's congregations. Applause and "amens" greet his assurance that God has "eternal life…and streets of gold" in store for them. *The Farm* and *10 Down* present black men relieved of their draconian sentences as a result of their personal redemption. However, the films suggest that for most of Angola's population, Louisiana's laws are so immutable that rehabilitation can only serve as a means to cope with life in prison.

"It will affect him more now": the impact of transformation in *Judgment at Midnight*

In fact, representations of reformed black men at Angola often emphasize the meaning their redemption has for others' lives rather than their own physical or spiritual fate. *Judgment at*

Midnight, for example, only briefly addresses the idea that because Antonio James has changed, he does not deserve to die. The documentary offers few details about James' actual transformation; neither Warden Cain nor James describes any specific conversion experience.[100] Images of James in the film indicate he is Catholic: a brief shot of James sitting on the edge of his bunk and crossing himself, a white Catholic priest sitting at the table during James' last meal.[101] James does tell McFadden that he and the warden believe in "the same God, Christ." Cain expresses confidence that James will go to heaven, and James tells McFadden that though he does not want to die, he is no longer afraid to do so because he has faith in God.[102] *Judgment at Midnight* does suggest, then, that James' redemption will result in eternal reward.

However, the filmmakers focus more intently on the way James' faith impacts others**.** Even in his last hours, James is more concerned with those around him than himself. Hugging his son and grandson, James insists he can endure his own execution, but regrets the toll it will take on his family. He is especially concerned that his teenage son and nephew might act out in response to his death. He models the behavior he wants the young men to emulate: calm composure, not anger and rebellion. Moreover, through Warden Cain, he explains that all young

[100] In contrast, *The Angolite,* Angola's prison newsmagazine, recounted the detailed testimonial James offered during a pardon board hearing. Though he maintained he was wrongfully sentenced to death, he determined that while on Death Row, he would "become a better person" and "free myself from all this anger and hate." James attributed his transformation to prayer. "All that hate, anger and bitterness just disappeared," he recalled. "It felt like something took over me that I can only describe by saying it was the Holy Spirit." Ernest Busby, one of James's neighbors on Death Row, testified at on James' behalf at one of his clemency hearings. "I'm not a religious man," Busby said. "I don't even believe in God. But I can tell when someone is faking it. Tony does not fake his religion. He was always ready to talk about the Bible, and help others…People change." See Lane Nelson, "Death Watch: Down to the Wire," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 3 (May/June 1995): 10, 13.

[101] News coverage indicated a Catholic priest administered last rites after James' and a Catholic nun served as his spiritual advisor. See James Minton, "James loses final appeal, is executed," *The Advocate,* March 1, 1996; James Varney, "Time Runs Out for Killer—Antonio James is Put to Death," *The Advocate,* March 1, 1996.

[102] Cain remarked after the execution that James had told him: " if he was afraid, it would merely reflect the weakness in his faith, and he is strong in his faith." See James Minton, "Punishment inequities send mixed message," *The Advocate,* March 19, 1996. Elvin Adams, Jr. actually prayed just prior to the execution that James "had it straight with the Lord." See "Convicted killer executed after victim's son leads prayer," *Associated Press,* March 2, 1996.

black men from his city should interpret his story as a cautionary tale. On the eve of James' execution, a grinning Cain tells a group of reporters at Angola's front gate that James' message "to all the predators and all the hoodlums in New Orleans," is that "there's consequences for your behavior." Though James maintains his innocence, here his story conforms to the traditional redemptive model so that young men from his community will take personal responsibility for their actions rather than blaming the justice system.

In addition to framing him as an object lesson for young black men, Cynthia McFadden repeatedly highlights the fact that James is more concerned with consoling those around him than receiving comfort himself. As he visits with his family for the final time and eats his last meal, Cynthia McFadden notes that James works "to keep things upbeat" and "keep the mood light" for those gathered to support him. Cain has to warn spiritual advisors not to cry, lest they compel James to console them. And James tells a flabbergasted McFadden that he hopes to make his own execution "comfortable" for the warden.

Indeed, in *Judgment at Midnight,* James' religiosity plays a more prominent role for Cain than it does for himself. The documentary emphasizes the friendship between the two men. Cain admits that James is "special" to him. But James does not expect that their relationship will stop the warden from carrying out his execution; it will simply ensure that James' death has a greater impact on Cain. James' impending execution will "affect [Cain] more now" because the warden now recognizes their shared faith. James' religious transformation is the key not to his own salvation, but to the warden's personal growth, to Cain's own shifting perspective on the death penalty. Cain briefly expresses concern that God may disapprove of his role in the execution. However, he later adamantly insists that his decision to carry out "the law of the land" is not a

sin for which he needs to seek James' forgiveness. Cain simply rethinks his approach to executions, not capital punishment itself. Instead of presiding over executions in a detached, impersonal manner, James' faith leads the warden to pray with the condemned man before his final meal, hold his hand as he lays on the gurney, and direct him to the afterlife as the lethal drugs take their effect.

In the end, James' religiosity is important to the extent that it brought about Cain's new approach to executions. James' faith did not cause Cain to oppose the death penalty, but rather enabled him to carry it out without remorse or guilt. Cain himself tells McFadden that this is the significance of James' faith. When she raises the possibility that James might be "just a great con artist," Cain dismisses her conjecture as irrelevant. "It doesn't matter if he is or not," the warden insists. "It matters how we ourselves deal with this. And how it moves me, and how it moves others. And that's what really counts. I don't think he is, but even if he is, it's still OK." Again, James' religious transformation is not primarily for his own benefit, as evidenced by the fact that it does not have to be genuine. The primary function of his faith is to keep black youth on the straight and narrow, comfort his friends and family, and inspire the warden. James' redemption is the means through which others can be saved, not a justification for sparing his own life.

In this way, *Judgment at Midnight* is a variation on two intertwined stock figures in American popular culture: the Magical Negro and the White Savior. Magical Negroes are usually poor and uneducated, possessing magic powers or superior spiritual insight that they use in the service of White men rather than to change their own precarious material circumstances.[103] One of the most notable recent examples is John Coffey in the film *The Green Mile.* A childlike

[103] Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham, "The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film," *Journal of Black Studies,* Vol. 40, No. 2 (November 2009): 135-152.

African American man sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit, Coffey uses his miraculous powers not to free himself, but to cure one of his jailers, a white man named Paul Edgecomb, of a painful bladder infection. Reluctant to destroy "one of God's miracles," Edgecomb offers to set Coffey free, but Coffey refuses, insisting his death will be a welcome escape from the evils of the world. As sociologist Matthew W. Hughey explains, the audience is supposed to believe Edgecomb has done Coffey a kindness by presiding over his execution and be satisfied that Coffey's suffering has made his white friend "a morally improved person."[104] A closely related character, the White Savior is a morally or intellectually superior white person whose paternalistic assistance helps people of color overcome the supposedly deficient culture that has marginalized them. One instantiation of this archetype is the white school teacher who lifts students of color out of their "culture of poverty" through superior pedagogical skills.[105]

Judgment at Midnight includes elements of both the Magical Negro and White Savior storylines. Antonio James possesses superior spiritual insight, as evidenced by his ability to comforting others rather than seek reassurance himself in the face of impending death. He does not expect that his transformation and strong faith will halt his execution. James is content that the process of carrying out his death sentence will impact Cain more now that he and the warden share a spiritual connection. Cain, too, emphasizes his own reaction to James' death, focusing in particular on the way the condemned man's faith has encouraged him to take a more humane approach to executions. At the same time, Cain maintains his moral superiority. Taking James' guilt for granted, the warden insists that he does not need forgiveness for facilitating capital

[104] Matthew W. Hughey, "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magic Negro' Films," *Social Problems,* Vol. 56, No. 3 (August 2009): 564.

[105] One of the more famous examples is Michelle Pfeiffer's character, Louanne Johnson in the 1995 film *Dangerous Minds.* See Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors," *Sociology Compass* Vol. 6, No. 9 (2012): 761.

punishment. In fact, Cain frames James' story as a cautionary tale, a warning he can use to convince young black men to reject the flawed morals that led James to commit murder. James is the Magical Negro who compels Cain to become a more moral warden at the same time that Cain is the White Savior who teaches moral lessons to inner city black youth. In either case, James' transformation benefits others more than it does him.

"Giving back, that's what really matters": self-sacrifice in *Serving Life*

Similarly, the stories of transformation in *Serving Life* are intended for the edification of the audience more than the benefit of those whose lives the film depicts. *Serving Life* characterizes hospice as a redemptive environment introduced by a benevolent white warden to teach incarcerated black men empathy and self-sacrifice. In an interview with the filmmakers, Warden Cain characterizes hospice as "the ultimate test" of whether individuals have truly changed because it requires them to abandon their selfish "criminal" lifestyles and instead adopt a life of service and self-sacrifice. They bathe invalid men, change diapers, and dress bone-deep bed sores. They sit vigil as men draw their last breaths in cinderblock hospital rooms, knowing that they will most likely face the same fate one day. They sew quilts that will cover the coffins of friends they have to bury. They develop intimate interpersonal relationships in a highly emotional atmosphere of death and dying. "That's the redemption," the warden concludes. "That's the rehabilitation."

Each of the volunteers featured in the film undergoes a significant transformation as a result of his time in hospice. Though he is a Bible College graduate and minister in Angola's cellblocks, Boston is initially overwhelmed by his hospice duties, especially the prospect of watching patients die. However, through his friendship with a cantankerous patient named

Chance, the narrator reveals that he not only discovered an unexpected passion for hospice, but also developed "true courage" rather than the "false bravado" that led him to prison in the first place. On his prison construction job, Ronald Ratliff is overbearing and irascible, barking at fellow workers when they do not properly follow his instructions. But in the hospice ward, he is gentle and tender, singing a normally unresponsive man his favorite Fats Domino song to bring him to life. Caring for others distracts him from his own problems and gives him an opportunity to prove to his dead mother that she did "raise [him] right." Justin insists the crime for which he was convicted does not merit a life sentence. Yet when he hears hospice patients praise God in the midst of their suffering, he concludes he, too, can endure any challenge. And after seeing a man die surrounded by his friends and family, Shaheed decides to reconnect with his parents, calling himself an "idiot" for losing contact with them in the first place. Ultimately, *Serving Life* suggests that serving as a hospice volunteer is a redemptive process.

However, while *The Farm* clearly implied that redeemed individuals like Bishop Tanniehill and Ashante Witherspoon should go free, *Serving Life* delivers no such message. From the opening scene, the film lays bare the collective transgressions of its subjects. Mugshots interspersed with the words "killer," "predator," "violent," and "cold-blooded" flash across the screen as menacing electric guitar music plays in the background. Each of the four men profiled in the film introduce themselves by describing their charge and sentence. And even as they are shown caring for the sick and dying or reflecting how hospice has changed them, descriptions of their crimes often flash beneath their images as they appear on screen. Whitaker reminds the audience: "They may not look it, but like every inmate at this maximum security prison, these men are hardened criminals." In fact, producer Lisa Cohen revealed in an interview with NPR that Oprah's company required such reminders, insisting the film repeatedly highlight the crimes

for which volunteers had been convicted. "Let's not forget who these men have been in the past and what they've done and why they're here," Cohen concluded.[106]

These constant reiterations of the characters' crimes remind viewers that the central question of the film is not whether incarcerated people can return to society once they are rehabilitated, but rather whether people convicted of serious crimes are redeemable at all. Introducing *Serving Life* for Oprah's documentary club, Rosie O'Donnell summed up the film's theme in a voiceover overlaying footage of Angola's hospice volunteers. "Some of the most dangerous criminals in the world care for dying inmates," O'Donnell reveals as Justin and his mentor carefully lift an elderly white man into his hospital bed. "Can a killer learn compassion and ultimately find redemption?" she asks as Anthony Diggs, a veteran volunteer, trudges out of a cinderblock hospital room, brushing a tear away with the back of his hand. Again, the question is not whether volunteers' transformations should result in the release of incarcerated people. The question is whether it is even possible for "dangerous criminals" to "learn compassion" and "find redemption." The film answers yes, but does not suggest any further questions are necessary.

Overall, Oprah tells viewers, her series of documentaries is supposed to "transform the way we see ourselves, each other, and the world," to "enlighten [and] elevate…us all." The stories of transformation are not primarily a justification for their freedom. They are first and foremost a means for the audience to learn that "hardened criminals" can be taught to care, though their crimes are never to be forgotten. Viewers can learn this lesson even if the volunteers remain incarcerated. In *Judgment at Midnight,* Antonio James' faith enriched individuals

[106] Lisa Cohen, "'Serving Life': Prisoners Find Humanity in the Face of Death," Michel Martin, *Tell Me More,* October 19, 2011.

featured in the film itself. In *Serving Life*, the perpetually incarcerated hospice volunteers transform for the benefit of the viewers off-screen, for the personal edification of Oprah's audience rather than as the justification for their release.

Characters in the film reiterate this message, explicitly stating that they do not expect any reward for their hospice service. A bald black man in his forties, Albert Lavalais is a veteran hospice volunteer and Justin's mentor in the program. He is also serving a life sentence for first degree murder. With little visible emotion, he recalls how his boss hired him to murder his wife: "[I] went in, shot her, and left." Still, Lavalais explains that part of him died with the woman, that he remembers her every day. Even when he attends his father's funeral, he thinks of her. As he lays a small crucifix on his father's chest, he regrets that he could not tend to his ailing father as he does for dying men in Angola. Yet he immediately recalls that the woman he killed died alone as well, negating his own frustration. When his death sentence was commuted to life, he could not understand why God had spared him. But in hospice, he found new meaning. "Giving back, that's what really matters," he concludes. "What I need—I think I threw that away a long time ago." Redemption entails not a second chance, but self-abnegation and perpetual service, as a hospice volunteer and an object lesson for viewers.

Serving Life and *Judgment at Midnight* depict black men whose redemption ultimately has more meaning for others than for themselves. Hospice volunteers forever changed by their experiences caring for the dying do not gain freedom or even shed the label of "criminal." Their stories of transformation serve primarily as a medium through which to enlighten audiences about the nature of humanity, presenting the supposedly shocking possibility that people in maximum-security prisons can still express empathy and emotion. Similarly, Antonio James'

faith is not primarily the key to his own salvation, physical or spiritual, but rather a source of comfort for his family and his captors.

"Generational curses" and "a culture of violent retribution"

Judgment at Midnight also briefly presents James' transformation as an example for other black men. His young male relatives are to refrain from resistance even when they perceive a situation to be unjust. James' counterparts on the streets of New Orleans are to view the possibility of incarceration and execution as a matter of their own choices rather than the consequences of a racially biased justice system. Media coverage of Angola's Malachi Dads and Returning Hearts Celebration further suggests that the redemption of individual black men has significant implications for the black community as a whole. Angola's Malachi Dads organization and Returning Hearts Celebration have become one of the more popular elements of moral rehabilitation journalists highlight in reports about the prison. Returning Hearts began in 2004, when North Carolina grandmother and Forgiven Ministries founder Scottie Barnes brought her "One Day with God" event to Angola in 2004. Barnes reunited children with their incarcerated fathers in Angola's rodeo arena, where they could participate in recreational activities like face-painting, arts and crafts projects, basketball, and obstacle courses together. Shortly thereafter, a Chicago-based evangelical children's ministry, Awana, or Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed, established "One Day with God" as an annual event called the Returning Hearts Celebration.[107] In addition to the one-day event, Awana Lifeline, the

[107] *CNN Live Today*, Daryn Kagan, September 13, 2004.

organization's prison ministry branch, created a program called Malachi Dads to teach Angola's incarcerated fathers how to be "godly parents" in anticipation of the Celebration.[108]

In stories about Returning Hearts and Malachi Dads, black men still repent and accept personal responsibility for their incarceration, but they frame their crimes in the context of fatherless families and a "culture of violent retribution." As I have suggested above, traditional frameworks of reform often disadvantage African Americans because they attribute incarceration to individual failings rather than highlighting systemic racism at work in the criminal justice system. Media coverage of Malachi Dads and Returning Hearts does assign blame beyond the individual, but identifies black "culture" as the culprit, not white supremacy embedded in public policy. The solution to high incarceration rates, therefore, is not to examine the justice system or other institutions, but rather to transform the values of individuals within black communities. In prison, incarcerated black men learn to value fatherhood and lives of others and teach their counterparts on the outside to do so as well.

In short, stories about Malachi Dads and Returning Hearts thus suggest redemption of black men is simultaneously individual and collective. Black men are personally responsible for their actions, but their transgressions also reflect a broader set of deficient values within black communities that can be only be addressed by changing one individual at a time. Historian Mark Kann reveals that a similar dynamic was at play in early American penal institutions. Penitentiaries became increasingly popular at a time when the founders feared that widespread licentious behavior among white men threatened the integrity of the new republic. Benjamin Rush asserted that temporarily depriving these men of their autonomy and authority over their families would correct their behavior and make them fit to participate in democratic society once

[108] "Malachi Dads." Awana Lifeline. Accessed April 28, 2016. http://awanalifeline.org/#/programs/malachi-dads.

again. Penitentiaries, then, were established to address a broader social problem through the reformation of individuals.

Still, reformers cast incarcerated white men as having committed "redeemable abuse[s] of natural passion." Their sexual indiscretions were aberrations, not the result of innate sexual immorality within the population of white males. On the other hand, black men were cast as inherently lustful and predatory. Today, even the most conservative observers are reluctant to suggest criminality is inborn. Instead, many commentators attribute high rates of crime in African American communities to black "culture," sometimes framed as the consequence of supposedly overgenerous social welfare programs, but often articulated in the language of heredity and pathology.[109] Stories about Angola's Returning Hearts Celebration present the event as the remedy for a "generational curse" of criminal behavior passed from fathers to their children. At the same time, coverage of the prison's Malachi Dads organization casts black "culture" as accessible and susceptible to human intervention, in contrast to the actions of white conservative politicians, which are transcendent, immutable, beyond the capacity of mere mortals to alter.

In short, redemption as presented in the context of reports about Malachi Dads and Returning Hearts actually reinforces the notion that black men are collectively prone to violence. Morally deficient black "culture" is the cause of crime, and though the remedy is the redemption of individuals, reform is intended to pervade the entire African American community. This formula pervades media coverage of moral rehabilitation more generally. Cain's introduction of Bible studies, chapels, and a seminary transformed a core group of individuals, whose influence

[109] For the one of the most popular iterations of this argument, see Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992). Olasky maintains that religious charities are more sound and effective than government assistance, which lacks personal accountability and moral dimensions.

transformed a once violent population. Here reformed black men have the potential to impact their communities beyond prison walls, reinforcing the idea that people from black communities are more likely to commit crimes.

In 2010, *USA Today*'s Rick Jervis published an article and produced a short film on Returning Hearts, profiling several of the participating Malachi Dads: Keith Morse, a 35 year-old black man serving life for first degree murder; Edward Burton, a 33 year-old black man serving 60 years for armed robbery; Randy Finch, an African American man in his early thirties serving a life sentence for murder; and Kyle Hebert, a bespectacled white man serving forty years for attempted first degree murder. Following the traditional redemptive model, each man confesses and repents of his crime. Malachi Dads, Awana Lifeline director Lyndon Azcuna explains, undergo a "transformation" through "the spirit of God." He voices over shots of religious activity at Angola: a black man leaning his head against his Bible, black men waving their arms as a white man sings a slow Christian country tune, and black men bowing their heads in the pews of a prison chapel. According to Aczuna, the instruction Malachi Dads receive helps them to "see their brokenness" and "repent."

Malachi Dads articulate their guilt and repentance in relation to their children in particular. Each man laments the impact of his incarceration on his kids. Burton tells Jervis how he asked his teenage daughter to forgive him for leaving her behind when he went to prison. "My son didn't wrong me," Morse insists. "I wronged my son. I have to be the one who actually make the sacrifices, the necessary sacrifices to make reconciliation, healing take place." Jervis depicts Returning Hearts as another form of "victim-offender reconciliation," an opportunity for guilty fathers to repent and make amends to the children they have harmed.

But Jervis' report does not just focus on individual fathers who have failed their children. From the beginning of his report, Jervis links criminal behavior with a pervasive culture of fatherlessness. "All our men are murderers, kidnappers, rapists, sex offenders, multiple offenders," Angola Chaplain Jim Rentz explains, as the camera pans over bleachers full of black men. "Most of these men come from single parent homes." Later, a series of Malachi Dads, all of them African Americans, recall their estranged relationships with their fathers.

> Finch: My dad was nonexistent. He basically abandoned me. I met my father while I was in prison.
>
> Burton: I didn't really never have my father there with me.
>
> Finch: My dad was incarcerated.
>
> Morse: He never really gave me any virtues or values.
>
> Burton: I never really understood what fatherhood was about.
>
> Finch: My dad, he was never consistent. He was always just this random pop-up guy.
>
> Morse: All I ever wanted my daddy to do was just tell me that he loved me.

This series of rapid-fire testimonials suggests that the black men presented to the audience ended up in Angola, at least in part, because they lacked parental, and specifically fatherly, guidance. In turn, their children are statistically prone to incarceration. Asserting that children of incarcerated parents are likely to be incarcerated themselves, Azcuna tells Jervis that Malachi Dads can "prevent these kids from following this pattern of crime." Citing statistics from a University of Michigan sociologist, Jervis confirms Azcuna's interpretation. Malachi Dads, he suggests,

consciously seek to prevent their children from becoming these statistics, to "break the cycle," to "snap that trend" of children following their incarcerated parents to prison.

Citing similar statistics, other stories about Malachi Dads and Returning Hearts more explicitly articulate criminal behavior in the language of heredity. Malachi Dads often use the term "generational curse" in Awana promotional videos. Keith Morse, for example, uses it to explain his participation in Malachi Dads: "In order for me to break the generational curse that I've been afflicted with, and my father been afflicted with, to keep my son from being afflicted by that same curse, I know that I have to raise myself up godly and raise him in a godly manner."[110] A recent Christian Broadcasting Network segment on Returning Hearts echoes this language. As he walks down bleachers full of fathers waiting for their children, CBN's John Jessup repeats the grim statistics about the likelihood that these children will also experience incarceration. Fathers participating in Returning Hearts, he reports, hope they can prevent such outcomes. "The purpose goes much deeper than having fun," Jessup says of Returning Hearts. "It's designed to let these kids know their fathers love them, and that they don't have to become a statistic by falling into some generational curse of crime." Jessup reiterates this framing in a brief interview with Joseph Glenn, an African American man in his mid-thirties enjoying the festivities with his son, Kevin. Glenn asserts that the "generational curse" of crime will disappear when incarcerated men love and guide their children.[111]

Used by and about incarcerated African American fathers and their children, this language of a "generational curse" invokes specifically anti-black myths and stereotypes. The

[110] Keith Morse, "Redeeming Time," *Awana Lifeline Media Video,* 3:26. See also Keith Morse, "Changed Hearts, Changed Lives," *Awana Lifeline Media Video,* 6:58; Peter Laxey, "Returning Hearts 2014," 7:08. http://awanalifeline.org/media.php?pageID=39.

[111] John Jessup, "Angola Prison: Land of New Beginnings," *Christian Broadcasting Network,* May 6, 2009.

term "generational curse" language recalls the biblical "curse of Ham" used to justify the transatlantic slave trade. Proslavery interpreters of the Book of Genesis claimed Noah's son, Ham, was the ancestor of black Africans. Therefore, they argued, when Noah cursed Ham's son, Canaan, to be a "servant of servants," he cursed all future generations of his supposed descendants to the same fate of enslavement.[112] Similarly, the notion that fatherless families encourage criminal behavior recalls Daniel Patrick Moynihan's notorious assertion that the "matriarchal structure" of black families created a "tangle of pathology" accounting for out-of-wedlock births, welfare dependency, and high unemployment rates among black men. Moynihan asserted that this "pathology" had its roots in white supremacy. But filtered through press accounts, and appearing in conjunction with black uprisings in American cities, the report became a justification for condemning African American communities and government assistance to them.[113]

Sociologists assert that *some* children of incarcerated parents *may* experience a higher risk of incarceration because of a variety of other environmental factors, such as poverty.[114] However, even when journalists do not use the term "generational curse," their coverage of Malachi Dads and Returning Hearts implies that black children are more likely to end up in prison because they lack moral guidance from their fathers, not because they are targeted for arrest or because mass incarceration has systematically deprived their communities of human capital. In these stories, black men are personally responsible for their crimes, but their actions

[112] See Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[113] James T. Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); Susan D. Greenbaum, *Blaming the Poor: The Long Shadow of the Moynihan Report* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

[114] James A. Graham and Yvette R. Harris, "Children of Color and Parental Incarceration: Implications for Research, Theory, and Practice," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, Vol. 41 (April 2013): 67, 69.

are also a microcosm of a morally deficient culture. Their rehabilitative efforts must not only transform their own lives, but those of their entire community. An emphasis on rehabilitation can foreground the individual to the exclusion of the broader narrative of African Americans' encounters with the criminal justice system. But individual stories of redemption can also imply that the entire black community is particularly prone to crime.

Like Rick Jervis, *Atlantic* correspondent Jeffrey Goldberg also situates individual stories of redemption within a broader narrative about the prevalence of violent crime in African American communities. For Goldberg, Malachi Dads like Ron Hicks, Daryl Waters, and George Guillam demonstrate that Warden Cain's regime of moral rehabilitation is effective. In his short film entitled "Angola for Life," Goldberg meets with these three African American men in one of Angola's chapels. Each man relates his story of redemption. Ron Hicks, for example, asserts that his transformation is so complete that the person who committed the murder for which he was convicted is "dead and gone." Goldberg is impressed by his interactions with Malachi Dads, concluding that they have changed so dramatically that "you would never know that these were murderers." Their impulse to serve others is especially compelling evidence of their redemption. George Guillam explains that because they have "a heart that's healed" and "a soul that's whole," he and the other Malachi Dads strive to "give back" to society. Referring to his own past and future potential, Hicks tells Goldberg: "That life that once took a life can save hundreds of lives." Warden Cain is more explicit, arguing that these men could help reduce violent crime, now that they have been rehabilitated. "They'd be of more use to society out on the streets of

New Orleans and Baton Rouge," Cain tells Goldberg. "If these peer ministers were out in their communities, they could work with kids so we never have to see them here."[115]

It is this possibility that led Goldberg to Angola in the first place. He became interested in Warden Cain while writing a piece about Mitch Landrieu, the white, Democratic mayor of New Orleans. Entitled "A Matter of Black Lives," Goldberg's article presents Landrieu as a tireless crusader against what the author calls "one of this country's most diabolical challenges": the high homicide rate in African American communities. Though he addresses Landrieu's commitment to mental-health services, substance abuse counseling, and job training, Goldberg focuses in particular on the mayor's quest to change what he calls "a particular culture." Goldberg terms the "culture" Landrieu alludes to as a "quick trigger culture," a "culture of violent retribution," a "culture…of male escalation."[116]

The mayor recognizes that attributing high murder rates in African American communities to "culture" is controversial, especially for a white politician. But objectors, he suggests, do not understand that he views culture as learned behavior, not heredity. Landrieu acknowledges that the culture to which he refers has structural foundations, like residential segregation. However, because these root causes occurred so far in the past, African Americans can no longer attribute their present actions to these factors. "If I knock you off a chair," Landrieu he explains to Goldberg, "that's on me. If you're still on the ground a week later, that's on you."

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[115] Goldberg, "The End of the Line."

[116] Jeffrey Goldberg, "A Matter of Black Lives," *The Atlantic,* September 2015. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/a-matter-of-black-lives/399386/. See also Jeffrey Goldberg, interview with John Dickerson, *Face the Nation,* CBS, August 31, 2015.

In this light, Landrieu focuses on the immediate circumstances that lead individuals to kill, particularly the emotions that drive a person to pull the trigger. This is where Angola and Warden Cain enter the story. With Goldberg in tow, Landrieu visits the prison to meet with some of Angola's lifers. The mayor hopes these men can explain why they killed so that he can understand how to stop others from committing murders in New Orleans. The men with whom he speaks are quick to claim personal responsibility. "I did everything with my own hand," Jackie Green says. "I did this to myself." Others attribute their crimes to their own deficient "critical decision making" skills or "communication problem[s]." Joseph Norfleet explains that while he now deeply regrets his actions, he was blinded by anger when he missed his intended target and accidentally shot a young black boy. These men suggest that conflict resolution training and anger management classes may be the key to curbing the murder rate. However, Angola's lifers also attribute their actions to the unique realities of the neighborhoods in which they lived. They explain that, "shooting is sometimes not a manifestation of wickedness or psychosis but a necessity for physical self-preservation," as Goldberg puts it.

Goldberg's *Atlantic* colleague Ta-Nehisi Coates explicated this point during a panel discussion with Mayor Landrieu, which Goldberg moderated. Coates suggested Landrieu should not be surprised at New Orleans high murder rate, given the policies that segregated African Americans into resource-deprived neighborhoods without employment opportunities. Such conditions, he suggested, would drive anyone to kill. In her book *Ghettoside,* journalist Jill Leovy presents further historical context for Coates' argument. In the Jim Crow South, Leovy argues, the courts punished African Americans only for crimes against whites. Black people could murder one another with impunity, only obtaining justice for the death of a loved one if they exacted it themselves. Southern black migrants brought these experiences with them to

northern cities, where conditions were not much different. Inescapable physical proximity and daily interdependence in "minority enclaves" raised the stake of conflicts, especially when residents could not trust a discriminatory legal system to resolve disputes. Highly mobile middle-class whites, on the other hand, did not interact with and depend on one another to the same degree, and they could rely upon effective legal responses if differences did arise.[117] In short, the lifers Landrieu encounters suggest that decisions that seem incomprehensible in the context of a white suburb are necessary for survival in their neighborhoods. "The things we care about are different," Burtell Thomas tells the mayor. "You really can't understand."[118]

Nevertheless, though Angola's lifers explicitly state that his ability to comprehend their motivations is limited, Landrieu persists in dissecting individual decisions to pull the trigger rather than addressing the circumstances that make those choices necessary. Though he makes a normative claim that African Americans should not attribute their choices to structural factors, the mayor ultimately frames his approach as pragmatic. To him, addressing residential segregation through reparations is a pipe dream. Referring to his emphasis on culture change, he tells Goldberg, "I'm going to spend my time fighting for something that has a possibility of happening." Similarly, he insists that gun control "can't be won" in Louisiana. Encouraging "parental control," however, is possible. "There's nothing that stops people in the community from trying to stop those guns from being used," Landrieu insists.[119] Politicians' refusal to consider reparations or gun control is not the result of any "culture" endemic to white conservatives. Their decisions are transcendent, beyond the realm of human intervention or

[117] Jill Leovy, *Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 158, 242.

[118] Goldberg, "A Matter of Black Lives."

[119] Goldberg, "A Matter of Black Lives."

judgment. African Americans, on the other hand, can be made to take responsibility for their actions.

Goldberg ultimately sanctions the mayor's approach. The author recognizes the historical context that makes Landrieu's emphasis on "culture" controversial. The 1965 Moynihan report, he reminds readers, fostered policies that imposed personal responsibility and self-help instead of offering assistance to African American communities. However, Goldberg explains that Landrieu's "thick bond with the African American community of New Orleans" gives him license to attribute high homicide rates to "culture." Besides, he suggests, Landrieu's criticisms of "African American street culture" are not nearly as vehement as those of some black politicians. And he accepts Landrieu's pragmatic justification for addressing culture rather than structure. "In a state where gun control is a lost cause," Goldberg concludes, "…the mayor wants to—and needs to—keep the focus on the men who hold the guns."[120] Like Landrieu, Goldberg does not interrogate the "culture" that leads conservative white politicians to oppose gun control or other structural reforms that would address high murder rates in black communities. Expecting African Americans to overcome substantial systemic inequalities by embracing new values and teaching others to do the same seems to be a more attainable goal. Again, stories of redemption emphasize personal responsibility for crime while simultaneously placing blame with black culture in general.

Conclusion

Ultimately, media coverage of redemption at Angola constitutes a double-edged sword for incarcerated African Americans. Some black men can successfully adhere to the standard rehabilitative model, but their release becomes the justification for continuing to incarcerate

[120] Goldberg, "A Matter of Black Lives."

other black men who interpret their incarceration as the result of systemic racism in the criminal justice system. African Americans are capable of reform, but the process focuses so intensely on the individual that it precludes any structural critique or contextualization. Themes of redemption evoke sympathy for incarcerated African Americans, but their transformations often have more meaning and significance for others than themselves. And stories of redemption become microcosms of broader social "problems," associating entire communities with crime while suggesting that the ultimate solutions are individual rather than structural. Seemingly sympathetic depictions of redeemed African Americans can actually reinforce structural inequities and racial stereotypes

CHAPTER THREE:

WORSHIPING AND WORKING ON YOUR CASE: REHABILITATION IN THE PAGES OF *THE ANGOLITE*

Glen Peacock is currently serving a life sentence at Angola. Ten years ago, ten years into his sentence, he described what it was like to know he would never leave the infamous prison. "I only exist in God's eyes now," he wrote in an essay he submitted to *The Angolite*, Angola's prison newsmagazine. Despite his prospects of life in prison, he found comfort in the knowledge that God was with him and encouraged others to seek the same reassurance.[121] Almost a decade earlier, however, Peacock voiced a different perspective on his incarceration. Having served only a couple of years of his life sentence, he expressed ambivalence about why he was in prison. "I messed up," he wrote. "I made a mistake, or perhaps the system did." Peacock attributed his incarceration to his own deeds. However, in the very same sentence he suggested that his life sentence could be the result of "the system's" mistake.

It is unclear whether "the system" to which Peacock referred was limited to the criminal justice system or whether "the system" encompassed American society as a whole. Similarly, it is unclear whether Peacock was claiming that he was innocent of the crime for which he was convicted or whether he was questioning the validity and integrity of the criminal justice system more broadly. Still, even though he implied that his actual guilt was in question, Peacock expected the state to offer him adequate rehabilitative services. He maintained that the

[121] Glen Peacock, "Day after Day," *The Angolite*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May/June 2006): 71.

agricultural labor, "GED school [and] kitchen jobs" taxpayers funded were not rehabilitative. "Society thinks that's rehabilitation?" he asked. "Well think again!"[122] Though he did not specify what rehabilitation should actually entail, Peacock was certain that the programs offered to lifers at Angola were not rehabilitative. Implying that his incarceration was unjust, he still not only demanded rehabilitation, but rehabilitation of a particular kind.

Peacock's essays reflect incarcerated African Americans' long-standing ambivalence about rehabilitation. In the 1960s, authors like Angela Davis and George Jackson increasingly highlighted the anti-black foundations of the American criminal justice system, framing black people in prison not as criminals in need of reform, but as political prisoners. They were to "question the premise that they—and not American society—needed to be fundamentally changed."[123] Rehabilitation was a distraction from radical critique. However, incarcerated African Americans have also demanded rehabilitative programming. Malcolm X's narrative of his own metamorphosis through the prison library inspired others to seek out literature and other educational resources in prison. They often shared knowledge in underground networks, but some prison administrators also briefly embraced black history and arts courses in the wake of the 1971 Attica uprising.[124] With these resources, prison environments could transform prisoners into black revolutionaries. Therefore, the question for incarcerated African Americans has not always been whether rehabilitation is a worthy goal, but rather what, precisely, rehabilitation entails.

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[122] Glen Peacock, "Society Don't Know," *The Angolite*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (September/October 1998): 67.

[123] Lee Bernstein, *America is the Prison: Art and Politics in the Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 104, 56.

[124] Bernstein, *America is the Prison*, 67-73. See also Francis T. Cullen and Karen E. Gilbert, *Reaffirming Rehabilitation* (Waltham, MA: Anderson Publishing, 2013), 107, 159.

Glen Peacock was one of the many incarcerated writers who addressed this question in *The Angolite,* Angola's prisoner-produced newsmagazine. Established in the early 1950s, *The Angolite* gained both popular and critical acclaim in the 1970s, after prisoner Wilbert Rideau took over as editor. The publication's first African American editor, Rideau won prestigious awards for his journalism, most notably the George Polk Award for his series, "The Sexual Jungle," exploring the dynamics of sexual violence inside Angola. His work on the prison newsmagazine brought him national and international support. Outside media accounts repeatedly told the remarkable story of a high school dropout who discovered his writing talents on Death Row and became a uniquely gifted journalist covering the isolated, neglected world of prisoners.[125] In addition to questioning the racial discrimination inherent in his case, supporters suggested his work on *The Angolite* demonstrated he was reformed and worthy of release.[126] In 1993, *Life Magazine* famously dubbed him "the most rehabilitated man in America."[127]

Through *The Angolite,* Rideau hoped not only to illuminate the realities of prison life for the outside world, but also to prove that there were others like him in Angola. In this light, the newsmagazine gave voice to views beyond those of the editor and his staff. Since the mid-1970s, the most popular sections of the newsmagazine have been "Sounding Off" and "Angola

[125] Rideau began his forty four years at Angola on Death Row (1961-1973). His sentence was commuted to life in prison after the United States Supreme Court temporarily invalidated capital punishment in the 1972 *Furmin v. Georgia* decision.

[126] Rideau stabbed and killed white bank teller Julia Ferguson during the course of a botched robbery. If he had been white, Rideau would most likely have been charged with manslaughter. But because he was an African American man who had killed a white woman, an all-white jury (which included Ferguson's cousin) convicted him of first degree murder, after which he was sentenced to death and sent to Angola. See Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 28.

[127] Erwin James, "From death row inmate to acclaimed author," *The Guardian,* May 31, 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/may/31/wilbert-rideau-rehabilitate-prisoners.

Expressions," which present unedited poems and essays penned by incarcerated people.[128] Men imprisoned in Angola were the most frequently published authors, but especially after the early 1990s, women from the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women contributed more and more frequently to the newsmagazine's creative writing section. Though they addressed a wide variety of other topics, Glen Peacock and his fellow incarcerated writers often interrogated rehabilitation and related concepts. Along with the editor and his staff, contributors to *The Angolite* frequently challenged the fundamental premises of rehabilitation, highlighting society's sins rather than their own. While they expected prisoners to repent and conform to Christian values, "law-abiding citizens" did not live up to these standards themselves.

Many did describe dramatic transformations, recalling how they and others changed their lives through education, vocational training, and religious activity. However, they also framed rehabilitation as an adversarial legal and political process. Incarcerated people demanded authorities recognize and reward objective measurements of their rehabilitation and pursued court appeals based on their legal rights in addition to evidence that they had changed. Indeed, legal training was part of a transformational education process through which incarcerated African Americans could challenge white supremacist norms rather than conforming to them**.** Religion played a variety of roles in these discussions, representing a mode of personal

[128] In 2002, one man wrote that he would not renew his subscription to *The Angolite* if the editors did not print "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions." In 2008, a woman wrote in thanking the editors for continuing to include "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions." She was encouraged that "so many incarcerated people…find strength through Jesus Christ and use that strength to get them through the ordeal of prison." In 2009, editor Kerry Myers apologized for the recent absence of "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" in *Angolite* issues. He acknowledged that these were the most widely read sections of the newsmagazine and promised they would return soon. A few months later, another reader wrote he was particularly touched by prisoners' poetry in "Angola Expressions." In 2011, a woman wrote to *The Angolite* expressing her appreciation for the poems and essays appearing at the end of each *Angolite* issue. "Mailbox," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 2002): 2; "Mailbox," *The Angolite,* Vol. 33, No. 4 (July/August 2008): 2; Kerry Myers, "Wire to Wire," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 3 (May/June 2009): 1; "Mailbox," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 6 (November/December 2009); 2; "Mailbox," *The Angolite,* Vol. 36, No. 5 (September/October 2011): 2.

transformation, but also serving as the basis for structural critique and fostering litigation and political organizing efforts.

The candor with which incarcerated writers express their views in *The Angolite* is surprising, given the precarious position of most prison publications. Prison officials have broad authority to impose not only censorship, but also harsh discipline upon writers whose criticisms are too pointed. However, for over twenty years, *The Angolite* was unique among prison publications for the considerable degree of discretion afforded its incarcerated editor. In 1976, then-warden C. Paul Phelps lifted administrative censorship on *The Angolite,* exercising oversight, but minimal control over the newsmagazine. In his history of prison journalism, James McGrath Morris suggests that during Rideau's tenure, "editorial conferences with the administration consisted of debates over style rather than content."[129] Kerry Myers, Rideau's successor, suggests that these discussions were actually more substantive, but he recalls only a few articles that caused serious pushback from the administration when Rideau was editor.[130] With this relative level of press freedom, *The Angolite* exercised considerable influence, prompting reforms, providing the basis for lawsuits, and drawing attention to the plight of Louisiana's lifers.[131] However, shortly after his arrival in 1995, Warden Burl Cain gradually curtailed privileges that had allowed *The Angolite* to operate as a semi-independent watchdog.

[129] James McGrath Morris, *Jailhouse Journalism: The Fourth Estate Behind Bars* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998), 165.

[130] Kerry Myers, interview with the author, February 7, 2017.

[131] Morris, *Jailhouse Journalism,* 15.

Most notably, Cain limited journalists' confidential communication with other officials inside the prison and outside news media. [132]

In 2005, Rideau was retried and resentenced to manslaughter, resulting in his immediate release (he had already spent 44 years in prison, more than twice the maximum sentence for his new charge).[133] In his memoir, the former editor draws an implicit connection between Cain's religious mission and his censorship of *The Angolite*. According to Rideau, Cain turned against him after he not only refused to "snitch" on prison employees, but rebuffed the warden's attempts to convert him to Christianity. "Saving" the famously skeptical editor would have been "a sensational coup" for Cain. Rideau immediately follows this story with Cain's early efforts to censor *The Angolite,* implying the warden's sanctions on the newsmagazine were in part retribution for the editor's intransigence. [134] Apart from his personal conflicts with the warden, Rideau suggests that Cain forced *The Angolite* to include more religious content. In his editorial for the March/April 1998 issue, he clearly stated how the warden's religious agenda was shaping the newsmagazine. Acknowledging that Cain had granted religion unprecedented prominence at Angola, Rideau wrote: "Since he is also publisher of the *Angolite,* we also give religious

[132] Rideau writes that Cain immediately forbade prison employees to speak with the press and required *The Angolite* to seek official approval for all outside phone calls. Then in 1997, Cain installed a new phone in *The Angolite* office. "The new phone," recalls Rideau, "unlike our old ones, couldn't receive incoming calls and allowed us to call only outside the prison, including our own supervisor. And our calls were now to be recorded." See Wilbert Rideau, *In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 243, 253. A little over a year later, Secretary of Corrections Richard Stalder, Cain's close ally and personal friend, ended confidential communication between *The Angolite* and the outside press. "The rule change," wrote Kerry Myers, "dismantles a 25-year policy giving prisoners the right to post sealed letters to 'identifiable' members of the news media and to have incoming mail from them opened only in the presence of the inmate." See Kerry Myers, "Confidential No More," *The Angolite*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (July/August 1998): 21. Several years later, Jim Lee Scott of Atlanta, Georgia wrote in a letter to the editor that recent articles "prove[d] to [him] the *Angolite* now is definitely censored and controlled thoroughly by the worst enemies and most dastardly criminals which our people need to beware, namely, the purported officers of the government." See Jim Lee Scott, "Letter to the Editor," *The Angolite*, Vol. 25, No. 6—Vol. 26, No. 1 (November 2000/January/February 2001): 4.

[133] Wilbert Rideau, *In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 328.

[134] *Ibid*, 243.

activities more attention than in the past."[135] In other words, the editor was not expanding religious coverage of his own volition.

Indeed, Rideau insisted in the same editorial that the "overwhelming majority" of people in prison were "irreligious," largely because of "disappointing experiences" with visiting evangelists.[136] In his memoir and later interviews, Rideau was less charitable, reiterating his claim that prisoners "are the most irreligious group of people in the world" and adding that those who did "get religion" merely used it as "a means to an end" or a "con job." In the years after Cain arrived, the number of "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" submissions with religious themes dramatically increased. Kerry Myers confirms that this increase reflects the actual volume *The Angolite* received, not an administrative effort to selectively publish only those pieces that concurred with the warden's narrative of moral rehabilitation.[137] Sympathetic interpreters might conclude that contributors to "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" have been spontaneously expressing the fruits of a religious revival Cain introduced. Critics like Rideau, however, would probably assert that incarcerated writers are merely seeking to curry favor with the administration in any way that they can.

In fact, Rideau framed the increasing prevalence of religious content in *The Angolite* to a decline in the newsmagazine's critical voice. In a 2010 interview with *Mother Jones*, he lamented that *The Angolite* was "mostly about religion," lacking "controversy," "criticism of the administration," and investigation of prison practices. In Rideau's formulation, religious coverage was the antithesis of hard-hitting journalism. However, it is important to note that

[135] Wilbert Rideau, "Getting it Together," *The Angolite*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (March/April 1998): 1.

[136] *Ibid.*

[137] Kerry Myers, interview with the author, February 7, 2017.

despite increased censorship, *The Angolite* continued to "slip in" subversive views in both regular reporting and opinion pieces. Contributors to "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" sometimes openly denounced the impact of Cain's religious agenda, arguing in particular that the religious fervor distracted individuals from legal work and political organizing. Moreover, incarcerated writers still used religious themes to express criticism of the criminal justice system and society in general. Religious coverage had not stifled critical views of rehabilitation. Instead, theology and religious imagery often undergirded these subversive perspectives.

The Angolite, then, represents a counternarrative to the often simplistic understandings of rehabilitation presented in the previous chapter. In turn, debates over the nature of rehabilitation appearing in the prison newsmagazine challenge frameworks in which black religion consists of an uncomplicated dichotomy between resistance and accommodation. Incarcerated African Americans defined rehabilitation, and religion's role in it, in ways that resisted strict categorization.

"Just us": racial discrimination negates rehabilitation

The Angolite often challenged the presumptions of the rehabilitative model by highlighting the fact that individuals were singled out for punishment based on their race and class, not necessarily their guilt. In his memoir, Wilbert Rideau writes that when he was appointed as editor, he sought to ensure that no particular racial perspective dominated the newsmagazine. Though his staff was majority-black for his first few years as editor, it became majority white by 1978. And he also shared his responsibilities with white co-editors or associate editors (Billy Sinclair from 1977 to 1986, Ron Wikberg from 1988 to 1992). However, under Rideau's leadership, Angola's newsmagazine did foreground Angola's black majority and

directly address racial disparities within the criminal justice system.[138] Brief news items covered the fact that African Americans served longer prison sentences than whites for similar crimes, were far more likely to be the victims of crimes than whites, and filled American prisons while corrupt white politician avoided jail time.[139] Feature stories and editorials also often highlighted racial inequities concerning crime and punishment. Rideau depicted the typical Angola lifer as "poor and black," opposed by "white and middle class" victims who used their legal and religious connections to protest release for even the most obviously reformed.[140] He also contrasted the leniency "white, wealthy, and educated" defendants enjoyed with the grim fate of Angola's "black, poor, and uneducated."[141] Rideau often highlighted not only anti-black discrimination, but white privilege inherent in the justice system.

Upon his retirement in 2001, Rideau named Kerry Myers, a white man, as his successor. But the *Angolite*'s majority-white staff continued to highlight racial disparities in the criminal justice system on a consistent basis. White reporters Douglas Dennis and Lane Nelson regularly reported that Angola's population was overwhelmingly African American and that long-term incarceration and the death penalty disproportionately impacted black communities.[142] The

[138] When he became editor, Rideau faced "immense pressure" from African American prisoners "to make *The Angolite* a black publication." To placate his "power base," Rideau kept the newsmagazine's editorial board all-black after white co-editor Bill Brown paroled. In 1977, he took on Billy Sinclair, a white prisoner he met on Death Row, as his co-editor. And by 1978, the majority of *The Angolite'*s staff was white. See Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 139, 140, 149.

[139] "Crime and Punishment: Some Robbers Spend More Time in Jail than Killers," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 3 (May/June 1981): 83; "News Briefs: The Face of Crime," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1986): 4-5; "News Briefs: Vices of Decency," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 2 (March/April 1986): 3-5.

[140] Wilbert Rideau, "The Forgotten Men," *The Angolite,* Vol. 5, No. 3 (May/June 1980): 43.

[141] Wilbert Rideau, "For the Wrong Reasons," *The Angolite,* Vol. 7, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1982): 17-18.

[142] Douglas Dennis, "The Non-Citizens: New Servitude," *The Angolite*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (November/December 1997): 35; Lane Nelson, "Book Review: Invisible Victims," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 4 (July/August 1998): 51; Douglas Dennis, "Legislative Digest," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 4 (July/August/September 2003): 36; Lane Nelson, "Inside Angola: Bringing Order to the Law," *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, No. 4 (July/August 2007): 11-12.

Angolite's "Legal Spectrum" section often included cases that addressed racial discrimination in different facets of the legal system.[143] And issues often ended with an image of Angola's field lines, recalling the prison's legacy as a symbol of slavery and racial oppression.

Throughout *The Angolite's* history, incarcerated contributors to "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" offered both class- and race-based critiques of the criminal justice system as well.[144] Voicing a common class-based critique, Clifford "Count" Hampton asserted that the justice system only targeted "blacks and poor whites."[145] In this light, some writers tried to convince prisoners of all races to recognize their common interests. "You ain't got shit, and I ain't got shit," wrote Albert Manuel, Sr., urging white and black prisoners to acknowledge they

[143] Rickie Westfall, "Legal Spectrum," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 3 (May/June 2003): 32-35; Raymond Bender, "Legal Spectrum," *The Angolite* Vol. 34, No. 2 (March/April 2009): 50-53.

[144] Class and race critiques were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Observers of the state-level criminal justice world sometimes indicted black as well as white leaders as complicit in racially discriminatory practices. Timothy Rudolph charged that by mobilizing African Americans to vote for Orleans Parish District Attorney Harry Connick, "Black Ministers" tacitly supported Connick's "great conspiracy on the Black Males." Alvin Reliford wrote that, "Louisiana [was] truly exploiting and abusing her Black peoples" through the drug war. But "Black Politicians" and "other Black leaders" remained silent because they "[had] been bought." Dudley Wilson revealed that he was sentenced by a "black judge" doing the bidding of his "boss." Timothy Rudolph, "Political Games," *The Angolite,* Vol. 4, No. 2 (March/April 1979): 85; Alvin Reliford, "The Big Lie," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1987): 78-79; Dudley Wilson, "The Way It Is," *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1988): 76.

[145] Clifford "Count" Hampton, "Saying It This Way," *The Angolite,* Vol. 8, No. 4 (July/August 1983): 80. See also Richard A. Pass, "Wake Up, Whoever You Are," *The Angolite,* Vol. 9, No. 6 (November/December 1984): 74; Kirksey Nix, Jr., "To Judge Reggie," *The Angolite,* Vol. 18, No. 6 (November/December 1993): 60; Larry S. Perkins, "Capitol Hill," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 2 (March/April 1990): 74; James H. Dunn, "Question of Insanity," *The Angolite,* Vol. 9, No. 3 (May/June 1984): 92; Truman McDonald, "Thoughts," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 4 (July/August 1987): 89; John Fulford, "New Parole Policy," *The Angolite,* Vol. 14, No. 6 (November/December 1989): 83; Larry Christy, "Results," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 5 (September/October 1991): 73; Albert J. Manuel, Sr., "Raw & Hardcore," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 2 (March/April 1992): 61. See also Timothy Loving, "Changing Times," *The Angolite,* Vol. 7, No. 6 (November/December 1982): 84; Lionel Berniard, "Now or Never," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 3 (May/June 1990): 75; Perry Curry, Sr., "Black & White Power," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 1 (January/February 1992): 89; Brady Williams, "United," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 1 (January/February 1992): 87; Nathan Arnold, "The Prison Race," *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 4 (July/August 1988): 71-72.

were all victims of capitalism.[146] Perry Curry, too, emphasized the commonalities between Angola's whites and blacks, concluding, "we are all convicts."[147]

But race-based analyses of the criminal justice system have always been more common in the pages of *The Angolite*. David Poydras wrote that society automatically branded black men as criminals, regardless of their actions.[148] Stephen Johnson argued that white judges, lawmakers, and voters followed the "malicious" example of their ancestors by casting all African Americans as "born criminal[s]."[149] Hymel Varnado suspected that representatives of the criminal justice system were not interested in reforming African American men, doling out unrelenting life sentences instead.[150] Discussing the cases of Angola Death Row prisoners Robert Wayne

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[146] Albert J. Manuel, Sr., "Raw & Hardcore," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 2 (March/April 1992): 61.

[147] Perry Curry, Sr., "Black & White Power," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 1 (January/February 1992): 89. After Cain arrived, contributors continued to characterize incarceration as a war on the poor of all races. Ben Daughtery, "Prisoners or the Poor?" *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 2 (March/April 2002): 65; David Lightsey, "IDB," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 4 (July/August 2006): 66; Robert Myles, "It's Everyone's Right," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 1 (January/February 1998): 66; Drew Pizzo, St. Gabriel, LA, "Equal Protection of the Law," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 6 (November/December 2009): 82; "Challenge for Change," Vol. 22, No. 3 (May/June 1997): 83; Donald Lee Leger, Jr., "Who I Am…Is You!" *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, No. 3 (May/June 2007): 60; William Fitzpatrick, "False Promises," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 4 (July/August 1998): 64, 65; Paul Gray, "Nature of the Beast," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 5 (September/October 1998): 66-67; "The Outcasts," *The Angolite,* Vol. 36, No. 1 (January/February 2011): 68; David Essex, "House of Blues," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 3 (May/June 2002): 69; Donald Lutcher, "Prison Life 4," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 4 (July/August 2006): 62; Anthony Williams, "Brothers and Sisters," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 5 (September/October 2006): 53; "My Home in Hell," *The Angolite,* Vol. 22, No. 6 (November/December 1997): 73; Gary Farcy, "Society's Cell," *The Angolite,* Vol. 26, No. 3 (June/July/August 2001): 79; Paul Ware, Jr., "Man, I'm Just Hollerin,'" *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 6 (November/December 2010): 61. Writers sometimes called for prisoners to overcome their racial differences to achieve their common goal of freedom. Arthur Carter, "Abstract Concept," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 2 (March/April 2003): 52; Jonathan Hilburn, "Compassion in the Midst," *The Angolite,* Vol. 26, No. 5 (September/October 2001): 71; Chuck Unger, "Irvin Sterling," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 6 (November/December 2006): 62; David Pope, "The 'Gain,'" *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 3 (May/June 2000): 65.

[148] David Poydras, "Black Man's Logo," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 4 (July/Aug 1992): 78.

[149] Stephen Johnson, *The Angolite,* Vol. 14, No. 2 (March/April 1989): 71-72.

[150]Hymel Varnado, CCR, "Rehabilitation? You Tell Me," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 2 (March/April 2000): 70. Writers disagreed about the solution to the racial discrimination inherent in the criminal justice system. Jeffrey Hillburn posited that more minority clerks would result in more equity with regard to Supreme Court rulings. But Glen Ayo suggested that even a black president (Obama) could not assure the repeal of discriminatory laws like the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA). Jeffrey Hillburn, "Supreme Court Clerks," *The Angolite,*

Williams and Dalton Prejean, Larry DX Williams and Elton Burnett, respectively, suggested that both men were executed simply because they were poor and black.[151] Dwight "Skeet" Smith offered his own case as an example of racial bias in the legal system, focusing specifically on the systematic exclusion of African Americans from juries. "Twelve white supremacists gave me a raw deal," he wrote. "In America it's called JUST US."[152] Don Brown asserted that young black men were so caught up in the excitement and profit of dealing drugs that it was only in prison they came to realize the structural forces that steered them into this lifestyle. Once they were sentenced, the legal conspiracy became all too clear. "Ya eyes open to the system," Brown wrote, "Seeing how it was designed/To introduce thugs-n-prisons."[153] John Boissiere charged that because most were "poor and black," most "law-abiding" citizens did not care that the "Amerikan Judicial System" impeded prisoners' legal petitions." On the other hand, a Louisiana jury decided that a "good white citizen" had only committed a "minor infraction" when he shot and killed a man accused of molesting his son.[154] Like *The Angolite's* editors and reporters, contributors to "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" highlighted both anti-black discrimination and white privilege within the criminal justice system.

Vol. 27, No. 2 (March/April 2002): 63; Glen Ayo, "President-Elect Versus Procedural Bar," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 2 (March/April 2009): 75.

[151] Larry D.X. Williams, "Legal Murder," *The Angolite,* Vol. 9, No. 2 (March/April 1984): 94-95; Elton Burnett, "The Journey," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 3 (May/June 1990): 81.

[152] Dwight "Skeet" Smith, *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1992): 81. In 2000, Miguel Kelly made similar use of the term "just us" in reference to his fellow "African trees." See Miguel Kelly, "Stand Up & Shine," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 3 (May/June 2000): 69.

[153] Don Brown, "Thugs-N-Prisons," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 5 (September/October 2006): 58-59. See also "Message to the People," *The Angolite,* Vol. 22, No. 6 (November/December 1997): 66; "The Time Has Come," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 3 (May/June 2000): 72.

[154] John Boissiere, *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 3 (May/June 1986): 54-55.

A "regional madness": condemnations of southern white Christianity and culture

In this light, *The Angolite* suggested that it was not people in prison, but society itself that needed to change. In contrast to the filmmakers and journalists discussed in chapter one, who featured a white conservative evangelical as a benevolent reformer, Rideau blamed white conservative Christianity in particular for a vengeful, discriminatory justice system. From the time that he became editor, Rideau argued that increased religious fervor fostered more punitive criminal justice policies. Observing the renewed prominence of evangelical Christianity in the 1970s, Rideau argued that the criminal justice system bore the fruits of this revival. "If nothing else," he wrote, "the 'eye for an eye' concept of the Old Testament is having one hell of an influence on our American society."[155] He asserted that given the tendency of Christian churches to support tough on crime initiatives, Louisiana's poor and incarcerated populations should "place [their] bets with the Devil."[156] When Republican governor Buddy Roemer, a self-professed evangelical, took office in 1988, Rideau balked at both the religious and racial moorings of the conservative "revolution" Roemer proposed to create in Louisiana state politics. Objecting to the "evangelical tones" in which the governor delivered his law and order rhetoric, Rideau maintained that Roemer's "revolution" was "a 'white' revolution—in the still 'Deep South" and expressed concern about the repercussions for incarcerated African Americans.[157] Rideau assumed that evangelical Christianity in particular merely incited a vengeful, white public against poor African Americans in prison.

[155] Wilbert Rideau, "The Revival Spirit," *The Angolite,* Vol. 1, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1976): 8.

[156] Wilbert Rideau, "Cast Your Bets with the Devil," *The Angolite,* Vol. 2, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1977): 12.

[157] Wilbert Rideau, "The Roemer Revolution," *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 2 (March/April 1988): 13; "Getting It Together," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 6 (November/December 1987): 2.

Rideau's criticisms of religious hypocrisy and racially motivated vengeance were especially apparent in his pieces on the death penalty. He identified capital punishment as a distinctly "Southern phenomenon."[158] Addressing the racial discrimination inherent in the death penalty, Rideau described the South as "lawless and evil," subject to a "regional madness" and "infected by its own peculiar evil." He maintained that the disproportionate execution of black men who killed whites fulfilled the same "regional need for violence" that lynching had in the past. Later, he asserted that racial bias had an "unholy presence" in the administration of the death penalty, especially in the South.[159] In Rideau's mind, this southern "evil" and "madness" was tied to religion. Victims of crime in the South were apt to "turn to the Bible for the ultimate punishment."[160] The South was distinctive by nature of its "deep-seated racial, religious, and cultural prejudices."[161] It was "the same Bible-thumping zealots who take to the streets in opposition to abortion" who most adamantly supported capital punishment.[162]

Contributors to "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" also condemned a vengeful, unforgiving society, but suggested these impulses contradicted the highest ideals of Christianity. Louis Williams reminded advocates of life imprisonment that God offered forgiveness only to those who forgave others. Citing Ezekiel 33:14-16, he concluded that prisoners should go free expressed remorse and a willingness to change.[163] Allen Anderson declared that the unforgiving

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[158] Wilbert Rideau, "Louisiana Death Watch: Rush to Death," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 4 (July/August 1981): 24.

[159] "Death Watch," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 1 (January/February 1986): 14.

[160] Wilbert Rideau, "The Victims of Violence," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 4 (July/August 1981): 61.

[161] Wilbert Rideau, "The Nature of the Beast," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 3 (May/June 1987): 13.

[162] Wilbert Rideau, "Editorial: A Bad Moon Rising," *The Angolite,* Vol. 8, No. 3 (May/June 1983): 34.

[163] Louis Williams, "Who Is Who?", *The Angolite,* Vol. 8, No. 2 (March/April 1983): 85-86. Williams quoted the passage from Ezekiel this way: "Again, when I say unto the wicked thou shalt surely die, if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right; if the wicked restore the pledge and give again that he had robbed, walk in the

attitude of Louisiana's officials and citizens showed that the state itself needed to be reformed and rehabilitated. "Jesus Christ forgave people for murder, rape, theft, and other crimes," Anderson insisted. In his mind, because of its vengeful approach to criminal justice, "Louisiana should be ashamed to mention the name Jesus Christ."[164]

Rideau and his staff also implicitly denounced the death penalty as anti-Christian. After the 1981 issue covering the revival of the death penalty in Louisiana, *The Angolite* introduced a section called "Death Watch" to present coverage of impending executions. Beginning in the mid-1980s, this section frequently featured an illustration of a man hanging on a cross.[165] The man's head droops on his chest, such that his face is not visible, but his skin is white and his hair is stringy. Given *The Angolite'*s emphasis on the racially discriminatory nature of capital punishment, it is notable that the image depicts a white man rather than a black man. It seems clear that the images were supposed to evoke parallels between Death Row prisoners and Christ himself. But it is not clear whether Rideau believed a white Jesus (rather than a black one) would render those parallels more resonant or simply accepted prevailing images of Jesus. He did sympathetically portray both white and African American Death Row prisoners based on their religious commitments. In 1981, the editor noted that Colin Clark and David Dene Martin, two white men facing execution, were both "deeply religious" Christians.[166] Before his 1987 execution, *The Angolite* revealed, an African American man named Alvin Moore had completed

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statues of life, without committing iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live."

[164] Allen Anderson, "Reform Louisiana," *The Angolite,* Vol. 18, No. 3 (May/June 1993): 82.

[165] "Death Watch," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 3 (May/June 1986): 9*;* Cover image, *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 3 (May/June 1987); Wilbert Rideau, "The Nature of the Beast," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 3 (May/June 1987): 9; Ron Wikberg, "Death Watch: The Horror Show," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 5 (September/October 1990): 44; "Death Watch," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 2 (March/April 1991): 22.

[166] Wilbert Rideau, "Is There an Alternative?," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 4 (July/August 1981): 48.

a theological degree.[167] And prior to his 1989 execution, Dalton Prejean, also African American, had been baptized and completed a Prison Fellowship Ministry seminar. *The Angolite* implied that the state was wrong to execute men who had been transformed according to the region's religious tenets.[168]

Similarly, contributors to "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" sometimes compared their suffering to that of Jesus. Implicitly evoking Jesus' prayer on the cross, Louis Witherspoon asked God to forgive "the free people as they misuse and abuse Your precious prisoners."[169] Ezzard E. Bowman described his prison sentence as "bearing the burdens of this merciless cross."[170] Reflecting on his own trial and sentencing, James Langendorfer, compared the American public to the crowds who demanded Jesus' crucifixion.[171] Similarly, James Taylor suggested that like Louisiana's lifers, Jesus was subject to an arbitrary and unpredictable pardon process (i.e. Pontius Pilate allowed an angry crowd to decide Jesus' fate).[172] "Big Willie" Williams named Jesus in a list of black men (Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Malcolm

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[167] Matthew J. Jacobs, "The Young Warriors," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 4 (July/August 1987). Moore's execution was especially controversial because Ossie Brown, the district attorney who prosecuted Moore, had failed to obtain the death penalty for three white defendants who had murdered Moore's cousin. See "Death Watch: Taking the Lead," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 4 (July/August 1987).

[168] See also Walter Burnette, "The Insanity of it All," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1987): 77. This kind of criticism of capital punishment continued during Cain's tenure, but in the "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" sections rather than the "Death Watch" features. Addressing "middle-class Christian" juries who imposed the death penalty, Jeffrey Hillburn refuted religious arguments against capital punishment. For every scripture supporters could cite in favor of the death penalty, Hillburn could cite two against it. He could not understand why Christians were "so eager to put someone to death." Similarly, Keith Thompson argued that "Christians who advocates for the death penalty" proved that humans were "fully capable of rational evil."

[169] Louis Witherspoon, "Lord Help the Prisoner," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 1 (January/February 1981): 83.

[170] Ezzard E. Bowman, "Misery Land," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 2 (March/April 1981): 105.

[171] James Langendorfer, "Reflections with a Reluctant Messiah," *The Angolite,* Vol. 7, No. 1 (January/February 1982): 77.

[172] James Taylor, "Bullshit Or Reality?," *The Angolite,* Vol. 14, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1989): 79.

X) who had been incarcerated or assassinated, linking the fate of these individuals to that of all African Americans.[173] Jesus served as a potent analogue for prisoners' own unjust suffering and oppression.

But contributors went beyond appealing to society's conscience through Christian imagery. Throughout *The Angolite's* recent history, they also warned that politicians and citizens would one day face divine judgment for the injustice of incarceration. Some did so subtly. Insisting that capital punishment was murder, Joseph G. Monnie wondered if those who carried out executions could ever be forgiven.[174] James R. Thomas wrote that unjust district attorneys, police officers, judges and politicians would be subject to "perfect justice" under "the Kingdom of God."[175] Ezzard E. Bowman reminded himself that the judge who sentenced him would face divine judgment one day.[176] The people who presided over the growth of America's prisons, wrote Allen Coco, had "deliberately forgotten" that God saw and would judge their actions.[177] Otha D. Evans stated that his "message…to each lawmaker is Psalm 35:5-9," in which the psalmist prays that God would punish his persecutors.[178]

Others warned of judgment for society more generally. Walter Nickless knew people in society believed that as a prisoner, he was "damned to hell." But he believed it was they who,

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[173] "Big Willie" Williams, "Truth," *The Angolite,* Vol. 18, No. 1 (January/February 1993): 87 .

[174] Joseph G. Monnie, "Brothers on Death Row," *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 2 (March/April 1988): 67.

[175]James R. Thomas, "An Opinion," *The Angolite,* Vol. 8, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1983): 112.

[176] Ezzard E. Boman, "Misery Land," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 2 (March/April 1981): 105.

[177] Allen Coco, "America's Crying Spirit," *The Angolite,* Vol. 26, No. 3 (June/July/August 2001): 80-81.

[178] In the King James Version, the passage reads: "Let them be as chaff before the wind: and let the angel of the Lord chase them. Let their way be dark and slippery: and let the angel of the Lord persecute them. For without cause have they hid for me their net in a pit, which without cause they have digged for my soul. Let destruction come upon him unawares; and let his net he hath hid catch himself: into that very destruction let him fall. And my soul shall be joyful in the Lord: it shall rejoice in his salvation."

like the Church in Laodicea in the Book of Revelation, would be "spit out" like "lukewarm water" for their treachery.[179] John Moreau warned readers that "on the day of judgment," God would take them to task for failing to show "forgiveness, the law of brotherly love" to prisoners.[180] Paul Gray believed that the day of judgment Jesus predicted in the New Testament had come, in part, because the "affluent" could "purchase justice" while the poor were imprisoned to create profit for the wealthy.[181]

Some contributors have predicted specific divine judgement against those who purvey white supremacy through the criminal justice system. Larry DX condemned the "legal murder" of Robert Wayne Williams, attributing his execution to the fact that he was poor and black. But Williams predicted that those who presided over his death would "someday be judged themselves."[182] Thomas J. Collins maintained that authoritative figures claimed to be morally superior would face "the judgment seat."[183] Charles F. Nelson was sure that those "high officials" who impeded prisoners' release "will have to answer to the greatest judge of all, when they face the judgment throne of God." Littell Harris addressed "Mr. Downpressor Man," who "brutalized" black people, insisting that they would prevail over him one day. Combining biblical passages from the book of Galatians and the gospel of Matthew, Harris warned Mr. Downpressor Man, "You must reap what you sow," and "The last will be first/The first will be last."[184] Willie Sparks wrote to the purveyors of "white supremacy" that he knew "the secret

[179] Walter Nickless, "Wishsong," *The Angolite,* Vol. 22, No. 1 (January/February 1997): 72.

[180] John Moreau, "Does It Matter?", *The Angolite,* Vol. 24, No.3 (May/June 1999): 69.

[181] Paul Gray, "Nature of the Beast," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 5 (September/October 1998): 66-67.

[182]Larry D.X. Williams, "Legal Murder," *The Angolite,* Vol. 9, No. 2 (March/April 1984): 95.

[183] Thomas J. Collins, "System of the Beast," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 4 (July/Aug 1986): 69.

[184] Littell Harris, "Downpressor Man!", *The Angolite,* Vol. 18, No. 4 (July/Aug 1993): 86.

numbers" that signaled the ultimate destruction of violent, "devious" white society.[185] Solomon Birdsong vividly described the prison system as a beast created and fed by "this state's movers and shakers," resulting in the near "extinction of the black race." But these legislators would ultimately face "doom for the misery they have dealt." Comparing himself to the prophet Jonah, Birdsong declared, "my prophecy is God's truth, and this will emerge."[186] For some of Angola's incarcerated African Americans, religious symbolism has served not only as a plea, but a warning.

Rehabilitation: a misguided effort?

Despite these frequent condemnations of society's vengeance and racial hatred, *The Angolite* still promoted rehabilitation in a variety of forms. In 1982, Rideau published a lengthy feature entitled, "Rehabilitation: A Misguided Effort." He devoted the bulk of his piece to the history of rehabilitation in America, portraying Angola as consistently behind the times. Addressing the national scene, Rideau praised reformers as "humanitarians" motivated by "Christian sentiment" to emphasize the environmental causes of crime, eschewing "moral judgment" in favor of "treatment" through education and vocational and religious training. However, their efforts were compromised by state bureaucracy, uncooperative wardens and officers, and their own mistaken belief that rehabilitation could be successful in an environment of confinement. In Louisiana, state officials cared more about profit than reform. Introduced only in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the first rehabilitation programs quickly fell victim to "apathy"

[185] Willie Sparks, "Gotcha," Vol. 11, No. 4 (July/August 1986): 67.

[186] Solomon Birdsong, "Creation of Lawmakers," *The Angolite*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (June/July/August 2001): 80-81. Joseph Fountain had a somewhat different take. He suggested that present-day crime was divine punishment for America's criminal foundations. "This country was obtained through armed robbery and murder" of African Americans, he wrote. "When you do evil, evil comes back to do you," he concluded. "So America, reap what you sow." Joseph Fountain, "Reap What You Sow," *The Angolite*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (July/August 1998): 67.

and "disinterest." Despite the efforts of reform-minded wardens in the 1960s, Rideau wrote that, at Angola, "the concept of rehabilitation was dead" by the 1970s.[187]

Yet despite this pessimistic tone, Rideau insisted that though society "only paid lip-service to it," rehabilitation did, in fact, occur inside prisons. Angola was a perfect example. Despite scant resources and lackluster support, graduates from Angola's vocational school were overwhelmingly successful upon their release (89 percent never returned).[188] Rideau argued that these men served as irrefutable proof that, "rehabilitation does take place at Angola." Indeed vocational training and education were central to the editor's definition of rehabilitation. He asserted that rehabilitative programs for people convicted of property and violent crimes should consist of education, vocational training, and industrial labor. (People convicted of sex offenses, he suggested, should receive psychological treatment).

Though it was not as prominent in his understanding of reform, Rideau did address religious activity as a possible method of rehabilitation. He quoted Angola's head chaplain, who insisted that being "born again" was "one of the surest ways of rehabilitating an individual."[189] In the same piece, Lawrence Jasper, a white prisoner active in Angola's religious community, also attributed his rehabilitation and exemplary disciplinary record to his "religious conversion" and ongoing relationship with God.[190] In fact, Rideau had previously argued that this connection between religion and rehabilitation made the absence of outside religious leaders at Angola reprehensible. In a 1981 feature on religion inside the prison, Rideau asserted that religious

[187] Wilbert Rideau, "Rehabilitation: A Misguided Effort," *The Angolite*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Nov/Dec 1982): 40.

[188] Rideau, "Rehabilitation," 44.

[189] Wilbert Rideau, "Religion in Prison," *The Angolite*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1981), 44

[190] Rideau, "Religion in Prison," 45.

ideals maintained only a "token presence" in prisons in the form of chaplains. Yet even that minimal foothold suggested "religion can be a force for rehabilitation."[191] He concluded his article with a description of a prisoner in his dorm praying for forgiveness: "That lonely, stifled picture the world outside will never see lends credence to the belief that not all of the men in Angola are beyond the pale of salvation."[192] Religious practice, then, was at least one kind of evidence of rehabilitation.[193]

Rideau, then, understood rehabilitation in the relatively traditional sense of the education, treatment, and even salvation of individuals justly punished for committing crimes. In the pages of "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions," Angola's incarcerated writers largely agreed with Rideau. A few did explicitly reject the concept of rehabilitation altogether. Donnie Lee Bronze urged his fellow prisoners to reject rehabilitation as a distraction from their freedom. Rather than self-improvement, they should focus on the broader economic and political context of their incarceration.[194] But more often, contributors desired, and even demanded, rehabilitative opportunities. They decried the lack of rehabilitation inside Angola. [195] Even more expressed frustration that only a select few prisoners could access rehabilitation programs.[196]

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[191] Wilbert Rideau, "Religion in Prison," 34.

[192] Rideau, "Religion in Prison," 56.

[193] Though *The Angolite* focused primarily on Christian worship, the newsmagazine did highlight Muslims as exemplars of rehabilitation as well. In a report about Camp F, a newly re-opened dormitory far from the Main Prison, the newsmagazine highlighted the difficulties facing Muslims transferred there. Christopher Salaam Shabazz, a trusty, told *The Angolite* that once he moved to Camp F, he was not allowed to attend monthly religious meetings in the Main Prison. "The main thing I'm concerned about is my religion," Shabazz said. "I have been striving for eight years, trying to build character in me to make me a better man, and they just took that away from me." "Inside Angola," *The Angolite,* Vol. 7, No. 1 (January/February 1982).

[194] Donnie Lee Bronze, "Let's Talk," *The Angolite,* Vol. 14, No. 1 (January/February 1989): 82. See also Donnie Hunt, Magnolia, "Time."

[195] Willie Jackson, "Rehabilitation," *The Angolite,* Vol. 3, No. 3 (May/June 1978): 56; Larry E. Booker, "Society and Reform," *The Angolite,* Vol. 14, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1989): 81; Timothy Loving, "A 'Dear Warden' Letter," *The*

By far the most popular definition of rehabilitation centered on education. Many described education as the means by which they and others could transform themselves and abandon their lives of crime. Describing his former self as violent and intransigent, Carlton Willis wrote that he began his "positive trip" by earning his GED.[197] For Dale Gaudet, extensive reading, had "opened his eyes."[198] Another contributor explained that "proper education" could lead individuals to repent of their crimes.[199] Desmond Lewis argued that education had caused him to "throw the life of crime out the window."[200] Surge Sherman wrote that literacy programs and GED courses made students "less likely…to commit a new crime once released."[201] Only education could "erase th[e] great evil" of crime, Robert Myles insisted.[202] Jason Lormand expressed similar sentiments. Only "extensive rehabilitation through education and drug treatment programs" could reduce crime.[203]

Angolite, Vol. 8, No. 3 (May/June 1983): 68; Peter O. Carter, "Thanks for Nothing!," *The Angolite,* Vol. 10, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 1985): 93; Larry Washington, "Crime—I Just Don't Get It," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 4 (July/Aug 1986): 58; Allen Anderson, "Reform Louisiana," *The Angolite,* Vol. 18, No. 3 (May/June 1993): 82.

[196] Freddi Gibson III, "I Suppose," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1991): 88; Mark A. Simien, "If I Were Warden," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1990): 91; Joseph E. Morgan, "Overcrowding," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 3 (May/June 1986): 52; Clay Huff, "Can You Read This?", *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 4 (July/August 1988): 72; James Taylor, "An Unheard Voice?", *The Angolite,* Vol. 8, No. 2 (March/April 1983): 84; Roy Rucker, "Serious Thoughts," Vol. 5, No. 3 (May/June 1980): 110; Eugene Rousso, "Rehabilitation," *The Angolite,* Vol. 4, No. 2 (March/April 1979): 84; Charles Unger, "Looking for Answers," *The Angolite,* Vol. 8, No. 3 (May/June 1983): 69; Louis Williams, "Who is Who?," *The Angolite,* Vol. 8, No. 2 (March/April 1983): 85; Eugene Rousso, "A Man with a Question," *The Angolite,* Vol. 3, No. 3 (May/June 1978): 54; Lionel Haqq McGruder, Jr., "No One Cares," *The Angolite,* Vol. 3, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1978): 52; Roland Pittman, "A Visitor's Question," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1990): 89.

[197] Carlton Willis, "Get on a Positive Trip," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 4 (July/August 1995).

[198] Dale Gaudet, "Change," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 1 (January/February 1995): 70.

[199] "Penology," *The Angolite,* Vol. 22, No. 6 (November/December 1997): 67.

[200] Desmond Lewis, "Behind Bars," *The Angolite,* Vol. 26, No. 6 (November/December 2001): 69.

[201] Surge Sherman, "On the Farm," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 4 (July/August 2006): 65.

[202] Robert Myles, "It's Everyone's Right," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 1 (January/February 1998): 66.

Others attributed their transformations to religious experience. Richard Carmack turned to God because he had once been "pretty bad."[204] Mike McDaniel had become "a better man" by seeking out God.[205] Louis Witherspoon thanked Jesus "for the transforming work He has done in my life."[206] Jesus had diverted George Brooks, Jr. from his "road to hell."[207] In prison, Peter Laxey "died and came back resurrected in Christ." Since then, he had become committed to "spitting scriptures," "building biblically," "blessing the Lord," and "denying self."[208] Patrick Dixon posited that he and other men in Angola had "bettered ourselves through Christianity" and mental health and educational programs.[209] Louis Williams also wrote that he "rehabilitated [him]self" by becoming a "born-again Christian" and recommended other prisoners follow his example.[210] Rodney Wayne Macon based his rehabilitation on theological study because only God could help him "overcome the utmost struggle."[211] Muslims also proclaimed themselves

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[203] Jason Lormand, "Rehabilitate!," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 2 (March/April 2000): 71.

[204] Richard Carmack, "Day by Day," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1991): 74.

[205] Mike McDaniel, "Look Out," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1987): 73.

[206] Louis Witherspoon, "Tribute to the Wise," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 3 (May/June 1981): 89.

[207] George Brooks, Jr., "A Story," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1990): 95.

[208]Peter Laxey, "Denying Self," *The Angolite,* Vol. 33, No. 6 (November/December 2008): 75. For similar stories, see Frederick Jones, Camp D, "A Convict's Testimony," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 1 (January/February 1995); Anthony Lordi, "William Light," *The Angolite,* Vol. 24, No. 3 (May/June 1999): 57; Fred Ricks, "Charlie's Song," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 2 (March/April 2002): 69; Donald Clark, "Comforts & Burdens," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 3 (May/June 2006): 70; Jimmy Harrison, "Cleaning House," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 4 (July/August 2006): 67; Darryl Cook, "Sinner to Saint," *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, No. 3 (May/June 2007): 65; Rockola Plaisance, "God is the Powerful One," *The Angolite,* Vol. 36, No. 4 (July/August 2011): 83; Walter Nickless, "Repentance," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 6 (November/December 2009): 74.

[209] Patrick Dixon, "A Matter of Record," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1991): 87.

[210] Louis Williams, "Who Is Who?", *The Angolite,* Vol. 8, No. 2 (March/April 1983): 85-86. Williams quoted the passage from Ezekiel this way: "Again, when I say unto the wicked thou shalt surely die, if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right; if the wicked restore the pledge and give again that he had robbed, walk in the statues of life, without committing iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live."

[211] Rodney Wayne Macon, *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 3 (May/June 1986): 53.

transformed. Touting his "self-discipline" and charity to others, Felton "Cheyenne" Williams concluded, "All my credit comes from Allah."[212] Even men from Angola's cellblocks and lockdown units, whom Warden Cain identifies as "the worst of the worst," described how God had changed their lives and promised to remain faithful even in their trying circumstances. Writing from Camp J, Michael Edwards insisted that Cain was "the best warden that has come through Angola in a long time." He admitted that he "was not always a good inmate," but revealed that he had "found the Lord, our God, in this place."

In general, contributors to *The Angolite* assumed that rehabilitation entailed guilty people transforming themselves, through one means or another. Often, the problem was not that rehabilitation required accepting personal responsibility for crime, but that the process of evaluating reform was so arbitrary and unscientific. In the pages of "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions," incarcerated writers lamented the fact that the state pardon and parole boards simply ignored all evidence of individuals' reform.[213] Similarly, in his 1982 feature on rehabilitation, Rideau asserted that parole boards were more concerned that prisoners display a deferential attitude than that they offer objective evidence of their reform. "The decision-making in the rehabilitation process really has nothing to do with merit, achievement, or fairness," the

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[212] Felton "Cheyenne" Williams, "My Life," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 5 (September/October 1995): 72. See also Ricky Davis, "The Garden," *The Angolite,* Vol. 36, No. 3 (May/June 2011): 69; Keith Thompson, "Pride and Lust," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 5 (September/October 2009): 62. For a more sardonic version of the Muslim transformation narrative, see Elgin Dennis, "A Ghetto Child," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 3 (May/June 2002): 66. See also Elgin Dennis, "Tears Flow," *The Angolite,* Vol. 26, No. 6 (November/December 2001): 70. Dennis admitted he had lived a fast life, but thought "those salats in that cell" should count for something. "You should let me in heaven," he told God, "'cause I already been to hell."

[213] Mark Smith, "False Hope," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 2 (March/April 1981): 102; Early Laverne, Jr., "Begging Your Pardon," Vol. 7, No. 4 (July/August 1982): 87; Allen Anderson, "Reform Louisiana," *The Angolite,* Vol. 18, No. 3 (May/June 1993): 82; James Taylor, "Bullshit Or Reality?," *The Angolite,* Vol. 14, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1989): 79; Ben Daughtery, "Love and Care," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1990): 72; Donnie Hunt, "Law," *The Angolite,* Vol. 8, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1983): 81; Thomas Hurst, "Public Radio," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 4 (July/Aug 1990): 65; Claude Woods, "Why No to Clemency?" *The Angolite,* Vol. 14, No. 4 (July/Aug 1989): 86; *The Angolite,* Vol. 7, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1982): 90; Dennis S. Lennon, *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 2 (March/April 1990): 77.

editor charged. "Rehabilitation is more often measured by the inmate's ability to kiss ass than anything else."[214] In short, Rideau wanted rehabilitation to play a more rational role in the parole and pardon process. To this end, he argued that prison officials should help decide which individuals to release. He admitted that "prison officials have not historically served the interests of rehabilitation." Yet he insisted that the "professional opinions" of wardens and corrections officers would be preferable to the uninformed opinions of parole and pardon board members who knew little about the individuals they evaluated.

Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston not only affirmed Rideau's conclusion, but argued that this more rational, objective evaluation of rehabilitation was already Louisiana prisoners' legal right. Johnston was sent to Angola in 1971 on an armed robbery charge. [215] In 1977, he volunteered to be *The Angolite*'s legal writer, to keep readers apprised of past and current court decisions that might help them work on their own cases. His first "Legal Spectrum" column appeared in the July/August 1977 issue—though he was confined in the cellblocks when it was published.[216] Deemed a "legal genius" by State Attorney General William Guste, Johnston became a well-respected authority on the law among prisoners at Angola.[217] His columns not only presented relevant recent cases, but also offered advice as to how prisoners might use legal decisions to their advantage.

Johnston's November/December 1982 "Legal Spectrum" was no different. Entitling this column, "The Right to Rehabilitate," Johnston argued that while the Supreme Court had ruled

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[214] Rideau, "Rehabilitation," 39.

[215] Wilbert Rideau, "The Forgotten Men," *The Angolite*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (May/June 1980): 31.

[216] Wilbert Rideau, "Getting It Together," *The Angolite*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (July/August 1977): 2.

[217] Wilbert Rideau, "The Forgotten Men," *The Angolite*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (May/June 1980): 31.

that prisoners had no constitutional right to rehabilitation (*McGray v. Sullivan*, 1975), Louisiana Revised Statute 15:828 made rehabilitation, including education, counselling, and religious services, a legally protected right for prisoners at Angola. Moreover, R.S. 15: 828, also required that the Department of Corrections help rehabilitated individuals "*return to the community as promptly as practicable*." Thus, implied Johnston, there was no need to create a new law by which corrections officials could speak on behalf of prisoners at pardon and parole hearings. The Department of Corrections was already under "a statutory obligation" to release rehabilitated individuals in a timely fashion. In light of this legal obligation, Johnston asserted that those who could "make a reasonable showing of rehabilitation" could take legal action against the Louisiana Department of Corrections. RS 15:828 made the Secretary of Corrections "liable for damages under either the state's tort law or the federal civil rights statute" if he failed to identify and release rehabilitated prisoners. [218]

In this way, *The Angolite* cast rehabilitation not as a process that benevolent officials could choose to recognize if the individual in question was sufficiently deferential, but as an objectively measured outcome rewarded by right and recognized through an adversarial legal process. In general, Rideau's *Angolite* had always shown great respect for prisoners who successfully navigated the legal system. The newsmagazine credited a series of 1970s lawsuits brought by four incarcerated African Americans with initiating the prison's transition from one of the most violent to one of the safest. The most important was *Williams v. McKeithen,* named after the lead plaintiff, Hayes Williams. As a result of this lawsuit, Angola was placed under a

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[218] Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, "Legal Spectrum: The Right to Rehabilitate," *The Angolite,* Vol. 7, No. 6 (November/December 1982): 57-58. Apparently, prisoners had already been taking similar legal action. In the September/October 1982 issue of *The Angolite*, Johnston reported that during that year, four lifers had filed lawsuits against the Board of Pardons in which they raised constitutional objections to the board's decision-making criteria and recommendations. Johnston briefly cited R.S. 15:828 as the partial basis of their claims. See Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, "Legal Special: The King's Prerogative," *The Angolite,* Vol. 7, No. 5 (September/October 1982): 68.

federal consent decree by which a federal judge, Frank Polozola, imposed reforms that improved conditions and drastically reduced violence inside the prison. Williams and his compatriots, *The Angolite* reported, had been branded "black radicals" and confined in Angola's lockdown unit for their actions.[219] Yet they placed their faith in the legal system. "This land is ruled by Law," Williams told *The Angolite,* "and the Law did not condone the way this prison was run. I focused my energy on changing the system by using the system. That is the American way."[220] Change had been wrought not by benevolent prison officials, but by an incarcerated black man whose "militant" litigation laid the groundwork for lasting reform inside the prison.

The Angolite also regularly reported on the activities of the Angola Special Civics Project (ASCP). Founded by incarcerated activists Norris Henderson and Checo Yancy in 1987, the ASCP organized prisoners and their families to promote political candidates and legislation favorable toward incarcerated people. Most notably, based on research concluding that people in their forties become increasingly less likely to commit crimes, the ASCP proposed in 1990 that lifers become parole eligible after serving twenty years and reaching the age of forty-five, again promoting evidence-based evaluations of rehabilitation.[221] *The Angolite* portrayed these efforts in a favorable light. Rideau praised the Project leaders for seeking to enact reform through "the political process" rather than "the less desirable means traditionally employed by prisoners" (i.e. rebellion). Noting that the ASCP emerged "during the 200th anniversary of the Constitution," Rideau implied that the organization demonstrated prisoners' commitment to American ideals.

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[219] Notably, Willliams spoke at length in the article about Lazarus Joseph, a Muslim prisoner who helped to bring the lawsuit and "suffered for his faith."

[220] See Michael Glover, "Prisonomics: A Man and a Prison," *The Angolite*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (July/August 1991): 29-44;

[221] Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, "Organizing for Freedom: The Angola Special Civics Project, 1987-1992," Master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2011: 61-62, 65.

Their legal and political work simultaneously functioned as a means of securing legal recognition and reward for their rehabilitation and providing evidence of their conformity to the democratic values upon which the United States was founded.[222]

Similarly, many contributors to "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" presented legal training as the highest form of rehabilitation. There were a few who were hesitant to place their confidence in the law, viewing legal victories as "part of a fantasy world."[223] Richard Mikkelson deemed working on his case just as much a pacifier as sports. "Man, the laws aren't going to change," he wrote. "You can argue, file, read, write, kick, scream, bite."[224] But in general, contributors to *The Angolite* placed great faith in the law and denounced all distractions from it.[225] Willie Fox advocated diverting all funds from sports to education. "We all should be smart enough to work on our case," he argued.[226] Calvin Deal also called for a shift from sports to legal pursuits. "If we have hopes of obtaining our freedom," he wrote, then the emphasis

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[222] Wilbert Rideau, "Politics: Special Civics Project," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1987): 22.

[223] Edward Gleim, "In Defense of Sports," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1991): 68; Mark King, "Living Dead," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1992): 78; Willie Sparks, "Tunnel Vision," *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1988): 83; Barry Diggs, "Jim Crow," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1992): 88.

[224] Richard Mikkelson, "They Keep Coming," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 6 (November/December 1998): 74; Raynell Bright, "Gray Tears," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 3 (May/June 2002): 70; Charlie Smith, "Hangin' On," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 3 (May/June 2002): 64.

[225] Anonymous, "What Have You Done?", *The Angolite,* August 1975: 15; Harold Daigre, "Get Involved," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1981): 61; Joseph Casbon, "Farewell Brothers," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 3 (May/June 1991): 66; Larry S. Perkins, "Capitol Hill," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 2 (March/April 1990): 75; Eddie "LA" Evans, "LA's Law," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1991): 89; Tracy Anderson, "Who's Guilty?," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1987): 75.

[226] Willie Fox, *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 2 (March/April 1990): 67; Brady Williams, "Recapture the Mind," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1992): 87; Albert Wright, "Waking Up," Vol. 18, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1993): 63; Alvin Howard, "The Promise," *The Angolite,* Vol. 10, No. 2 (March/April 1985): 94; Alvin Howard, "The Promise," *The Angolite,* Vol. 10, No. 2 (March/April 1985): 94; Calvin Deal, "Let's Talk," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 3 (May/June 1991): 70; Herbert Williams, "Sounding Off to Harry Connick," *The Angolite,* Vol. 3, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1978): 58; Joseph E. Morgan, "Overcrowding," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 3 (May/June 1986): 52; Norris Henderson, aka Abdus Saboor Muwwakkil, Assistant Law Librarian, "The Loss of Access," *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1988): 70.

shouldn't be placed on the NBA, NFL, or NCAA, but placed on the USSC (United States Supreme Court), ACLU (American Civil Liberty Union), ASCP (Angola's Special Civics Project), and pursuing our release from LSP."[227] Tommy Cullier asserted that those who truly understood their circumstances would spend their time in the law library rather than the basketball court or football field.[228] Paul Meschal denounced his fellows for knowing minute details about television soap operas, but knowing nothing about how to file legal paperwork.[229] Terrence Nichols suggested that if prisoners did not engage in sports and same-sex relationships, they could not help but think of and work on their legal cases.[230] At the same time that he denounced sports, TV, and "homosexuality," Donnie Lee Bronze called on all prisoners to "pick up the law book, pick up the pen and paper."[231] Donnie Hunt vowed to give up all other forms of comfort and entertainment in prison for "a law book."[232]

Some described the legal education as a means for African Americans in particular to resist racial oppression. It is true that some argued that legal work was futile for Black people, given the white supremacy inherent in the criminal justice system. Eddie Marshall, for example, had no use for "a law book," because "the white main ain't giving no nigga no play."[233] But others placed their faith in the law. Robert Graham was dismayed that "our young black

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[227] Calvin Deal, "Let's Talk," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 3 (May/June 1991): 69.

[228] Tommy Cullier, "Recapture the Mind," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1992): 86.

[229] Paul Meschal, "Angola Cry-Babies," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 2 (March/April 1987): 70.

[230] Terrence Nichols, "Facting," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1987): 75.

[231] Donnie Lee Bronze, "Let's Talk," *The Angolite,* Vol. 14, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1989): 83.

[232] Donnie Hunt, "And the Clock Ticks By," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1991): 93.

[233] Eddie Marshall, "I'm Down with my Crown," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 5 (September/October 1995): 69.

youth…hardly know anything about criminal law" that could set them free.[234] Derrick Howard argued that prisons were "strategically designed" to destroy African American families by removing black male role models and making black mothers welfare dependent. But black men could change these realities through education and legal action. Howard described a hypothetical "brother-man" motivated by reading Elijah Muhammad's *Message to the Blackman in America* and Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro.* "Eventually he hit the law library and became his own legal counsel," wrote Howard. "So brother-man lost his chains, most importantly the ones that shackled his brain."[235]

Though they did not make this connection explicit, by emphasizing the importance of legal education in particular, contributors to *The Angolite* implied that rehabilitation could include efforts to challenge their convictions rather than simply accepting personal responsibility for the crimes for which they were convicted. Similarly, Angola's incarcerated writers suggested that education served not only as a means of self-improvement and crime reduction, but also of recognizing and challenging the white power structure. Obtaining an education, wrote Feltus Taylor, was a blow to the "people out there who don't want you to learn," who actively opposed black people "becoming anything in life."[236] Describing how he had initially rebelled against his incarceration, one contributor wrote that his perspective changed once he began reading black history. He learned that his own "ignorance and stupidity" merely reinforced the white supremacist system in which he was ensnared. He called on his

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[234] Robert Graham, "Cells Make Me Think," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 3 (May/June 2003): 53.

[235] Derrick Howard, "It Can Happen—To You," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 4 (July/August 2002): 60.

[236] Feltus Taylor, "Education," *The Angolite,* Vol. 24, No. 1 (January/February 1999): 64.

fellows to "educate your mind instead of laying there and doing your time."[237] Melvin Toomer also highlighted learning black history as a pivotal experience. Recounting his knowledge of Africa and the history of slavery, Toomer concluded that the powers that be ("the Board of Education") had an interest in keeping such knowledge from him.[238] Jimmy Williams wrote that pursuing education would improve an individual's chances of obtaining a favorable ruling from the parole or pardon board. But he also insinuated education served a greater purpose. Quoting W.E.B. Du Bois, Williams insisted that "an educated negro is a dangerous negro," able to challenge the conditions of his confinement.[239] Though he was white, Ellis characterized himself and other prisoners as battling against a white power structure by obtaining an education. "I am a white man," he concluded, "but I understand reality."[240] Angola's incarcerated writers did characterize rehabilitation as a form of individual transformation. However, they also framed rehabilitation as active efforts to demand that their redemption be recognized, to prove that their convictions were not valid rather than that they had changed, and to educate themselves in order to resist white supremacy.

"I don't like it, Massa": The impact of Burl Cain's tenure

Many major themes appearing in *The Angolite* remained constant before and after Cain's tenure. Understandings of rehabilitation as repentance and salvation, self-improvement, and litigation had always shared the same pages of "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions." Accounts of religious transformation had always appeared alongside calls for divine judgment

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[237] "Mind Control," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 3 (May/June 1995): 81.

[238] Melvin Toomer, "Learning Our History," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 4 (July/August 1995):73.

[239] Jimmy Williams, "The Game Should Be Told," *The Angolite,* Vol. 22, No. 1 (January February 1997): 67.

[240] Ronnie Ellis, "Growing Up and Reality," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 2 (March/April 1998): 63.

against an anti-black criminal justice system. Still, there is a degree of truth in Rideau's assertion that *The Angolite* became "mostly about religion" during Cain's tenure. In general, religious poems and essays became increasingly prominent in *The Angolite*, especially after the mid-2000s. After the "Christian warden" arrived, the number of entries describing religious transformations doubled. [241]

However, the nature of these religious pieces was more notable than their volume. Many were noticeably more evangelistic and sermon-like, perhaps reflecting the increasing number of graduates from Angola's Bible College.[242] Some simply expressed praise and devotion to God.[243] Many emphasized repentance and salvation.[244] Some stressed the suffering Jesus endured on the cross to inspire devotion.[245] Others warned of the dangers of judgment and hell for unbelievers.[246] Some called on those who professed to be Christians to examine the basis of their

[241] Douglas Benson, "My Wish for Angola," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 5 (September/October 2010): 59; Ron Walker, "On the Farm," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 3 (May/June 2003): 55.

[242] Prior to Cain's tenure, incarcerated writers did make evangelistic appeals, but not nearly as frequently. For appeals, see Andrew Joseph, Jr., "The ABC's of Life," *The Angolite,* Vol. 9, No. 4 (July/Aug 1984): 61; James Green, "Dawn to Dusk," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 3 (May/June 1987): 71; Kenneth Paul Jones, "Letter from a Friend," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 2 (March/April 1992): 69; Steven Rounsaull, "The Great Hoax," *The Angolite,* Vol. 5, No. 4 (July/Aug 1980): 73; David G. Regan, "Eternal Life or Eternal Hell," *The Angolite,* Vol. 4, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1979): 83. For writers who responded, see Clinton Gonzales, "True Friend," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1992): 91; Michael L. Walden, "The Friend in You," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 2 (March/April 1981): 104; Christopher Dufrene, "Prison Thief," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1986): 57.

[243] Donald Clark, "A Friend in All Seasons," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 3 (May/June 2003): 52; Donald Clark, "Glory to Our Teacher," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 1 (January/February 2006): 62; John Chesson, Ward 2, "Along the Way," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 2 (March/April 2003): 60; Willie Robinson, "Jesus, My Friend," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 5 (September/October 1998): 69; Eddie Viree, "I've Got to See," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 5 (September/October 2010): 64.

[244] Rickey McBroom, "Thoughts," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 4 (July/August 2000): 67; Eugene Hansberry, Jr., "A Sinner's Prayer," *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, No.2 (March/April 2007): 67; Henry Lowe, "The Ultimate Sacrifice," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 1 (January/February 2010): 74.

[245] Henry Lowe, "The Ultimate Sacrifice," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 1 (January/February 2010): 74.

[246] Johnny Foley, "God is God," *The Angolite,* Vol. 24, No. 6 (November/December 1999): 74; James Smith, "Mississippi Rising," *The Angolite,* Vol. 36, No. 3 (May/June 2011): 66; Jamie Maduro, "A Brother's Cry," *The*

faith more carefully. Asserting that Christianity was actually a "minority religion," Willie Martin lamented the "biblical illiteracy" common even among "churchgoers," and urged readers to "genuinely study the Bible."[247] Eddie Viree agreed. "[The Bible] should be our blueprint for life," he wrote, "and not just something we've heard."[248]

Such sermons would not distinguish these writers as incarcerated preachers. However, other religious messages spoke directly to particular circumstances of incarcerated people in new ways. For instance, narratives of religious transformation became increasingly racialized during Cain's tenure. Several men who explicitly identified themselves as African Americans described how God helped them renounce "street life" when no one else could. Antonio Synigal wrote that he had changed his "thug living" by "asking God for forgiveness." His "Afro-American soldiers" had told him to "pray with it" and "find/Righteousness [he] always had deep inside." In the end, he still described himself as an "Uptown thug" but insisted that now he had "God on [his] shoulder."[249] In a later poem, Synigal revealed that he had ignored mother's pleas that he attend church, choosing instead "to do [his] thug thang." When he was sent to Angola, he resisted the devil and found joy in God.[250] LaKeith Debrow told a similar story. Though his preacher, teacher, and mother had all tried to reach him, Debrow did not "give up the streets." But now, in prison, he "read a few scriptures" and prayed to God for forgiveness.[251] Reginald Reddick wrote

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Angolite, Vol. 32, No. 1 (January/February 2007): 59; Neal Divine, "Hell Bent," *The Angolite,* Vol. 26, No. 2 (March/April/May 2001): 67.

[247] Willie Martin, "Revolutionize Your Life," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 2 (March/April 2006): 64.

[248] Eddie Viree, "The Bread of Life," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 2 (March/April 2010): 59.

[249] Antonio Synigal, "How a Thug Change," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 2 (March/April 2002): 70.

[250] Antonio Synigal, "Days Like This," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 1 (January/February 2003): 68.

[251] LaKeith Debrow, "Stop, Look, Listen, and Learn," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 5 (September/October 2006): 61.

that "as a black man" he had sinned and "lived the life of a gangster." But he had also repented and given God control of his life.[252]

These pieces were significant in relation to a broader subset of poems explicitly pinpointing the origins of crime and incarceration within black communities, perhaps reflecting the notion of a "generational curse" and "cultural" causes of crime associated with Angola's Returning Hearts and Malachi Dads programs (see chapter one). Ronald Walker argued that the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans was evidence of "self-destruction" and "self-extinction" through violent crime, drug addiction, and abuse of black women. "It's proven that we're our own worst enemy," he concluded.[253] Keith Barrow described incarceration as a "self-inflicted condition" driven by a continuing "slave mentality."[254] Noble Robinson attributed "black on black crime" to self-imposed disunity among African Americans.[255] Albert Wright, too, suggested that a lack of unity among African Americans accounted for violence in their communities. "Where is the love and sense of Black pride?" he asked.[256] David Brewington believed violence in black communities would end only when African Americans discarded "old traditions."[257] Toliver Johnson, too, asserted intraracial violence would disappear when African

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[252] Reginald Reddick, "The Black Man," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 4 (July/August 2002): 72. A few prayed to God even as they refused to give up "street life." Describing himself as "young, irritated, and black," Hymel Varnado described crying out to God "at the gates of Hell." But God "didn't answer because he know I wasn't livin' right." Varnado made an effort to "make [himself] a better man," but ultimately could not resist his life of "thuggin'" and "hustling." Mario Westbrook prayed to be "forgiven for my thug career," but saw himself as "a living sacrifice," his deeds as a necessary evil. Hymel Varnado, "Young, Irritated, & Black," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 4 (July/August 2002): 62; Mario Westbrook, "For My Dogz," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 5 (September/October 2006): 62.

[253] Ronald Walker, "An Endangered Species?" *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, No. 1 (January/February 2007): 58.

[254] Keith Barrow, "The Blues," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 6 (November/December 2010): 70.

[255] Noble Robinson, "Stop the War," *The Angolite,* Vol. 36, No. 2 (March/April 2011): 64. See also Ronald Alexander, "Disrupted by. Lead," *The Angolite,* Vol. 37, No. 6 (November/December 2012): 80.

[256] Albert Wright, "Hear My Cry," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 5 (September/October 1998): 74.

Americans collectively decided to "stop glorifying the gun, the dope and the destruction they bring to us."[258] A few made reference to Nation of Islam teachings to hold fellow African Americans personally responsible for repudiating criminal activity. Emanuel Randall urged black men to "discard the label of 'urban terrorist' and come to the true identity of his character—the original man." [259] And in a modified version of NOI creation stories, Robert Cleveland explained black men engaged in familial neglect, drug abuse, theft, and murder because they had "lost their nature." [260] Synigal, Debrow, and Reddick's individual stories of religious transformation, then, bolstered a broader racialized narrative about "cultural" origins of and solutions to violent crime in the pages of "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions."[261]

As indicated above, incarcerated writers implicitly countered the idea that crime was endemic to African American communities by highlighting the anti-black bias inherent in the criminal justice system. However, contributors to *The Angolite* responded more explicitly to another trend in the newsmagazine's religious content: an increasing assertion that religious transformation did not necessarily entail release from prison. "Only your physical being can be incarcerated," wrote Elvis Johnson, "not your spiritual being." Through Jesus and the Bible, he

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[257] David Brewington, "Shake Your Karma," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 5 (September/October 2006): 52-53.

[258] Tolliver Johnson, St. Gabriel, LA, "A One-Two Punch," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 3 (May/June 2006): 70.

[259] Emanuel Randall, "The Tears of Men," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 4 (July/August 2000): 62.

[260] Robert Cleveland, "They Are Not From Us," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 6 (November/December 2002): 54. One also spoke against "homosexuality" and "the white man's religion," upholding men who participated in Angola's "Young Man's Program" as exemplars for other black men. "They are filled with light!" he exclaimed. "Thank God (Allah) we cannot quit." "African American King," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 3 (May/June 1995): 77. Women at LCIW rarely revealed their race and rarely made race-based critiques of the criminal justice system. One woman did, however, lament the devaluation of women in African American communities. Charging that they had "lost all morals," Betty Jean Broaden charged that black men valued cars more than they did black women. See Betty Jean Broaden, "It's Sad to Say," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 6 (November/December 1998): 67.

[261] Women at LCIW rarely revealed their race and rarely made race-based critiques of the criminal justice system. One woman did, however, lament the devaluation of women in African American communities. Charging that they had "lost all morals," Betty Jean Broaden charged that black men valued cars more than they did black women. See Betty Jean Broaden, "It's Sad to Say," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 6 (November/December 1998): 67.

and others could "still live a full life" behind bars.[262] Though she was sentenced to life, Brandy Holmes insisted that she was free in her "heart and soul."[263] Expressions of hope for the afterlife were equally common. Andrew Joseph wondered whether God was just for allowing men to serve decades and ultimately die in Angola. But he concluded that "a trivial thirty years/Of pain, loneliness and tears/Only opens eternity's doors."[264] Gerard Bourne admitted that the life of a prisoner could be bleak. But he insisted that, "in the end, we will be with him for eternity."[265] Janettra Brown reminded her friends that "there is a life after life," encouraging them to look forward to reconsideration from "the ultimate judge." [266]

Some writers explicitly discouraged their fellows from connecting faith and freedom. Eddie Viree denounced Angola's population for believing God was good "only if He allows someone to leave prison free" and went to church only "to be seen." Viree urged these men to focus on what was really important: "[God] sent Jesus to save your soul" and "your freedom is

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[262] Elvis Johnson, "Living a Full Life," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 2 (March/April 2003): 53. See also John McGinnis, "Freedom in Angola," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 4 (July/August 2006): 63; David Poydras, "What I Have Learned," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 5 (September/October 2010): 61. Some expressed hope for a satisfying life in prison without reference to God. Thankful for his health and safety in prison, David Lightsey vowed to face prison life with a positive attitude, as a "tsunami of negative energy" would "not change the situation at hand." Kirt Hall found inspiration within himself. "Despite the odds," he wrote, he had "carved out meaning" during his time in prison. He did so, he insisted, "because I know that I am/Greater than the tragedy/Which has befallen me." David Lightsey, "Positive Perception," *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, No. 1 (January/February 2007): 64; Kirt Hall, "Along My Journey," *The Angolite,* Vol. 37, No. 6 (November/December 2012): 81.

[263] Brandy A. Holmes, "My Two Fathers," *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 2007): 66.

[264] Andrew Joseph, "In Memory of Wilbert Frezel," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 2 (March/April 1998): 69.

[265] Gerard Bourne, "In Spite of the World," *The Angolite,* Vol. 38, No. 1 (January/February 2013): 62. See also Glen Peacock, "Day after Day," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 3 (May/June 2006): 71; Derrick Garrett, "There's a Light," *The Angolite,* Vol. 36, No. 4 (July/August 2011): 89; Ray Sampay, "I'm Going Home," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 3 (May/June 2010): 69; Mike Burge, "A Soldier (doing life…)," *The Angolite,* Vol. 26, No. 2 (March/April/May 2001): 67.

[266] Janettra Brown, "Hold On," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 2 (March/April 2003): 5; For similar sentiments, see Gail Jones, "Higher Authority," *The Angolite,* Vol. 24, No. 2 (March/April 1999): 64; Sandra Stafford, "A Daughter's Cry," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 3 (May/June 2000): 63; Melissa Carr, "Everything Happens for a Reason," *The Angolite,* Vol. 33, No. 4 (July/August 2009): 64; Valerie Coleman, "Who Will You Think Of First," *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, No. 2 (March/April 2007): 57.

already here."[267] Relating the story of a fellow prisoner who falsely predicted that God would release him from prison, David Settlemeyer decried the "name it and claim it" gospel of the "Me-Now Generation." He charged that many of Angola's Christians relied on "cheap grace," emphasizing God's power to "release you from prison" rather than "save you from your sins." Most of these so-called Christians "remain[ed] in their sins," giving all Christians in the prison a bad name. Settlemeyer believed that God could "release a man from prison," but he also believed the "focus of our churches and our hearts [should] return to God and the Gospel."[268] People were supposed to have faith in God regardless of whether or not their hopes for a life outside prison walls were realized.

Other contributors expressed dismay that so many were content that the only reward for their rehabilitation would be eternal salvation. A few drew explicit comparisons between Cain's moral rehabilitation and slave owners' religion. Referring to Cain as "Massa," Jeromy Seal denounced those prisoners he deemed to be complicit in the warden's plan. These "houseboys" informed Cain about the prisoners who "ain't been brainwashed yet." The warden, Seal imagined, would simply prescribe bible readings to create a compliant prisoner. But Seal refused to get with the program. "I won't be told that my redemption lies in rolling over and letting the system kick me in the ass," he declared. "I don't like it, Massa, and I don't like what it's doing to the other slaves in the prison system."[269] Others identified religion as a more generalized

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[267] Eddie Viree, "Patience to Freedom," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 2 (March/April 2006): 69. See also Eddie Viree, "It's Amazing…And It's Sad," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 1 (January/February 2010): 72.

[268] David Settlemeyer, "The 'Me-Now' Generation," *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, Nos. 5&6, Vol. 33, Nos. 1, 2 &3 (September 2007/June 2008): 84-85.

[269] Jeromy Seal, "Enough Is Enough," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 4 (July/August 2002): 61. See also Russell Alexander, "Ding Dong," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 6-Vol. 26, No. 1 (November/December 2000 & January/February 2001): 71; Michael Edwards, "The Christian's Walls," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 1 (January/February 2002): 58.

"pacifier." Mike Shoemaker expressed particular antipathy toward prison ministry volunteers, scorning their "antidepressant happiness."[270] Religion was first on David Essex's list of ways that prisoners "escape" (the others being "drugs, books, clubs, [and] sports").[271] Charlie Hamilton identified "a Bible with handles" as the administration's latest pacifier.[272]

Before Cain's tenure, contributors to *The Angolite* decried sports, radio and television, and same-sex relationships as the primary "pacifiers" in Angola.[273] Some incarcerated writers did criticize chaplains and religious volunteers for encouraging prisoners to accept their incarceration rather than work for their release. "They told me to hold on to God's amazing grace," wrote Rodney Macon, "As I spend the rest of my life in this place."[274] However, for the most part, religion did not feature as prominently as a distraction from legal work and political organizing. In fact, religious individuals had been notable in pieces about legal and political

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[270] Mike Shoemaker, "The Real Feel," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 2 (March/April 2009): 78.

[271] David Essex, "House of Blues," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 3 (May/June 2002): 69.

[272] Charlie Hamilton, "Lifer," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 5 (September/October 2000): 76.

[273] For sports, see Terrence Nicholas, "Facting," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1987): 75; Perry Curry, "Angola's Ability," *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1988): 88; Calvin Deal, "Let's Talk," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 3 (May/June 1991): 69. For radio and TV, see Paul Meschal, "Angola Cry-Babies," *The Angolite,* Vol. 12, No. 2 (March/April 1987): 71; Donnie Lee Bronze, "Let's Talk," *The Angolite,* Vol. 14, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1989): 82; Donnie Hunt, "Forgotten Soldiers," *The Angolite,* Vol. 14, No. 4 (July/August 1989): 87; Donald Wascom, "A Point of View," *The Angolite,* Vol. 9, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1984): 72. For contributions that address homosexuality, see Donnie Hunt, "Time Has Told Time," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1986): 52; Dannie P. Devereaux, *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1988): 86; Perry Curry, "Angola's Ability," *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1988): 88; Dwight "Skeet" Smith, "Name of the Game," *The Angolite,* Vol. 17, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1992): 81; Joel Prickett, "Angola Super Rap," *The Angolite,* Vol. 18, No. 4 (July/August 1993): 87; Peter Davis, "Cold Place," *The Angolite,* Vol. 18, No. 4 (July/August 1993): 86. In contrast, Rideau wrote in 1991 that homosexuality often provoked violent behavior among prisoners rather than pacifying them. He claimed: "One, if not the, major factor in prison violence at Angola from a contemporary historical view, is the behavior stemming directly or indirectly from homosexuality. Whenever the sexual proclivities of one translates into the health, welfare, or safety of another, either directly or indirectly, the editors shall always point it out. We prefer to call it fact, not bias." See Wilbert Rideau, "The Mailbox," *The Angolite,* Vol. 16, No. 2 (March/April 1991): 5-6. However, just a few years later, Rideau was more cautious. When a reader expressed disappointment at what she perceived as the newsmagazine's "anti-gay bias," Rideau asked her for a specific example. "While we don't worry about being 'politically correct,'" he wrote, "we do try to avoid bias of any kind." See Wilbert Rideau, "The Mailbox," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 1 (January/February 1995): 2.

[274] Rodney W. Macon, "My Struggle," *The Angolite,* Vol. 9, No. 5 (September/October 1984): 72.

organizing. When Ron Wikberg set out to investigate Louisiana's life sentence statutes in 1981, *The Angolite* noted that "many of the religious groups" provided assistance.[275] *The Angolite* portrayed the Angola Special Civics Project as effective organizing across religious lines, highlighting the fact that Norris Henderson, one of Angola's most prominent Muslims, co-founded ASCP with Checo Yancy, an active participant in several of the prison's Christian groups. In 1993, *The Angolite* covered a panel Angola's religious organizations organized to discuss sentencing and other criminal justice issues.[276] Recognizing him as the leader of St. John's Institutional Baptist Brotherhood, the newsmagazine also identified Andrew Joseph as the president of the Lifers' Association. Joseph was outspoken about the injustice of Louisiana's life sentence statutes, especially the racial disparities inherent therein. In a 1982 *Angolite* article about sentencing, he asserted that while "poor, uneducated, black" defendants were charged with murder, white defendants were allowed to plead to lesser crimes, like manslaughter. "Louisiana's criminal justice system," he insisted, "is infected with a sophisticated kind of racism…today many of the racists wear black robes instead of white ones."[277] And even when the club was not headed by one of Angola's religious leaders, the Lifers' Association often sought religious sanction for their meetings. *The Angolite* reported that Church of God in Christ pastor Wilfred Cain frequently offered the opening prayer for Lifers' gatherings.[278] *The Angolite* made it clear that religious activity could facilitate political organizing.

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[275] Tommy Mason, "Forgotten Men Committee," *The Angolite,* Vol. 6, No. 3 (May/June 1981): 75.

[276] "Still a Human Being," *The Angolite,* Vol. 18, No. 1 (January/February 1993): 20.

[277] "Life: No Rhyme, No Reason," *The Angolite,* Vol. 7, No. 5 (September/October 1982): 39, 41.

[278] "The Lifers' Fete," *The Angolite,* Vol. 8, No. 6 (November/December 1987): 48.

In general, *The Angolite* presented religion as a symbol of black autonomy within Angola. In a 1992 feature on Angola's religious landscape, then-editor Michael Glover revealed that almost all of the prison's incarcerated religious leaders were African Americans. The majority of worshipers, too, were black. Yet all of Angola's full-time chaplains were white. Religious leaders were divided as to whether an all-white chaplaincy serving a majority-black prison was a problem. But Glover suggested that it was Sidney Deloch of St. John's Institutional Baptist Brotherhood who "encapsulated the feelings of a large segment of the population."[279] Characterizing the absence of black chaplains as a "sad injustice," Deloch insisted that white chaplains simply could not relate to black prisoners, who felt more "comfortable" with chaplains of their own race.[280] Some cited overt racial prejudice on the part of some chaplains.[281] But prisoners' discomfort with chaplains also had to do with preaching style. "Inmate preachers," Glover wrote, "bring excitement, emotion, and lots of energy to the pulpit, often working their congregations to a fever pitch." Chaplains, on the other hand, "delivered dry dissertations—informative speeches."[282] Sidney Deloch suggested that it was "a cultural difference…a racial barrier" that separated chaplains from the prisoners they were supposed to serve. *The Angolite* included side-by-side photos of Wilson and Deloch preaching to augment this point. Wilson

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[279] Michael Glover, "The Religionists," *The Angolite*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (July/August 1992): 34.

[280] Glover described Deloch as "the most controversial religious leader in Angola," and "certainly one of the most outspoken." Deloch publicly criticized Baton Rouge pastor TJ Jemison for flying to Indiana to defend Mike Tyson, but ignoring "poverty stricken convicts here in Louisiana." He said "Jesus Christ" was "the only true rehabilitation," but denounced "the vast majority of Christians in society" for believing prisoners were "second class saints." Glover, "The Religionists," 37.

[281] Joseph Stevenson of Methodist Men told *The Angolite* that Chaplain Fontenot had once told him "that he's still learning how to like black people." "So how can you deal with people as a chaplain in a community which is 80% black?" Stevenson asked. "You're saying you don't like 80% of the people that you are hired to minister to" (32).

[282] Glover, "The Religionists," 40. Glover wrote that Joseph Stevenson was "considered more of a teacher than a preacher, and prepares himself for his Bible study classes with extreme attention to detail." Glover, "The Religionists," 43.

stands still with his hands folded in front of him, a plaintive expression on his face. Deloch shouts into a microphone, sweat beading on his brow.[283] Religious activity encouraged repentance and self-transformation, but also represented black resistance to state authority.

Yet shortly after Warden Cain's arrival at Angola, *The Angolite* presented the prison's religious leaders and their sponsors singing the administration's praises. In 1997, *The Angolite* covered a Church of God in Christ event in which Reverend Barnard Harrell, COGIC's outside sponsor, honored Cain. Harrell lauded Cain for accelerating Angola's "spiritual development" and urged all "community leaders" to emulate Cain's example.[284] In 2000, Wilbert Rideau himself covered a ceremony in which Angola's religious leaders, many of whom were among the Bible College's first graduates, honored Warden Cain. Arthur Rhodes of Methodist Men thanked God for Cain's "vision" and "support [for] the Christian community." Willie Williams, president of Men of Integrity, appreciated the "free liberty" the warden granted him and other ministers to preach. Charles Gray, president of Full Gospel Businessmen Fellowship, was grateful that Cain recognized the need for evangelism in the prison. Salvation, he maintained, was "the only way men change." Wilfred Cain of the Church of God in Christ thanked Warden Cain for the Bible College, insisting it made him and others "better qualified today to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Joseph Stevenson, president of the United Methodist Men's Fellowship, lauded Cain as "a Christian who God has called to be a warden."[285] Many of the same men who had represented

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[283] Glover, "The Religionists," 40-41. *The Angolite* had previously written favorably of volunteer chaplains, however. "For the most part," wrote Charles Lawrence, "they are average, middle-class citizens committed to their way of life…Because of their sincerity, they cannot ignore the human beings held captive in jails and prisons around the state…Although the response from volunteers was slow at the beginning, the momentum has been constant and their ranks continue to increase. Presently, Angola has 4 full-time chaplains, and about 25 volunteers to meet the spiritual needs of the inmate population." Charles Lawrence, "Volunteer Chaplains," *The Angolite*, Vol. 13, No. 6 (November/December 1988): 71.

[284] Ashanti Witherspoon, "COGIC," *The Angolite,* Vol. 22, No. 4 (July/August 1997): 55.

black autonomy within a white administered prison were now visible and vocal supporters of Cain's agenda.

Angola's savior was no longer a black militant with a law book, but a white evangelist with "the good book." In 2009, the *Angolite*'s Lane Nelson captured the impact of this shift in Angola's religious community on political organizing within the prison's population. In general, the newsmagazine encouraged prisoners to pursue legal redress during Cain's tenure, presenting legal instruction and updating readers on relevant court cases.[286] *The Angolite* continued to advocate for criminal justice reform at the legislative level during Cain's tenure, publishing regular legislative digests of state-level criminal justice bills and updates on the activities of the Angola Special Civics Project. Still, Angola's incarcerated journalists suggested that Angola's "religious revolution" had distracted prisoners from legal work and political organizing. Recounting the history of Angola prisoners' criminal justice reform efforts, Lane Nelson suggested that moral rehabilitation had stunted these efforts. Nelson credited Cain's program with "stem[ming] the prevailing hopelessness" resulting from Louisiana's harsh sentencing laws. However, he argued, the "stability" he introduced also curtailed "any sizeable united effort for penal reform." Nelson explained that those who had once led organizing efforts were now wrapped up in "the Bible College," "inmate religious fellowships," and other programs Cain

[285] Wilbert Rideau, "In the Middle of the Race: Cain Honored by Inmate Groups," *The Angolite,* (March/April 2000): 53-54.

[286] Kerry Myers, "Follow the Rules," *The Angolite*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (July/August 2000): 38; "Innocence Project," *The Angolite*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (June/July/August 2001): 58; Raymond Bender, "No Freebies," "Pay to Play," *The Angolite*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (January/February/March 2004): 38, 40; Raymond Bender, "Missing Transcripts," *The Angolite*, Vol. 32, Nos. 5&6, Vol. 33, Nos. 1, 2 &3 (September 2007/June 2008):43-44; Larry Sharp, "Defending Yourself," *The Angolite*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (July/August 2012): 46-47.

instituted. The warden may have reduced violence, but he also "created a diversion from the fight for sentencing reform."[287]

In this context, contributors to "Sounding Off" and "Angola Expressions" increasingly framed religion as an impediment to litigation and political organizing. In general, incarcerated writers urged their fellows to avoid activities that distracted from the legal work that would set them free. [288] Many singled out religion as an especially pernicious distraction. Only a few months after Cain arrived, Denny Brown declared, "all that Holy-roller-Holier-than-thou-Bible-thumping-praise the Lord Hallelujah bull is not changing the laws that are keeping us in here." In fact, he charged that the very people who came to worship with prisoners were part of the tough on crime "moral majority" who opposed criminal justice reform. These people would only think of prisoners as "slime that needs saving rather than releasing."[289]

However, while these criticisms pitted religion against litigation and political organizing, others used religious frameworks to challenge the moral rehabilitation regime. Some contributors asserted that the results of moral rehabilitation were actually promoting anti-Christian behavior among prisoners. Willie Campbell denounced those who claimed "snitching" was their Christian

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[287] Lane Nelson, "A history of penal reform in Angola—Part 2: The immovable object: With victories in short supply limitless determination is the only option," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 6 (November/December 2009): 29. Indeed, while religious organizations continued to advocate for sentencing reform after Cain's arrival, *The Angolite* reported on their involvement less frequently. See "Full Gospel," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 5 (September/October 1998): 61; Steven Quatrevingt, "St. John's," *The Angolite,* Vol. 24, No. 2 (March/April 1999): 54.

[288] See Kevin Christy, "Wake Up Brothers," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 4 (July/August 1995); Carey Robinson, "Pay Attention," *The Angolite,* Vol. 23, No. 1 (January/February 1998): 67; Lester Lewis, "Wake Up," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 6 (November/December 2006): 61; Warren Bernard, "Time to Wake Up," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 4 (July/August 2002): 63; Jeffrey Dale Hillburn, "On the Farm," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 5 (September/October 2002): 64; Chris Gage, "Why I Ride," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 3 (May/June 2006): 69; Lakyia Skinner, "Quiet Storm," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 4 (July/August 2002): 67; Willie Rogers, "U-Brother," *The Angolite,* Vol. 31, No. 6 (November/December 2006): 72; John H. Jones, "Reality First Hand," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 2 (March/April 2009): 77.

[289] Denny Brown, "Losing Focus," *The Angolite,* Vol. 20, No. 5 (September/October 1995): 73.

duty. Accusing these men of "hid[ing] behind Scripture," Campbell cited 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 and 2 Thessalonians 3:11 to prove their behavior was unbiblical.[290] Lester Lewis asserted that Cain's "new penal culture" encouraged men to spread rumors about one another rather than addressing grievances with one another directly. He questioned whether men who participated in this culture were truly Christians, or merely participating in religious activities for appearances' sake. Therefore, some writers charged that by encouraging them to "snitch" on one another, Warden Cain was actually guilty of promoting immoral, un-Christian behavior.

Similarly, some critics explicitly identified themselves as participants in Angola's religious revival even as they pushed for political change. Lester Lewis had "nothing at all against religion" and regularly attended religious events. "But…where are the lawyers and judges?" he asked. "The politicians for change?" The prison had become "well-tamed because of the Bible College," but that transformation did not result in anyone's release. Attending "a spirit-filled religious callout or class" did nothing to "open prison doors."[291] Michael Murray warned Christian visitors they should not deliver their message and then "expect [him] to convert and die." As a lifelong Christian himself, Murray believed visitors were supposed to do more than preach and pray. "Don't tell me…that you forgive me for my supposed sins and leave me to rot until death in this cesspool of society," he admonished. "Express your opinions to your local lawmakers…use your influence to wield a sword of truth that makes a difference to the world."[292] Aaron Jones held prisoners themselves responsible. "Whatever happened to working diligently on your case to get freedom?" he asked. "I'm here to tell you that you will not box or

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[290] Willie Campbell, "Brother's What?", *The Angolite,* Vol. 32, No. 3 (May/June 2007): 56.

[291] Lester Lewis, "You Gotta Be Kidding," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 1 (January/February 2010): 66.

[292] Michael Murray, "Embracing Suicide," *The Angolite,* Vol. 33, No. 6 (November/December 2008): 70.

preach your way out of prison."[293] Paul Ware contrasted those who utilized the law library with those who went to church. "These men are doing something," he insisted. But "the church-goers" acted as though they could "fast and pray us all out of bondage," buying into the fallacy of "faith without works."[294]

Indeed, some contributors to *The Angolite* actually linked their faith in God and their quest for release from Angola through the courts. Emanuel Randall looked forward to his "bigger reward" in heaven. But in the immediate future, he also planned to expose systemic injustices perpetrated against African Americans.[295] John Jones urged his fellow prisoners to "follow God and his teachings." But he also called on them to put their faith to practical use by working on their cases. "Faith without works is dead!" he declared. "So put in some work, and you will receive some greater gifts, as in regaining your life!" [296] Hope in God, then, did not necessarily entail accepting one's life sentence.[297] Indeed, several writers asserted that religion and legal work should be compatible, not contradictory. Sammy Crawford praised "Bible College graduates" and "inmate counsels" in the same breath, suggesting that one could pursue a

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[293] Aaron Jones, "To Whom It May Concern," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 2 (March/April 2010): 54.

[294] Paul Ware, "Rabbit with a Gun," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 3 (May/June 2010): 65.

[295] Emanuel Randall, "The Tears of Men," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 4 (July/August 2000): 62.

[296] John Jones, "50/50 or 20/20," *The Angolite,* Vol. 33, No. 6 (November/December 2008): 72.

[297] See also James Bradley, "Life," *The Angolite,* Vol. 26, No. 3 (June/July/August 2001): 82; Douglas Benson, "Wilderness Experience," *The Angolite,* Vol. 28, No. 2 (March/April 2003): 51; Torrell Brown, "How Long Time Takes," *The Angolite,* Vol. 36, No. 4 (July/August 2011): 86. Apart from their release from Angola, some used religious references to support broader communal goals beyond prison walls. Citing Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Nat Turner, and Harriet Tubman as exemplars, Joseph Brown, Jr. advocated for "self-love, self-respect, and self-reliance." He called for black people to obtain "control of our housin', schoolin', jobs situation" as well as "land [to] produc[e] what our people need to eat, live, and to succeed." They should "support black business and Africentric education" as well as "learn trade skills." Brown cited the Qur'an to support his injunctions: "Azzah says in S-16-A-125, invite all to the way of the Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious; for they Lord knoweth best who have strayed from his path and who receive guidance." Joseph Brown, Jr., "Self-Reliance," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 1 (January/February 2002): 60-61.

seminary degree while simultaneously working on one's legal case.[298] Norman Dozier expressed similar sentiments. He was appalled that "the average brother in here don't know the number on their writ." Like Jones, he prayed that men in Angola would "use faith and works, and give your life to God/And start working on your appeal."[299] Similarly, Frederick Jones framed religion as a means for prisoners to avoid "drugs, lust, violence, chaos, and self-pity" while they were "legally struggling for freedom."[300] Though she described herself as "equipped to carry the boulder" of her life sentences, Sherral Kahey wrote that she frequented both the church and the law library, worshiping and working on her case.[301] And while he denounced his fellows for measuring God's goodness by whether or not they were released, Eddie Viree articulated similar compatibility between Christianity and legal work. "Nothing is wrong with filing your appeal or post-conviction in an effort to get free," he wrote. "And nothing is more right for a Christian than being that change he desires to see."[302] Sometimes the very people who emphasized eternal salvation framed legal work as pious action.

Conclusion

Contributors to *The Angolite*, then, engaged in lively debates about rehabilitation, shaped by complex understandings of race and religion. Highlighting the ways the criminal justice system targeted African Americans, some framed incarceration as the result of systemic racism

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[298] Sammy Crawford, "The Walk," *The Angolite,* Vol. 35, No. 3 (May/June 2010): 70.

[299] Norman Dozier, "Wake Up!," *The Angolite,* Vol. 27, No. 3 (May/June 2002): 72.

[300] Frederick Jones, "Doors," *The Angolite,* Vol. 34, No. 2 (March/April 2009): 72.

[301] Sherral Kahey, "The Boulder," *The Angolite,* Vol. 25, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 2000): 71. Maureen Holderfield expressed respect for "inmate lawyers," admiring the fact that they had "a mission." See Importance of the law. Maureen Holderfield, "The Eleventh Con," *The Angolite,* Vol. 26, No. 3 (June/July/August 2001): 74.

[302] Eddie Viree, "Change," *The Angolite,* Vol. 37, No. 3 (May/June 2012): 96.

to the implied exclusion of individual guilt. Others accepted their own responsibility to rehabilitate, framing religious experience as the means through which they recognized and repented of their wrongdoing and changed their lives. Yet incarcerated writers often charged that society itself was in need of reform. “Law-abiding citizens” would be judged for perpetuating white supremacy and failing to live up to their own Christian principles. Their unwillingness to forgive distanced them from the example of Jesus, while the plight of incarcerated people highlighted their close connections with Christ. At the same time, contributors argued that rehabilitation should be objectively measured and rewarded by legal right, not by the unreliable mercy of prison officials, lawmakers, and members of the public. In fact, many framed legal training as the highest form of rehabilitation, characterizing reform as an adversarial challenge to white supremacy rather than deferential conformity to the norms of white society. Especially during Cain’s tenure, critics charged that religion encouraged individuals to find contentment in God to the extent that they did not pursue their freedom through the courts. Others suggested that religious devotion and litigation were commensurate. Examining your case for legal discrepancies and loopholes that might support a courtroom appeal and seeking forgiveness in church were compatible rehabilitative activities. In this way, Angola’s incarcerated writers suggested that rehabilitation could entail both repentance and transformation as well as seeking out the fault lines in the legal system that might lead to freedom regardless of one’s penitence. In contrast to the often simplistic models of rehabilitation presented in documentary features about Angola, *The Angolite* represented reform as a complex, highly contested process in which personal responsibility, legal opposition, and political critique often coexisted.

CHAPTER FOUR:

"THE ACTORS HAVE ALL THE POWER": RELIGION, RACE, AND REHABILITATION IN *THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST*

On a sunny summer afternoon, a middle-aged black man kneels alone in the dirt of Angola's multi-purpose arena with his hands lifted toward the sky. Beating his chest, the man tearfully recounts his role in his friend's arrest and execution. With sweat beading on his forehead, he cries out for forgiveness**.** As he makes his plea, hundreds of people sit on aluminum bleachers, watching. Many set aside their cokes and hot dogs and lean forward, giving the man their full attention. This is one of the most dramatic moments in *The Life of Jesus Christ,* a full-length passion play following Jesus' life from his birth through his ministry and culminating in his death and resurrection. The man in the arena is Levelle Tolliver, who plays Judas Iscariot. He is serving a life sentence at Angola. Tolliver's fellow cast members are also incarcerated, either at Angola or at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women (LCIW), also known as St. Gabriel. The cast is multiracial, but a majority of the actors are black, and most of the major characters are played by African Americans. Eight hundred people incarcerated at Angola and LCIW are in the audience. They are joined by about 150 outside visitors: family members and friends of the incarcerated; people attracted to Warden Burl Cain's message of moral rehabilitation (prison ministry volunteers, senior citizen church groups, children from area Christian elementary schools); and individuals simply curious to see a passion play performed by incarcerated people inside a maximum-security penal institution.

The arena in which *The Life of Jesus Christ* is performed is more frequently host to Angola's controversial rodeo. Warden Cain claims that the rodeo is an essential part of moral rehabilitation, providing funding for religious programming and chapel construction, serving as an incentive for good behavior, and providing people in prison an opportunity to demonstrate the reform they have undergone.[303] However, others charge that the rodeo presents participants as objects of ridicule, building on and reinforcing racial prejudice against Angola's black majority. Critics have dismissed Christian performances like *The Life of Jesus Christ* in similar terms, asserting that such events reinforce white audience members' sense of their own cultural superiority. Describing "The Power of Freedom," a 2005 gospel music revival at Angola, anthropologist Daniel Atkinson frames the event with a quote from Louisiana-born saxophonist Jules Broussard: "Nothin makes Southern White folks happier than to see N-----s singin' about Jesus. [Be]cause that means they got us under control!'" Atkinson affirms and extends Broussard's interpretation, drawing parallels between Angola's gospel revival and Fisk Jubilee Singers concerts, which were meant to assure white audiences that African Americans could "fit into the White world" after emancipation. For Atkinson, the event at Angola seeks to humanize people in prison, but does so by "affirming the status quo," by showing that incarcerated African Americans can adhere to white religious and social norms.[304] The gospel revival casts men at Angola not as animals deserving of humiliation and threats of violence, but as docile creatures who are human only by virtue of the fact that they adhere to the structures and limitations of white supremacy.

Can the same be said of *The Life of Jesus Christ*? Is Angola's passion play a

[303] Burl Cain, "After Midnight," *Louisiana Lockdown, Season 1.* Prod. Jess Beck, Lisa Bloch. Animal Planet. Bell Media Television. Ontario. July 20, 2012.

[304] Daniel Evan Atkinson, "Angola is America" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2011), 150.

representation of racial control, presented and received as evidence that incarcerated African Americans have submitted to the standards of white society? Yes and no. Cain emphasizes docile behavior during the performance as evidence of moral rehabilitation, and some audience members situate the play within the warden's efforts to control and morally instruct people in prison. Cain and incarcerated actors also describe *The Life of Jesus Christ* as a rehabilitative act and tangible evidence that reform has already taken place. Evoking the conventions of theater programming in prisons, incarcerated actors partially merge with their characters, transforming themselves through the process of performing particular roles. When he delivers his monologue, Tolliver/Judas is performing the first step of moral rehabilitation right before the audience's eyes: he is confessing and repenting of his crime. Spectators are then placed in the position of evaluating this transformation, judging the extent to which incarcerated people have conformed to society's norms and values.

Yet *The Life of Jesus Christ* also challenges this formula**.** Actors emphasize their own rehabilitation, but also frame themselves as privileged interpreters and purveyors of the story of Jesus. A good number of actors see the play as an evangelistic tool, creating some tension within the religiously diverse cast. But incarcerated director Gary Tyler, who describes himself as "spiritual but not religious," insists that religious difference must be subsumed to reach a common goal: conveying a broader social message. This message concerns forgiveness, but also racial injustice. *The Life of Jesus Christ* also reflects the roots of Angola's Drama Club in the southern manifestation of the Black Arts Movement by addressing issues of crime and incarceration from African American perspectives. Bobby Wallace's Jesus presents the audience with a black Christ and highlights the symbolic connections between crucifixion and capital punishment in African American communities. The majority-black cast challenges the idea that

rehabilitation can only occur under the punitive conditions of imprisonment. Black actors/characters in particular (especially Sandra Starr as Mary Magdalene and Levelle Tolliver as Judas) suggest that people can repent and reform without being socially ostracized or physically punished. And even minor characters like shepherds and crowds in a marketplace serve as a reminder of sources of unrest among marginalized black men and women. While actors in the play emphasize individual reform and tacitly assent to religious norms audiences find appealing, they also reinterpret the biblical story and reframe rehabilitation as part of a broader social critique of the racial prejudice and systemic inequalities endemic in the criminal justice system.

Background and context

Written by Scottish playwright Peter Hutley, *The Life of Jesus Christ* was introduced to Angola by Cathy Fontentot, then an assistant warden at Angola. Fontenot had seen the performance at the estate of Sir Jack Stewart-Clark during a visit to Scotland. The grounds of Stewart-Clark's castle reminded her of Angola's green fields, and in light of Warden Cain's emphasis on religious programming and unique public events, she believed the prison would be a perfect venue in which to mount a similar production. The warden called on Gary Tyler, the longtime president of Angola's Drama Club, to direct the play, with the help of Suzanne Lofthus, the head of the Scottish production company that staged the performance at Stewart-Clark's estate. Officials at Angola forged an agreement with the warden at LCIW to allow incarcerated women to play female characters in the production. Sets and costumes were all created on-site at either Angola or LCIW. Men constructed helmets and shields out of repurposed football gear and garbage cans in Angola's hobby shop; women sewed costumes in LCIW's garment factory. Actors prepared for their roles by researching biblical history and watching Jesus films,

including *Jesus of Nazareth* and *The Passion of the Christ.*[305]

Initially, *The Life of Jesus Christ* was to be a promenade play, in which audiences would follow actors throughout the prison grounds as they performed scenes in different locations around Angola. But ultimately the administration decided that such a setup would be too exhausting for spectators. Instead, audiences consisting of fellow incarcerated people and members of the public would view the play in Angola's multi-purpose arena. Ticket sales were administered through the Louisiana Prison Chapel Foundation; funds collected from the play are supposed to go to the Inmate Welfare Fund to pay for programming. The play has been performed three times: May 2012, March 2013, and November 2013. In addition to the several thousand visitors who have seen it in-person, the play has received broader national attention through coverage by media outlets like *The New York Times* and National Public Radio, as well as a feature documentary entitled, *Cast the First Stone.*[306]

The Life of Jesus Christ is reminiscent of both a baseball game and a church service. There are moments of intense action interspersed among long lulls. The smell of hot dogs and nachos wafts over the arena as audience members ferry back and forth between the concession stand and the bleachers. People snap action shots with their smart phones and cheer and shout in response to what is occurring in the arena. Yet audiences also react as though they are listening to good Sunday preaching. Women wave their hands in the air in praise. Men shout "Amen!" when Jesus recites a familiar verse. At times, it seems that the only reminder they are not in church is the constant beeping and buzzing of guards' walkie talkies. In short, *The Life of Jesus Christ* is both reverent and raucous.

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[305] Larry Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," *The Angolite*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 64.

[306] Robertson, "In Prison."; "On This Stage, Jesus is a Robber, The Devil's a Rapist." Narrated by John Burnett. Weekend Edition. *NPR*, June 23, 2012. http://www.npr.org/2012/06/23/155535620/on-this-stage-jesus-is-a-robber-the-devils-a-rapist.

The Life of Jesus Christ *as a showcase for moral rehabilitation*

But not too raucous. *The Life of Jesus Christ* is supposed to be, at least in part, an opportunity for the public to see that incarcerated people are no longer unruly and unpredictable. "Free people" are encouraged to attend the play, but the majority of the audience is comprised of people in prison. Outside visitors sit in the middle section of the bleachers, facing center stage. They are flanked by two sections of incarcerated people. Those facing stage left are trustys, those who have earned special privileges by avoiding disciplinary write-ups. Those facing stage right have not yet achieved trusty status. There is also a small contingent of women from LCIW in the audience; they usually sat in a clearly demarcated section among the non-incarcerated audience. In addition to the men and women acting in the play, the incarcerated people in the stands are being watched and evaluated by other spectators. Cain means for their conduct to reflect well upon his program of moral rehabilitation. "This *Life of Christ* thing," he said, "is really a test…It's…a test for the inmates to show their best side."[307] Cain revealed one sense of what he meant by "best side" during the intermission of one performance in November 2013. He gestured toward the two sections of incarcerated people and proudly declared, "This is moral rehabilitation. Sitting here respectful, quiet, watching *The Life of Christ*." He indicated that both their behavior and the content of the play were significant. Cain presented moral rehabilitation as successful and appealing because it produced individuals who were "quiet," or under control. His phrasing suggests that watching a specifically Christian play is in itself moral rehabilitation, or that "respectful" demeanor during such a performance is evidence of moral rehabilitation—possibly both. Either way, Cain connects the Christian subject material and subdued behavior.

[307] Burl Cain, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

Some conversations I had with audience members suggest that Christianity and control were foremost in their minds as well. A couple I met during intermission of the first performance in March 2013 is a good example. Traveling from Baton Rouge to see the play, Bill and Linda were sitting with about twenty other senior citizens from their Baptist church. They proudly informed me about the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's satellite campus inside Angola ("Isn't that something?" asked Linda) and credited Warden Cain with the transformation of the prison from a violent institution to a peaceful one. As proof, they offered a recent story of a man incarcerated at another Louisiana prison who stole an ambulance so that he could return to Angola's peace and security. "You'll always have a few who mess things up, though," lamented Bill. When I asked them why they had come to see the play, Linda laughed and said, "Well, because I'm a Christian." But then they further elaborated that they believed Cain had done a good job in both "giving prisoners spiritual upbringing" and keeping them "under control." They viewed their attendance at the play both as a Christian duty and as evidence of their support for sound penal policy. They explicitly linked "spiritual upbringing" and "control," suggesting that the performance displayed and reinforced the connections between the two.

It is true that Cain does not always explicitly emphasize control with regard to *The Life of Jesus Christ.* More often he emphasizes the play's representation of incarcerated individuals' ability to change, to internalize morality and behavior that "the public" will recognize as desirable. He insists that the performance "has reflected the morality of the inmates" and "the change in the prison" with regard to rehabilitation.[308] In his remarks to the cast before the first performance, Cain indicated how the play constituted a mechanism of such change: The public, he admits, often see people in prison as "animals." But the play proves otherwise. "Here you are, depicting Christ, and the life of Christ," he says. "So how can you be what you were, when

[308] Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 65.

you're really proving that you aren't?" [309] In short, a play about Christ is an especially effective medium to shift public perceptions because actors' performances directly show how they have been changed by the gospel. By definition, people in prison cannot be the "animals" they were if they are playing characters in a biblical story. They cannot depict Christ and be un-Christ-like. Moreover, Cain suggested that their performances should have a, "profound effect" on actors' lives off-stage, making them "better people" who can better influence others inside and outside the prison. In the end, he suggests, demonstrating moral rehabilitation is the key to changing public opinion about people in prison.

Acting out rehabilitation

Cain's remarks touch on a theme that actors themselves elaborate much more fully: the idea that actors experience rehabilitation by connecting with the roles they play in *The Life of Jesus Christ*. Practitioners and scholars of theater programs in prison often emphasize the therapeutic value of drama, characterizing participation in theatrical productions as a form of individual rehabilitation and preparation for reentry. The cultivation and expression of self through theater is a very prevalent theme in prison drama. In the process of acting, asserts theater scholar Jonathan Shailor, incarcerated people develop "a dual consciousness" in which "one is both oneself, and not oneself; a character, and not that character." This dual consciousness in turn allows "performers to become more self-aware, to expand their sense of what it means to be human, to develop empathy, and to exercise their moral imaginations."[310] Dramatic performance is a means of self-knowledge and a method of self-improvement.

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[309] Burl Cain, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[310] Jonathan Shailor, *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011), 22.

Media coverage of *The Life of Jesus Christ* highlighted this understanding of prison theater by focusing on actors' descriptions of the significant parallels between their own lives and their roles on stage. Just the titles are suggestive. Campbell Robertson of the New York Times titled his piece, "In Prison, Play With Trial at Its Heart Resonates." One of the sections in John Burnett's NPR report was titled: "Acting through Past Pain." Larry Sharp, a reporter for *The Angolite,* was perhaps the most pointed. The lede for one of his articles about the performance read: "Angola passion play ignites self-examination as actors take on the roles of biblical characters."[311] Men acting in the play described such self-examination in relation to their characters. Layla Roberts, who played the Inquisitor-Pharisee, asserted that like his character, he was once "misguided and misled."[312] Levelle Tolliver said he decided to play the role of Judas because he, too, was "a conniver," "a thief," "a killer," and "a liar."[313]

Women describe an even more intimate connection with their characters. Gail Willars, a reporter for LCIW's prison newsmagazine, the *Walk Talk,* wrote that actors' lines could just as well have been "words from a script of their own lives."[314] Sandra Starr, an African American woman who is serving a life sentence for murder at LCIW, plays a woman caught in adultery and brought before Jesus for judgment. This woman is identified as Mary Magdalene in the play's program. Starr draws parallels between Mary's life and her own. For her, learning about Mary in preparation for the play was, "like looking in a mirror, seeing my own self." Starr describes how

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[311] Larry Sharp: "'The Greatest Story Ever Told': Theater Inspired: Angola passion play ignites self-examination as actors take on the roles of biblical characters," *The Angolite,* Vol. 38, No. 6 (Nov/Dec), 16-23.

[312] Layla Roberts, "Audio Slideshow: Prisoners at Play in 'The Life of Jesus Christ," *National Public Radio,* June 23, 2013, http://www.npr.org/2012/06/23/155456533/audio-slideshow-prisoners-at-play-in-the-life-of-jesus-christ.

[313] Levelle Tolliver, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[314] Gail Willars, "Breaking New Ground: The Passion, the Play, the Women," *The Angolite,* Vol. 37, No. 3 (May/June 2012), 60.

a long history of abuse ultimately led her to shoot and kill her boyfriend, resulting in her incarceration. Having once felt starved of love herself, she imagines Mary to have been in a similar condition, prompting her (Mary) to seek affection in a manner for which she is condemned by society. But Mary, Starr asserts, finally found real love from Jesus. By playing Mary, she sought the same experience. "I was hoping through this with her," Starr concludes, "I could find that connection and make that change, in her, but for me. And I think I did."[315]

Starr's descriptions imply that, at least in the context of the play, she both is, and is not, Mary. For Starr, playing Mary means being "with her," and even "in her," but also "for me," for her own self. During the play, she is Mary, but also herself at the same time. As such, Starr is embodying Mary's life, but also reliving her own experiences, in hopes that she may change the course of her own life to mirror that of Mary. In the liminal space of the theater, the boundaries between Starr and Mary become blurred, but both women are always present. Yet what is ultimately important to Starr is the implication that playing Mary will have for her own life off stage. She anticipates that acting out Mary's experiences will help her find the same love and self-worth Mary found in Jesus. In turn, she hopes that her change will be communicated to audiences, showing them "that broken people can be made whole by faith and trust in God."[316]

Several women describe their roles as an opportunity to repent of and experience forgiveness for what they regard as sexual transgressions. Consuela Thomas believes that she was "predestined and ordained by God" to play the Samaritan woman at the well because she had also had extramarital relationships. "I felt as if I were walking in her shoes," Thomas said of

[315] Sandra Starr, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[316]Sandra Starr, quoted in Willars, "Breaking New Ground," 60.

the Samaritan woman, referring both to her sins and the joy she found in Jesus.[317] Cherie Perez also describes her role as the "she-devil" as an opportunity to overcome her past. Perez's performance is very sexually suggestive. During the scene in which Jesus is tempted for forty days and nights in the desert, Satan is portrayed by several actors, including Perez. She represents sexual temptation, attempting to entice Jesus by speaking in a throaty voice, swaying her hips, taking Jesus' hand, stroking his chest, and pressing herself against him while promising to show him "all the fun and splendor of the world." Jesus vehemently rebukes her, violently throwing up his arms and sending her and all the other devils scattering in an unmistakable rejection of their offers. Recalling conversations she had during rehearsals, Perez recounts how fellow actors concluded that her convincing performance suggested she had "a lot of practice" in the art of seduction. "Man, I do," she reflected. "And that's disgusting." [318] She regrets her past sexual exploits, attributing her behavior to "some sort of demonic force holding onto me."[319] For Perez, then, playing the "she-devil" involves re-creating her past actions in order to renounce them. "This play has changed my life," she concludes. "I'm not who I was when I first got here."[320]

For other women, their characters reminded them of guilt associated with their children. For Patricia Williams, a white woman with graying hair, playing Mary, the mother of Jesus, evoked the guilt she feels for disappointing her children. Williams no longer has contact with her children because they are "ashamed" of her crime (embezzlement). But the actors in the play

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[317] Consuela Thomas, quoted in Willars, "Breaking New Ground," 61.

[318] Perez, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[319] Perez, quoted in Willars, "Breaking New Ground," 60.

[320] Perez, quoted in Willars, "Breaking New Ground," 60.

"treat [her] like a mother" and give her "the opportunity to be a mom again."[321] Similarly, for Serey Kong, a Cambodian woman who served a fifteen year sentence at LCIW, playing the Virgin Mary meant confronting the memory of an abortion she underwent when she was fourteen years old. When the shepherds come to visit Mary, they sing the popular Christmas song, "Mary, Did You Know?" The line, "Did you know that your baby walked where angels walk?" always makes Kong break down in tears. "It was like God right there saying, 'I forgive you and your baby is safe,'" she says. "No matter what you feel, let it go, let it go.'"[322]

These women suggest that *The Life of Jesus Christ* functions as a means of personal transformation, specifically according to traditional gender norms. Thomas, Perez, Williams, and Kong renounce promiscuity in favor of sexual propriety. They embrace motherhood and reject abortion. They not only change, but change in ways commensurate with conservative values. They describe their rehabilitation according to values and standards audiences at Angola will recognize as desirable. Moreover, the very fact that women from LCIW were invited to perform with men from Angola suggests the ways the play simultaneously promotes gender conformity and sexual abstinence as evidence of rehabilitation. Before the 1960s, theater at Angola primarily consisted of minstrel shows, in which incarcerated men dressed like women and behaved in a seductive manner. After one of the performers, an African American man named James Bruce, killed a guard's wife, officials banned minstrel shows, assuming that Bruce's cross-dressing in this context was evidence of the psychotic mind that led him to murder the woman.[323]

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[321] Patricia Williams, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[322] Serey Kong, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[323] Ann Butler, *Angola: Louisiana State Penitentiary: A Half-Century of Rage and Reform* (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1990), 53.

Requesting that women from LCIW participate in *The Life of Jesus Christ* suggested a similar reluctance on the part of Cain's administration to have men play women's roles.

At the same time, officials feared that bringing together incarcerated men and women in the play might lead to sexual impropriety. Without meaningful prospects for release, men might take advantage of the opportunity to engage in sexual relationships with women, regardless of the consequences. Longtime Angola Drama Club member Bobby Wallace, who played the role of Jesus, recalls explaining to his fellow male cast mates that such a course of action was dangerous. "I really understand the differences between St. Gabriel and Angola," he says. "Their security is rough." While men might endure temporary punishment, women would "be locked up forever." Bobby was always on the lookout for men who might be putting women at risk. "He's going to make this thing fall," Bobby would tell director Gary Tyler of such individuals. "Get rid of him. [324] Pursuing sexual relationships would not only result in harsh punishment for women, but jeopardize the future of the play. *The Life of Jesus Christ* was supposed to serve as evidence of rehabilitation by demonstrating that men and women could perform together without succumbing to sexual temptation. As explained in chapter one, many of Angola's rehabilitation programs, such as the Returning Hearts Celebration and the Malachi Dads organization, explicitly promote nuclear families based on marriage between one man and one woman. Performing with women gave Angola's men the opportunity to pursue such heterosexual relationships, but because marriage was not an option, sexual abstinence became evidence of self-control and reform.

This reinforcement of traditional gender norms point to a common concern about theater productions in prison: in their emphasis on self-transformation, these performances reinforce rather than challenge the principles of the penal system and society at large. Michael Balfour

[324] Bobby Wallace, interview with the author, June 16, 2016.

suggests that prison officials only allow theater productions to take place inside their institutions to the extent that these performances are "useful" to them. Plays in prison thus run the risk of reinforcing the validity of prison discipline as a means to transform individuals.[325] Similarly, Laurence Tocci argues that public audiences validate prison theater only when incarcerated people perform plays that enjoy broad cultural acceptance. "When they decide to show some receptiveness to our cultural and social values," states Tocci, "then our attention tends to perk up. It suggests a desire to conform to the mainstream, showing sufficient contrition, and a willingness to repent and reform."[326] Both in terms of the subject material and actors' descriptions of their transformations, *The Life of Jesus Christ* confirms rather than challenges public audiences' expectations, values, and assumptions about the criminal justice system and the world. Spectators can recognize rehabilitation, but only on their own terms, not those of people in prison.

Yet even when actors from Angola and LCIW present their stories of individual reform and conformity to societal norms, audience members often understand incarcerated people's identities as monolithic and static. For example, Cynthia and Dennis, a white couple from Rayville, Louisiana whom I met at the refreshment stand during intermission, had never been to Angola before, but both were familiar with the state's criminal justice system. Cynthia works for a judge, and Dan oversees individuals on work release in his capacity as a school bus driver. "These aren't the hardened criminals," he assured me. "Just drug offenders. But they're just like

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[325] Michael Balfour, "Introduction," in *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, edited by Michael Balfour (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2004), 16. See also Caoimhe McAvinchey, *Theatre & Prison* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 77: "The pioneering, radical spirit which characterized early theatre in prison has, in some cases, been compromised by the impact of private management principles embraced by government which inform the discourse and practice of both the arts and the criminal justice system."

[326] Laurence Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage: Critical Case Studies in U.S. Prison Theatre Programs* (Youngstown, New York: Cambria Press, 2007), 5-6.

us; they're human." With regard to men imprisoned at Angola, Dennis insisted, "They've got some real talent; they just have to put that talent to good use." Still, he and Cynthia distinguished between people at Angola and those in other facilities for minor offenses. They planned to bring juveniles to Angola to see men working in the fields with hoes and rakes, to see how much worse their situations could be. They recognized people at Angola have "talent," but also emphasized their potential use as object lessons for others rather than highlighting their individual potential for rehabilitation.

The Life of Jesus Christ *as an evangelistic tool*

Apart from its implications for individual reform, *The Life of Jesus Christ* is a biblical drama, shaped by the conventions that emphasize the impact of dramatization on audiences as much as actors. In the late Middle Ages, religious leaders believed plays to be an especially effective means not only to convey the message of Christ, but to evoke an emotional response that would lead to repentance and salvation. Describing biblical drama during this period, V.A. Kolve explains the underlying assumption that, "by the experience of pity, grief, and love for Mary and Christ in their human roles—[audiences] could best come to an understanding of the Godhead, to a true awareness of the price of their salvation, and to an adequate sorrow for their own sin."[327] Having human beings embody biblical figures and imbue them with palpable emotions was supposed to inspire in spectators deeper devotion toward Jesus, Mary, and others in ways that simply reading or hearing about them could not.

Popular in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, passion plays have experienced a recent resurgence in the United States. Today, there are a number of popular passion plays that take place annually in the United States, primarily in the South and the

[327] Quoted in Martha Greene Eads, "Biblical Drama in Britain and North America," in *Western Drama through the Ages: A Student Reference Guide*, vol. 2, edited by Kimball King (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 315.

Midwest.[328] Now as then, actors are supposed to remind audiences that biblical figures were also human, making these figures more real, relatable, and sympathetic. A visitor to the now-defunct *Black Hills Passion Play* in Spearfish, South Dakota wrote of her experience: "The Bible was no longer words; it became flesh for me."[329] Recalling the opening verses of the Gospel of John, the visitor suggests passion plays evoke the incarnation itself, making the gospel stories more immediately present and thus more meaningful for those who see them. For those producing and experiencing such plays, being able to see actors depict biblical characters makes the story of Jesus more personal ("it became flesh *for me*") than reading the Bible or even listening to a sermon.

Both actors and audience members at *The Life of Jesus Christ* described similar experiences. Jeanne Ray, who is serving a fifteen year sentence for forgery and plays the innkeeper in Bethlehem, told Larry Sharp of *The Angolite* that the play not only impacted her as an actor, but as a spectator as well: "Before the play, the scriptures, the stories, were only that, stories," she says. "The truly horrifying abuse that Jesus suffered never came alive for me, until now."[330] Deserine Jordan of Belle Chasse, Louisiana marveled at actors' ability to make the story of Jesus into present reality. "The actors were amazing making it come to life," she said. Erin Foster of St. Francisville, Louisiana emphasized how actors' efforts evoked an emotional

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[328] These include *The Great Passion Play* in Eureka Springs, Arkansas; *Jesus of Nazareth* in Puyallup, Washington; *The Life of Christ Passion Play* in Pigeon Forge, Tennesee; *The Living Word* in Cambridge, Ohio; *The Louisiana Passion Play* in Ruston, Louisiana; *Worthy is the Lamb* in Swansboro, North Carolina; and *Two Thieves and a Savior* in Fort Mill, South Carolina; and *Jesus of Nazareth: The Passion Play* in Munster, Indiana. Attractions like The Holy Land Experience theme park in Orlando have also become popular destinations for many Christians in the U.S. See Joan R. Branham, "The Temple That Won't Quit: Constructing Sacred Space in Orlando's The Holy Land Experience Theme Park," *CrossCurrents* 59 (3): 358-382.

[329] "Passion for the Passion," *catholicdigest: faith and family living*, accessed October 16, 2014, http://www.catholicdigest.com/articles/travel/no_sub_ministry/2009/03-31/passion-for-the-passion

[330] Quoted in Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 62.

response in her. “Everyone was so passionate in their roles,” she said. “It brought me to tears a few times during certain acts.”[331]

As with all biblical drama, actors’ ability to emote and evoke emotional responses is crucial to the process of connecting with and transforming audiences at Angola’s *The Life of Jesus Christ*. “This unique thing about us,” director Gary Tyler says to his actors, “is that we are gifted with *emotions*, and we got to be able to utilize that to our advantage.”[332] Based on their shared ability to feel and express emotions, incarcerated actors in *The Life of Jesus Christ* can reach audiences. Coaching Bobby Wallace, in his role as Jesus, Tyler reminds his actor, “It's all about making the audience *feel* as though they're a part of this.”[333] Feelings and emotions are the means by which actors can impact their audiences. Levelle Tolliver makes a similar point. “The play is just the stories in the Bible,” he says, reiterating, “*The play is just the stories in the Bible*. But the actors have all the power.”[334] Without actors embodying the biblical characters, expressing their feelings through their spoken words and actions, the “stories in the Bible” would not have the same emotional impact on audiences.

But what is the goal of making this emotional connection? Many of the actors in the play are Christians themselves and see the performance as an opportunity to evangelize. Rontrell Wise, who plays the archangel Gabriel, prayed God would use him to spread the gospel to “all people throughout life, including his family and friends.[335] Cindy Anderson, serving a life

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[331] Quoted in Sharp, “A Passion for the Play,” 64.

[332] Quoted in Sharp, “A Passion for the Play,” 64.

[333] Gary Tyler, *Cast the First Stone,* directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[334] Quoted in Sharp, “A Passion for the Play,” 64. Emphasis mine.

[335] Quoted in “Audio Slideshow.”

sentence at LCIW, had both grand and humble expectations for the play as an opportunity for evangelistic outreach. “I feel that the whole world is going to hear about what happened at Angola,” she said. “My daddy is not saved and I told my mom, ‘If daddy gets saved, then the play did its job.”[336] Bobby Wallace, a graduate of Angola’s Bible College, said he took on the role of Jesus in part “because I was a born-again Christian.”[337] He insists that the play confronts onlookers with a choice to acknowledge or dismiss Christ’s sacrifice. "Everybody is not saved," he told *Cast the First Stone* filmmakers."[338]

Indeed, some of those involved with the play suggest the gospel message is especially meaningful when portrayed by incarcerated people. Analyzing the play for LCIW’s *Walk Talk*, Gail Willars wrote about the scene in which the apostle James asks Jesus why he chose his disciples and not others. “Why does Jesus consistently reveal himself to those of us deemed lost or unredeemable?” Willars reflected. “As it was then, the marginalized, the outcasts and the criminals became messengers of God.” Willars maintains that Jesus has always chosen people like those in prison to convey the message of salvation. It is those who are rejected by society who understand his story the best, to the point that Jesus does not reveal himself “to the rest of the world.” [339]

This interpretation is dramatized in the feeding of the five thousand. Shortly before intermission, Jesus feeds a large crowd, miraculously multiplying five loaves and two fish to feed the people gathered to hear his teachings. (This effect is made possible by a small hole in the ground through which dozens of loaves of bread are passed onstage. Actors crowd around

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[336] Quoted in Sharp, “A Passion for the Play,” 64.

[337] Quoted in Sharp, “A Passion for the Play,” 59.

[338] *Ibid.*

[339] Willars, “Breaking New Ground,” 61.

Jesus with baskets, blocking the audience's view and gathering the bread that comes up from below). With their baskets full of bread, Jesus' disciples and followers run into the metal bleachers where the audience is sitting, distributing chunks of bread to both incarcerated people and visitors. “The bread of life,” the actors murmur as they hand out the pieces of bread.

Audiences respond enthusiastically to this scene. I once saw a guard from Angola, a middle-aged African American woman, hold her bread in the air and exclaim, "Thank you, Jesus!" Similarly, Frances Morrison, a self-identified Baptist who brought her grandchildren to see the play told me this was her favorite part of the performance. "My grandkids were recipients of the bread,” she said, “and it made it so special to them. It brought the miracle to life.”[340] Many in the audience react as if the actors facilitated an actual miracle. “Free people” are no longer morally superior to people in prison. Rather, incarcerated people are purveyors of Christ’s miraculous power; the audience depends on them to receive a divine blessing from God.

However, despite this evangelistic bent, the play’s cast includes not only Christians, but people from a variety of other religious traditions. Serey Kong, who plays the Virgin Mary, is a Buddhist. Kong thinks “Jesus’ message is the bomb as far as not judging people.” But she is disillusioned by the fact that Christians do not live up to Jesus’ teachings.[341] Levelle Tolliver, who plays Judas, is a devout Muslim, as is Elton Thomas, who plays the Disciple Thomas. Gary Tyler indicates that he had to contend with differing interpretations of the performance material based on these varying religious points of view. He assured actors that the performance was not "an infringement of anyone's religion, philosophy, or political views," but instead an opportunity

[340] Frances Morrison, e-mail message to the author, June 14, 2012.

[341] Serey Kong, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

to demonstrate to a public audience that incarcerated people of different religious backgrounds could indeed work together.[342]

Tyler's core cast of actors revealed they subscribed to his vision by emphasizing what different religious traditions shared in common. Tolliver stated that as a Muslim he wanted to participate in the production to show that "there's no conflict in religion." He elaborated, "I feel like we're all seeking forgiveness and mercy from the same God." Similarly, Elton Thomas insisted that Jesus' message of peace reflects the mission of every prophet in history. Thomas also maintained that Muslims, "hold Jesus in a high esteem, as well as Mother Mary, as is stated in the Qu'ran."[343] And Wallace praised Tyler's ability to foster cooperation between adherents of different religions. "You have shown us," he said, "that it doesn't matter the diversity that's in here, we got this object to do. This one goal, no matter what you believe."[344] Though their religious differences are not eliminated by participating in the performance, actors express a willingness to submit to the common "goal" or "object" Tyler presents.

Rehabilitation as a social message

What precisely is this common goal? In some ways, Tyler's approach to the play sounds similar to that of Warden Cain. According to Tyler, many members of the Drama Club were initially skeptical about becoming involved with the production because it was introduced by prison officials. But he convinced his actors that the play would promote unity within the prison population and reach the public as well.[345] Like Cain, Tyler emphasizes the idea that the play is

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[342] Quoted in Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 63.

[343] Quoted in "Audio Slideshow."

[344] Bobby Wallace, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[345] Quoted in Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 55.

an opportunity for incarcerated individuals to demonstrate to a public audience how they have changed and become "better individuals" who live "a positive life." Similarly, he describes it as his responsibility to help each of his actors "become a better person." Though he does not consider himself a Christian, he believes that Jesus was a model of "greatness" and "what God wanted of his people" that people can follow to make themselves "better men."[346]

Tyler also believes that the play's message is about "forgiveness and redemption." But his emphasis here is not on what incarcerated people do to merit forgiveness. "When you find it in your heart to forgive someone," he says, "you can remember sometime in your life when you did something that you wanted to be forgiven for."[347] Here forgiveness and redemption are contingent upon audience members' recognition of their own failures, not those of people in prison. Incarcerated people are not proving that they are worthy of forgiveness because they are striving to be like people in the audience. Rather, people in the audience are compelled to offer forgiveness because they and their loved ones are already like people who are in prison: in need of forgiveness. Ultimately, Tyler maintains that the main purpose of the Drama Club "is to enlarge life in general by putting it on stage."[348] In *The Life of Jesus Christ,* he is "enlarging" audiences' sense of what rehabilitation means rather than simply affirming their standards.

Rehabilitation and the Black Arts Movement at Angola

In many ways, Tyler is a strange choice to direct a play about Jesus. "I am not a religious person," Tyler states bluntly. [349] "I was used to doing [plays] that are secular."[350] In fact, when

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[346] Gary Tyler, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[347] Quoted in Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 65.

[348] Quoted in Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 63.

[349] Quoted in Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 63.

the administration first introduced *The Life of Jesus Christ* to him, he was initially concerned that the prison population might object to him directing the play because he is "not a Christian."[351] Though he was raised in the church, he made a conscious choice to refrain from involvement in organized religion. Still, he considers himself to be spiritual, promoting "the sanctity of mankind."[352]

Tyler's relationship with the concept of rehabilitation is also complicated given the nature of his case. He has served almost forty years at Angola for a murder he has always maintained he did not commit. In 1974, a young white boy was shot and killed as a white mob attacked Tyler and other African American students seeking to integrate a white high school just outside of New Orleans. Because they had long considered him to be a black radical, local law enforcement almost immediately identified Tyler as the shooter.[353] Sentenced to death for first degree murder by an all-white jury, the seventeen year old Tyler became the youngest person on death row in America at that time.[354] From the beginning, civil rights activists framed his fate as a miscarriage

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[350] Quoted in Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 55.

[351] Gary Tyler, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[352] Gary Tyler, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[353] Joe Allen, "Free Gary Tyler: Thirty Years of Injustice," *Counterpunch*, August 26, 2006. http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/08/26/free-gary-tyler/. Accessed October 2, 2015.

[354] His trial was riddled with racial bias and too many inconsistencies to list briefly. Though they were unable to find a gun at the scene, police produced a .45 that was stolen from a firing range frequented by St. Charles Parish deputies. With African Americans systematically excluded during the selection process, Tyler was convicted by an all-white jury. His attorney was an expert in civil rather than criminal trials. Most witnesses have since recanted, claiming that they were coerced by police to implicate Tyler. See Bob Herbert's series on Gary Tyler in *The New York Times.* Bob Herbert, "A Death in Destrehan," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2007, A23; "Gary Tyler's Lost Decades," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2007, A21; 'They Beat Gary So Bad,' *The New York Times*, February 8, 2007, A21.

of justice, and Tyler himself characterized his case as a "symbol for many blacks" of systemic racial discrimination inherent in the criminal justice system.[355]

After he was resentenced to life in prison in the mid-1970s, the issue of rehabilitation became a repeated source of contention for Tyler. Governor Buddy Roemer denied him clemency in 1990, insisting that Tyler had not shown sufficient "evidence of a change of character," during his fifteen years of incarceration.[356] Tyler objected that rehabilitation was irrelevant for an innocent man like himself, but he also cited his involvement in Angola Drama Club as evidence of his positive activities.[357] When he appeared before the pardon board again in 1995, Tyler continued to maintain his innocence, but also presented evidence of his participation in vocational programming. His mother, Juanita, told the board, "Gary has really helped himself. He has changed a whole lot."[358] Former Angola warden John Whitley also spoke on Tyler's behalf, arguing that, Tyler had become "a responsible, focused and productive adult," as evidenced by his efforts to address juvenile delinquency and drug use through drama.[359] And Tyler himself describes his participation in Angola's hospice program in rehabilitative terms. "This program has reassured me of my humanity," he told a reporter in 2009.[360]

Nevertheless, there are indications that prison officials are still wary of Tyler's potential to subvert the premises of rehabilitation. When journalist Bob Herbert began a three part series

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[355] "Release Urged for Murder Convict," *The Press of Atlantic City*, December 15, 1989, A-3; Amnesty International, "The Case of Gary Tyler, Louisiana," 1995; Allen, "Free Gary Tyler."

[356] Ed Anderson, "Roemer: Tyler Not Ready for Freedom," *The Times-Picayune*, January 26, 1990, B-6.

[357] "The Long Road Back," *Angolite*, Jan/Feb 1990, 21-26.

[358] Katrice Franklin, "Board favors reducing man's life term," *The Advocate*, March 24, 1995, 1-A.

[359] Kim Cobb, "Celebrated prisoner again seeks freedom/Rights group backs Louisiana inmate," *Houston Chronicle*, April 12, 1995, 14.

[360] Rick Jervis, "Inmates help in prison hospices—Harsher sentencing laws contribute to the increase of senior populations that are ill, dying," *USA Today*, November 30, 2009, 3A.

on Tyler for the *New York Times* in 2007, Cain's administration refused to allow him interview Tyler personally, stating, "we're not interested in having our inmates speak to reporters to politicize their plight."[361] Indeed, Tyler's political outlook made him a natural fit for Angola's Drama Club. The organization was established during the height of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), driven by an internally diverse group of African American artists seeking to promote cultural nationalism and Black Power politics among black audiences through their poetry, plays, and other art forms. Figures like Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) highlighted the power of dramatic performance to enlighten and inspire ordinary African Americans to revolutionary action. In the 1960s, organizations like the Free Southern Theater (FST) and BLKARTSOUTH promoted professional theater and community drama workshops in southern cities like New Orleans, often with a heavy emphasis on black nationalism and pan-Africanism. [362] Baraka viewed incarcerated African Americans as quintessential representatives of the black underclass whose cultural material that could be transformed into "high" art within the Black Arts Movement. Black playwrights on both sides of prison walls engaged with one another, and Baraka himself had personal experiences with incarceration.[363]

Since the Club's inception in 1975, the influence of the Black Arts movement has been apparent. Given that African Americans incarcerated at Angola often came from cities like New Orleans, it is possible that some had been exposed to the FST and BLKARTSOUTH. Muslims

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[361] Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, interview with Bob Herbert, *Democracy Now!,* March 1, 2007. http://www.democracynow.org/2007/3/1/the_case_of_gary_tyler_despite.

[362] See Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement;* Cindy Rosenthal, "The Free Southern Theater: Overview," Annemarie Bean, "The Free Southern Theater: Mythology and Moving between Movements," and Jan Cohen-Cruz, "Comforting the Afflicted and Afflicting the Comfortable: The Legacy of the Free Southern Theater," in *Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theaters and Their Legacies,* edited by James M. Harding and Cindy Rosenthal (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 263-306.

[363] Lee Bernstein, *America is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 99-128.

have been prominent members of the organization.[364] Drama Club events have often featured performers of African art forms, such as Kumbuka Percussion, Inc., an African dance and drum troupe whose name means "remember" in Swahili. The group once dedicated a concert specifically to Gary Tyler, who in the 1980s adopted the name Nyeusi Kuumba, or "Black Creativity" in Swahili.[365] Topics have included: the impact of the Vietnam War on black veterans; Nelson Mandela; and the meeting between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.[366] In 1991, the organization produced, "Who's Killing the African American?" a play by Clifford Doleman about how drugs and violence are destroying black communities.[367]

But plays have also focused on traditional themes of repentance and redemption. In 1989, Drama Club members Michael Walden and Early Laverne performed Walden's play, "Ultimate Mercy," which portrayed frustrations with the pardon board, namely its failure to recognize and reward individuals' efforts toward rehabilitation.[368] In 1993, Percy Tate starred in a one-act play entitled, "Concerned Parent and Child Abuser," in which "a man jailed for severely beating his daughter on her birthday…relives the anger that drove him to the crime, and agonizes over what he may have done to the child he loves." The same year, the Drama Club put on a play called, "Between Friends -- A Day in Prison," in which a group of men in prison reflect on the

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[364] In addition to being selected as the first DJ for Angola's prisoner radio station (KLSP), Abdullah Rauf Amin was heavily involved in the Drama Club. "This is KLSP Radio," *The Angolite,* Vol. 11, No. 5 (Sep/Oct 1986), 23.

[365] Lisa Frazier, "Rhythm and Sunshine—Behind Bars," *Times-Picayune,* March 10, 1989, E1; Lisa Frazier, "Inmate Still Denies '74 Killing," *Times-Picayune,* March 12, 1989, B10.

[366] Floyd Webb, "Drama Club Features 'Kumbuka' Dancers," *The Angolite,* Vol. 13, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1988), 63; "Drama Club Banquet," *The Angolite,* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1990), 79.

[367] Laurie Smith Anderson, "Budding playwrights at Angola get tips from the pros," *The Advocate,* November 10, 1991, *1-L.*

[368] Floyd Webb, "Drama Club," *The Angolite*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (May/June 1989), 69-70; Frazier, "Rhythm and Sunshine—Behind Bars."

challenges mothers face when the fathers of their children are incarcerated.[369] Kim Cobb of the *Houston Chronicle* described the organization's repertoire best: "These are clear morality tales with heavy lessons in personal responsibility and the destructiveness of anger."[370] Similarly, Tyler and others described the drama club in rehabilitative terms. "A lot of good can come out of the place if people let it happen," Walden said. "I haven't expressed myself like this in a long time." Tyler insisted that theater helped men find their hidden talents and better themselves.[371] Mujahidin Abdul-Karim said he wanted to give back and change perceptions of Angola.[372] Angola's Drama Club, then, suggests that radical politics and rehabilitation are not mutually exclusive.

Beginning in the early 1990s, when Gary Tyler became president of the organization, the Drama Club also began performing in cooperation with religious groups inside and outside Angola. Once, actors dramatized the martyrdom of Stephen and Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. In 1990, the Drama Club put on a play to accompany a sermon entitled "The Black Prodigal Father," delivered by Pastor Pate of Church Point Ministries, an African American church in Baton Rouge. "Not only is the drama emphasized," Tyler said of the religious-themed play, "but the social message is of paramount importance."[373] Under Tyler's leadership, the Drama Club has continued to serve as a venue for political issues. For example, in 2002, the Drama Club invited the Angola Special Civics Project to discuss state criminal justice

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[369] Kim Cobb, "Louisiana inmates get their act together to make a point," *The Houston Chronicle*, March 14, 1993, 20.

[370] Cobb,"Louisiana inmates."

[371] Frazier, "Rhythm and Sunshine."

[372] Cobb, "Louisiana inmates."

[373] "Drama Club Banquet," *The Angolite*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 1990), 47.

policy, and in 2010, the organization performed a satirical sermon urging family members to address Louisiana's lengthy sentences with lawmakers.[374] Thus the Drama Club has a history of combining religious content and social messages with particular relevance to African Americans.

In this context, it is notable that some of the earliest biblical theater in the United States was closely tied to concerns at the time about race relations between blacks and whites. Theater historian Martha Greene Eads examines Ridgely Torrence's *Simon the Cyrenian* (1917) and Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* (1930), both "gospel dramatizations with all-black casts," created by white playwrights who, "challenged audiences to consider "whether Christianity really is a faith that transcends race."[375] In *Simon the Cyrenian,* Jesus is crucified offstage as the eponymous protagonist, an African, is beaten and abused, ultimately suggesting that injustices perpetrated against African Americans are equivalent to the persecution of Christ. In *The Green Pastures,* God, who is played by a black man, learns compassion and forgiveness through his son Jesus' crucifixion (which also occurs offstage).

When they were first performed, both *Simon the Cyrenian* and *The Green Pastures* were characterized as successful efforts to challenge racial prejudice through Bible-inspired stories. Since then, *The Green Pastures* in particular has been subject to increasing criticism for its romanticized, stereotypical depictions of African American religion. Curtis Evans, for example, argues that the play depicted black religious life as comical, naïve and characterized by a "carefree spirit about the hardships of this life." Such a portrayal allowed white audiences to indulge in their own conception of an "innocent past" rather than confronting the realities of

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[374] "Taking Responsibility," *The Angolite,* Vol. 26, No. 6 (Nov/Dec 2002), 48.

[375] Martha Greene Eads, "Biblical Drama in Britain and North America," in *Western Drama through the Ages: A Student Reference Guide,* vol. 2, edited by Kimball King (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 321.

racial discrimination and violence pervasive at the time.[376]

At the same time, there have been more well-received biblical plays with black casts. Langston Hughes' *Black Nativity* (1961) is often evaluated in a more favorable light, in large part because it is a depiction of black religious life created by an African American. Chronicling the birth of Jesus, *Black Nativity* also featured an all-black cast and marked the first appearance of gospel music on stage. The performance focuses in particular on the shepherds and wise men seeking the Christ child. *Black Nativity* represents an effort to foster a common understanding of black religious life through a biblical story that both black and white audiences could appreciate.[377] In short, biblical drama has afforded opportunities for black actors to challenge racial discrimination and injustice, but also perpetuated infantilizing racial stereotypes.

How does Angola's *The Life of Jesus Christ* fit into this context? What does this biblical drama with a majority-black cast reveal about race in America? In what ways does the play challenge audiences to confront endemic racism? I suggest that Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Judas, and the shepherds challenge spectators to reconsider punishment as a means of redemption, and to confront racism pervasive not only in the criminal justice system, but in American society as a whole.

Jesus: Black Christ and Condemned Man

Productions like *Simon the Cyrenian* cast black actors as characters associated with Christ. But in Angola's passion play, Jesus himself is a black man. As mentioned earlier, the role of Jesus is played by Bobby Wallace, an African American man in his middle forties who served

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[376] Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 219. For a discussion of the play's film version, see Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

[377] Leslie Sanders, *The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 112-114.

a 66 year sentence for armed robbery. (Wallace was recently paroled after almost twenty years at Angola). It is still unusual to cast a black man as Jesus. African American theologians and artists have promoted the idea of a black Christ since the mid-nineteenth century, and nonwhite images of Jesus have become increasingly commonplace since the 1960s. Yet Warner Sallman's blond-haired, blue-eyed *Head of Christ* remains the pervasive prototype for representations of Jesus in American culture.[378] Indeed, this image prevails at Angola itself. Incarcerated artists depicted a fair-skinned Jesus, albeit with dark hair, inside the penitentiary's Our Lady of Guadalupe chapel. Incarcerated artists commissioned to paint scenes from the life of Christ to display in Angola's Museum and Gift Shop also depicted him as white with long hair. Even in the play itself, images of a white Christ compete with Bobby Wallace's embodiment of Jesus. In the final scene of the play, the ascension of Jesus is signified when Wallace climbs onto a stage near the arena entrance and raises his hands toward the sky. As he finishes delivering the Great Commission, a banner emblazoned with an image of Jesus and the words "Freedom in Christ!" is unfurled above his head. On this banner, Jesus is white, with flowing hair. Which is the real Jesus? The man with dark skin and Afro who has portrayed Jesus for the last three hours, or the representation on the banner?

Both onstage and off, many actors and audience members treat Wallace like he is the real Jesus. Wallace's sister attended performances proudly wearing a T-shirt that proclaimed in bright, airbrushed letters, "My brother is Jesus!" During one rehearsal, Cherie Perez became a little anxious when she was practicing the "she-devil's" attempts to seduce Wallace's character. "When I looked at him," she said, "I'm like, 'Oh my God, I'm touching Jesus, I'm going to hell.'

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[378] David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Edward Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

I thought I was going to hell!"[379] When he is teaching the crowds in the play, audience members often cry out, "Thank you, Jesus!" or "Yes, Lord!" in response to his words. When he performs miracles, "amens" and "hallelujahs" resound. During the resurrection scene, Wallace's Jesus walks through the stands where the audience is sitting on his way to the stage, and there are always a few who reach out to touch him in a reverential manner.

Wallace remembers that even outside the confines of the performance, he had to act like Jesus. He can tell a half-dozen stories in which people in the prison interpolated him as Jesus in a variety of contexts. In 2011, shortly before the play was supposed to open, the Mississippi River, which surrounds Angola on three sides, began to flood. All incarcerated people were required to build walls of sand bags to prevent the prison from being inundated. Because he had grown out his hair and beard for his role, Bobby was clearly recognizable as the man who was going to play Jesus. Several men mocked him, jeering, "Look, they've got Jesus in the field; they don't care nothing about Jesus." Wallace grew frustrated and was tempted to quit working. But he continued because, playing the role of Christ, he felt he had to hold himself to a higher standard. "I did not want to cause people to stumble," he remembers.[380] He even chose to stay in the fields when one of the guards gave him an opportunity to leave. "I'm with my people," he replied, and turned away. The other men in the fields rushed toward him, incredulous that he would choose to continue working in the sweltering heat. "Y'all are my people," Bobby reiterated. "You letting that Jesus role get to you," they told him. He insisted that though he wanted to leave, he felt compelled to suffer with them instead, as Jesus would have done.[381] Wallace does not state that

[379] Cherie Perez, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

[380] Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 59.

[381] Bobby Wallace, interview with the author, June 16, 2016.

he is Jesus. But he does suggest that people connected him so closely with the role that his actions, good or bad, had the potential to impact perceptions of the play and Christ himself. And his preparation for the role caused him to act in ways that he would not otherwise have done**.** For all intents and purposes, Jesus is this black man convicted of armed robbery and serving time at Angola. Angola's *Life of Jesus Christ*, then, implicitly participates in a long history of challenges to white supremacist images of Jesus.

Indeed, Bobby's experience playing the role reveals that Jesus' race is still relevant. "It does matter to people," he muses. "It matters to a lot of people." He recalls that people reacted to him in a variety of ways when he handed them flyers for the play at the rodeo. Some sneered when they realized he would be playing Jesus. "I encountered that a lot," he says. "It used to hurt my feelings." He started "stereotyping" people, avoiding those he thought would react negatively to him. Even when he was performing, Bobby could gauge audience members' reactions to him. "I know what's on *your* mind," he would think. "Racism, it exists." On the other hand, he remembers intentionally approaching an older African American woman to enjoy her reaction when she discovered he would portray Jesus. "Oh, I've got to come!," she exclaimed. "We've got a black Jesus; I got to come!" Bobby considers himself "mixed," both Mexican and African American, but this woman claimed him as a black Christ. He acknowledges that he would have attended the play for similar reasons. Though he insists that the color of Christ should not matter, he had only ever seen images of Jesus as a white man, and he would be eager to see how a black man would impact the performance. "I want to see just how far they're going take it," he explains. "I want to see just how much they're going to let you do."

Bobby's words indicate that a black actor playing Jesus is subversive in itself, but also has the potential to express a message that a white actor playing the role might not. Wallace's

portrayal of Jesus also fits within the lineage of African American theologians and artists who have depicted Black Christs and Christ figures to denounce racial injustice and violence. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and culminating in the black liberation theology of the 1960s, black theologians have argued that Jesus was a black revolutionary who identified with the suffering of African Americans by virtue of his own suffering on the cross. Black poets and authors have also drawn symbolic connections between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of African Americans. In W.E.B. Du Bois 1911 short story "Jesus Christ in Georgia," Jesus is an olive-skinned man with "close curls" who appears suddenly in the convict lease South. The story ends when a white mob lynches a black man, who has escaped from a chain gang; behind the man's writhing body, the white woman on whose account the man was lynched sees Christ hanging on a flaming cross. Countee Cullen claimed Jesus as the first in a long line of lynching victims, "extending down to me and mine," his cross "but the first leaf in a line/Of trees on which a Man should swing." And Langston Hughes famously proclaimed "Christ is a N-----," hanging, "On the cross of the South."[382]

More recently, black religious leaders and artists have highlighted parallels between crucifixion, lynching, and capital punishment, especially in light of the fact that the disproportionate majority of people on Death Row are black men. For example, Ernest Gaines' 1992 novel, *A Lesson before Dying,* casts Jefferson, a young black man wrongfully convicted and executed for murder, as a Christ figure put to death by white supremacists in the guise of impartial state officials. Around the same time, Reverend Jesse Jackson began referring to state-mandated executions as "legal lynching," a phrase that has entered the popular vernacular.[383]

[382] See James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 93-119.

[383] See Jesse Jackson, *Legal Lynching: Racism, Injustice, and the Death Penalty* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 1997).

Melynda Price's recent book on African Americans' understandings of the death penalty is entitled *At the Cross* and features an artistic rendering of a black man hanging on a cross with a crown of thorns.[384] And in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* James Cone argues that the disproportionate execution of people of color constitutes "legal lynching." "One can lynch a person without a rope or tree," he says.[385]

Bobby Wallace's portrayal of Christ suggests how African Americans now highlight resonances between crucifixion and the death penalty as their predecessors did with lynching. Wallace himself draws these connections. "First and foremost," Wallace maintains, "Jesus was a prisoner."[386] His close friend snitches on him. He is arrested in the middle of the night. He endures a swift sham trial. He is beaten and humiliated by authorities. He is sentenced to death amidst the cheers of a vengeful public. His fate is all too familiar to black men in the South, including Gary Tyler. In *Cast the First Stone,* filmmakers make these parallels clear by interspersing images of Jesus carrying the cross with images of Angola's lethal injection gurney, its body and arm restraints resembling the shape of the cross. Wallace's portrayal of Jesus highlights significant parallels between Christ's death on the cross at the hands of Roman authorities and the state-sanctioned execution African American men.

Wallace's performance prompts consideration of the racial disparities inherent in capital punishment. But his death on the cross also raises long-standing questions about African Americans and the concept of vicarious suffering. Martin Luther King, Jr., along with many other figures in the Civil Rights movement, characterized the suffering black people endured as

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[384] Melynda Price, *At the Cross: Race, Religion, and Citizenship in the Politics of the Death Penalty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[385] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* 163.

[386] Bobby Wallace, *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack. New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012.

redemptive, not only for themselves, but for "the soul of America." Critics worried that this formulation legitimized violence against African Americans. Womanist theologians like Delores Williams and Kelly Brown Douglas have charged that an emphasis on Christ's sacrifice justifies the suffering of black people, and black women in particular.[387] In American popular culture, the vicarious suffering of African Americans is embodied in the "magical Negro" character. From Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel to Michael Clarke Duncan's John Coffey in the film adaptation of Stephen King's *The Green Mile,* "magical Negroes" possess special spiritual insight and even magical powers that they use in service of white protagonists. However, they cannot use their gifts to benefit themselves personally. In fact, these figures usually perish by the story's end. In this way, African Americans are Christ-like beings, but only as vehicles for white salvation[388].

What kind of Christ does Wallace portray? Like most passion plays, Angola's *Life of Jesus Christ* does heavily emphasize Jesus' suffering. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the anguish Wallace's Jesus experiences is palpable. At times his upper body is bent toward the ground, indicating the crushing weight of his impending crucifixion. He repeatedly stretches his arms toward the sky, brow furrowed and eyes squeezed shut in anguish. He begins his prayer in soft tones, then crescendos to a shout when he cries out to God in anguish to "let this cup pass me by," jolting audience members awake. But finally his voice falls to almost a whisper as he concedes, "let your will be done." His emotional exhaustion by the end of his entreaty is apparent. Though he is calm, almost aloof, during his trial, his agony is evident when he is

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[387] Dolores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness; The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013); Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005).

[388] Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham, "The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film," *Journal of Black Studies,* Vol. 40, No. 2 (November 2009): 135-152.

beaten. Soldiers drag Jesus off stage, but the sound effects used to indicate that he is being flogged are particularly gruesome. Audiences hear the whip whistle through the air and land with a crack, and Wallace's Jesus lets out an excruciating cry with each blow. When Jesus comes back on stage, his back is crossed with bloody stripes. During one performance, an older white man next to me was so affected that he gasped aloud and crossed himself.

As Jesus carries his cross from stage right to stage left, the actors in the crowd throw real dirt and stones, many of which actually strike Wallace. He stumbles and drops the cross several times. During many performances, Wallace falls into the fence separating the rodeo arena from the spectators, clutching the bars to impact the audience as much possible. As with the flogging, sound effects make the process of Jesus being nailed to the cross particularly visceral. The soldier swings a mallet forcefully to nail Jesus to the cross, and with each blow, the flinty noise of metal mingles with Jesus' cries of agony. He nearly screams, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" There is almost a collective sigh of relief from the audience, when Jesus finally utters, "It is finished."

Wallace's Jesus, then, is inescapably a black body enduring extreme suffering for a redemptive purpose. But what is notable here is that this redemption is for a predominantly black cast. It is true that incarcerated people of all races act in the play. Most notably, Jesus' mother is played by a Cambodian woman (Serey Kong) and a white woman (Patricia Williams), suggesting that his racial identity is ambiguous. Still, most of the characters closely associated with Jesus are played by African American actors. All of those who prophesy about Jesus are African Americans, including the angel Gabriel (Rontrell Wise, Kadarious Lee, Demetricy Moore) Anna (Mary Bell, Marilyn Lively) and Simeon (Michael Porche), and John the Baptist (Earl Davis). All of Jesus' disciples are African American men (with the exception of Judas in

one performance). He most frequently interacts with black women (Sandra Starr's Mary Magdalene, Consuela Thomas' Samaritan woman). Starr's Mary is the first person to whom he appears after the resurrection. With the exception of the man from whom he casts out demons, all of the people on whom he performs healing miracles are black: the centurion, the woman afflicted with leprosy (Michelle Allen) a young crippled girl (Demetricy Moore). The man on the cross (Donald Cousan) whom Jesus promises to see in paradise is African American, as is the other man hanging beside him. There are white extras in the crowd, but most of the sustained interactions Jesus has with other people in the play are with African Americans. Again, this fact is made all the more noticeable by the fact that there are white actors in the play. In the context of the performance, Jesus is God in the image of African Americans, a representative of the suffering and redemption of black people in particular.

Moreover, most of the play focuses on Jesus' life and ministry rather than his crucifixion. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, a black Christ should not be characterized primarily by a particular "metaphysical nature" or physical appearance, but rather by specific actions on behalf of black people. A womanist conception of the black Christ, she maintains, "starts in history with Jesus' ministry as that is recorded in the Gospels" and offers an example to be imitated rather than merely admired.[389] *The Life of Jesus Christ* meets these parameters. Wallace's Jesus preaches a message that elevates those most marginalized by society, especially people in prison (e.g. "I've come to call sinners"). He heals and provides materially for the people who follow him. He humbles himself by washing his disciples' feet. And his ministry ultimately offers an opportunity to reconfigure relationships between crime, punishment, and rehabilitation.

[389] Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 110, 113.

Reimagining rehabilitation: Mary Magdalene

Bobby Wallace asserts that Jesus is significant to incarcerated people because Christ himself was a prisoner. But Jesus represents a specific subset of those behind bars: the innocent. Characters in *The Life of Jesus Christ* draw a distinction between Jesus and other incarcerated people. Most notably, one of the men crucified alongside Jesus rebukes his compatriot for mocking Jesus. He insists that Jesus' actions do not warrant the suffering theirs do. "Leave him alone," says the man. "Don't you fear God? He has done nothing wrong. *We deserve what's been done to us*, not him." Warden Cain reiterates Jesus' significance for the wrongfully convicted. "Jesus Christ was innocent," he says. "There are innocent people in this prison. Believe me."[390] This framing implies that perhaps those who do not claim to be innocent might "deserve what's been done" to them.

But Wallace's Jesus not only grants preference to African Americans; his ministry also reimagines the relationship between sin, punishment, and reform. Perhaps the most popular scene depicting Jesus' ministry is his initial interaction with Mary Magdalene (Sandra Starr). When audiences first encounter Mary Magdalene, Jesus is in the center of the rodeo arena, teaching a crowd of people. Most everyone onstage appears to be concentrating on him and his message. But the attention of the audience in the bleachers is directed toward an African American woman in a long, flowing, bright pink dress with bold jewelry that makes her stand out from the others in their muted-color, unornamented tunics and robes. She flirts brazenly with a soldier on the outskirts of the crowd, suggestively stroking his chest, whispering in his ear, and batting her eyes at him. Suddenly, a group of men seize her and roughly bind her hands together while she struggles against them. They throw her down before Jesus, where she weeps and lays

[390] Robertson, "In Prison."

her head on the ground. The men accuse the woman of adultery and demand that Jesus give a ruling as to what should be done with her. The crowd of men and women around him shout and jeer, picking up rocks to stone her. Jesus sits down and begins writing in the sand. Finally he replies: “If any one of you is without sin then let them be the first to throw a stone at her.” Though one man picks up a stone, the others hold him back. One by one, all her accusers slowly file away. Jesus turns to the woman, inquiring whether anyone has remained to mete out punishment against her. When she reveals no one has, Jesus replies, "Then neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

Though brief, this scene has proven to be one of the most influential in the play. It inspired the title of the documentary about the play (*Cast the First Stone*). During every performance, it has been a crowd favorite; audiences burst into applause and cheer as Jesus embraces the woman and tells her to “go and sin no more.” Georgia, an elderly black woman I interviewed during intermission at a March 2013 performance, singled this out as her favorite scene. “They had to think about how they had sinned too and couldn’t go through with the plan,” she said. Many members of the audience echoed her sympathy for Mary Magdalene. During the second performance in 2012, a female guard sitting behind me loudly voiced her disapproval when one of the Pharisees suggested that Mary should be stoned to death. Similarly, there was wild applause and cries of “Hallelujah!” when Jesus shamed the crowd and dismissed Mary without condemning her. For the audience, the power of this scene lies in the fact that Jesus not only forgives Mary, but reminds the crowds of their own sins, implicitly rebuking them for their hypocrisy.

Gail Willars, the reporter from LCIW, suggests this scene should lessen the public’s appetite for vengeance. “Can we, as a society, conceive the true meaning of mercy?” she asks in

response to Jesus' interaction with Mary Magdalene. "Are we, as a people, merciful? Or are we more like the crowd who shouts, 'Stone her!'"[391] Willars' rhetorical question implicitly shames those who call for harsh punishment. Similarly, Suzanne Lofthus, who flew in from Scotland to help direct the play, says that after discussions with incarcerated people involved in the production, she hopes that audience members might reflect on how this scene applies to their own relationship with people in prison.[392] It is tempting, she acknowledges, to view those acting in the play as "murderers" and "the lowest of the low," and therefore deserving of imprisonment. But Jesus' reaction to Mary Magdalene and the crowds eager to stone her remind everyone that "Jesus' teaching says I'm exactly the same as that person down there."[393] Lofthus directly challenges people watching the play to not only reevaluate their attitude toward people in prison, but also recognize their own guilt. Maintaining that all are sinners in the eyes of God, she implies that audience members should consider whether they are any less deserving of incarceration.

Jesus' interaction with Mary Magdalene raises the question of whether imprisonment is a necessary precursor to redemption. He grants forgiveness immediately, without requiring Mary to endure an extended period of contrition, or even to produce evidence of her repentance. Instead, as Willars notes in her article about the performance, Sandra Starr portrays Mary as a rapid convert who consistently follows Jesus as he conducts his ministry throughout the rest of the play.[394] Most importantly, Mary is the first to see Jesus after his resurrection, and the first to proclaim that he has been raised from the dead. She undergoes her transformation without external punishment or self-flagellation. Mary Magdalene, then, suggests that imprisonment is

[391] Willars, "Breaking New Ground," 61.

[392] Sharp, "A Passion for the Play," 64-65.

[393] Quote in Robertson, "In Prison," A18.

[394] Willars, "Breaking New Ground," 61.

not the only medium of transformation.

Starr's performance is all the more powerful because she represents individuals doubly disadvantaged in the American penal system: African American women. Historically, incarcerated women have been treated with even more contempt than their male counterparts. Because nineteenth century conceptions of femininity painted women as more morally inclined than men, women were often characterized as especially monstrous when they did commit crimes. This mindset means that women have often received longer sentences for lesser offenses than men.[395] African American women have been beset by both the disadvantages of their race and their gender. Today, black women constitute an even larger proportion of the female prison population than black men do of the male prison population. Perceived as both masculine and hypersexual, black women have been subject to harsher punishments than their white counterparts.[396] At Angola, which housed women until 1961, black women often worked in the fields with men, while white women performed less strenuous labor.

Starr's depiction of Mary Magdalene brings this history to the forefront. Her alleged crime in the play, adultery, reflects the hypersexuality historically attributed to African American women and the drastic punishments they have faced for offenses that go unpunished when committed by men. (As a formerly incarcerated man I interviewed pointed out to me, the Pharisees do not bring the man with whom she is supposed to have committed adultery before Jesus). Starr's own biography adds another layer of resonance. Like many women in prison, she has been convicted of killing a man who abused her; violence against women often passes

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[395] Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons, 1800-1935* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985).

[396] See Angela Davis, "Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex," *Color Lines* 1, no. 2 (1998): 11-13.

unnoticed and unpunished until women themselves act in ways that bring them under the purview of the criminal justice system.[397] Starr's intersectional identity makes it all the more notable that her character raises questions about the necessity of incarceration.

Reimagining rehabilitation: Judas

Popular representations like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *The DaVinci Code* have made Mary Magdalene the subject of controversy by depicting her as Jesus' sexual partner. But Starr's performance adheres more closely to medieval understandings of Mary as "a chaste, reformed sex offender whose turn to the sacred life made her one of the most holy and powerful of Christ's followers after his death."[398] Mary Magdalene's history makes it more likely that audiences will be willing to reconsider punishment as a necessary precursor of reform. But *The Life of Jesus Christ* also attempts to reimagine rehabilitation through the character of Judas, one of the most reviled figures in the biblical accounts. In the New Testament, Judas is an unambiguous villain condemned for betraying Jesus. Only in the gospel of Matthew does Judas return the money he received from the priests and repent of his actions. Subsequent artistic renderings expand on many of the motifs in the biblical stories. Judas is often visibly distinct from Jesus and his other disciples in terms of costume or physical appearance. Most filmmakers emphasize the bribe Judas receives from the priests. Few depict his repentance, but most portray his suicide. Ultimately, suggests religion scholar Richard Walsh, "isolation, alienation, and an ignoble death are the film Judases' just deserts."[399]

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[397] For media coverage, see Gloria Hillard, "Domestic Abuse Victims Get Chance At Freedom," NPR, *All Things Considered*, October 5, 2012. http://www.npr.org/2012/10/05/162169484/jailed-domestic-abuse-victims-get-chance-at-freedom.

[398] Bart Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 184. Ehrman refers specifically to Pope Gregory the Great's description of Mary in 591 CE, as well as to Italian author Jacobus de Voraigne's *The Golden Legend* (1260).

Yet directors have also framed Judas in a variety of complex ways. In fact, "Judas usually proves a more complicated and intriguing character than Jesus."[400] He has been the traditional antagonist, motivated by excessive greed and self-interest (*Jesus of Montreal*). He has been Jesus' sexual rival for the affections of Mary Magdalene (Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings*). Inspired by the DeQuincey theory, directors like Nicholas Ray have depicted Judas as a nationalist revolutionary who hands Jesus over to the authorities to goad him into violent resistance. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Judas is Jesus' tough-minded right-hand man who ensures that he will follow through with the crucifixion rather than succumbing to the weakness of the flesh. Judas has also been a naïve follower, duped into believing the religious leaders will accept Jesus as the messiah if he is brought to them (*The Greatest Story Ever Told*). And he has been a disillusioned and anxious disciple, giving Jesus up to the priests for fear that Jesus is carelessly putting himself and his followers in danger by allowing revolutionary appeal to go unchecked (*Jesus Christ Superstar*).[401] Walsh offers three categories into which these Judases fall: 1) the traditional, inhuman villain, 2) the "modern, subjective individual" whose motivations and emotions are foregrounded; and 3) "the Christ-figure Judas" whose prominence effectively supplants Jesus as the central sacrificial, redemptive character. But in all three cases, Judas is most often "a divine victim," his actions ultimately determined by God's will rather than his own.[402]

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[399] Richard Walsh, "The Gospel According to Judas: Myth and Parable," in *The Bible in Film—The Bible and Film*, edited by J. Cheryl Exum (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2006), 41.

[400] Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 255.

[401] Kim Paffenroth, "Film Depictions of Judas," *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (October 2001): 29.

[402] Walsh, "The Gospel According to Judas," 47-48.

In Angola's *The Life of Jesus Christ,* Judas is set apart from Jesus and his other disciples. He is dressed in a dark blue, almost black garment, identical to the ones the devils wear when they are tempting Jesus. In contrast, most of the other disciples are dressed in white or pastel colors. Indeed, Judas behaves suspiciously throughout the play. He often stands at the edges of the crowd assembled to hear Jesus speak. His facial expressions indicate concern with Jesus' words rather than joyful agreement. Here Judas is not a nationalist revolutionary or a naïve dupe. Greed frames his betrayal of Jesus, but his clearest motivations are doubt, disillusionment, and pride. Throughout the play, Judas is skeptical about Jesus' supernatural power. Before Jesus feeds the five thousand, Judas is the disciple who expresses incredulity at the idea that Jesus can provide for everyone present with just five loaves and two fish. When Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer, Judas voices doubts about making requests of God. "I pray and ask God for things," he says, "but nothing ever happens." As in the gospel of John, the woman anointing Jesus' feet with perfume is the event that precipitates Judas' betrayal. He rebukes the woman, insisting that the perfume could have been sold and the proceeds distributed among the poor. (Notably, the play gives no indication that Judas intended to steal the money, as John does). Immediately after Jesus chastises him for his treatment of the woman, Judas is approached by the priests. Their encounter reveals another of Judas' motivations: pride. When the priests ask him if Jesus is his master, Judas defiantly replies, "No one is my master but myself!" His actions are personal more than they are political. When the priests warn that Judas and Jesus' other disciples will have to answer to the Roman soldiers should Jesus gain too much power, Judas expresses only resignation. "What chance would we have against them?" the priests ask. "What chance does any of us have?" Judas replies dejectedly. Unlike his counterpart in *Jesus Christ Superstar,* this Judas is not motivated primarily by fear of Roman backlash, but rather by his own doubt.

Yet throughout the play, Judas appears conflicted and concerned rather than conniving. He never sneers at Jesus. And when the Pharisees approach him he is also reluctant to betray Jesus. At first, he responds scornfully, standing apart from them and recoiling from the touch of one Pharisee who attempts to place his hand on Judas' shoulder. The moment Judas hesitates before the bag of silver the Pharisees offer him is always the most memorable part of this scene. He draws out this moment, reaching for the bag, then drawing his hand away before finally snatching the silver and agreeing to betray Jesus. Many incarcerated audience members cry "No!" or "Don't do it!" in the seconds just before Judas grabs the money. These cries always have a somewhat mocking undertone, but Gail Willars suggests that Judas' situation is "all too familiar" for people in prison. His actions, she argues, "pierced the souls of every offender in the audience" as they "grieved for their own choices."[403]

Unlike many Jesus films, *The Life of Jesus Christ* emphasizes Judas' repentance. During Jesus' trial, Judas shouts out frantically to Jesus, "Save yourself!" When Jesus is taken away to be crucified, Judas runs up to the group of men, holding his head, weeping, and throws the bag of money at their feet, crying, "Take it! I don't want it! Take it back!" They refuse, saying Judas knew what he was doing. Judas insists, "I didn't know, I didn't…" He then sees Peter, runs to him, and clings desperately to him, crying that he tried to give back the money and did not really understand what he was doing. However, Peter violently shakes him off, indicating that he rejects Judas' explanation.

Judas is most definitely a divine victim in this case. One of the most gripping scenes of the play is when Judas cries out to Jesus in a riveting monologue, which is not in the original script. He comes to center stage, facing the crowd, with his head in his hands, shaking as he audibly weeps. Suddenly he bursts out, "Why me, Messiah?" stretching his hands toward the sky

[403] Willars, "Breaking New Ground," 61.

and crying out at the top of his lungs. His tone most closely parallels the musical number "Judas' Death" in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, combining grief, guilt, and defiance. When he shouts, "I am Judas Iscariot, and I am of this world!" he strikes a defiant posture, staring directly into the heavens with a furrowed brow, stiffly stretching out his arms perpendicular to his body, and pumping his arms in a staccato fashion to articulate each word. He laughs hysterically and stumbles about the stage when recalling how the crowd called for Barabbas instead of Jesus to be released. But when he delivers the line, "I understand that I too was chosen, but this burden is too much for me to bear," he slumps his shoulders and holds his head, shaking as he weeps to convey his grief and guilt.

Yet this Judas is as much a victim of his own mistakes as God's divine plan. After Judas accepts the bribe from the priests, Luke (the narrator) notes that Judas had "set something in motion that was now beyond his control." Luke's words suggest that Judas' acted of his own volition, but his actions resulted in consequences he never intended. Gary Tyler and Levelle Tolliver frame Judas in a similar fashion. Tyler recalls that at first, no one wanted to play the role of Judas. No one wanted to depict a man who is remembered as a traitor and the man responsible for the death of Jesus. During one rehearsal, director Gary Tyler asked all the actors what they thought of Judas. One responded that Judas was "a sell-out" and that his behavior was "unacceptable." When actors voiced objections like this, Tyler explained that Judas was "destined" to do what he did, but also that many of them were just like Judas: they had each committed a terrible act that they later deeply regretted. "And you don't wanna be judged by that very act, correct?" Tyler offered. It may have been this explanation that led Tolliver to play Judas. After accepting the role, Tolliver explained his understanding of Judas to other actors. "Personally," he said, "I think Judas did what he did to Jesus out of ignorance, but, once [Judas]

really realized who [Jesus] was, he went to try to give the thirty silver back.[404] To Tolliver, Judas is not a willful traitor, but a conflicted man like himself who made a mistake in a moment of anger and confusion.

In addition to reframing him as a confused and conflicted man, *The Life of Jesus Christ* also uses the character of Judas to explore complicated questions about associations between racial identity and sin. Unlike Jesus, who has always been played by Bobby Wallace, Judas has been played by two different actors: Levelle Tolliver, a black actor, and David Sonnier, a white actor. It is notable that audiences respond to Judas in similar ways, regardless of who plays him. During one of Tolliver's performances as Judas, a black woman sitting on the bleachers in front of me during the final show seemed rather unsympathetic to Judas. As he pleaded for mercy and openly wept, the woman scoffed, "He's been doing that the whole time." Despite the sympathetic portrayal, she could not shake the notion that Judas is the villain, and his repentance and grief are either disingenuous or insufficient. Reactions were similar when Sonnier played Judas. At the final performance in March 2013, a black man in one of the incarcerated sections shouted, "You're a sell out!" during a pause in Sonnier's monologue. Audiences are reluctant to see Judas as anyone other than the man who betrayed Jesus. But even when they see him as the most sinister of villains, the fact that he has been embodied by both an African American actor and a white actor subverts associations between blackness and sin. This kind of alternating casting of villains takes place throughout the play. The priests who push for Jesus to be crucified have been portrayed by both white and black men. Satan is always portrayed by multiple actors, including men and women of multiple races. (Most notably, before he played Judas, David

[404] *Cast the First Stone*, directed by Jonathan Stack (New York: Highest Common Denominator Media Group, LLC, 2012).

Sonnier gave a particularly convincing performance as the devil). Evil can be embodied by people of any race and gender, these casting choices imply.

Yet Sonnier and Tolliver's performances each have unique resonance. In fact, Sonnier's betrayal of Jesus appears more vivid by virtue of the fact that he is Jesus' only white disciple. It is a white man who turns out to be the ultimate traitor, who sends an innocent black man to his death. As delivered by Sonnier, Judas' monologue becomes an expression not simply of personal anguish, but of white guilt. A similar dynamic plays out in the casting of Barabbas, the man whom the crowds demand Pilate release instead of Jesus. A black man named Kevin Sandiago played Barabbas in May 2012; a white man, Timothy Guidry, played him in March 2013. Sandiago's Barabbas was exuberant, smiling and defiantly brandishing the ropes that once bound him before tossing them to the ground triumphantly and running away from the crowd that is calling for Jesus' execution. But Guidry's Barabbas was reluctant to be released. The guards had to shove him into the crowd before he would comply. Implying that Jesus is innocent and he is guilty, he throws down the ropes in protest and shouts his disapproval as the people call for Jesus' crucifixion. In reality and representation, a white man insists upon the justness of his own punishment while arguing that a black man is innocent.

Tolliver's Judas embodies a different message. Historically, Judas was always an implicitly racialized character. Historian Jeremy Cohen argues that "Judas Iscariot epitomizes the Jewish Christ killer," and "has come to embody so many of those hateful characteristics with which Jews have been stereotyped over time" (e.g. greed).[405] Indeed, in *King of Kings,* Cecil B. DeMille chose a Jewish actor, Joseph Schildkraut, to play Judas, viewing Schildkraut as the quintessential religious and ethnic "bad guy."[406] But Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ Superstar* is

[405] Cohen, *Christ Killers*, 257.

unique in that an African American man (Carl Anderson) plays the role of Judas. Anderson's Judas appears to reinforce racial stereotypes: he is a black villain betraying a white hero. But this Judas is also one of the few "Christ-figure" manifestations of the character. When Jesus is led away to be crucified, Judas sings, "God I'll never know/Why you chose me for your crime/For your foul bloody crime/You have murdered me!" The music crescendos and becomes chaotic, and Judas hastily hangs himself from a tree branch. Jaime Clark-Soles aptly asserts that this scene "sickeningly recalls the lynchings so strongly associated with the fight for civil rights in the US."[407] Yet Judas reappears in the film's final scene, wearing a sparkling white pantsuit and singing with a "heavenly chorus" to indicate his "resurrection." Anderson's Judas, then, appears as another manifestation of the interconnections between the cross and the lynching tree.

In this light, it is important to remember Levelle Tolliver's interpretation of his character. "I really do believe," he insists, "Judas was forgiven of his sins. I just don't believe Judas knew that he was forgiven." During the last performance of the play (November 2013), Tolliver enacted this belief on stage. In the first two runs of the play (May 2012 and March 2013), Judas' monologue ended with his implied suicide. He tentatively picked up a rope that had been dropped by another character during a previous scene, then grasped it firmly with a look of grim resolve and ran off stage. The audience was supposed to assume that he had gone to hang himself, as one biblical account describes Judas' fate. But in the November 2013 performance, there were two significant changes. First, about halfway through the monologue, Roman soldiers dragged Jesus out on stage and began to beat him right next to Judas. This seems to be something like a dream sequence, but Judas does pause and turn to Jesus, indicating that he is thinking of

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[406] Anton Karl Kozlovic, "The Deep Focus Typecasting of Joseph Schildkraut as Judas Figure in Four DeMille Films," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture,* Vol. 6 (Spring 2004).

[407] Jaime Clark-Soles, "*Jesus Christ Superstar*," in *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films,* edited by Adele Reinhartz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 142.

the torture Jesus is suffering. He then says, “You died for me, gave your life for me, that I may see the kingdom of heaven when I die,” a line that was not included in any previous performances. Shortly after this, he runs off stage, but in contrast to all earlier performances, he does not pick up a rope or any other weapon. This small shift subtly enacts Judas’ redemption rather than his condemnation. Judas not only repents, but he also receives forgiveness. He undergoes considerable emotional turmoil, but does not endure physical punishment for his role in Jesus’ death. Like Anderson’s version of the character, Tolliver’s Judas ultimately experiences redemption. But he does not have to undergo the torture of the lynching tree to do so, suggesting the ways Tolliver’s rendition reimagines both Judas and rehabilitation.

The shepherds and the crowds: political context and communal redemption

Both Mary Magdalene and Judas represent individuals who grapple with sin and reform. But *The Life of Jesus Christ* also presents scenes that suggest the importance of redemption as a communal experience. One of the most memorable scenes of the play occurs near the beginning, just after Jesus is born. Here an angel announces the birth of Jesus to a group of shepherds. Prior to the angel’s appearance, the shepherds warm themselves around a small fire near the front of the rodeo arena, close to the audience. Suddenly, one shepherd begins a bitter monologue about shepherds’ wretched circumstances, describing their lives as, “just one long, cold darkness.” Another interjects his hope for the messiah, but also catalogues the oppressors to which he and his people have been subject: Assyrians, Greeks, and finally, Romans. “We need a strong leader to be an independent nation again,” he concludes. Elaborating on this sentiment, the first shepherd declares, “We want a leader, like David, one who will unite us as in the days of Solomon, and make us one nation again, and *kill all these Romans*, and make us free with a life to look forward to!” The actor crescendos through this line, and each phrase is punctuated by the

other shepherds shouting “Yes!” in unison and pumping their staffs in the air. But immediately after this line is delivered, the angel appears to proclaim the birth of Jesus, and all the shepherds fall on their faces in reverence.

This scene recalls the Wakefield Second Shepherd’s play, a medieval “mystery play,” in which guilds performed plays from biblical passages that resonated with their particular trade. In the Second Shepherd’s play, the angel’s appearance to the shepherds is preceded by a longer, more farcical story line in which one of the shepherds steals a sheep and pretends it is his newborn child in an unsuccessful attempt to hide his theft from his fellow shepherds. Here, too, the shepherds grumble bitterly about the miserable conditions in which they live, but are distracted from their anger by the angel’s appearance. Similarly, the incarcerated actors playing shepherds in Angola’s *The Life of Jesus Christ* enact their own contemporary social conditions as well as those of the characters in the story. Reflecting the racial demographics of most prisons, the group of shepherds usually consists entirely of black men, and in more recent performances, black women as well. The actors’ description of their oppressors in their roles as Judean shepherds resonates with the discrimination and inequalities they have faced as both African Americans and incarcerated people. But what is most striking is the way that actors embody the shepherds in this scene. They fall down to their knees with their heads bowed in deference and submission when the angel appears. Yet for a significant portion of the scene, their bodily postures convey open defiance and intense anger. For a moment, these actors are able to physically express the frustration and rage of racial discrimination and incarceration. In many ways, this scene recalls a chant Gary Tyler leads for his actors during practices and before performances: “We are the willing, doing the impossible, for the ungrateful! We have done so much, with so little, for so long that we are now qualified to do anything with nothing!” The

enthusiasm with which actors recite these words mirrors the emphatic delivery of the shepherds' lines.

Moreover, in more recent performances, the shepherds indirectly implicated the audience in their suffering. Whenever a shepherd referred to "the Romans," he would deliberately point toward those of us sitting in the "free people" section. When the shepherd called for a leader to "kill all these Romans," he and his compatriots gestured with their arms and bodies toward us as well. Though the shepherds' anger is quelled by the appearance of the angel, this simple shift in body language conflated audience members with Romans, identifying both groups as oppressors who were worthy of potentially violent retaliation from the people they marginalized. This gesture is ambiguous, as the outside audience consists of white church groups, but also family members and friends of the incarcerated. The scene always provokes momentary anxiety amongst guards; a flurry of walkie talkie chatter always attends this scene. This moment in the play too closely resembles the prelude to their worst nightmare: a prison uprising.

A similar scene occurs while Jesus is teaching in a marketplace in Jerusalem, but this time, the group is multiracial and consists of both men and women. Luke the narrator sets the scene by revealing that during the time of Jesus' ministry, people in the city were full of hatred of the Romans and hope for the new messiah. The people in the marketplace begin discussing petty squabbles, but their complaints quickly escalate into more militant rhetoric. Referring to the messiah, one man says, "if he doesn't come soon, maybe we will do something about it ourselves." The crowds around him shout and cheer. At this point the Roman soldiers arrive on the scene to pacify the crowd. They demand the people disperse, asserting that they have no right to assemble. A man in the crowd responds, "You're scared of the truth." The soldiers forcefully push the people back with their shields. Again, officers' walkie talkie activity spikes at this

moment. But soon the Pharisees arrive to mediate between the soldiers and the people, urging the latter to go and purify themselves and go in peace. Jesus is notably absent during this scene, having slipped off stage before the altercation. He neither condones nor condemns the people on the verge of an uprising. But given that the Pharisees, the villains of the story, defuse the situation, the play seems to legitimate the people's anger.

In both of these instances, the focus shifts from individual redemption to communal liberation. In neither case is the people's anger and sense of injustice condemned. And correctional officers' reactions suggest that the parallels with reality are a little too close for comfort. It is hard to tell how audience members feel about these scenes. There are few visible or audible reactions at these points in the performance, and no one I have interviewed has even alluded to these scenes. Some do indicate that they take to heart the implied accusation of the shepherds. Anne Bucey, who attends an Episcopal Church in Baton Rouge, reflected upon the fact that people incarcerated at Angola are "mostly black and poor" and are likely in prison "because they lack the cultural and financial capital that other people in our country have."[408] Similarly, Cindy Dunlop, who flew from England to attend the performance, maintained that after seeing the play, she was more and more convinced "that if the attention given to locking these men up had been given to directing their lives at an early stage, they could have been productive members of society."[409] Some audience members, at least, read the play through a lens of institutional racism and systemic societal neglect. But it is difficult to determine the extent to which parallels between the political context of the characters in the play and Louisiana's incarcerated population resonate with audiences.

[408] Anne Bucey, e-mail message to the author, June 14, 2012.

[409] Cindy Dunlop, e-mail message to the author, June 14, 2012.

Conclusion

"Now you may go to your homes. But remember what you have seen and what you have heard. And may God be with you." These are the final lines of *The Life of Jesus Christ*, spoken by Luke, the gospel writer and narrator of the play. Luke releases the audience, but enjoins those who have seen the performance to *remember*, to keep in mind the play's message and impact. Neither Cain nor actors in the play can control what people will remember. There is no feedback, no question and answer session between actors and audience members. But people in the audience do have conversations with one another. As I walked out of the final performance in November 2013, an older African American man with greying hair walked in front of me with a group of younger children (whom I assumed might be his grandkids). He wore a suit jacket and a faded blue baseball cap whose adjustable strap read: "I 💙Jesus." To our right, armed guards led men in denim uniforms back to their camps after seeing the performance. The man waved to them, but then pointed at the men and said to the children, "See, that's what freedom really means. They're all lined up, about to get locked back up. Don't ever do anything that would bring you here." A teenage boy walking with him said, "And most of them are in here for life." "Yeah," the older man replied, "they won't never come back." "Life," said the boy, "that's a serious word." "I know that's right," the man affirmed, shaking his head meditatively as he exited the stadium to the parking lot.

The Life of Jesus Christ is a performance of moral rehabilitation, an attempt on the part of both Cain's administration and incarcerated actors to present people in prison conforming to prevailing religious values and social norms. But it is also a reinterpretation of the biblical story that privileges incarcerated people's perspectives on the life of Jesus, interrogates deeply ingrained racial prejudices, and confronts audiences with racial injustice inherent in the criminal

justice system. Rooted in the southern manifestation of the Black Arts Movement, the history of Angola's Drama Club and director Gary Tyler constitute a framework for interpreting the prison passion play's religious and political dimensions. Bobby Wallace's Jesus is a Black Christ who challenges white supremacist images of Jesus as well as racial disparities that define capital punishment in the U.S. The production uses a black woman (Sandra Starr's Mary Magdalene) to highlight society's hypocrisy in condemning prisoners, and reimagines rehabilitation outside the confines of punishment. As portrayed by Levelle Tolliver and David Sonnier, Judas alternately subverts associations between blackness and sin, expresses white guilt, and questions the relationship between black suffering and redemption. And minor characters like the shepherds and the crowds in the marketplace deliberately draw vivid parallels between the oppression faced by first century Jews and twenty first century African Americans. Audiences participate in this framework in various ways, expressing reverence for Wallace's Jesus, sympathy for Starr's Mary, and skepticism with regard to Tolliver and Sonnier's Judas. Individuals interpret prisoners' performances as proof of Cain's administrative control, effective object lessons for juveniles, but also as evidence of structural inequalities inherent in American prisons and society more broadly. But what happens when people leave the liminal space of the theater? How do they define rehabilitation, and to what end? In the final chapter, I will take up these questions in the context Warden Cain implies moral rehabilitation should culminate: the legislative arena.

CHAPTER FIVE:

"DON'T BE PILATE": REPRESENTING REHBILIATTION IN THE LEGISLTIVE ARENA

In the spring of 2016, state senator Danny Martiny introduced Senate Bill 424, which would extend parole eligibility to Louisiana's lifers. It had been over 25 years since the state legislature had considered such a possibility. SB 424 was premised on the notion that lifers should have the opportunity to present evidence of their rehabilitation to Louisiana's parole board, which would then determine whether or not they were worthy of release. When the senate's Judiciary B Committee met to debate the bill, formerly incarcerated people and the loved ones of people in prison assembled to voice their support. Some highlighted the fact that people sentenced to life without parole had long since rehabilitated themselves and were worthy of a second chance. One testimony, however, stood out for both its brevity and unique content. A white man in his fifties, David England identified himself as a volunteer with Kairos Prison Ministry, one of the most popular prison ministries at Angola. "Unlike many people who are here today," he told the committee, "I do not have a loved one in prison. But Jesus does. And my question is, if Jesus were here, what would he do? Gentlemen, Jesus is here. Thank you."

England did not know how right he was. Jesus was there—in the form of Bobby Wallace, who had been released on parole in 2014 after playing the title role in Angola's *The Life of Jesus Christ* play three times. Wallace appreciated England's testimony. Calling the ministry's retreat "a beautiful experience," he surmised that England's involvement with Kairos motivated him to appear before the legislature. He had proven himself to be a true Christian, a true friend to those

behind bars. And his words made a difference. “I think his testimony is just as powerful as somebody who has somebody in prison,” Wallace said. As an “innocent” and “neutral” party, whose interests would seem to align with those of lawmakers, England showed that the love of Christ led him to side with people in prison and their families instead.

In one sense, England’s testimony represents the fruition of Warden Cain’s promise: if members of the public witnessed the effects of moral rehabilitation in venues like *The Life of Jesus Christ* play, they might urge lawmakers to reconsider Louisiana’s draconian sentencing laws. Having fellowshipped with incarcerated people in the context of one of Angola’s prison ministries, England felt compelled to testify in favor of legislation that could result in their release. However, it is notable that England only obliquely referenced the process of rehabilitation. He never directly stated that people in prison had to undergo any kind of transformation to become Jesus’ “loved ones.” Nor did he suggest Jesus loved only those who participated in prison ministries. Perhaps he highlighted his participation in Kairos to advocate specifically for the morally rehabilitated. However, England more clearly implied that Jesus was present in the Judiciary B conference room, waiting to see whether the senators would follow his example. England’s question, “What would Jesus do?” was clearly rhetorical. Because Jesus loved people in prison, he would vote to grant parole eligibility to lifers. England’s brief statement focused more on legislators’ Christian duty than on what incarcerated people did to merit release.

Angola-centered documentaries, *The Angolite*, and *The Life of Jesus Christ* present active negotiations of what rehabilitation means. Contributors to *The Angolite* and audiences for the films and the play bring diverse understandings of reform to the table. However, these liminal spaces often allow freer interpretations than does the legislative arena, in which political

considerations more directly constrain how actors define rehabilitation**.** Most notably, hearings at the state legislature often bring together people with significantly different understandings of the criminal justice system in ways that other intellectual and physical spaces do not. Sentencing reform advocates directly encounter the powerful opposition of crime victims and district attorneys, as well as legislators who fear appearing "soft on crime." These "stakeholders" often view rehabilitation as suspicious at best, or irrelevant at worst. The state legislature, then, is a particularly contentious environment in which rehabilitation is defined and debated. Advocates continually calculate: Who are the people best suited to represent rehabilitation as a justification for sentencing reform, and how should they do so? Who will legislators be most likely to listen to, and what are the frameworks that will be most likely to convince them?

This chapter focuses on two main legislative events: Senator Martiny's parole eligibility bill, SB 424, and the meetings of the Louisiana Justice Reinvestment Task Force. Ultimately, the Louisiana senate voted against SB 424. However, during that same session, state legislators voted to create a task force of lawmakers, judges, representatives for district attorneys and public defenders, as well as a leader of the "faith-based community" to investigate the "drivers" of Louisiana's high incarceration rates. With data compiled by the Pew Charitable Trusts, this task force was to determine not only how to reduce the state's prison population, but to reinvest any resulting savings in programs to reduce recidivism. In both contexts, advocates have had the opportunity to directly address legislators, defining rehabilitation in a variety of ways in an effort create support for sentencing reform.

Not all advocates agree with David England's approach**.** Some formerly incarcerated advocates do highlight their own rehabilitation, often defined as adherence to conservative Christian standards such as "traditional family values." Some frame rehabilitation as a process

recognized and rewarded through Christian mercy. Prison ministry volunteers relate their own stories of transformation, explaining how witnessing the rehabilitation taking place at Angola led them to reconsider their negative assumptions about people in prison. However, in the policy arena, even those who explicitly reference redemption often do so in the context of arguments based on statistical data and fiscal constraints. Many are convinced that only social scientific evidence of rehabilitation (defined in terms of the statistical unlikelihood that an individual will recidivate) combined with the state's budget woes will sway legislators in favor of sentencing reform. Victims' rights groups often express offense when formerly incarcerated people describe how their lives have changed, insisting that victims of crime (murder, in particular) do not have the same opportunity. Facts and figures, reform advocates hope, will move the debate to a different plane, overcoming the deadlock of competing claims about the possibility of redemption and the value of human life.

In the same vein, they hope that securing the support of white conservatives, both lawmakers and prison ministry volunteers, will help translate rehabilitation into "neutral" terms Louisiana's conservative legislature can accept. They hope that people not typically associated with criminal justice reform will serve as "objective" intermediaries, lending their arguments the air of disinterested legitimacy necessary to overcome the emotional testimony of aggrieved crime victims. In this light, advocates frame rehabilitation as a means to save money, providing the political "cover" legislators need to release certain lifers and reduce prison populations and expenditures. Lawmakers can cloak their support in the language of fiscal responsibility if not compassionate conservatism.

At the same time, reform advocates seek to rethink the victim/offender dichotomy that the rehabilitative model often assumes. Although most media portrayals depict the prototypical

crime victim as white and middle class, most actual crime victims are African Americans. In fact, many of those who have been convicted of crimes are also victims of crimes themselves. While retributive victims' rights organizations garner the most media attention, significant numbers of crime victims advocate for reform. Traditional understandings of rehabilitation assume a stark divide between victims and offenders, with the onus on the latter to demonstrate to the former that they have changed. Though independent parties evaluate incarcerated individuals' levels of rehabilitation, the pardon and parole process also puts victims in the position of overruling these assessments. However, some victims frame crime as evidence of society's failings, questioning the individualistic basis of rehabilitation and calling for a more restorative criminal justice system. And even as they reference rehabilitation, some formerly incarcerated advocates allude to Christian scriptures to both shift traditional understandings of victimhood and warn legislators of the consequences of their failure to show mercy.

The way that Louisiana's sentencing reform advocates navigate religious, scientific, and economic approaches to defining rehabilitation is nothing new. Historian Jennifer Graber reminds us that nineteenth century Protestant reformers themselves embraced social scientific theories about the causes of crime and methods of reform, abandoning specific theological language to secure the place of generalized religious morality in the disciplinary regime of penitentiaries.[410] Similarly, sentencing reform advocates often convert individual redemption stories into statistically verifiable risks legislators can plug into calculations about how to save taxpayer money. In other words, these advocates shift from one religious framework to another,

[410] Jennifer Graber, *The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons and Religion in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 146, 184.

from narratives of sin and salvation to conservative Christian support for low taxes and limited government.[411]

At the same time, such a transition from the language of biblical forgiveness and mercy to the rhetoric of risk assessments and budget cuts is particularly fraught for African Americans. In her account of African American race histories, Laurie Maffly-Kipp notes that African Americans expressed ambivalence about the shift from biblical understandings to pseudo-scientific explanations of racial difference. White supremacists had used the story of the biblical patriarch Noah's and his sons to assert that blackness was a curse, but "God could lift a curse or possibly reveal a just motivation for His prior actions." Fixed biological categories of race, on the other hand, excluded the possibility of "Christian notions of redemption, forgiveness, or spiritual equality," or "a miraculous overturning of social hierarchies."[412] In the same way, some charge that "scientific" measures of rehabilitation systematically disadvantage African Americans by using "objective" criteria more likely to characterize white than black incarcerated people.[413] Framing incarcerated African Americans as expenses to the state rather than redeemed human beings leaves open the possibility that state legislators could choose to cut rehabilitative programming to reduce government spending on prisons.[414] And relying on white advocates to

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[411] For explanation of evangelical support for low taxes and limited government, see Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011); Robert Wuthnow, *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[412] Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 50.

[413] Bernard Harcourt, "Risk as a proxy for race: The dangers of risk assessment," *Federal Sentencing Reporter*, 27, 237-43; Eric Silver and Lisa Miller, "A cautionary note on the use of actuarial risk assessment tools for social control," *Crime & Delinquency*, 48, 138-61; Sonja Starr, "Evidence-based sentencing and the scientific rationalization of discrimination," *Stanford Law Review*, 66, 803-72. For a rebuttal, see Jennifer Skeem and Christopher Lowenkamp, "Risk, Race, and Recidivism: Predictive Bias and Disparate Impact," *Criminology*, 54, 4 (November 2016): 680-712.

perform as "neutral" interpreters of rehabilitation reinforces racialized perceptions of crime that fueled "law and order" policies in the first place. In this light, it becomes necessary to subvert racialized dichotomies inherent in portrayals of the criminal justice system, reimagining the foundations of rehabilitation in transformative ways.

Rehabilitation as reverence for family values

One of the first to speak in favor of SB 424 at the Judiciary B hearing, Sibil "Fox Rich" Richardson implied rehabilitation should be a major impetus for sentencing reform. Her husband, Robert, is serving a 60 year sentence for armed robbery at Angola. Fox herself is formerly incarcerated, having served half of a seven year sentence at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women for the same conviction. In addition to raising six sons and running a successful auto dealership, she is a motivational speaker who frequently highlights the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on African American families like her own. SB 424 actually originated with a speech she gave at Angola's annual Lifers Banquet in late November 2015. Driving home to New Orleans after the banquet, Fox reached a breaking point. She was tired, she recalled, of "waiting on the cavalry to come and save us." She decided to set up a conference call with other women whose loved ones were incarcerated at Angola to discuss the possibility of introducing a bill at the upcoming legislative session to extend parole eligibility to all lifers.[415]

Initially, Fox's testimony challenged the basic premises of rehabilitation. She argued that a vindictive district attorney had "excessively sentenced" her husband. Robert had been sentenced to 60 years despite the fact that he had never before been convicted of a felony offense and had not physically harmed anyone. Misleading legal advice only compounded his plight.

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[414] See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012) and Marie Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[415] Fox Rich, interview with the author, June 18, 2016.

Describing how his parents' incarceration detrimentally impacted his life, Fox's son Lawrence reiterated her assertions. He attributed their predicament to the fact that, like many other poor families, they did not have the money to mount an effective defense. In these ways, Fox and her family framed themselves not as wrongdoers in need of reform, but as victims of the criminal justice system.

Nevertheless, Fox took great pains to show how she and her husband conformed to the rehabilitative ideal. She acknowledged that they had committed a crime. Yet she insisted that "even in the midst of our errors, even in the midst of our wrongdoing, we have been intent upon becoming productive members of our community." Robert, she revealed, had completed degrees in culinary arts and graphic arts and was currently completing his final year at Angola's Bible College. And from prison, he helped raise the couple's six boys, three of whom were present at the hearing. Fox listed her sons' impressive educational accomplishments as evidence of her and her husband's collective efforts to contribute to society. Lawrence, Justus, and Freedom also attested to their father's rehabilitation by describing his positive impact on their lives. Freedom remembered that even in prison, his father had always been an influential presence, teaching him to tie his shoes and play chess on visiting days. Yet, Fox concluded, despite **"**all of those rehabilitative efforts," the state's sentencing laws made it impossible for Robert to obtain parole consideration. And her story was not unique: she and Robert's trials resembled those of Louisiana's other 40,000 incarcerated families. "We are working to redeem ourselves," she insisted. "To simply be heard is all we're asking, to be heard that we have redeemed ourselves and are worthy to be returned to our state and to our homes and to our families." In short, she argued, rehabilitation should be the primary motivation for sentencing reform.

In her testimony, Fox measured her rehabilitation by a standard that should have been particularly appealing to Louisiana's conservative lawmakers: she was striving to maintain a nuclear family and adhere to traditional family values. Her motivational speeches often highlight the importance of the family unit. At a 2011 speaking engagement at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, Fox charged that African Americans no longer value family. Most black households, she lamented, are single-parent families headed by women. The problem, she argued, is that young black men and women pursue relationships with one another based on lust rather than desire for a long-term, stable partnership. But she is concerned with more than conformity to traditional gender roles and sexual relationships. Family, she insists again and again, is a source of power, providing intellectual, emotional, and financial strength. She says it is the responsibility of black people to assign value to black life and black families.[416]

However, Fox also highlights the external obstacles to black family cohesion. Historically, she insists, black families "didn't count." Marriages between slaves were not legally recognized and families could be torn asunder by the slave trade in an instant. "All of what happened in the past," she insists, "it just sits on different verbiage today. The actions are still the same."[417] Today, she argues, the prison system has the same effect on black families that slavery did. In a 2015 speech in Baton Rouge, Fox framed exorbitant prison phone rates as an impediment to family cohesion. In light of visitation limits, she said, phone calls were the only way her children could know their father. She estimated that she had spent $50,000 in phone bills throughout the course of her husband's incarceration. "It is not about me and him," Fox told us. "It's about our family. We are trying to keep the institution of the family together." At the

[416] Sibil Richardson, "The Institution of the Family," YouTube video, posted by MedgarEversCollege, January 31, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7RvKyaSyjg&t=1s.

[417] Fox Rich, interview with the author, June 18, 2016.

Judiciary B hearing for SB 424, Fox set this family values tone by noting that she and Robert had just celebrated their nineteenth wedding anniversary. Emphasizing the longevity of their union despite the challenges of incarceration, she presented her sons as living proof of their shared commitment to family. Fox frames her family values as clear evidence of her rehabilitation and compelling justification for criminal justice reform.

The language of family values has functioned as a rhetorical weapon for and against black women. Drawing on the work of liberal sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, conservative politicians have long demonized black women as lazy and sexually promiscuous "welfare queens" who disrupt the "natural" nuclear family structure.[418] As referred to in chapter one, this perceived dysfunction in black families, this dominance of black mothers and absence of fathers, often appears as one of the major root causes of crime in representations of moral rehabilitation at Angola. However, especially in the 1990s, conservative evangelicals increasingly viewed African American Christians as allies in the battle for family values, focusing in particular on shared beliefs that abortion and same-sex marriage are threats to the "traditional family."[419] Black women have been prominent among those intent upon "rebuilding and strengthening the family."[420] Yet when African Americans assented to family values, they have still often lacked the financial stability required to live up to the ideal of a single-earner household in which

[418] Julia S. Jordan Zachery, *Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[419] Annie Dillard, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Now?: Multicultural Conservatism in America* (New York: New York University Press*;* Angela K. Lewis, *Conservatism in the Black Community: To the Right and Misunderstood* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Leah Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican: Pragmatic Politics and the Pursuit of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). See also Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); and *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) on family structure and sexuality in black churches.

[420] Dillard, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Now?*, 21.

fathers could serve as breadwinners and mothers could stay home with their children.[421] Black women often express a deep commitment to the nuclear family, but face structural obstacles in realizing that ideal.

Fox's testimony reflected this conundrum. She framed prison as an environment in which both she and her husband had undergone considerable transformation, as evidenced by their lasting marriage and their sons' educational successes. However, she suggested that Robert's continued incarceration was now an impediment to their complete rehabilitation, their ability to function as a stable nuclear family. Reforms like SB 424, then, would allow her and her husband to fully conform to the rehabilitative ideal.

Justifying sentencing reform as a reward for rehabilitation based on family values has had mixed results for Fox. When she and her sons Freedom and Justus testified at a March 2015 meeting of the Public Service Commission, Fox insisted that high prison phone rates threatened "the institution of the family" by making it difficult for her sons to keep in contact with their father. She criticized the commissioners, who are responsible for regulating the state's utility rates, for their unwillingness to protect families like hers. Then-chairman Clyde Holloway, a Republican, sneered, asking why her husband was in prison. When she responded with his conviction, the commissioner shrugged his shoulders, concluding that Robert had relinquished "certain rights" when he went to prison. Because he was serving a sentence for armed robbery, he supposedly deserved to pay higher phone rates. However, Commissioner Foster Campbell, a Democrat, commended Fox for raising such "good boys," asserting that Holloway should be ashamed of his comments. Similarly, when Fox and her sons testified in favor of SB 424,

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[421] Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 18.

Judiciary B chairman Senator Gary Smith, a Democrat, congratulated her for making her family so successful. He even urged her to highlight the impact of incarceration on families more clearly.

Fox's family values testimonial finds sympathetic ears among Louisiana's liberals. If former Commissioner Holloway is any indication, the state's conservatives are less convinced by family-focused justifications for reform. However, some of Louisiana's Republicans, like Representative Rick Edmonds, have also begun to use the language of family values in the context of criminal justice reform. A white Republican representing District 66 in East Baton Rouge parish, Edmonds is also a graduate of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the vice president of the Louisiana Family Forum. Speaking in favor of a bill to "ban the box" requiring job applicants to indicate whether they have ever been convicted of a felony, the representative implicitly defined rehabilitation as the process of instilling family values. In his mind, he and his fellow legislators had to "restore family values" before they could "restore safety" and "restore productivity." In other words, incarcerated individuals would become law-abiding economic contributors if they learned how to "provide for their families" and "love their wives and children" while they were in prison. In at least some cases, then, Louisiana lawmakers from both sides of the political aisle not only assented to Fox's definition of rehabilitation as reverence for family values, but considered this form of rehabilitation to be a compelling foundation for criminal justice reform.

Reverend Gene Mills, a white minister with the Louisiana Family Forum, also framed family values as the foundation of rehabilitation during the first meeting of the Louisiana Reinvestment Task Force. He simultaneously affirmed Fox's definition of reform while reinforcing negative stereotypes about African Americans. Representing the faith-based

community on the Task Force, Mills cited data indicating family structure was a major influence on crime and recidivism.[422] In particular, he cited Larry Elder, a black conservative talk show host, who argues that the absence of black fathers poses a bigger threat to black communities than racism and that welfare programs discourage work and family cohesion among African Americans.[423] In Reverend Mills' mind, Elder highlights the importance of the faith community in the work of the Task Force. Churches and other religious organizations, he implied, were best equipped to inculcate family values, promoting a family structure that would prevent both crime and government dependency. Significant differences separate Fox from Reverend Mills. Both suggest that African Americans often lack family values. Yet while Mills identifies unstable family structure as a primary driver of crime, Fox asserts that the criminal justice system itself weakens black families, disproportionately and unfairly targeting African Americans for incarceration and imposing structural obstacles to family unity. The very system that is supposed to rehabilitate individuals by inculcating family values prevents those same individuals from putting those values into practice. Fox and Reverend Mills both present family values as evidence of rehabilitation, but also express distinct understandings of how such reform takes place. For now, however, their similarities converge for the strategic purpose of sentencing reform.

Recognizing rehabilitation as an act of mercy

Defining rehabilitation as adherence to family values, Fox and other advocates also framed rehabilitation as a process recognized through voluntary acts of mercy. Beginning with the women involved in her initial conference call, Fox created an organization called Coalition

[422] He cited a report produced by his own organization, the Louisiana Family Forum. See John R. Hill, "Louisiana Cultural Indicators Report," *Louisiana Family Forum*, 2015. http://www.lafamilyforum.org/lcir/.

[423] Larry Elder, "Black Fathers Matter," *Prager U*, https://www.prageru.com/courses/race-relations/black-fathers-matter.

for Mercy to create institutional support for the parole eligibility legislation they all hoped to pass. Fox explains that she thought of the name after a Catholic friend told her they were in the midst of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy that Pope Francis declared months before. She also cited the story of "the thief who asked for mercy on the cross," St. Dismas, whom Jesus forgave and promised to meet in heaven.[424] That was the mercy she and the other members of the Coalition were seeking, Fox said. Despite their mistakes, their loved ones wanted "gentle" correction that recognized their value to their family and society. "You're no less than human because you erred in your ways," she concluded. She also hoped that the term mercy would encourage sympathetic allies to act. Citing the examples of John Brown and Quakers who aided runaway slaves, Fox maintained that "there were those that were not of color" who risked their lives for the cause of abolition. "So how do you prick the spirit of those?" she asked herself. "What was it that ignited [them]?" In her mind, mercy was the answer. [425] Rehabilitation would only facilitate release if she and other advocates could appeal to legislators' conscience.

In his testimony before the Judiciary B committee, Norris Henderson also framed rehabilitation as a process recognized and rewarded at the mercy of those in power. Though he grew up in a Christian household, Norris became a Muslim several years after he arrived at Angola to serve a life sentence. In some ways, Norris believes he was destined to be a Muslim, as he already lived the disciplined lifestyle that would be required of him. In the early 1980s, Norris' Muslim friends at Angola invited him to observe Ramadan with them, and from that point forward, he became a practicing Muslim. "It stuck," he says. "In my quest for truth, this

[424] In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus is crucified alongside two men charged with theft, one of whom mocks Jesus, asking how someone claiming to be the Son of God could be executed. In the Gospel of Luke, the other man rebukes the first and asks Jesus to remember him when he received his kingdom. Jesus promises him that he will see him in paradise that very day. In Catholic tradition, this "good thief" is referred to as Saint Dismas, the patron saint of incarcerated people, among others. See Rosemary Guiley, "Dismas," *The Encyclopedia of Saints* (New York: Facts on File, Inc.), 91.

[425] Fox Rich, interview with the author, June 18, 2016.

religion became compatible with that truth I was seeking." Despite his dedication, former Angola Imam Fahmee Sabree suggests that people who do not know Norris would probably never know that he is a Muslim because he is far more likely to discuss criminal justice reform than quote the Qu'ran. Yet Sabree maintains that Norris is a better Muslim because he translates his principles into action in his everyday life.[426] Norris, too, emphasizes the importance of living out one's religious convictions. "It's not like, my way or the highway," he says. "You follow yours better than I follow mine, it makes you better than me, and vice versa."[427]

This principle seemed to guide Norris' testimony. He urged lawmakers to live up to their own religious principles rather than his. He testified that during his 27 years of incarceration at Angola, he had personally seen countless individuals "redeem themselves." He asked senators to "extend some mercy" by rewarding this redemption. He reminded senators that Pope Francis had declared it the year of mercy. On the day of the Judiciary B hearing, Norris had driven Ronnie Moore, a veteran of the Civil Rights movement who works with the Vincentian Reentry Organizing Project, to the legislature. On the way, the two discussed "how to better utilize the church." Moore suggested that criminal justice reform advocates should redouble their efforts to take advantage of the moral authority the year of mercy would lend them. "That stuck in my brain about the year of mercy," Norris recalled. "That's where that actually came from."[428] Norris told the senators that the Catholic Church and other religious groups were focusing on prisons with renewed fervor because, "there are people that are redeemable inside these environments." He had witnessed this reality firsthand during his time at Angola. Whether or not that rehabilitation was rewarded with release depended on the senators' level of mercy.

[426] Fahmee Sabree, interview with the author, June, 16, 2015.

[427] Norris Henderson, interview with the author, July 26, 2014.

[428] Norris Henderson, interview with the author, June 26, 2016.

Racialized rebuttal to rehabilitation: crime victims and district attorneys have their say

Senators' favorable reactions to testimonies like that of Fox Rich and her sons created an atmosphere of hope that senators would demonstrate their mercy by passing SB 424. But the mood in the room shifted when Senator Smith invited opponents of the bill to voice their concerns. Flanked by Natchitoches district attorney Van Kyzar, Nathan Albritton, a stocky, middle-aged white man, tearfully recalled how a fifteen year old boy, Jason Pilcher, had killed his wife and young son while Albritton was working on his farm. Albritton did not omit any gruesome details, insisting people like Pilcher were "cold-blooded killers" and "animals" who did not deserve a second chance. If such individuals were released, they might kill again. "This time it was my family," he warned the senators. "The next time it might be your family or someone else's family." Moreover, Albritton directly rebutted the narrative of rehabilitation and family values that Fox and her sons had presented, making specific reference to Freedom's testimony about how his father exerted positive influence, teaching him to tie his shoes and play chess on visiting days. "I heard the young man testify that he learned how to play chess in prison," Albritton remarked. "That's good. But my eleven year old boy will never learn to play chess. My wife will never see her grandkids." For him, the evidence of Robert's rehabilitation only reminded him that his wife and son would never have the same opportunity to enjoy the institution of the family.

This kind of victim opposition is not uncommon. Such opposition is often based not on skepticism of evidence of reform, but rather anger that such evidence exists at all. The very idea that the person who harmed them or killed their loved one has the opportunity to grow and change is offensive to many of the most vocal crime victims. Even those who strictly adhere to

standard rehabilitative models of confession, repentance, and self-transformation cannot overcome such opposition. Because the crime itself is immutable, the question of whether the person who committed has changed is largely irrelevant.

It is often district attorneys like Van Kyzar who invite crime victims like Nathan to offer emotional testimony in opposition to measures like SB 424. Indeed, advocates regard prosecutors as the most vociferous opponents of reform. The face of Louisiana's district attorneys is E. "Pete" Adams. The executive director of the Louisiana District Attorneys' Association (LDAA) since 1976, Adams often lobbies the state legislature on behalf of prosecutors. Bob Downing, a retired judge who has been heavily involved in both prison ministry and lifers' organizations at Angola for over thirty years, thinks that Adams is the key to successful reform. "You need somebody conservative to sit down with Pete Adams," he insists. "If Pete Adams is not behind it, it ain't gonna happen."[429] Downing believes God is answering his prayers, as Adams has shifted his stance on some issues in recent years.

Downing also notes Adams is a Christian, expecting many would find this fact surprising. Adams grew up Catholic, but became a self-described born again Christian over thirty years ago. "I have a personal relationship with Christ," he says, eschewing any particular denominational affiliation. In his estimation, his faith drives him to encourage the state's district attorneys to be fair to defendants and seek justice above all. Justice entails "retribution" that will satisfy victims such that they will "not take justice into their own hands." And in Adams' experience, victims demand that people convicted of crimes serve the entirety of their sentence regardless of their

[429] Bob Downing, interview with the author, June 3, 2015.

level of rehabilitation. He understands that sixty year sentences may seem excessive to some. "Well, from a victim's point of view," he counters, "sometimes sixty years is too little."[430]

At the same time, Adams also believes in the possibility of rehabilitation, asserting that "the corrections industry ought to be correcting." He favors "better utilization" of the pardon and parole process to reconsider individual cases. And he suggests that even crime victims might be amenable, if such release mechanisms accurately determined whether or not people constitute "a significantly reduced risk to public safety." In other words, Adams allows that people convicted of crimes can be rehabilitated to the extent that they no longer pose a threat to other people. The question is not whether rehabilitation is possible, but whether the process of pardon and parole can accurately assess it. [431]

Still, for Adams, rehabilitation is first and foremost a means to ensure that those already statutorily eligible for possible release are no longer a threat public safety, not the basis for reconsidering whether those currently barred from the parole process should have access to it. In fact, he suggested that the state should allocate its limited resources for rehabilitation to "those who are going to come back out." Moral rehabilitation of lifers at Angola may be "laudable" in the sense that "every human being deserves respect." But redemption stories emerging from the prison did not convince him that the state's sentencing laws should change. [432]

Adams' understanding of rehabilitation was evident in his testimony at the Judiciary B hearing on SB 424, he expressed sympathy for those whose loved ones were in prison. However, in his mind, the stories of victims far outnumbered those of family members of the incarcerated.

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[430] Pete Adams, interview with the author, February 25, 2016.

[431] Pete Adams, interview with the author, February 25, 2016.

[432] Pete Adams, interview with the author, February 25, 2016.

District attorneys had promised victims that they would never have to attend a parole hearing. "But if you do this," he maintained, victims would have to "relive their horrible worst day again," possibly multiple times. It would cause them emotional pain and undermine public confidence in the justice system. Here there was no room for reconsideration based on rehabilitation. In Adams' testimony, victims' demand for truth in sentencing outweighed appeals for mercy based on incarcerated individuals' redemption.

The fact that many of those pleading for merciful recognition of their rehabilitation were black and the district attorney-supported victims demanding retribution were white reflects the typical framework of the victims' rights movement. Before the1980s, victims were a relatively marginal presence in criminal justice policy.[433] The "law and order" era brought victims newfound prominence, bolstered by court decisions and laws that increased victim input in the legal process, as well as the introduction of televised trials that framed court proceedings as melodramas and victims as the characters with whom viewers could most readily sympathize.[434] Now, writes David Garland, victims are "routinely invoked" to justify "tough on crime" policies.[435] All victims, however, are not created equal. While African Americans are statistically more likely to be victims of crime, the victims' rights movement has long been dominated by whites in terms of both leadership and media representation. [436] "The paradigmatic victim of the

[433] David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 11.

[434] Elayne Rapping, "Television, Melodrama, and the Rise of the Victims' Rights Movement," *New York Law School Review* 43, No. 3-4 (1999): 665-689.

[435] Garland, *The Culture of Control*, 11.

[436] According to a 2007 Bureau of Justice Statistics Report, African Americans comprise thirteen percent of the population, but nearly half of all murder victims. See Erika Harrell, "Black Victims of Violent Crime," *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report*, August 7, 2007.

victims' rights movement is white," writes law professor Markus Dirk Dubber. "The paradigmatic *offender* of the victims' rights movement is black."[437]

These dynamics were at play during the SB 424 hearing. Almost immediately after Fox began testifying, Pete Adams, who had been sitting in the audience, left the room and came back with Nathan Albritton, who was already at the capitol to weigh in on legislators' efforts to address recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions about juvenile lifers. Adams knew Albritton's emotional testimony could effectively counter Fox's narrative of rehabilitation and family values. However, Jacqueline Germany, who also voiced opposition to SB 424, is actually the more typical victim of violent crime. A heavyset African American woman dressed in a floral print dress, Germany had no district attorney accompanying her as she spoke. And her testimony in opposition to the bill was conflicted. She came to the legislature that day in support of SB 424, favoring "a second chance" for incarcerated people like her own nephew. But when she read the bill, she changed her mind. Nearly twenty years ago, her 28 year-old son had been murdered. When she learned from her niece that parole eligibility might be extended to the man who had killed her son, Germany was horrified. She did express "empathy" and even "heartfelt warmth" for those who wanted to see their family members released from prison. "And I want to see my nephew get out," she insisted. But at least these families could still speak with and visit their incarcerated loved ones. She could no longer share any such moments with her son. Although "he was not perfect," she did not miss him any less. Like Albritton, she countered Fox's narrative of family-based rehabilitation by highlighting the fact that she could no longer share such a bond with her son.

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[437] Markus Dirk Dubber, *Victims in the War on Crime: The Use and Abuse of Victims' Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 177.

However, unlike Albritton, Germany did not enjoy the visible support of her district attorney. Crime victims are supposed to remind others that they, too, could endure similar losses (i.e., Nathan Albritton had warned senators that their families could be next). However, victims only evoke such sympathy if they resemble the majority of people in power. "Their suffering speaks to us because they are like us," Dubber writes of prototypical crime victims.[438] Albritton's testimony carried weight because he represented the average voter, not the average crime victim, as Germany did**.** Albritton and Germany's respective testimonies, then, highlight the highly racialized nature of the conflict between rehabilitation and retribution in the realm of criminal justice policymaking.

Converting rehabilitation into data, dollars and cents

Victim opposition of the kind Nathan Albritton represented leads Cammie Maturin to frame rehabilitation in the context of fiscal conservatism, the subject of a contractual agreement between taxpayers and the state. A white woman in her forties, Cammie was one of those who participated in Fox's conference call about parole eligibility legislation after the 2015 Angola Lifers' Banquet. Cammie's husband, Sirvoris Sutton, has been in Angola for over twenty five years, seeking to prove that he did not commit the murder of which he was convicted. Cammie met Sirvoris when he came to speak at the school where she was teaching in 2009. Sirvoris was initially hesitant to accept Cammie's offer to help him prove his innocence. Because theirs would be an interracial relationship (Sirvoris is black), he was concerned that they might encounter "a challenge" from the guards at Angola. "Remember, that's a slave plantation," Cammie says. "And they're still rednecks." But Sirvoris eventually relented, and he and Cammie have been together ever since.

[438] Dubber, *Victims in the War on Crime*,176.

Though she is motivated by the plight of her incarcerated husband, Cammie refrains from speaking about his case in the legislative arena. In her mind, advocates do themselves a disservice when they tell personal redemption stories, primarily because such stories offer victims an easy inroad to voice their opposition. “You can't ask for a second chance,” she maintains. “Because that's when you give the victim a leg to stand on… The first thing they can say is, ‘My family don't have a second chance.’” Sirvoris himself tells her that she represents him best when she addresses “cost, savings, and public safety.” [439] Cammie took this approach when she testified at the SB 424 hearing. Reading a prepared statement from her laptop, she presented SB 424 as a means to alleviate Louisiana’s financial crisis without sacrificing public safety. It cost the state $120 million, she informed the senators, to keep the state’s 5000 lifers, more than half of whom were first offenders, in prison. But if the parole board voted to release 1200 of the1800 individuals who would become eligible for release under SB 424 the state would save over $22 million. Moreover, those released would pay not only parole fees, but taxes, generating almost $400,000 in revenue for the state. “With the budget crisis this state faces,” Cammie warned, “we must find a way to cut costs every way we can, and this bill will be a way to cut costs and save the state money.” This money, she insisted, could be better spent on education and public health, which made communities safer than prisons. Moreover, many of those who would become eligible for parole would not be a threat to public safety, as studies indicated that the recidivism rate for people convicted of second degree murder was virtually “nonexistent.” In fact, they could serve as mentors to the state’s “troubled youth.” The people of Louisiana, she argued, deserved to know whether the rehabilitation programs funded by their tax dollars were actually effective.

[439] Cammie Maturin, interview with the author, June 18, 2016.

In her testimony, Cammie introduced the concept of rehabilitation only after thoroughly describing the state's budget crisis and emphasizing how much money Louisiana could save if the senators passed SB 424. Cammie asserted that rehabilitated lifers not only pose no threat to society, but could actually improve public safety through mentorship if they were released back into their own communities. Other supporters present at the hearing also suggested that legislators should not only honor this form of rehabilitation as a matter of principle, but as a guarantor of public safety. When Fox's son Freedom testified, Bobby Wallace and Norris Henderson, both of whom served time with his father, were seated at the table. They remembered seeing the young man as a boy in the visiting shed. Norris marveled at how well Fox had raised Freedom, but wondered if he could have accomplished even more if his father had been home. Bobby, who also watched Freedom grow up, emphasized the importance of strong male role models as well. Rehabilitated men from Angola, he argued, could redirect "misguided" youth. He admired mothers like Fox, but suggested their influence was not enough. "A mom can raise a young man to be a good person," Bobby concluded, "but only a man can raise a boy to be a man." In short, Norris and Bobby suggested that rehabilitated men should be released, not only because they deserved to return to their families, but because their rehabilitation could perform an ameliorative function in society. In this way, legislators could frame their support for SB 424 as a boon to public safety rather than a "soft on crime" concession to "criminals."

Cammie's decision to cite statistical evidence was also a common tactic. In this way, her testimony reflected the advice Debra Sheehan offered during a 2016 legislative workshop for the criminal justice reform organization CURE (Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants). A white woman in her early fifties with blonde hair and bright blue eyes, Debra is the vice president of CURE and has been active in the organization for almost twenty years. Her husband,

John, has been at Angola for almost thirty years. The two had been high school sweethearts and reconnected several years into his incarceration. Debra characterizes John as a poster-child for moral rehabilitation, citing his Bible College degree and service as a mentor in the automotive program. At the same time, she situates her husband's story in the context of broader statistical data, often implicitly referring to a Louisiana State University study on recidivism rates among people released after serving long (over twenty year) sentences.

According to the study, among those released through Louisiana's pardon process, no individuals convicted of second degree murder never committed another crime.[440] Researchers offered several explanations for these findings. During their decades of incarceration, lifers undergo physiological changes that make them less likely to commit crimes.[441] Environmental factors could also play a role: enduring years of prison discipline "pulls convicted offenders toward conformity."[442] The study sample consisted of individuals "who behave in prison and who accept the programming that is available in the prison system."[443] In other words, the recidivism data reflected the efficacy of the rehabilitative process. However, while acknowledging the importance of "individual characteristics," the authors of the study concluded that "macro factors" like age and sentence length should also play a role in evaluating whether it was safe to release people.[444] Rehabilitation, then, was not simply a subjectively evaluated process of personal redemption, but a state one reached after a certain age and number of years in

[440] Edward S. Shihadeh, Keith Nordyke, and Anthony Reed, "Recidivism in the State of Louisiana: An analysis of 3- and 5-year Recidivism Rates among Long-Serving Inmates," Working Paper Series: Crime and Policy Evaluation Research Group, 9.

[441] Shihadeh, et al, "Recidivism in the State of Louisiana," 11.

[442] *Ibid*, 12.

[443] *Ibid*, 11.

[444] *Ibid*, 10.

prison. These were the facts Debra insisted advocates had to communicate to legislators. "The people you speak to don't speak Angola," she warned those assembled at CURE's 2016 legislative workshop. "You have to convince them by statistics and information." Personal redemption stories would not have an impact unless advocates presented them in the context of objective data about risk and recidivism. They had to translate rehabilitation into a language lawmakers could use to justify criminal justice reform.

Similar assumptions undergirded Norris Henderson's testimony on behalf of SB 424. In their recidivism study, LSU researchers revealed that they drew their sample population from those who had benefited from Act 790, a law proposed by the Angola Special Civics Project (ASCP) and passed by the Louisiana legislature in 1990.[445] Based on research concluding that people in their forties become increasingly less likely to commit crimes, the ASCP proposed that lifers become parole eligible after serving twenty years and reaching the age of forty-five (advocates commonly refer to this formula using the shorthand "20/45"). In Act 790, state legislators agreed to these terms, but only for "practical lifers" serving "numbered sentences" (e.g. 200 years). People serving "natural life" would remain ineligible for parole unless their sentences had been converted to a fixed number of years.[446] Speaking before the Judiciary B Committee, Norris, the co-founder of the ASCP, recalled this history to voice his support for SB 424. Referring to Act 790 as the "genesis" for SB 424, he revealed that he and others members of the ASCP had based their bill on Tulane law professor Jonathan Turley's "criminal menopause," the idea that men in their mid-forties who have served twenty or more years in prison are unlikely to engage in further criminal activities. "I am the proof in the pudding," Norris told the

[445] *Ibid*, 3.

[446] Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, "Organizing for Freedom: The Angola Special Civics Project, 1987-1992," Master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2011: 61-62, 65.

senators. Released in 2003 after serving 27 years in prison, he had served as a community leader for the past thirteen years, working on behalf of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people at both the local and national levels. He was sometimes baffled by the accolades he had received for his advocacy. “I hear people talking about me,” he told the senators, “[and] I have to look over my shoulder to figure out if they're really talking about me.” However, his life after incarceration was only one many examples. “I left a lot of men behind who are smarter than me, better prepared to do things in life than I am,” he insisted. All of these individuals could further validate Turley’s thesis if they were released. In the end, senatorial mercy was the gateway to the parole process, but rehabilitation itself was an operation to be objectively evaluated by a professional board based on individuals’ accomplishments as well as factors like their age and number of years served.

In light of this statistical data, Norris urged lawmakers to be guided by biblical wisdom as well as mercy. The committee, he maintained, had to “play the role of Solomon” by mediating between those who supported SB 424 and those who opposed it. “How do we split this baby?,” he asked. “How do we give both opposing sides the thing that they need? I think this is the just position for this legislature to be at.” Later, Norris further explained the biblical story to which he was referring. Two women lay claim to a single child. Solomon rules that the baby should be cut in half. Horrified, one woman relinquishes her claim to the infant, preferring the child live with the other woman rather than die. The other woman, however, agrees to Solomon’s terms, showing her willingness to sacrifice the child’s life in the name of so-called fairness or justice. The women’s respective reactions reveal the child’s true mother (the woman who relinquished her claim to spare the child), leading Solomon to give her the baby. Solomon never intended to cut the child in half. He offered such a solution to reveal the child’s true mother. In the same

way, Norris' allusion to the Solomon story suggests that one side is more just than the other. His intent was not that lawmakers "split the baby in the sense of give them some and give us some." Instead, he wanted, "somebody to apply some wisdom in this situation and be like Solomon."[447] Presenting Turley's conclusions about the relationship between age, sentence length, and recidivism, Norris suggested legislators would be most like Solomon if they voted to extend parole eligibility to lifers. People who had served decades in prison would not only refrain from crime, but contribute to society upon their release. District attorneys and the victims they supported, then, were like the mother who asserted Solomon should divide the baby, advocating for policies that deprived communities of productive leaders like him out of a misplaced sense of justice. Legislators had to recognize that sentencing reform advocates were the real mothers, those who had the best interests of society as a whole at heart.

Other advocates asserted that prosecutors and their victim representatives were not only depriving society of human capital, but of actual financial resources. They suggested that the state's budget crisis was the means by which legislators could justify their support for such a politically risky measure. When Bobby Jindal was inaugurated in 2008, Louisiana had a $1 billion budget surplus. When he left office in 2016, the state had a $1.6 billion deficit. Having signed on to Grover Norquist's "Taxpayer Protection Pledge," Jindal enacted the most substantial tax cuts in Louisiana history. He slashed social services and engaged in risky financial maneuvers to offset the resulting plunge in tax revenues, creating a budget crisis that is still ongoing. Current Governor John Bel Edwards and the state senate have proposed budgets that preserve the current level of funding for the Department of Corrections (DOC). However,

[447] Norris Henderson, interview with the author, 6-26-2016.

the Louisiana House of Representatives has passed a budget that would result in cuts of over $4 million for DOC and over $1 million for Angola, specifically.[448]

Though they would likely result in decreased funding for rehabilitative programming, Louisiana's criminal justice reform advocates also hope such cuts will force legislators to consider their data-driven evidence pertaining to rehabilitation and recidivism rates.[449] Back in 2015, Debra suggested that the budget crisis would also make lawmakers more amenable to these arguments. "We're gonna be broke next year," she said. "We have an avenue with that. I've never been more encouraged."[450] Similarly, Cammie insists that monetary arguments are the only way to nullify crime victims' efforts to contrast incarcerated people's transformations with their own loved ones' missed opportunities. "You literally have to give it to them as, because the budget is what it is, we have got to do something," she concludes.[451] If they could understand rehabilitation as a means to save the state money, lawmakers would feel safer endorsing reforms like SB 424.

However, Cammie's SB 424 testimony framed rehabilitation not only as "cover" Louisiana's lawmakers could use to justify a politically risky decision, but as a public investment on which taxpayers could demand lawmakers show a return. "Our state pays millions of dollars on rehabilitation programs in these facilities to rehabilitate these offenders," she reminded the senators on the Judiciary B committee. "If we continue to lock them up and throw away the key, how will we know if these programs will ever work, or ever are productive?" The state owed

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[448] Julia O'Donoghue, "Louisiana Senate votes for budget in middle of what House, governor want," *Nola.com*, February 19, 2017, http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/02/louisiana_senate_budget_vote_1.html.

[449] The LSU recidivism study drew similar connections, suggesting policymakers should compare the high "cost and labor savings to house older inmates" with the low "potential danger to the public" such individuals pose. Shihadeh, et al, "Recidivism in the State of Louisiana," 10.

[450] Debra Sheehan, interview with the author, April 8, 2015.

[451] Cammie Maturin, interview with the author, June 18, 2016.

taxpayers proof that the rehabilitation programs they funded were actually effective. Taxpayers had a right to know that their money was being put to "productive" use. Only by providing those scientifically proven to be rehabilitated access to release mechanisms could lawmakers fulfill their obligation to the citizens who footed the bill for reform. As a contract between citizens and the state government, Cammie's definition of rehabilitation implicitly trumped the promises individual district attorneys made to crime victims. The money of the millions outweighed the personal grievances of the few.

Senator Danny Martiny, the sponsor of SB 424, also believes that invoking lawmakers' duty to taxpayers can help overcome concerns about victim opposition. Money, not mercy, will impel the state legislature to offer the rehabilitated the possibility of release. A conservative Republican, Martiny has a long history of supporting criminal justice reform. He confessed that he had contributed to the "lock them up and throw away the key" mentality in the 1990s.[452] But he was proud to say that he had spent the better part of the last decade "trying to undo it."[453] He has pursued reform in part, "because I thought it was right." Identifying himself as a "reasonable Catholic," Martiny keeps his religion at arm's length. "I'm not a public pray-er," he told me. "I don't wear my religion on my sleeve." Still, he maintains that being a Catholic makes him

[452] He has also authored some "tough on crime" bills more recently. One allowed prosecutors to bring first degree murder charges against defendants accused of killing police officers, firefighters, or crime lab employees. Another charged a fee for probationers for criminal and traffic violations to fund the controversial Crimestoppers organization. A 2003 bill raised the fee sheriffs receive for housing prisoners awaiting trial, increasing sheriffs' incentive to keep prison populations high (he has been the attorney for the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Department at least since the mid-1990s). That same year he authored several bills requiring district attorneys to notify victims of their rights. Ed Anderson and Steve Ritea, "House approves aggravated robbery bill: Lower penalties pass muster in 98-0 vote," *The Times-Picayune,* June 5, 2001; "Senate Oks bill on cabbie killings—it also Oks abortion, self-defense bills," *The Times-Picayune,* May 1, 2012; Wayne Knabb, "FBI director salutes local Crimestoppers: Program receives laurels from feds," *The Times-Picayune,* June 16, 2002, 1. Crimestoppers thanked him for helping pass the bill, HB 33, into law. The resulting fees raised about $300,000 for the organization. "Anti-crime group thanks supporters: Crimestoppers holds awards luncheon," *The Times-Picayune,* February 15, 2003, 8. See also Eva Jacob Barkoff, "Anti-crime group presents awards," *The Times-Picayune,* July 13, 2006, 99; Steve Cannizaro, "Council is against raising inmate fees," *The Times-Picayune,* April 2, 2003, 1; Naomi Guidry, "Rights bills in House: Bills deal with victims' rights and juvenile crime," *The American Press* (Lake Charles), April 13, 2003, 13.

[453] Senator Danny Martiny, "Justice Reinvestment Task Force," *Louisiana State Legislature* video, June 17, 2016.

reluctant to lock people up for good. And in 2010, he filed Senate Bill 494, which would have allowed parole eligibility for juvenile lifers after thirty years, at the request of the Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops (LCCB), who advocated for the bill based on Catholic social teaching about the dignity of human life and restorative justice.[454] Religious teachings about mercy, then, do inform his efforts to offer rehabilitated lifers access to release mechanisms**.**

Unfortunately, he does not think that his fellow lawmakers are similarly influenced. "I hate to say," he lamented, "mercy doesn't have a big place in the legislature."[455] When he began work to repeal mandatory minimums for certain nonviolent crimes over fifteen years ago, he emphasized money more than morals. "It's costing us too much to lock these people up and throw away the key," he told the Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate* in 2001.[456] "It's killing us. It's costing us a ton of money."[457] His own religious convictions notwithstanding, Senator Martiny suggests that it is only when something like moral rehabilitation has been converted into dollars and cents that legislators will feel compelled to recognize and act upon it accordingly.

Whiteness as neutrality and objectivity

Who Martiny is matters just as much as what he says to sentencing reform advocates. During CURE's 2015 legislative workshop, Linda Fjeldsjo, a longtime member, expressed gratitude for the support of the Louisiana legislature's Black Caucus. "But we also need some old white conservative legislators to listen," she insisted. A white woman in her late fifties, Linda coordinates prison ministry and transitional housing for Catholic Charities with the Diocese of

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[454] Katy Reckdahl, "For young people in prison for murder, there's little hope of one day earning freedom. But the winds of change may be blowing. Supreme Court may review life sentences," *The Times-Picayune,* December 2, 2011, A1. Danny Martiny, "Senate Judiciary B hearing," *Louisiana State Legislature* video, 55:00, May 12, 2010.

[455] Danny Martiny, interview with the author, June 28, 2016.

[456] "Prison policy needs change," *Saturday State Times/Morning Advocate,* June 16, 2001, 10BS.

[457] Danny Martiny, interview with the author, June 28, 2016.

Baton Rouge. Her work has led her to believe that African Americans' overrepresentation in Louisiana's prison system is the result of racial discrimination more than a reflection of actual crime rates. "I'm not so naïve to think that white people don't commit crimes," she says.[458] Though she clearly recognizes that black communities bear the brunt of the state's punitive policies, Linda asserts that lasting reform will require the support of white as well as African American legislators. At CURE's monthly meeting in June 2016, Linda praised Cammie for convincing Senator Martiny to sponsor SB 424. "You need white male conservative legislators to be smart on crime and not just punitive," she maintained.

Senator Martiny concurred with these assumptions. Because the overwhelming majority of people in prison were black, he suggested, white legislators perceived criminal justice reform as a race issue when African American legislators presented such legislation. It would take white conservatives like himself to frame the issue in terms of cost reduction and efficiency. Martiny also fit the profile of the old, white conservative some advocates saw as their ideal champion. With the support of people like him, proponents of criminal justice reform could shift perceptions of their cause. Reform could no longer be dismissed as a moral crusade of bleeding heart white liberals and or a politically expedient "race issue" for self-interested black Democrats. Old white conservatives would render sentencing reform objective, neutral, and free of emotion, allowing lifers access to a process through which their rehabilitation could be recognized and rewarded. Incarcerated people had to appear not first as redeemed individuals, but as costly dependents of the state, a financial burden to be reduced rather than rehabilitated humans deserving of release.

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[458] Linda Fjeldsjo, interview with the author, February 20, 2015.

Cammie also believes appeals to rehabilitation as a statistically verifiable process that enables lawmakers' fiscal obligations to taxpayers are powerful in and of themselves. However, she suggests that such are most effective when voiced by "neutral" parties: white people who do not have personal experience with incarceration. Indeed, invoking the word "taxpayer" implicitly evokes just such individuals. Just like the prototypical crime victim, the prototypical taxpayer is white and middle class. With programs that both included and excluded African Americans, the New Deal shaped discourses that juxtaposed poor blacks who benefited from government assistance with the white taxpayers who footed the bill. Whites supposedly earned their money through their own ingenuity and hard work; African Americans presumably relied on state relief because they lacked a strong work ethic.[459] In the present, such discourses rely in part on the patently erroneous assumption that African Americans comprise the majority of welfare recipients.[460] Now cloaked in colorblind rhetoric of "free-markets, merit…and individualism," the term "taxpayer" continues to evoke images of long-suffering middle-class whites surrendering their hard-earned pay for "undeserving" African Americans.[461]

Sentencing reform advocates seek to use these assumptions to their advantage. At CURE's 2016 legislative workshop, Cammie characterized herself and other members of the Coalition for Mercy as "taxpaying citizens." "I don't care what color you are," she insists. "If you pay taxes, and you vote, or you're registered to vote, they'll listen to you." However, Cammie

[459] Erin Baribeau, "Taxpayers and Homeowners, Forgotten Men, and Citizen-Workers: Theorizing Conservative Egalitarianism," PhD Diss. University of Michigan. 2014, 34. In the early 1990s, Mary and Thomas Edsall framed the racialized discourse of taxpayers as white backlash against the gains African Americans made through the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. However, just as historians like Heather Thompson do with mass incarceration, so scholars attribute the rise of "taxpayer" rhetoric to New Deal and Great Society ideals and policies. See Mary and Thomas Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992).

[460] Martin Gilens, "Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[461] Baribeau, "Taxpayers and Homeowners," 19.

also suggests that because Louisiana's prison population is majority-black, lawmakers assume African Americans are speaking on behalf of individuals they know personally and dismiss their arguments as self-interested and emotional. "Me on the other hand," Cammie says, "I got a teaching certificate, and I got a check stub to say that I'm a public school educator. I don't have a marriage certificate that says anything about me being married to an inmate. Can't prove that." [462] Though her partner is an incarcerated black man, Cammie recognizes that her racial identity affords her the benefit of appearing neutral and rational. She reinforces the idea that a taxpayer is white and devoid of personal interest in the prison system. "I'm not just a white woman," she concluded. "I am the face of reform." [463] Cammie seeks to affirm that black people whose loved ones are incarcerated are taxpayers like anyone else. Yet by touting the influence she can attain by disassociating herself from this interrelated racial identity and family affiliation, she simultaneously reinforces the idea that a taxpayer is white and middle class.

While she characterizes herself as a taxpayer to ensure her testimony carries weight, Cammie also recognizes that other representatives can appear to have an even stronger claim to objectivity and neutrality. At a recent meeting of her new organization, the HOPE (Helping Other People Evolve) Foundation, Cammie explained that a group of local businesspeople were currently working behind the scenes to convince legislators to vote for criminal justice reform during the 2017 legislative session. If this group could have more luck, she was happy to step aside and allow them to negotiate. Primary among these business leaders was G.G. Hargin, who had testified before Louisiana's Justice Reinvestment Task Force last November.

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[462] Cammie Maturin, interview with the author, June 18, 2016.

[463] Cammie Maturin, interview with the author, June 18, 2016.

Like David England, with whose testimony this chapter begins, Hargin represented one of those who had been changed by his experiences with prison ministry at Angola. Unlike England, Hargin described his transformation in detail in his testimony at the legislature. At the urging of his brother-in-law, an Episcopal bishop, Hargin had visited the prison for the first time several years ago. He was "stunned" by what he witnessed**.** Angola's Malachi Dads "personalized" and changed his "hardline law and order position." These men helped Hargin gain a "healthy understanding of rehabilitation, what it is, and how to recognize it." In his view, rehabilitation consists of moral, social, and economic components. Economically, incarcerated people have to learn skills that could help them financially sustain themselves and their families upon their release. Socially, they have to be prepared to face a society in which they will often be "ostracized because of their past offenses." And morally, they have to express "recognition [of their wrongdoing], remorsefulness, and repentance." Both qualitative and quantitative measures, Hargin insisted, would prove that men at Angola exhibited all three components of rehabilitation.

Such reformed men, he argued, should have an opportunity to be released. Hargin understood that law enforcement officials had a duty to "maintain a moral order in our society" by incarcerating those who violated that order. However, they also had a duty to complete "effective restoration" of these individuals back to society upon their successful rehabilitation. Hargin also understood that victims' forgiveness was often a precursor to such restoration. Yet he was frustrated that forgiveness was given such weight, as victims' views did not necessarily "reflect what an inmate has become."

Hargin thus espoused a conventional definition of rehabilitation as the process of repentance and transformation through which an individual can conform to existing social and economic realities. Like other sentencing reform advocates, he asserted that rehabilitation could

be objectively measured and evaluated. And like Cammie, he insisted the state was *obligated* to restore reformed individuals back to society. However, this obligation was more a fiscal imperative than a Christian duty. Moral rehabilitation was attractive because it could transform "criminals into contributors," or "a negative cash flow into a positive one." He assured the Task Force: "We can have both reductions in expenses and the constructive release of rehabilitated inmates." Like Cammie, Hargin framed himself as a "taxpaying citizen" who demanded better government use of his money. Like Martiny, Hargin embodied the ideal "neutral" proponent of criminal justice reform. A white man in his seventies, Hargin immediately flaunted his conservative bona fides. He introduced himself as "a lifelong Republican and a strong law and order advocate." And he closed out his testimony by emphasizing his neutrality, insisting that he had no "personal agenda" in appearing before the Task Force. Reinforcing perceptions of his objectivity, Hargin began and ended his testimony by advocating for sentencing reform in fiscal terms. Revealing that he had been confronted with similar choices as a bank executive, Hargin insisted that legislators faced "hard decisions" about how to reduce the state's $300 million budget deficit. Representatives from Pew, he asserted, had provided the members of the Task Force with hard data as to how they could save money by reducing the prison population. He urged the task force to "use these facts as a pathway to significantly reduce the expense load in the prison system." To do otherwise would be financially "unsustainable." While he implied that rehabilitated individuals should have the opportunity for release regardless of whether or not victims forgave them, Hargin also offered legislators the fiscal framework they needed to overcome victim opposition.

Fox Rich had hoped to "prick the spirit" of sympathetic whites by appealing to mercy. [464] People like David England and G.G. Hargin represented such whites, motivated by their Christian principles to appear before the legislature on behalf of lifers. England had used the same principles to urge legislators to pass sentencing reform. Because Jesus loved people in prison, and because Jesus was observing and judging senators' actions, the members of the Judiciary B committee should report SB 424 favorably. Like England, Hargin himself had been transformed by personal interactions with the morally rehabilitated men of Angola. Yet he appealed to the Task Force not by invoking the example of Christ's mercy, but by converting these personal redemption stories into potential cost savings for the state. And Hargin's status as not only a businessman, but "a lifelong Republican and a strong law and order advocate," lent his testimony further credibility. His own transformation could be a model for other white conservatives. Like Senator Martiny, his identity was just as important as the words he spoke.

Redefining victimhood, reimagining rehabilitation

Sentencing reform advocates characterize individuals like Hargin as objective arbiters whose mere presence can interpret rehabilitation in ways that legislators will understand. Representing the archetypal taxpayer, Hargin's definition of rehabilitation and his rationale for recognizing reform as the basis for release resonated. He was neither a victim nor a "perpetrator," but a neutral citizen whose perspective legislators could trust as being free of self-interest. However, formerly incarcerated advocates also insisted that they themselves transcended these dichotomies. At the November 2016 meeting of the Justice Reinvestment Task Force, Checo Yancy identified himself as a formerly incarcerated person, a taxpayer to whom legislators were answerable for their expenditure of public money, and an analog for Task Force members' own children. Sitting next to Norris, Checo revealed that the two of them represented

[464] Fox Rich, interview with the author, June 18, 2016.

47 years of firsthand experience with incarceration. “But now we’re out,” he told the Task Force, “and we’re doing well.” He and Norris were proof positive that people were not “learning to be better criminals” in prison, but rather pursuing “a new way of life.” He and Norris appeared as both advocates and exemplars of rehabilitation.

Implicitly affirming Hargin’s social component of rehabilitation, Checo also alluded to the fact that he and other formerly incarcerated people lived exemplary lives despite the obstacles they faced upon release. In many ways, he is uniquely positioned to represent this perspective. Checo is a poster child for moral rehabilitation. He served almost twenty years of a life sentence at Angola for kidnapping and attempting to force a teenage girl to perform oral sex. In conversations about his time in prison, he repeatedly confesses and repents of his crime. He insists that he was reformed the instant that he arrived at Angola. Remorseful and convinced that he needed God, he immediately joined Angola’s Baptist congregation and later became “heavily involved” with Kairos Prison Ministry. His transformation was so impressive that Warden Cain spoke on Checo’s behalf at his parole hearing. Similarly, the guards who once treated him “like a dog” now call him Mr. Yancy when he visits the prison as part of the Kairos. “See that’s God there!” he proclaims.[465]

Despite this miraculous recognition of his rehabilitation, Checo is constantly aware of the stigma associated with his conviction. **“**I’m a registered offender for an attempted crime against nature,” he says. “There’s so much mean mind-set out there.” While God forgives completely, he contends, human beings are unwilling to forget. Though Jesus told the thief on the cross that he would meet him in paradise, Checo often says, we still remember that man as a thief. [466] In addition to social stigma, Checo must contend with a myriad of related restrictions on his living

[465] Checo Yancy, interview with the author, July 12, 2013.

[466] Checo Yancy, interview with the author, July 12, 2013.

arrangements, employment opportunities, and voting rights. He is currently applying for a Soros fellowship to help people who were convicted of sex offenses navigate the minefield of requirements they will face upon their release. In the case of some convictions, it seems, rehabilitation can never be complete.

In fact, when he was first drafting SB 424, Senator Martiny believed legislators would not even consider a bill that offered parole eligibility for people convicted of sex offenses. Martiny recognizes that people labelled as sex offenders are a convenient target for lawmakers. "I used to joke with people," he recalls, "'Is there anything else we can do to a sex offender?'" In her most recent work on incarceration, Marie Gottschalk characterizes people convicted of sex offenses as "the new untouchables." Though they were included in the "law and order" statutes of the 1980s, people accused of sex offenses were subject to exceptional scrutiny beginning in the early 1990s. As public opinion has turned against the War on Drugs, a significant portion of the population still supports stringent punishment for sex offenses. "Talk of embracing the plight of sex offenders makes even some of the most progressive penal reformers squeamish," Gottschalk notes. "It is hard to imagine a group of offenders that has fewer advocates than they do."[467] Despite declining incidences and statistically low recidivism rates within this category of crime, arrests for sex offenses have increased by 400 percent.

Gottschalk argues that what she calls "the war on sex offenders" does not fit Michelle Alexander's "New Jim Crow" model of mass incarceration. While the most visible victims of sex crimes are white, large numbers of white men have been introduced into the criminal justice system through sex offender statutes. However, Chrystanthi S. Leon finds that sex offenders of

[467] Marie Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 214, 196.

color face more stringent sentences,[468] while sociologist Trevor Hoppe reveals that in 49 states, the sex offender registration rate is sometimes two to three times higher for African Americans than whites.[469] In Louisiana, just over half of those serving time for sex offenses are African Americans, and the rate of sex offender registry for African Americans is nearly twice that for whites.[470] Martiny's decision to exclude people convicted of sex offenses from the parole process categorically nullified possible claims to rehabilitation among a group disproportionately comprised of African Americans like Checo.

Recognizing the ostracizing effects of his conviction, Checo often prefers to operate under the radar rather than in the public eye. However, at the Task Force meeting, he publicly presented himself as "a productive citizen" in the thirteen years since his release. Like Hargin, he also contributed revenue to the state. "I'm concerned about *my* tax dollars, OK?" he told the Task Force. "I pay taxes now." He also specified the kind of financial calculations policymakers would have to make, urging them to emphasize long-term investments in formerly incarcerated people rather than immediate savings only. "A short-sighted approach," he warned, "may save a dollar today, yet cost two dollars tomorrow." Moreover, whereas Nathan Albritton had warned senators that their families, too, might one day become crime victims, Checo reminded members of the Task Force that their children might one day commit crimes. In that case, he warned that Louisiana's leaders should enact "whatever sense of justice [they] would want for their own children." In this instance, Checo characterized himself as both a formerly incarcerated person

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[468] Chrysanthi S. Leon, *Sex Fiends, Perverts, and Pedophiles: Understanding Sex Crime Policy in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

[469] Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, and Wisconsin were the states in which African Americans were registered at three times the rate of whites. Trevor Hoppe, "Punishing Sex: Sex Offenders and the Missing Punitive Turn in Sexuality Studies," *Law & Social Inquiry,* Vol. 41, No. 3 (Summer 2016): 583-584.

[470] Hoppe, "Punishing Sex," 587. The rate for whites is 251 per 100,000 people. The rate for African Americans is 470 per 100,000.

and a taxpayer, implying that his firsthand experience with incarceration did not diminish his right to dictate how legislators use public funds to which he contributed. He also blurred distinctions between himself and Task Force members, reminding them that their families, too, might one day be subject to the very standards of justice they promoted.

While Checo emphasized his status as a taxpayer, Norris claimed the mantle of crime victim. Jacqueline Germany had represented African American victims who had similar qualms as those of white victims about the possibility or relevance of rehabilitation. Norris, however, sought to put not only a different face on victimhood, but to redefine its contours. Most notably, he hoped to prove that victims supported rehabilitation just as often as they advocated retribution. “The first thing I wanna say,” Norris told the senators during his SB 424 testimony, “[is] I understand the strong emotions of crime victims, because I am one.” He revealed that over fifteen years ago, his son and future daughter-in-law were murdered by her ex-boyfriend. “But I don't think we should pass laws based on the way we feel at the worst moments of our lives,” Norris insisted. Unfortunately, he said, the state of Louisiana had done just that over the course of the past forty years, pursuing vengeance rather than justice. Norris later explained he began his testimony this way to “level the playing field.” Just before he testified, he saw Van Kyzar bring Nathan Albritton and his niece into the room. Anticipating that they would appeal to sympathy for victims, Norris decided to “temper” their testimony with his own tale of victimization. He could have sensationalized the latter story even further; the ex-boyfriend who killed his son and his son’s fiancée had escaped from prison. This detail, he thought, granted his perspective even more legitimacy. People would expect him to seek vengeance against the man

responsible for his son's death. They would be surprised when he instead insisted on the possibility of redemption and rehabilitation.[471]

In general, Norris insisted that not all victims had the same mentality. "Everybody isn't as mean spirited and vengeful as the DA's Association think people should be or are," he argues. "I'm not an anomaly."[472] During the November 2016 meeting of the Justice Reinvestment Task Force, a woman named Deborah Cotton confirmed his assertion. Cotton testified as she sat next to Catalene Theriot, the founder of VOICE, or Voice of the Innocent Citizens Empowered, a local victims' rights organization. A middle-aged white woman, Theriot represented the prototypical crime victim, and she purported to represent others.-"We believe victims and their families are being forgotten in all of this," she told the Task Force. Policymakers, Theriot insisted, would not be so quick to reform sentencing laws if they had to personally inform victims of these changes, or if their own family members were affected. She spoke from her own personal experience as a crime victim, revealing that the man who killed her son was serving a life sentence at Angola. "I can tell you I have forgiven him a long time ago," Theriot said, "but that doesn't mean that he should be released. I think he should remain there for life because he made that choice. My son did not have a choice." Unlike Nathan Albritton, Theriot had forgiven the man who killed her son. Though she did not reference any transformation on his part, her forgiveness indicated the possibility that he was not an altogether irredeemable human being. However, because his decision to kill her son was immutable, so was his current condition,. Rehabilitation, if it was possible, could never entail release.

However, immediately after Theriot's testimony, Deborah Cotton, an African American freelance reporter living in New Orleans, offered an alternate victim's perspective.

[471] Norris Henderson, interview with the author, June 26, 2016.

[472] Norris Henderson, interview with the author, June 26, 2016.

Characterizing herself as “a survivor of violent crime” and a “law-abiding citizen,” Cotton revealed that she was the most seriously injured of nineteen people shot at a 2013 Mother’s Day second line parade in New Orleans. She drove home the gravity of the crime, noting that she had endured several dozen surgeries as a result of her gunshot wound. However, her first recommendation to the Task Force was to address the exorbitant fines and fees that trapped formerly incarcerated people in a cycle of debt. Only then did she express her perspective as a crime victim. “Survivors/victims are very varied in their voices,” she told the Task Force. In contrast to Theriot, Cotton had not only forgiven the young men who shot her, but was actively mentoring one of them. Though he was serving a life sentence, he had the “capacity to change the course of his life…to transform himself…to create a new script for himself.” She encouraged the Task Force to reinvest any savings realized from criminal justice reform into “marginalized communities.” The young men who shot her had simply been responding to the “conditions that we have actually let proliferate.” Corrupt leaders misspent money intended for “the most vulnerable of our communities,” but society only expressed outrage when “the folks who have been pushed up against the wall lash out and take what's ours.” Individuals like the young men who shot her were still responsible for their actions, but should not be punished for the rest of their lives. “So in terms of pursuing justice in my name,” Cotton concluded, “I don't want to see excessive and long incarceration with no pursuit of rehabilitation.” For her, justice entailed “creating safe communities” by providing people the resources they needed to thrive. Cotton situated rehabilitation within a larger framework of justice, which included personal responsibility for individual acts of violence, but also communal accountability for neglect and tangible measures to redress the economic inequalities that led people to commit acts of violence in the first place.

Shortly after Cotton testified, Norris repeated the story of his son's murder that he had shared at the SB 424 hearing several months earlier. However, he did not reiterate the dual sense of victimhood he had claimed at that time. In addition to being the father of a murder victim, Norris was also a victim of the criminal justice system. At the same time that he presented himself as proof that people who spend decades in prison rarely commit crime again, Norris revealed that he had not committed the crime for which he spent 27 years in Angola. "In 2003," he told the senators, "I had my conviction overturned and I was released." He elaborated later: "I can tell two victim stories. One: I went to jail for something I didn't do."[473] His brief statement about the nature of his conviction and release framed Norris as someone who never needed rehabilitation in the first place.

While Norris implied he was a victim of a faulty legal system because he had not committed the murder for which he was convicted, Bobby Wallace framed all incarcerated people as innocent victims of a vengeful public by virtue of their rehabilitation. "This is personal for me," Bobby told the Judiciary B committee, "because it's the first time I've had an opportunity to actually speak for myself from two perspectives." First, like Norris, Bobby spoke as a formerly incarcerated person. Having served over twenty years in Angola, he had an opportunity to observe many transformations. "I watched things change," he said. "I watched people change. I changed." Most notably, his performance in Angola's *Life of Jesus Christ* play had been a transformative experience. "I really humbled myself and I gave my heart over to Jesus." In this sense, Bobby presented his own rehabilitation and those of others he knew as justification for sentencing reform.

But his transformation through his performance as Jesus also imbued him with moral authority to advocate for reform. "I'm feeling like I'm back in this role again," he told the

[473] Norris Henderson, interview with the author, June 26, 2016.

senators. “Because you're Pilate.” Like Pilate, they had to choose whether they would grant mercy to men like Norris and himself. Pilate initially made the right decision, “by letting Jesus go, giving him another chance.” But he eventually succumbed to popular demands, washing his hands of responsibility for Jesus’ fate and allowing him to be crucified. “Don't wash your hands,” Wallace warned the senators. “Give mercy. Do what's right in your hearts.” He reiterated this point in his conclusion, echoing the phrasings he had used in his performance as Jesus. “Consider what I say,” he implored the committee. “Don't be Pilate. Be merciful. God bless you.”

Through their rehabilitation, Bobby and other incarcerated people had become not only Jesus’ loved ones, as David England had suggested, but stand-ins for Christ himself. Conversely, Jesus became their representative, perhaps an innocent man, but also a convicted criminal whom Pilate could offer “another chance.” Conversely, vengeful crime victims insisting upon indefinite punishment for lifers became the crowds calling for Jesus’ crucifixion. Their grievances were no longer simply unfortunate obstacles to sentencing reform: their opposition to parole eligibility for lifers was sinful, equivalent to the ultimate act of betrayal in Christian history. Incarcerated people remained at the legislators’ mercy, but were also in a superior position relative to the lawmakers on whom their fate depended, on par with Christ himself. In this context, Bobby’s appeal for mercy was more than an admonition for lawmakers to live up to Jesus’ example. Rather, it was a way of elevating parole eligibility for lifers to a level of biblical significance. If legislators gave in to retributive crime victims, they were not only deviating from their Christian principles, but committing a grievous sin equivalent to Pilate’s decision to execute the Christian savior. Because Bobby and his friends were rehabilitated, they had become like Christ, and were therefore in a privileged position to demand change.

Bobby intended for the biblical reference to place lawmakers' decision in "the spiritual realm."[474] Elected officials, Bobby suggested, profess to be Christians, but insist that their choices are constrained by the law or by the strictures of public opinion. They fear they will not get reelected if they leave their "comfort zone." Fiscal considerations would not be enough to overcome this fear. "Think them people really care about the state using money?" Bobby asked, laughing. "State been losing money…Things are still functioning." Legislators would procure funds by "bullying people" and exploiting natural resources, "like [they] always do."[475] Something else, Bobby suggested, would have to change. Sentencing reform advocates could not rely on "objective" measures of rehabilitation and "neutral" financial calculations. Only stories of transformation, framed in the context of a Christian imperative that made mercy mandatory, could shift the political tides in favor of lifers.

Conclusion

In the context of both the SB 424 hearing and the Louisiana Justice Reinvestment Task Force meetings, sentencing reform advocates defined rehabilitation in ways that reflected the racialized constraints of the criminal justice policymaking process at the state level. Prominent formerly incarcerated advocates presented their impeccable family values as evidence of their rehabilitation in ways that both resonated with and challenged prevailing evangelical understandings of this term. African Americans were personally obligated to build strong families, but the criminal justice system was also accountable for imposing structural obstacles to the realization of this rehabilitative ideal. Legislators merely had to show mercy by rewarding individuals with the possibility of release for their adherence to family values and related

[474] Norris believed that those who "knew the story of Pontius Pilate" would be affected by Bobby's testimony. "I don't need y'all to act like Pilate and Herod," he said, summarizing Bobby's point. "We need you to make a decision."

[475] Bobby Wallace, interview with the author, June 16, 2016.

measures of reform. District attorneys and their selected crime victims, however, rejected such evidence of rehabilitation as insulting to the members of their dead loved ones, who no longer had the ability to enjoy life changes and family bonding. Individual stories of transformation could never serve as the basis for reconsidering current sentencing laws. Confronted with such opposition, some advocates shifted the framework within which they presented rehabilitation from redemption and mercy to biblical wisdom and discernment. They converted redeemed individuals into statistically verifiable levels of risk lawmakers can assess as they fulfill their duty to taxpayers to curtail government spending in the face of Louisiana's budget crisis. They countered the prototypical white, middle-class crime victim with idealized white Republicans whose conservative credentials could affirm rehabilitation as a means to save the state money. Yet some advocates suggested that a retreat to the "neutral" and "objective" frameworks of risk assessments and fiscal calculations was not a sure fire means through which lifers could obtain the opportunity to prove their rehabilitation. Instead, these proponents of reform also subverted the victim/perpetrator dichotomy upon which the most potent challenges to parole eligibility are based and defined rehabilitation as part for a broader a communal responsibility to effect social and economic justice. These complicated negotiations offer a reminder of the way African Americans draw upon overlapping religious and racial discourses to make demands of a political system that often refuses to recognize black humanity.

CONCLUSION

Burl Cain stepped down as Angola's warden in January 2016. Suspicions about his private business endeavors have plagued Cain since he arrived at the prison over twenty years ago.[476] He resigned as both Louisiana's legislative auditor and the state's corrections department launched separate investigations into his real estate ventures with the stepfather of a man serving time at Angola.[477] The Bible College and other religious programs Cain established survived his departure, but it remains to be seen how these initiatives will fare in the future. Without the presence of the charismatic warden, will they receive the same kind of media attention they have in the past? Will prominent evangelists enjoy the same kind of access to Angola? Will they display the same degree of interest in the prison? Will religious activity continue to have the same prominence among Angola's population? How will contributions to *The Angolite* change? Will events like *The Life of Jesus Christ* continue? Will more prison ministry volunteers like David England and G.G. Hargin translate their experiences with Angola's morally rehabilitated into public advocacy for sentencing reform? How will they do so, and to what effect?

Regardless of its ultimate fate, moral rehabilitation at Angola highlights the nuanced relationship between race and reform. Historically, scholars have associated the hyperincarceration of African Americans with declining public faith in the rehabilitative ideal. While incarcerated whites generally evoked sympathy, racial prejudice fueled punitive sentiments as "law and order" policies funneled increasing numbers of African Americans into U.S. prisons. However, anti-black animosity did not cause the rehabilitative ideal to simply

[476] For a review of the myriad controversies, see Gordon Russell and Maya Lau, "Fall of Burl Cain: How one last side deal led to Angola warden's undoing," *The Advocate*, December 15, 2015, http://www.theadvocate.com/new_orleans/news/politics/article_b3f58cfe-8d69-57c3-bd53-2ab81682ab19.html.

[477] Maya Lau and Gordon Russell, "Angola warden Burl Cain to resign amid twin probes into his side business dealings," *The Advocate*, December 9, 2015.

disappear. Rather, moral rehabilitation indicates that a variety of assumptions about African Americans continually reconfigure reform. The definition of rehabilitation shifts depending on those employing the concept and in what context.

Documentaries about Angola depict black men adhering to a standard rehabilitative model of repentance and self-transformation, but their race also limits the implications of reform. Rehabilitation for Angola's majority-black population is often redefined as a method of coping with perpetual imprisonment and a means of enriching whites rather than preparing for life on the outside. Those rare redeemed individuals who are released justify the continued incarceration of black men who attribute their incarceration to systemic racism. Indeed, the process of rehabilitation entails implicitly attributing the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans to a dysfunctional black "culture." In popular media, then, Angola's majority-black population renders rehabilitation compatible with long-term incarceration and long-standing racial stereotypes.

At the same time, incarcerated African Americans reinterpret rehabilitation to include both individual transformation and structural critique. African Americans have often expressed suspicion of rehabilitation, interpreting the concept as an effort to secure black conformity to existing political, social, and economic norms that marginalize their communities. Incarcerated black radicals asserted that America itself needed to be reformed, not them. Indeed, scholarship on faith-based reform initiatives often emphasizes the way such programs are particularly prone to focus on the individual to the exclusion of addressing broader structural issues like racial disparities. However, in the context of *The Angolite* and *The Life of Jesus Christ* play, individuals' commitment to change their lives does not necessitate unmitigated admissions of guilt or overshadow systemic factors that foster the disproportionate incarceration of African

Americans. Instead, people in prison cite scriptures, statutes, and episodes from America's long history of racial oppression to define rehabilitation as means to demand release as a legal right and call the public to self-examination and repentance. In prisoner-produced media, rehabilitation becomes a means to achieve racial justice, not efface the structural racism inherent in the criminal justice system.

The legislative arena proves more limiting than the liminal spaces of creative writing and theater. Warden Cain often suggests that moral rehabilitation will culminate in action at the state capitol. Witnesses to the transformations that have taken place at Angola will be motivated to testify before state senators and representatives, urging them to reconsider Louisiana's draconian sentencing statutes. Prison ministry volunteers do appeal to their firsthand interactions with Angola's morally rehabilitated inmates as justification for sentencing reform. Formerly incarcerated people, too, cite evidence of their own rehabilitation, hoping to move policymakers to show mercy to Louisiana's lifers. However, racialized understandings of victimization constrain formerly incarcerated African Americans' narratives of redemption. Many reform advocates thus define rehabilitation in terms of supposedly race-neutral risk assessments and cost saving measures to overcome the objections of prototypical white victims. Yet formerly incarcerated black advocates also challenge frameworks that dichotomize taxpayers and people in prison, victims and offenders. Uncertain that "objective" factors like budget constraints will overcome racialized victim opposition, they define rehabilitation as part of a broader communal pursuit of social and economic justice and employ religious frameworks that cast reform as a biblical mandate. Awareness of anti-black prejudice causes some to translate rehabilitation into a cost-benefit analysis, but motivates others to reinterpret reform as a collective responsibility. In short, the way race shapes different constituencies' articulation of rehabilitation varies depending

on the specific context, causing some to narrow the implications of reform and others to expand its boundaries beyond notions of individual guilt, repentance and transformation.

Though President Donald Trump's revival of "law and order" rhetoric threatens to reinvigorate "tough on crime" policies, public support for some of the punitive measures of the 1980s and 1990s has waned significantly. Increasing numbers of Americans across the political spectrum support the legalization of marijuana and favor treatment rather than imprisonment for people who use cocaine or heroin.[478] People once characterized as fiends whose addictions made them a threat to society are now seen as victims of misguided, overzealous policies. Michelle Alexander warns that if this "bi-partisan consensus" does not address the underlying anti-black animus that fueled the War on Drugs in the first place, the "new Jim Crow" of mass incarceration will merely manifest itself in another form. Yet Alexander's own emphasis on drug crimes can unintentionally justify the continued incarceration of approximately half of the U.S. prison population: people convicted of "violent crimes." Public sympathy for "nonviolent drug offenders" has not extended to "violent criminals." In fact, some advocates present criminal justice reform as palatable because it will only result in the release of the former, not the latter.

As they did for individuals incarcerated for drug crimes, Americans need a new narrative about people convicted of murder, rape, and armed robbery to reconsider the laws that keep them in prison. Moral rehabilitation seems to offer such a story. The faith-based reform program implies that though people in Angola have committed serious crimes, they can be completely transformed as a result of religious revival inside the prison. They become sympathetic figures by virtue of the changes they have made in their lives. At the same time, portrayals of moral

[478] Pew Research Center, "America's New Drug Policy Landscape," April 2, 2014, http://www.people-press.org/2014/04/02/americas-new-drug-policy-landscape/.

rehabilitation suggest that for their reform to be recognized, incarcerated people must adhere to models that reinforce current racial inequalities. Yet contributors to *The Angolite,* participants in *The Life of Jesus Christ,* and formerly incarcerated advocates, do not simply accept the given parameters of rehabilitation. Instead, they reinterpret reform, playing an active role in determining the standards by which their transformations should be judged and rewarded, situating individual cases within the context of systemic racism and proposing expanded understandings of victimhood and innocence. They suggest that ending mass incarceration must involve not only efforts to assert the humanity of African Americans, in prison and otherwise, but recognition that the very process of "humanizing" is contentious and contested. Individuals and organizations working to address mass incarceration must carefully consider how they employ concepts like reform and rehabilitation, recognizing that such religious frameworks can both challenge and reinforce the racialized understandings of crime and punishment that gave rise to the disproportionate imprisonment of African Americans in the first place.

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