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BURL CAIN, ANGOLA, AND PARCHMAN: THE NATIONAL INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY

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ABSTRACT

Former warden of the Louisiana State Penitentiary and current commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections Burl Cain's career has drawn national attention for his supposed heraldry of penal reform. Having declared himself to be fulfilling a divinely mandated mission, Cain has frequently cited his criteria of a "good prison: good playing, good praying, good food and good medicine."¹ This article seeks to critically examine these criteria as they relate to Cain's tenures in both Louisiana and Mississippi while answering the following question: what is the human impact of Burl Cain's approach to wardency? Despite his focus on the provision of what is "good," the penitentiaries he has managed have been plagued by records of malnutrition, medical discrimination, relentless proselytization, and settler colonialism; therefore, this article argues that the framework necessary to understand the figure of Burl Cain is the national institution of slavery and the advancement of the prison-industrial complex.

¹Rick Bragg, "Inmates Find Brief Escape in Rodeo Ring," *The New York Times* (New York: New York Times, October 25, 1996), <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/10/25/us/inmates-find-brief-escape-in-rodeo-ring.html>.

Introduction

The story of America is one fundamentally rooted in oppression, in the mechanisms of slavery and labor exploitation -- institutions so integral to the American economy that the Thirteenth Amendment's abolition of chattel slavery was written with a caveat: "except as a punishment for crime." The formalization of a constitutional exception to abolition was no mistake: the plantation South, such staunch defenders of slavery that they infamously undertook secession and civil war for its preservation, needed a loophole for the institutional reestablishment of slavery, simply hidden under new systems with new names.² The Southern response to abolition has not been one of acquiescence to federal jurisdiction, but rather one of finding loopholes and workarounds so that compliance is technically claimable; while singling out the South for this evolution of slavery into systems by a different name provides the strongest comparison of modern institutions to the plantation system of the past, it neglects the larger American trend towards the adoption and utilization of loopholes for slavery -- the United States is a mass incarceration state whose prison-industrial complex is nationwide and integral to its operation. Make no mistake: the thought of slavery may evoke images of the South in the national consciousness, but it remains a national institution both historically and in modernity; an examination of its regional components necessitates the examination of the American whole, which is precisely the aim of the paper at hand: to conduct a thorough review of the institutionalization of slavery into a system of national mass incarceration by looking more closely at the South, at two of its most infamous state penal plantations and the man that connects them.

What better state to begin with than the one that boasts the highest incarceration rate in the world?³ Yet the failures of the Louisiana government don't even begin to capture the infamous reputation held by Louisiana State Penitentiary, better known as Angola, as one of the worst prisons in the United States.⁴ That's in part because it's the largest maximum-security prison in the country,⁵ having routinely received judicial rulings condemning its inadequate medical care⁶ and ranking among the most dangerous prisons nationally; it holds the only death row in Louisiana and it exports its violence as tourism twice a year through the Angola Prison Rodeo,⁷ not to mention the year-

² Flores Forbes, "How a 13th Amendment Loophole Created America's Carceral State," *The Crime Report* (The Crime Report, June 3, 2019), <https://thecrimereport.org/2019/06/03/539754/>; Caroline Kiesel, "Loopholes have preserved slavery for more than 150 years after abolition," *The Washington Post* (The Washington Post, January 27, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/01/27/loopholes-have-preserved-slavery-more-than-150-years-after-abolition/>.

³ Emily Widra and Tiana Herring, "States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2021," *Prison Policy Initiative* (Prison Policy Initiative, September 2021), https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2021.html?gclid=Cj0KCQiAkZKNBhDiARIsAPsk0Wiy7CiNBpWC-H-Y1h8ekCJva67t1_K0S5IP5Jv_Kyj43p4Wu4MGT8aAlcXFATw_wcB.

⁴ Tauren Holter and Leila Barghouty, "A Look At 5 Of The Most Dangerous Prisons in America," *Bustle* (Bustle, July 20, 2020), <https://www.bustle.com/life/worst-prisons-in-america>.

⁵ Kathryn Gillespie, "Placing Angola: Racialisation, Anthropocentrism, and Settler Colonialism at the Louisiana State Penitentiary's Angola Rodeo," in *Anthropode* (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 1267.

⁶ Liam Kennedy, "Reflections From Exile: Exploring Prisoner Writings at the Louisiana State Penitentiary" (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2015), 33; *Brown v. Cain*, Civil Action Number 11-103-JJB-SCR.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

round Angola Museum that proudly displays the devices of torture and execution that comprise the penitentiary's history.⁸ Above all -- or rather, what should be considered above all -- is the nature of the prison's operation upon an 18,000-acre property constructed in the nineteenth century as a plantation, built and farmed initially by enslaved Angolans -- hence "Angola."⁹ Following the abolition of chattel slavery, the exception provided by the Thirteenth Amendment assured that Southern plantations would continue to function as normal plantations whose operators would exert unilateral control over its laborers -- the only difference was that it was then done via convict leasing, where the convicts were Black men and women whose existence was now criminalized rather than privately owned, although the nature of criminalization is that of state ownership and the nature of convict leasing that of renting ownership of a human being from the state. The foundation's unchanged, but the wallpaper's new; the concept of human ownership remains and is still the basis for the violent oppression of Black people and the exploitation of Black labor, but the legality behind ownership has shifted from private practice to state-mandated, state-regulated. Under the framework of convict leasing, southern plantation owners can't purchase and own slaves -- they have to go through the government, who's performing their end of the bargain through routine criminalization and incarceration. Since involuntary servitude and slavery are prohibited except for individuals convicted of a crime, state and local governments create more crimes and more convicts.

Constitutionally banned in 1898, convict leasing provided the groundwork for the next evolution of slavery, one that took the course of the twentieth century and was completed with the rise of the American incarceration state;¹⁰ in the case of Angola, the plantation was purchased by the Louisiana government for the establishment of Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1901.¹¹ Convicts were no longer being leased to plantation owners but being sent directly to a plantation by the government -- despite the relabeling of itself as a penitentiary, Angola has carried its practice as a plantation forward into the present. Newly arrived inmates are forced to work, though only one job is available to them upon arrival: fieldwork -- plantation work at a plantation whose mansion is a maximum-security prison.¹² Fieldwork is required for at least the first three months of an inmate's incarceration, after which an inmate with a clean disciplinary record can apply for a job elsewhere in the prison, though those jobs are few in supply and routinely denied to people with perfect records.¹³

But Angola's unique for its notoriety, not just its epitomization of the Southern plantation prison. You don't have to look far from Louisiana to find Parchman in Mississippi, its own state penitentiary similarly built upon 18,000 acres of plantation land purchased by the government in 1901¹⁴. The intentional purchase of plantations for the placement of Parchman and Angola

⁸ Angola Museum, "History of Angola," Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum Foundation (Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum Foundation, 2019), <https://www.angolamuseum.org/history-of-angola>.

⁹ Gillespie, "Placing Angola," 1273-1274.

¹⁰ Angola, "History of Angola."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Andrea Armstrong, "Slavery Revisited in Penal Plantation Labor," Loyola University New Orleans College of Law (New Orleans: Loyola University, 2012), 874.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ MDOC, "State Prisons," <https://www.mdoc.ms.gov/Institutions/Pages/State-Prisons.aspx>.

emphasizes the reconstruction of the plantation as penitentiary that occurred throughout the South in response to abolition, a response reflected in the national logos by politicians at every level of governance.¹⁵ Like Angola, Parchman carries a history of atrocity, of slavery, torture, and violence -- guards preferred whippings by “Black Annie,” a massive leather strap, and the authorization of preferred inmates to kill other inmates at their determination as their approach to enforcement, otherwise adopting a practice of neglect and detachedness.¹⁶ Excepting violence as enforcement, no element of corrections is present at the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC)’s primary facility -- the mechanism of guard interaction is torture, the provision and maintenance of necessities considered unnecessary.

So, Parchman prisoners rioted.¹⁷ Between July 2019 and January 2020, seven people were murdered by fellow inmates as buildings have fallen evermore into disrepair, completely understaffed¹⁸ while funding dwindles — politically ignored despite federal oversight from 1974¹⁹ until 2011²⁰ ensuring at least administrative knowledge of Parchman’s decay. As public demonstration does, the riots drew political attention: Tate Reeves hired Burl Cain as the new commissioner of the MDOC.²¹ Cain has experience with the task of reforming a state plantation penitentiary -- for twenty-one years from 1995 until 2016, Cain received consistent national attention as warden of Angola. A self-proclaimed reformer more accurately describable as a self-believed prophet,²² Cain believed himself tasked by God to bring “morality” to Angola inmates and so created a framework of religion for enforcement and rehabilitation. He created an exclusionary Christian religious community,²³ constructing chapels and churches and immediately inviting the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary to establish a prison seminary at Angola;²⁴ a Southern Baptist himself, Cain’s focus on Baptism doesn’t stop with the faith of either the seminary or the plurality of religious structures constructed -- he implemented the routine broadcasting of exclusively Baptist Sunday programs²⁵ and strictly encouraged attendance to his weekly Baptist Bible

¹⁵ Kiesel, “Loopholes.”

¹⁶ Jerry Mitchell, “Violence brews at Parchman: Lack of funding, not enough guards and decrepit conditions,” *Clarion Ledger* (Clarion Ledger, January 8, 2020), <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/local/2020/01/08/parchman-prison-riot-mississippi-violence-deterioration-underfunding/2824006001/>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Gates v. Collier*, 501 F.2d 1291.

²⁰ Mitchell, “Violence brews.”

²¹ Jerry Mitchell, “Cain vows to rehabilitate, repair Mississippi prisons,” *Hattiesburg American* (Hattiesburg: Gannett Co., March 24, 2021).

²² Mary Mitchell, “Warden’s ideas could do a lot to help the rest of us,” *Chicago Sun-Times* (Chicago: Chicago Sun-Times, October 7, 2003).

²³ Ashton Pittman, “MDOC Nominee Burl Cain’s Colorful Past: Lions, Black Panthers and Baptists,” *Mississippi Free Press* (Mississippi Free Press, May 22, 2020), <https://www.mississippifreepress.org/3286/mdoc-nominee-burl-cains-colorful-past-lions-black-panthers-and-baptists>

²⁴ Michael Hallett, “Faith at Angola Prison,” *Commonweal* (Commonweal, March 30, 2017), <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/faith-angola-prison>.

²⁵ Gwen Filosa, “Death row inmate, ACLU win fight to have Catholic Masses shown in cells,” *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans: The Times-Picayune, July 7, 2009), https://www.nola.com/news/article_f2a33c33-fed4-5d2b-b047-2034c1412d35.html

study.²⁶ He coupled his heavy handed proselytization with a particular care for tourism, nursing the existent industry of tourism at Angola via prison tours and the Angola Rodeo while creating a new one through the 1997 opening of the Angola Museum, located adjacent to Angola's main facility's front gates.²⁷ As aforementioned, it proudly displays Angola's violent history with accompanying iconography of slavery; Angola is both plantation and prison, so this Southern industry of prison tourism is intrinsically plantation tourism and carries with it the celebration of a violently racist and oppressive history and the voyeuristic racism implied by celebratory display.

The best definition of Cain's praxis of reform is that it is one of religious revivalism, of emphasizing moral assertions under a theological framework while supporting religious institutions as the focus of a publicly-funded prison. Cain, however, has provided his own definition of his approach to reform: "It takes four things to run a good prison: good playing, good praying, good food and good medicine. [The Angola Rodeo] is good playing."²⁸ The former two correspond to his praxis quite well -- Cain says good playing includes his industry of prison tourism, and the good praying speaks for itself in his heavy handed and restrictive proselytization; the issue is that the latter two are categorically false. Despite raising and slaughtering its own cows, Angola sells that beef for profit while importing poorer quality meat to feed its population;²⁹ the result is a provision of food that's minimally edible, a complete sacrifice of quality for affordability representing a conscious decision to deprive inmates of the products of their labor -- thus generating a profit -- while providing resources of significantly lower value and thus devaluing their labor, their lives and their integrity to the state's plantation profits. As for good medicine, Cain has been the defendant of multiple lawsuits challenging his medical negligence, confronting the subpar medical resources of his prisons as inhumane.³⁰

Setting legal challenges aside for a moment, Burl Cain is personally responsible for the Angola 3: Robert King, Albert Woodfox, and Herman Wallace, who spent a combined 114 years in solitary confinement at Angola, with the latter two each contributing over forty years of that total -- the two longest periods of solitary confinement in American history.³¹ The willingness to boast about the importance of good medicine while simultaneously being willing to define the plurality of a man's life as solitary, as seclusion and subjection to torture externally and internally, signal a significant hypocrisy between diction and action. Any claim Cain can make to good medicine and good food is categorically false; as for praying and playing, their description as "good" may be

²⁶ Mitchell, "Warden's ideas."

²⁷ Angola Museum, "Our foundation," <https://www.angolamuseum.org/foundation/>.

²⁸ Rick Bragg, "Inmates Find Brief Escape in Rodeo Ring," *The New York Times* (New York: New York Times, October 25, 1996), <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/10/25/us/inmates-find-brief-escape-in-rodeo-ring.html>.

²⁹ Beth Shelburne, "Angola's Angst: A Disquieting Tour through the Largest Maximum Security Prison in the Nation," *The Bitter Southerner* (The Bitter Southerner, January 21, 2020), <https://bittersoutherner.com/angolas-angst-louisiana-penitentiary>

³⁰ Associated Press, "Angola inmates: Medical care at prison is subpar," *Shreveport Times* (May 21, 2015), <https://www.shreveporttimes.com/story/news/local/louisiana/2015/05/21/angola-inmates-medical-care-prison-subpar/27709267/>; Brittany Brown, "Disability rights group sues MDOC for 'inhumane and discriminatory' prison conditions," *Mississippi Today* (Mississippi Today, August 11, 2021), https://www.meridianstar.com/news/state/disability-rights-group-sues-mdoc-for-inhumane-and-discriminatory-prison-conditions/article_c6b9ad24-66c1-594c-b376-c8fd1870160b.html.

³¹ International Coalition to Free the Angola 3, <https://angola3.org/>.

subjective, but this paper anticipates that their “goodness” is just as false as that of their counterparts.

To examine the national evolution and institutionalization of slavery into a system of mass incarceration, this paper seeks to more closely examine that evolution’s grossest and clearest examples in Angola and Parchman. Because of Burl Cain’s newfound position as commissioner of the MDOC, he provides a simultaneously significant and topical link between two institutions already so closely tied. Burl Cain’s approach to wardency does little to improve the quality of life for inmates; in fact, his reforms arguably worsen living conditions and position Cain as an inheritor and defender of American institutions of oppression, especially plantation slavery and the prison-industrial complex. In short, his approach to wardency is unethical and begets a negative human impact.

Literature Review

In discussing elements of mass incarceration, it’s first imperative to establish the American mass incarceration state as the status quo; significant amounts of literature exist on this subject, including data published by Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner of the Prison Policy Initiative that breaks down the population of 2.3 million incarcerated Americans into the type of prison they’re housed (state, federal, local, etc.), whether or not they’ve been convicted, and the crimes for which they’ve been sentenced;³² of the 631,000 prisoners of county jails, 470,000 remain unconvicted -- jails receive 10.6 million people a year with recidivism rates of at least 25%, although only about 160,000 people are convicted and incarcerated within jails on any given day. As for the unconvicted that remain imprisoned, the culprit is bails set far beyond suspects’ means, thus secluding them to sentences that may prove wholly unnecessary upon acquittal. Further illuminations offered by this dataset are the fact that a fifth of incarcerated Americans have been imprisoned for nonviolent drug offenses, translating to approximately 450,000 people; similarly, a fifth of the global incarcerated population is in America. Moreover, the American justice system operates far past the 2.3 million people it incarcerates: nearly 7 million people are controlled -- the plurality through probation, then incarceration. 40% of the American correctional population is Black while 39% is white, despite the former comprising 13% of the total population while the latter represents 64%. Finally, the majority of the people in prison are poor, the plurality people of color or women; median annual incomes of incarcerated people before incarceration are typically about half of the median annual incomes of non-incarcerated people in the same demographics -- the median annual income of non-incarcerated men is \$41,250 while that of an incarcerated man before incarceration is \$19,650; for women, the numbers are \$23,745 and \$13,890, respectively. These figures illuminate unfortunate truths about the American justice system, particularly the fact that it’s simply unfair: the majority of its population is poor, Black people are grossly overrepresented while white people are underrepresented, and half a million people are detained absent a conviction because of unaffordable bails.

³² Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pic 2020,” *Prison Policy Initiative* (Prison Policy Initiative, March 24, 2020).

Previously cited in the introduction was Mary Mitchell's 2003 article in the *Chicago Sun-Times*,³³ in which Mitchell paints a more pleasant picture of Burl Cain and Angola than either deserves: she even titled it "Warden's ideas could do a lot to help the rest of us." First, it's necessary to emphasize the fact that this article comes from Chicago -- not from anywhere in Louisiana or Mississippi, the states Burl Cain is most involved in, but from Illinois; as previously mentioned, Cain drew national attention for his wardency, and that attention often became praise. Moving on, though, Mitchell's hook is a call to "set aside the well-documented unfairness that has corrupted America's criminal justice system"; she continues to imagine someone that, having spent decades in prison and grown a "heart hardened by hate," will eventually be freed and "emerge as walking time bombs" -- she's talking about recidivism, the underlying focus of the article in which Burl Cain espouses his typical theology. The article becomes painfully ironic and entirely untrue when it decides to mention Angola's plantation history while neglecting to consider its plantation modernity: "the land became a prison operated by profiteers who leased out prisoners to work on farms, essentially keeping slavery going until the government took the prison system back in 1901," to which Cain's response was, "Can you imagine the misery and suffering that went on?" Mitchell depicts slavery at Angola as having ceased in 1901, although the convict leasing that she identifies as essentially slavery had been banned three years prior. Angola, however, is the government response to that ban -- the government's establishment of a plantation penitentiary functionally equivalent to the systems of slavery and convict leasing that predate it. When Mitchell asks Cain about criticism of his approach of religious reform at a public institution, Cain obfuscates -- he defaults to recidivism rates, boasting that they've been cut in half at Angola, despite the fact that recidivism has nothing to do with the First Amendment and that the article mentions that 85% of prisoners at Angola will die there: the vast majority of prisoners at Angola are wholly incapable of reoffense. Finally, per Cain himself:

All religions teach morality -- knowing right from wrong, giving instead of taking. Prisoners are very selfish people. They take from others. They want shortcuts and are self-indulgent. Morality teaches you to think of the other person...Prisons have to remove the demon at the gate and let the religious community have access to prisons so they can moralize the men. If I were an atheist warden, I would still want my prisoners to be moralized.

His prisoners -- or at least 77.8% of them -- are Black. When he refers to prisoners, calling them selfish and demons, it's a specific color he has in mind and it's not the 22% white population.

Even while he was warden at Angola, Burl Cain was heavily involved in Parchman; in 2009, Shelia Byrd of *Alaska Highway News* reported on the graduation of inmates from the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's prison seminary at Parchman, at which Burl Cain delivered a commencement speech.³⁴ Yes, the same New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary that Cain invited to establish the first prison seminary at Angola at the beginning of his wardency -- together they spread to the point that Byrd reported on it from Canada (Fort St. John, B.C.). Byrd details

³³ Mitchell, "Warden's ideas."

³⁴ Shelia Byrd, "Prison Seminary Program Gives Inmates 2nd Chance, Become Agents of Change," *Alaska Highway News*, (Fort St. John: Alaska Highway News, June 12, 2009).

their spread, noting their expanded operations in Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida while discussing the emergence of other religious education programs at other prisons in Virginia, New York, and South Carolina. Cain's influence upon this development cannot be understated: ministers at both Angola and Parchman graduate to become missionaries, to be sent to evangelize at other prisons -- "Cain said when he first started sending 'missionaries' out to other prisons, the culture began changing there, too." To be fair, that culture change is reduced violence -- Cain cites a single year reduction of acts of inmate violence from 500 to 100 and a 43% reduction at Dixon Correctional Facility within six months after the arrival of missionaries from Angola. His approach, though, is fire-and-brimstone, telling the Parchman graduates that "everybody's watching you. They're waiting for you to fail." Coupled with his routine rhetorical characterization of prisoners as demons, his aggressive heavy-handedness can't be hidden under short-term statistics; Burl Cain is a warden that considers himself foremost a man of God, a preacher tasked with the moralization of demons -- it's a remarkably similar justification to the one used by Europe for colonialism, the delusion of the divinely-ordained "civilizing" mission of the white savior complex.

Jerry Mitchell's "Burl Cain remade Angola prison in his own image"³⁵ explores Burl Cain's religion and its intersection with his reform, noting that his mother warned him that he had to introduce his inmates to God; according to Cain, his first execution as warden kept him up at night -- the man was frightened, had no last words, and Cain felt guilty for not talking to him about God and his soul. Going forward, he brought his Bible with him to every execution, holding the hand of the next person strapped to Angola's injection table under Cain's wardency. On another personal note, Mitchell and Cain discuss *The Farm*, an Oscar-nominated 1998 documentary that catapulted Angola and Burl Cain to the national consciousness. This article focuses significantly on Cain's efforts at reform, at his invitation and establishment of a prison seminary and subsequent construction of churches; it further details the Reentry Court, through which inmates can complete a training program in two to three years and have a ten-year sentence reduced to two or three years. Crediting the Reentry Court, this article cites a more updated version of Mary Mitchell's recidivism stat, pointing to one three times below the Louisianan average at less than 10%; Cain has urged Mississippi lawmakers to establish its own Reentry Court.

Following Cain's call to policymakers, Mitchell spends the majority of the remaining article enumerating Cain's actions thus far as warden and his plans for the future; first, there exist 433 vacancies amongst MDOC's correctional officers while their active numbers have dropped from 1,591 in 2014 to 667 in February of 2021. In the interest of filling vacancies, Cain has asked politicians to raise COs' starting salary from \$25,650 to \$31,971. According to Cain, decaying infrastructure at Parchman and other Mississippi prisons has been repaired, although nothing specific is provided save for the repair of holes in walls; more recently, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Southern Poverty Law Center have conducted an investigation that concluded Parchman continues to suffer from its decrepit plumbing, from dirty drinking water to bathrooms flooded in sewage in flagrant violation of the Safe Drinking Water and Clean Water

³⁵ Jerry Mitchell, "Burl Cain remade Angola prison in his own image," *Jackson Advocate* (Jackson: Jackson Advocate, March 18, 2021).

Acts.³⁶ Furthermore, Parchman has become increasingly incapable of treating its own sewage, turning instead to dispelling it in surrounding bodies of water;³⁷ Cain has a tendency to embellish his own successes. He says he was horrified by the small portions of food served to MDOC inmates elsewhere in the state, and so determined that “he is ending food service contracts and returning prisons to the practice of growing food, he said. ‘we’re going to have plenty of big helpings and not feed them with a thimble.’” After the pandemic, he wants to establish MDOC sports leagues and establish a prison rodeo at Parchman, noting the success of his rodeo at Angola as generating an annual revenue of \$4 million. He cites a marked decrease in violent crime while failing to comment upon the more-than-fifty inmates that have died at Parchman since the beginning of 2020; Cain’s approach remains Cain’s approach, the rhetoric of “good food, good medicine, good playing, and good praying.”

Cain’s career is forever underpinned by scandal, by backroom deal after backroom deal cut for his own enrichment.³⁸ According to Walbert Rideau, “Cain was like a king, a sole ruler...He enjoyed being a dictator and regarded himself as a benevolent one.” As befits a dictatorial approach, his response to criticisms levied from within the prison, such as when William Kissinger wrote to DHHS that a plant established at Angola by Burl Cain in conjunction with Louisiana Agri-Can Co. was suspicious, with punishment: he demoted Kissinger to fieldwork -- the fields are not only a requirement, but a method of punishment, of enforcement.

Holly Genovese’s thesis “They Held Their Fists Up: The Myth of the Violent Black Panther and the Making of the Angola 3” is primarily focused upon the Angola 3, the aforementioned Robert King, Albert Woodfox, and Herman Wallace that each spent decades of their lives secluded in solitary confinement.³⁹ According to Genovese, Angola annually produces around four thousand pounds of vegetables while further maintaining industrial factories, like the aforementioned Agri-Can Plant or the Tag Plant, which produces Louisiana’s license plates.⁴⁰ While the Angola 3 were first banished to decades in solitary confinement under Murray Henderson — Cain’s predecessor — the two wardens are both men that completely failed to perceive other men as anything but militant — not humans, certainly not people with families.

Much of existing journalism focuses on Burl Cain specifically -- especially his process and history as religious reformer -- while much less theory exists for him himself, opting instead for analysis of his prisons and discussing Cain as he relates to those elements. This is, in part, the reason for the paper’s adoption of a significantly larger focus; the framework for the research question is one that recognizes Cain’s national influence, and thus his personal influence upon the lives of significantly more people than those at Angola or in MDOC facilities. Examination of Cain has to take place in

³⁶ Sara Imperiale, Sarah Tallman, Natalia Ospina, and Marisa Guerrero, “Environmental Injustices Plague Parchman Prison, Mississippi,” NRDC (NRDC, September 16, 2021), <https://www.nrdc.org/experts/sara-imperiale/environmental-injustices-plague-parchman-prison-mississippi>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Gordon Russell and Maya Lau, “The fall of Burl Cain: How one last side deal led to longtime Angola warden’s undoing,” *The Advocate* (New Orleans: The Advocate, December 15, 2015).

³⁹ Holly Genovese, “They Held Their Fists Up: The Myth of the Violent Black Panther and the Making of the Angola 3,” (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2015), 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

that context, with the further exploration of Angola and Parchman as the primary institutions he has been and is responsible for.

Research Methods

Design

This comparative study is entirely an existing data analysis where that existing data is primarily qualitative, thus the study's analysis is similarly qualitative. Data was collected through the University of Mississippi Library's OneSearch and Google Scholar; outside of journalism, the majority of available data came in the form of research articles, theses, and dissertations. Anything published after 1995, the first year of Burl Cain's wardency at Angola, until now was considered valid for the topic.

Sample

The sample became the data that illuminates Cain's four qualities of a good prison -- good food, medicine, playing, and praying -- by expanding what he considers their definition in rhetoric and practice. Particular emphasis was placed upon data regarding playing and praying, the prongs by which Cain's approach to reform is defined. To reiterate previous points, that playing is prison tourism and that praying is religious revivalism, both of which are centered in penitentiary plantations -- not to mention Cain's efforts to turn all MDOC state facilities into penal farms enumerated in the literature review.

Measurement

After data was chosen and determined to expand at least one of Cain's four qualities, that data was consumed and measured. Again, there was a particular emphasis on praying and playing, and so they became the primary measurements of the study. For the former, I coded religious revivalism at the mention of prison seminaries, inmate ministers, religious construction, Bible study, missionaries, and any evocation of God or morality. For the latter, I coded prison tourism at the mention of prison rodeos, prison museums, and prison tours. As for medicine, I coded denial of medical resources for lawsuits related to that denial; for food, I coded penal slavery -- Cain wants his prisons to be self-sufficient, so he wants the prisoners to grow their own food, although much of the food grown is sold for profit rather than locally consumed.

Procedures

Data was collected through OneSearch, Google Scholar, and Google's normal search engine. This data was compiled in Foxit PDF Reader, which I found was the best free software with which I could keep PDF tabs open. In the process of data consumption, the procedure was to highlight and

annotate those passages relevant to the coding. While I only read data once, I used my annotations and highlights to more easily navigate data in the process of writing. No quantitative data was consumed outside of the dataset presented first in the literature review.

Findings

Burl Cain is, first and foremost, a religious reformer. A Baptist himself, Cain invited the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary to establish its first prison seminary at Angola in his first year as warden there;⁴¹ he supplemented this invitation with the construction of chapels and churches, primarily Baptist ones,⁴² and a weekly Wednesday-night Bible study taught by Cain himself.⁴³ Until challenged in court, Cain broadcast Baptist Sunday programming to Angola every week; once challenged, he expanded the mandatory broadcast to include Catholic programs.⁴⁴ Cain has spoken repeatedly that God has called him to his work, that he has been tasked with running away demons and bringing morality to selfish men. His view of himself is thus divinely ordained and his actions divinely pardoned; despite claims to the contrary, Cain created an exclusionary Baptist community at Angola and continues in the same effort at Parchman. His conception of “good praying” is thus imposed upon his inmate populations – some may be Baptist, some may be willing to be exposed to Baptist preaching, but his specific imposition of Baptism in the process of turning a prison into a religious community violates his prisoners’ freedom of religion by limiting the religious space available for them to worship; while the funds used for his religious reform have been private, the position he has used to enact them is public and the place they’ve been enacted equally so. This is a state employee using his position as warden, then commissioner, to proselytize his personal faith and force his ideas of morality – ideas informed by his theology – upon his constituent population; the wall of separation is thus crumbled.

Second to Cain’s status as a religious reformer is that of the rent-seeking businessman, the underlying truth to his ideas of what “good playing” is. He connects play to tourism and thus seeks to build an industry of tourism at the prisons he operates; the Angola Rodeo, the most significant facet of that industry, generated a revenue of \$4 million while Cain was Angola’s warden – he seeks to reestablish Parchman’s rodeo in the next few years.⁴⁵ The rodeo is an exercise in voyeuristic racism; from Schrift via Gillespie, “In one rodeo where an African American inmate was running from a bull (with laughter abounding), a spectator commented to me that the rodeo offered one of the ‘acceptable’ ways to make fun of black people.”⁴⁶ The prime feature of tourism under Burl Cain is public torture, coupled with evocations of the Confederacy and the belittlement of Black inmates by white audiences. Its master of ceremonies, whose dialogue accompanies the rodeo, is openly racist: “Next, several white men dressed as Native American riders wearing the skins of bison rode out into

⁴¹ Hallett, “Faith at Angola.”

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Mitchell, “Warden’s ideas.”

⁴⁴ Filosa, “Death row inmate.”

⁴⁵ Mitchell, “Burl Cain remade Angola.”

⁴⁶ Gillespie, “Placing Angola,” 1277.

the ring, followed by white men dressed as cowboys with guns firing at them...The MC described how the ‘Wild West’ was tamed by the ‘White Man.’”⁴⁷ Under his wardency at Angola, the Angola Museum was established directly adjacent to the prison’s front gates and stocked with celebratory displays of the prison’s plantation history.⁴⁸ Tours are routine at Angola, even for high school field trips – my own takes its juniors there annually. This tourism cannot be separated from the plantation history celebrated in the museum: Angola is actively a plantation, constructed on the grounds of plantations, that imprisons a majority-Black population and forces a majority of its inmates to work in the fields. It grows its own crops, raises its own animals, and sells both for-profit both locally and nationally. It carries with it a legacy of violence and oppression congruent with its roots in the institution of slavery and the institutions it evolved into; rather than focusing his reform on minimizing or eliminating this legacy, this history, Cain chooses instead to celebrate it while doing his best to make the status quo run more smoothly. He is unconcerned with the modern-day slavery of his prisons, instead concerned with the proselytization of the people there and finding financial, public support in the industries of tourism he works diligently to create.

While he preaches the necessity of a good prison having good food and has thus decided that MDOC inmates will start growing their own,⁴⁹ Angola sells what it creates and imports lower-quality options for inmate consumption.⁵⁰ While the food provided may be enough for a healthy caloric intake, its quality is certainly worse than what prisoners labor to create and are deprived of. As for good medicine, Cain has repeatedly been the defendant of lawsuits challenging him for inadequate and inhumane access to medical resources.⁵¹ Forever reflective of each other, Angola and Parchman share similar histories of denying their inmates the proper provision of food and access to medicine.⁵²

Burl Cain was hired because of his experience at Angola, essentially Parchman’s sister plantation: the two are deeply ingrained in the same system and share in much of those systemic errors. But Cain didn’t stop seeing those issues in his wardency – it wasn’t ever his focus. He was busy building and encouraging a Baptist community while developing Angola’s tourism industry, and those are precisely what have been his focus at Parchman thus far;⁵³ he does nothing but encourage that his prisoners work their prisons like plantations to the point that he’s adopted it as MDOC policy – Cain is a profit-seeking and proselytization-minded preacher, not a reformer.

The immediate reemergence of slavery through convict leasing followed by the institutionalization of convict leasing through mass incarceration constitute the framework of the modern American criminal justice system; in light of that context, Angola, Parchman, and the other plantation penitentiaries of the South represent the epitome of an American prison: one constructed

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1280.

⁴⁸ Angola, “Our history.”

⁴⁹ Mitchell, “Burl Cain remade Angola.”

⁵⁰ Shelburne, “Angola’s Angst.”

⁵¹ AP, “Angola inmates.”; Brown, “Disability rights group sues MDOC.”

⁵² Alizza Zhu, “Parchman inmates resort to setting fires to get help,” *Hattiesburg American* (Hattiesburg: Hattiesburg American, July 26, 2020).

⁵³ Mitchell, “Cain vows.”

explicitly for slavery, that explicitly continues slavery. Burl Cain only serves to abet and enable that injustice, ignoring it entirely while pursuing aggressive religious conversion and tourism revenue. The religion is control, the revenue its support, and Burl Cain is the power-hungry dictator overseeing it.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the human impact of Burl Cain's wardency and found that he ignores systemic issues, be it his institutions' roots in slavery or their inadequate provision of necessary resources, while simultaneously proselytizing the prison to construct a privatized Christian -- primarily Baptist -- community and expanding the industry of prison tourism through the encouragement of controlled public interactions with his prison. It recognizes that this approach to wardency begets a negative human impact, positioning itself firmly in the legacy of American slavery and its mindset of increasing control over humans' determinism.

One shortcoming of this study is that it was solely an existing data analysis; a more vivid picture of Angola and Parchman can be painted through on-hand field experience and would benefit massively from inmates' direct thoughts on the issue. The existing data, however, serves this function well -- there exists significant literature on conditions at Angola and Parchman. Furthermore, the scope of this study forced the neglect of some key discussions: Cain's embodiment of the white savior complex, his extended history of scandalous backroom deals, and his legacy of medical discrimination lawsuits. Future research should expand on these discussions for a fuller examination of Cain's human impact. On that note, another weakness of the study is the testability of the hypothesis; measuring its factors involve impact calculus, of determining whether or not decreased rates of violence are worth the religious and social control of a penitentiary. This paper has determined that diminished violence is not worth that exchange because the penitentiaries are plantations that actively and historically practice slavery, exporting it as tourism to generate profits that aren't used to fix the decrepit living conditions of the prisons. Therefore, Burl Cain's approach to wardency is inherently harmful and unjust. When the warden's role mirrors the enslaver, incarceration can only be understood as slavery.

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