‘Reflections From Exile’: Exploring Prisoner Writings at the Louisiana State Penitentiary

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Research investigating life inside U.S. prisons is on the decline at the precise time when it is arguably most desperately needed. And absent from much of the work that has been done is a consideration of how incarcerated men and women actually cope with, conceive of, and experience their imprisonment. Undertaking the case study of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola), I analyze over two decades worth of prisoners’ writings contained in \textit{The Angolite} prison newsmagazine in order to further our understanding of the daily lived experiences of incarcerated individuals during the era of mass imprisonment. First, I examine how the correctional instability that characterized the last several decades of the twentieth century played out on-the-ground at Angola, as well as how penological changes shaped the conditions of confinement and impacted prisoners’ lives. Next, I explore in-depth one factor with the potential to influence a prisoner’s life behind bars: masculinities. Specifically, I investigate how prisoners navigate the hypermasculine prison code in addition to how they conceptualize manhood. And in the third paper I dig deeper into Angola’s plantation past. That is, I analyze how administrators narrate the history of the prison to tourists and outsiders as well as if and how the collective memories of slavery and the Jim Crow era inform prisoners’ ideas about their
incarceration today. Overall, this project actively strives to highlight prisoners’ humanity and complexity, document the nuances of prisoners’ carceral experiences, and demonstrate the value of incorporating prisoners’ knowledges into academic debates.

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And finally, I would like to recognize the men – both past and present – who contribute(d) to The Angolite. Your words were illuminating, touching, and eloquent. Thank you for sharing your experiences.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

“The Promise” by Mark “Melody” Smith (1980: 75):

The promise of life without parole
The promise of living that life in this hole
The promise of being degraded for all that time
Makes me wonder what type of sanity I have in my mind

The promise of many nights without sleep
The promise of many nights I’ll weep
The promise of living without hope
Makes a prisoner want to slice his throat

The promise of dying here when I’m old
The promise of being buried in a deep lonely hole.
The promise of being just a number on a page
Makes me desire a quick ripe old age.


They all say
if you’re gonna do the crime
then bro, you better get ready
to do a whole lot of time.

There are men all around me
with wrinkles on their face
and they will probably die
in this low down place.

Some will go home
but most will stay
and I stand here and watch
as they waste away.

I’m stuck down in Louisiana
in the penitentiary....


Locked down without the key
no one out there seems to want to help me
I’m being kept confined
By a man named Cain
I don’t know if my life
will ever be the same
some nights I lay in my bed
just wishing I was dead
when I close my eyes
it brings back all the pain
sometimes I feel
I’m going insane
I live to be free
from Louisiana State Penitentiary.

Known popularly as Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary is “the end of the road” in a state that incarcerates more individuals – 847 per 100,000 as of 2013 – than any other jurisdiction in the world (Carson 2014; Rideau and Wikberg 1989: 21). Louisiana ranks number one (or dead last; it depends on your perspective) on another front as well: over 10% of its prisoners are serving life sentences with no chance of parole (Chang 2012; Nellis 2013). The average sentence length at Angola is 93 years and almost three-quarters of the men there are serving life without parole, with many others serving terms that mean they will likely never leave (Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections 2009/2010; Robertson 2012). Many of these men, as the sample of poetry above reveals, experience pain, regret, and sadness, struggle to maintain their sanity, watch as those around them grow older and eventually die, and grapple with loneliness, hopelessness, and despair.

The men’s writings, and Louisiana’s startlingly harsh approach to sentencing that provides the context for them, actually serves to spotlight a broader shift in American penology occurring over the last several decades: rather than focusing principally on ‘correction’ or preparing individuals for success post-release, an aging offender population is being warehoused in “no-frills” prisons for unimaginably lengthy terms (see American Civil Liberties Union 2012; Irwin 2005: 58; Simon 2000). Much like elsewhere, Louisiana drastically changed the way it dealt with offenders starting in the 1970s. Briefly, the state abandoned the ‘10-6’ practice – which saw lifers eligible for release after serving 10 years and six months – in 1972, and by the end of the decade the Louisiana legislature had enacted its life without the possibility of parole sentence
(“Forgotten Man Committee” 1984; “Legal Spectrum: The Effect of Dunn” 1982). The effects of this change in sentencing policy were compounded when governors began to cut down on pardons and clemency in the 1980s (Foster 1988). Together, these developments increased sentence length, significantly curtailed release opportunities, and left Angola filled with longtermers spending the rest of their life at the sprawling plantation prison.

While one expert has referred to Angola as the “prototype of a lifer’s prison,” data published in recent reports demonstrate the broad scope of this “punitive swing” (Irwin 2005: 3; Moore 2009). Notably, Angola’s several thousand lifers comprise only a small fraction of the nearly 160,000 individuals serving life sentences across the United States (Nellis 2013; Robertson 2012). While over 49,000 of these men and women have no chance at parole, even those who are eligible are serving more time and are less likely to be released than their peers were in the past (Nellis 2013). This has contributed to an aging prisoner population. For instance, the average age of the offender population at Angola is 41.6 years (Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections 2009/2010). Nationally, over 41% of sentenced male prisoners in U.S. state and federal prisons are age 40 or older and approximately 125,000 of them are over the age of 55 (American Civil Liberties Union 2012; Carson 2014). The so-called ‘graying’ of the U.S. prisoner population has been the subject of reports by the American Civil Liberties Union (2012: i), Human Rights Watch (2012), and the Sentencing Project (Nellis 2013), the topic of articles in the New York Times (Belluck 2012; Fellner 2013), Times-Picayune (Chang 2012), and Wall Street Journal (Matiash 2014), and researched extensively by scholars in other disciplines (e.g. Aday 2006; Mara 2002; Maschi, Kwak, Ko, and Morrissey 2012; Reimer 2008; Williams, Goodwin, Baillargeon, Ahalt, and Walter 2012). This body of work is important as it calls attention to some of the implications – deteriorating mental and physical health, escalating costs, difficulty providing programs and services, etc. – of this new way of dealing with crime and criminals. Unsurprisingly, sociologists and criminologists have also devoted considerable time and effort to theorizing this approach to penology and documenting its consequences. But, as I outline immediately below, the everyday lives, experiences, and perceptions of the men and women who are spending
much, if not the remainder, of their lives in austere prison warehouses have rarely been the focus of rigorous analysis. This is despite the obvious need to understand what has been going on inside prison walls during this period and the pressing nature of the matter.

**A Survey of the Field**

A disconcerting paradox is currently plaguing the sociology of punishment. On the one hand, scholars have gone to great lengths to document, theorize, and make sense of the instability that has characterized American penology over the last several decades. Some, for instance, have looked at the causes and consequences of mass incarceration (e.g. Clear 2007; DeFina and Hannon 2013; Frampton, López, and Simon 2008; Garland 2001a, b; Pettit and Western 2004; Tonry 1999; Turney 2014; Wacquant 2001; Western 2002; Wildeman 2014). Others have analyzed the ways in which rehabilitation and risk management are conceptualized and implemented (e.g. Cullen and Gendreau 2001; Feeley and Simon 1992; Garland 2001a; Goodman 2012; Hannah-Moffat 2005; Harcourt 2007; Hutchinson 2006; O’Malley 1999; Phelps 2011). And still others have examined the (re)emergence of explicitly punitive sanctions (e.g. Garland 2001a; Hutchinson 2006; Matthews 2005; O’Malley 1999; Pratt, Brown, Brown, Hallsworth, and Morrison 2005).

On the other hand, there continues to be great uncertainty surrounding how these and other developments have affected carceral experiences and much about life in prison in the era of mass or ‘hyper’ incarceration is still unknown (see Simon 2000).

This inconsistency is particularly surprising and frustrating because for years scholars of various stripes have publicly lamented the decline of prison research, particularly in the United States (e.g. Bosworth, Campbell, Demby, Ferranti, and Santos 2005; Crewe 2005; Goodman 2008; Reiter 2014; Simon 2000; Wacquant 2002a). Ironically, they note, this fall-off has occurred exactly when more individuals are being sent to prison and when this type of research is most needed (e.g. Reiter 2014). This is a “worrying trend,” writes Crewe (2005: 458). The picture of the field presented by these scholars is oftentimes quite bleak. Several examples are illustrative. Goodman (2008: 740, 741), for one, remarks on the “paucity of contemporary literature that examines the nature of life inside prisons and other penal institutions” and concludes that prisons are “woefully
understudied locales”. Likewise, Bosworth et al. (2005: 259) suggest “the once-vital U.S. tradition of prison sociology has largely gone out of vogue” and Reiter (2014: 418) observes that “prison research…seems to be academically outdated”. This is – or should be anyway – cause for alarm for anyone interested in making sense of how and why we punish those convicted of violating the law. While the magnitude of this decline has been debated (e.g. Jewkes 2012, 2013) and exceptions to the trend exist (see, for example, Dolovich 2011; Goodman 2008, 2012; Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005), those of us attempting to understand prison life and prison culture are left, in Reiter’s (2014: 420) words, and continuing with the analogy of the photograph, “trying to make sense of an image with too few pixels”. These scholars, then, are not just documenting a trend, but denouncing it. Their lamentations sometimes conclude with a call to action (see Reiter 2014; Wacquant 2002a), but this seems to have been too infrequently taken up.

It is not just the sheer lack of academic work that is troubling to scholars, however, but also the type of research that is being conducted inside prisons. For instance, Reiter (2014) bemoans the decline in qualitative prison research in particular, while Jewkes (2013: 14) suggests that the focus on quantitative work has “overshadowed” other types of research. Similarly, Liebling (1999) notes that descriptions of prison life are likely to disregard emotions. And Bosworth et al. (2005: 259) pull no punches in their assessment of the scholarship; they claim that publishing research that is “statistical, inhuman, [and contains] no compassion” ensures that no one will care about it. This is not an entirely new observation. In fact, Gaucher (1988) implied over a quarter-century ago that we have lost touch with the populations we aim to study, while Garland (1992: 419) suggests that the discipline “tends…to silence the human beings who fall under its gaze”. Our general neglect of prisoners’ feelings and emotions has serious consequences, perhaps even hindering our ability to understand what goes on inside penal institutions on a daily basis. Jewkes (2013: 14), for instance, argues that this approach “conceal[s] complex lives” and calls for researchers to “go beyond abstraction and describe the lived experience of imprisonment”. To do so, Farrant (2014: 467) observes, requires we adopt “more humanistic approaches”. Of course, I am not implying here that quantitative prison research is without merit; on the contrary, this type of work adds much to our
understanding of punishment, including providing the information regarding changes in sentence length and the shifting demographics of the offender population cited earlier. Instead, the critical point here is that, in scholars’ well-intentioned efforts to draw attention to the scale of mass incarceration and its myriad negative effects, we have often lost sight of the people most impacted by the developments we document and their stories.

This paradox – the decline in qualitative prison research at the same time it is arguably most necessary – serves as the motivation for my dissertation project. I turn to Angola because carceral experiences in the South remain particularly undertheorized by scholars. Given the attention the region has received for its atypical penal policies and practices both historically and presently, this oversight is bewildering to say the least (e.g. Garland, 2010; Mancini, 1996). The story of the South’s uniqueness in this regard usually begins with convict leasing. This was a system under which criminals were contracted out to private companies or individuals and sent to work on cotton and sugar plantations, on farms, in mines, and so on. Much like slavery, the convict leasing system was underpinned by racialized brutality and violence, designed to save the state money while simultaneously exploiting a cheap source of labour, and intended to both control black individuals and preserve white supremacy (Adamson 1983; Mancini 1996). Today, the states that comprise the South and Southwest stand out for their relatively high incarceration rates, use of capital punishment, the primacy of private prisons, and the imposition of openly punitive policies like chain gangs and chemical castration (Lynch 2010). Yet, while some states in this region – namely Texas, Arizona, and Florida – have received significant attention from the academic community (Campbell 2011, 2012; Lynch 2010; Schoenfeld 2010), Louisiana, despite its position as world leader, continues to be overlooked.

‘Home’ to a large contingent of longtermers, Angola is the logical place to critically interrogate some of the key issues currently being debated in the sociology of punishment as well as explore new, potentially fruitful, areas of study. Namely, looking to Angola provides us with a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the rise of the law-
and-order movement and the ways it varied across jurisdictions, of the manners in which prisoners coped with and adapted to penological change, of how rehabilitation is talked about and plays out on-the-ground in late-modern U.S. prisons, of the ways in which men navigate and negotiate pressures surrounding gender performance while incarcerated, of prisoners’ perceptions of their labour and their interactions with the criminal justice system, and of how the prison also functions as a space where competing ideas about national mythology and history are created and contested.

**Methodology**

*The Angolite* is a bi-monthly prison newsmagazine compiled and edited by prisoners at Angola. It began its current run, much of it uncensored, in 1976. Each issue of *The Angolite* ranges from approximately 60 to 90 pages in length and contains news briefs about events or happenings at Angola (e.g. prisoner deaths, escape attempts, athletics, religious groups, offender organizations), updates regarding criminal justice developments in Louisiana and across the United States (e.g. legislation that impacts sentencing policy), and an investigative feature article or articles (e.g. prisoner suicide, HIV/AIDS). Contributions from outside academics and professional groups are accepted, but *The Angolite*’s staff produces much of the newsmagazine’s content. There are also two sections dedicated to original writings submitted by readers: ‘Sounding Off’ and ‘Angola Expressions’. The majority of the submissions contained in these sections come from prisoners at Angola, but contributions from Angola staff, prisoners at other institutions, and ‘free people’ are also accepted. In order to be published, these submissions must meet several criteria: 1) no profane language; 2) general relevance (e.g. no appeals for penpals); and 3) no unsubstantiated claims or personal attacks regarding a prisoner’s individual case.

I contacted the current editor of *The Angolite* in July 2011 and requested copies of two issues per year from the years 1976 to 2001. I decided to cut the sample off in 2001 because this was shortly after former editor of *The Angolite*, Wilbert Rideau (2010), claims prison administrators attempted to limit the staff’s journalistic freedom. Data for
the first paper (chapter two) are derived from a convenience sample of 43 issues drawn from the years 1979 to 2001. I contacted the current editor of The Angolite again in September 2012 and requested copies of every available issue from the years 1979 to 2001. He sent me an additional 52 issues. Consequently, data for paper two (chapter three) are derived from a total of 95 issues ranging from 1979 to 2001. There is no reason to believe that the content of a completely random sample of issues would differ in any systematic manner from what was found in these convenience samples.

There are limitations that come with these data and these are worth discussing. For one, prisoners’ literacy levels, space restrictions, and The Angolite’s ban on profane language all have the potential to influence these prisoners’ writings to some degree. It is also likely that those prisoners who submit writings to The Angolite for publication are not representative of Angola’s prisoner population. The individuals who are members of The Angolite staff or who write in the hope that their letter or poem will be published might be more reflective regarding their experiences, more willing to divulge their feelings, or perhaps more politically-minded. Just as these men are not likely to be representative of Angola’s population, they are almost certainly not representative of prisoners elsewhere. But while I may not be able to make broad, generalizable claims using these data, this methodological approach has clear value. These men’s writings provide insight into their daily lives, their thoughts and feelings, and their subjective experiences of their incarceration in an era characterized by much upheaval in U.S. penology. And, as we have already seen, research utilizing these kinds of data are sorely lacking in the sociology of punishment. Thus, we have much we can learn from these men’s writings.

Along these lines, I hope that this project helps to highlight the importance and value of integrating prisoners’ knowledges into academic debates (see also Gaucher 1988; Piché, Gaucher, and Walby 2014).

I also travelled to the prison, located in West Feliciana Parish and about a thirty to forty-minute drive from St. Francisville, Louisiana, on multiple occasions. I attended the Angola Prison Rodeo on April 27th, 2014 and October 5th, 2014. I spent approximately six to seven hours at the prison each of these two Sundays mostly browsing for
hobbycrafts, observing interactions amongst prisoners and between prisoners and attendees, and watching the rodeo events.

On October 3rd, 2014 I went to Hill Memorial Library, home to the Louisiana State University’s Special Collections. In the Louisiana & Lower Mississippi Valley Collections I viewed and scanned for personal use four documents: three issues of *The Angola Story* – a small pamphlet produced by prison officials that provides an overview of Angola’s operations, describes its programs and initiatives, and documents its history – published in 1997, 1999, and 2001; and a General Information Brochure published by the prison in 1960. On Saturday, October 4th, 2014 I visited the Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum, which opened in 1998 and is located just outside the prison’s front gate. I spent approximately one to two hours viewing the exhibits and taking photos of the items on display. During the October trip I also acquired six additional issues of *The Angolite* (these issues were drawn from the years 2011 to 2014), purchased the Rodeo Souvenir Program for $5, and picked up a copy of *The Angola Story* pamphlet – this one published in 2011 – from the museum’s gift shop. In addition to the set of 95 issues of *The Angolite*, my observations during these visits and the documents I obtained and described above inform the third paper (chapter four).

## Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation comprises five chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapters two through four consist of three papers that could each easily be considered stand-alone articles. What unites these three chapters is that in each I aim to: 1) describe the daily lives, experiences, and conceptions of prisoners at Angola; 2) highlight the importance of incorporating prisoners’ writings – or, more broadly, their knowledges – into academic discussions about penality; and 3) demonstrate that narrowing our analytical focus to the local level can result in a more comprehensive understanding of the issues currently being debated by those who study crime, deviance, and punishment. Below I provide a brief description of each of the three papers.
Characterized by a massive increase in incarceration rates, a purported paradigm shift in penal philosophy away from rehabilitation and toward incapacitation of prisoners, and the return of unambiguously punitive practices like capital punishment and chain gangs, the last several decades of the twentieth century was a period of tremendous upheaval and volatility in American penology. But there remains much debate and very little consensus about the exact nature of these developments and the extent to which they represent a significant change from past policies and practices (see, for instance, Cullen and Gendreau 2001; Feeley and Simon 1992; Garland 2001a; Hannah-Moffat 2005; Harcourt 2007; Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005; Phelps 2011). A consequence of this continued debate is uncertainty about how the lived experiences of prisoners have been impacted by these and other happenings. Building on an emerging body of literature (e.g. Barker 2006; Beckett and Western 2001; Campbell 2011, 2012; Campbell and Schoenfeld 2013; Lynch 2010; Page 2011; Schoenfeld 2010) that underscores the importance of examining the degree to which the penological trajectories of different jurisdictions in the United States resemble one another, in the first article (chapter two) I investigate what transpired on-the-ground at Angola over this time period. Specifically, this paper outlines how a combination of national trends, state-level policies, and institutional developments informed the conditions of confinement and shaped carceral experiences at Angola.

The literature on masculinities in prison generally falls into one of two camps. Too often, in my view, scholars (e.g., Dolovich 2011; Haney 2011; Hsu 2005; Kupers 2005: 717, 2010; Phillips 2001; Sabo, Kupers, and London 2001; Toch 1998) concentrate on the “socially destructive” elements of hegemonic masculinity that male prisoners are said to idealize and embody and that the prison ostensibly exaggerates; these include, but are not limited to: repression of emotions, insensitivity, a preoccupation with violence, and exploitation of those who are viewed as weak and/or feminine. Another group of scholars (e.g., Bandyopadhyay 2006; Crewe 2006; Evans and Wallace 2008; Jewkes 2002, 2005; Nandi 2002; Phillips 2012; Sim 1994) has asserted that masculine identity and performance in prisons is actually more complex than this. They point to the plurality of masculinities on display, suggest that prisoners’ ideas about manhood may change over the course of one’s sentence, and note that some prisoners may endorse the tenets of the
hypermasculine prison code in public but do not subscribe to this set of beliefs in private. While the work stemming from this latter group has established a solid foundation from which to build, as Crewe (2006) points out, there is a lack of empirical research to support these claims and we need to hear more prisoners’ voices on this issue. Following this, in paper two (chapter three) I analyze over 1,230 individual submissions to The Angolite to explore both how prisoners at Angola negotiate the hypermasculine prison code and how they conceive of manhood more generally.

It is well established that mass incarceration has disproportionately impacted black men and women (see, for example, Western and Pettit 2010). Some scholars (e.g. Alexander 2010; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Wacquant 2000, 2001, 2002b; Weatherspoon 2007) suggest that the best way to understand this overrepresentation is to situate it in the United States’ broader history of racial discrimination and subjugation. Mass incarceration, according to this perspective, is the latest chapter in a history that also includes slavery, convict leasing, and the Jim Crow era. But while drawing attention to the parallels between these institutions is important, it presupposes that we all have the same negative memories of slavery or the Jim Crow era and it fails to consider how prisoners view this relationship. In the third paper (chapter four) I examine how Angola’s plantation past – the land on which it sits used to be a series of slave plantations and prisoners continue to farm at Angola today – is remembered and forgotten by both administrators and prisoners. Specifically, I investigate how penal officials narrate the history of Angola to the outside world and whether they acknowledge the ‘cultural trauma’ of slavery (see Eyerman 2002, 2004). I also look once again to prisoners’ writings in The Angolite in order to examine whether memories of slavery and Angola’s plantation history shape how prisoners understand their incarceration today.

In chapter five I summarize the key findings of each of the studies and discuss the major implications of this project for the sociology of punishment. I then suggest directions for future research and conclude with a few final words.
Before I continue, however, I would like to make a quick note about my approach. Throughout the remainder of this dissertation I explore how prisoners adapt to changes in penal policy and practice, discuss their struggles, their hopes, and their fears, and examine their views on their imprisonment and the criminal justice system. As I do so, I consciously strive to insert some humanity and empathy into the academic debates that inform each of the substantive chapters that follow this introduction. To do otherwise, in my view, would ring false and would also obfuscate, rather than elucidate, the lives, experiences, and conceptions of prisoners in the era of mass incarceration.
NOTES

1 An important exception might be the research examining how prisoners cope with maximum and supermaximum security confinement (e.g. Haney 2003; Rhodes 2004).
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Chapter 2
‘Longtermers Blues’:
Penal Politics, Reform, and Carceral Experiences At Angola

Introduction

Scholars continue to struggle to understand contemporary developments in US penology, which encompass the relatively recent dramatic increases in incarceration rates, (re)implementation of a series of explicitly punitive measures, and preoccupation with incapacitation. Some believe these changes represent a significant transformation in crime prevention and corrections, marking the emergence of a ‘new penology’ or a ‘culture of control’ (e.g. Feeley and Simon 1992; Garland 2001). Others, however, question the relative newness of the ‘new penology’ or the extent to which it marks a departure from previous ways of dealing with crime and doling out punishment, underscoring the uncertainty surrounding how these developments have affected carceral experiences (e.g. Hannah-Moffat 2005; Harcourt 2007). This project builds on this latter perspective. First, I link the macrotheoretical punishment scholarship to on-the-ground changes at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola), a prison with a rich and enthralling history. Second, addressing a topic that has not received sufficient consideration from scholars, I explore whether and how this period of correctional instability shaped the experiences of prisoners at Angola, and more specifically how they conceived of and coped with their incarceration. I turn to Angola in large part because carceral experiences in the South remain undertheorized, an oversight that should surprise us in light of the attention scholars (e.g. Garland 2010; Mancini 1996) have given to the ways in which this region’s penal policies and practices have diverged from the rest of the nation both historically and presently.

Through a content analysis of The Angolite prison news magazine from the years 1979 to 2001, this paper traces Angola’s trajectory over the last several decades of the twentieth century, examines how this path was informed by national trends, penal politics in Louisiana, and Angola’s own unique history, and analyzes how this influenced carceral experiences. Corresponding to the work of scholars like Hannah-Moffat (2005), who
question the welfare/risk binary most famously outlined in Feeley and Simon’s (1992) ‘new penology,’ I find that there was no sharp transition from rehabilitation to managerialism. Instead, the focus at Angola in the 1970s was on bringing order and security to the ‘bloodiest prison in the nation’ (The Angolite 1983: 18). Further complicating this narrative, I discover that rather than solely a product of neo-liberalism, responsibilization rhetoric at Angola dates back to the 1950s, when inmate self-help organizations were first created. As such, this paper contributes to the growing body of scholarly work that stresses the need to investigate changes in penality on a subnational scale. Perhaps even more importantly, it advances our understanding of late-modern US punishment by highlighting the frustration, despair, and struggle with hopelessness that prisoners experienced following the imposition of stiffer sentences and restriction of release opportunities that began in the 1970s.

**Literature Review**

**Paradigm Shift?**

It is widely recognized that rehabilitation, driven by a sense of optimism and hope for the future that prevailed following the end of World War II, was the ‘guiding principle’ of the US criminal justice system for much of the twentieth century (e.g. Mauer 2006: 40). During this era of ‘penal-welfarism’ punishment was characterized by indeterminate sentencing, individualized treatment based on expert classification and assessment, education, parole, and assistance during reintegration (Garland 2001: 34). Scholars have noted, however, that the relationship between punishment discourse and practice is less than straightforward and that it is likely that rehabilitation played a less prominent role in corrections than the rhetoric would suggest (e.g. Cohen 1985; Wacquant 2001). As Garland (2001) observes, there were varying levels of commitment to these policies across and within agencies, institutions, and actors, and there was tension within the system as to how the policies should be translated into practice.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s scholars began documenting the decline of the rehabilitative ideal. As Feeley and Simon (1992) note, the focus appeared to shift away
from clinical diagnosis and treatment of individuals to the classification and management of risky groups. Prison officials no longer aimed to rehabilitate or transform offenders, but rather to manage and control. The penal system’s emphasis on rationality and efficiency meant that lower-risk individuals were more likely to be subject to electronic monitoring in non-carceral settings, while those deemed ‘higher-risk’ were incapacitated in institutions that offered fewer programs and services. There have been a number of explanations for these developments. These include the changing role of criminological research, a loss of confidence in the welfare state, and scepticism about the effectiveness of rehabilitation as embedded in an institution designed to punish (Cullen and Gendreau 2001; Garland 2001; Mauer 2006). Significantly, what these scholars do agree on is that both sides of the political spectrum grew increasingly dissatisfied with penal-welfarism, thereby leading to the collapse of the status quo.

Another group of scholars, however, question whether the purported shift to the ‘new penology’ signifies a qualitatively different way of dealing with offenders, as they draw attention to the complex and multi-faceted nature of punishment. Hannah-Moffat (2000, 2001), for instance, notes that multiple governing logics can – and do – operate simultaneously. O’Malley (1999: 175), on the other hand, endeavors to make sense of what he calls the ‘volatility’ and ‘incoherence’ in penal policy and practice. Here he means that punishment appears to be contradictory in that the prison warehouses and seeks to rehabilitate, disciplines and empowers, stigmatizes and aims to restore relationships. Others have been even more explicit in addressing the purported decline of the rehabilitative ideal, contending that risk management has not simply replaced rehabilitation, but rather that rehabilitation has been re-worked so that it meshes with risk management to provide the foundation for correctional treatment. These authors claim that today rehabilitation is designed to enhance public safety, manage risk, impose controls, and encourage offenders to think about past actions in moral terms (Garland 2001; Hannah-Moffat 2005; Robinson 2008). In this new framework, rehabilitation is often tied to empowerment, as offenders are encouraged to make choices that will lead to their reformation and to take responsibility for their past and future actions (Hannah-Moffat 2000, 2001; Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005). In other words, rehabilitation is
malleable and can fit with a number of different styles of penal governance. A similar pattern applies to risk. For example, some scholars (Maurutto and Hannah-Moffat 2006: 440) contend that risk technologies are ‘constantly being reinvented, retrofitted and reassembled’ and that these modifications are connected with wider strategies of governance, while others (Harcourt 2007) have observed that actuarial logic and risk tools have a lengthy history and it is just the criteria used in risk assessments that have changed over time. The key point here is that the welfare/risk binary must be reconsidered (Garland 1990; Hannah-Moffat 2005).

While the considerable rise in incarceration rates and the re-emergence of punitive practices such as chain gangs in various jurisdictions suggests that something has changed in the way the USA punishes its criminals, exactly what has changed and the extent to which it represents a departure from the rehabilitative era remains unclear. Phelps (2011) utilizes data on staffing, types of correctional facilities, and inmate participation in programming in order to empirically test the decline of the rehabilitative ideal and the hypothesized punitive turn. She finds that despite the shifts in penal rhetoric in the 1970s, rates of programming have been relatively stable over time. However, since 1990 participation in academic programs has declined, while participation in reentry-related programming has increased. Phelps suggests that this matches broader shifts in penal governance and ways of thinking about crime and the offender in that reentry-related programming seeks to responsibilize offenders, while academic programming is designed to remedy social and economic disadvantage. These findings further complicate the notion that there has been a drastic qualitative transformation in penalty and substantiate the argument that we must rethink the ‘penal-welfarism’/‘new penology’ dichotomy.

Despite the attention devoted to examining this period of correctional instability, there has been a relative dearth of scholarly work that explores daily life inside of the prison (Simon 2000; Wacquant 2002). This is not to suggest that such work is entirely absent from the sociology of punishment, but rather, as Goodman (2008: 740) puts it, prisons are ‘woefully understudied locales’. There are exceptions to this general trend, however. For
instance, scholars have examined how racial/ethnic identity influences the carceral experiences of female prisoners in different contexts (Kruttschnitt and Hussemann 2008), how male prisoners negotiate their masculinity (Comack 2008), and the role agency and resistance play in the institution (Bosworth and Carrabine 2001). While such accounts and others have added to our understanding of prison life, much remains unknown, especially with regard to whether and how these changes in penal rhetoric and strategies of governance shaped the lived experiences of inmates.

Kruttschnitt and Gartner (2005) take an important step in this regard, as they examine how the purported penological shift from rehabilitation to incapacitation affected the daily lives of female prisoners in California. They find that, while there are differences over time and between correctional facilities in the carceral experiences of these women, there were also some key similarities. Notably, Kruttschnitt and Gartner observe that rehabilitation did not disappear by the 1990s, but it had been re-worked to correspond with the greater focus on order maintenance and managerialism. Interventions were now targeted at empowering prisoners, enabling them to make responsible choices about their lives. The authors also suggest that as the goal of the prison shifted away from treatment and toward management the inmates grew more self-reliant and became more distrustful of one another as well as of the staff. Kruttschnitt and Gartner conclude that institutional context and time period shape the experiences of prisoners, but also that the carceral experience ensures that there is continuity in how prisoners adjust to prison life and interact with others.

Another element of late-modern punishment that must be further evaluated is the degree to which the penal narrative operates the same way across different jurisdictions in the USA. There is a budding body of literature on this issue, as a number of scholars have recently undertaken case studies that force us to question the utility of relying solely on macro-level explanations of penal policy. Recognizing the influence of citizen participation in the democratic process, racial and economic composition of the population, and cultural norms in shaping punishment policies, various scholars argue that we need to explore shifts in penalty at the local, state, and/or regional level (Barker
2006; Beckett and Western 2001; Lynch 2010). Several other examples are worth mentioning. These include Schoenfeld (2010), who examines the impact prison conditions litigation had on the rise of mass incarceration in Florida, Campbell (2011, 2012), who documents the importance of party politics, law enforcement officials, and Texas’ history in shaping that state’s prison expansion, and Page (2011), who suggests that the California Correctional Peace Officers Association played a key role in influencing policy debates in California. This line of thought informs my project, which seeks to strengthen our understanding of subnational variations in punishment. While my project complements this body of work, it also advances it. Specifically, rather that examining penological developments at the state level, I undertake a case study of one particularly infamous prison, Angola, to analyze how national trends, state penal politics, and various institutional factors combined to shape carceral experiences.

Angola

A logical starting point for scholarly examinations of penality in the South is convict leasing, a system under which criminals were contracted out to private individuals or organizations and sent to work on plantations, farms, mines, and so on. Like slavery, it was designed to provide a cheap source of labor and establish/maintain a racial hierarchy while being underpinned by violence and brutality (Adamson 1983; Mancini 1996). The state of Louisiana leased its convicts from 1844 until 1901. It was not concerns over long working hours, the poor quality of food and clothing, or the discipline of the convicts that led to the end of convict leasing, but rather politics and the death of Major Samuel James, the lessee for much of the post-Civil War period (Carleton 1971). In 1901 Louisiana purchased the Angola plantation, where the penitentiary stands today, and so named because of the homeland of its slaves (Schrift 2008). Carleton (1971) notes that despite improvements in the treatment of offenders following the transition to state control, convicts continued to labor in poor conditions and their rehabilitation was simply not a concern. In fact, spurred by the use of convict guards and a less-than-professional group of employees, the legacy of brutality at Angola continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century. This changed briefly in the early 1950s when 37 inmates slashed their
heels in order to protest corruption and appalling conditions, an incident that directed the public’s attention to the prison (Wikberg 1991). Reform efforts, including the creation of a small vocational and academic program, the firings and forced retirements of some of the more troublesome employees, and the hiring of professional penologists ensued, but by the early 1960s fiscal constraints reversed the progress that had been made (Wikberg 1991). Thus, contrary to the popular portrayal of the era outlined by Garland (2001), at the height of penal-welfarism in the 1950s and early 1960s Angola was not a place where offenders were classified and treated by experts, could learn a trade, or have access to recreational opportunities. Instead, it was lawless and violent, with inmates subject to arduous working and living conditions that were characterized as ‘nothing short of barbarous’ (Rideau and Wikberg 1990: 20).

The remainder of this paper explores carceral experiences at Angola over the last several decades of the twentieth century. It should be no shock that, with its bloody and unique history, Angola followed an unusual trajectory. Understanding how Angola is unique is the more important task. By looking to the Deep South – and to Angola in particular – I contribute to the growing body of research that addresses penality on a subnational scale and, in so doing, complicate our notions of late-modern US punishment.

Data and Methods

The **Angolite** is a bi-monthly, uncensored prison news magazine edited and published by prisoners at Angola. It is an outstanding source for researchers interested in carceral experiences for several reasons: (1) it was free from censorship for over two decades; (2) it is arguably the most recognized inmate produced news magazine; and (3) it has an uninterrupted publication history. The **Angolite** currently has 1,200 paid subscribers covering every US state and five foreign countries. Subscribers include academic institutions and individual professors, major media outlets, and individuals with friends or relatives in prison. Approximately 1,800 copies of every issue are produced for the 5,000 or so inmates at Angola. While the majority of the content is produced by their small staff, **The Angolite** also accepts relevant contributions from academics and
professional groups (e.g. The Sentencing Project). Each issue contains letters to the editor, news briefs, a feature article exploring a range of topics from HIV/AIDS to capital punishment, and a section devoted to original writings submitted by readers. The content of this original writing section varies, but it is typically composed of poetry, prose, and letters written by the inmates at Angola. While prisoners may make multiple contributions, this section represents the best source for exploring how the general inmate population experiences their imprisonment. Although contributions from inmates at other prisons and ‘free people’ are also accepted in this section, for my analysis I relied only on contributions from inmates at Angola. The Angolite has several criteria for inmate submissions: (1) general relevance (e.g. no personal appeals for penpals); (2) no personal attacks or unsubstantiated claims about the prisoner’s particular case; and (3) no profane language.

Data are derived from a convenience sample of 43 issues drawn from the years 1979 to 2001. I contacted the editor of The Angolite and requested copies of two issues per year, which were then selected by the staff based on availability. At one level, my coding scheme was focused and derived from debates on the ‘new penology’. Sample codes include rehabilitation, risk management, and order maintenance. I used an open coding strategy to explore the ways in which inmates experienced and adapted to their incarceration.

While this methodological approach allows me to access and analyze a much larger sample of carceral experiences across a longer time period than interviews with current and/or former prisoners would, there are several limitations inherent in using these data. Specifically, I make no attempts to generalize beyond Angola because The Angolite cannot provide adequate substantive information on the experiences of prisoners outside the institution. Similarly, these data cannot accurately portray the daily lives and feelings of the approximately 5,000 inmates at Angola. Moreover, literacy levels, space limitations, and restrictions regarding profane language all place constraints on the voices heard in the pages of The Angolite. As such, these data are unlikely to be representative of the entire inmate population. Therefore I do not claim to be telling the definitive story.
about life at Angola. What these data can do, however, is provide a window into one of the most infamous prisons in the USA during a time thought to represent unprecedented change in punishment. In short, this study sheds light on how some of the inmates at Angola experienced, felt about, and adapted to this volatile period in corrections.

Findings

Bringing Order and Security to Angola – the late 1960s and 1970s

After the budget cuts in 1962, many of the advancements made following the heel-slashings at Angola were abandoned. Programming fell by the wayside, employees were fired and replaced by convict guards, violence escalated, and the number of escape attempts increased (Wikberg 1991). Safety and security at Angola deteriorated to the extent that it became known as ‘the bloodiest prison in the nation’ (The Angolite 1983: 18). The march toward substantive and enduring change began in 1971 when four inmates filed a civil lawsuit protesting the lack of medical service, unsanitary conditions, racial segregation, violence, and abuse by guards (Dennis 1998). This lawsuit led to a 1975 federal court decision ordering Louisiana to end the violence and relieve the overcrowding at Angola (The Angolite 1979a). The convict guard system was abandoned, sanitary conditions improved, and new staff - social workers, mental health workers, medical personnel, teachers, and administrators - were hired (Glover 1991). Moreover, racial segregation ended and new guidelines were enacted to alleviate overcrowding and guarantee the staff necessary to clamp down on inmate violence (Mason 1987).

In the wake of the turmoil that plagued Angola throughout much of its history, the focus of the administration in the mid-1970s shifted to obtaining control and bringing security to the prison (Mason 1987). While the decline in bloodshed may be partly attributed to the restriction of inmate freedoms that followed the hiring of additional correctional officers as well as the improvement in conditions, Warden Ross Maggio, Jr.’s emphasis on work and recreation also likely played a role. Believing that idleness created only violence and disorder, and that this type of environment inhibited any of the prisoners’
rehabilitative efforts, Maggio – who arrived at Angola in 1976 – ensured that every able-bodied prisoner worked during his regime (*The Angolite* 1984a). Other wardens also followed his approach. The rationale for this is articulated by Warden Butler, who in an interview with *The Angolite* observed:

> just like I believe in a good work program, I also believe in a good sports and recreation program. When inmates aren’t busy working, they need something to occupy their minds. I think you ought to work eight hours a day and have an opportunity to play sports or watch TV or whatever. It takes all that to make the prison operate well (*The Angolite* 1987: 44).

Thus, while daily life at Angola during the post-war period was not informed by the tenets of penal-welfarism, by the mid-1970s the focus shifted to bringing order and security to the prison. However, the transition to this more managerial style played out quite differently and relatively early at Angola. While other institutions were becoming more austere and efficient in the 1980s and 1990s, at Angola the budget was increased, overcrowding reduced, conditions improved, work and recreation provided outlets for tension, and more programming sprung up.

**Hopelessness, Despair, and Frustration – the 1980s and 1990s**

Other factors are also critical to the maintenance of order at Angola. For instance, current warden, Burl Cain, like his predecessors, believes that television, fitness equipment, and the like are tools to be used to modify the inmates’ behavior and to run the prison effectively (Glover 1995). When these tools are not at the warden’s disposal, he argues, the prison must be ruled through force – this causes bad prisons. To achieve a ‘good prison’ Cain suggests that there must be good medicine, food, sports, and religion; he declares, ‘even if I was an atheist I’d still want religion in the prison because the side-effects are peace and harmony. Godly people don’t steal or strongarm, or do the things that cause problems...it’s just plain good sense’ (Glover 1995: 21).

While the influence of religion should not be ignored – particularly after the arrival of the ‘Christian Warden’ Burl Cain in 1995 – it is hope that emerges as perhaps the predominant theme in the 1980s and 1990s. Hope is something also clearly informed by
Louisiana’s penal politics and tied to Angola’s new managerial ethos. On this issue, Wilbert Rideau (1989: 2) writes, inmates ‘exist on hope and the prison operates on, even more than guns and fences, hope’. Rideau and Wikberg (1989: 22) suggest that it is hope that ‘shapes [prisoners’] aspirations and controls their behavior and existences’. When ‘lady hope’ is gone, one prisoner writes, ‘your world just ain’t the same’ (Unger 2000: 60).

The relationship between hope for release and order maintenance becomes clear when we look to changes in sentencing policies and clemency practices. In the mid-1970s Louisiana embarked ‘on a law-and-order binge with each lawmaker trying to outdo the next in changing the nature of offenses, increasing penalties, and restricting or eliminating probation, parole and good-time’ (The Angolite 1986: 33). There appear to be two developments in particular that affected prisoners’ sense of hope: 1) the abandonment of the ‘10-6’ practice; and 2) the politicization of pardons. Between 1926 and 1972, prisoners sentenced to life in Louisiana were, with good behavior and the support of the warden, given a state-backed clemency review hearing after serving ten years and six months; the Board of Pardons then regularly recommended the sentence be commuted to time served, and the governor consistently approved these recommendations. In fact, this occurrence was so common that it was considered ‘legalistic ritual’ (The Angolite 1982a: 19). In the wake of the Furman v. Georgia decision, Louisiana ended the ‘10-6’ practice for fear that those prisoners who had spent ten years and six months on death row would be eligible for release; in 1979 the ‘10-6’ practice was officially repealed and a life without parole sentence was implemented (The Angolite 1982a; The Angolite 1984b).

In line with his predecessors, and Southern governors more generally, Edwin Edwards, who served four terms as governor of Louisiana (1972-1980, 1984-1988, and 1992-1996), appeared to make the most out of his ability to pardon and commute sentences during his first two terms, granting clemency to over 2,000 individuals (Foster 1988). In 1979, however, the Times-Picayune ran a series that detailed the political dealings of the Pardon Board, reporting that those with connections to Edwards had seemed to fare better
than others. While Edwards was unable to run for a third consecutive term in the
gubernatorial election later that year, Dave Treen was elected in part because of his
promise to be tough on crime and clemency, and ‘to change the moral tone of
government’ (Foster 1988: 37). Pardons and clemency went on to become one of the key
issues in the 1983 gubernatorial election. Treen – having signed fewer than 200 pardons
over his four year term – once again campaigned on issues like law and order and
honesty, suggesting that Edwards had been too generous in granting pardons during his
time in office, and that his supporters and friends had benefitted the most from this
generosity (Foster 1988). While Treen lost that election, Foster (1988) argues that he
succeeded in making clemency a political issue, leaving his successors wary of appearing
to pardon too many offenders. In his third term as governor, Edwards himself granted
clemency at a fraction of the rate of his previous two terms (Foster 1988). Together, these
two developments drastically reduced the chances of release for many of Angola’s
residents.

This issue came to a head in the late 1980s. It is at this time that Rideau and Wikberg
(1989: 22) document then-Governor Buddy Roemer’s (1988-1992) refusal to grant
clemency to anyone at Angola, tying this policy decision to a ‘recent rash of acts of
seeming desperation’ and in particular to increased levels of violence and to attempted
escapes by longtermers. For those outsiders sceptical about the causal relationship
between hopelessness, brutality, and desperation, Rideau and Wikberg (1989: 19) argue
‘one doesn’t need a degree in psychology to realize that even the most sane and law-
abiding of men will be moved to irrational and desperate behavior if hope is removed
from their existence. Prisoners are no different’. The reluctance to grant executive
clemency was continued by subsequent governors Edwin Edwards (1992-1996) and Mike
Foster (1996-2004) (Dennis 1994a, 1997a). Prisoners serving life sentences were left
believing that regardless of their readiness to show remorse for past actions, efforts to
rehabilitate themselves, or attempts to become responsible, they were doomed to spend
the rest of their lives at Angola (Dennis 1997b). Release opportunities also appear to be
linked to the suicide rate, as twenty-two prisoners committed suicide between 1986 and

Of course, the final decades of the twentieth century bore witness to the increased warehousing/incapacitation of offenders with the imposition of mandatory minimums and habitual offender statutes across the United States. For instance, New York’s infamous Rockefeller Drug Laws were enacted in 1973 – the same year Louisiana instituted a life sentence for possession with intent to distribute – (Nelson 2000), while California’s Uniform Determinate Sentencing Act was passed in 1976 (Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005). Despite mirroring these national trends, prisoners in Louisiana, and at Angola in particular, are unique in that they face serving some of the longest sentences of anywhere in the world (Rideau and Wikberg 1989). As Warden Butler noted at the time,

this is the end of the road. This is where all the lifers, all the longtermers and all the people other institutions don’t want, wind up...Angola is different and has to be operated differently from other prisons because you’ve got a different type of convict (Rideau and Wikberg 1989: 21).

In fact, by the year 2000, 86% of Angola’s 5,100 inmates were expected to die in prison (Rideau 2000). The large number of prisoners facing natural death at Angola creates a unique environment and poses a distinct set of challenges not only for administrators, but also for inmates. For example, Wallace McDonald, one of the original heel-slashers in 1951, reflects on Angola’s evolution this way: ‘now you got better living conditions, don’t work as hard and got no corporal punishment, but you ain’t got no hope. You can just forget it. Before, you at least had a chance to get out’ (The Angolite 1990: 29). Speaking about the time when Angola was still the ‘bloodiest prison in the nation’ and before sentencing policies grew increasingly punitive, Herbert Williams - having served thirty-four years of a life sentence - notes, ‘it was bad back then, but still you went home sooner or later’ (Myers 2000/2001: 35). ‘The worst thing you can do to a lifer’ notes Sylvester Peters, ‘is tell him he’s gonna grow old and probably die in prison’ (The Angolite 1982b: 37). Eric Perry (2001: 69) articulates the fear associated with this realization this way:

*Everything that gave me a feeling  
Is gone into thin air*
My dreams are empty
My heart is not there
Everything is gone
So why should I care
People tell me to relax
It will all be fine
After all
You have plenty of time
Time is no friend
It surely is my foe
No one to call a friend
And a lifetime to go
Inside this place
I don’t dare shed any tears
I face a new fear
To know I will die here

Significantly, however, even as the prospect of release became increasingly bleak not all prisoners at Angola lost hope. For instance, there are those like James Williamson (2000: 59), who declares,

I don’t really know what going to happen, but I think I can see light.
People (inmates) around Angola think I’m crazy because ever since I came here I keep saying I’m going home. I never gave up hope. I truly believe that I am going home.

For others, hope seemed to be a complex concept, and linked to more than just the prospect of release. Bradley (2001: 72), for example, is aware he will likely never leave Angola but is still able to avoid complete despair; he expresses himself this way:

All this emptiness I feel inside
They’ve got my body
I’ve got my mind and pride
They can imprison me for eternity
But still in my heart, I’ll always be free

Inmates at Angola coped with hopelessness but also struggled in other ways. For instance, Gerard Edwards’ (1992) open letter to his fellow prisoners affirms that a penal system that believes offenders are incapable of positive change can lead to frustration, hostility, and aggression. Troy Oatsvall (1983: 69), on the other hand, observes that ‘the real prison is loneliness that sinks its teeth into souls of men and leaves a sick feeling inside. It is anxiety that pushes and swells. It is uncertainty that smothers and stifles’. He
continues: ‘the real prison is memory that comes in the night, its cry like the scream of a trumpet. It is frustration, futility, despair and indifference’. Thomas Hurst (1990: 66) suggests that the carceral experience leaves some prisoners ‘broken,’ strips others of their compassion, and fills him with rage.

Rehabilitation as Self-Help – A Constant

There has been much scholarly discussion about neo-liberal-inspired attempts to make offenders responsible for past decisions, empower them to make the ‘right’ choices in the future, and to make the prison an environment conducive to positive personal transformation (Hannah-Moffat 2000, 2001; Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005; O’Malley 1999). At Angola, however, this type of rhetoric dates back to the 1950s, when the first education programs and inmate self-help groups appeared at the prison under Warden Sigler (Dennis 2001). Warden Henderson continued with this practice, as he encouraged inmates to create and participate in self-help organizations in the late 1960s when budget constraints meant there was little money for rehabilitative programming (The Angolite 1979b). The responsibilization discourse remained prevalent right through the turn of the century. This is revealed in an interview with C. Paul Phelps following his removal as Secretary for the Department of Corrections; here he tells The Angolite that ‘you can’t rehabilitate anybody who doesn’t want to be’ (The Angolite 1981a: 16). Warden Burl Cain has his own view of rehabilitation that is in line with this notion of self-help. As Cain tells The Angolite in an interview shortly after arriving at Angola, upon looking at recidivism rates he ‘came to the conclusion that rehabilitation is a moral, not a social, phenomenon. The only thing that helps is when you change a man’s soul’ (Glover 1995: 21 emphasis original). Today, the Inmate Welfare Fund helps cover the cost of recreation and educational equipment and a host of other items that the state is unwilling to provide (Myers 1997b).

Despite – or perhaps because of – the hopelessness and despair that coincided with the realization that natural death at Angola was a distinct possibility, many inmates adopted this rhetoric of responsibilization and self-help. For instance, Eugene Rousso (1979: 84) writes, ‘rehabilitation, all change, must start with the self’ and contends that this is
possible only when prisoners have ‘reach[ed] a stage in their lives where they are tired of what they are like, where they have been and the direction they are heading’. Other inmates issue ‘wake-up’ calls to their peers, advising ‘the only person that is going to help you while you are here, is you’ (Reado 1985: 56). These types of calls to action appear throughout The Angolite. Tommy Cullier (1988: 69), for example, tells his fellow inmates, ‘you are responsible for you! If the whole world suddenly refuses to help you, that does not deny you from helping yourselves’. Then there are those like Sylvester Peters, who after serving almost fourteen years, reflects:

I’ve acquired two skills and kept an excellent conduct record while incarcerated. The system didn’t encourage me to do this. I did it on my own because I want to be ready and prepared to lead a decent, productive life once I’m free (The Angolite 1986: 35).

Significantly, there is an emphasis on collective betterment in this discourse that distinguishes it from top-down neo-liberal rhetoric that promotes individual responsibilization. Specifically, some inmates used The Angolite’s ‘sounding off’ section to attempt to empower their peers. Examples include Carlton Blue (1990) and Freddie Taylor (1990), who both urge their fellow inmates to take control of their lives through education, while others like Donnie Hunt (1991: 88) suggest that it is possible to treat incarceration as a learning experience and to ‘overcome’. Russell ‘Sharky’ Pearson (1993: 65), on the other hand, encourages prisoners to be responsible and to restore some sense of pride, asking rhetorically, ‘since you’re here why not make the best of it and try to better yourself?’ This is also present in personal narratives of individuals like Ned Rollo, a former inmate who used his time at Angola to reflect on his life and who left prison determined to make a difference, eventually creating a program aimed at helping ex-offenders (Rideau and Sinclair 1983). Prisoners are reminded frequently in the pages of The Angolite that they should not continue to blame others for their current situation and that they are the ones that choose to alter the course of their lives (Chevalier 2000; LeRoux 1998). This type of collective thinking is perhaps best articulated by the former editors, who appear acutely aware of the connection between public perceptions of offenders as a group and inmates’ individual fates; Rideau and Sinclair (1979: 3) write:

we unfortunately find ourselves caught in a period of time in which the mood of the public is ugly and vindictive and the cry is to literally bury us
all beneath tons on [sic] concrete cemented by hate, a cry that presupposes that we are all irrevocably evil and dangerous and incapable of ever being anything different, beyond redemption and not even worth the effort. There is little, if any, compassion in the way they see and feel about us as a class of people. We can cry, plead, rant and rave all we want to, but the reality is that there is little hope for us until there is some improvement in the way they view us.

The link between self-help and state assistance is a common topic of discussion, however, as there are some prisoners who suggest that rehabilitation is not solely their responsibility and that the criminal justice system should be doing more. Inmates like Norbert Camp, for instance, express frustration with the lack of assistance provided by the state. Camp, a graduate of Angola’s paralegal program, claims that ‘you have to show that you want to do something for yourself’ and that ‘the system don’t care about you’ (Dennis 1994b: 17). Others (Miller 1994: 68) assert that ‘this is a get up and make something out of your life situation’ but that the state and the prison need to provide more rehabilitative programming and vocational training. David Brewington (1997) suggests that administrators at Angola should be focused on providing more therapy and programming, as well as hiring a new batch of counsellors to assist with issues such as substance abuse. Brewington (1997: 66), however, is careful to acknowledge that while he thinks offenders need help he understands that prisoners ‘must first be willing to change the condition within [their] hearts’. Moreover, in a story touting lower recidivism rates for those enrolled in one of the few education programs available at Angola, Myers (1997a: 10) observes that these are individuals who ‘have the desire and, given the opportunity, prove by their performance how strongly they want to become better than they were’. And Tilghman Moore, head of the vo-tech program for decades, notes that while training is a ‘tool for rehabilitation’ in fact ‘true rehabilitation comes from within’ (Myers 1997a: 16).

Interestingly, prisoners often try to reconcile their desire to change their lives with being kept in an institution that is designed to strip them of their independence. Negotiating this balance seems to underscore the resolve of those who become success stories, as those
inmates who want to improve their lives have to ‘fight for a chance’ (Fitzpatrick 1997: 65). This is elaborated on in an article about providing assistance to releasees:

the prison bureaucracy stifles individuality and personal initiative while the criminal ethic of the prison subculture destroys, through vicious peer-pressure, any incentive to change or improve. The prisoner is hopelessly trapped in these two worlds – the keeper and the kept, and it is tragic that they both coexist through a criminal trade-off between them. The individual seriously wanting to change and improve must surmount the vested interests of both worlds – and very few prisoners have that kind of courage, discipline and determination (The Angolite 1981b: 36).

The idea that rehabilitation is largely a matter of personal initiative appears to be a vehicle of hope for some inmates. As Dennis (1992) writes, showing that they had improved themselves and matured beyond criminality was the key to maintaining hope for clemency in the face of extraordinarily long sentences.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

While much has been written about how and why punishment has transformed over the last several decades of the twentieth century, less is known about how this supposed paradigm shift might have shaped carceral experiences. Furthermore, too often scholars have suggested that these changes have occurred in the same way and had a similar impact across the United States. Building off the work of Kruttschnitt and Gartner (2005) and the expanding list of scholars whose research complicates macro-level explanations of penological change, this paper has explored the ways in which inmates at one of the most notorious prisons in the Deep South, Angola, experienced this period of correctional instability.

A content analysis of *The Angolite* from the years 1979 to 2001 uncovered several important findings. First, even in the heyday of rehabilitation in the 1950s and early 1960s prisoners at Angola were forced to sit idle or work long hours under the supervision of convict guards, cope with dreadful sanitary conditions, and had little access to medical care or recreational opportunities. Violence and brutality were pervasive. Lacking the funds to provide traditional rehabilitative programming and
correctional treatment, inmates were encouraged to form self-help organizations. This demonstrates that idealized conceptions of a rehabilitative era simply did not exist at Angola. However, motivated by a prisoner-initiated lawsuit protesting conditions at Angola, we do witness a new emphasis on securing and maintaining order beginning in the mid-1970s. While the extent to which Angola’s path matches other prisons in the Deep South and elsewhere is worth exploring further, we know from Lynch’s (2010) work on Arizona that Angola is not the only place where penal-welfarism failed to take hold. This should further problematize the ‘penal-welfarism’/‘new penology’ binary.

Second, these findings complicate the widespread notion that responsibilization rhetoric was adopted following the entrenchment of neo-liberalism. Instead, because there was no funding for rehabilitative programming at Angola, the offender’s transformation was framed in terms of self-help by administrators and inmates as early as the 1950s. Interestingly, attempts to promote self-help organizations by Wardens Sigler and Henderson are recounted fondly; their efforts represent the struggles of administrators devoted to ending the bloodshed, stimulating reform, and bringing some humanity to Angola (Dennis 2001; The Angolite 1979b). Framing rehabilitation as self-help appears to be more than merely a strategy for correctional officials to govern or normalize offenders, limit accountability, or excuse their inability to provide inmates with skills and training. Instead, it seems to function as an important mechanism for inmates to demonstrate perseverance and preserve some sense of hope or self-worth in the face of lengthy prison sentences. This is a question worth interrogating further.

Finally, this study reveals that the decline in the levels of violence and improvement in the material conditions at Angola in the 1970s did not translate into an easier prison experience. As sentences became longer and the state cracked down on clemency, many inmates endured a loss of hope, loneliness, frustration, and anger which then manifested itself in violence, escape attempts, and suicides. Others, however, dedicated themselves to educational pursuits or self-help groups. Consequently, this project should serve as a reminder that while macro, meso, and micro-level factors shape developments in penology, prisoners – as they cope with and adjust to various changes – help construct
carceral experiences and remain actors in this equation (see also Bosworth and Carrabine 2001). In sum, this paper has contributed to the body of literature that questions macro-level accounts of penological change, highlighting the factors that shaped how Angola navigated this period of correctional instability. In particular, this analysis has revealed the importance of national law-and-order trends, state penal politics, and various institutional factors – Angola’s history, offender sentence length, and the ideologies of various wardens – in shaping the conditions of confinement, the challenges facing administrators, and the way rehabilitation is framed and practiced.
NOTES

1 This article has been published in *Punishment and Society*. The full academic reference is:

2 In an attempt to help promote reform at Angola, the administration lifted censorship in 1976. Long-time editor Wilbert Rideau (2010) contends that the July/August 1999 issue was the first to reflect an attempt by administrators to curtail journalistic freedom.

3 There is no reason to suspect the content of this convenience sample differs systematically from what would be found in a random sample.
References


Chapter 3
‘He Must Learn What Being A Man Is All About’: Negotiating the Male Code at the Louisiana State Penitentiary

Introduction

Questions about the relationship between crime and masculinities have only really begun to be explored in the last two decades. Even less has been written about masculinities within the prison. Much of the literature that does exist suggests that prisons are horrifically violent institutions, housing men mostly preoccupied with displaying their toughness, hiding their emotions, and victimizing the weak (e.g., Dolovich 2011; Haney 2011; Hsu 2005; Kupers 2005; Sabo, Kupers, and London 2001; Toch 1998). A smaller group of scholars (e.g., Bandyopadhyay 2006; Evans and Wallace 2008; Jewkes 2002, 2005; Sim 1994), however, contend that prisoners may take on multiple masculinities, ideas about manhood may change over time, and that some prisoners endorse hypermasculinity publicly but do not subscribe to this code privately. I undertake a case study of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola), exploring both how prisoners at Angola negotiate the hypermasculine prison code and how they conceive of manhood more generally.

An analysis of writings contained in The Angolite, Angola’s prisoner-produced newsmagazine, reveals the complex ways men at the penitentiary discuss masculinities over the last several decades of the twentieth century. Prisoners talk consistently of their efforts to learn and grow in prison, of the importance of striving to better themselves, and of the need to make positive contributions to their environment and community; in many minds this was perceived as an indicator of manhood. Perseverance in the face of lengthy sentences and limited release opportunities demonstrated one’s strength of character and resolve, and therefore a particular type of masculinity, one distinct from violence and exploitation. Some prisoners acknowledged the existence of – and the pressure to conform to – a hypermasculine prison code that demanded they repress emotions, conceal weakness, and appear tough, but in the same breath publicly rejected this code. Others
composed poems to romantic partners, openly discussed the range of emotions they were experiencing, and documented the struggles associated with their incarceration. By adding a wide array of prisoners’ voices to the prison masculinities literature, this project brings much-needed nuance to this body of work, an area of scholarship with important implications for how we study crime and offenders, how we think about prison life, and how we conceptualize masculinities more generally.

**Literature Review**

**Machos or Paper Tigers?**

Building off of the foundation laid by Connell (1995) and Messerschmidt (1993), a number of scholars have observed that the prison limits men’s capacity to accomplish or ‘do’ masculinity in ways that are widely considered socially acceptable or productive. Specifically, the prison houses men who are often subordinated well before they first enter the institution, further degrades and stigmatizes them, divests them of their autonomy and role as breadwinner, and deprives them of access to material goods as well as heterosexual partners (e.g., Bandyopadhyay 2006; Crewe 2006; Dolovich 2011; Haney 2011; Hsu 2005; Karp 2010; Newton 1994; Phillips 2001). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this threatens their self-esteem and their status as men; as Newton (1994: 197) writes, “the prisoner’s masculinity is...besieged from every side”. These conditions often compel prisoners to attempt to reconstruct their manhood in any way they can, resulting in intensified pressure to subscribe to a more rigid male code of behaviour (Comack 2008; Karp 2010; Kupers 2005; Phillips 2001). Simply put, elements of a specific type of masculinity are thought to become exaggerated within the prison, with this more extreme version often referred to as hypermasculinity (Comack 2008; Crewe 2006; Dolovich 2011; Haney 2011; Karp 2010; Kupers 2005, 2010; Newton 1994; Toch 1998). The institution’s tendency to (re)shape behaviours and identities in this way has led Comack (2008: 110) to call incarceration a “gendering experience”.

That prisons have the ability to mould men, to alter their masculine identity and performance, appears difficult to dispute. But what is the nature of this transformation?
While there are differences in the ways hypermasculine prison culture is described, scholars tend to agree that it is primarily the negative or “socially destructive” aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are exaggerated in the prison (Comack 2008; Kupers 2005: 717, 2010; Sim 1994). A quick review of the way prison hypermasculinity is discussed is illustrative of this fact. It also reveals the clear parallels between the masculinities that exist both inside and outside of the prison (Jewkes 2005; Sabo et al. 2001; Sim 1994). To live up to the hypermasculine prison code, men must be strong, tough, and loyal, as well as able to repress their emotions, hide their vulnerability, and conceal weaknesses (Comack 2008; de Viggiani 2012; Dolovich 2011; Haney 2011; Hsu 2005; Karp 2010; Kupers 2010; Phillips 2001; Robinson 2011; Toch 1998). Men in prison must be stoic, capable of managing their own problems, and able to experience pain in silence (Karp 2010; Kupers 2005, 2010; Phillips 2001; Toch 1998). They must be aggressive, ready and willing to resort to violence, and insensitive to others (Comack 2008; Haney 2011; Kupers 2005; Sabo et al. 2001). Some scholars have suggested that it is not enough to simply show off one’s toughness, and that prisoners must be prepared to exploit and dominate weaker men who are considered feminine, a practice that appears grounded in pervasive misogyny and homophobia (Dolovich 2011; Hsu 2005; Kupers 2005, 2010; Newton 1994; Phillips 2001). The supremacy of this hypermasculine prison code and the pressure to conform to its standards has been observed in contexts as varied as youth facilities in Ontario, Canada, and men’s prisons located in the United States, England, and Taiwan (Cesaroni and Alvi 2010; Dolovich 2011; Evans and Wallace 2008; Hsu 2005).

However, the wider literature on masculinities gives us reason to pause and to doubt that gender relations in male prisons are really this straightforward. All too often, critics (e.g. Hood-Williams 2001; Jefferson 2002) observe, masculinity (especially hegemonic masculinity) has been used in the singular and typically defined by listing off a series of purportedly manly traits or attributes. This is problematic, Jefferson (2002) suggests, because it ignores the fluidity of gender identity and performance. What is more, the implication that there is one ideal version of manhood that all men in a specific context aim to emulate and hope to embody takes much for granted and disregards how
individual men actually conceive of and relate to these ideas (see Collier 1998; Jefferson 1994, 2002). These critiques have been supported empirically. For instance, Mullins (2006) finds that on the streets of St. Louis, Missouri there are different ideas about what constitutes manhood and that the realities of everyday life make gender performance more complicated and dynamic than simply following a rigid set of behavioral demands. In addition, and more directly tied to the substantive content of this paper, scholars who seek to establish the connection between masculinities and crime/offending have often focused on the negative aspects of masculinity, at the expense of any positive elements or expressions (see Collier 1998; Jefferson 2002). The body of work that implies that male prisoners endorse and act out the same exaggerated and destructive masculinity throughout their sentence tends to overlook the dynamic, complex, and potentially positive nature of masculine identity and performance in prisons, and is thus, in my view, similarly problematic.

Some scholars appear to agree with this outlook, with Phillips (2012: 165), for instance, calling for a “more variegated, multidimensional understanding of prison masculinities,” while others (Seymour 2003; Sim 1994) have been careful to emphasize that because masculinity is socially constructed, and accomplishing it is an ongoing process, resistance, change, and transgression are all possible, even in prison. And others, still, remind us that not all prisoners act in this hypermasculine way, and that not only does hypermasculine prison culture vary between prisons, but it has been undermined at various points by different penal policies, as well as by collective and individual opposition (Kupers 2010; Sim 1994). The prison code, in other words, is more complex than it might appear initially (Sabo et al. 2001).

While there has been a growing recognition of the variation in masculine identity and performance within prisons, there is a startling lack of empirical work to support these claims, and prisoners’ own voices are often absent from the work that does exist (Crewe 2006). This has started to change in recent years, however. There are a handful of examples worth discussing briefly. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in a prison in India, Bandyopadhyay (2006) found that ideas about hegemonic masculinity are far from
uncontested, and that prisoners adopt different, sometimes conflicting masculine identities at different times. Two different conceptions of the ideal male prisoner appeared to predominate in this prison: one celebrating the aggressive, brazen, and disobedient prisoner, and the other privileging the quiet, compliant, and docile prisoner. Prisoners went back and forth between projecting a soft persona and a tough one, as well as between attempting to manipulate the correctional system and being deferential to authority. Phillips’ (2012) work also exposes the plurality and fluidity of masculinities in prisons, with the participants in her study linking manhood not just to violence, but also to the roles of provider and breadwinner, to ideas about personal responsibility and maturity, and to strength, independence, and selflessness. In Nandi’s (2002) study of incarcerated black males, many of the participants contrasted manhood not with some essentialized femininity, but rather with boyhood, suggesting that it is boys who are preoccupied with violence, aggression, and sex, and that their time in prison proved a learning experience for what it meant to be a real man. And while some participants emphasized that aggression was a key component of masculinity, others noted that men could be defined in part through their ability to love and express emotions, or their resistance against those who sought to degrade them. Still others made note of the importance of men possessing a positive outlook, self-respect, and principles.

For his part, Crewe (2006) conducted interviews with both staff and prisoners at a medium-security prison in the UK and observed that male prisoners conceive of female prison staff in a multitude of ways. Some, for instance, chose to sexualize female officers while others used female officers as an emotional outlet, sharing feelings they were unable to express in the company of other prisoners. Others, still, emphasized their chivalry. And finally, Evans and Wallace (2008: 484) analyzed the life narratives of male prisoners, discovering that each of their nine participants could be placed into one of three discrete categories: 1) those who subscribed to the hegemonic masculine standard; 2) those who had previously internalized this code of behaviour, but reconsidered their ideas about masculinity and shifted toward something “softer and gentler,” a transformation often precipitated by life events such as imprisonment, the beginning of a new relationship, or becoming a father; and 3) those whose self-image was defined apart
from the hegemonic masculine code. Together, these works demonstrate that masculine identity and performance within the prison, much like on the outside, is a complex and ongoing process and that there is no single hegemonic masculine ideal that triumphs uncontested.

A number of scholars (de Viggiani 2012; Jewkes 2002, 2005; Karp 2010; Nandi 2002), building upon Goffman’s (1959) work, have noted that one common way of coping with incarceration is to construct a public persona that allows prisoners to fit into the dominant hypermasculine prison culture, while at the same time maintaining a private identity. Jewkes (2002, 2005) suggests that displaying the macho persona expected in prison is a burdensome task, and prisoners require a break, a time when they can remove the mask they have been wearing, abandon the facade, and restore their sense of self. In other words, it is possible that prisoners perform hypermasculinity – hide their fears and emotions, appear willing to fight, resist dependency on others – but in private endorse a more complicated notion of manhood that allows them to distinguish themselves from their peers. Jewkes (2002, 2005) adds that not all men have the same ability to maintain this hypermasculine front, that it may become less important to adopt this facade as one nears the end of his sentence, and that some prisoners might demonstrate their masculinity in other ways, perhaps taking on the identity of student or tradesman. Along these lines, de Viggiani (2012) observes that some prisoners withdraw, become depressed, and lose interest in maintaining the facade, while others discussed being able to let their guard down with someone they had developed a particularly close friendship with.

In sum, much of the current body of work on prison masculinities suggests that a hypermasculine code that values toughness, aggression, and the repression of emotions, among other traits, tends to prevail in men’s prisons (e.g. de Viggiani 2012; Dolovich 2011; Haney 2011; Hsu 2005). However, this culture is not, to borrow from Comack (2008: 146), “overdetermining”. That is, individual prisoners are capable of defining their manhood in ways that do not correspond to the hypermasculine prison code, may alternate between different masculine identities, and may change their conceptions of
manhood over time (e.g. Bandyopadhyay 2006; Evans and Wallace 2008; Jewkes 2005; Nandi 2002; Phillips 2012). Yet there remains significant pressure to live up to this hypermasculine prison code, such that even those men who do not subscribe to it are reluctant to share these views, and remain extremely cautious when considering if, when, and how they might begin to open up to others (Comack 2008; Evans and Wallace 2008).

Since several scholars have already demonstrated that not all men in prison endorse and/or perform this particular form of hypermasculinity, what exactly does this project contribute? First, examining over two decades worth of prisoner writings composed by hundreds of men who served time at Angola makes this analysis more comprehensive than extant work. On theoretical and empirical levels, this project highlights the vast array and complexity of prisoners’ ideas about manhood. In so doing, it demonstrates once more the dynamic, contested nature of masculinities, something that is too-often forgotten when the focus is on hypermasculine violence, aggression, and exploitation.

And finally, these are the unsolicited thoughts of men who express their emotions, show their vulnerability, and share their thoughts about manhood in The Angolite, a newsmagazine read by their peers, prisoners at other institutions, and ‘free people’. This complicates the literature that suggests prisoners are reluctant to ‘open up’ or endorse alternative views of manhood in public.

Data and Methods

The Louisiana State Penitentiary is home to The Angolite, a bi-monthly prison newsmagazine edited by prisoners at Angola. For this project I rely upon a convenience sample of 95 issues drawn from the years 1979 to 2001. While its small staff produces the bulk of the newsmagazine’s content, relevant contributions are occasionally accepted from academics and professional groups such as The Sentencing Project. Each issue contains news briefs about the goings on at Angola, updates on criminal justice happenings across the country, and an investigative feature article or articles; this material helps contextualize the prisoner writings that make up the bulk of my analysis.

My primary focus, however, is the two sections of The Angolite comprised solely of readers’ original writings: ‘Sounding Off’ and ‘Angola Expressions’. While contributions
from ‘free people,’ staff, and prisoners at other facilities are also accepted here, I categorize and analyze only the writings – typically letters, poetry, and prose – of prisoners housed at Angola. The submissions to The Angolite have to meet several criteria: 1) no profane language; 2) general relevance (e.g. no appeals for penpals); and 3) no unsubstantiated claims or personal attacks regarding a prisoner’s individual case. There were a total of 1,239 submissions over the 95 issues, with 545 of these related to one or (as was often the case) more of the nine themes outlined in my coding scheme (see table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Letters and poems to romantic partners of past or present; also includes open discussions about wanting to find love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional confessions</td>
<td>Discussions of loneliness, sadness, emptiness, despair, fear, personal insignificance, frustration, and vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camaraderie</td>
<td>Prisoner friendships and bonds; distinct from general prisoner unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Macho</td>
<td>Explicit opposition to the hypermasculine prison code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth</td>
<td>Reflections on one’s maturation and efforts at self-improvement over the course of his sentence; also includes calls for same NOTE: does not include general references to rehabilitation/education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of character</td>
<td>Resolve, will, determination, pride, and perseverance; also includes references to morals, principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive actions</td>
<td>Contributions to environment and those around you (including family); acts of kindness and charity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mask</td>
<td>Adopting a facade to fit into masculine prison culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypermasculinity</td>
<td>References to exploitation, violence, and aggression, as well as the pressure to hide emotions and weakness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Developing the coding scheme was a multi-stage process. I acquired a working knowledge of the prison masculinities literature several years ago while reading for a term paper. Though I was unable to articulate the reasons for my discomfort at the time, something about this body of work did not sit well with me. I realized later, after some additional reading about men in prison and my own continued reflections on what it means to be a male, that I felt two things were missing from much of the scholarly literature: 1) nuance – I was sceptical that prisons housed men who were just aggressive, misogynistic, and eager to exploit others; and 2) prisoners’ voices – I wanted to know
how prisoners felt about or what they had to say regarding these issues. *The Angolite* provided me with the opportunity to explore these men’s views on manhood, the ways they coped with their incarceration, and how they expressed their thoughts and feelings. Already familiar with Angola’s history from an earlier project, I expected to (and did) find that some men would write about violence, exploitation, and the pressure to hide emotions. But I also quite quickly discovered that many prisoners articulated thoughts and feelings that diverged noticeably from the scholarly writing on prison hypermasculinity. I found that they were willing to document an array of emotions, write poems or love letters to romantic partners, and talk about friendships. Some of the men also expressed different ideas – involving personal growth, perseverance, principles, and making positive contributions – about what constituted ‘manhood,’ ideas that have been mostly neglected in existing work (see Evans and Wallace 2008; Nandi 2002; Phillips 2012 for exceptions). Moreover, it became apparent that these men would touch on a range of themes within one submission. In these instances, rather than impose a singular meaning or code, I would count the submission in multiple categories. That many individual submissions did, in fact, deal with a variety of these themes, oftentimes simultaneously, serves as further evidence of the multi-faceted nature of (prison) masculinities and, more generally, of these men’s identities. Simply put, coding in this manner reveals both the nuance often lacking in academic work as well as the overlap and complexity inherent in these men’s writings.

It is important to acknowledge here both the benefits and drawbacks of this methodology. First, the drawbacks: *The Angolite*’s ban on profane language and its space restrictions, as well as the literacy levels of prisoners, all place constraints on these writings. It may also be that those who reflect on their ideas about manhood and discuss these views in an open forum like *The Angolite* are a distinct subset of the prison population, one that is, perhaps, more reflexive or inclined to join prisoner organizations or unwilling to use violence. But while the findings may not be generalizable, these men’s writings do tell us something about the ways that some men at Angola see themselves and compel us to reconsider the way we think about masculinities in prison. In the pages that follow I aspire to create a depiction of these men’s worlds that reflects their views and to write
about them in a manner that is “faithful to their understanding of themselves” (Anderson 2002: 1549). This paper also actively aims to inject some humanity and feeling into an academic discussion that is typically “cold, calculated, surgical” (Bosworth, Campbell, Demby, Ferranti, and Santos 2005: 259). Often overlooked in the extant scholarly literature – and what this paper seeks to highlight – is the complexity of prisoners’ lives as men, men who experience a range of emotions, who struggle, and who have complicated ideas about what it means to be a man. Integrating such a large number of viewpoints into this analysis has the added potential benefit of leading to a “stronger and more convincing critique of the current system” (Bosworth et al. 2005: 261). But for this to happen academics must begin to acknowledge and appreciate prisoners’ capacity to add to our body of knowledge and their ability to help us comprehend how they themselves live; it is my hope that this project contributes to this ongoing endeavor (see Bosworth et al. 2005; Gaucher 1988; Piché, Gaucher, and Walby 2014).

**Angola – some background**

“Nerves stretched tight and tension ran through Angola like unharnessed electricity, exploding here and there in sparks of violence. It was a brutal time” (Rideau 1993: 19). Wilbert Rideau (1993: 19), long-time editor of The Angolite, continues his description of life at Angola in the early 1970s: “it was a dog-eat-dog jungle...the strong ruled, and the weak either served or perished. Slavery was widespread. The only law was that of the knife. It was the bloodiest prison in the nation”. While violence at Angola might have been at its peak in the early 1970s, the prison had long been understaffed and overcrowded, boasted subpar sanitary conditions and inadequate medical care, and lacked recreational, academic, and vocational programs (Glover 1991; Wikberg 1991). Angola, simply put, had for some time been a “macho, ultramasculine world ruled by the forces of politics, corruption and brute force” (“Against All Odds” 1985: 23). Henry Patterson, looking back on when he first arrived at Angola in 1961, notes, “everything I did was outta fear...If I struck a dude, I was trying to strike before I got struck...You develop a demeanor that makes a person think before he fucks with you” (Dennis 1994: 41). Sammie Robinson, Jr., reflecting on life at Angola in 1953 - when he arrived at the age of
seventeen - adds, “if you didn’t fight for your manhood, you was gonna be a whore. I ain’t gonna be no whore. That was why many dudes carried knives back then, to keep from being turned out. That caused a lot of the killings” (Wikberg 1991: 23).

A 1975 federal court decision and the appointment of Ross Maggio, Jr. as warden the following year signalled the end of this era at Angola. Conditions improved and for the first time administrators were provided with the funds necessary to effectively staff the prison, thereby enhancing security and restricting prisoner freedoms (Glover 1991; “Maggio Retires” 1984). Subscribing to the belief that idleness impeded prisoners’ attempts to rehabilitate and led only to chaos and violence, Maggio forced thousands of unoccupied prisoners to work and helped develop a large recreation program; levels of violence dropped quickly and dramatically (“Maggio Retires” 1984). Today, Angola stands as perhaps the safest maximum-security prison in the United States (Dennis 1997). This transitional period is the focus of this project, with these data covering the years 1979 to 2001.

Findings

Opening Up – Prisoners’ Discussions of Love, Loneliness, and Camaraderie

Throughout The Angolite, prisoners express themselves in ways that do not conform to prevailing notions of prison hypermasculinity (see table 2). In 7.7% of all submissions (n=95), prisoners talk about their experiences with love; these submissions take a variety of forms. Some, like Tommy LeBlanc (1979: 78), pledge their devotion to a romantic partner:

_Prison walls may be between us,_
_Prison walls may keep us apart._
_But each letter I receive, darling_  
_Bring you closer to my heart._

_Love, there’s no need to worry._
_There’s no reason to fear._  
_When I offered you my Heart._  
_I placed it in your care._
It won’t be long now, Sweetheart,
Our time is near,
I’ll show you I love you.
And prove I’m sincere!

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of Submissions</th>
<th>Percent of Masculinities-Related Submissions (n=545)</th>
<th>Percent of All Submissions (n=1,239)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Confessions</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camaraderie</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-‘Macho’</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Character</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Actions</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mask</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypermasculinity</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On other occasions, such as with Gervis Thibodeaux (1987: 80), a poem to a romantic partner also reveals the author’s vulnerability and dependence on a distant loved one, qualities not typically associated with ‘macho’ prisoners:

The one thing that matters more to me than anything else in the world, is you and me. You are my world.
You’re the [person] who gets all my love and my wishes and my prayers.
But somehow, despite all my best intentions, I never feel quite safe enough or sure enough to rest assured that I’ll be able to make you happy.
I need to know. I need you more than my words can say.
I need to always feel the warm peaceful feeling that I get when you hold me.
I need to experience the beauty of our love that I gently relieve when we caress.
I need for us to remember, all the love that’s been given, and all the Love that will unfold each day, between the wonder of you and the warmth of me.
And sometimes, I just need to know that we’ll be okay ... won’t we?

Other prisoners (28.2% of all submissions; n=350), much like Thibodeaux (1987), opened up about the emotional struggles associated with incarceration. A small sample of these submissions reveals the range of difficulties experienced by prisoners. To add further context to these writings it is important to note that prisoners at Angola are serving the longest sentences of anywhere in the world (Rideau and Wikberg 1989). For
Mark Burge (1997: 88), his lengthy sentence means fighting an ongoing battle against despair, anger, and fear, a battle that necessitated he remind himself to stay strong, persevere, and ‘hang on,’ themes which will be discussed further below; he writes:

Hanging on, for nothing, being nothing.
Counting the years, pretending there’s an end, hanging on.
Taking the abuse, swallowing your pride.
Growing old, folks dying, letting the small dis slide, wanting blood.
Denying the rage, trying to be cool, hanging on, being nothing.
Sweating the courts, open the legal mail with trembling fingers. Shoot at the pardon board, “Just a time cut please, sir, a little daylight.”
Cross your fingers, hang on, for nothing, being nothing.
Wait for a miracle, wish for some luck.
So sorry, too late, laws getting stricter, hammer coming down.
Do your work, mind your business,
be cool, stay above the madness, the ratting,
the hate, the foolishness, hang on tight, be nothing.
Say you’ve got to be strong, rock on, how long, how long, hang on, hang on.
Thrill is gone, no longer bad to the bone, can’t even get stoned, just want to go home. Got to keep on keeping on, hoping it won’t be too long, brother you’ve got it all wrong, it’s just hanging on, for nothing.
So if you think it’s something, I’m telling you it’s nothing, a forsaken generation, creating jobs across the nation, paying for our crimes doing limitless time, faking like we’re making it, not even crying while we’re dying—just hanging on tight, chained down day and night, hanging on for dear life, to nothing, being nothing.

Others, like Andrew Fatheree (1991: 70), document the pervasive loneliness and pain they experience:

Quiet intervals subdue one’s soul
Loneliness thrives, peace subsides
Racking the mind over the coals.

Pain seeps in, flooding a space
Harder to breathe, air is so scarce
A hurting begins, written on your face.

Silent screams ring out, so sad are the words
Isn’t it a shame that only dogs heard.

Whipping my nerves, my heart feels the sting
Lord, I know now, why the caged bird sings.
Thompson (1998: 65), for his part, describes his sentence as “thirteen years of mental anguish, captivated by loneliness”. Longtermers repeatedly mention their struggles against hopelessness and despair and this is perhaps best articulated by Smith (1998: 65), who claims he would have preferred a death sentence to suffering through nearly 24 “years of anguish and desperation seeking a ray of hope that just isn’t there,” or Unger (1998: 70), who suggests that life in prison is characterized by “eternal gloom”.

The death of a peer is sometimes the cause of prisoners’ emotional pain. While any death seems to have an impact on the rest of the prison population, when it is a friend that passes, “the loss is most severe and difficult to overcome” (Brown 1994: 71). Some prisoners suggest that the extraordinarily long sentences they are serving play a role in the development of friendships; in fact, camaraderie was mentioned in 3.7% of all submissions (n=46). As Robert Howard (1996: 63) puts it, after a lengthy period of incarceration “in most cases immediate family members have died, grown up, or grown away. Hence, fellow prisoners become your family. Accordingly, we should show an attitude of love and concern for our brothers who fall and become frail during this journey”. Joseph Casbon (1991: 67), shortly before his release, reflects on the relationships he developed and the range of emotions he experienced during his 15 plus years at Angola: “we laughed, cried, got mad and shared just about all the other emotions a man can share. So, I hope y’all understand when I say its hard to leave – its coming from my heart – and not my head. Y’all have become family to me”. Casbon (1991) goes on to encourage his peers to maintain hope, to stick together, and to help new prisoners. As Green (1992: 72) reminds readers, this kind of benevolence was necessary because “everyone needs to know someone cares for them”. Thus, rather than being insensitive to the suffering or emotional problems of others like one might expect upon reading the prison masculinities literature (see Crewe 2014 for an exception), prisoners’ writings revealed compassion and empathy for their peers. This compassion is perhaps most apparent among Angola’s hospice volunteers. James West (2001: 71), recounting his experience with one hospice patient, serves as an example:

I took his hand in mine and promised him that I would be with him from then on. I explained the hospice philosophy to Ernest, then invited him to accept hospice care so that I could literally love him to death. I’ll never
forget asking him if he knew how to spell hospice. He rolled his eyes at me and with his hoarse whisper he spelled, H-O-S-P-I-C-E. I smiled and said, “That’s correct, but we spell it a little bit differently. We spell it, L-O-V-E.” He nodded, eventually accepted the hospice, and we set out upon a daily journey, hand in hand.

Prisoners’ willingness to express emotions other than anger, be openly vulnerable, and empathize with the hardships of their peers is a startling contrast to the aggressive, violent, insensitive prisoner that is often the primary focus of both public discourse and scholarly work (e.g. Dolovich 2011; Haney 2011; Hsu 2005; Kupers 2005).

**Hypermasculinity Abandoned?**

It would be incorrect, however, to suggest that hypermasculinity simply fell by the wayside following Angola’s period of reform in the mid-1970s. Instead, as a number of contributors explain (6.1% of all submissions; n=75), violence and exploitation remained a possibility. On this issue, Smith (1991: 68) asserts the prison is “a jungle in which only the strong survive,” Tyler (1987: 63) notes that he has “seen a lot of violence, rapes, fights and witnessed one murder” during his 12 year stint, and Divine (2000: 69) claims “the motto is kill or be killed”. Wilkins’ (1985: 65) description of Angola is particularly telling; to him it is

*A place where Dreams are shattered, and hope
Hope is just a mirage.*

*A place where 18-year-old boys are sent in
The name of Justice.*

*A place where they grow up, become men, become
Old, and a place where they sometime dies.*

*A place where the strong plays upon the weak,
and weak on the weaker.*

*A place where Homosexuality is the rule and
Not the exception.*

*A place where men masquerade around like they
Have forgotten their true sex.*

*A place that breeds criminals like an infested
house breeds rats.*

*A place where ones kindness is sometimes viewed
as a sign of weakness.*

The hypermasculine prison code also continued to shape the face prisoners presented in public. It is surprising, given the observations of a handful of scholars (see de Viggiani
2012; Jewkes 2002, 2005; Karp 2010; Nandi 2002), that prisoners very rarely (0.7% of all submissions; n=9) reference adopting a mask or facade in order to cope with the burden of conforming to a hypermasculine prison code. Larry Landry (1995: 68) is one of the few that does; he admits, “I give the impression that I’m secure, that all is sunny...that confidence is my name and coolness is my game, that waters are calm, that I’m in command, and I need no one”. But, he continues, “my surface is my mask...beneath dwells the real me, in confusion, in fear, in loneliness” (Landry 1995: 68). Similarly, Robbie Knight (1998: 70) describes the conflict between his public persona of confidence and his private self that struggles with loneliness and despair:

*Outwardly, confidence is the illusion that I portray so well.*
*While inwardly I am without a soul, just another empty shell.*
*Alone against loneliness, I battle myself in a war that I cannot win.*
*While the claws of despair lash against me, striking my heart deep within.*
*A beast rages inside of me, far beyond my control.*
*This is the beast of past sins, and he is the master of my soul.*

Michael Edwards (2000: 69) ponders an alternate existence, one where prisoners are not “ruled by a conquering male mentality” but where he can “feel free to cry...feel free to smile; to laugh; to simply let [his] guard down and be happy”. Edwards (2000: 69) yearns to do these things while also being able to think of himself as “more of a man and not less of one!” Thus, while prisoners still felt pressure to live up to a male code that encouraged them to repress emotions and handle their own problems, by discussing the difficulty associated with wearing this mask – and with their imprisonment more generally – in a public forum they also resist conforming to this code.

A slightly more common occurrence (2.5% of all submissions; n=31) was for prisoners to openly reflect on – and repudiate – the tenets of the hypermasculine prison code. While other scholars (see Comack 2008; Seymour 2003; Sim 1994) have noted prisoners’ capacity to resist, oppose, or challenge the hypermasculine prison code, we must remind ourselves that the men writing in *The Angolite* are expressing their views in a public
Keith Stewart (1993: 84) serves as an example; he wonders, “does killing your fellow man make you a man? Or turning out your younger brother make you a man? Or fighting the free people and stabbing one another make you a man?” He calls on his peers to “wise up and get [their] act together because anybody can kill, and anybody can turn out the next person, and a baby can stab somebody. Doing these things doesn’t make you a man” (Stewart 1993: 84). On this topic, Smith (1996a: 58) adds,

just being male doesn’t make us men. There are those among us who have been misguided that they believe because we are male we are automatically men at some magic age. Some of us also assume that proof of manhood comes from fighting with our fists instead of using our brain or from using a weapon or fathering children. Please understand that only the weakest excuse for a man hides behind a gun. Because that’s just what carrying one is—weakness, and an excuse for not thinking.

As Elcee Woolridge (1997: 76) observes, young prisoners seem more likely to be volatile, aggressive, and indifferent to developments that might impact their cases and lives:

*Young, ignorant, and wild,*
*ain’t nothing but a manchild.*
*Pants sagging grabbing your crotch,*
*yelling obscenities with a boot in your mouth.*
*Sure about the gym, first to the gate,*
*don’t have the least info on 930.8.*
*Quick to kick with the homies about the past,*
*running ’round playing grab ass.*
*Knows all the stats for the N.F.L. and N.B.A.,*  
*My advice to you is get on your case.*
*These other entertainments ain’t what it’s about,*
*if they do mean this much to you, your destiny is Point Lookout.*
*So, Gangsta’s, Thugs, and Playa’s, and whatever else,*
*show ’em that your game’s tight by winning back your life.*
*Get bout it, bout it!*

In other words, far from being the only prerequisites for manhood, readiness to use violence or a willingness to exploit others are frowned upon and seen as signs of weakness and foolishness by at least some prisoners. For men at Angola, much like in Nandi’s (2002) work, one has to learn what it is to be a real man and progress beyond the actions of a ‘manchild’. The next section of this paper explores the diversity and fluidity of masculinities at Angola in more depth.
Conceptions of Manhood

If some prisoners at Angola are willing to publicly reject certain tenets of the hypermasculine prison code, how, then, do they conceive of manhood? One alternative masculinity documented in these prisoners’ writings celebrated discipline, resolve, and men’s efforts to better themselves and their environment. The number of submissions relating to the following themes substantiates the prominence of this conception of manhood: strength of character (13.9% of all submissions; n=172), personal growth (6.7% of all submissions; n=83), and positive actions (3.9% of all submissions; n=49). A handful of examples demonstrate the ways these themes are interconnected and form a particular masculine narrative about growth and maturity, and imbued with qualities like autonomy, self-control, and responsibility. Evans (1994: 71), for instance, remarks on the inner strength required to simply endure one’s sentence; he writes: “being locked away from life’s meaningful emotional experiences and being punished for any independent decision making-any show of manhood-are not conducive to emotional growth. Fear, anger, boredom and lack of interpersonal experiences tends to disintegrate all but the very strong. Only the Herculean survive”. Roland Pittman (1990: 89), on the other hand, reflects on the battle to “hold onto dignity and self-respect while living at close quarters with many who have had the last vestiges of these qualities stripped from them and some who never had them at all” and to “maintain composure, poise and abstain from violence when dealing with people who respect only that”. In an environment this negative, Pittman (1990: 89) argues, “it is a constant test of will and self-discipline to achieve anything positive”. These men’s writings indicate that they perceive resistance, resolve, and perseverance as being linked to manhood. This is also reflected in the poetry of Tommy Porter (1984: 76):

You will suffer and you will have pain,
but to survive you will have to be a man.
There will be letters that will make you cry,
but you will say to yourself,
that you will make it if you try.

There are clear parallels between these men and the men in Nandi’s (2002) sample who accomplish their masculinity by resisting their oppressors and possessing inner strength. These men’s writings also recall (with a spin) elements of the hypermasculine prison
code (and valued 'masculine' attributes outside of prison), namely stoicism, the ability to endure, and the capacity to take care of one’s self (see Karp 2010; Phillips 2001; Toch 1998). In both cases, men seem to be drawing on something inside of themselves to deal with the situation.

Not only was strength of character necessary if a prisoner was going to get through his sentence, but it was also essential for his rehabilitation, which Larry Booker (1992: 85) defines as “getting rid of old bad habits and values and replacing them with morals and principles”. Morals and principles, he continues, are “intangible. They don’t exist unless you manage to look within yourself and find the desire to become rehabilitated. That is the only thing that is actually required besides persistence”. For Booker (1992) and others, then, self-improvement often requires a transformation, with individuals abandoning previous ways of thinking and acting in favour of a new approach to life. Similar to participants in previous studies (e.g. Evans and Wallace 2008; Nandi 2002), some men at Angola implied that they had shifted their views over the course of their sentence. Discussing the dynamic nature of his conception of manhood, Joseph Fountain (2000b: 67) writes, “prison has taught me the value of life, family, woman, freedom and hopes, dreams. Prison has also help me overcome the theory of what a man is. A man is not someone who is just capable of being macho. Being a man has everything to do with being able to be responsible, respectable, and accountable”. Evans (1994: 70-71) adds that “the endless years of sitting and waiting in prison provide opportunity for reading, thinking, discussing, growing. Most men achieve great mental growth in prison”. Others reflect on their personal trajectories. Bennett (2000: 63), for one, suggests that he was once “blind, careless and reckless” but that “life is about change” and growth. Blakes (1995: 68), having been incarcerated twice for a combined total of 21 years, remarks: “I’ve been through many different changes, and like most longtermers, I made the decision to move in a positive law abiding direction. I also made the decision to take complete responsibility for all my actions”. And finally, Smith (1996b: 59) also looks back on his development: “since I’ve been here I’ve had the chance to mentally grow. My outlook on life is different. I now value my freedom and the small joys of life. Yes, I
entered with childish thoughts, but I will be released as a man. It took this to open my eyes and my mind”.

In some cases just one prison experience had transformative potential. The Woods brothers are the subjects of one of The Angolite’s feature articles in 1979 about young offenders adapting to life at the penitentiary. Joseph Woods, involved in a knife fight at Angola in 1973, reflects on how the incident and the additional five years he received because of it shaped his ideas about manhood:

It really wasn’t the five years that slowed me down and made me start thinking. It was the last dude I hurt. We had a beef, and after it was over, I stood over him to let him know that I had won the fight. I stabbed him one more time while he was down to make sure the fellows saw me. As I was trying to pull my knife out of him – you know, it got hung-up in him – I was looking in his face. He said, ‘Man, Woods you done hurt me bad.’ I thought about it a lot while I was in the dungeon waiting on my disciplinary hearing – and, someway, out of it I came to realize that violence is the act of a child. I called myself a man, so I felt it was time I started acting like one (“Young Men Behind Bars” 1979: 40).

Woods elaborates, noting that a prisoner

must be able to mature quickly and get some sense in his head. He must learn what being a man is all about. He must put his childish attitudes behind him. A man is not someone who will pick up a knife to settle a dispute or win an argument. A man is someone who thinks positive and works for his freedom. He uses his confinement to improve himself and prepare for the day when he will return to the free world (“Young Men Behind Bars” 1979: 42).

But it was not enough for a prisoner to simply change his own way of thinking and being. Instead, some wrote of making it their goal to make a positive contribution to their environment, whether it benefit their family and friends, aging fellow prisoners, or young men who could use a role model. The ability to “do something good for their peers, or something positive for this wicked environment” is most certainly a sign of strength according to Ricky Jones (1994: 71). After noting that he has “learned a lot through self-discipline, and now… [has] principles that will withstand the ups and downs in life,” Williams (1995: 71-72) appears concerned with his legacy; he writes:
I want people to remember me for the good I have done in helping others to improve their lives. I want to be thought of as a respectable man who have stood up for what he believes in and for what was handed down to me from my family. I want the young men to remember me as the one who helped them change their minds and lives to become better and positive individuals.

Joseph Fountain (2000a: 63) provides another example; he believes that “if every male who consider theirselves as men would stand accountable as father figures we as people would be a better community” and this entails more than just a financial commitment, as men “must teach [their] children honor, respect, principles, and how to be independent”. To recap, some of the men at Angola present themselves in ways, and discuss ideas about masculinities, that diverge sharply from the violent, insensitive prisoner that exploits those weaker than himself that we have come to expect from broader public and academic discourse. A significant number of those writing in *The Angolite* appear to be celebrating a notion of manhood that emphasizes self-control, principles, and persistence, and links strength of character to personal growth and positive actions. While it is certainly possible that these men’s perspectives have been informed by official rhetoric that aims to responsibilize offenders (e.g. Hannah-Moffat 2000, 2001; Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005), Angola has a lengthy history of self-help initiatives (Kennedy 2013) and it is also possible that this is a way for prisoners to cope and to reclaim some degree of agency.

**Discussion**

Other scholars (e.g. Bandyopadhyay 2006; Evans and Wallace 2008; Nandi 2002; Phillips 2012) have commented on the diverse range of masculinities in the prisons they have studied, with some participants articulating ideas about manhood – tied to responsibility, maturity, selflessness, etc. – that remind us of the men writing in *The Angolite*. So while we know that Angola is not the sole exception to an otherwise unavoidable prison culture characterized by violence, aggression, and exploitation, given the context-specific nature of masculinities (see Connell 1995; Messerschmidt 2001) it is worth speculating why Angola is this way. For one, it is possible that Angola’s relatively large recreation program, arts and crafts festival, and emphasis on religious education
permit prisoners to take on different identities – athlete, hobbycrafter, and student respectively – and accomplish their masculinity in ‘prosocial’ ways (see Jewkes 2005). It might also be that The Angolite itself, in providing prisoners with an outlet for their thoughts and emotions, plays a role. Together, these factors might create a somewhat unique emotion culture (see Turner and Stets 2005).

Careful consideration must also be given to the demographics of the prison population. As noted above, prisoners at Angola are serving extremely lengthy sentences; this has prompted observers to describe it as “the biggest repository of lifers in the world” (Foster 1995: 18). Concerns about the effects of Angola’s aging population were being expressed by the early 1980s (“Growing Old in Prison” 1982). And by the end of the twentieth century, only 24.2% of the prisoner population was under the age of 30, 33.3% were in their thirties, and 42.4% were over the age of 40, with over 85% of the men at Angola expected to die there (Nelson 2000/2001; Rideau 1999). Some existing work tells us that the composition of Angola might help us make sense of the construction of masculinities at the prison. For instance, de Viggiani (2012) finds that the emphasis on hypermasculinity sometimes declines as prisoners become more familiar with one another and develop routines. Similarly, Toch (1998) suggests that hypermasculinity tends to peak at an early age, and that as prisoners grow older they are less willing and able to engage in violence and are forced to adopt new ‘scripts’ (see also Mosher and Tomkins 1988). In other words, perhaps the reason much of the existing body of work remains generally fixated on hypermasculinity is that scholars are telling stories about young men relatively new to prison. This preoccupation is surprising given that it is not just administrators at Angola that face dealing with an older prison population; as of 2011, over 39% of sentenced male prisoners in state or federal custody in the United States were age 40 or over (Carson and Sabol 2012). In light of this aging prison population, we clearly need a better understanding of masculinities over the life course. Yet this is an area of study that has been undertheorized (Spector-Mersel 2006). Carlsson’s (2013) recent work exploring how age-specific ideas of manhood are tied to persistence and desistance is an important step towards remedying this oversight, but more work is required, particularly in the prison context. A better grasp on the
relationship between masculinities, crime, and offending could have important implications with respect to curbing harsh sentencing practices in Louisiana and elsewhere, instituting real release mechanisms, and/or offering substantive help to aid in prisoners’ reintegration efforts.

Conclusion

Current prison masculinities work (minus a few exceptions) too often concentrates on “socially destructive” qualities – aggressiveness, willingness to use violence, concealing vulnerability, and so on – purportedly idealized and embodied by prisoners (e.g. Haney 2011; Karp 2010; Kupers 2005: 717, 2010). Through a content analysis of over two decades worth of prisoner submissions to *The Angolite*, I find that while the hypermasculine prison code continues to shape life at Angola, this is far from all there is. In addition, many prisoners discuss their emotions, describe lasting friendships and efforts to help their peers, and denounce violence. Other prisoners talk of the importance of determination, principles, and personal growth, and imply that these are signs of manhood. That these individuals do so in a public forum like *The Angolite*, a newsmagazine read by their peers as well as outsiders, suggests that prisoners are willing and able to *openly* contest the hypermasculine prison code, conceive of manhood in a variety of oftentimes complex ways, and that ideas about masculinities may change over time. Thus, in addition to furthering our understanding of carceral experiences during the era of hyper-incarceration, these findings also reaffirm the dynamic nature of gender identity and performance, the existence of multiple (hegemonic) masculinities in each social context, and the range of masculine subjectivities. This project also clearly points to the need for scholars of all stripes to aim to better understand masculinities – and their connection to criminality and the prison – over the course of men’s lives. And finally, my hope is that it also helps deconstruct the perception of prisoners – and criminals – as ‘others’ that pervades public discourse and that the literature focusing predominantly on hypermasculinity serves only to reify.
NOTES

1 This paper is an Accepted Manuscript of articles published by Taylor & Francis in *Deviant Behavior*. DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2014.1004027


3 I requested copies of every issue from 1976 (when the first uncensored issue of *The Angolite* was published) to 2001 (shortly after former editor Wilbert Rideau (2010) claims the administration began trying to limit the staff’s journalistic freedom). The first available issue was dated March/April 1979. There is no evidence to suggest that the content of this convenience sample differs in a systematic manner from what would be found in a strictly random sample of issues.
References


Chapter 4
‘Today They Kill With The Chair Instead Of The Tree’:
Remembering and Forgetting Slavery at a Plantation Prison

Introduction

Scholars have strived relentlessly to make sense of the mass incarceration of black men and women in United States prisons in recent decades. Oftentimes these scholars (e.g. Alexander 2010; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Wacquant 2000, 2001, 2002; Weatherspoon 2007) view this overrepresentation not as an entirely new development, but instead choose to situate it in the nation’s broader history of racial discrimination and subjugation. They suggest that contemporary criminal justice policies and practices bear a startling resemblance to slavery, convict leasing, and the Jim Crow era. While there is certainly merit to this approach, it leaves much unaddressed. Most notably, it requires us to investigate, rather than take for granted, how we think about, discuss, and recall the “cultural trauma” of slavery (see Eyerman 2002, 2004). This paper begins to address this outstanding issue by exploring the memories of slavery at a plantation prison. I turn to the Louisiana State Penitentiary (known popularly as Angola) - where a subset of the mostly black prisoner population continues to ‘work’ land that was once a series of slave plantations - to unpack how actors at the prison remember and forget elements of the past as they attempt to understand the present. Specifically, I analyze how penal officials narrate the history of the prison. And, recognizing that memories are dynamic and diverse, I look to prisoners’ writings in *The Angolite* in order to examine whether Angola’s plantation history shapes their views of their incarceration today.

I find that at Angola the past is almost as inescapable as it is unsettled. When individuals visit the prison – thousands go each year for the rodeo and arts and crafts festival as well as to visit the Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum, located just outside the prison’s front gates – they are presented with a narrative of positive transformation. It goes something like this: while Angola was once the ‘bloodiest prison in the nation’ (see Rideau 1993: 19) in need of sweeping reform, today, because it is both safe and home to numerous progressive programs and initiatives, it serves as a model for prisons across the country.
Angola’s plantation history – and thus, the penitentiary’s link to slavery – is absent from this ‘official’ narrative. A small number of prisoners view the connection between past and present differently, however, claiming in their writings that their experiences at Angola are analogous to those of enslaved individuals in the antebellum era. Based on these findings, I argue that Angola is more than just a state penitentiary. It is simultaneously a space where national mythologies and collective memories are created, contested, and reproduced, as well as a place where we actively grapple with, try to understand, and construct different versions of our history.

**Literature Review**

**The New Jim Crow?**

Numerous scholars have been consumed with understanding the massive overrepresentation of black men and women in United States prisons, investigating whether it is explained by higher offending rates, social contexts, or a discriminatory criminal justice system (e.g., Blumstein 1988; Bridges and Crutchfield 1988; Garland 2001b; Kirk 2008). For Muller (2012: 282), however, these scholars have tended to begin their quest to elucidate the origins of this racial disparity “too near to the present”.

Recently, a body of literature that situates the current overrepresentation “against the backdrop of the full historical trajectory of racial domination in the United States” has emerged (Wacquant 2000: 378). While contemporary laws and sentencing guidelines are no longer explicitly racist, this group of scholars argues, the effects of these statutes are largely the same as they were in the past: black individuals are subject to harsher punishments, forced to provide free or cheap labor while incarcerated, and are stripped of various rights (Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; King 2006; Wacquant 2001; Weatherspoon 2007). For his part, Wacquant (2000, 2001, 2002) argues that the prison is the latest ‘peculiar institution’ – following in the path of slavery, Jim Crow, and the ghetto – to define and regulate black persons in the United States. In other words, law and custom continue to ensure that blacks are perpetual second-class citizens (Alexander 2010). The similarities between the past and present lead Weatherspoon (2007: 601, 602) to refer to
the contemporary experiences of blacks caught up in the criminal justice system as “de facto slavery,” with young black men being placed in “involuntary servitude for life”. The key distinction between slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration has to do with rhetoric and outward appearance rather than a fundamental shift in the social structure or a bona fide improvement in race relations (Alexander 2010; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008). At present, then, we find ourselves in an era of “color-blind racism,” where race is presumably no longer a consideration in criminal justice policy and practice, but where black individuals remain disproportionately surveilled, policed, prosecuted, and incarcerated (Alexander 2010; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008: 633). The conflation of blackness with criminality provides a socially acceptable outlet for anti-black hatred – thereby depoliticizing the issue of race – at a time when explicit racism has become increasingly censured, and helps mark the new dividing line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Alexander 2010; Wacquant 2001, 2002; see also Frampton, López, and Simon 2008). The key argument here is that mass incarceration is the new (and to certain extent modified) form of slavery or Jim Crow.

This body of work has also been subject to critique, particularly by James Forman, Jr. (2012), who suggests that the Jim Crow analogy obscures some key elements of mass incarceration. Specifically, he argues, the proponents of the analogy are keen to emphasize the importance of white voters’ resistance to the social upheaval of the 1960s – perhaps best symbolized by the Civil Rights Movement – as a key reason for the law-and-order movement, but they tend to ignore that crime rates increased drastically during that decade. In addition, it was not just white elites who fought for tougher laws and harsher sentences, but also black activists worried about crime and violence. Simply stated, Forman’s (2012) point is that, unlike Jim Crow, the laws and sentencing policies that led to mass incarceration were supported by some blacks and had some basis in levels of crime and violence. Black individuals are actors in this equation, and not simply victims of discriminatory policies. Moreover, Jim Crow sought to disenfranchise and subordinate every black American, while mass incarceration has a disproportionate impact on the black underclass (see also Pettit and Western 2004). The analogy also ignores that some whites and Hispanics are likewise targeted by these policies. For this
reason, Forman (2012) rejects the argument that mass incarceration is the primary race-making institution and suggests that no institution can define blackness in America as entirely as slavery and Jim Crow once did. The quest to find similarities between these regimes, Forman (2012) worries, has the potential to alter memories and threatens to make society forget the unique awfulness of Jim Crow.

**Remembering and Forgetting Trauma**

As Forman’s (2012) concerns highlight, suggesting that the practices and consequences of mass incarceration are similar to those that were prevalent during slavery or Jim Crow necessitates that we engage with our memories of the past. Simply put, we cannot assume that we all think or feel the same way about these historical systems of racial oppression. There is a rich literature from which to draw upon in this regard, as a number of scholars (e.g. Halbwachs 1992; Olick and Levy 1997; Savelsberg and King 2005, 2007; Schwartz 1982) have explored how groups remember and forget. These scholars suggest that recalling the past is not a straightforward task that entails reading from a laundry list of historical ‘facts,’ but rather is an “active, constructive process” (Schwartz 1982: 374). Some researchers have narrowed their focus to a particular type of collective memory, cultural trauma, which Savelsberg and King (2005: 582) describe as the memory of “catastrophic past events”. Much like other strands of collective memory, cultural trauma is complicated and is not the inevitable outcome of a group of individuals enduring pain and suffering. Rather, it requires “cultural work” (see Alexander and Breese 2011: xiii). In a process that takes time and negotiation, actors in a collectivity must choose to represent a suffering as causing a “dramatic loss of identity and meaning” (Eyerman 2002: 2) and as signifying “a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go” (Alexander 2004: 10).

How we think of a past event in the present – its meaning – is the outcome of “ongoing dialogue” (Ofer 2013: 83). Whether described this way or as a “negotiation through time,” this recollection happens in a particular social context, one that is perpetually shifting (Ofer 2013; Olick and Levy 1997: 921). Thus, what is considered most important about the past, or how a certain event is remembered (by a collective and the individuals
that comprise that collective), changes over time and depends on the conditions of the present (Alexander 2002; Eyerman 2002; Schwartz 1996). Despite this ‘malleability’ (see Olick and Robbins 1998: 128), the past cannot be reconstructed literally, and this process is instead constrained by the historical record, available resources, and the broader power structure (Alexander 2002, 2004; Eyerman 2002; Schwartz 1982). Furthermore, trauma narratives are often subject to contestation, competition, and debate (Alexander 2004; Giesen 2004; Rosenblum 2002). There is no one story about a traumatic event that all groups in a society agree on across time. The same can be said for a nation’s collective memory (Savelsberg and King 2005). It is important to note that even when those in a collective seem to remember an event or era or person, these memories can be specific to the individual and not about a shared experience (Schuman and Scott 1989). There is, simply put, fluidity and individual variation to how we remember.

Carrier groups are the “collective agents of the trauma process” - they aim to convince fellow members of their collective that they have been traumatized by the event in question (Alexander 2004: 11). Exploring the practices and strategies of these groups, Degloma (2009: 107) argues that they “provide a discursive means for a broad pool of individuals to link their personal stories to a shared traumatic reality”. In essence they widen the net, allowing others, including those who did not experience the event directly, to identify with, and build bonds based on the memory of, shared past trauma and its effects (Degloma 2009).

Extant scholarly work published on collective memory and cultural trauma has focused, for the most part, on the Holocaust (e.g. Gallant and Rhea 2010; Gutwein 2009; Jacobs 2014; Levy and Sznaider 2006; Ofer 2009, 2013; Olick and Levy 1997). A quick overview of a sample of these studies demonstrates empirically some of the theoretical insights discussed above. For instance, Ofer (2009, 2013) finds that there is no singular way of remembering the Holocaust, Gutwein (2009) suggests that shifting remembrances of the Holocaust are tied to different versions of Israeli collective identity and nation-building projects, and Jacobs (2014: 29) discovers that Nazi sites of terror are places of “memory transfer,” strengthening feelings and intensifying identification for descendants.
While much work has examined memories of the Holocaust, the literature on the cultural trauma of slavery, its effects, and the ways in which it is remembered, is less developed (see Blight 2006; Eyerman 2002, 2004; Graff 2014 for exceptions). This is despite the fact that slavery “burdens all of American history” (Horton and Horton 2006: x). Those who have done work in this area have referenced slavery’s impact on the enslaved group’s self-identification and associations (Eyerman 2002; Hamilton, Hodgson, and Quirk 2012). Others (Downs 2012; Hamilton et al. 2012) have suggested that public discussions and representations of slavery are informed by notions of community and nationhood, as well as (dis)honor, and that they also tend to avoid the messier questions of cruelty, inhumanity, and profit. For the United States, a nation seemingly perpetually concerned with individual rights and freedoms, acknowledging slavery (or making reparations for that matter; see Torpey and Burkett 2010) is a tricky – or, to borrow from Horton (2006: 36), an “embarrassing, guilt-producing, and disillusioning” – endeavor. Along these lines, Savelsberg and King (2005) have noted the tendency of the United States to ignore its own domestic evils, their memory of trauma focused instead on its role as a liberator, both at home and abroad.

A promising strand of research investigates this issue in-depth, exploring how slavery is talked about and memorialized at slave plantation tourist sites across the Southern United States (e.g. Buzinde and Santos 2008, 2009; Eichstedt and Small 2002; Modlin 2008). These are clearly not ‘apolitical’ spaces, observe Buzinde and Santos (2008, 2009: 439), but rather places where visitors are encouraged to recall a particular version of a controversial, contested past, a version that aligns with, reinforces, and extols dominant values. In short, visitors to these sites are taught about life (or a romanticized/idealized notion of it) during slavery (Buzinde and Santos 2008, 2009; Modlin 2008). At the Hampton Plantation in South Carolina, for instance, the emphasis was on economic prosperity brought about as a result of the resourcefulness and cleverness of the white planters; the contributions of, and brutality directed against, the enslaved population were disregarded (Buzinde and Santos 2008). Similarly, docent-led tours at plantation museum sites in North Carolina focused on the original owners, architecture, and furnishings more
than they did slavery (Modlin 2008). On the occasions when slavery was mentioned, docents would often claim that slavery did not happen at that particular site, or that the practice of enslaving individuals was somehow different – benevolent or benign – at that specific plantation (Modlin 2008). In perhaps the most extensive of these studies, Eichstedt and Small (2002) examine the rhetorics used at 122 plantation museums in Virginia, Louisiana, and Georgia. These plantation tourist sites, on the whole, present the antebellum South as “genteel, honorable, and romantic” (Eichstedt and Small 2002: 258). The authors found that while a small number of plantation sites incorporated discussions of slavery throughout their tours, and other sites presented information about the institution of slavery at separate displays or tours, the majority were likely to either ignore slavery entirely or mention it in passing and without context, a practice the authors refer to as “symbolic annihilation” (Eichstedt and Small 2002: 10). Eichstedt and Small (2002: 258) also toured twenty sites designed to challenge the dominant narrative and tell the stories of African-Americans, but conclude that the approach taken by ‘mainstream’ plantation museums exposes and reproduces a system of discrimination and subjugation based on race. These findings reveal the propensity for ignoring or forgetting a portion of American history that is upsetting and objectionable, in what some scholars have called “social/collective amnesia” (Timothy and Boyd 2006: 3).

The current project combines the two distinct literatures reviewed above and explores the collective memories of slavery at Angola. Angola is the logical choice for this type of work. For one, the Deep South, as Angolite staffer Douglas Dennis (1996d: 30) writes, “has always set the tone, practice and legal framework of sanctioned racial injustice in America.” Moreover, the land on which the Louisiana State Penitentiary now sits was at one point in time a group of plantations, home to slaves “who cut sugar cane and picked cotton for the master” (Nelson 1995: 20; Nelson 2001). At contemporary Angola some prisoners – the vast majority of whom are black – continue to “work five eight-hour days a week in the fields, much of that time tending crops or scraping sides of ditches with hoes or mowing down Johnson grass with swing blades” (Nelson 1998b: 20). I begin by examining how Angola’s history is documented and discussed by contemporary administrators. I then turn my attention to prisoners’ subjective experiences, exploring if
and how they use the memory of slavery as a means to make sense of their incarceration. I take this approach because I believe it is important to investigate not just ‘official’ discourse about slavery and historical racial discrimination – museum exhibits, state-produced documents, and the like – but also how individuals make sense of these accounts and create narratives of their own (see Schwartz and Schuman 2005). Doing so demonstrates the tensions between competing histories, reveals that our ways of conceptualizing slavery remain complex and variable, and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the connections between slavery and contemporary criminal justice policies and practices.

Data and Methods

Initially I set out to investigate how ‘race’ permeates life at the penitentiary, using prisoners’ writings as my window into Angola. I began by coding 1,239 prisoner submissions – spread out over 95 issues – to The Angolite. I found that only 135 submissions (or 10.9%) were explicitly tied to ‘race’. I also discovered a disjuncture between the prisoners’ conceptions of their carceral experiences and the New Jim Crow literature. That is, the writings of relatively few prisoners at Angola – a former slave plantation where some of the mostly black inmates continue to ‘work’ in the fields! – seemed to match up with the work of scholars (e.g. Alexander 2010; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Wacquant 2000, 2001, 2002; Weatherspoon 2007) who have focused so much attention on drawing parallels between slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. In fact, fewer than forty of the 1,239 submissions implied that elements of their incarceration were analogous with slavery, and only seven submissions referred to Angola as a plantation. Surprised by these preliminary findings given Angola’s past, my interest shifted. I began to focus my attention on the ways in which the controversial racial history of the penitentiary and the land on which it sits was being narrated – or remembered and forgotten – by both administrators and prisoners.

Data for this project are drawn from issues of The Angolite, an uncensored prison newsmagazine produced by prisoners at Angola. I contacted the current editor of The

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Angolite and requested copies of every available issue up until 2001— he sent 95 issues from 1979-2001. While The Angolite’s small staff produces much of the content, contributions from outside groups such as The Sentencing Project are also accepted. Every issue contains news briefs, updates on current criminal justice developments across the United States, an investigative feature or features that cover a range of topics, as well as two sections set aside for original writings— normally letters, prose, and poetry— submitted by readers (mostly prisoners at Angola). Prisoners’ individual submissions must be of general relevance (e.g. no personal appeals for penpals). To be accepted for publication, prisoners must also refrain from making personal attacks or unsubstantiated claims about their case and must avoid using profane language. I also visited the prison on several occasions. I attended the Angola Prison Rodeo twice: on April 27th, 2014 and October 5th, 2014. On the second of these trips I also visited the Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum and acquired six additional issues of The Angolite (from the years 2011-2014). The purpose of these trips was to investigate how prison officials presented the history of the prison to the outside world.

It is important to acknowledge that The Angolite’s limits regarding space, its ban on profane language, as well as the literacy levels of the prisoners, all have the potential to modify or hinder the ability of prisoners to express their views. Similarly, the writings published in each issue of The Angolite are unlikely to be representative of those incarcerated at Angola, or of prisoners more generally. What these writings can show us, however, is whether, and how, prisoners think about Angola’s racial history, and if they make sense of their incarceration through the lens of slavery. Thus, this project broadens our understanding of contemporary carceral experiences by showing how the memory of the cultural trauma of slavery shapes how prisoners understand their incarceration. It also reveals that Angola is more than simply a site of punishment; it is also a space where collective memories are created and altered, and where ideas of nationhood are made and remade. And while this is quite obviously a story about Angola, the implications of this project extend beyond the prison’s front gates. Angola’s legacy of hard labor, appalling conditions, and brutality resembles other prisons in the region (see Oshinsky 1996). As Dennis (1996b: 12) writes, “the Angola experience exemplifie[s] how Southern prisons
evolved from cash-crop oriented plantations with little regard for basic humanity…to bureaucratic human warehouses”.

Findings

Forgetting Slavery and Celebrating Progress – Angola’s ‘Official’ History

At the 1998 opening of the Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum, Marianne Fisher-Giorlando, a member of the museum’s advisory committee, remarked: “we have to know where we were to know where we are now. And we need to measure where we are now to know where we are going…That’s how we’re able to tell how far we’ve actually come” (Myers 1998: 17). This is also the case for Angola, where the prison’s history of violence, of overwork, of awful treatment of convicts very much informs how we are encouraged to view Angola’s present. In this section of the paper I outline the so-called ‘dominant’ or ‘official’ history of Angola, the one that is presented to the outside world.

After decades of brutality and backwardness, visitors to the prison or readers of *The Angolite* are often told, Angola is now a model penitentiary, both relatively safe and progressive. Referring to the ground on which the penitentiary now sits, *Angolite* staffer Lane Nelson (1999: 33) hints at the typical tale of transformation; he writes: “if the soil could speak, it would tell of the sweat and blood it has soaked up, of lives it has claimed, and of reform.” The plot of land known as Angola was acquired by Isaac Franklin and set up as a plantation in the 1840s (Foster 1993). We know that it first began operations as a sawmill and woodyard, when more land was bought and sold, as well as who married whom and who inherited what, but details about the lives of the enslaved individuals that ‘worked’ the land during this period are scarce (Foster 1993; Nelson 2001). Interestingly, slavery is almost entirely absent from documents designed to educate individuals about the history of Angola. The Rodeo Souvenir Program, *The Angola Story* pamphlet located inside the museum gift shop, and museum displays all begin their history of Angola not actually at Angola, but in Baton Rouge circa 1835, with the opening of “The Walls,” the first Louisiana State Penitentiary (Louisiana State Penitentiary 2014; Louisiana State
Penitentiary Museum Foundation 2011). This, of course, mirrors the findings of scholars (see Buzinde and Santos 2008; Eichstedt and Small 2002; Modlin 2008) who have toured plantation museums across the South only to discover that the horrors of slavery were either ignored or diminished by tour guides, and that the focus instead was on the possessions and achievements of the white plantation owners.

After the abolition of slavery, convicts worked the land under the supervision of Confederate Major Samuel James, who leased all of Louisiana’s prisoners from 1869 to 1901 \(^3\) (Dennis 1997a). *The Angola Story* notes that James purchased the Angola plantation in 1880 and relocated some convicts there, housing them in the Tenant Farmer Quarters, which would later become Camp A (Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum Foundation 2011). The prison in modern times, writes Angolite contributor Burk Foster (1993: 47), “survives as a lasting memorial” to both Major James and his accomplishments. The welfare of the “prisoner-slaves” - who worked on farms and plantations, cut timber, performed household servant duties, and helped construct railroads and Mississippi River levees - was disregarded throughout James’ rule (“Its History” 1982: 61; Foster 1993). The focus was on turning a profit, and this meant that life was “harsh and often deadly” for these convicts (Butler 1991: 70).

Louisiana purchased the land and put an end to the convict lease system at the beginning of the twentieth century (Nelson 1998b, 1999). While at this juncture Angola became a state penitentiary (or penal farm or plantation prison), prisoners continued to work long, hard hours in the fields under the threat of physical violence (Nelson 1995, 1998b, 1999). In other words, this was a change “in name only” as James’ strategy informed the approach to corrections in Louisiana for decades after the end of the lease – predominantly black prisoners were still “crowded into large wooden buildings and work[ed] from sunup to sundown in sugar cane and cotton fields-rain or shine, 12-14 hours a day, seven days a week” (Foster 1993; Nelson 1995: 20). Profit, and not rehabilitation or reformation, remained the primary concern (Foster 1993). Management controlled prisoners and maintained order through the use of beatings and floggings (“Against All Odds” 1985; Nelson 1995). For the first half of the twentieth century
“Angola remained a hellhole of dilapidated quarters, inedible food, political patronage, overwork, corruption, racism and brutality” (Dennis 2001: 34). It was these conditions that motivated prisoners to cut their heel-strings in the early 1950s and drew attention to their plight (Wikberg 1991). While reforms followed, they only lasted until 1962, when concerns about the budget and politics negated any progress (Wikberg 1991). Conditions deteriorated and by the early 1970s “Angola was a full-blown monster” with “violence…woven into the very fabric of the prison’s daily life” (Foster 1988: 23; “Maggio Retires” 1984: 15; Wikberg 1991). A federal court order and a new warden helped bring about real, lasting change in the mid-1970s: additional staff was hired, overcrowding was reduced, the practice of racial segregation ended, and violence subsided (Glover 1991; “Maggio Retires” 1984; Mason 1987). The federal court decision is a pivotal moment in Angola’s history, believed to have finally brought “the prison out of its “dark ages”” (Foster 1988: 23) and credited with having inspired a “massive clean-up effort” (“Rehabilitation-A Misguided Effort” 1982: 43) that “resulted in the institution’s progress and change” (Mason 1987: 28).

This narrative – the nation’s bloodiest prison transformed – is the one that prevails. A reading of The Angolite reveals as much. In one issue, for example, a staffer writes that over the years Angola was converted “from a slaughterhouse into the safest maximum-security prison in the nation” (Dennis 1997b: 24-25). That it is now the safest maximum-security prison in the United States is a claim made repeatedly and the state of Louisiana is acknowledged for the ‘progress’ it has made in corrections (Dennis 1996c: 4, 1997a: 30; Rideau 1993: 21). When asked about their time spent at Angola, high-ranking security officials give a similar account. For instance, Lt. Colonel Clovis Tillery reflects: “over the years things have changed dramatically. This was once a violent place ruled by brute force. Believe me when I tell you there has been a tremendous change” (Glover 1995: 36). Likewise, Lt. Colonel Jimmy Johnson observes: “when [I] first came to work in 75 it was rough…There were still a large number of murders, and a lot of aggravated fights…Things were starting to really change, and it has changed completely since I started here” (Glover 1995: 36). This narrative is also adopted by some prisoners; one example is Larry Winfrey (1979: 79), who writes that while the “history of Angola is
ugly and violent,” “things…have taken on a new color” recently. Readers, then, are encouraged to conclude the “harsh and brutal practices which had been so prevalent” are now something of the past (Wikberg and Rideau 1989: 15).

The Angola Prison Rodeo\(^4\) – held one weekend in April and every Sunday in October – is another opportunity for administrators to drive home to a large audience just how progressive the Angola of today is. Between events that pit prisoners against bulls, the announcer boasts to the crowd of thousands that Angola “stands as a model for the rest of the country” and, just in case they missed that pronouncement, the Rodeo Souvenir Program, sold for $5, notifies readers that Angola is “home to the first four-year accredited college degree program inside a prison in the United States” and a “licensed, award-winning hospice program with professionally trained offender volunteer caregivers that serves as a national model for prison hospice” (Louisiana State Penitentiary 2014: 12). Moreover, a “culture change” sweeping across the prison over the past 15 years is purported to have “resulted in decreased violence” and “inspired an environment conducive to moral rehabilitation” (Louisiana State Penitentiary 2014: 42). Today, many prisoners housed at Angola have been transformed “from selfish criminals into purpose driven citizens who are eager to volunteer and serve others,” with some even certified as vocational and academic tutors and working to help “prepare short-term offenders to successfully return to society” (Louisiana State Penitentiary 2014: 11, 42). The rodeo itself is said to aid in this endeavor, as “funds from concession sales are dedicated to offender re-entry and other educational and training programs that reduce recidivism and victims of crime” (Louisiana State Penitentiary 2014: 4). This echoes earlier editions of The Angolite, which note that the rodeo and arts and crafts festival gives prisoners an opportunity to spend their time on something socially “constructive” and to learn important life skills, with the chance for a reward at the end of their hard work (Dennis 1996a: 16; Sharp 2011). Alluding to the reformative potential of hobbycrafting, Mitchell Cox states: “it keeps me from being idle, keeps me out of fights. For me, it’s self-rehabilitation” (Nelson 1998a: 18). Baton Rouge Judge Bob Downing takes it a step further, noting “this is the kind of event that prepares inmates to return to society as productive taxpayers…Many will be able to earn a living with the skills they’ve learned,
but even those that can’t have learned the value of hard work and determination” (Guzman and Glover 1990: 45-46).

But for all its talk about facilitating reformation and rehabilitation, entertaining rodeo attendees appears to be the chief preoccupation. There is no concerted effort to initiate any type of real discussion about the consequences of Louisiana’s extremely harsh sentencing policies or how to go about achieving criminal justice reform. The rodeo, as described in *The Angolite*, is a “rip-roaring, hilarious and often dangerous affair” (“Rodeo” 1986: 9) and is typically advertised as the “wildest show in the south”. *Angolite* staffer Keith Elliott (1994: 57) recognizes this focus on entertainment when he observes that the “rodeo ground is no longer a part of the prison, but a special magical bazaar that holds all manner of wonderful and beautiful sights, sounds and smells”. In fact, visitors, like Belva Reynolds, can forget they are even at a plantation prison where men still work the fields and have limited prospects of ever being released; she states: “After a while I almost forgot where I was, everyone is so friendly. There’s so many different things. Most of it’s really nice” (Dilosa and Armstrong 1999: 20). Thus, just like those who go on plantation tours (see Buzinde and Santos 2008, 2009; Modlin 2008), those attending the rodeo are encouraged to leave with a rosy perception of life at Angola and without a real understanding of the issues facing those who live(d) there.

Attendees are forced to drive by the Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum on their way to and from the rodeo. A plaque just inside its entrance advises that the museum was set up to “establish and preserve Angola’s past and to educate all who visit about the role this sprawling prison farm has played in our state’s history”. And while a collection of prisoners’ weapons, instruments used historically to punish convicts, and a clipping from the 1952 *Collier’s* article labeling Angola “America’s Worst Prison” inform visitors of the penitentiary’s brutal past, a display on the prison’s hospice program and the framed copy of an article from *The Advocate* noting that Angola has been freed from federal oversight help signify to visitors that the prison has been cleaned up in recent years, with conditions and attitudes having improved considerably. Other materials also highlight this transformation. *The Angola Story* pamphlet, located near the museum’s entrance, for
instance, outlines the prison’s “rehabilitative efforts,” describing initiatives like *Character Counts*, *Parenting Skills*, *Steps Toward Educational Progress*, and the *Pre-Release Exit Program* (Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum Foundation 2011: 9). Moreover, the pamphlet notes that prisoners at Angola may earn Associate or Bachelor degrees from the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, with Corrections Departments in states like California, Georgia, Illinois, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas having followed Angola’s lead by launching similar faith-based programs (Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum Foundation 2011). Visitors are encouraged to attribute much of the prison’s transformation to Angola’s current warden, Burl Cain. For instance, the final point on a timeline of significant events in Angola’s history, located on the wall in the museum’s gift shop, reads: “1995-Present Burl Cain becomes warden, begins massive expansion of education and moral rehabilitation programming; violence inside the prison is dramatically reduced”. Also located in the gift shop, right beside *The Angola Story*, is Dennis Shere’s (2005) book entitled *Cain’s Redemption*; the back cover commends Cain for the “progressive, compassionate programs and sound correctional procedures he has implemented”. An entire room of the relatively small museum is dedicated to the rodeo, while posters and memorabilia from the major movies filmed at the prison fill up another corner – all this helps create the idea that Angola is exceptional, both good at what it does and unique.

Farming is another way in which Angola is unique. Currently, the museum also has on exhibit several farming tools as well as photographs and paintings depicting prisoners laboring in the fields. Hundreds of men at Angola remain “constructively active” by working 40 hours a week in the farm lines, tending crops – soybeans, corn, wheat, okra, beans, strawberries, onions, peppers, cabbage, and tomatoes – for both sale and consumption (Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum Foundation 2011: 9). The Rodeo Souvenir Program asserts that Angola produces over 1.4 million pounds of fresh vegetables a year; this is enough to feed more than 11,000 prisoners in five state prisons (Louisiana State Penitentiary 2014: 12). A 2014 short video produced by LSP-TV, the prisoner-operated television station, entitled *Farming on the Farm* is available for viewing at the museum; it provides an overview of the farming practices, both past and
present. More than that, though, it reveals that perhaps Angola is not as far removed from its controversial, troubling history as we may be encouraged to believe. The narrator begins by informing viewers that hours were long and conditions were harsh when agricultural operations first began over 140 years ago. And while “life on ‘the Farm’ improved over the years,” he continues, “the more things change, the more they remain the same”. So-called “primitive” methods are still used, creating a scene reminiscent of a “dark, bygone era”. In fact, in 2013, thirty-eight years after the sugar mill was shut down, prisoners at Angola began harvesting sugarcane again. They make the syrup the “old-timey way” claims Cain proudly, “like your great-grandpa would do it, a long time ago”. While Angola’s previous era of sugarcane production is linked with brutality, appalling conditions, and convict guards, the prison is of course very different now (Hilburn 2014).

Assistant Warden Cathy Fontenot explains that bringing sugarcane back is really a lesson, noting that “Warden Cain wants to show that we can keep transforming this prison into a model for others to follow, while still preserving those things that made Angola what it is today” (Hilburn 2014: 10). As Cain himself states in the Farming on the Farm video: “it’s a plantation prison, it was that way throughout its entire history, so [it is] very important that we have agriculture here”. Cain does not explain why exactly this is important, nor does he explore the connection between plantation and prison. At Angola, then, a very specific history is presented for consumption: this history disregards the practices and effects of slavery, choosing to focus instead on the prison’s transformation into a model penitentiary.

“Modern day slave labor is what it is”5 – How the Past Shapes Prisoners’ Perceptions of Their Incarceration and of Farming at ‘the Farm’

While Angola’s contemporary public image is tied to ideas about reform, advancement, and progress, some prisoners view the connection between past and present much differently. On this issue Nelson (2000a: 18) argues that “Angola’s turbulent history is stitched to the present by threads of oppression.” Continuing, Nelson (2000a: 17) notes that “people have been held in bondage on this land for more than 200 years”. First slaves, then ‘tenant farmers,’ and now prisoners, have all labored – mostly involuntarily –
at Angola, home to some of the “world’s richest farm land” (Nelson 2000a: 18). And as we saw in the previous section, only part of this history is widely acknowledged by administrators and officials today. While fewer hours may be spent in the fields, sugarcane is no longer the primary crop, and the conditions have noticeably improved, the emphasis on work has remained a constant (Nelson 1998b, 1999). But regardless of the extent to which change has occurred over the years, fieldwork at Angola “still conjures historical images of Southern slavery” (Nelson 1999: 33). The ways in which present-day farming practices at Angola recall slavery does not go unnoticed by prisoners. When Monroe Green first arrived at Angola in 1957, for example, he made sense of what he saw using his knowledge of slavery practices; he reflects: “I saw a big farm. There were a lot of men in the fields. The living conditions were like on those slave ships coming over here, with the quarters filled with slaves” (Nelson 2000b: 40). Similarly, Roland Pittman (1990: 90) identifies other prisoners as his “fellow slaves”. The poetry of Mark King (1992: 78), which references the brutality and forced labor overseen by ‘slavemasters,’ serves as another example; for him, this means little is different than it was a century ago:

*A century of forced labor, blood and pain*  
*Lives wasted, buried in the shame*  
*Slavemasters oversee their daily tasks*  
*Hidden behind century-old sadistic masks*  
*The world has passed this deathly land by*  
*The inhabitants still ask why*

Others, such as Larry Williams (1984: 73), also liken prison officials to “slave-masters and overseers”.

Many, if not most, prisoners regard being assigned to work in the fields – one of a number of jobs – as punishment (“In The Field” 1979). “This is beyond cruel and unusual punishment, working in this heat, cutting grass that doesn’t need to be cut,” suggests Donald Labuzan (Nelson 1999: 39). But Angola’s philosophy with respect to fieldwork is articulated nicely by Nelson (1999: 36), who observes, “crops and vegetables have always been the heartbeat of Angola and always will. The soil demands it”. In contrast to the administration’s claim that fieldwork keeps them “constructively active” (Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum Foundation 2011: 9), some prisoners argue that forced labor,
particularly in the fields, makes them no different than slaves. For example, Donnie Hunt (1986: 52) references Angola’s “fields of modernized slavery,” while Chuck Unger (1998: 63) suggests that prisoners have “become modern-day slaves for the state. We work at hard labor for practically nothing and we make people rich.” Other prisoners express frustration with being forced to work in the “fields like slaves,” this preoccupation with hard labor often coming at the expense of rehabilitative programming (Bronze 1989: 82; see also Robertson 1990). On a similar note, George Elliott (1994: 68) observes that prisons today exist not to correct, but instead to “punish and contain” those considered “human waste”; he believes this “warehousing…has become another form of slave labor”. Arguing that fieldwork does little to prepare prisoners for release, Gibson (1987: 65) asserts that prison officials “want us to slave all day in the field, like in the old slavery days, instead of being sent to school to educate ourselves, by taking up some type of trade, or getting our GED’s so that we can get a job on the streets”. It is “just like the old slavery days,” continues Gibson (1987: 65), “except they do their thing, in a more sophisticated manner”. For his part, Lormand (2000: 71) adds that hard labor is “worthless”. As the above examples demonstrate, a subset of Angola’s prisoner population sees clear similarities between past and present. For them, forced labor in the fields recalls the practices of slavery. This history, in other words, is not entirely forgotten.

We already know from Goodman’s (2012) work on California’s fire camps that prisoners’ conceptions and experiences of their labor are complex. Thus, it should come as little surprise that multiple, nuanced viewpoints are expressed at Angola as well. In addition to evoking memories of slavery, forced work in the fields was also believed by some prisoners to be degrading. For example, Spencer (1996: 70) writes:

They work us like slaves  
And treat us like dogs  
They feed us slop  
That ain’t fit to feed a hog

Johnny Johnson’s (1982: 87) writings reveal the belief that continued emphasis on fieldwork is dehumanizing, precludes the rehabilitation of prisoners, and is in actuality regressive rather than progressive; he observes:
We’re not livestock, we’re human just as you! It’s time you start some kind of rehabilitate thing here, if you think a person going to rehabilitate through the fields, you’re wrong. We need some place where we can educate our minds and get some kind of skill, that’s the only way to rehabilitate a person, you can’t through farm work. We’re one of the largest penitentiaries in the United States, but we are so far behind the times. Now release yourself from the past!

King (1993: 88) echoes this sentiment and argues that Louisiana is still backwards:

Yes, we’ve come from Plymouth rock  
and have gone to the moon  
But in Louisiana we still pray modernization  
will come soon

In the blistering heat and numbing cold  
we are led out into farm fields of old  
While in other states, an illiterate may fall  
and be taught technology, college and all

Rehabilitation in Louisiana is excessive and quite clear  
It is psychological harassment and hard labor year after year

Adds Roland Pittman (1990: 90): “we are not recognized as human beings but as a commodity of cheap labor”. This is nothing new, Ardis (1992: 79) writes, because “for 500 years now we as Blackmen have yet to find respect in America as men and human beings”. Russell Alexander (2000/2001: 71) differs from many of his peers; he claims that because prisoners receive wages, however miniscule, in exchange for their labor, and are not “bought and sold like horses,” they are unlike slaves. What binds these examples together, however, is that prisoners’ understandings of their incarceration are, to at least some extent, “filtered through the veil” of slavery and lengthy history of racial oppression (Eyerman 2002: 87).

Angola’s past as a plantation, and the South’s history of slavery more generally, finds its way into the prisoners’ submissions in other ways as well. This is seen when we look to the writings of David LeFerre (2001: 68), who notes that his “people [have been] in bondage 4 hundred years” or Larry Ardis (1992: 81), who refers to other black men in prison as his “Brothers in bondage”. Similarly, Joe Robertson (1990: 72) writes about being free from the “chains of bondage” and Joe Zina (1998: 67) remains hopeful that
prisoners can “overcome [their] bondage”. Others, like Owens (1993: 61), flip the analogy on its head; he believes that “from the time the first of our fathers were bound, shackled and herded into the darks holds of Christian slaveships to the present day, the experience of the black man in America can be summed up in one word – prison”. Still others (e.g., Pittman 1990: 90; Nelson 1994: 70; Deboue 1996: 60) liken the penitentiary to a plantation, while Larry Perkins (1993: 88) adds a descriptor, referring to Angola as “this lonely plantation”. And alluding to Louisiana’s extraordinarily harsh sentencing policies, Willie Peters (1991: 81) expresses concern about the fate of the “mass majority of slave prisoners” who face the “reality of dying on this plantation of old age”6. Thus, prisoners’ writings bring to light contemporary Angola’s ties to slavery, even if prison-produced documents and the administration’s narratives attempt to redirect attention towards the prison’s progressive programs and relative safety.

Other prisoners issue a larger critique, discussing contemporary criminal justice policies and practices and the inequality that pervades the system today. But here again the past plays a prominent role in their writings. Some, like Harris (1993), believe their incarceration is part of a larger conspiracy with deep historical roots, while Peters (“The Politics of Sentencing” 1986: 34) tells The Angolite that “niggers are punished; we’ve always been punished in this country”. The writings of other prisoners reference the Confederacy, public lynching, and the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, thereby encouraging readers to recall the lengthy history of racial oppression in the South, and the United States as a whole. While the methods may have changed, these prisoners argue, the outcomes remain the same. Several examples are demonstrative. For his part, former editor of The Angolite, Wilbert Rideau (1987: 61), claims that when “justice by rope ended, it mattered naught because the judicial system could essentially achieve the same results via sophisticated manipulations of the system that were less objectionable to the public conscience”. Johnny Brown (1985: 58) is even more explicit in his views:

| the south have a history of disregarding Black people lives, being unfair in and out of the courthouse, no matter what the case. The KKK tries to deceive American people with white robes in public. But in reality they wear every color robe and uniform in this country, even black robes in our state courts. Today they kill with the chair instead of the tree. |
And finally, as Burgess (1999: 60) observes, “the South has truly risen again, in the form of vast prison/industrial complexes in the eleven original states of the Confederacy. There are more private prisons in the Southern region in the United States than anywhere else”. What these men’s writings make clear, then, is that memories of the past – slavery, the Civil War, lynching, Jim Crow, etc. – inform how some of the prisoners at Angola make sense of their incarceration and dealings with the criminal justice system.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Scholars have documented, described, and tried to make sense of the mass incarceration of black individuals in United States prisons. Some of these scholars (e.g. Alexander 2010; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Wacquant 2000, 2001, 2002; Weatherspoon 2007) have looked to the past as a way to understand the present. They claim, generally, that there are many similarities between historical and contemporary methods of regulating this population, and outline the parallels between slavery, Jim Crow, and current criminal justice practices. To adequately explore this topic, however, requires us to consider how we remember the past, and to think about the legacy of discrimination based on race. This project does exactly that. I undertake the case study of Angola, Louisiana’s maximum-security penitentiary, to investigate how slavery is remembered and forgotten at a plantation prison.

The extent to which the institution and effects of slavery remain contested and a source of tension in the United States is readily apparent at Angola. Both administrators and prisoners use history as a tool in order to comprehend what goes on at Angola today, but do so in very different ways. Multiple visits to the prison and an analysis of prison-produced documents reveal that rather than acknowledge or commemorate its plantation history, the ‘official’ narrative about Angola focuses on its transformation from the most violent prison in the United States to the safest. Today, when tourists flock to the prison every spring and every fall for the “brilliant mixture of color, sounds, excitement and thrills” that is the rodeo (“Wildest Show in the South” 1982: 15), they hear about the prison’s progressive policies and programs. And Angola’s farming practices are lauded
for keeping prisoners “constructively active” and saving taxpayers money (Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum Foundation 2011: 9). That enslaved people ‘worked’ this same land before prisoners were compelled to – and therefore, modern-day Angola’s most explicit connection to slavery – remains unspoken or forgotten. This allows the rodeo and arts and crafts festival to remain, in the words of Warden Cain, a source of “affordable family entertainment” (Louisiana State Penitentiary 2014: 4).

Like scholars of collective memory and cultural trauma tell us, the ways in which we think and talk about – or re(construct) – the past discloses important information about the present (e.g. Alexander 2002; Eyerman 2002; Schwartz 1996). In Angola’s case, the absence of slavery from the prison administration’s version of history reproduces and “reflect[s] the current socio-political order,” an order that seems largely unwilling to engage with issues relating to race and punishment (see Buzinde and Santos 2008: 470; Halbwachs 1992). That is, hearing that Angola is now a model penitentiary while simultaneously ignoring its plantation past and this past’s link to contemporary policies means that we can avoid asking ourselves difficult questions about how we deal with offenders, enables us to carry on as we have been for years, and allows us to disregard, nay forget, the experiences, lives, and humanity of the criminalized and incarcerated. These projects of forgetting are made possible, and easier, by our continued insistence on viewing this group of – mostly racialized – individuals as wicked, dangerous, predator-like others who must be controlled because they cannot be reformed (see, for instance, Garland 2001a; Mauer 2006; Welch 2007).

In contrast to Angola’s administrators, when looking to individual submissions to The Angolite prison newsmagazine I find that a number of prisoners write of the lengthy history of racial discrimination, particularly in the South, as well as of the prison’s own past as a plantation. Oftentimes these men suggest that working in the fields is analogous to slavery. Interestingly, and recalling the work of Levy and Sznaider (2006), who note that references to the Holocaust are common in discussions about both colonialism and slavery, several prisoners at Angola evoke the memory of the Holocaust when documenting their understanding of their experiences. For instance, Moore (1991: 87)
claims that prison is actually a “euphemism for Modern Concentration Camp,” while Unger (1989) likens Angola staff members to Hitler and Mussolini. For his part, Kelly (2001: 73) believes that “slavery, mandatory life sentences without parole and the death penalty all violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, specifically, articles 3, 4 and 5. If these issues aren’t addressed, I envision the day Angola will be spoken with the likes of Aushwitz, Burchenwald and Dauchau [sic]”. Perhaps these individuals adopt this strategy because they are aware that in the United States “the meaning and memory of slavery are still unresolved” (Eyerman 2002: 221) and that the Holocaust “provides an absolute and non-relative measure of evil” (Alexander 2002: 52), one that individuals who have a more nostalgic view of life in the antebellum South are incapable of disputing or rejecting.

To evoke the memory of a past trauma is to “employ a powerful bridging metaphor” that allows individuals to understand their current situation (Alexander 2002: 51; Degloma 2009). While the capacity of this type of memory work to effect change is disputed by some (see Schwartz 1996), others (Alexander 2002; Harris 2002; Savelsberg and King 2007) suggest it has the potential to not only unite the affected group, but also to bring attention to their plight and legitimacy to their cause, as well as strengthen calls for intervention and reform. I argue that, through their writings, these prisoners are actually doing the “cultural work” of a carrier group (see Alexander and Breese 2011: xiii). Regardless of whether they reference slavery, public lynching, or the Holocaust, these prisoners are encouraging us to remember these past atrocities and drawing the readership’s attention to a contemporary cultural trauma whose negative effects are sure to be long-lasting: mass incarceration. In illuminating the parallels between the past and the present, they are helping us connect the dots. And in challenging the administration’s apparent monopoly on telling the ‘official’ history of Angola, this relatively small collection of prisoners is also resisting one of the more subtle ways in which power functions at the prison (see Crewe 2007).

There is much at stake in this struggle over the nation’s history, both in terms of ideology and criminal justice practices. Sociologist Geneviève Zubrzycki (2011) suggests that
national mythology is (re)produced, circulated, performed, embodied, and consumed in myriad ways – clothing, music, photographs, monuments, landscapes, folktales, parades, cuisine, and so on. This is clearly evident at the Angola Prison Rodeo. Old Glory, the “showcase of our freedom,” is carried out to the rodeo arena – already adorned with American flags – on horseback before the Star-Spangled Banner is belted out to the audience (Louisiana State Penitentiary 2014: 24). The rodeo, a cultural practice already connected to ideas about the frontier and notions of autonomy (see Adams 2001, 2007), thereby becomes even more inextricably linked to U.S. nationhood. Thus, forgetting a troubling chapter of Angola’s (and the nation’s) history – slavery and its legacy – means that visitors can feel free to engage in consumption, light-hearted fun, and patriotism and that there is no incentive to dig beneath the surface in order to critically examine our approach to penology.

One of the “biggest problems Americans” have with respect to developing and implementing criminal justice policies, former Angolite editor, Wilbert Rideau (1995: 41), argues, is “historical “amnesia”. It causes them to see the present in a vacuum, divorced from its past.” While Rideau (1995) was referring specifically to the surprisingly large number of citizens who voted for former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke in Louisiana’s 1991 gubernatorial election, his words also alert us to the practical consequences of forgetting Angola’s plantation history. Our inability (or refusal) to remember obscures the rather obvious connection between past and present. Thus, the way Angola and its history is presented to the public permits us to continue to avoid confronting the horrors of what used to occur at Angola and to eschew substantive discussions about changing what continues to happen - mass incarceration, the struggle with hopelessness and despair that can arise as a result of a natural life sentence, the consequences of an aging prison population, and penal labor - on this land.
NOTES

1 Approximately three-fourths of the prisoner population at Angola is black; this number has been relatively unchanging over time (Foster 1993).

2 I cut the sample off in 2001 because this is shortly after long-time editor Wilbert Rideau (2010) contends the prison administration first began trying to limit the staff’s editorial freedom. There is no reason to suspect that the content of a random sample of issues would differ in any systematic way.

3 Carleton (1971) has documented the period from 1835–1968 in Louisiana’s correctional system.

4 See Adams’ (2001, 2007) and Schrift’s (2004, 2006, 2008) work on the Angola Rodeo and Arts & Crafts Festival. Schrift (2004, 2008) argues, in part, that while the event is presented as rehabilitative and progressive, it exploits prisoners and obscures troubling elements of prison life and criminal justice policies. In a chapter of her book, Adams (2007: 140) recounts her trips to the Angola Rodeo, where she and other attendees “enter a living history of ante-bellum plantations that maintains a link between the Middle Passage and post-slavery society”.

5 Quote from field worker Julian Robinson (see Nelson 1999: 39).

6 In 1999 over 88% of the men at Angola were lifes or ‘virtual’ lifes (Rideau 1999).
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Chapter 5
Discussion and Conclusion

The decline in scholarly research that strives to document daily life inside United States prisons has been well documented (e.g. Bosworth, Campbell, Demby, Ferranti, and Santos 2005; Crewe 2005; Goodman 2008; Reiter 2014; Simon 2000; Wacquant 2002a). This decline has occurred at a time – with sky-high incarceration rates, concerns about the collateral consequences of mass imprisonment, and much debate about what exactly is going on behind prison walls and whether it aligns with political rhetoric – when this type of work is most needed (see, for example, Clear 2007; DeFina and Hannon 2013; Kruttschnitt 2010; Pager 2003; Phelps 2011; Roettger and Boardman 2012; Roettger and Swisher 2011; Tonry 1999; Turanovic, Rodriguez, and Pratt 2012; Turney 2014; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011; Western 2002; Western and Wildeman 2009; Wildeman 2014; Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012).

Located in a state that incarcerates more individuals per capita than anywhere else in the world, Angola is an operational prison farm filled mostly with longtermers and is much talked about for its history, its approach to rehabilitation, and its aging offender population. This makes it the logical place to study many of the key issues currently being debated in the field. This dissertation contributes to the sociology of punishment by examining the lives, feelings, experiences, adaptations, and conceptions of prisoners at Angola during this period of correctional upheaval and volatility. Below I recap the key findings of each of the three studies, explore possible directions for future research, and then summarize the main conclusions of the project as a whole.

Key Findings

While much has been written about the correctional instability that characterized late twentieth century American penology (e.g. Feeley and Simon 1992; Garland 2001; Hannah-Moffat 2005; Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005; O’Malley 1999; Phelps 2011), much less is known about how carceral experiences have been impacted by these changes. Moreover, scholars have too-often suggested that each jurisdiction took a similar path during this period. Using the emerging body of work that explores sub-
national variation in penology (see Barker 2006; Beckett and Western 2001; Campbell 2011, 2012; Campbell and Schoenfeld 2013; Lynch 2010; Page 2011; Schoenfeld 2010) as a starting point, in chapter two I traced Angola’s trajectory during the last several decades of the twentieth century, linking the macrotheoretical punishment scholarship to on-the-ground developments at Angola. I outlined how a national law-and-order spree beginning in the mid-1970s, Louisiana’s penal politics, and a variety of institutional factors – a prisoner-initiated civil lawsuit, average offender sentence length, and the ideologies of various wardens – combined to inform the conditions of confinement and shape carceral experiences. I found that there was no paradigm shift from rehabilitation to managerialism at Angola. In fact, even during the peak of the rehabilitative era the prison lacked programming as well as recreational opportunities. Consequently, prisoners were encouraged to form self-help groups by administrators, with some prisoners appearing to embrace this early responsibilization rhetoric. In the 1970s – before we might have expected based on the scholarly literature – the focus at Angola became order maintenance and making the prison more secure. Together, these findings complicate the idea of a welfare/risk binary and suggest that not all states are in sync with one another, thereby demonstrating the importance of discussing penal change on a subnational scale. Equally important, this paper reveals how prisoners coped with and adapted to longer sentences and diminishing release opportunities.

Believing that the preoccupation with a “socially destructive” prison hypermasculinity (see, for example, Dolovich 2011; Haney 2011; Hsu 2005; Kupers 2005: 717, 2010) lacks nuance, in chapter three I analyzed over 1,230 submissions to The Angolite to explore how men at Angola navigate expectations about gender identity and performance in prison as well as how they conceive of manhood. Integrating hundreds of men’s voices into this discussion, I argue, reveals the fluidity and complexity of masculinities in prisons. Specifically, while the hypermasculine prison code still exists at Angola, many prisoners open up about their feelings, condemn violence and aggression, and discuss the friendships they have developed. They also talk about their efforts to learn, change, and grow while incarcerated, as well as of the importance of helping their peers and community. To do so in the face of the very real possibility of never leaving Angola –
discussed in greater detail in chapter two – necessitated discipline, perseverance, and principles. These qualities pointed to strength of character and were indicators of a specific type of masculinity, one that was not linked to insensitivity or exploitation. Not only do these findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the daily lived experiences of incarcerated individuals during the era of mass imprisonment, but they provide further support for scholars (e.g. Collier 1998; Connell 1995; Jefferson 1994, 2002) who point to the wide range of masculine subjectivities, the fluidity of gender performance and identity, and the presence of multiple (hegemonic) masculinities in all social contexts.

One of the primary tasks confronting those studying penology in recent years is making sense of the vast overrepresentation of black men and women in United States prisons. A subgroup of these scholars (e.g. Alexander 2010; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Wacquant 2000, 2001, 2002b; Weatherspoon 2007) suggests that we can only really understand this phenomenon if we look to the nation’s lengthy history of racial discrimination and to substantiate their argument these scholars point to the parallels between slavery, convict leasing, the Jim Crow era, and mass incarceration. This line of theorizing, however, assumes that we all have the same memories of the past and leaves unexplored how prisoners conceive of this relationship. In chapter four I investigated how administrators narrate the history of Angola, as well as if and how the prison’s plantation history shapes prisoners’ ideas about their incarceration today. I found that while a small number of prisoners draw on Angola’s plantation past and compare their work in the fields to slavery, administrators ignore this controversial history and focus instead on the prison’s relatively recent progress and improvement. In addition to providing us with some idea of how prisoners at Angola view their labour, it also demonstrates that there is ideological work occurring at the prison. These findings show, I claim, that Angola is a space where different versions of history are constructed and struggled over, and where collective memories and national mythologies are (re)produced and challenged. Furthermore, this unwillingness or inability to remember the past hinders our ability to engage in discussions about criminal justice policies and practices or to imagine substantive reform.
Together, these papers significantly further our understanding of prison life in the era of mass incarceration. This project revealed the ways prisoners experienced, felt about, and adjusted to changes in policy and practice. It explored how they negotiated the hypermasculine prison code and their ideas about what it is to be a man in prison. It examined their conceptions of their forced labour in the fields and interactions with the criminal justice system, and the ways these views are linked to collective memories of Angola’s (and the nation’s) history. And, finally, it integrated prisoners’ writings into scholarly analysis in a manner that drew attention to both their knowledges and their humanity.

**Directions for Future Research**

While this project contributes to the sociology of punishment, it also underscores the need for more research in several areas.

For instance, while the men’s writings in *The Angolite* shed light on how some prisoners conceived of manhood and navigated the pressures of the male prison code, because I did not have ready access to the demographic information of contributors to *The Angolite* I was unable to compare the submissions of subgroups of prisoners. Thus, while, as I discussed in chapter three, there is reason to believe that this way of thinking and talking about manhood might be related to the high proportion of middle-aged longtermers at Angola, more information – for example, regarding each prisoner’s age, sentence length, time served, and so on – is required if this is to be more than speculation on my part (see also de Viggiani 2012; Toch 1998). But this additional information would mean relatively little unless we also seek a better understanding of masculinities over the course of men’s lives at the same time. Particular attention should be devoted to the ways in which masculine identities and performances are tied to criminality, desistance, and the prison as men grow older.

Along similar lines, despite being unable to compare the men’s submissions across race, the parallels between my findings and those outlined in Nandi’s (2002) study of
incarcerated black males suggests that further investigation of black masculinities in prisons is justified. Additional research on this topic is welcome as it has the potential to enhance our understanding of prison culture, draw attention to the diversity of carceral experiences as well as to the heterogeneous nature of masculinities, and even dispel myths relating to the amoral and animalistic nature of offenders (see, for example, Garland 2001 on prevailing discourses and imagery pertaining to criminals). Considering the overrepresentation of this group of individuals in penal institutions, this issue is especially pressing.

Staying on this topic, for the third paper my initial plan was to examine whether ‘race’ was salient at Angola and if so then how it might shape carceral experiences (see Phillips 2007; Phillips and Bowling 2003). This was, after all, an understudied area (see Goodman 2008; Kruttschnitt and Hussemann 2008 for exceptions) and Angola, because of its racial composition, its history, and my access to the prisoners’ writings, seemed like the ideal place to explore the topic. An analysis of prisoners’ submissions to The Angolite revealed that memories of Angola’s plantation past informed some individuals’ conceptions of their incarceration and that prisoners were able and willing to discuss race-related topics, but I was not sufficiently able to answer any of the questions I had posed at the beginning of the project with these data. While I was forced to switch directions and shift my analytical focus to the different ways of remembering and forgetting slavery at the prison, the need to investigate how racialized individuals experience their incarceration, as well as how these experiences might compare to the experiences of individuals from dominant groups, remains, however, and this is particularly true in the United States (see Kruttschnitt and Hussemann 2008).

The third paper also engenders questions about the relationship between race, space, and memories. For instance, is there something unique about Angola that encourages prisoners to draw on the memory of slavery when describing their incarceration? Is it because Angola continues to operate as a prison farm? Or because of Angola’s plantation history? Do prisoners at other plantation prisons also evoke the memory of slavery? Or what about men and women incarcerated in prisons outside of the South? Is it only black
individuals who use the memory of slavery to make sense of their life in a penal institution? Or might prisoners from other racial groups also analogize their experiences in this way? Glancing at *The Angolite* hints at what we might expect outside of Angola, but there is clearly much unknown about how space, place, and race shape the ways in which we remember and forget cultural traumas. An excerpt from a poem by Jimmie ‘Red Dog’ Tennant (1994: 84), incarcerated in Florida, demonstrates that at least some prisoners elsewhere use the memory of slavery as a way to understand and/or describe their imprisonment; he writes:

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manipulated slaves
from the womb until the grave
you never had a chance
they have you in a trance
against your will
no reason to exist
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Pursuing these lines of inquiry might permit us to expose and critique prevailing ways of thinking and talking about the relationship between race and criminal justice, deconstruct how we present local, regional, and national histories, and bridge disciplinary divides – incorporating, for instance, geography, history, and cultural studies into work on punishment – that limit the academy’s ability to ask new and interesting questions.

In addition, prisoners’ willingness to draw parallels between fieldwork at Angola and slavery should also prompt us to investigate how different occupations are perceived, experienced, and talked about by prisoners. For instance, how does fieldwork at Angola compare to fighting fires in one of California’s fire camps (see Goodman 2012a)? Or perhaps making office furniture or taking hotel reservations (Fraser and Freeman 2012)? Moreover, how are different types of penal labour related to ideas surrounding rehabilitation and redemption, exploitation, self-worth, self-help, work ethic, and the like? As Goodman (2012a) reminds us, the experiences of the approximately one million prisoners working in some fashion (should) absolutely matter (see also Fraser and Freeman 2012).
Of course, the confines of a three-paper dissertation mean that some topics, questions, and debates relating directly to Angola went underexplored. For instance, I was only able to briefly touch on Warden Cain’s ‘moral rehabilitation’ program that is said to be “key to public safety and fewer victims” (Louisiana State Penitentiary 2014: 4). The same goes for the formation, evolution, and contemporary role of Angola’s numerous self-help organizations. Digging deeper on these issues would lead to a more thorough understanding of the ‘braided’ nature of penalty, the malleability of rehabilitation discourses and practices, and where exactly responsibilization and risk management strategies fit in this puzzle (see Goodman 2012b; Hannah-Moffat 2005; Hutchinson 2006: 448; Robinson 2008). I would add to this that we also need more research examining the effects of longterm sentences and aging in prison. Extant research is valuable in that it gives us some idea of the financial costs of these policies as well as the difficulties associated with providing care for this changing prisoner population (e.g. Aday 2006; American Civil Liberties Union 2012; Mara 2002; Reimer 2008; Williams, Goodwin, Baillargeon, Ahalt, and Walter 2012). And while my analysis of The Angolite suggested that these developments are linked to increased feelings of despair, loneliness, and hopelessness, adjustments to the manner in which prisoners relate to one another, and interesting ways of thinking about self-help and personal growth, how exactly the shifting demographics of the U.S. prisoner population have impacted the culture inside penal institutions remains mostly a mystery.

And finally, I believe this project points to the value of expanding existing notions about how we might go about our research. It goes without saying that ethnographies, interviews, and survey data can, and do, help us understand everyday life inside prisons. Looking to prisoners’ writings provides that same opportunity; the current project clearly demonstrates this fact. But equally apparent is that the analytical usefulness of this methodological approach has not been exhausted. As noted in the paragraph above, we have much we can still learn from The Angolite. Moreover, other prisons publish their own newspapers/newsmagazines, or have done so in the past. There are also anthologies of prisoner writings (see Thompson and DeFreitas 2014), newsletters, and other publications readily available to the public. It would be a mistake to continue to overlook
these, and other, data sources, as they contain the (oftentimes) unsolicited thoughts, feelings, and ideas of incarcerated men and women. This is, simply put, a relatively untapped means by which we can better understand how these individuals live, what they experience on a daily basis, and what matters to them. Paying closer attention to the words, expressions, and knowledges of these individuals will also lead, I suspect, to a greater focus on, and appreciation of, their humanity. And this in turn might stimulate understanding, debate, and reform, which is, after all, our primary responsibility as sociologists.

Conclusion

Despite various calls to action, a gaping hole continues to exist in the sociology of punishment. Almost entirely absent from the field are in-depth, qualitative studies that explore daily life inside of United States prisons. Engaging with some of the key debates and outstanding questions in this body of research, this project helps to fill this hole significantly by undertaking the case study of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola). Underscoring the importance of looking to the local level, I demonstrated that Angola followed its own unique developmental path during the last several decades of the twentieth century. Angola’s trajectory was informed by a combination of national trends, state politics, and institutional factors and this is a path that further problematizes the notion of a paradigm shift in penology or a welfare/risk dichotomy. The men at Angola coped with and experienced these changes in a number of ways. Their long sentences and limited release opportunities were oftentimes linked in their writings to hopelessness, despair, frustration, anger, loneliness, the formation of strong bonds with their peers, and the need for perseverance, discipline, and resolve. Not only do these men’s writings provide insight into how carceral experiences have been shaped by changes in penal rhetoric and policy, but they also reveal some of the nuance and complexity embedded in these men’s ideas about masculinities, their labour, and their interactions with the criminal justice system. In addition, they demonstrate that Angola is more than just a site of punishment. Angola also functions as a place where national histories and mythologies – particularly surrounding slavery and liberty – are constructed, confronted, and
contested. In so doing, this project draws our attention back to the lived experiences of the individuals who have faced, adapted to, and endured vast changes in penalty.
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