Preserving Difficult Histories
Angola Prison: Collecting and Interpreting the Afterlives of Slavery in a National Museum

PAUL GARDULLO

"American History is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it," James Baldwin wrote in 1963. That quote, penned the same year as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham—and not long after multiple Freedom Riders were imprisoned in Parchman Farm, a Mississippi state prison that was born as a penal plantation in the aftermath of slavery—has served as my compass point for the nearly decade-long process of helping collect for and conceptualize the exhibitions that now make up the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC).

Chartered 40 years after Baldwin wrote those words, the NMAAHC began without a collection, a building, or a set of exhibition plans. Founding Director Lonnie Bunch’s vision called for the museum to articulate the American story for all people through the lens of African American history and culture. But what does it mean to create a national narrative from the experience of people whose equal rights within the nation have so often been deferred or denied? That challenge necessitated a level of truth-telling about issues of race, slavery, and oppression that has rarely, if ever, been found in our national institutions—despite those issues being central to the foundation and mainsprings of our nation’s economic, social, and political life for centuries.

Because the museum was founded with a mandate to build a foundational collection, it has embraced an expansive new vision of collecting, forcing us to rethink basic questions of museum work—provenance, cataloguing, curation, and preservation. This has also meant dealing with complex interpretive themes of violence and victimization, as well as humanity, creativity, and resilience in the face of oppression. In sum, over the course of a decade, the muse-
um’s most important work has become that of attempting to fill the silences of American history to which Baldwin referred, primarily by constructing a collection of materials that could provide evidence of and speak powerfully and directly to these themes.

**PRISON FARMS: AN “AFTERLIFE” OF SLAVERY**

One of the largest and most complex silences we addressed while conceptualizing and collecting for our inaugural exhibitions concerned slavery’s legacies or “afterlives.” This required both explicating a more comprehensive history of slavery and providing a more complex interrogation of the ways in which its influence continued and continue to shape our world. This entailed balancing stories of freedpeople’s success in building communities and institutions that gave material substance to legal emancipation against the tenuousness of black freedom and the persistence, reformulation, and resurgence of white supremacy and violence. A heinous but often overlooked example is the continuum of slavery to bonded labor and mass incarceration.

Following Emancipation, most Southern states sought new ways to revive systems of enslavement to control the labor of African Americans. One method was the convict-lease system, wherein African Americans arrested for petty crimes such as vagrancy or public disorder were leased by the state to private employers. Convict labor quickly became a substitute for slave labor, and once African Americans were brought into the system, it was nearly impossible for them to get out. Convict labor built railroads, graded roads, constructed factories, made turpentine, grew and harvested cotton and other crops, felled timber, and performed many other tasks in conditions that historian Douglas Blackmon has called “slavery by another name.” An exposé about convict labor in the late 19th century, which seems to have first appeared in the *New York Tribune* under the title “Slavery in Georgia,” stated that “the wretched creature is actually a slave, as much in 1883 as in 1860, only that he is worked by the State instead of an individual, and is watched by armed soldiers instead of overseers.”
The system seemed to collapse when reports surfaced of leased prisoners being routinely starved, beaten, and even killed. Multiple states, however, merely continued the practice by creating massive state-run prison farms without the leasing component, maintaining full control over prisoners and using captive labor to fill state coffers. Many such prison farms were founded on former slave plantations. The largest and longest-lasting of these plantation prisons, several of which are still operating today, were Mississippi’s Parchman Farm; Cummins State Farm in Arkansas; Jester Prison Farm and Central State (“Sugar Land”) Prison in Texas; and the Louisiana State Penitentiary, otherwise known as Angola.

While scholarship that traces this history is at least a generation old, it—like much academic work about slavery and its afterlives—is not well known among the general public. A resurgence of sophisticated and well-researched but popular books, projects, and documentaries—most recently Ava DuVernay’s film 13th—is bringing this history to light. Nonetheless, articulating the complex trajectory from slavery to mass incarceration in a museum setting is not a simple or straightforward task. We at NMAAHC decided to explore that continuum through the story of a particular place.

The largest and perhaps most notorious American penal plantation, Angola is thought to be named for the origins of those once enslaved there. Isaac Franklin, one of the largest slave traders in American history, and his partner, John Armfield, made millions by trafficking thousands of African Americans in the domestic slave trade from Alexandria, Virginia, to Natchez, Mississippi, where Franklin owned the plantations that would become Angola.

Following the sale of Franklin’s former plantations in 1880 and their subsequent transferal to the state of Louisiana, the prison developed as a constellation of inmate camps spreading across the landscape. The first of these, Camp A, was constructed in the late 19th century on what are believed to have been former slave quarters. At the dawn of the 20th century—on January 1, 1901—Louisiana ended the lease system and recommenced state control of prisoners. Over the next two decades, the state expanded the series of camps, keeping Camp A intact. It was reconstructed and
expanded in the late 1930s to include three dormitories and a disciplinary segregated cellblock known as “the dungeons,” which was demolished in 1955. No longer in regular use, the camp sometimes houses overflow populations of prisoners during natural disasters, such as during Hurricane Katrina.

Among the largest prisons in the United States, for most of its history Angola has also been known as one of the harshest and most inhumane. It remains a working plantation to this day, and while it has been making efforts since the 1970s to recast itself as a more humane penal institution with a full slate of modern rehabilitative programs, critics inside and outside the prison say that it is still in need of significant reforms. More than 6,000 people are incarcerated there, in a compound roughly the size of Manhattan, tucked within a bend in the Mississippi River. The great majority of inmates are African Americans serving life sentences, and most will die there.

DISPLAYING AND INTERPRETING ANGOLA PRISON IN THE MUSEUM

Between 2010 and 2015, I led the effort to collect two key structures from Angola: a guard tower built sometime in the 1930s or 1940s and a jail cell from Camp A. Through these objects, now installed in different exhibitions within the museum, we ask visitors to grapple with the power and depth of a particular place and its connection to the legacy of slavery in America.

*Slavery and Freedom,* the first of the NMAAHC’s three exhibitions that trace a chronology of history from the
15th century to the 21st, introduces visitors to both the breadth and depth of the domestic slave trade, which forcibly moved more than 1 million enslaved African Americans from the upper South to the Deep South and West. The exhibition juxtaposes the massive wealth generated by the domestic slave trade against its brutal inhumanity through stories of individuals who struggled to keep themselves whole amidst the heartache and dehumanization of being split from their families and loved ones, sold and resold as commodities in a vast economic engine. A central object that captures both the cold calculation and the human cost is a manifest that lists the names of the people transported as cargo on the Franklin and Armfield slaveship that sailed from Virginia to Louisiana.

In the subsequent exhibition about the era of segregation, visitors encounter the iconic Angola guard tower. From its elevated platform—21 feet high—guards watched over inmates on the same land where Franklin had previously enslaved thousands. The tower evokes not only surveillance, power, control, and incarceration in the context of the mid-20th century but also the long and embedded roots of white supremacy, tracing back to conditions created under the system of slavery. Displayed near a large segregated rail car from Southern Railway and Emmett Till’s casket, along with the history of his life and murder, the tower contributes to narratives not just of the prison landscape but of the coercion and violence enacted upon black bodies in multiple contexts.

The Camp A cell, meanwhile, is displayed within a thematic exhibition called Power of Place, which focuses on the importance of different spaces and places in African American history and culture across a wide geography. The cell bar structure, sink and toilet, and metal bunk bed frame that the museum collected date back...
to a 1972 renovation of Camp A that left cells measuring 6’7” x 7’–7.5” x 7’8”.

Near the cell, a short film tells the long history and development of Angola prison from slave plantation to its present incarnation as a working prison farm—one that holds more prisoners than any other correctional facility in the United States and where 75 percent of the inmates are African American. Tracking both the brutal history of Angola and the halting, contested, controversial, and sometimes significant reforms that have, over more recent decades, brought it in line with prisons as rehabilitative institutions, the film provides a meditation on how deeply the structure of the plantation and its racial attitudes have shaped and continue to shape Angola, not just in its physical environment but in its relationships and culture. It also shows visitors how prisoners have continued to seek ways out of no way, sometimes finding justice, education, community, redemption, and freedom of expression in the worst of conditions.

Although—in response to both struggles within the prison population and outside pressure—the brutality and racist attitudes of the past have evolved over time, reformers both inside and outside of the prison continue to push for basic human rights. In a country with the world’s highest incarceration rate, where African Americans are imprisoned at more than five times the rate of white Americans, the persistence of Angola as a place that both changes and yet stays the same is a powerful testament to the continuum between slavery and incarceration. Its presence in the museum does not provide answers, but provokes questions about slavery and its legacies; about crime and punishment; about compassion, empathy, and redemption; and about the power of race in America.

**CONTINUING TO COLLECT ANGOLA**

As part of the process of constructing the collections, exhibitions, and building itself, the NMAAHC has found that collecting only the built environment of the carceral landscape, no matter how powerful, is incomplete—akin to collecting the history of slavery by focusing only on the instruments of restraint and control. We’ve therefore committed to a wider, though incipient, collecting effort...
focused on those who have been imprisoned at Angola. We’re working with Wilbert Rideau, former prisoner and founding editor of the *Angolite* newspaper—the first and, perhaps, only instance in American history of free and uncensored press in prison—to develop a collection of materials closely related to his 20-year tenure as editor. The Rideau collection, which includes materials from the *Angolite* as well as Mr. Rideau’s Polk Award for journalism, helps us think about the role of free press in prison reform, about the possibilities of personal rehabilitation, and about the human condition more broadly.

The museum has also collected the first oral history interviews given by Albert Woodfox, a member of the “Angola Three.” These three former inmates—Robert King, Albert Woodfox, and Herman Wallace—were originally imprisoned for armed robbery but later placed in solitary confinement in April 1972, accused of killing a corrections officer. It has long been claimed that this charge was concocted as retaliation for the trio’s political organizing through a Black Panther Party chapter at Angola. Woodfox himself maintains that, “our political activities marked us, and that’s why they locked us up in solitary confinement, where I remained.”

On November 20, 2014, the U.S. Court of Appeals overturned Woodfox’s murder conviction, and in April 2015, his lawyer applied for an unconditional writ for his release, which was granted on February 19, 2016. Woodfox was the last member of the Angola Three to be released from prison, where he served the world’s longest term in solitary confinement. We hope that collecting his
oral history, along with his prison-issued clothing, will allow the museum to shed light on his unique personal experience as well as on the brutality of solitary confinement.

By documenting and humanizing the incarcerated, illustrating the value of a free press in prisons, and focusing on prison programs such as the Angola hospice, we ultimately hope to depict Angola as a complex world for those who work and are incarcerated there, with a network of cultures and human relationships inflected by race and systems of power and control. If we are to tell a fuller story of Angola—as a place and as an exemplar of broader narratives about incarceration, race, and the human condition—we need to collect documents, ephemera, film, photographs, and other objects that illuminate the perspectives of those who populate that world.

THE SILENCES THAT STILL REMAIN
Unlike Alcatraz, Eastern State Penitentiary, or other decommissioned prisons that can serve as interpretive sites of the past, Angola is still fully functioning. How can interpretations of its history connect Angola’s past to its present struggles for human rights and reform? What does it mean to preserve this place, and how might we preserve and interpret sites of conscience in a place that is still ground zero for such struggles?

Angola has made some strides toward reckoning with and interpreting its dark and brutal past. The prison’s donation of structures to the NMAAHC has allowed us to tell a story never before told in a national museum. There have also been efforts to recognize and preserve in situ: one of Angola’s original and horrifically inhumane cell blocks, “Red Hat,” was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 2003. And by maintaining former structures of oppression and state-sponsored terror as part of its landscape, the prison allows for the possibility of further interpretation. But the prison’s tentative strides toward preserving and displaying its past have been clouded by marketing that sensationalizes and encourages dark tourism, ignoring or censoring connections to present conditions. Angola does also have a prison museum—one
that operates under the aegis of the Board of Corrections of the State of Louisiana and is currently seeking accreditation from the American Alliance of Museums.

In order to provide more truthful, scholarly, and accurate accounts of the continuum between slavery and incarceration—or even to recount the histories of prisons—it can at times be necessary to either remove items from their contexts and environments or push for better preservation and interpretation in situ. The NMAAHC has thus far focused on transporting the story of Angola from its landscape in order to better contextualize it and thus fill some of the silences of American history. We must also pay attention to the silences that still remain. FJ

PAUL GARDULLO is a curator at the National Museum of African American History and Culture and director of the museum’s Center for the Study of Global Slavery.

**TAKEAWAY**
Read “From Memory to Action: A Toolkit for Memorialization in Post-Conflict Societies.”

**TAKEAWAY**

**VIDEO**