

Placing Angola: Racialisation, Anthropocentrism, and Settler Colonialism at the Louisiana State Penitentiary's Angola Rodeo

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Abstract: The Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola) is a site embedded with historical legacies of plantation slavery and settler colonialism; as the largest maximum security penitentiary in the United States, the prison also reflects the racial injustice of contemporary US mass incarceration. Situated on the site of an old plantation, the prison hosts the Angola Rodeo twice a year, an event that crystallises violent multi-species social relations in the merging of the US West and South as two distinct kinds of colonial projects. Whereas much scholarship and activism has worked against the wholesale dehumanisation inherent in chattel slavery, settler colonialism, and mass incarceration, this paper works to interrogate and disrupt the human-animal binary through which processes of dehumanisation are sustained. Drawing together postcolonial studies and animal studies, the paper centres empirical research on the Angola Rodeo to highlight how racialisation and anthropocentrism are intertwined logics of subordination and exclusion that carry forward into the present. Ultimately, the paper suggests the need for a mode of analysis and action that does not maintain the subordination of the animal, and instead, takes a de-anthropocentric and decolonial approach to injustice.

Resumen: La Prisión Estatal de Luisiana (Angola) es un sitio atravesado por el legado de las plantaciones de esclavos del pasado y el colonialismo de asentamientos. Siendo la prisión de seguridad más grande de Estados Unidos es un cabal reflejo de las injusticias raciales que sostienen los procesos de encarcelamiento masivo en el país. La prisión ocupa el lugar donde antiguamente se hallaba una plantación colonial, y en la misma, dos veces al año se lleva a cabo el Rodeo Angola, evento que cristaliza las violentas relaciones sociales multiespecies y que combina los proyectos coloniales distintivos del Oeste y el del Sur de los Estados Unidos. Mientras que muchos trabajos académicos y de activistas han concentrado sus esfuerzos en oponerse a la completa deshumanización propia de la esclavitud, el colonialismo de asentamientos y el encarcelamiento en masa, este trabajo busca interrogar y desafiar el binomio humano-animal que sostiene los procesos de deshumanización. El presente trabajo empírico sobre el Rodeo de Angola se nutre de los estudios postcoloniales y los estudios de animales para mostrar cómo la racialización y el antropocentrismo son lógicas de subordinación y exclusión que se entrelazan y prolongan en el presente. Finalmente, este trabajo sostiene la necesidad de encontrar un modo de análisis y acción que no perpetúe la subordinación del animal, y propone una perspectiva decolonial y no-anthropocéntrica sobre la injusticia.

Keywords: rodeo, postcolonial studies, critical animal studies, anthropocentrism, racialisation, settler colonialism

Introduction

Colonial histories span both temporal and species boundaries, extending violent pasts into violent presents and impacting human and nonhuman lives in distinct modes of bodily appropriation. Rooted in place, these colonial histories shape contemporary social relations and embodied experience, reproducing racialised encounters that shed light on how we understand humanity and animality, coloniality and violence. The Angola Rodeo, held twice a year at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Louisiana, United States, is a cross-species site where imaginaries of the US South meet those of the West, revealing the lasting resonances of plantation slavery, settler colonialism, and the role of the animal in these histories. I explore what might be learned from theorising how distinct histories of colonisation reveal the violence and confinement operating to shape the way places are made, reproduced, and politics enacted. Resonances of violence are sustained through time in a particular place like the Angola Rodeo, tracing through the spaces of confinement and lives confined at the prison.

I use postcolonial and critical animal studies frames to analyse the public event of the Angola Rodeo to reveal the underlying racist and anthropocentric logics of the prison and rodeo and the way the public face of the rodeo provides a sanitised vision of mass incarceration and colonial histories in the United States (Schrift 2008). Black geographies theorise how politics of place-making are entangled with modes of racial exclusion, bodily appropriation and structural violence, but also how place becomes central to a reaffirmation of life and relationality (McKittrick 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007). Indeed, a key project for critical race theory and postcolonial studies is to consider what “being human” means and how humanness is a relational project of redefining a conceptualisation of living (McKittrick 2015). The category of the human—what it means to be human, who is included in this category and who is not, and indeed “whether the appellation ‘human’ can be borne equally by all”—has a complex and contested history, as well as being an ongoing site of conversation and debate (Hartman 1997:6; Jackson 2013, 2015; Livingston and Puar 2011; Muñoz 2015; Wynter 2003). Sylvia Wynter (2003) challenges the conception of the “human” in modernity as being modelled on the figure of the white, Western “Man”, and she argues for a reconfiguration—what Zakkiyah Iman Jackson (2013:672) describes as a “transformation from within”—of *the human* as a category. Social constructions of race and their intertwined formulations of *full human*, *not-quite-human* and *nonhuman* have been key features in how *the human* as an ontological category is conceptualised (Hartman 1997; Jackson 2013; McKittrick 2015; Weheliye 2014).

Conceptions of the human, however, rely on the “abject opposite of the human, of whiteness”; they rely on “the (necessarily) nebulous notion of the animal” (Ko 2017:45). This human–animal binary is, like the formulation of Man, solidified through Western Enlightenment conceptions of humanity and animality, and is frequently in direct opposition to other conceptions of ordering life that manifest through, for instance, Indigenous ways of knowing (Johnson and Murton 2007; Sundberg 2014; Tallbear 2015). Indeed, Jackson posits that these binary ways of thinking are a result of their geographic location in Western

epistemologies, and points out that within Enlightenment thinking “blackness [was simultaneously reformulated] as inferior to both ‘the human’ and ‘the animal’” (2013:678). Within a Western framework of colonialism and imperialism, anthropocentrism and racialisation are intertwined logics of violence, and this necessitates a deep interrogation of not only the categories and processes themselves, but also how they play out in historically contextualised colonial presents. As Jinthana Haritaworn argues, “such a nonhuman turn—which would naturally be allied to Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination—would have the potential to tackle anthropocentrism and dehumanization simultaneously, as relational rather than competing or analogous paradigms” (2015:213).

The Angola Rodeo, because of its situatedness in the Southern plantation-penitentiary, is most obviously a site where the co-constitution of whiteness, blackness and animality can be understood as forms of racialisation and anthropocentrism that animate a particular formulation of *human*. But the rodeo itself and the “clearing” of Indigenous land to make way first for the plantation, and later for the prison, locates what occurs at the Angola Rodeo in the violence of settler colonialism and genocide. The abject category of the animal and the process of “making animal” underlies this geography. As Billy-Ray Belcourt explains:

The logic of anthropocentrism is ... militarized through racial hierarchies that further distance the white settler from blackness and indigeneity as *animalized* sites of tragedy, marginality, poverty, and primitivism. That is, black and Indigenous bodies are dehumanized and inscribed (and continually re-inscribed) with animal status—which is always a speciesist rendering of animality as injuring—to refuse humanness to people of color and colonized subjects. This not only commits a violence that re-locates racialized bodies to the margins of settler society as non-humans, but also performs an epistemic violence that denies animality its own subjectivity and re-makes it into a mode of being that can be re-made as blackness and indigeneity (2015:5).

Thus, a decolonial project that does not recover or redefine the ontological violence of *the animal* may in fact leave intact a fundamental part of how these racializing, anthropocentric logics sustain themselves.

Like *the human*, *the animal* is not a monolithic ontological category. Animals, as a category, include many forms of life—and, of course, humans themselves are animals. Even among nonhuman animals, often-arbitrary and culturally produced belief systems categorise species into those humans love as “companion animals” or “pets”, those eaten as “food”, those who are experimented on for biomedical research, or those trained into entertainment. Critical animal studies scholarship has aimed to decentre the human as the sole site of ethical and political consideration by bringing nuanced critiques of how these categories of nonhuman life are constructed into dialogue with human geographies (Philo and Wilbert 2000; Wolch and Emel 1998). Some animal geographies work concerned with decentring the human in human geography pays particular attention to the construction of racialised notions of the human and how this is entangled with social and cultural geographies of the nonhuman (e.g. Anderson 2007, 2014; Elder et al. 1998). By highlighting the processes of racialisation and animalisation that occur at the Angola Rodeo, I argue that serious consideration of humans and other

species in this site can work to reformulate the violence done and redone by these categories. Katherine McKittrick (2013) warns that yet another retelling of violence against black people is not sufficient and in fact may reinforce notions of black lives as exploitable, disposable and ungrievable, or of “black suffering as spectacle” (Hartman 1997). With these warnings in mind, my project here aims to contribute to destabilising and undoing the foundational ontological base—the human/subhuman/nonhuman categories—on which these distinct forms of violence are enacted.

It is crucial to note that there are important risks in trying to understand racialised human histories and politics in conversation with the commodification and appropriation of nonhuman bodies and lives (Armstrong 2002). Long histories of “dehumanisation” and “animalisation” of people of colour make this a troubling site for dialogue and research (Ahuja 2009; Deckha 2012; Elder et al. 1998; García 2015). In the context of scholarship on prisons and animal institutions, there is an ongoing debate about the complexity, ethics and politics of drawing comparisons among these various institutions (Morin 2016; Thomas and Shields 2012). While this conversation prompts provocative and politically charged questions that are worth exploring, in my approach, I am not attempting to draw comparisons or say that the experience of men incarcerated at the prison is similar to other species’ experience of rodeo or domestication. I am also wary of moving too quickly beyond the human without a close attention to the racialised underpinnings of these formulations, as Jackson (2013) and Juanita Sundberg (2014) have expressed concern over in relation to animal studies and posthumanist scholarship; Jackson writes:

the resounding silence in the posthumanist, object-oriented, and new materialist literatures with respect to race is remarkable, persisting even despite the reach of antiblackness into the nonhuman—as *blackness conditions and constitutes the very non-human disruption and/or displacement they invite* (2015:216).

Bringing together an analysis of the entangled genealogies of race and species at the Angola Rodeo, I draw on a strand of postcolonial critical animal studies that interrogates in careful, critical ways these “dangerous crossings”, as Claire Jean Kim (2015) calls them—the crossings where distinct historical and contemporary understandings of race, species and violence are entangled in messy hierarchies of power and exclusion (Ahuja 2016; Belcourt 2015, 2016; Deckha 2010, 2012; García 2013, 2015; Glick 2013; Weaver 2013).

Combining textual research with spectator-observation at the Angola Rodeo in October 2014, my findings suggest that this particular rodeo offers a unique melding of how US Southern and Western colonial imaginaries of place get reproduced in the historical present to enact violence on human and nonhuman lives. This site, as an embodiment of settler colonialism, plantation slavery, and mass incarceration highlights the entangled logics of (and possibilities for disentangling) white supremacy, racialised violence, and anthropocentrism. I begin by introducing a very abbreviated history of rodeo in the United States, followed by a history of the Louisiana State Penitentiary and an exploration of the geography of the Angola Rodeo. Then, I provide an analysis of the modes by which the

South and the West meet at the Angola Rodeo. My hope, by way of conclusion, is to contribute to conversations about the decolonial potential for an enriched radical geography in multispecies contexts.

Rodeo in the United States

The history of rodeo spans the globe, emerging originally from “cattle” herding practices in Mexico and Spain. *Rodeo* is a Spanish word, meaning “round up”, and so initially *rodeo* simply referred to the common practice of rounding up bovines. Later, this developed into informal events where people working on ranches demonstrated skills at roping and herding, and these contests became commonplace in colonial Mexico and spread throughout North America, specifically from Mexico to the Western US and Canada. Rodeo in the US dates back to the early- to mid-19th century and, over the course of the 19th century became an iconic symbol of the West. As rodeo events grew in popularity and attracted spectators, the number of events and contests grew, developing into an institution and an industry bringing in revenue for rural places and even bringing rodeo events to east coast US urban centres.

US rodeo idolised working cowboys, helping to solidify them as a masculine icon of the taming of the “Wild West”. Cultural geographies of the cowboy include the Western film genre (and its thread of overt racism and sexism), the cowboy as a childhood hero and character for children to play, and the maintenance of the cowboy as a key cultural figure through contemporary rodeo.

Within popular cultures, the cowboy is associated with a particular kind of virile hyper-masculinity and is often representative of American (colonial) ideals such as freedom, modernity, and independence. The cowboy is also racialized as White, signaling the racial dimensions of the American colonial project (Jafri 2013:73–74).

The hypermasculinity and whiteness that define the cowboy, then, become synonymous with nationalistic ideas about freedom and what it means to be *human*. The whiteness and humanity of this iconic cowboy is important because it is through this kind of body that the violence of settler colonialism was delivered, cementing white supremacy as the foundation of the US settler state. And this vision of the cowboy also erases and rewrites historical cowboy identities: although the imaginary of the hypermasculine cowboy is white, many real working cowboys were not:

Rodeo shows ... presented a narrative of American progress predicated on the idea of white conquest of an uncivilized frontier; Anglo-American civilization subdued racial others ... As a result, Wild West shows generally presented cowboys as white, effacing the racial diversity of those who labored on the pastoral frontier ... This narrow construction of the cowboy past not only distorted the history of the West, but it also rewrote the geography of expansion (Fischer 2015:3–4).

This rewriting of history and the idolisation of the cowboy keeps settler-colonial relations alive, as the figure of the cowboy, as well as real, embodied cowboys, were integral to the settler-colonial project of radically changing western

landscapes, killing and displacing Indigenous communities, and driving many native animal species from their habitats. The historic work of cowboys in settler colonialism relied on a sense of the landscape as “unoccupied” and “wild”—needing to be enclosed through fences and property rights; it also relied on the depoliticised “disappearance” (i.e. genocide) of Indigenous people, and on those remaining as in need of being “tamed”, “civilised”, or enrolled as labour in the further expansion of the settler-colonial project (Coulthard 2014; Fischer 2015; Smith 2012). Rodeo and contemporary animal agriculture, then, is deeply connected to settler-colonial violence, and Belcourt argues that the institution of animal agriculture (of which rodeo is a part) is “only possible because of and through the historic and ongoing erasure of Indigenous bodies and the emptying of Indigenous lands for settler-colonial expansion” (2015:3). Rodeo is fundamentally linked with agriculture and ranching in particular, and these institutions were formed through reifications of whiteness and the abjection of animality.

In addition to these forms of racialised and colonial violence, anthropocentrism is enacted in and through the cowboy, who violently renders the animal colonised, domesticated and subordinate. The purpose of the working cowboy, for instance, is to round up cows grazing on the range, eventually driving them to the slaughterhouse where they will be killed for beef. Animal agriculture, as an institution, visits significant violence on the farmed animal body through breeding, raising and slaughtering animals for food (Gillespie 2014; Nibert 2013). Cowboys performing in rodeos demonstrate skills at roping and wrestling animals to the ground: one common rodeo event (although it has been banned in some areas for animal welfare reasons) is “calf roping”, where, from a horse’s back, the cowboy lassos a calf around the neck, and then dismounts, runs to the calf, flips the calf on the ground, and binds their legs to immobilise them in a timed contest. Other modes of control are also present in rodeo events, from the use of the flank strap (a leather strap fastened around the lower abdomen that encourages the horse or bull to buck higher and straighter), to other events (like calf roping) that exercise power over the animal body, to the fear and anxiety many animals experience being chased or wrestled to the ground in front of a large screaming crowd.

Of course, situated as it is within the anthropocentric, settler-colonial imaginary, the rodeo is not routinely viewed as a violent space of human dominance over other animals. Normalising violence against the animal body in the rodeo—indeed, making this violence into a spectacle of entertainment and pride—helps to reproduce violent hegemonic social relations between humans and farmed animals. It is, in fact, their abject status as nonhuman that enables farmed animals’ appropriation and subjugation for commodity production and which excludes them from serious ethical consideration. For this reason, then, the rodeo offers a site not only to understand the reproduction of settler-colonial histories, but also a place for understanding the often-overlooked modes of structural violence (i.e. animal agriculture, global meat and dairy industries) to which other species are subjected. White supremacy, which is articulated through both the settler-colonial project and the project of slavery and incarceration, is at least in part sustained by the continued subordination of *the animal*. Belcourt writes:

settler colonialism is invested in animality and therefore re-makes animal bodies into colonial subjects to normalise settler modes of political life (i.e. territorial acquisition, anthropocentrism, capitalism, white supremacy, and neoliberal pluralism) that further displace and disappear Indigenous bodies and epistemologies (2015:9).

These ideas could likely be explored at any rodeo in the United States; what makes the Angola Rodeo a particularly interesting site is how its geography brings together these modes of Western settler colonialism with colonial histories of the South.

The Louisiana State Penitentiary: A Plantation-Prison

To fully understand the Angola Rodeo, it is necessary to contextualise the geography in which this event occurs. The Louisiana State Penitentiary sits on 18,000 acres surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River in rural Louisiana, about an hour northwest of Baton Rouge. The prison's rural geography exacerbates the isolation of those who are imprisoned there. Many men incarcerated at the prison are from Louisiana's urban centres—New Orleans, Baton Rouge—and the long trip to the prison prohibits many from being able to visit their family members there. This isolation is further compounded by the temporal aspect of their confinement—the fact that over 70% of the more than 5000 people incarcerated at the prison are serving life sentences.

The prison is commonly called Angola for Angola Plantation on whose ground the prison sits, named for the homeland of the first people who were enslaved there. The road to the prison winds past the Myrtles Plantation, a tourist destination for the popular plantation tourism industry. Angola is also, in its own way, a destination site for the plantation tourism industry, although it is not framed as such. Although Angola is no longer technically operating as a plantation, the historical resonance of the plantation and the embodied violence of plantation slavery is not hard to discern in the daily life at Angola where three-quarters of the prison population identify as black/African American and where the place itself holds in it the history of plantation slavery economies. In addition to other forms of prison labour, men incarcerated at Angola labour in the fields of the massive prison farm for between 4 and 20 cents an hour: an agricultural landscape where crops are hand-cultivated by prison labourers and where a couple thousand steers are raised for beef—all overseen by guards with rifles on horseback.

Angola is well known for its infamy as “America's bloodiest prison”, for its heralded status, more recently, as a model of prison reform, and for its sheer size and long and fraught history intertwined with plantation economies in the South. In 1835, a state penitentiary was built in Baton Rouge to replace an earlier New Orleans jail. However, the Baton Rouge prison was costly for the state to run, and in 1844, the prison and the people incarcerated there were leased to McHatton Pratt and Company (a private firm) through a “convict leasing” programme. Prisoner leasing programmes enabled legal slave labour even after Emancipation and, in fact, as Edward Baptist argues, like slavery, prisoner-leasing programmes were central to the accumulation of wealth among the elite class in the US and were

integral institutions in the growth of US capitalism (Baptist 2014). In 1867, the prison was leased to Major Samuel James who, for the next 30 years, accumulated wealth through the use of conscripted prison labourers in construction and farming projects. It was James who, in 1880, purchased 8000 acres of plantation land, called “Angola”, in West Feliciana Parish, and began using prisoners to cultivate the plantation through the leasing programme. The egregious conditions for prisoners in this programme, and its continuation of state-sanctioned slave labour generated public concern, and in 1900, the state of Louisiana purchased the land from James and took over the running of the prison, expanding to 18,000 acres of plantation land in 1922 (Tolino 2013). The transition from the plantation to the prison at Angola carried forward the logic of the plantation, and the geography of the plantation was reproduced at the prison. For instance, spatial traces carry resonances of the plantation, like Camp A (the first housing unit to confine prisoners at Angola), which was the slave quarters from the site’s years as a plantation (Angola Museum 2015). The prison farm’s fields, too, where prisoners hand-cultivate crops, are a vestige of plantation slavery, carried through time first by “convict leasing” and then by the maintenance of the prison as a contemporary plantation farm.

Indeed, Angola, and the prison industrial complex more generally, is a way of keeping the plantation—certain forms of plantation labour and racialised modes of dispossession and marginalisation of black lives—alive (Alexander 2007; Gilmore 2007; Mauer 1999). Of course, not all prisons employ prisoners in forms of labour that recall plantation histories; Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007:21) points out that many prisoners do not work at all in prison landscapes where the goal is often “incapacitation”. Angola, with its particular extension of plantation labour into the present, is its own unique geography that may not be wholly generalisable to the broader carceral landscape. And yet, theorising these linkages sheds light on what McKittrick calls *plantation futures*:

a conceptualization of time-space that tracks the plantation toward the prison and the impoverished and destroyed city sectors and, consequently, brings into sharp focus the way the plantation is an ongoing locus of antiblack violence and death that can no longer analytically sustain this violence (2013:2–3).

Speaking on the creation of the penitentiary, Davis (2016) argues:

One forgets that there were punishment systems operative during that time, within slavery. And as a matter of fact in the aftermath of slavery, when one sees the convict lease system develop, when one sees the transformation of some of the huge slave plantations into places where prisoners work ... and of course Angola and others remain as witness to that connection between punishment and slavery, and mass incarceration in the 21st century ... One often forgets that slavery played a very important role in establishing the kind of punishment system that exists today.

Thus, the historical lineage of the plantation and a prison like Angola connects histories of place-making to the politics of the present—as a way to attend to historical presents, and also, as McKittrick argues, as a way to imagine less violent, decolonial futures.

The Geography of the Angola Prison Rodeo

The Angola Prison Rodeo is held at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in April and October each year, attracting tourists from around the country, and even abroad; in fact, a list in Germany of 100 things you have to do before you die includes the Angola Rodeo as #38 in not-to-be-missed life experiences (Cain 2017). The history of the Angola Rodeo dates back to 1965 when the rodeo began as a form of entertainment for staff and prisoners. The event opened to the public in 1967 and, shortly after, the prison constructed an arena of spectator bleachers and began to expand the number of events included in the rodeo. In subsequent years, the rodeo's popularity spread in the surrounding area, attracting corporate sponsorship, and the prison began to contract with professional rodeo suppliers (Angola Museum 2017).

Today, men incarcerated at the prison volunteer to participate in the rodeo, many of whom have never ridden a horse before. Participation in the rodeo is complex—it is, on one hand, discursively constructed as an event in which to gain respect, glory and redemption from the audience, the other prisoners and the prison staff (Bergner 1998). But participation in the rodeo is materially dangerous, especially so because of the amateur nature of the incarcerated riders: as I observed, the riders are often thrown and trampled by the animals in the rodeo, animals frequently trip and fall and leave the arena limping; in short, human riders and animals are often injured, sometimes fatally, when they participate in the rodeo. This danger adds to the discourses of “glory” and “redemption” circulating at the rodeo in the crowd and in the rodeo MC's constant narrative (Bergner 1998). This danger is also highly problematic because of the ways in which prisoners are incentivised to participate in the rodeo (a subject I return to later). Danger, in fact, is a theme that carries through the prison rodeo space—through the imagined danger of the prison as a space of confined criminality, through the danger for the prisoners of participating in the rodeo, and through the conceptualisation of the animals themselves as dangerous.

The animals at the rodeo include horses, cows (bulls, steer, cows and calves) and bison. Entering the prison grounds, there were large herds of steers grazing on wide, open pastures, bred and raised at the prison for beef. Closer in to the prison were horses; the prison breeds horses and mules for farm labour (e.g. rounding up steers, pulling up plows, carrying guards who oversee prisoners labouring in the fields) and they run a well-respected Percheron horse-breeding programme (horses bred at Angola are commonly purchased by urban mounted police brigades throughout the US, animals that are used as tools in the maintenance of the carceral state). Inside the rodeo grounds, the animals made to perform in the rodeo were contained in pens that said, “Danger: Wild Cattle”, a warning that helps to construct rodeo animals as “wild” rather than as the thoroughly domesticated and tightly managed beings that they are. These animals, and their perceived wildness, are the foundation of the performance of the rodeo event, but their lives and their animality are also intertwined with logics that also render racialised and criminalised human participants objects of entertainment.

The rodeo features events that are standard to many rodeos, such as bareback riding and bull riding, as well as those that are unique to Angola, like convict

poker (where four prisoners sit at a table playing poker, a bull is released and charges the table, and the last man sitting at the table wins). Contrary to the professional rodeo circuit, the amateur nature of the rodeo riders adds to its appeal for the audience. Also adding to the unique appeal of the Angola Rodeo as a tourist destination is the spectacle of visiting the prison with an element of imagined danger and a voyeuristic curiosity about the largest maximum security penitentiary in the country (Adams 2007; for more on prison tourism, see, for example, Brown 2009; Montford 2016; Wilson et al. 2017; for more on Louisiana plantation tourism, see Adams 2007; Bright and Carter 2016; Miles 2015). Indeed, a central element of the Angola Rodeo is not only the entertainment provided by the rodeo generally, but the Angola Rodeo in particular places the reinforcement of notions of black criminality on display, indeed, as *entertainment*, reinforcing racist logics that reproduce the criminalisation and incarceration of people of colour. Angela Davis and asha bandele argue that, in fact, we must move past a critique of mass incarceration to challenge the deeper, more pervasive problem of mass *criminalisation* of people of colour, as well as the deeply rooted racism imbricated in many other key institutions in society (and this echoes Davis' earlier work on race and criminalisation that extends through and beyond the penitentiary) (Davis 1997, 2016).

Although the prison population is overwhelmingly composed of black men, and many of the rodeo participants identify as black, there are a disproportionate number of white-identified men who participate in the rodeo compared with the racial make-up of the overall prison population (Schrift 2008). Schrift explains, based on interviews conducted at the prison, that perhaps this disproportionality is a result of the fact that:

some inmates, particularly African Americans, assert that the rodeo ridicules its participants as "clowns" or "monkeys" ... Given the historical legacy of derogatory representations in popular culture, African American inmates may be more aware of the aspect of ridicule that pervades participation in the rodeo and the particular iconography of the white Western cowboy (2008:30).

And this history of ridicule and black lives-as-entertainment traces back much further than popular culture references. The prisoners who Schrift interviews signal an awareness of, and an uneasiness with, plantation histories where those who were enslaved were forced to perform for the slaveholder and family; as Saidiya Hartman argues, the power of the slaveholder was exercised not only through labour but also through leisure: "By encouraging entertainment, the master class sought to cultivate hegemony, harness pleasure as a productive force, and regulate the modes of permitted expression. Slave owners managed amusements as they did labor, with a keen eye toward discipline" (1997:44). The logic of animality that renders the black body as entertainment and a subject of ridicule relies on the figure of the animal as a site of entertainment and ridicule as well. These logics of racialisation, animalisation and anthropocentrism are deeply intertwined and, importantly, *produced* by notions of whiteness-as-humanness on the part of the audience and the staff (MC, professional cowboys, warden, and correctional officers) orchestrating this event. Schrift recalls a conversation with an audience

member at the Angola Rodeo: “In one rodeo where an African American inmate was running from a bull (with laughter abounding), a spectator commented to me that the rodeo offered one of the last ‘acceptable’ ways to make fun of black people” (2008:30).

There is something illuminating about the audience finding the rodeo and its violence funny and a legitimate site of ridicule. This is partly rooted in a reification of the absurdity of the racialised cowboy and the persistent imaginary of the whiteness-as-humanness of the settler-cowboy. Beenash Jafri (2013:74) analyses the figure of the racialised cowboy through a reading of the film *Indian Cowboy*; she writes:

If the figure of the cowboy is an icon for an idealised form of American masculine subjecthood, then the figure of the racialised cowboy is articulating something about the relationship between non-whiteness and American masculinity. The racialised cowboy disrupts, on the one hand, the presumed whiteness of the cowboy, throwing the racialisation of settler authority into question. Incredulous and amused responses to the presence of the racialised cowboy, moreover, point to the failure to take seriously (to recognise) the racialised subject playing cowboy. At the same time, desires represented through the racialised cowboy are not meaningless, but are productive of the settler project. These desires, in turn—for recognition, for inclusion, for belonging, for settlement—are constituted through constructions of race, gender, and sexuality.

The racialised cowboy as entertainment that is produced at the Angola Rodeo, even as it seems to disrupt the figure of the white cowboy, in fact, reinforces (through rendering the racialised cowboy *funny*) the reification of whiteness that is so integral to the ongoing settler-colonial project.

These complex dynamics of racialisation and anthropocentrism are organised at the Angola Rodeo around a country fair geography. A large field is dedicated as a parking lot and fair foods, souvenirs and crafts are available for purchase. Although, the key difference between the Angola Rodeo and a county fair is that it is, obviously, geographically located within the prison. Entering the prison grounds, rodeo-goers are searched for food, water, weapons, cameras and other contraband. Once inside, there is an odd feeling that the space is part Southern plantation prison, part “Wild West”: the space has been transformed into the aesthetic of the Western rodeo with its iconography of the cowboy, “wild” and “dangerous” rodeo animals waiting in pens, the rodeo arena itself, and cowboy attire worn by some attendees, participants, and announcers. But the correctional officers, the smells of Southern food offerings, and the Southern accents permeating the space persist as reminders that this “Wild West” is a performance that falls away when the rodeo is over.

At the centre of the rodeo grounds is a large arena with dirt floor for the rodeo events and bleachers extending up from the ground. “Inmate spectator” sections are caged in, with chain-link fencing and razor wire, directly adjacent to the open bleachers for paying patrons, exacerbating the distinction between those prisoners who are confined to the prison grounds (literally in a cage) and the members of the public who are free to come and go as they please. Simone Browne’s theorisation of the “surveillance of blackness” is articulated in this caged spectator

section and articulates with Fanon's notion of the "white gaze" that operates to Other those incarcerated at the rodeo, through surveillance by the correctional officers, the incarcerated spectators' hypervisibility, and the voyeuristic gaze of the mostly white audience at the criminality of the caged black men on display (Browne 2015; Fanon 2008). And indeed, I noted the way in which the paying audience members stole furtive glances at the "Inmate Spectator" section, glances that extended into long lingering stares at the men seated there, watching the rodeo. But this was not a one-way stare; many of the men seated at the edges of the prisoner spectator section were more interested in watching the audience and chatting with audience members seated on the other side of the chain-link fence than they were in watching the rodeo. While a fuller exploration of the gaze of the black prisoner would require more research, it is worth noting that this was just one aspect of the dynamics unfolding at the rodeo that rendered whiteness a spectacle, and that disrupts a theorisation of racialisation that relies disproportionately on an objectification of blackness.

The danger of the rodeo was implicitly acknowledged in the presence of ambulances that parked at both ends of the arena, their back doors open, ready to receive an injured rodeo rider. The remainder of the rodeo grounds are dedicated to food booths (Louisiana fare such as gumbo, deep-fried frog legs, and jambalaya, as well as foods typical of US fairgrounds, like blooming onions, funnel cakes and lemonade) and a large Inmate Arts Festival tended by prisoners whose good behaviour grants them permission to sell their crafts to rodeo attendees. Crafts on offer included carved wood crafts, jewellery, paintings, and leather products like belts, bible covers and purses—made from the hides of animals raised for beef at the prison. And, in fact, you see these animals as you drive into the prison past fields where cows and horses are grazing—on hundreds of acres. The aesthetic effect of these fields and the animals on the range draw together the visual geography of the South (bordered by the Mississippi River—the dividing line between east and west, and its historic role in the slave trade and plantation economies) with the West (and its sprawling grasslands, cleared for ruminants' grazing, and its violent settler-colonial histories of expansion).

Colonial Encounters in the Meeting of the South and the West

Where the South and the West meet at the Angola Rodeo is an entanglement of colonial histories that make violent colonial presents for both human and animal lives. Louisiana represents an overlapping geography of the South and the West with its Southern roots in plantation slavery and its cultural Southern-ness, paired with its close proximity to Texas and histories of cows being driven east to Louisiana from Texas in the early- to mid-1800s to transport them up the Mississippi. The state is a transitional kind of space between these imagined regional geographies and their material consequences. These distinct colonial histories (of the Southern colonialism of plantation slavery and the settler colonialism of the West) resonate not only in place-making surrounding the plantation and the prison, but also in the domestication and farming of animals, and the meeting of the logics

of plantation tourism of the South with rodeo performances of the West. Jessica Adams (2007:140) writes on the Angola Rodeo, in her book *Wounds of Returning*:

We might say that rodeo is to the West what plantation tourism is to the South, a nostalgic performance of its mythology. But the Angola Rodeo, in which inmates ... are the contestants, connects rodeo's myths of freedom directly with the opposite of freedom—incarceration and the plantation as a "metonym for American disciplinarity". Western myths inform southern landscapes, in the process exposing the violence of nostalgia. As slavery and the penitentiary are magnified by violent desires of the frontier, it becomes obvious that, as Richard Slotkin writes, myths have the capacity to "reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living".

US patriotism floods the rodeo discourse: at the start of the rodeo, the MC (a middle-aged, white, Southern man) said, "We're in a place where the word freedom comes to mind!", and the primarily white, Southern audience cheered wildly, followed by a dramatic playing of Taps on a bugle. The Angola Rough Riders gallop into the arena on horses, flying the flag of the US alongside the Confederate flag. The legacy of the South (slavery, the Confederate states, the preservation of overt racism) is called up in the black prisoner who rides into the arena—in black-and-white striped shirt—carrying the Confederate flag. In the midst of this landscape, an imaginary of freedom is reproduced between the white MC, the white warden, and the primarily white audience—all of whom might be able to imagine that this *is* what freedom looks like: an "Inmate Spectator" cage full of black men, criminalised and locked away; farmed animals dominated and in their rightful place of service and subjugation; the Confederate flag as a nostalgic reminder of the past days (that are not the past) of glory and white supremacy. The irony of the imaginary of freedom in such a place of human and nonhuman incarceration and captivity, domestication and discipline was hard to ignore. Freedom for whom?

The histories of the South and the West—and their present manifestations of freedom and incarceration—merge at the rodeo and a more enriched politics of place in the present is possible if we consider multispecies lives and labours in these contexts. This is articulated, for instance, in practices of farming and ranching—and the historical and contemporary appropriation of animal lives in these spaces. David Nibert (2013) offers an historical account of animal domestication as colonisation (a process he renames *domesecration* to emphasise and denaturalise its violent impacts), which puts forth a counter-discourse to the dominant narrative that domestication was a mutually beneficial process for humans and animals. He traces histories of domestication and early instances of human slavery and argues that these histories are not only deeply entangled, but foundational for the growth of capitalism. As animals were domesticated, human slavery was justified as a form of labour to care for the newly domesticated farmed animals; thus, the extraction of both human and animal labour was integral for the global accumulation of capital (Nibert 2013).

In addition to being colonised beings themselves, farmed animals—and the cow and the horse in particular—were also used by white settler cowboys as tools of colonisation in the so-called settling of the US West. Virginia Anderson (2006)

argues that settlers used “cattle” farming and ranching practices as both justification and material means for the genocide and displacement of Indigenous communities as well as the destruction of native animal species and prairie ecosystems in places throughout the West. In short, white settlers deployed cows to physically take up space, and their presence changed the landscape through their grazing impact on the land itself and in the need for fencing to demarcate and lay claim to land as property (Anderson 2006). Horses were also appropriated by white settlers (“broken” through capture and training to domesticate them) who leveraged them as multi-purpose living, colonised instruments—as modes of transport, herding, war making, and as key actors in the domestication of new animals like wild horses and bison. The white settler-cowboy, then, positioned himself as a particular kind of human, first through a colonisation of animal bodies. Importantly, animals were used as tools, but they were not merely tools in the settler-colonial project; their animality was foundational to the conceptual framework that drove settler colonialism. And this framework of animality propelled white settlers’ use of animals in the genocide, displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land and solidified a second layer of defining *the human*. The supremacy of whiteness (and white masculinity in particular) that the white settler-cowboy engenders became the legitimate (Manifest Destiny-justified) figure of the human in the settler-colonial project. And this figure of the human was then used to cement a system of value that had to be defined in relation to what it was not (Cacho 2012): the white, masculine, lone cowboy, or the white heteronormative settler family structure that the cowboy protects or cleared the way for, defined as human in opposition to Indigenous family and community structures, traditions and ways of living. Modern farming and ranching, then—along with celebrations of the frontier West, like the rodeo—are political practices of violence that sustain these taxonomic orderings.

This history was not, in fact, lost at the Angola Rodeo—in fact, one event involved a deeply racist performance of the “settling” of the West. Three bison were let out into the ring—bison who the MC claimed were “as wild as the West”. As he spoke, they flopped down and rolled in the dirt, enjoying a dust bath. Next, several white men dressed as Native American riders wearing the skins of bison rode out into the ring, followed by white men dressed as cowboys with guns firing at them. The bison stood in the centre of the ring, unperturbed. The MC described how the “Wild West” was tamed by the “White Man” as they re-enacted, by shooting (with blanks) the bison and the white-men-as-Native-American riders, “how the West was won”. This performance, and the white men dressed up in stereotyped Native American dress, simultaneously recalled and erased the violence of settler colonialism in its glorification and rewriting of this history—a literal disappearance in Indigenous people from the land, compounded by the reification of whiteness that performed this scene. A few moments later, a semi-truck drove out into the arena, and the bison (clearly trained to do so) were herded up a ramp on the back of the truck. The truck itself was also a reminder of development and commerce across Western North America—a symbol of the interstate highway system that cuts through the landscape and whose construction enabled further violence on animal habitats and rural human geographies.

The perceived “wildness” of the West was recalled again and again throughout the rodeo events, enacted mostly through the bodies of the animals in the rodeo ring. But the disjuncture in the actual behaviour of the animals was not difficult to discern—these animals, were not, in fact, “wild”, but domesticated and trained, as was demonstrated when the bison casually walked up the ramp and onto the truck. For the “Bucking Bronco” event, the horses were fitted with a flank strap, which encourages them to buck and perform “wildness”, throwing the riders from their backs and sometimes trampling them in their erratic movements.

The incarcerated rodeo riders are at the heart of this rodeo spectacle. Dressed in black and white striped shirts, blue jeans and boots, their role in the rodeo is complicated. The proceeds from the rodeo fund the “Inmate Welfare Fund” and provide the main form of support for programmes that make life in the prison marginally liveable—the GED program (the General Equivalency Diploma as an alternative to completing high school/secondary education), the prison magazine (called the *Angolite*), along with other classes and activities that otherwise go unfunded by the state or institutional budget. Thus, to a certain extent, incarcerated men are incentivised to put themselves at risk and ride in the rodeo. But on the other hand, in interviews with Angola rodeo riders, Daniel Bergner found that participation in the rodeo was, for many, a source of pride, privilege and glory. The MC informed us at the start of the rodeo that the prisoners “may not have been cowboys when they came to Angola, but they have earned the right to be so today”. If the cowboys are, at least in part, a symbol of US patriotism, honour, and a rugged masculinity, then granting men incarcerated at the prison “the right to be a cowboy” is perhaps a mode of granting them momentary citizenship or “humanity” (in the white, Western, man formulation of humanity). What is often routinely lost in being incarcerated—dignity, full citizenship, being recognised as human—is dangled at the rodeo through the MC’s narratives of redemption and through suggestions of reclaiming what it means to be human.

Before visiting Angola, I had imagined that the rodeo was a site in which the prisoners would perform both their masculinity (as rodeos are commonly performances of masculinity) and their humanity in the routinely “dehumanising” space of the prison. I imagined that it may be through the act of dominating or conquering the animal in the rodeo ring that a performance of humanity—a reinforcing of the perceived human–animal divide—might be enacted. However, in the moment of the rodeo, I sensed that there was something more complicated going on. As a white spectator-observer researcher in the mostly white audience, my own participation and presence in this space worked to solidify histories of racial inequality and uneven power relations in knowledge production, even as my own commitments remain embedded in working to undo this violence. This is a dimension of fieldwork that I worry over with increasing intensity. I have written elsewhere, for instance, about the deep anthropocentrism at work in social scientific tendencies toward conducting fieldwork in spaces of violence against animals; the expectation to view violence problematically normalises violence against animal bodies and solidifies the human–animal binary in the relationship between researcher and researched (Gillespie 2018). In the space of the rodeo,

there was again this dynamic of uneven anthropocentrism in my role as spectator and the nonhuman animals in the ring. But the racialised bifurcation of blackness/whiteness, of incarcerated/nonincarcerated, of entertainers/audience eclipsed (or rather, intensified) this earlier concern, and called up profound anxieties over the ethics of complicity and participation and/or presence as a white academic and ongoing racialised violence in knowledge production in the Western academy. Indeed, these experiences have made me fundamentally question the ethics of conducting *fieldwork* more generally.

As a white audience member, I also paid attention to how other members of the primarily white audience responded to the prisoner riders. On one hand, they seemed to commiserate with the prisoners—gasping as they fell off the animals and were trampled, holding their breath when a rider was knocked unconscious and wasn't getting up, and then cheering when he finally managed to stand. This might be read as a way in which their vulnerability made the prisoners more human (although likely not seen as equally or fully human)—more real, an embodiment of redemption—for the audience. They could identify with the rush of an event win for the rodeo rider, and the disappointment of failure. But another way of reading this is that the mostly white, nonincarcerated audience also had an integral part to play in the spectacle of the rodeo. It was through the white bodies in the audience, as living embodiments of the settler-colonial project, who could enter and leave this space freely and who paid admission to play this role that the animality and criminality of the incarcerated rodeo participants and the black prisoners in the caged spectator section were sustained. White audience members actively performed the persistent entitlement to space, to black and incarcerated lives as entertainment, and to a naturalised vision of settler-colonial society built on genocide and enslavement.

The rodeo—*any* rodeo—is, of course, a spectacle, performed as a source of entertainment. And so, on one hand, the act of the audience viewing the human and animal participants in the rodeo is an expected and mundane dimension of the event, whether it takes place in a prison or not. And yet, in *this* space, in the plantation-prison rodeo, the political nature of this viewing is heightened. It cannot be divorced from its historical roots of recollection of the white settler-cowboy conjured to embody and protect whiteness, the heteronormative family structure, and the persistent formulation of animality and blackness through which white-masculinity-as-humanness is reinforced. Writing on prison and zoo tourism, Kelly Struthers Montford points out that “the human/animal dualism is deployed to establish certain humans and animals as subjects of objectification and therefore viewable captives” (2016:78). Indeed, the act of looking is embedded with uneven hierarchies of power, and the reality of being inescapably looked at or surveilled as captive beings (both human and animal) erodes a fundamental sense of dignity (Gruen 2014:240). On their own experience of being incarcerated, Bryant et al. explain:

our every movement is watched or recorded. As we walk through the halls, guards stare. As we eat, they hover. As we talk on the phone, they listen. When we are not

under the steady gaze of a guard, we are being recorded by cameras. One prisoner described it as “stalking” (2014:105).

The rodeo operates as a heightened site of viewing; men incarcerated at Angola, whose lives are already tightly surveilled, become publicly viewable in front of an audience of prison-rodeo tourists.

These dynamics of viewing and the performance of sympathy for the fallen riders—the gasps, the *oooohs* and *aaaahs*, and the cheers—were part of the creation of the rodeo (and blackness and animality) as spectacle. Integral to this performance, though, was the disposability and interchangeability of the animals and riders. If one rider was injured, another would take his place and the audience would soon forget the rider who had left the ring. The show was orchestrated by white professional cowboys riding around the outskirts of the ring, herding the animals and the incarcerated riders out of the ring at the end of each event, loosening the flank straps on the horses so they could be returned to their pens, and checking on fallen riders to ensure they were not badly injured. The white MC’s narration of the event spoke directly to the audience, reinforcing the supremacy of whiteness and non-criminality, celebrating settler colonialism, and articulating nostalgia for the Confederacy. The MC also told the audience how to feel. When a man was knocked out and finally regained consciousness, the MC made a joke of it: “No matter what you dream, you’re still at Angola—you’re stuck here”. Then he transitioned quickly to a New Orleans Saints football score update. And so the audience was reminded in not-so-subtle ways to take the violence operating in the rodeo lightly and to remember that, at the end of the day, these were prisoners and animals who could be easily left and forgotten within the fences and razor wire of the prison. Adams explains that “the term ‘prison rodeo’ signals the dual incorporation of dreams about what America means within the bodies of those whom society as a whole has segregated, cast off, ejected from its center” (2007:141). Whiteness-as-humanness, then—of the audience, the MC, the warden, the professional cowboys, my role as a researcher—actively produces blackness, criminality and animality in this space. Rather than asserting merely another reading of black suffering or of violence against animals, the starkness of how these relations play out at the Angola Rodeo offers an opportunity to deconstruct the ontological foundations of human/subhuman/nonhuman that underwrite not just this space but more mundane and everyday practices of living.

Conclusions: Race, Animality and the Animal

One way of theorising what’s happening at the Louisiana State Penitentiary is to think about mass incarceration and criminalisation, its highly racialised dimensions, and its reproduction of histories of plantation slavery as a process of continual dehumanisation and animalisation. And much critical scholarship framed around human rights and non-violence takes this approach, arguing for a more inclusive conceptualisation and embodied practice of what it means to be human and how the human is defined, contested and articulated (Kymlicka 2017).

At the same time, there remains—in critical academic scholarship—a level of unwillingness to think seriously about nonhuman animals as subjects of violence, power and dispossession. Kim and Freccero (2013:463) argue that this resistance “signifies the a priori refusal to think through the fact that ‘the animal’ was made and not born”. How the animal has been *made* is an essential site of critique, not only for scholars concerned with human–animal relations, but also for critical race and postcolonial/decolonial theorists. The “animal” as a socially constructed lesser status—whether it is applied to human or nonhuman lives and bodies—enables social relations often characterised by complete and largely unquestioned commodification, violent bodily appropriation, dispossession, exploitation and malleability or *fungibility* (see King 2016; Wilderson 2010) in service to the accumulation of capital and the white/human supremacy. To be treated “like an animal” indicates substandard or inhuman treatment. A subject of critique when it applies to humans, this substandard treatment remains acceptable when animals are treated “like animals”.

Scholarly or activist discourses that note the animalisation or dehumanisation of people of colour or people with low income regularly maintain the subordination of “the animal” as a category. As Syl Ko explains:

Notice that there is an *open acceptance* of the negative status of “the animal” here which, as I see it, is a *tacit acceptance of the hierarchical racial system and white supremacy in general*. The human-animal divide is the ideological bedrock underlying the framework of white supremacy. The negative notion of “the animal” is the *anchor* of this system. “White” is not just the superior race; it is also the superior mode of *being*. Residing at the top of the racial hierarchy is the white *human*, where species and race *coincide* to create the master being. And resting at the bottom as the abject opposite of the human, of whiteness, is the (necessarily) nebulous notion of “the animal” (2017:45).

Maneesha Deckha, writing on formulations of the human and subhuman in this context, highlights why it is important to understand the role of these human/animal or human/subhuman binaries as key features of racialisation, bodily violence and exclusion. Deckha uses an example from Razack’s work on US military detention camps (like Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib) and the modes of racialised violence with which US military personnel treat Muslim detainees (Deckha 2010; Razack 2007). Deckha argues that it is:

“*species thinking*” that helps to create the racial demarcation ... Racialization is not enough and does not complete their Othering experience. Rather, they must be dehumanized for the larger public to accept the violence against them and the increasing “culture of exception” which sustains these human bodily exclusions (2010:38).

Considering the entanglements of violence and colonisation of human and non-human lives in a site like the Angola Rodeo helps to reveal the ways in which conceptions of the human, subhuman and nonhuman make certain lives killable, disposable and forgettable in political economies tied to colonial histories of violence and domination. The particular kind of Southern US patriotism at the rodeo that relies on a conception of “freedom” entangled with racialised histories of

exclusion and social death betray the ways in which the US as a nation-making project was founded on notions of animality and whiteness-as-humanness that legitimised the genocide and enslavement of Indigenous and black people. What is also apparent are the ways in which the US is built on foundational and contemporary enactments of animals' involvement in the colonial project—both as colonised lives and as tools of colonisation.

Bringing together these unique geographies and distinct historically informed forms of violence is a difficult and uneasy task and, through this preliminary field-work at the Angola Rodeo, I have been struck by the ways in which patriotism, political economy, and contemporary politics of place in the present readily strip lives of their dignity and agency in the most fundamental ways. This becomes all the more obvious in the stark relief of the prison rodeo where visitors can move freely through the rodeo grounds and in and out of the prison gates—as tourists in the prison industrial complex, and in the contemporary plantation tourism industry.

Adams writes about the plantation tourism economy, saying, “Ecstasy, sensation, holiday, plantation, colonial—leisure blends with commerce and motifs of oppression in the rhythmic pulse of postslavery geographies, reminding us to attend to the revelations of the mundane” (2007:20). This is true of the prison rodeo as spectators travel to the rodeo for fun and leisure and to buy inexpensive crafts to take back home. If we “attend to the revelations of the mundane” at the Angola Rodeo, this attention shows that incarcerated spectators are caged, surveilled by guards at every moment, every action tightly monitored and controlled so that sneaking a drag of a cigarette might become an act of resistance or defiance—not standing or putting a hand on the heart for the National Anthem at the start of the rodeo might become a mode of reclaiming agency and autonomy. These actions are perhaps a tacit rejection of the settler colonialism and plantation slavery on which that National Anthem was founded. This attention also reveals that the rodeo is an event where some of the men selling crafts can spend the day visiting with their families who have come out for the event, and some of the men sit alone at their booths with no one visiting. The political economy of the prison is made visible in the prisoners who labour in the surrounding fields—fields that not too long ago were growing the same crops under the plantation slavery economy. And we see that this colonial legacy is alive and well in the racialised social structures that disproportionately incarcerate people of colour.

If we “attend to the revelations of the mundane” at Angola, we also see that animals are entrenched in ongoing colonial practices of farming in the form of labour: plows are pulled by workhorses and horses are used for wrangling cows and for transporting guards who oversee the farm labour. Cows are raised for beef: bred, castrated, branded, raised, and slaughtered as domesticated beings for a US staple (“beef, it’s what’s for dinner!”). And finally, animals are enrolled in the rodeo performance—as “wild” creatures to be dominated, tamed and subordinated—as simultaneously valuable and disposable bodies. They are meticulously cared for due to their cost and breeding, but quickly shot if they are injured—not worth the cost and trouble of veterinary care.

The Angola Rodeo is a site layered with historical and contemporary violence that is deeply racialised and at the same time reliant on the real and imagined figure of the animal and animality as a fundamental site of dominance and subordination—through the animalisation of men incarcerated at the prison, and through the routine animalisation of farmed animals throughout the institution of agriculture that spans economies in the South and West. Patriotism and nostalgia for the plantation and “Wild West” operate to normalise, celebrate and erase this violence. Adams writes:

the rodeo becomes a means by which nostalgia, longing, and fascination can be openly indulged for the price of gas and a ticket; the frontier West and the expanse of plantation history meet in the immediacy of confined bodies in motion (2007:141).

In the spirit of contributing to the conversation in radical geography on these multispecies entanglements of coloniality, race and animality, I suggest that attending to the multispecies dimensions of these “bodies in motion” reveals the ways in which hierarchies of power and inequality, historical and present social relations span across species boundaries, producing and reproducing one another. These are boundaries that do violence; preserving “the animal” as an exploitable, subordinate figure maintains a category that makes it acceptable to visit violence on a living, feeling being. Studying the lives and labours of nonhuman animals is a way to highlight how hierarchical logics that operate to make some lives matter very little or not at all because these hierarchical logics are so visible across species difference.

This disposability and the (im)possibility of caring for certain lives underpins the historically contextualised politics of Angola in the present. A multispecies approach to theorising violence, coloniality and confinement informs radical geographies concerned with the way places are made, reproduced, and politics enacted. Violence resonates and is sustained through time in a place like Angola, as the racial violence of the plantation lives on in the racial violence of the prison as a site of mass incarceration. This violence traces through the spaces of confinement and lives confined at the prison—lives that are, importantly, not limited to the human realm. A more complete landscape of the politics of place in the present is visible if we attend to both human and nonhuman life and embodied particularities in this context. These politics also involve a speculative consideration of the possibilities for the ways in which decolonial theory and praxis might be enriched when we consider how racialisation, settler colonialism and anthropocentrism are mutually constituted.

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