

Racism, Rodeos, and the Misery Industries of Louisiana

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Racism is a multilevel and multidimensional system whereby minority groups are oppressed and scapegoated by the dominant group. Claims that America has become a post-racial society notwithstanding, manifestations of racism are all around us, especially in the state of Louisiana. Louisiana is home to some of the poorest, and the least educated citizens in the nation. The state is also the site of one of the country's most notorious prisons. Angola, a former—and present penal—plantation, is a majority black prison where the inmate 'rodeo' provides annual entertainment for largely white audiences and hundreds of thousands of dollars to supplement services for prisoners that could arguably be paid for in less dehumanizing ways. White racial frame is a useful paradigm for understanding the linkages between mass incarceration, the exploitation of the Black body, the miseducation of Black youth, as well as the persistent racial economic inequality in Louisiana and in US society as a whole. We extend the idea of white racial frame further by introducing a concept we call "bridges to benefits". Bridges to benefits are networks of white privilege, which flow between institutions, such as education, the economy, and the law, which involve capitalizing on the misery of Blacks while simultaneously protecting white supremacy.

Racism is a multilevel and multidimensional system whereby minority groups are oppressed and scapegoated by the dominant group (Horton, 2002). Claims that America has become a post-racial society notwithstanding, manifestations of racism are all around us, especially in the state of Louisiana. Louisiana is home to some of the poorest, and the least educated citizens in the nation. The state is also the site of one of the country's most notorious prisons: Angola. Angola is a majority black prison where the inmate 'rodeo' provides annual entertainment for largely white audiences and hundreds of thousands of dollars to supplement the inmate welfare fund and matriculation in a local seminary. White racial frame is a useful paradigm for understanding the linkages between mass incarceration, the exploitation of the Black body, the miseducation of Black youth, as well as the persistent racial economic inequality in Louisiana and in US society as a whole. We extend the idea of white racial frame further to introduce a concept we call "bridges to benefits". Bridges to benefits are networks of white privilege, which flow between institutions, such as education, the economy, and the law, which involve capitalizing on the misery of Blacks while simultaneously protecting white supremacy.

Crime and the Post-Racial Myth

The Civil Rights Movement represented a commitment on the part of individuals and organizations to American ideals of democracy, equality, justice, and fairness, and prosperity. Men and women, boys and girls, fought against seemingly insurmountable odds to ensure Americans had equal access to education, housing, voting, and areas of public accommodation. Signature pieces of legislation passed during the era included the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. An increase in the Black middle-class and the increased concentration of poor Blacks led many to declare an end to the Jim Crow era (Wilson, 1978). Yet, overt manifestations of racism were soon replaced with more covert tactics, and the law remained a powerful tool used by the dominant group to control large segments of the Black population.

Alexander (2012) highlights the impact of the "War on Drugs" on the mass incarceration of young Black males in *The New Jim Crow*. Drug policies and other law enforcement tactics serve much of the same function as race-specific policies and codes during the enslavement era, argues Alexander. There are, currently, an increasing number of Black men who are apprehended, prosecuted, sentenced and punished by the criminal justice system today than several decades ago. The incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Americans since the 1970s—a disproportionate number of whom are Black or Brown—provides some of the best evidence of the continuing significance of race, thus debunking the myth that we are living in a post-racial society.¹

The perception that we are living in a post-racial society has contributed to a host of factors, including a fear of crime that is articulated not in racialized terms, but is rooted in the negative stereotyping of people of color as deviant. The perception that we are living in a post racial society has also contributed to blaming the victim (Martin, 2013). If race no longer matters, then the experiences people of color face with crime in their communities is due to individual shortcomings and not to structural factors or a racialized social system which privileges members of the dominant racial group and disadvantages members of racial and ethnic minority groups. Despite experience that runs counter to embracing wholly the rhetoric of post-raciality, the dominance of American notions of equality and individualism framing understandings of crime and justice seem to effectively remove racial and structural analyses from view.

We recently interviewed residents in a predominately Black community in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The zip code where the interviews took place has some of the highest rates of homicides and violent crimes in the City of Baton Rouge and in the State of Louisiana. We asked residents a series of questions to assess fear of crime and trust of law enforcement agents. For example, Mary's comment illustrates this tendency. Her comments were reflective of the majority of responses. Mary, a 30-year-old minister commented:

The major cause of crime is us killing each other for no reason, we're robbing and the drugs not helping either. Mostly the drugs because that's what they doing drugs. Some of them will tell you that they don't have a job, can't get a job. They don't have the education; lack of education but it's up to us the people. We have to want to see our neighborhood do better. We have to have the desires in us to do better, to go get an education, to go get a job. You can get a job somewhere. May not be the best that you want but something is better than robbing other people and making your own neighborhood unsafe.²

The aforementioned remarks from a female resident clearly acknowledge that crime is a problem in the community and that violent crimes are a direct consequence of the presence of drugs in the community. High unemployment and low levels of educational attainment are not the consequences of large-scale economic changes, or discrimination in housing, or under resourced schools, according to the respondent. Community residents engaged in deviant behavior apparently lack motivation and lack the desire to do better. Jobs are plentiful according to the respondent and one of the primary causes of unemployment is that residents have standards that are too high and rationalize their deviant behaviors. The neighborhood is unsafe because residents within the neighborhood make it unsafe.

Race is not explicitly identified as a significant predictor of crime, poverty, or a lack of education and yet volumes of scholarly research highlight the linkages between race, crime, poverty, and education (Alexander, 2012; Fajana, 2007; Kim et al. 2010). Race has paradoxically become hypervisible *and* also invisible in American society, and this is particularly evident in Louisiana.

The overrepresentation of Blacks in high crime areas, correctional facilities, failing schools, and among the poor makes the issue of race highly visible; however, the efforts to explain the racial disparities in non-racial terms represents the invisibility of race as well. Feagin's white racial frame (2010, 2013) and our concept of bridges to benefits provide a framework for understanding this paradox, including and illustrated by the oddity that the Angola Prison Rodeo provides. Angola, in its history and specifically via its rodeo, is an ideal case study of the ways in which the dominant group profits on the misery of racial minority groups. We move now to a detailed discussion of the white racial frame perspective.

White Racial Frame

Given our previous claims that the idea of a post-racial society is a myth, it is important to understand that the nature and context of that myth lives within particular frameworks. Contextualizing mythical post-raciality, we are able to explicate and understand the nature of whiteness. White racial frame (Feagin, 2010, 2013) surfaces as a useful analytic in understanding not only what the myth of a post-racial society does for whites, but also how white privilege is a deeply rooted and consequently deeply protected construct which manifests within what has been called the school-to-prison or cradle-to-prison pipeline (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et. al. 2003; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006; Winn, 2011).

Feagin (2010) identifies a three-pronged framework for understanding whiteness that addresses whites' beliefs in their virtuosity, whites' framing of marginalized peoples through stereotypes, and counter-narratives from within communities of color to address the previous two elements. The first two constructs align with Harris' (1995) conceptualization of whiteness as property. Whiteness as property suggests that whites not only significantly value themselves and their worth within a property framework, consistent with Feagin's notion of virtuous whiteness, but do so with a fierce protection from outside forces (Fasching-Varner, 2009; Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

In order to protect the value of whiteness, whites must negatively stereotype ‘others,’ people of color (Feagin, 2010), so as to show that people of color are different from whites; consequently, such cannot possess or benefit from whiteness, except in limited circumstances where whites provide conditional acceptance of people of color who abide by the social order of whiteness and do nothing to threaten it. In order to understand the connection between schools and the frame of whiteness it is important to explore some of the sub conditions in Feagin’s first two premises which lead toward a pathway that maintains poverty for people of color and propels them, particularly Black males, into prisons.

Feagin posits that whites deploy a number of self-ascribed markers to frame themselves, and their whiteness, as virtuous. For example, among whites people there is a tendency to believe that whiteness is protected by “moral Teflon”. That is, white people nearly always frame themselves as moral, just, kind, and consequently incapable of being racist. Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2013) articulates a curious phenomenon in that white people will acknowledge in great numbers that racism exists, but virtually no white will acknowledge, admit, and/or take responsibility for his or her individual or white collective racism. In schools, teachers articulate an abstract, expansive and seemingly progressive set of narratives. The narratives emphasize love and acceptance of all people at the same time that teachers and administrators act in ways that suggests restrictive conservative values (Fasching-Varner, 2009). That is, a primary defense of a white’s racism is to preface a racist statement or action with something like ‘I’m not racist, I love everyone, BUT...’ The more profound the racism is the deeper the whites work to create Teflon around themselves to be positioned as good, virtuous, accepting people. Concurrent with this Teflon approach is a belief that racism is no longer impactful on society at large and great distancing from allegedly racist pasts (the myth of the post-racial) that rolls out as color-blind in its nature (Bonilla Silva, 2001; Feagin, 2010). Many teachers point out that there has been a great time since the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case and that teachers have become inoculated to racism. Teachers often articulate color-blind ideas such as ‘it doesn’t matter to me if a child is Black, Brown, or white, I teach them all the same’ (Fasching-Varner, 2013). In articulating such approaches they fail to recognize that racism’s continuing impact creates disparities in opportunities, that students need to be engaged in their differences, and that there are differences in identities between themselves and the students they teach (Fasching-Varner & Dodo-Seriki, 2012; Fasching-Varner, 2013). As Fordham (1996) and Young (2007) have pointed out, Black youth, particularly Black males, are forced to chose between appropriating whiteness and female gendered approaches in order to please a predominately white female teaching force. Academic success in marginalized communities is often dependent on teachers positioning their whiteness as emotionally normative (Feagin, 2010), and forcing students to select away from their identity markers to be successful or suffer from the “crime and punishment” model that aims to force cooperation, conformity, or incarceration within communities of color.

Feagin's second construct, the negative stereotyping of people of color, is also critically important to understand how whiteness works. For some whites, as for all people in general, and here also teachers specifically, practices and interactions are informed by beliefs. So while whites build a Teflon around themselves that is intended to be stick proof and based on morally righteous ideology, underneath that veneer lays a much harder surface whose foundation is steeped in racist beliefs manifested in any number of stereotypes. The stereotyped beliefs are informed over many years and as a result of racist interactions with families, friends, and communities of racism. To that extent the stereotypes are informed by "everyday interactions of friends and relatives ...[to]...make up the 'muscles and tendons that make the bones of structural racism move'" (Feagin, 2010, p. 94). Based on stereotypes teachers often ascribe poor performance of students of color along with negative perceptions of student behavior to which they have been socialized. In a study of pre-service teachers (Fasching-Varner, 2013), teachers were found to contradict their Teflon-like moral nature with stereotypes of parents in urban settings as uncaring, drug addicted, and absent, as well as framing students in urban settings as incapable of learning, unmotivated, and "troubled". When confronting situations within the context of their practice, teachers rely on stereotypes about communities of color to normalize and justify their racism while essentializing and dismissing students of color and crime and punishment disciplinary practices. These beliefs consequently lead to disengaged teaching practices that have been identified as a poverty of pedagogy (Haberman, 1991), which lead to further academic debt levied against communities of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

To address the first two components of the whiteness frame, Feagin (2010) identifies counter-framing as a potential mechanism to address the pernicious nature of whiteness. Specifically highlighting the accomplishments and achievements of people of color, acknowledging unjust practices, and calling for more revolutionary actions are ways to address the perverted and problematic nature of whiteness. Similarly, counter-narratives (Delgado, 1989, 1990, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) may prove helpful in helping frame common sense understandings of phenomenon that are too often situated within white racist frameworks. As a type of counter-narrative we posit that the white racial frame helps us understand not only the trajectory of a community to school to prison to death pipeline, but also what we could understand in the reverse as a *prison-to-school pipeline* informed by whiteness. In a prison-to-school pipeline we could understand that the very structure and approach of the prison has also reflected a normative whiteness, that is: *you lock up non-virtuous people situated within your societies' negative stereotypes of the people who are imprisoned*. In a counter-approach, we could reinterpret the relationship as living within a pedagogical penal lens that informs thinking about curriculum and assessment, (dis)engaging teaching styles, and law and order—classroom management and discipline—within schools to protect the virtuous from the 'savage' children; and such, leading to the criminalization of Black youth with harsh punishment for any behavior which does not sufficiently conform to white female expectations.

Much attention has been paid to the direction of the pipeline as going from school to prison, which would suggest that well informed white pedagogy fails Black and Brown students, which leads to a particular set of student disengagements, which leads to behaviors society views as criminal and ends with incarceration. Arguing in the other direction creates a counter-perspective, consistent with the third aspect of Feagin's (2010) framework. In the reverse, we could conceptualize that the carceral state (Meiners, 2010) of our nation is reflected in a crime and punishment approach at levels far beyond school—we should consider that our federal government wiretaps, eavesdrops, monitors, and punishes with relative ease and permission of the judiciary. Schools are not creating the values society will follow; rather, society creates a set of expectations to which schools meet. In this counter-direction framing prison and jailing approaches are the society reflecting and informing the localized practices that create a constant vacuum within the pipeline to continue incarcerating mostly marginalized populations, or at least marginalized populations in disproportionate volume. Prisons do not merely detain, punish, and/or correct behaviors that society deems illegal; prisons actually could be understood as creating a pedagogical approach of crime and punishment in their orientation that informs teachers' pedagogical decision making in settings with marginalized populations, which we know to be disproportionately imprisoned (Blumstein, 1982, 1988, 1993; Frase, 2009; Garland, Sphon, Wodahl, 2008). In South Louisiana, where Angola Prison is located, teachers of children in urban settings within significant student of color populations, and with elevated levels of socio-economic struggle, spend a majority of their instructional time enforcing arbitrary behavioral expectations, and severely punishing children who do not conform, controlling bodies while anesthetizing minds (Foucault, 1977; Robinson, 2001).

Instead of investing in setting high academic expectations, displaying cultural competence, and being socio-politically connected in ways identified as culturally relevant (Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2009; Fasching-Varner & Dodo Seriki, 2012; Gay, 2000; Hayes & Juarez, 2012), schools do the opposite—according to our counter-understanding. Data gathered from observations of schools in South Louisiana, which other educators report is consistent with other populations where schools are populated by marginalized people, children are expected to walk on marked straight lines, keep their heads down, keep their mouths closed—even during lunch, and move around in a highly monitored, controlled, and disciplined context (Fasching-Varner, 2013). Student learning environments are resource bare, and reflect minimized planning and teacher investment, and adults are spending a significant part of their day operating like prison guards and not teachers. In these settings, teachers create records and documentation of student behavior more than they examine student strengths and abilities or teach (Fasching-Varner, 2013). Teachers yell, demand, and strike fear into the children, and non-compliance is not only punished within the setting but often also involves police officers, reflecting a trend Thompson (2011) describes as an increasing number of small children as young as five being walked out of school in handcuffs.

So, the *prison-school* pipeline could be understood as not just being conceptually informed by ideas of incarceration but also in-formed by an integration of incarceration approaches into the school in the following order: prison behavior to school level behavior to curriculum/pedagogical approaches to classroom management to child disengagement to disconnected community engagement and back.

Bridges to Benefits

The prison-school pipeline is reflective of networks of white privilege, which flow between institutions, such as education, the economy, and the law, and involve capitalizing on the misery of Blacks while simultaneously protecting white supremacy. We refer to the network as “bridges to benefits”.

Brunsma et al. (2013) describe protections that whites receive at predominately white institutions of higher learning from attacks on white supremacy. Predominately white colleges and universities do not seek to bring the walls down; rather, they help to fortify the walls through institutional practices and daily activities that are products of processes involved in the creation and perpetuation of our racialized social system. Furthermore, Brunsma et al. (2013) lay out a series of assumptions with which we agree and also use as points of departure. These assumptions include an understanding that race is a foundational concept in the founding and the development of our nation; race is socially constructed; and racism impacts both whites and people of color, but differently.

Much like historically white colleges, universities are viewed as white spaces; correctional facilities, inner-city public schools, unemployment lines, and social services are considered Black spaces. Political rhetoric and media representations reinforce negative stereotypes about Blacks. These stereotypes include the perception that: Blacks do not value education; Blacks have a propensity towards violence; and Blacks are lazy and unmotivated and prefer to live off of public assistance than work and receive an honest day’s pay (Block, Aumann, & Chelin, 2012). Demographically, prisons, failing schools, and social service agencies are far too often majority Black, or are spaces where Blacks are overrepresented relative to their population in the broader society (Martinez, Banchemo, & Little, 2002; Monnant, 2010). Prisons, schools and social service agencies are “structured in ways that reflect their historical demography, ideology, and associated hegemonies” (Brunsma et al., 2013, p. 721).

While spatial walls are said to *separate* white and non-white students on predominately white colleges and universities, bridges to benefits *link* whites in positions of power and influence with one another.

Powerful and influential whites in the law, education, and the economy benefit not only from their privileged positions within their respective institutions but also through their relationships with one another as privileged individuals in other institutions (Hastie & Remington, 2014). Under resourced schools, for example, provide the inputs for the school-to-prison pipeline (Wald & Losen, 2003). Many of these schools are filled with majority Black students—who in far too many instances—are disproportionately poor (Martinez, Banchemo, & Little, 2002). Whites benefit from the existence of failing schools in many other ways. The fact that white children have relatively greater access to high quality schools means they are well on their way to gaining access to colleges and universities and ultimately to positions in the primary sector of the labor market, which are characterized by relatively high salaries and opportunities for advancement (Restifo, Roscigno, & Qian, 2013). Relegating young Black children to failing schools today limits competition in the marketplace in the future and sets them up for “discipline,” their course on the pipeline (Tonry, 2012). Mass incarceration has become a multimillion-dollar industry, providing a source of economic development for predominately white communities across the nation (Clear, 2009). Although the inmate population is disproportionately minority, the majority of staff is not (Noble, 2006).

Color-blindness, white privilege, and white entitlement represent several ideologies in walls of whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; McIntosh, 1988). We argue that the aforementioned ideologies also—and can perhaps best—be understood within the framework of our bridges to benefits concept. Color-blindness is routinely used to dismiss racial differences in educational attainment, mass incarceration, and overall economic well-being. Among the central frames of color-blindness, cultural racism and minimization of racism are particularly significant. The overrepresentation of Blacks in failing schools, prisons, and among the economically disadvantaged is explained not as the consequence of discriminatory institutional policies and individual practices but as the direct result of a culture of deviance and poverty. The bridges and benefits networks whites enjoy go unnoticed, unexamined, and unchallenged—in fact expand, strengthen and grow.

Furthermore, the election of President Obama and the hypervisibility of other economically successful Blacks have emboldened claims of the declining significance of race. In the color-blind era evidence that the social playing field is level is attested to by the election of the nation’s first Black president, the success of Black entertainment moguls, and Black professional athletes. The persistent racial wealth inequality, high levels of Black asset poverty, persistent educational achievement gaps, and differentials in arrests and sentencing by race are far too easily dismissed. Blaming the victim and minimizing the pain of white privilege provides the justification and rationalization for capitalizing on the misery of Blacks (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Wellman, 1993).

Bridges to benefits rely on white privilege ideology. The unwillingness to see or to concede that whites receive unearned benefits allows whites in positions of power and influence the cover to continue to reap returns on their investments into the misery—or systematic disadvantage of Blacks—and reciprocate and enjoy those benefits across institutions.

Within these misery industries whites with influence and power exert their sense of entitlement within each of their respective institutions and reinforce it within their interactions across institutions (Taylor, 2007). The white leadership represents “a very elite group,” “a very privileged group,” those who often “question the qualifications of non-whites...but do not question their paved route here-legacies” (Brunsma et al., 2013, p. 731).

Whites exhibit a sense of entitlement to a quality of education in their resistance to desegregate schools. Schools by extension are divided by race with white children receiving the best education possible to set white youths on the path towards taking their rightful place in society—at the top. At the same time, schools that are majority Black are disproportionately under resourced and serve as spaces for for-profit companies to make money through such tactics as standardized testing. The mandatory assessments are supposed to make schools more accountable, but have the intended—or unintended consequences—of stifling critical and creative thinking (Carroll, 2013). Therefore, the majority of Black public schools prepare Blacks for positions on the lower rung of the social ladder.

White entitlement is also evidenced in the justice system and the economy. Whites demonstrate a sense of entitlement in efforts to privatize prisons and to locate prisons in predominately white communities where the mass incarceration of mostly Black men serves as a form of economic development. The backlash against Affirmative Action is also evidence of the ideology of white entitlement. Policies collectively referred to as Affirmative Action are intended to redress historic racial discrimination and enhance employment, educational, and economic opportunities for minorities groups, including Blacks. Holding on to the idea that whites—by virtue of their race—are entitled to hire anyone—regardless of race—often translates into hiring individuals within their social network and/or within their racial group. Social networks tend to include same-race connections.

Whites not only receive protection from the invisible walls which protect attacks against white supremacy, but more significantly whites use their positions in social institutions to facilitate the flow of benefits associated with whiteness within and between institutions, such as education, the economy, and the law, and capitalize on the misery of Blacks while simultaneously protecting white supremacy. The Angola Rodeo is emblematic of this misery industrial complex, benefiting whites in its affirmation and perpetuation of whiteness.

The Angola Rodeo and the Post-Racial Myth

Louisiana is the prison capital of the world (Chang, 2012; Prison Index)—with Angola, its infamous state penitentiary, also the largest maximum-security prison in the United States (U.S.). It is perhaps no secret that the U.S. incarceration rate is the highest on earth—representing some five percent of the total world population, it houses around twenty-five percent of its prisoners, about 2.3 million in number (NAACP website; Prison Index Rios, 2011); Louisiana distinguishes itself here in that the state imprisons more of its people than any other in the nation (Chang, 2012): for every 100,000 residents: in Louisiana, 1,619 are imprisoned; in the U.S., that number is about 730 (Alexander, 2012, records this number at 750.)—almost doubling the national average, of Louisianan adults, one in 86 is incarcerated (Chang, 2012). Alexander (2012) locates the rise of the industrial-prison complex in the U.S., and its accompanying exponentially increasing incarceration rate, with particular policies emerging during the Reagan era of administration, specifically its “War on Drugs” which disproportionately also criminalizes Black men, the racial dimension its most striking feature. The state of Louisiana is something of an exemplar of this growth, and its “tough on crime” underpinning—three counts on conviction of drugs can mean a life sentence in Angola (Chang, 2012).

According to Chang (2012), in her series “Louisiana Incarcerated”, economics here also provides the impetus for the maintenance and expansion of the prison state—a continual flow of incarcerated human beings required to sustain what has become a 182 million-dollar industry. She describes a prison network of for-profit facilities that serves not only economically but also politically³ the “good old boys”—e.g., read “whites”—that direct them as well; dependent on a business model based on “head count”, the substantial portion of law enforcement financed by the skimmings from such operations trades prisoners “like horses”. While Chang’s focus here is not specifically on the racialized economy of this industry, she does hearken back to Louisiana’s history in leasing convicts, a disproportionate number of whom were Black, for plantation labor in the 1800s, and also notes that in New Orleans today, one in 14 Black men is doing time, one in seven also either on probation, on parole or in prison, and that in some places time behind bars is considered a right of initiation.

The history of Angola—and its well-publicized, highly popular, and much applauded Angola Prison Rodeo—illustrates further the racist and racialized economy, and the structural workings of white racial frame/whiteness (Feagin, 2010, 2013), operating at the heart of the prison system and institutional prison tourism as misery industry.

The now 18,000-acre West Feliciana parish property in South Louisiana, nearly 60 miles northwest of the state capitol of Baton Rouge, Angola was once a slave plantation, named for the area in Africa from which its slaves were taken, before Confederate major Samuel James bought it with three others in 1880 and turned to state-leased convicts for its labor supply (Bergner, 1998).⁴ Under his direction, and after when he sold the plantation to the state in 1901, it became infamous as a place of brutality and death.

Known as the “South’s bloodiest prison”, Schrift (2008) locates Angola at the pinnacle of the horrors of the penal system in the South in the 19th century, with death rates three times higher than those of northern prisons. Within this system—heavily reliant upon work camps in which inmates were leased-out on chain gangs to provide low-cost labor, convicts, deprived of healthcare, were forced to live and work in the most wretched of conditions, and subjected to overcrowding and guard abuse, and punitive torture and cruel restraint via such instruments as guns, dogs, chains and wire. Additionally, with a post-Civil War population of largely Blacks incarcerated, little attention was paid to penal reform or inmate welfare. “The system both mimicked and perpetuated the slavery mentality, with Angola serving as the penultimate example” (p. 26). In general, areas of the rural South, particularly, increasingly dependent on these prison network economies, and as a platform for further economic development, were not only slow to address the social problems endemic to and reflective of them—including the perpetuation of racism and a racial caste system in the U.S., but rather perpetuated them in order to maintain the capital bridges to benefits growth of whiteness.

These oppressive practices continued at Angola, in fact, until in 1952 when thirty-seven white inmates drew attention to the inhumane conditions there by severing their Achilles tendons with razors in an act of protest. While improvements were made for a time in response, it was not until the mid-1970s when four Black inmates successfully sued the state in federal court—citing widespread murder (e.g., 40 in 3 years, and 360 stabbings on record) and rape, beatings with mop handles and racial segregation and discrimination (e.g., Blacks assigned to crop-picking and whites allocated to easier work—these bridges to benefits even reaching and serving prisoners, that is, those who were white), in addition to the practice of arbitrary discipline and the failure to provide doctors for medical needs. Within a few years of federal oversight, significant improvements were made, and by 1999 when the state resumed leadership, Angola was deemed standard setting and held up as a model American prison. The rhetoric of reform and rehabilitation has been central to this standing, and the Angola Prison Rodeo, a bi-annual symbol and icon also showcasing to the public this reform and rehabilitation—and implicitly the virtues of a white moral frame (Feagin, 2010), as well.

Today Angola houses some 5000 plus male inmates in 1600 cells, about two thirds of whom are serving life sentences. Most are Black—76% reported in the 2010 annual report of the Louisiana State Penitentiary—and under 40 years of age. Most of Louisiana’s violent criminals reside here—around 50% for homicide, 20% for robbery and 16% for rape;⁵ others for assault, kidnapping, theft, burglary or drug offenses. Inmates who are able work a forty-hour week, with the potential for something around 20 cents per hour incentive wages, mostly on the prison farm. Other programs are available in which inmates can participate in their free time, and pursue self-improvement and education: e.g., in vocational training, through club membership, in study for a four-year college degree through New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, and in contributing to *The Angolite*, the prison’s award-winning magazine, as well. The Angola Prison Rodeo, along with its Inmate Arts Festival, is the most publicized and well known among the rehabilitative opportunities offered to the inmates there.

First begun in 1965, the rodeo sought to provide entertainment for prison employees, inmates and locals. It opened to a larger audience two years later, and since has seen expansion each year. With the arrival of present, and longest standing, warden Burl Cain in 1995, the rodeo has seen exponential growth, been the subject of international media attention, and been lauded for its unparalleled success. A forum to showcase Angola as the model prison, delivered from the specter of its ever-incited tortuous past—also ever inciting something of the “plantation myth” and “glory days” of old for whites; Cain, acclaimed for his leadership in revolutionary prison reform, enthusiastically relates key tenets of the penitentiary’s administration: “good food, good medicine, good prayin’, and good playin’”(Schrift, 2008, p. 26). In this portrait, however, Schrift—in whose keen analysis of the rodeo we ground much of our own here⁶—suggests something of the rodeo’s history is belied, one tied to a legacy wherein inmates were brutally mistreated by prison guards and fellow prisoners, and denied nearly any voice whatsoever. In 1997, in fact, in concert with the rodeo’s documentary filming and at the initiative of the warden—though reported to have been put also to a vote by inmates (Bergner, 1998), the black and white broad-striped shirts of the pre-reform chain gang days (often dubbed slavery by another name, PBS) were readopted—a loaded marker and emblem of Angola’s dark past, and demonstration of strong symbolic import (and reasserting the authority of whiteness) that solidly identifies and presents the incarcerated as such to the public, as well.

Today the Angola Prison Rodeo is held in a 7500-seat inmate constructed, partially covered arena every Sunday in October, and again on a weekend in late April each year. At \$15 per ticket, sold-out audiences arrive in long car lines stretching Louisiana’s back roads awaiting the 9 AM opening of the maximum-security prison. Before the 2 PM rodeo event, and after, until 5 PM, attendees imbibe tasty treats (e.g., the inmates’ fried coke innovation) at prisoner-run concession stands, and a variety of other entertainment delights accompanying the main event.

Children there enjoy fair rides like carousel and climbing wall, with shooting tower in view. Through the popular and profitable Inmate Arts Festival, visitors can mingle with the incarcerated and purchase their art and ‘hobbycrafts.’ With inmates who are not ‘trustees’—those who have been at Angola for at least ten years and earned this interaction through good behavior—and are separated from the public by additional fencing, they can negotiate prices across it. Souvenir enticements include photographic posing as a convict behind bars, or sporting a cap, tote or tee that reads—“Angola, A Gated Community” (These items can be ordered directly from the Angola Prison website, an interesting source of information of all kinds on the rodeo, as well). Advertised and embraced as a fun weekend activity for families, the signature draw is the rodeo which features untrained volunteer convict ‘cowboys’ in a program inspired by professional rodeo: “The Wildest Show in the South.”

A few key elements constitutive of and central to the rodeo program—and also some of its most popular events—serve well to illustrate how this preference, perhaps as no other there, embodies, enacts and affirms essential features of a pervasive and pervasively institutionalized white racial frame (Feagin, 2010). Such is effected “though the spectacle of ‘live’ inmates against a historical backdrop of deeply ingrained racial and sexual codes, violence and state authoritarianism” (Schrift, 2004, p. 332). The program opens with some visually striking signifiers, also visually highlighting the visibility of race: A largely white and unconfined audience sits beside a section of confined incarcerated, largely black and in white shirts; and the warden Cain—“God of the Rodeo” (Bergner, 1998), presiding in the welcoming ceremony, is the picture of white paternalism, as he emphasizes the care he has for his boys and assures visitors that their contributions—proceeds going to the Inmate Welfare Fund—make for the benefit and rehabilitation of the prisoners, affirming to what Feagin (2010) names White Virtueness. The momentous full gallop Grand Entry of the Rough Riders in cowboy attire arrives with the prominent and provocative bearing of flags—one rider waving the U.S. flag; another, the Louisiana flag; and a third, and often Black, the Confederate flag. The moral authority and force of the state, and prison economy—and hearkening back to the plantation economy of the Old South—is symbolically asserted herein, and amid clear delineations of the incarcerated via pre-reform striped convict prison wear as well.

With the exception of the Rough Riders, prisoners participating in the rodeo events are inexperienced; most of them are ‘city boys’ with little to no exposure to livestock. In fact, this reality lends much to the excitement and appeal of the spectacle—and danger. What Schrift (2004, 2008) concludes, and we as visitors⁷ of the rodeo can also confirm, is that these ‘cowboys’ through these displays are dominantly positioned as brainless buffoons and brutes, very near to the animals they meet in the ring, not only needing oversight but also taming, which of course the prison effectually accomplishes.

Even the very notion of the convict cowboy is riddled with contradiction: while the cowboy is an American icon (and also one of westward expansion and imperialism)—an independent, courageous, and free heroic figure taming and opening the wild frontier; the convict is a symbol of degradation and filth—isolated, inhumane, anti-heroic, nameless and without status, requiring taming, enclosure and captivity through incarceration. Through the rodeo ritual, the offering of cowboy status is pretense performed—altered and abnegated in the enacting.

To these workings of mockery are added others, as announcers make much of convicts' urban inexperience, and follow each participant's name with his sentence—usually 'life' called out in an exaggerated droll. In some instances, they describe the prisoners as having "more guts than brains", and warn of the possibility of "an early discharge." Schrift (2008) notes: "a spectator commented to me that the rodeo offered one of the last 'acceptable' ways to make fun of Black people" (p. 30).⁸ Others, to us, likened the occasion to that of the Roman gladiators, although those 'entertainers' were at least armed. Here the convict—and black, male body—is clearly become, as well, an object of physical violence. Yet, those watching him as an animal in the ring, convict-striped and othered, can indulge and purge their violent fantasies and assuage any guilt all at the same time. From a climate defined in many ways by the gaze of the white voyeur upon the (re)criminalized Black 'other', the meanings and messages of these scenes if not acknowledged are nonetheless deeply racialized. Amid Black convicts, the "moral Velcro" (Feagin, 2010) of wickedness and debauchery continues to stick to African-Americans, and whites, supporting these with monies and recognition of a sort, can maintain their "moral Tephlon" (wherein even such racist performances don't stick) and superiority.

Involved prisoners on view appear inept and foolish, for example, in scenes where teams of two chase a cow in attempts to milk her, or work to catch and wrestle an animal to the ground. For Buddy Pick-up, one convict rides bareback to pick up his 'buddy' atop a barrel across the arena from which both race back together and struggle to stay on the horse. Linguistically coded (e.g., *pick-up*, *bareback*), the effort as viewed also simulates a bumbling and awkward sex act between two men, and on public display. Incited here are images of the (over) sexualized Black man, and also those pertaining to homosexuality and rape among inmates. While engagements involving ropes and roping do not come particularly with the great threat of injury, the moments a Black roper is inadvertently caught in and pulled by or with the rope can call to mind historical memory rooted in lynching too.

In a most popular and publicized event called Convict Poker, four seated inmates hold cards at a table and try not to move as a 2000-pound charging bull threatens to throw them, with their 'hands' and 'clear the table' (rodeo website). The last to remain seated is declared winner, though the event is defined most by fleeing, fumbling, falling and flying participants.

In this and other events (e.g., bull riding), the possibility, or promise, of injury and even death is real. In the most celebrated, culminating event called Guts and Glory, those who dare enter the arena into which the most aggressive Brahma bull to be found is unleashed, to which a chit, or poker chip, is tied—usually between the horns and eyes. The goal is to draw near to the bull in order to acquire the chit. This season, we witnessed an injured inmate being carried off by medical personnel on a stretcher.

It is not difficult to see how deeply embedded and negative stereotypes and framings of blacks (Feagin, 2010) are excited and avowed—a white racial frame reenacted and reaffirmed—in the Angola Prison Rodeo. These Blacks actually are convicts, affiliated already with danger, criminality, and violence. These Blacks, not only in the arena with the animals, they too are the animals, in the dirt, on exhibition and display—with all the affiliated and racialized emotions, images and smells; and yes, also sexually deviant and hyper-sexual. Volunteering to be thrown to the bulls and potentially gored by them, clearly, too, these men are easily viewed as profoundly ignorant and without the capacity to protect or determine themselves. Even as hyper-visible to white eyes, they are rendered truly invisible indeed. From the back roads, behind electric fencing and barbed wires if not bars, the prison itself is a “back stage” setting for the rodeo as “racist performance”—such “back stage” engagements, according to Feagin (2010), also constitutive of and essential to the maintenance of a white racial frame; wherein whites can be protected from the brunt of society’s violence and avoid any penetrating query into racism and its injuriousness or serious discussion or criticism of mass incarceration and the penal system in the U.S., particularly along racial lines.

The public festival—albeit this one behind closed gates, Schrift (2008) suggests, is a “ritual display” conveying “deeper cultural meanings through which a collective group asserts its history and identity.... The Angola Prison Rodeo... is a compelling model of this kind of public display, communicating complex and disturbing messages about crime and incarceration to a curious public” (p 23). These complex and disturbing messages, too, are, we would submit, deeply and indelibly also about race. Institutional tourism⁹ herein as well plays a particularly insidious role as it finds ways to express itself through and capitalize upon the misery industry that is the prison: white supremacy is not only reiterated and recreated, but also criminality—and the Black male face of it—and prison life normalized. Isn’t even the wretchedness of others recast as a site of pleasure and the consumption of otherness unapologetically celebrated as well?

Conclusion

Clearly, we are not living in a time where race no longer matters, nor are we living at a time where race is declining in significance. One only needs to look at the spectacle and sport of the Angola Rodeo for a textbook example of racism in the twenty-first century. How is it possible that such an event wrought with racist stereotypes and contradictions of consciousness would thrive in the post-civil rights era? How can the cradle-to-prison pipeline line endure in a nation where a Black man is—for the first time in world history—at the helm? The Angola Rodeo—and the over-representation for people of color in the criminal justice system more broadly—endures because white privilege permits members of the dominant racial group in America to build walls of whiteness and bridges to benefits that are founded upon the misery and exploitation of people of color in virtually every social institution.

Given that race is a foundational socially and politically contested construct, riding social institutions, including the criminal justice system, of racism will not happen overnight; it may not happen in a generation. However, it is critical that scholars continue to debunk the myth the we are living in a post-racial society by drawing attention to efforts on the part of the majority racial group in America to capitalize on the misfortune of racial minority groups—misfortunes that are the direct and indirect consequences of historic and contemporary public policies and private practices that have advantaged whites and disadvantaged people of color. It is only when we recognize the continued unequal treatment of people of color in our society that we can do something meaningful to bring about a more equitable, a more just, and a more fair society; otherwise, we will continue to bequeath to the next generation a world more unjust than the one which we inherited, and we owe them—and ourselves—much, so much, more. It is time to dismantle the white racial frame and burn the bridges to benefits.

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Notes

¹ Alexander—War on drugs, prison population in 30 years went from 300,000 to over 2 million; Prison index—1990s growth in prisoners +439,121, though crime, despite public perception, was actually falling. NAACP website—1 million of 2.3 million incarcerated in US are African American; African Americans are incarcerated at nearly 6 times the rate of whites.

² The respondent's name was changed to protect the confidentiality of the subject. All of the residents in the study were African American men and women who resided in the 70805 zip code located in Baton Rouge. The age range of the respondents was from eighteen to fifty-six years old. Of the thirty interviews, sixty percent were women and forty percent were men.

³ Woods (2009) outlines a contemporary history of the city of New Orleans and state of Louisiana through what he calls the “restoration of Bourbonism”, and revitalization of its institutions. Personified in Republican Governor Foster—a sugar planter, in office from 1996 to 2004, he describes a “progrowth coalition” drawing upon “public subsidies for Bourbon controlled economic sectors and projects” (i.e., bridges to benefits), and reducing substantive social services so as to foster hunger, homelessness and incarceration, and by which the public school system also became “the worst in the nation and a pipeline to prison” (p. 444).

⁴ While we have drawn upon and compared a number of sources (including the Louisiana State Penitentiary and Louisiana Correctional Facilities websites and other state publications) in presenting this short sketch of the Louisiana State Penitentiary's history, ours is rooted primarily in the work of Bergner (1998). See Bergner for more details on this history, as well as Butler (1995).

⁵ These numbers are the most current that could be gleaned, reliably, albeit in comparing marginally different figures across sources. The Louisiana Correctional Facilities office tends to figure and report statistics for the entire state, with breakdowns for state and local facilities, but sole statistics for Angola alone are more challenging to procure.

⁶ See Schrift, 2004, 2008. While Bergner's 1998 address is rich and substantial, our critical readings of own rodeo experiences from participation in the October 2013 events resonate more directly with those of Schrift, who also while race is not the central analytic of her work nonetheless takes up the racialized dimensions of the event in direct and poignant ways. See also Adams, 2001.

⁷ We attended the October 2013 events of the Angola Prison Rodeo and Inmate Arts Fair, in concert with our historical, cultural and critical studies of the prison and rodeo through existing literature and other forms of documentation.

⁸ From Bergner (1998) and Schrift (2004, 2008), and their interactions and interviews with inmates, we know that some—maybe many or all—of the prisoners are keenly aware of that they are being exploited and laughed at, that spectators want to see them make fools of themselves and “get stomped”, and of some of the racialized undertones also in play. By in large, though, the benefits outweigh for them the costs, among other things: favor from the warden and staff; interaction with the world, and especially with women, and potentially also family; entertainment, challenge, and recognition; and the chance to make money and experience a taste of some kind of normalcy, such as it is.

⁹ Relatedly, Woods (2009), drawing upon critics of contemporary tourism in Louisiana, specifically in post-Katrina New Orleans, argues that much of it: “packages the lived experience of historically-oppressed communities for the comfortable consumption of the privileged”; constitutes “a form of racialization” affirming racial exoticism and white supremacy in which Blacks are reconstituted as inferior; and “places... African-American communities within a narrative of racial exceptionalism, or ‘colorblindness,’ while silencing the realities of racial and class inequalities” (p. 447).