

Becca Smith

Professor Gallon

AFRC 177

2 March 2022

### “Hell on Earth”: Neoslavery in the Post Civil War American South

In post-Civil War America, though slavery was abolished de jure, white southerners used pseudo-slavery systems to continue to profit from black labor. Plantation owners who had financially relied on slaves used confusing and unfair contracts to keep black workers indebted towards them. In this system of peonage, if the workers failed to fulfill the contracts to their master's satisfaction, they were imprisoned. Due to peonage and other commonly used allegations such as vagrancy, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the beginnings of the disproportionately high rates of black prisoners who were exploited for labor to benefit white people. In a 1909 postcard in a Johns Hopkins collection (attached below), an image of white men overseeing black penal laborers highlights the abuse and inherent racism of the prison system. This postcard reflects the sentiment of white pride in the ability to subjugate black laborers that was seen in neoslavery institutions of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

The postcard illustrates four white men with guns watching black penal laborers partake in some outdoor work using shovels. The postures of the white guards, standing proud and tall with their guns highlights the pride the white men had in their power over the black men. The back of the postcard shows the text “This is a photo of our work. Don’t you think it pretty?”, again showing not only how the white men are proud of the system of forced black labor and consider it “pretty”, but that they actually take credit for the work and say “our work”. It is very unlikely that this “our” included the prisoners as well because white men at the time would not

have considered them and any black people in a shared category. The depiction of the workers also symbolizes how they were viewed, in their matching prisoner's clothing and how they work in a crowded, fenced in area. They appear rounded up like animals, dehumanized to perform menial labor for white men, and the white men take pride in the power they possess. A similar concept of animal-like dehumanization was seen in the popular culture at the time, which spread the ideas that black people needed to be controlled by whites. Specifically, as seen in the *Ethnic Notions* documentary, the image of the violent "black brute" was present in television and comics and truly had the impact of disseminating this stereotype. Black people, especially men, were viewed as dangerous, savage, and predatory, helping justify a system of imprisonment that is depicted in the postcard.

The context of this postcard was the pseudo-slavery systems of peonage and convict lease, which dominated the American south post-slavery. *The Silent South* describes the mentality that "the best way to make the prison self-sustaining would be to lease the convict labor", explaining how an economic desire for black labor was the main motivation for these imprisonments, as opposed to actual crimes that warranted punishments. In the same way that the sender of the postcard took ownership and pride in the work the penal laborers produced, white southerners wanted to maintain the financial benefits of black people being forced to work for them and found ways to do it even after the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment. This postcard is from Virginia in 1909, and it was reported that there was approximately an 8.5% death rate for men in prison in Virginia at the time, and this number did not even count "certain accidental deaths that legitimately belong to the perils of the work" (Cable).

The way the white men stand emotionless with guns and the fact that the postcard sender said the work was "pretty" illuminates the cruelty with which the black convicts were treated.

According to *The New Slavery in the South, 1904*, a black peon expressed that “call it slavery, peonage, or what not, the truth is we lived in a hell on Earth” (Freedom on My Mind 409).

Another report from *The Silent South* stated that “the dictates of humanity...should be sufficient to silence any effort to establish this system of prison management in Virginia,” depicting not only how abusive the overall system of imprisoning black people for labor was, but how inhumanely they were treated once within the system.

It is important to note how the convict lease system only began the racist prison practices that continue today. As Michelle Alexander notes in *The New Jim Crow*, in 2010, “one in three black men had a felony record” (xxi) and today “more African American adults are under correctional control...than were enslaved in 1850” (224). What started as means to financially benefit white people led to the criminalization of the black race that has perpetuated this stereotype of black people as violent and dangerous. Alexandra explains how “black people, especially black men, are criminals” and “that is what it means to be black” (245). The 1909 postcard reflects the same racialized power dynamic and black criminalization complex that is seen today in a discriminatory prison system, so while Americans take pride in the racial progress that has been made since the Jim Crow era, the question remains of how far we have actually come.



<https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/45371>

#### Works Cited

Cable, George Washington. *The Silent South*. New York : C. Scribner's Sons, 1885.

Marlon T. Riggs. *Ethnic Notions*. California Newsreel, 1987.

Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York, The New Press, 2010.

White, Deborah Gray, et al. "The New Slavery in the South, 1904." *Freedom on My Mind*, Third edition, vol. 2, Macmillan Learning, 2021.