

On Unit 29: Writing from Parchman Prison

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In a short time, I guess you could say, looking out into the zone, I see a jungle, a gang land, a hostile environment. People yell a lot, argue, and behave aggressively. I've seen people throw feces, squirt urine, set fire, flood the building and occasionally assault an officer over little things. Usually, it's over respect or an unruly gang member.

-Jacob Neal, "The Way Things Are"

Unit 29 (VOX Press, 2024), edited by poet and translator Louis Bourgeois, presents the writing and artwork of over 30 inmates at the Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP) at Parchman, Mississippi (also known as Parchman Farm). The pieces—vignettes of about 300-1,000 words, poems and captioned drawings—are the products of a writing program Bourgeois runs at MSP.

Well, I'm puttin' that cotton in an eleven-foot sack
Well, I'm puttin' that cotton in an eleven-foot sack
Well, I'm puttin' that cotton in an eleven-foot sack
With a twelve-gauge shotgun at my back - Mose Allison,
"Parchman Farm"

The book is unusual in that there is no introduction, no biographies of the writers, no explanatory footnotes, no afterword. The only editorial intrusion is an epigraph from 20th-century English author Jessica Mitford, which states in part, "The prison system, inherently unjust and inhumane, is the ultimate expression of injustice and inhumanity in the society at large." After this epigraph, the inmates' writing is left to speak for itself.

As if to confirm the epigraph, one of the first pieces in *Unit 29*, "From the Depths of the Beast" by Anthony Wilson, opens,

From the Depths of the Beast arises a chance for freedom from within. After ten and a half years in solitary confinement, I have finally regained a chance at staying in general population.

Raw, passionate, introspective, mourning and hopeful, the book is riveting. It is also challenging, putting the reader in places and states of mind that approach the unbearable. Arthur Lestrick writes in "Forgotten,"

As the years pass beyond the looking glass: I'm forgotten.

As this coffin sinks six feet deep, so traditionally and your memories fade of me: I'm forgotten.

As my children grow and my nights are lost in limbo: I'm forgotten. As the lion's roar can be heard across the field and my eyes close preparing for the thunder of the blackest days & darkest nights: I'm forgotten.

Unit 29, a medium-security cell block that also houses the MSP's death row inmates, is a particularly notorious section of a particularly notorious prison. For instance, in the month of January 2020, Unit 29 saw eight inmate deaths by suicide and homicide.

Rappers Jay-Z and Yo Gotti funded lawsuits brought by inmates of Parchman against the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) over the squalid conditions at the prison.

The state's Justice Department conducted an investigation, finding "gross understaffing" and "uncontrolled gang activity," and that inmates had "unfettered access to contraband," largely drugs. Other complaints about the prison alleged the presence of rats and mice, mold, inadequate health care and torturous heat in summer. After partial renovations by the MDOC, including air conditioning in only some areas of the prison, the lawsuits were dismissed.

According to the inmates writing in *Unit 29*, though, violence, vermin and filth still reign in their block. Gang violence in particular is a recurring theme in the writing. Here is Jacob Neal:

Prison at MSP isn't safe and gang violence is out of hand. MDOC needs reform. Public please help!

Neal also writes about the exploitation of inmates by the prison system.

I crucified myself up on MDOC's cross, made into an example for the well-being of public safety, all along lining public officials' pockets with state and federal tax dollars, a lot like slave trading.

Exploitation of inmates at Parchman extends to labor as well. The MDOC's website boasts, "MSP offenders provide more than 100,000 hours of free offender labor each year to adjacent municipalities and counties."

And of course, there is the toll that incarceration takes on the prisoners' loved ones. Steve Wilbanks writes,

Being sentenced to death was not the worst thing that happened to me that day; witnessing the utter destruction of my family was.

Bourgeois is a co-founder of the nonprofit VOX Press. In addition to *Unit 29*, VOX has published *In Our Own Words: Writing From Parchman Prison* in 2014, *Unit 30: New Writings from Parchman Farm* in 2016, and 2021's *Mississippi Prison Writing*, featuring writing by women inmates from the Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility.

"It doesn't have to be good; it just has to be brutally honest," Bourgeois has written. "The whole premise of VOX Press is to allow the unheard to have a voice, and that is being played out now (in) a most meaningful way."

Many of the entries in *Unit 29* are poems. From Bryant Kirk's "Time in This Penny Arcade":

I'm a O.G. in this coin-operated prison
Amusement Park of games, inmates and officers
Play.

It's like have you ever been to a fucking
cautious carnival without music
And entertainment with side shows, absent
The rides unless you're on that Turn up Burn up! Sack. K-Z
pack. Cast off
Abandoned?

Another poet in the book is Leon Johnson. This is "Officer Judy Gives Instructions to the Lock Down Inmates":

Officer Judy tell these
nasty and lazy prisoners
In L-Building their ZONE
Need cleaning up, real bad.

When Officer Judy makes
Her daily rounds to count,
She smell piss, toe jam
Dirty clothes, work outmoded
Sweat, old food and
Do do, and Just old
Shower musk.

Officer Judy say, I want
Those beds made, I want
Floors swept and bleach
mop, toiletslysol clean,
bars dusted, and a steel
Brush, to scrub those
thick yellow stains officers
Of that dirty wall.

Officer Judy, say clean
up, and walk off of
the ZONE.

resemblance to some of the best literature about war. Men thrown together by the state into wretched physical conditions, and long hours and days of boredom tinged with dread, punctuated by moments of traumatizing violence. And like the best war literature, a reader closes *Unit 29* with the sense of having been immersed in a reality that should and need not be.

Unit 29 stands as an exhibit entered against the barbaric realities of daily life for masses of people under capitalism. It is true that the US is an outlier when it comes to incarceration, a country with 5 percent of the world's population holding 20 percent of its prisoners.

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, the various federal, state, local and tribal legal systems in the US

hold nearly 2 million people in 1,566 state prisons, 98 federal prisons, 3,116 local jails, 1,277 juvenile correctional facilities, 133 immigration detention facilities, and 80 Indian country jails, as well as in military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories—at a system-wide cost of at least \$182 billion each year.

In the end, this reflects the brutal state of social relations in America, the harshness of class rule and oppression.

Moreover, among American prisons Parchman Farm is particularly notorious for its unbearable conditions.

But the exposures on view in *Unit 29* are not limited to the inhumanity of Parchman, or even of prison life.

The writing and art in *Unit 29* provide a rare glimpse of a portion of working class existence in Mississippi and in the US generally. As various wars and, more recently, the lack of a serious government response to the COVID-19 pandemic have made abundantly clear, workers are wholly disposable in the eyes of the ruling elite. From inadequate housing to inadequate schooling, from a lack of access to proper health and mental health care to a lack of meaningful and reliable work, the conditions of working class life—as broad as that term may be—largely involve poverty or near-poverty, a dearth of genuine opportunities to develop oneself, and a relationship with the criminal justice system that is at best uneasy.

Just as superfluous working class individuals are warehoused in prisons, so they are warehoused in dilapidated neighborhoods, housing projects and trailer parks. Warehoused in overcrowded and run-down schools, then in the military or low-paying retail or service jobs. Introduce drugs and alcohol, sexual relationships or just the desire for *something more* into these warehoused lives, and the criminogenic character of poverty becomes obvious. An impulsive act in youth—a result of desperation, rage, bravura or mental illness—and one can find oneself on Parchman Farm.



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Taken in the aggregate, the writing in *Unit 29* bears a striking