

***One Big Self: Prisoners Of Louisiana***

Photographs by Deborah Luster

Text by C. D. Wright

Twin Palms Publishers, \$60

In the introduction to this arresting collaborative volume, photographer Deborah Luster writes of how the unwieldiness of violence and grief might be resolved by the ultimately “formal quality of loss.” Luster comes to the project as one who has lived through the pained experience of the court system. After the violent murder of her mother and the trial that followed, the project became a way of addressing not just her own grief and anger but the endgame of “criminal justice” and of the cultural and economic poverty within America. To be caught on either side of this violence is to understand something about the system that produces it. Weirdly, the depth of personal trauma seems to find an uneasy match in the penal system’s vast, unfathomable, broken expanse.

*One Big Self* is the result of visiting three Louisiana prisons—the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women at St. Gabriel, East Carroll Parish Prison Farm at Transylvania, and the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. The sad ironies of Angola, the largest maximum security prison in the country, where the average inmate reads at a third grade level and 78 percent are African Americans, are particularly gripping; its 18,000 acres were once a plantation named for the slaves’ country of origin, and it was turned into a prison shortly after the Civil War. Luster lets us know that 88 percent of the men incarcerated at Angola will die there. She goes on to share the astounding fact that in the wake of September 11th, the inmates of Angola donated \$13,000 to aid victims of the disaster, in spite of earning only four to eight cents per hour for hard labor.

These luminous portraits, which Luster eloquently calls a way “to touch the disappeared,” are produced as tintypes with simple black backgrounds, reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century studio portraits—though they are, of necessity, taken in an environment that is controlled by neither the photographer nor her subjects. The dramatic line between inside and outside is also the marker of very different temporal registers. We become increasingly aware of the fact that we are looking at people with little but time on their hands.

It’s important to note that this collaboration of image and text is not just between the artists but involves the prisoners themselves; each of the participants chose to be photographed and chose to a great extent how they wished to appear, and they received copies of their portraits to distribute to family and friends. Given that mirrors are prohibited in prisons, for some of the long-term inmates, the photographs are the only way they’ve seen themselves for years. As one inmate exclaims, “Damn ... I done got old.”

Poet C.D. Wright's illuminating text has a similar give and take. She captures something of the compulsory and compulsive inventories of prison life as they slide between utility, wry humor, and elegy, often finding phrases that apply universally and so have an added depth in this context: "It gets old the way we do things." The exchange is informed by self-awareness on both sides of the camera and the page: "I don't have a clue, do I."

Wright's remarkably flexible poem, an extended sprechstimme collage, performs the broken tale of this crisis, which is at once institutional and spiritual, public and private, and which touches us all—hence, "one big self." Her poem mixes the diction of homemade street signs and questionnaires with recorded pieces of overheard and intimate conversation. And yet the terms of the telling are more mediumistic than appropriative, more expository than lyric—even though the power of the text is realized through lyric's potential for investigating and deploying such unwieldy and extreme conditions. This blending and borrowing of public and private language, like the mixture of the public and private gaze, creates an uneasiness around an unclear demarcation between the "disappeared" and the living, between inside and outside.

Some might argue that producing a coffee table book based in prison life is inappropriate, but as a citizen of a country that incarcerates more of its own people than any other first-world nation and that counts privatized prisons as one of its largest growth industries—a reality that constitutes one of the great failures of human rights as we move into a new century of class warfare—I would say the subject has been so suppressed from public discourse that *however* it comes into contact with the outside world is not only valid but necessary. Wright touches upon the extension of this situation outside of Louisiana by referencing the Committee to Restore the Night Sky in Susanville, California, a failed mining town whose new maximum-security prison is large and bright enough to be seen from outer space.

*One Big Self* is a stunning composite of universal and particular realities—of private loss, private lives, private language and public policy, public enemies, public problems, public institutions. In the contact made between these polarities, the distinction between viewer and viewed, subject and object, is interrogated. In fact, there's very little to draw attention to the presence of the artist-collaborators; the book's jacket is plain black, and before we even get to a title page, we are faced with fourteen portraits of inmates. The volume ends with a reading list of lock-down literature and a portrait of "Old Sparky," an electric chair transported by pickup truck for executions throughout Louisiana's parishes.

This work is disturbing, and it is meant to disturb. It is haunting, important, creepy, and captivating, proving again that reality is stronger than fiction, that what we do and what we

choose to suppress as a culture is far more troubling—and its representation far more revealing—than we could have imagined.

PG; Winter 2004; *Rain Taxi*