



Between the mid 19th- and early 20th-centuries states would lease out convict labor to railway and mining contractors or large plantations. The practice became especially prevalent following the Civil War.

False convictions, theft of bail money, and identity fraud supplied the lease system with so-called convicts.

The convict declares in their labor, their body bent into the weight of shovel, hoe, hammer, stance upon the ground shaken by strike and arranged by the pull of ties and spikes

“Convicts working in unison by singing,” reads a caption by John L. Spivak in 1932, making an aesthetic predicament out of the ethical paradox depicted in the image of a chain gang. “Rhythmic movement is necessary,” he continues, “to avoid injuring one another while bending or rising.” The way history sometimes projects memory forward, erasing the breach of the moment that is the present, makes of the scene a dimension interpreted objectively as the

naturalness of a state,

of being in such a pose, the naturalness of law to keep the body there under watch near death like the pixelated skyline made gray by the technology. To work towards that death, to overcome it, sing it, to praise a faith in it. Convince us of its legitimacy in brush and syncopation. Convince before the heavenly angels and the screen through which their song projects with blurred echoing boundaries that there is no childhood to speak of, no age, no getting old, no recollection, no iteration, no life.

The lease system signals a theatricality to American abolition. The staging of rights and the commitment in performance belie the reflexive self-awareness of faith in being liberal, being a people of rights. A culture of belief.

While it leaves behind black and white photos scattered around archives of a past possibility, a forward projecting memory of the uniforms being overcome, the progress accommodated, the transformed land, the built carceral networks squat like stumps throughout these states. The benefit and the reward of work made invisible by classification still circulates. Forced incarceration is coeval to labor without contract, the contract being a legality premised on the racialization of crime.

Lost childhood is a ghost in every echo of public discourse.

The gravity of a prisoner's convictions in the lease system could range from mere fisticuffing, hog-stealing, or other misdemeanor crimes like carrying a concealed weapon—a crime, as noted by George W. Cable in 1880, common among whites though often overlooked.

My son's voice at times, pressing as it does to the limits of his body, is an investigation. How far will the ribs go. What is his. Who is it that is that his. The one feeling skin stretch or the bones move. A word without contrast. It fills the rooms. Presses against the windows. Fills the smallest spaces between fur on cats, suprised by how voice might travel along their spine like fingers. His language is a filling that seems to not end until suddenly consonants break the song of a voice. One that until then was the universe itself.

While some 1200 convicts during the year 1880 were leased in the convict lease system fewer than half were serving sentences of 10 years, many sentences of less than 1 or 2 years. 10 years was the maximum amount of time an overworked convict in the system was expected to live. In Tennessee, Cable uncovered 12 boys under the age of 18 leased in the system, with each serving sentences of less than 1 year. In North Carolina there were 234 convicts under the age of 20 leased in the system.

Vagrancy was a common charge in the Leasing System. Orphanhood, for children.

Our sound is a field sometimes. One where things are moved by their own influence on each other. With no judgement as we know. To witness is to give it that. Capture it.

Because I am Willful is a word often used to be kind without discipline kindness. To be generous by capturing in a word. It is categorical. Do we learn about paternalism through histories of violence? To have been violated? To be one who studies violence is seeing influence. What is influence by other names. Learning them. What is truly another name is another language. Another place. *Sometimes my students ask how I became read that word out loud, and I say I have to, that the writer meant for it to be there for us to have to reckon with.*

My son pushes a small plastic lawn mower so that bubbles are coaxed from a spinning yellow sprocket. The faster he pushes it, the more excited the bubbles seem to float into the light, bursting into the palms of the maple leaves forming a canopy above the scene of us. Him pushing. Me watching.

our life blurring at the edge of becoming an aesthetic moment

He pushes his lawn mower until his skin becomes rosy and it seems to glow, to me

*One time a student
asked if I would
feel the same
if I were
White,
and I said "but I'm
not." But
I didn't
have
an answer.*

I would burn every acre in America

touched by dulled glops of sweat from my child's burnt face.

I sit watching him push and feel weighed and immense, and immobile in an anger that is mine. That has frothed among pages of study and that has no counterpart and clouds my ability to be neighborly.

Privilege and too much television at a young age makes this anger a heroic passion. The just. The burning vengeance

For a reason

I do not know

John L. Spi

vak, a photographer,

chose to

fictionalize his document-
ing of Southern

convict camps. He ca

lled it "Georgia Ni

gger." He had t

o include an

appendix of

atrocities

to acc

ount

for the

sto

ry.

The fiction moves in where the absence of real reckoning
leaves a space unaccommodated with the words

we have
for naming the

exertion taking place there. The commons.

The riot is always new form to the arrangement,
and there is nonetheless an afterwards. The riot is
always forward remembering, a syncopation the
photographs can't keep speed with. A temporality
within which the possible is kept in anticipation of
its own forthcoming potential as fugitivity.

There is a popular children's song I like to play for my son called "Tengo una muñeca." Traditionally, it is sung while children form a circle holding hands. As they sing they skip in one direction, then in the opposite direction, then back again, depending on the stanza. Children in the middle of the circle perform the lyrics of a small girl who, after taking out her doll past an appropriate hour and the doll becomes ill, must give the doll medicine. The song ends with arithmetic:

*dos y dos son cuatro
y cuatro y dos son seis
seis y dos son ocho
y ocho dieciseis*

exact correlation

no study

no interpretation

memory rendered through faith in the computational

Teaching my son about regret is only possible at the moment he feels shame. And this is a tricky lesson. To feel the full shame of regret and the empowerment of learning from that shame. Being good from being bad is a privilege I'm not used to as a transnational who grew up in a overly policed and militarized bordertown. Being (adj.) analytically and affectionately is a descriptive theory of the person I want to believe in. Being singular and symbolic. I want this possibility for my son. I am constantly vigilant for the ballistics whistling towards us holding hands and moving in a circle within the world created by the small logic of shame, of a giving a doll imagined medicine to cure a breached trust.

nihilism, to me, recognizes failure in a remix, riotous
even, of what can be restored together

then I remember why I
began this
to be naturalized
is one
thing
to be
born American
however

my son's body
acquired
the weight of
meaning laden
hues
before
even
opening
his
lungs
to
the light
of
our scene



There is no neutrality in the apocalypse of emotion. What we call lyric.