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Poets' Landscapes

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### Landscapes of Violence in *One Big Self*

To those of us living on the outside of the razor wire perimeters that separate American prisons from the outside world, the lives unfolding within those borders are often invisible. *One Big Self*, a collaborative work by poet C.D. Wright and photographer Deborah Luster, seeks to shed light on the characters and experiences of such inmates. Luster's empathetic portraits of Louisiana prisoners and Wright's poetic evocation of their joys, fears, routines, and desires place a mirror before the outside world, challenging assumptions about the moral separateness of those we have cast aside. Unity, in fact, is the overriding emphasis of the book; Wright asserts that lives and landscapes on both sides of the perimeter are infused with violence as part of a "cultural landscape of violent activity" that encompasses the violence of inmates' crimes, the violence of the prison towards inmates' minds and bodies, and the violence of American society by which criminals are relentlessly made (Luster, n.p.). We are one society and, perhaps, one self; we are from the same place, and we are complicit in each other's sorrows. By reintegrating the insular worlds of three Louisiana prisons with the outside realities to which they are inextricably bound, *One Big Self* forces all Americans to question a culture of violence and punishment that leaves none of us unmarred.

*One Big Self* centers on three Louisiana prisons, the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women at St. Gabriel, the East Carroll Parish Prison Farm at Transylvania, and the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Between these three prisons, Wright and Luster sample both men and women held in minimum, medium, and maximum security, which allows *One Big Self* to speak broadly about the Louisiana prison experience. In fact, Wright specifically does not differentiate between the three prisons when she presents quotations, events, or images. This leaves readers with a more general sense of place in prisons, rather than particular notions about individual prisons. Remaining general about the prison experience serves Wright's larger project of showing that prisons are not fundamentally different places than the world around them, as it enables her to comment on the prison system as a whole. By showcasing the humanity of prisoners and the violence inherent to all prisons, she can draw parallels between free and caged Americans, and the violence that shapes our sense of place both in prisons and on the outside. This representation of a unified landscape of violence is heightened by her poetic techniques of collaging fragments of language that seem to come from different voices. Quotations from inmates, guards, loved ones, radio announcers, and prose sections that appear to represent Wright's own voice, all attest to the violence of American society, showing the unity of discourse and experience across the American landscape.

Throughout the poem, Wright intersperses images of steel mirrors, the only reflective surfaces allowed in maximum security. Luster, too, references these mirrors by printing her portraits onto metal sheets, revealing the inmates' faces

through the medium in which they see themselves. Mirror imagery serves to underscore the intention of *One Big Self*: to show the commonalities between free and prison landscapes, and to force readers to see their own warped reflections in the people our shared society has condemned. This requires a reader to both empathize with inmates, as well as identify with them. Luster and Wright incite these reactions both explicitly, through arguing that those in prison are not inherently different from those on the outside, and implicitly, by showing prisoners' deeply human reactions to an extreme environment of institutionalized control and violence.

Wright's explicit argument about the similarity between those in prison and those outside forces mutual identification. Her most overt statement takes the form of a letter addressed to "My dear conflicted reader," and calls into question whether our choices spring from our personal nature or our environment. She writes,

If you will grant me that most of us have an equivocal nature, and that when we waken we have not made up our minds which direction we're headed; so that—you might see a man driving to work in a perfume- and dye-free shirt, and a woman with an overdone tan hold up an orange flag in one hand, a Virginia Slim in the other—as if this were their predestination. Grant me that both of them were likely contemplating a different scheme of things. (14)

That human nature is equivocal is a central point to *One Big Self*, though, clearly, the stakes are greater than this initial example. Wright clarifies the intention of this passage near the end of the book, writing, "you too have penitentiary potential/We may meet in a steel mirror/behind rows of *Amaranthus* and vortices of razor wire" (78). Clearly, Wright believes that nobody's nature is inherently superior; prisoners are not morally separate from the free.

This explicit commentary on morality and human nature frames Wright's implicit argument about humanity in the prison environment. If readers outside of prison believe Wright that inmates are not significantly different from them, then the conditions to which these prisoners are subjected seem inhumane and even violent. Wright evokes those conditions poignantly, showing the intense control the prison exerts on inmates, both physically and psychologically. Wright then cements the reader's empathy with prisoners by revealing the humanness of their striving for normalcy in such an environment. *One Big Self*, then, forces readers to see prisoners as whole people, emphasizing the unity between prisons and the outside.

Control is the thematic fulcrum of Wright's evocation of the prison experience. The inmates live in an environment explicitly designed to control their bodies and behavior, and Wright's poetry gives a sense of the mechanisms and cruel effects of that control. One mechanism of control that Wright repeatedly exposes is the prison's tendency to deliberately deny inmates pleasure or dignity. Some denials are outright; of a woman in solitary, Wright writes, "No, she can't have no mattress. No, she can't have no spoon" (6). Wright shows other denials by portraying institutional rules, such as the text of a sign that reads, "DUE TO THEFT:/All True Crime and Black Study titles/Are housed in closed shelving/Limit 3 books per person/0 exceptions so don't ask" (18). Wright repeats different iterations of the "0 exceptions" language throughout the poem ("In some prisons the last cigarette is no longer permitted/ 0 exceptions Don't ask"), emphasizing the absolute and even capricious control the prison exerts over an inmate's desires (43). Denials are also manifest through the prisoners' nostalgia for freedom, as in the passage, "I miss a

bathtub./And a toilet. With a lid. And a handle./And a door” (7). This hints at the ways in which constant surveillance in prison is central to effective control, denying inmates dignity by forcing them to use the toilet in view of guards and other inmates.

The other pervasive mechanism of control in *One Big Self* is the threat. Wright frequently invokes the K-9 unit, which tracks escapees. Several times, she quotes a guard, “No one’s beat the dogs yet, said Castlebury,” showing one way in which the prison cultivates a climate of fear and submission (16). Solitary confinement is another threat that appears throughout *One Big Self*, perhaps most poignantly in a passage in which Wright attempts to imagine herself as a prisoner: “If I were you:/Screw up today, and it’s solitary, Sister Woman” (9). She conveys the gravity of this threat through such passages as, “Solitary confinement, Mr. Abbott wrote,/can alter the ontological makeup of a stone” (13). The stress Wright places on these omnipresent mechanisms of control heightens the chilling nature of the sole instance in which the prison presents an inmate with a choice: referring to electrocution, she writes, “AC or DC/You want to be Westinghoused or Edisoned/Your pick     you’re the one condemned” (32).

Wright’s language and imagery work in tandem with the poem’s structure to convey the intense control to which inmates’ lives are subject. Wright has appropriated as the refrain of her poem the “count,” a several-times-daily prison ritual in which guards count the inmates to check for escapees. Wright’s counts detail various countable aspects of inmates’ lives and surroundings—she writes, in one instance, “Count your grey hairs/Count your chigger bites/Count your

pills/Count the times the phone rings/Count your T Cells/Count your mosquito bites” (14). As a structural device, the count helps to embody the experience of a prisoner’s day. Each instance of the count interrupts Wright’s previous linguistic and thematic content, jarring the reader into a new and more rigid poetic structure. The count in prison is similarly disruptive, halting all inmate activities several times a day. Wright’s intense focus on the prison’s control shows its cruelty. Her language and structure allow readers to glimpse the terror and frustration that inmates experience, challenging the appropriateness of such controlling practices.

A significant difference between the count in prison and Wright’s appropriation is that, in the poem, the count belongs to the inmates instead of the guards. This means that the linguistic content of the count sheds a more nuanced light on an inmate’s experience of control, and helps advance Wright’s argument for the humanity of prisoners. Inmates, given few choices of what to do or where to go for the duration of their sentences, often fill their days with repetitive tasks like lifting weights, weeding the gardens, or knitting: “The septuagenarian murderer knits nonstop/One way to wear out the clock” (10). Wright’s use of the count, then, alludes to both the structure by which the prison controls inmates, and the ways within that structure that inmates control their own activities.

Both the poem and the photographs that comprise *One Big Self* show readers that prisoners endure such harsh conditions by exploiting the few arenas, such as domesticating animals or tattooing their skin, in which they themselves have control. Wright describes the essence of this pursuit as, “the sense of normalcy for which humans strive under conditions that are anything but what we in the free

world call normal” (Luster, n.p.). For Luster, revealing a prisoner’s agency (and, thus, humanness) required that each photograph result from a collaboration between the photographer and subject. She writes, “I chose to photograph each person as they presented their very own selves before my camera,” which meant that prisoners chose their clothes (some wore favorite articles from their free lives, others elaborate Halloween costumes), chose their own poses, chose how much of their body filled the frame, and, in one case, chose to present a ship made of matchsticks with no human presence at all (Luster, n.p.). For many inmates whose last portrait was a mug shot, the fact of being photographed how they themselves want to be seen was, itself, a radical departure from the kinds of visibility and control typically available to them.

Wright, working in the medium of language, chooses to focus on prisoners’ actions to show the ways they control their own lives. The natural world seems, in *One Big Self*, to be the primary sphere over which inmates have dominion. Many inmates domesticate animals: “The one called Grasshopper raises wild things—sparrows, hares, you/name it,” “Sissy is Mr. Redwine’s catahoula,” and “Mack trapped a spider/Kept in a pepper jar/He named her Iris/Caught roaches to feed her” (15, 15, 39). These examples not only show an inmate controlling aspects of his or her own life, but reiterates, by highlighting acts of compassion, Wright’s and Luster’s belief that prisoners are not significantly morally different from those on the outside.

Imagination is another realm in which prisoners assert autonomy. Wright shows one inmate literally pretending to be outside of his imprisonment: “On the

phone he told his sister/He hung strips of a plastic bag from his bunk/And pretended he was in his boat/And his cellmate's flushing, Arctic Ocean"(22). A third source of control for inmates resides in language. One of the poem's repeated lines, "MOM LOVE GOD," comes from graffiti "drawn on a wall in solitary by a young one" (12). It shows that a prisoner, in a moment of fear, left a mark representing what he or she values, a gesture of humanity and self-care. Tattoos, of course, serve a similar purpose; they allow inmates self-expression and a reminder of what they love or miss. For example, Wright writes, "What does that tattoo say/That's my baby's name/What is your baby's name/UTOPIA" (59).

Wright and Luster thus establish that prisoners are empathy-deserving humans just like the free, showing readers one dimension of their common lives. *One Big Self*, however, does not argue that humanness is the only unifying element between prisons and the outside; the book's other, and perhaps more powerful, tool is to reveal the violence that pervades the American landscape. Showing violence as a norm, not an aberration unique to the imprisoned, challenges the logic of incarceration, deepens the critique that our choices are determined (at least in part) by our environment, and even reveals the often-unspoken mechanisms by which the free perpetuate a violent prison system that disproportionately criminalizes certain demographics of people. Wright's searing exposition of the different types of violence common in the United States, and the different spheres in which that violence occurs, points to disturbing commonalities between all Americans, free and caged.

Wright includes in her poem some evocation of the violent acts committed by inmates that led to their incarceration, though she deliberately devotes less representation to these crimes than one would expect from a typical discussion of a prisoner. Many of the references are oblique, such as, "She is *so* sweet. You wouldn't believe she had did all the things they say she did" (7). Other mentions of violent acts, though, are more explicit: "Jugged her jugular/The jury's collective shudder/You behave, he told her, before he cut her neck" (59). Though inmates' crimes are portrayed, Wright gives much more attention to the violence done to inmates by the prison. In her exploration of control, Wright gives readers the sense that the control that prisons exert over inmates is a kind of violence, but her more startling exposition of prison violence is the explicit connection she draws between the physical violence done to inmates by the prison and the nature of their own crimes.

Many of the inmates about whom Wright has written are incarcerated for murder, and some are on death row. Wright devotes significant portions of her poem to the physical, psychological, and historical landscapes of capital punishment, deliberately drawing a parallel between murder and state-sanctioned killing. In one passage, she writes about the inmates' relationship to the machinery of electrocution: "Mr. Redwine is the coffin builder; Grasshopper his apprentice/Built a replica of Old Sparky for the prison museum/International Harvester provided the generator for the original/drove it around on a flatbed/from penitentiary to penitentiary" (17). This passage powerfully calls attention to the perversity of the American fixation on violence that makes inmates build coffins and an electric chair

replica in order to repay a debt to society, owed, itself, because of violence. She illuminates the psychological effects of the death penalty, as well, writing: “All these days I’ve been off death row/death row has not been off me/the words of an exonerated man” (33).

Wright presents capital punishment in more clinical terms for a different effect: “him: 3 jolts in 2 minutes and 45 seconds/her: 5 jolts, 4 minutes and 30 seconds,” and the line “AMA guidelines forbid a physician to be a participant” (31, 73). This jarringly neutral language forces acknowledgement of the cold reality of capital punishment; we, as a society, condone subjecting certain people to lethal violence. In this context, Wright’s inclusion of a seeming justification for this violence, “No one promised you the light or the morrow,” does not seem earnest (42). Wright believes that the violent crimes prisoners commit are directly linked to a cultural landscape that condones state-sanctioned violence, and she draws the parallel deftly, leaving readers to consider whether this constitutes hypocrisy. Lethal violence in prisons is, of course, not confined to the death penalty; Wright also chills readers by imparting a piece of prison wisdom, “A woman is better in the gun tower than a man/less hesitant they say to shoot a man on the run” (79). Amid such imagery, a reader cannot escape the conclusion that violence, in prison, flows from both directions.

Wright does not stop at exploring the mutual violence of inmates and prisons, though; her project is to contextualize the prison and its inmates as part of a larger cultural landscape, which she does by portraying American violence that occurs outside the purview of the carceral system. This exploration takes many

forms, one of which is to allude to the violence that affected many inmates before they committed crimes. Wright writes:

For whatever it's worth  
My friend here        her mother was murdered  
                                 sleeping in her own bed  
One stepfather shot playing cards  
                                 her college man died on a motorcycle in a foreign land not long  
                                 after they let him out of the bughouse  
And mine by his own hand  
                                 with his partner's target pistol (49)

Wright also, in revealing this type of violence, writes of the many scars that Luster's photographs show on inmates' bodies. For instance, she writes, referencing two separate photographs, "Difficult to look at the woman/much less photograph and not ask/about a scar that runs from one ear/to the opposing breast/whose babies died of smoke inhalation/Or the gasoline-wrecked face/of the green-eyed black man" (65-66). These images hint at the normalcy of violence outside of the prisons, suggesting a somewhat arbitrary logic that governs who is imprisoned and who is free. Wright also addresses the effects of violence that leaves victims with permanent mental damage, writing of, "The guileless face of the one whose boyfriend beat her lastingly senseless," and another inmate who, "as a little girl was struck in the head with a machete, and I don't think she'll learn much more..." (67, 7). These instances of violence more starkly call into question the morality of imprisoning people who, due to violence they experienced themselves, may not be mentally competent to judge their own behavior.

The scale at which Wright portrays an American society saturated in violence is not merely personal—she addresses, at the structural level, a cycle of violence

that disproportionately lands some groups of people in prison, generation after generation. For Wright, some of this relates to geography, some of it to class, and some of it to race. It is through this exploration of the culture of violence that Wright comes closest to making explicit political arguments. Southerners, Wright argues, are more likely to be imprisoned. In one of several prose sections, she writes, “Up north with its thirty minutes in the sun, good schools for the moneyed and silent alarms, and south with its petrochemical plants and joblessness. And the children of children, buckets of children, jumping through snatches of smoke, penitentiary bound” (57). This passage alludes to the nexus of geography and class that renders poor Southerners more likely to be imprisoned than others.

Class as a factor of imprisonment also appears in Wright’s repeated references to former Louisiana Governor Edwin Edwards. At the time that Wright was composing *One Big Self*, Edwards was convicted of racketeering, and, Wright writes, “They will/will not be sending the former governor to Big Gola” (10). However, as Wright repeatedly mentions that, “the former 4-term governor will be well-lawyered,” it is no wonder that Edwards ultimately serves his sentence in a Fort Worth prison with a much less brutal reputation than Angola (13). The continual invocation of Edwards and his lawyers is meant to show the role of money in the justice system; Edwards provides a counterpoint to the description of Angola’s actual inmates: “What they hold in common, their poverty” (23).

Race, too, matters in *One Big Self*. In a section called “Black Is the Color,” Wright writes:

Of that big old ugly hole  
Of 77% of the inmates in Angola

Of your true love's hair  
Of 66% of the inmates at St. Gabriel  
Of the executioner's corduroy hood (24)

By using the color black to posit a relationship between disproportionate rates of incarceration for African-Americans, solitary confinement (the “hole” in prison parlance), and execution, Wright makes a powerful political argument about the violence American society does to a racially-defined group. Since Wright suggests that prisons disproportionately attract people from particular demographics, she frames the prison system (and the interconnected justice system) as serving a different function than the one we expect, an objectively fair mode of punishment for those who have erred.

If prisons do not serve only neutral justice, then readers must wonder what other cultural forces are at play in incarceration; Wright's answer is profit. Indeed, she shows that the landscapes associated with incarceration are inextricably tied to a profit motive, casting a particularly nasty pall over her discussions of inmate demographics. First, Wright ties profits to the disproportionate number of poor inmates by postulating a relationship between prison location and poor communities. She writes:

Dear Dying Town,

The food is cheap; the squirrels are black; the box factories have all moved offshore; the light reproaches us, and our coffee is watered down, but we have an offer from the Feds to make nerve gas; the tribe is lobbying hard for another casino; the bids are out to attract a nuclear dump; and there's talk of a supermax— (27)

On the page following this passage, she lifts text directly from publicity materials for a private prison company, stating:

Corrections Corporation of America increased its inmate mandays by 12% From 15.1 million in 1998 to 16.9 million in 1999 A manday is one inmate held for one day for which the company bills government a *per diem* The increase in mandays in 1999 led to a 19% increase in CCA's revenues for the year to \$787 million. (28)

Placing these two passages in sequence forces the reader to connect them in a direct relationship. Prisons post tremendous profits, they create jobs, and they can replace the industries that have fled the United States and gutted the middle class for the past half-century. Building prisons makes economic sense, but when we fight to build one, we prioritize profit over social well-being and, indeed, over the idea of justice as most of us would understand it. Prisons must be filled to be profitable, and we fill them not with a cross section of our whole society, but with particular demographics of people. This itself is a form of violence in which most Americans are complicit.

Thus violence, taking many forms that weave in and out of the prison yard's perimeter fence, is the thread that binds Wright's book-length poem. She repeats the statement, "Violence, H. Rap Brown proclaimed, is American as apple pie," and, by the end of her poem, we believe it (17). Wright and Luster humanize prisoners, challenging the convenient American fiction that those behind bars are monstrous. Forced to see that prisoners are not significantly different than the free, we must acknowledge that the punishments we inflict on other human beings are, themselves, violent. Wright's unique contribution to the understanding of the nature of prisons, though, is her argument that the prison is not more violent than the outside world. The prison, perhaps, exemplifies a more overt type of violence that Americans are socialized to reject, but all of us, by allowing the proliferation of

private prisons, by accepting differential opportunities for certain groups of people, and by condoning a carceral system focused more on punishment than rehabilitation, exert violence on members of our own society. We are complicit in a cultural landscape of violence that seeks to deny the humanity of certain groups for the profit of others. *One Big Self* succeeds in showing us a reflection of that chilling reality, illuminating our common cruelty and delusion.

### Works Cited

Note: All citations come from *One Big Self: An Investigation*, unless specified as "Luster."

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