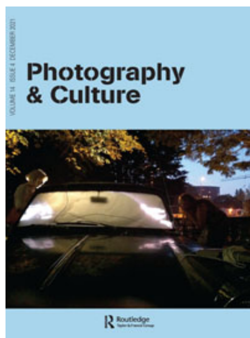

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Kimberly Schreiber

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Kodachrome Plantation: Bruce Jackson's Color Prison Photographs

Kimberly Schreiber

Abstract
This article examines the color photographs that were taken by Bruce Jackson at prison farms throughout Texas and Arkansas between 1964 and 1979. It not only asks why Jackson's photographs have been exclusively published and exhibited in black-and-white, but also explores what might be gained by seeing the prison farm in color. Extending from Sally Stein's examination of the rhetorical meanings of monochrome and polychrome photography in the inter-war context, this article argues that, due to the widespread recirculation of Farm Security Administration photography in public life during the 1960s and after, black-and-white documentary gained a newfound historical authenticity. As a result of their clear resonance with Depression-era photographs of manual, agricultural labor, Jackson's photographs were drained of color in order to displace the institution onto a remote past. This article claims that, by coding the prison farm as both in and out of time, Jackson's color photographs upend the way in which we have been made to see the prison farm and, in doing so, produce an alternative history of the 1960s and after—one that fully attends to the ongoing temporality of slavery and its afterlives.

Keywords: Bruce Jackson, color photography, prison photography, prison farm, documentary

Seeing the prison farm
In his untitled 1978 photograph, taken at a penitentiary in east Texas, Bruce Jackson constructs a legible picture of the American landscape (Figure 1). The image is bifurcated by a small stream. On one side of the water, a group of incarcerated men walk toward the camera, wearing matching uniforms and carrying empty sacks that will soon be filled with bolls of cotton. On the other, a prison guard sits on horseback. He surveils the prisoners from behind dark sunglasses and, through his continual stare, constitutes their extreme powerlessness. Structured by an unwavering horizon line, the photograph depicts the land as open and accessible, cohering with received ways of rendering the inchoate productivity of the rural, agrarian South. The photograph is utterly devoid of any modern commodities, commercial signage, or industrial machines

Figure 1. Bruce Jackson. Cotton squad carrying empty sacks, on the way to the cotton field, 1978.

that might ground its temporal coordinates, producing a perceptually remote scene that appears in conflict with the timestamp of the documentary image. The picture typifies the temporal distance that is often produced by Jackson's photographs—a perspective that has led writer and critic Brian Wallis, among many other commentators, to describe Jackson's photographs as "astonishing, in part, because they seem so alien and anachronistic" (Wallis 2018, 37). These comments suggest that these scenes are entirely incommensurable with the dynamics of late-capitalism; or, at least, at odds with how they have been mediated by photography and written out through its histories.

The photograph was taken at what is commonly known as a "prison farm." A type of state penitentiary that is almost unique to the American South, prison farms were typically constructed on the grounds of former slave plantations, inheriting their material foundations in the first few decades of the twentieth century (Lichtenstein 1996). These institutions are defined by their use of forced agricultural labor not only as a method of punishment, but also as the means through which the prison sustains itself and those it incarcerates. While some prisoners are forced to pick cotton to spin into blankets and uniforms, others tend crops and livestock for daily meals. Jackson's photograph gives visual expression to the continuities and convergences between prison and plantation. The image produces a slippage between these two institutions of racial domination, reaffirming Loïc Wacquant's characterization of the modern prison as the material and symbolic "functional analogy" of the antebellum plantation (Wacquant 2002). Just one of the many thousands of photographs that Jackson took during his numerous visits to Texas and Arkansas prison farms between 1964 and 1979, the picture

has been widely published and exhibited, most recently in Jackson's 2013 collection of photographs entitled *Inside the Wire: Photographs from Texas and Arkansas Prison* (Jackson 2013). However, like all of Jackson's images that have been circulated in the public sphere, the reproduction of this photograph has been subject to one significant caveat: the original Kodachrome transparency had to be drained of color.

Jackson began taking color photographs in 1968. He produced almost 800 polychrome images that, like his black-and-white photographs, were initially meant to serve as functional field notes or "*aides-memoire*" that could assist and illustrate his scholarly research into Afro-American folklore (Jackson 1987, 118). In these early days, Jackson's images were put to work: they functioned as utilitarian records of the encounter between ethnographer and subject, ameliorating the lag between Jackson's immersive research and the production of his sustained analyses of prison culture. Jackson's singular pictorial record of prison life and labor not only documents the degraded lived experience of incarceration, but also evidences the myriad ways in which this heightened isolation and sensory deprivation can give birth to a singular, often dissident set of cultural formations. Work songs, tattoos, paintings, family photographs, graffiti, and books are all faithfully catalogued throughout his photographic archive, foregrounding the creative ways in which prisoners attempted to make meaning out of the empty timelessness and dehumanization of captivity. While some photographs harness distant vantage points, many of Jackson's images are more intimate and direct. Taken almost always from eye level, his photographs often capture fleeting glances between photographer and subject, allowing Jackson's presence within the scene to reveal itself. In this way, these images remain consistent with his conception of documentary—a practice that Jackson has described as "an engagement with a community, a process, a social issue, and an audience; you are engaging that thing and you are a part of it" (Wallis 2018, 40). Photography is just one medium through which Jackson pursues his broader documentary endeavors.

Unlike his unpublished color photographs, which comprise approximately one-tenth of his overall collection, Jackson's black-and-white images of the southern prison farm and, in particular, the agrarian labor that sustains it, have been widely circulated for many decades. These pictures have been frequently put to use in order to illustrate the archaic brutality of the prison farm, portraying the institution as perceptually disjunctive with late-capitalist American life, as a curious relic from a bygone era. In some ways, the preference for monochrome photographs of the prison farm can be attributed to the technological and fiscal constraints of polychrome film. Throughout the 1970s, developing color photographs was, according to Jackson, "a pain in the ass."[1] It was an expensive and tedious process that would have been prohibitive for a young academic, especially one who initially considered photography purely a supplement to his broader academic research. "Doing color at home was very difficult in the 1970s." Jackson explained, "I looked for a few grants; nobody cared" (Kelly 2015). Moreover, the color reversal film was significantly less forgiving than the black-and-white Kodak Tri-X film used by Jackson, demanding near perfect exposure times that, until the more recent development of digital technologies, could not be easily balanced or corrected after the film was exposed.[2] Color did not lend itself to the dark, windowless corridors of the penitentiary and, for this reason, Jackson employed the technology almost exclusively outdoors, in the prison farm's vast, agricultural fields.[3]

But although a sense of pragmatism certainly motivated the decision to disseminate Jackson's prison photographs in black-and-white, the continued preference for monochrome images of the prison farm in our contemporary moment, a time in which digital technologies have virtually rendered obsolete the practical distinctions between color and black-and-white, suggests that ideological considerations cannot be disregarded. Indeed, these meanings can be glimpsed in the Spring 2018

Aperture issue "Prison Nation," which included a feature on Jackson's photography (Figure 2). While certainly not unique in interrogating the cruelty of incarceration, the article frames his images as capturing a puzzling hangover from another time. "When a folklorist set out to document life in American prisons" the article claims, "he found the enduring segregation of the Old South (Wallis 2018, 37)." Although Jackson sent a wide selection of both monochrome and polychrome images for publication, the editors selected exclusively black-and-white images both to feature in the magazine, as well as in the related exhibition.[4] Despite this clear preference, *Aperture* selected many other color photographs of American penitentiaries to feature in the same issue, such as Jack Leuders-Booth's portrait series "Women Prisoners, Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Framingham," undertaken from 1978 to 1985. This side-by-side juxtaposition of color and black-and-white suggests that, far from simply a technical choice, the decision to publish Jackson's photographs exclusively in monochrome performs an ideological function.

This article traces the repression of Jackson's color photographs from the public, visual record of the prison farm to the shifts in the rhetorical value of mono and polychrome that transpired throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Extending from Sally Stein's seminal analysis of color photography and its rhetorical meaning during the interwar period, this study renews her considerations in a new context.[5] If, as Stein demonstrates, in the 1920s and 1930s, black-and-white and color came to represent the authenticity of rural poverty and the excesses of commodity culture, respectively, then, decades later, this chromatic opposition took on a distinctly temporal register. While color came to represent the here-and-now of everyday life, black-and-white became inextricably bound up with the historical record, gaining the capacity to displace the present onto the past. What justifies the narrow focus on these disparate moments in the long history of color and black-and-white is the centrality of the Farm Security Administration file to the making and remaking of these rhetorical codes in public visual culture. Whereas, in the 1930s, FSA photographers mobilized a monochromatic documentary vernacular in order to testify to the material deprivation of the rural poor, in the 1960s, the reintroduction of these images into the public sphere ensured that black-and-white photography gained a newfound historical resonance. The recirculation of Depression-era documentary meant that, if manual, agricultural labor was to be represented photographically decades "late," it had to be rendered in black-and-white and, in this way, made to appear out of time.

By capitalizing on the historical value of monochrome documentary, black-and-white could resolve the perceptual anachronism of the prison farm, suturing its scenes of agrarian work, such as manual flat-weeding or cotton-picking, into a linear narrative of progress. The institution could thus be anchored to a receding past—one that was visually incommensurable with the more recent, post-industrial models of labor and leisure that were unevenly transforming the American South and its built environment throughout the 1960s and after. While this article certainly pivots around Jackson and his decision to make color photographs in the face of such overwhelming material and technical challenges, it is less concerned with unveiling his personal motivations for doing so, and more interested in examining the dynamic interplay between Jackson himself and the broader, discursive networks in which chromatic difference has gained its rhetorical meaning. It is nearly impossible to discern where Jackson's personal agency ends and these systems begin, resulting in a blurred boundary that is encoded within and animates this article as a central tension. Rather than stem from a methodological failure, this messiness is a product of the complex ways in which photographs are made and take on rhetorical value: it is a result, in other words, of the historical conditions in which images are at once reproduced and repressed.

This article not only examines why we have been made to see the prison farm in black-and-

Figure 2. Page spread, Brian Wallis, "On the Inside," *Prison Nation*, Aperture 230 (Spring 2018).

white, but also explores what might be gained if we are made to see this peculiar institution in color. What is at stake is not simply the recovery of visual material that has been elided from official histories of photography, but rather the denaturalization of the conventions through which these histories have been written. This article argues that Jackson's color photographs have the capacity to produce an alternative history—one that, by reframing enslavement as an ongoing social relation, as opposed to a neatly bounded historical event, grapples with the temporality of slavery and its afterlives. By rewriting the visual history of the antebellum plantation from within the civil rights movement and after, Jackson's work compels a reckoning with the plantation as an extant reality that, despite its spatial and temporal remoteness, must be seen as always internal to the American political-economy. Jackson's photographs ask us to perform what Christina Sharpe has described as "wake work" (Sharpe 2016). This involves not only wrestling with the imprint of chattel slavery after emancipation, but also reckoning with these continuities such that an alternative future could be imagined. These photographs suggest that, if we are to fully attend to the processes of racialization that constitute the making and remaking of American racial capitalism (Robinson 1983), then our histories of photography must be radically rewritten.

Shifting chromatic codes

In the summer of 1964, as his peers from colleges and universities in the North flocked to the southern states to register black voters during what would become known as "Mississippi Freedom Summer," Jackson embarked on his first research trip to an archipelago of east Texas prison farms. Rather than produce images of the protest or the

street, Jackson thought civil rights photography otherwise, visualizing the movement by way of the rural, agrarian South. Facilitated by the relative open-mindedness of Dr. George Beto, the Director of the Texas State Department of Corrections, Jackson gained unusual freedom to roam the grounds of these strategically inaccessible penal institutions without interference from prison officials or guards.[6] Jackson's early documentary endeavors, comprised of field recordings, academic publications, photographs, and films, were primarily borne out of his investigation into Afro-American oral traditions.[7] This mutable, living folklore could be traced to the creative strategies of survival and storytelling that were incubated on the antebellum plantation. Extending the traditions of their enslaved ancestors, prisoners mobilized the rhythm and tempo of work songs to regulate the pace of their labor, constructing a unified collectivity that aimed to protect individual workers from gratuitous punishment. Jackson explains: "The only place in this country where a viable work song tradition exists is the southern prison, and that is because the southern prison maintained a social institution long dead outside its fences: the culture of the nineteenth-century plantation" (Jackson 1999, xxi).

While Jackson certainly worked within the folklorist discourse established by John and Alan Lomax in the prewar period, he was, at the same time, fully immersed in the revival of Depression-era documentary that had taken hold throughout American visual culture since the early 1960s. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City was a major vehicle through which these photographs were brought back into public visibility: Edward Steichen reintroduced the FSA file in his final exhibition "The Bitter Years" in 1962; Walker Evans' *American Photographs* was reissued; and the institution held a retrospective of Dorothea Lange's oeuvre in 1966. A few years later, Roy Stryker, the former head of the FSA, offered his own reevaluation of the endeavor in his 1973 book *In This Proud Land*, and that same year William Stott published his seminal examination of 1930s photographic culture entitled *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. With the exception of Stryker, those who reacquainted the public with the FSA file believed that the archive contained exclusively black-and-white images. As the construction of "the Thirties" became inextricably bound up with a monochromatic vernacular, black-and-white documentary was solidified as the register of a collective, national past. The assumption that the entire pictorial record of the era existed in black-and-white became so entrenched in American thinking that, in a 1975 *Artforum* article on emerging color photography practices, Max Kozloff inquired rhetorically: "Is there even one photograph of the Depression in color?" (Kozloff 1975, 34).

The centrality of the FSA file to the fossilization of black-and-white as the chromatic register of the past is thematized in a June 1960 issue of *Esquire Magazine* that was dedicated remembering the Thirties. Adumbrating the resurgent interest in the period that would take hold throughout the decade, the editor's letter read: "It might be of interest to point out that on the timetable of nostalgia, we are leaving the era of the Twenties and plunging into that of the Thirties. It's So Long Sucker, and Hail to the Okies." The preamble continued: "Our first illustrated feature this month is a fusion of some of the distinguished talents of the Thirties in writing and photography which has as its goal an attempt to define and illuminate some of the main currents of the time." For those writing out the history of the Thirties from the position of the Sixties, the Depression was a neatly bookended historical moment from which to draw "lessons both bitter and rewarding" for a new age. The issue featured an essay by John Steinbeck entitled "A Primer on the 30's" (Steinbeck 1960) in which the preeminent chronicler of the Great Depression offers a highly personal account of the "terrible, troubling, triumphant, surging Thirties" (Figure 3).[8] A tale of resilience and overcoming, Steinbeck relates his experience of this "warm and friendly time" with a cautious nostalgia. While the author certainly does not yearn for the material deprivation of the Great Depression, there persists throughout the piece a quiet longing

Esquire

For those who have forgotten what it was like . . . . For those too young to know . . . . by JOHN STEINBECK

A PRIMER ON THE 30's

Sure I remember the Nineteen Thirties, the terrible, troubled, triumphant, surging Thirties. I can't think of any decade in history when so much happened in so many directions. Violent changes took place. Our country was modeled, our lives remolded, our Government rebuilt, forced to functions, duties and responsibilities it never had before and can never relinquish. The most rabid, hysterical Roosevelt-hater would not dare to suggest removing the reforms, the safeguards and the new concept that the Government is responsible for all its citizens.

Looking back, the decade seems to have been as carefully designed as a play. It had beginning, middle and end, even a prologue—1929 gave contrast and tragic stature to the ensuing ten years.

I remember '29 very well. We had it made (I didn't but most people did). I remember the drugged and happy faces of people who built paper fortunes on stocks they couldn't possibly have paid for. "I made ten grand in ten minutes today. Let's see—that's eighty thousand for the week."

In our little town bank presidents and track workers rushed to pay phones to call brokers. Everyone was a broker, more or less. At lunch hour, store clerks and stenographers munched sandwiches while they watched the stock boards and calculated their pyramiding fortunes. Their eyes had the look you see around the roulette table.

I saw it sharply because I was on the outside, writing books no one would buy. I didn't have even the margin to start my fortune. I saw the wild spending, the champagne and caviar through windows, smelled the heady perfumes on fur-draped ladies when they came warm and shining out of the theatres.

Then the bottom dropped out, and I could see that clearly too because I had been practicing for the Depression a long time. I wasn't involved with loss.

I remember how the Big Boys, the men in the know, were interviewed and re-interviewed. Some of them bought space to reassure the crumbling millionaires: "It's just a natural setback." "Don't be afraid—buy—keep buying." Meanwhile the Big Boys sold and the market fell on its face.

Then came panic, and panic changed to dull shock. When the market fell, the factories, mines, and steelworks closed and then no one could buy anything, not even food. People walked about looking as if they'd been slugged. The papers told of ruined men jumping from buildings. When they landed on the pavement, they were really ruined. The uncle of one of my friends was a very rich millionaire. From seven millions he dropped to two millions in a few weeks, but two millions cash. He complained that he didn't know how he was going to eat, cut himself down to one egg for breakfast. His cheeks grew gaunt and his eyes feverish. Finally he shot himself. He figured he would starve to death on two millions. That's how values were.

Then people remembered their little bank balances, the only certainties in a treacherous world. They rushed to draw the money out. There were fights and riots and lines of policemen. Some banks failed; rumors began to fly. Then frightened and angry people stormed the banks until the doors clanged shut.

I felt sorry for Mr. Hoover in the White House. He drew on his encyclopedic arsenal of obsolescence. His gift for ineptness with words amounted to genius. His suggestion that the unemployed sell apples became the "Let them eat cake" of the Thirties. His campaign slogans—"Prosperity is just around the corner; a chicken in every pot"—sounded satiric to the shuffling recruits on the bread lines.

Visiting the Virgin Islands, recently purchased from Denmark, he called them the garbage dump of the Caribbean. The Islanders still remember that.

Brigades of Bonus Marchers converged on Washington. Congress had voted the bonus money, but for later. Some of these men might have been hustlers and perhaps there were a few Communists among them, but most were ex-soldiers who had served the nation, frightened men with hungry families. The ragged hordes blocked traffic, clung like swarming bees to the steps of the Capitol. They needed their money now. They built a shack town on the edge of Washington. Many had brought their wives and children. Contemporary reports mention the orderliness and discipline of these soldiers of misfortune.

What happened in the seats of power? It looked then and it still looks as though the Government got scared. The White House, roped off and surrounded by troops, was taken to indicate that the President was afraid of his own people. The rumor spread that Mr. Hoover had stocked his Santa Cruz Mountain estate with food for three years. It doesn't matter whether or not it was true. People believed it. And there must have been fear in the Administration because only the frightened fall back on force. The Army got called out to disperse the hungry and tattered ex-Army.

Four companies of infantry, four troops of cavalry, a machine-gun squadron and two tanks drove the petitioners from the streets of Washington, moved under a cloud of tear gas on the scrap-and-kindling shanty town and burned that pitiful citadel of misery. It is interesting that the commandant was General Douglas MacArthur. Of course he was under orders. They cleared the ragamuffins out.

I speak of this phase at length because it was symptomatic of many of the positions of leadership. Business leaders panicked, banks panicked. Workers demanded that factories stay open when their products were unsalable. People on all levels began hoarding nonperishable food as though for an invasion. Voices shrill with terror continued to tell the people that what was happening couldn't happen. The unfortunate Mr. Hoover was quoted as having said Prohibition was a noble experiment. He didn't say that; he said noble in intent.

The noble intention had created inner governments by gangster, little states which fought wars, committed murders, bought officials, issued patronage and sold liquor. Not only was this new aristocracy supported by any citizen who had the high price for a bottle of bad liquor, but successful gangsters were better-known, even more respected, than any other Americans save movie stars. Their lives, loves, felonies and funerals were fully reported and hungrily read. Important citizens courted their acquaintance and favor. They seemed the only people in the land who weren't confused nor afraid.

Then Mr. Hoover, running for re-election with a weary momentum, came up with another beauty. He said grass would grow in the streets if Roosevelt were elected. He should have looked. Grass was already growing in the streets. Farmers dumped milk, burned crops to keep prices from collapsing. Armed neighbors guarded homes against mortgage-foreclosing sheriffs. Grass was growing not only in the streets but between the rusting tracks of factory railroad sidings.

There wasn't much doubt of the election's outcome. In Dizzy Dean's immortal words, Franklin D. Roosevelt slud home.

I guess Mr. Roosevelt was called more names and accused of more crimes than any man in history, but no one ever thought or said he was afraid. Furthermore, he spread his fearlessness about among the whole people. Much later, when business picked up and business

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Figure 3. Page spread, John Steinbeck, "A Primer on the 30's," *Esquire Magazine* (June 1960).

for the individual resourcefulness and social cohesion that had supposedly defined the era.

Steinbeck reflects on the way in which the decade has been mediated and archived, particularly through photographic images: "There are whole libraries of books about the Thirties—millions of feet of films, still and moving. It is a completely recorded and documented period. But to those of us who lived through the period and perhaps were formed by it, the Thirties are a library of personal memories" (Steinbeck 1960, 86). This jockeying between the personal and the collective, the subjective account and the archival record, is fully borne out in Steinbeck's use of black-and-white photographs from the FSA file, that, explicated only by the author's own captions, serve both to illustrate his personal essay and to evoke the atmosphere of the decade as a whole. Photographs are uncredited and lack dates or original captions, an editorial decision that is explained in the introductory note: "We selected the works of four of those photographers—Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Russell Lee, and Arthur Rothstein—to illustrate the spirit, if not the specifics of Steinbeck's essay. The author has made them integral to it by his captioning of them." When the issue lays flat, the colorful pages of the *Esquire* advertisements and its other feature stories peek out from the sides of Steinbeck's spread, throwing into stark relief the monochrome photographic language that served to stand in for "the Thirties." These chromatic juxtapositions point to the way in which, in the 1960s, the FSA file became synonymous with a monochrome vernacular and, in turn, coded black-and-white documentary as the register of a fading past from which the nation had decidedly moved on.

In addition to the recirculation of the FSA file in public life, just as personally significant for Jackson

was the republication of Walker Evans and James Agee's landmark 1941 photobook *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. A second edition was reissued in 1960 to great acclaim (Agee & Evans, 1960), finding an eager audience in idealistic young whites from the North who were finding their place within the early stages of the civil rights movement and negotiating the vast power asymmetries with which they were immediately confronted (Quinn 2001). At first, Jackson writes, he was bewildered by the photobook's "disorganized" structure and Agee's "confrontational language." He remembers putting the text down after just a few pages. A few years later, however, Jackson returned to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and was "transfixed," finishing it in a single night. Jackson insists that his own experience encountering this canonical text was far from unique; rather, it reflected a broader, resurgent interest in the Great Depression and the documentary culture that had flourished alongside it. Twelve years out of print and nearly impossible to find, Jackson recalls: "It was a book that existed in rumor, in legend … people spoke of the book as if it were the grail: brilliant, redemptive, perfectly inaccessible" (Agee & Evans, 2002). If, in the 1940s, *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* remained relatively obscure, then, by the 1960s, the book had become a cultural phenomenon, providing a revelatory guide for a new generation of photographers and journalists, such as Danny Lyon and Tom Wolfe, who eschewed the pretense of neutrality in favor of a more sustained, immersive engagement with their subjects.[9]

However, just as the stark monochromatism of Depression-era photography came to signify distance from the dynamics of late-capitalism, color was harnessed to give vivid expression to the here-and-now of everyday life. No longer reserved for the fantastical constructions of commercial advertisements or Hollywood films, color began to suffuse every corner of the televisual news media. Across the 1965 to 1966 season, over half of prime-time television programs switched from black-and-white to color and, as a result, Americans began buying over ten thousand color television sets per day. The 1966 *TV Set Buyers' Guide* devoted its entire issue to the topic, boldly announcing that "black, white, and gray are out of the living room. Red, green, blue, yellow, vermillion, fuchsia, and magenta, and company are in— very, very in" (Lachenbruch 1966). In an attempt to compete with the excitement of prime-time television, popular magazines brought the Vietnam War home to Americans in living color. Larry Burrows, a British photojournalist who executed several Vietnam spreads for *LIFE Magazine*, pioneered the use of color in war reporting, honing his chromatic language while undertaking assignments creating exoticized travel stories throughout Asia and the Middle East (Kennedy 2011). His first spread for *LIFE*, published in January 1963, was a fourteen-page photo-essay that included twelve color photographs. The story featured on the cover with the title "In Color: The Vicious Fighting in Vietnam." The use of color to enhance the drama of the war and to intensify the impenetrable, tangled green landscape against which it unfolded was evidently so attractive that it merited mentioning on the magazine's cover (Orshefsky, 1963).

Far from an act of postmodern pastiche, in which historical styles are appropriated in order to comment on the limits of representation under the conditions of late-capitalism (Jameson 1989), Jackson's use of color photography is an act of remediation—one that stages the 1930s as extant and ongoing. Committed to the indexical nature of the photographic image, this remediation not only interrogates whether "the Thirties" ever really ended, but also renews the political commitments of documentary within another context. This critical strategy demonstrates that polychrome is not simply a technological choice, but rather, to follow Roland Barthes, a rhetorical code—one that is charged with an historically-situated, ideological meaning. Barthes explains: "We saw that the code of connotation was in all likelihood neither 'natural' nor 'artificial,' but historical, or if it be preferred, 'cultural.' Its signs are gestures, attitudes, expressions,

Figure 4. Bruce Jackson, untitled color photograph, 1968.

colors, or effects endowed with certain meanings by virtue of the practice of a certain society" (Barthes 1975, 206). After what has been described as her "shocking" (Eauclaire 1981) discovery of 700 color FSA photographs in the 1980s, Sally Stein expanded upon these arguments in the American context, writing that "the modern opposition between color and black-and-white photography constituted a coding choice at the first level of meaning" (Stein 1991). If, as Stein has argued, black-and-white photographic realism defined itself in opposition to the colorful world of mass culture during the inter-war period, then, by the 1960s and 1970s, rhetorical shifts in the meaning of polychrome meant that this chromatic binary had taken on a distinctly temporal character.

Jackson's oeuvre does not simply passively reflect his immersion within the resurgence of Depression-era documentary that characterized the 1960s, but also, by attending to the ongoing reality of agricultural labor, actively contests the way in which the 1930s were being written as and into history. Perhaps taking a cue from James Agee's self-referential text, Jackson's photographs are often marked by his own indelible presence. Subjects openly acknowledge and perform for the camera. Prison guards, pictured in khaki uniforms with cigarettes dangling from their lips, assume the exaggerated poses of vigilante cowboys, evoking characters that seem drawn from the sets of the hugely popular 1967 Hollywood film *Cool Hand Luke*.[10] These photographs confirm Jackson's sense that the prison guards seemed to model themselves after the disciplinarians they viewed on the silver screen. It is unclear, he wrote in 1965, whether "the Code received more reinforcement from prison exigencies or Burt Lancaster movies" (Jackson 1965, 320). In other photographs, prisoners proudly display their tattoos and elaborately decorated cells, openly offering up their art collections, family photographs, and pornographic images for the camera to behold. In the most overt instances of self-reflexivity, Jackson's own shadow is often cast within the frame, allowing his own image to intermingle with the many figures he documents. By blurring the boundary between photographer and subject, Jackson

opens up the possibility for critical reflection on the documentary method, not simply as a transparent act of observation, but rather as an active engagement with and invariable impingement upon the world.

The resonances between Jackson's photography and the work of the FSA are at their most overt in his many photographs of stooped laborers, hunched over in vast cotton fields beneath the blistering southern sun. In one 1968 photograph, taken at a prison farm in east Texas, Jackson closely frames three men at work amidst a tangle of thorny cotton plants, transforming their rhyming bodies into symbolic abstractions of endless toil (Figure 4). Rather than produce these figures as individual subjects, the photograph dwells on the type, bringing its historical iterations into the 1960s and after. Taken just beneath eye level, Jackson's picture emphatically recalls Dorothea Lange's 1938 photograph of a cotton picker in San Joaquin Valley, California (Figure 5). The image pictures a stooped man nestled among a mass of flowering cotton plants, evidencing the way in which agricultural labor inscribes itself on the body and overdetermines its visual form. Just as Lange endlessly played with the juxtaposition of worker and field, so too does Jackson find innumerable ways to render these vistas into photographic compositions, constructing a myriad tableau of agrarian work from an array of angles, distances and heights. Jackson's internalization of these earlier documentary codes occasionally veers into homage. In one particular photograph, he frames a pair of tired, leather shoes that have been discarded by a prisoner, recreating Walker Evans' iconic photograph of Floyd Burroughs' slouching work boots in color. In Jackson's image, however, a bare foot is caught within the frame.

And yet, despite Jackson's commitment to rendering the prison farm in color and, in this way, to contesting the perceived pastness of manual, agricultural work, the public life of his photographs became conditional on their ubiquitous monochromatism. The recirculation of the black-and-white FSA file within American visual culture and, in particular, the

Figure 5. Dorothea Lange, Stoop labor in cotton field, San Joaquin Valley, California, 1938.

many scenes of agrarian life and labor with which it became closely entangled meant that, if agricultural work was to be represented photographically, it had to be in black-and-white. As a result of their resonance with the countless scenes of sharecropping farms and migrant workers depicted by the FSA, Jackson's photographs had to be drained of color so as to become legible within official histories of photography. By capitalizing on its novel intertextuality, black-and-white functioned to displace the prison farm onto a remote past, allowing the institution to be retroactively sutured into a linear history. The prison farm simply could not be thought or seen alongside the quotidian rhythms of late-capitalist American life and, therefore, had to be represented as out of time. By suppressing the prison farm from the visual history of the civil rights movement and after, this history of photography has colluded with a narrative of American progress—one that figures the 1960s as a moment of unprecedented rupture with historical forms of racial domination, as opposed to a moment in which modes of racial subjection were reinvented and reinscribed.

The case of Jackson's missing color photographs testifies to the way in which, by the time Jackson began publishing his photographs of southern prison farms in 1970s, the chromatic register of photographic realism had dramatically shifted. In a wholesale reversal of the rhetorical meanings that were established during the interwar period, wherein color was harnessed to communicate distance from everyday life, during the 1960s and after, polychrome became valued for its capacity to signify the raw immediacy of the here-and-now. If color became tied to notions of proximity, registering the fast-paced tempo and casual decadences of late-capitalist American life, then black-and-white became, in direct contradistinction, anchored to a receding history, defined by the material scarcity and ecological deprivation of the Great Depression. The inversion of these rhetorical meanings not only reveals the impossibility of either black-and-white or color to offer an unmediated window onto the world, but also suggests that the very idea of photographic transparency must be understood as constituted by and within chromatic difference. At issue, therefore, is not simply the extent to which color photography has been repressed from the history of documentary. Rather, what is at stake is the way in which these histories have been constituted through the naturalization of chromatic codes and the invisibilization of their coded rhetorical meanings. Jackson's color photographs suggest that, if we are to write a history of the prison farm that wrestles with its imbrication within the late-capitalist American project, its perceptual anachronism must be vigorously contested.

Remediating the plantation

Far from simply disclosing previously obscured visual facts, the warm, intensified hues of Jackson's Kodachromes radically upend the codes through which the prison farm has been made to be seen and thought as past. Jackson's color work has the capacity to produce an alternative history—one that contests the ways in which processes of racialization and their iterative temporalities have been elided from official histories of photography. Jackson offers a way of seeing the prison farm that fully attends to its temporal contradictions within the shifting American political-economy. While, on the one hand, these photographs insist upon the prison farm's contemporaneity with the dynamics of late-capitalism, on the other, Jackson harnesses photographic history in order to situate the institution within a long history of racial domination. Color not only stages the prison as both in and out of time, but also reveals the way in which time itself must be understood as coded through chromatic difference. Rather than reaffirm standard narratives of progress, which frame the civil rights movement as an unprecedented moment of transformation, Jackson produces a visual slippage between plantation, sharecropping farm, and plantation, constructing a photographic archive of the plantation from the position of the 1960s and after. In this way, these photographs foreground what Saidiya Hartman has

described as "the convergences, the continuities, and imbrications of slavery and freedom" (Hartman 1997, 139).

Jackson's contemporaneous research on the southern prison farm chimes with this view of the prison farm as both a break with and intensification of historical modes of domination. Sensing a shift in the nature of the carceral state, Jackson argued that, far from a bewildering aberration from an increasingly postindustrial, racially equal landscape, the prison farm was becoming more essential than ever to smoothing over the contradictions of the American political-economy. His comments anticipate Loïc Wacquant's characterization of the neoliberal prison, not simply as a legitimate response to criminality run amok, but rather as a "warehouse" for "deproletarianized factions of the black working class" (Wacquant 2002, 53). Jackson explains that, while efforts to modernize penal facilities and to racially integrate prison work gangs throughout the 1960s may have aimed to make incarceration more humane, these predominantly esthetic, superficial changes resulted in the unprecedented growth of the prison population, deepening its penetration into the lives of mostly black and poor Americans. Hardly an atavistic hangover from another time, the prison farm became a crucial political and geographical solution to a much deeper, structural crisis. It came to serve as the destination for an ascendant carceral pipeline—one that began in the South's increasingly ghettoized, urban areas, such as Atlanta and Dallas, and stretched across each state into remote, rural areas. The prison became a repository for those citizens who had become superfluous to the wage-labor market, especially in the wake of widespread deindustrialization. Jackson explains (Jackson 1977, 23):

> One of the dreadful ironies here is that the prison commitments increased specifically because the prison became so much less horrible than it had been: as soon as judges around the state thought the prisons were no longer torture chambers, they became willing to sentence to prison terms men and women they would earlier have placed on probation.[11]

Jackson's color photographs attend to these histories, asking us to hold in contradiction the elements of continuity and change that characterized the prison farm at this historical juncture. These images not only rewrite the history of "the Thirties" as extant and ongoing, but also place vividly on display what the actual archive of antebellum plantation life deliberately elides: the forced, manual work and system of racial domination upon which the South's economy depended. By allowing these photographic archives to fold into one another, Jackson demonstrates how the movement from plantation to sharecropping farm to prison reinscribed the constricted humanity of the slave. As John Michael Vlach has argued in his extended study of plantation paintings, slave labor is remarkably absent from the painted landscapes of the antebellum South. "If the chief purpose of a plantation painting was to present a reassuring, tranquil scene," Vlach explains, "the presence of slaves would … only have spoiled the picture" (Vlach 2002, 185). Vlach describes these pictures as "documents of denial"—picturesque landscapes that, through their excision of the presence of slave labor, served to naturalize the dominance of the planter class and soothe anxieties about the viability of the plantation economy (2). Jackson's photographs—at once deeply felt pictures of human immiseration and forensic documents of agricultural labor—offer a rebuke to this strategic lacuna that, constructed a century after the formal end of slavery, makes visible the reality of the plantation even as entrenched systems of racial domination were being vociferously challenged both from within the prison and on the outside.

If, in the nineteenth-century, the plantation was pictured as entirely absent of the unending labor and gratuitous punishment upon which it depended, then, over a century later, Jackson places these relations at the very center of how the prison farm deploys its cruel methods of punishment. Photographs strategically position incarcerated

Figure 6. Bruce Jackson, untitled color photograph, 1975.

workers next to the prison guards who surveil them, giving visual expression to the dramatic power asymmetry between prisoner and boss through strategic vantage points and camera angles. In one photograph, a single prisoner is photographed in conversation with a guard, who leans against his saddled horse with one hand placed on his hip (Figure 6). The picture is taken from a significant distance, heightening the two figures' isolation within a large, empty field and, in this way, emphasizing the prisoner's intense vulnerability. Another photograph frames a group of prisoners from behind, their bodies uniformly stooped over thorny cotton plants. A single prison guard on horseback is arrested by the camera with his legs slightly askew and arms in the air, suggesting that he has just thrown something across the field in the direction of his look. His spontaneous motion, candid and unposed before the camera, sharply contrasts with the rigid, bent figures of the prisoners, whose bodies are disciplined and constrained by the labor they perform. Emphatically reminiscent of the way in which the relationship between slave and overseer has been represented, especially in popular cinema, these juxtapositions between prisoner and guard evidence what the antebellum archive actively suppressed: the relations of domination through which enslavement was constituted.

In sharp contrast to the plantation painting's naturalization of the landscape and its endless fecundity, Jackson provides an intensely granular mapping of the means through which the earth is transformed into landscape—a process that is fully illuminated by the use of color. His detailed photographs of work strongly evoke what Linda Gordon has described as Dorothea Lange's "sociological" approach to documenting agricultural labor (Gordon 2006). The muddy earth is disciplined into lush green rows,

which finally beget enormous piles of white cotton. In one photograph, Jackson frames a figure with a spade raised above his head, as if he about to strike the soil. Prisoners stand on either side of his body and stretch into the distance, tilling the mound of earth in preparation for a new row of cotton plants. The photograph harnesses color to foreground the labor through which the empty land is reordered into a productive field: from left to right, the rows of earth fade from green to brown, from already tilled to not yet sowed, hinting at the unending work that undergirds the production of a fertile landscape. Another picture, awash with soft, painterly hues, frames a half dozen prisoners as they squat toward the soil to thin newly planted cotton seedlings (Figure 7). The photograph evidences the exacting precision with which the prisoners must delicately grasp the tiny, green shoots, as they crouch toward the earth to gingerly pluck individual plants with pinched fingers. Jackson rigorously attends to the entirety of a day's work: he documents the prisoners from when they exit the gated penitentiary in the morning to when they are stripped searched in the evening upon their return from the fields. He offers slipping glimpses of rest and solidarity, recording prisoners as they exchange a lighter or pass a steel cup filled with water.

If, as W.E.B. Du Bois has written, in the wake of emancipation "the slave went free, stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery," then Jackson's photographs produce a history that fully attends to these disjunctures, constructing a visual repertoire of antebellum plantation labor from the position of the 1960s and after (Du Bois 1935, 30). These images reframe slavery as a social relation, rather than a temporally-bounded historical event—one that irreversibly culminated in the unencumbered expansion of liberal freedoms to

Figure 7. Bruce Jackson, untitled color photograph, 1968.

all. By making slavery visible as an iterative structure, these pictures reaffirm Hazel Carby's conception of racialization as a mediated process through which identities are actively and relationally produced (Carby 2009). These racialized identities, Carby explains, are not only constituted in relation to others, but also, following Stuart Hall, exist "always within representation" (Hall as quoted in Carby 2009). Highlighting the unfolding temporality of racialization, Carby rightly draws attention to the potential for narrative to engage what she describes as "the composite nature of the creation of the subject" (627). By remediating the plantation by way of a detour through the Thirties, Jackson's photographs have a similarly narrational capacity, articulating a relationship between image and history that exceeds the temporal juncture that is spliced by the camera and captured within the frame. Jackson's images actively reveal what the singularity of the photographic moment can often belie: long histories, their continuities and ongoing temporalities. In this way, Jackson offers the possibility of reading the prison farm as an open-ended process of mediation—one that actively reconstructs enslavement as a symbolic form of punishment.

By framing racialization as a process of mediation, Jackson's photographs caution against the reduction of racial difference to skin color. Indeed, many of these photographs feature white or white-passing subjects, toiling in the prison farm's vast, agricultural fields. In recording the intermingling of differently colored bodies, Jackson's oeuvre tracks, on the one hand, the gradual desegregation of prison work gangs throughout these decades and, on the other, the unprecedented explosion of the prison population. In doing so, these photographs usher us away from considering race exclusively through the lens of chromatism, asking us to take seriously a mode of racialization that is at once an extension of historical systems of racial domination and specific to the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism. If, in the 1970s, rampant deindustrialization resulted in the emergence of a structurally unemployed, surplus population, then racialization functioned to resolve simmering anxieties about this potentially unruly population, creating widespread consent for the expansion of the carceral state and its increased intervention into everyday life. Race, as Stuart Hall wrote at the time, was the modality through which structural contradictions were lived and worked through (Hall et al. 1978, 394). In this context, racialization is best understood as a productive, malleable process that is not simply a reaction to stigmatized skin tones, but rather constitutes, following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the "production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 2007, 28).

So although Jackson's work gives expression to the convergences between prison and plantation, his oeuvre also points to the cleavages between these two institutions. Unlike the many photographs of agricultural labor taken by Dorothea Lange in the 1930s and 1940s, Jackson's images never depict the cotton being weighed, sorted or sold. The processes through which the fruits of their labor are transformed into commodities are entirely absent from Jackson's vast collection of photographs. If this shift from production to realization is missing from Jackson's images of the prison farm and its vast, agricultural operations, then this is because, by the late 1960s, only a small portion of the cotton produced within the penitentiary was destined for sale within the formal economy. Instead, the ten thousand acres of cotton plants were nurtured each year for use in the facility's own mills, providing the raw material for the prisoners' work uniforms, bedding, and other essential textiles. The absence of these quotidian processes through which cotton is bought and sold points to the disturbing reality of forced prison labor: the work performs a predominantly symbolic, rather than material function. In this way, Jackson's photographs demonstrate how the exercise of punishment is inextricable from its performance as visual spectacle. By mediating prisoners as slaves, the prison farm strategically positions inmates outside of the progressive temporality of modernity, and into what Calvin Warren has called the "abyss

of black time"—a recursive temporal existence that was incubated in the cauldron of the slave ship and constitutes its long aftermath (Warren 2016, 62).

By harnessing color to code the prison farm as both in and out of time, Jackson produces a way of seeing the prison farm that is at once rigorously historical and dialectical. Jackson constructs the visual register of slave labor from the position of the 1960s and after, reframing emancipation as a moment of transition between modes of racial domination, as opposed to a clean rupture with processes of enslavement. At the same time, however, Jackson's use of color and, through it, his recoding of the prison farm as operating in both the past and present tense suggests that, despite its perceptual and geographical distance from everyday life, the prison must be placed at the very center of the making and remaking of the American political-economy. Jackson reveals that the spatial and temporal remoteness of the prison farm is a product of visual representation. These ways of seeing, constituted by the repression of color from and the elevation of black-and-white documentary in public consciousness, have functioned to displace the institution into history at the precise moment in which the prison began to capture and control an unparalleled number of black and poor Americans. Jackson's work asks us to take seriously Ruth Wilson Gilmore's assertion that the geographical remoteness of the prison is a "trick of perspective"; instead, his photographs insist that the penitentiary be woven into the fabric of massive nation-building project— one that was both foreign and domestic in scale (Gilmore 2007, 11).

By harnessing color to dramatically collapse the perceptual distance between the prison farm and the dynamics of late-capitalism, Jackson restages the penitentiary as fully imbricated within an emerging neoliberal order and the expanding carceral state that constituted it. Jackson's work suggests that, if the prison farm is unreadable in color, this is only because of how the institution has been coded by photography and written into its histories. In order to write a history of photography that attends to the "genealogical link" that conjoins the antebellum plantation to the modern penitentiary by way of the sharecropping farm, then existing chromatic codes must be denaturalized (Wacquant 2002, 41). Time itself must be considered as always existing within representation. Jackson's color photographs make readily apparent that the simple unveiling of the prison farm and its quotidian cruelties is not a panacea to its enduring function within the American political-economy. Instead, these photographs demonstrate that, if we are to fully reckon with the ongoing temporality of the prison-plantation and to upend its legitimacy as an inevitable and necessary tool of social differentiation, then dominant ways of seeing the carceral order must be challenged. Jackson's color photographs perform this critical task, producing a history of the prison that not only attends to its many pasts, but also excavates the social relations and power structures that undergird its present.

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Notes

1. Email from Bruce Jackson to author (26 November 2018).
2. Although color film speeds had improved since the 1930s, black-and-white film had also improved, meaning that the relative slowness of color remained a significant concern, restricting its use to bright, outdoor environments or resulting in the need for artificial lighting equipment that Jackson found intrusive and unnatural. These technological

limitations explain why the prison farm's agricultural fields provided an ideal environment for the use of color film, in sharp contrast to the prison's indoor facilities.

3. Jackson recalls using both Kodachrome and Ektachrome film. Author interview with Bruce Jackson (November 2018).

4. Author interview with Bruce Jackson (November 2018). Later, when asked about the choice to publish Jackson's photographs exclusively in monochrome, Brian Wallis replied: "Given the nature of the thematic issue of *Aperture*, I narrowed my remarks to just his prison work in black-and-white. The assignment was also based around Jackson's book *Inside the Wire*, so that dictated the particular selection of his black-and-white photography." Wallis' remarks indicate how seemingly benign decisions to publish Jackson's photograph exclusively in black-and-white can build upon and reify one another. The absence of color is thus be made to seem logical or pragmatic and, therefore, lacking in an ideological inflection. However, as Sally Stein demonstrates in her study of the FSA and the material costs of color, pragmatism must ultimately be considered ideological. Email from Brian Wallis to Author (10 November 2020).

5. While a full review of scholarship around the history of colour photography is beyond the scope of this essay, is important to note that the history of colour and its rhetorical meaning neither begins in the 1930s or ends in the 1960s. For a recent overview of this history, see: *The Colors of Photography*, ed. Bettina Gockel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

6. Beto once commented in an interview that Bruce Jackson was "the only liberal I ever knew whom I could trust" (Horton and Nielson 2005, 237).

7. Jackson's first book is widely considered a pioneering work in the field of Afro-American folklore and in the scholarship on black oral traditions (Jackson 1974).

8. The essay has also been reprinted, without the accompanying photographs, in John Steinbeck, *America and Americans and Selected Nonfiction* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002).

9. This era is often described as the heyday of "New Journalism," an essayistic mode of reportage that blends subjective judgements with more distanced observation (Wolfe and Johnson 1973). Often situated within this form, Danny Lyon spent time alongside Jackson photographing prison farms in Texas from 1967-1968. His experience culminated in a photobook entitled *Conversations with the Dead*, which includes his stark, black-and-white photographs of prison life and labor (Lyon 1971).

10. The film is a fictionalized treatment of a Florida prison farm. It chronicles the many attempts made by the titular character Luke Jackson, played by Paul Newman, to escape the cruel prison and to find his freedom. Interestingly, the film is a period drama: it is meant to take place in the early 1950s.

11. Emphasis added. Jackson also noted the irony that these improvements were quickly undone by the ballooning prison population: "The additional inmate population more than offset the increase in room and bed space" (Jackson 1977, 23).

Kimberly Schreiber is a PhD candidate in History of Art at University College London.

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