



Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary

Dennis Childs

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The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, passed in 1865, has long been viewed as a definitive break with the nation's past by abolishing slavery and ushering in an inexorable march toward black freedom. *Slaves of the State* presents a stunning counterhistory to this linear narrative of racial, social, and legal progress in America.

Dennis Childs argues that the incarceration of black people and other historically repressed groups in chain gangs, peon camps, prison plantations, and penitentiaries represents a ghostly perpetuation of chattel slavery. He exposes how the Thirteenth Amendment's exception clause—allowing for enslavement as “punishment for a crime”—has inaugurated forms of racial capitalist misogynist incarceration that serve as haunting returns of conditions Africans endured in the barracoons and slave ship holds of the Middle Passage, on plantations, and in chattel slavery.

Childs seeks out the historically muted voices of those entombed within terrorizing spaces such as the chain gang rolling cage and the modern solitary confinement cell, engaging the writings of Toni Morrison and Chester Himes as well as a broad range of archival materials, including landmark court cases, prison songs, and testimonies, reaching back to the birth of modern slave plantations such as Louisiana's “Angola” penitentiary.

Slaves of the State paves the way for a new understanding of chattel slavery as a continuing social reality of U.S. empire—one resting at the very foundation of today's prison industrial complex that now holds more than 2.3 million people within the country's jails, prisons, and immigrant detention centers.

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