Bourgeois, L., ed. (2024) *Unit 29: Writing from Parchman Farm*. Vox Press.

Review by Nathaniel Heggins Bryant

Unit 29: Writing from Parchman Farm is a sobering and raw anthology of original art, short nonfiction and documentary narratives, and poetry from people (mostly men) incarcerated in Unit 29, a notoriously violent and repressive section of the prison. This unit, also referred to as "the zone," was the site of 16 different murders and suicides and many more stabbings and beatings over a three-week period spanning late 2019 to early 2020. Parchman also saw deadly outbreaks of COVID in 2020 and 2021, further contributing to the fear, anxiety, and unrest on the unit. At the invitation of Parchman officials, Louis Bourgeois, editor of *Unit 29* and executive director of the Oxford, Mississippi-based Vox Press, worked with more than 30 individuals in an effort to use creative writing to help them make better sense of their lives on the zone as well as to quell some of the violence. While it is ultimately unclear whether or not the violence was mitigated by this writing experience, the result, this book, is a powerful and damning collective critique of one of the United State's most famous—or infamous—penal institutions. *Unit 29* is the third in Vox Press's Prison Writes Initiative, and all three were anthologies produced by incarcerated individuals in Mississippi State Penitentiary, better known throughout the South as Parchman Farm.

Like other infamous southern prison farms—including Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola and many of the numerous ones across Texas that were built before the 1980s—Parchman Farm was built on land formerly a part of a 19th century plantation. The echoes of chattel enslavement, as well as Jim Crow-era convict leasing, inform the sensibilities of some writers in *Unit 29*, particularly in the way they depict abysmal living conditions and prison labor. Both Black and white convicts refer to the heritage of slavery and their own sense of being a slave to the state. One writer, Whitzey Walker, includes a piece entitled "Slave Speaking;" he conceives of his piece as a "newsletter from a man of miscarriage of justice, of profit, of legal slavery" and later describes that "mass incarceration isn't just about making money off of a black person's body" (p. 35), though of course it does include that motive. In the short poem "Save Me," Nathan Sumrall refers to his existence more succinctly: "Owned by the state like a slave with no escape" (p. 101).

Perhaps more surprising is the idea that white convicts in the collection routinely cite their minority status in the zone as a source of potential violence against them, in a kind of institutionalized reverse racism. Most vehement in this regard is Christopher Smith, who observes, "We, as non-gang members and mostly white, are put through hell every day by pigs [guards] and gang members," ending his essay with the claim, "You don't have the right as a white person to have shit" in the unit (p. 54). Then again, given the racial politics of rural Mississippi and its apartheid-like minority white rule across its history, the notion that white convicts find themselves as victims in a space overwhelmingly dominated by poor, Black people—all there by design—doesn't seem that far-fetched, either.

Beyond the ever-present subject of race and racism, other subjects occur with enough regularity across *Unit 29* that readers can achieve a comprehensive sense of life in the zone:

- drug use (particularly crystal meth and "spice," a synthetic cannabinoid created to mimic THC, the psychoactive compound in marijuana);
- the tension between those affiliated with "organizations," gangs inside and outside the prison, and those who do their time on their own;
- conflicts between prisoners often devolving into flinging feces at one another;
- sexualized violence (both between inmates but also between inmates and guards—usually young, Black women who risk their employment by engaging in these acts);
- poor diets consisting mostly of cheap, empty carbohydrates usually supplemented by over-priced canteen purchases;
- boredom, particularly when locked down due to emergencies or violence;
- criticisms of the infrastructure of the unit in particular and the prison more generally (especially notable since Parchman is Mississippi's oldest prison), including the lack of both heating in the winter and air-conditioning in the summer;
- indifference to outwardly, unabashedly violent guards and administrators;
- depression, poor mental health, instances of self-harm, and suicidal ideation; and
- different forms of prison protest, from the wrecking of prison cells and the starting of fires or creation of floods (usually by stopping up toilets) to Christopher Smith's days-long hunger strikes.

Of particular interest to readers of this journal are the pieces depicting the various forms of institutionally sanctioned labor (ranging from cleaning and other forms of repair to working in the kitchen). Some of these narratives take the form of an-average-day-in-the-life-of a unit convict, such as Anthony Cathey's short piece "Kitchen Punch Line Jells" (detailing mess hall work beginning at 2:00AM every day) or Leon Johnson's "Prison Creates Lines," a poetic litany of the many queues that a regimented prison-life demands of inmates. Some of the longest pieces in the anthology read like long excerpts from a personal diary: Rufus McFadden's "My Lockdown Chronicles;" Elijah Stamps's " Thoughts Everyday;" and Ronald Thompson's "Days" are a few like this.

Some of the pieces are rough, unvarnished, appearing with very little heavy-handed editorial interventions—a deliberate choice, it appears, to avoid prettifying the stories these writers needed to tell. Likewise, there is no framing foreword or editorial introduction to the collection as a whole, outside a brief note on the copyright page indicating that the pieces were drawn primarily from the writing workshops held by Bourgeois from November 2021 to June 2024. As such, the pieces are meant to speak for themselves. The light editorial touch imparts a sense of hardboiled realism from time to time, but more important than that, the book, as a whole, captures a real sense of urgency around the immediate conditions that Unit 29 prisoners were facing while they sat down to write these narratives. Despite the way some pieces date as far back as late 2021 and serve as slices of time from the recent past, it is clear that the imprisoned writers in this anthology still face these conditions, thus making this collection all the more important as both a testimony and a demand for action from the state.

Reviewer Bio:

Nathaniel Heggins Bryant is Associate Professor of English at California State University, Chico, where he also serves as the chapter president of California Faculty Association, the labor union representing faculty, counselors, librarians, and coaches in the CSU system. He is the author of several articles dealing with the intersection of labor studies, prison studies, and prison writing on individuals like the Soledad Brother George Jackson and Caryl Chessman. He has served as the Working-Class Studies Association secretary and is currently working on two book-length research projects: the first on a critical reassessment of Robert F. Stroud, better known as the Birdman of Alcatraz, and the second on prisoner unionization efforts in the 1960s and 1970s.