



# Prison Nation

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# DEBORAH LUSTER

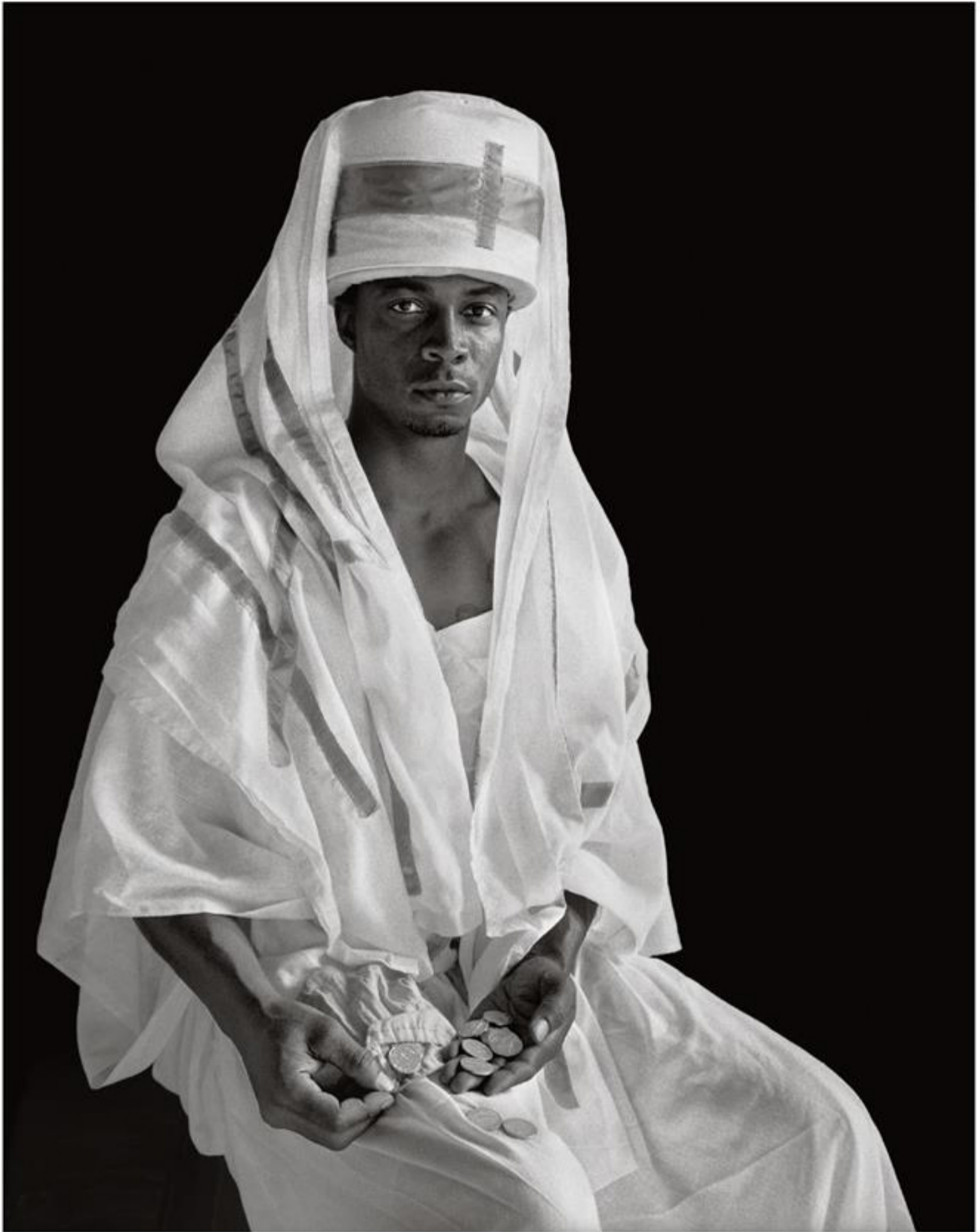
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Zachary Lazar

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# ANGOLA PASSION PLAY

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In 2013, two weeks before Easter, Deborah Luster and I went to document *The Life of Jesus Christ*, a passion play being performed for the general public at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, a maximum-security prison. Cathy Fontenot, now a former assistant warden at the prison, who initiated these performances in 2012, saw it as an opportunity to humanize incarcerated people for an audience of free people.

An implausible coincidence led Luster and me to this project. We both had a parent who was murdered. Both murders happened in the same city, Phoenix, Arizona. They were both contract killings. Many years later, after establishing our separate lives, we met when I moved to New Orleans, where it turned out our houses were two blocks away from each other. Luster had photographed inmates at Angola many times, most notably for a book-length collaboration with the poet C. D. Wright called *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (2007). As I wrote in my letter to Fontenot asking permission to visit, it seemed possible that by collaborating on this project Luster and I might force the coincidence between us to become more than just an unlikely wound that we shared.

The vast prison in central Louisiana, which houses about six thousand men, consists of several former slave plantations. I thought we would have a day there, but Fontenot provided a place for us to sleep at night, allowing us to stay for a full week. During this time, I interviewed over forty prisoners at great length—men from Angola and women from the nearby women’s penitentiary in St. Gabriel—while Luster took photographs. Most of the men, and some of the women, are serving life sentences, or sentences so long that they amount to life. Because parole is extremely rare in Louisiana, 90 percent of the inmates at Angola are expected to die on its grounds. You can be sent to prison for life in Louisiana for just being present during a crime, even if you did not actually commit the crime yourself. You can be sent away for life for doing something stupid when you’re sixteen. You can be sent away for doing nothing at all, an innocent person, or an exemplary one, like the protagonist of *The Life of Jesus Christ*. The state has the highest rate of incarceration of any place in the world.

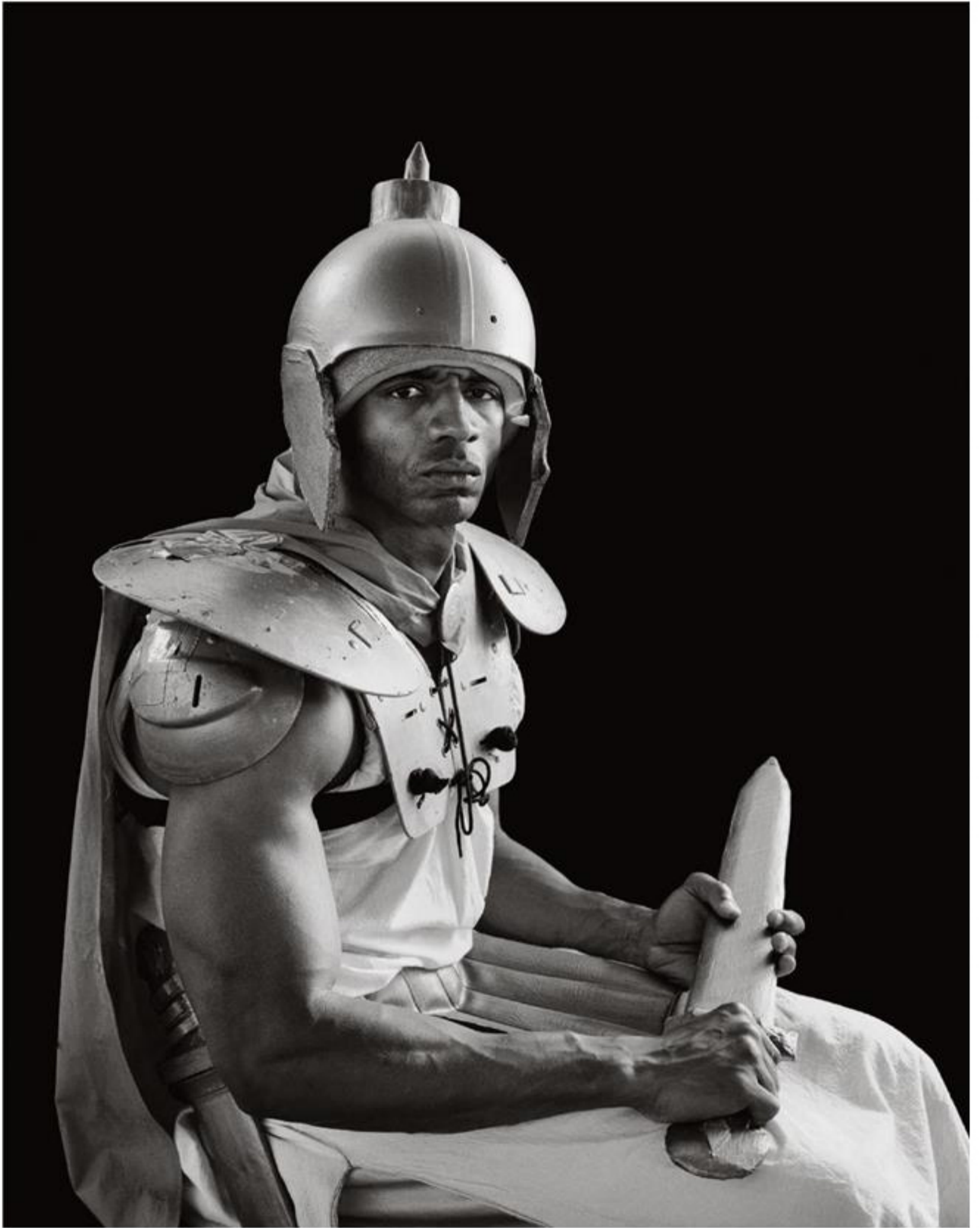
Bobby Wallace, Donald Cousan, Earl Davis, Levelle Tolliver, Michael Porché, Vernon Washington—these are some of the men seen in Luster’s photographs, who all revealed more to me about their lives than I can recount here. Wallace, who played Jesus, was the only one not serving life (he is now free). Cousan is an expert cook who uses the microwave in his dorm-style sleeping quarters to prepare red beans and rice, greens, corn, and his specialty, steak and gravy—“not gravy out of a can but from scratch.” Washington is a superheavyweight boxing champion in the prison league. Luster’s portraits capture something complex and indescribable about these men. Luster has said that she distrusts color because it’s too seductive, preventing us from seeing what’s really there. Shooting photographs in black and white is not an analogy for “seeing the world in black and white.” The interest is in the infinite range of grays.

Upon our arrival at Angola, the crew was still building the stage sets. Three wooden crosses, bedecked with ropes, had been raised on a mound of dirt. A crowd of prisoners was standing around, chatting amid a few ranks of potted shrubs and a fake Roman temple made of plywood. It dawned on me that the men working with tape measures, levels, hammers, and saws on the emerging sets were not hired carpenters, but prisoners. The man standing next to me shooting with a Nikon turned out to be a prisoner who was a reporter for the prison magazine, the *Angolite*, covering the same story Luster and I were: A man who happens to be the son of God is betrayed, convicted, and sentenced to death. On the third day, he rises from the grave to save the world with a message not of retribution, but of mercy.

Zachary Lazar is the author of five books, including *Vengeance* (2018), a novel inspired by his experience of the passion play at Louisiana State Penitentiary.

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Washington (Pharisee)  
All photographs from  
the series *Passion Play*,  
2012–13  
Courtesy the artist and Jack  
Shalman Gallery, New York







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