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Homage to Michel Fabre

“We Share Everything We Can the Best Way We Can”

Sustaining Romance Across Prison Walls

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"We Share Everything We Can the Best Way We Can"

Sustaining Romance Across Prison Walls

Megan Comfort

- 1 Since the mid-1970s, the United States has engaged in a continuous and now-infamous rise in the rate of incarceration of its residents, with the result that the country has become a world leader in penal confinement (International Centre for Prison Studies 2006). A vastly disproportionate number of the people affected by this phenomenon are African-American males: 4.8% of African-American men were behind bars in 2006 compared to 1.9% of Hispanics and 0.7% of whites (Sabol, Minton and Harrison 2007), while 20 percent of African-American men and nearly 60 percent of African-American male high-school dropouts born between 1965 and 1969 had been to prison at least once by 1999 (Western, Pettit and Guetzkow 2002). The implications these figures have for the likelihood of knowing a black man who has gone to prison or jail are obvious, the chances being that anyone acquainted with more than a few African-American males, especially those who did not complete high school, will have a personal connection to someone doing time behind bars. The repercussions of such staggeringly high levels of incarceration among African Americans have become a focal topic for researchers of marriage and family life, social inequality, public health, and other areas (Blankenship et al., 2005; Green et al., 2006; Harris and Miller, 2003; Massoglia, 2008; Western, 2006; Wildeman, 2006).
- 2 In 2000 over a nine-month period, I conducted in-depth interviews with fifty women whose husband, fiancé, or boyfriend (hereafter referred to as "partners") was in prison. I recruited my participants using convenience sampling methods; twenty-five (50%) of the women I interviewed identified themselves as African American, and thirty-five (70%) identified their partners as African American. During my fieldwork, I also spent nearly three hundred hours observing the designated zone in which people must wait before they are permitted entry to northern California's San Quentin State Prison as visitors. Elsewhere I have proposed that the mere act of entering correctional facilities as visitors subjects women with incarcerated partners to processes of "secondary

prisonization" (see also Clemmer, 1940, 1958; Comfort, 2008), a weakened but still compelling version of the elaborate regulations, concentrated surveillance, and corporeal confinement governing the lives of ensnared felons. In this article I dissect the interactions that occur between couples during a man's incarceration and elaborate the analysis of secondary prisonization along two theoretical lines. First, I demonstrate how women—motivated by love, compassion, and the fear that problems behind bars will cause injury, mental illness, or a delayed release date for their partners—vigorously apply themselves to the tasks of mitigating the "deprivations" (Sykes, 63-84) characterizing penal internment. Their strategies for doing so include writing and receiving letters, sending packages, accepting phone calls, and participating in fantasy play, even when these activities require forfeiting their own privacy, depleting their scarce resources, and jeopardizing their emotional well-being. Through this approach of "doing time together" couples create feelings of closeness and collectivity despite the ostensible segregation and isolation of imprisonment, and thus they perceive their efforts as being in opposition to the castigatory functions of the correctional institution. However, this willful *dualization of the convict body* that suffers the punishments of detention in fact *reinforces* the secondary prisonization of non-incarcerated women by repeatedly subjecting them to extensive penal scrutiny and control. It also assists men in serving their sentences with minimal disruptions or demands of the authorities and thereby generates the "docile bodies" (Foucault, 135-169) ultimately desired by the prison.

- 3 The second theoretical point connects to Clemmer's (312) assertion that "the inmate who has become prisonized to advanced degrees would be a poorer risk on parole than others who had not" largely because of such an individual's grafting onto a "prison primary group" in his social interactions. As women provide abundant emotional support during their partners' incarcerations in efforts to affirm men's connections to the outside world, the prisoners, confined to a dreary and difficult existence, typically value this outpouring and invest significant energy in showing appreciation for it. Couples thus become enmeshed in a pattern of exchange that accentuates and enhances the romantic devotion and yearning in their relationships, transforming the men's incarceration into an extended period of what Laura Fishman terms "renewed courtship" (162) that may contrast greatly, and even favorably, with the tenor of home life and daily interactions away from the prison. Paradoxically, then, the maintenance of connections across and within carceral borders *prisonizes intimate ties*, often positioning the correctional facility as a regulative device that—despite the enormous sacrifices, indignities, and control it demands—becomes integral to the functioning of relationships.
- 4 Following the theme of this issue of *Transatlantica* and the honoring of Michel Fabre, this article draws primarily upon interviews conducted with African-American women. In other publications (e.g. Comfort, 2008), I utilize data from women of multiple ethno-racial backgrounds, and thus these arguments should not be taken to pertain exclusively to women of African descent. Nonetheless, in all works on prisoners and jail inmates in the United States, it is of critical importance to emphasize that "minority" groups collectively form the majority of the carceral population, and that the deepening socioeconomic inequality and transformations of family life produced by the penal system are concentrated predominantly among people of color, particularly African Americans (Wacquant, 2007; Western, 2006).

Communicating Across the Bars

- 5 When couples cohabitate or have unimpeded and frequent interaction, their various mechanisms of communication are often cloaked by the proximity of the individuals and their habituation to the presence of one another. The enforced separation and extensive control of mates makes these methods explicit, providing a converse example of Georg Simmel's "stranger" (he who is physically close but socially distant) that can be used to probe the meanings of near and far, intimacy and remoteness. Penal researchers, as well as journalists and "in-house" writers, have abundantly documented the ingenuity of convicts in adapting, stretching, and thwarting the powerful regulation of seemingly every aspect of their lives while incarcerated (e.g. Cohen and Taylor, 1974; Conover, 2000; Demello, 1993; Frazier, 1995; Martin and Sussman, 1993; Rideau and Wikberg, 1992). As demonstrated in the following four sections, female partners apply a similarly high level of energy and innovation to the means of staying in touch, thereby maximizing the range of permitted methods of communication and shouldering a portion of the burden of "doing time."

Letters

- 6 Among the research participants, letter writing and receiving was the most common way of staying in touch: 98% stated that they and/or their mate wrote at least periodically during the incarceration period and over half identified exchanging letters as a highly gratifying activity central to their experiences of courtship and relationship development. Correspondence is relatively inexpensive and can be performed daily in accordance with one's own time schedule, in the (semi-)privacy of one's cell or home, and without the immediate engagement of correctional officials. There is, however, strict monitoring at a secondary level: "All non-confidential inmate mail is subject to being read in its entirety or in part by designated employees of the facility before it is mailed for or delivered to an inmate" (State of California 1999, section 3138(a)). Since only correspondence with government officials, legal-service organizations, and attorneys is deemed confidential, mail sent between prisoners and their kin and kith is systematically opened and inspected, a process that retards the distribution of incoming mail by two-to-six weeks. While long acknowledged as degrading for residents of "total institutions" (Goffman, 31), the censorship of post also affects the outside writer who knows that each intimate thought that she or her loved one pens will be exposed, judged, and possibly suppressed. The policy under which prisoners' outgoing mail is "marked indicating that it originated from a California state correctional facility" (State of California 1999, section 3147(2))—stamped with the name of the institution in bold, capital letters on the exterior of the envelope—compounds this stigmatization.
- 7 Twenty percent of the interview participants said that they and/or their partners wrote to each other almost every day, and another 22% sent and/or received multiple items a week. These missives ranged in length anywhere from a few sentences on a postcard to digests in excess of twenty pages, and sometimes included self-authored poems or short stories in addition to personal news, reflections, and the occasional photograph. Thirty-six percent of women specifically remarked that their partner

wrote more prolifically than they did (anywhere from two-to-five times as often), a phenomenon that overwhelmed them both positively and negatively, as Josephine, a 35-year-old African-American assembly and warehouse worker whose husband is completing a 14-month sentence, explains:

MC: Do you write to each other?

Josephine: *Oh my Lord!* [laughing heartily] Let's not talk about writin'! This man writes me a letter, I will get at least a *letter a day*. *Yes!* [slowly, incredulously] One time he wrote me a 21-page letter. *Yes!* Yes he did. [chuckles] I'm not the writin' type! But, because of him, I was writin'. ... So, you know, I've been writin' him, he just wants [...] the pen on the paper, so I do it all, I've just done it all.

- 8 It is striking that couples turn to high levels of correspondence as a primary means of staying in touch during a man's incarceration given that 16% of the participants did not graduate from high school, 28% had no education beyond a high school diploma or General Educational Development credential (GED), and only 36% held white-collar jobs; among the men, at least 22% did not graduate from high school and 42% had completed their education with a GED or high school diploma¹. While education levels did not bear any relationship to the frequency of correspondence among the research participants, poor writing skills and illiteracy constitute serious and costly hindrances for prisoners wishing to keep in touch, necessitating the enlistment of the services of a paid inmate "scribe" in order to produce a suitable document. That, despite these difficulties, men persist in sending frequent and often voluminous letters to their mates signals the powerful practical and symbolic importance of these missives in a prison relationship. Indeed, the exchange of mail between prisoners and their partners serves five main purposes. Most obviously, and most conventionally, it provides a *means of communicating with someone over distance*, in this case someone who may be geographically far but who also is barred from partaking in more regular or intimate interaction. Due to the institutional constraints of censorship and the delayed delivery of incoming post, however, epistles often serve less as couriers of concrete information (since women who are financially able to visit and accept phone calls find it more efficient to discuss everyday life directly with their mates) and more as instruments used to enrich relationships by combating prisoners' sense of isolation and thus the "pains of imprisonment" wrought by the "sterile aesthetic spaces [that] permeate prison environments. In this deadened aesthetic sphere, ideas, images and imagination are critical to maintaining sanity" (Phillips, 370). Blessing, a 38-year-old African-American representative for a communications firm who has been partnered for thirteen years with a Death Row prisoner she met and married at San Quentin, uses correspondence to fight the "prisonization" of her husband by injecting such critical elements into his barren life:

Blessing: From day one, I have always, he has *always* received at least one or two pieces of mail a day, whether it be a card, a postcard, or a letter, he's receiving something.

MC: Wow! And why do you feel that's important?

Blessing: Because [long pause, reflecting], they need to communicate more than just with the people that's inside there, it's just like you yourself, I mean, would you just want to communicate with one or two people that's around in your house and that's it? You know, you need to, you need that um, that *outreach*, you need somebody that's outside those walls, and somebody that's caring for you and loving you, and you need to know about what's going on, because all they have are these walls around them. And some of them don't have TVs, some of them don't have radios, so to give him everything I possibly can I cut out pictures, I send in pictures that

you take, um, you share scenery or something, that you might take a picture of the city, because they don't see it unless it's on television or in a magazine, that's another thing, you send magazines in to them. Um, and, you know, if you go to school like myself, um, just to like an adult-type school, and whatever I learn I'm going to send to him for him to learn as well. So, um, just everything I can possibly share! That I think a wife and a husband should share.

- 9 The process of epistolary exchange can become all-consuming, highly ritualized and even sanctified for women: in their homes, numerous participants displayed scrapbooks or filing cabinets filled with meticulously organized correspondence, sometimes complete with longhand or Xeroxed reproductions of their own letters as well as those received from their mates. Such arrangements serve the practical purpose of helping women keep track of their correspondence, as Rosemary, a 44-year-old African-American nurse's assistant, and Amy, a 38-year-old white US postal worker, reveal:

Rosemary: [My partner] was telling me, in fact today he said, "I got a letter from you," and I said, "Which one?" and he said, "It's a yellow envelope" – that's how we have to [keep track of the letters sent, by making something distinctive about each one], either this one's gonna be a yellow envelope, a green envelope, the date, the first sentence that I told him, cuz a lot of times, he doesn't get [the mail I send].

Amy: We have to keep a, a *diary* of what we write, so we even know what we've sent them, because it takes so long.

- 10 Both Rosemary's and Amy's partners have death-penalty sentences, and neither woman knew her mate before his imprisonment. For those who are intensely involved with partners whom they have, and have had, no opportunity to see in private, letters are imbued with a second key role: they become "*body substitutes*," tangible extensions of the person that are the sole physical part of the beloved someone is permitted to embrace in her home and enjoy alone, away from the watchful eyes and ears of the authorities. The poet Asha Bandele, whose memoir *The Prisoner's Wife* (1999) chronicles her courtship with and marriage to a lifer in the New York state prison system, describes this sensuous attachment to her husband's missives: "You have to understand, Rashid's letters are like dates. I have to get myself ready. I have to give them their proper space. Before I read his letters, I take a long, mango-scented bath. I burn white candles around the edge of the tub, and sandalwood incense, serenade my own self with Nina Simone songs." (32)

- 11 The envelopes decorated by inmates are famously artistic objects, lavishly ornamented with graphics similar to those imprinted on the flesh through prison tattoos (Phillips). Similarly, women transform paper into skin by adorning and scenting their letters, fabricating a corporeal substitute that is permitted into the restricted areas of the correctional facility and that penetrates the prisoner's intimate space:

Amy: I spray all of his cards and letters with perfume!

Rosemary: Both of us do!

Amy: Believe me, you can't imagine how much perfume we go through! And it's not cheap!

Rosemary: I only buy it for the paper, I don't wear it.

- 12 In admitting that she actually does not wear perfume, Rosemary reveals the degree to which her letters have become replacements for her physical self: she purchases nominally body-enhancing products solely to garnish her missives, to create a sensual entity for her fiancé to relish with an immediacy forbidden to the pair in other interactions. For most couples, mail is the only authorized sexual forum available

during the incarceration period, and even women who describe themselves as "self-conscious" will pen graphically steamy texts or enlist a friend to snap erotic photographs to send to their mates as a means of participating in a sexual relationship. In these instances, the relativity of the freedom of correspondence becomes more salient since women know that these materials will be viewed by a correctional officer during the mail-inspection process and possibly later during a cell search: as Duszka Maksymowicz (my translation) laments: "When my words reach you they are already read. ... When my absent-body offers itself for your caress, it first has been ransacked by the gaze of the reader-voyeur" (69).

- 13 The amount of energy, creativity, and time women devote to crafting their prison correspondence suggests its third function, *the letter as a gift* or "ritual offering that is a sign of involvement in and connectedness to another" (Cheal, 96) While the above quotations clearly show women's efforts to prepare literary offerings for their partners, men's reciprocity in this exchange holds particular significance since sending dispatches is the only means of interaction available to inmates, which does not require the physical or financial participation of women². An epistle therefore ostensibly attains value as a "pure" demonstration of caring and commitment³ that does not further encumber someone already in the throes of sacrifice—a contributing condition, along with the large proportion of unoccupied hours in a prisoner's schedule, to the abundant number of men who write more often than their partners. Yet the propensity of convicts to not only *remember* but *initiate the celebration* of dates that previously eluded them (birthdays, anniversaries, minor holidays) by sending lavishly illustrated and poetically worded cards spurs both pleasure *and* twinges of suspicion in their mates since the earnest articulations transmitted from prison often contrast markedly with men's sullenness and worry in the home (or, in the case of those who met their loved one during his confinement, with the uncommunicativeness or inattentiveness of a woman's previous partners). Celina, a 23-year-old African American raising two sons whose husband is serving 6 months, comments:

Well when he's been out of jail, he doesn't *talk* as much about hisself and stuff like that, and he doesn't reveal a lot of stuff as much cuz he's so into having to get the dollar, getting work, doin' this, and doin' that, and you get so preoccupied with being, you know, goin' to work and goin', doin' this and doin' that and trying to provide for the family, so that we never really get the time to like, sit down and have time for each other, but [giggles, seeing the irony] *it's weird that he would have to go to jail for us to be able to get, you know, sensitive and stuff like that.*

- 14 This discrepancy highlights the fourth purpose of epistolary exchange in the carceral relationship, *the showcasing of the "feminization" of the male* and his newfound commitment to providing emotional sustenance. Although immersed in a hyper-macho environment (Carter, 1996; Sabo, Kupers and London, 2001), inmates are deprived of stages on which to perform (stereo)typical displays of masculinity for their partners such as sexual prowess or being—however nominally or sporadically—the "provider" or the "head of the household". With few other means of giving or gifting, men thus turn to what is "basically a domestic art, a distant relation of sewing and embroidery ... Nobody can deny that to write good personal letters you have to prize the affective life and have a tendency to look inside yourself, both conventionally feminine qualities" (Hofstadter, xvii). The prisoner's masculine role is thus diminished and he becomes feminized through his passionate communication conveying empathy and sentimentality: as Mai, a 40-year-old African-American dance teacher who

primarily communicates with her "love interest" through letters because he is serving six-to-ten years in an out-of-state federal facility, exults: "*He is a male me! He is a male, he is sensitive, loving, he's all of that!*"

- 15 Confinement undoubtedly spurs men's eagerness to demonstrate their emotive selves through the previously unutilized and often labor-intensive (or pricey, if illiterate and hiring a scribe) task of letter writing. Butta, a 32-year-old African-American administrative assistant whose husband has been penning her two or three amorous epistles a day during his 20-year sentence, comments sassily: "That's the best part about him. He's very understanding. But now, in the position he's in, *he ain't got no choice but to be understanding, right?*" Her jibe ties the asserted feminization of the male to the final function of prison correspondence, *retention of the woman's involvement-and hence her emotional, financial, and practical support-in the relationship*. In their writings, men frequently reflect on the error of their ways, atone for past mistakes, and request help in taking steps toward recovery and reform, thereby producing texts that resonate with the purported point of their internment and encourage women to visualize a brighter future. In Ken Plummer's words, "they turn themselves into *socially organized biographical objects*. They construct—even invent, though that may be too crass a term—tales of the intimate self, which may or may not bear a relationship to a truth" (34). Brandi, a twenty-year-old, African-American hairstylist whose boyfriend is serving a one-year sentence, enthuses:

Brandi: And [in his letters] he talk about what he want to do, and how he want to *change* and his *goals* and stuff.

MC: Do you guys talk about that in person too, or does he just write it down?

Brandi: Um, yeah, we talk about it in person, but he like, he really get *deeper* into it when he writin', we might just like talk about it, but he'll really, you know, go *into it* if he writin' it.

- 16 A recurrent theme among participants when asked about hopes for the future of their relationships were visions of domestic stability centering on the man's permanent return to the household and successful assumption of the roles of loyal husband and attentive father—although not necessarily the primary financial provider. In the words of Stephanie, a 25-year-old African-American security guard and college student married to a man serving four years: "And, by then [the time of her husband's release] I just hope that I'm in a career, and then we can just start establishing our family, you know, get stuff together, cuz we wanna have kids, like within the next couple of years. So, get everything together so we can have a *good, financially comfortable, happy family*". The decision to "stand by your man" prompts women to counteract the cognitive dissonance of choosing a legally stigmatized or dishonored mate by seeking verifications of his "worth" and devotion to the relationship (Comfort et al., 2000). Stories of redemption therefore play a crucial role in solidifying most partnerships during the detention period by providing verbal assurance that men are making progress towards law-abiding, family-centered lives that complement the domestic stability and harmony the majority of the women covet. Hence the "gifts" of letters become "vehicles and instruments for realities of another order: influence, power, sympathy, status, emotion; and the skilful game of exchange consists of a complex totality of maneuvers, conscious or unconscious, in order to gain security and to fortify one's self against risks incurred through alliances and rivalry" (Lévi-Strauss, 19). When narratives of repentance and transformation invoke positive responses from wives, fiancées, or girlfriends their telling continues, linking couples in a cycle of profession

and affirmation which "not only heightens sexual and emotional intensity among couples, but ... also provides them with a belief in the permanence of their relationships" (Fishman, 168). Keisha, a 20-year-old African-American service-industry worker, was one of the few participants who identified this pattern, bluntly rejecting the messages she receives from her fiancé during his one-year parole-violation sentence for domestic violence:

Keisha: And he tell, I mean, it seem like he tell me everything I wanna hear, but it's not. You know, you cain't believe letters, that's just a dream...

MC: Why do you think you can't believe them?

Keisha: Cuz I done been through it before. A guy, I wrote him for six months, and he got out and went home to his wife. ... [My current boyfriend] always tell me, "I'll never do it again!" [pause, dourly] *But a person'll say anything while they in jail. They'll tell you everything, "I won't never get in trouble again," [then] they get out [of prison], be cool for three months, and then they back in cuz they done hit you again!*

- 17 Unlike Keisha, the majority of women suppress any cynicism or misgivings about the contents of their mailboxes and instead ground their convictions about and expectations for the relationship in men's artistically persuasive outpourings: "I told my girlfriends ... that it was those letters that hooked me. I told them that no woman has ever gotten a love letter until they've gotten a love letter from a man in prison" (Bandelet, 30). Feeling optimistic about the future and compassionate towards their mates, partners then become willing to shoulder the burdens of the more expensive forms of keeping in touch, phone calls and packages.

Packages

- 18 San Quentin prisoners are permitted to receive one box weighing 30 pounds of food, clothing, and cigarettes/tobacco every three months. In order to obtain these parcels, a man must send his "Quarterly Package Authorization" form to an outsider who is willing and able to purchase the desired stock, wrap it up appropriately, label it with the authorization form, and mail it into the facility. Fifty-four percent of the interview participants spoke of regularly providing these treats for their partners, usually the full four times a year if economically feasible, and 10% said they wanted to send parcels but their mate was not eligible to receive them. Several women mentioned collaborating with the prisoner's mother in assembling packages, and among those who did not send boxes, the second most common reason for not doing so (following the prohibitive expense) was that the mother-in-law took care of this duty.
- 19 Packages are the only means by which people are allowed to directly give any object other than letters or photos to prisoners, and they are highly coveted since their recipients can supplement their meager institutional allowances with extra clothing and nourishment, and hence enjoy higher standards of living than inmates who do not have access to outside resources.
- 20 While women speak passionately about compensating through packages for the prison's material shortfalls and infuse their contributions to their partners with expressions of love and caring, anxiety about likely hidden motives and struggles for power inevitably haunt these offerings. In prison romances, inmates find themselves highly reliant on their mates for both emotional nourishment and economic backing. The specter of "being used" by incarcerated men permeates the participants'

discussions of sending packages and money and is often expressed in conjunction with (self-)assurances that an individual had taken steps to avoid this situation—such as those expressed by Jeanette, a 31-year-old African-American home-healthcare attendant whose husband is serving six months and who was ill-disposed towards her spouse on the day of our interview due to rumors that another woman had come to visit him:

And then when men is incarcerated, that's all they know how to do is manipulate and use women, and *mess with people minds to get what they want*. ... I don't know what men do [sadly, voice going to whisper] use other women to get money? I don't know. But they ain't usin' me! [vigorously] *He ain't usin' me, I drew my line!* I've already been through past relationships, I know the score *and* the deal.

- 21 Although the majority of women denied that their mates pursued their relationships for reasons other than love, the few who did perceive ulterior motives in a man's overtures recast this potential mistreatment in their own favor by emphasizing the inmate's vulnerability and dependence. This reversal adds a more brute dimension to Sandra Lee Bartky's (105) assertion that "the opportunity to attend to the Other" can be "morally empowering ... through the cultivation and exercise of important moral qualities" since women may use men's reliance on their caregiving to wrest control of a relationship. The utilization of financial support as a means of guiding men's conduct can occur subtly and in ways that position women as unwitting collaborators in penal control. Alice, a 22-year-old, African-American unemployed mother, talked about equipping her husband for his 3-year stay at San Quentin:

Alice: He wanted a watch but I didn't send him a watch [laughs].

MC: Why not?

Alice: I said [sarcastically, alluding to the regimentation of his days], "*What do you need to know the time for?!*" [we both burst out laughing] I said, "You don't *need* to know the time!" I said, "You just worry about getting out!" I said, "Maybe in the next three months I'll send you a watch. But you don't *need* no watch!" But I did send him the shoes cuz he said the boots hurt his feet. But when he first got here, he didn't have no shoes, he had like some, slippers, some thong-slippers that they give 'em, and somebody he knew was here and left, so they gave him some boots and I feel really bad because the boots he had, the shoe-strings? *Were ripped sheets*. So he had sheets goin' through, and I was like, "I got to send you some shoes!" That made me feel really, really bad. So, that's why I got him some shoes.

- 22 It is clear in Alice's statements that she wants to attend to her husband's needs and to protect him from humiliation and pain by delivering appropriate footwear to him. But her refusal to include a watch in the first shipment indicates that she plans to withhold certain indulgences as incentives for desired behaviors. Throughout her interview, Alice expressed much concern that her husband, who had never been to prison before this sentence, complete his punishment without incident: "I tell my husband over and over, every visit that I see him I tell him, 'Please don't let it [prison] get to you, just take it one step at a time, you know you'll be home [soon]'". She therefore equips her husband with the provisions necessary for him to maintain his dignity and avoid succumbing to the violence and vulgarity of prison life, but uses the promise of luxury goods to remind him of his obligation to her. By implementing such a "reward system" promoting orderly and trouble-free behavior, women facilitate the smooth daily operations of the correctional institution, which benefits from well-tended-to inmates supplied with exteriorly funded enticements for good comportment.

Phone Calls

- 23 At San Quentin—and at the vast majority of US correctional facilities—placing a collect call is the only option a prisoner has for speaking with someone by phone: no incoming calls are permitted, and inmates are not able to use alternative means of payment such as calling cards. The rate of communication among the 80% of participants who said they spoke with their partners by phone fluctuated widely, with 8% receiving at least one call a day, 30% talking one-to-four times a week, and the remainder hoping to eke out one or two conversations a month. Most attributed their degree of phone contact to the ability of the prisoner to place a call, a factor which hinges on a man's institutional status (low-security prisoners have more access to phones than their high-security peers), his work schedule (the unemployed have more unoccupied hours during which to place calls), and his inclination to be in touch.
- 24 The inability to initiate a call themselves and the imprecision characterizing the timing of men's communication particularly frustrated the women, who could never be certain exactly when – or even whether – their partners would be able to reach the phone. "To be kept waiting—especially to be kept waiting for an unusually long while—is to be the subject of an assertion that one's own time (and, therefore, one's social worth) is less valuable than the time and worth of the one who imposes the wait" (Schwartz, 30). Although directed at inmates, the bureaucratic and punitive delays that disrupt phone calls automatically affect the recipients of those calls and in fact are arguably *more* problematic for outsiders since women often (dis)organize their demanding personal agendas to accommodate the prison timetable and then fret over conjectured causes of any holdup. Aameena, a 46-year-old nutritionist of mixed parentage whose husband is serving a 24-year sentence, systematically curtails her evening plans in hopes of hearing the reassuring voice of her husband:
- He calls me whenever he can. At least once a week. I'm not, I usually *always* try to be home by 8:30, *every night, always*. It's just a habit that I've gotten into cuz that's usually when he calls. And um, what's really awful is when he *doesn't* call for like, if I go see him let's say on Saturday, and I haven't heard from him, and it's Friday, I start to worry a little bit, you know? So getting a phone call, even just once a week, is very comforting.
- 25 All calls originating from San Quentin are likely to be monitored, a fact announced at the beginning of the conversation by the recorded operator greeting: "This is a [phone company] operator. I have a collect call from a prisoner at a California state institution. This call could be monitored or recorded." Despite the clear initial broadcast, the entire exchange is interrupted at varying intervals by an automatic warning system that reiterates: "This is a collect call from a prisoner at a California state institution. This call could be monitored or recorded." Poor phone connections and significant din in the background (the inmate phone-booths are located in loud and busy areas – on the ground level of multi-tiered cellblocks or inside open dormitories – and do not have doors for privacy) further hamper conversation, and although they receive a two-minute warning, at the end of the 15-minute time limit imposed by the prison, an abrupt closure of the line terminates the connection. Unlike the censorship of letters, which is conducted at the prison and without the direct involvement of either of the concerned parties, the monitoring of phone calls immediately affects a woman while she is in her home. Phone calls therefore are conduits for the "*real time*" experience of penal control in the domestic sphere.

- 26 In her study of the mates of men in the US armed forces, Margaret Harrell observes that "an officer's wife becomes an extension of the officer" (60-61) to the extent that if she attends functions in his place she is addressed with his rank, as if she were him. Meanwhile, "[i]n an environment of decreasing budget dollars, officers' spouses are perceived as an easy solution for addressing the problems faced" by others in the military-base community, so much so that their "volunteerism is valued at millions of dollars each year" (Harrell, 57). As the dynamics surrounding packages and phone calls demonstrate, similar situations of transference and reliance occur in the case of prisoners' partners who themselves contend with punitive sanctions ostensibly reserved for convicted felons while simultaneously subsidizing a rewards system that promotes acceptable comportment and tends to men's "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 63-84). Beginning in the 1990's, the trend in correctional facilities has been to "make the experience of imprisonment more severe by removing gym equipment, televisions, college extension courses and the like" (Simon, 286),⁴ while implementing policies such as charging inmates for doctor visits, toiletries, even room and board. By natural consequence, the importance of the few remaining privileges – notably phone calls and goodies sent by outsiders – increased, as did prisoners' need for financial help to meet their debts. Hence kin and kith shoulder the economic and labor costs of providing incentives within the prison system (Braman, 2002; Davis, 1992; Grinstead et al., 2001; McDermott and King, 1992).

Presence Creation

- 27 The fourth technique employed by couples to communicate during the man's imprisonment falls outside of the official categories established for staying in touch. By "presence creation" I mean people's attempts to transcend institutional perimeters by using props, fantasy, and synchronization to incorporate an absent partner into one's life. Among the "Forms of Togetherness" elaborated by Zygmunt Bauman, this strategy best corresponds to "*postulated togetherness ... a work of imagination spurred by homesickness,*" a "*togetherness [that] seduces by its promise of intimate encounters guaranteed to be consummated before even attempted*" (47-48, original emphasis).
- 28 Informal and personalized, the practices of presence creation evolve over the course of relationships according to the imaginativeness of couples and the time they have to devote to such routines, which often become more intense and intricate as their years together progress. Much like widows striving to simulate commensality (Sidenvall, Nydahl and Fjellstrom, 416), wives, fiancées, and girlfriends of prisoners frequently use pictures and other representations of their beloved to designate a particular space as occupied by his presence. Although every photograph taken at San Quentin is framed by the same background and the men are always dressed in their prison uniforms, women arrange to have themselves regularly photographed with their partners and display multiple examples of these portraits (either in their initial Polaroid form or in a more standard format achieved by making color photocopies of the original and adjusting the sizing) in their homes and wallets. Placed among other depictions of family and friends, these photos integrate the distant mate into a woman's personal realm, blurring the dividing line of the prison and establishing the man's status as an intimate. As noted in the discussion of correspondence, letters and other objects can also invoke someone's presence and provide a visceral link between cell and domicile by substituting for the missing person's body. During a nearly one-year period of

suspension of face-to-face (or "contact") visits for Death Row inmates, Rosemary requested a "prop" from her fiancé to help her "transport" him from behind the thick separation glass and into her private sphere:

[I missed smelling him so much] to where I told him, "Send me a package with a shirt that smells like you". He sent me two shirts, and he said, "I stuffed some handkerchiefs in the pockets, and they smell like me". So every night before I go to bed I unzip it, because I have it in a big comforter bag that zips, and I throw it in there because I don't want to lose the smell even though it smells like an institution, it doesn't smell like me remembering his body. So I smell his shirt-[and] his handkerchief smells like him.

- 29 Another means of fictively collapsing the division between the institution and the home is the synchronization of activities, which thereby enables couples to imagine doing things "together." Like other American couples, who "speak of sharing-thoughts, feelings, tasks, values, or life goals-as the greatest virtue in a relationship" (Bellah et al., 91), women with incarcerated partners place much importance on the exchange of information and the simultaneous engagement in endeavors. Blessing—who was mentioned by other wives with admiration for her creativity—manages to actively participate in many of her husband's recreational interests:

I still keep him exposed to everything I possibly can. And all different cultures, whatever I learn, I give to him, um, we share as much as we can like, we watch the same movies, San Quentin has a movie station and I'll go out and rent the movie and watch it with him that way. We'll read the same books, um, so we share everything we can the best way we can.

- 30 This concept of "sharing" may extend as well to women consulting, and even legally including, their partners when making decisions, despite the lack of immediate effect these undertakings have on the men. Ameena, who recently purchased a small parcel of land in the mountains, stresses the important role she accorded to her husband in this enterprise:

[W]e make decisions mutually, if I have an idea I'll take it to him, I *never* make a decision on my own, especially if it's an important one, without talking it over with him first, cuz *I don't ever want him to feel like he's not a part of my life*, even if he can't participate out here, we really respect that about each other. And um, so I thought that it would be, it would be a really good idea, because it would give him something to focus on. You know, it would give him something to look forward to. So when I bought the land I had it put in both of our names, you know, *it's deeded to both of us* and as soon as it's paid for we'll get the deed, *I had him sign all the papers*, you know, for the title company, and I take him pictures of it, I go up there, I was just up there in April, I'm going to go again in August and build a campsite. I consulted with him about the campsite. I take pictures from every angle in all different seasons whenever I go to show him, and actually it's really, *really* been a good idea to do that because we talk about it, we talk about what we want to build there, what we want to create there, the spirit with which we want to, you know, live our lives there.

Conclusion

- 31 Altogether, the examination of the four mechanisms used to develop and sustain relationships with prisoners demonstrates the significant curtailing of aspects of women's lives through their attempts to alleviate the isolation and deprivation typifying internment. During their efforts to "join with" and support an incarcerated loved one, women link their domestic environments to the institution and as a result

an array of penalties – stigma, censorship, invasion of privacy, regulation, spatial confinement, and the regimentation of time – reverberates within the home. Hence, even when not physically at the prison, women are subjected to secondary prisonization via institutional management and regulation since the methods for staying in touch with a mate require yielding the private domicile as an extended site of punitive control.⁵ Such findings work in concert with other analyses (see also Miller 1996; Tonry 1995; Wacquant 2000) arguing that lower-class African Americans in the United States are being absorbed by a penal system that exceeds the perimeters of correctional facilities and casts its surveillance and punishment over entire neighborhoods, condemning even the legally free to live and love in the penitentiary's long shadow.

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NOTES

1. Eleven participants did not know what level of education their partners had attained. It is probable that this 22% of the men had a high school diploma or less.
2. Although women often keep men supplied with stationary and stamps, the majority perceive this as a negligible outlay compared to the hefty financial burdens of packages and phone calls (as discussed below) and visits. On disruptions of complementarity in reciprocity (see Gouldner); on asymmetrical gift-giving in male-female relationships (see Komter).
3. For a discussion of the intricacies and obligations of the "Pure Gift", see Malinowski.
4. See also the prescriptions of "America's Toughest Sheriff" Joe Arpaio (Arpaio and Sherman 1996).
5. Arguably, some of these punishments can be disconnected from the actual residence through the use of PO boxes and portable phones (although such devices incur costs that are beyond the means of the majority of prisoners' partners). My point, however, is that women experience these ramifications *at a distance*, when they are away from the direct surveillance of the prison authorities and ostensibly occupying "private" space.

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