"It's a Lot of Good Men Behind Walls!": Mass Incarceration and the Transformation of Romance in the United States

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A discussion of the "social effects" or "collateral consequences" of the American model of mass incarceration on social and family life has emerged in recent years (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002; Pattillo, Weiman and Western 2004; Braman 2004). Keenly attuned to the poverty, unemployment, single-mother parenting, and other socio-economic burdens shouldered by those most affected by the United States' punitive penal policies (see Tonry 1998: 3-30), researchers tend to position incarceration as the catalyst of these woes – that is, being sentenced to spend time in jail or prison is claimed to be the disruptive force that results in job loss, family disintegration, social ostracism, and the like. While punitive confinement does trigger an ever-increasing array of civil penalties such as disenfranchisement and restrictions on public welfare, housing, and educational benefits (Mele and Miller 2005), an in-depth analysis of women's romantic relationships with prisoners demonstrates that correctional institutions can grant a surprising measure of control to these women in their dealings with men. Indeed, prisons can provide structures for enacting the gendered roles of nurturer and caregiver as well as substitute sites for domestic and conjugal life that, paradoxically, may be preferable to or easier to manage than the chaos and stress of the family home.

This article primarily draws upon nine months of intensive fieldwork at northern California's San Quentin State Prison, which currently houses upwards of 6,000 men and occupies four hundred and thirty-two acres of prime real-estate property in Marin County, an affluent area north of the San Francisco Bay. From April through December 2000 I conducted nearly 300 hours of participant observation in San Quentin's visitor-waiting area, where I sat several times a week for seven-hour stretches in order to watch the dynamics among the visitors and their interactions with the authorities as they waited to be admitted into the correctional facility. I also audio-recorded interviews with fifty women whose husband, fiancé, or boyfriend was incarcerated and traced a sample of these women in their daily lives. In addition to this concentrated period of fieldwork, my analysis is informed by five years (1997-1999 and 2002-the present) of HIV-prevention research and intervention activities conducted with women visiting men at San Quentin in collaboration with my colleagues from the University of California at San Francisco's Center for AIDS Prevention Studies and from Centerforce, a non-profit organization that provides services to incarcerated people and their families (see Comfort et al. 2000; Comfort et al. 2005; Grinstead et al. in press).

When exploring women's romantic attachments to incarcerated men, it is useful to apply the theories of how incarceration transforms those who live *behind bars* to the study of how the incarceration of an intimate partner transforms those who maintain relationships *across* the bars. One finds the tools for such an investigation in a classic of prison sociology, Donald Clemmer's *The Prison Community* ([1940] 1958). Clemmer's key conceptual innovation is that "as we use the term Americanization to describe a greater or lesser degree of the immigrant's integration into the American scheme of life, we may use the term *prisonization* to indicate the taking on in greater or less degree of the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary" ([1940] 1958:299). Clemmer identifies key factors among inmates indicating assimilation to the

correctional institution: "Acceptance of an inferior rôle, accumulation of facts concerning the organization of the prison, the development of somewhat new habits of eating, dressing, working, sleeping, the adoption of local language, the recognition that nothing is owed to the environment for the supplying of needs…" (Clemmer [1940] 1958:300).

Women with incarcerated partners undergo what I call "secondary prisonization," a less absolute but still potent process of socialization to carceral norms and subjection to penal control that – at a time of the massive expansion of the penal state and the concurrent retrenchment of the welfare state – induces women to rely upon the correctional authorities as the most consistent and powerful public institution available to them. This reliance confounds the assumption outlined in the opening paragraph that incarceration fuels disruption: instead, poverty, unemployment, and the breakdown of interpersonal relationships become the pre-existing conditions, and incarceration is transformed into the means by which women attempt to reframe and manage these problems. Indeed, a fine-grained analysis reveals that the disintegrative repercussions elaborated by the collateral-consequences perspective and the integrative functions of the prison-as-peculiar-social-service *coexist*, with either force exerting more or less influence depending on an individual woman's socio-economic circumstances or her specific situation at a given point in her romantic relationship. In addition, the disintegrative-integrative effects of incarceration may operate distinctively in different domains of a woman's life, for example by causing increased economic hardship while simultaneously shielding her from an abusive mate.

In this article, I use interview and observational data on the subsection of my research participants (approximately one woman in four) who – in the absence of mental-health services, substance-abuse treatment, domestic-violence intervention, and other social-welfare assistance for themselves and their partners – most visibly engage the criminal justice system as a protective intervention in their relationships with difficult or dangerous men. I begin with a case study of a woman I knew for over five years that vividly illustrates her recourse to penal institutions as the sole resource for providing a paradoxical "relief" from the serious problems jeopardizing her safety, health, and marriage.

Erica and Leon

> In all the years I have known Erica[1] she always and adamantly has been "between thirty and forty – I haven't reached forty yet!" and "a member of the human race – although according to society I'm an African-American woman." She and her husband Leon have been together since 1983 and married in the early 1990s; although she has never told me the story of how they met, she once showed me a photo of a handsome young couple posing in front of a prison gate and commented, "This is how it started: me and him in jail."[2] Efforts to tabulate how often during their relationship Leon has been thrown behind bars yield similarly vague and inconclusive responses, with the likely answer being more times than Erica can – or cares to – remember. A rail-thin woman given to manic spurts of energy, Erica spends many of our conversations delivering lengthy and impassioned diatribes against her errant husband and the dysfunctions of the criminal justice system, complete with expansive gesticulations, theatrical pratfalls, and dramatic stomping or leaving-of-the-room for emphasis. Over time I realize that she usually

[1] All study participants selected their own pseudonyms.

[2] Although Erica uses the words "prison" and "jail" interchangeably, they refer to two separate institutions. Jails are local facilities that hold people who are awaiting trial or who have been sentenced to serve less than one year. Prisons are state facilities that confine people who have violated parole or who have been sentenced to serve more than one year.

phones me when she needs to blow off steam, and when transcribing our interviews I note that her preferred form of interaction is to lecture me at the top of her lungs with a "you" referring to Leon, thus creating a submissive and attentive conjugal stand-in who not only soaks up but actually tape-records her every word.

Erica's speech is peppered with self-help sound bites drawn from pop-psychology books, a wealth of Oprah-esque television shows, her preacher's Sunday sermons, and the various drug- or alcohol-recovery groups she periodically attends (once after vigorously informing me that a "real man" should avoid repeating his mistakes and "not go back and do the same thing *over and over and over* again, expecting different results," she winked at me slyly: "Got *that* from A.A. [Alcoholics Anonymous], by the way!"). When Leon is incarcerated, these support systems and vocabularies of self-actualization have a strong effect on Erica, who is remarkably successful at obtaining above-minimum-wage jobs in telecommunications, often as a phone operator or call-center manager for wireless companies. Employment is central to Erica's ethos and her self-validation of being a worthy person – "Because see, companies hire you today based upon your integrity. Not just your skills! Your *morals*, your principles. That's how I get all of my jobs" – not to mention crucial for keeping her housed and fed as she lives paycheck-to-paycheck. In addition to steadily holding down jobs throughout the three-to-nine month periods when her spouse is away, Erica usually attends church and her 12-step program meetings, socializes with friends, and spends time with her and Leon's seven-year-old daughter, of whom Erica's mother has legal custody.

The story dramatically changes when Leon comes home. Erica typically uses her extensive employment connections to line up work for her husband upon his release, and Leon typically loses this job a few weeks later because of insubordination or failure to adhere to a regular schedule. Home alone all day with nothing to do and feeling depressed, he returns to using drugs, paying for them by hocking possessions: "He went and sold his jacket, he started sellin' his watch, my watch that he bought me. Everything. All of a sudden I come home, *everything* had disappeared. So I knew that he had went back on the crack." Often Leon's next step is to steal his wife's car and disappear for days or weeks at a time, at which point Erica loses *her* job due to lack of transportation and stress-related maladies. Once things escalate to this level Erica usually appeals to the police for help but she is realistic about why her case is not their top priority: "[Leon] disappeared for two months. Okay? No word, *nothing*. We put out a missing person's report after the first thirty days. Because that was his MO [modus operandi], to disappear for thirty days. … *I* wasn't about to go, you know, lookin' for a drug addict in alleys in the city [of San Francisco]. Which I've done before. And I'm sure I'm not the only one. But it had got to the point where, *hell no*, I'm not gonna put my life in danger looking for this man. The police were supposed to do that. *But who's gonna look for a convict on drugs*? *Please*! There are *children* that are disappearing, okay?"

Out of work, stranded without a car or other possessions Leon sold (like her cell phone and pager), and preoccupied with finding her husband, Erica's life starts to unravel. She falls into debt, loses touch with her daughter, her friends and her church, and sometimes relapses into alcohol and drug abuse, especially if she already had started using with Leon when he was home. Eventually her spouse winds up on her doorstep, phones her from the county jail, or gets word to her of his whereabouts. In one episode, Erica received a tip from an acquaintance that Leon was living in a homeless encampment on the border of downtown San Francisco and in the early morning hours of January 1, 2000 after a night of celebration she decided to track him down: "He looked like a mixture between James Brown and Oscar the Grouch on Sesame Street! He had lost *all* of his weight. He could wear *my* pants, and I weigh a hundred and fifteen pounds. … He was *funky*, he was *smelly*, he had a very strong odor, probably like the Unabomber did! But

[cracking herself up, clapping her hands and laughing], in fact he looked like *he could'a been related to the Unabomber*! I mean he was [strong emphasis] *ugly*, okay? Just flat-out *ugly*. [laughing] Here I am all dressed up all pretty, coming from this classy club where it cost fifteen dollars to get in, you know, [with broadcaster hype] *it's the year two thousand*, a new *millennium* and thangs an' I'm havin' a ball! [shrieks] *Okay*? An' *you* out here in crack alley. Somethin' is *wrong* with this picture. Houston, we got a problem. … I said, '*Where the hell have you been living?*' Excuse my French, but I went fifty-one fifty [referring to the San Francisco police radio code 5150 designating a mental-health detention, used in slang to mean "crazy"]! And he said, 'I wanna come home.' I go, '*Home*? What's that? *This* is your home!' He had some crack change in his pocket, like about five bucks, that he let me see. And I didn't want his money, I looked at him, and *I pitied him*. I, I could not believe that was the man I had married. I *couldn't* believe it! And then I felt *sorrow* in my heart for him, because of the Christ that lives in me – even though yes I cuss, I ask God to forgive me for that – but still, I have God in me. Cuz God is in your heart. But the fact of the matter is that, you know, I, I looked at him Megan, and I was just *so devastated*."

After these disappearances, Leon returns to an unstable domestic situation: Erica is unemployed and in financial trouble, she does not have job prospects for him, and now one or both of them are in the full swing of abusing drugs. Tempers soon flare, and violence follows. Erica, who freely admits to serving time in jail for assaulting Leon, offers tutelage on how she fends off her husband's attacks: "I go put on Mary J. Blige [a musician], [singing raucously] '*I should'a left your ass a thousand times before! Oh, I ain't gonna cry, ain't cryin', I ain't gonna cry no mo'!* And I blast it to the top! Of the roof! Okay? And I have *hardwood* floors! Okay? It's *echoin'*! [standing up and stomping around laughing] I jeopardized my apartment! For my *life*. Cuz see, we ain't supposed to have all that drama. You can get kicked out for that kinda mess [meaning she could get evicted from her apartment building for disturbing the peace]. But see, that's how I turn a bad situation to a good sit-, [fiercely] *I'm* gonna survive! *I will* survive! See? This is what women don't know how to do, *you gotta draw attention to yourself, get some police there before somebody kill your ass*. This guy is under the influence of crack and Lord knows what else. *I* don't know what he's gonna do to me! This is *not* my husband, this is *not* the man I married! I'm not even gonna try to talk to him like that! But I knew, [matter-of-factly] I got a knife, and I didn't have my mace, but I got a knife, I picked up a knife, and I started boiling some water. And I put some uh, syrup in it, cuz my mom told me, 'If you don't have grits, just scald him with some syrup an', an' you know, that'll stick to him and he'll wake the hell up and leave you the hell alone!' So if an intruder is in your house, always cut the hot water on an' put some syrup in there and just scald his, you know, set up little traps in the house, for, for the scenario to go down."

Creating enough of a disturbance to provoke her neighbors into phoning for help is important for Erica, who says that she only dials 911 [the number to dial for emergency assistance] as a last resort: "If I was to call the police *myself*, and let him see me? That is saying I've gotta come and see you, I've gotta come and visit you [visit Leon when he is incarcerated]. I am responsible for sending you to jail. *That is just a no-no*. You don't do that. … Cuz it's like, *that's* what they *want* you to do. So you can feel *obligated* to go visit them. Yeah, yeah! So they'll create a scenario, *making* you call the police cuz they know they got to go back to jail anyway, cuz they done violated their parole, right? So they try to set you up. *So I'm hip to that game*!" One way or another, law enforcement eventually does arrive and Leon is carted off to the county jail, charged with violating parole, and then sent to the penitentiary to serve another three-to-nine months during which he settles down, detoxes, and apologizes to Erica, begging her for another chance. Erica – who repeatedly manages to re-establish herself with a car (possibly by earning money in the underground economy – she acknowledges exchanging sex for money during

certain periods) and later gainful employment – atones too, blaming herself for not being more accepting and supportive of her mate ("I was pretty much just being selfish, thinking about myself and what he had did to me. And actually, spiritually, I should have been praying for him, praying for him to be free from whatever he was going through"). Prohibited from harming each other physically by the guards and bars, and with time apart to reflect on their mistakes and pine for each other's company, by the time of Leon's release date both parties have reconciled their differences and are eager for reunification.

Depending on where she is in this cycle, Erica offers different answers to a fundamental question: Why does she continue to actively pursue this relationship, especially when she often has other suitors competing for her affections? Despite her bravado when describing domestic altercations, Leon's tendency to violence and his history of jealousy-provoked rage are significant factors – as became evident during a conversation in which Erica berated herself for repeatedly allowing her husband back into her life while insinuating that she feared Leon might kill her if she rejected him: "I am *very* upset with myself! About it, um, I'm uncomfortable with, with the fact that um, I keep [long pause], it's like, how much is it gonna take? … What I'm waiting on now is for him, I'm givin' him enough rope to hang hisself and I'm also surviving. There are people now that are *dead* [pause, measuring her words carefully], behind leaving relationships [ominously] *inappropriately*." Yet Erica also recognizes that she further jeopardizes herself by maintaining contact with Leon when he is in prison, seeking him out when he has disappeared, giving him keys to her apartment, and otherwise trying to share her life with him. In one moment of self-analysis she proffered this insight, gleaned from her favorite book, *Women Who Love Too Much*,[3] to explain: "We [women] are focusing more on what we *want* to happen in the relationship, as opposed to what is *in actuality* happening. So in other words we're like *blind*, okay? And that's why we have family members that are *not* in love with these men that are tellin' us, 'You can do better.'" This coincides exactly with a scene Erica's life-long friend Mai describes: "I've been knowing Erica since before Erica was in love with Leon. And I think that that's a relationship from hell, because it causes her nothing but grief and turmoil and drama. So what kind of enjoyment can you *possibly* be deriving from that? You know? And I've asked her before, but, I remember her saying to me, she had a little figurine, and the figurine was a man sitting – an African-American family – a man sitting in an easy chair, the wife with her arm around him, and the little girl on the floor. And she picked it up, and she started crying, and she started screaming at the top of her lungs, '*This* is *all* I wanted! This is *all I wanted*!' And I looked at her and I said [with a hushed voice], '*But that's not what you have.* That's *not* what you have. You've been in this relationship for thirteen years, your child is three years old, it's not what you have, so let it go.'"

Instead of "letting go" of her vision, Erica sticks to her belief that with dedication to Christian ideals and a firm will she can be the mistress of her destiny: "I take *charge* of my life today! And that's what I'm tryin' to tell him [clapping her hands together for emphasis], *you gotta take charge*! You gotta be a *man*! I am a woman, I take charge of my life! I do *not* let people run it for me! I do not let people make decisions for me today!" Hence her conviction that Leon can reform his ways if only he will really try, her periodic self-recriminations for not having been the "good woman" to help him do it during his previous releases, and her re-commitment during each incarceration to their life together: "I want to be with my husband. I want to be

[3] *Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He'll Change* (Pocket Books, 1991), a "stunning bestseller classic" (according to its back-cover text) by Robin Norwood, addresses those for whom "being in love means being in pain" and promises that "women who love too much can recover – when they find the power to love themselves."

> with the man that I had his baby with. I want to give this man an opportunity to be a productive member of society and take care of his child. If I leave him now, he's just going to regress, he's going to get worse. And so am I." And so, come Leon's next parole date Erica's heart will have softened, her hope will be renewed and her door will be open: "All of the time and the effort, and the money, and the love, that we have invested – that's worth more than gold. Because people don't just be together for that long amount of time, and you just can't throw it away. It's just something, it's just, [with deep feeling] *you just can't throw it away*."

Few of the women I interviewed were as open as Erica about their reliance on the correctional facility as a "social agency of first resort" (Currie 1998: 34) to help them manage the drug-addicted, criminally involved, philandering, and oftentimes violent men in their lives – and most likely they are not as painfully aware as Erica is about their dependence on carceral control. But the internal contradictions in the accounts many women give of their partners' incarceration are significant: expressions of mournfulness at the loss of a partner alongside memories of satisfaction or even happiness at news of his arrest; rifts in the relationships that are healed rather than exacerbated during his absence; condemnations of a "no-good" and "hard-headed" man followed by impassioned speeches of how he has been framed or why he deserves help; great optimism about future domestic harmony coupled with histories of life being calmer and both partners being more stable when the male is behind bars. In such interviews, women return repeatedly to the same issues in their dealings with men as do the participants in Kathryn Edin's (2000; 2005) work on the declining rate of marriage among low-income single mothers. Edin (2000:112) asserts that while most low-income single mothers "aspire to marriage, they believe that, in the short term, marriage usually entails more risks than potential rewards." She identifies "five primary reasons why poor parents do not form or reform a legal union with a man": 1) "affordability," or refusal to support an unemployed male; 2) "respectability," or the disinclination to marry an out-of-work, possibly criminally involved man; 3) desire to maintain control of household and child-raising responsibilities; 4) belief that men cannot be trusted to remain sexually faithful; and 5) fear of domestic violence (Edin 2000: 114; see also Edin 2005: 71-137). The personal histories detailed in my research suggest that, for some women, selecting a mate who is frequently or permanently incarcerated becomes *an alternative to non-marriage* since a man's penal confinement can help women restructure and manage these five areas of concern. Indeed, the fact that my participants and those in Edin's study contend with similar issues in their dealings with the opposite sex but the latter choose *not* to commit to the men in their lives underscores the significance of the intermediary role played by the penitentiary in encouraging and sustaining carceral dyads.[4]

The remainder of this article employs the framework of the five areas distinguished by Edin as problematic for single mothers to demonstrate how a subsection of my research participants clearly draw upon the criminal justice system as a queer resource in recasting their relationship dynamics and shielding themselves from the destructive behaviors of their partners. Three factors are important to note in discussing these women. First, they are among the poorest of all of my study participants: one of them makes $35,000 (28,000 euros) annually by working

[4] While Edin specifically addresses women's choices not to legally marry, her analysis can be generalized to the desire to "commit to" a partner with the hope to wed since those in Edin's sample actively expressed skepticism about whether or not their relationships would endure and spoke freely about desires to remain single. This differs greatly from the participants I discuss, who largely were already married to or were planning to marry their partners.

two service-industry jobs, thereby netting an income nearly double that of the top salary of any of the others. Three are unemployed and receive under $5,000 (4,000 euros) a year in government aid; three more work full-time for annual salaries under $10,000 (8,000 euros); and five have yearly incomes fluctuating between $10,000 and $20,000 (8,000 – 16,000 euros) depending on their employment status and what type of job they can obtain.[5]

The second factor is that the majority of the partners in this group regularly went to prison for "violating parole." In the United States, people typically serve a fraction of the time of their prison sentence and then they are released on parole for the remainder of that time. During this period of conditional release, parolees must obey a variety of regulations such as meeting regularly with their parole officer, reporting any changes in address, not traveling more than 50 miles from their homes, maintaining employment, not associating with other parolees, and not having any "police contact" (that is, not arousing the suspicions or attracting the attention of police officers). Failure to meet any of these conditions results in a "parole violation" and the return to correctional custody. California has a particularly high rate of parole violations, with 76% of all parolees in 2000 being sent back to prison compared to the national average of 58% (Criminal Justice Institute Incorporated 2002). At the time of the interviews, eight of the partners of the twelve women analyzed in this article were serving between four and twenty-four months for parole violations. Seven of the twelve women directly linked their partners' repeat offending and violation of parole to untreated alcoholism or drug addiction.

The final important factor is that I had on-going contact with several women in this subgroup after their partners were released from prison, which enabled me to record views that contrasted greatly with the rosy outlook they described during the incarceration period. It is quite possible that other participants had similar experiences of disenchantment and recourse to the criminal justice authorities as the dozen women discussed here that did not arise in the single interview I conducted with them, and thus the following arguments could apply to a larger percentage of the overall sample of women.

Affordability and Respectability

Like the women in Edin's work who found men to be more fiscal hindrance than help, the majority of the participants in this group gained no economic advantage through their partnerships. Only three women's spouses were contributing financially to the household before the time of their arrests; one participant's unemployed husband provided essential care for their five children which enabled her to work the day shift as a cashier at a grocery store (when her spouse is incarcerated she switches to the 6:00 pm – midnight shift), and another woman's partner took over duties of a traditional housewife: "[My fiancé would] watch my kids while I go to work, and clean the house and cook and massage me when I come [home]." The remaining men provided neither financial nor practical support on a regular basis, and indeed four of them were sources of considerable financial loss when they periodically stole money, belongings, or vehicles from their partners, usually in connection with their drug addictions. Given these circumstances, the economic ramifications of a man's incarceration on most of these women did not entail the proverbial "loss of the breadwinner." Indeed, only two participants felt

[5] Importantly, the United States does not have a universal health-care system and "benefits" (medical coverage) are tied to employment status. Part-time and low-wage jobs typically do not confer benefits on employees but often do disqualify people from receiving state-funded medical coverage because their earnings are "too high." People in this situation are left without access to medical care other than emergency services (see: Abraham 1993).

overwhelmed by financial hardship as a direct result of their spouses being sent behind bars – and both of these women already had been living in poverty before their husbands' departures.

However, despite the lack of monetary contribution from the men prior to their incarceration and the expenses women faced feeding and housing them, the imprisonment period was *not* easier financially for women. The economic drain of maintaining contact with a prisoner can be prohibitively high due to expensive fees for phone calls, costs associated with visiting (such as travel to the prison and food during the visit), and pressures to send clothing and extra food or money to inmates (Comfort in preparation; see also Grinstead et al. 2001; Braman 2002). Thus incarceration did not alter the "affordability" of women's mates in a practical sense. Instead, the relational dynamics around economic issues changed in ways that gave a context of "respectability" to the partnership and valorized the women's support of their men. Edin (2000: 120) documents the linkage of a man's economic viability and his ability to confer "respectability" on his wife: "[Single] mothers said that they could not achieve respectability by marrying someone who was frequently out of work, otherwise unemployed, supplemented his income through criminal activity, and had little chance of improving his situation over time." Faced with high rates of male unemployment and criminality, therefore, "[m]ost mothers weren't willing to sign an apartment lease with the man they were with, much less a marriage license." On the whole, women with incarcerated partners shared the desire of Edin's interviewees for their mates to participate in the wider societal labor force, yet when the men went to prison the women's expectations diminished noticeably: out of all 50 participants only one woman argued that her husband should work and cover his own expenses, with the other 49 women not caring about or not counting upon their partners' ability to hold a job while behind bars (although ironically for a handful of men their stints in prison were the *only* times that they held jobs). For many this lack of expectation stemmed from the practical constraints governing prison labor, namely the relative scarcity of jobs, the prohibition of prisoners under certain security classifications to work, and the extremely low wages paid for most institutional duties ($0.35 an hour at San Quentin). Others actively opposed their partners' penal employment, viewing prison work as collusion with the enemy and participation in a form of labor exploitation reminiscent of slavery. In either case, participants did *not* stigmatize unemployed prisoners as being lazy, noncommittal, or "hard-headed" about working – characterizations they did apply to jobless men in the outside world.

The radical shift of women's expectations for men's labor-force participation when their partners go to prison signals the role of the penitentiary in changing the meaning attributed to men's "acts of omission" (Brooks and Silverstein 1995:281) such as unemployment, lack of fathering, and relationship inadequacies. Speaking in retrospect about when their mates were last released or in anticipation of their homecomings, women share the attitudes of Edin's interviewees and communicate strong yearnings for their partners to settle down, find work, and attend to their families – and they express scarce sympathies for the parolees' shortcomings if they are unable to do so. Yet during the men's sojourns behind bars the women temporarily absolve them of many such responsibilities, acquiescing that it is no longer the heavily constrained prisoner's fault that he is "omitting" these roles from his life for indeed, how could he enact them under his present circumstances? Such pardons are facilitated by the stories of redemption told by prisoners, who express newfound devotion to their partnerships and avow that they truly wish and intend to mend their ways if only their dedicated mates will help them do so (Comfort in preparation).

Hence the twofold way by which incarceration confers "respectability" upon troubled relationships: first by furnishing a culturally acceptable and "manly" excuse for a partner's joblessness, his lack of interaction with his children, and his financial drain on the household (attributes which were disparaged as "not being a man" when he lived in the outside world), and second by positioning the inmate as a "reformed soul" who is now committed to the values of marriage, family, work, and sober living, as so eloquently expressed in his letters and phone calls.[6] In this context, the beleaguered woman who labors to put food on the table is no longer a dupe supplying drug money and free shelter to a disrespectful and disreputable man, but rather a "good woman" working hard for the benefit of her family, including her attentive and appreciative (although temporarily distant) mate. In addition, rather than having her money ignominiously stolen and wasted on street drugs or sex workers, the woman has control of her expenditures and can direct her finances towards the emotionally gratifying purchase of communication, food, and nurturance through phone calls, packages, and visits. These displays of "standing by your man" confer moral righteousness upon the woman and bolster her self-image as a loving and loyal mate – a characterization that can help sustain her through a subsequent round of rejection and disappointment. I met Paige while she was riding the bus to San Quentin to visit her boyfriend, a journey she made at least once a week during the six months of his incarceration. When the young man disappeared within a few days of his release from prison in a car Paige had borrowed from a friend, Paige consoled herself by emphasizing her selfless devotion:

> It's like, [sarcastically] *hello*? I waited seven months for *this*?! [philosophically] I waited, and I wouldn't take that back because you know what? *That's the woman I am*. I waited 'cuz I wanted to wait. Okay? So there's nothing that I would do differently about that, at all. 'Cuz *I know I'm good*. I know that I fucking did what I said. I was faithful, I've *still* been faithful! To this fucking very moment! You know? And I still *will* be because I'm fucking *stuck* on him.

Paige's experience with the release of her partner illuminates the conundrum that a man's affordability and his respectability (and thus the respectability of the relationship) *are contingent on his carceral status*. Sent home with no drug treatment, job prospects, or other rehabilitation, he is sure to shatter his high standing in short order.

Trust and Control

Some women with incarcerated partners express notable disillusionment with "free" men and compare them unfavorably with prisoners, saying that men who have been locked up have learned important lessons about life and about how to treat their loved ones whereas men who are not incarcerated are superficial and take women for granted. The women who rely upon the correctional institution for social assistance make similar claims, but these women generally are

[6] In cases when men are drug addicted imprisonment also can impute a more respectable physical appearance (one remembers Erica's colorful description of Leon's "funkiness" when she found him in the homeless encampment). As Philippe Bourgois (1995:109) documents, addicts returning to the streets from prison are noticeably more robust than their "free" counterparts – much to the bemusement of crack dealers attempting to screen out undercover officers: "The most frequent confusion [over who was an authentic customer] arose over men who had just been released from prison and had not yet destroyed their bodies on crack. … [A crack dealer assessing a prospective customer commented] 'He musta just came outta jail because that nigga' looked fresh union. That nigga' was healthy.'"

speaking about the *same* men, whom they feel change significantly – and for the better – during their periods of incarceration. For example, Butta reunited with the father of her oldest child once he was behind bars: years after their initial relationship had ended, she saw a local-television news report publicizing his detainment in connection with a high-profile drug bust and car chase. She began visiting her lost love in jail and married him on the day he accepted a plea bargain for twenty years instead of facing a 40-to-80-year sentence in a trial. Reflecting in her experience, she said:

> We have a lot of men that's very immature that don't know how to treat a woman, you know. For mine's, I know that his head was hard! An' he didn't listen. So, this is his punishment. … It's a lot of good men behind walls! You know, it's just that it took them *to be* behind the walls to wan' to get theirself in order. An' that's sad.

Likewise, when Brandi first met her current boyfriend while hanging out in her neighborhood she did not like his personality and did not pursue his affections; years after their original meeting he contacted her while locked in a correctional facility and it was only then that their romance blossomed. Brandi now calculates that her beau has been in prison for all but four months of their two-year relationship, and she spoke dispiritedly of his shift in demeanor when he last came home from a southern California penitentiary: "It was just a difference, the way he would act. He wouldn't be, it's like, he was gettin' *harder*, back to the way he *used to be* I guess. Cuz he was real nice and stuff when he *first* got out. Then he started to change." Similarly Celina, whose partner stayed out of prison for almost twelve consecutive months during the first three years of their relationship, described the time of their cohabitation as being full of "yelling and screaming and fighting and arguing and stuff like that." Even so, home alone with two sons under the age of three and deeply moved by her lover's "melodious" and repentant letters from San Quentin, Celina optimistically awaited his return: "I feel like I'm just passing time until he comes home. … I can't wait till he gets home so we can just have fun again and just be a family again, and be productive and all that." A month after her partner's release, the young mother sounded exasperated and depressed:

> Celina: [listlessly] He like, *took over*.
> MC: Oh really?
> Celina: Yeah, but it's, I mean [heavy pause], it's kinda, I don't know, it's different but, I mean, he's takin' care of business an' stuff, but, I mean it's like, I feel like I'm like *takin' second wheel*, like I'm just, he took over everything and I'm just like on for the ride I guess. But, I don't know. [pause, growls in frustration]. … It's not a fairy tale like I thought it was gonna be. But, it's cool though. We're just tryin' to make it. It's the same thing, it's just, I don't know, once you put all the elements of, tryin' to *survive* and *make it* it's like totally different, it's that, it's not like the same thing as when they're in jail and stuff. So, [dully] I don't know. It's okay, but, *I don't know*, somehow I think I was disappointed, but then, I just like, I just hold on and just don't even trip off of it no more.

Celina's comments speak to her longing to continue to exercise control over finances, child-rearing, and other household decisions once her mate returns to the home. As Martin Moerings (1992:256; see also Bourgois 1995:229) notes, women's "role transitions" when their partners are incarcerated often elicit untapped capabilities:

> Not all women [whose partners are imprisoned] have negative stories: Some women successfully tackled their problems and became more independent. They were forced to make decisions on

matters that used to be their husbands' responsibility. The situation is different where women feel relieved at their husbands' absence from home: The detention offers them the opportunity to lead a life with more freedom, without the frequent strain of the relationship.

Like the women in Ann Davis' (1992:83) study of the financial impact of men's imprisonment on their mates, none of whom "reported a feeling of increased personal financial security following their partners' release," Keisha was initially disturbed by the arrest of her fiancé but soon learned to relish her self-sufficiency:

> I mean when he first came in [to prison], I'm like, he was payin' the bills and he was doin' this and he was doin' that and now he gone, who gonna do it? Then I just have to realize, I don't supposed to never look up to no man to do anything for me, and that's one thing my mama *always* told me, "Don't look for a man to do anything for you, you do it for yourself." So, now I'm doin' it for myself!

Men's disruption upon their release from prison of women's autonomy and household control – often at the cost of the women's economic stability and quality of life – engenders feelings of resentment and powerlessness in their partners, especially if the men anchored their mates in the relationship during the incarceration period with assurances that their circumstances would improve. As Celina aptly pointed out in her above comments, contending with an ex-felon who is struggling to find work, control a drug habit, avoid the temptations of the street, and subdue his violent temper is "totally different" than interacting with this man when he is housed, fed, and restrained by the penitentiary. When men fall short in their efforts at self-rehabilitation, or when they show no motivation to make such efforts in the first place, the women who believed their promises and staked their future happiness on their guarantees angrily turn on their partners, often looking to the criminal justice system to validate their sense of betrayal by punishing the man who has done them wrong. After yet another demoralizing failure to settle into domesticity with Leon, Erica reveled in his shipment by the Department of Corrections to a facility in southern California instead of placing him in his customary environment of San Quentin:[7]

> Erica: They shipped him all the way to the *far-depths of hell* this time, which [laughing gleefully] I'm *so happy* about!
> MC: Why?
> Erica: Because! [laughing heartily] He's up there by like, San Diego, like Mexico, an' he's up there with all these ah, you know, Hispanic Mexican people, gangs, and he's, he's *scared shitless*! [shrilly] *Okay*? Because he's, he's not of that culture. And that's uncomfortable [for him]. And they're crazy.
> MC: And why are you happy about that?
> Erica: Because, it takes something like that maybe to [make him] *wake the hell up*! Maybe, maybe, you know, he, he brought this on hisself! And it's like, I'm, I'm really kind of *satisfied* with the situation because, I don't know *who* decided to ship him to the far-depths of hell, but I wanna really personally *thank him*. [more subdued] *However*, I do not want anything to happen to my husband, I

[7] Leon's placement in a distant facility almost certainly occurred out of administrative necessity (overcrowding at Bay Area prisons and space available elsewhere) rather than for punitive reasons. Prisoners are not sent to specific correctional facilities as punishment *per se*, although people with high security classifications may land in notoriously fearsome prisons and those suspected of gang membership or who are alleged to be threats to other inmates and correctional officers may be placed in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) at the remote and brutal Pelican Bay facility.

don't want him to get killed up in there, it's not that serious. Okay? But, nevertheless, he was taking for granted that they were always gonna send him to San Quentin.

Erica and the other participants in this group generally supported the arrest and incarceration of their partners, agreeing with the law-enforcement authorities that the men were guilty of wrongdoing and deserved punishment. Yet the nature of the men's offending in the women's eyes was often manifestly personal and not the legal reason for their detention, a distinction which permitted the coexistence of rationalizations claiming men's innocence and victimization by the system. Kim, a 21-year-old woman, worked four nights a week from 9:30 pm – 8:00 am packaging groceries for Web Van (an Internet-based food delivery service) and repeatedly seemed to be on the verge of dozing off during our interview. Her brief and lethargic responses nonetheless clearly communicated her pleasure that her fiancé now had the opportunity to contemplate his infidelity from behind bars:

Kim: It [his incarceration] brought us closer together, so. If it hadn't been for him comin' here we probably wouldn't even be together right now.
MC: Really? Why do you say that?
Kim: He needs to sit here and *think*. This is his first time just ever sittin' down, jus' [pause], when he's out he's you know, he's been workin' or whatever, but, he still hasn't sat down and *think*. That's what he's doin' now. Nothin' but time to think!
[…]
MC: So how did your life change when he came here?
Kim: [pause] A lot of stress went away. *For me*! [we both laugh] For me!
MC: What kind of stress?
Kim: Just emotional problems. Problems, period. A lot of problems. And when he came here, it was just cool. [chuckles, pause] Cool for me.
MC: So what's your life like now?
Kim: [pause] Um [long pause]. It's the same, just without him. [chuckles]
[…]
MC: Do you feel like you've changed at all since your fiancé's been in prison?
Kim: Um, no. [pause]
MC: Did it change any of your attitudes about things?
Kim: No, I just started eating more and I started gaining more weight!
MC: Why?
Kim: [chuckles] Cuz I was less stressed!
MC: Cuz there was less stress?
Kim: Um-hmm!
MC: And what kind of things were stressful before?
Kim: [bluntly] Cheating. [pause]
MC: So when you first heard he was arrested, how did you feel?
Kim: *Happy*. [giggles]
[…]
MC: Are you lookin' forward to him comin' out?
Kim: Yeah. [pause]
MC: What's the main reason?
Kim: Cuz I wanna see how much he changed. That's the only reason. [chuckles]
MC: And what are you gonna look for?
Kim: [pause] *A better man*. [pause]
MC: What do you mean by a better man? What makes a man better?

> Kim: I just wanna see if he's gonna *just* be with me, that's all. [pause] That's all. That's all I worry about.

Although hopeful immediately before a man's release from prison, women express frustration about the lack of leverage they have in controlling their partners' sexual, drug-related, and violent behaviors and frequently resign themselves to giving the authority over their men to the penitentiary. This frustration and resignation typically stem from long histories of being failed by inadequate or non-existent support services which foster a fatalistic realism about the (un)likelihood of receiving help from social institutions other than the penal system. For example, Ann is the 30-year-old mother of five children ages four to thirteen. She single-handedly supports her offspring by working as a grocery-store cashier for under $10,000 (8,000 euros) a year following the termination of her state assistance under the Welfare-to-Workfare program.[8] She left school at age 13 and has been living away from her parental home since age 16 due to her mother's schizophrenia, which rendered the mentally ill woman unable to care for her family. Ann's first husband was extremely abusive and her current husband, with whom she has had a 12-year relationship, has struck her hard enough to cause bruising on multiple occasions. After the first time he hit her Ann tried to leave the relationship by obtaining a restraining order (a legal order that he must stay away from her) but she wound up reconciling with him because she could not find legal help to assist her in recovering her daughter, whom the husband was keeping away from Ann as a means of enticing his wife to return to him. This man first went to prison when he was sentenced to 18 months for selling amphetamines to support his own drug habit. In the next four years he served four more sentences for parole violations, usually for failing his drug tests, and in one instance Ann's mother tipped off the parole officer that her son-in-law had been getting high because she wanted him to go to prison to detox. Ann, who has struggled with her own drug addiction, described the pattern that occurs each time her husband returns home from prison and the psychological damage he inflicts on their children:

> [sullen, flat tone] I was like, "I'm gonna tell you what's gonna happen. You're gonna get high. You're gonna start selling. And once you start selling, we're gonna start arguing, you're gonna start going out and not coming home. You're gonna meet somebody else who's gettin' high with you, cheat on me, and go to jail." And that's, and it happened just that way. [pause] Just that way. And, now he's back [in San Quentin] and [pause, sadly], my kids go through it when he's high. Because they know when he's high, my older ones, cuz they could tell, you just, you could tell when someone's on drugs. And um, they're like, [said slowly, exaggerating, like a tedious list] they don't like *all* the people coming in and out of our *house*, once he starts *selling*, people start *knocking* on our *door* all the time, asking if he's *home*, coming *by* late at *night*.

Judith Clark (December 1995/January 1996:35), who is serving a 75-years-to-life sentence in New York state's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, lucidly documents "the tragic paradox of imprisonment" for incarcerated mothers who were too consumed by drug addiction, criminality, and sheer survival before their arrests to tend to their children. The penitentiary, "which tears women from their children and their mothering roles, [brings] some sense of relief in its terrible wake. Deprived of their children's daily presence, but also free of much of what

[8] In 1996, President William Jefferson Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, also known as "welfare reform." This Act established a five-year lifetime limit on receiving welfare benefits and placed strict requirements on states to move welfare recipients into the work force (see Sidel 1998: 201-227).

distracted them, the mothers can finally think first about their children." Clark describes the prison as a "punitive parent" (1995:310) that imposes welcomed restraints on chaotic lifestyles, a characterization echoed in John Sloop's (1996:2) account of a Texas woman who tearfully praised her strict home-surveillance and drug-testing program: "This program has been like a parent to me, the parent I never had" (or, one could say, "the social services I never had;" see also Duncan, 1996:24-31). For interview participants like Ann, the criminal justice apparatus intervenes in situations that have failed to attract other institutional response, enabling women to regain control of their households and reestablish trust in their relationships –in highly relative terms.

Domestic Violence

Research has documented high rates of domestic abuse perpetrated by prisoners prior to incarceration (Dutton and Hart 1992; Wolfus and Bierman 1996). The US Federal Bureau of Investigations estimates that intimate violence is the country's "most underreported crime" (Smith 1989:6) and indeed participants sometimes had difficulty addressing the issue. Even so, among those in this group nearly half of the women discussed violent incidences with their current partners while several others hinted but did not acknowledge outright that their mates were emotionally or physically abusive. In a particularly awkward but revealing conversation, Linda, who had introduced me to Jessica, interrupted her friend's romantic reverie with a reminder of Jessica's boyfriend's past behavior:

> Jessica: [I miss my incarcerated boyfriend] especially when I'm going through my hard times, cuz like, he was always the one that would always, be my savior, you know, no matter –
> Linda: [sarcastically] He was always the one to tell you how *dumb* you were!
> Jessica: [ignoring Linda] And you know, regardless of whatever, he always was there for me, and I don't have anybody now.
> Linda: Yeah, nobody to beat up on you!
> Jessica: [laughing nervously] Shut up Linda! [addressing MC] We got into a fight once, okay? And he, and he –
> Linda: He beat the *shit* out of you!
> Jessica: [laughing] He didn't beat the shit out of me!
> Linda: He did!
> Jessica: We got into a really big argument, he took my shoes, I remember that.
> Linda: *I* remember what he did, he *beat* the hell out of you!
> Jessica: And um –
> Linda: You called me up cryin'! "Waa-waa-waa! Come get me!"

Other women were forthright about violence in their relationships. Keisha, for example, spoke openly about how her fiancé came to be behind bars for assaulting her: the couple had been arguing over Keisha's suspicion that her fiancé was cheating on her after he returned to the house late one night drunk and smelling of perfume (at age 28 this man had fathered eleven children with four different women, including an infant with Keisha). When her fiancé grabbed her and yanked her backwards by her hair, Keisha "cracked him upside his head with a VCR… I *knocked-him-out*" and then picked up the phone, warning him, "I know what I'm gonna do! I'm gonna call the po-lice on you! You gonna get outta my house *tonight*!" By the time the police arrived both parties had calmed down; the officers decided not to arrest Keisha for her fiancé's injury, but since the young man was on parole they booked him on a violation. The episode left

Keisha conflicted, believing on the one hand that she was wise to defend herself (as a child she bore witness to her father's battering of her mother, a trauma she refers to often) and on the other feeling responsible for her fiancé's incarceration, acknowledging her unpunished violence towards him:

> [My fiancé] always told me, as long as we been together he always told me, "If I gotta get to the point where I gotta hit you, I'm gonna leave you alone. And I promise that." And I mean, I been goin' by that! So, that's why when he did it [grabbed her hair] I was just like, "*What*? You pullin' my hair, you fixin' to get to the point [of serious abuse]!" Cuz it start from your hair an' then it gets to a swat, an' then it get to a sock! I know about that [from seeing my mother abused]. [pause] But his, his mom tol' me, she ain't never seen him beat up his wife, or, you know, his friends, or his other girlfriends. You know, this is the first time, on his *whole record* this is the first time he ever been in jail for domestic violence. So it was like a shock to me! … I don' feel guilty, because I feel that he shouldn't'a pulled my *hair*, but I feel wrong because, if I wouldn't'a kept goin' on, I probably could'a just tol' 'im to leave and then we'd probably be still together. Because I done put, threw his clothes, I done that before, I done set [his] clothes on fire, I mean, *everything*! Me and him done been through *a lot*, and this is the first time he ever went to jail for anything we did.

Despite the spiraling levels of aggression in her relationship and her strong desire not to repeat her mother's experiences, Keisha says that she has never contacted any domestic-violence prevention services (indeed she does not know of any available to her) and that when she or her friends require help they telephone the police as a first recourse: "Sometimes I think the po-lice can be a real asshole, but then, when you need 'em, they do be there." Beth Richie (1996:130) finds a similar primacy of the criminal justice system in women's management of violence, but with a crucial distinction: some in her sample of women relied on their *own* incarceration for respite when going to "jail became one of the few sources of safety from abusive male partners that they could envision." The discrepancy between the ways these two groups of women use penal control for personal protection (the former as a means of removing men, the latter as a means of finding refuge from them) is intriguing, especially given their commonalities in defending their partners. Both Richie's (1996:70-80) and my participants balked at directly phoning the police to arrest a man, particularly an African-American man, due to their strong feelings about institutional racism, injustice, and the socio-economic disadvantage burdening American black males. Those who had called the police felt ambivalent or remorseful, usually vowing that they would not do so again and trying to compensate for their actions by providing abundant financial and emotional support to their partners throughout the men's imprisonment. Dawn, a 55-year-old white woman involved for ten years with an abusive black man, explained why she only once had made a criminal statement against him (when she was "out of it" from taking medication): "[I] believe that [my husband] really needs a good break in life, you know? It's *very* hard being a black man in this country. *I* wouldn't want to be a black man in this country for anything! … I don't trust them [the police], frankly! And, in this situation – I might have trusted them in other circumstances, but not when there's an interracial thing."

"Preoccupied with the negative social circumstances, and deeply loyal to the African-American men" (Richie 1996:71), women's tales of their mates' difficult life histories and limited life chances resonated with a pattern Ann Goetting (1999:7) identifies:

> For many women a twist of pity enters the battering equation early on. This man may present himself as sad and wounded by mistreatment: perhaps he was abused as a child or by another woman or at work. Whatever his source of pain and injury, it is the love of this woman alone, he says, that can

> deliver him from his tortured existence. He convinces her that he needs her unconditional love for his very survival. … When pity becomes a factor in the battering, guilt emerges as a powerful retention force: How could she be so heartless as to compound his misfortune and pain with her abandonment, especially if there are children involved?

Sandwiched between conflicting desires not to abandon or betray their partners but also to defend themselves against physical harm, the women in this group have discovered a criminal justice "escape hatch" that permits them to temporarily rid their households of violent men while maintaining their mates' honor: the oft-maligned parole violation. As described earlier, under the conditions of parole having "police contact" – that is, drawing the attention of law-enforcement authorities for any reason – can be grounds for a violation and return to prison. Thus, if a battered woman can either wait out her partner's round-up in a police sweep (a near inevitability in low-income neighborhoods) or plot to attract police attention (using strategies such as those described by Erica), she can be practically guaranteed a period of relief while the man cycles through the correctional system. Meanwhile, the fact that he technically is guilty only of "police contact" and has *not* been incarcerated for abusing her facilitates the woman's defense of him as a man wronged by a hyper-punitive system and preserves harmony between them because she did not bring charges or testify against him. Paradoxically then, the parole system functions as both a safety net in the absence of other social services for women involved with abusive men *and* as a mechanism that perpetuates the relationship by virtually assuring periods of respite during which "loving contrition" (Goetting 1999:11) can occur.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I noted that the disintegrative repercussions of incarceration and the integrative functions of the prison-as-peculiar-social-service coexist. As the case histories and interview quotations presented in this article show, women at once denounce *and* commend the criminal justice system for its intercession in their personal lives, and both rebel against *and* cooperate with the correctional authorities charged with monitoring, restraining, and sanctioning their partners. One can make sense of these findings using the concept of "sociological ambivalence" elaborated by Robert Merton and Elinor Barber (1976:6), which "directs us to examine the processes in the social structure that affect the probability of ambivalence turning up in particular kinds of role-relations." It is clear when one considers the processes in the social structure that underlie women's ambivalence towards the prison that the queerly beneficial functions of the penitentiary arise *in the absence* of social-welfare institutions traditionally charged with such roles: job-placement and drug-treatment programs, mental-health services, domestic violence shelters, and individual and family counseling. The need for these services is not exclusive to the impoverished, yet the interconnected cutback of the social-welfare state and expansion of the penal state that has been occurring in the United States since the 1980s has virtually erased these services from the public sector, diverting those who can afford to pay for therapy and treatment to private clinics and leaving the rest to turn to the one government-funded resource that is still robustly in operation– the correctional facility.

One might then wonder: if low-income women are finding assistance through the incarceration of disruptive or dangerous men, why not advocate for wider-sweeping arrest and detention policies, longer sentences, and more prisons as a means of providing "protection" for the poor? Such a stance, however alluring to the conservative viewpoint, is a misinterpretation of the reasoning put forth in this article in that it overlooks the key concepts of ambivalence and

secondary prisonization in my analysis. The fact that a close investigation finds paradoxical "benefits" to incarceration does not override the much more obvious and amply documented destructive effects of forced separation and confinement on family ties (Braman 2004; Western, Lopoo and McLanahan 2004), children's welfare (Johnson and Waldfogel 2004), and community life (Clear 2002; Lynch and Sabol 2004). As is evident throughout the interview quotations, women's expressions of relief at their partners' imprisonment are consistently interwoven with statements of remorse, longing, fearfulness, and depression, in clear recognition that correctional facilities cause their own forms of harm and are inferior substitutes for the family-centered, therapeutic and economic programs women and their partners require. Indeed, women are not choosing incarceration over other existing services, nor do they tout it as a particularly effective means of controlling their men, protecting themselves, or bettering their lives in the long term. On the contrary, women turn to what would otherwise be their option of last resort because criminal-justice intervention has become the only reliable method of obtaining help (one recalls Keisha's blunt statement: "the po-lice can be a real asshole, but then, when you need 'em, they do be there"), and although their hopes for the future rise while their partners are serving time, women describe the periods of reunification after the men are released as disappointing and frustrating repetitions of the behaviors that landed the men behind bars in the first place. Certainly the annual national recidivism rate of 58% (Criminal Justice Institute Incorporated 2002) attests to the inadequacies of entrusting "rehabilitation" to the punitive wing of the state.

In the words of Pat Carlen (2005: 6), the prison, "whose primary function, to keep people confined against their will, necessarily (*not* contingently) perverts any of the other, more therapeutic functions claimed for it." Decreases in social funding and increases in penal funding might result in correctional facilities being incidentally charged to do the work of schools, of health clinics, or of detoxification centers (Glaser and Greifinger 1993; Hammett 2001), but the official purpose of a prison system is to punish the guilty and all other tasks will forever be compromised by that driving mission. By extension, therefore, secondarily prisonizing women by keeping them enmeshed in and dependent on the criminal justice system as they attempt to create a safe, healthy, and sustainable existence for themselves and their families condemns these women to degraded proxies of the services they need and thereby ensures their stagnation in a "carceral community" even as they pursue a life beyond bars.

"I'd Love to Shout This to the World: Men Out There Are Worthless!"

At age 31, Sarah has graduated from a reputable university, traveled extensively in South America, and profited from the Silicon Valley boom with a six-figure salary as an account manager in a high-tech firm. We first spoke in September of 2000, roughly one year after she first met Ben, the man who would become her fiancé, while volunteering as a tutor for San Quentin's higher education program.[9] Ben, a 33-year-old, white, first-time offender, accidentally killed a man during a fight (his weapon was a hefty tree branch he wrested from his victim) and subsequently followed the advice of his court-appointed attorney to accept a 15-years-to-life sentence as a plea bargain, reasoning that he would atone for his crime by serving the minimum eleven years and then be freed as the Public Defender had promised. By the time he met Sarah six years later, he and his devoted parents had come to understand the highly charged "no parole" politics surrounding indeterminate life sentences in California and, since plea-bargain sentences are ineligible for appeal, the trio had immersed themselves in campaigning for widespread policy reform in hopes that the outlook for Ben's release would be less bleak by the time of his first parole eligibility hearing in 2004.

Sarah recounts that she became "enlightened to alternative press" and politics during college, but it was while working for a design firm in San Francisco's South of Market area (a neighborhood famously gentrified during the early years of the dot-com take-off) that she realized she wanted to reorient her life: "I would drive into work every day listening to KPFA [a local progressive radio station], hearing about how horrible and screwed up our country is *and then I would see it*! I felt that going into work and sort of living in this kind of sheltered world that was all about me and selling design was not fulfilling. So I decided *forget it*, I'm gonna forget all this stuff, I'm gonna go back to school, I'm gonna study public interest law, and focus on prisoners' rights as an issue." The subject of imprisonment already had hit close to home for Sarah since her brother had been incarcerated in the mid-90s on an assault charge and was serving his time in "administrative segregation" (or solitary confinement) at California's notorious – and notoriously violent – Pelican Bay Prison.[10] While Sarah did not contest her brother's guilt, she objected to the harsh and degrading conditions of his confinement and of visiting, and she therefore arrived as a volunteer tutor at San Quentin in October of 1999 with considerable empathy for her students in general. After a month and a half of bi-weekly forays behind bars, she found herself strongly drawn to one man in particular, Ben: "I didn't really know what to *do*, and I wouldn't have pushed anything, but it was, I mean, I just really *liked* him. I *respected* him, he was *fun*, he was *funny*, he was *intelligent*, he was *none of the things* that are the stereotypes of people in prison! He's *beautiful*, he's *kind* and *considerate* and *motivated* and ah, [we] love to talk about *politics*! That's where we really bonded, because, I would say after we had been working together for about three weeks, I started to share with him what I knew about political issues and social issues, and I started to recommend certain books for him to read." From intense

[9] Due in large part to its proximity to several universities, including the University of California at Berkeley, San Quentin is the only prison in California with a program through which inmates can receive an Associate's degree by attending classes taught inside the facility by volunteer professors and teachers' assistants. Despite overwhelming evidence of the benefits of postsecondary correctional education, the Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act signed in 1994 by President William Jefferson Clinton prohibits all prisoners from receiving Pell Grants, the major source of funding for such programs ((see Page 2004).

[10] Pelican Bay State Prison, which opened in 1989 in northwest California near the Oregon border, is one of the state's most brutal correctional facilities. Riots, killings of inmates by correctional officers, and the "hiring" by correctional officers of inmate enforcers to inflict punishment on targeted prisoners have resulted in numerous investigations, including one by the US Department of Justice into civil rights violations ((Sward and Wallace 1998; Associated Press 2000)

discussions of Howard Zinn's *The People's History of the United States* the couple gradually moved to writing lengthy and impassioned love letters. After an absence while traveling in Peru, Sarah resigned from the volunteer program and returned to San Quentin as Ben's personal visitor. By the spring of 2000 they were engaged.

Compared to the relative "freedom" the couple enjoyed during their courtship evenings in the educational program (staff and students could bring books, paper, and writing utensils to class, talk in groups or one-on-one, and pass the time without constant surveillance by correctional officers), the constraints of being a prison visitor weigh heavily on Sarah, who remembers a precious moment unlikely to be repeated while Ben remains behind bars: "The last night that I saw him [as a volunteer], I went to the class and I was the first one to get there and I was waiting in the classroom and he showed up and nobody else was around. So we've spent, we had four minutes alone together, that's the only time we've *ever* been alone, was in that classroom that night, and that's bizarre to think that we've never been alone. You know, it's very sad too." The "constant struggle to maintain what little you have" which now characterizes her romantic life is a far cry from what Sarah had envisioned for herself: "I never would have dreamed in a million years that I was going to marry someone in prison, in San Quentin, who had an indeterminate sentence. It just was not on my *strategic plan* when I graduated from high school and tried to figure out what my life was going to be like!" Yet, since adolescence finding her soul mate has been a top priority and she is overjoyed at having finally met the man of her dreams: "I think about my life, and I easily have spent the past seventeen years *looking* and *yearning* and *waiting* and *wanting* the love of my life … seventeen years really looking for the person that I was going to fall in love with, and always wishing and wanting and hoping and wondering who was that person, where is he now, what is he doing, what does he look like, where is he from, what's he about, *that constant searching*, at the same time going through the continual disappointments of meeting men who were not Ben, and not fulfilling, and abusive, or, just *unhealthy* for me."

For Sarah, the comparison between her past boyfriends and her fiancé is stark, and not incidentally linked to the hardship the latter has endured: "I look around me at what's out there in the world – I dated *a lot* before I met Ben – *worthless*! *Worthless*! *Totally worthless*! I'd love to shout this to the world: *men out there are worthless*! And it's just amazing how it takes something, a significant, dramatic change in one's life to make them a decent, good human being. That's sort of a sad commentary on our society quite honestly." Indeed, "one of the main reasons that I got involved with Ben, why I stay involved with him, and why many other women stay involved with their [incarcerated] significant others, is because the men that they're involved with treat them beautifully … the way that Ben treats me, *I would never have gotten that* from any guy running around out here in the free world." When describing what she was seeking in a mate, she returns to the theme of experiencing adversity: "I wanted to meet a man who had a *deep* appreciation for life. And not only a deep appreciation for life, but a clear understanding of *what* was really important. Not all the money, and high-paying job, and the big house, and the fancy Porsche, the hair plugs, and the personal trainer – you know what I'm saying? Not all of that. But somebody who *really knew* what was important in life and had *really* suffered and out of that suffering, and out of that pain, had grown as a human being and as a spirit."

"At times I can't even believe that I'm doing this, I really can't, it just *amazes* me that it's *me*," Sarah confesses. "Sometimes I feel like I'm talking about somebody else. Sometimes I feel like I'm watching someone else's life! … It's almost like I'm not even in control, I'm not even the one making the decisions. It feels so much like the decisions have been made for me, *it's fate*! And, I'm just, I've just made the decision to go along with what I believe is my fate and my destiny." Although her immediate family has warmed to her relationship (to varying degrees: her mother attended the couple's wedding and her father maintains a strong bond with Sarah but has yet to

venture to see his son-in-law), Sarah can imagine the reaction of skeptics: "I mean most people look at this, and anybody who's practical and anybody who's realistic will look at this and go, '*You are totally out of your mind*!' … And no, it doesn't make *practical*, *scientific*, *mathematical* sense, but, a lot of things in the universe don't make sense or can't be explained, and this is one of them. … I am *not* a religious person and I don't ascribe to *any* religion even though I'm Jewish I don't even believe *that*, but, I see myself as spiritual and I have to look at this and go, okay you know what? This is, *this is fate*, this is destiny, this is what was meant to happen. That's just how it's been mapped out." Implicit in this conviction is the assuredness that her present situation is temporary, a mindset she shares with other lifers' wives: "I mean really, these women would not be married and involved with these men for the period of time that they have if they did not believe and have hope that somehow, some way these guys were going to get out. So there is a strong faith." Above all, though, her reasoning is simple: with "*all* of the unknowns, and *all* the unpleasantries, and *all* the pain, and *all* the frustration, why do I do it? One simple reason: *I love him. I absolutely love him.*"

Justice in Black and White

Twenty-four-year-old LaShawn and her 26-year-old husband Darrell have known each other for "six years and change": the couple met in a barber shop when LaShawn took her baby for his first haircut, and they married just over a year before I encountered the bride in the Tube. If not for her husband's whereabouts, LaShawn would seem a model of upward mobility: coming from a stable working-class background (her mother is a secretary at a university and her father labored at Lucky's supermarket for 26 years), the teen mother returned to high school a week after giving birth in order to graduate on time, then went to college for two years, and now works long hours as a unionized public-transit bus driver, bringing home $35-40,000 a year. Darrell shares her trajectory of solid education and hard work: his father was in the military, and after attending Catholic schools as a child Darrell graduated from a predominantly black university in the mid-West, after which he worked as an accountant for a janitorial service and later as the manager of an IKEA warehouse. Owning two cars and having purchased a small property together in Oakland the young African-American couple enjoyed moderate financial stability and looked forward to increasing their investments while providing a good quality of life for themselves and their only son.

The first setback came in 1996, when Darrell was accused of plotting a crime committed by a group of his friends. According to LaShawn the convicted offenders testified that her husband was not involved but the police insisted this was a cover-up, a conflict that resulted in three hung juries over a period of eighteen months – during which Darrell remained in the county jail and only saw his family for thirty minutes at a time during bi-weekly non-contact visits. This was the young man's first arrest and he had hired his own lawyer rather than rely on a public defender, but after the third trial a combination of depleted finances, desire to return home, and the realization that one way or another he was serving time led him to accept a plea bargain for a four-year sentence. With credit for time already spent in custody and for good behavior, he was released nine months later with two years of parole. There were no further problems for a year: the young couple settled back into the routines of work and family time, with Darrell assuming primary responsibility for childcare since his hours were flexible, and LaShawn driving her bus from noon to 9:00 pm five days a week.

Steady employment and a quiet lifestyle minimized the rigors of parole supervision: "He had been doin' so good, you know how they supposed to go check in with the parole officer every month? His parole officer tol' him he didn't have to, he could just fill out paper[work] every month." But exactly three hundred and sixty-six days after Darrell's release, the parole officer (PO)

phoned to say that the young man needed to stop by the office for his annual review. Upon arrival, he was handcuffed and arrested for violation of parole. The issue in question was a trip to Disneyland the week before for his son's birthday: Darrell and LaShawn claimed that he had been given verbal authorization to leave town when he wanted as long as he continued to "program" (stay out of trouble and hold a job), but the PO – who had discovered Darrell's absence when he phoned IKEA looking for him – argued that no such permission had been granted. "I guess the parole officer was tryin' to clear his butt," LaShawn speculates, referring to the laxity of her husband's supervision. "Because he hadn't did the review and my husband was outta town, he wouldn't be able to do the review 'til after his [first] year [of parole] was up. It's lookin' bad on the parole officer, it's lookin' like he hasn't been doin' his job, hasn't been checkin' up." Despite testimonies at a Morrissey hearing[11] from his wife, child, and employer arguing that his absence had been family- and not crime-related, Darrell was returned to custody in September 2000 for his remaining year of parole.

LaShawn sees the role played by race as highly consequential in Darrell's initial conviction and his parole violation. Speaking of the Morrissey hearing she notes: "His parole officer is white. … The only white people that were there that were on his side was the people from his job. Everyone else who came in, it was me, his mother, my son, you know, *we're all black*. So it was just, it was a *very uncomfortable* situation. I was *really* nervous, I didn't want to be there." Her husband's court and prison experiences have left her furious with the criminal justice system, which she bitterly condemns as racist and illogical: "Here you have a man. All he did was go outta town. He was workin', he has a family. … Instead of tellin' this man, you know, 'Okay, you did something wrong, don't do it again, but you need to be there to take care of your family'… Here you would take this man, the breadwinner *of* this family, *from* that family! Okay, you did cause a triple effect: you got another man in jail. You got a single parent now. You got a child without a father. And if I was on welfare, you know, here I am back on the system. To me, they're not tryin' to help the problem [angrily] *takin' all our black men away an' lockin' 'em up*! [heatedly] You know, when they should be there with their families! The society say, you know, that they're not there providin' for their family, but when they *are* there tryin' to be there to provide for their family, look! You take 'em to jail for some, [stammering with rage] some, some *bullcrap*!"

LaShawn anticipates that with credit for good behavior her husband will serve just six months, but nonetheless his reincarceration has served a hard blow. On a practical level the young mother once again has had to assume sole financial responsibility for the household, selling her own car and working overtime in order to be able to make payments on her husband's truck, his credit cards, and their mortgage; she also changed her work schedule to the 5:00 am-to-3:00 pm shift and dropped out of a stenography program at a local community college in order to care for their son after school. Emotionally, entanglement with the criminal justice system makes her feel that her hard work is for naught: "This is not somethin' I want to go through, I'm tryin' to move forward in life, *this made me feel like I was moving backwards*. And it was just very disappointing, *very, very* disappointing." Her past efforts to avoid this predicament make her current frustration especially keen: "Before I got married I'd have boyfriends who would go to jail. And I would leave 'em alone, cuz I kept sayin' '*I don't want to mess with a man in jail*! I don't wanna mess with a man that goes back and forth to jail!' So I'd be like, 'I'm *not* getting into this pattern!' … You know, *all* the men in my family work, *all* the men in my family, they take care of they kids, and they *weren't* back and forth to

[11] The case *Morrissey vs. Brewer* (1972) established minimal due process requirements in parole violations proceedings. Morrissey hearings are informational hearings designed to establish that violations are based on verified facts.

jail, so I always said I wanted to marry the man like my daddy, like my grandfather. I wanted to associate myself with men like that."

LaShawn's criteria for a mate ultimately distanced her from her childhood sweetheart and the biological father of her son – a "party-party, kick-it-with-his-friends" character eight years her senior – and drew her to her "family-oriented," "homebody" husband. She still believes she made a good choice. Trouble with the law, she explains with a mix of resignation and outrage, is not limited to hoodlums and gangsters: "Black men have trouble with the law, *everywhere*, *all the time*. I mean, you could be a business man. Went to college, graduated! You know, and they could be drivin' their BMW, Mercedes, or not even driving! They could just be walkin' down the street, *dressed nice*, you know, fitted down! And they automatically gotta be sellin' drugs, automatically gotta be doin' somethin', that they're not supposed to be doin'. Here you are, po-lice officer hasn't even spoke not one word to this man, has never seen this man before, will *automatically* assume the worst." Although disapproving of Darrell's friends, whom she holds responsible for his first arrest ("I think it's time for them to just go they separate ways"), she repeatedly defends her husband and pledges him her full support: "I couldn't blame *him*, because I know he hadn't been doin' anything wrong, cuz it was *my* idea to take my son outta town … If he would have came back to jail for something he *did*, you know, actually committin' a crime? I don't think I would have been as understanding. … [But] since this is somethin' he didn't, it's, you know, not his fault, this is some *chumped-up charges*! You know, I'm gonna be *more* than supportive. … So since it's not somethin' that he *did*, he didn't do anything he shouldn't'a been doin' in my eyes, you know, *I'm gonna be behind him a hundred percent*, you know, do whatever I have to do to make this time as easy as possible for him." Describing Darrell's many good qualities – his intelligence, his commitment to fatherhood, his marital fidelity – LaShawn's voice waxes tender, then somber: "If he hadn't'a been to jail he'd be the perfect man!" she sighs. "That's the only damn fault he has."

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