

'Papa's house'

The prison as domestic and social satellite

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ABSTRACT ■ Concerned about their partners' potential desensitization to carceral existence and their ensuing loss of ability to function outside of the penitentiary walls, women whose husbands, fiancés, or boyfriends are incarcerated attempt to involve their loved one in personal and family life by relocating various everyday activities into the prison visiting room. As kinship gatherings, family celebrations, and romance are conducted behind bars, the prison becomes 'Papa's house', an alternative site for the performance of 'private' behavior. This article draws upon intensive field observations in the visitor-waiting area of California's San Quentin State Prison and in-depth interviews with 50 women whose partners are incarcerated to examine the contradictory emotional and institutional processes that complicate and reshape relationships during periods of incarceration and thereby profoundly transform the nature of precisely what visitation is meant to maintain, namely family ties. The depiction of three ostensibly intimate occurrences – commensality, weddings, and spending the night together – shows that their importation into the correctional facility twists them according to penal criteria and establishes the penitentiary as a domestic satellite. Hence the peculiar predicament facing women battling the 'institutionalization' of their mate: through their efforts to create strong inclusive bonds with their partner, they in fact partake in the paradoxical 'institutionalization' of their own family life and thus extend the reach and intensity of the transformative effects of the carceral apparatus.

KEY WORDS ■ prison, women, wives, visitation, food, wedding, family, intimacy, secondary prisonization, mass incarceration, United States

Thursday, November 23, 2000: Thanksgiving Day. *When I pull into the San Quentin State Prison visitors' parking lot at 9.00 this morning, I note about 100 other cars already there (since it's a holiday today, visiting hours began at 7.30 am). There are still plenty of parking spaces available and I take one on the outer rim of the lot, overlooking the waters of the San Francisco Bay. It's a gray, dreary day, so I grab my heavy coat along with my backpack and head up the ramp towards 'The Tube' (a long, unheated, concrete corridor in which people wait their turn to enter the prison). As I walk, I see Melissa and her four children inside the facility's gate, making their way to the main visiting room. This family has been coming to San Quentin at least weekly for four years, and they are well-known and popular among the other visitors due to the vivacity and charm of the kids, who range in age from five to eleven years old. Today Melissa is holding the youngest girl on her hip, and as the other three scamper noisily around her heels the oldest daughter notices me and waves cheerfully, 'Hi Megan!' I wave back, and Melissa gives me a smile while the remaining siblings call out greetings as well.*

The whole family is obviously in high spirits and as I watch them I remember a conversation between Melissa and another mother of four (all of whose offspring were conceived in correctional facilities – she met her husband after he had begun serving his life sentence) in which the women commiserated about the difficulties of explaining a father's incarceration to his children. Both women had chosen to be truthful with their broods but agreed that it was hard to decide on the 'right' moment to have such discussions. Melissa laughingly said her son, who was four years old at the time, gave her the needed opening when he asked, 'Why does Daddy wear the same clothes every day?' The other mom chuckled and recalled her own son's annoyance at age five with their cramped living quarters and his petulant outburst, 'Well, why is Papa's house so big?' I had been interested to learn from these women that their children in fact knew their fathers were incarcerated, since in all the time I had spent playing and talking with the kids they never gave any indication that they perceived San Quentin as a prison: for them, the massive, forbidding complex towards which they skipped each week was indeed, first and foremost, 'Papa's house'.

On any given day, thousands of women and children come to correctional facilities to see a loved one held captive among the over 1.4 million people in state and federal prisons in the US (Beck et al., 2002).¹ While visiting is just one means of staying in touch with a prisoner, it is often the focal point

of those inmates who receive outsiders, their kin and kith, and any family-oriented programming within a correctional facility (Carlson and Cervera, 1991; Jose-Kampfner, 1991; Lloyd, 1992). Advocates of convenient and humane visitation conditions at prisons stress the documented correlation between family involvement and lower recidivism rates: 'The chances of ex-prisoners leading productive and law-abiding lives after release are much greater when they have strong and supportive family ties. Enabling families to stay intact and maintain links throughout a period of imprisonment is essential' (NACRO, 1994: 3; see also Bakker et al., 1978; Jorgensen et al., 1986; Schafer, 1991; Breen, 1995). Correctional officials themselves emphasize this link when purporting that visiting programs are 'intended as an avenue to develop and maintain healthy family and community relationships' (California Department of Corrections, 1999: 1), which upon release will ease the societal re-entry process and bolster post-incarceration 'success'.

Yet when carefully dissected, studies of 'predictors of reconviction' reveal 'some tantalising but rather confusing hints' (Paylor and Smith, 1994: 133) about the roles of the family and of visitation programs, which are found to be more ambiguous (Goetting, 1982; Schafer, 1994) or more problematic (Fishman, 1990: 256–76) than commonly believed or claimed. Indeed, closer inspection cautions against regarding prison visiting as a monolithic practice which automatically confers the benefits of 'reunification' upon those brought together and highlights the importance of the relationship history, communication patterns, and coping techniques which bear upon the experience – not to mention the peculiar circumstances of attempting to enact intimate life in a tightly controlled, stigmatized, and highly scrutinized milieu wherein personal freedoms are sharply curtailed (Carter, 1996a). As Hairston (1988: 51) notes, it is in fact the *absence* of social support that is consistently shown to significantly hinder parolees, while the modest array of studies associating reduced recidivism with family connectedness lack the conceptual frameworks necessary to indicate 'the effectiveness of these models in achieving their specific objectives, in contributing toward corrections' recidivism-prevention goals, or in maintaining the quantity or quality of family ties either during or after imprisonment', and thus 'there is little understanding of why they [family-contact programs] do or don't work'. Such considerations lead Hairston (1991) to ask a crucial question about family bonds during imprisonment – 'Important to whom and for what?' – and to call for more comprehensive analyses of the personal and social experiences of felons and their kin both within and away from the penitentiary's walls.

This article depicts a range of familial interactions that occur during prison visiting in order to examine the contradictory emotional and institutional processes that complicate and reshape relationships during periods

of incarceration and thereby profoundly transform the nature of precisely what visitation is meant to maintain, namely, family life. Its arguments are grounded in nearly 300 hours of participant observation in the visitor-waiting area at California's San Quentin State Prison and in-depth interviews with 50 women whose husbands, fiancés, or boyfriends are in prison. This fieldwork, undertaken to document how the incarceration of a partner infiltrates and systematically distorts women's personal, domestic, and social worlds, reveals a notable fear among loved ones that men will become 'institutionalized' (a now-common term in prison lingo) while incarcerated. When asked what they mean by 'institutionalization', interview participants speak of a desensitization to carceral existence and a loss of ability to function outside of the prison walls, as described by Alice,² a 22-year-old, African-American unemployed mother, who worries that her husband will become accustomed to San Quentin during his three-year stay:

My husband was telling me, like, it *bothers* him to be in here [voice indicating relief that this is so, but implying that his attitude could change]. But other people, he said, it *don't* bother 'em, he said, some people – this is home, and *getting out* is a vacation. You know? And they just go right back, he said it don't bother 'em though, cuz it's just like the streets, and this is more home. Well, sad part is, some people that stay in here for a long period of time get out and be kind of all 'institutionalized', you know? And that's their life.

One primary way women attempt to combat the 'institutionalization' of their partner is by providing abundant emotional support during his incarceration in an effort to affirm his connection to the outside world. The centerpiece of this strategy – for those who are financially able³ – is regular, frequent visitation, a practice that shows an intuitive grasp of Erving Goffman's warning that

[a]lthough some roles can be re-established by the inmate if and when he returns to the world, it is plain that other losses are irrevocable and may be painfully experienced as such. It may not be possible to make up, at a later phase of the life cycle, the time not now spent in educational or job advancement, in courting, or in rearing one's children. (Goffman, 1961: 15)

Hoping to reduce the 'irrevocable losses' incurred due to a man's absence from the home and community, wives, fiancées, and girlfriends attempt to involve captives in personal and family life by relocating various everyday activities to the prison's visiting room. A curious inversion of the premise that frequent visitation facilitates societal reintegration results: as kinship gatherings, family celebrations, and romance are imported into the carceral environment, the penitentiary becomes a *domestic satellite*, an alternative site for the performance of 'private' life, which, in addition to investing the prisoner more firmly in his outside connections, simultaneously absorbs his

relations within the boundaries of 'Papa's house'. Elsewhere I have proposed that the mere act of entering correctional facilities as visitors subjects women to processes of 'secondary prisonization' (Comfort, 2003a; see also Clemmer, 1940) through which they suffer several of the forms of the 'pains of imprisonment' postulated by Sykes (1958) as the determinants of the social structure and culture of the 'inmate society'. In the following, I analyse three ostensibly intimate occurrences – family meals, weddings, and spending the night together – and show that their importation behind the prison walls also changes them according to penal dictates. Hence the peculiar predicament facing women battling the 'institutionalization' of their mate: through their efforts to create strong inclusive bonds with the incarcerated partner, they partake in the paradoxical 'institutionalization' of their own family life and thus extend the reach and intensity of the transformative effects of the carceral apparatus.

Design and parameters of the study

Constructed with convict labor between 1852 and 1856 as 'an answer to the rampant lawlessness in California' (California Department of Corrections, 2000), San Quentin is the state's oldest prison and it currently occupies 432 acres of prime real-estate property in Marin County, an affluent area north of the San Francisco Bay (see Figure 1). In contrast to most prisons, which are located in rural settings far from residential areas (Shichor, 1992), San Quentin is easily accessible from several major cities, being 18 miles from both San Francisco and Oakland, 60 miles from San Jose, and a mere nine miles from Richmond. During the 1999–2000 fiscal year, the institution consumed \$120 million of California's state budget⁴ and operated at around 179 percent of its capacity, housing 6121 men in December of 2000 (California Department of Corrections, 2002). San Quentin hosts California's Death Row and execution chamber, and also encompasses minimum-security and medium-security areas.⁵ There are three distinct housing areas within the institution, with the highest-security units (Death Row, the 'Adjustment Center' or solitary confinement, 'Mainline', and the newcomers' 'Reception Center'⁶) located in the original edifices of the prison, the medium-security 'H-Unit' situated on the outer edge of the main boundary wall, and the low-security 'Ranch' barracks placed in the northwestward expansion, the border of which nearly reaches a busy public boulevard leading to several local shopping centers.

I first came to San Quentin in 1995, when I was hired by a non-profit AIDS project to direct an HIV-prevention program for women visiting prisoners at the institution (see Comfort et al., 2000). During the two years I spent in this position, I had ongoing contact with dozens of regular visitors,

San Quentin State Prison (SQ)



Warden: Jeanne Woodford
Mailing Address: San Quentin, CA 94964
Phone Number: (415) 454-1460

Institution Profile

San Quentin State Prison (SQ)

Date Opened: 1852	<u>Designed Bedspace & Count</u>		
Number of Acres: 432	Facility	Design	
Number of Custody Staff: 915	Level:	Capacity:	Count:
Number of Support Services Staff: 633	I	250	250
Total Number of Staff: 1,548	II	1,077	1,857
Annual Operating Budget: \$120 million	RC	1,436	3,300
Fiscal Year: 1999–2000	Condemned	554	560
	Total:	3,317	5,967

INSTITUTION MISSION SUMMARY

San Quentin is California's oldest and best known correctional institution. The prison today includes a reception center for new commitments, a parole violator unit, general population units, and a minimum security work crew unit. The state's only gas chamber and death row for all male condemned inmates are located at San Quentin.

Figure 1 An overview of the prison, as posted on the California Department of Corrections' website.

many of whom were still frequenting San Quentin when I returned to the site in April 2000 to conduct nine months of intensive fieldwork for my doctoral research. My familiarity with long-term visitors and their willingness to introduce me to other women coming to the prison were decisive in my obtaining access to 'The Tube', an 80-foot by six-foot concrete corridor in which people wait to enter the institution. I undertook a methodical study of this area, arriving early in the morning and 'camping out' in the hallway for six- or seven-hour stretches in order to watch the dynamics among the women⁷ and children entering and exiting the prison throughout the day and the correctional officers who 'processed' them (checked their identification, verified their permission to enter the facility, inspected their belongings and attire) for their visits. In addition to these ethnographic observations, I carried out in-depth, tape-recorded interviews with 50 women whose husbands, fiancés, or boyfriends were incarcerated. Forty-one of these men were imprisoned at San Quentin, but the majority of the interview participants also had experience visiting this partner and/or other people at various correctional facilities throughout the state.

San Quentin holds 'contact visiting' (during which prisoners and their guests sit next to each other) every Thursday and Friday continuously from 11.30 am until 6.30 pm and on Saturday and Sunday from 7.30 am until 2.30 pm, while 'phone visits' (conducted through a Plexiglas barrier and obliged for those in the Adjustment and Reception Centers) occur at hourly intervals each of these four mornings. Visits for Death Row prisoners, which are scheduled like phone visits for two-hour appointments, take place in individual caged areas which narrowly accommodate three to four people. Inmates' work or school schedules determine the time or frequency limitations placed on contact visits, but it is not unusual for someone to be available for visitation at least several hours every day. Those restricted to phone visits may not have more than two sessions a week, one on a weekday and one on a weekend. Within these parameters, 74 percent of the interview participants frequented the prison between one and four days each week: 24 percent came to see their partner once every seven days, 34 percent made the journey twice a week, 6 percent showed up three times weekly, while a full 10 percent regularly came each of the four allocated days. Furthermore, 28 percent of the women either currently were or previously had been eligible for 'family visits', overnight stays in the prison typically scheduled once every 30 to 90 days.⁸ Overall, 58 percent of the interview participants said that they saw their partner as often as possible within their personal array of constraints, meaning, for example, that employed women came on both of their days off for face-to-face meetings or once if their partner was required to have a phone appointment, while people traveling long distances to the prison tried to budget for a visit every month or two.

These high levels of devotion to visiting and the relatively numerous

hours that legally free women spend within penal institutions cannot but pique the social scientist's interest about what actually happens when outsiders enter this distinctive locale. In this article, I investigate three traditionally 'personal' practices that transpire during visiting at San Quentin and show how partners of inmates at once recreate and transform these customs by lodging them in the correctional setting. I begin by discussing the organization of food and communal eating, then examine the enactment of penitentiary weddings, and finally explore the experience of spending the night together behind the prison walls.

Bringing him 'home and heart and hearth': eating together

Before I even stepped into the Tube today, I saw Millie, a 34-year-old white woman who works as a retail cashier and whom I started talking to a few weeks ago, shortly after her husband arrived at San Quentin with a six-year sentence. She came bounding out of the Tube to meet me at the entrance, making a gesture like fans do at sports games, pumping her arms around as if she were running and giving me two thumbs up.

'I'm so glad to see you! I'm really sorry I haven't called you back, I've been so busy shopping, getting ready for this visit!'

'Do you have a family visit today?' I asked her, already reading the answer in her beaming face.

'Yes!' she yelped. 'And I'm so nervous! I've got all my stuff together. I'm really nervous. My husband and I have to get all re-acquainted again.' She gulped a breath of air, then set off in an excited rush: 'It took me four days of shopping to get all the food together! I had to keep going back, because I wanted everything to be really fresh. Like, I wanted to bring in one of those pre-cooked chickens. But I have to buy cold food, because I'm using food stamps. So I tried to get a chicken the night before, thinking it would be really fresh – but they didn't have any chickens! So no chicken. But you should see the steaks I bought! Big, thick t-bones' – she held her fingers about two and a half inches apart – 'I spent 15 dollars on two steaks. And then I spent another 10 dollars on New York steaks that we'll probably have for breakfast.' She looked at me slyly, 'My husband said to me, "If you're not bringing meat, don't show up!"' We both laughed, and Millie continued describing her menu: 'We'll probably have bacon and eggs for breakfast today, and the t-bones tonight – they are this thick!' She held her fingers apart again to emphasize the steaks' sumptuousness. 'I brought Chicken-in-a-Biscuit crackers, Stove-Top potatoes in chicken flavor. And macaroni and cheese – four boxes! The guard even asked me why we had four boxes, "Do you have kids coming in?" he asked. I said, "No, we just eat a lot!" He told me that they've had trouble with people bringing in too much food and then

smuggling the leftovers to the inmates, but we'll eat all that! My husband and I could easily go through two boxes of macaroni and cheese. Plus, I'd rather have enough and then we'll just throw the extra away. And for snacks, I brought peanut butter, and Top Ramen, you know, just for easy snacks.' Pausing, Millie scrunched up her forehead, trying to remember any remaining items on her shopping list. With nothing coming to mind, she glanced impatiently at her wristwatch, jiggled her body nervously, and grinned at me with happy anticipation.

Food might seem a tangential or banal aspect of prison visiting, a low priority compared to the more pressing yearning for face-to-face conversation or physical interaction with someone forcibly separated from his loved ones. However, during my research interviews and field observations, women repeatedly described their behind-bars eating situations in great detail, elaborating the planning involved in organizing carceral meals, the motives behind purchasing specific types of food, and recollected or expected experiences of communal consumption. Correctional authorities recognize the high value placed by visitors and inmates on food and therefore use the control of commensality as one of three key factors – along with the length of the meeting and the degree of bodily contact allowed – to structure the distribution of visiting privileges along the hierarchy of prisoner security levels. Phone visits occupy the lowliest end of this spectrum: these meetings are limited to approximately one hour, forbid all exchange of touch, and do not entail any opportunities for eating. Only slightly more advantageous are the Death Row 'cage visits', which are scheduled for two hours, prohibit touching other than a greeting and goodbye hug, and preclude leaving the cage to purchase food or go to the restroom. Next up on the ladder come the Mainline and H-Unit 'contact visits', which can last for up to seven hours,⁹ take place in large cafeteria-style areas, and sanction an embrace and a kiss at the beginning and end of the visit plus holding hands throughout the encounter – within certain limits: 'Holding hands on top of the table in plain view is permitted, with no other physical contact . . . Violation of the rules and regulations may result in termination, restriction, suspension, or denial of visits' (California Department of Corrections, 1999). Although no outside food is allowed into these areas, guests may bring in up to \$30.00 a day to buy a variety of sandwiches, snacks, and beverages from vending machines for themselves and the prisoner. These machines, which are consolidated against one wall of the visiting room, provide a welcome distraction and opportunity to move around in an otherwise stark and physically restricted environment.

People visiting men at the Ranch, the minimum-security area where inmates live in barracks and may work in off-site crews for the California Transit Authority,¹⁰ enjoy greater leeway. There, meetings occur in an

RANCH VISITING

HOURS

Saturday, Sunday and Holidays

Processing starts: 7:30 am

Processing ends: 2:00 pm

Thursday and Friday (food is not allowed on these days)

Processing starts: 2:30

Processing ends : 6:30

AT THE RANCH IT IS NOT ALLOWED TO:

1. RECLINE OR SIT ON THE TABLE TOP.
2. LAY ON THE GRASS
3. CROSS VISIT. VISITORS MUST REMAIN WITH THE INMATE DESIGNATED ON HIS/HER PASS.

FOOD

1. YOU MUST HAVE RECEIPTS FOR ALL FOOD ITEMS.
2. NO HOME MADE FOODS OR THERMOSES ARE ALLOWED
3. FOOD ITEMS TAKEN INTO THE VISITING AREA SHALL BE CONSUMED DURING THE VISIT OR TRANSPORTED FROM THE VISITING ROOM/AREA AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE VISIT.

THE FOLLOWING UNOPENED VENDOR PACKAGED FOOD ITEMS ARE ALLOWED AT THE RANCH PICNIC AREA :

- * Prepared meat - Chicken, Fish, Ribs, Pizza, etc.
- * Unprepared meat. No marinating is allowed (Steak, Chicken, Fish, Ribs, Chops, etc) No butcher paper is allowed.
- * Lunch meat - Bologna, Salami, Hot Dogs, etc.
- * Cheeses
- * Beverages (non-alcoholic) - Only one 2-liter plastic bottle per inmate and visitor. Containers must be sealed.
- * Chips - One large bag per inmate and visitor.
- * Garnishes - no glass containers
- * Instant coffee - One six ounce plastic jar
- * Hamburger and Hot Dogs buns - 4 per inmate and visitor
- * Bread - one loaf
- * Tortillas - One package per inmate and visitor
- * Fresh Fruit - Whole, not sliced. - Two pieces/8 oz. Servings per inmate and visitor. **No melons**
- * Potatoes (baking) - One per inmate and visitor
- * Onions, Peppers - One per inmate and visitor
- * Bakery products - Factory sealed by vendor - 8" pie or cake
- * Self-starting charcoal briquettes - One 12 Lb. bag unopened
- * Plastic Utensils - No metal
- * Ice chest - It must be able to fit through the X-ray machine
- * Ice - One unopened bag of ice
- * Baby food - Unopened jars, boxed cookies, formula (pre-mixed) in bottles, no glass or metal.

Figure 2 The list distributed to Ranch visitors detailing conduct and food regulations.

unlocked lodge with an adjoining grassy space rimmed by barbeque grills and shaded picnic tables; although the rules for physical contact are presumably the same as those for Mainline and H-Unit, the relaxed atmosphere facilitates furtive caresses and enables prisoners to tussle or play tag with their children. Ranch visitors are allowed to bring in limited amounts of outside food conforming to specific requirements (see Figure 2): items must be either in factory-sealed packages or have been bought at fast-food outlets (receipts are required to verify the purchases), and no homemade dishes are permitted, although once at the Ranch people may use the barbeque grills for cooking. The most coveted of all encounters are 'family visits', granted to the immediate relatives of prisoners who have not been convicted of domestic violence or sexual crimes and who have a release date.¹¹ During family visits, inmates and their guests spend 43 hours together in one of a cluster of bungalows within a patrolled compound on the prison grounds; at San Quentin there are two family-visit areas, one for Mainline and H-Unit prisoners and one for those coming from the Ranch. At the former, prisoners must order their food – which is delivered meal by meal – in advance from the institution's cafeteria, while at the latter, outsiders are allowed to bring in factory-sealed supplies for 'homemade' fare, a prized liberty that generates much excitement, as recorded in my above fieldnotes on Millie.

Women's longing to nurture their loved ones, particularly through the feminine offering of home-cooked food, has been richly and abundantly documented (DeVault, 1991; see also Murcott, 1983; Ungerson, 1983; Charles and Kerr, 1988; Fürst, 1997; Sidenvall et al., 2000), and anthropologists have highlighted the symbolic value of receiving food from a trusted source, especially during times of personal vulnerability (e.g. Meigs, 1991: 17–29; also, more generally, Leach, 1982). Such desires become more salient in tightly controlled relationships with scarce opportunities for shared activities or the exchange of gifts, and thus in prison both the provision and partaking of food develop into central acts for the creation of connectedness and closeness.¹² Sophia, a 37-year-old white nanny, explains:

[During visits] you can buy very disgusting cafeteria food in the vending machines and cook it, together, in the microwave. I mean, at least you can eat together. That's a wonderful part of the visiting, I would say, and it's hard to understand but, as a woman, I want to nurture my husband. The food in there [that is regularly provided to prisoners] is atrocious . . . The food inside that he gets, yes, horrific! So I try to do everything in my power to bring him nutrition and wholesome and *home and heart and hearth* and everything that is possibly normal about breaking bread with somebody that you care for, which is a very sacred ritual, for people to share food. That's my only opportunity to really give him anything. I can't bring anything with me, I can't bring my homemade food, so I buy what they have and we break bread. And I try

to buy healthy food, or maybe, like ice cream, cuz, Lord knows he doesn't get ice cream, you know.

The understanding that men receive inadequate supplies of food, and generally no nutritious fare or 'treats', during their detention drives women to compensate for this lack during visits. Wives participating in family visits like Pat, a 34-year-old homeless and unemployed African American, try to furnish surprises that make the occasion special:

It was like, candlelight, we had little plastic wine glasses you can take in, and they were red, but we had like, strawberry and kiwi soda. You can't take alcohol in, so you know, we had strawberry and kiwi soda that we poured in the wine glasses. It was candlelit and steaks for dinner, I mean, you know, we had a nice time.

In a similar effort, many women who are restricted to buying snacks in the prison routinely bring in the maximum amount of money permitted and spend the bulk of it on overpriced victuals for the prisoner. Jasmine, a 19-year-old Palestinian who quit her job as an assembly-line worker following her boyfriend's arrest so that she could move closer to San Quentin, describes this practice:

Jasmine: An' then comin' here I have to giv'im – their food in there is *so expensive*, it's like unbelievable! Hot wings are like three bucks, a little sandwich like this [indicating with her hands a square the size of a piece of Wonder Bread] is three bucks, you know? The only thing that's regular from outside is the sodas. Seventy-five cents.

MC: So how much will you spend on food in a visit?

Jasmine: Um, 'bout 25 dollars. And sometimes he won't even be full. So. You know. That's kinda hard cuz, their prices don't need to be like that. They're vending machines, you know? So, there's no need for it to be like that. They're just tryin' to get over on people, I think.

The desire to augment the standard prison menu is so keen that some women who are not allowed to bring food into the prison resort to smuggling various delicacies to their mates. Ameena, a 46-year-old nutritionist of mixed heritage (Serbian, Egyptian, Hungarian and Creole), confides that her husband, who is a practicing Muslim 'won't eat the meat there, cuz it's not halal. Maybe once a month, they'll get some halal chicken. But, for the most part, he doesn't eat any meat. So I'll take him some, I'll cook him something.' Likewise, Sarah, a white, 31-year-old account manager in a high-tech firm, once regaled me with the story of her elaborate efforts to share leftovers from Thanksgiving dinner with her husband: after carefully unfolding flattened samples of various dishes in saran wrap, she distributed

the packets around her thighs and stomach, holding the items in place with a pair of support pantyhose and cloaking the operation with loose trousers. Once she entered the visiting area, she went to the restroom and dismantled this veritable 'moveable feast', hiding everything in her coat pockets. Her next maneuver entailed buying a decoy article from the vending machine, dumping out the uneaten foodstuff from its shallow plastic container, and furtively replacing it with the illicit turkey, stuffing, and side dishes. Successfully managing to heat the repast in the microwave, Sarah carried it (under the convenient cover of a paper towel) to her husband – who then found himself unable to lift a telltale forkful to his mouth due to the persistent vigilance of the correctional officers. 'We were sitting there and it seemed like they would never look away, and the food was getting cold and the room was filling up, so I was afraid I was going to get terminated, and I was just feeling miserable,' she remembers. Sarah's husband, noticing her distress, asked, 'What's wrong, Babe?' '*I just want you to be able to eat your turkey!*' she wailed, almost in tears. (An opportunity arose soon after for Sarah's husband to steal a few mouthfuls.)

As accounts like these demonstrate, women clearly see eating during visits as occasions to recreate, or import, 'home' within the penitentiary walls by employing the practical and symbolic functions of food to nourish their partner's body and soul (on the use of food in the social reproduction of families, see Charles and Kerr, 1988: 17–38; Lupton, 1996: 37–67; Beardsworth and Keil, 1997: 73–99). Yet the concentration of attention on consumption *inside* the prison frequently skews the meanings and practices of eating *outside* the facility, and thus transforms the act it purportedly imitates. For example, although Sophia notes that 'I'm a health-food girl, I prefer organic and non-processed [groceries]' and complains about the unwholesome snacks available in the visiting room, she substitutes this fare for her own regular diet during eight of her weekly meals in order to eat with her husband.¹³ In addition, the high prices of the vending machines and the considerable cost of bringing in only factory-sealed packages of food¹⁴ mean that Sophia, Jasmine, and numerous other low-income women forfeit the quality or quantity of their own intake both inside *and* outside of the prison – scrimping on their personal food budgets or skipping meals altogether – so as to be able to afford the appeasement of their mate's appetite. Even among those with higher incomes, sharing meals with an inmate necessitates the reorganization of eating patterns around visiting hours, precluding supping at more conventional times with family or friends. For people confined to the cafeteria-style areas, prison dining also disrupts commensality: rather than relaxing comfortably around a table, the prisoner and his guest perch awkwardly side-by-side in interlocked chairs, hold food in their hands or laps because the knee-high tables are too low to use with ease, and struggle with plastic utensils amid the din of the crowded room.

Yet each of these sacrifices and transformations appears more evident to the analytical observer than the participants, the majority of whom focus on the pleasurable and sensual aspects of eating in correctional facilities (on the importance of attentiveness to an ‘anthropology of the senses’ see Herzfeld, 2001: 240–53) and tout the benefits of blurring the boundaries between prison and home. The latter is especially important for mothers like LaShawn, a 24-year-old African-American bus driver who hesitated to bring her seven-year-old son into standard visiting rooms, preferring areas like the Ranch where ‘it’s just like a picnic’ (a statement echoed by Millie in reference to her decision to let her four-year-old daughter visit). As the vignettes presented above document, women use food as a tool to ‘domesticate’ the carceral environment, and indeed when one surveys the line of visitors tugging their multi-colored coolers filled with factory-sealed or fast food behind them, little in their appearance or comportment suggests they are going anywhere more complicated than a light-hearted family gathering.

‘The happiest day of our life’: weddings behind bars

Under California state law, any prisoner has the legal right to marry while incarcerated. It takes several months to file a request to marry and to fill out the requisite paperwork with the assistance of an inmate’s ‘counselor’ (a prison employee charged with helping with administrative matters), and among the necessary documents is the fiancée’s signed affidavit that she understands her intended spouse is a convicted felon who is serving time in a state correctional facility (see Figure 3). Each prison organizes its own schedule for marriages; San Quentin conducts ceremonies six times a year, on the first Thursday of every other month. Typically, three or four couples share the same wedding day, but the officiating chaplain performs an individual service for each, attending to them on a first-come, first-conjoined basis. Although relatively few visitors decide to marry someone while he is incarcerated – often preferring to wait until he is released, if possible – the weddings that do occur are highly visible and symbolically valued events with a large social impact, publicly affirming the romance and durability of carceral relationships.

When unembellished by the participants, the prison nuptial is an austere event, subject to the standard procedures and troubles of regular visits. This was the case for Stephanie, a 25-year-old, African-American security guard and college student, who wed a man held at Corcoran State Prison, a facility 235 miles south of San Francisco:

Stephanie: Well that day, um [matter-of-factly], it was like a normal visit, I had to get processed, and wait until the shuttle came to pick us up. And then

State of California

Department of Corrections

Memorandum

Date: January 19, 2001

To: Inmate [REDACTED]
J [REDACTED]
3 [REDACTED]

From: California State Prison, San Quentin, CA 94964

Subject: MARRIAGE

You are scheduled to be married on Thursday, February 1, 2001. Please tell your fiancée to bring with her a money order or certified check for \$95.00. She should be in the visiting room by 12 noon on that date (main visiting room).

If you have any questions, you can call me at ext. 5036, or your supervisor can call me.

This is the only correspondence you will receive from me. You will be ducated on Wednesday, January 31, for your February 1 marriage.

Pat
Pat [REDACTED]
Office Technician
Unit II

<p>***** PRIORITY DUCAT *****</p> <p> [REDACTED] </p> <p>NAME: J [REDACTED] CDC #: J [REDACTED]</p> <p>TO: MAIN VISIT REASON: MARRIAGE</p> <p>DATE: 2/1/2001 TIME: 1200 HRS</p> <p>INMATE MUST REPORT AT DESIGNATED TIME AND PLACE. FAILURE TO DO SO COULD RESULT IN A CDC-115.</p> <p>CDC-119(SQ) D.B. [REDACTED] ET.</p> <p> [REDACTED] </p>	
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Figure 3 Paperwork for a prison wedding. A 'ducat' is the permission slip necessary for an inmate to move from one area of the prison to another. A 'CDC-115' is the Rule Violation Report filed for a disciplinary infraction.

I got there and they had to get him out. And we had to wait for the pastor to come, and what happened was, we had to have another inmate, which was his cellmate, sign a marriage certificate. Then we went into a room, it was just a little small room, with nothing inside, just somewhere we could stand, and that's how we got married . . . I tried to be as special as possible, considering the rules. I had a purple-floral dress that was like two sizes too big because it can't be form-fitting . . . [Then there was a problem because] he had to work on Saturdays but it wasn't until 3:30. Visitin' was over at 2:30. Well his ducat [authorization for the visit] said 12 o'clock. But he didn't have to go to work until 2:30, so he was, he was supposed to have his visit until

2:30. But they were like, 'No, your ducat says 12:00 so your visitin's over at 12:00.' So after we got married I only had a hour to visit with him. An hour, hour and a half to visit with him, and they made him go back to his cell, until it was time for him to work.

MC: So, you went by yourself to get married?

Stephanie: Yeah, I drove by myself, and stayed overnight. There was this place, this hotel that's like right down the street pretty much, and they give you like a six-dollar discount if you're visiting Corcoran.¹⁵ [bursts out laughing] . . .

MC: How did you feel driving back home?

Stephanie: I was like *man*, you know, this is it, you know, I did that! [laughs] I'm married now! But then I was also really upset because I couldn't visit him for that time, they wouldn't let me visit him as long as the visit allowed, I felt like they could've let us *have* that time, they could've checked later. But they wouldn't do that. I was upset, and I could tell he was upset too because when he hugged me, he wasn't really like, 'Okay, I'll see you later,' he was just *silent*. You know, and I asked him about that later and he was like, 'You know, I really hated to see you go because we're married now and I can't even be there with you.'

MC: And does your family know you got married?

Stephanie: Yeah, they know about it. I came back and I tried to hide it from my mom, like hidin' my ring – I wasn't gonna take it off, cuz it's like I'm married, you know? I'm not gonna do that. But um, I tried to like hide it, I put it in my pocket [giggles], and she was like, 'I know you're married! I know you went down there and married him!'

While special circumstances can be arranged for prisoners with no contact privileges,¹⁶ the majority of weddings occur in the regular visiting areas. In accordance with the rule permitting no more than five people to visit an inmate at any one time, there is a limit of four outside guests who may witness the occasion. However, as explained by Blessing, a 38-year-old, African-American representative for a communications firm who married a man on Death Row after an 11-year romance begun behind bars, couples often capitalize on the lack of privacy surrounding their marriage by including others to enlarge the celebration:

I had invitations go out . . . And the people I invited [were other visitors and prisoners], because these people become your family, these visitors, these guys that are here, they become like a family to you because you see them! So your feelings grow for them as well . . . Um, the majority of people [invited] were from here [San Quentin]. Some of them I didn't even know well. But we tend

to try to support each other when we get married. Because we know that it's not the same kind of deal. You know, you're leaving your husband here, after you get married.

By sending formal invitations to people who most likely would have been present at her marriage anyway, Blessing strives to make a personal virtue out of a penal necessity by recasting a forcedly public spectacle as an elective private affair. Also, by replacing her jural network with the carceral community – and thus demonstrating the granting of kin status to social intimates noted by Stack (1974: 29–30) – she manages to preserve her wedding as a 'family' event despite the absence of her blood relations ('My family, they don't quite understand, why and how [I decided to marry a Death-Row prisoner], and I'm sure that they hurt behind it'). This dependence on the benevolent participation of a collective characterizes penitentiary marriages, for even when a woman's kin condones her choice of spouse, the restrictions on the number of people coming to see a prisoner necessitate the substitution of visitors for family members or outside friends on one's wedding day. Miki, a 60-year-old, African-American former nurse and current college student, is the mother of 12 living children, 11 of whom warmly embraced her decision to marry a man serving a life sentence at San Quentin. On the day of her wedding, however, only two of her kids and two of her husband's offspring were allowed into the facility. Nonetheless, the ceremony was a large affair, with almost everybody in the visiting room coming to stand with the couple when they were wed, prompting the chaplain to remark, 'There's a lot of love here, you have nearly everyone with you.' In addition to lending their presence, the other women gave Miki a range of offerings custom-tailored to the penitentiary marriage: one convict's wife brought a disposable camera and snapped photos of Miki and her friends in the parking lot before they entered the institution; another gave Miki a 20-dollar roll of quarters, saying it was for the bride and groom to spend on vending-machine treats that day; a third woman produced a Native-American design necklace made by her inmate husband which she had smuggled out of the facility on a previous visit; and a final loyal friend came to San Quentin at 8.00 in the morning the day of the marriage, telling Miki, 'I thought you might be nervous and want someone to sit with you [while waiting to go into the prison], so I dropped off the kids and came here to be with you.'

Weddings are perhaps the most heavily scripted of personal rituals, propelled by an enormous industry centered on inculcating desires, primarily in women,¹⁷ for a host of specific objects and activities that collectively produce 'the perfect day' (Lewis, 1998; Shida, 1999; Corrado, 2002). So powerful are these forces that even women marrying under circumstances seemingly antithetical to romantic pageantry go to great lengths to replicate the dominant model of what constitutes a wedding. Tee, a 42-year-old white

nurse's assistant, married her husband in 1991 at another state prison prior to his transfer to San Quentin:

Tee: We had a *very* special wedding that nobody probably has ever had. Because there happened to be a guard – we were at Tracy, DVI [the Deuel-Vocational Institution in Tracy, 65 miles southeast of San Francisco], at that time – and there was one guard, a female guard, that knew him really well, and she was affiliated with the same religious organization as us, so she like took the chance to speak for us and say, 'I'll be with them and I'll watch them if they can get married out on the garden, in the yard.' A real pretty garden with flowers all around and green grass, you know, you could still see the prison in the pictures a little bit but, it looked like we had a beautiful garden wedding. And that's what I'd always wanted all my life, was to have a garden wedding. So she was *really* nice and we had like five inmates, and they all had five visitors, or six visitors, so we had altogether like 25 people at our wedding. And I had a *full-length wedding gown*. Full-length wedding gown, veil, *everything*. And I had flowers, a fresh bouquet of flowers. And I had a little flower girl, my little niece was my flower girl. It was really a beautiful wedding we had. Everybody, all the guards up there said, 'This is the most romantic wedding I ever saw in DVI.' [chuckles] So. And at that time they allowed us to bring a camera in, to take pictures.

MC: So things have really changed.

Tee: Things have changed a lot. Now it's a very, um, not-so-nice weddings people have. For one thing, you can't even wear a wedding gown anymore probably, cuz you can't get through the metal detector! But back then they allowed you to wear a regular wedding dress, and they'd just wand, use a wand and wand you. But now they, you know, they're so strict about everything, I don't think anybody wears, *I've* never seen anybody else wear a full-length wedding gown [chuckles, proud of herself]. And a veil and everything.

On the day of her prison-bound marriage, a new bride relies heavily on the expertise acquired by long-term visitors – who take on the role of 'wedding veterans' (Westlake-Chester, 1995) – regarding the production of ritually satisfying and appropriately 'special' ceremonies in the dearth of conventional resources. Sarah, the Silicon Valley account manager, had dreamed of her nuptials since she was a little girl and recounted with much tenderness her friends' concoction of her wedding cake:

Sarah: It was really cute because you know, people get really creative in there, so whenever it's somebody's wedding, a whole bunch of other people will make them a cake. So they'll take something, like a piece of coffee cake – it's all vending machine food – [excited, appreciative of people's innovation] so, a piece of coffee cake, and they'll melt cream cheese and they'll frost the inside

with cream cheese and then they'll melt like a Hershey bar, and they'll frost it, you know, drizzle it over the top with the melted chocolate.

MC: Where do they melt all these things?

Sarah: Oh, in the microwave. Yeah, and what else have I seen them do? Or they'll take a muffin, and same thing, they'll mix cream cheese with chocolate and frost it, and you know, they'll put little candies all around it, and on top of it, and, and [happily] like our cake! You saw the picture of our cake! You know, it was basically a piece of cinnamon coffee cake, and it was frosted, oh, it had chocolate drizzled all over it and then they'd taken cream cheese and they drew an 'S' and 'B' on the top, for Sarah and Ben, and then they put some other little candy or something around it. You know, so they made us a wedding cake.

Sarah's delight belies the stark fact that, by virtue of her association with a prisoner, a woman with an annual income of \$100,000 has a connubial celebration akin to that of Chicago's South Side ghetto residents, whose crushing poverty forces them to 'have to make do with degraded imitations and inferior substitutes of the goods, rites, and values sanctified by the encompassing society' (Wacquant, 1996: 70–1). In addition to these severely limited opportunities for pomp and revelry, a fundamental condition of prison marriages is that shortly after being joined in matrimony, the groom himself becomes a scarce resource. Despite this strikingly unconventional feature, some newlyweds, like Blessing, actively pursue a traditional 'bridal experience' by partaking in the full range of prescribed activities:

Blessing: And I had a bridal shower, too. And I had a reception after the wedding. . . . A girlfriend of mine gave the reception after visiting at her home. And her dad barbequed and a lot of people came, and it went well into the night! We had a grand time, I received a lot of gifts, some gifts I'm still using because of course they didn't give me gifts that him and I could use, but then they gave me gifts and um, I still have a lot of them that I haven't even opened, so it was, it was nice. Um-hmm, it was really nice. . . . But it makes a big difference I noticed between those who, were married and didn't have no real celebration afterwards, like before they just got married and that was it. Versus people who, um, women who have had a celebration *before* and *after*, it makes a big difference.

MC: What kind of difference?

Blessing: Well you don't feel, um, lonely probably. And, you're still celebrating like you should. You know, instead of just, 'I'm married and I'll go home and that's it.' You're still celebrating like most brides and grooms do except [laughing] the groom's not there! So I think it's a big difference. You know? And most women here [at San Quentin], I think we started doing these

receptions and bridal showers about [pause], about five years ago. We try to get each one.

The striking commonality in the accounts of Blessing, Miki, Tee, and Sarah is their attempt to normalize the holding of a romantic, joyful, and hopeful ritual in a setting whose symbolic organization and practical operation are meant to diametrically oppose and inhibit such emotions. In contrast to outside couples who experience their wedding as a 'joint enterprise' which can be hyper-managed or flexibly designed (Snieszek, 2002), prisoners and their fiancées are exceedingly limited in their opportunities for collaboration and must comply with a date, time, outfit, guest list, chaplain, sermon, menu, reception and honeymoon dictated by the demands of a bureaucratic authority with no stake in the pair's happiness. The strong backing of other visitors and the energetic deployment of stipulated conventions help to mask the bleak surroundings and circumstances of this happening, which become more apparent in cases like Stephanie's when there is an absence of familial support and a lack of ceremonial display. The key to a gratifying penitentiary wedding therefore is the bride's ability to use external trappings and traditions to obscure the harsh realities of the situation while mobilizing a collective effort to realize the event despite its special constraints. Fulfillment also entails strenuous and sustained 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979) on the part of all involved as people labor both *for* the obligatory cheer suited to a wedding (Mauss, 1921; see also Hochschild, 1998) and *against* the resentments and frustrations that well up as the authorities and environment blight their hopes for this singular and momentous day. Among the women I interviewed and observed who married in the prison, the majority recollected their nuptials with positive, if sometimes bittersweet, sentiment: in the words of Ameena, 'It was cool. It was great. It was a really sweet day.' Or, as Butta – a 32-year-old African-American administrative assistant who married her beloved on the day he was sentenced to 20 years – stated simply, 'That was the happiest day of our life.'

'Like a cozy little home that I should have outside the prison walls': spending the night together

In 1968, under the governorship of Ronald Reagan, the California Department of Corrections established overnight visits – during which up to three members of a prisoner's immediate family can spend three days and two nights locked in a compound with him – for a mix of disciplinary and rehabilitation purposes:

Conjugal association in prison is recommended as having the practical consequences of reducing tension and hostility among inmates, providing an

incentive for conformity, promoting a more normal life style in preparation for the transition back into free society, increasing the likelihood of post-release success, and fostering marital stability. (Goetting, 1982: 63)

At San Quentin family visits take place in groups of small portable houses dedicated either to Mainline and H-Unit or the Ranch. Each unit is equipped with one or two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a modest kitchen, and benefits from access to the communal outside area which includes a small playground. The stays are scheduled in 43-hour segments throughout the week; up to five families in each spot may have overnight visits simultaneously, and although a mother or sister might occasionally join her relative, wives of inmates constitute the vast majority of participants. The frequency of a couple's visits typically varies between once every 30 to 90 days, depending on the overall number of eligible inmates. In order to qualify for these encounters, couples must be legally married and the prisoner must have a security classification commensurate with contact visits (e.g., not be in solitary confinement); in addition, he cannot have been 'convicted of a violent offense involving a minor or family member or any sex offense', nor can he be 'sentenced to life without the possibility of parole', 'sentenced to life, without a parole date established by the Board of Prison terms', or be 'designated a condemned inmate', that is, sentenced to death (State of California, 1999: 63). Prior to 1996, 'lifers' (people with a life sentence) were allowed to have family visits (Davidson, 1996), and the revocation of this privilege deeply affected those who previously had been enjoying these periods of closeness with their spouse, as was the case for Tee, who stayed overnight with her husband every few months from 1991 until their visits were eliminated five years later:

And then I think the hardest times came when they took our family visits away. That's when it got real hard. Before when we had our family visits we had that little bit of time where you would be together and you would have those two days to be like a real couple. You know, you got a little sense of, 'Hey, we're really married! *We're really a couple!* We're really, we're *intimate*,' you know, we got to be intimate and everything. But now, when they took that away, it just, it really made it very difficult, to never have that intimacy. [heavily] To me, I felt that it was like a *death*. Like goin' through a *death* or, you know, because it was just such – we were mourning! We were really in mourning! To know that we would *never* be able to be together intimately. It was so hard. [pause] And it's still hard, but it's like, it gets a little easier as time goes by.

While partners obviously value these visits as rare opportunities for private sexual contact during the man's incarceration, the three-day, two-night scheduling and the marked contrast with the bustle and exposure of the regular visiting room emphasize the 'family' orientation of the encounter,

encouraging people to simulate an ordinary living situation rather than fixate on a hurried physical congress. Indeed, through the 'quality time' couples may spend together, family visits afford an emotional anchoring fervently expressed by Aameena, who contested the termination of her family visits since her husband, who is serving 24 years, technically does not have a life sentence:

And I *begged* this man [the correctional official] not to do it [stop her family visits]. I begged him, I said, 'Look, it's not just about us getting together and having a good ol', you know, ass-slappin' time, okay? This is, it's more important than that. It has to do with peace and tranquility and peace of mind and a happy inmate and a happy wife and coping and de-stressing and you know, learning how to pray together and all of the above. Way, way, way, much more important than, than what you might think.'¹⁸

For those who continue to be eligible, the depth of interaction possible during family visits makes them a highlight of a man's time behind bars. Women waiting to enter San Quentin for overnight visits typically bubble with nervous excitement, cheerfully comparing stories with each other about the tribulations of organizing food, linens, and clothing for the stay, while in interviews wives warmly recollect their experiences in the compounds, focusing on the recaptured mundane pleasures of residing with a loved one. Virtually absent in their accounts is talk of discomforts related to being held captive for an extended period in a prison, and in fact such concerns are described as being aberrant or comically disruptive. Pat spoke with amused exasperation about her mother-in-law's intense reaction to temporary correctional confinement:

And, like I say the second one [family visit] was a trip cuz we had his mama there, *and* my son, and she [Pat's mother-in-law] kinda flipped out about bein' locked in. I think she had like a claustrophobia thing come over her, an' they had a little white phone there – if you pick the phone up they gonna automatically think something's wrong. So she's like [belligerently], 'Well, can't I leave? *I wanna get outta here!* What's this phone for? Le'me pick up the phone!' [laughing heartily] She really tripped out! But my *son* had a great time. You know, we got to swing on the swing, they have little bicycles, they throwin' the football. You know, we really had a nice time, and she felt more comfortable the next day, when there was other couples there, cuz we all got outside and barbequed, and we drunk coffee and talked, and you know, she felt a little better then. . . . Each [prisoner-housing] unit has a separate place where they go. For home visits. So, yeah. It's really nice, it really is, it's truly nice. It's like your own little two-bedroom *house!* And it's really nice.

The description of the overnight-visit bungalows as being 'like your own house' or the assertion that one feels 'at home' in the units appears with

striking frequency in visitors' reports of their prison sojourns. Although such claims clearly affirm wives' appreciation of the privacy granted to them during these visits, they also signal an important cognitive shift in women's perceptions of *what* constitutes their home life and *where* this home life can blossom. For example, Pat – who makes the telling slip of referring to 'home' rather than 'family' visits – was homeless during her husband's incarceration and had been living precariously for years before his arrest, a factor which contributed to her losing custody of three of her four children.¹⁹ In her case, then, spending a few days in a fixed environment in the company of her kin was a closer approximation of 'home' than she normally enjoyed and this likely contributed to her positive reaction to the 'truly nice' living quarters provided by San Quentin. Similarly, Jeanette, a 31-year-old African-American nurse's assistant, characterized her residential neighborhood – the infamous public-housing project of Bayview-Hunter's Point in San Francisco – as being replete with '*drama . . . the drugs and the killin' and the shootin', over stupidity. Over music. Or, or, who's sellin' the most drugs and stuff like that.*' Although preoccupied during the interview with rumors that another woman had been seen visiting her husband, when discussing family visits Jeanette brightened visibly, exclaiming that, since her spouse had been arrested for violating parole shortly after their wedding, 'We made our family visits our honeymoon!':

Jeanette: This [San Quentin] is a nice prison. And I enjoy it, I look forward to coming to visit him. . . . I had my two family visits here.

MC: Oh really? Tell me about those.

Jeanette: [rapturous] They were *beautiful!* Oh my God! They [the correctional officers] give you *much* privacy, they ring the phone every couple'a hours, you just answer the phone, look out, wave your hand, let'em know we still there. I figured that they would come an' knock an' look around, you know, but *very much* privacy, it's like we're at home. I don't have to do *nothin'*, he [her husband] cooks everything, or we'll cook together [dreamily], an' turn the radio on an' *dance*. [we both giggle] Yeah, or watch TV, the TV is nice. . . . It was *wonderful*. The visits, [when] I was there – I slept well. It's peaceful. We got to talk some inner feelings out where you can't talk in front of the room full of visitors.

In the above discussions of eating together and getting married in prison, I specify the ways in which women introduce food, props, and personal traditions into the penitentiary and thereby attempt to 'domesticize' or resocialize the carceral setting by making it more like the familial world. Discourses on overnight visits like Pat's and Jeanette's, however, demonstrate the fabrication of a romanticized 'home' environment inside the correctional facility which in fact *surpasses* that which exists away from the prison walls

and which – despite the powerful constraints of forced confinement and stringent surveillance – offers women idealized versions of domestic tranquility and emotional closeness not available to them under their regular socio-economic and conjugal circumstances. While for some women this discrepancy is temporary and directly caused by the separation from the partner (which then makes for joyous reunions and the strong appreciation of private time), for many a calm and satisfying home life remains unattainable even when the man is *not* incarcerated but simultaneously is not engaged in the household in a manner that fulfills his spouse. Millie explained that for years her husband's drug addiction alienated the pair, driving her into clinical depression and compulsive overeating: 'He's not a huggy-touchy kind of person, you know? But, I felt lonely, even when he was sitting right next to me, I'd want him to hold my hand and he'd be like, [disgusted] "Oh *God*, do I have to hold your hand? I don't wanna hold your hand!" ' After her first family visit, she reflected:

Millie: It [the residence] was like a cozy little home that I should have outside the prison walls. . . . [wistfully] We were *so* comfortable in that little cozy apartment with the heater on, you know, and watchin' TV – we actually sat on the same couch, it actually looked just like this [indicating the couch on which she and I are sitting]. But it's leather, I mean, we both fit on it comfortably, he leaned here and I leaned there [showing that she had her head on his shoulder] and it was so relaxing and cozy. . . .

MC: How has your relationship with your husband changed [since he was incarcerated]?

Millie: It's better. [clears throat, pauses] The, the main reason why I say it's better is because he's off drugs. We can actually talk – I mean, we'd always get along before, but when he was on drugs, it really wasn't him, it was this, false person. . . . It [his incarceration] brought us closer because we now talk about things like feelings, that we never talked about before. And I kinda like that, it makes me feel closer to him. Because before, we were pretty far apart. . . . In a way, I think it all happened for the best. That sounds kinda weird, but it, it got him off drugs.

The propensity of prisoners and their partners to engage in patterns of intense romantic behavior, or what Fishman (1990: 162–8) calls 'renewed courtship', during a man's incarceration is common, documented both in personal memoirs (bandele, 1999; Maksymowicz, 2000) and academic research (McDermott and King, 1992; Carter, 1996b; Klein and Bahr, 1996). In addition, women may experience 'father's [or a partner's] imprisonment as family therapy' (Shaw, 1987: 34) when confinement interrupts household stressors like a man's alcoholism, drug addiction, entanglements in the street economy, or domestic violence.²⁰ Indeed, for women

whose volatile partner is detained, time in prison likely corresponds to the stage in Goetting's (1999: 10–11) 'cycle of battering' termed 'loving contrition', when a man energetically atones for abusive behavior following an explosive event. Millie's commentary reveals that such periods of endearments and tender comportment can differ significantly from a couple's ordinary interactions, leading women to view their penitentiary encounters as opportunities to engage in fantasized, rather than realistic, family relations ('like a cozy little home that I *should* have'). Hence the paradoxical inversion of women's desire to strengthen inclusive bonds with their mate as a means of preventing his 'institutionalization': by facilitating the necessary conditions for rewarding interpersonal contact, the correctional apparatus becomes an indispensable element in the performance of intimate life.

Between a rock and a hard place

Stories like those narrated here illustrate the counterintuitive processes that transpire when wives, fiancées, and girlfriends of inmates strive to bridge the distance between the outside world and their loved one: unable to bring him home, they bring home to him through the relocation of intimate activities inside the penitentiary walls and concomitant attempts to 'civilize' prison existence through the mimicry of external life. As the correctional facility develops into a *domestic satellite* through its hosting of family meals, weddings, and sleepovers, this temporary and fictive domicile can appear – in spite of the enormous sacrifices, degradations and curtailments exigit by the authorities as requisites for prison visiting – attractive compared to the dire conditions with which women contend in free society. But this normalization and borderline appreciation of 'Papa's house' must not be misconstrued as a so-called 'social pathology' of the 'underclass' (Jencks and Peterson, 1991). Rather, it is apparent that in a society simultaneously engaged in widespread policies of 'mass incarceration' (Garland, 2001) and intensive welfare retrenchment (Piven and Cloward, 1993; Katz, 1996; Sidel, 1996), the prison stands out as the most prominent, powerful, and 'reliable' state institution in the lives of the poor and dispossessed. In Elliott Currie's words:

The prisons became, in a very real sense, a substitute for the more constructive social policies we were avoiding. A growing prison system was what we had *instead* of an antipoverty policy, instead of an employment policy, instead of a comprehensive drug-treatment or mental health policy. Or, to put it even more starkly, the prison *became* our employment policy, our drug policy, our mental health policy, in the vacuum left by the absence of more constructive efforts. . . . *Prison, then, has increasingly become America's social agency of first resort* . . . (1998: 32–4, last sentence my emphasis)

This analysis aptly frames the choices made by Butta, a 32-year-old mother of five and Welfare-to-Work participant who was involved with an emotionally and physically abusive man for eight years. Finding no therapeutic or crisis-intervention services to assist her, Butta eventually escaped her tormentor by having him arrested for domestic violence when she began her current relationship ('I had to do it [end the abuse] on my own, basically. With the help of the police department'). She now is wed to the father of her oldest child, with whom she reunited after she saw a local-television news report publicizing his detainment in connection with a high-profile drug bust and car chase: Butta began visiting her lost love in jail and married him on the day he accepted a plea bargain for 20 years instead of facing a 40 to 80-year sentence in a trial. Ruminating on her past and present partnerships, she exposes deep ambivalence about her current situation, which at once liberates her from the cage of abuse and embeds her in conjugal loss and loneliness:

MC: What makes this relationship different from your past relationships?

Butta: Well, it makes it different because he's not here. He's not here to share, in our child's growin' up. You know, bein' there for him for sports, bein' able to walk him to school. Bein' home, you know, where we can have a nice candlelight dinner. It's a big difference. An' those are all the things that I want, but, I guess I can share that with him when I go on a contact, a *family* visit. . . . Sometimes it's um [pause, then sadly], painful. I wish that he was home. But, um [switching tone, matter-of-fact], actually it's okay. Because I can, I can move freely, the way I want to move, without someone stayin' on my back. I can move freely, without the hassle. You know, I can have, have my friends over if I want to, I ain't got to worry about him fussin' about [with a brutal snarl], 'Well why they over here?' an' 'What they doin' here? What 'ch y'all doin' an' where y'all goin'?' You know, it's, it's more like, I don't have nobody tellin' me when to do it, how to do it, why to do it, or how I should do it. If I'm'a, if I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it. An' he can't object to it. So it's, it's nice. It's not nice all the time. Like on holidays, it's the most painful because this is when you supposed to be wit' yo' family, wit' yo' loved ones, sharin' the festivities.²¹

Safe but solitary, freed from domestic tyranny but willfully subjected to correctional control, united in matrimony but separated by the penitentiary walls: this is the patchwork construction of a family life spanning the now-porous boundary between domestic and correctional sites, the 'institutionalization' of intimate relationships played out in the grip of the 'carceral home'.

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Notes

- 1 Since there is no systematic nationwide documentation of prison visitors, it is impossible to calculate the specific number of people who come to correctional facilities to see their relatives or friends. The figure of 1.4 million state and federal prisoners does not include the additional 630,000 people incarcerated in America's local jails (Beck et al., 2002).
- 2 All participants had the choice of selecting their own pseudonym or using their actual name.
- 3 While not the subject of this article, the formidable expense of visiting a prisoner (including travel costs, cash for snacks and other personal supplies, and, when necessary, money for over-night lodging and incidental expenses, plus income foregone) should not be overlooked (see Davis, 1992; Grinstead et al., 2001; Braman, 2002 and Marchetti, this issue).
- 4 The operating budget for the California Department of Corrections (CDC), which encompasses 33 state prisons, 38 minimum-security camps, 16 community-corrections facilities, five prisoner-mother facilities, and the parole-supervision program, is \$4.8 billion a year, more than the total prison budget for any Western-European society and representing 6 percent of California's General Fund in the 2001–2002 Budget Act (California Department of Corrections, 2002). Since the early 1980s, the CDC has undertaken a prison building and expansion program unprecedented worldwide in its scale and speed (see Zimring and Hawkins, 1994; Irwin and Austin, 2000).
- 5 Security levels in California state prisons are calibrated on a scale of one (minimum) to four (high) – plus special categories for Death Row and 'Security-Housing Units' (maximum-security solitary confinement) – with most institutions housing two or three levels of security (e.g. Folsom State Prison is a level I-II prison, while California State Prison at Solano houses level II-III convicts).
- 6 Once offenders are sentenced to time in prison they are sent to one of the California Department of Corrections' 12 Reception Centers, where they undergo a medical exam, receive a security-level classification, and await

the completion and consolidation of their paperwork – all of which typically takes between eight to 16 weeks – before being assigned to an institution in which to serve their sentence. Approximately half of San Quentin's daily population consists of Reception Center inmates.

- 7 Based on my observations and information gathered from correctional officers, I estimate that women constitute approximately 95 percent of the two-to-four hundred daily adult visitors at San Quentin.
- 8 A full discussion of family visits and the eligibility criteria is found below in the section on spending the night together.
- 9 If there is adequate space in the visiting room, outsiders may stay until the end of the visiting hours. However, when overcrowding occurs, people are 'terminated' on a 'first-come, first-to-leave' basis.
- 10 Due to men's work schedules, visiting hours at the Ranch begin at 2:30pm on Thursday and Friday. The prestige of gainful employment apparently compensates for this abbreviated visiting period, as I never heard women complain about not being able to see prisoners housed on the Ranch on weekday mornings.
- 11 The implications of this last criterion, added in 1996, are discussed below in the section on spending the night together.
- 12 The woman's role as provider is accentuated in the Mainline and H-Unit visiting rooms by the regulation prohibiting prisoners from directly handling any money, meaning that the outsider must insert all currency into the vending machines herself and thus effect the purchase of each item.
- 13 Sophia typically visits the maximum number of days and hours allowed, four days a week for seven hours.
- 14 This regulation for Ranch and Family visitors includes salt, pepper, condiments, butter, and other items that one typically uses over long periods of time before finishing an individual container, thus new, unopened supplies must be purchased for each visit.
- 15 Stephanie lives four hours by car away from Corcoran State Prison. She spent the night before her marriage in the hotel in order to be sure to arrive at the prison on time for her visit.
- 16 I learned recently of a marriage that took place on speaker-phone: the prisoner – who is held in protective custody and not allowed visits – placed a collect call to his beloved at the designated hour, and she was awaiting him at City Hall in the presence of a Justice of the Peace.
- 17 The critique of the wedding industry for targeting women and saddling them with primary responsibility for a supposedly egalitarian event (Currie, 1993) has particular resonance in prison marriages, since the inmate is necessarily excluded from participation in any external planning and preparation. My discussion here focuses on women's efforts to realize their weddings due to both this limitation on male contribution and the female-focus of the research.

- 18 Aameena's and her husband's pleas had no effect: the couple found out that their administrative appeal had been denied by the authorities in Sacramento, the seat of the California Department of Corrections, which blocked any future hope of resuming their family visits.
- 19 In an ethnographic study of homeless men, Gowan (2002) observes that incarceration often precipitates homelessness, while living on the streets frequently catalyzes incarceration. This vicious cycle extends to partners and children of homeless and/or incarcerated men, whose housing situations may also be contingent on the man's whereabouts or penal status.
- 20 Although prisoners convicted of domestic violence are not eligible for family visits, the correlation of risk factors for criminality with those noted among abusive men (Dutton and Hart, 1992; Moffitt and Caspi, 1999) makes it highly likely that substantial numbers of inmates imprisoned for other offenses also assaulted their partners and/or children.
- 21 In work examining the dwindling rate of matrimony among low-income single mothers, Kathryn Edin (2000: 113) asserts that, although most of these women 'aspire to marriage, they believe that, in the short term, marriage usually entails more risks than potential rewards'. Edin identifies 'five primary reasons why poor parents do not form or reform a legal union with a man' (Edin, 2000: 117): 'affordability', or refusal to support an unemployed male; 'respectability', or the disinclination to marry an out-of-work, possibly criminally-involved man; desire to maintain control of household and child-raising responsibilities; belief that men cannot be trusted to remain sexually faithful; and fear of domestic violence. In a related paper (Comfort, 2003b), I hypothesize that for some low-income mothers, 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, for example by ensuring that a violent spouse is contained and surveilled while granting the wife authority over her household and children, or by upping a male's 'respectability' through emphasis on his oppression by an unjust and racist society (as Butta comments, 'I think that they're tryin' to take a lot of our men away from us. . . . it's a lot of good men behind walls').

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