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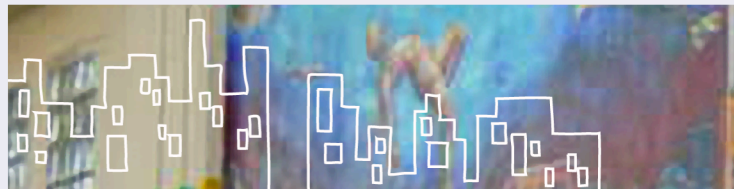
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**Intimacy, Manipulation, and the Maintenance of Social  
Boundaries at San Quentin Prison**

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San Quentin is an infamous prison in US history, the subject of myths, cautionary tales, and cable network specials. And yet ask the men living inside its walls, and they will insist San Quentin is the best place to do time in California. Beginning in the mid-1990s, San Quentin's gates were opened to volunteers from the San Francisco Bay Area interested in providing educational and therapeutic programs. The implementation of these programs disrupted the routines and norms governing social relations within San Quentin and provided a rich window into the daily operation of the prison as it responds to pressure. In this paper, I identify and analyze three narratives which surface in the official discourse used by institutional actors to describe the prison environment and compare these narratives with observations of daily life behind San Quentin's walls. Ultimately, I argue that in contrast to popular portrayals of prisons, which depict prisoners and officers as locked in depraved and antagonistic relationship patterns, the very structure of San Quentin, and perhaps prisons more generally, is highly conducive to the development of intimate bonds between these groups.

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## **Introduction**

San Quentin is an infamous prison in US history, the subject of myths, cautionary tales, and cable network specials. And yet ask the men living inside its walls, and they will insist San Quentin is the best place to do time in California. Some prisoners petition to transfer from institutions in Southern California to San Quentin, hundreds of miles farther from friends and family, because they have heard that it is possible to earn a college degree. Others are transferred or assigned to San Quentin through a series of institutional classification procedures outside their control, and arrive off the bus overwhelmed with fear and anxiety. Soon they notice other prisoners studying at tables usually reserved for weight lifting on the exercise yard, officers and prisoners chatting nonchalantly, and prisoners of various races making conversation in the cellblock, and they start to realize that there is something different about this place.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, San Quentin's gates were opened to volunteers and professionals from the surrounding San Francisco Bay Area interested in providing educational and self-help programs. As the years passed, these programs proliferated to the point that, today, an average of more than 4000 volunteers possess institutional security clearance to offer services inside San Quentin at any given time. Prisoners can enroll in college courses, take financial management classes, and participate in restorative justice programs, to name a few options. Once they have graduated from the various programs, prisoners often petition to initiate their own groups, addressing unmet needs they see among their peers, such as support for juveniles who were sentenced as adults and first-responder trainings in suicide prevention. San Quentin,

home to California's Condemned Row and such notorious figures as Richard Allen Davis and Scott Peterson, has become the rehabilitative mecca of the California prison system.

Despite this proliferation of rehabilitative programs, it would be inaccurate to characterize San Quentin as a "rehabilitative prison," in which institutional policies facilitate the initiation and smooth operation of rehabilitative programs and provide incentives for prisoner participation. In fact, the national and statewide trends away from rehabilitation and towards retribution and incapacitation over the past 35 years are starkly apparent at San Quentin. These include increasing law enforcement and risk-prevention orientations among correctional professionals, punitive sentencing policies, prison overcrowding by a vast overrepresentation of Black and Latino men, and racial segregation and organization among the prisoner population. San Quentin is thus both representative of the "warehouse prisons" of the punitive era and exceptional given the opportunities for self-development available behind its walls.

The implementation of rehabilitative programs by actors foreign to the pre-existing San Quentin social world interrupts and collides with the daily routines and norms of San Quentin's correctional officers, administrators, and prisoners alike. From a pragmatic standpoint, this interruption enabled my access to an institution and population rarely glimpsed by the media, researchers, or even politicians, let alone the general public.<sup>1</sup> From a theoretical standpoint, the

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<sup>1</sup> I began working as a writing tutor for the San Quentin College Program in 1998, and went on to serve as program coordinator of the College Program from 2002 to 2006. In this capacity, I worked on prison grounds three to five days per week, advising and recruiting students, working with various officers and administrative offices within the institution to facilitate logistical aspects of the program, counseling volunteer faculty on curriculum and interpersonal issues, and teaching English and Composition classes for over 8 semesters. I returned to San Quentin as a volunteer in 2009 to coordinate a GED tutoring program, and I continue to provide this service one day per week.

I volunteered at San Quentin with the desire to learn to teach and to provide services to a particularly disadvantaged population; in the process, I became fascinated with the inner workings and logics of the institution, dismayed by the inadequacies of the system to address the needs of the men it incarcerated, and increasingly cognizant of the ways in which inequalities were reproduced through their incapacitation and punishment. I applied to graduate school in order to educate myself about the prison system and to give myself the time and resources to contextualize and make sense of my experience at San Quentin. This paper represents the first step in this process.

collision provides a means to witness how the particular San Quentin social order “reveals itself in the way it responds to pressure” (Burawoy 1998, 17). Indeed, my work coordinating educational services inside San Quentin has provided a unique window into how those living and working behind the walls react and respond to the challenges and pressures offered by the initiation of programs intended to benefit prisoners inside an enormous, archaic, and repressive institution.

This paper focuses specifically on discourses employed by institutional actors—officers and administrators—to describe and explain the operation, relations, norms, and behaviors within San Quentin. I identify and examine three narratives which surface in the institutional trainings offered to San Quentin volunteers, the only formal interface between volunteers and the institutional administration, and, as such, the only opportunity for San Quentin correctional officers and administrators to present formal rules, policies, and regulations, as well as informal concerns, warnings, and accumulated wisdom in an officially sanctioned forum.

Three primary “interpretive schemes” (Goffman 1961, 84) surface in the trainings, providing a pervasive and powerful language of explanation for San Quentin’s institutional actors. The first posits “safety and security” as the primary goal of the institution, even as a surprising number of concrete and significant safety and security concerns are consistently unaddressed in the trainings. Instead, the trainings almost exclusively focus on the second

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The analysis contained here is based on my reflections on over 10 years of work, which included hundreds of informal conversations with San Quentin administrators, officers, prisoners, and volunteers. During this time, I developed friendly relationships with numerous San Quentin officers with whom I interacted on a daily basis for several years, and professional ties with correctional administrators, particularly those affiliated with the education department, the community relations office, and the warden’s office. I attended nine institutional trainings, five for volunteers and four for contracted employees. Finally, I collected San Quentin staff bulletins, training materials, volunteer program newsletters, and copies of the prisoner-produced San Quentin newspaper, materials which I analyze and quote in this paper.

To continue exploring the ideas in this paper, I plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with current and/or former San Quentin prisoners, officers, administrators, and volunteers to explore the maintenance and regulation of social boundaries within the San Quentin social world, and how the existing social order has been impacted by the introduction of rehabilitative actors, spaces, and perspectives. This paper is intended to use reflections and textual materials to develop theoretically useful concepts which will serve as the foundation for future research.

interpretive scheme: avoiding “overfamiliarity,” an overarching concept containing concrete regulations as well as a penumbra of vaguely and inconsistently defined behaviors. The central importance granted to avoiding overfamiliarity from a security standpoint is predicated on the third, and most often repeated, interpretive scheme, that “inmates will manipulate you.”

I analyze the central importance and function of these narratives by employing Pierre Bourdieu’s distinction between metapragmatic discourse, or official discourse used by actors to explain their behavior, and practical knowledge, or lived experience (Bourdieu 1977). While great emphasis is placed on the dangers of overfamiliarity *for volunteers*, this interpretive scheme seems to point to an institution-wide preoccupation, one that I argue stems from the need to entrench and sustain stark social distance between staff and prisoners, as well as to absolve institutional actors of responsibility for abusive or illegal behavior. Both of these functions are necessary due to the heightened potential for the development of intimate bonds between these two groups, a potential built into the structure of the prison itself.

In the following sections, I contextualize San Quentin within the larger trends defining punishment practices in California over the past 35 years and describe the characteristics which establish San Quentin as representative of and exceptional to prototypical “warehouse prisons” of the contemporary era. I then describe and analyze the interpretive schemes characterizing official discourse as it is presented by San Quentin officers and staff in volunteer training presentations and materials. I conclude with an analysis of the function of these interpretive schemes and the insights they suggest about social distance and proximity in San Quentin and perhaps contemporary prisons more broadly.

## California's Punitive Turn

The recent upsurge of rehabilitative programs at San Quentin is particularly remarkable given the history of punishment practices in the US and California. In 1973, after 50 years of stability, incarceration rates began the sharp and consistent rise which has now earned the US the distinction of incarcerating more people per capita than any other country in the world (Walmsley 2005). Today, more than 2.3 million people are behind bars, and an additional 9 million cycle in and out of jails each year (Osborne and Solomon 2006).

California has led the nation in the punitive sentencing and prison management policies emblematic of this period. For example, California was one of the first states to build a super-maximum security prison in which prisoners who violate prison rules or are suspected of gang affiliations are housed in long-term solitary confinement (Reiter 2010). California also passed the most punitive “three-strikes-and-you’re-out” law, allowing a misdemeanor to qualify as a third felony and therefore a third strike, mandating a 25-years-to-life sentence (Zimring, Hawkins, and Kamin 2001). Most recently, in 2008, California voters passed Marcy’s Law, a ballot initiative increasing the amount of time people serving life sentences can be denied a parole hearing. Before the initiative passed, if a prisoner was found unsuitable for release by the parole board, the default waiting period for a new hearing was one year, with parole board members granted the discretion to deny individuals for up to three years. Marcy’s Law changed the default denial period from one to 15 years.

Punitive law enforcement, prosecutorial, and sentencing policies led to unprecedented growth in the prisoner population, from 21,088 in 1976 to 168,830 as of December 2009 (CDCR 1997, CDCR 2010). The state constructed 24 prisons during this period, twice the 11 total which existed in 1975 (Irwin 2005). This explosive growth, particularly during the 1980s and 90s,



prompted criminologists Franklin Zimring and Gordon Hawkins (1994) to deem California “in a class by itself” (83).

### **San Quentin in Context**

The statewide trends towards retribution and incapacitation impacting prisons over the past 35 years are starkly apparent at San Quentin, despite the proliferation of rehabilitative programs. The logic of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) posits that the social order of a given environment is continually constructed and maintained. In order to understand the normal order and the mechanisms by which it is sustained, it is necessary to disrupt that order—or at least attend to naturally occurring disruptions. San Quentin offers a particularly viable site for viewing and interpreting the inner workings of the prison social world precisely because the routine behaviors and norms of prisoners and institutional actors in a warehouse prison are interrupted, and therefore, thrown into relief, by the people, spaces, and services rehabilitative programs insert into the prison.

In *The Warehouse Prison: The Disposal of the New Dangerous Class*, Irwin (2005) describes the fundamental features defining contemporary prisons. He writes, “Since 1980, many prisons in states such as California and Texas that rapidly expanded their prison populations have become true human warehouses. In these warehouses, prisoners...are merely stored to serve out their sentences” (57). Warehouse prisons house up to 6000 prisoners in overcrowded conditions; the prisoner population is rigidly divided along lines defined by racial gang affiliations and serve longer sentences than their counterparts in previous eras; correctional officers and front line staff hold antagonistic and morally superior views towards prisoners; and the administration is characterized by highly bureaucratic but often conflicting and inconsistently

enforced rules and regulations (Irwin 2005). In these respects, San Quentin squarely fits the warehouse prison model.

### **San Quentin as Warehouse**

San Quentin is currently operating at nearly 200 percent capacity, and the administration has struggled over the years to accommodate this excess population. An indoor gym, once used for basketball and other forms of recreation for individuals housed in the reception center, is now filled with bunk beds used to store this overflowing population. Hallways and other nooks and crannies are sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently, filled with bunks.

The predominantly Black and Latino men incarcerated within San Quentin's mainline reside in two housing units.<sup>2</sup> North Block, constructed in the late 1800s, consists of five tiers of 100 cells housing two prisoners each. Two men, two narrow bunk beds, a toilet, sink, and two lockers, their television, hotpot, photos, toiletries, and other personal items are contained in a 6'6" by 10'6" cell with three concrete walls pale yellow with age and nicotine stains. One small door on a fourth wall of thick iron bars is manually locked and unlocked numerous times a day by correctional officers.

The approximately 800 men housed in North Block are known as "lifers," meaning they will be called for a parole hearing after serving 85 percent of their minimum sentence (12 years, 9 months for a "15-years-to-life" sentence) and will only be released from prison when they are found suitable by a majority of members of the parole board. These men have been convicted

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<sup>2</sup> Of San Quentin's more than 5000 all male prisoners, approximately 1600, forming San Quentin's "general" or "mainline" population, are housed in medium security conditions, form the labor base of the institution, and are granted access to the exercise yard, religious services, and rehabilitative programs. Of the additional 3500+ prisoners, approximately 3000 are housed in San Quentin's maximum security "reception center" awaiting reassignment, 100 participate in a minimum-security work crew, and more than 600 are confined to the maximum security Condemned Row. This paper focuses on the general or mainline population.

for serious, and usually violent, crimes such as murder, manslaughter, rape, aggravated assault and felony murder. They are also widely acknowledged among correctional professionals, prisoners, and volunteers to form the most stable and mature population within the prison, as lifers in a medium security facility such as San Quentin must have evidenced good behavior in order to be transferred there, the parole board requires they participate in rehabilitative programs as a condition of their release, they tend to be older, and they often consider the prison “home”—and are therefore more invested in a peaceful and consistent environment than their counterparts serving shorter sentences.

The remaining mainline prisoners reside in “H-unit,” an area exemplifying the warehouse prison model the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) constructed to make room for additional prisoners as the prison population began to rise. In H-unit, five large prefabricated warehouse-style “dorms” circle a concrete exercise yard and house 200 prisoners each in bunks. The men in H-unit are generally serving sentences for between one and ten years and will be released on a date determined at their conviction, regardless of their behavior while in prison. On average, they tend to be younger than their counterparts in North Block and serve sentences for drug-related offenses, possession of an illegal firearm, theft, burglary, and/or assault, to name a few crimes. These men form the core of the California prison system’s “revolving door,” the seven out of ten prisoners who will be returned to prison within three years of their release (Petersilia 2003).

Across North Block and H-unit, prisoners are segregated into pseudo-racial categories which map onto real or alleged gang affiliations. During classification proceedings, each prisoner is labeled by “race” and a point-based security designation. San Quentin exclusively houses

prisoners labeled Black, Northern Mexican, White, or Other.<sup>3</sup> Those classified as Southern Mexican do not reside at San Quentin as a matter of CDCR policy, to avoid conflicts with Northern Mexicans and other groups with whom they have historic disputes. Once they arrive on the San Quentin mainline, prisoners are assigned to housing units based on their security classification and to particular cells or bunks based on their race.

Prisoners also self-organize according to these quasi-racial divides. The San Quentin exercise yard and cafeteria are clearly demarcated along racial lines, with particular spaces assigned to specific groups. For example, the basketball court on the San Quentin yard may be used by Black prisoners and Others, as these groups have formed an alliance. Northern Mexicans, however, use a set of exercise bars and picnic tables on the other side of the yard for their physical activities. Moreover, stark rules govern not only the spaces these prisoners may inhabit but also the ways in which they relate to one another on an individual basis. For example, prisoners report that members of one group are prohibited by the internal rules of their own group from touching a spoon or bowl in the cafeteria if it has been touched by a member of any other racial group. These are rules maintained through the threat of force.

For correctional officers at San Quentin, “inmate” is often used as a dirty word emphasizing the inferiority of the prisoner population, and volunteers may be derogatorily referred to as “inmate lovers.” Irwin argues that officers in warehouse prisons—due to staff training, exposure to existing informal officer culture, and their role controlling a population “in a position of extreme deprivation who are antagonistic towards their overseers” (65)—tend to distrust and demean prisoners. In a recent conversation with a correctional officer, in which a

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<sup>3</sup> These classifications do not map onto race as generally understood. The terms “Northern” and “Southern Mexican” refer to whether an individual of Mexican descent was born in Northern or Southern California, with a dividing longitudinal line marked by Bakersfield, CA. “Others” refer to individuals of Asian, South or Central American, Middle-Eastern, and other international descent. These quasi-racial categories instead reference presumed or real prison and street gang affiliations. Black prisoners are organized into the Black Guerrilla Family and the Bloods; Northern Mexicans, often referred to as “Nortefios,” form part of Nuestra Familia; and White prisoners are associated with the Aryan Brotherhood.

volunteer asked his advice about an uncomfortable interaction with a prisoner in the context of a GED tutoring class, the officer began by stating, “You’ve gotta remember, this guy’s an *inmate*,” clearly insinuating the moral inferiority of the prisoner in question.

While it is common for prisoners to blame prison staff for purposefully causing unnecessary problems and harm, the administration itself is generally characterized by a dysfunctional bureaucracy in which harms to prisoners are a side effect, as opposed to a result of malicious intent. A recent experience while organizing the GED tutoring class at San Quentin illustrates this dysfunction nicely.

The CDCR is currently facing immense pressure both to cut costs in response to the state of California’s fiscal crisis as well as to reduce overcrowding in its prisons due to a federal case mandating large decreases in the prison population. In January 2010, CDCR administrators cut state-funded correctional education positions, despite the fact that providing education for prisoners without a GED or high school diploma is also legally mandated. At San Quentin, even with 35 staff educators, waiting lists for the limited number of classroom desks were generally close to two years long. Due to the cuts, 29 instructors were laid off, leaving six paid instructors to provide Adult Basic Education and GED preparation and testing to the entire San Quentin prisoner population.

At the same time, in an effort to reduce overcrowding, CDCR officials initiated a policy by which prisoners who earn a GED receive six weeks off their sentences per year for each year remaining on their prison term. In other words, when more prisoners than ever are motivated to work towards and pass the GED test, the opportunity to do so is almost completely eliminated. When taken together, these two policies are rendered ineffective. By cutting educational

positions, the department undercut its ability to save money and comply with mandated population decreases by releasing GED graduates early.

Moreover, the policies have a perverse effect on the prisoners themselves. Just as individuals hear that there may be a way to reduce their sentences, the opportunities to earn time off are removed. Thus, these policies will do little to reduce overcrowding and costs, but may do much damage to individuals already distrustful and demoralized by their passage through a repressive bureaucracy.

### **The Rehabilitative Disruption**

Life in a warehouse prison, according to Irwin, is not “brutal, dangerous, or excessively cruel. It *is* tightly controlled, limited, monotonous, and lacking in opportunities for self-improvement” (80). In this sense, San Quentin diverges significantly from the warehouse prison model.

San Quentin’s location is central to understanding how this divergence occurred. Unlike the 22 prisons constructed in California since 1980, all located in economically devastated rural communities hours from major urban areas (Gilmore 2007), San Quentin’s proximity to the San Francisco Bay Area, a politically progressive and resource-rich urban metropolis, facilitated its emergence as a rehabilitative oasis in the California prison system.

During the height of California’s punitive frenzy, President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which, in part, barred prisoners from eligibility for Pell Grant funding for post-secondary education (Page 2004). Due to this removal of their primary source of funding, hundreds of college programs operating within prisons throughout the United States folded almost immediately (Karpowitz and Kenner 1995). Patten

University, a non-denominational Christian school in Oakland, California, operated several college-level ministry programs in California prisons until 1994, and had plans to open an additional campus at San Quentin. Patten University's president had already met with Jeanne Woodford, the San Quentin warden at that time, and had received approval to initiate the San Quentin campus.

When Pell Grant funding was cut, Patten's other prison programs were abandoned, but professors from UC Davis and UC Berkeley who had participated in the planning process for the San Quentin campus decided to attempt to initiate courses leading to an Associate of Arts in liberal studies without the use of Pell Grant funds. Patten University provided college credits, transcripts, and diplomas, while faculty of local colleges and universities provided teaching services as volunteers and relied on donations and small-scale fund-raising for textbooks and school supplies.

The College Program began offering its first courses in 1996 and slowly grew over the coming years. At its inception, a few other volunteer programs were operating at San Quentin, including Toastmasters, a public speaking program, and several substance abuse and religious programs. The combination of a warden open to allowing volunteers into the prison and San Quentin's location within the greater Bay Area—only 30 minutes from San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland—led to a proliferation of rehabilitative programs in the coming years. A growing number of Bay Area residents heard about volunteer opportunities within San Quentin and began assisting with existing programs, initiating services of their own, or assisting prisoners by sponsoring programs the prisoners felt met important and unmet needs.

Today, in addition to the literacy and GED classes offered by San Quentin's state-funded education department, volunteers also offer classes in spiritual, recreational, vocational and

therapeutic areas,<sup>4</sup> with over a dozen programs meeting every night in the religious and educational buildings on prison grounds.

Martin Ramirez<sup>5</sup>, the valedictorian of a recent San Quentin College Program graduating class, used his graduation speech to depict the contrast between his experience of incarceration at Folsom Prison with San Quentin, where he transferred after serving the first several years of his life sentence:

Six years ago, I was warehoused in Folsom Prison at the end of a nearly two-year lock down...Back then, I devoted most of my day and all of my evenings to PBS. I had a notebook filled with facts about the Civil War, black holes, and the secrets of lost empires. I desperately sought out information not only to escape the mental monotony of staring at four white walls, 24 hours a day for years at a time, but because I needed information like I needed air...

I heard stories about the depravities of the oldest and most infamous prison in California, but I discovered that the only thing scary about San Quentin was the amount of people standing in line offering some sort of help. I struggled in my first English class—for like two weeks. Soon, I found myself on the tier with Mike or Henry comparing and contrasting the philosophies of Hume and Descartes or creating midterm study guides with Dave and Poky, searching through crumpled notebooks for the exact date of the Clovis period. I became enthralled with analysis and the traditions of inquiry. I fell in love with prose and style and grace. I even learned—or relearned—some social norms like knowing when it's my turn to talk in normal conversation. (San Quentin Graduation Valedictorian Speech)

The contrasts Martin describes in his speech are echoed by prisoners, administrators, and officers alike, particularly when they first transfer to San Quentin from other prisons in the state. In addition to expressing shock over the sheer number of outside people granted access to the institution on a daily basis, they describe their surprise in seeing many prisoners carrying mesh bags full of school books over their shoulders or practicing yoga on the exercise yard.

These individuals also allude to ways in which social relations are loosened within the institution. In a piece written for the San Quentin college program newsletter, Achilles Mason Williams, a San Quentin prisoner, described an experience in which the behavior of fellow

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<sup>4</sup> A partial list of classes and services includes restorative justice, financial management and entrepreneurship, baseball, basketball, football, soccer, yoga, the San Quentin newspaper, first responder courses (for suicide prevention), Incarcerated Men Putting Away Childish Things and the San Quentin TRUST (prisoner-led self-help programs), SQUIRES (in which prisoners mentor at-risk youth), Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous, parenting, reentry preparation services, a support group for juveniles sentenced as adults, substance abuse counselor certification, and a seeing-eye-dog training program.

<sup>5</sup> All names are pseudonyms except where drawing on published sources.



College Program students disrupted the usual norms governing prisoner-to-prisoner interactions. In describing his decision to drop out of a writing course due to family problems, he writes, “I chose to bypass college but immediately I was confronted by an avalanche of opposition from both the likeliest and unlikeliest of sources: my fellow students...the thing is, there are new rules when you get into education in prison. Prison code or rules, to some extent, do not apply—the rules about minding other people’s business do not apply—often, people do the opposite, as in my particular case (Williams 2010). Prisoners also describe the unique space rehabilitative programs create for dialogue and connection across racial lines. Jeff Brooks, a prisoner in a theatre and improvisation course, described the formation of these bonds, “You can go into this class being anti-social, a loner, quiet, reserved, or shy and there is always some exercise to get you past those stages. Especially important is how all the different ethnic groups come together as teams, often working together in some of the funniest situations. We learn to see our true selves and communicate together in accord” (Brooks 2006).

Officers and prisoners alike reference a prison environment rendered less dangerous and violent given the number of prisoners who participate in programs they find meaningful. Because lockdowns and spells in solitary confinement disrupt prisoners’ ability to participate in these programs, they are more likely to avoid situations that could lead to confrontation.

Finally, the relations between officers and prisoners are significantly less rigidly regulated than at other prisons, according to these individuals. In other prisons, prisoners and officers simply do not engage in casual conversation, a rule enforced through the potential labeling of either participant as a “snitch.” At San Quentin, chatting and joking across prisoner/officer lines is a normal occurrence. A volunteer for a GED tutoring

program who showed up for class early one day described playing a game of dominoes with a prisoner who worked in the education department and the two officers posted there while they waited for classes to begin, an experience that simply would not be possible at other prisons in the state.

Ultimately, San Quentin may be best understood as an institution in tension with itself. After 35 years of punishment and incapacitation, the re-introduction of rehabilitative programs, spaces, and norms by actors foreign to the regular operation of the prison has disrupted the routines and norms defining life within San Quentin, and a particularly interesting window through which to view the social world behind the walls. Here, the reintroduction of “care” collides with and thereby reveals the routines, assumptions, and logics of the warehouse prison operational at San Quentin.

In the following sections of the paper, I analyze how institutional actors respond to the disruptions to the social order provided by rehabilitative actors and spaces, and the loosening of social norms and regulations they engender. Through an analysis of the official discourse presented in volunteer trainings and materials, I analyze how social interactions between institutional actors and prisoners are regulated and policed in an environment in which the normal devices for maintaining distance are weakened.

### **Security, Overfamiliarity, and Manipulation: Lessons from the “Beige Card” Training**

At 5pm on the third Thursday of each month, a crowd begins to gather outside of San Quentin’s East Gate. These 60 or so volunteers are about to spend approximately three hours filling out paperwork, listening to warnings and advice by correctional administrators and

officers, and sharing their own stories of the challenges of service-delivery inside the institution. At the end of the night, they will return their paperwork to the training facilitator, and in a few weeks, they will be able to pick up a “beige card”—an official San Quentin identification card which will enable them to walk to and from San Quentin’s secure perimeter to the classroom or religious building where they offer services on their own or as an escort for newer volunteers. Beige card holders, as these volunteers are known, must carry whistles in order to signal alarms in the case of emergencies. They are also granted permission to “supervise” prisoners, in other words, to be the only non-incarcerated person in a classroom with prisoners.

San Quentin’s Community Relations Manager (CRM) facilitates the training, and generally enlists the assistance of one or two correctional officers to provide the front-line staff perspective. The CRM and officers begin and punctuate their presentations with the refrain that safety and security are the primary goals of the institution. The safety and security refrain represents what Erving Goffman (1961), in his work identifying the core facets of prisons, monasteries, concentration camps, and other total institutions, calls an “interpretive scheme” (84). Interpretive schemes provide a “key to meaning—a language of explanation that staff, and sometimes the inmates, can bring to every crevice of action in the institution” (83).

As the training progresses, a clear emphasis emerges on particular safety and security concerns, while others are ignored. Volunteers consistently report their concrete concerns are not covered in the trainings. For example, while volunteers are granted enhanced privileges to escort other volunteers or walk alone within the facility, the training does not explain how many other volunteers can be escorted at one time, where within the facility the volunteers are allowed to walk, whether there are specific areas which are off limits, or how and under what conditions to blow the whistle volunteers are required to wear upon completion of the training. One volunteer

who had been trained as a lifeguard noted that lifeguards are trained to blow their whistles in specific ways to signal particular emergencies or concerns. At the beige card training, these and other such concerns are not included in the official training curriculum. The answers are only provided if volunteers specifically ask about them, and even when they do ask, the material is not incorporated into subsequent trainings. These pragmatic safety and security concerns are therefore inconsistently, partially, and haphazardly communicated to volunteers who will be granted heightened security status within the institution.

The substantive two-hour portion of the training is dedicated instead to discussing how to avoid “overfamiliarity” with prisoners, a second and related interpretive scheme pervasive among San Quentin’s institutional actors. There is no standard definition presented when institutional actors use this term, and yet it seems to consist of both specific and amorphous rules and norms. Concretely, the *San Quentin Volunteer Handbook*, provided to each beige card training attendee, includes the following rules subsumed under the heading of overfamiliarity:

- (1) Don’t discuss personal matters with inmates;
- (2) Don’t hug inmates;
- (3) NEVER give out your address or phone number to an inmate;
- (4) NEVER loan money to an inmate;
- (5) Do not buy anything for or give anything to an inmate—not gifts, money, letters, tips, or rewards of any kind;
- (6) Do not take anything from an inmate—not gifts or letters to be mailed (2011, 11)

The handbook also includes references to overfamiliar behavior that indicate a concern with professional and consistent behavior, although the specifics of where the line exists between friendly, professional, and overly familiar behavior remain amorphous. For example: “1) Be friendly, but not overly familiar. Recognize inmate needs. 2) Enforcing rules for some and relaxing them for others is inconsistent and unfair. It is also a form of overfamiliarity” (2011, 5).

When discussing the pitfalls and warning signs of overfamiliar relationships, the CRM and correctional officers offer a wide range of definitions and accounts. Volunteers report

explanations and references provided by officers at their trainings such as “I know overfamiliarity when I see it” and “An inmate asked me how my weekend was, and I pushed him against the wall, because *that’s* overfamiliarity.”

As the previous quote demonstrates, “overfamiliarity” can be used to justify aggressive and punitive behavior on the part of staff; however, it is officially justified in the name of safety and security. The danger associated with overfamiliar relations is predicated on the third and final interpretive scheme which surfaces in the beige card trainings and materials, that “inmates will manipulate you.” The volunteer handbook advises, “Earn respect for yourself. Make it clear you will not be manipulated” (2011, 5). Moreover, it implies a manipulative behavior pattern on the part of inmates throughout the lists of suggestions and rules. “Inmates may test you, call your bluff, and see if you follow through on your promises,” it warns. “Don’t discuss personal matters with inmates. Inmates may push you until you say ‘stop.’ How hard and how far they push will depend on how hard and how far you allow them to push” (2011, 6). These rules and suggestions are supplemented by stories offered by the training facilitators of instances in which correctional officers or volunteers were manipulated by prisoners into inadvertently breaking the rules, bringing contraband items into the institution which could then be sold on the black market or used as weapons, thus threatening safety and security.

In addition to the official *San Quentin Volunteer Handbook*, training attendees receive an anonymously authored eight-page, single-spaced story entitled “Downing a Duck (An Inmate’s Version)” which exemplifies the anxiety and rationale behind the threat of manipulation. In the document, a prisoner tells how he manipulates an officer into assisting him to escape. A note from the author precedes the story in which the author states that this is information compiled from several prisoners “who know and understand the set-up process” (n.d., 2). While these

individuals did not divulge their personal “techniques for modifying personnel behavior,” they cited the techniques contained in the story as “typical” (n.d., 2). In a beige card training in early 2011, the CRM explained that she was given the document by a correctional officer, and it has circulated around the institution for years. While it is unclear whether it is based on a true story, she explains that this kind of incident happens on a regular basis and she has seen employees walked off prison grounds for the kinds of behaviors described.

“Downing a Duck” is told from the first-person perspective of a prisoner carefully planning an escape attempt. The narrator explains, “You gotta start small if you want to get a person to a point where they’ll do just about anything you say” (n.d., 2). After identifying his target, he gets to work by first paying other prisoners to get the officer in trouble with his supervisors, and then jumping in at the last moment to help him out. “As the days and weeks passed,” he explains, “I worked my tail off for this joker” (n.d., 3). Then he begins asking for small favors. When the officer leaves his lunch pail open and unattended, the narrator takes a cigarette and notes that the officer says nothing. Then he asks the officer to bring him some paper and pencil. “With a long explanation and unsteady voice he turned me down. Saying ‘No’ was hard for him. I looked hurt and sad. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking. I thought you knew I liked to relax and write after working at my regular job, then cleaning this unit for you. I only asked you because most of the guys in the wing told me you understood things like that—that you like to see us doing constructive things’” (n.d., 3). After this guilt trip, the officer is hooked. He provides the paper and pencils surreptitiously, and in the following months, carries letters and packages into and out of the institution for the narrator, and performs other illicit favors.

At this point, the narrator decides to use the officer to help him escape. He turns from obsequious to threatening, demanding that the officer bring in pieces of an officer’s uniform in

his lunch pail, and using the fact that he has already broken so many rules to coerce him into obeying. He states, “With all the hatred I could muster, I shouted, ‘Look, you stupid SOB, you ain’t got no choice! Every convict in this wing will snitch you off. You took out letters, money, you brought in things we still have stored to use as evidence against you...Now you bring in that damn uniform or you’re dead, sucker!’” (n.d., 5-6). The narrator effectively coerces the officer into bringing in a full uniform, then uses it to walk out of the institution, and the story concludes with him robbing a store three days later, killing three people in the process.

The deprivation, loneliness, vulnerability and alienation prison writers and scholars describe as endemic to incarceration do not affect the narrator in “Downing a Duck” (Clever 1968, Jackson 1970, Sykes 1958). This narrative of manipulation, intended to illuminate prisoner strategies and attitudes, portrays prisoners as sociopaths—incapable of compassion and empathy, emotionally ingenious, devious, and out for themselves—who will take advantage of weakness and use it to their advantage with scorn.

The manipulation scheme also serves to absolve institutional actors from responsibility for their actions, neglecting any intentional role played on the part of officers in facilitating or producing deviant behavior. The fact that some officers sell cell phones, drugs, and other illicit paraphernalia to prisoners, earning significant amounts of money (cell phones currently sell for at least \$1000 inside the prison) is not mentioned. The “duck” in “Downing a Duck” can use the manipulative and devious conduct of the prisoner to excuse his behavior in breaking prison rules, and thus has a ready-made justification for his actions.

This narrative of manipulation surfaces has also been used to absolve institutional actors in the CDCR’s defense against legal actions. In an article regarding the experiences of transgender prisoners in California, Valerie Jenness (2010) opens with a depiction of the case of

*Giraldo vs. the California Department of Corrections*,<sup>6</sup> in which a transgender prisoner sued the CDCR, claiming prison staff placed her in a men's prison without regard to the risk of sexual assault and ignored beatings and brutal sexual assaults by her cellmate. Jenness describes the CDCR's response: "The [CDCR's defense team] argued that Giraldo's allegations were unsubstantiated and discredited him as a disgruntled parolee with a history of manipulative and deceitful behavior...They claimed he had financial motivations for filing suit. They argued that he is a convicted felon who, by virtue of his previous convictions, has demonstrated he is capable of—and well rehearsed at—engaging in fraudulent endeavors in the obvious pursuit of self-interest" (2).

Depicting individuals as manipulative portrays them as deeply untrustworthy, purposefully deceptive, as people whose claims and emotional displays must not be taken at face value. For the person doing the labeling, it provides a wall behind which they can take refuge from the sympathies and confusion empathizing with a prisoner would produce. It is a moral judgment as opposed to a factual one; not that an individual may be confused, or that his deception may be produced by need, vulnerability, and lack of options, but that he is a liar. The narrative of manipulation therefore operates as a mechanism by which prisoners are discredited and thereby fundamentally walled off and distanced from empathy and connection with institutional actors.

### **The Threat of Intimacy**

Why, of all the safety and security concerns that might be addressed in the beige card trainings, are overfamiliarity and the narrative of manipulation given such a consistent and

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<sup>6</sup> Case No. CGC-07-461473, Superior Court of California, City and County of San Francisco.



exclusive emphasis? And why is so much work put into privileging the narrative of prisoners as deceptive manipulators incapable of developing healthy human relationships, above all other possible ways of explaining their perspectives and behaviors?

In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu creates a distinction between metapragmatic discourse, or the discourse about how members of a social world understand their own practices, and practical knowledge, the felt sense of how the world works which “goes without saying because it comes without saying” (Bourdieu 1977, 167). Practical knowledge constitutes “habitus,” a system “which functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions*” (83) and reveals itself in the organization of space and time, the movements of the body, and various types and strategies of interaction among actors.

This distinction, when applied to the social world of San Quentin, may suggest answers to the questions raised above. The presentations and materials offered at the beige card trainings represent the metapragmatic discourse of San Quentin’s institutional actors, how they understand their practice and function within the institution. However, the “habitus” of San Quentin actors, constituted by the emotional and physical experience of living and working behind the walls, reveals a different set of understandings about San Quentin’s social world.

Officers and prisoners share a habitus that powerfully impacts their lived experience, their perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and self-presentation. Indeed, in many respects, officers and prisoners share much in common. Officers and prisoners in the warehouse prison era, particularly in California, come from similar class, racial, ethnic and educational backgrounds (Irwin 2005). It is not uncommon for an officer to have a family member in a California prison, and it is even more common for officers to come from the same communities as prisoners and to have neighbors and childhood friends who are incarcerated. In fact, there is an official procedure

for officers to report the family members and friends who are incarcerated in order to ensure they are stationed at prisons or posts that minimize contact with these individuals.

Officers often work multiple shifts in a row, for 16 hours at a time, sometimes for days in a row, in part because this enables them to collect higher salaries for working overtime. The environment in which officers work and prisoners live is cut off from the outside world, in many ways indescribable to family and friends unfamiliar with day-to-day prison realities. Daily life for both groups is generally divided between watching the clock in suffocating boredom (for the vast majority of time) and witnessing or being involved in extremely dangerous, aggressive and depraved surges of violence, traumatic experiences which prisoners and officers share. Moreover, officers and prisoners alike often gloss over, lie, or remain silent with friends and family about the worst elements of prison life, in order to protect their loved ones from the fear and anxiety these stories would inevitably produce.

This shared habitus creates the natural conditions under which intimate bonds develop across the social boundaries between prisoners and officers. Indeed, San Quentin, and perhaps other prisons, is an environment *hyper-conducive to intimacy*. This intimacy manifests along multiple dimensions, not least of which is similarities in self-presentation. Officers and prisoners, particularly “lifers” and officers who have worked for several years in the system, often wear the same shaved heads and mustaches; they lift weights and develop barrel chests; and they wear similar state-issued uniforms, albeit of different colors, markings, and quality material.

Officer Harris is a middle-aged White man with a bald head and a mustache who works outside San Quentin’s secure perimeter. In describing how he came to work at his current post, he told me he recused himself from his previous position of over ten years because he was becoming overfamiliar with the prisoners. He worked in a 200-bed dorm in H-unit, and he

reflected with pride, “I ran a good dorm.” He tells me how he bought house paint and worked with the prisoners to brighten the walls of the building, and he chuckles as he reminisces about how they used to pull pranks on each other on a regular basis.

Despite his insistence that San Quentin has a low incidence of violence, Officer Harris felt uncomfortable enough about the relationships he was developing to bid for a post in which he came into essentially zero contact with prisoners. He was unable to articulate what made him uneasy about working at San Quentin, “a poo butt” prison in his estimation given the low incidence of violence and the generally lax atmosphere. He used the official discourse of overfamiliarity to characterize his anxiety in this situation, but he had trouble articulating why he felt anxious given the lack of violence and his comfort with the prisoners with whom he interacted.

I would argue that Officer Harris’ anxiety derives from the emotional danger inherent in developing empathy with prisoners. The stark hierarchy operating within prisons creates conditions under which officers’ identification with prisoners—individuals in a position of intense emotional, physical, material, sensory, and spiritual deprivation—produces unsustainable emotional discomfort. The official discourse privileging overfamiliarity and manipulation as primary interpretive schemes serves, then, as a mechanism by which the threat of intimacy is identified and policed.

Overfamiliarity provides institutional actors with a label for the behaviors which express and foster bonds and feelings of empathy, which naturally develop in the prison environment. Depicting individuals as manipulative suggests their emotional claims, pleas and displays cannot be taken at face value. In portraying prisoners as consciously deceptive, it undercuts any emotional identification a staff member might begin to make. It also provides staff with a means of judging and blaming prisoners for their vulnerable state. An expression of emotional or

material vulnerability on the part of prisoners, when labeled as manipulative, is transformed into a justification for moral condemnation.

The narrative of manipulation can therefore operate as a mechanism by which prisoners are discredited and thereby fundamentally walled off and distanced from institutional actors; it provides a means by which to blame prisoners for their deprivation; and it provides a powerful tool for policing the intimate bonds which are produced by the structure of the institution.

## **Conclusion**

At San Quentin, the wide availability of rehabilitative programs and the spaces they create have loosened the normal mechanisms maintaining social distance between staff and prisoners. These conditions enable a raw facet of prison life, often buried under rigorously enforced social norms, to bubble to the surface.

In this prison, at least, officers do not fear for their lives on a daily basis. Instead, they are faced with the monotony of watching thousands of men in conditions of extreme repression and deprivation count the days until they are released. As the days turn into years, officers come to know these men well. They joke, complain, and bicker with one another. Sometimes they engage in serious and problematic rivalries. Sometimes they respond together to emergency situations, such as suicides or psychotic episodes among the mentally unstable. They witness each other mature into adults, get married and divorced, and become fathers, uncles and grandfathers. In short, many officers and prisoners form bonds that under other conditions would be called friendships.

I suggest that for officers, treating these relationships as friendships is not only unprofessional, but also unbearable. Emotional identification with prisoners jeopardizes

officers' ability to maintain professional boundaries and make neutral decisions; it also raises impossible questions about the legitimacy of the prison hierarchy and the machinations of the criminal justice system.

These tensions between the pull of intimacy and the emotional danger of over-identification form part of the daily reality of those living and working behind San Quentin's walls. In contrast to popular portrayals of prisons, which depict both prisoners and officers as locked in depraved and antagonistic relations, San Quentin reveals a different reality. It reveals that the very real difference in power and status between officers and prisoners is constantly challenged by the very human bonds that develop, and must therefore be policed, between these groups.

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