

EXPLORING POWER SYSTEMS AMONG CALIFORNIA'S FEMALE INMATES

SURF Conference Panel Opening Plenary Session

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As we sat in the main office of the California Coalition of Women Prisoners in San Francisco, she asked me, "So imagine you're 18 right? You just got sentenced to 15 plus years to a prison, a place you know nothing about. How do you feel? And more importantly, who do you turn to?"

Currently the state of California has three women's correctional facilities, California Institute for Women (CIW), Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), and Folsom State Prison (FSP), which range from minimum- to maximum-security facilities, camps, and rehabilitation programs. As of August 2013, there were 5,903 women confined to one of the three previously named correctional facilities.¹ Both CCWF and CIW face severe conditions of overcrowding with occupation rates of 173% and 153%, respectively.² When we talk about mass incarceration and the California prison crisis, the experience of those 5,903 women currently incarcerated in the state of California is often times silenced and/or forgotten. Through both my research and civil engagement with prison work, I have had the opportunity to work with formerly incarcerated women. For me, this project goes beyond just a summer of research, and I am committed to making sure that the lived experiences of these women are told.

My thesis project looks at the conditions of confinement and how, as a result, women organize themselves within the prison culture. More specifically, I ask, "What power relations help organize internal control within California's prison complex for women?" For the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing primarily on the ideas of heteronormative gender roles, hegemonic masculinity, and healthy masculinity all performed by incarcerated women. To better understand the emergence and importance of fictive kinship as it exists within women's correctional facilities, I will explore two main questions:

1 Data Analysis Unit Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Estimates and Statistical Analysis Section State of California Offender Information Services Branch, "WEEKLY REPORT OF POPULATION." Last modified August 2013. Accessed July 2013. http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/Reports_Research/Offender_Information_Services_Branch/WeeklyWed/TPOP1A/TPOP1Ad131113.pdf.

2 *Ibid.*

1) How are these familial ties born, and, more importantly, maintained within these correctional facilities?

2) How do these fictive familial ties provide emotional and physical security for those who constitute the family?

For this study, I have employed the method of participant observation and open-ended in-depth interviews with eight formerly incarcerated women who served anywhere from 120 days to 20 years within California's prison complex. I also conducted participant observation while volunteering with the California Coalition of Women Prisoners, as well as actively engaging in the Freedom Rally at Chowchilla and the Prison Hunger Strike Rally at Corcoran State Prison.

I. Empirical Framework—Interviews & Analysis (Data Source)

In understanding how these fictive kins exist within prison, I have drawn two fictive kin charts representative of two different carceral families. With the help of my research informants, I have been able to hone in on two examples of these fictive families as experienced by these different women.

Figure 1 illustrates a kin chart, which I have titled POD Family. POD refers to a prison decentralized “podular” layout with individual self-contained housing units arranged around centralized recreational space. In Figure 1, the solid colored triangle within the circle represents the “Daddy” figure of the family. Located to the right of the encircled solid colored triangle, you find a “similar” sign for a couple who are parents but who do not necessarily have an intimate relationship with one and other. The circle thus represents the “Mother” of the family. Directly below the parent figures, I have drawn a solid line followed by a horizontal bar to indicate kin descent. In this POD family, there is a daughter and a son. Something worth noting in Figure 1 is the “almost equal” sign I have drawn between the sister and son. The “almost equal” sign indicates that these inmates are also a “cohabiting” couple. My research informant explains,

When I first went to prison, I was pregnant and in my mid thirties, there was this one lady, she was an aggressive fem in my room, who liked me. I was considered the mother, cuz I was always being “motherly” to the others, plus they were younger than us. Then there was the older woman, she was considered the Dad, because she was whatever more “manly.” And we had these two twenty something year old girls who were considered our children—one was an aggressive fem, and one a fem—they considered us the parents, because we were always helping them out in situations.³

In this specific instance, the family emerged due in part to situational factors, such as sharing a living space with three other women.

In Figure 2, I have mapped out a “Yard Family.” Yard refers to an outdoor recreational space where inmates typically engage with other inmates. Most correctional facilities have multiple yards. In the case of CCWF, there are four yards in which there is the possibility for

³ Samantha Rogers (California Coalition of Women Prisoners), interview by Julissa Muñiz, July 2013.

inmates to move between them through the usage of privilege cards. At the core of this chart is a solid colored triangle within a circle representative of the “Daddy” figure of the family. To the right of this symbol is an equal sign that indicates an established long-term relationship. Different from the first chart, these parents are in a long-term committed relationship, which is most common among those inmates who are serving long-term or life sentences. The longevity of these relationships is key to the establishment and maintenance of these fictive families. It is these examples of “pairing” that give way to the collection of children and extended family. Central to the existence of these fictive families is the father and the mother who, in this case, are represented by the encircled solid-colored triangle and circle. Above the parents, I have included two circles with a G to illustrate the existence of grandmothers. To the right of each parent, I have used a solid horizontal bar to mark the relation between the mother and father’s siblings, respectively, and in turn, their siblings may or may not have their own children. Now returning to the center of the kin chart, I have once again used the horizontal bar to illustrate the children of these two parents. As I mentioned before, it is not uncommon for parents to collect various children throughout their time of incarceration because the nature of these families is very fluid.

Now that there is a clear understanding of who comprises these carceral families, I will now focus on my second question, “How do these fictive familial ties provide emotional and physical security for those who join or seek to create the carceral family?” I will situate the notion of security in relation to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,⁴ in which I will focus on the second and third needs: safety and social needs. For the purpose of this discussion, we will assume that the basic needs of these women, which include air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, and sleep, are met by the prison institution, even if only at its most basic level. Thus security refers to an individual’s need to solidify a physical and emotional base in order to reach self-actualization, which is “realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.”⁵ Consequently, I argue that these fictive families serve not only the self but can also produce a communal energy of empowerment.

Throughout all my interviews, there was the recurring theme of masculinity. How is it that a correctional facility of all women can produce a discourse of masculinity? To better situate this conversation, I borrow from feminist philosopher, Judith Butler, who first coined the term gender performativity. Butler maintains, “gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts,” acts which “both constitute meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted.”⁶ As one of my informants describes,

I never understood how you could come into prison with nails, a weave, a skirt, and the minute you put your prison blues on, they’re sagging, and you’re talking about what you can do to a woman. A lot of these women were able to manipulate the need of those women who needed that masculine figure in their lives. They were able to manipulate them through this persona of masculinity.⁷

⁴ Abridged from A. H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370–396.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay on Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Performing Feminisms Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*: 278–282.

⁷ Maritza Torres, interview by Julissa Muñiz, July 2013; Samantha Rogers (California Coalition of Women Prisoners), interview by Julissa Muñiz, July 2013.

Thus, masculinity as experienced within correctional facilities is an embodied performance: speaking, walking, talking and acting in a way that produces an impression of a hegemonic male.⁸ Within these women's facilities, the dominant form of masculinity, as described by my interviewees, involves physical strength, aggression, and the looming threat of violence, physically and mentally, toward another inmate. As result, various nouns were used interchangeably to describe these masculine women, including "shot callers, heavy hitters, aggressive fems, butch, and dominant person." All of these imply a coercive power relation.

"It was no different than a regular man out here using a woman. Except now you have a woman in prison who looks like a man, using another woman. And unfortunately because you have a woman who needs this, lacking something in her, that she allows herself to be in that position." Or as another interviewee states, "9 out of 10 times, women are coached into a relationship inside prison, when that's not even what they want to do, but more so it's a survival skill."⁹

While these aggressive fems are evident examples of an embodied hegemonic masculinity, one that entails physical and psychological force and abuse, these Daddy figures are considered an embodiment of a skewed, yet healthy, masculinity. The premise of this statement is that if it is possible for women to uphold an unhealthy patriarchal masculinity, then it is also possible for women to engage in a caring, loving, and dignified protection, in other words, healthy masculinity. So much in the same way that a woman can uphold a patriarchal system and oppress a woman through the patriarchal system, therefore, my argument is that within a fictive family, women can teach other women about positive healthy masculinity. Unfortunately, there was no positive male figure for many of these women to turn to as a model for healthy masculinity. As one of my interviewees describes, "The relationships you never got to build are now formed inside of prison...The Daddy figure, some of us didn't get that Daddy love, so when we meet these women inside, that remind us of that figure and the love we never got, that relationship takes place."¹⁰ What this woman shared with me is the perpetual need to create the emotional base necessary for realizing one's personal potential.

In many ways, these familial ties are adopted as a means of creating a circle of protection within the general population. This circle of protection is needed in order to ensure physical safety from aggressive fem predators, gang violence, and correctional officer induced retaliation. Central to this physical security is the Daddy, who serves as not only the mediator but, as is often necessary, the physical protector. For those women physically incapable of doing so for themselves—such as pregnant women, the elderly (Grandma), small/petite women, and those women psychologically susceptible to abusive relationships—the Daddy acts as a defense against physical aggression. To further illustrate the role of the Daddy, I will paraphrase an instance described to me by one of my informants. She described how one of the daughters got into "some trouble" having accrued a drug debt on another yard. Word had gotten around to the Daddy she was "not acting right." Given the prison culture, drug debts are serious offenses and are often times grounds for severe physical retaliation. Rather than allowing for his daughter to get her "ass beat," he called her to his yard to discuss the details of the situation. After having done so, the Daddy met with the drug dealer to settle the situation. Although it was left unclear just how

8 R.W. Connell, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 829 (2005): 829–859.

9 Rojo Misty (California Coalition of Women Prisoners), interview by Julissa Muñiz, July 2013.

10 Samantha Rogers (California Coalition of Women Prisoners), interview by Julissa Muñiz, July 2013.

that situation was handled, my informant ended the story by saying, "If Daddy needed to throw down, he would."¹¹ Here, the Daddy figure served as a mediator to prevent his daughter from getting hurt for the purpose of ensuring her physical security.

In conclusion, I would like us to consider what the parameters are of healthy masculinity and healthy femininity. As opposed to aggressive fem predators who are seeking to exploit vulnerable women, the Daddy figure, who in many ways embodies what can only be understood as a skewed but healthy masculine behavior, counters hegemonic masculinity. These Daddies serve as mentors, mediators, protectors, and seemingly non-coercive leaders because their carceral self-actualization is rendered through their daughter's capacities beyond the prison walls. Daddies encourage their daughters to do vocational training, drug rehabilitation programs, and simply ensure that they stay out of trouble. Due to their life sentences, the parents do not have this opportunity. Foucault reminds us, "If there are relations of power throughout every social field, it is because there is freedom everywhere,"¹² even within California's women's facilities.

Appendix

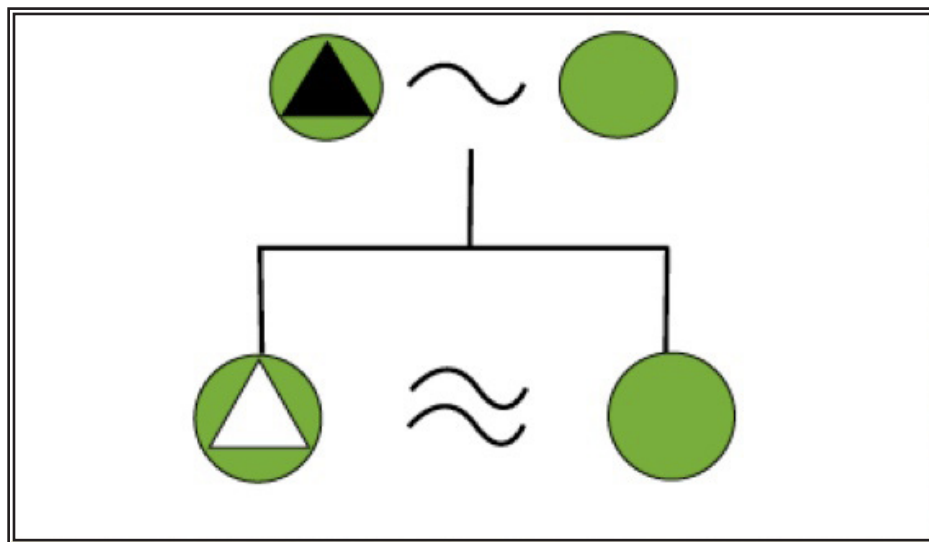


Figure 1.

11 Samantha Rogers (California Coalition of Women Prisoners), interview by Julissa Muñoz, July 2013.

12 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power." In *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, edited by H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, 208–226. 2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

