

# Imprisoned Bodies: The Life-World of the Incarcerated

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**W**HY PAY ATTENTION TO THE EXPERIENCE OF THE IMPRISONED? THERE ARE SEVERAL important reasons, some sociological in nature, some phenomenological. I begin with the former. One reason, in 21st-century America, to focus on inmates is simply because there are so many. The United States now incarcerates over two million men and women.<sup>1</sup> In 1972, the United States held a little over 300,000 inmates (see Justice Policy Institute, 2000). This six-fold increase in the last three decades is a result of myriad factors, including the war on drugs with its focus on criminalization and punishment, and an overall trend toward longer sentences and reduced use of parole. The incarceration binge has continued largely independent of criminal activity. Crime has decreased for the last nine years,<sup>2</sup> during which time the prison population has risen precipitously.

Our incarceration rates are six to 10 times as great as similar Western industrialized countries. For example, we hold more prisoners in one *state* (California) than do the nations of France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Singapore, and the Netherlands *combined*. The United States, though it has but five percent of the world's population, holds fully one-quarter of the world's prison population (*Ibid.*).

We might say the U.S. has embarked on a unique social experiment. In response to a complex variety of social ills, we respond with one "simple solution": place an ever-increasing proportion of our citizens in cages. Needless to say, this strategy has disproportionately affected minority populations whose social position is already disadvantaged. Though African-Americans compose 13% of Americans, they represent 46% of all inmates in U.S. prisons. Fully 63% of inmates are either Hispanic or black.<sup>3</sup>

For sociological reasons alone, it is thus important to pay careful attention to the experience of these two million. Their presence has been erased from the common society, but must not be from our scholarly and public discourse. Otherwise, the wisdom of our prison "solution" will continue to go unchallenged.

In addition to the sociological import, the experience of inmates has phenomenological meaning. Phenomenology developed as a branch of philosophy

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dedicated to investigating and describing the structures of human experience: time and space *as lived*, movement and perception, the embodied self in its encounter with objects and Others. But what happens to all these when a human being is confined for decades on end, often in cells the size of a normal bathroom? What then becomes of lived temporality and spatiality? What then the relation to one's own embodiment, or that of other people? To investigate these is to understand better the human capacity to construct a life-world even in the most constrained of circumstances.

From a sociological and phenomenological standpoint, issues of power are key within this world. The severe constraints mentioned above are imposed by state power in response to individual behaviors judged intolerable. We might say the prison exists to disempower the individual, and re-empower the threatened state. Yet the prisoner is not passive in this equation. His or her construction of a life-world is not only provoked by mechanisms of power, but constitutes a strategic response to them, sometimes carefully reasoned through, sometimes pre-thematic. I will thus examine the inmate's life-world as an active constitution. We will find that the inmate's experience of space, time, and body are interwoven with strategies of resistance, reclamation, and escape *vis-à-vis* a hostile environment.

Philosophically, I will draw on the work of a variety of Continental philosophers, including Heidegger's phenomenology of the life-world, Merleau-Ponty's focus on the lived body, and Foucault's attention to the body in the field of power relations. I will also draw heavily on work I did with inmates, mostly serving life sentences, in the maximum-security Maryland Penitentiary. As a volunteer, I taught some 10 to 13 men (it was an all-male prison) in a not-for-credit philosophy seminar that continued over two years. We studied a broad range of texts, including several in Continental thought by authors such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault. The inmates used concepts from such works to analyze their experiences of life on the street, and in maximum-security prison. The conversations were so powerful and illuminating that I began to record them. From transcripts I produced edited dialogues that are published, with my own comments, in a recent book, *The Soul Knows No Bars: Inmates Reflect on Life, Death, and Hope*.

This article relies heavily on these dialogues, cited here by page numbers in parentheses. My goal is to allow the inmates to articulate their own life experience, though I gather their insights into an overarching framework. The voices we hear are mostly those of African-American men from an inner-city environment, unusual for their level of educational achievement (largely secured through prison college-extension programs that have subsequently closed down as a result of the 1993 Omnibus Crime Bill). I make no pretense that this is a representative cross-section of all inmates. If anything, categorical thinking about all "prisoners" and "criminals" has tended to feed the incarceration binge. Yet I believe the individual voices represented here do shed light on the range of human responses possible in conditions of incarceration.

Aspects of the analysis may be applicable to other institutions. Foucault argues that in the modern regime of "discipline," similar mechanisms of power are at play not only in prisons, but also in the military, schools, workplaces, and hospitals.<sup>4</sup> I believe the work of reclamation, escape, and integration may be employed by individuals within those institutional settings.

Ultimately, inmates may provide insights into something even more general about human strategies for coping with adversity and restraint. "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" (*Hamlet*, II, ii, 263). So says Hamlet, struggling with an inward dilemma — or so might say someone suffering from a debilitating disease, the constraints of poverty, or other existential limitations. And so say the inmates. Bounded by the nutshell of a prison cell, the inmate can strive to be king of infinite space and time — but contends with a world of bad dreams.

### Lived Time

Husserl, Heidegger, and many other Continental philosophers have distinguished between lived time and clock-and-calendar time. The latter is grounded metaphysically by Newton's vision of an absolute time that flowed forth equably, independent of observers. It is susceptible to mathematical measurement, can be divided into standardized increments, and even plotted geometrically as on a timeline. By way of contrast, lived-time, time-*as-experienced*, is a complex and variable phenomenon. Past, present, and future do not simply unfold consecutively as on a time-line. Heidegger (1962: 378) suggests that, in a sense, the future comes first. Our future goals and anticipations organize our present activities, and even our interpretations of the past. Nor does experiential time unfold in equable increments. Time may slow down, as when we check the clock repeatedly during a tedious lecture, and are stunned to find the minute hand all but paralyzed. At other times we wonder "Where did the time fly?" A day of delightful play may seem gone almost before begun. Yet, after the fact, it might expand in pleasant memory, while the tedious lecture contracts to insignificance.

Ultimately, our experience of time has much to do with the rhythms of our daily life and our extended projects. Waking and sleeping, washing and eating, works begun and accomplished, friends and family encountered, special events, and the change of seasons, all combine to create a textured temporal field. Often, this field can be altered, even shredded by "life on the street." The problems of the inner city — drug addiction, chronic poverty and unemployment, disrupted family life, community fragmentation, loss of hope concerning the future, all have the power to distort lived temporality. Yet life on the street is nonetheless a life, with its own goals, rhythms, activities, and interactions.

All this is radically disrupted by a prison sentence.<sup>5</sup> Lived-time is supplanted by an abstract Newtonian framework of mathematically measured calendar time. "Twenty years" says the judge. This is time turned into alien beast — or *automaton*

we should say, given its blind and abstract nature. Twenty years are to be taken from a person's life. They belong not to him or her, but the state. Time itself has become something that *must be served*, an instrument of disempowerment. This is true not only on the macroscopic scale, but also in the intricate management of daily time to which an inmate is subjected. When you sleep, hours in and out of the cell, and limited opportunities for action will be largely predetermined by prison authorities — not natural inclination.

A massive disordering of temporality can ensue. The past may be brooded over as a scene for repetitive regret, if only at having gotten caught. The experienced present may be slowed almost to a halt by the lack of things to do, the boredom, the paucity of meaningful projects offered to inmates as they are “warehoused” for their duration. Experience of the future may be transformed, to use Minkowski's terms, from one of “activity” to one of “expectation.” He writes, “through its activity the living being carries itself forward, tends toward the future, creates it in front of itself.” However, “expectation” involves an inversion of lived-time. While awaiting an event that we do not control, instead of moving toward the future, “we see the future come toward us and wait for that (expected) future to become present” (Minkowski, 1970: 87). We are paralyzed in anticipation. The expected future “absorbs, so to speak, all becoming,” allowing the present “only a shadowy existence” (*Ibid.*: 89), shriveled up and constricted. This is the predicament of many prisoners counting off the years on the way to an expected release date. Instead of living richly and purposively, they are trapped in a desiccated present, watching the future march oh-so-slowly closer.<sup>6</sup>

This constitutes a brief description of the altered time that threatens to overcome the incarcerated. But the individual remains capable of responding to and resisting such vectors. I will now turn to a variety of strategies whereby inmates rework temporality. This theme will be introduced by an excerpt from our prison class discussion on phenomenological notions of lived-time.

**Donald Thompson:** I think the problem is that guys in here spend most of the time just discussing the good ole days, the glory days, “When I had my car, these two jobs, or those five girls.” Or “When prison was better” or “Instead of knives and machine guns we had forty-five magnums.” If you try to talk about the future it's just not acceptable.

**Selvyn Tillet:** I've seen guys with a couple life sentences plus some numbers behind it, saying “Yeah, my wife will be waiting for me like the old days.” I be thinking, “Are you out of your mind?” I wouldn't say it 'cause they'd be ready to fight, but they're trapped in *that past*.

**John Woodland:** Quite a few guys try to live in the past. I like living in the future, thinking about what my life is going to be. But I think one thing most of us try to avoid is the *present*. Because the present here is the most painful (Leder, *The Soul Knows No Bars*, p. 86).

Articulated here is a strategy of resistance I will call "escape." Trapped in a painful present, the men seek ways to escape into the past or future. In its most deficient form, this can devolve into a sterile, even self-destructive escapism. The discussants are aware that dwelling in an idealized past can be a waste of time, perhaps even a set-up for a repetition of bygone failures. Rather than actively advancing in life, one retreats to a static past.

But the strategy of escape need not always be escapist in the pejorative sense. Happy memories can be a source of strength and comfort. "Thinking about what my life is going to be," as John does, introduces hope and ambition. Heidegger (1962: 377) writes of lived-time as involving a series of *ecstases*, etymologically from the Greek for "standing outside." To live in and for the future, like John's, allows a door to swing open so one stands outside the prison cell. Freedom is not then something just to be "expected" at a future date, as in Minkowski's sense of debilitating expectation. Rather, imagining the future introduces an element of freedom into the prisoner's current life-world.

Resuming the inmate discussion:

**Q (an alias):** I see it a little differently. To me, time is like a dragon I have to slay. If I can master the present, I will have used my time to *redeem* time. Then I can go back and offer something to people who never had to be in that situation.... I get up in the morning at 8:30 and I don't get back to my cell until about 10 p.m. Between those times, I'm constantly involved in activities that are beneficial and what I want to do. I'm reading materials I intend to use in the future for political work, and philosophical literature, concentrating heavily. The time flies for me, you know? Sometimes I can't even find enough hours to complete what I wanted.

**Wayne:** I call this "*doing time*" — when you use every available moment for your benefit. When you have time to sit back and mope and worry, is when *time begins to do you* (p. 86).

In contrast to the strategy of escape, I will call this the strategy of "reclamation." The living present is reclaimed as a scene for fulfilling and purposive action. One is back to "doing time" instead of having time do you. Q cites satisfying activities that give meaning and richness to his day, even one spent in prison. The temporal alienation introduced by the imposition of sentence is successfully overcome.

The strategy of "escape" emphasizes flight from an oppressive reality. The strategy of "reclamation" emphasizes redeeming that reality: the life-world is re-humanized. However, this polarity is far from absolute. Like the yin-yang symbol, such opposites bear within themselves seeds of one another, and can flow together and harmonize. This harmonizing of opposites is an ideal in Taoism, and has its merits in a prison setting.

For example, we see this harmonizing in Q's description of being "constantly involved in activities that are beneficial...reading materials I intend to use in the

future." Perhaps Q started by reclaiming the present, discovering the joys of reading even in prison. This reading may then have stimulated new visions of a life post-release. Reclamation leads to escape. The progression can also be reversed. Perhaps Q liked to escape to an imagined future. Envisioning what he wants to do post-release (and Q is the only living participant in my class who has been released) may have then helped Q find meaning in his prison days. Escape leads to reclamation.

Whichever movement came first, I will call this blending of escape and reclamation "integration." From the Latin *integratus*, meaning "renewal" or "made whole," we see the power of integration in Q's ability to affirm his incarcerated present, and to see it as a route to a different and better future. The "ecstases" of time are effectively integrated, making whole again lived temporality. This can lead to an enhanced sense of the self's integrity, as it dwells in a reintegrated world.

This analysis would be overly sunny if it failed to mention a series of obstacles to this integrative work that can make it almost impossible for many. Take the example of Q's intellectual labors. He is unusual in having been highly educated before being imprisoned for drug dealing. Some 70% of inmates have a degree of functional illiteracy, and prison schools are ill equipped for the massive remedial effort needed. Even for strong readers, prospects can be discouraging. Prison libraries are woefully under funded, and have restricted rules on utilization. Inmates and their families often have few financial resources to purchase books. Prisoners may only be allowed a small number of books in their cells, because it constitutes a "fire hazard." Those attempting to send books in from the outside world (as I have done) often find it is treated as a security hazard, rejected because it does not come directly from the publisher, or that it mysteriously disappears in the prison mailroom. Certain types of literature — including, for example, religious materials — may have to be approved by a censoring authority. On and on it goes, as barriers within and without make it difficult to accomplish the integrative work mentioned above.

### Lived Space

Phenomenologists, Heidegger being a prominent example, have distinguished between geometric space and the lived-spatiality of human experience. The former, like the Newtonian conception of time, is an abstract, calculable entity. It can be plotted using Cartesian axes, as can any particular spatial point (this itself a theoretical concept, since points have no dimensionality). Space thus conceived is a contentless void, stretching uniformly and infinitely in all directions.

Spatiality-as-lived is something wholly other. It is oriented by our embodiment, which vectors space into what lies ahead and behind, right and left, up and down, accessible or withdrawn from our sensorimotor powers. Moreover, our lived-space is filled with meaningful "places" that orient our life. There is the home in which we dwell, places of work and recreation, social gathering and solitude. We experientially dwell not only in a house, but also in nested environs

— a neighborhood, city, or natural landscape — that can become a wider home shared by other “homies.”

Yet all this is vulnerable to displacement. The pronouncing of sentence rips the convicted out of the temporal life-world, as well as out of a previous fabric of lived spatiality. “Twenty years” spoken means 20 years during which the sentenced cannot return to his or her home. He or she cannot wander, cannot even see, the familiar neighborhood, or — except for dislocated visits — friends and family who dwell there. Even the world of nature is largely ripped away, but for a patch of dirt or sky.

What does the prison put in place of these places? First, we might say it offers *constricted* space. The inmate’s ability to roam freely has been forfeited. Hereafter, he or she will dwell in zones of brutal restriction — the narrow cell, the tiered building, the hemmed-in yard, the prison compound.

This is also a *ruptured* space. Contrast the experience of walking across an open field toward the distant horizon with space experienced by an inmate. Everywhere bars, fences, barbed wire, and tall walls cut through space separating limited *heres* from unreachable *theres*. The outside world, hitherto the place of all places, is severed off from access.

We might also refer to this space as *disoriented*. The spatiality of home and neighborhood is oriented by vectors of meaning, possibility, and preference. Far less so is the spatiality of prisons. They are often laid out in geometric grids, substituting an abstract Cartesian space for the more humane contours of ordinary habitations. Architecture here is dictated by issues of security and surveillance, not oriented by the desires of the home dweller. Moreover, the prison usually stands in no meaningful relation to the natural landscape into which it is thrown, or the life of surrounding communities. A life-world of nested places gives way to space structured as an instrument of control.

This can even give rise to a *reversed* spatiality. German phenomenologist Bollnow (1961) writes about the primacy of the “home,” broadly understood, in centering one’s life-world. But prison tends to reverse all the meanings of home — security, privacy, comfort, and freedom of choice. The guards are there to keep you in against your will, not to protect you from intruders. Whereas the boundaries of home establish a zone of privacy, prison walls do the opposite: they compress you together, often in overcrowded conditions with hundreds of other criminals. This is “maximum security” for the outside world, not those dwelling within the prison. There is a door to your “home” cell, but you don’t have the key. You are not free to go in and out as you please, but your enemies, the guards, can. You have a big picture window, but it faces inward where there is no view. In contrast to home as a place of settled dwelling, you can be transferred at a moment’s notice by administrative fiat. This, then, is home in reversed caricature. Instead of establishing a positive center to lived spatiality, the prison “home” is like the epicenter of a flushing toilet, centripetally sucking away the world.

The newly incarcerated must contend with this disordered spatiality as he or she did the disordering of time. Again, with reference to inmate dialogues, we will see a variety of strategies to re-humanize the world.

**John Woodland:** We always had a concept around here about keeping yourself distant from prison activities and the prison mentality. Don't participate in a whole bunch of prison groups, don't get caught up in playing football, basketball, don't think about fixing no cell up to make it comfortable. Let it stay raggedy. You want to keep a mindset that this is not some place for me to get comfortable.

**Michael Green:** I agree. I got a friend that every cell he moves in he paints to the max. I *refuse* to paint one of these cells or lay it out like it was home. To me it's just a place where you exist.

**Charles Baxter:** [*laughing*] I understand what Mike's saying because I'm one of those dudes — I call my cell my *palace*. As a matter of fact, I just got it painted last week and paid the dude four packs to do it. He painted the floors, my ceiling, the whole thing. I got my Oriental rugs laid down. I don't care where I'm at, I'm going to make it heaven while I'm there. Even in this hellhole, I'm going to find some heaven.

**Wayne Brown:** It's different being in a double cell. I could feel at home laying on my bunk. But when I got up and took one step to the wall, I felt like I'm in a danger zone 'cause I had somebody else on the top bunk. I was under their scrutiny. There's somebody watching....

**Tray Jones:** Yeah, when I used to sleep in a double cell, if I was in there with a person I didn't like, I felt like Wayne. But when I was in the cell with T — the only cell buddy that I really got along with — a bond developed, and in our closeness we were so brotherly.... It seemed like I had *more* room in the cell with him than I do now when I'm alone. We'd play cards and talk, and it felt like there was a lot of room (pp. 57–58)!

In this discussion, John and Michael emphasize a strategy of escape. That is, they cope with the disordered world of prison by refusing to become complicit with it. Instead, they imaginatively escape beyond its barriers, not allowing themselves to feel at home in a cell. Rather, they orient to the outside world, considering *that* their true home, albeit one from which they are temporarily exiled.

Charles adopts an opposite strategy, one that I have termed reclamation. He is determined to make himself as at home in prison as possible. If spatiality has become constricted, ruptured, disoriented, even reversed, Charles will do what is possible to reverse the reversals. He will make of his cell a palace. With paint and oriental rugs (and Charles is a Muslim imam), he will fight to humanize, even divinize his surroundings into an earthly/heavenly home.

Wayne and Tray remind us that such strategies are never effected alone. A human being is always a social being, inhabiting a world with others. As such, lived



space is not constituted by the solipsistic individual, but is a shared construction, deeply influenced by those around us. Wayne's life-world is constricted by the alienating "scrutiny" of a cellmate. However, Tray shows how the sympathetic Other assists the process of reclamation. An experience of communion and community has the capacity to radically expand lived-space.

To further the analysis, I introduce two more comments:

**Charles Baxter:** And the cell's where you actually get your schoolwork done, or work for organizations you're in, or work to get out of prison. Man is created from one cell, right, and as man grows he adapts into another cell, and that cell's also a place for growth and development. When you read the *Koran* and the *Bible*, you'll see that different prophets went to the *cave* for comfort and isolation. And the cell's like that cave (p. 56).

**Tray Jones:** My space ain't too restricted because I think of myself as on an *odyssey*. Even in here. I don't look at this as my home; it's just an experience that's necessary in order for me to get where I'm going. I believe I'm here because I lost my road. That's what I'm searching around for, the road to the larger society. In the meanwhile, I'm supposed to be restricted in space. I take the stoic outlook — my space is supposed to be restricted, but my ideas don't have to be, and that's where I find all my freedom.... When I was on the street, I had *less* space than I do in prison. I would only associate with the criminal elements.... Since I've been in prison, I've met people with sophistication, people from different races.... We meet here, and get a chance to rest and get out of our immediate world, and we can think about things we couldn't on the street (pp. 75–76).

In these comments we hear eloquent statements of what I have termed the strategy of integration, combining elements of reclamation and escape. Both men positively affirm — and thereby reclaim — aspects of prison life that might otherwise seem alien. For Charles, the limitations of the prison cell remind him of the prophet's cave, a place for growth and development. Tray, torn out of his driven world of drug dealing, uses prison as a haven for thoughtful exploration. Again, this process is assisted by others, whose diverse perspectives broaden his own.

Reclaiming the possibilities immanent within the prison world is the very tool that allows these men transcendence. That Tray is pinned in place (serving a sentence of life plus 20 years) has launched him on an *odyssey*. So, too, Charles, on a spiritual journey that unfolds in his prophet's cave. Here are examples of the strengths of the integrative strategy. The limits of prison space and time are used to trigger a life-world expansion.

### **Embodiment**

I now turn to what has been implicit in my previous analysis: the place of the body in the inmate's life-world. The notion of embodiment I use is not to be equated with the body in its sheer physicality — a piece of Cartesian *res extensa*,

or the anatomico-physiological entity described by medical science. In such frameworks, the human body is thematized as a thing in the world, like a desk, tree, or automobile. The properties of the human body can then be characterized — as can those of other material entities — using the language of mathematical description and mechanical analysis.

Yet, as Merleau-Ponty explores in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the body is not just a thing in the world: “The body is our general medium for having a world.” It is through our embodied perception and motility, reflection and expression — not just a purified rationality — that we experience a world of objects, people, and meanings. That which grounds my experience has been called the lived body (*Leib* in Husserl’s German) imbued with subjectivity, as distinguished from the object body (*Körper*), viewed as a thing in the world.

Earlier I said that prison tends to replace the richness of lived temporality and spatiality with a kind of geometrical and dehumanized time and space. We now see this is in every way correlative with a shift in embodiment. The body is *ec-static* — it naturally stands outside itself through its ability to perceive across a distance and move toward its goals. It is engaged with a world beyond its limits. But these projective capacities can also be blocked. A tall wall brings the body to a halt. We cannot see over or move through the wall. The imprisoned body is not primarily an active subject, advancing through space as it chooses, but a thing that is held, observed, and controlled. The prisoner is reduced to the status of contained object within a confining world.

Prison thus reminds us that the body is inherently ambiguous. To use Merleau-Ponty’s language, the lived body contains an *écart* — a fissure, or divergence. The living body is always both perceiver and perceived, a constituting subject and a worldly object. The restrictions of prison have the capacity to turn this two-sided nature into an outright opposition experienced between self and embodiment.

Other situations provoke this sense of opposition. When one falls ill, or is hampered by physical incapacity, one’s own body may emerge as an alien thing. In health, the body was an unproblematic and largely unthematized seat of self. Now it surfaces as Other. The sick body blocks one’s will, undermines one’s projects, and may threaten one’s very life.

This is not quite the existential situation of the body incarcerated. Unlike illness, where an alien power arises *within* the body, the prisoner is more likely to experience hostile forces located *outside* — the incarcerating system, guards, and bars. Social constraints immobilize the body, not its own disabilities. Nevertheless, the body can seem to be a co-conspirator. If one did not have a body, one could not be observed, punished, and restrained in this way.

Another imperfect analogy to the situation of the prisoner may be found in the experience of female embodiment within a patriarchal culture. As de Beauvoir discusses, women are often identified particularly with the body, and taken as an object for the male gaze and use. Insofar as women internalize this gaze, they

come to regard their own body as the thing in the mirror that must be rendered properly attractive, fit, and constrained in order to be socially acceptable. Whereas Merleau-Ponty (1962: 137) writes about the body's "I can" structures of ability, Iris Young (1980) writes that women often internalize an "I cannot." They learn an objectified style of embodiment that limits their capacities — for example, how to "throw like a girl."

Similarities abound in the position of the inmate. He or she is also made into an Other, an object under an omnipresent gaze. The inmate's body is everywhere constrained. The institution reinforces the experience of the "I cannot": I cannot move freely, leave the prison, secure privacy, or pursue my preferences. The prisoner's bodily location, dress, and actions are largely dictated by the state. A woman in a patriarchal society may be reigned in by subtle reinforcers (for example, "My, you look pretty today in your dress"). In a prison situation, the forces of confinement are much more blatant, fashioned of bars and barbed wire, threats of longer sentences and solitary confinement. Nevertheless, both cases provoke alienation from one's body. The body renders the self vulnerable to outside powers.

An alienated embodiment can also result from living as a "minority" member in a racist society. This is relevant to the 63% of inmates in the U.S. who are African-American or Hispanic. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes about a formative encounter with a young boy who becomes frightened at seeing a "Negro." Confronted with his blackness, culturally associated with primitiveness and defect, Fanon feels "imprisoned." "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, clad in mourning" (Fanon, 1967: 111–113).<sup>7</sup> The experience of being literally imprisoned may compound this distortion. The imprisoned body, like the black body in Fanon's description, is associated with violence and deficit, objectified by a fearful gaze, appropriated by hostile others. Exploration of the complex interplay between race, gender, ethnicity, and incarceration is an important topic for future work.

Given the prisoner's alienation from the body, it is not unusual for him or her to wish to cast it off, or transmute it into a nonhuman form — say that of a bird seen flying over the wall. The human body keeps one chained to earth. Yet this embodiment can also be reclaimed or escaped in a variety of ways that I will now explore. I begin with an inmate's remark (part of a discussion that was excerpted earlier) on the prison as "home."

**Tray Jones:** But you can never really have a home in here. Because the officers could come with the key anytime they want and uproot you. Like right now, everything that I own I brought out with me (my toothbrush and all) because *I'm the cell*, my own body, rather than some hole cut out of space (p. 56).

This comment reminds us that as much as prison renders the body "Other," a possession of the state, it can also reaffirm the body as the self's one true possession and locus of power. We see a similar paradox in the case of illness. The sick

person may feel both alienated from the body, which surfaces as a hostile Other, and more closely tied to the body, hyperaware of its functions and solicitous of its well-being in a way that was unnecessary in health. So, too, may the inmate become solicitous of the body. With so much else of the world ripped away, the body remains to be reclaimed — guarded and cultivated with care.

This strategy of reclamation takes many forms. Tray Jones affirms the body as a zone of privacy and security. Often the inmate's first task is to bolster the lived body against possible assaults from guards or other inmates. Many prisoners develop the body's energy and skills, through weightlifting, sports, yoga, and various forms of work, insofar as these are available. Inmates also develop the body as a locus of self-expression. Prisoners have produced amazing artistic creations with the most limited resources. A certain style of walk, dress, or mode of speech may help assert one's power and individuality. Then, too, the body can be a source of pleasure. Even within a depriving environment, gratifications of music, movement, sexuality, and drug use often remain obtainable.

The presence of others can assist in bodily reclamation. In Merleau-Ponty's words (1968: 143), we inhabit "intercorporeal being": our experience of self and world intertwines with that of those around us. Tray mentions the threat posed by invasive guards. Yet, earlier he spoke of a brotherly cellmate whose presence expanded lived-space when "we'd play cards and talk." The communion of prisoners with one another, sympathetic employees, and outside visitors can help the inmate reclaim embodied wholeness.

This is a challenge in the face of the disciplinary gaze. Foucault (1979: 195–228) discusses how the architecture of the "panopticon" serves to keep potentially rebellious bodies under surveillance. The inmates respond:

**Mark Medley:** When you're virtually under 24-hour surveillance — like the new prison in Jessup — there's also a way you can *resist* or *escape*. Autistic thinking. Total absorption in fantasy. "I'm building an island and this is what my water source will be, and the kind of plants I'll have...." You can absorb yourself in this for hours and hours and resist being conditioned by the discipline.

**Charles Baxter:** I was in Supermax, and a lot of the brothers in there, they escape by a lot of reading and studying — African history, the *Bible*, the *Koran*. They realize they're being watched, but they escape to something that gives them, you know, hope and inspiration.

**Donald Thompson:** But there's another side. Before I came here I was very violent. It didn't take much for me to strike out at another person — different ways — a baseball bat, a brick, a gun. But since I came in here, I've had one fight. Knowing that I'm being watched has made me control this violence. And as time went on, it helped me discipline myself, 'cause my intellect eventually kicked in (pp. 44–45).

Donald's comment is an example of the strategy of reclamation. He has found a way to turn even the disciplinary gaze — potentially alienating and disempowering — into a source of personal power. He cannot escape being watched, yet he uses this to help him overcome his own violent impulsivity. The result is a greater sense of self-mastery.

Comments by Mark and Charles remind us that the imprisoned body can be reclaimed and strategically escaped. Mark Medley, rather than affirming discipline, as does Donald, chooses to escape it via fantasy. Through "autistic thinking," he all but vacates the body, giving it over to the authorities, but as a lifeless thing. Charles Baxter makes reference to the escapist power of reading available even when confined in Supermax (imum security) — a place where the "worst" inmates are isolated in their cells 23 hours a day.

Is the body genuinely escaped through such activities? Not exactly. The very means by which the inmates "transcend" the body are rooted in the body's own capacities. Mark distracts himself with visual imagery, constructing a perceptual scene that calls upon body-memories. Charles holds a book in his hands and scans it with his eyes, using his brain to process symbols and formulate thoughts. The body is as involved in activities of the "higher intellect" as it is in weightlifting or sex.

Yet, as I discuss in *The Absent Body*, certain activities, because they put out of play or background large regions of the body, and involve modes of projection and self-transcendence, can seem *as if disembodied* (Leder, 1990: 108–125). In reading, for example, we often sit still. The body's movements are reduced to subtle eye-scans and sub-vocalizations. The physical words on the page become as if transparent to the meanings they signify, which are processed by brain activity unavailable to our senses. Imaginatively, we feel transported out of our immediate locale to other times and places, or a world of nonphysical ideas. Such factors combine to create an experiential sense of escaping the body, of being pure mind or spirit. We have seen how such experiences help many an inmate cope with confinement.

Strategies of integration combine elements of escape and reclamation. This is implicit in Charles' comments. Even in the extremes of Supermax body-confinement, he and his "brothers" can reclaim their situation and use it as a launching pad for transcendent escape.

### **The Penitentiary**

In doing this integrative work, inmates, often unknowingly, operate according to the original meaning and intent of the penitentiary. The term "penitentiary" was coined in the 1770s to define what was then a new vision of penal correction.<sup>8</sup> (Maryland Penitentiary, where I taught, is the oldest continuously operating penitentiary in the Western world, having first opened — or closed? — its doors in 1811.) Rather than endorsing harsh corporeal punishment, the penitentiary

movement, led by Quakers, sought to humanize, even spiritualize criminal justice. The prison cell was modeled on the monastic cell. Just as monks retreated in confinement and isolation to repent their sins, so might criminals, emerging reformed by the experience.

Certain prisoners do accomplish something like this in prison. In integrative work, the very conditions of confinement are used to enlarge the self and its life-world. There is a genuine, and positive, existential re-formation. The irony is that the contemporary penitentiary does so much to undermine this process. Conditions are harsh and overcrowded. Treatment by prison authorities is often dehumanizing, demeaning, and radically disempowering. Opportunities for educational, therapeutic, and occupational advancement are sadly deficient. The prisoner seeking to positively transform the self battles hostile forces at every turn.

I will give a few examples from personal experience. Due to a change in the status of the prison to medium security, most of the men I worked with were abruptly transferred en masse to other prisons. The sense of community we had painstakingly built was shattered. (This is not unusual in a prison culture where close relationships and inmate-communities are often seen as a security threat to be countered by transfers.) Further teaching there on my part was discouraged. Around this time, the 1993 Omnibus Crime Bill also cut off Pell Grants, which fund higher education for low-income Americans, to all prisoners. The result was a wholesale closing down of prison college extension programs. Soon thereafter, the governor of Maryland (a moderate Democrat) announced he would not approve the parole of any inmate serving a life-sentence, despite any positive recommendations from the parole board. The message is that any process of self-reformation the "lifer" engages in will neither be recognized nor rewarded by the state. This serves to undercut just the sorts of motivated prisoners with whom I was working. Most recently, my own attempt to volunteer as a philosophy teacher in a women's prison was rejected by the warden. The stated reason had to do with issues of "space and security."

Whereas Charles envisions the cell as a prophet's cave, all too often it is more like Plato's cave in the *Republic*. To illustrate the state of the unenlightened, he used the metaphor of prisoners chained within a cave.<sup>9</sup> Their necks are fastened so they cannot turn to see the light at the mouth of the cave. All that is visible to them are dark shadows cast on the wall. These they take to be reality, having no object of comparison.

Though metaphorical, it seems an apt image of many a prison. Educators, counselors, and others who might bring "light" from the outside world are often woefully absent. The inmates are left primarily among "shadows" — the society of frequently contemptuous authorities, other criminals, and the memories of their previous misspent life. For most, there is little of a positive nature to pursue. Not surprisingly, upon release from this cave, the inmate is often poorly equipped to reenter the broader society. Incarceration has torn them from the fabric of their

previous life-world. It has infantilized and disempowered them. The prisoner who emerges is often angrier as a result, and more dysfunctional. He or she is out of touch with new cultural developments and technologies that others take for granted. Then there is the permanent label of ex-con, making it harder to find a job and forge a new identity. Is it any wonder that the rate of recidivism is so high for released inmates? This, then, reinforces a stereotype that rehabilitation doesn't work, justifying harsher prison conditions.

I have heard it said that if a mad scientist wished to create a system designed to *increase* criminality, he or she would come up with something like our modern prison system, now caging more than two million Americans and peripherally affecting tens of millions more of their dependents, family members, associates, and friends. Yet to see only this bleak picture is to miss the power of the person to escape, to reclaim, to integrate, even in the harshest of worlds. The inmate is not only the passive recipient of punishment. He or she is also an active constitutor of the world, capable of creating freedoms.

## NOTES

1. For up-to-date statistics concerning incarceration rates, see reports from the United States government's Bureau of Justice Statistics (available at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/prisons.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/prisons.htm)). There is suggestive evidence in the last report ("Prisoners in 2000") that the prison population is finally leveling off after decades of dramatic increase.

2. This is according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (available at [www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm)).

3. Bureau of Justice Statistics, report on "Prisoners in 2000." On this topic, also see "Punishment and Prejudice: Racial Disparities in the War on Drugs," Human Rights Watch, May 2000 (available at [www.hrw.org/reports/usa/](http://www.hrw.org/reports/usa/)).

4. See, for example, Michel Foucault (1979: 135–128).

5. My thinking on prison time was influenced by "Time and Punishment: Toward an Algonquin/Pragmatist/Platonist Critique of the Popular Philosophy of Prison," a paper delivered by Greg Moses at a conference on "Thinking About Prisons: Theory and Practice," State University of New York at Cortland, October 2001.

6. This example is not one of what Minkowski would call "primary expectation," where we are trapped in a state of brutal arrest and anguish, but what happens when "we have expectation already impregnated with measurable time" involving a precise event expected at a determinate moment (*Ibid.*: 87).

7. For valuable references, see also Gordon (1997).

8. See Evans (1982).

9. See Plato, *The Republic*, Book 7: 514a-521d.

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