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TOTAL CONFINEMENT

*Madness and Reason
in the Maximum Security Prison*

Lorna A. Rhodes

Chapter I | CONTROLLING TROUBLES

These people are taught we're the enemy, that this is the worst of the worst.

CONTROL UNIT INMATE, OF OFFICERS

He is definitely a very dangerous person, capable of probably doing anything that he has ever been accused of, whether founded or unfounded. He is very dangerous, very smart.

CONTROL UNIT OFFICER, OF AN INMATE

The control unit sits alone on the prison grounds, built partly underground and surrounded by its own razor-wire fence. My companion, a quiet man who works in a different section of the prison, leads the way through the double gate in the fence, through a set of heavy metal doors, along a clean, bright hallway, and past several small offices. Finally we emerge into the circular interior. A glassed-in control booth sits in its center, slightly elevated, a row of video monitors visible above the booth officer's head. Around the perimeter are two tiers of tightly secured cells. Each has a narrow window on its outside wall, frosted to prevent prisoners from seeing out. Looking down a tier, as in Figure 1, one sees rows of cells with their steel doors, small windows and cuffports hinged to open outward. The interior space of the unit is divided into sections of these cells—called “pods”—separated from one another and from the control booth by shatterproof clear walls and locked doors. This clean, shadowless interior, almost devoid of natural light, gives the fleeting impression that it is empty except for the uniformed staff working the booth.

An officer takes us for a brief and gingerly walk along one of the tiers, where we can see through the little windows into the 8 x 10 cells. Most of the prisoners wear only their underwear. Some sleep on their concrete beds, or simply lie on them staring into space; others pace restlessly back and forth. Some gaze at us silently; others yell up and down the tiers to



Figure 1. Control unit tiers. From the perspective of someone facing the cells, the doors that seal the pods are to the left and right and the control booth is to the rear. Photo by Allan R. Adams.

one another. Echoing in the hard-edged interior, their shouts are a blur of rage-saturated sound. The atmosphere is dense as an inmate calls out to us from his cell. He's got a "nine mil" in his cell, he says through the window, and he's gonna kill himself if they don't let him out. The officer asks him what he means. He raises a clenched fist and waves his muscled, tattooed arm in our faces: *This* is my nine mil. The noise around us escalates, though I can't make out the words. My companions explain that this man's neighbors are egging him on. Eventually, they say, he will do

something to himself because, the officer tells me, "The guy next to him will talk him into it."

On our way into the unit we walked past big carts stacked with plastic meal trays. Since the inmates are not allowed to have anything sharp, all the food is soft or bite-size; today each tray has a grapefruit cut into quarters. Two officers deliver lunch to each pod, carrying the trays to the inmates one at a time. One officer opens the cuffport and stands carefully to one side while the other, who is dressed in a waterproof jumpsuit, quickly pushes in the tray. The officers stay clear because sometimes inmates stab them through the opening or hurl feces or urine at them. On the upper tier of cells one door has been covered with plastic to keep the man inside from throwing as the officers walk by.

Like all control prisons, this one is based on a "lockdown" system that keeps prisoners in their cells twenty-three or more hours a day. Booth officers operate a twenty-four-hour computerized system that runs the unit's mechanized doors and gates, trains video monitors into every corner of the building, and makes it possible to listen in on cells and tiers (Figure 2). An inmate can leave his cell only under escort after allowing himself to be cuffed through the cuffport. The two officers who bring him out may add leg and waist chains, or a tether that hooks onto his cuffs. One on each side, they lead him to a brief shower or to solitary exercise in a small, walled-in yard.¹ An ad from a correctional trade journal (Figure 3) reflects the concerns of those who design these units. Offering the "highest reliability," it promises a seamless electronic control that works in tandem with architecture to completely encompass the space of the prison. Each panel of the illustration shows an aspect of this control: the centralized system that manages the internal doors, the tight, possibly electrified perimeter, the computer screen that can display not only the space itself but the history and photograph of every inmate, and the impressive electronics. Thus the prisoner who is controlled by visible and routinized forms of bodily restraint is also contained within a pervasive and efficient surveillance. The intent is to ensure that all "complexities" remain in the hands of management; in reality, as we have just glimpsed and as the ad itself seems to acknowledge, this focus on control occurs in the face of "possibilities" that challenge the order imposed by these technologies.

The United States has over sixty maximum security prisons like this one. They have many names: maximum security units, supermaximum

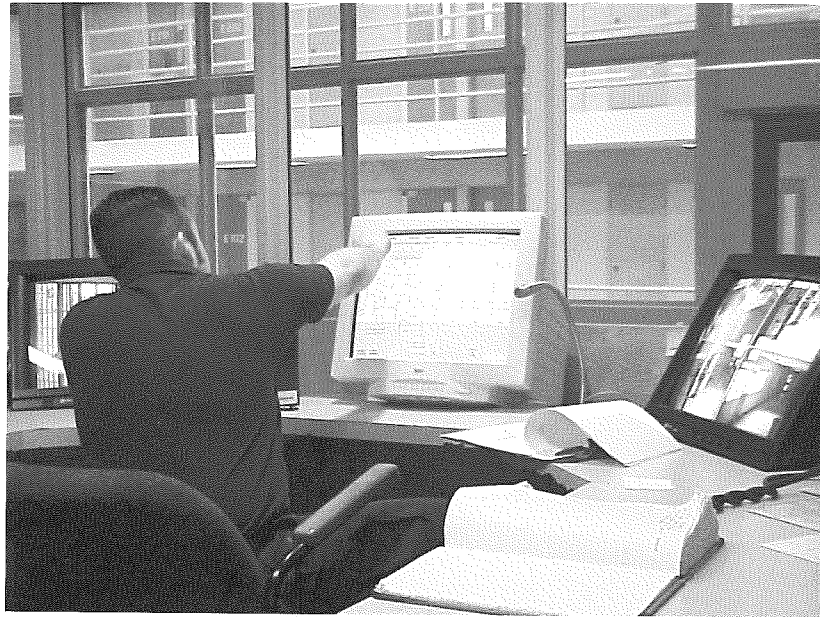
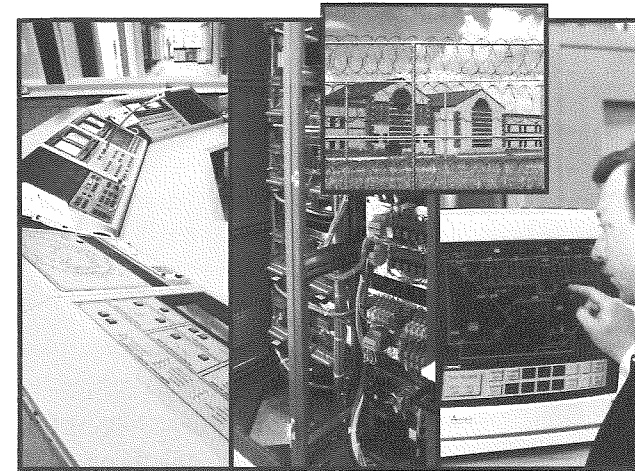


Figure 2. Control booth. Photo by Allan R. Adams.

prisons, special housing units, or intensive management units (the term in Washington State). I will use the generic “control prison” or “control unit.” Control prisons are freestanding institutions, while control units, which are more common, are special sections of larger prisons. These facilities are routinely described by correctional officials and in the press as housing “the worst of the worst” and thus serving as “prisons within prisons.”²

To meet with prisoners, I leave the main part of the unit and circle around the back to a row of visiting booths like the one in which I talked to Jeremy Roland. Two officers bring a man about twenty years old whose shaved head and muscular shoulders give him an air of being ready for anything. In prison on life without parole, he is polite and enthusiastic as he tells me “what it is like in here.”

This is real confined in here. Talk about antisocial [not a term I had mentioned to him], they try to *make* people antisocial! But there’s no way to keep your mind going in here. I’ve been in [the control unit] two years.



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Figure 3. Correctional trade journal advertisement: “The Best Design Implementation.”

It gets boring. I wake up about lunchtime, work out for three or four hours, pace, write letters. There’s a big part of the day with nothing to do. Anger does build up. I don’t know how to put it into words. Most of us have an anger problem, but we have no security to express it. We don’t trust the guards, and if we go to psych we have to keep our guard up. Anger just boils up.

Eager for conversation, he has scarcely paused for breath when the officers come to return him to his cell, bringing another man who is in his late

twenties. He too speaks rapidly and intently, as though he feels we are running out of time before we start.

Petty things build up in here, the *police* [officers] sometimes go overboard . . . You can't do nothing that can make an impact . . . The police are running around and playing games, little games to mess with me. Stress builds. It's true, I've slipped at times. I want to try not to assault, try not to throw piss or shit.

These prisoners convey a sense of pressure in their speech and bodies. When at one point the second man jumps up to act out an incident of trouble with officers, he seems almost too big for the room containing him. But a third man who talks with me that day sits quietly on the other side of the glass and apologizes, in a voice almost too low to hear through the scratchy speaker in the wall, "I haven't talked to anyone in a long time." Haltingly he speaks of difficulty sleeping and distress caused by other inmates on the tier. One young prisoner, describing later what he had seen during a control unit stay, says of prisoners like this, "A lot of the guys have nothing to live for and just give up."

The officers in the control unit spend most of their time working in pairs to escort prisoners to and from their brief yards and showers. When not in protective jumpsuits, they wear uniforms decorated with state insignia and indications of rank. They carry no guns, only a radio to call for help and a heavy set of keys; handcuffs dangle from their belts.³ Their shifts are often hectic; during brief breaks they retreat to the sergeant's office to sit around a table with cans of soda and coffee in Styrofoam cups. Here an older man, retired from the military, confides that he finds the paramilitary structure of the prison disappointing. I assume at first that he is criticizing it for being lax, but it turns out that what he objects to is the difficulty he feels in being heard by his superiors. A younger officer, big circles under his eyes, says he sometimes works two shifts in a row, then goes home to take care of the children while his wife comes in for her shift in a different part of the prison. As the room empties, a heavysset woman who has been sitting silently at the end of the table turns to me and says, "I hate this job. It's made me hard. Here there's two answers, yes and no, and it's usually no. You think, 'This person's being awfully nice, what do they want?' You forget that people out there might just be *nice*."

Some officers describe working in a control unit as a challenging, dangerous assignment. Prisoners, they say, have "all the time in the world" to watch them, notice their weaknesses, and plan attacks against them.

[Other prison units] are a cakewalk compared to this. You see every type of emergency response in here. Most people won't work here. I like it, the excitement, the action. You're respected for working here. And it's interesting, you *do* things. But at times it can get to you—there aren't too many jobs like this.

But others insist that because lockdown conditions in fact require little spontaneous decision making the danger is overblown. One man who no longer worked in a control unit said,

There are a lot of people [there who] have a kind of cowboy mentality. But it's not a difficult job. It's one of the most secure places to work. [Out here in population] you can't treat the inmates poorly and get away with it because they'll come after you. So [the control unit's] a very easy place to work because everything's routine.

Regardless of whether they see the control unit as dangerous, many believe that prison work requires a specialized emotional stance. "You've got to have a little bit of compassion but you cannot become involved," said one officer of his wary approach to inmates. Asked if they like their work, officers shrug and say, "Well, it pays the bills."⁴

As we leave the control unit, my escort talks about the changes he's seen in the many years he has worked in prisons. He is proud of the way the prison system has "tightened up" and become more "progressive" since the widespread prison uprisings of the 1970s and early '80s. Then, he says, "this place was a pit." Now, in contrast, "*we're* gonna control the institution. It's gotten less violent." He believes that better management, more professional staff—and, not least, the existence of the unit we've just visited—have moved the prison away from the chaos of earlier years. The administrator of the control unit later explained,

We need to contain the bigger disruptions. It's a very necessary unit. It has a positive effect with the general population and it has the negative deterrence of [taking the prisoner out of] the general population. There's less

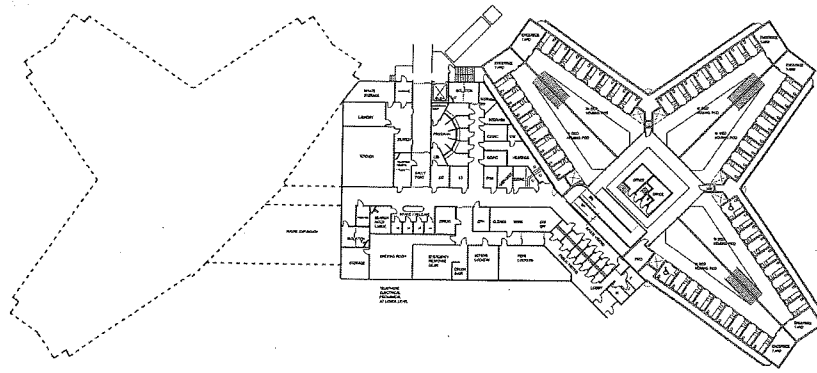


Figure 4. Architect's preliminary plan for a control prison. Reproduced with the permission of KMB Justice Facilities Group.

privileges, and it's a more sterile environment. It's a negative effect, but it's a positive effect from our standpoint of basic security and the safety of the staff and the other inmates . . . You have to be able to remove people from the population.

American prisons have always had a "hole," a special area for solitary confinement or "segregation." Traditional forms of "seg" consist simply of fairly brief periods of isolation and deprivation of privileges. A prisoner who was placed in segregation at Alcatraz in the late 1950s describes a dark, dank cell, out of sight of inmates and guards, in which he lost all track of time.⁵ Control units, by contrast, are a product of the rationalized management my companion pointed to when he said that prisons have become "more progressive"; they are tightly organized, brightly lit, and maximally visible in every corner (Figure 4). Many observers note that the current belief in the "negative/positive" effect of these facilities began at the federal prison in Marion, Illinois, in 1983. There a week of violence led to a prolonged emergency lockdown, a "large scale-experiment in solitary confinement," that continues to this day.⁶ As the number of people being incarcerated rose dramatically in the 1980s and '90s, prison systems all over the country began using isolation to "tighten up" on their inmates.⁷ This high-tech, sharply individualized form of custody is labor-intensive—an endless round of escorts, meals, mail deliveries, and cell searches. But administrators like my companion, charged with keeping order in less re-

strictive settings, argue that it is worth the price to keep the "worst" prisoners locked down where they can do no harm.

This project of exclusion, however, produces troubles of its own. One is that a mechanized, almost seamless, containment of prisoners' bodies exacerbates or produces extreme states of mind. Raging, depressed, or hallucinating men "knot up" within the tiny confines of their cells. A second, paradoxical, effect is that tight control over the body precipitates extreme uses of the body itself. These resist containment despite the multiple steel doors and scripted practices designed to manage them; a piece of plastic taped over a cell door becomes the last defense against a prisoner's body waste. Thus the routine work that creates the intensive order of the control unit is not enough; additional work—physical, emotional, and intellectual—is necessitated by that very order. This chapter is a consideration of how, through practices that yield more trouble the tighter their hold, the prison tends to secrete the very things it most tries to eliminate.⁸

ISOLATION IS THE WORST THING

There's no way you can know what it's like for us in here.

CONTROL UNIT INMATE QUOTED IN
HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, *Cold Storage*, p. 1

Isolation is the worst thing we do to people.

PRISON OFFICIAL

The natural man can be maintained while the social man
withers away.

MICHAEL IGNATIEFF,
The Needs of Strangers, pp. 50-51

Go into your bathroom, say the prisoners, and lock the door. Now try to imagine the passage of hours . . . days . . . years. One prisoner gave this typical description:

It's pretty much like not living. You're locked in a cell twenty-three hours a day . . . That's it. Sit in the house, watch TV, listen to the radio if you have those . . . It's boredom, a real intense boredom. No outside air . . . you can't see out the windows. They don't treat you bad, but it's just that everything is so impersonal. It's like dealing with automatons.

Most control units operate on a “level” or step system in which prisoners spend an initial period in a bare cell with almost nothing to do; in some cases only a Bible or Koran is available. If they can “do good,” they gradually gain a radio, television, and limited access to books, magazines, and writing materials. One young prisoner in his first thirty days on the “program”—as it is called by inmates and staff—said:

Your lights are on all day . . . it really kind of dulls all your senses . . . It makes you numb. You get easily mad. You feel that everything they do is just to make you mad . . . It's terrible in here. I think they go out of their way to turn this into hell.

Confined to their small, densely walled cells (Figure 5) along the periphery of the unit, prisoners are both physically and psychologically distant from the officers who move briskly down the tiers or stand in the center looking out at them with the grave disengagement of the police. Inside the cells, the concrete walls are painted a dull gray and contain nothing but a built-in bed and desk and a metal combination sink and toilet. A light fixture high on the wall is covered with tamper-proof clear plastic and left partially on twenty-four hours a day. One day, standing outside an empty cell with a group of prison workers, I ventured a request, and an administrator signaled the booth officer to close the door on me. Once I was inside, it slid shut with a massive clang, far louder than the same sound heard from the outside. The small room felt completely airless. The administrator looked in at me through the little window in the door and said firmly, mimicking the frequent response to a prisoner's requests: “No.”

The administrator captured with this “no” the essence of the captivity I so fleetingly experienced. Prisoners depend on the staff to bring them everything—food, toilet paper, books, and letters from home. They depend on the scheduling and discipline of the staff for their brief showers and yards. As many officers put it, “We bring them breakfast in bed, we take them to recess, we take them to showers . . . We're responsible for their well-being.” Well-being is here so minimally defined, and the lack of contact with other people so complete, that this dependency—which officers complain makes them feel like servants—can turn almost any inmate request into a “bid for attention.” Officers and prisoners agree on the deadening effects of an atmosphere in which there is so little room for

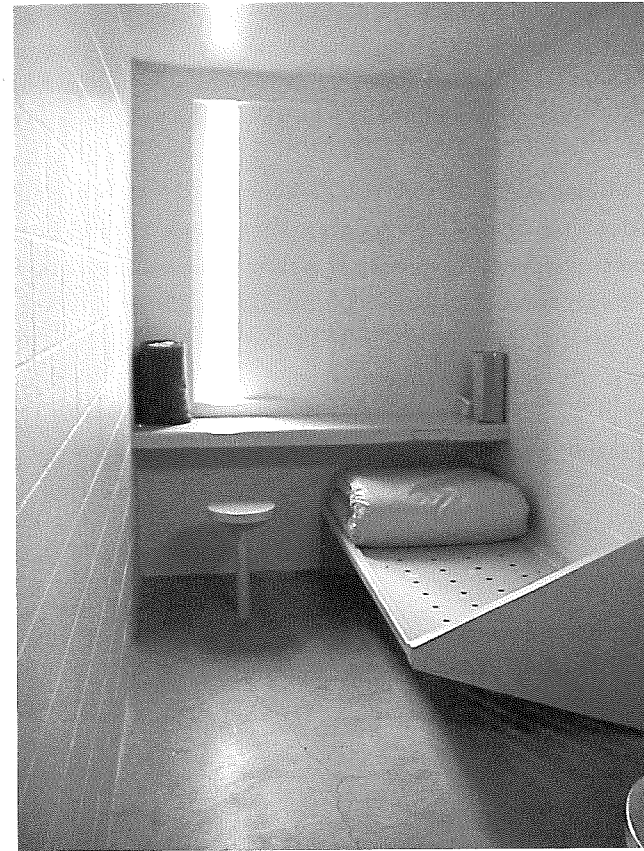


Figure 5. Control unit cell interior. Photo by Allan R. Adams.

maneuver. One officer said, “There's probably very few more negative places in this world. If nothing happened it was a great day.” Many prisoners describe a contracted, thickly enclosed world.

They put you in an environment where you can't talk to anybody else, you can't have any contact . . . unless you yell or scream . . . The only thing you get to hear is the keys jingling . . . And that type of psychological imbalance you place upon somebody is very detrimental . . . Because when you're subjected to these types of things and you are without the elements of life . . . if you're without those things, it'll make you go crazy. You end up talking to yourself . . . It's part of their psychological war that they inflict upon us

in order to get us to conform and to do what they want. But they don't realize that they're actually doing more harm to us . . . There's no correction here. There is no rehabilitation here . . . If you take a dog and put him in a corner . . . sooner or later this dog is going to come out biting, snapping.

Using an animal idiom pervasive in these units (dogs, in particular, will recur in this account), this man points to the extreme effects of conditions of isolation and sensory distortion. In a state of derealization in which all forms of contact become attenuated, "you end up talking to yourself." Like many who critique these units for producing sensory deprivation, this inmate suggests that one consequence is the "snapping and biting" of a cornered animal.⁹

Derek Janson, a prisoner to whom I will return in later chapters, wrote "Just One More Beautiful Day in Your Captivity" after living for many years in a control unit.

So smile
And don't let them see you sweat.
Sweat? . . . Shit, how about
Pure unadulterated hatred oozing
From every core of your being
And smelling the stink that comes off your dark thoughts
When all you can think of
Is dying, yeah dying
Like a rabid animal in a cage
Because you find yourself spending
One more endless day in this
Cold fucking cage that tries
To steal the very life from your soul
And you are no longer capable
Of even shedding a tear.

And all around you is a rag tag
Assemblage of dysfunctional miscreants
And pathetic deviants who can't muster
The social or mental capacity of a
Skid row wino who's spent the past
Decade sucking sterno juice over a
Bottle of Mad Dog 20/20

And just as you think you've found
A moment of peace within your
Dreams . . . You are awakened by
The maddening screams of a delusional
Psychotic who's just thrown
A handful of shit from his cage
Only to land in front of yours.

Yeah smile
Because when the skeletons come rising out
Of your closets to haunt your poor
Misguided ass
I'll still be standing righteous within
The valves of my own soul
Even after your cages have claimed my bones.

Yeah . . . smile
Because this is just one more
Beautiful day in your captivity.

Janson describes himself engulfed by a numbing anger and hatred behind a "smile" of compliance, his social isolation manifested in a virulent aversion to weaker prisoners and a burning sense of injustice. Many prisoners speak similarly of the "dark thoughts" that haunt them in isolation. For some, all contact and stimulation become aversive. Some cover their windows, living for weeks in the dark. Others become too apathetic to respond even when moved to other units and provided with more stimulation. One young man who had been taken out of a control unit and sent to a psychiatric facility said, "I'm kind of institutionalized. I'm afraid to be around other people. The [control unit] kinda wears and tears on you. Sometimes you get really depressed, you have no contact at all." "A lot of the guys," said another inmate, "don't care about anything and just want to die."¹⁰

Though prisoners in control units are in solitary cells and cannot see one another, they can talk by shouting back and forth to their neighbors or across the tiers. Some of these conversations are about everyday events (the television news, for instance) or express anger toward the prison sys-

tem, officers, or other inmates. In this sense control unit confinement is not entirely "solitary"; rather it fosters distorted forms of sociality patched together from the little contact that is available. But for many prisoners, particularly those who experience tenuous mental states, these shouted conversations create a disturbing echo-chamber effect. One man complains, "They tell shit to each other all night long. There's no peace in the place." In one unit we spoke briefly with a frantic prisoner, identified by officers as mentally ill, who said, "I gotta get outta this place—it's a jellybowl, and it makes you worse! It's an isolation tank, and these walls, there's nothing painted (on them) and they capture the voices, and you keep hearing things . . . It angers you."¹¹

Despite the need for contact, many prisoners also undergo an expansion of personal space and an inability to tolerate others. One officer explained:

[Inmates] spend so much time in single cells they get very paranoid. We have an inmate [who] went to a regular unit, but he only lasted a day. He asked to come back here. He said, I can't stand it, people come up and *talk* to me. His personal space has gotten larger than usual.

An inmate made the same point:

When I get out I am going to have to go to a four-people cell. That's going to be a lot of anxiety . . . I'm trying to do my yoga right now so I won't be so tense when I get out there. Plus I've got some people out there I know from the streets and I know they're going to give me a hug. But I won't be able to do it because it's embedded in my mind that when people touch me it has a negative effect, you know, that every time somebody touches me it's a cop.

As this comment suggests, many prisoners look for ways to keep themselves going in solitary; working out, reading, letter writing, meditation, and yoga were mentioned by inmates we interviewed. One said of the control unit, "It's given me solitude and either I went nuts or I got my mind right. I took the opportunity to try and get my mind right." A survival guide published by the American Friends Service Committee contains advice from prisoners held in California. "The mind and body needs to continually be fully active," one prisoner suggests, outlining a rigorous reading, writing, and exercise regimen. Another insists, "Only my body is being

held captive."¹² Some prisoners come to define strength itself in terms of resistance.

If you're not strong-minded, this place will tear you down. I'm walking around here like a caged animal—it makes you feel so inadequate, so inferior, so *less than*. The thing that keeps me sane is knowing I'm strong-minded.

But although some prisoners are able to muster emotional and intellectual strength against captivity, often these measures described by "survivors" are simply no match for the intensity of this form of confinement. Unable to "stonewall the boredom devil," in the words of one California inmate, prisoners go to extreme lengths to fill the void with human attention in whatever form it is available.¹³

Behavior problems get the most attention. Like if you kick the door, they respond, or you can get your needs [for contact] met by going on a hunger strike. Then they label you a manipulator.

Holding trays [refusing to return meal trays], things like that are the only way you can get the guards' attention. You try to talk to them, they don't really give a shit.

The extremes of behavior that are common in control units are almost unknown in the outside world, but these comments point to one way we can begin to comprehend them. In these settings it is not only prisoners' bodies that are tightly managed. Here attention itself—those moments when one human being notices and responds to another—is administered, "guarded," and applied sparingly. In this economy of attention, prisoners' oppositional use of their bodies expresses not only their diminished options for action but also the parsimonious way in which "trouble" comes to be defined in a setting that takes for granted the reduction of the self to its narrowest range.

A SURPLUS OF POWER

In the eighteenth century . . . as if with a blinding flash of insight . . . architecture [was] discovered to be a serviceable weapon in the war against vice . . . A new role had

been found for it as a vessel of conscience and as pattern giver to society.

ROBIN EVANS, *The Fabrication of Virtue*, p. 6

Our father God, we thank thee for this prison.

CHAPLAIN BLESSING A PRISON
ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Prison workers and administrators sometimes fantasize about a facility so automated that food would be delivered on a conveyor belt with absolutely no human contact. Perhaps robots could even do some of the escorting. A more humane vision of the perfect prison, called “Self-Sufficient Isolation,” was described in *Corrections Forum* in 1995. The author, Andrei Moskowitz, suggests that prisoners be kept alone in small, simple apartments. An accompanying drawing shows a solitary man sitting at a desk in a freestanding unit complete with books, a kitchen, and woodworking tools (Figure 6a). A second, unpublished drawing by Moskowitz indicates that these units would be placed in a suburb-like configuration with a substantial yard around each one (Figure 6b). By “mustering discipline in complete isolation”—pictured as the constructive colonization of a small but complete domain—prisoners thus housed would “master their projects” in preparation for life in the outside world.¹⁴

The dream of the perfect prison has deep historical roots. In the early nineteenth century, America’s first prison-building boom was based on a fervent belief that incarceration could produce an almost magical cellular individualism. New “silent system” prisons kept inmates in either partial or total isolation and enforced complete silence; at Cherry Hill in Philadelphia, for example, inmates labored alone in their cells and wore hoods during exercise periods. These prisons were based on the theory that regimen and architecture could be combined into a force for moral regeneration, acting on those within to “soften the mind” and make “each individual . . . the instrument of his own punishment.”¹⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville’s trip to America in 1832 was for the purpose of visiting these institutions, which were regarded as models for penal systems elsewhere. In *On the Penitentiary System in the United States* he and his friend Gustave de Beaumont reported enthusiastically that “the solitary cell of the criminal is for some days full of terrible phantoms . . . [but] when he has fallen into a dejection of mind, and has sought in labor a relief . . . from that moment he is

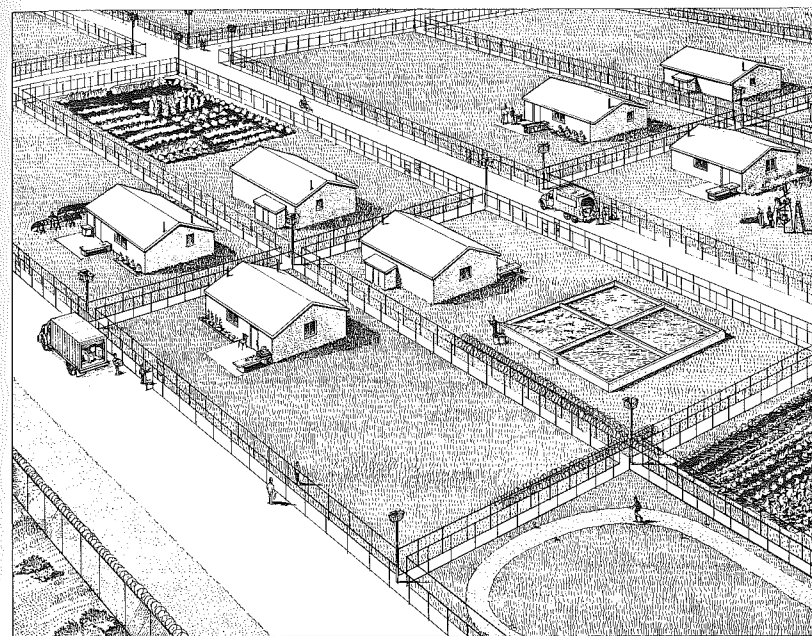
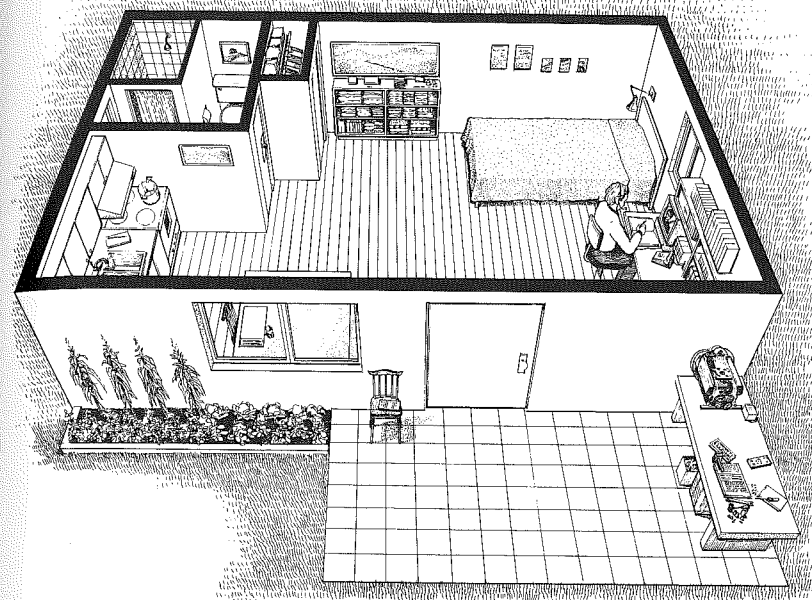


Figure 6. “Self-Sufficient Isolation” by Andrei Moskowitz. (a) Interior of housing unit. (b) Exterior view. Reproduced with the permission of Andrei Moskowitz.

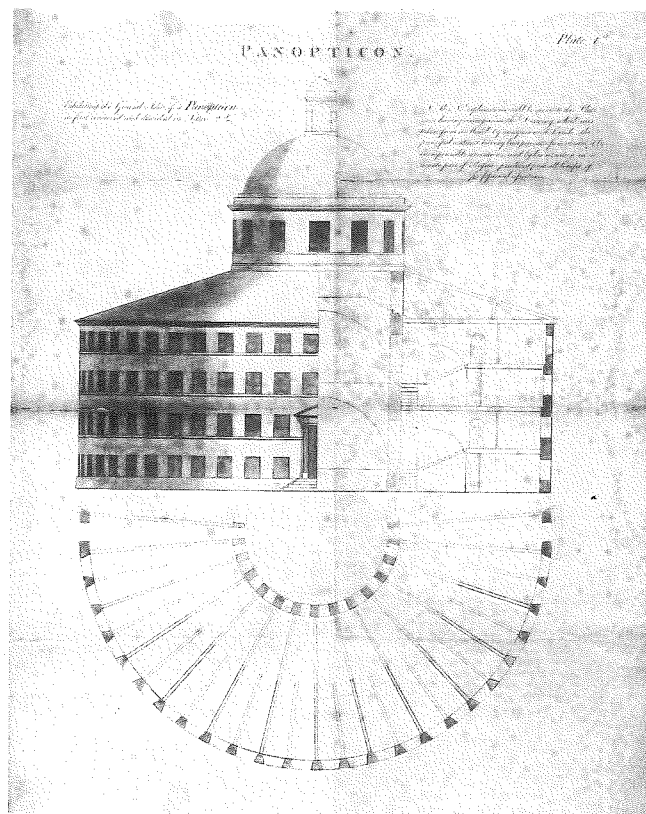


Figure 7. Plan for the Panopticon, or Inspection House, 1787 (Bentham 115/43). The Critchef Panopticon shown here is an early version of Bentham's plan drawn by an engraver. The cells are around the periphery with the governor's quarters in the center. Reproduced with the permission of Special Collections, University College, London.

tamed and forever submissive to the rules of the prison."¹⁶ Informing this method for taming the criminal was Jeremy Bentham's late eighteenth-century plan to make his utilitarian philosophy the foundation of punishment (Figure 7). Individuals could be changed by architecture—or so went the theory—because human nature dictated a predictably self-regulating response to the imposition of painful consequences for bad behavior. The discipline and loneliness of an organized form of solitary confinement could be trusted to make work and repentance less painful

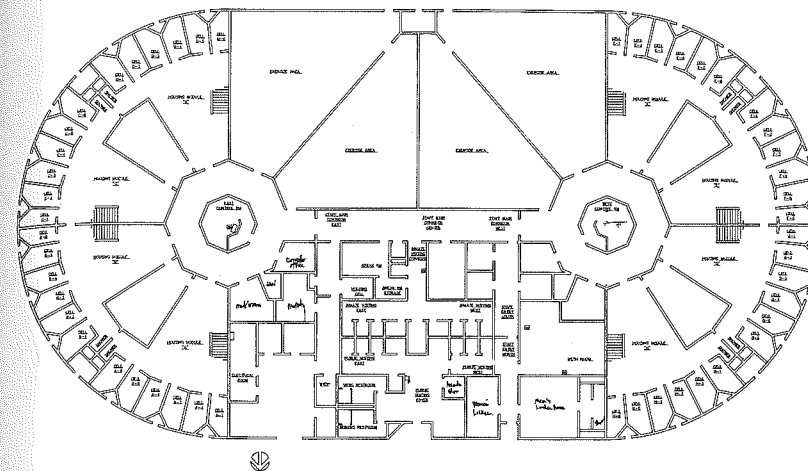


Figure 8. Architect's plan for an oval control prison. Reproduced with the permission of KMB Justice Facilities Group.

than the alternatives. Just as in "self-sufficient isolation" two hundred years later, a "useful individual" would be the product, not of contact with other people, but of a deliberately controlled material environment.¹⁷

The silent era was short-lived: expensive to build and maintain, the early prisons soon gave way to overcrowded and often chaotic facilities in which there was little room for solitude.¹⁸ As a number of recent critics of the control prison have pointed out, it is as though the silent prison lay dormant for almost two centuries—persisting mainly in architectural memory and the elaboration of forms of surveillance—only to resurface now in an eerie replica of the panopticon (Figure 8).¹⁹

One telling similarity between the early experiments and contemporary prisons is a preoccupation with a technologically elaborate efficiency. The designers of the silent era facilities, for example, came up with ingenious mechanical methods for delivering meals while keeping prisoners from seeing or hearing other human beings. In the contemporary prison, technological innovation is combined with bureaucratic management in a similar attempt to organize every detail of prisoners' lives and officers' behavior—to ensure, in other words, that "nothing" happens.

Consider, for instance, the lunch trays stacked on a cart at the control unit's gate. Each tray with its dull spoon and bland food has emerged from

a tightly regulated food service to meet that need for sustenance in which every inmate is just like his fellows, while at the same time differentiating him, if necessary, according to whatever dietary specifics—diabetes, religious restrictions—make him individual. The trays are neatly labeled, the contents carefully prepared to make eating possible where weapons can be made out of anything. This system of meal delivery—like the systematic operation of the earlier prisons and like dozens of other elements of contemporary management—is simultaneously abstract and concrete, distant and proximate. On the one hand, it involves much classification, planning, and paperwork dedicated to the speedy accomplishment of complex tasks in which the inmate himself is simply a unit of operation; these tasks spring from an apparatus of control located elsewhere, in a multitude of policies, legal rulings, and governmental and institutional offices. On the other hand, this form of efficiency bears in on the most intimate details of daily life, especially on those closest to the body—eating, bathing, and physical activity. The dream here is that the more effective the prison becomes in materializing administrative plans—framed in one advertisement for food service as the implementation of a “security business, a social service business . . . even a political business”—the more efficiently it can provide for the natural man.²⁰

Those who point to the similarity between control prisons and the silent system are struck by the observation of nineteenth-century critics that solitary confinement—particularly the form that involved no work—drove prisoners mad. Writing about England’s most intense experimental prison of that era, Michael Ignatieff notes, “Men came apart in the loneliness and silence . . . every year at Pentonville between five and fifteen men were taken away to the asylum.”²¹ We can find in the failures of the silent prisons the equivalent of a disturbing message in a bottle, taking from this bitter history a warning not to continue. But seeing the design of these prisons as inherently madness-inducing follows those who originated the early prisons in giving the architecture itself a kind of automatic force. Tucked away in the last few pages of *On the Penitentiary System in the United States* is a different message. Beaumont and Tocqueville append to their report a transcript of their interview with Elam Lynds, the first warden of Sing Sing, in which they asked him, “Do you believe that [in the new prisons] bodily chastisement might be dispensed with?” He replied,

“I am convinced of the contrary . . . I consider it impossible to govern a large prison without a whip. Those who know human nature from books only, may say the contrary.”²²

As Lynds clearly knew, the bodily life that the prison regulates inevitably provides opportunities for prisoners—and, he might have added, staff—to interrupt the fusion of abstract order and material practice on which the operation depends. Some of the early prisons turned out to be “defective” because prisoners could hear one another through the walls.²³ In control units—staying for the moment with mealtime—prisoners describe having their food spat on or their meals withheld, being falsely accused of sharpening spoons into weapons, and being unable to eat on some days because stinging gas saturates the air. Officers describe prisoners who decline their food, refuse to return their trays, make shanks out of the dull plastic, or throw urine out the port as the tray is handed through. Because prison rules do not allow trays to be kept in cells for fear they will be fashioned into weapons, the tray itself, one of the few items exchanged at the cell door, becomes an opportunity. How is a desperate or lethargic prisoner to respond to the demand to return it? If he acquiesces, he shrinks into a debilitating visible anonymity, a tacit acknowledgment that he has been tamed or broken. If he refuses, a team of officers organized into the prison version of a SWAT team and encased in protective gear will forcibly extract him from his cell.²⁴

An advertisement for food trays (Figure 9) suggests that mealtime in a prison requires special technologies to meet the unusual circumstances the trays, and perhaps those who deliver them, must endure. The text plays on a conflation between the toughness and “rugged durability” of the tray—“specifically designed to take punishment”—and the implied toughness of the prisoner serving time. Expressing a similar theme, officers explain that inmates’ refusal to return trays is a matter of self-will. Regardless of whether the withheld tray results in a full cell entry, in their view it places the prisoner in the position of creating the action.

They won’t return their tray because earlier somebody did something to them so now they are gonna . . . retaliate . . . Whether they hope we are going to suit up and come after them, so that they can get a blow in on that officer, or they are just doing it because you messed with them, so now they are gonna

When It Comes To Serving Time, You Need The Toughest Tray On The Block!

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The Aladdin Temp-Rite J05B Open Shelf Stainless Steel Delivery Cart is the perfect means for delivery of up to 60 Tivoli III servers. Stacked trays may be strapped to cart shelf for added security.

Figure 9. Correctional trade journal advertisement: "The Toughest Tray on the Block."

mess with you . . . So they hold their tray and make the officer go through the whole mess . . . The officer suits all the way up . . . and then [the inmate] will cuff up, just to make [the officers] do all the work.

One officer, fresh from an "incident" involving a tray, described a tacit agreement to follow implicit rules of engagement.

He just had a conflict with a couple of officers. It was a personality conflict . . . so he just . . . instead of giving up his tray, he had us do the show of force to get his tray. [He wanted] everyone to stop what they were doing,

"now focus on me, this is my statement. . . . He went so far, and he can't back down now . . . Once you cross so many lines you can't back down . . . You've got to [do it]—everyone has their code. His statement was made by us coming in there, by us entering his cell.

These remarks describe struggles in which both sides are compelled to respond to the symbolic as well as the overt content of the gestures of antagonism that gather around their points of contact. The apparently trivial tray—the only thing the prisoner can get his hands on—takes on a charge of defiance. This is a "power struggle," as prison workers often say. But in what sense? The control prison is already structured around an intense form of power. These struggles indicate a certain "extra," a surplus generated at the point where the full force of institutional domination meets the oblique resistance of the prisoner. Both prisoners and officers can be seized by the possibility of engaging one another's attention in this way, as though this surplus power exerts a kind of uncanny hold on them.²⁵ Each side, obeying its respective "code," moves forward with a sense of inevitability to "make the statement" that affirms the boundary between them.

A control unit does produce a "tame" prisoner, in the sense that it is difficult for him to affect the world beyond his cell no matter what he does inside it.²⁶ The plan put forth by Bentham and the architects of the silent prisons was intended to make this taming effect reach all the way into the prisoner's mind and soul—to change him—though as Lynds admitted, the strategy did not necessarily work. The question of whether this is still the prison's purpose—and whether, if it happens, it constitutes rehabilitation or what prisoners call being "institutionalized"—haunts the contemporary prison and will come up repeatedly in this account.

SOMETHING SO DISGUSTING

Alone in his cell, the inmate is handed over to himself.

DARIO MELOSSI AND MASSIMO PAVARINI,
The Prison and the Factory, p. 238

It is impossible to spend much time with prison workers without hearing about prisoners' defiant or deranged use of their body products. Inmates

throw feces, urine, blood, and semen at the staff; sometimes they smear feces around their cells and on themselves. Occasionally this behavior starts in general population, causing the inmate's transfer to a more specialized facility. More often, throwing starts in control units.

Written accounts by prisoners describe "shit throwing" as an effective weapon developed by those deprived of everything but their own bodies. Willie Turner, a death row inmate executed by the state of Virginia in 1995, wrote, "It was a normal thing in Isolation for prisoners to keep containers of feces around, in case an occasion for throwing it arose . . . Some guys doctored it with urine, eggs . . . and other stuff, so it would cover better."²⁷

A story by Jarvis Jay Masters, who is incarcerated at San Quentin, illustrates how a prisoner who throws is doing so in relation both to prison staff and to his compatriots, in this case with an intensely negative response.

Not long after I'd been relocated [to the maximum security unit] . . . the evening chow cart came rolling down the tier . . . When the cart was just a few cells away from mine, I saw a hand lunge out of an open port and fling a cup of urine and feces into the faces of the two guards serving the food. It took a few seconds before I could believe my eyes and nose. The guards stood there with faces dripping, their serving spatulas still in their hands. Then a maniacal laugh broke the silence.

"Eat my shit! I saved that from yesterday when you punks didn't give me no shitwipe. Now both of you can just eat it."

"You'll pay for this," one of the guards said calmly . . .

"You did it now!" said Joe [a neighboring prisoner]. "They'll be back to beat the Rodney-King shit out of you, Walter!"

". . . I did that for you guys too . . ." [Walter responds]

"You did that on your own," Joe yelled. ". . . So don't try to pull us into it."²⁸

While one might initially assume that throwing indicates individual pathology or regression, Masters is typical of many prisoners who frame it as a distinctly *social* act. Even though it contaminates their own environment and brings down the rage of the guards, inmates describe shit throwing as a particularly satisfying form of resistance. One said, "We throw shit because they've searched the cell, taken away our *Playboys*, denied our yard. The guy in the next cell [to me] could throw ten feet; [the

staff] had total respect for him." Here is one act capable of reversing—at least momentarily—the usual trajectory of contempt.

The prisoner quoted earlier who said that he was *trying* not to throw also suggests that in this context there is an element of attraction, even seductiveness, to this mining and manipulation of the body. It offers, among other possibly more perverse forms of pleasure, an opportunity to play with meaning. In a world where your food is thrown at you through a hole, where the head of your bed is next to your toilet, where toilet paper has to be requested, throwing shit *says* something.²⁹ One prisoner put it this way:

[On that unit] the guards are right up front; they tell you they have it in for you. Their job is just throw-away-the-key. I was throwing shit and pissing on them. It's cold there, you're a piece of shit, you don't even [dare] look them in the eye.

This kind of scatological reference pervades the prison. A prisoner writes, "prisoners are human waste. The more forbidding the penitentiaries, the more like garbage they define us."³⁰ Shit, garbage, and scum—both the material kind and the prisoners defined as such—seem to threaten escape and the contamination of everything they touch.

This contamination produced at the point of overflow is emotional and social as well as literal. In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Miller writes about the capacity of disgust, the most visceral of emotions, to connect the gut to the social order: "*Me* . . . is not just defined by the limits of my skin . . . The closer *you* get to me without my consent . . . the more alarming, dangerous, disgusting you become, even without considering your hygiene. I understand your violation as a moral one . . . You are dangerous simply by being you and not me." It is this danger that throwers exploit. The prisoner who sees himself defined as a piece of shit hurls into the faces of his keepers the very aspect of himself that most intensely represents his contaminated status in their eyes. He spreads to them a kind of contagion, not only by contaminating them with "him" but by making them, at least momentarily, disgusting themselves.³¹

Custody workers find that the sheer fact of knowing about and observing this behavior alienates them from normal society and reinforces a sense of the separateness of the prison. Imagine coming to work and arriving at your assigned area to shouts and the smell of human waste, a murky fluid

trickling from under the doors of the cells, and the weary admonition to “suit up, it’s one of those days.” A control unit officer says:

Until you’ve stood there and had it dripping off your face you just don’t know what it’s like. I could tear down the door [to the cell] but all I get to do is write an infraction. It’s tough. It’s humiliating. The first thing I feel is anger: the cell door is there partly to protect *him* from *me*. Other staff will get me in the shower—the anger will be partly gone when I get back, but I still think of ones [in the past] who threw at me.

Disgust surrounding throwing is made the more intense—if that were possible—by the compelling medical aspects of contamination in institutions where HIV/AIDS and hepatitis are common. Signs everywhere in prisons warn about the danger of contact with body fluids and set out procedures for handling them. When a prison worker is attacked with body fluids—and particularly if the attack involves blood—his or her life is affected for months by tests and fear of infection. The issue is exacerbated by the fact that officers are not supposed to be aware of inmates’ medical status (due to confidentiality rules) so that, from their point of view, all inmates must be considered equally dangerous. Any inmate is thus seen as having a powerful potential to make his infringement of workers’ personal space permanent and deadly.

Thus the prisoner who throws has a weapon that makes the most of the connection between the intense emotions that surround body wastes and the creation and maintenance of social boundaries. That “alarming, dangerous” aspect of “you” is intensified by contact—or even the thought of contact—with the products of your body. But the products of the body are also heavily charged symbolic carriers of the fact that you are “other” than me; one way a social boundary can be sustained is through the projection of disgust onto those on the “other” side of it. Unlike those involved in the more rhetorical forms of projection that aim to keep relatively distant others in their place, prisoners and their keepers are constantly in one another’s presence yet enjoined never to lose sight of the line between them. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that some prisoners enlist the most literal aspects of the body to invoke the tangle of wary contempt governing that boundary. The rage, humiliation, and fear described by prison workers in the face of shit throwing arise from loss of control and an un-

willing enmeshment in the body of another, and not just any other but one already identified as abject, dirty- and possibly life-threatening.³²

To my knowledge, prison workers do not get used to having shit thrown on them. When I mentioned how preoccupied some seemed with this topic, a prison psychiatrist asked rhetorically, “Has anyone ever thrown shit at *you*?” The impossibility of not reacting with disgust attests to the visceral qualities of both the situation and the emotion. But if they can personally stay out of the way, workers do adjust to the *idea*, and to cleaning up after these episodes. One officer said, “You get used to dodging turds.” It is this routinization that threatens officers in the world outside the prison.

I recall sitting with another officer in her backyard, talking about her twenty-year career at the prison. In the pleasant early evening a litter of kittens tumbled at our feet as she reflected on how her work often seems remote from daily life. One day, she said, she was washing dishes while her husband sat behind her at the table in their kitchen. Caught up in telling him of the day’s events at work, she began describing one prisoner who was smearing feces all over the walls of his cell. As she started going into detail she noticed a strange silence in the room; turning, she saw that her husband had gone pale. “How can you do this?” he asked. “How can you just stand there and chat about something so disgusting?” Her unnerving effect on her husband caused this officer to notice the “hardening” or indifference that had crept up on her, and after this conversation she became more cautious about “bringing it home.” In public discussions of these situations, prison workers are careful and formal in their language. A mental health worker described testifying in court about an inmate who was masturbating with feces; she had to describe his behavior, loudly, to a judge who was slightly deaf. She was embarrassed by the silence that fell over the room and uneasy about her public association with such extreme behavior. Just as prisoners can be seen as “pieces of shit,” so those who clean up after them may fear the perception that they too are veering away from humanity toward dirt.³³

On the inside, among themselves and when pulling in outsiders, prison workers make something else of this experience—a dismaying but also compelling mark of affiliation. During the early months of our work with prisons, workers told us tales of incorrigible shit-throwers and joked enthusiastically about “feces art.” I eventually realized that this is not a eu-

phemism but a reference to drawings made by smearing; one inmate made drawings of Christmas trees on the walls of his cell. Experienced prison workers play on the aversive fascination of this kind of behavior when they communicate with those less familiar with the prison. In a course for new custody workers, veteran worker-volunteers set up mock scenes of challenging situations. One was particularly violent and included exuberant "inmates" who threw paper cups of water representing "cocktails" into the faces of the rookies. "Kill all the cops!" they shouted, banging furiously on the cell doors. "Come here, you assholes!" Once the students had attempted, awkwardly, to carry out instructions and quell the riot, the veteran teachers exhibited a mixture of enjoyment at their discomfort and concern that they might have gone too far in their attempt at realism. One of the officers said, with a touch of relish, "Officers get douched all the time. You haven't *lived* until someone throws shit all over you. And it's not nice turds either, they mix it up, it'll go all over you." However, once the scenes were over and the students back in their seats at the end of the day, an older instructor said gently, "Don't walk out of here unless you're OK. Stay and talk if you need to. We've all had this queasy feeling. Everything you heard, everything that came flying out of those cells is something we've lived through."

In these comments, seasoned prison workers say to the inexperienced: you can expect this, it happens all the time. They point to the way in which negative associations emanating from the prisoners' abject status concentrate themselves at the line that separates them from the workers, with the body as the highly charged medium of exchange at this border. But in addition—and the reason the instructors are so certain the exchange is ongoing—is that repetition is what sustains this bodily reiteration of social order. The line between the prisoner and everyone else cannot be demarcated once and for all. Instead it is repeated literally, as a dramatic extrusion and intrusion of "waste."³⁴

We might see throwing as theatrical or spectacular, as some prisoners certainly do. It creates incidents and emergencies in which attention must be focused on the perpetrator and victim and in which, as in Jay Masters's description, both positions threaten to spread and reverse. But this kind of trouble is also chronic, involving prisoners and their keepers in a persistent round of dirtying and cleaning and keeping everyone engaged in this aversive corporeal "conversation." In this way the body that is the tar-

get of control, far from transferring acquiescence to the mind, turns onto itself; instead of being the solution to the project of achieving order, it becomes the problem.

The prisoner who throws manages for a moment to throw sand, so to speak, into the machinery of control prison operation. But one wonders—and prisoners and prison workers wonder—what kind of resistance this is. Is it something no sane adult could do? Or is it a willful—perhaps even *too* sane—deployment of the most obvious of weapons? This is a central question in the relationship between custodial and psychiatric responses to extreme behavior, a question that bears on the rationality and intentionality of the thrower and, ultimately, on what kind of attention he receives.

YOU'RE NOT GONNA WIN

Fighting is to prove you're not scared.

TEENAGE CONTROL UNIT PRISONER

He threatens to kill me . . . but the isolation wears on him, it has to mess with his head.

OFFICER IN CONTROL UNIT, OF INMATE

They want to make me learn a lesson, they want to *make* me learn. I'm real resistant to that.

CONTROL UNIT PRISONER

It is difficult for the visitor to a control unit to imagine what prisoners could do to gain the upper hand in this environment. But prison workers know that this effect is hard-won and most likely temporary.

One morning I visit a control unit that is—at first—strangely quiet. But there are many signs of recent trouble: scratches and graffiti on the walls, cells with fixtures torn out, a small office ripped apart. Graffiti smear the windows of the pods and yards. My companion is an administrator from another prison, here to learn what she needs to do to fortify her own units against this kind of damage. According to the officer who shows us around, it is peaceful now only because the inmates were up late; "This place has been rockin' and rollin'," she explains. As she talks, a prisoner wakes up and hears her voice ("They hate me right now," she adds) and starts banging out a loud drumbeat on the metal door of his cell. We study

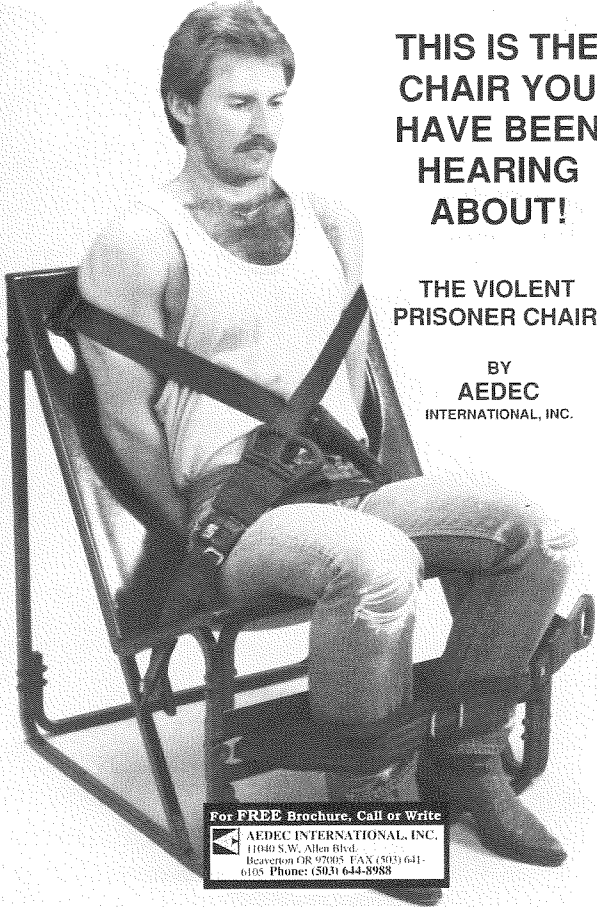
an empty cell, uninhabitable now because the sink fixtures were ripped out and used as weapons. This tenuous nature of normal prison discipline lies behind ads like the one for the “violent prisoner chair” (Figure 10). Prisoners with any freedom of movement at all have some capacity, however slight, to lash out. The restraint chair straps down all four limbs and, in some designs, the head as well. The ad promises a control that goes beyond architecture, something administrators faced with rebellious inmates may well be “waiting for.” Such direct measures—chairs, four- or five-point restraints (with the prisoner lying down), pepper spray, and electronic forms of control—not only offer final resort in case of trouble, but also form the backdrop to a more general atmosphere of threat and counterthreat. Their mere presence—the threat of use—has weight. As one officer put it:

The bottom line is that if he assaults the staff, you gas him, you go get him, and you bring him out of the cell. And you either stick him in the chair or you stick him in one of those holding cells with very little and you say, “When your behavior dictates that a staff member can open that cuffport without being afraid of being hit with something, we will give you something back.”

One former control prisoner pointed out that because these units are “the end of the line . . . if you misbehave there, what are they gonna do to you, lock you up?” Once violence starts, the cycle of resistance and further punishment is hard to break. This man continued, “They do something, you do something to show ’em and before you know it years have passed by.”

Riots like the one that destroyed the unit described above are relatively rare; they may be spontaneous but usually depend on leadership from dominant prisoners who urge or coerce others to join in as the situation escalates. One young inmate gave this description of what it was like to be in such an “incident.”

It gets really boring [in the control unit] . . . some guys who mostly just sleep come alive for riots, excitement, when the goon squad comes and someone gets gassed. A guy lit his cell on fire and it was a chain reaction, the whole place went up [not in fire, in riot]. A guy came out of his cell swinging, and the cops had gas and shields, the guys on the tier were breaking out glass, there was smoke rolling out of another house, they



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Figure 10. Correctional trade journal advertisement: “The Violent Prisoner Chair.”

were kicking partitions, breaking concrete pieces off. Watching the excitement, it’s entertaining, I like to see it . . . but it’s stupid, you’re not gonna win in this system.

Charlie Chase, a long-term prisoner in a Massachusetts control unit, draws heroic superman-like prisoners fighting with huge, gas-masked guards (Figure 11). This one seems to echo that long-ago remark by Warden Lynds, as well as the fascination and resignation expressed by the young man’s

“you’re not gonna win.” Here, heavy-set men have overwhelmed a bloodied prisoner whose body takes up almost no space compared to the blood-spattered shield in the foreground of the picture.³⁵

As these examples suggest, violence by and upon individual inmates does occur in control units despite their architectural and managerial constraints. Inmates and staff can experience this environment as a battleground of malevolent intentions on both sides—the “little games to mess with me” a prisoner described earlier. Prisoners make weapons from any available material, stab officers through the cuff ports, or manage to wrest free and attack their escorts. A few openly express their determination to harm or kill specific officers. Officers in turn provoke or retaliate against inmates. An administrator said of cell extractions, “If they don’t want to come out [of their cells] we’ll get them—they’re *coming* out. They can get hurt . . . Anytime we go in a cell, we assume they have a weapon.”³⁶ A prisoner who had a long history of violent stand-offs with staff described his experience of hurting and being hurt:

They said I tried to head-butt ’em, throw things through the cuff port. They throw your food at you, they turned off my water. They say weird things over the speakers . . . I was also being a jerk too.

Administrators charged with system-wide order insist that this kind of trouble inside control units cannot be separated from violence and other problems elsewhere in the prison. Many inmates come to these units because they are being separated and punished for fighting, attacking officers, or harming other prisoners. Administrators also believe that “the inmates that are coming into our system [now] are much more prone to violence . . . to a lack of respect for life in general” than those of past decades. Prisoners sometimes have a similar perspective, describing their own behavior in terms much like those of the administration. An inmate in his late teens said:

This is pretty messed up. It is not a good place to be. But there is probably a need for [these units] because of the violent inmates that can’t function well on the main line . . . I am here because we had a multiracial fight on the yard . . . We got into it. [Last time in solitary] I was pretty bad. Cussed at them. Threw everything I could . . . I guess it is kind of like us against

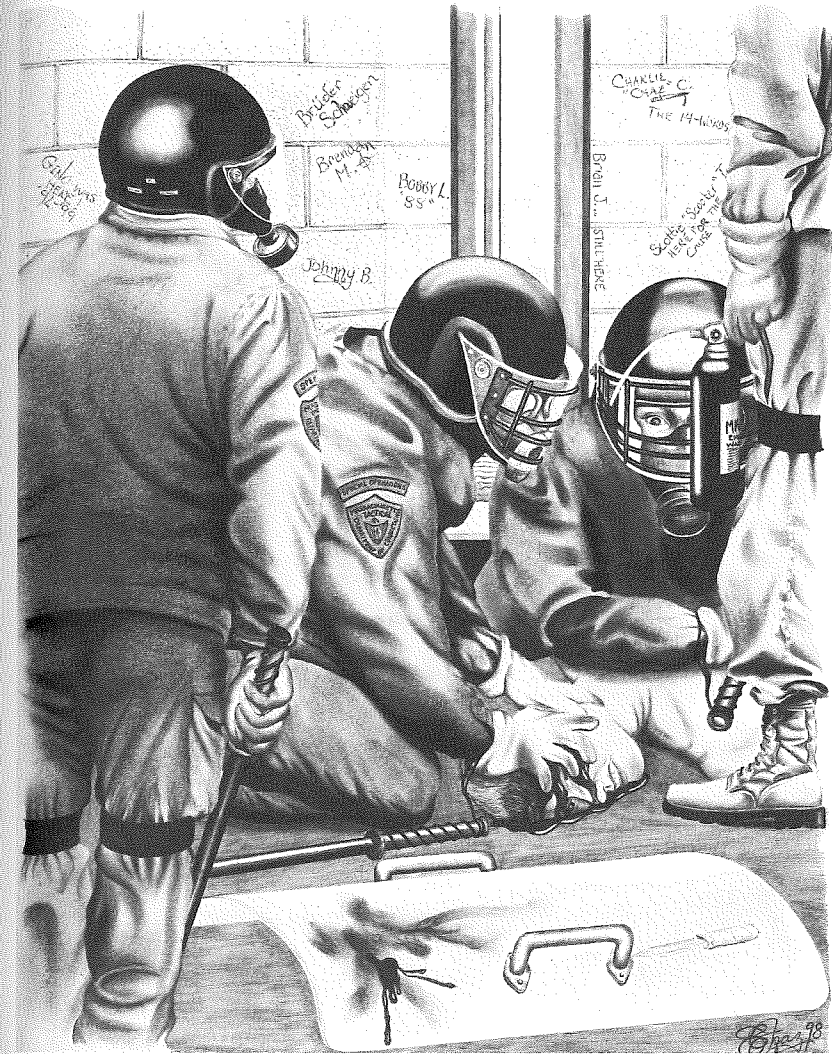


Figure 11. Untitled drawing of cell extraction by Charlie Chase. Reproduced with the permission of Charlie Chase and Bruce Porter. Previously published in Bruce Porter, “Is Solitary Confinement Driving Charlie Chase Crazy?” *New York Times Magazine*, November 8, 1998.

them, you know? I been doing this since a pretty early age. Been to a lot group homes and mental hospitals and stuff—ward of the state, and honestly, the state is not a very good guardian.

The formal system designed to move inmates out of control units is based on a behavioral model that rewards the avoidance of bad behavior. In order to move up the levels and, perhaps, back to general population, a prisoner must be able to impassively endure the indignities of this form of confinement: the constant noise at night, the raving man in the next cell, cold food, late mail delivery, a delayed yard. Some inmates are also on the receiving end of racial taunts, encouragement to commit suicide, or other predatory behavior directed at signs of weakness. One who had been transferred to a psychiatric unit said:

I stayed in the [control unit] six months . . . I kept getting infracted because I was the only black on the tier and they would tease me, call me nigger, crazy . . . It got worse when I cried, when people died in my family . . . so I said, I'm gonna keep everyone up [making noise at night] . . . Plus, I couldn't have no radio because of infractions so I was only listening to them, what I heard and what they said.

A prisoner who had been kept for years in control units vented barely contained fury at those he regarded as weak:

We've got to deal with these mentally ill inmates who rub shit on themselves and these PC [protective custody] cell warriors . . . they should put the rats and snitches in one pod, the mental patients in one pod—they stir up anxiety and stress. They [administrators] put them in [here] to *create* stress.

In these ways anger “just boils up,” and an episode of loss of control can gain an inmate like this additional months or years in solitary.

Many prisoners come to feel that difficult conditions are designed to *test* their control, to “create stress” and “make us antisocial” in a purposeful effort to produce negative effects. These effects in turn confirm the reason for the attempt: to break them and make them “crazy.” The man described earlier who perceived the control unit as a “jellybowl,” and who seemed to be struggling with psychosis, said, “I don't know, man, I been tryin' to turn the other cheek, man, but it don't seem like nothing I can

do to get out of here.” Many prisoners believe that they can leave these units only by “turning the other cheek,” that is, through self-control bordering on self-abnegation. A survival guide written by control prisoners at Pelican Bay offers this counsel:

We have to accept things we don't like. Even certain amounts of disrespect will have to be tolerated . . . Let your wisdom, your discipline . . . guide your actions. Not! your anger, your hostility, or your dislikeful feelings for the wrong things they do to you.³⁷

This writer points to what makes “discipline” problematic in this context: to control one's response to prison is to allow oneself to be disrespected. Some prisoners do not acquiesce: “I kept my humanity through my anger,” said one. “Every time they opened the door I would fight . . . The [control unit] is to break a man's spirit, that's what it's about.” And in fact both staff and prisoners express contempt for the “cell warrior”—the inmate who is full of bravado so long as he remains safely in his cell. The prisoner whose “alligator mouth gets his hummingbird ass in trouble” is seen as weak when he *doesn't* follow through on his rage. Thus the very “good behavior” that may reward a prisoner within the disciplinary logic of the system—control of anger and obedience to the rules—may work against him within a logic of masculine self-respect. One man explained:

If I'm being good and they don't give me nothing, I can't take that kind of rejection . . . I just went off, spitting, urinating, tearing up my cell, the whole nine yards . . . If they feel like I'm gonna be a badass, why not be one? . . . They think they can control me, but I'm gonna be the one in control.

Like the men quoted earlier who try to bring people to them through “bad behavior,” this prisoner attempts to locate *his* will at the center of the effects of his imprisonment.

Respect is a pervasive theme in prisoners' descriptions of their own violence, with seemingly small slights carrying a tremendous charge in the saturated atmosphere of the prison. The destruction of the unit I described earlier began when a powerful inmate was given a “level” that was later taken away from him. A younger prisoner who “followed” this man in rioting later explained how respect was central to this relationship.

We are respectful to the older guys [except for child-killers and rapists, he carefully adds]. Respect depends on how you carry yourself, and on your crime. I get respect because I have "life without" [i.e., he is a murderer]. The older con helps with kids who get out of line and teaches them respect.³⁸

For this man, respect is the social glue allowing him to feel that he can "carry himself" well—and safely—among his peers. Many inmates suggest that they cannot afford injuries to the self-respect acquired in this way. James Gilligan, who worked for years in a Massachusetts maximum psychiatric facility, believes that the violence endemic to these institutions can be located in the threat that feelings of humiliation pose to the "coherence of the self."³⁹ He points out: "We find it hard to comprehend how a trivial incident could lead to violence . . . because such explanations violate our sense of . . . rationality . . . The secret [of violent men] is that they feel ashamed—deeply ashamed . . . over matters that are so trivial that their very triviality makes it even more shameful to feel ashamed about them."⁴⁰

What "sets off" a prisoner may thus seem insignificant or irrational, but it is something he feels himself compelled to redress. Overt interpersonal conflict is one sign of this dynamic. "The guards," said one prisoner, "they fuck with you." Another spoke bitterly of "going off" after "behaving" for six months only to be refused the transfer to general population he felt he had been promised. "They say 'calm down,' which is hard . . . 'give us no infractions for six months' . . . it's almost like a test. They didn't recommend release [from the unit] and I snapped." Another, speaking about his level of intolerance for other inmates, said, "Prison has made me horrible. It's made me capable of being violent . . . I don't want to [be] when I think rationally, but I could. That comes from here."

A sense of exposure and shame—the threat of being "broken"—also becomes a pervasive pattern of feeling, apart from any particular incident of overt humiliation.⁴¹ The prison environment could not be better designed to activate a sense of threat to the coherence of the self. Petty humiliations like withheld toilet paper, to which a "rational" person would not react with homicidal rage, are both the effect and the sign of a larger, more fundamental source of shame. Disrespect is chronically implicit in what Michael Ignatieff calls the "cold gray space of state confinement" because people who are indifferently provided with basic "needs" are defined *by*

the giving as merely needful.⁴² They may be maintained with water, stale air, the tasteless prison food cut into small pieces, a place to sleep, basic medical attention.⁴³ But when the administrator looked through the cell door at me and said "no," he was saying: most things you might *want* are not needs. "In the best of our prisons," writes Ignatieff, ". . . inmates are fed, clothed and housed in adequate fashion . . . Yet every waking hour . . . [they] still feel the silent contempt of authority in a glance, gesture or procedure." In these places the contempt of authority is not separate from the procedure, the feeding or cleaning; rather it is embedded in it. "Needs are met, but souls are dishonoured."⁴⁴

Officers can sometimes be very clear about the surplus power generated at the cell door, insisting on the value of self-control in the face of provocation. A young sergeant remarked, "Inmates feed on making you mad, it's like negative energy. If you do get mad, you don't belong here." As with the prisoners, self-control involves "accepting what we don't like." "You get tired of dealing with the same crap every day. It does get to you [but] you try to tell yourself it's not personal. You say to yourself, Yeah, he's a butt-head, but just deal with his behavior." But some prison workers cannot or do not want to resist the excess of authority made available to them, using their position to launch aggression of their own—gratuitously, preemptively, or in retaliation, openly or covertly. To be "manly" and "not be a sissy" is to act. One officer said of his peers:

The term "supercop" comes up—most of them won't give the inmate the time of day. They won't de-escalate a situation . . . they almost want to accelerate it. It makes them feel powerful and commanding . . . There was a time when I was the same way, I enjoyed suiting up. When an inmate would go off, you would rub your hands together and say, "We need to do something about this guy. It is very dangerous for us, and let's get her done."

It is in this context that supervisors may try to convey to officers that their own emotional control is a fundamental tool of their trade. Explaining the importance of a rule-oriented "security mindset," a correctional class teacher said to new officers: "Everyone gets stressed out in this work. You need to adhere to policies and procedures—violations come back to haunt us." Lapses in attention to detail or loss of emotional control may result

in dangerous incidents that in turn produce a diffuse sense of unease and exposure. For many prison workers, whatever success they have in controlling their own behavior under these conditions becomes evidence that such control is possible, a point that underlies many officers' insistence that inmates, too, should be able to control themselves under difficult circumstances. This is one way in which the notion that we create our own behavior—that the will is at the center of rational action—becomes vital to the interpretation of events between prisoners and their keepers.⁴⁵

THE "WORST OF THE WORST"

You either deal with it or you don't deal with it . . . I feel I could act like a fool and do crazy shit and talk shit to them all the time and smash my TV and break up the cell. People get pretty determined sometimes. You can tear the toilet off the wall if you're strong enough.

CONTROL UNIT PRISONER

It's the end of the line for inmates who threaten the security of the staff, the security of the institution. This is basically the end of the line and this is where you will go and you will be [here] until you can get a straight behavior.

CONTROL UNIT ADMINISTRATOR

HEARING OFFICER: Why are you still in the [control unit]?

PRISONER: Because I refuse to submit.

Control units are in a complex relationship to a larger institutional system for which they serve both practical and symbolic purposes. In some cases of misbehavior a prisoner undergoes a fairly brief—if thoroughly unpleasant—period of segregation followed by an uneventful reintegration into the general population. But many ambiguities attend the issue of "misbehavior." The placement of mentally ill inmates in control units and the development in some cases—whether the prisoner is regarded as mentally ill or not—of ongoing patterns of throwing and violence raise questions about the relationship between the ratcheting up of measures of control and a decreasing ability on the part of the prisoner to control himself. In addition, particularly out-of-control prisoners who are kept in these units until the end of their sentences emerge directly into their communities.

This raises troubling questions about what purpose such control really serves.

Those outside prisons assume that "the worst of the worst" refers to prisoners who have committed particularly heinous crimes. Control units do contain a greater proportion of prisoners with violent histories, younger prisoners with juvenile records, and, of course, prisoners who have harmed other inmates or prison staff. But others are in intensive confinement for their own protection or because they have accumulated a prescribed number of infractions. Mentally ill, disturbed, or persistently defiant inmates continue to accumulate sanctions while in maximum custody, thus adding to their time. Some prisoners may be placed in isolation preemptively, and some are kept there indefinitely regardless of their behavior.⁴⁶

These differences among prisoners raise the question of what it means to "get a straight behavior," as the administrator quoted above said in defense of his unit. Those who manage these units offer arguments based on their own accountability as well as the inmates'. A control unit administrator explained, "We try our best and we're professional. We make the inmates accountable and so we keep them [here, in the control unit] for a long time . . . [because when we recommend release] we have to deal with the inmate in a revolving door process." Some argue bluntly for a primarily punitive and deterrent effect. The warden of a large facility in Minnesota, for example, said in response to inmate interviewers, "[Special housing units] serve a punitive purpose . . . They exist to deter people from acting out. I'm not going to apologize for that."⁴⁷ These comments point to fundamental issues that have attended imprisonment since the early 1800s: Is its purpose punishment, with or without a presumed deterrent effect? Or is it—perhaps instead, perhaps also—intended to change behavior? And in what sense do these purposes make for accountability?

In the rest of this book I explore the vexing consequences of these questions for those who must live within them. Maximum security confinement—in control units and in the mental health units that stand as their complementary doubles—entails difficulties in the interpretation of behavior. When a fairly brief stay in solitary confinement does result in better behavior, prisoners and staff may be in general agreement about how to interpret such change.⁴⁸ But the common sense that makes such agreement possible—shared notions of individual autonomy, rational action, and free choice—is also a source of unsettling complications. Disturbed

mental states are addressed by imposing conditions that further disturb the mind. And the indeterminate “accountability” of long-term solitary confinement ultimately escapes behavioral explanation and is interpreted as a “choice to be bad” no longer subject to the possibility of re-inclusion.

The possibility that what they were creating with the silent prisons would look like slavery troubled the prison reformers of the early 1800s, many of whom were abolitionists.⁴⁹ As Angela Davis points out, the main thing differentiating the silent prisons from slavery was the rehabilitative model that inspired them. Softening the minds of prisoners for their own good was not a rationale for the enforced labor of the South either before or after the Civil War. In the control units I describe—geographically and politically far removed from the prison-farms of the South—most prison workers believe that the inmates ultimately control their own fate. Yet at the same time, as we’ve just seen, prisoners in these units can slip toward seeming nothing but bodies—beyond or unworthy of rehabilitation—to be managed by nothing more than a parsimonious economy of attention. This tension about the shape of accountability raises the question of what it means to allow the “social man” to wither on the other side of the bars while, at the same time, attributing to him an almost superhuman ability to exercise his will.