

Posing in Prison: Family Photographs, Emotional Labor, and Carceral Intimacy

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Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grandfathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st and 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

I have at one time or another been in love with my mother, 1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts (1 went to the asylum), and 5 cousins. I am now in love with a 7-yr-old niece (she sends me letters in large block print, and her picture is the only one that smiles at me).

—Etheridge Knight, “The Idea of Ancestry,” 1968

I appreciate the insightful reviews of anonymous readers for *Public Culture*. Additionally, this essay has benefited from the comments of Lila Abu-Lughod, David Adler, Vaughn Booker, Ricardo Abreu Bracho, LeRonn Brooks, Tina Campt, Daniel Carlton, Sylvia Chan-Malik, Saidiya Hartman, Sharon Howard, John L. Jackson Jr., Julie Livingston, Caleb Maskell, Sherally Munshi, Ralph Rodriguez, and Krista Thompson, as well as feedback from audiences at Rutgers University, Cornell University, Columbia University, CUNY Graduate Center, Duke University, Miami University, Northwestern University, Princeton University, the American Studies Association annual meeting in Puerto Rico (2012), and the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey. I want to thank my cousins Allen and De’Andre and the rest of my family for our ongoing practices of love and belonging.

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Since 1994, I have had an exchange of words and images with my cousin Allen, who was sentenced to life in prison at the age of eighteen. We write to each other regularly, often reminiscing about growing up in southwestern Ohio. There is such a familiarity in our connection, although our time together is limited to a couple of hours in one sitting during my visits to see him. Allen and I grew up as siblings, with several other first cousins in our large and close-knit family. His mother is my mother's older sister, and child rearing was very much a group effort that was shared among all the women and teenage girls in the family.

Allen ends his letters to me in the same way: "Niki, send more pictures. Love, your lil cuz Allen."

His requests for pictures make me think of other populations removed from their loved ones—those in exile or at war, migrant workers, those estranged from their families who stay connected through letter writing and family photographs. I send him pictures, lots of them, and he reciprocates. I have a small suitcase of memorabilia from Ohio prisons—letters, greeting cards, and prison photographs sent from Allen and other male relatives during their time incarcerated. The photographs they send are studio portraits taken by incarcerated photographers whose job in prison is to take pictures. Allen poses in these photographs sometimes with props, always in uniform. The backdrops are designed and painted by incarcerated people. They break up the uniformity and repetition of the prison attire and staged poses. There are also photographs from our visits to see Allen. In most of these, he stands in the center and we huddle around, hugging him as tightly as we can.

In the first few years of Allen's incarceration, I could not look at these pictures that arrived tucked behind his letters. I dreaded opening an envelope from him if I could feel that the contents included something akin to the thickness and flexibility of photographic paper. I would quickly glance and put the image back in the envelope, feeling much more comfortable with his words. With his words, I had space to process and react. With the photographs, I had difficulty controlling my emotions and reactions. Over time, I learned to prepare myself for an onslaught of feelings that always settled into a lingering sadness and sense of helplessness. After a brief and steadied glance, I would store the envelope in the suitcase under my bed. Gradually, my looks grew longer. I began to fixate on certain details—his hairstyle, a new tattoo, the shape of his arms and neck. Then, as an experiment, I decided to hang the photographs around my home—secured by magnets on the fridge, tacked to a wall, or taped to the back of a door. I greeted these photos and



Figure 1 Allen with his daughter, August 1998



Figure 2 Allen posing with his daughter and niece during a family visit, October 2001

smiled back at them. After a while, they no longer unsettled me. They were just there, along with all the other possessions and images in my cluttered life (figs. 1 and 2).

In some ways, I forgot the images were on display until a friend who is an art historian visited my home and inquired about one of them. Hanging on my refrigerator was a photograph of another cousin who is serving time in a prison in Ohio. In the photograph, De'Andre, in his late teens, smiles at the camera; he stands in a blue uniform, while hugging his grandmother (my aunt Frances). The backdrop is a painting of a winter scene, with snow-covered trees and rolling hills. A deer's partial figure animates the landscape. I replied, "That's my cousin De'Andre in prison during a visit from his grandmother—my aunt." My friend was shocked: "Wow. That was taken in prison. . . . There's so much love in that image. They both look so happy" (fig. 3).

My art historian friend had never seen a photograph documenting a family visit to an imprisoned relative and was unaware of how common these images are among certain populations of blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and poor whites—groups most affected by mass incarceration. The smiles and hug shared between grandson and grandmother documented in the photograph were far from

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Figure 3 De'Andre posing with his grandmother (the author's aunt), February 2010

what he associated with prison life and culture. He compared the backdrop and setting to photographer James Van Der Zee's early twentieth-century famous portraits of black residents of Harlem, in particular the fantasy backdrops. Also notable of Van Der Zee's photographs is the intentionality of his photographic subjects to use portraiture to document aspirations for upward mobility, equality, and inclusion. In Van Der Zee's work, there's a sense of futurity, hopefulness, and often a subtle or explicit claim of the nation (e.g., the US flag as prop or black soldiers in uniform); his images document anticipation of a future of more possibility and equality for blacks in the early twentieth century (notably, before the civil rights movement).

Our conversation led me to see these images as more than documents of my family's pain and loss, our separation from De'Andre, Allen, and other loved ones. I began to consider the form and aesthetic of portraits and acknowledge that there are millions of these images that circulate between incarcerated people and their loved ones and friends, given that there are about 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States and more than 7 million people who are "under supervision of adult correctional authorities" (Glaze 2011: 1).¹ These photographs serve as important visual and haptic objects of love and belonging structured through the modern carceral system.

This essay considers how vernacular photography that takes place in prisons circulates as practices of intimacy and attachment between imprisoned people and their loved ones, by articulating the emotional labor performed to maintain these connections. I focus on my family's collection of portraits of our incarcerated relatives and, to a lesser extent, a 2012 exhibition of studio portraits of prisoners at Clocktower Gallery in New York City. Influenced by works in critical prison studies that analyze the political economy, racialization, and sociological implications of mass incarceration, I turn my attention to the cultural practices and aesthetics

1. The Bureau of Justice Statistics report (Glaze 2011) states that there are 2,266,800 people serving time; this number combines inmates in jails, state prisons, and federal prisons. The number of people reported under supervision of local, state, or federal correctional officers is 7,076,200.

resulting from or in response to the prison industrial complex (see Gilmore 2007; Alexander 2010; Muhammad 2010). The essay “both personalizes and generalizes,” to use Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s phrase (2007: 185), the emotional labor and circulation of feelings of incarcerated subjects and their loved ones through photography “to highlight objective *and* subjective dimensions of the expansion of punishment and prison” (ibid.). Through tracing the haptic and affective features of prison photography, I attempt to map feelings of intimacy, kinship, and futurity that circulate between imprisoned people and their loved ones and through the porous boundaries of the US carceral system.

Etheridge Knight’s 1968 poem “The Idea of Ancestry” engages the haptic and emotive function of photographs between prisoners and their families. The poem also provides insight into the impact that imprisonment has had on black family structures for generations and across generations. As the verses in the epigraph of this essay convey, photographs are material objects taped to the wall, as much as they are a familial lineage and emotional connection for incarcerated Knight; he signifies, “I am all of them, they are all of me.” Knight’s meditation on these photographs displayed in his cell illustrates how emotions circulate through photographs for incarcerated and nonincarcerated loved ones. He writes, “I am now in love with a 7-yr-old niece / (she sends me letters in large block print, and / her picture is the only one that smiles at me).” Here, fantasy is woven with family and racial histories in the imaginary of the imprisoned. Heterosexual romance serves as a mode of expressing a visceral yearning to connect through and beyond the photographs of his loved ones.

One strategy that I use to expose the emotive and haptic features of prison photography in the context of modern carcerality is the anecdote. As a narrative device and theoretical tool, the anecdote helps to expose how photographs touch and are touched by those most affected by mass incarceration in the United States. I use anecdotes to extend a conversation and visual exchange that I have had with incarcerated relatives over the past two decades. The flexibility of the anecdote allows it to function as a mode of inquiring about culture and as a methodological intervention that opens up possibility. Jane Gallop explains that using the anecdote as a theoretical device gestures at the complexity of lived experience in ways where canonical theory falls short. She writes: “Anecdotal theory drags theory into a scene where it must struggle for mastery. Theorizing in explicit relation to the here and now, theorizing because the subject feels the need to, theory must contend with what threatens its mastery. Subjecting theory to incident teaches us to think in precisely those situations which tend to disable thought, forces us to keep thinking even when the dominance of our thought is far from assured” (Gal-

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lop 2002: 15). In my usage, to anecdotalize theory is to grapple with a series of photographs of incarcerated loved ones as “unfree” but who use the medium of photography to communicate love and a complex recognition structured through familial bonds and modern carcerality. I use the anecdote to “personalize and generalize” a massive amount of visual material that has received little public recognition or scholarly attention—vernacular photographic practices taking place among prisoners under the watchful eye of prison staff.² In many of these photographs, imprisoned people work to produce themselves as subjects of value against the carceral state that defines them as otherwise. These practices of recognition and belonging are complex, as Elizabeth A. Povinelli (2011) theorizes, given how late liberalism employs and sanctions forms of recognition to manage difference and life outcomes.

Vernacular Photography and Carceral Scenes

Prison portraiture and photographs of family visits are part of the tradition of vernacular photography. Geoffrey Batchen (2000: 262) examines vernacular photography as a “non-category” of everyday images that account for the vast majority of photographs taken since the medium’s invention in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Yet these photographs are rarely included in museum collections, public histories, and archives (ibid.). Vernacular prison portraits are produced in makeshift studios and in prison visiting rooms. Incarcerated artists paint backdrops and, in some cases, design sets for their photo shoots. Occasionally, minimal props and accessories are available for staging the photographs. These makeshift studios exist in many prisons across the United States. The photographs capture individual and group portraits commissioned by incarcerated people and document visits from family and friends. Incarcerated people and their visitors purchase these images for typically \$2.00–\$3.00 per copy, making this a lucrative business for US prisons.³

2. In anecdotalizing my entry to this work, I invoke the works of other scholars who have theorized through narrative and experience. Some notable examples for me are Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* (2007); Karla Holloway’s introduction to *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (2002); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling* (2003); R. Dwayne Betts’s *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison* (2009); and Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying* (2007).

3. This price range for portraits is based on information gathered from prisons in Ohio, New Jersey, New York, and California. Between 2011 and 2013, I have purchased images in several prisons in Ohio for \$2.00–\$2.50. It is difficult to find data on how much prisons make from operating these studios, because it is not considered a formal program. The costs of these photographs are

Vernacular prison portraits provide an important counterpoint to a long history of visually indexing criminal profiles. The most prevalent images of criminalized and incarcerated populations are those used in service of carceral institutions to identify and index subjects, such as arrest photographs and prisoner identification cards. Therefore, vernacular prison portraits and those documenting family visits are crucial modes of self-representation that serve as counterarchives to visually indexing “the criminal” through photographic technology. Shawn Michelle Smith, John Tagg, and Allan Sekula, among others, have shown the connections between the development of photography and disciplinary discourses and technologies of the modern era. One of the most significant is the mug shot—the quintessential image of suspicion and public threat. Sekula (1986), Tagg (1993), and Smith (1999) examine how such uses of photography in the late nineteenth century were connected to eugenics and racializing projects that are significant to the history of criminalizing blacks and other nonwhite groups through the modern penal code. In the context of photography’s most prevalent usage to buttress carceral systems, vernacular photography, commissioned by prisoners and sent to their loved ones, functions to wrestle against the civil death and visual indexing of carcerality and serves as what Sekula (1986: 10) labels a “shadow archive.” Thus vernacular photographs by prisoners serve a normalizing function in legitimating intimate bonds and familial attachments among criminalized populations.

At the same time, these images function as points of access to observe the quotidian familiarity of penal settings for large swaths of US subjects as they navigate familial and intimate relations through the porous and punitive boundaries of carcerality. There are millions of these images that are sent out of US prisons each year to relatives, loved ones, and friends. In terms of sheer volume, prison photography is one of the largest practices of vernacular photography in the contemporary United States. Like most vernacular photography, these images are primarily stored in private collections, housed in shoeboxes, photo albums, drawers, and closets. Until recently, the images have had little visibility outside of their circulation among incarcerated people and their personal networks. However, in the past few years, vernacular prison portraits have circulated more broadly in public culture through exhibitions, art auctions, and blogs dedicated to prison culture.

significant given the low wages of prison laborers. For example, in 2003 the Prison Policy Initiative estimated that the average prisoner in the state of Ohio makes \$18–\$24 per month. See Wagner 2003.

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Figure 4 “Sal, Pleasant Valley State Prison, CA.” *Prisoner Fantasies: Photos from the Inside, 2007–2012*. Courtesy collection of David Adler



Figure 5 “Daniel, California Correctional Institution.” *Prisoner Fantasies: Photos from the Inside, 2007–2012*. Courtesy collection of David Adler

Arguably, one of the first public exhibitions of this genre, *Prisoner Fantasies: Photos from the Inside, 2007–2012*, at the Clocktower Gallery in New York (May–August 2012), consisted of a handful of photographic portraits from various prisons in the United States.⁴ The sixteen four-inch-by-six-inch portraits exhibited were from the collection of artist and curator Dave Adler, who has taught art classes and collaborated with various US prisons. Adler has solicited portraits from incarcerated people through his work and other channels, including prison newsletters (fig. 4).

Absent from the *Prisoner Fantasies* exhibition are the names of those photographed, the photographers’ names, locations, and exact dates. The uniforms of the incarcerated posing in these portraits, however, suggest that they were taken at

4. The building in which the Clocktower Gallery is located is owned by the City of New York and houses several governmental offices and a courthouse. To see the exhibit, one had to go through a similar screening that visitors to prisons must endure. In November 2012, the show traveled to the American Society of Criminology meeting in Chicago.

various penal institutions. What is striking is the absence of obvious signs of incarceration. Only one photograph has information that identifies its subject as being incarcerated. In this image, a man stands solo in front of a landscape backdrop. “CDCR Prisoner” (CDCR stands for California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation) is imprinted in bold yellow letters on his pants (fig. 5).

In another photograph, a shaven-head white man stands topless, displaying the tattoos that cover his chest and arms. He smiles at the camera; behind him is the serene image of a beach in soft focus. In another portrait, two men wearing caps (one a kufi and the other a skull-cap) pose in front of a landscape backdrop. The lush grass and a serene stream are in the center of the backdrop, while autumnal trees frame the corners. Both men are in gray sweat suits. One stands angled; the other faces the camera boldly, with his left fist at his chin and his right arm across his chest, and tattoos run along his left forearm. They gaze at the camera, as they hold their poses (fig. 6).

The small exhibit received considerable media attention, in large part because of the lack of access that the public has to these images. Adler and another artist/collector, Alyse Emdur, are part of a small group of collectors and curators who have begun to exhibit and catalog prison portraiture and other forms of vernacular photography in prison.⁵ These vernacular and carceral collections are gaining greater recognition and value as documents of prison life and culture. Of note is a collection of Polaroid photographs from California prisons taken in the 1970s and 1980s labeled “The Los Angeles Gang and Prison Photo Archive”; the collection of four hundred images has moved through many dealers since it hit the market in 2011 and, at one point, had a price tag of \$45,000 (see Brook 2013). By and large, the photographers and the artists who design and paint the backdrops remain unidentified or, more precisely, cannot be easily identified, given the closed systems of prisons. In some exhibitions, photographic

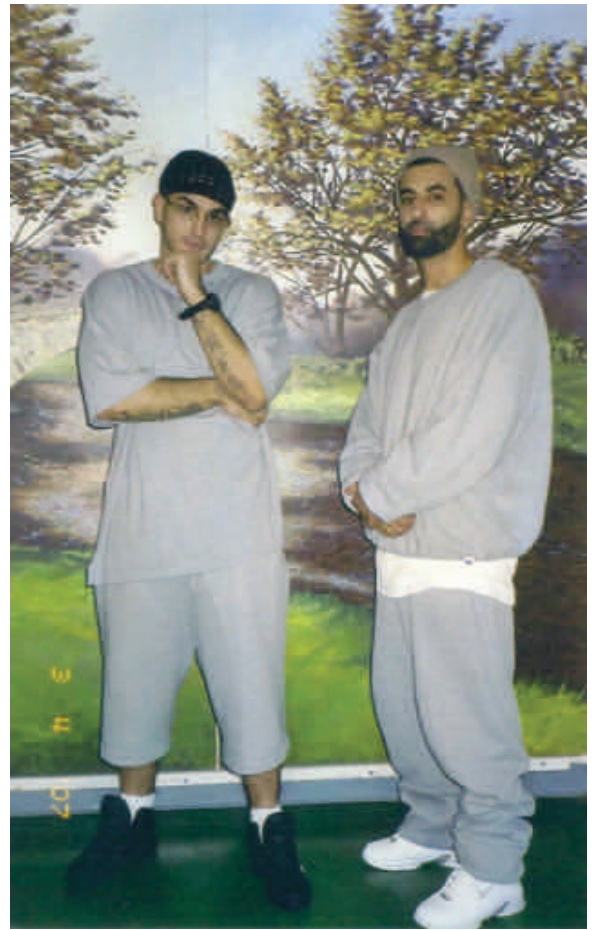


Figure 6 “Untitled, Louisiana.” *Prisoner Fantasies: Photos from the Inside, 2007–2012*. Courtesy collection of David Adler

5. *Prison Landscapes* is a collection of photographs of prisoners and their visitors posing in front of these backdrops and compiled in catalog form by Emdur (2012).

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subjects are identified by first name and prison location. I mention these projects to demonstrate the recent public circulation of this genre through art shows and the larger art market.

Among the most striking features that set these images apart from more publicly circulated photographs of prisoners are the range of poses, the emotive smiles, the familial gaze of the photographic subjects that, one could argue, acknowledges their intended audience, and the imaginative backdrops. Within portrait photography, backdrops tend to be read as signs of aspiration, futurity, and fantasy-as-play. Photographic historians date the use of backdrops to shortly after the advent of photography itself.⁶ Avon Neal (1997: 13) writes: “As folk art the photographer’s painted backdrop is an often overlooked but nevertheless significant example of vernacular painting. Created primarily by self-taught artisans, its large-scale imagery is designed to dominate the photographer’s workspace. One of the fascinating aspects of photographing with a painted background is the transforming blend of magic and reality that makes the subject indistinguishable from the painting, an illusion that is confirmed by the photograph itself.” Neal cites examples of how backdrops alter people’s memories of events and locations; these examples point to how the backdrop indexes the photograph as a document of an event with symbolic, material, and historical registers (e.g., a family poses in front of a backdrop of the Grand Canyon at a local fair and later remembers the photograph as a document of a trip to the landmark).

In prison portraiture, the backdrops are more varied than the poses and uniforms of the imprisoned photographic subjects. For the most part, these backdrops project exterior life—a space outside prison walls—and they fall within landscape painting traditions. While some backdrops reference iconic landmarks like New York City’s skyline, the majority do not project a sense of place or the specificity of location. Instead, they represent a sense of nonconfinement, a lack of bars, boundaries, borders—an ungoverned, yet manicured, space. While animals are occasionally present in these backdrops, signs of human life are often excluded—no cars, infrastructure, symbols of the built environment. If buildings appear, they tend to be lighthouses or the bucolic ideal—farmhouses, barns, and mills. According to Adler, the abstract aesthetics and landscapes are used because prison staff monitor the backdrops: “A common theme is paintings with vague imagery, just abstract patterns, and there is a reason for that. This isn’t really a free

6. See James P. Wyman’s (1997) introduction to the exhibition *From the Background to the Foreground: The Photo Backdrop and Cultural Expression*, published in a special issue of *Afterimage*. Wyman, editor of the issue, acknowledges London daguerreotypist Antoine Claudet for patenting backdrops in 1841.

system; there are wardens monitoring it for gang symbols. The belief is that if it's some kind of watery, abstract background it's easier to spot a gang symbol" (quoted in Cheadle 2012).

Prison backdrops index specific visits to see relatives in prison, while they also alter the memory and experience of the visit. They simultaneously invoke fantasy spaces that the incarcerated and nonincarcerated can occupy together and mark time differently for both groups. In one of my family photographs, Allen, my mother, and his mother pose for the vacation that has yet to happen. The women stand on each side of him, as he hugs them tightly. He peers forward with a slight smile and stares into the camera. My mother and aunt smile and pose casually. The backdrop is of the setting sun at sea from the vantage point of someone at sea. Upon initial glance, in fact, the image appears to be from a cruise ship. Considering the power of studio portraiture and fantasy backdrops to shake loose "indexical certainty," Karen Strassler writes: "Studio portraits exploit the illusionistic potential of photography to bring into material, tangible proximity a fantasy portrayed 'as if' it were real" (2010: 77). It is Allen's blue uniform, property of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, that reveals the context for those who know to read his clothes as carceral markers. Every time I look at this photograph, I know that it was taken in prison, but I also have to tell myself that Allen, as an adult, has never taken a vacation. He has never watched the setting sun aboard a ship with relatives by his side (fig. 7).

Other common references in prison backdrops are symbols of light—lighthouses, suns, light reflected on water, rays of light entering space. One of the most remarkable backdrops I have observed is a painting of a wall of glass bricks in which each brick reflects light into the space of the prison visiting room. The backdrop painting is in a photo-realist tradition and is a study of how light refracts, so it appears as if the sun's rays have penetrated through the prison's architecture and into this interior space. Before posing with Allen for our photograph, my aunt touched the backdrop and said: "Wow! It looks so real. I mean the light coming in" (fig. 8).



Figure 7 Allen posing with his mother and aunt, 2007



Figure 8 Allen, his mother, and the author, August 2012

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Arjun Appadurai explains that backdrops locate photographs within public discourse at a historical moment and within a geographic or national context. Considering the role of photography as a mode of visualizing modernity in early twentieth-century India, he writes: “All backdrops thus direct the viewer’s attention outwards from the foregrounded subject of the photograph to a location represented in it and to the discourse in which the photograph is located, to which it is a potential contributor. These wider discourses, because they are inflected by a medium which is itself ‘realistic’ in peculiar ways, have a complex relationship to the power relations implicit in photography, wherever cultural ‘others’ are concerned” (Appadurai 1997: n.p.). Appadurai distinguishes two backdrops that shape most posed portraits—the visible backdrop, which foregrounds the human subjects, and the invisible backdrop, which “is the context that shapes the power of the photographer and the wider set of practices of observation and cataloging from which he or she emerges” (ibid.).

The power attributed to the photographer in Appadurai’s analysis, and in studies of photography more generally, is somewhat diminished in prison photography. Prison photographers negotiate the desires of other incarcerated people and their loved ones to have a photographic document that in some way erases the visible signs of carcerality, while working under the direct supervision of prison guards. These photographers are not credited for their job; instead, they labor anonymously as their works circulate through many hands. The prison photographer labors under the supervision of the penal state to capture regulated self-expression among the imprisoned and with their visitors. At the same time, the position of the photographer is a privileged job among prisoners, in large part because this person is able to interact with others, sometimes with less regulation and more fluidity than in other carceral spaces. The photographer has a great deal of mobility in the studio space and has relative control and autonomy over how the studio runs during his work shift. When he is not photographing, the prison photographer walks around and straightens up the visiting room—lining up chairs and removing food packages that have been left behind. He must appear to be busy and cooperative when not actively photographing.

The prison photographer choreographs the shoot using a familiar repertoire of static poses. In prison portraits, photographic subjects stand directly facing the camera, angle sideways, or crouch. Their hands are usually clasped together at their crotch or at their sides. In most photographs of family visits, the incarcerated man stands center and visitors hug him on both sides. Within carceral settings, power and surveillance are not invisible backdrops but the lens through which prisoners pose in uniform against fantasy backdrops.

How Carcerality Structures Emotional Labor and Family Intimacy

What I find most compelling about these images is how they circulate within the context of relationships of love, kinship, and familial attachments. While they replicate the composition of traditional family portraits in which a male patriarch often stands center, these photographs add complexity and layered emotional registers to the long and voluminous tradition of family photography. Scholar Tina Campt and others have explored the relationship between black family photographs and public and national archives.⁷ Campt (2012: 7) offers useful tools for thinking about family photographs among black populations as “sites of *articulation* and *aspiration*” (Campt’s emphasis). The cultural historian queries “why and how photography functions as a powerful medium for understanding the history of black communities transnationally, and of racial and gendered formation more generally” (ibid.: 24). By focusing on multiples and sets of photographs, instead of a single image, Campt is interested in “the work of image-making as a collective and relational practice of enunciation. Why does a community make certain kinds of photographs? . . . And what makes such photographs significant, not only for what they show but also for what we see in them, specifically, what registers affectively in and through them at other sensory registers?” (ibid.).

As these concepts relate to prison populations, the collective and relational practices involved in photography are laid bare and heightened by the foreground and backdrop of carcerality. These photographs document the regulations of the carceral system while also circulating feelings of love, longing, belonging, and hopefulness, even when a relative has been sentenced to life in prison. The family photograph is often discussed in anecdotal terms: “Oh, this is when we vacationed in . . .” or “This is when we traveled to . . .” Yet the family photograph staged in prison is one that marks another family narrative of crisis, disruption, structural inequality, dreams deferred, anticipation of a future moment, a temporal coming together under the strictures of carcerality. The prison photograph is processed and circulated through the lens of the penal institution. This visual and haptic artifact documents the state’s continued restructuring and disarticulation of black families. Photographs from prison visiting rooms complicate readings of the documentation of family life for many whose relatives are under the jurisdiction of correctional authorities. In these photographs, the free and unfree pose together in front of fantasy backdrops; they are marking time together. The circulation

7. In the edited collection *Picturing Us*, Willis (1994) invites various black academics and writers to respond to images from their personal collection or from a more public narrative of black lived experience to reflect on the role of photography in black self-determination.

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of these images for prisoners and their families can be a mode of touching on multiple levels. The haptic as a mode of touching refers to the materiality of the photograph as object in the world and the affective power of the photograph to produce feelings. In prison portraits, the intimate gaze of the photographic subject and the intended audience can communicate across prison walls sensory experiences of feeling and touching that challenge the structural rigidity of carcerality and yet can only happen through the institution itself. They touch feeling, to paraphrase Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003). They feel touched. They touch and are felt by the other.

The exchanges that take place through vernacular prison photography reflect gender divisions in conventional family structures. They are often tender and demonstrative acts between incarcerated men and their mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, wives, lovers, and female friends—women who support them on many levels (through caring for their dependents, visits to prison, monetary support, or accepting collect calls). As studies like Megan Comfort's *Doing Time Together* (2008) demonstrate, the responsibility for maintaining familial and intimate bonds with incarcerated loved ones—whether prisoners are men or women—relies primarily on the women with whom prisoners are intimately connected. Given that an estimated 93 percent of US prisoners are male, the gendered dynamic of maintaining familial and intimate bonds are important to note because they evidence how the carceral state burdens often poor and working-class Latina, Native American, and black women with maintaining familial and intimate relations in the era of mass incarceration (Guerino, Harrison, and Sabol 2011: 18).

While Comfort and others have emphasized the toll on women of maintaining these relationships, I contend that incarcerated male relatives labor to love and to perform familial notions of belonging too through letter writing, sending art, having photographs taken, and demonstrating an emotional attentiveness not commonly expressed outside of carceral structures. For example, in a portrait that Allen commissioned for Valentine's Day as a gift to several of his female relatives, he stands in front of a celestial backdrop of billowy clouds and blue sky with a cupid hovering in the upper edges. A large valentine heart sits upright on a pedestal at the same height as Allen's head. Allen's hair, which typically he wears short or in braids, is "lorded"—a soft, yet hypermasculine, style taken from urban street culture.⁸ Allen wears a crucifix necklace, an adornment rarely seen in his

8. The term is an obvious reference to British nobility and court systems. The hairstyle and fashion borrow from these traditions. Allen spent \$2 for each of these images and sent them out to several relatives.

photographs. He smiles slightly and clenches his fists. He is in an A-frame tank shirt and blue sweatpants—a version of his prison uniform that is less marked with signs of incarceration. It is a carefully manicured presentation of self, using the limited resources available to him in prison, and one that conveys gendered and familial notions of tenderness and strength. It is a conscious and deliberate act of staging love and affection and staying connected to his relatives on the outside (fig. 9).

One of the most challenging—and yet difficult to document—aspects of prison life is the management of emotions and expectations between incarcerated subjects and their loved ones. The work of feminist sociologists, such as Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, on intimate, reproductive, and emotional labor is useful in exploring the performance and management of emotions through prison portraiture. Moving beyond conventional notions of labor, recent feminist sociologists and theorists have examined how intimate and emotional labor are deployed in particular sites and practices by various categories of women. Boris and Parreñas (2010: 5) write: “Intimate labor involves tending to the intimate needs of individuals inside and outside their home. Our intimate needs would include not just sexual gratification but also bodily upkeep, care for loved ones, creating and sustaining social and emotional ties, and health and hygiene maintenance.” Their analysis grows out of reproductive labor studies and Arlie Russell Hochschild’s influential research on emotional labor among women in specific employment sectors. Hochschild (2003 [1983]: 7) writes that emotional “labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” She distinguishes this “management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” from “*emotion work* or *emotion management* to refer to these same acts done in a private context where they have *use value*” (ibid.: 7n; Hochschild’s emphasis).

Prison photography documents an intimate and emotional (unpaid) labor that is tethered to reproductive labor among populations most affected by mass incarceration at a cost to those photographed. To access these services, family members and visitors must come to some prison sites with large quantities of quarters or, before entering visiting rooms, load money onto vending cards they must purchase from prison vendors. Such seemingly small acts accumulate into expen-

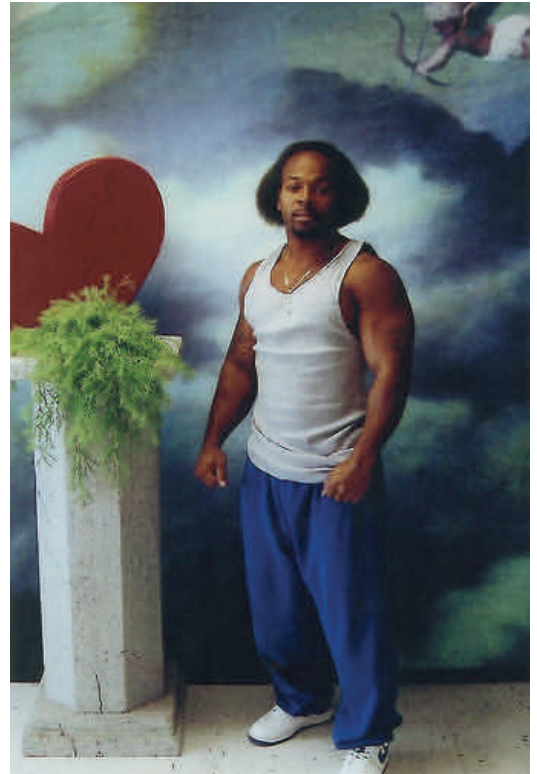


Figure 9 Allen, Valentine’s Day portrait, date unknown

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sive endeavors for relatives when one also considers their costs of getting to and from carceral institutions that are often hours away from where they live. Gilmore (2007: 183), in her study of the grassroots organization Mothers Reclaiming Our Children, examines how mothers and female relatives of the incarcerated “transformed their caregiving or reproductive labor into activism, which then expanded into the greater project to reclaim all children, regardless of race, age, residence, or alleged crime.” Her analysis of caregiving and reproductive labor provides insight into how prison photographic practices visualize forms of emotional labor inasmuch as they document repetitive and deliberate uses of bodies to perform tasks, economic and monetary exchanges, and spatiotemporal frameworks that regulate bodies as work in paid and unpaid duties. These photographs rely on rehearsed, deliberate, and laborious acts of conveying emotional investment for the incarcerated and nonincarcerated.

While the emotional labor of staying connected through the carceral state has been understood as part of the expansive work of the gendered labor of women, long-term incarceration can produce shifts in the practices of care and emotional labor between male prisoners and their female relatives and loved ones.⁹ What has gone overlooked and underresearched is the emotional investment of incarcerated men to stay involved and connected with family and loved ones on the outside. Both of my cousins Allen and De’Andre have expressed how difficult they find it to manage emotions and to stay calm before a family visit. The anticipation and anxiety can cause sleepless nights and lead to altercations with other incarcerated men or prison staff.

The practice and toll of emotional labor can also be observed through the regulation and practices of intimacy that take place during visits to the incarcerated. Prisons regulate intimacy in the most quotidian ways so that the touch of a loved one is a rare experience that can be purchased during a photo shoot in the visiting room. The visiting room in prisons is one of the sites where certain intimate acts are allowed; yet these acts can only be performed in full display of other prisoners, their visitors, and prison staff. Prisons have long and strict rules about physical contact and conduct during visits, and they vary from state to state and are based on the security level of the institution and the incarcerated. Typically, the prisoner faces the guard’s booth, while visitors sit with their backs to the guard.

Posing for photographs is one of the few opportunities when displays of affection and physical contact are allowed. When pictures are being taken the rules

9. See the writings of Boris and Parreñas, such as their edited collection *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (2010).

are softened. For one, it is often the only time when prisoners and their visitors can walk together. The seemingly normal act of walking together is a special and cherished occasion where not only movement is allowed, but also the bodies of loved ones get to occupy space differently than in the stationary seating areas. Hugs, kisses, and hand-holding, while staged for the camera's lens, are moments where loved ones can momentarily experience bodily contact and other modes of recognition. These are forms of public intimacy that all present in the visiting room—prison staff, the incarcerated, and visitors—may witness.

In theorizing the ways that intimacies are regulated by the state, Lauren Berlant (1998: 283) writes:

How can we think about the ways attachments make people public, producing transpersonal identities and subjectivities, when those attachments come from within spaces as varied as those of domestic intimacy, state policy, and mass-mediated experiences of intensely disruptive crises? And what have these formative encounters to do with the effects of other, less institutionalized events, which might take place on the street, on the phone, in fantasy, at work, but rarely register as anything but residue? Intimacy names the enigma of this range of attachments, and more; and it poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective.

Within the context of carceral institutions, the regulation of intimacy is magnified. In fact, one of the conditions of being in prison is the restriction on forms of intimacy and privacy. Each photograph purchased extends the time and contact between the incarcerated and nonincarcerated loved ones. These photographs also capture the work that is necessary to maintain connection and facilitate physical and emotional expression in carceral spaces. Smiling, hugging, and performing a sense of togetherness are deliberate and labored activities when carcerality and strictures of “doing time” mark these photographic moments as fleeting and enduring.

The makeshift photo studio at Ross Correctional Institution in Ohio consists of a backdrop painted by prisoners and a wooden park bench. In September 2012, I was there with my cousin Eric visiting his son De'Andre, who at twenty-three years old had been in an adult prison for more than six years. At the time of our visit, he had six years left of his minimum sentencing. Eric was visibly uncomfortable. De'Andre had recently been transferred to this closed, maximum-security facility, where the majority of incarcerated men are in lockdown for twenty-three hours a day. De'Andre had written to both of us, depressed and worried about

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his safety. He had not had a visitor in over a year. This facility has been the biggest challenge yet since he was incarcerated. As we wait in the visiting room for De'Andre, Eric fidgets; he's uncomfortable in the visitor's seat. He turns to me at one point and tells me that the last time he was at Ross was fifteen years ago, when he was incarcerated and sitting on the other side. De'Andre was in elementary school at the time.

On this Saturday afternoon in late September, the backdrop is of an autumnal setting sun. The sky is a pale shade of pink and centered at the top of the landscape is a large, warm yellow sun. The outer ring of sun bleeds into the pink and touches the edge of the lone tree on the horizon. The tree, leafless, stands majestic, peaking up above the sun's rays. This is one of the sparest backdrops I have seen and is unusual in color scheme.

At Ross, the photography studio is right next to the guard's desk and close to the visitors' entrance. I speak briefly to the photographer while he sets up a shot; communication between the photographer and visitors is not officially allowed, but the guard does not seem to mind. The shift photographer, a middle-aged white man, tells me that he learned to take pictures in prison; he had never given photography much consideration when he was on the outside, he notes. The visiting room experience, in general, here feels more casual and less regulated than in most prisons I have visited, and yet this is one of the most restrictive institutions known to house prisoners who have committed serious felonies or who have had disciplinary records at other penal institutions.

Photo shoots in prison tend to be quick and cursory. The photographer is careful not to spend much time talking with his photographic subjects for fear of scrutiny by the guards, but today the shoots last longer, and those who are posing linger on the park bench and chat with each other. Ahead of us, a young Latino couple spends considerable time at the studio, staging several images. The photographer talks to them, as he casually sets up each shot. He tells the prisoner to turn slightly toward the camera, as his female visitor wraps her arm around his waist. The guard at the desk, less than two feet away, leans forward and watches with mild interest. The photographer appears relaxed and in command. At one point, he turns and chats with the guard. The couple sits on the bench hugging tightly as several images are taken. In the final pose, they embrace and kiss for an extended period. It is an open-mouth kiss. I have never seen this in my thirty years of visiting prisons. The guard says nothing. The photographer continues to click away.

After the couple finishes their shoot, they walk back casually to the seating area. The photographer walks to our table and tells us that we are next. De'Andre,

Eric, and I take two pictures. In one, De'Andre is in the center, Eric is on his right side, and I am on the left (fig. 10). For the second picture, Eric says that De'Andre and I should take one together. De'Andre likes this idea; he has had very little contact with women in six years. He squeezes me much tighter than I expect when the photographer asks us if we are ready. For our second picture, the photographer takes a few shots without our asking. He then lets us choose the one we like best.¹⁰

After the photo shoot, De'Andre turns morose. He complains that his father and I are not paying enough attention to him. He sits quietly looking



Figure 10 De'Andre, Eric, and the author, September 2012

down at his lap. He interrupts our conversation, and I know that he wants more than we can give him here and now. I tell him what I have been thinking for a while, that there is only so much we can do to support him, that life is also hard on the outside. I tell him that every time he writes, it can't be to request something from me. There's only so much that I can do. It all feels so burdensome. He wants to leave with us. He wants to know that we won't leave him here. De'Andre starts to cry, long and hard. His father breaks the rule that keeps the incarcerated on one side and visitors on the other. Eric hugs him and cries too. Eric tells him that he is always here for him, that he is never a burden. I stand near them, watching them and watching the guard watch us.

The Vernacular and the Anecdote: Family Narratives and Pictorial Genealogies

I have this photographic collection of Allen and De'Andre aging, maturing, changing in prison. The images of Allen, now almost twenty years into his life sentence, accumulate, from an angry and scared teenager to a depressed man in his twenties, now to a resigned but hopeful man in his late thirties, anticipating each time he goes before the parole board that he will be released.

10. Digital cameras have influenced the quality of images taken inside prisons. Prior to the early 2000s, most of the images that document family visits were taken with Polaroid cameras. One shot was it per token purchased.



Figure 11 Fleetwood grandmother's nine daughters, November 2008

when De'Andre sent me his portrait a couple of months after he had had surgery to remove a cancerous growth on his forehead. He was seventeen and had just been transferred to an adult prison, where he had been diagnosed. The surgery was performed by prison medical staff without any family present or even notified that he was undergoing surgery.

These portraits assure us that our incarcerated relatives are alive and managing, but what they cannot reveal is what life is like on a daily basis for our loved ones serving time. After one visit to see Allen, my grandmother was so unsettled that she could not return for many years. Allen had been in solitary confinement for weeks without a proper cleaning. When they met him in the visiting room, he was unshaven, unclean, talking unclearly. He was not able to make eye contact; he kept fidgeting until they had to cut the visit short. It was too unbearable. They did not take a picture that visit.

When my grandmother finally gathered enough calm to see him again, several years after this incident, it would be her last visit to him. Suffering from dementia and advanced diabetes, she was unable to drive. So my grandmother took the two-hour trip to the prison and back with Allen's mother, one of her oldest daughters. On their way home, my grandmother held on to the pictures taken during that visit. At one point, according to my aunt Sharon, she looked at them and said to her, "I see you. And Allen looks good, but who is that old woman standing next

to Allen?” Sharon said, “That’s you, Momma.” They drove the rest of the way in silence.

After years of struggling with anger, shame, guilt, and depression about Allen’s life sentence at such a young age—his first time being arrested and convicted of any crime, but the judge said during sentencing that he was going to make an example out of Allen, so that other boys in our community would stay “in line”—his mother and sister work even harder to incorporate him into their daily lives. Allen is brought up with the frequency of one who shares a home with them. Their 2011 holiday card is evidence of this commitment. The photograph, staged in prison against an idyllic winter backdrop, is thickly layered as it circulates through many locations and emotional registers. Allen is the male central figure customary of family portraiture, as the women—his mother, sister, niece, and daughter—stand at his sides and lean in toward him. The prison portrait has been enfolded into another narrative and way of marking time—the holiday greeting card. The message on the card reads: “Have a blessed & prosperous 2011. Love, Sharon, Cassandra, Allen, Tanasha, & Mariah.” Each family member is listed in order of age, marking family lineage (fig. 12).

There is one image of Allen that unsettles me. He poses with his mother, my mother, and me during a visit in June 2009. My mother and I were in town to celebrate the graduation of four younger cousins from high school, a milestone that Allen did not accomplish. In this medium shot, we stand close to him. He hugs my mother and me tightly on each side of him. Aunt Sharon leans in, and we wrap our arms around each other’s waist. The women, all three of us, smile at the photographer. Our eyes are focused on the moment at hand, documenting our visit,



Figure 12 Winter holiday greeting card, 2011



Figure 13 Allen, his mother, the author's mother, and the author, June 2009

a temporary break in Allen's routine, a moment of connectedness. Allen's eyes, his half smile, the creases around his mouth disturb me. His features remind me of our uncle David, our mother's oldest brother, who spent a period in prison in the late 1970s to early 1980s. After his release, Uncle David spent the next couple of decades strung out on crack and died in May 2011, shriveled on a hospice bed and weighing less than one hundred pounds. The doctors said that his condition was a combination of drug abuse and exposure to Agent Orange during his two tours of duty in Vietnam. The doctors said that they have seen other black men his age die in a

similar manner. Allen's face too reminds me of Sherman Fleetwood Senior, our grandfather, who died at the age of fifty-four from the layered structures of racism and class oppression endemic in midwestern steel mill communities: alcoholism, cancer, and toxic fumes from years of working double shifts in the mill to support his wife and eleven children. The steel mill where he worked is up the road from the first prison where Allen was located. I want to erase these connections from his face. I want to alter the image—to paint his face over with a cold stare, a

mischievous grin, something other than that look of resignation, of being caught up in a narrative that is bigger than the self (fig. 13).

To fight the sense of helplessness and the feelings of hopelessness that my family carries, I rely on the anecdote and I touch another image from a visit to Allen (fig. 14). I use it to shake loose the stranglehold of this unrelenting narrative, so structurally determined. I zoom in on the staging of the moment, the setup and performance that the photographer will direct and capture. Allen and his visitors walk over to the backdrop—the tropical forest with light radiating from



Figure 14 Allen, the author's mother, three aunts, and the author, August 2001

above. It is the only time we walk together in the same direction. We are moving together, and it feels good to walk next to him, even if only momentarily. The emotions are heightened; everyone turns playful before the picture is taken. As we wait for the photographer to set up, Allen punches my bicep playfully. He calls me Boss Hog, a reference to my childhood nickname—rightfully earned for being a little dictator over my younger cousins. As we find our position and move into our poses, I retort: “I’ll always be your big cousin. I’ll always be older than you.” We squeeze in closely, arms wrapped around one another’s backs and waists. And in a few seconds, the photo shoot is over. We all quiet down and stand there for a moment before walking back to the seating area, where he will be on one side and we on the other. On our way back, Allen hugs me tightly; the money that we pay for each image buys us time to have physical contact. Allen sneaks a whisper to me: “I love you so much, Niki.” Then he sits on his side facing the guard’s booth and we wait, knowing that at any moment the guard can announce that our visit is over.

Coda

On February 2, 2015, Allen was released from an Ohio prison after serving almost twenty-one years. He walked out of the facility with his mother and sister accompanying him. They walked to the family car and took a “group selfie.” It was his first photograph outside of prison. In the weeks after his release, Allen used the smartphone that his mother purchased for him and took digital images of many of the photographs that his relatives had sent him over the past two decades. He then sent those photographs to us in text messages and e-mails with notes of love and playful emoticons. Many of the images that he returned were photographs that we had forgotten about. Allen had archived them. In many respects, he has become the keeper of our family’s photographic record. For the next five years, he will be heavily monitored through parole. Nevertheless, he told me to refer to him in this article’s conclusion as a “free man.”

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