It’s Like Living in a Black Hole:

Women of Color and Solitary Confinement in the Prison Industrial Complex

by Cassandra Shaylor

If I'm living in a Black Hole, Cassandra Shapley

The population and relies on estranged societal fear of crime and of certain led to several important factors (1) political economy, (2) crime exacerbated by the economic downturn. For politicians, economic choices were the least relevant until about 1940, though increases in the rate of incarceration for women has resulted in an amount 40% increases in the rate of incarceration for the economy. Specifically, addressing the implications of mass incarceration for women.

This section is dedicated to the political economy in which control and male-dominated control. The lack of control and the effect on female bodies.

Generally discussed, the analysis addresses the gendered and racial.

This section is dedicated to the political economy of incarceration for women's experiences in solitary confinement in women's institutions.

Introduction

Billions of dollars are spent every year on prisons. Inmates are isolated from the outside world, their basic human rights are taken away, and they are forced to live in conditions that are often dehumanizing.

Inmates are not treated as human beings. They are treated as criminals, and their dignity is not respected. This is unacceptable, and it is time to change our approach to dealing with criminals.

We must work towards a society that values human dignity and respects the rights of all individuals. Only then can we truly say that we are living in a just society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the discussion has highlighted the importance of addressing the political economy of incarceration for women. We must work towards a society that values human dignity and respects the rights of all individuals. Only then can we truly say that we are living in a just society.
classes of individuals as criminals; (2) inflammatory media and cultural representations of criminality; and (3) legislative and judicial systems that consistently deploy a model of total punishment when dealing with citizens who fail to live up to prescribed behavioral norms. n4

One of the largest women's prisons in the world is Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW) in Chowchilla, California. n5 This article draws upon the author's experiences as an attorney working for women imprisoned at VSPW and focuses in particular on women housed in the control unit, the Security Housing Unit (SHU). As a staff attorney for a non-profit organization that provides legal services for women prisoners, this author regularly conducts interviews with women in California state prisons. Though this analysis is limited to interviews of women prisoners in California, California's prison system is the largest in the country and contains the two largest women's prisons in the world. n6 As such, it provides a blueprint for the nation; thus, this analysis of control units is applicable to other prison systems as well.

This analysis of the prison is grounded in and shaped by the experiences of women prisoners. This is especially important given the almost complete silence around contemporary prisoners' perspectives. Although this article looks at racialization practices and solitary confinement conditions for women prisoners, the analysis also draws connections between their experiences and the political economy of the prison industrial complex as well as the larger history of solitary confinement practices.

Control Units

Control units represent the penultimate form of technology and space in the service of social control and dehumanization within the prison. For women at VSPW, this punishment regime consists of twenty-three hours a day of isolation in cramped, cold, dark cells, sometimes involving total sensory deprivation. n7 These cells are approximately eight feet by six feet, the size of an average bathroom. n8 Women in the SHU are allowed nine hours outside a week. n9 This is the only opportunity they have to interact with other women. n10 Although the cells originally were designed with small windows, the institution recently blacked out these windows, n11 removing any sense of a world outside.

Control units are also referred to as security housing units (SHUs), violence control units (VCUs), or maxi-maksi facilities. n12 There is a frightening trend in prison construction toward building separate "supermax" prisons, that is, entire institutions modeled on the control unit. n13 Forty states, the
Women in Conflict Zones

The perpetrators of conflict are often the victims of political and social violence. Women are often at the center of this violence, as they are often targeted for their roles in support of political groups or for opposing the ruling regime. The impact of conflict on women is profound, with many facing displacement, violence, and discrimination.

In the context of conflict, women often bear the brunt of violence and suffering. They are more likely to be victims of sexual violence, and they often have limited access to medical care and other resources.

Despite these challenges, women have played a critical role in conflict resolution and reconciliation. They have been instrumental in peace negotiations and in post-conflict reconstruction. Women have also been leaders in their communities, working to provide support and assistance to those affected by conflict.

The international community has recognized the importance of women's participation in conflict resolution and has established mechanisms to promote their involvement. However, more needs to be done to ensure that women have access to decision-making positions and that their voices are heard in the resolution of conflict.

Women's participation in conflict resolution is critical for achieving lasting peace. It is essential to ensure that women's contributions are not overlooked and that they are given the tools and support they need to participate effectively in the resolution of conflict.

This page discusses the role of women in conflict zones and the challenges they face. It highlights the importance of women's participation in conflict resolution and the need for international support to ensure their effective involvement.

References:
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n206 See id.

n207 See Goldberg, supra note 176. It is significant to note that in the same period, only one university campus was constructed. See id. In 1995, the state budget for the Department of Corrections exceeded the budget for higher education in California. See Fox Butterfield, New Prisons Cast Shadow Over Higher Education, N.Y. Times, Apr. 12, 1995, at 21. In 1980, 2% of the state budget was dedicated to corrections in California; in 1994 that percentage rose to 9%. See C. Pascal Zachary, Economist Say Prison Boom Will Take Toll, Wall St. J., Sept. 29, 1995, at B1. The Rand Corp. estimates that corrections will consume 18% of the budget in 2002 if imprisonment continues at this pace. See id.

n208 California now maintains four prisons for women. See Monthly Report of Ethnicity, supra note 62. California Institution for Women (CIW) in Frontera opened in 1952. See California Institution for Women, Institution Profile (1997). It is designed to hold 1,026 women; it now holds 1,706. See id. Thirty-five years later, in 1987, Northern California Women's Facility (NCWF) in Stockton opened. See Northern California Women's Facility, Institution Profile (1997). It was designed for 400 and holds 721. See id. This was quickly followed by Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) in Chowchilla in 1990 and Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW) in Chowchilla in 1995. See Central California Women's Facility, Institution Profile (1997); Valley State Prison for Women, Chowchilla, Institution Profile (1997). CCWF was designed for 2,004 women, but holds 3,148 and VSPW was designed for 1,980, but holds 2,960. See id. These prisons are located across the street from each other in the Central Valley and are the two largest women's prisons in the world. See Prisons: Pressure, L.A. Times, Oct. 17, 1994, at A1, A21. CCWF proudly advertises this fact. Materials issued by the prison announce it as "The Nation's Largest Female Prison." See supra note 2. The trend toward decreasing the emphasis on rehabilitation and increasing repression in prisons is reflected in the names of these institutions, which have changed from "institution" to "facility" to "prison" over a period of 40 years. It is important to note that these prisons are all located in isolated, rural areas, which makes visits from children, other family members and friends difficult, especially for those who are poor. See supra note 2.


n210 See Sourcebook, supra note 3, at 516 fig.6.2.

n211 See Sourcebook, supra note 3, at 510 tbl.6.11; see also, Marc Mauer, Americans Behind Bars --A Comparison of International Rates of Incarceration, in Cages of Steel: The Politics of Imprisonment in the United States, supra note 25, at 22, 25 tbl.3.

n212 See Women in Society: Statistics on the Condition of Women, in Criminal Injustice: Confronting the Prison Crisis 130, 132 (Elihu Rosenblatt ed., 1996). In 1980, there were approximately 13,000 women in federal and state prisons. See id. By the end of 1992, that number had risen by almost 300%. See id. This rise is largely attributable to the "war on drugs" in the 1980s and concomitant mandatory-minimum sentences and "three strikes" laws. See Angela Y. Davis, supra note 180.

n213 See generally Women, the State, and Welfare (Linda Greene ed., 1990) (discussing the "Feminization of Poverty").

n214 See id.

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The women describe the process as an extension of "worse conditions" and "reportedly more frequent and intense searches.

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they do it for humiliation. Some of them really like it. There is nothing we can
do between our cells and the shower, no way we can pick anything up. They’re
with us, watching us, the whole time. They are just tryin’ to break us down. n37

Claudia Johnson, a fifty-two year old white woman in the SHU, stated
that she refuses to be stripped out. n38 The institution sends in an “extraction
team” to force the strip-search on her when she has to go to court. n39 This
team consists of eight men in riot gear who enter her cell and hold her down
while a female guard rips off her clothes and conducts the search in their
presence. n40 Claudia Johnson reported that during the searches male guards make
vulgar comments and threats, and they videotape each incident. n41

The use of extraction teams is a routine practice in supermax facili-
ties; women are not exempt from it. n42 For women, however, this treatment
is uniquely traumatic because male guards usually perform the extraction. The
incidents are highly sexualized: women are rendered immobile, placed in a posi-
tion of extreme vulnerability, stripped of all of their clothing, and then subject-
ted to a full body search. n43 Because about sixty percent of women in prison
are survivors of some form of physical or sexual abuse, n44 cell extractions for
many of them are not only traumatic in the moment, but result in a re-experi-
encing of past trauma. n45 Claudia Johnson said, “It is about humiliation and total
loss of dignity, and I don’t care what they call it. I call it rape.” n46

Johnson reported that when she first began to refuse to strip out, the
male guards locked her in the cold shower for two days without food, water or
a blanket. n47 They periodically passed by the shower and yelled that when she
decided to comply with the stripsearch, they would give her food and water and
let her return to her cell. n48 Several other women who overheard the incident
conforced her story. n49 After two days, the guards finally released her. n50
They now use the extraction team to force strip searches on her. n51

Control units are built without any concern for the detrimental effects
they have on the women within them. Solitary confinement has a particularly
devastating effect on mentally ill women, many of whom are sent to the SHU
because they “act out” in general population as a result of their mental illness.
Many women are prescribed psychotropic medications, but most receive
no meaningful psychiatric treatment. n53 Within penal institutions, the medical-
ization model is widely used against women. n54 This author has interviewed
women who can barely speak because they are so heavily drugged and has
been told about others who rarely move from their bunks because the medica-
tion virtually immobilizes them. n55 Some women talk to themselves or yell
incessantly at their cell doors, while others experience paranoid delusions and

n127 See id. at 84-85.

n128 See id. at 92.

n129 See id. at 92-94.

n130 See id. at 94 (citing James V. McConnell, Criminals can be Brainwashed Now, Psychol.

n131 See id. at 96-98.

n132 See Bill Dunne, The U.S. Prison at Marion, Illinois: An Instrument of Oppression, in

n133 See id. at 1-2.

n134 See id. at 12, supra note 12, at 2.

n135 See id. at 38. A lockdown means that the prisoners are confined to

n136 See id. at 12, supra note 12, at 1.

n137 See id. at 78.

n138 See Ray Levasseur & Daniel Burton-Rose, From USP Marion to ADX Florence

n139 See id. at supra note 12, at 38.

n140 See Rosenberg, supra note 25, at 128.

n141 See Dr. Richard Korn, Excerpts from – Report on the Effects of Confinement in the

n142 See Rosenberg, supra note 25, at 128.

n143 See id. at 114-16.

n144 See id. at 114-16.

n145 See O’Melveny, supra note 25, at 112.

n146 See id. at 114-16.

n147 See id. at 114-16.

n148 See id. at 112.

n149 See id. at 114-16.

n150 See id. at 114-16.

n151 See id.; see also supra note 2.

n152 See Sourcebook, supra note 3, at 533 tbl.6.36; see also Barbara Bloom et al., Center on

n153 See Sourcebook, supra note 3, at 456 tbl.5.34.

n154 See id.

n155 See id.

n156 Interview with Luz Rodríguez, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal.

n157 See id.

n158 Interview with Denise Jones, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal.

n159 Interview with Harriet Lewis, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal.

n160 Interview with Luz Rodríguez, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal.

n161 Interview with Harriet Lewis, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal.
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Scheins, supra note 2 at 67 ("Discussions: First Session")...The process of information in the

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and recalcitrant; guards, therefore, are predisposed to view them this way and discipline them accordingly. n72 This analysis can be extended to Latinas and Native American women in prison. Latinas are perceived to be loud and belligerent, sexually aggressive, or immigrants who are unable to speak English. n73 Native American women are perceived as backward, savage and/or primitive, especially when they seek to preserve religious rights while imprisoned. n74 These views of women of color rely on stereotypes of white femininity as a model against which to judge “other” women.

Beyond the racist politics of the SHU, as represented by the disproportionate confinement of women of color there, the dehumanization practices that take place within it in can also be read as racialized. Women are degraded, sexually humiliated, and denied minimal medical care and any meaningful human contact. n75 Women are often denied basic necessities, such as food and hygiene supplies. n76 They are made to beg for sanitary napkins and toilet paper and are often told during the last week of the month that the prison has “run out.” n77 Such practices resonate with larger histories of racism that dehumanize people of color.

The institution consistently deploys racially coded discourses when interacting with the women in the SHU. Guards regularly accuse women of being dangerous, manipulative, or malingering, especially when women seek medical treatment. n78 Guards speak to and about the women as though they are subhuman. n79 A pamphlet, produced by the Warden’s office, is given to women when they enter the SHU and lists times for daily “feedings.” n80 Guards constantly use racial epithets, many of which are gendered, to refer to the women. They call the prisoners “dogs,” “niggers,” “bitches,” “whores” and “black bitches,” women refer to their cells as “cages.” n81 When women are denied privileges, they are put on what guards refer to as “dog status.” n82 “Privileges” in the SHU amount to very little, but include: showers three times a week; possession of property, like writing implements and paper; time spent outside; and permission to purchase hygiene supplies from the commissary. n83 All of these are rights accorded to women by law, n84 but the institution often withholds them as punishment, transforming them into “privileges.” Denise Jones stated: “They treat us like animals. No, you wouldn’t treat an animal the way they do us here. I am sure they don’t treat their dogs the way they treat us.” n85

The consistent relegation of women prisoners to a subhuman status reflects the intertwined histories of the subjugation of women and the dehumanization of people of color. Control units are designed to remove agency and humanity from people they target. The fostering of a perception of prisoners as less than human allows state employees to deny the women any semblance of

Though Crenshaw speaks about Black women only, I extend this argument for purposes of my analysis to include Latinas and Native American women. n72 A more complex analysis, which incorporates and critiques heteronormative notions of sexuality, is also warranted here. Homophobia plays a significant role in guards’ expectations of and reactions to women prisoners. Unfortunately, there is not enough space in this paper to include this analysis in sufficient detail. n73 See generally Juana Diaz-Cotto, Gender, Ethnicity, and the State: Latina and Latino Prison Politics (1996) (discussing Latino/Latina prisoner politics). n74 Luana Ross, Healing While Imprisoned, Address Before the “Unfinished Liberation: Policing, Detention and Prisons” Conference at the University of Colorado at Boulder (Mar. 15, 1998).

n75 See supra note 2.

n76 See supra note 2.

n77 See supra note 2.

n78 See supra note 2.

n79 See supra note 2.

n80 See Valley State Prison for Women, Administrative Segregation/Security Housing Units, Inmate Orientation Pamphlet (n.d.) (on file with author) [hereinafter Inmate Orientation Pamphlet].

n81 See supra note 2.

n82 See supra note 2.

n83 See Inmate Orientation Pamphlet, supra note 80.

n85 Interview with Denise Jones, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal. (Dec. 5, 1997).


n89 See Russel P. Dobash et al., The Imprisonment of Women 147 (1986).

n90 See supra note 2.

n91 Interview with Regina Morris, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal. (Oct. 30, 1997).

n92 Interview with Teresa Brown, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal. (Feb. 13, 1998).

n93 See supra note 2.

n94 See supra note 2.

n95 See supra note 2.

n96 See Immarigeon, supra note 12, at 2-3.


n98 See id.
to the property of the state. The right of privacy is protected by the Constitution of the state. This means that certain types of personal conduct are illegal only when such conduct violates a state constitutional right. While the state constitution is the supreme law of the state, the U.S. Constitution and federal laws also apply to the citizens of the state.
is actually much more expensive to maintain control units than those units that house the general population, because of the level of security involved and the increase in health-related expenses. Illinois and Wisconsin have recently begun constructing their first "Supermax" facilities at a cost of sixty million and ninety million dollars respectively. Each control unit cell costs $74,000 to build.

A deeper look reveals other, more disturbing and probably more accurate, readings of the purpose of control units. Former Warden of USP Marion, Ralph Arons has stated: "The purpose of the Marion Control Unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in the society at large." There is an interesting connection between Arons' statement and history - the first control unit opened at Marion in 1972, one year after the Attica uprising in New York.

A 1989 Prison Discipline Study found that the most common disciplining strategy used against jailhouse lawyers was solitary confinement. This study found that jailhouse lawyers were found to be by far the largest number of those in control units. Other categories of prisoners who were found to be placed in solitary confinement in disproportionate numbers were: blacks, mentally disabled individuals, gang members, political prisoners, Latinos, gays and lesbians, and people with AIDS.

Many prisoners are sent to control units for filing grievances or organizing other prisoners to respond to prison conditions. Patricia Smith reported that she was sent to the SHU for retaliating against a guard who had repeatedly forced her to have sex with him. She filed an inmate grievance against him; he responded with a "115," which is a serious disciplinary write-up, claiming that she attacked him. That "115" resulted in a SHU sentence.

Denise Jones is a thirty-three-year-old African-American woman at VSPW who came to prison as an eighteen year old and has been incarcerated for fifteen years. In 1996, she was brutally beaten by a male guard while his superior officer watched. She filed a civil rights lawsuit against the guards involved. She has repeatedly received threats and harassment as a result. She recently organized an HIV peer education group in the prison. These were women who were committed to educating themselves, leading workshops and producing theater pieces about HIV prevention and treatment on all four of the prison yards. According to Jones, several of the guards told her they did not like the level of freedom she now had in the facility. She explained that on the night before her peer education theater group began rehearsals for their performance, she was taken to administrative segregation. See Cal. Code Regs. tit. 15, § 3287(a)(b) (1997).


n23 The Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA) was passed as a rider to a 1996 Appropriations Bill. See 18 U.S.C.A. § 3626 (West 1997). Its provisions include: a two-year time limit on consent decrees; a limitation on the power of Special Masters; and a cap on attorneys' fees, reducing them to one third of what plaintiffs' lawyers usually receive. See id. These provisions make it virtually impossible for legal advocates to bring class action lawsuits on behalf of prisoners.


n26 See supra note 2.

n27 See supra note 2.

n28 See supra note 2.

n29 See supra note 2.


n31 See supra note 2.

n32 See supra note 2.

n33 Interview with Jean Davis, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal. (Mar. 6, 1998); Interview with Melva Daniels, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal. (Mar. 6, 1998); Interview with Bessie Reynolds, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal. (Mar. 6, 1998).

n34 See id.

n35 When guards are caught engaging in "inappropriate behavior" with female inmates, they are usually "walked off the yard." This means they are relieved of their post at the prison, often only to be transferred to another institution. See supra note 2. In many instances, this transfer is to another women's institution. See supra note 2. This information is also based on the author's communication with the personnel office of the California Department of Corrections.

n36 See supra note 2.

n37 Interview with Yvonne Smith, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal. (Dec. 5, 1997).

n38 Interview with Claudia Johnson, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal. (Oct. 30, 1997).

n39 See id.

n40 See id.

n41 See id.

n42 See Human Rights Watch, Cold Storage: Super Maximum Security Confinement in Indiana 52-56 (1997); see supra note 2.

n43 See supra note 2.


n45 See supra note 2.
It's Like Living in a Black Hole - Cassandra Shaylor


n13 See id.


n15 See Immarigeon, supra note 12, at 1.

n16 See generally Immarigeon, supra note 12, at 1.

n17 See id. at 2.

n18 See Immarigeon, supra note 12, at 1-2 (discussing The Human Rights Watch report on Prison Conditions in the United States). The history of USP Marion will be covered in greater detail in a later portion of this paper. See infra text accompanying notes 33-37.

n19 See generally Marin A. LaLonde, Note, Solitary Confinement: Legal and Psychological Considerations, 15 New Eng. J. on Crim. & Civ. Confinement 301 (1989) (discussing the application of the Eighth Amendment to solitary confinement). Generally, courts focus on whether prisoners are denied basic necessities when making a determination as to whether a condition amounts to cruel and unusual punishment. See id. at 304. Psychological considerations are rarely taken into account. See id. at 302. Contrast this with the court’s opinion over one hundred years ago, in In Re Medley, 134 U.S. 160 (1890), in which the court wrote about the Walnut Street Jail: A considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others, still, committed suicide; while those who stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service. . . . It is within the memory of many persons interested in prison discipline . . . and its main feature of solitary confinement was found to be too severe. Id. at 168.

n20 See Immarigeon, supra note 12, at 3; Burton-Rose, supra note 14, at 8.

n21 See, e.g., Madrid v. Gomez, 889 F. Supp. 1146 (N.D. Cal. 1995). Chief Judge Thelton Henderson ruled that solitary confinement of certain subgroups, including mentally ill prisoners, violates the prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment of the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. See id. at 1279-80. This lawsuit was filed on behalf of male prisoners at Pelican Bay State Prison in California. See id. at 115. A substantial portion of the lawsuit concerned conditions in the SHU. See id. at 1227. One of the most disturbing examples of the brutal conditions in the Pelican Bay SHU concerned a mentally ill African-American man named Vaughn Dorcht. See id. at 1166. Dorcht was removed from his cell by guards and placed in a bath of scalding hot water. See id. Guards scrubbed his burning body with a wire brush while making racist comments. See id. As a result of this treatment, he sustained third degree burns over eighty percent of his body. See id. at 1167. Opened in 1989, Pelican Bay was designed as a state-of-the-art facility. See id. at 1155; see also Sally Mann Ramano, If the SHU Fits: Cruel and Unusual Punishment at California’s Pelican Bay State Prison, 45 Emory L.J. 1089 (1996). Though conditions in the SHU at Pelican Bay are similar to those in the SHU at Valley State, Pelican Bay SHU is operated almost completely by use of remote control. See id. This means that prisoners never interact with other human beings, including guards, except when meals are brought to them. See id. at 1102. Each prisoner exercises alone on a cement enclosed yard the size of a dog run at a kennel. See id. at 110203.

The History of the SHU

These cases are only two of many that illustrate the importance of uncovering the increasing and hidden use of the control unit as a disciplining strategy of the prison, particularly against women of color. In order to understand the growing trend toward repression in women’s prisons, it is important to discuss the history out of which the SHU at VSPW arose. Solitary confinement was introduced in 1829 by Quakers, who believed isolation and self-reflection would promote penitence and reform. n124 It quickly became apparent that instead, such isolation often led to mental breakdown. n125 As a result, solitary confinement was abandoned as a general practice; however, it remains a method of social control against specific prisoners. n126 In the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. Edgar Schein of Massachusetts Institute of Technology conducted research on the Chinese model of “reeducation” deployed by Koreans against U.S. Prisoners of War. n127 From interviews with American servicemen repatriated to the U.S., he distilled a model of mind control that he then presented to key representatives from the Bureau of Prisons at a conference in 1962. n128 Transcripts from his speech and the discussion following reveal interest on the part of prison officials in using the research to suppress the beliefs and organizing efforts of Black Muslims and conscientious objectors. n129 In 1970, Dr. James V. McConnell published an article entitled “Criminals Can Be Brainwashed Now,” in which he argued for the application of sensory and perceptual deprivation and social isolation to prisoners. n130 During the 1970s, numerous behavior modification programs were instituted in US prisons which implemented these strategies, sometimes combined with use of psychotropic medications. n131

The first control unit prison emerged in 1983 at USP Marion, a federal
prison for men in Illinois. n132 USP Marion became the model for the current wave of control units and solitary confinement strategies throughout the country. n133 Ostensibly in response to a violent incident, the entire prison was locked down. n134 That lock down has never been lifted, effectively transforming the entire prison into a control unit. n135 The tactics developed at Marion have been applied at prisons all over the country. These tactics were instrumental in the design of the high tech federal control unit at Florence, Colorado, which houses 550 people in permanently locked down cells. n136

The only control unit specifically designed for women political prisoners was opened at Lexington Federal Prison in Kentucky in 1986. n137 The unit employed multiple tactics to destroy the women's senses of self and to break down their political convictions through sensory deprivation and small-group isolation. n138 The unit housed three political prisoners: Alejandrina Torres, Puerto Rican independentista; Susan Rosenberg, North American anti-imperialist; and Silvia Baraldini, Italian national and anti-imperialist. n139 The structure was built underground and the interior was entirely white, which resulted in reports from the women of hallucinations of black spots and strings on the walls and floors. n141 The women were made to wear large, shapeless clothing and were forbidden to hang anything on the white walls. n142 What little contact they had with their jailers was often in the form of disembodied voices addressing them through loud speakers. n143 They had only occasional contact with the outside, mostly with their lawyers. n144 After an intense campaign waged by a broad coalition of concerned people, the unit was shut down in 1988. n145 The legal decision was based on the political nature of the placements—the court determined that the women were housed there as a result of their political beliefs and that such placement was unconstitutional. n146 Although the courts came close to admitting that there are political prisoners in the United States, the decision did not declare that such treatment rises to the level of cruel and unusual punishment. n147 The decision was undermined when the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that prisons are free to use political associations and beliefs to justify different and harsher treatment. n148 Since Lexington closed, other units, modeled on Lexington, have opened in other parts of the country. n149 Women in the federal prison at Marianna, Florida, for example, and other prisons across the country, are reporting increasingly brutal, similar conditions. n150 Where once such units housed mostly political prisoners, now all prisoners are potentially subject to this level of social control. n151

and the isolation and dehumanization practices of the SHU.

As concerned members of the national community, we must interrogate the stereotypes we receive from our government and through the media about criminals and demand information about the status of prisoners in our nations' prisons. We must recognize the importance of women in prison and commit ourselves to organizing against their increasing incarceration. The silence around this issue and the increasing invisibility of women in prison will allow for the vast expansion of the prison industrial complex and the infliction of repression on greater numbers of women. As scholars, lawyers, activists, and researchers, it is necessary to develop new directions for critical analyses of women's imprisonment. This article is a contribution to that process. As the argument has outlined, the prison industrial complex affects women in unique ways. As advocates for prisoners, we must develop new ways of thinking about the gendered and racialized dimensions of imprisonment. If we fail to address the boom in the imprisonment rates of women and the increasingly repressive character of prisons, the devastating effects on women and their families and communities will be impossible to overcome.

FOOTNOTES:
n1 Interview with Angela Tucker, Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal. (Feb. 6, 1998).
n2 Most of the factual statements in this article are based on information gathered by the author during interviews with women incarcerated at the Valley State Prison for Women, in Chowchilla, Cal. The names of interviewees and the dates of interviews have been altered to protect the privacy and safety of the women. Specific information has been included only with the permission of the women interviewed.
n5 See supra note 2.
n6 See supra note 2.
n7 See supra note 2.
n8 See supra note 2.
n9 See supra note 2.
n10 See supra note 2.
n11 See supra note 2.
In terms of the SHU, this analogy to the black hole is multiplied; the darkness of the SHU is reflected in both its racialized nature and the darkness of the experience of these women. The SHU is experienced as a place where the passage of time is transformed, and communication flowing both into and out of the SHU is severely restricted. The SHU is experienced as a place where the space of the black hole is so great that a person entering it would be ripped to shreds. By contrast, the impact of the SHU on our bodies and minds leaves us altered for life.
three times in order to check the entire body. n166 This exposes the visitor to an excessive amount of radiation. Such technology contributes to the climate of fear around prisoners; the public is made to believe that such measures are necessary. These devices serve to erect yet another barrier to visitors from the outside, contributing both to the isolation of prisoners and the secrecy around the brutality of prison life.

There is currently a state enforced media ban against face-to-face interviews of prisoners by journalists. n167 This ban is part of a growing national trend to prevent representatives of the media from interviewing prisoners. n168 This insures that only prisoners and their supporters are witness to the brutality of prisons, thus denying the larger public information about the reality of prison conditions. This lack of information makes it much easier for people to believe in stereotypes about criminals and to see themselves as separate from them. Because of the current state of secrecy around prisons, it is necessary to have personal communications with prisoners in order to uncover at least some of what is happening inside.

The Emerging Prison Industrial Complex

The growing isolation of prisoners through the use of the control unit and the isolation of knowledge about prison life facilitated by state sponsored actions like the media ban, are reinforced by strategies of isolation deployed outside of prison. In City of Quartz, Mike Davis identifies a new “fortress” mentality that informs urban spaces and planning practices. n169 As a result of this mentality, poor communities of color are increasingly isolated from wealthy white neighborhoods, through planned “gated communities” with high-tech security systems. n170 Repressive policing tactics in poor neighborhoods result in the cordoning off of people of color into areas of extreme poverty and isolation.

The level of repression in the emerging isolationist model both within and outside of the prison is tied to the economic and political effects of the national investment in the military industrial complex. This investment in militarism increasingly informs policing and imprisonment practices. The US government is currently selling surplus surveillance equipment and weapons, including tanks, to police departments in cities in the U.S. n172 In 1997, law enforcement agencies purchased 1.2 million pieces of military hardware from the Department of Defense. n173 Communities as small as 75,000 people are policed by officers in full riot gear riding in armored personnel carriers. n174 Black urban neighborhoods are the most frequently targeted areas for this paramilitary activity. n175

the California Three Strikes Initiative. n224 Ideas about the ease of prison life are cultivated in order to legitimize increasingly brutal prison conditions and punishment practices. Misperceptions about the availability of rehabilitation in prison belie the reality that a regime of punishment has completely replaced even the slightest gesture toward rehabilitation. As Angela Davis has argued, the prevailing racist logic allows for the assumed criminality of black and brown people, rather than the recognition that the inordinately high number of incarcerated people of color is evidence of structural racism. n225

Imprisoning America

The rise in incarceration and the increasing repression in prisons is connected to the economic and political restructuring of America. In order to understand what that political project entails, it is necessary to unmask the ways in which the prison remains excluded from the rest of society because it is a racialized space. As police chief of Atlanta, Eldrin Bell asks:

If we started to put white America in jail at the same rate that we're putting black America in jail, I wonder whether our collective feelings would be the same, or would we be putting pressure on the President and our elected officials not to lock up America, but to save America? n226

Though Bell’s statement reinscribes a black/white dichotomy that fails to fully address the racial constitution of the prison, the sentiment it expresses is extremely important. He describes two Americas, black and white. This author would argue that what is also relevant in his statement is the division between two other notions of America — one inside and one outside. Through the space of the prison, there is a contest over what it means to be American. Racism is a constitutive piece of this construction.

When individuals are imprisoned, they are no longer considered national subjects; they lose most of their rights as citizens and are thus perceived to be outside of the national body. This is especially true if, in addition to transgressing prescribed societal norms through activity that is deemed criminal, they are racialized subjects. Many people express no opposition to the diminishing civil rights of prisoners, in large part because they believe that individuals forfeit those rights when they commit criminal acts. Individuals outside of prison define themselves as “good” citizens in contrast to those inside. They fail to acknowledge the heavy hand that racism plays in determining which citizens are targeted by the state for arrest and conviction.

Prisoners thus represent the abject of the nation, in large part because a
economic opportunities for corporate and government systems, which little on

can form in communities in which those systems offer limited financial

safety net for the community, and in which opportunities for economic and poli-

cical action are limited. In the United States, the policies of economic and political

expansion have often been at the expense of social justice, as evidenced by the

existence of ongoing poverty and inequality. This is especially concerning when

considering the disproportionate impact of poverty on communities of color.

The growing importance of fingerprint analysis in criminal justice is

Editorial by the United States government, the FBI, and other law enforcement

agencies, has increased the number of fingerprint databases and the amount of

information collected on individuals. This has raised concerns about privacy and

the potential for misuse of this data. The use of fingerprint analysis in criminal

justice is a complex issue, with both potential benefits and risks.

In addition to the challenges posed by fingerprint analysis, there are also

issues related to racial and economic disparities in the criminal justice system.

These disparities are evident in the disproportionate number of people of color

who are arrested, convicted, and sentenced, as well as in the conditions

in which they are held.

It is important to consider these issues and work towards creating a

criminal justice system that is fair and just for all people.

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the violence they perpetuate against those communities.

A central example of corporate involvement in the prison industrial complex is the Corrections Corporation of America. It is currently the most profitable company in the privately-run prison industry. American Express and General Electric have contributed to private prison construction. Financial powerhouses, such as Merrill Lynch & Co., Inc., Smith Barney Shearson, Inc., and Goldman Sachs & Co. are currently underwriting prison construction through the sale of private, tax-free bonds which require no voter approval. Furthermore, the construction industry is not the only private interest profiting from prisons. Everything from Dial Soap to AT&T is marketed to corrections officials. Health care companies and food service providers compete for lucrative prison contracts.

Annual exposions provide a forum for companies to market products ranging from stun guns to razor wire. A startling example of such technology is a computer tracking system designed by QueTel Corp., which would require institutions to issue scanners to guards and attach bar codes to prisoners. The introduction of a device such as a bar code is the ultimate material semiotic manifestation of the marriage of economy and technology in the prison—the prisoner’s body symbolically inscribed as commodity.

Perhaps most disturbing about this political economy is the growing exploitation of prison labor. As growing numbers of women are arrested and imprisoned, they increasingly become a part of this exploited class of laborers. Prisoners work to produce shrink wrap packages for Microsoft and handle reservations for TWA. California voters passed Proposition 139, the Inmate Labor Initiative of 1990, which paved the way for inmates to be leased out to private industry, reinstating slavery through the explicit repeal of the principle that prison work would be voluntary. The initiative states in part: “The people of the State of California find and declare that inmates who are confined in state prison or county jails should work as hard as taxpayers for their upkeep, and that those inmates may be required to perform work and services.”

In California, a semi-autonomous state agency called the Prison Industry Authority (PIA) was created to make industries within the prison self-sustaining and profitable. The PIA mission statement no longer refers to rehabilitation or training; it focuses only on maximizing profits. Ultimately, prisoners find that they do not learn marketable skills in prison and are rarely able to find jobs similar to the ones they performed inside (or any job at all, for that matter). A gendered division of labor exists within prison industries; women have generally worked in laundry, upholstery, fabric production and data entry, while men have worked in metal and wood production, automotive shops, dairies and slaughterhouses. At VSPW, women prisoners produce eyeglasses for LensCrafters through PIA-Optical. These women are paid less than one dollar an hour, are forced to work overtime or risk losing their jobs, and are prevented from organizing against dangerous and exploitative work conditions.

Prison labor practices in the United States are analogous to neo-imperialistic, transnational corporate practices in the world outside. The hypermobility of capital creates large populations of unemployed free people in the United States. Corporations can seek out low-cost laborers: prisoners provide such cheap, local labor power. The result is the commodification of prisoners; not only is their labor commodified, but their very bodies now represent profits. These bodies, most often racialized and increasingly female, are bought and sold on the stock market, as the prison industry requires a steady supply to maintain profits. This demand for prisoners is met through public policy decisions which encourage the incarceration of greater numbers of people. Prison labor represents the ultimate alienated labor; for prisoners there is no longer even the illusion of choice. The disregard for the humanity of imprisoned women and men, and the unadulterated joy in the possibility of profiting at their expense is summed up in a brochure for a conference on private prisons. This conference was organized by the World Research Group, a New York-based investment firm, whose marketing motto was: “While arrests and convictions are steadily on the rise, profits are to be made from crime. Get in on the ground floor of this booming industry now!”

Race, Gender and the Prison Boom

The material reality of this “booming industry” is the proliferation of prisons. In the last ten years, twenty prisons have been built in California. Three were prisons for women. This expansion is part of a national historical trend. Though only two or three women’s prisons were built per decade between 1930 and 1950, there were seven built in the 1960s, seventeen in the 1970s, and thirty-four in the 1980s. Scholars and activists who address issues of imprisonment seldom acknowledge the expanding population of women prisoners and the proliferation of women’s prisons. This expansion is not insignificant: while the number of men in prison has doubled in the last decade, the number of women has more than tripled. Thus, women play an ever-growing role in the increasingly profitable punishment industry, an industry in which the financial stakes are incredibly high.

The United States now incarcerates approximately two million people,