

Hard Copy, Harder Time

The aura of the prison letter



Prison letters: the hardest copy.

An entire generation has now lived in the world without the experience of sharing a correspondence through handwritten letters. I don't mean being forced to write a thank you note to grandma after your birthday - a true correspondence, at a distance by what we now derisively call "snail mail." This means of communication has receded into the mists of nostalgia, like vinyl records, like film photography. The current U.S. administration has even added the dismantling of the Postal Service to its list of "Evil Things To Do." (This has more to do with suppressing mail-in ballots, but as an anti-human gesture it is very much on-brand.) Many of us over fifty have fallen in love, honed our intellects, found connection, and embraced a human-scaled sense of time and place through letters.

Perhaps there is no group of people in our society for whom letters have been more important than prisoners. I was one of them. For nearly fourteen years through two prison sentences, my letters were the means of my psychic and creative survival. They sustained me through that time. And now they give me a vehicle for time-travel to interrogate and comfort that young revolutionary who wrote those hundreds of letters from Rikers Island and then in solitary confinement at USP Marion.¹

¹ Rikers Island is the New York City jail complex, situated on a 400-acre island in the East River near LaGuardia Airport. It has become synonymous with violence and brutality. USP Marion was the focus of international protests led by Amnesty International and Human Rights watch for its institutionalization of solitary confinement. Only minor reforms resulted. Marion's mission was relocated to USP Florence in Colorado where its practice is even more onerous.

The ritual of letter-writing

Prisoners create rituals to ground us in a reality beyond the walls and into the realm of the possible. Reading my mail was a ritual; it had definite rules. A cup of instant coffee must be brewed first. This would usually mean tepid tap water from the cell's sink or, if I was lucky, the orderly would be out on the tier who could be persuaded to give me hotter water from the tier's slop sink. The quality of it - like warm water swirled with a brown crayon - was secondary to the fact of it, the act of making it. It had the power to place me back in time-- sometimes with comrades underground who taught me to pay attention to this one thing to remind you who you are, or perhaps with friends at the kitchen table in Northampton after college, or in my parents' kitchen in New Jersey. It could also transport me forward to some possible future where I would grind myself a proper cup of strong espresso in my own flat, a free man again. Having carried out this sacrament, I would then sit on a folded army blanket and use the concrete bed platform as my desk. I assembled the day's arrivals in front of me. Newspapers were scanned first, followed by letters from attorneys (so many!) then letters from my correspondents in reverse order of how emotionally tied I was to them. I saved the sweetest ones for last. Some of these arrived with traces of perfume and stuffed with photographs (I fell in love over and over.)

After the first reading, comes the response. It requires a closer reading, and you respond, thought for thought. You acknowledge the emotions and the process of your correspondent. You engage, you comfort, you argue vehemently. You articulate alternatives. You think, man, you think hard and make it as real as you possibly can with the tools before you. It is a miniature act of escape: you summon as much as you can of yourself to the paper with a stub of a pencil (if you're in the hole) or a cheap ballpoint pen. You press your laughter, your strength, your tenderness onto the paper so that, at the other end of its journey when the envelope is opened, your soul will be set free on the other side of time and distance. You want to make yourself as real as you possibly can with the tools before you. And you make your escape: in the act of writing, for those moments, you join the soul to whom you are writing. You make your mark, you trade markings with other human beings - which in the end, is the real stuff we're all here to do.

my letters fill a box on the floor by your bed
the words clatter like a lanyard driven against a flagpole
its tattered and windshorn banners
demanding to be taken out to sea.²

To the world in my letters, I was a positive, energetic, happy man - which was generally the case, anyway. Sometimes assuming that posture would be enough to actually push me out of whatever doldrums or longings might crop up. Like a mantra, the repetition of declarations of ongoing strength and well-being seemed to have its own meditational effect. I also tried to imagine my correspondent on the other side of the conversation: Would they continue to write to me if I was constantly complaining and listing the indignities and abuses of my treatment? I never wanted that to be a reason for someone to stop writing.

2 From "Between Two Trees," *The Risks Worth Taking*, 1997.

I wrote about the world - about politics, mostly, about US wars and incursions, about human rights abuses at home and abroad, about our political movements, and revolutionary theory. Nothing specific, nothing incriminating or useful to the authorities. My letters from isolation were particularly political and, I imagine, for many of my unfortunate friends on the street, strident, dogmatic screeds. Being in isolation confines you (literally) to the state of mind and being in which you arrived. There isn't anyone to directly challenge you or your thinking face to face, soul to soul. And on the other hand, to survive years of solitary confinement, you have to have reasons to get up each morning and live your life. Thus every letter, every drawing, every poem was a round fired in self-defense.

Letters to friends...and Interpol

But there was another reason for taking care in crafting the persona I presented.

I licked a lot of stamps, but never an envelope. Prisoners don't know what the mucilage on their envelopes tastes like. The final act of preparing an outbound letter is to address your envelope and place those licked American flag first class stamps in the upper right corner (upside down, because *fuck them*.) But you cannot seal it. Other eyes - the anticipated but uninvited audience - will read this letter before it is sealed. Security. Inspection. Invasion. Psychological warfare.

All of our mail was inspected. This was a given. Most often this was a duty given to guards in the guard towers and other locations where nothing much was happening. I know for a fact that my own mail received special attention and often travelled a longer route through the offices of the investigating lieutenants. I assumed that they read and copied everything I wrote and most things that came to me. I'm not sure what their protocols might have been, but I imagine there was a ranking system that determined which letters they were copying and analyzing. My operating assumption was that all of my mail was read thoroughly. Beyond the prison staff, I also had to assume that multiple layers of the US government's security apparatus had access as well: the FBI, the Joint Terrorist Task Force³, and other working groups that might also include military intelligence and private sector think tanks. I understood this, accepted the reality, and went ahead and wrote as much as I could. I instinctively censored myself, imagining the extra sets of eyes, making sure not to reveal anything about my past lives, my comrades still on the street, or emotional reactions to my treatment or to the events in the prison. I did not complain; I did not betray anything that could be used to analyze my state of mind, be leveraged against me in the future.

The effect of having this other audience is numbing at first, but then your circumspection and care to not give anything up of value become second nature. But here is where the long-term damage occurs. You are never rid of them. They have become internalized, as if a pod of FBI agents resided in a corner of your brain. The sense of being psychologically surrounded has never completely left me, even after twenty years on the street. It is more than just editing

³ Joint Terrorist Task Force (JTTF) was a multi-agency unit combining agents from the FBI, New York City Police Department, and regional state police to investigate "domestic terrorism."

oneself for particularly triggering locutions or phrases that might trip an NSA search engine. It is another layer of incarceration that imprisons the part of you that wants to, needs to declare out loud the harm that has been done to you, to enumerate the abuses and indignities that you and the people around you suffered, that adds to that wall inside that prevents you from being an authentic person *in the world*.

Reasons to live; reasons to write

But you write. You write because every letter is also an act of resistance.

After waves of arrests and profound changes in the world, most related to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of those I knew on the streets were reexamining their own practice and beliefs. I could not afford to do so. For me, the fight was ongoing, regardless of what was happening in the outside world. I clung to my revolutionary core for two reasons: 1. A belief that my analysis of the system and need for its destruction was fundamentally correct, and 2. For self-preservation. I knew why I was there. It would have been dangerous to become unmoored and launch into a journey of soul-searching and self-discovery. I did not have the luxury or the psychological space to challenge myself in that way. I required knife-edge hatred for the system and its representatives. I needed to hate them as much as they hated me and what I represented to them. Their goal was to deny me a vital, creative life, undermine my political agency, and ultimately to turn me into a traitor. So in retaliation, I read, I wrote, drew pictures, wrote poetry and of course, wrote letters to comrades all over the world because: Fuck them. On some days when the walls were closing in, writing letters was like doing my handstand push-ups against the wall; it made me stronger. On most days, and my best days, it was my means of travel to the time-space of my correspondents and out of prison.

in letters we merged our aspirations
with the oils of our hands

is the trace of scent on the pages your own
or that of one of our faceless intercessors?

in spite of them
because of them
what each holds from the other is blessed
for somehow we've learned each other⁴

Fire a thousand poems; fire ten thousand letters.

My correspondence with other political prisoners was the most sustaining for me. These were the letters to which I was most ardently committed, which most commanded much of my attention. According to Bureau of Prison rules, I was not permitted to correspond with anyone

4 From "Between Two Trees," Timothy Blunk, *The Risks Worth Taking*, 1997.

serving prison or jail time in the United States, but astonishingly and to my great fortune, this regulation did not extend to prisoners in *other countries*. Given that generosity and humanity are utterly uncharacteristic of the Bureau of Prisons, this was unlikely a security slip; there must have been an ulterior (intelligence-gathering) motive. But from my perspective, the opportunity to commune with these folks was vital; if a guard had forgotten to lock a door, I certainly wasn't going to tell them to come back and throw the bolt.

My letters would then be launched in the direction of Europe. My letters to the prisoners of the RAF (Red Army Faction) and the RZ (Revolutionary Cells) in Germany, the Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades) in Italy, GRAPO (First of October Anti-Fascist Resistance Groups) in Spain, ETA (Basque nationalist organization,) the IRA, and political prisoners in Turkey were connections made to other comrades who were also combating isolation and fighting for their political identities. Our letters specifically disrupted the state's goals of politically isolating and undermining us.

My correspondence with Brigitte Mohnhaupt was the most meaningful of all. Brigitte, who herself had been arrested in Germany two years before, was the first person who wrote to me following my arrest with Susan Rosenberg in November 1984. Susan had been on the FBI's "10 Most Wanted" list - capturing her was a top priority. Our arrest was therefore a very big deal, and the FBI wanted to exploit the opportunity for all it was worth. The security put in place around us was largely unprecedented - a domestic military show of force and intimidation. I was placed in the high security unit on the 9th floor of New York's Metropolitan Correctional Center. The segregation cells were behind an additional layer of glass as a subunit of the already locked down floor. Brigitte was known to me as one of the leaders of the second wave of the post-1977 Red Army Faction; I never imagined she would have known of me or our case. I was surprised to learn that the German anti-imperialist left had been paying close attention to the development of the resistance in the US, and that she and her comrades knew more about us than the vast majority of the US left.

The RAF prisoners including Brigitte were engaged in rolling protracted hunger strikes against the use of isolation against them and for *Zusammenlegung*, their right to political association, to be housed together and treated as political prisoners. As the months and years went by, we shared information about our respective struggles against the prisons and our observations about the state's strategies against us. I was taken to USP Marion - the US version of Germany's notorious Stammheim which had been the focus of the fight against isolation since the 70s. We were also engaged in a fight with the US Bureau of Prisons as they opened an isolation unit for my women comrades at Lexington, Kentucky. As the German and US governments compared notes and strategized in their use of isolation against political prisoners, through our letters we shared the warmth of solidarity and expanded our universe of resistance.

These letters were therefore a terrain of ongoing battle between us and the state. There were doubtlessly many new sets of eyes on our correspondence - Interpol, the German BND and

5 BKA. The letters were an obvious source of raw intelligence that would likely help them create psychological profiles and fine-tune their incarceration strategies. On more than one occasion I had a lieutenant make an off-handed comment to me, quoting one of my recent letters verbatim in language that would have been utterly foreign to them otherwise.

The prison banishes your letters whenever they can. When you are forcibly transferred, your letters are all sent home. Those of us in isolation we were permitted to have no more than five letters at a time in our cells. I can only surmise the particular policy justifications: perhaps fire hazards or the prison's penchant for military standards of neatness and order. But the actual effect was to keep prisoners psychologically unmoored. You can no longer give them pride of place among your few possessions in your cell as a talisman of human solidarity, warding off the evil spirits of the prison. You cannot go back to them or rejoin a thread of correspondence except as you might resurrect it from your already beleaguered memory. You anguish over them as lost, for indeed they may well be.

Letters keep us looking for new words

Seeing how my German comrades were educated in English and made the effort to communicate with me in my language, I felt the need to meet them halfway. At Marion, I secured books to begin a study of German so that I could at least make an attempt to bridge the language barrier from my side. I cannot say I made much progress with my writing, but I learned enough to be able to read. My new German friends - family and supporters of the RAF prisoners - subscribed me to the left-of-center daily newspaper, *Die Tageszeitung*, and I received stacks of them at a time. I imagined the prison investigative staff trying to make sense of it all. The *Taz* was filled with articles about the prisoners and the rolling hunger strikes. They also carried news of us and demonstrations around Germany in solidarity with US political prisoners. I was stunned to see photographs of demonstrations with young activists carrying placards with my picture and those of my comrades on them. Such demonstrations in the US were rare and quite small.

Brigitte and I kept each other apprised of the events in our respective struggles, but over time the reportage and information sharing transformed itself into a much deeper bond of friendship. We shared photographs of our families; she sent me many photographs of the countryside near where she grew up in the Rhineland. I sometimes received cards from her mother and messages from the relatives group that had formed around the prisoners. We drew pictures for each other and shared poems. I had never met her, yet she became a central person in my interior life. I could imagine her voice constructed from the shape of her handwriting - a particularly European way of writing in block letters - almost always on parchment airmail paper. I suppose one even writes with an accent. Sometimes, too, she had access to a typewriter, but

5 The International Criminal Police Organization, commonly known as INTERPOL, is an international organisation that facilitates worldwide police cooperation and crime control. BND (Bundesnachrichtendienst) is Germany's foreign intelligence service. BKA (Bundeskriminalamt) is the federal criminal police agency, similar to the US FBI.

her typed letters nearly always included handwritten postscripts that were at least as long as the original message.

11.8.90

Hello Tim -

here comes the Wiedehopf!

I just found him in a book from the library about birds, and at the same time I got another book with old Arabic fairy tales, and there he was again.

Now listen. In the first book they say he comes from Eurasia and Africa, and lives near meadows and pastures in hollow trees. When he gets excited he erects the feathers on his head like a fan.

In springtime you can hear him calling: hoop hoop hoop.

Now we know why his English name is hoopoe.

And in the second book I found his Arabic name: hoodhood.

He must be something similar to the raven in our tales, a clever and wise bird giving advice to the people.

In the legend of the queen of ~~Sabbe~~ Saba the hoopoe travels with Salomon to Yemen. When Salomon rests in the noon he takes some free time and leaves the camp, because he is nosy to see more of the country. Soon he meets a Yemeni hoopoe telling him about the beauty of his country and its queen. In the meantime Salomon awakes and gets mad, because the hoopoe is missing and he is the only one who is able to find water however hidden it might be.

They all want to drink, but still no hoopoe. (He flew to the fortress of the queen and looked through her bathroom window.) Salomon calls him an outlaw, a villain, a tramp and swears to punish him. Finally he sends the vulture to bring him back. They return, and the hoopoe quickly stops Salomon's rage telling him all the news about the queen. Salomon is reconciled - the hoopoe has also found the water - and busy now thinking about the queen.

And who helps him to solve her riddles and guess her secrets? Sure the hoopoe.

So he is a very famous bird, and we knew nothing about him.

I've painted him from a photo in the book - this is our Wiedehopf.

And love

Biggille

A picture enclosed

This letter - about the *Wiedehopf*, the hoopoe bird - is as much a “Brigitte” letter as the others detailing the state of the hunger strikers. She mentions a painting she made from a photo, which unfortunately never made it to my cell. I imagine it in a government file somewhere in Washington or Berlin. Or at the Brookings Institute-- an academic's terrorism trophy.

Brigitte's letters never proclaimed her weight as a political figure in Germany, or the force of her personal history as a revolutionary. Perhaps there is no one who inspired more fear in the hearts of the ruling class in Germany, but hers was a gentle presence in my cell. I knew her writing like no other. I read her words, but also read her mark - the weight of her pen on the onion skin Luftpost paper, the subtle fragrance of the ink from her fountain pen, the spacing of the letters, the organization of lines. Her mark was unmistakable; I knew it completely and had completely identified those signs as her *voice*. I could sense my own letter and its enclosures in front of her as she studied and responded to each paragraph, each photograph, each drawing. With the length of each letter, crafted in minute characters so as to save the cost of airmail stamps, with the determinedly chosen words so as to give nothing up, I could sense the time and labor invested in its writing. I had come to possess an equivalent knowledge of what it required that was based on knowing the specific conditions of how such a letter would be made inside a high security prison cell.

A matter of honor, of reciprocity

A letter gets thrust through the iron grill. When, upon opening it you see 6, 7 or more pages, you sense the time, the mark of commitment to the connection that is elaborated before you. It is sometimes overwhelming to behold as it warrants a response in kind, an equivalent measure of time invested. There is a debt to be paid, your part of a social contract to be fulfilled. You cannot cheat. As you read, as you write, you imagine the person who has written to you in her cell. You can feel the cold of the concrete through your legs as you will sit on your own cell floor to write. You feel the pen cramping your hand. You know the sound of the guards' boots as they make their rounds at night while you struggle to write under the weak light from the tier. You cannot cheat another prisoner who has paid so dearly for this gift you now hold in your hands.

You must honor the letter's journey as well - each envelope inscribed with a return address of the prison (Münchner Str. 33, 889 Aichach, FRG) posted with airmail stamps, multiple postmarks, read, copied, likely laughed at, sneered at and stamped by prison bureaucrats, sullied by the cheap cologne of prison guards as they finally handed them through the bars. My letters were strip-searched and cavity-inspected before they reached my cell. How much humiliation can a simple letter endure? How much subjugation was this process meant to convey? And yet, at the end of the journey there is joy - just as when you get a glimpse of a dear friend waiting for you in the visiting room. You honor the journey.

In a parallel and malevolent universe of think tanks and the security apparatus, copies of this correspondence were being analyzed and catalogued as evidence of our pathological refusal to accept capitalism as the ultimate expression of our species. Understanding this as we did at the

time only added to the power of what we did. We were conscious - at least in part - of the way in which history was flowing around us.

¡Hay un compañero aquí!
(for Brigitte Mohnhaupt)

i went out to the yard this morning
determined to find something beautiful
to give to you -
a feather, an unusual stone or seed,
maybe a blossom from one of the heroic weeds
that, like you, doesn't accept the terms
of its confinement.
surely nature would offer up something
even in that desolate place.
and it did:
some wing-feathers from one of the kites
nesting in the gun-ports,
and five tiny pieces of quartzite.

but the most beautiful discovery
i made was a poem of initials scratched in the asphalt

FMLN FPL

!¡hay un compañero aquí!⁶

Letters create their own time and space

Part of the power of handwritten letters is that you can return to them - even thirty years later. Those manifestations of a friend or loved one's time spent with and *for* you invites your return. Love letters are a special category, but in a way each is a love letter. I would return to particular letters over and over again, reading them differently each time, wondering if somehow, by magic, new words had manifested on the paper since my last reading. More often than not, I would miss things the first time through - important things -- perhaps driven by haste to see if there was some devastating news about a comrade (it was never the opposite). Perhaps I simply longed for a glimpse of some human touch at the letter's end.

Letters required days of rereading up until the moment was right to sit down and craft a response. The need to formulate a well-honed response is always the most detailed and definitive function of reading. I would enjoin the conversation with my sender line by line, weaving our thoughts together across time and space. My cursive and form of letter was

⁶From Timothy Blunk, *The Risks Worth Taking*, 1997. (FMLN/FPL are the acronyms for the Salvadoran revolutionary army and one of its constituent militias: Farabundo Marti Forces for National Liberation/Popular Front for Liberation.)

propelled by the shape of hers; the marks from her hand became my own as they swirled and dashed across the pages, pulling my hand with them.

Different from any digital form of communication, the handwritten letter creates its own temporality. By re-reading, you step outside of simple chronological, unidirectional time and space. The date of a handwritten letter is not a data point, but a necessary breath taken in an ongoing conversation, a chapter heading in a book that is being continuously written and revised collaboratively between two correspondents. The handwritten date is for both the writer and the recipient, acknowledging a time-space where the receipt and reading of the letter is already conceived and implied: "July 7, 2020. I am here with you now. I am writing, and you are reading." Perhaps it is not different from our distant ancestors' cave paintings realized over the course of thousands of years of carving, painting and repainting; to the present day viewer they say, "I am here with you now. Together we define this space between us." The realized place, date and time of a letter's receipt is unimportant. Time has yet to be invented as a cognitive construct. It is the creation of the letter that assumes and inhabits that future reading. The letter has its own built-in calculus that includes the space-time of its reading. An unread letter is a tragedy understood in every culture. What might have happened had it been read?

Literacy: Owning your words

I became even more aware of the power of letters when I met young men who could not write them. At USP Lewisburg, a group of us formed a peer literacy group to help those around us learn to read and write. We learned basic literacy pedagogy and worked individually with other prisoners who were functionally illiterate. Think of the consequences for the incarcerated: you cannot read your legal papers or communications, you cannot read the rules and regulations or access any of the ways you might seek redress of grievances or secure an essential service like medical attention. You cannot write to your parents, your wife, your children. It is another circle of hell within the hell to which you've already been sentenced.

Our group used various texts prepared by international literacy organizations, but we quickly figured out that the greatest motivation for our students lay in their desire to write letters. This became our curriculum. I asked my students to dictate to me what they wanted to say in their letter. I wrote it down word for word exactly as it had been told to me. Then I gave the paper to them to copy the letter in their own handwriting. I can still picture the determination of what most of us would consider an otherwise imposing, hardened convict as he gripped that pen, tongue poised in concentration, and painstakingly formed his letters. Once transcribed, they would read it aloud. Simple. In a wonderful, almost magical act they took ownership of their words - the spoken, the read, and the written. They made their own unique marks. The letters went out in the mail. Responses came back quickly. We read them together and wrote back. They rejoined the world. I don't think I have done many things in my life of more consequence.

The art of the letter: making my mark



USP Lewisburg, 1995. (Note: photograph at the top of the easel taken when RAF prisoner Imgard Möller was released after 22 years in prison. Mumia Abu Jamal's photograph is part of the collage below..)

I became an artist in prison. I was led to that vocation through correspondence.

I wanted to make gifts. I needed to find some tangible way to thank people on the outside for sending me money for commissary - the essentials we take for granted, but most of all for stamps (all those little upside-down American flags.)

I began when I was in solitary confinement by making small cards that I drew on or collaged to include with my letters. These were the gifts I could make in return for the abundant kindness that flew through my cell's bars each day. I made countless such cards, painstakingly tearing down large pieces of Canson paper to be able to create multiple editions. These were inflicted on most everyone who wrote to me. I loved the crafting of them and anticipating the pleasure they would bring to people who were keeping me whole. The drawings and cartoons began to make their way onto the pages of the letters themselves. I expanded the markings I made from the text of my writing to now include playful characters of my invention who still crop up in my letters today.

After being transferred to open population at USP Lewisburg, I was able to have an easel and work space in the basement Arts and Crafts area. I experimented with collage and moved on to oil painting, making pieces that were always intended as gifts. My art enabled me to inhabit a larger space on the street as my works -- however crude they might have been-- began to find places on walls around the US and in Europe.

In 1995 with me at Lewisburg were Puerto Rican political prisoners/POWs Alberto Rodriguez, Ricardo Jimenez and Edwin Cortes, as well as Jihad Abdul Munit, a former Black Panther and member of the Black Liberation Army. At that time, former Black Panther and MOVE supporter

Mumia Abu Jamal was facing imminent execution in Pennsylvania for the shooting of a Philadelphia police officer. I thought that an international response was needed for us as prisoners to have an impact in stopping this. It occurred to me that many of us had discovered art or crafts work in prison, and that we might use an exhibition as a means of amplifying our voices. We set to writing, and with the help of our comrades in prisons around the US and many good folks on the street, we received contributions of art and writing from political prisoners in seventeen countries around the world. Political prisoners from the IRA, from the Brigade Rosse (Red Brigades,) the RAF, the RZ (Germany,) Action Directe (France,) GRAPO and ETA (Spain and the Basque region,) Turkey and South Africa joined us in this handmade declaration of love and solidarity. *Art Against Death: Political Prisoners Unite Against the Death Penalty* traveled to cities around the US and then toured Europe.

NEW JERSEY CRIME LINE - NJ-SPEAKOUT PUBLICATION

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Art Against Death: Art & Writings Against the Death Penalty

In conjunction with Nuyorican Poets Cafe

10/6 thru 11/2, 1995

Friday, 10/6, 6-9pm puffin room - ART OPENING

Art Against Death: The Art and Writing of Political Prisoners with "freeworld" ... Speakers: Leonard Weinglass, Mary Taylor (poli-pris activist), Poets: Hon. Bruce Wright, CVGSHeba, Bob Holman Artists Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Howardena Pindell, Marina Gutierrez, Mel Edwards, Jerry Kearns, Kiki Smith, Lloyd Oxendine, Aekan Huang, Juan Sanchez, Kamran, Ashtary, Irving Epstein, Juane Quick-To-See-Smith

Thurs, 10/12, 8:30-10:30pm, Puffin Room - POLITICAL PRISONERS IN US. Panelists CVGSheba (Black Panther newspaper cmte, former prisoner of war), Alan Berkman (MD, former poli pris), Herman & Betty Liveright coordinator of THIS JUST IN ..., Poli Pris/Pris of War Bulletin, Richie Perez, x-Young Lord, Natl. Coord, Natl Cong for Puerto Rican Rights

Sunday, 10/15. 3-6pm, Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Art Opening
Art Against Death: The Art and Writing of Political Prisoners with "freeworld" ... Speakers: Ramona Africa, Mary Taylor; Music by Joseph Jarman; Poets: Hettie Jones, Fielding Sawson, CVGSheba, Sandra Maria Estevez (Visual Arts funded in memory of Alicia Wilkes)

A web notice from the Institute for Global Communications, a San Francisco area-based information sharing hub for progressive causes.,

This was to be my first experience as a curator, although I didn't know what that was at the time. It is my profession today. It began, as have so many crucial things in my life, with the act of writing letters.



Tim Blunk, USP Marion, 1987.

Letters lost, letters found

Many of my letters scattered to the winds as a result of prison policies and my various transfers. Others perished in a flood in my brother's basement in his house along Bound Brook in New Jersey.

But some are still alive. Some now sit in a box before me as I write, rescued from my parents' attic before the house was sold. So powerful is their aura that I have avoided opening this box for twenty-three years. I have feared them. Letters can connect you to good and ill. The yellowed, dusty, neatly folded contents of this box had the power to return me to prison. Since I walked out into the cold March air on Good Friday in 1997 as a free man, I was gripped by

nightmares five or more nights a week. I implicitly understood how I would be transported back to the space and time of my captivity. I struggle now with making this happen on my own terms.

The cardboard box holds letters from 1981 through 1997 covering two different periods of incarceration. Some of the perfumes are still clinging to the paper. Some of the inks may have faded; the papers have degraded, glues on the envelopes have been eaten away by insects or dried up. But the human marks are there, holding impressions of the authors' hands, the subliminally perceptible oils of their skin (stuff of forensics) the products - all - of a human being fully engaged in the visual-motor, hand-eye system of engaging, reaching out and creating a voice of markings on paper. I have voices in my head that I develop over time for each of my correspondents - even those who I have never met. These voices are all the more recognizable through their physical marks.

With a handwritten letter, its very degradation of these letters is part of the conversation. It is anachronic time. The fading, the deterioration of the perfumes, the drying, insect damage, are a part of the life cycle of the object. It takes us to that moment when the letter was first opened and places us in the ephemeral real time of seasons, or weather, of travel, of new relationships, new homes, of forgetting who we are and who we once were. The letter object is replete with the aura of the original, in Walter Benjamin's words. There is no copy, no paste, no replacement. It has one life and one true life, one true connection memorialized by time processes of degradation. The letter takes us to the person we once were and at the same time reminds us of our journey from that person to who we are becoming as we reread, as a tropical rain will rejoin the sea from which it arose.

Thrust into the digital

An email, by contrast, leaves behind a mere timestamp. As I stare somewhat numbly at my box of real letters, it strikes me how much has changed, and what human communication has lost.

As I left prison in 1997, the personal computer was just making its way into most middle class households with telephone modems, and AOL. I arrived at my parents home and to the culture shock of email. Like the rest of my life in those first few months, it was novel and something that I needed to learn. CDs had replaced cassette tapes and vinyl, debit cards replaced cash, and email was replacing handwritten correspondence.

As I now had the entire palette of human relationships before me, I was no longer dependent on correspondence for my sustenance. I was prevented from writing to prisoners (now including international prisoners) under the terms of my parole. Except for an occasional notecard, I no longer had use for letters. I have written very few in the last twenty years - I could count them all on one hand. And now, like the rest of us, my inbox is stuffed each day with more information than I can possibly process.

Yet quantity and the instantaneous nature of email does not compensate for the loss of what is intimate and personal about handwritten letters. In the first instance, the email address is not a real address - not in any sense of an address that can be found on a street, in an apartment building, off a dirt road, by a stream, on a map - connected to any known or knowable frame of reference that would make sense to a living human being. The email address may correspond to a person, carrying a smartphone, tablet or laptop. But it is not a place with a fixed geographical location.

This changes the act of writing itself. The conversation is with a more limited, dislocated (or better, *un*-located) person who is accessing a remote server. We don't think about typing coded text to relay to a server farm owned by Google. At best, we conjure up an idealized version of the person (or company, institution, or organization) that most often has no context that we can imagine.

Thirty-eight years later. Time travel by post.

Contrast this to my letter-writing to my friend, Jim, with whom I had a 38-year correspondence. I pictured him where I knew he would be reading: seated at his yellowed second-hand formica kitchen table on South East Street in Amherst, set in the farmland at the base of the Hampshire range. Across the room is the blue and white Delft ceramic coffee grinder which he has just used to make his afternoon espresso. Sally's freshly baked fougasse is on a plate next to my letter - the one I was then writing. The windows are open, and the faint aromas of sage, lavender, and geranium tumble into the room, with each flutter of the curtains. Through the doorway is Jim's study where his manual typewriter sits on his desk, already loaded with paper and carbon paper. Collected in a file cabinet next to the desk is a folder with copies of all the letters we have exchanged over fifteen years. My letter would be addressed to *that* man in *that* place where we continued our conversation, sidestepping time and place.

In 1976, I was a college student and had just transferred to Hampshire College, an experimental school in Massachusetts where students designed their own education based on pursuing deep learning in specific subjects. In my first week I met Jim Koplin, a professor of cognitive psychology in the School of Social Sciences. He taught psychology, but was much more interested in teaching subjects related to New China. Jim was to become my advisor, my mentor, and most powerful friend until his death in 2012. Very soon after we became acquainted, I was greeted by what would become almost daily letters in my student mailbox, composed on a manual Smith Corona typewriter in his home or the IBM Selectric in his office. (The transition to an electric was a painful one for him; Jim was raised as a farmer. He was a self-professed Luddite who taught me the importance of grinding coffee with a hand grinder. I was not around when he retired to Minneapolis and moved on to a laptop, so I don't know how in the world he coped with that.)

Jim kept carbon copies of every letter he sent me, and saved the few notes I would write in response. All of them. I had never known anyone with such an attention to correspondence, and

have not encountered anyone since (until sharing my brother's research into the life of the poet James Wright). Jim wrote me letters as follow-ups to our meetings and independent study sessions, filled with musings, recommendations for books or articles I should read, quotes from political theorists or poets, or patient inquiries into my ever-changing interests and direction. His abundant caring as a teacher and friend was carved in the recycled paper he used (often on the backs of political flyers) by the strokes of his Selectric. Each was signed in pen with his so familiar, "Jim." Visits to my campus mailbox often meant finding several of these missives which often had me wondering if all of his students were the recipients of this avalanche of notes and letters. They were. We became aware of each other through Jim's expansive anecdotes, and we called ourselves "The Koplinettes," musing on our good fortune to have found someone so devoted to his students.

As I became more involved in political causes - ones more radical than Jim could support - I became estranged from him. But his letters never stopped. He never hesitated to say what he thought about what I was doing and where I was headed, but his support for me was like that of a parent - unconditional. His letters were proof. It was a constant in my life that I began to take for granted, or sometimes even resented. He just had to let me know that he was there, and that I needed to *think* about things.

Jim was the first person to write to me when I began serving my first sentence at Rikers Island following a demonstration against South Africa. During my nine months at Rikers, Jim's letters came to me nearly every day at mail call, just as they had arrived in my campus mailbox at Hampshire.

While in prison, one recurring and ironic dream - I could scarcely call it a nightmare - had me wandering the Hampshire campus with a rifle on my shoulder, searching for my campus mailbox which I visualized as stuffed to the point of overflowing with letters that I had neglected while underground. I awoke completely bemused that my anxiety dreams involved scenarios that were so utterly harmless compared to my waking reality.

In recent years, Jim passed away after a bout of pneumonia. Several months following his death, I received a box in the mail from Soxe Sperry, one of my fellow Koplinettes who had remained in touch with and close to Jim during all the years post-Hampshire. Soxe's cover letter said that he had found the enclosed files in Jim's office. The files included my Hampshire thesis papers in neuroscience and feminist theory and a complete copy of all of our correspondence - carbon copies of each letter sent to me and every letter, card, leaflet and drawing I had sent him during my incarceration.

I did not open the files. I brought the entire box to my attic where it remained with my other "approach avoidance" files: documents from my trial, photo albums of prison visits, and other accumulated letters sent home in bundles to my parents over the nearly fifteen years I had been in prison or underground. These boxes contained the interior life of the radical I had become, the damage that was done over time, and my deep struggle to find a new path. This was not an exhumation I wished to attend.

For the few who still possess them, collections of handwritten letters are usually not our own words. They are typically letters addressed to us but written by others, letters we've inherited addressed to parents or grandparents. How unusual in the days of handwritten or hand-typed letters is it to end up with one's own words in your hands.

Right now, I'm looking at a letter written soon after I began serving my sentence for a demonstration against apartheid South Africa. Police were injured after being splashed with the organic acid used to make chemical malodorants. The action was designed to make the plane carrying the South African rugby team unflyable. There was no intention to hurt the cops, but several were burned as they attacked us. In the aftermath, I was systematically beaten and by any meaningful definition, tortured, for nearly eight hours by the NYPD and FBI Joint Terrorist Task Force. My body carries the scars.

In kind, my letters from those years carry the voice of the young radical who was then propelled on the path for revolutionary action, and a measure of revenge. This particular letter to Jim sounds like a leaflet from that era. How very strange to see one's own writing in what felt like a foreign voice, as if I had been transcribing someone else's words. It is familiar, yet distantly so, like visiting one's childhood home after many years away and finding everything to be smaller, confined, and duller than you remember. Like a once beloved jacket from your closet that you once would never take off, but that now no longer fits right and is decades out of fashion. The invariants that remain across change tell the subtle story of the passage of the years.

Nov 8, 1982
Rikers Island

Dear Jim,

This is just a short note to let you know what's up. No major news except that after two great meetings with my codefendants & counsel we are in the midst of an offensive around our sentence appeal. It took months to get the transcripts of the sentencing so we have only just recently filed the papers. The decision may not happen for another 4 months so the lawyers have also filed for bail pending the decision. Given the outrageousness of the sentencing (even worse on paper than I remembered) and the strength of our papers, the lawyers are optimistic - and they are not people prone to optimism. We also now have 100 letters a day arriving at the Appellate Division demanding that we get a favorable decision ASAP and bail until that time. Politically, it comes at a good time - Chairman Mate Pokela of the PAC is now in NYC for a speech before the UN. & will also be speaking in Harlem. The Azanian struggle, therefore is getting a wider ear in the NY area. My codefs. & I just finished writing up some questions for an interview with him about the Azanian liberation movement. We see the campaign for our release as very much tied to building solidarity. Otherwise it becomes very parasitic & opportunist. We are still asserting the illegitimacy of our incarceration as being in violation of international law. The appeal is a good platform for that. It is also our assessment that the state understands that it lost one in our case. This is definitely our view of it! They couldn't get the big criminal convictions they wanted, we turned the press around to a large degree and jail has only served to strengthen our resolve & commitment. Margot just got released last week after finishing her sentence - a victory we really celebrate. At this point the state may not want to have a big campaign around this appeal blow up in their faces. The bail would give them an "out" and would give us the momentum. Having served the majority of our sentences (!) they might be hard-pressed to argue for our re-incarceration.

Things are at a lull in the Brinkes case. Pretrial hearings are over with Solomon & Kathy still being the only ones participating. The "trial" gets under way fairly soon. Due to the failure of the Grand Jury so far, the state has subpoenaed 3 more people, one of whom is already in jail. The state has also issued another superseding indictment that includes another comrade formerly

of May 19th Susan Rosenberg. She is someone who played a big role in organizing me to anti-imperialism. Now they are looking for her and a number of other people on conspiracy charges around a series of armored car hold-ups in the Bronx, 2 years ago. These indictments come out of the RICO grand jury. I think they will have a hard time finding Susan. God help them if they do.

My co-defendant Eve, just had a good day in court arguing what is called a "Grumbles" motion - or forcing the state to give reasons why after 10 months she should still be incarcerated. She really put the state on trial - they have everything they subpoenaed her for - hair and handwriting samples, fingerprints, - from previous arrests and breaking into her apartment after Oct. 20 last year. It's clear she won't talk now or ever. The US Attorney had no response! The decision will be made within the next few weeks.

For me, life continues at the same pace. I'm happy to say that I'm actually busy with the Chaplains office job - the teaching, and my other political study. I've also begun to discover some latent artistic ability in some drawing I've been doing (see enclosed). I'm also including a copy of a poem about Beirut I just finished. Had you heard about the bombings in NY against Bankers Trust (claimed by the FALN) and against the JDL offices (unclaimed)? Once again the armed clandestine forces have demonstrated in practice what true solidarity means! Long live the FALN!

I enjoyed your newspaper debut! Would love to see more. Actually I'd like to see some breakdown of exactly whom from which national groups are using the highest percentage of land. I know in the South Black farmers are being foreclosed on and hoodwinked through various tax + inheritance law conspiracies. The same is no doubt true for Mexicanos and American Indians. Land is key to political power (a consistent teaching of Malcolm X)

Will close for now. Take good care my friend.
Free the land, Free the people!

Tim

Nov. 11, '82
Rikers Island

Dear Toni,

This is sort of a belated P.S. I was waiting to get some of the enclosed stuff copied at the Evening High School where I work and the damn thing broke down for 2 days. In the meantime there has been a new development in our collective situation here in NYC. The state is trying to ban May 19th. Yesterday I was greeted in the AM. by one of my lawyers who told of the latest arrest: Sylvia Baraldini - one of my closest and dearest friends and a public spokesperson for M19. She has been busted on frame-up charges from the RICO grand jury for conspiracy to commit Bank robbery, etc. etc. She's in MCC with a \$300,000 bail though she's still tough as nails. The grand jury has been a total failure, so they are relying on fabricated indictments to jam us up. Parts of this one are really fiction because while they claim she was driving a getaway car she was meeting with African leaders in Tanzania.

So comrades on the outside are dealing - (making brownies for street sale to raise the bail!) There was a militant demonstration outside MCC at 10:30 to reaffirm our support for SB and the armed clandestine movement. I can only say that I wish I could be on the street to contribute more fully. Hence I'm trying to prepare myself physically and politically with even greater discipline to return to the streets.

The trial(s) around the BLA, federal + state are going to be something else. Similar to the PAC Bethal 18 trials in Azania/South Africa it will certainly show the people that the BLA has been far more active than anyone ever imagined. The public movement has its work cut out for it. One thing I think we've learned from SB's bust is that, public or clandestine, revolution in the US is illegal, and we must conduct ourselves on that basis. As comrade George Jackson put it "Settle your quarrels, come together, understand the reality of our situation, understand that fascism is already here, that people are already dying who could be saved, that generations more will die or live poor ~~and~~ butchered half-lives if you fail to act. Do what must be done, discover your humanity ~~and~~ and your love in revolution. Pass on the torch. Join us, give up your life for the people."

Nov 11, 82
Rita's Island

I don't think that there are any words that for me, define my aspirations and drive more eloquently. Better to die fighting for a better world than to 'live' in compromise with fascism. It's a decision for all of us to make for ourselves.

Thankfully I can finally get this off —

Towards our total dedication to the death of imperialism

Much love,
Tim

BEIRUT: SUMMER 1982

Dedicated to the Palestinian and Lebanese people and the Freedom
Fighters of the PFLN

Beirut!

I've longed to write for you a poem
An armed exultation for those who have written a legend of courage
across the consciousness of a World's people.
How many times have I walked through your streets and passed through
your checkpoints in the newspapers? From the Airport to the Hippodrome
to the American University Hospital to the Museum Crossing on the
Green Line where your own poet of the Revolution had declared on the wall
one truth of our lifetime:
IF THEY ARE STRONGER THAN AMERICA, THEN WE ARE NOT WEAKER THAN VIETNAM!!
I know that I could find my way to your heart, Beirut, with only the names
Sabra Shatila Burj al Brajneh Fakhanieh on my lips --
Here the People now look for lost flowers amidst the rubble
while 'Israel' searches for its 'lost soul' somewhere on the pages
of the New York Times (a search I heard was recently concluded in the
Situation Room of the Pentagon)

Beirut, the stench of your death
courses through the streets of Sabra and Shatila
and rises upon Mediterranean winds, swirling like a desert storm
encircling the Zionist murderers like a tomb.
Its beckoning reaches to the Bekaa Valley, to the West Bank, across
the Red Sea to Yemen
filling the lungs of the guerrilla, Death becoming its opposite
in the Liberation Army.
There are no longer any dead
only stars rising up from the phosphorus-encrusted ruins
to blaze along the silent path of the guerrilla
to Jerusalem.

Beirut!

I've longed to write for you a poem
a sonnet of People's War that I might teach my children
a love poem in words of liberation unknown until now and tomorrow
that rhyme with the dissonant clatter of automatic weapons
I will write an epic, dedicated to the future of our generations
in couplets metered with guerrilla precision
that resound and explode in the imperialists' most sacred temples
erected to the dollar and human misery.

2.

Our poetry, rehearsed in clandestinity
will be performed in readings to the People and their children
that they may never grow like parasites nourished on warfare
and devastated lives
but instead they might breath deeply the courage you have
set loose on the wind.

They will criticize and create for themselves
more brilliantly,

improving with each line that is written

joining the eternal poets of the People:

Guevara	Lumumba	Sandino	Nehanda	Khaled	Jackson	Giap
Truth	Pouliyan	Shabazz	Biko	Albizu Campos	Zapata	
Tubman	Sundiata					

in songs of Chimurenga!

We will come to know your heart, Beirut

Found in the melodic movement of the markets

in the fields of desert wheat baptized by the sweat of Arab women

in the citrus groves bathed in breezes from River Jordan

and in the sweet smell of ~~newborn babies~~

children, all, of the Land

Palestina!

Note: On Monday, Sept. 20, 1982, The Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN) bombed the Bankers Trust building in Manhattan in support of the heroic resistance of the Palestinian people and in protest against the massacre of Palestinians by Zionists and imperialist-backed Phalangist terrorists.

It is poignant to read this now, particularly quoting George Jackson's own prison letters from Soledad, in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement that has brought thousands of young white people into the streets in solidarity. In 1981, you could have fit into one single room all of us white folks who were demonstrating against the police and pointing to white supremacy as the fundamental issue that needed to be addressed in the US. I feel both ashamed for the doctrinaire tone of my letter, and fiercely proud and redeemed for having fought for something true at a time when very few of us would.

The poem, "Beirut: Summer, 1982" was written appropriately on the typewriter in the chaplain's office at Rikers Island. It would later be used as evidence to withhold bail when I was arrested again in 1984. The US Attorney thereby offered up a poem as the proof of my determination to wage war against the United States. Perhaps there was some truth to that, and I was signalling my intentions - a stupid thing to do on many levels, bad poetry aside.

We often hear things like, "I wish I could go back and talk to my younger self." It is a trope, a standard Hollywood plot device. Through the gift of Jim's saved letters I am having that chance. This anachronic dialogue exists only through an object record with a multiplicity of signs (derived from several sense modalities) and referents that locate me in parallel spaces. My 63 year-old script has become wilder, more hurried and less precise in the absence of daily practice. My voice is far less strident, and perhaps more weary, more focused on shades of grey. I have a more secure foothold in humor, fatherhood, and life experience. But the 24 year-old aspiring revolutionary's soul still unwinds itself across the page. The tines of a tuning fork resonate against the piano's soundboard.

How many of our texts or emails will be around to examine in forty years? Had my correspondence with Jim been confined to email, I would have nothing of him now, nothing us together, no clue as to who I was then. Forget about my letter's marginalia, the words crossed out, the curved arc of my left hand pushing the script across the unruled page, the form of my cursive, the way I always hold my pen in a death grip and press into the paper on both sides, turning notebook paper into a kind of inked parchment. Without paper letters, what traces of us will exist to remind us of our journey? Most of us are one electromagnetic pulse away from oblivion. Or is the luxury of the digital mode the ability to reinvent ourselves each day without the burden of a verifiable past? Some would argue that it is the epitome of freedom to not be tied to a place or the material world of objects and evidenced communication. But this notion of freedom occurs to me as the freedom I would associate with floating forever in a space capsule. Or a sensory deprivation cell.

Email is the act of forgetting.

Emailing is like being put on an information treadmill: we are trained to keep running through the currency of data packets. We spin our way through an impoverished, bloodless language in exchange for the illusion of contemporaneity, and for the commercial possibility of being

connected to what we might be enticed to order from Amazon within the next few moments. Increasingly in our business or academic lives, it feels like emailing is *what we do*.

The email is data. It is nothing more than endless strings of 1s and 0s. Code is its species being. It has no existence as an object. It has no function as a gift or talisman. It cannot ward off evil (and some may argue that it is a stand-in for evil itself.) Within the text or the header, but surely within the metadata, the email's timestamp and the IP address of its origin is its soul, its identity, its ultimate data point that fixes its location as evidence for merchandising, recruitment, advertising, monetizing, arbitration, surveillance, future prosecution. It is electronic forensic evidence, cast into who-knows-where. Even if deleted by the putative owners, it is imminently searchable. It's all right there, but utterly forgettable except to the state. Forests of servers are manufactured each day and brought online to store emails - the vast majority of which, like our now ubiquitous cellphone photographs, will never be seen or read again by their creators or intended recipients. But it will be *mined*. Storing it is an industry based in monetizing the forgettable, the forgotten, and the leverage-able.

When an email "arrives," from its circuitous route through fiber optic cables and server farms, it takes form on the screen as the world might appear to the residents of Plato's cave. It is not an object in any sense that we can understand, but a pure relation - coded, symbolic, approaching the mystical where most of us are concerned. Its identity, its one advantage, lies in instantaneity. While my letter to Jim provides the anachronic sense of dialogue outside of time, the email confers the illusion of "I am here with you now in present time." Often our emails take on that "real time" conversational mode, like a text message. But there is no true address, no place. We could be seated at adjoining tables at a coffee shop or on different continents. You could be anywhere. Or nowhere. Absent of human marks from which to conjure a real person, you could be you, or an impersonator.

The trade-off for instantaneity is an obliteration of trace, geographic address, and a sense of human-referenced scale of time and velocity of travel through space. There is no journey implied in any way that comports with our experience on the planet, of walking, running, riding a bicycle or horse, sailing on a ship or flying in an aircraft. No roads were traveled. No oceans were crossed. The how of its arrival is as mysterious as the how of its creation. Sidestepping a human scaled time frame also blurs the line between author and reader. There is little that can actually fix or demonstrate the agency of the writer. Perhaps this is why emails are so utterly forgettable. Different from objects, even ones as ephemeral as photographic prints, they are closer to the stuff of memory. In business and the legal profession, emails are customarily written and sent to oneself to "memorialize" an important conversation - to create a hardcopy of a memory, the elusive "engram" that neurobiologists have been searching for since they left behind the theory of the homunculus. Printing it out creates an object, but it is more akin to the copy, a facsimile of a memory, a journal entry about a thought you had in the middle of the night, than a chapter in an ongoing correspondence. To email someone, is to cede your memory to Google. The *you* in you has already forgotten, as if that was the intention all along. Perhaps it is not coincidental that our society is so susceptible to manipulation. We are increasingly detached from any objective, material connection to each other.

Handwritten letters have an objective existence; they belong to the correspondents and to them only with the recipient holding the primary rights of ownership. You are not the owner of your email. Not on any level. You do not own or possess an email in the way that you own a letter. The access to the means of producing is owned and controlled by corporations, whether they be Microsoft, Google or your employer, or other word processing or internet service providers. How you write and its coding particulars is determined by them; the means of transmission, the terms of storage, the terms of access, and the means for receiving a response are theirs and not yours. Similarly, in most countries, the terms and conditions for third party access, sharing, mining, or use in state investigations or prosecutions is outside of the writer's control. There is no real attempt to create the illusion of creating your own unique human mark on a page to be shared across time with another person. You are required instead to enter into a social/political contract by which your communication will be packaged as data under the terms and conditions to which you sign onto as a user of Google.

You cannot make art this way. I would argue that you *cannot authentically connect to others in this way*. The entire premise and practice of electronic mail is the antithesis of intimacy, of trust. The intimacy of sensory signs and traces is replaced by forensic metadata that is mostly only accessible by the corporation. More importantly, you cannot connect with a *singular* other person. Instead, you are signalling through a veil of digital mediators with multiple access points to other persons and entities all along the way, whether they read your actual words or not. These algorithms at Google and elsewhere are the prison guards inspecting all of our mail. Your data is their data. And this is what you've been reduced to: a data packet. With the click of a mouse, somewhere in the catacombs of the NSA, your entire data existence can be surveilled, suspended, or even erased.

Should you ever feel the urge to reread an email (admit it: you almost never do except in business for particular details) you will never feel your correspondent's mark beneath your fingertips. You will not smell their cologne. You will not thrill in the way they form their capital letters in cursive. There is nothing crossed out, no marginalia, no spontaneous cartoons. If a photograph is inserted or attached, it too has been digitized. There is simply no way to definitively detect the writer's authenticity as *one who is known specifically to you*. But to stay marginally sane, you must force yourself to forget the possibilities of all of the other readings your email will receive in its existence as data -- to ignore the fact that you have no more privacy than a high-security prisoner whose mail is being read by guards. You are corresponding with a hive.

Digitization blends together of all sorts of information (Google tries to help you sort it out into categories of relative interest - primary, social, promotions) but all of it looks much the same - the same fonts, the same type size whether it's an advertisement, a marketing proposal, a work termination notice, a subpoena, or declaration of abiding love. It is all the same - everyone's. It is read the same way, it feels the same. It can be erased, disappeared with equal ease. Each blends into the ocean of other emails like drops of water into the sea. They are utterly homogenous and barely distinguishable. The human trace has been cauterized, sterilized,

removed. Arial font, 11 point type. The ease of access does not in any way mitigate the impoverished nature of writing, reading and being read in email. To tie any particular email definitively to an individual human requires teams of forensic scientists armed with the means of analyzing data patterns and sequences. There must be the trace of you in there, somewhere. The data miners on a mission can find it and exploit it.

Writing from the other side of the wall

As such an avid letter-writer in prison, you might think that the practice would be permanently ingrained in my life when I rejoined the world. You would be wrong.

One of the most misunderstood parts of the prison experience is the release from prison. That's the happy ending: embrace your family and lawyers in the prison parking lot, scroll credits. But it is the end of one kind of trauma and the beginning of another. The same walls and razor wire that kept you inside prevent you from returning. Your mind slams the door shut, seeking to protect you from what you've just been through.

But it is indiscriminate. There are generous, kind, and funny men who helped sustain my life every day for years who -- to be honest-- I have barely thought of since I walked out of Lewisburg. I always imagined myself as the kind of person who would take care of my brothers inside after my release. Could I begin by writing to them? One would hope, but I was mired in a quicksand of survivor's guilt..

One of my closest friends was an exception. Misael (who we called "Flex") is one very funny dude with a mischievous wit and the soul and skill of an artist. He always had our tier in a comic uproar with never-ending practical jokes. He worked in the prison's dental lab where he managed to make himself an outrageous front grill of false teeth which he used in the creation of his alter ego, "Cousin Johnny." Cousin Johnny was a phantom crazy bad guy who wore his pants hiked up to his chest and his socks over his shoes. He would appear out of nowhere when a new guy arrived on our tier to create mischief and good-natured mayhem, led by that snarl of false teeth. Misael begged me to teach him some basic chords so that he could play keyboard on a few songs in my prison band, just so that Cousin Johnny would have a chance to appear on stage. I complied-- and he, of course, stole the show.

During the final weeks as I approached my release date, Misael and his cellmate acted as my bodyguards, ensuring that nothing and nobody sabotaged my path to the door. They set up chairs outside my cell and interrogated anyone who dared peek their head in to say hello.

On my final day in prison, Misael walked with me to Receiving and Discharge, all the way to that last door that would bring me to the final set of locks. I will never forget the moment he embraced me, then let me go, sinking to his knees, sobbing as the door closed behind me, knowing that that door might never open for him. That memory of him there haunts me to this day as if I had shot him there in that doorway myself to keep him from leaving and just walked away.

But I couldn't write to him. For my twelve years on parole, *I was forbidden to have any contact of any kind with anyone like Misael who was in prison or anyone who had been in prison*. It was a particular cruelty that I had never anticipated. On my side, I was rudderless, unable to talk with or share with anyone who had the slightest idea of what I had lived through. There is no support group for ex-convicts (I even asked my parole officer about starting one under their supervision); there is no VFW bar where former prisoners can hang out and swap cellblock stories. You are on your own. On the other hand, I was put in the position of having to choose between leaving my brothers behind or violating the terms of my parole and being returned to them to have the conversation in person in B-Block at USP Lewisburg.

However, I must be honest. I'm not sure how many letters I could have brought myself to write even if our correspondence had not been prohibited. For many years, I visited prison at least five nights a week in my nightmares; I didn't need any more triggers than I already had. My guilt, though, became overwhelming.

Guilt, in and of itself, becomes an obstacle all its own. I was to remain on parole for twelve years, supervised by a parole officer who never let me forget that I was just one bad day away from being sent back to prison. I was out of the habit and out of the mindset of writing to anyone, let alone my former comrades inside. I had accumulated underground reservoirs of guilt.

But Misael was always in touch in some way. His lovely mother would call from Florida, and we would talk on the phone in Spanish about his legal prospects. I felt it my duty to give her the best possible read on the situation. She deserved some hope, even if I didn't have anything real to offer. Now that it was legal to correspond, I exchanged a few letters with Misael, and then would lapse. Approach avoidance. He sent poems and ideas for conceptual art projects that he hoped I might help him realize in the New York art scene. Faced with my own limitations, my own deep failings, I would shut down. His letters would go unanswered. My guilt would pile up, making even the smallest gesture insurmountable. And then Misael finished his federal sentence and was transferred to the State of Florida to serve his consecutive life sentences there.

JPay and the data chain gang

In the Florida state system, they have ceased allowing actual correspondence by mail. One could imagine that email in its first iteration was designed specifically for prison correspondence. It is the perfect medium from the prison's point of view. That is not the case, perhaps, but the adoption of for-pay email platforms by prisons across the country is illustrative of the medium's contradictions.

To write to Misael in Florida, I would have to go through a corporate third party for-profit portal called JPay. It is an odious, shameless business model based on making money off of prisoners and their families - people on opposite sides of the prison wall, desperate for human contact.

The JPay portal is utterly sterile, offering the chance to add photos (extra cost) or cheesy e-card templates, and a choice of two font sizes. You can prepay your respondent's response costs by purchasing virtual "stamps." There is no way for me to turn the flag upside down on these emails. I overcome my approach avoidance, buy the "stamps" and forward him money so that he can write to me in return.

JPay has also created their own "JP4" tablet to be used by inmates to play games and download music MP3s -- at a markup 50% above what Apple charges for iTunes. In their greed to draw profit from every possible niche of the prison system, JPay created their own debit cards that are given to prisoners released on parole or probation. The credit card fees charged to these recently released prisoners whose savings derive from subminimum wage prison jobs paying \$.35 to \$1.05 an hour reach up to 40%.

In addition to diminishing the entire experience of correspondence, JPay offers the prisons the opportunity to mine data as they wish while seizing unregulated profits. JPay's model was so lucrative, it was acquired in 2015 by Securus Technologies, owned by Platinum Equity, a private company headed by billionaire Tom Gores. In 2019 they netted \$7.5 million (split with the City of New York) *in profits* off of charges for phone calls made by New York City inmates. Securus lobbies for the elimination of face-to-face visits between prisoners and families and friends. They have already monopolized for-pay video visitation through JPay's JP4 tablet, presaging the virtual reality of COVID-19 Zooming. Visit with your daughter in prison just as you would your daughter in college. It's all the same.

[Inbox \(0\)](#)

Compose

[Sent](#)

[Buy Stamps](#)

[Stamp Balance \(46\)](#)

[Transfer Stamps](#)

[Transaction History](#)

Compose

This email requires 1 stamp per page.
Each attachment requires 1 additional stamp.


**Please note, emails may be monitored. Carefully consider the contents of your email.*

Cancel

Send

[Attach ECard](#)

[Attach Image](#)

To  Inmate: MISAL IBARRA

Text Size   

Mail autosaved at 3:03 PM EST

My dear brother:

First of all, I have to know, how is your health? I've been very worried about you given the COVID crisis in the prisons. Were you affected? New Jersey was one of the country's first real epicenters - especially the town where our shop is located. Bodies were just being stacked up in the funeral home across from the hospital. No services. Just cremation, after a couple of family members took a quick look at the body. Creepy AF.

19551 Characters Remaining

☐ Include a pre-paid reply for the Inmate

Preview



Prison abuses are almost always accomplished in the name of “security,” and this is no different. You must acknowledge that to write to someone you love in prison, you have entered into an agreement to have your personal data entered into the law enforcement establishment's vast network of servers. There is always a bargain, a transaction to be made in order to have contact with someone inside prison. To visit, there is a price in dignity - the Xray, the pat search - and to write, you must trade data. The data itself is transactional and interchangeable. For the privilege of writing at all you sacrifice your individuality as well as your control over the now digitized marks/data packets you have made. This you have ceded to the prison, the security and investigative agencies, and the data miners who have purchased access through JPay.

There is always a way to monetize misery for the enterprising capitalist. Slavery also had its myriad spin-off businesses which were foundational to the economy of the United States. Capital abhors a vacuum, no matter how wretched or fetid that space might be. Securus/JPay is there to reap its benefits. Street language lacks proper words to describe this practice. In the joint, we would call this a “dope-fiend move” - a scam or scheme so craven, so diabolical, that you marvel in equal measures at its ingenuity and its utter disregard to the consequences for live human beings.

To write to my friend, Misael, I am required to enter into this dirty transaction to supply him a lifeline. I long to send him a real letter, not a facsimile. Misael is an artist who now has no means to sketch out ideas for me. If I want to include a handmade drawing or cartoon in a letter to him, I cannot.

I want to deny JPay and their ilk the profits they make off of this misery. I might argue that to deny a prisoner the ability to receive a handwritten letter would rise to the level of “cruel and unusual punishment” prohibited by the US Constitution. However, as the federal attorneys have argued before the Supreme Court in defense of the death penalty and torture, it may be cruel, but not *unusually* so. Everyone does it.

Return to the handmade

Artists, like prisoners, value the handmade and understand the crucial importance of making your mark. We share the drive to assert our personhood with our own hands, our own heard voices. Those of us who survive, who even learn how to thrive, have learned to step outside of time in the directly experienced presence of others. This is what makes us whole.

Prisoners and artists alike are subject to nostalgia and share a critical appraisal of modernity and its social consequences. After twenty-some years on the street, in the middle of the COVID pandemic, I am returning to the handmade. I am writing letters again, not emails, not out of nostalgia, and not just because I “have time,” but because I am creating the time to do so. I am stepping over the data stream. Artists cannot wade into this stream without getting wet. To make one’s mark on the surface of a flowing river has predictable results: the mark disappears with a swirl and flourish of water and moves away. You forget what it was your fingers have done. You write, you forget, the stream follows its course to the ocean.

I have ventured into my box of letters. My conversations with that younger version of myself and my re-reading of letters from Brigitte, Christa Eckes, from my family, from Jim Koplin, myriad friends from college, have helped me to grasp the essential humanness of making one’s mark, on paper, in the midst of an out-of-time conversation with past and future selves. I believe you should try it, or go back to it.

I have a good pen, paper. I will write to you now and send it off in the morning. Please understand why the stamp might be upside down.



Winter night, cold moon.

Tim Blunk, USP Marion, 1991

Moon of the bare branches

No one knew how cold

only this man
in this cell

now someone knows
how cold the moon can be.

The moon is a bowl tonight
full of tenderness for the old stars.

February 2002