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Love is in the Airwaves: Contesting Mass Incarceration with Prisoners' Radio

Eleanor R. Benson

Everyone has their favorite nighttime ritual. Mine usually involves a cup of tea with a podcast or a Spotify playlist, but tonight I listen to something completely different. As I plug in my earbuds and tune out the world around me for a few hours, thousands of folks a thousand miles south do the same. We all hear the same woman's soft southern drawl:

This message is going out for Jeremy. I'm just calling to check in with you. I'm doing good, I had a good week at work. I got a letter from you yesterday asking about those shoes that come out on Sunday...I'll tell you what they look like. They're white with a top piece and the shoelaces [are] black. I don't like them, but I'm sure you will. I'll go ahead and get them for you...I love you and I miss you and I'm counting down the days for you to come home...Know that you're always in my heart and on my mind.¹

In many ways, this message feels mundane and perhaps even familiar: an attentive mother looking out for her kid, anxiously awaiting the day that he will be home for a visit. She just wants to make her son happy—even if she does not approve of his fashion sense. From the warmth in her voice and the earnestness in her closing words, there is no questioning the love she feels for her child.

But beyond the surface, this is no typical mother-son relationship. Jeremy's message is one of dozens of shout-outs that

broadcast every Friday night during *The Prison Show*, a Houston-based community radio program made specifically for prisoners and their loved ones. As of 2012, the program reached one-sixth of the total incarcerated population in Texas, amounting to tens of thousands of people behind bars.²

Several states away, another community radio station devotes their Monday nights to prisoners across the coalfields. Broadcasting from Whitesburg, Kentucky, WMMT-FM 88.7's *Calls From Home* transmits loving messages to incarcerated people in over a dozen prisons, jails, and detention centers across Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia.³ *Calls From Home* and WMMT-FM's broader media initiative, *Restorative Radio*, revolutionize how loved ones interact in the destructive age of mass incarceration through video, radio, and media training tools.⁴ One particularly innovative project is *Restorative Radio: Audio Postcards*, which airs long-form radio pieces created by prisoners' families using professional audio equipment. These 10 to 45 minute pieces aim to "capture sounds, voices and music from

² Carrie Feibel, "'The Prison Show' Helps Texas Inmates Find Escape," NPR, 16 Jan. 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/01/16/144970513/the-prison-show-helps-texas-inmates-find-escape>.

³ Rose Hackman, "Calls From Home: The Radio Show That Connects Inmates and Their Loved Ones," *The Guardian*, 23 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/mar/23/calls-from-home-wmmt-kentucky-prison-inmates-family-friends>.

⁴ "About Restorative Radio," *Restorative Radio*, accessed April 2018, <http://www.restorativradio.org/about/>.

¹ "The Prison Show," 90.1 KPFT, accessed April 2018, <http://kpft.org/programming/newstalk/prison-show/>.

home” to invite incarcerated people back into the lives of their loved ones.⁵ These one-sided interactions are purely metaphysical and marked by the absence of the incarcerated person, but they nonetheless strengthen loving relationships which are too often devastated by prison.

From Southeast Texas to the heart of Appalachia, the preferred bedtime ritual for thousands of incarcerated men and women involves tuning into *The Prison Show* and *Calls From Home* using a Sony SRF-39FP, a personal analog radio ubiquitous in American prisons. The radio’s transparent body, meant to discourage prisoners from smuggling contraband, displays a single AA battery which boasts an impressive 40 listening hours. Even though newer digital models and MP3 players exist in some prison commissaries, the SRF-39FP costs significantly less than other audio devices (at under \$30) and runs the longest—awarding it the name “the iPod of prison.”⁶

Radio projects like *The Prison Show* and *Restorative Radio* have significant impacts that resonate well beyond the family networks of the incarcerated. For members of the broader community—particularly those of us without personal connections to the prison system—these shows grant the unique privilege of hearing public displays of fiercely unapologetic love for incarcerated people. Love is an intrinsic marker of humanity, so the deliberately public nature of these heartfelt

expressions allows prisoners and their advocates on the outside to actively challenge the dehumanization of prisoners. By bridging a diverse and distant listening base—prisoners and their loved ones, individuals who stumble across the shows while scrolling through the stations, and people from across the country who tune in through the online live streams—prisoner-oriented radio programs rooted in an ethic of love play an essential role in building community that traverses prison walls.

In this article, I explore the intersections of prison, radio, community, and love through an analysis of *The Prison Show* and *Restorative Radio*. I argue that prisoners and their loved ones appropriate the radio to perform public and revolutionary acts of love, countering the oppressive forces of mass incarceration in the United States. By unapologetically positioning their love for incarcerated people front and center, ordinary Americans—mothers, fathers, siblings, kids, spouses, and neighbors—subvert racist and classist structures in our society which mark prisoners as incapable and unworthy of love. By bearing witness to these public pronouncements of love, those of us whose lives remain otherwise untouched by mass incarceration have no choice but to accept the humanity of people behind bars. From a sense of shared humanity stems solidarity and positive change.

Moving forward, I first address my own positionality⁷ and personal interest in

⁵ “Audio Postcards,” *Restorative Radio*, accessed April 2018, <http://www.restorativerradio.org/audio-postcards-2/>.

⁶ Feibel, “The Prison Show”; Joshua Hunt, “The iPod of Prison,” *The New Yorker*, 19 June, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-ipod-of-prison>.

⁷ As Maher and Tetreault describe in “Frames of Positionality: Constructing Meaningful Dialogue about Gender and Race,” “positionality” refers to how “gender, race, class and other aspects of our identities are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities. Knowledge is valid when it

prisoners' radio. Next, I unpack bell hooks' conceptualization of love as a mode of political resistance along with the ways that mass incarceration and mass media undermine her vision of love. I then discuss the potential of prisoners' radio in bringing this vision to life. Finally, I delve into the inner workings of *The Prison Show* and *Restorative Radio* to explore how these programs foster love.

Radio Love: A Personal Account

Growing up in a house where sound was constantly emanating from my parents' giant stereo in the living room, radio has always been an important part of my life. I was familiar with *A Prairie Home Companion* before I learned how to read or ride a bike. I could always count on waking up to *Morning Edition* and coming home to *All Things Considered* after school. And between the talk shows, there was always music: classical, jazz, folk, classic rock. In my family, radio listening was often a communal activity, something shared at the dining table or in front of the fire during the winter. Across hundreds of these seemingly unremarkable moments, radio brought us closer together. Cultural critic Susan J. Douglas offers an explanation of why radio fosters such a powerful sense of connectivity between listeners:

People listening to a common voice, or to the same music, act and react at the same time...They are unified around that common experience...The fact that we hear not only with our ears but with

our entire bodies—our bones, our innards vibrate, too, to sounds, and certainly to music—means that we are actually feeling similar sensations in our bodies at exactly the same time when we listen as a group. In part because of this physical response, listening often imparts a sense of emotion stronger than that imparted by looking.⁸

This visceral reaction to radio listening almost seems to transcend time and space. Hearing a familiar voice or song on the radio never fails to transport me to happy moments in my childhood, surrounded by love.

During a semester abroad in Peru, I had the opportunity to investigate this connective power of radio in an international context. Through a community radio project called *Sisichakunaq Pukllaynin*, I explored how students at a predominantly indigenous elementary school appropriate the radio to affirm their personal, collective, and cultural identities. Many of these children, some as young as five or six, immigrated to the city to receive an education hours away from their families and home communities. *Sisichakunaq Pukllaynin* allows students to produce their own radio programs in Quechua, the most widely spoken indigenous language in Peru, on topics of their choosing.

These kids gain so much from participating in radio production, but one of the most striking aspects of the project was its ability to strengthen relationships between students, teachers, and families from afar. By broadcasting stories about creation myths, important traditions, and the ordinary

includes an acknowledgment of the knower's specific position in any context, because changing contextual and relational factors are crucial for defining identities and our knowledge in any given situation" (118).

⁸ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 30.

moments of rural life, these youth pay loving homage to their cultural roots and the communities they came from. Despite the numerous obstacles that they face, these young migrants refuse to sever ties with the people they care about.

When I returned to the United States, I wanted to better understand how radio's connective and transcendent qualities impact Americans who also struggle to stay in contact with their home communities: prisoners. As someone with no personal connection to the criminal justice system, *The Prison Show*, *Restorative Radio*, and radio in general undoubtedly mean something different to me than they do for people whose lives are intrinsically tied to prisons. I cannot pretend to know how it feels to hear the voice of a partner, parent, or child through my headphones after spending the majority of my day locked in a cell. I cannot fully comprehend what it means to those on the outside to transmit messages powerful enough to transcend impenetrable prison walls.

As a White woman, I will never be capable of speaking to the experiences of people of color inside or outside of prison. My intention is never to speak for anyone whose experiences are not my own; instead, I aim to call attention to a grassroots movement which media scholars in the United States have largely overlooked. I hope to demonstrate that the subversive work accomplished by prisoners, their loved ones, and their communities deserves public recognition and scholarly attention.

Before moving forward, it is worth noting that there is a broader discussion to be had about the ethics of studying prisoners'

radio from an outsider's perspective. One could argue that listening to a message meant for someone else is an invasion of privacy and inherently voyeuristic. Although participants in *The Prison Show* and *Restorative Radio* make the conscious decision to share their messages publicly over the airwaves, incarceration forces their hand to a certain extent: too many families torn apart by prison have to choose between expressing love publicly and severing ties altogether. Keeping this in mind, I ultimately decided to move forward because I see this research as a direct threat to the inhumanity of mass incarceration. These radio messages and the people who choose to share them are extraordinarily powerful—we all have something to learn from them about love, justice, agency, and resiliency.

**The Deepest Revolution:
Love Lessons from bell hooks**

*Making the choice to love can heal our wounded spirits and our body politic. It is the deepest revolution, the turning away from the world as we know it, toward the world we must make to be one with the planet—one healing heart giving and sustaining life. Love is our hope and our salvation.*⁹

In her visionary book *All About Love*, Black feminist scholar bell hooks calls for a return to love—an end to the pervasive lovelessness that saturates American society. In her quest to understand a concept that seems to defy definition, hooks draws insight from renowned twentieth century scholars—predominantly White men, she points out—

⁹ bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 225.

who grappled before her with the task of articulating love.

Psychological and critical theorist Erich Fromm was one of the first to view love through an academic lens. In his seminal work *The Art of Loving*, Fromm argues that love is an action that requires four key elements: care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. He believes that genuine love is elusive and involves hard work but that this effort has great rewards for love's true practitioners.¹⁰ Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck adds that love is not only an action but also a conscious decision: "Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love."¹¹ By situating love as a choice, Peck challenges the widely held assumption that humans love intuitively.

Building on this foundation, hooks further articulates love as a combination of "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication."¹² While she agrees that it is useful to envision love as a verb rather than a noun, hooks takes issue with the lack of intersectionality¹³ in the work of Fromm and

Peck. Instead, she positions love as a radical action, whose "transformative power" can undermine White supremacist and patriarchal structures of oppression.¹⁴

In an essay titled "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," hooks argues that ending White supremacy will require humanity to create the conditions not only for Black people to love Blackness but for everyone else to love Blackness.¹⁵ While hooks' assertion that love can overcome domination might seem idealistic, it places the responsibility of challenging oppression on all of us who strive to love and be loved, not just those who experience injustice. hooks' conceptualization of love also makes resistance more accessible to the general public, even to those without considerable political power. No matter how elusive genuine love may be, love is something that most humans desire and can relate to. And like radio, love has a strong connective power: by embracing a love ethic, we accept "a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet."¹⁶ Only when this occurs will our society move towards eradicating injustice in all of its many forms.

For prisoners and their families who wish to practice love for one another, hooks' final element of love—honest and open communication—is especially difficult. Numerous studies demonstrate that maintaining family connections during and

¹⁰ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956).

¹¹ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), quoted in bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 4-5.

¹² hooks, *All About Love*, 5.

¹³ "Intersectionality" refers to the interwoven nature of one's social identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, and disability. After facing exclusion from both White feminist and Black anti-racist circles, Black women in particular strove to illuminate the interlocking power dynamics at play within both feminism and anti-racism. Although legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw was the first to coin the phrase in 1989, multiple Black feminist intellectuals—including Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Patricia

Hill Collins—contributed to the development of this movement.

¹⁴ hooks, *All About Love*, xxix.

¹⁵ bell hooks, "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

¹⁶ hooks, *All About Love*, 88.

after incarceration reduces recidivism and helps with societal reintegration.¹⁷ However, protecting vulnerable families does not seem to be a priority in the age of mass incarceration. While prisons support outside communication in theory, they all too often implement policies and practices which obstruct the maintenance of family ties.¹⁸ Honest and open talk is often compromised by the “high cost of receiving collect calls from prison, long travel times to the correctional facility, inconvenient visiting hours, and uncomfortable or humiliating security procedures at the prison.”¹⁹ Many prisoners are incarcerated hundreds or even thousands of miles away from their loved ones, usually in remote rural areas far from public transit. Visiting these facilities may be impossible if family members do not have access to a car.

Even when contact is possible, strict regulation and censorship behind bars severely restrict honest and open talk between loved ones. From opening prisoners’ mail and recording phone calls to closely monitoring in-person visitation, prisons constantly invade the privacy of incarcerated folks, intruding upon intimate expressions of love that were never meant to be shared publicly—all in the name of “security.”²⁰ These harsh measures often result in a gaping disconnect between prisoners and their

families, obstructing their ability to actively love each other.

Incarceration and the dominant media threaten hooks’ vision of love in other significant ways. In her book *Salvation: Black People and Love*, hooks argues that the mass media too often undermine love’s progress in combating White supremacy and other systems of oppression. By bombarding Americans with “degrading and dehumanizing” representations of Blackness, mainstream media perpetuate a “pedagogy of racial hatred.”²¹

These images not only teach black folks and everyone else...that black folks are hateful and unworthy of love, they teach white folks to fear black aggression. This fear allows white folks to feel justified when they treat black people in dehumanizing ways in daily life. A white woman who clutches her purse as she walks toward a young black male or female on the street sends the message not only that she fears for her safety but that she sees all black people as potential criminals.²²

This racialized fear-mongering by the mass media has dire repercussions, particularly for incarcerated people. Since prisons are designed to be “total institutions”²³—to keep prisoners in and the wider community out—the general public knows very little about who prisoners are or the trauma they face behind

¹⁷ Jeremy Travis and Michelle Waul, *Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 2003).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁹ Travis and Waul, *Prisoners Once Removed*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²¹ hooks, *Salvation*, 64.

²² *Ibid.*, 65.

²³ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1961), quoted in Tiziano Bonini and Marta Perrotta, “On and Off the Air: Radio-Listening Experiences in the San Vittore Prison,” *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 2 (2007): 191.

bars.²⁴ Consequently, the public learns about prison through sensationalized media representations of incarcerated folks, brimming with racist stereotypes and misconceptions.

While media scholar Catharine Lumby claims that all media coverage of incarcerated folks has value because prisoners' visibility in the public eye is more important than their accurate or positive representation,²⁵ I disagree. I challenge the belief that the ubiquitous trope of prisoner as violent, insolent, and hateful criminal can be beneficial in any way. Instead, these portrayals exist to degrade and dehumanize, to uphold the cruel punitivity of mass incarceration. By uncritically absorbing these images, America moves farther away from answering hooks' call for a return to love.

Radical Love Stories: The Power of Prisoners' Radio

Community media, and prisoners' radio in particular, has the potential to address both dominant media misrepresentations and the communication barriers that incarcerated folks face. Community media is community-driven—that is, it is a form of locally-funded media created in, by, and for the community. “Community” in this context is often a bounded geographical space, usually a neighborhood or a village, and sometimes encompassing an entire region.²⁶ But

as technology continues to develop, “community” can even move beyond physical space to include geographically distant individuals who share a common goal or identity (via online live streams, for example).

Instead of prioritizing profit like commercial media, community media exists to serve the interests and amplify the voices of marginalized groups. Radio in particular is one of the most popular types of community media, serving its empowering purpose well as among the most egalitarian, accessible, and inexpensive media forms.²⁷ Unlike the costs associated with print and audiovisual media, you do not need to be literate or affluent to listen to radio, own a radio, or even participate in radio production. From indigenous peoples seeking to preserve native languages to low-income women striving for reproductive justice and everything in between, ordinary people across the globe can and do appropriate the radio to share their stories and speak their truth—in ways both humanizing and unifying.

Prisoners' radio is not necessarily a form of community broadcasting, but it operates almost exclusively within the community sector.²⁸ Australian media scholar Heather Anderson, one of the few academics to study prisoners' radio,²⁹ classifies this concept as “any type of radio broadcast by or for a ‘prisoner community of interest’ that can

Alternative and Community Media (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 6.

²⁷ Anderson, *Raising the Civil Dead*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁹ It should be noted that there is minimal research by American scholars on prisoners' radio in general, and little scholarship exists about American prisoners' radio. The research that does exist tends to focus on Australia and the UK. However, Anderson deliberately frames her research broadly to apply within an international context.

²⁴ Heather Anderson, *Raising the Civil Dead: Prisoners and Community Radio* (Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2012), 63.

²⁵ Catharine Lumby, “Televising the Invisible: Prisoners, Prison Reform and the Media,” in *Prisoners as Citizens: Human Rights in Australian Prisons* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2002).

²⁶ Chris Atton, “Problems and Positions in Alternative and Community Media,” in *The Routledge Companion to*

be heard by the general public.”³⁰ Anderson goes on to identify two main types of prisoners’ radio programs: (1) shows that broadcast messages from family members on the outside to incarcerated loved ones, and (2) shows that address issues relevant to prisoners like reentry obstacles, state-sanctioned violence within prisons, and the death penalty.³¹ *Restorative Radio* falls into the first category while *The Prison Show* accomplishes both objectives.

Sometimes prisoners’ radio showcases the actual words of incarcerated people who submit audio recordings or letters to community radio stations. In other cases, community members—whether they were previously incarcerated themselves or simply sympathetic to the plight of prisoners—produce shows for audiences within prisons. Either way, incarcerated people and their loved ones are active participants in prisoners’ radio, either as producers, contributors, or listeners. And as active participants who choose to practice love for one another over the airwaves on *The Prison Show* and *Restorative Radio*, prisoners and their families exercise considerable political power. I delve into both programs in greater depth below.

The Prison Show

The Prison Show is a live radio program which broadcasts every Friday from 9 to 11 PM Central Time from Houston’s Pacifica Network radio station, KPFT FM 90.1. As an independent community radio station, KPFT strives to disseminate “accurate, objective,

[and] comprehensive news” throughout the communities it serves in Southeast Texas.³² *The Prison Show* was founded in 1980 by previously incarcerated activist Ray Hill, an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ issues and prisoners’ rights. Prisoners in Texas were not allowed to make phone calls in 1980, so *The Prison Show* gave incarcerated people the opportunity to hear their loved ones’ voices, sometimes for the first time in years or even decades.³³

As someone who experienced firsthand the trauma of incarceration, Hill created *The Prison Show* to address a tremendous need in prison and in the community: to maintain ties with the outside world. Hill produced and hosted *The Prison Show* for 30 years and remains involved as an advisor to this day. The staff and volunteers who run the program include previously incarcerated people along with “teachers, professors, lawyers, chaplains, activists, [and] ex-politicos...who see the error in the current prison system and the worth of the American people lost but still not forgotten inside.”³⁴

During the first hour of the program, the hosts invite criminal justice reform activists to discuss issues that matter to prisoners. Topics include racial disparities in the criminal justice system, indigent criminal defense, the death penalty, prison healthcare, voting rights, and reentry obstacles. The show also advertises community events across Texas that previously incarcerated people and prisoners’ advocates may want to participate

³⁰ Heather Anderson, “Prisoners’ Radio: Connecting Communities Through Alternative Discourse,” 426.

³¹ Anderson, *Raising the Civil Dead*, 15.

³² “About KPFT,” 90.1 KPFT, accessed April 2018, <http://kpft.org/about/#1429296836-1-11>.

³³ Feibel, “The Prison Show.”

³⁴ “The Prison Show - Our Mission,” 90.1 KPFT, accessed April 2018, <http://theprisonshow.net/about.html>.

in. The second hour of the show is the shout-out segment, transmitted from family and friends on the outside to prisoners on the inside. *The Prison Show's* staff and volunteers also participate in grassroots efforts outside of the recording studio. In 2007, *The Prison Show* played a role in successfully lobbying the Texas Legislature to install payphones in prisons across the state. Staff and volunteers also marched on Washington alongside other prison reform advocates in 2015 in support of Ban the Box and the adoption of fair hiring policies.³⁵

One of the most unique aspects of *The Prison Show* is its enduring commitment to fostering love between incarcerated and non-incarcerated folks, most notably through proxy weddings. Starting with Ann Staggs' wedding in 1997, a woman who later became the proxy-wedding coordinator at KPFT, *The Prison Show* conducted and broadcasted dozens of weddings in the years to follow.³⁶ Performed live on-air with the help of a proxy to stand in for the incarcerated partner, these weddings were legally recognized unions in the eyes of the state for decades. Marriage ceremonies were not allowed inside Texas penitentiaries for security reasons, but *The Prison Show* creatively bypassed this obstacle in a way that allowed the incarcerated partner to participate, even if they could not be physically present.³⁷

Ray Hill often acted as a proxy husband during his tenure at *The Prison Show*. In an

on-air ceremony filmed by *National Geographic*,³⁸ Texas Judge Dale Gorczynski weds Rachel, a young woman wearing green eyeshadow and a long white dress, and Johnny, a man incarcerated a hundred miles away. Hill, speaking for Johnny, reads aloud the vows that Johnny wrote behind bars:

Rachel, you have made me the happiest man alive. You totally captured this old outlaw's heart. I surrender my guns and wild lifestyle for you. When I met you, even under such stressful circumstances, I found peace, love, and a happiness unequal to any I had ever known. With all of my heart and soul, I love you.

Next, it is Rachel's turn. She turns to the microphone and starts speaking confidently, but her voice breaks near the end:

Johnny, from the first day you entered my life, I knew you were something else. I am eternally grateful that I have been and continue to be part of your life. Pure honesty and faithfulness is what you can expect of me, along with a kiss whenever you desire, a hug when you need it, and a friend to listen open-heartedly. I am totally and completely yours. Thank you, my honey love, for giving me a reason to believe again.

Rachel then pulls out two wedding bands. She exchanges rings with Hill in a symbolic gesture of love as Judge Gorczynski pronounces the couple husband and wife.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Elizabeth Koh and KK Rebecca Lai, "Proxy Marriage Limits End Inmate Weddings," *The Texas Tribune*, 6 Aug. 2013, <https://www.texastribune.org/2013/08/06/proxy-marriage-restrictions-imperil-inmate-matrimo/>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "Prison Proxy Wedding," *National Geographic*, accessed April 2018, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com.au/videos/society/prison-proxy-wedding-1557.aspx>.

The camera then cuts to Johnny, grinning broadly from behind the glass wall of his cell. The audio picks up the deafening cheers that erupt around him from his wing-mates who have tuned in to *The Prison Show* to share in this happy occasion. Johnny is clearly moved by the outpouring of support: “It got loud. Everybody kicking the doors, I was kicking the doors, crying. Everybody’s yelling congratulations. It was pretty cool.”³⁹ His voice catches in the back of his throat, radiating with pride and love for his new wife. It is impossible to listen to Johnny in this moment and imagine a hardened, hateful, and inhuman criminal. Love is what makes him, like all of us, definitively human.

As special as this ceremony must have been for Rachel, Johnny, and everyone else listening in, it is so markedly defined by absence. When Rachel describes in her vows her desire to hug, kiss, and listen open-heartedly to Johnny, it becomes clear just how much incarceration hinders her ability to actively love her husband in these seemingly simple ways. Even though she has dressed for the occasion, Johnny cannot see her—he can only hear her voice. Johnny cannot embrace her or anyone around him in the prison—all they can do is kick the doors to express their euphoria. On one of the most important days of their lives, Rachel and Johnny’s physical disconnection is undeniable. But despite these obstacles, Rachel and Johnny’s union is a radical and public act of defiance against the totalizing forces of mass incarceration. In accepting bell hooks’ call for a return to love and broadcasting their decision to love each

other over the airwaves, these newlyweds reclaim Johnny’s humanity.

Rachel and Johnny were among the last incarcerated couples in Texas to enjoy sweet moments like this over the airwaves, together yet apart simultaneously. The proxy wedding tradition on *The Prison Show* ended abruptly on September 1, 2013 when Texas passed House Bill 869.⁴⁰ Adopted in an effort to end benefits and insurance fraud against unknowing victims, House Bill 869 limited proxy marriage in Texas to those serving overseas in the military, excluding prisoners from tying the knot. House Bill 869 violated the constitutional right for everyone—even prisoners—to marry, a right recognized in 1987 by the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Turner v. Safley*.⁴¹

Prisoners, their loved ones, and their advocates at KPFT did not sit quietly after this law passed. Public outcry led Texas to draft new legislation in 2014 allowing incarcerated and non-incarcerated couples to get married inside prisons across the state.⁴² Even though *The Prison Show* can no longer conduct weddings on-air, tireless prison reform activism created an even better alternative for couples separated by incarceration. Today, *The Prison Show* continues the essential work it started almost forty years ago—airing loving messages to prisoners every Friday night.

⁴⁰ Koh and Lai, “Proxy Marriage Limits End Inmate Weddings.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “Texas Prisons to Allow In-person Wedding Ceremonies after Prohibition on Proxy Marriages,” *Prison Legal News*, Feb. 2, 2016,

<https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2016/feb/2/texas-prisons-allow-person-wedding-ceremonies-after-prohibition-proxy-marriages/>.

³⁹ “Prison Proxy Wedding.”

Restorative Radio

Calls From Home, the community radio program at the heart of radio project *Restorative Radio*, broadcasts every Monday night from Kentucky's WMMT-FM 88.7. WMMT's mission is to be a "24 hour voice of mountain people's music, culture, and social issues, to provide broadcast space for creative expression and community involvement in making radio, and to be an active participant in discussion of public policy that will benefit coalfield communities and the Appalachian region as a whole."⁴³ WMMT staff record shout-outs from prisoners' loved ones between 7 and 9 PM during a hip hop program called *Hip Hop from the Hilltop*, and they air the messages during *Calls From Home* from 9 to 10 PM. Every single message is aired as long as it complies with FCC regulation.⁴⁴ WMMT's far-reaching signal stretches to six federal and state penitentiaries along with many regional jails and detention centers across the Appalachian region.⁴⁵

Calls From Home came into existence after long-time DJ Amelia Kirby took over the Monday night hip hop program. Kirby frequently accepted song requests, and eventually listeners started calling in to dedicate songs to loved ones behind bars. In a promotional video for the show, Kirby describes how prisoners and their families brought *Calls From Home* into existence: "One night we got a call from a woman whose

brother was incarcerated at Red Onion [State Prison]. She just asked, would it be possible for [me] to go on the air and send a message out to him directly?"⁴⁶ The woman was calling from Washington D.C., 500 miles away. Her brother had introduced her to the show after tuning in every week himself. After that first shout-out, prisoners began to share the station's toll-free phone number with relatives and friends in hopes of receiving their own on-air messages. This led to more and more calls pouring into WMMT every Monday night from places as far as Florida, Connecticut, and Hawaii. Today, the phone lines ring off the hook from the second they open at 7 PM sharp.⁴⁷

The organic evolution of *Calls From Home*, initiated by a woman whose loved one sits behind bars, shows that prisoners and their families desperately want and need programs like this. *Calls From Home* would not exist if she hadn't reached out to WMMT, and if incarcerated folks hadn't spread the word to their own loved ones. In this way, prisoners and their families created *Calls From Home*, appropriating the medium to serve their own too-often-overlooked interests. The staff and volunteers at WMMT have done everything in their power to facilitate these needs. In fact, Sylvia Ryerson, then-Director of Public Affairs at WMMT, had the idea to push the *Calls From Home* format even further by producing long-form, professional quality audio pieces capturing the soundscapes of home. Thus, *Restorative Radio: Audio Postcards* was born.⁴⁸

⁴³ "About Us," 88.7 WMMT, accessed April 2018, <https://www.wmmt.org/about/>.

⁴⁴ Sylvia Ryerson, "Restorative Radio," *Transom*, 27 Sept. 2016, <https://transom.org/2016/restorative-radio/>.

⁴⁵ "Hot 88.7 - Hip Hop from the Hilltop / Calls From Home," 88.7 WMMT, accessed April 2018, <https://www.wmmt.org/callsfromhome/#about887>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Ryerson, "Restorative Radio."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Ryerson sees *Audio Postcards* as a way to bring some form of peace to loved ones living on the outside:

I hoped this could be a therapeutic process for family members—to actively create something beautiful for the person they love inside, to share their own world in their own terms. We didn't need any approval from the prisons to do this. We just needed access to [the] airwaves.⁴⁹

This element of control, of speaking on one's own terms, is extremely important. When most modes of communication are so heavily moderated within prisons, radio is one of the few types of media capable of evading this censorship. Ryerson also reached out to regular *Calls From Home* callers to see if anyone had suggestions or would like to collaborate on the new project.⁵⁰ Michelle Hudson, whose husband is serving life in prison seven hours from home under Virginia's three strikes law, expressed her full support:

Calls From Home has become his 'eyes' for seeing into our lives on the outside. Sound has become his sight and escape from daily prison life...I believe *Audio Postcards* will bring life to those who are incarcerated. Can you imagine hearing the sounds of your family celebrating a grandparent's birthday, or the first cry of a newborn? Audio postcards will not only give them the opportunity to stay closely connected to their loved ones, but it will challenge them to make positive changes so they can return home and become actively involved

with the sounds that they have come to love. Connecting the sounds of life and love to provide vision for the incarcerated—that's what *Audio Postcards* will do!⁵¹

Bringing life to a desolate place like prison should not be undervalued. In allowing prisoners to become more active participants in the lives of their loved ones, sharing in both important life events and the mundane moments of everyday life, *Audio Postcards* challenges the isolating aspects which too often define total institutions like prison.

Charlene Yarbrough and her son JJ understand first-hand how powerful *Audio Postcards* can be. At age 22, JJ was convicted of murder and is currently serving a single life sentence in Virginia's Wallens Ridge State Prison.⁵² At the time she recorded this piece, Charlene lived in Newport News, Virginia, eight hours from JJ. She suffers from health issues and cannot drive, so twenty years had passed since she last saw her son. For her audio postcard, Charlene decides to throw a party so all of JJ's family members can record messages for him. After the last relatives leave, Charlene spends some time speaking to her son alone. She turns on one of JJ's favorite songs, "Caribbean Queen" by Billy Ocean. She sits quietly for a while, enjoying the music in silence. Finally, she speaks with a deep tenderness in her voice:

I remember you dancing to this song, you used to love to dance. Your little goofy dances, you remember? Your dad used to like this song too...

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Charlene Yarbrough," *Restorative Radio*, accessed April 2018, <http://www.restorativeradio.org/charlene-yarbrough/>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

What's that [other] singer's name? MC Hammer! You remember I made y'all those pants like he wore, and y'all wore them to school and everyone wanted to know, where y'all get these pants from? And you said, my mom made these!...

Charlene shares story after story, laughing hard when she remembers how JJ looked after he shaved off his entire eyebrow as a kid. Even though I have no way of seeing her, I imagine her sitting alone at the kitchen table with the audio recorder, her eyes twinkling, lost within the labyrinth of her memory:

You know, when I close my eyes, I can see you, JJ. See you dancing, enjoying your young life. I can just close my eyes and see you, that goofy smile. I love you so much, darlin'. And I want you to know I'm proud of you, I really am. Regardless of what has happened, you're still my child and I'm proud of you and I love you. And your people love you.⁵³

Listening to Charlene reminisce about JJ's childhood is utterly heartbreaking. Her voice never shakes and she never loses control, but the palpable emotion in her words has devastating impact. This is a woman who hasn't seen her son's face in two decades. She only sees him frozen in time in her memory, dancing and laughing as a carefree kid, oblivious to what his future holds.

Charlene's manner of speaking forces the listener to acknowledge the one-sided, non-reciprocal nature of this conversation. Throughout the piece, she frames so many of her sentences as questions, questions that JJ is not there to answer. So much remains

unspoken in the lingering sighs that punctuate Charlene's storytelling. There are thousands of moments from the past twenty years that Charlene and JJ can never get back, and they may never again have the chance to build new memories together on the outside.

In many ways, the fact that Charlene chose to share this audio piece publicly is a revolutionary act. She loves her son deeply and by her own volition has granted the general public the privilege of sharing in her joy and her love. Her words directly challenge how dominant American culture has conditioned us to perceive prisoners, restoring JJ's humanity with only her voice. But if JJ were a free man, Charlene would not have to choose between loving her son publicly and not loving him at all. This is another element of humanity that incarceration strips away: the ability to maintain one's private self, to act privately, and to love privately. Nonetheless, in broadcasting this audio postcard, Charlene proves her unwillingness to let go of her son despite the unyielding forces driving them apart. She continues to resist, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity.

**“It's All About Love”:
Building Community Beyond the Bars**

Whenever we heal family wounds, we strengthen community. Doing this we engage in loving practice. That love lays the foundation for the constructive building of community with strangers. The love we make in community stays with us wherever we go.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ hooks, *All About Love*, 144.

In this article, I have illustrated how ordinary Americans appropriate the radio to strengthen the loving connections that are constantly under seige in this age of mass incarceration. The decision to practice love publicly over the airwaves has radical and resounding impacts in the lives of prisoners, their loved ones on the outside, and American society at large.

For prisoners, hearing the voices of family members on *The Prison Show* or *Calls From Home* might provide the necessary incentive to make positive changes in their lives, to work towards release and become productive citizens on the outside. These messages might break up the monotony of prison life, making time move a little faster. And they might bring a small dose of joy and hope to a place where positive emotions are likely in short supply.

For families on the outside mourning the loss of a loved one to incarceration, prisoners' radio provides an outlet to share their lives on their own terms, to say exactly what needs to be said with minimal obstruction or censorship. Radio offers a means to begin bridging the chasmal divide that incarceration tears into so many relationships across the United States.

And for broader American society, prisoners' radio forces listeners to acknowledge the humanity of incarcerated people. WMMT's Amelia Kirby sums it up well: "It's difficult to hate someone when you hear their grandchild tell them they love them on the radio."⁵⁵ Over in Houston, a regular *Prison Show* listener with no other connection to the

criminal justice system seems to agree: "You tend to think that convicts in a prison really don't have much of a love life and yet when the family members talk, it's all about love."⁵⁶

By positioning love at the forefront of this movement, *The Prison Show* and *Restorative Radio* succeed in laying the foundation for community building with strangers. In helping us to accept that our liberation is bound up together, prisoners' radio and the communal love it fosters pose a direct threat to the oppressive forces of mass incarceration.

Because love, as bell hooks proclaims, is our hope and our salvation.

⁵⁵ Hackman, "Calls From Home."

⁵⁶ Feibel, "'The Prison Show'."

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