Learning to Live with Crime

Wilson, Christopher P.

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In the fifth chapter of his *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing* (2000), undercover journalist Ted Conover pauses, as many authors of prison exposé will, for a long historical interlude. Breaking stride from recounting his enlistment in the state of New York’s training program for corrections officers, and then his ten months at the infamous maximum-security facility at Ossining, Conover instead takes his reader through the oft-re-told phases of prison history. He begins with the Quaker-inspired innovation of the penitentiary in antebellum America, which drew European visitors like Charles Dickens and Alexis de Tocqueville, and then turns to describing the gradual, turn-of-the-century elimination of abuses like the cat-o-nine tails, cold-water torture, and contract labor, counterpointed by the grim arrival of the electric chair in 1891. Then Conover recalls the work of twentieth-century reform wardens like Thomas Mott Osborne and Lewis Lawes, who installed job training, prison furloughs, and community programs, so many of which have been curtailed in our grimmer moment of bureaucratic stagnation and lockdown. In the end, what therefore is most startling about Conover’s historical interlude is how nearly irrelevant it comes to seem. In the face of the collapse of prison’s rehabilitative mission, that is, the effect of these historical antecedents seems purely bathetic or ironic. Conover presents the contemporary prison as a world hollowed out, drained of any function except as an empty space of pain and isolation, as if having been distilled to its essence: jail, warehouse, “keep.” It

“They’re keeping him there till they think that he won’t do the same thing again.”
—John Edgar Wideman, to his daughter Jamila
is almost as if we have come not only to the end of history, but beyond it—in Conover’s phrase—to the “scrap heap” of Time (208). To a prison that, though “storied and mysterious” (59), is a monument to liberalism’s ruination.1

These days, the gesture seems apt. Prison in its many manifestations, old and new, public and private, from detention center to supermax, has come to stand as a material culmination of the neoconservative turn and its fatalistic premium on “learning to live with crime.” Incarceration is intimately related to many of the tactics I have described in earlier chapters—informing that capitalizes on administrative plea bargaining, deceptive interrogation, pretext busts, warrant squads, and more—and a site of symbolic investment, a place where the premium on vigilance and control becomes manifest in the extreme. (Even Frank Abagnale argued for more punitive incarceration, though he himself was reformed through plea bargaining.)

But perhaps even more vexingly, the prison also seems to speak to public acquiescence about the costs these measures have exacted. Whatever stories prisons still hold for American readers, the dismantling of the rehabilitative rationale is actually an open secret. As Joseph Hallinan reminds us, a Harris poll from 1970 once showed that 73 percent of Americans believed the main goal of prison should be rehabilitation; by 1995, that number had dropped to 25 percent.2 While hardly universal, this public fatalism seemed a sorrowful affirmation of two related planks in the neoconservative platform: the idea that prison should punish offenders and control crime in advance; and that its costs had to be accepted on behalf of at-risk neighborhoods. Indeed, prison exposé has been the one genre where the war on crime has gone beyond fear or political backlash. Rather, it is often argued, Americans have been systematically incorporated into the prison as an economic and political institution, into a “prison-industrial complex.” And like the military-industrial complex before it, prison comes to signify a state of political stagnation—as it were, the permanence of the war on crime itself.3

This final chapter seeks to take the pulse of contemporary prison exposés by evaluating this recent argument, and then by looking more closely at two texts that bracketed the neoconservative turn: Conover’s prize-winning account of 2000 and a memoir from a decade and a half earlier, John Edgar Wideman’s Brothers and Keepers (1984). Though the prison is a hub of many social ideas and practices, I want to zero in, instead, on these two texts in light of the signature micropolitical tactic of incapacitation: the argument, so often made by neoconservatives, that prison could
control crime by targeting repeat offenders and removing them from their neighborhoods. An idea that received renewed emphasis in the 1970s, incapacitation remains central to the public defense of the prison system, even in its most dismal, warehousing manifestations. But beyond looking at this premium on “doing time,” I also want to examine how our prison exposés “do” our time: that is, how they capture the political claims of the turn on which I have focused in this book. Ostensibly, the theory of incapacitation offered to turn back the clock to the prison’s traditional function. On the other hand, the tactic actually brought together many of the forward-looking elements I have discussed: the imposition of actuarial thinking (targeting repeat offenders), the renewed premium on personal control and vigilance to manage risk, and the idea that a mixture of new federalism and privatized management might reconstruct the state’s power.

And for all the talk about making incarceration legible to potential offenders, recent decades have witnessed new forces that have actually worked to limit what Americans could know about prisons. To begin, I will focus on two related dimensions of recent prison exposés, the “concrete” (my pun intended) and the cultural. In the first sense, these exposés have shown us how prison operations have become a jobs program; in regions like upstate New York, the prison literally became something citizens had to learn to live with, just as, albeit in a vastly different way, the families and neighbors of those in prison did. But in the sense more central to this book, prison has also had its cultural dimensions rewritten, as part of the manufacture of consent. The prison solution reconstructed citizen affiliation with crime control even as it attached a specific tactic (incapacitation) to the criminal himself. In these senses, “doing time” behind prison walls meant rewriting both real communities and imagined ones, prisoners’ hopes and family memories, present-day social relations and what we imagine they can be. Incapacitation’s cultural effects were often redoubled behind prison walls. To inmates, that is, the tactic offered a bleak reminder of the choices in their own past and the lost legacies of communities whose memories they tried to carry with them.

Houses of correction, of course, present enormous challenges for journalistic exposés, and no single account can be comprehensive. Beyond their sheer scale and variation, prisons are typically secretive places, worlds of rumor and self-pleading, riddled with internal economies of privileges, punishments, violence, and information. Some exposés, as I will show, delineate the regional or national contexts of prison more fully than Wideman or Conover do; others delve more extensively into neighboring communities, or the post-prison experience; others capture
prisoners’ experience more thoroughly, including the brutality that is all too common. Yet in capturing the material and cultural meanings of incapacitation, the counterpoint between Conover and Wideman’s memoirs can be especially instructive. As if re-deploying the tactics of Josiah Flynt, Conover uses undercover reporting to enter into the labor of corrections officers, thereby hoping to examine the physical and psychological state of vigilance at the point of contact with those deemed criminal. (And as we shall see, echoes of the streets outside get under even Conover’s undercover skin.) Wideman’s text, meanwhile—actually a meditation co-written with his own imprisoned brother Robert (Robby)—offers a startling repudiation of the restructuring of neighborhood memory and individual futurity within the neoconservative turn. From different positions in a critical American racial divide, both writers struggle to come to terms with what, in our culture of crime, has become something like a sanctioned underworld. The prison has become a place where, as an emerging complex of ideas about the state would have it, criminals could be placed in a condition that immobilized them—as the Widemans’ memoir puts it, frozen in their “dull, inferior portion” (195) of time.

I.

A more contemporaneous but equally dispiriting interlude for Conover’s book might have begun with Susan Sheehan’s *A Prison and a Prisoner* (1978), a portrait of the Green Haven, New York, maximum-security facility in the years following the Attica uprising of 1971. As on so many crime fronts, the 1970s proved to be a turning point in prison management and in the political conditions shaping crime genres, including exposés of the “prison-industrial” complex.

Writing for *The New Yorker* before this template was at her disposal, Sheehan had made use, instead, of her magazine’s trademark chiseled restraint. Her goal was to deflate reader expectations generated by, among other influences, Hollywood prison melodrama. Instead of depicting “men with furrowed brows, bent heads, or plaintive eyes” (38), for example, Sheehan chose to deadpan prison life: the absurdities of its bureaucracy, wholly inadequate psychiatric resources, and even guard brutality (92). Yet reading Sheehan back from our time, we also realize she had arrived at a darkening moment. At first, in the immediate aftermath of the Attica uprising, the New York state legislature had actually experimented with the liberalization of prison management: with a relaxing of prisoner-movement
and lockup rules, freeing up phone and mail privileges, and allowing type-
writers and tape recorders in cells. Green Haven had even added a gym
and a law library, and then inaugurated a formal grievance procedure for
inmates. Conover and Wideman would be especially interested to discover
that the liberalization of prisoners’ visitors’ rooms (under the banner of
prisoner “resocialization”) was also experimented with. But soon, the
tide shifted. In the summer of 1977, under the leadership of State Correc-
tions Commissioner Benjamin Ward, New York officially repudiated the
objective of rehabilitation. The state then instituted draconian cost cuts,
abolished honor blocks, reestablished lockdown procedures, and curtailed
the freedom of movement prisoners had briefly enjoyed. Sheehan would
only remark obliquely upon the mood of “uncertainty and disarray” (162)
resulting from these changes. But of one thing she was sure: the retrench-
ment had “sent the morale of the guards soaring” (162), even though
increased inmate supervision often meant more work. (In fact, in the next
twenty years, U.S. prison employment would double.)

All this, of course, was but a prelude to the massive prison boom of
our time—a national boom extensively documented by a flurry of gen-
eral-interest exposés: most prominently, aside from Conover’s memoir,
Joseph Hallinan’s Going Up the River (2001); Christian Parenti’s Lock-
down America (1999); Cristina Rathbone’s A World Apart (2005); Andi
Rierden’s The Farm (1997); and Eric Schlosser’s influential Atlantic
terpoint lay behind all of these accounts. As prison support programs of
all kinds would be eviscerated, they would be replaced by devices that
would effectively dragnet the poor (and often the nonviolent) into the
world of the penitentiary: mandatory minimum-sentencing laws, “relevant
conduct” and conspiracy clauses, three strikes provisions, and more. In
New York State alone, the prison boom resulted in the quintupling of its
incarcerated population. Inside the prison, meanwhile, one would see the
institution of administrative segregation and twenty-three-hour keeplock,
practices that, in many ways, would define Conover’s tenure as a guard.
New York’s map would itself be split between older facilities like Sing
Sing and newer, upstate prisons, many built under Democratic governor
Mario Cuomo, ostensibly under the aegis of “community development.”
Urban and minority prisoners would effectively be exiled from their neigh-
borhoods and families, to be watched over by largely white guards from
the regions surrounding the newer facilities. Schlosser’s essay, though it
focuses mainly on prison privatization, describes how Cuomo’s new pris-
ons displaced the traditional economies of the areas into which they were
placed. In upstate New York, it is the downturn in farming, mining, and manufacturing that provides the opening for development. (One West Virginia county with two new facilities, Joseph Hallinan similarly tells us, has more prisoners than coal miners [203].) Meanwhile, the incarceration of women—documented in Rathbone’s *World Apart*—often became the locus of an underground economy of cosmetics, prohibited food, and most disturbingly, sexual exchanges with guards. Contradicting some of the principal tactics I describe in my first three chapters, Rathbone shows that it is low-end members of the drug economy (often women) who cannot bargain their way into informing (99–100), and that nonviolent inmates serving mandatory-sentence drug time aren’t eligible for work release—whereas murderers, pedophiles, and arsonists are (138–39).

Thanks to these writers, as well as a persisting clamor of alarm by academics and activists, the story above may seem a distressingly familiar one. Nevertheless, documenting the prison boom has been achieved against considerable odds. It is easy to overlook the ratcheting down of journalists’ rights of access to prisons since the mid-1970s. Following a trio of Supreme Court decisions—*Pell v. Procunier* (1974), *Saxbe v. Washington Post Co.* (1974), and *Houchins v. KQED Inc.* (1978)—state governments and prison officials have been given broad discretion to limit or, in some cases, prohibit journalists’ entry or face-to-face contact with inmates. Particularly in the 1990s, as government officials tightened controls over prisoner mobility, reading material, and access to lawsuits, state and local wardens erected a variety of restrictions for journalistic access. One could be denied entry based on whether one was a print or broadcast reporter, whether one conducted interviews in person or on the phone, and more. Some locales even created restrictions based on the content of articles (for instance, whether the story proposed would benefit the corrections department itself). Wardens, legislators, and tough-on-crime governors such as California’s Pete Wilson legitimized these prohibitions by complaining about the media’s tendency to create celebrity prisoners at the expense of suffering victims. The change in climate is made no more evident than by contrasting Sheehan’s account with its successors. Sheehan was given unobstructed access to the prison of her choice. Taken to “every part” of the prison she “asked to see at a moment’s notice,” she was allowed to spend “countless sixteen-hour days” interviewing prisoners, sometimes in their cells and out of earshot of guards, who could be an entire floor or two away (vii–viii). In 2002–4, by contrast, Rathbone was forced to wage an eighteen-month legal battle merely for access to female prisoners in Massachusetts. Because of byzantine state regulations,
even though Rathbone won her court battle, no journalist had yet conducted an unsupervised inmate interview when she went to print.\(^9\) New York’s Department of Corrections refused Ted Conover access to its training academy, thus compelling him undercover, where he concealed his ruse from all but a few close friends. Later, his book had entire portions excised before it was allowed to circulate in prisons themselves.\(^10\) Given these restraints, again, the revival of prison exposé has been remarkable.\(^11\)

What interests me here, however, is the form in which this story has often been told. Naturally, the given of these accounts is the war on crime itself, generated by fearmongering politicians indifferent or even oblivious to the social costs of the prison boom. But even more commonly, prison building on the outside and its underground expressions on the inside are cast as reflections of the supply-side greed of economic irrationality, of a capitalist West finally freed from its cold war constraints and Great Society idealism. This foundation produces a story of economic and political alignment, or what in cultural analysis is sometimes called an “economistic” interpretive style.\(^12\) Statistical recitations or ironic facts are typically used to puncture recent trends: for example, the fact that between 1988 and 1998 New York State prison spending soared some $761.3 million, offsetting the entire range of cuts for state and city colleges; that over 60 percent of women incarcerated nationwide are more than one hundred miles from their children or families; that Colgate now markets a translucent toothpaste tube to thwart the smuggling of contraband or weapons.\(^13\)

The emergence of private prisons, in particular, has served to give much of contemporary prison portraiture an ironic, future-perfect aura. Schlosser’s essay, for instance, begins by contrasting the “granite” and “Gothic stonework” of prisons much like Conover’s with the sleeker California State Prison at Sacramento. More recently built, this prison—already overcrowded before it was finished, Schlosser tells us—presents a “stark and futuristic” portent. Ironically, Schlosser observes, private corrections corporations are making prisons into the greatest “public works” program of our time (77).\(^14\)

As this kind of irony suggests, examinations like Schlosser’s also signaled the retooling of an older style of exposé, a revival of early-twentieth-century muckraking.\(^15\) That is, in illustrating the capitalist economy’s indifference to the public good, the prison system became at once a political boss system and an underworld unto itself. In these analyses, prisons epitomize a confluence between political opportunism by state and local officials (notably in impoverished rural areas), private corrections corporations, and federal policymakers—what would have been called, one
hundred years ago, a political “nervous system.” Although politicians wax poetically about “small government and the virtues of the free market,” Schlosser observes, they seize upon the public fear of crime to “encourage increased spending on imprisonment regardless of the actual need” (58). Much as in muckraking portraits of the boss system, prison contracts became symptomatic of a decentralized octopus, even public-private “fiefdoms” extending into the New York countryside (53). As it were, prisons are symptomatic of a new public shame outside of the cities and driven by fear of them. Meanwhile, incarcerated criminals, sometimes manning telephone banks or laboring in fast-food production, become what Walter Lippmann once called the “secret servants” of the mainstream.16

As in classical muckraking as well, greed works here to create both literal effects and metaphorical irony, as the profit motive produces a system of fixed demand with arcane results. On the one hand, Hallinan shows, draconian cost cutting produces the dreary functionalism of the new prison architecture, along with terrors within. But Going Up the River also shows that supply often exceeds the demand. Again, for Hallinan, as for Schlosser, prison building is a jobs-creation program, an engine of local development, and (irony at work again) environmentally safer than older industries; however, like a tourist business, it must always fill beds. Prisons even provide employment, Schlosser argues, that is labor-intensive, year-round, recession-proof, and again non-polluting (and in several southern states, non-union). Prison employment also keeps the young men in town close to home by offering high salaries and benefits; little wonder, then, that local politicians seek it out. No problem when the supply of criminals drops off: supermax prisons, once built to house the worst of the worst, can be made to lower eligibility requirements to sustain their capacity (Hallinan 204–5). The hyphenated prison-industrial modifier therefore puns off Dwight Eisenhower’s original formulation. Much like the now-collapsed Soviet Union, the fear of crime provides a more reliable threat than actual crime rates, which actually fell during the prison boom. And as with the national security apparatus, political influence-peddling takes hold: revolving doors between state corrections officials and private consultants, indifferent wardens provided rhetorical cover by politicians, and kickbacks coming from corporations in search of prisoner-consumers or laborers.17

Like any narrative form, this “macro” approach has its strengths and its drawbacks. It would be silly to deny the power and scope of these narratives: one comes away convinced of a national redrafting of social and political resources around the prison. Although prisons can be isolated
(geographically and from public consciousness), they are nevertheless integral to the political and economic status quo. And guard unions have been, in some cases, beneficiaries of this new social compact. In addition, these exposés, particularly Schlosser’s, effectively show how prisoners’ rights can be eroded (even more than they already have been) when they are farmed out to private corporations exempt from meaningful state oversight. We also see how local communities are re-inscribed by the prison into a racial divide, keeping watch over prisoners from nonwhite communities, though this subject needs still fuller treatment.

Nevertheless, the “prison-industrial complex” paradigm may overreach in certain ways. It may make us forget that commercial operations have been integral to prisons at least since the 1920s, that private prisons are still vastly outnumbered in our prison system (including New York State), and that corrections officials (as in New York) have, in some instances, resisted privatization precisely because it is anti-union. Because prisons under “private management” are often relatively small, it is not clear how economies of scale might affect their profitability. Nor does it need to be said that the United States seems to be having little trouble finding external replacements for the threat of Communism.

Meanwhile, as incisive as these exposés often are, one wonders if they actually countermand the public resignation that has too often marked the neoconservative turn. The exorbitant costs of the prison boom may indeed, as Jason DeParle has suggested, eventually erode even conservative support; bribery, cronyism, or incompetence may also produce a reaction. And as Christian Parenti points out, the pressure prison growth puts on social services is also not always welcome in the locales asked to bear the burden. But to put it baldly, exposing that prisons are horrible or expensive places may not, on its face, undermine public attitudes, much less trump the claim that incapacitation serves as a form of crime control. That is, we may avoid confronting the tradeoff that voters outside prison walls may still be willing to countenance. As effective as it has been, therefore, the “prison-industrial” critique may continue to struggle for public traction.

All that being said, these limits may also shed light on Conover’s or Wideman’s more personal, smaller-scale contributions. It is striking, for instance, how dependent even the best of these macro accounts are on a rather statistical rendering of Conover’s subject: prison labor. That is, the prison-industrial critique often casts corrections work as a job with measurable salaries or benefits but less often as the labor it actually might entail. We could still know more about what it is to work as
a keeper, to buy in to security not only with one’s consumption (as with Frank Abagnale), but with the work of one's days. In addition, what (in my Introduction) I have called the tactical point of power between guard and prisoner—the heart of that labor—remains, despite legitimate concerns about brutality, an elusive quarry, difficult to connect to its historical moment. Schlosser is surely right that there is a massive contradiction between the current celebration of the free market and the accompanying “eagerness to deny others their freedom” (77). In my view, however, it has always been easier to describe this contradiction than to explain precisely how it has been implemented. We may, in fact, partly mistake the nature of the intellectual justification that neoconservatives have attached to the prison boom: the logic of incapacitation as crime control, the rationale revived by the RAND Corporation and articulated by thinkers like James Q. Wilson.

Admittedly, Wilson’s “Incapacitation” chapter, the fifth in Thinking about Crime (1977), is not famous as its second “Broken Windows” chapter. But we need to connect the two. The Broken Window thesis provided the template for the turn to community policing under the banner of restoring the traditional functions of the beat cop. Wilson and his coauthor, Kelling, postulated that a broken window left unattended in an at-risk neighborhood signaled the community’s larger indifference to order and hierarchy. That is, the window became a symbol, read in common by citizens and criminals alike, of a decline in neighborhood authority, manifested in the loss of informal social controls formerly exerted by elders, long-term residents, local businessmen, and cops. Such a decline necessitated, Wilson and Kelling argued, a return to “back to basics,” order-maintenance policing and community watches, even when such an ethos brought tactics that went beyond the strict boundaries of the law. In turn, so too was prison incapacitation proposed as a mode of control exerted upon repeat offenders who demonstrated, or so it was claimed, the loss of that internalized communal control. Incapacitation was the tool designed to recuperate this lost social authority of the neighborhood at the level of the subject, the inmate.

The crucial point, I think, is that incapacitation was only compatible with the tenets of neoconservatism with one important twist. Liberty could be revered only if, at the same moment, the incapacity of some citizens to grasp its promise was also fatalistically acknowledged. Economic “cost” was thus linked emotionally to the “cost” of preserving that liberty—which meant, in a deep contradiction, removing it from those who had demonstrated their unsuitability. Incapacitation became the dominant
crime control justification, for example, not because, as in common误解 of “three strikes,” punishment was a moral or symmetrical response by the state. It was not a “conservative” solution, akin to punishing a recalcitrant child, although some police or community members might interpret it that way. Rather, incapacitation’s logic was actuarial: three strikes were a predictor of a fourth or a fifth crime, a risk that incapacitation could supposedly countermand. Philosophers of punishment like Ernest van den Haag were quite frank in saying that incapacitation was no longer a matter of proportionality but of protecting the polity. Nor was it assumed to be cheap for the state to work this way; rather it was a cost that had to be borne to protect the liberties of the non-incarcerated. One should underscore how literal the term to incapacitate was: to remove the power to act. Prison thus becomes the taking of prisoners out of the time when they otherwise might commit another crime. The measurement for success became, in Wilson’s hands, predicting what these criminals would do (as he puts it) if they were “otherwise free” (146). In terms of governance, incapacitation was quintessentially the deprivation of liberty.

Meanwhile, despite the claims about prison’s legibility to a future criminal pondering his choices, an important transformation had taken place. It is apparent that, whatever the invocation of the prison’s traditional aura, the contemporary, post-Attica moment actually charts a movement away from the conservative standard of punishment fitting a crime. In theory, now, the punishment should supposedly fit the criminal (as his history or profile was charted, for instance, in the grids of sentencing guidelines). Wilson and the RAND Corporation did not, for instance, argue for the wholesale lengthening of sentences; rather, they recommended targeting them at those who committed the most crimes. What this future-perfect, circular logic disguised, obviously, was that incapacitation was tantamount to punishing offenders for crimes that, by definition, they would never commit. This was why it was incredible when Wilson asserted, so confidently, that his argument for incapacitation did not require “any assumptions about human nature” (145). In this sense, control was its own good. Economic costs or prisoner’s rights took a back seat to this fundamentally cold risk assessment.

Were all this not horrifying enough, this rationale was also claimed to benefit the very neighborhoods from which inmates themselves had originally come. Depriving repeat offenders of liberty was claimed to preserve the future order of the communities they left behind; their criminal past was used to legitimate control of the future. For prisoners themselves,
therefore—as if offering a different turn on Conover’s collapse of history—incapacitation actually meant making their criminal past a permanent state. This is a point about “doing time” that a prisoner in Conover’s *Newjack* himself makes, and—as my chapter epigraph suggests—a tragedy that John Edgar Wideman’s memories of his brother will also bring out into the open.

II.

Ted Conover’s assignment to the classic venue of Sing Sing might seem to have taken him off the beaten path of other recent exposés. As he acknowledges, his downstate, nineteenth-century institution, staffed predominantly by urban and nonwhite guards, was quite different from those prisons built by upstate New York’s “growth industry” (41, 60). And in response to New York’s restrictions on journalistic access, Conover also seems to have retooled his trademark undercover technique. Formerly preferring a looser, discursive idiom, he now decides to evoke a more intense, sensational literary style appropriate to Sing Sing’s labyrinthine world of spiders and feral cats. That is, while many contemporary writers disdain any resemblance to what Peter Brooks calls melodrama’s aesthetics of astonishment and apostrophe, Conover seems to have invested even more deeply in them. He turns back to the style of reportage emphasizing verification through physical registers of experience, secret witnessing, and intense bodily sensations. His depiction of Sing Sing’s “storied and mysterious” (59) past even recalls the sensational idiom of Victorian underworld narratives. *Newjack* echoes the work of not only Josiah Flynt or Jacob Riis but also of Nelly Bly, whose undercover narrative, *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887), might be said to have gone inside the nineteenth-century’s reform faith in asylums.

At first reading, Conover seems fully at home in these inheritances. Classic undercover excursions are fond of threshold moments, as well as patterns of surprise followed quickly by fears of emotional drowning or the loss of identity. Collaterally, underground realms are presented (as in Rathbone’s title) as a “world apart” existing in parallel to the mainstream but out of sight. The undercover spy commonly has his or her privileged education unwritten, must learn a new underworld argot, and become so immersed that he or she often feels marooned even when returning home. The opening chapter of *Newjack* is likewise called “Inside Passage,” as we cross over the threshold entrance to the cellblock, pushing away its
The concrete and steel and brick create a hard and resonant sound chamber (9); some outbuildings remind Conover of colonial ruins (66). In all, Sing Sing is laid out for us in a “stupefying vastness” (8) that stands for the spirit of “neglect” itself (4).

As this casting suggests, meanwhile, the narrative is carried by a passionate, heart-on-its-sleeve voice. Sheehan had used her New Yorker style to muffle attribution, talk indirectly about prison beatings, or obliquely call up the retrograde elements in guard culture (including racism) she found permeating Green Haven. Her pointillism produced a pacific effect, emphasizing the tedium and lethargy of prison life.27 By contrast, Conover’s tactics of immersion make his body visible, his voice always first person, his identity always under threat. He thus tends to favor the idiom of astonishment rather than deflation. Mad inmates are described as “bugs” by guards; the cellblock is likened to a Pandora’s box of “swarming” inmates (11). The final lines of his text, calling up his own phantoms, liken guards to plantation house slaves who secretly relish the idea of their Big House being burnt down (309).28

Freewheeling and free associative, his heart often pounding, Conover aims for a visceral response, an identification on our parts. His prison knowledge, he means to show us, is not constructed out of the customary circuit of interviews or even journalistic observation; rather it is gathered by actually having become one of Sing Sing’s own identities.

In an interview with Robert Boynton for The New New Journalism (2005), Conover makes clear why he feels he can make this claim. He does so while explaining why he didn’t seek out an advance book contract before starting out: “The . . . reason I didn’t want a book contract was so that it wouldn’t look like I was serving two masters. After the book appeared, I didn’t want New York State officials to be able to accuse me of pretending to be a guard, while actually working on a book for my publisher. When I was a guard, I wanted to be 100 percent a guard” (13). A rationale like this—which, let it be said, will not convince every reader—points to Conover’s fundamentally humanist assumption: as he says in his first book, that the “other” is, inside, “one of us.”29 Conover seems to claim that moving through New York’s training course for corrections officers, literally qualifying for the job and then shouldering the responsibilities of a regular shift, made all traces of “undercover” pretense disappear.30 The story we follow, therefore, is of a newjack (rookie guard) gradually initiated into “group feeling” (48), much in the familiar narrative movement of what James Clifford calls ethnographic realism. In fact, Conover himself wants to call his technique “participant observation” (18) in this sense.31
Such assumptions often give *Newjack* its vivid emotional impact, and yet also undermine some of its interpretive claims. Even the most self-aware of writers can easily fall victim to the disabling rhetorical inheritances of this technique. As many readers know, the undercover tradition rather infamously displays patterns that exoticize the “other” world, or that foster identification with the mobile traveler rather than the inhabitants under scrutiny. Undercover voyagers often express dismay when saying “farewell to civilization” and then betray a sense of release when returning “home” to it.\textsuperscript{32} *Newjack’s* rhetoric, as I’ve suggested, often strays into these reflexes.\textsuperscript{33} That being said, we should also recognize that the undercover journey does not always generate such uncritical identification by the reader. Rather than “buying in” to an illusion of full immersion, readers of Conover’s narrative are just as likely to recognize what Kate Baldwin has called a “continual ‘error’ of identity” in his role playing. That is, often simply due to his narrative position, we are repeatedly made aware of the gaps (educational, cultural, physical) between Conover and other guards.\textsuperscript{34} Conover does enter into the “manufacturing” (training) of prison “keepers.” But paradoxically he can do so only while smuggling in a different identity, one more connected to his own readership than the guards themselves. Reformist undercover writing, in fact, has often been more about modeling mediation of the underworld, as much as has been recreating the experience of any of its inhabitants. That is, Conover is more accurately modeling keeping while also looking at it.\textsuperscript{35}

Conover’s desire to overcome the play of “surfaces” of a simple prison tour (21), therefore, results in something like a double vision. At one level, his desire to use the undercover strategy to get inside guarding is quite reminiscent of David Milch’s tutelage under Bill Clark, or Gourevitch’s under Andy Rosenzweig. We are encased in another micropolitical venue, in this case the prison cellblock. And yet, that double vision also allows us to see that we are initiated into the blue fatalism of everyday citizens who, themselves, simultaneously serve as law officers and stand-ins for the public. Conover’s own mixed status ends up, in other words, capturing important dimensions of corrections officers who are, he says, like forgotten soldiers “on the front lines of our prison policies” (18). He calls them society’s “proxies” (18) as well as society’s “last representative[s]” to inmates themselves (207).

In many ways, in turn, guarding is defined, from the get-go, by its inability to cross this divide, by its lack of access to prisoners’ experience. While Conover expresses sympathy for the “soul ache” (41) of inmates, he is fully aware that their lives remain, quite literally, locked away from
him. In addition, he shows us that the alienation of keeping partly derives from the impersonality demanded by his job. On the cellblock floor, everyday routines block the forming of personal relationships (223), and personal histories of inmates are supposed to be left undiscussed by guards (88). In this sense, his casting of Sing Sing as a perpetual present tense for both parties is quite apt. “The past seemed like so much noise,” Conover writes, “when you were trying to deal with the difficult present” (223). The guards’ ID badges omit first names, supposedly to limit manipulation or verbal abuse by inmates (85). Even the most sympathetic depictions of prisoners in Newjack, therefore, seem but pale reflections of the guarding regime. Conover admits as much when he closes his book: he tells us of a prisoner who has tattoos on his entire body, Spanish translations of passages from Anne Frank’s diary that speak of “turning my heart inside out, the bad part on the outside and the good part on the inside” (293). As we’ve seen, that is precisely what a guard is asked to do, as well. In a particularly telling moment—an important contrast to Wideman’s memories, as we shall see—he describes his mixed emotions upon seeing prisoners’ families interact with their husbands or sons in the Visitor’s Room. Particularly when he observes the females who remain loyal to their imprisoned men, Conover can only voice the confusion of the keepers who have, in the prison boom, seized upon their jobs as the means to a more secure future. “The CO’s couldn’t figure [that loyalty] out,” he writes, “because those [inmates] would never support the women, and the goal of solvency animated officers’ entire lives” (155). As Conover says in a reflection on both his journalistic and prison labor, “work in so many ways becomes our lives” (318). Guards also don’t share their occupation’s secrets when they’re off the job; to outsiders, they are often likely to lie about what they do for a living (21).

In my view, Conover’s dual burden of keeping undercover and mastering the labor of keeping may magnify this absorption in work. The undercover reporter’s fears of his own vulnerability can easily double back on his interpretation of the subject’s (in this case, the guards’) consciousness; carrying the additional fear of exposure can also add to the stress Conover means to represent. Moreover, going undercover sometimes means constructing what might be called a “model” figure of the subject being impersonated. One must internalize rules so fully that breaking them seems that much less imaginable. As a result, work brings its own blinders. For all of Newjack’s veering into the melodrama of astonishment, we don’t actually see impromptu beatings or much day-to-day corruption in the society of the guards. In fact, we hear more about all of that
in Sheehan’s comparatively downbeat account. Conover himself admits that his fears of intruding on other guards’ privacy kept him from cultivating friendships with them outside of work (316ff.)—a limit, again, on how truly “participatory” his ethnography can be. His ever-vigilant guard is, by definition, someone who has little time off, who is never “himself” either on the job or off it. This may all contribute to the way Newjack often casts Sing Sing as what is sometimes called a “total institution,” a place where the guard’s duty is simply equivalent to his or her self-preservation (96). Because he is both reporter and guard, Conover’s attention isn’t free to wander; if he fails, he fails at both jobs. In this sense he really is a guard—on guard.

As I will argue shortly, this conflation may create other interpretive problems as well. But it also clarifies why, to Conover, Sing Sing comes to seem like a scrapheap of its own designers’ intentions, a place reduced to the essence of guarding. It is made virtually equivalent to its work of administering what he calls “that strange practice of ‘doing time’” (247). It should therefore not surprise us that he feels the guard-inmate relationship hasn’t changed much over the course of history (207). In his historical interlude, he quotes the dark prophecy of Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont, who themselves seem to have written about Sing Sing’s eclipsing of time:

One cannot see the prison of Sing-Sing and the system of labour which is there established without being struck by astonishment and fear. Although the discipline is perfect, one feels that it rests on fragile foundations: it is due to a tour de force which is reborn unceasingly and which has to be reproduced each day, under penalty of compromising the whole system of discipline. The safety of the keepers is constantly menaced. In the presence of such dangers, avoided with such skill but with difficulty, it seems to us impossible not to fear some sort of catastrophe in the future.

(176)

This passage is perhaps Newjack’s keynote: the prison is reduced by its own routine to its cycle of keeping. Perpetual vigilance always seems ready to collapse into its antithesis, chaos; each day, therefore, control is summoned up again. And thus we see how the regime of incapacitation, a supposedly traditional function of prison, produces a future-perfect eclipsing of time behind walls. Quite effectively, I think, Newjack shows us that the prison becomes actuarial cynicism made into a concrete manifestation of the outer society’s fatalism about prisoners’ past criminality and how it
is re-imposed upon them in the now. Countermanding the antique feel of Sing Sing’s cobweb world, one prisoner suggests that the outer world is “planning prison for somebody who’s a child right now” (233). And he’s right.

Meanwhile, as a representative of that outer world gone inside, Conover attempts to show us how that plan is executed. As I’ve said, his internal voice frequently registers an “error” or gap by pointing to his aversion to military discipline (17), to his curiosity and other guards’ lack of it (221), or to his knowledge that they’ll be transferring upstate and he won’t (169). But on the other hand, he also participates in these guards’ work culture. He is actually initiated not into official New York State mandates about guarding, as much as the shop-floor accommodation with those ideas. Much like chroniclers of municipal police training, Conover casts New York State’s correctional training program as a bookish academy that is actually out of touch with the demands of the “street” or, here, the cellblocks. The program is called, early on, a place of “institutional denial” about the “moral weirdness” (42) of prison, oblivious to the needs of those it claims to train as “peace officers” (33). Whereas other writers of the prison exposé emphasize connections between the prison and the outside economic system, Conover stresses the distance between public proclamations and the everyday micropolitical practices of corrections work. Much like a double agent, he asks us to witness not just how such incapacitation is enforced but how enforcing it feels.

We also engage darker elements of this thin blue line. He limits his storytelling mostly to what his body can be present to. Yet in turn, Conover’s portrait, like Milch’s or Gourevitch’s, also takes us into the effects of vigilance on the psyche of the enforcer. Conover thus echoes the gallows humor among guards (inmate conjugal visits are called the “Felon Reproduction Program” [159]). Or he follows the lead of comrades who tell him not to log a “use of force” incident with an inmate they deem insane (146). In this way, Conover illuminates a blue-collar resistance to the “white shirts” of wardens and politicians (95), showing us a guard culture both better and worse than what the state’s training dictates. In Newjack’s line of sight, indeed, we are taught that guards and inmates reciprocally restructure the rules handed down to them. At the academy, for example, he was taught not to talk to prisoners; on the prison floor, he learns that the job is all about talking (69). Previously given tedious rules to memorize, he discovers the value of maintaining the appearance of inmates’ compliance in a way he hopes is not degrading to them (255). The point, perhaps, is thus not only how the stress doubles up on Conover
as investigator and actual guard. What also produces stress in corrections work, it seems, is the unstable balancing of managerial imperatives with the actual demands of labor; the constant threat of violence beneath the routine, from guards and from inmates; and the corruption among guards that can result from the necessary ceding of some of their power on the cellblock floor.\textsuperscript{41} Whatever Newjack’s limits, this results, I think, in a much richer and also more frightening portrait than that of a no-frills functionalism the “prison-industrial” critique might convey. And, in turn, much more than any theory that claims it needs no account of human nature.

To add to the turmoil, the outer half of Conover’s identity, the part that is a proxy for many of his readers, creeps back under his undercover skin. His anxious heart, we might say, becomes tattooed on his own adopted identity, as he experiences what often seems like a perpetual state of dread on the job. “Keeplock” becomes a verbal conflation that expresses fatalism and fear, even gratitude about the collective security of guarding in a group. Albeit often with disarming candor, Conover speaks frankly about the thrill he gets in seeing his guard team subdue a prisoner (134–35, 275–76), or how he found himself wondering of any given inmate, constantly, “Could I beat him in a fight?” (247). Perhaps the most telling symbol becomes not the baton but the emergency pin on each guard’s radio, a pin that always seems about to be pulled (62). Before long, Sing Sing becomes, Conover admits, simply equivalent to living with fear (95). Over time, guards who initially seem unduly cautious or insensitive come to seem like veterans, primarily through a series of anecdotes that unveil, for instance, their experience as POWs (116) or, more tellingly, of having been taken hostage by prisoners in the past. Attica, the epitome of these fears, becomes quite like Bill Clark’s imaginative rewriting of Vietnam. “At some level,” Conover says of one superior officer who had been taken hostage by inmates in the past, “[the older guard] Wickersham hated our innocence and wanted to cure it through abuse”; soon, however, he seems only to be “insuring himself against repeating the experience” (117). As if this man individuates Tocqueville and Beaumont’s daily tour de force, one’s superiors become veterans much as in a war narrative. Wickersham’s experience seems only to validate the rookie’s own fears of the dangers ahead of him. Fear of inmates, or fear of failing on the job, ends up amounting to the same thing—or, we might say, learning to live with the prison’s incapacitation of inmates’ identities.

However, here is precisely where we arrive at the downside of Conover’s citation of Tocqueville and Beaumont’s prophecy. As persuasively as that vision captures the prison’s regime of control, it also runs the interpre-
tive risk of making that regime seem fearful primarily because it menaces the safety of the keepers. To his credit, Conover fully recognizes that this flip side to impersonating “society’s last representative” means carrying with him its social fears, including white or majoritarian racial fears. He understands, for instance, that “minority officers’ allegiance to the system was constantly being tested in ways that white officers’ was not” (285). While we often mistake undercover writing for an invisibility strategy, Newjack again shows us otherwise: Conover actually feels his whiteness made more visible behind prison walls, not less. (The most frequently used prisoner nickname for him, “Barney Fife” [226], speaks volumes.) And when Conover flashes back, in the aftermath of a cellblock melee, to the Rodney King beating, the image he calls up is that of Reginald Denny (273).

These fears suffuse even the best of liberal intentions. Along with pointing to the injustices of Rockefeller drug laws (204), as well as the need to restore prison education programs, Newjack rightly draws our attention to a sclerotic bureaucracy that fails to offer guards training in counseling. This is especially shocking given the number of prisoners now in need of serious psychiatric care (43, 208). But in the absence of political will for such resources, it is startling that the most Conover can do is propose that we humanize the keeper. Specifically, his working experience leads him to hypothesize that the best correction officers are those who make themselves akin to beat cops (89, 219). One is certainly struck by the fragility of this analogy: a cellblock is not a neighborhood of consenting, free citizens; guard labor is predicated on control and confinement, not civilized exchange; and so on. But beyond even those limits, it is telling how Conover’s liberal intentions end up in an ideological neighborhood so like the mythological constructions of neoconservatism. It is as if he intuits, that is, the other end in the chain of control (the street) that architects like Wilson had described. The result may be a sentimentalizing of his fellow guards and their own desire to be friendly counselors, against the grain of so much of what he has shown us. Stepping out of the rules of the undercover game, where facts are only supposed to be directly felt or seen, Conover wants to believe that, like him, his fellow guards want training in counseling even more than economic security. Though denied that schooling, Conover writes that “in their hearts, I think the officers wish it wasn’t so” (208).

To be fair, we don’t know if they do or they don’t. At its best, Newjack dramatizes the burdens that keeping might exact on their lives, and the paranoia that could be produced by the regime they helped to create.
Albeit economistic in its own way—in its focus on the guards’ premium on solvency—the book also reminds that the costs of maintaining such vigilance are not experienced equally by all. But one of the reasons we don’t fully know the inside of their hearts, a dialogue with *Brothers and Keepers* might suggest, is that Conover hasn’t calibrated his story of “doing time” by looking outward. That is, he hasn’t fully looked at the communities incorporated into the prison-industrial complex—communities of guards or prisoners—and engaging their memories of what life had been like before learning to live with the prison. In accepting Conover’s humane pleas, we are still liable to feel that these lost histories, not only the collapse of liberalism, haunt his portrait of Sing Sing—a past still present to *Newjack*’s perpetual present tense.

III.

Written nearly two decades earlier, and from the other end of the Visitor’s Room, John Edgar Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers* could hardly seem more different from Conover’s *Newjack*. A scathing portrait of the incipient forces gathered around his black brothers as the neoconservative turn grew in force, Wideman’s memoir presents prison guards as conscious agents of humiliation, proxies of a “crusade, a war on crime” (80), who degrade those they have already punished. As John puts it, “[w]hat politicians demanded in the free world was being acted out inside the prison” (80). Yet Pittsburgh’s Western Penitentiary, where his brother would be sent—and remains today, despite a tortured appeals process—is not just the end point of Robby’s sorrow. It is the actual starting place, the setting of John’s remembering. There, John must face, again, Robby’s straying into adolescent rebellion: into petty theft, drug use and drug-dealing, and finally, robbery homicide. The memoir thus both represents John’s visits to Western and recreates their past together through the lens of prison life. In turn, the book connects the project of incapacitation to these brothers’ lost neighborhood of Homewood.

Although *Brothers and Keepers* has a long historical, retrospective interlude, much like *Newjack*’s, a more local, microcosmic history is embedded in Robby himself—one might say, as he endures his own private Attica. Paralleling the broader historical trends of his era, Robby was incarcerated right after Western’s own prison strike (following upon the death by asphyxiation of an inmate in 1980). He was then subjected to a new “get tough policy” instituted by a younger generation of guards. The
new regime includes more strip searches, more cell shakedowns, and more humiliation. Robby also flirted with Islam, and then backed away when it only seemed to double the surveillance he was subjected to. As John begins his visits, Robby has been assigned to “administrative custody” in the “Behavioral Adjustment Unit” (81–84)—in other words, to administrative lockdown. Thus the entire donnée of Brothers and Keepers is the ethos of control and incapacitation. But by definition, the book can therefore achieve neither catharsis nor release.

Instead, Brothers and Keepers is a more lyrical and provisional book, a fluid text John creates in collaboration with Robby. Whereas Newjack evokes prison’s perpetual present and its hard surfaces of steel and concrete, the Widemans’ is a more historical, improvisational, and bluesy narrative, bending material and temporal realities. The memoir is built around the call-and-response of African American spirituals, the back and forth of blues (“Got two minds to leave here. Just one of them telling me to stay” [40]), and even the folktale byplay of the plantation “briarpatch” (39) between a rational “John” (the bear) and Robby (rabbit, the trickster). Blood and racialized “brothers” converse with “keepers,” a term referring to guards and family members and the wider social powers around them. The book’s dialogic structure also evokes a series of metaphorical transfers, puns with violence, or riffs upon words’ secret stories that so often evoke the underworlds of crime: “mugging” (21) for the camera, a “slammer” that “sure as shit . . . slams us together” (47), or a play on “the length of your sentence” (25). Prison solitary, or the “hole,” becomes a place where the boys’ mother witnesses the unfairness of a “whole” assault upon her neighborhood and family; as the memoir says, “[s]he’s peeped their hole card” (72). The blending of John’s and Robby’s voice also means that the “you” (and the “you-alls”) used by this memoir evokes—at times simultaneously—the conversation between these siblings, a direct appeal to readers, a social generalization, or interior monologue by either brother. John, for his part, reexamines the open secret he always suspected, what he calls the “rape” of Homewood in the years of their youth (40). Robby tends more to revisit how the ethos of the war on crime imposed itself upon the choices he made.

Complicated riffs on time and “doing time” quickly become the organizing motifs of the memoir. If Newjack tried to evoke Sing Sing’s impossible routine of days, the Widemans’ book time-bends the central contradiction of the retributive calculus itself. At one point, the book verbalizes the social rationale of “doing time,” offering a bitter rendering of its era’s dominant ideology: “A narrow sense of time as a material entity, as a
commodity like money that can be spent, earned, lost owed, or stolen is at the bottom of the twisted logic of incarceration. When a person is convicted of a crime, the state dispossesses that criminal of a given number of days, months, years. Time pays for crime. By surrendering a certain portion of his allotment of time on earth the malefactor pays his debt to society” (52). But then, as if we are listening to the dialogue of a minstrel show, another Wideman voice speaks up:

But how does anyone do time outside of time? Since a person can’t be removed from time unless you kill him, what prison does to its inmates is make time as miserable, as unpleasant, as possible. Prison time must be hard time, a metaphorical death, a sustained, twilight condition of death-in-life. The prisoner’s life is violently interrupted, enclosed within a parenthesis. . . .

Yet the little death of a prison sentence doesn’t quite kill the prisoner, because prisons, in spite of their ability to make the inmate’s life unbearable, can’t kill time. . . .

In spite of all the measures Western society employs to secularize time, time transcends the conventional social order. Prisoners can be snatched from that order but not from time. Time imprisons us all. (35–36)

Thus again material and cultural constructions of the prison come into play. Here, time itself serves to negate the simple cultural calculation that “time pays for crime” (35). In prison, to be sure, “Time’s all you got” (91). But it’s never your own.

To enlarge upon this contradiction, the Widemans give voice to the conflicts the process of mutual remembrance creates. As John wades into Robby’s past, and also into his own—sadly, we learn, not the same thing—John feels overwhelmed by the unfolding of time. “My imagination creates something like a great seashell,” he writes, “enfolding, enclosing us.” The image of the shell evokes a structure both comforting, like a brothers’ shared secret, and yet daunting as well, with repeated inward turns and revisions: “Its inner surface is velvet-soft and black. A curving mirror doubling the darkness . . . time stolen from time in the hole” (87). Like the figure of the parenthesis in the long passage quoted above, the shell shape alludes to the plot of the memoir as well. By moving from the “Western” provinces of Laramie (where Robby first escapes to seek John’s help), back to the “Western” penitentiary so near their home, the linear story is made to circle back and inward. The book begins with Robby’s capture, moves
into the first section called “Visits,” and then shifts haltingly back into Robby’s crime, in the section called “Our Time.”

“Our Time,” of course, invokes the vexed memories this collaboration calls up. The phrase refers not only to the time into which any of us are born, but to the factors that shape our identities: birth order, how close to holidays we are born, or how close to historical events. As but one example, Robby swerved into drug use (117) in 1968, the year that Martin Luther King was shot. That year was also the historical moment when, as John tells it, the “net” of economic deprivation settled down upon Homewood (40). The phrase “Our Time” also calls up the hubris, competitiveness, and desperation of late adolescence. That is, the phrase refers to the relish young men often take in their young manhood, their supposed “time” of achievement and establishing an identity. As it happens, though, this is the precise moment that John’s and Robby’s paths diverged. In Robby’s case, “our time” meant trying to be the “star” of a perpetual party, then a local Superfly, then a petty con man and self-appointed “stone gangster”; in John’s, it meant going to college. John was consequently no longer there to look out for his brother, having escaped into what he describes as the “cage” of his own upper-middle-class freedom (203). In other words, the brothers did not really share “their” time at all. We discover that John actually has to be retold the key events by which Robby became a criminal; the “you” of the narrative functions, now, more as a gentle brotherly correction. Robby’s earlier charge of “big brother” (9) similarly implicates John both in judgmental observation and in Orwellian betrayal: for escaping Homewood. “I wasn’t around for all that,” John admits (67).

John and Robby do, however, share a sense of what the net of deprivation has done to their family. John’s departure into the world of the keepers illustrates the phenomenon that sociologists like William Julius Wilson call the loss of “old heads” in disadvantaged neighborhoods. It is a story paralleled by the death of an older, more level-headed brother-surrogate for Robby named Garth (62). As the Widemans’ mother remembers, Garth’s death triggers Robby’s turn to more reckless criminality, as does the waning of his own father’s strength. And so, in a story articulated by the “Broken Windows” mythology, we see the decay of many of the forces that might have kept Robby in check. In fact, John’s memory of neighborhood decline is keyed to the disintegration of the local A & P, and even to a “plate-glass window that gets broken and stays broken” (75), the very symbol around which the crime-control case was being built.
Yet if the Wideman brothers seem to be diving into neoconservatism’s own shallow pool of social memory, they actually rewrite the meaning of this symbol. For one thing, in the twilight of Pittsburgh’s steel industry (40–41), the Widemans understand that a broken window is liable to be a sign of a closed factory, not merely of impulsive vandalism or neglect. Even more to the point, the spaces left by disappearing landmarks remain haunted by memories and thus are sites that continue in the neighborhood’s own consciousness. As John Wideman says in one interview, they are a “world that’s carried around in people’s heads”—places of personal connection, of belonging.49 Brothers and Keepers also uses the “net” or “rape” of Homewood not to denote a simple hollowing out of the ghetto—economic or social decline—but to suggest an attack, and thus to recall the imposition of new controls, the new “law and order” (72) ethos itself. Like Robby’s school, guarded by metal detectors after the summer of 1968, the “keeping” of the ghetto therefore anticipates the prison itself—lorded over by violence and betrayal, and by corrupt figures of authority like drug-dealing cops.50

Most importantly, the Widemans cast this transformation with an entirely different generational backdrop than the apologists for order-maintenance did. In the past, Robby and John’s father would, indeed, have taken it upon himself to personally avenge a family insult (73–74). But their mother, by contrast, carried on a stronger family tradition of forgiveness, of extending what the boys remember as “the benefit of the doubt.” It was a matter, John said in one interview, of always taking a “longer, slower look at people and situations,” calling on “your better side and try[ing] to get your ego out of it.”51 Or, what the Wideman boys remember as an ethos of seeing with others’ eyes: “You tried on the other person’s point of view” (69). (John’s daughter is said, in a telling mutual recognition between the brothers, to have their mother’s eyes [18].) As Robby is brought down partly by his own recklessness, family bitterness ensues, and the capacity for extending doubt is momentarily forgotten. After a time, however, their mother “realized her personal unhappiness and grief were inseparable from what was happening out there” (75), and the anger subsides.

Recouping this fragile legacy from their mother is crucial, we begin to recognize, to the entire subject of imaginatively engaging the prison. “Visiting,” a residual ethos brought to the North during the Great Migration, actually comes to stand for that legacy. Like “revisiting” in memory, visiting the prison becomes a process of remembering, or rejoining the social relation through writing with Robby, and hopefully seeing with his eyes.
This reconnection, in turn, challenges the literal, more vexed visiting of the keepers’ turf in the penitentiary. Of his earliest encounters with Western’s inmates, for example, John writes that “I want to learn from their eyes, identify with their plight, but I don’t want anyone to forget I’m an outsider, that these cages and walls are not my home” (46). What begins as an evocation of tension at not being in Robby’s “home,” or his memories, or even his actual historical past, gradually turns to John’s re-initiation as an institutional visitor, one who must learn the keepers’ rules anew. Just as Conover extrapolated from his own immersion, John must also imagine, since one’s own eyes are not enough. The “visit,” in other words—doing some time with Robby—becomes a trope about imaginative engagement. Yet the trope also reminds us of the determining limits on our imagining: limits imposed by one’s fears, one’s ego, one’s personal history, and more.

John learns, as I have said, about incapacitation. He discovers quickly that the guards have tremendous power, of course. Yet he also speculates that they are bored, “numbed by routine” (49), looking to avoid hassles and to just stick to their job; here, he intuitively anticipates Conover’s findings. And like most visitors, John must import analogies more familiar to him: the prison seems, for instance, like a funeral parlor (185), the Visitor’s Room itself like a “coffin” (218). Or, passing through a prison metal detector, John remembers that he had been stopped in an airport in the early 1970s, since his racial profile supposedly fit that of an “air pirate” (185). John also uses a story that Robby has told him about a temporary extension of control given inmates over the Visitor’s Room itself:

You said the prisoners complained about the state of the visitors’ facilities and were granted, after much bullshit and red tape, the privilege of sprucing them up. But when it came down to supplies or time to work on the project, the administration backed off. Yes, you can fix up the place. No, we won’t provide decent materials or time to do it. Typical rat-ass harassment. Giving with one hand, taking away with the other. If the waiting room’s less squalid than it was three years ago, it’s still far short of decent and it’s turning nasty again. The room thus becomes one more proof of the convict’s inability to do anything right. We said you fellows could fix it up and look what a crummy job you did. . . . Like you fucked up when you were in the street. And that’s why you’re here. That’s why keepers are set over you. (51)

In other words, control granted to inmates becomes another lesson in control over them. Indeed, many times John imagines that the purpose of the
Visitor’s Room was to humiliate him in the same way Robby has been, to force the visitor “to become an inmate. Subjected to the same sort of humiliation. Made to feel powerless, intimidated by the might of the state” (52).

Reading passages like these might easily lead to the conclusion that John identifies with Robby. John indeed cannot help but feel tied to Robby; in that involuted shell design again, the prison recapitulates the net of Homewood, but this time they are together in it. As it were, slammed together by the virtual space of the Visitor’s Room. Nevertheless, this desire for solidarity—or what John calls his “Soledad George Jackson fantasy” (191)—is made ridiculous by the end of visits, and more. John knows he’s not really in Robby’s skin. Imagining he is, even for a moment, might only be a way to hide from himself and his own past (77). In John’s view, the fantasy only exposes the brothers’ shared habit of compartmentalizing, an egocentrism that still keeps them apart, “each one alert,” both “trembling behind the vulnerable wall of our dark skins” (222). A pose of sentimental empathy can also disguise the competition between the brothers (87–88, 202), or the guilt John feels about Garth having taken his big brother role. Instead of these rhetorical identifications, therefore, the stronger moments in Brothers and Keepers work toward re-listening to Robby’s story. In what Gertrude Stein would have called the “time of the composition,” in other words, it is the differences between the brothers that unlock the meaning of their time together, in the prison and outside of it.

Certainly, John’s university-trained, more self-consciously political voice has its contributions to make. In a telling debunking of the emergent logic of neoconservatism, for example, John recasts prison through the lens of governance, revealing it as a gross distortion of majoritarian rule. He recalls the history of slavery to invoke this enduring wound, adapting the infamous reasoning behind Dred Scott (1857): “Prisoners have no rights,” Wideman reasons, “that the keepers are bound to respect” (187). Like slavery, then—as a regime of law extending beyond the South as such—the prison must express the total, encompassing vigilance reflected in such legal reasoning:

As the keepers decide what time prisoners must awaken, when they may clean themselves, when they may eat, to whom they may speak, how they may wear their hair, which patches of ground they may march across and how long they may take crossing them, as the keepers constrict space and limit freedom, as the inmates are forced to conform to these mandates, an
identity is fashioned for the prisoners. Guarding the inmates’ bodies turns out to be a license for defining what a prisoner is. The tasks are complementary, in fact inseparable. (188)

Along with invoking the “keepers” of slavery, such a reading obviously also calls up the imagery of a zoo or prison camp, territorial and regimented to an extreme. Western is every bit the “total” institution that Sing Sing is in *Newjack*.

On the other hand, what John may learn from Robby is that this control is not the strict “rule-based” regime that it pretends to be. To Robby, the prison is more a “fun-house mirror” that makes rules themselves arbitrary, “more perverse” than a predictable imposition of authority (183). If the prison were simply about rules, even upside-down ones, one could learn to live with it. Instead, it becomes a place where everything is distorted, and the inmate—by his submission and his fear—must encounter a grotesque reflection of himself. And if he doesn’t internalize this image, the Widemans suggest, he’s often put in even more danger (183). “Nothing is what it seems. You must always take second readings, decode appearances, pick out the obstructions erected to keep you in your place. Then work around them” (221). In other words, what Conover experiences as a regimen produced by the daily round of incapacitation is now provisionally “seen” (with Robby’s eyes) as something even more arcane. *Brothers and Keepers*’ image of the mirror is thus further revised. As is the “you”:

You, the custodians, formulate whatever rules, whatever system you require to keep the prisoners in custody. You must stand between them and us. You are not a connection between the free world and the prison world but a chasm, a wall, a two-sided, unbreakable mirror. When we look at you we see ourselves. We see order and justice. . . . When prisoners gaze into the reverse side of the mirror they should see the deformed aberrations they’ve become. (189)

After reading Conover, we are perhaps likely to feel that, like other “peace officers,” prison guards are the handy symbols of the broader public cry for order. But in this passage, Wideman ends up depicting the literal, onsite keepers not as Conover does—not just as “proxies.” Rather, they become a one-way mirror that blocks the Homewood tradition of trying on the other’s point of view. Therefore the prison does not, as in the future-perfect fantasies of its neoconservative keepers, become an institution that saves the old neighborhood; rather, it attempts to eclipse that home,
driving the tradition of “you-alls” and shared “eyes” into the lockdown of each brother’s memories. But perhaps like time itself, this tradition cannot really be “owned”—by any one person, that is. It can be revisited only by its collective inheritors. In *Brothers and Keepers*, it can be viewed only collaboratively, and even then, only through a bending light.

**IV.**

We can never really know whether John Edgar Wideman successfully captures the world on the other side of the mirror, the prison as experienced by the incarcerated. Like *Newjack*’s strategy of undercover immersion, the time-bending, collaborative technique of *Brothers and Keepers* is merely an attempt to cope with prison’s intractable barriers to an outsider’s observation and understanding. Indeed, the proliferation of analogies in both texts—whether a prison is called a zoo, compared to the condition of slavery, made into a funhouse—demonstrates how elusive the prison experience can be. In contrast to exposés that investigate the broader or “macro” span of the prison-industrial complex, both books are also more personal and more intent upon the relationship between the guard and prisoner. Yet both are inevitably the work of visitors. Lest we conclude that these authors have somehow gotten us further “inside” than other exposés, we should remember that both of them encounter, in different senses, the limitations of their own skin, as well as their kinship with keepers of all kinds. In narratives like these, therefore, James Clifford’s reminder about the doubly partial nature of cultural description—“partial” in the sense of invested, and also meaning incomplete—is all the more germane. Nor can these books’ micropolitical focus do more than complement and complicate accounts of the “net” descending upon neighborhoods like Homewood.

At their core, these books come up against one of the fundamental tensions in depicting the prison-industrial complex: the challenge of capturing how a site so “out of the world” nevertheless reflects the larger social system that created it. Prison’s portraitists must explain how the release of controls upon capitalist enterprise, in our day, has been accompanied by the imposition of new controls upon others. Indeed, this is a contradiction akin to those I have discussed earlier in this book: how to justify using criminal informants in the name of “zero tolerance” about law and order; how to validate the work of public police officers in terms of extralegal order-maintenance; or how to create a new architecture of security,
paradoxically, in the name of personal sovereignty and consumer freedom. Conover and the Widemans remind us, as well, that “learning to live with crime” has meant vastly different things for different citizens and communities. The phrase refers not only to the choices we make as voters, or as adolescents in “our time,” but to whose jobs are integrated into the prison system, or to who is forced to sustain a relationship with a loved one behind bars. The cold calculus of incapacitation has meant, as well, that prison is not simply about retribution or “payback” for individual crimes, despite what politicians or even the system’s critics often insist. Rather, prison’s culture of keeplock and Alice-in-Wonderland arbitrariness suggests a doubling up on prisoners’ pain through the control device of incapacitation. As the Widemans’ allegory of the Visitor’s Room “reform” suggests, prison becomes a perpetual reminder, in one final turn of the phrase, of the prisoner’s incapacity to better himself.

In such a light, therefore, we also might carefully measure our understanding of Robby Wideman’s continuing survival in prison—his choice, in particular, to complete a prison degree program (239). His endurance is not meant, I think, to serve as exemplary of the “model” prisoner, one who has survived by internalizing control, or reflecting it back, as his keepers supposedly want. That might be the story we would prefer to tell ourselves. Much more tellingly, bending incapacitation’s own collapse of time to a different argument, Brothers and Keepers contends that Robby survives by being who he always was. As John says, “[t]he character traits that landed Robby in prison are the same ones that have allowed him to survive with dignity, and pain and a sense of himself as infinitely better than the soulless drone prison demands he become. Robby knows his core is intact: his optimism, his intelligence, his capacity for love, his pride, his dream of making it big, being somebody special” (195). In fact, this core includes doing the very thing Conover’s keepers can’t imagine: Robby falls in love again, doing so without telling the girl he loves that he’s in for life, ignoring time as he always has. Ever the rebel and trickster, Robby survives, paradoxically, through his inability to accept his fate. In prison, he only redoubles his refusal to accept that “dull, inferior portion” handed out to black boys in the Homewood streets (195), which to him had meant passively taking his welfare check and waiting to die (132).

In the end, Brothers and Keepers calls up a series of social memories that countermand the emergent mythologies of what I have called the neo-conservative turn. The memoir serves as a powerful repudiation of the central myth of the prison’s timeless function, its supposed turning back of the clock to protect what neighborhoods like Homewood were said to
have lost. It is not only that the Wideman brothers still recall the “benefit of the doubt” they found in their original keepers, their parents—in the “old heads” that, in another generational involution, the brothers are now themselves becoming. More to the point, *Brothers and Keepers* shows that Robby retains a repository of neighborhood values that, at least in his case, do survive the incapacity of doing time. And Robby, in turn, repudiates the actuarial predictions that others have made about his own future. Because his crime skills, his impulsiveness, and his sense of specialness remain, they help him survive, or endure, prison’s special degradations. Turning us through the curving shell one last time, *Brothers and Keepers* tells us that Robby’s past was never a dismal predictor of what his real future could be. In this sense, he is a keeper for all of us.