



Gay college students teach Atascadero prisoners to dance and cruise in a therapeutic role-play scenario. From Rob Cole, "Behind Bars, Lessons on Being Gay," *Advocate*, June 20, 1973, 5

Lessons in Being Gay: Queer Encounters in Gay and Lesbian Prison Activism

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On June 28, 1970, the first gay march in New York City commemorating the Stonewall rebellion of the preceding year passed the Women's House of Detention. The march's route was not an accident. The jail was symbolically important, having held many renowned activists. Catholic radical Dorothy Day, labor organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and accused communist spy Ethel Rosenberg all had been incarcerated there in earlier decades. Radical feminist Valerie Solanas was held at the Women's House of Detention after shooting Andy Warhol in 1968, as were Angela Davis and Weather Underground member Jane Alpert in that same year. At the time of the 1970 march, two members of the Panther 21 group arrested on bomb conspiracy charges in a COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program) frame-up—Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur—were inside the jail.¹

The location of the Women's House of Detention would also have been meaningful to gay and lesbian marchers. Situated on a triangular block at the busy intersection of Sixth Avenue, Eighth Street, and Christopher Street near Sheridan Square, the jail lay in the heart of Greenwich Village and its flamboyant and newly politicized queer scene.² Sheridan Square was a popular gay cruising spot and home to several gay bars, including the Stonewall Inn. The jail's downtown location had long invited a boisterous exchange between women behind bars and their friends

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and relations on the street. Joan Nestle remembered the “House of D” as “a shrine for separated lovers” where lesbians would call up to their incarcerated girlfriends late at night after the bars closed.³

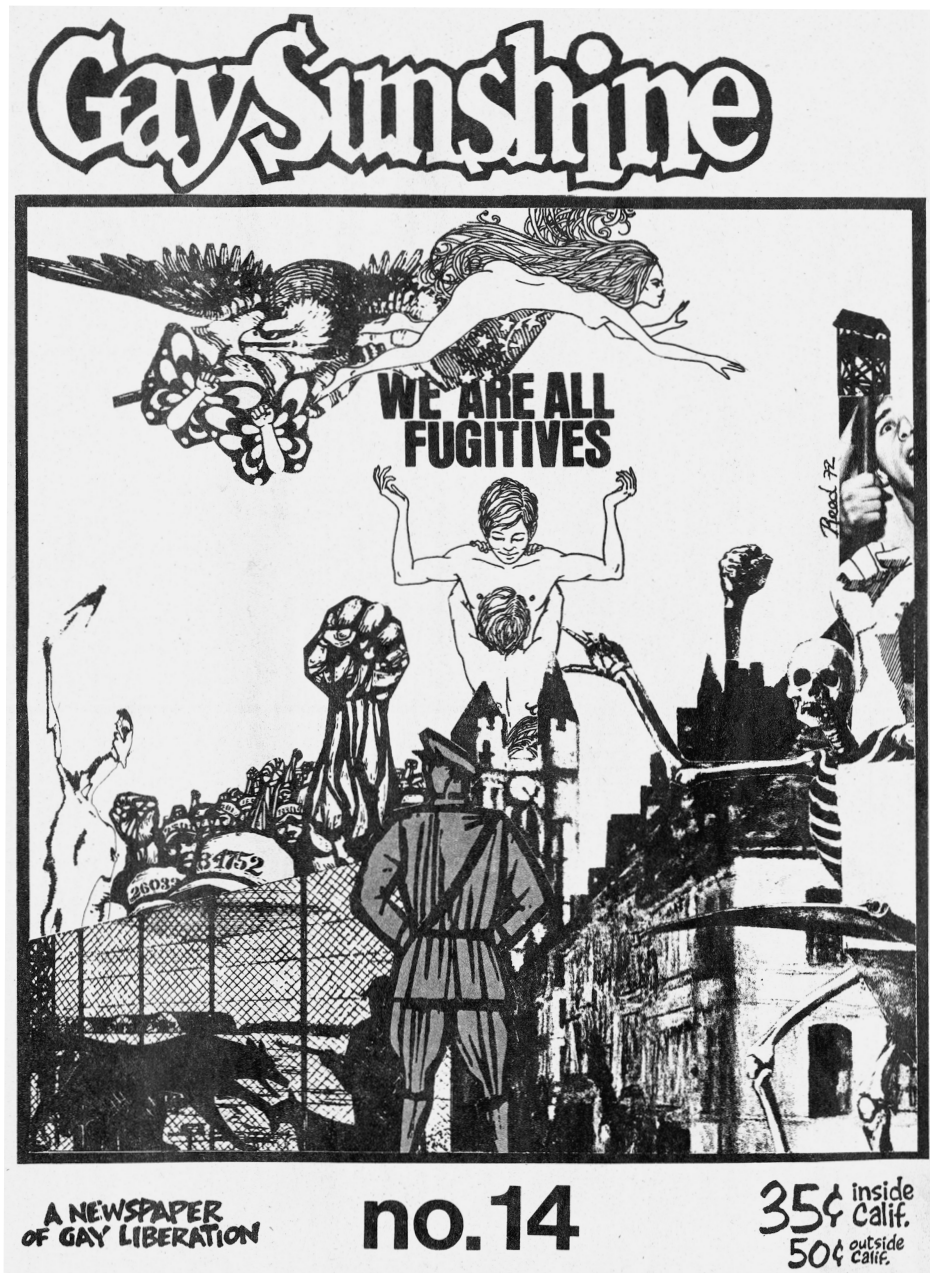
The permeability between street and urban jail that gave rise to that social and sexualized scene facilitated political connections as well, connections in evidence at that first march in June 1970. As the demonstrators passed the jail, Gay Liberation Front members chanted, “Free our Sisters! Free ourselves!”⁴ Expressions of solidarity among gay activists and prisoners became bolder and more reciprocal later that summer. On August 29, a march protesting police harassment began on Forty-second Street and proceeded downtown, concluding with a battle cry in front of the women’s jail. Protestors on the street called up, “‘Power to the sisters!’” and prisoners yelled back to the crowd, “‘Power to the gay people!’”⁵ When demonstrators happened on a police raid taking place under the guise of a fire inspection at the Haven, a popular neighborhood gay club, they responded with rage, hurling bottles at police, overturning cars, looting stores, and setting fires. The riot spread upward to the Women’s House of Detention, where prisoners threw burning paper through their barred windows to the cheering crowd below.⁶

The Women’s House of Detention was shut down the following year and demolished soon after. But political connections between lesbian and gay activists and prison inmates persisted as an important and underrecognized feature of the gay liberation movement of the 1970s. Many marches and demonstrations of the movement’s early years chose jails and prisons as rallying sites.⁷ And beginning in the early 1970s, gay activists initiated a wide range of projects on behalf of prisoners they called “brothers” and “sisters,” publishing newsletters, investigating and publicizing prison conditions, offering legal counseling, organizing prison ministries, sponsoring pen-pal and outreach projects, and assisting parolees. At the same time, prisoners, some of whom identified as gay, began organizing on their own behalf against discrimination, harassment, and violence.

The unity evoked in the chants of solidarity exchanged between prisoners and activists in the summer of 1970 masked much more complicated and at times fraught connections between newly politicized gay men and lesbians and prisoners who inhabited a sexual world permeable to but different in marked ways from the one taking shape outside. This article explores the understandings, misunderstandings, and often uneasy alliances forged between queer prison insiders and outsiders. Detectable in queer encounters wrought from the most radical impulses of gay liberation were the roots of politics that were normative in their assumptions and normalizing in their aims.

“What’s Outside Is Inside Too”

Gay liberationists joined others on the radical left in allying with prisoners and in theorizing connections between the worlds behind and beyond bars.⁸ Indeed, leftist



Gay liberationists proclaimed unity with “brothers” and “sisters” behind bars. Collage by “Read.” *We Are All Fugitives* appeared on the cover of *Gay Sunshine*, no. 14 (1972). Published with permission of the publisher, Winston Leyland

credibility in this period seemed to depend on radical prison activism. As African American, Chicano/Chicana, and Puerto Rican militants embraced prisoners as a revolutionary vanguard in the early 1970s, participants in the gay liberation movement, too, came to see gay prisoners as “victims of a vicious system.” “Whether the charge emerges from their homosexuality (sodomy, solicitation, ‘lewd conduct’), or indirectly (burglary, prostitution, shoplifting),” gay liberationist Allen Young insisted, “all gay prisoners are political prisoners.”⁹

Advocacy on behalf of incarcerated gay people preceded the liberationist efforts of the 1970s. Soon after its founding in the early 1950s and into the 1960s, the Mattachine Society, the first organization to argue on behalf of “homophile” rights in the United States, recognized that heightened police surveillance of gay cruising spots, routine raids on gay bars, and the felonious status of same-sex sex made it likely that gay men would at some point run afoul of the law. Mattachine mobilized to protest the then-common use of entrapment against gay men and printed wallet cards with practical instructions for gay men titled “What to Do in Case of Arrest.”¹⁰ Gay men’s criminalized status and vulnerability to arrest continued to inspire gay prison activism into the 1970s. The editors of *RFD*, a quarterly newsletter that announced itself as “A Country Journal — For Gay Men Everywhere,” justified devoting a section called “Brothers behind Bars” to prison issues in 1976 by reminding readers of their own vulnerability to arrest. “One of the few ways rural gay men have to meet each other is at the tea rooms in parks and along highways,” the editors noted, where they risked entrapment and arrest.¹¹ Since “anti-gay laws are most often enforced in small towns and rural areas, away from the group power of organized gayness,” the *RFD* editors argued, gay men in those areas were “likely to be scapegoated for a crime.” The publication envisioned “Brothers behind Bars” as a way to bring “victims of this injustice” and “potential victims” together in a common cause.¹²

The politics of gay liberation and the larger context of radical ferment in the early 1970s produced analyses that envisioned connections between gay activists and gay prisoners in newly intense, if often more analogized, terms. Mike Riegle, the founder of *Gay Community News*’s Prisoner Project in 1975, declared that “what’s outside is inside too,”¹³ and he proposed that the multiple oppressions faced by gay prisoners were simply exaggerated versions of those experienced by all gay men and lesbians. Riegle extended the comparison by inverting it, asserting that “what’s going on inside is only an exaggeration and a distortion of what’s happening right out here, in what some of my prisoner friends call ‘minimum custody.’”¹⁴ Insisting on the connections between a “politics of ‘crime’” and “the general politics of social control, control of bodies, and even control of desires,” Riegle asked by way of instructive provocation, “Kissed your lover in public lately?”¹⁵

Prison activism was “not just about giving prisoners a ‘hand out,’” a group of Illinois gay activists insisted; “it’s about building a new kind of community.”¹⁶ From these powerfully imagined connections emerged a rhetoric and politics of

unity based on an assumed kinship between gay prisoners and gay activists. The language of brotherhood and sisterhood infused the rhetoric and ideology of gay prison advocacy and inspired strong commitments to a range of activist efforts on behalf of prisoners.

Challenging Discrimination behind Bars

Gay and lesbian activists did not have to look hard to find evidence of an array of discriminatory practices and oppressive conditions suffered by gay and lesbian prisoners. The blatant discrimination involved in segregating homosexual prisoners was one key focus of gay prison activism. A long-standing practice in men's prisons, segregation was justified by the claim on the part of prison administrators, articulated both vaguely and sweepingly, that homosexuals represented a threat to institutional order and security. By the 1970s the segregation of gay inmates was newly promoted as a form of "protective custody" intended to shelter them from harassment and assault. Gay men, especially effeminate ones, were often targets for humiliation, exploitation, and sexual violence in prison, but many experienced their recourse of last resort—a request for protective custody (PC)—as compounding rather than relieving the conditions of their incarceration. Protective custody stamped gay men with the stigma of cowardice; it was also associated with the cardinal prison sin of informing, and placement in PC could brand gay men with the damning label of "snitch." Protective custody also entailed a wide array of restrictions and penalties, and gay prisoners alerted activists to the lack of meaningful distinction between PC and punitive solitary detention. Prisoners incarcerated in PC were often held in the same physical quarters as those in solitary confinement, and they suffered the same lack of access to social, recreational, vocational, and rehabilitative opportunities. As a consequence, gay prisoners were often unable to accrue "good time" credit or build a favorable prison record toward early parole or gain placement in work-release programs. One prisoner described the conditions of his confinement: "I am here on what they are calling Protective Custody. It means I'm locked in a 9x4 cell 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and have no program of any kind." He added in understated conclusion, "I'm what you might call getting the shaft."¹⁷

Few women's prisons engaged in similar practices of segregating lesbians. But lesbian activists protested the policy of placing identifiable (typically butch) lesbians in a separate cell block termed the "Daddy Tank" at the Sybil Brand Institute, the Los Angeles county jail for women. Selection for the Daddy Tank was reportedly made on the basis of physical appearance and deportment, segregating women, in one gay reporter's account, "with short hair cuts or no make up, those wearing trousers with flies [*sic*], jockey shorts, T-shirts or turned up socks, those who spread their legs when they sit, and those who hold a cigarette between thumb and forefinger."¹⁸ Women were held in the Daddy Tank under harsh and restrictive maximum-security conditions regardless of whether they were awaiting trial or serving time and regardless of their offense. Conditions there were reportedly "three or four

times worse' than in other sections of the jail.¹⁹ Women confined in the Daddy Tank, lesbian activists charged, "have the least privileges; the filthiest jobs; get thrown in Lock Up without warning."²⁰

In a demonstration held in mid-June of 1972, lesbian activists picketed the Sybil Brand Institute to protest its discriminatory and punitive segregation policy.²¹ Although they refused to admit bowing to pressure, Sybil Brand officials modified the Daddy Tank into a medium-security "Daddy Dorm," in which inmates were housed in a dormitory rather than in small single cells, were permitted access to an open dayroom, and were newly eligible for occupational classes and recreational programs. But some inmates denied any meaningful improvement in the still segregated conditions. One former resident of the Daddy Tank reported, "they just pulled a few femmes out of the general population" in an effort to make the discriminatory punishment for gender nonconformity less obvious.²²

Prisoners and their advocates also protested the discrimination against lesbian and gay inmates resulting from indeterminate sentencing laws and the routine denial and revocation of parole on the basis of homosexuality. The indeterminate sentence, a popular reform measure in the late nineteenth century that became the standard form of sentencing throughout the United States, gave courts wide discretion over sentencing lengths and allowed prison officials to hold prisoners beyond their minimum sentencing period for a variety of disciplinary reasons, homosexuality among them. Members of the San Francisco-based collective Join Hands—formed in 1972 and comprising gay men, some of them former prisoners—protested this practice in testimony before a state congressional committee hearing in 1974. "This negative discrimination is often for *no other reason* than the prisoner's sexuality," collective members stated. To support their claims, Join Hands representatives quoted from a letter written by Eddie Loftin, a California prisoner who had been denied parole along with other gay men: "There was 7 gays that went to the parole board, and out of the 7 only one made parole. . . . That is a 'Hell' of a average."²³ Loftin died of a heart attack three months later, still awaiting parole at Folsom.

The discretionary power that indeterminate sentencing granted prison administrators meant that parole could also be denied to inmates on the basis of gender nonconformity. One prisoner at the California Men's Colony complained that he was denied parole sixteen months following the termination of his sentence, "solely because I expressed my intention of having sexual reassignment surgery and hormonal treatment upon release." He was told that his parole would not be reconsidered "until I change my sexual identity."²⁴ Parole could also be revoked, and prisoners who had been released were consequently forced to hide their homosexuality and gender nonconformity to avoid reincarceration.

Outside and Inside: Queer Encounters

Gay activists arrived at their critique of incarceration in part through the politics of gay liberation and through radical politics more generally. They also did so, impor-

tantly, in conversation with gay and lesbian prisoners. Eager for genuine dialogue with prisoners, gay activists insisted that the direction of discussion not be simply one way. The Join Hands collective advertised its newsletter as “a vehicle for gay prisoners to communicate with each other and to educate those of us on the outside as to what’s coming down so that we can most effectively direct our support and action.”²⁵ The Seattle-based lesbian feminist collective that published the newsletter *Through the Looking Glass* on women’s prison conditions in the Pacific Northwest likewise solicited the writing of women and lesbian prisoners, as did the feminist and lesbian journals *off our backs*, *Lesbian Connection*, and *Lesbian Tide*. Mike Riegle developed and edited “The Other Side of the Wall,” a monthly section of *Gay Community News (GCN)* devoted to publishing articles and letters written “by prisoners about their experiences being in and up against the prison system.” In these pages, Riegle wrote, “prisoners speak for themselves for a change, instead of being the subject of others’ writings, or forgotten altogether.”²⁶

The gay, lesbian, and feminist press served as a crucial conduit of information from the outside in and from the inside out.²⁷ For some prisoners, especially for those who had been active in the movement before their incarceration, news of gay life and politics in the outside world could prove a lifeline. One prisoner who claimed to have been among the “group of shouters” in the Stonewall riots wrote to *Join Hands* that he was “still shouting” and “will not stop. . . . If you are out in those streets, shout a little bit louder for us in here. If you listen really hard you can hear us shouting with you.”²⁸ Another prisoner in New Mexico thanked Riegle for sending him copies of *GCN* that enabled him to “maintain a modicum of pace with current events and grants some perspective to and mediates the negativity around me.”²⁹ For a Wisconsin prisoner, receiving the *Advocate* “keeps me informed as to what is happening in the gay society.”³⁰ Another expressed his appreciation to gay activists who demonstrated against the state penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas, to protest the prison’s ban on gay publications: “GAY LIB WAS HERE!” he exclaimed. “WOW! Beautiful! Fantastic!! I wanted to hug every one of the protestors. . . . The Gay Community cared, and it felt good. Really great!” As a result, he wrote, “gays walked around here proud of the protestors and of themselves. . . . It’s really hard to explain how much this means to gay inmates here.”³¹

The value of gay publications to gay prisoners could be measured by tracking a single newspaper’s circulation around an institution. “My own G.C.N.s make the rounds of gays on this floor, six of us,” one prisoner wrote; “then it goes upstairs to two more gays, then goes to another section of this prison for other gays to read.”³² Another inmate in a Missouri prison on sodomy charges counted “about half a dozen other gay men in this housing unit who are lined up to read each issue of *GCN* as I get them, so we are passing it around to everyone! We’re building quite a readership here, I think.”³³

Members of that prison readership learned of gay demonstrations and pride marches, the election of Harvey Milk to San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors in

1977 and his assassination the following year, Florida's Dade County anti-gay rights initiative, the defeat of California's Briggs initiative that would have banned gays and lesbians from teaching in public schools, and other news of the successes and setbacks of a growing movement. Reading in *RFD* about "the 100,000 gay march in San Francisco" in 1976 inspired one prisoner in the Washington state penitentiary to exclaim, "YEH-HOO! It opened my eyes to a new world, to know that gay brothers and sisters are out there doing what we want to do, but can't at this time."³⁴

Perhaps less self-consciously but no less important, the gay press alerted readers to new homosexual norms and values. In the process, gay newspapers and journals not only informed readers of news of the movement but also instructed them in new ways to be gay. The new movement was accompanied by a new ethos—informed by the affirmation that gay was good and a call to gay pride, an imperative to "come out," a belief in sexual reciprocity and mutuality, a refusal of gay stereotypes, and a critique of gendered roles. Those new norms often collided with a sexual culture in prison that had a much longer history. In a 1976 *Advocate* article, David Rothenberg wrote that "gay pride and gay self acceptance . . . challenge the lifestyle and social structure of the prison population."³⁵ The norms of prison sexual culture, by contrast—characterized in women's prisons by butch-femme partnerships and in men's prisons by the participation of heterosexually identified men whose masculine gender presentation and "active," penetrative role in sex with other men did not confer or connote a homosexual identity, and by their asymmetrical and sometimes exploitative partnerships with other men who were sometimes feminized by association—ran directly counter to the emerging norms of post-Stonewall urban gay life.

Prisons were far from impermeable to phenomena in the larger outside culture, and there is some evidence that the new norms of gay life were beginning to appear behind bars by the 1970s and 1980s. "Just as the gay scene has changed in the free world," one prisoner wrote, "so in prison one finds a more militant gay who values his masculinity and refuses to be a female surrogate."³⁶ The demographic profile of the San Francisco jail in San Bruno would hardly have been typical, but one gay man imprisoned there reported in 1983 that "every conceivable Gay subculture" was represented on the jail's "Gay tier": "drag queens, muscle men, preppies, post-op transsexuals, hippie queers, rednecks, leather men, clones—the gamut."³⁷ One Oklahoma prisoner, considerably further from the epicenter of gay culture, who identified as "not overly butch nor overly femme, I'm just me," wrote in 1976 about his defiance of prison gender norms in a relationship with another inmate: "We both agreed that neither of us was the dominant one . . . Sometimes I would be in the passive role, sometimes Roger would." "The trouble started," he wrote, when straight prisoners started asking "what could two whores do for each other?" The fact that two guys were making it to the exclusion of all straights rankled their souls."³⁸ Another prisoner at Vacaville wrote in 1977 that after "bounc[ing] in and out (mostly in) of the California prison system for close to 20 years," he had "at long

last” begun to “break out of the restrictions of the almost mandatory stereotyping of sexual roles imposed on us here in the penal society by our peers.”³⁹ When he stopped plucking his eyebrows and wearing tight pants, his noncompliance with prison gender norms incited a “battle” in which he had to “fight to prove my sincerity in demanding to be allowed to be myself” and to “put up with frequent threats of being stabbed.”⁴⁰ One Lompoc inmate noted the “new trend” of what he termed “‘fag-on-fag’” sex that emerged in the early 1980s, a trend that he blamed for disrupting “the sex life of straights” in the prison, his own included. “Regular guys can’t compete with homosexuals,” he added, because they could not abide sexual reciprocity: “Homos on homos get into sixty-nining, rimming . . . We can’t deal with that. That’s tough to compete with.”⁴¹

Some gay male prisoners resisted the feminizing demands of prison sexual culture, but many found the pressures of prison sexual norms and expectations overwhelming. That collision provoked frustration and anger on the part of some inmates who were forced to adjust to a sexual code that differed markedly from the one taking shape outside. Those accustomed to gay life on the street “must set aside their ‘old self’ and make way for a new personality” on coming to prison, one inmate wrote.⁴² A California prisoner explained, “you don’t have gays here . . . There are ‘men’ and ‘women.’ The ‘men’ are ‘straight’ and the ‘women’ are queer, punks, fags, etc. All of the labels that the gays on the outside fight against . . . It’s a real bummer of a trip . . . These things merely serve to make things difficult for those who are gay and proud.”⁴³ Another wrote to members of New York’s Gay Activists Alliance that in prison, “there is no such animal as a ‘Gay.’ You must be a punk, a queer, a faggot, a dicksucker . . . , a bitch, a whore—but you *may not be Gay*, and *certainly cannot be proud!*”⁴⁴ Still another complained, “There simply is no room in the prison environment for a man who likes other men. The only relationship that can be understood and accepted is a man and his ‘girl.’”⁴⁵

Some lesbian prisoners voiced similar frustration with the dissonance of gay life behind bars and the one taking shape outside. While women prisoners had long organized their relationships along gendered lines, many lesbian feminists criticized butch-femme roles as imitative of heterosexuality and supportive of traditional and oppressive gender roles, and those criticisms found their way into prisons in the 1970s. One inmate told an interviewer in 1973, “there’s a lot more role playing” at California’s Terminal Island prison “than out on the street,” and that she felt forced to participate because people said, “‘Oh, look at the new daddy that’s in.’ ‘I’ve never been a daddy in my life!’” she added, “but as long as you walk with an aggressive walk, then they tag you as a daddy and that’s what you’re gonna be.”⁴⁶ She did note, however, that “now that Women’s Liberation has come around, it’s changed a little bit. Like I’ve noticed that more girls are accepting you being a woman instead of being a male image or a butch or a dyke.”⁴⁷ Another California prisoner used the terminology of lesbian feminism in referencing “women loving women relationships,”

but complained that in prison, they “take on all the fucked up aspects of male female relationships—the dominant/passive, the games, the possessiveness, the jealousies, the role playing.”⁴⁸

The collision between new norms of gay liberation and lesbian feminism and those of prison sexual culture elicited a change in consciousness, or at least a new consciousness of appropriate sexual script, on the part of some prisoners. One inmate who had once adopted the gendered norms of prison sexual culture recalled self-critically in an interview with a gay activist that he had been “into a role thing, where I was a homosexual and [my partner] was a straight man.” When asked, leadingly, if he had come to think differently, he replied, “Oh, yeah. My consciousness is entirely different now. I think that having to play those roles was extremely oppressive for many of us.”⁴⁹ The inmate Bobbie Lee White testified to the transformative power of receiving *GCN* while in prison. In learning about the gay movement outside, White explained, he had come to understand that “being gay is something more than having sex with the same sex.”⁵⁰

Some who suffered the oppressive conditions of prison life were inspired both by the gay and the prisoners’ rights movements to organize on their own behalf. Some of those efforts appeared to be spontaneous responses to discrimination. An Illinois prisoner recounted that “we used to have this thing where many of the gay people would organize, and do strikes, and sit-ins, and shit like that, refuse to do any work.”⁵¹ Other groups emphasized support and consciousness raising. La Toya Lewis, a male-to-female transsexual prisoner in the state penitentiary in Los Lunas, New Mexico, notified *GCN* of a group called Gays in Prison, which held “rap sessions to help each other with the problems of everyday prison life,” especially with vulnerability to sexual violence.⁵² Another prisoner, Tyrone Gadson, announced the start of “a self-help organization” at New Jersey’s Rahway State Prison called the Gayworld Organization, for “gay inmates who are having adjustment problems with their gaylife in the institution.”⁵³ Gay prisoners in the Louisiana state prison at Angola formed the Self-Help Alliance Group (or SHAG) in 1984 to “help, promote, and assist this segment of the prison society which has, for so long, been ignored, ridiculed, and belittled” and to develop the “creative talents of homosexuals.”⁵⁴ The founders of SHAG proposed an orientation for gay men entering prison to “indoc-trinate homosexuals to the various lifestyles and atmosphere of the various prison environments” and to teach them to “conduct themselves . . . so that they can live in peace, without harassment.”⁵⁵

One of the first organizations of gay prisoners was founded in 1977 at the Washington state penitentiary at Walla Walla. Initiated by members of the George Jackson Brigade, a revolutionary guerrilla organization active in the Pacific Northwest in the mid-1970s convicted for several small bombings and bank heists, the group worked to protect gay and other vulnerable inmates from sexual harassment and violence. Members met the “chain” (the bus on which new inmates were trans-

ferred to the prison) each week and provided orientation to new prisoners to tutor them in the complexities of prison etiquette and warn them of prison dangers. They also worked to secure “safe cells” and provided escort services for “those men most likely to be raped, sold, pimped, and preyed upon in the sexual meat market condoned by the administration.”⁵⁶ Gay prisoners at Walla Walla boasted some remarkable successes. “The other day two prisoners ‘sold’ a gay cellmate to another prisoner,” one prisoner wrote. “We moved into the situation and smashed the deal. The ‘property’ was moved into one of our cells and is under our escort.”⁵⁷ They also worked to release gay prisoners from protective custody and helped integrate them safely into the general population.

The name that Walla Walla prisoners chose for their organization, Men against Sexism, articulated an analysis of prison sexual violence comprehensible to gay and lesbian activists and fully compatible with the ideological foundations of gay liberationist thought. In working toward an analysis of gay oppression, lesbians and gay men looked to sexism as a root cause, indicting in particular the patriarchal values, normative gender roles, and institutionalized heterosexuality nurtured and policed by the nuclear family. Gay Liberation Front activist Martha Shelley identified gay men and lesbians as “women and men who, from the time of our earliest memories, have been in revolt against the sex-role structure and nuclear family structure.”⁵⁸ It was perhaps not surprising that lesbians would be drawn to radical feminism for analyses of their oppression. But gay male activists also located their oppression in the nuclear family’s enforcement of normative masculinity. “Gay liberation is a struggle against sexism,” Allen Young announced. “Within the context of our society, sexism is primarily manifested through male supremacy and heterosexual chauvinism.”⁵⁹

Those critiques inspired Walla Walla’s Men against Sexism, whose members challenged the hypermasculinist prison ethos they viewed as contributing to sexual violence. Prisoners who called on feminist analyses of sexism in order to understand prison oppressions were readily comprehensible to gay activists outside. The language of gay oppression and pride used more generally by many other incarcerated activists resonated with and echoed the language used by activists outside. Gay activists could not help but be gratified by proclamations like that of the inmate La Toya Lewis that “it was a long fight to get where we are now, but now the Gay Men and Transsexuals (such as myself) can walk with pride that cannot be DIMINISHED!!!!!!!!”⁶⁰ A representative from the “gay collective” in the Florida prison at Raiford likewise proclaimed it time “for us gay people to realize that we are oppressed people,” and appealed to others to “reach out and join hands with your oppressed brothers.”⁶¹ Indiana prisoners wrote to Black and White Men Together (BWMT), declaring their interest in starting a chapter of the organization behind bars and asking outside members to “please send the Starter’s Kit.”⁶² The language of brotherhood and sisterhood infused gay prison activism, and in communicating

their gratitude to outside allies, some prisoners echoed the language of gay kinship. One lesbian wrote that *GCN* offered her and other gay prisoners “a sense of belonging—of being part of a family. The family of gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.”⁶³ Connections between activists and prisoners were also apparent in appreciative and comradely salutations in their correspondence. One inmate signed his letter to Riegler, “Sealed with a kiss of our gay struggle,” and another concluded a missive to *GCN* with “Thanks Fellow Gays.”⁶⁴

For gay and lesbian activists working in solidarity with their “brothers” and “sisters” behind bars, the familial resemblance of some prisoners was striking. When those newly forged familial connections produced a shared language and shared assumptions, conversations between prisoners and activists were mutually comprehensible, productive, and gratifying. Finding (and in some cases, producing) likenesses among others took more effort. Gay activists forged critiques of sexism that condemned the forced gendered roles of prison sexual culture expressed most violently in sexual assault and coerced partnerships, but their ethos of sexual reciprocity and condemnation of gay stereotypes sometimes made it difficult to ally with those in men’s prisons who identified as ladies, queens, and transsexuals and who often felt the brunt of prison misogyny most directly. Activists typically disavowed those attitudes, but they were sometimes perceived by prisoners and occasionally by prison officials. When *Mattachine* and Gay Activists Alliance members held a lecture and rap session with men training to be correction officers in New York City’s penal facilities, one officer in training observed the masculine gender presentation of the activists and noted, “I think you should have had a feminine homosexual on the panel” since “that is the kind we have to deal with mainly in here.”⁶⁵ Another trainee, perhaps referencing class and racial divisions between activists and prisoners, as well as gender differences, told the gay panelists: “I think you have a different frame of reference coming in from the outside like you do. I think most of you would look down on most of the homos, I mean homosexuals, we have in here.”⁶⁶

Not all gay activists, certainly, disparaged queens, in or out of prison. But the 1970s ushered in a new understanding of gay identity in which gender-transgressive queers would be increasingly marginalized. As the gay movement moved away from its earlier embrace of gender transgression, many gay men assumed a clonish masculinity, and lesbian feminists rejected butch-femme styles they cast as relics of an earlier, apolitical time for a purportedly gender-neutral androgyny.⁶⁷ Many prison queens who insisted on identifying as gay at a time when inclusion in that category was coming to privilege gender normativity felt looked down on by gay activists from the outside. One complained, “The gays outside are so wrapped up in saying that drag queens are a disgrace to macho gays, . . . that they forget . . . that we’re all homosexuals and on top of that we’re all oppressed.” He criticized *Join Hands* as a group that “wish[es] to continue bickering about whether queens are acceptable to be part of the gay society and if we should be cast out even further into oppres-

sion *by our own brothers and sisters.*" In response to the *Join Hands* invitation to prisoners to help define gay political strategy, this prisoner stated: "First of all you should drop all your barriers about gays having to be macho."⁶⁸ Another who identified as "a gay prisoner from Illinois" who was transferred to a small male unit of a predominantly women's institution "because I have breasts resulting from hormone treatment" addressed "all you gay brothers and sisters out there," asking "why don't you give the queens a break? It's hard enough on us being put down by straights."⁶⁹ And still another spoke to the tensions between "queens" behind bars and "machos" outside: "Both are Gay," he wrote; "this . . . should be the Unity point." This prisoner urged gay activists to focus on "just being Gay brothers seeking to help other Gay brothers."⁷⁰ Other prisoners felt pressured to conform to the gendered expectations of gay men outside, ones shaped by the scripts of gay pornography that eroticized prisoners as roughly masculine. "Just because we are in prison," one wrote, "doesn't mean we are all supermen, macho, hung like mules, etc., etc., etc." He added that he had been "forced to live these lies" in order to "keep the letters coming" from gay pen pals on the outside.⁷¹

Some observers described the presence of prison queens and butches and the differences between prison sexual culture and gay culture in temporal terms, as the clash between "primitive" and more evolved forms of sexual organization, or the meeting of a stubbornly retrograde sexual culture with a modern one. Casting prison sexual culture in an overtly developmental narrative, some characterized its gendered roles as evidence of a less enlightened homosexual past. To Wayne S. Wooden and Jay Parker, the "prison sexual code, which works to feminize homosexuals," was "directly opposed to the goals of the modern gay movement." "A positive gay identity," in their estimation, "attempts to free men from the tyranny of rigid role-playing."⁷² That tyranny was usually equated with gender deviance and most strongly with male effeminacy; masculinity for gay men was cast not as a "role," but rather as a reclamation of the manhood and the dignity long denied them and as a sign of gay modernity. Prison life, Wooden and Parker wrote, keeps gay men "bound to rigid stereotypic roles—the roles of the submissive, dependent, passive, and weak female—the same roles many in society have also rejected" (145). Prison gender norms, to Wooden and Parker, were signs that gay identity in prison "has remained at less advanced stages of development . . . compared to the gay subculture that is developing external to the prison environment" (219). Wooden and Parker contrasted prisoners' gendered pairings with relationships in the outside "gay community" that tend "*not* to be modeled along dichotomous male and female lines" (160) and were characterized instead by "a bond between two self-affirming and masculine-defined gay men" (161). Their definition of modern gay men—those "who assume both active and passive roles, and who display few if any effeminate mannerisms"—effectively removed prison queens from the category of "gay" (3).

The developmental explanation of prison sexual culture was deeply imbued

with assumptions about the gender norms appropriate to modern gay identity. As in other iterations, this narrative of sexual primitivism and modernity was also deeply racialized.⁷³ Those assumptions were laid bare in an account by gay journalist Randy Shilts, who arranged to be booked on fake traffic charges to observe gay life behind bars. After spending several nights in the jails' gay tiers, he felt that he had entered "not only another world but another era." The "queens' tanks" in San Francisco county jails, in Shilts's account, gave rise to their "own social system and stylized sex roles reminiscent of the gay world of two decades ago." In highlighting racial and class differences in his representation of the gendered roles he observed in jail as an anachronistic marker of same-sex desire, Shilts made clear the racialized assumptions implicit in the developmental narrative of modern gay identity. Inmates of the San Francisco jails "brought back to me what I had read about poor gays from black and Latin cultures. Influenced by the more stringent sex roles of their own worlds, I found these prisoners adopting feminine roles rather than the newer, masculine gay-male roles of the educated white middle classes."⁷⁴

Gender identity was sometimes a point of contention in advocacy efforts on behalf of gay prisoners, and emerging norms of gay masculinity and sexual reciprocity sometimes created tensions between gay activists outside and queens and transsexuals behind bars. Gay and lesbian activists' alliances with men incarcerated for sex with minors were also occasionally strained, as they struggled over how and whether to accommodate men who were attracted to boys into the larger movement. That ambivalence was, in some cases, mutual. In a 1980 *GCN* article, Tom Reeves, the founder of the North American Man-Boy Love Association, offered an analysis "of a serious oppression of gay men, among whose number I may some day find myself."⁷⁵ But Reeves was dismayed to find that few of the 125 Massachusetts prisoners convicted of having sex with minors affiliated with "the gay community." Some of them expressed their alienation from that community in class and gender terms. One man told Reeves that the gay life he knew about in Boston, "downtown, on Beacon Hill, faggots dressed up like women, gay bars," had little to do with working-class life in Revere where he grew up. Another told him, "I knew nothing about gay organizations other than bars. If I had known, I would have thought I didn't fit in."⁷⁶ Reeves found it gratifying, though, that more and more of the men in prison for having sex with minors were "coming out": "More of them are asking for subscriptions to *GCN*, more are identifying as gay in prison, and more are seeking gay activist lawyers . . . They are beginning to define themselves as a gay population suffering a particularly severe oppression."⁷⁷ Reeves and others like him made a case for their inclusion in the larger gay liberation movement, but gay advocacy on behalf of men incarcerated for having sex with minors was always contentious. The transformation of a movement for sexual liberation into a movement for civil rights, requiring in turn a respectable homosexual subject deserving of such rights, ultimately led to an effort to remove the pedophile from the category of homosexual.⁷⁸

Before that point, however, in one California institution, men who had been diagnosed as “disordered sex offenders,” most charged with having had sex with minors, were encouraged in a strikingly literal fashion to redefine and remake themselves as gay. They were led in that remarkable effort by psychiatrist Michael Serber. A strong proponent and practitioner of behavior modification, Serber had earlier pioneered what he called “shame aversion therapy,” a technique that developed, he explained, as the incidental and fortuitous result of photographing a transvestite patient in the act of cross-dressing, which produced what Serber judged to be the usefully transformative shaming effects of social exposure.⁷⁹ The photography session was originally conceived as merely instrumental to the therapeutic plan. Serber had intended to project photographs of the patient dressed in women’s lingerie while administering “painful electrical shocks to one of his extremities.” But he found this later stage in the “therapy” to be unnecessary: the patient became “markedly anxious” and “unable to get sexually excited” while being photographed and reported that the experience had “completely ‘turned him off’” and “changed his entire feeling about cross-dressing.”⁸⁰ In Serber’s later applications of the technique of shame aversion therapy, patients were ordered to cross-dress in front of therapists. Serber also reported positively on the use of aversive conditioning to alter the behavior of homosexuals, noting that “homosexual practices were virtually eliminated and homosexual interest was substantially decreased” in patients who were administered electric shocks when aroused sexually.⁸¹

Serber came to disavow such therapies when his consciousness, along with that of many other psychiatrists and psychologists, was raised by gay liberationists who challenged the psychiatric profession’s homophobic and pathologizing assumptions and practices.⁸² After experiencing a Gay Activists Alliance “zap” at a meeting of the Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy in New York in 1972, Serber introduced a new treatment and “retraining” program for inmates he termed “inadequate homosexuals”—most of them convicted of having sex with minors—sentenced to California’s maximum-security carceral hospital at Atascadero. One gay activist characterized Atascadero inmates as “closeted Gays on the street” who “have never experienced being Gay but have shared the common trauma of feeling different and unaccepted.”⁸³ Serber explained the goals of his program as working to retrain sex offenders “in the social skills most rewarding in the gay community while at the same time minimizing their problems in getting along in a generally hostile world.”⁸⁴ The reporter Rob Cole translated Serber’s social scientific language for readers of the *Advocate*, writing that he aimed “to teach adult males how to make it with each other instead of with young boys, and not get arrested.”⁸⁵

Toward that end, Serber renounced aversion therapy and instead led group discussions with inmates, exploring topics including “the problems of being gay in a predominantly straight society,” “social alternatives for homosexuals,” and “situations to be avoided in order not to be subsequently arrested.”⁸⁶ To help Atascadero

inmates learn social skills appropriate to modern gay life, Serber solicited members of the newly formed Gay Student Union at the California Polytechnic University to serve as instructors and “appropriate behavioral models.” Cal Poly students led Atascadero inmates through imagined scenarios at a gay bar, coaching them in “specific verbal and nonverbal components of gay social interaction which served as a ‘behavioral base’ upon which further social skills could be built.”⁸⁷ Atascadero inmate Tom Close explained that “we were taught cruising from eye contact to wrapup, and given the opportunity to practice our dancing skills.”⁸⁸ Phase 2 of Serber’s program involved consciousness-raising, the first topic of which was titled “Gay is ____,” calling on inmates to come to terms with homosexuality’s negative associations and to arrive at more self-affirming definitions.⁸⁹ In the final phase of the program (and an important part of their treatment) inmates were encouraged to form and participate in a gay organization of their own, the Atascadero Gay Encounter, within the institution.⁹⁰ Minority identity group identification and political organization thus constituted the program’s therapeutic denouement.

Serber’s program replaced earlier treatment regimes at Atascadero and other prisons that were considerably more violent in their sexual pedagogy and more sexually normative in their aims. Stories had circulated for years in the gay press about the use of succinylcholine, a muscle-relaxing drug that produced a feeling of suffocation and was used along with nausea-inducing drugs in aversion therapy, as well as the use of electroconvulsive shock treatment as punishment for homosexual patients who “deviated” while in the hospital. Serber acknowledged that the history of treatment at Atascadero had “mainly centered around inadequate and sometimes cruel attempts at conversion to heterosexuality or asexuality,” and he developed his treatment regime with considerably more humane and progressive aims.⁹¹ Newly critical of the belief among psychiatrists that homosexuality was a psychopathic condition, Serber advanced “an alternative perspective of homosexuals,” in line with the developing gay rights ideology, as “a minority group that should be provided meaningful social and psychological services in the criminal justice system.”⁹² “It is questionable that it is even possible to effect a change from complete homosexuality to complete heterosexuality,” Serber wrote, “but even if it were possible to successfully effect complete change, does anyone have the right to revise a person’s entire value system in an area of behavior that influences only himself and a consenting partner?”⁹³

Serber’s recognition that “a homosexual has the right to be a homosexual if he wants to” led the *Advocate* reporter Cole to call his program “revolutionary.” And surely his “retraining” program was appreciated by prisoners as more humane than earlier treatment regimes.⁹⁴ But Serber’s program had a disciplinary purpose as well, however benevolently intentioned: Atascadero inmates were tutored in the new gay norms being forged in the 1970s. Those pedagogical aims were clearly recognized by Cole, who titled his article “Lessons in Being Gay.”⁹⁵

The pedagogical impulses at work in Serber’s program were evident in other

aspects of gay prison activism as well. The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), a nondenominational Christian church with largely gay congregations founded in 1968, began conducting services in some prisons in 1972 and was very active in advocating on behalf of gay prisoners. In addition to holding services for prisoners—resisted in many prisons and requiring a long legal battle for recognition as a legitimate church—the MCC developed pen-pal and visitation programs for gay inmates.⁹⁶ Some of the MCC's literature made clear that among the church's missions in prison activism was inculcation in new gay norms and values. The MCC's *Prison Ministry Handbook* stated that "[a] person who is homosexual by nature, by inclination, and by behavior can benefit immensely by understanding what it is to be gay."⁹⁷ This illuminating line made clear that to be *homosexual* and to be *gay* were emerging as two different things—the first simply descriptive of a sexual orientation and the second embodying a set of norms and values, no less powerful for being only occasionally articulated explicitly.

The MCC's "Homosexual's Prayer," distributed in prison services, perhaps went the furthest in delineating those norms and exposing the MCC's missionary zeal in promoting them. In it, the MCC urged the homosexual prisoner to "be a Gay we can be proud of."⁹⁸ That self-improvement project involved coming to understand homosexuality as being "on a level higher than 'messing around.'"⁹⁹ The "bona fide homosexual," the MCC instructed, should be encouraged to "come to an understanding of how gay can be good and clean and ennobling"; that person, in the MCC's understanding, "becomes a whole lot healthier when he or she can say 'I am gay and I am proud.'"¹⁰⁰ This process also involved an acceptance of the minoritizing assumptions of the gay movement—the understanding of oneself as "member of a minority," one united with "brothers and sisters in a true family; bound together in a common cause"; and willing to "thank God that I am a homosexual."¹⁰¹

While Serber's treatment program and the MCC's prison ministry suggested that there were proper ways to be gay, the MCC's reference to "bona fide homosexuals" suggested that some prisoners provoked more basic questions about who among the prison population, many of whom participated in homosexual sex, was truly "gay" to begin with (not just properly so). Gay activists were, for the most part, curiously silent about men who surely constituted the majority of participants in same-sex sex behind bars—those identified as "jockers" and "punks." A long-standing prison aphorism declared that "Queens are born. Punks are made."¹⁰² A type recognized in prison argot since at least the early twentieth century, the punk was a presumptively heterosexual prisoner who submitted to same-sex sex as a result of sexual coercion and sometimes assault. Prisoners known as jockers or "men" had long been identified in prison life as conventionally, often aggressively masculine men who preserved (and in some accounts, enhanced) that status by assuming the active, penetrative role in sex with other men.

Gay activists, for the most part, had little to say about prisoners who had sex

with other men without adopting (or, in the case of jockers, being ascribed) a gay identity. But in a section of the MCC's *Prison Ministry Handbook* tellingly titled "Who Is Gay?" the MCC warned those involved in prison ministry to "take note of special problems associated with sexuality in prisons," clarifying that "in prisons there may be homosexual behavior on the part of men and women who will never be 'gay' and who probably never will identify themselves with the gay community."¹⁰³ Because of circumstances the MCC described vaguely as "factors peculiar to homosexuality in prison," especially the "'old man–old lady' relationships that are common" behind bars, it recommended against performing the rite of Holy Union, practiced in MCC churches, in prison ministry work.¹⁰⁴ While some prisoners might, with some effort, be brought into the gay fold, others stretched the notion of gay kinship beyond the breaking point.

Anxiety about distinguishing "true" gays from their imposters arose most frequently around the subject of pen-pal correspondence with prisoners. Many gay newspapers and journals supported pen-pal initiatives with prisoners in the 1970s as a form of outreach and support as part of the political project of connecting prisoners to gay men and lesbians outside and intended to let gay prisoners know that "they really are still part of the family." "Remember that . . . those who submit their names for correspondence have a lot in common with those on the outside," *Advocate* editors wrote in 1973.¹⁰⁵ But ten years later, in 1983, following reports of prisoners scamming gay pen pals out of money and gifts, the editor of the *Bay Area Reporter* prefaced the paper's prison pen-pal request section with a cautionary note that "the paper in no way endorses or can stand behind the integrity of the letter writer. We . . . don't even know if they're Gay or not."¹⁰⁶ One reader warned, "beware of the phony and non-gay that want to prey on us even from within the walls of Folsom, Pendleton, Michigan City, Travis, Lucasville, or wherever. They use OUR publications even as they sit in their jail cells as a means to get at the faggots."¹⁰⁷ One *Advocate* reader asked the editor of the pen-pal section, "Isn't there any way you can weed out the non-gay mail order pimps from your list of prisoners who want mail?" and wrote that "your column is too good to be used by some tramp whose only aim is to 'use the queers.'" "Can't you screen these gays out," he asked, "or at least make sure they're gay?"¹⁰⁸

Distinguishing between "real" and "phony" gays, however, was not always easy. A misunderstanding between the prisoner Troy Lewis and *GCN*'s Mike Rieggle illuminated some of the competing and unpredictable definitions of identity at work in interactions between prisoners and gays outside. Lewis had sent a pen-pal request to *GCN*, in which he identified himself as "straight." When Rieggle rejected the ad, specifying that the *GCN* pen-pal section was for gay prisoners, Lewis responded in protest: "Well, Mike, I don't know how or what you consider the terms Gay, straight, etc . . . to be but my interpretation of straight is a homosexual that partakes an *active* role playing (i.e. fucker) during the course of homosexuality, in contrast to 'a gay,'" who he defined as "a homosexual who partakes the *passive* role of homosexual-

ity.” “When I use the term ‘straight,’” he concluded, “it doesn’t exclude me from being homosexual too.”¹⁰⁹ The self-understanding of some prisoners—in Lewis’s case utterly confounding the categories of the gay movement, as well as those of the larger culture—was difficult to assimilate into the sexual epistemology of even the most accommodating and expansive of gay activists.

Anxiety about the criminal as well as the sexual status of prisoners was implicit in the many warnings about pen-pal scams and “fake” gays. The suspicions and prejudices of many gay men and lesbians who supported a politics of prison advocacy were sometimes ignited when they were confronted with actual convicts. “Never have I seen one where the writer reveals what he is in prison for,” the editor of the *Bay Area Reporter* wrote of prison pen-pal ads in a warning to potential correspondents, “but when they come from the maximum security prisons, I have to imagine the reason is for more than jaywalking.”¹¹⁰ One reader wrote that “in fairness to us readers, I think they should send a copy of their rap sheet to be published along with their letter. I’m sure most of those guys didn’t get where they are for helping grandmothers across the street.”¹¹¹ One gay prisoner wrote to the *Advocate* to complain that his pen pal stopped writing when he told him that he was serving a sentence of ten years to life for armed robbery.¹¹² Another reader warned that gay men who wrote to prisoners were “ideal targets for everything from blackmail to murder.”¹¹³ One lesbian wrote to *GCN* in 1987 to “refuse to support the paper further as long as it continues the asinine policy of supporting ‘gay and lesbian’ prisoners,” her quotation marks raising questions about the authenticity of their sexual identity. She added that she was “tired of seeing letters bitching about how terrible prison is. They should have thought of that before they committed a crime.”¹¹⁴ Comments like these reflected a marked shift from the solidary position that “we are all prisoners” to a feeling of distance and disidentification, especially on the part of the predominantly white, middle-class readers of gay magazines, from those behind bars.

Interest in gay advocacy on behalf of prisoners declined in the 1980s and 1990s, evidenced by the discontinuation of prison pen-pal projects, often following exposés of scams perpetrated by prisoners on gay and lesbian correspondents, and the dwindling coverage of prison issues in the gay and lesbian press. In 1987, *RFD* renounced the Left’s (and implicitly its own) romanticized relationship with prisoners, which it traced to “a certain resentment of authority which elevates the criminal to the rank of hero.” “The simple truth,” the *RFD* editors wrote, “is that most men in prison are there because they belong there,” adding that “some are truly evil.”¹¹⁵ That change coincided with the transmutation of a movement for sexual liberation into a movement dedicated to pursuing equal rights and reflected a corresponding shift in the movement’s commitments and priorities. The activist David Frey suggested as much, writing bluntly in 1980 that “the Gay Prisoner Activist is a role I see no future in.” In part, Frey framed his objection to prison advocacy as a pragmatic calculation of winnable battles. “You cannot expect government institutions to allow

magazines depicting illegal sex acts,” Frey wrote, dismissing the long-standing fight against the prohibition of gay publications in prison. More broadly, Frey asserted, prison activism “serve[d] as a negative element in the overall debate” in the struggle for “Gay Rights.” That struggle, Frey insisted, “must be a united one, with as little fragmentation as possible,” and he worried that advocacy on behalf of the most stigmatized and marginalized members of the community threatened to fragment the “gay community.” “Let’s stay on the right path and keep Gay Rights a legislative issue,” Frey urged. In his prescient conclusion that “legally sanctioned Gay marriage should be a primary concern for all of us,” Frey anticipated the priorities of the gay and lesbian rights movement as they would evolve in later decades.¹¹⁶

Frey made these comments in 1980, a year before the ravages of the AIDS epidemic would begin to spur some gay men and lesbians toward more militant activism and radical social analysis. With few exceptions, however, gay and lesbian activists failed to take those forms of activism and analysis into work on behalf of prisoners.¹¹⁷ In 1988, the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) prison advocate Judy Greenspan recalled discussing prison AIDS activism with Riegle, who “looked at me and said, ‘Well, there’s you and me.’ . . . He was very depressed.”¹¹⁸ Riegle continued to work on behalf of prisoners until his own death from AIDS-related illness in 1992.¹¹⁹

Riegle called for gay men and lesbians to support prisoners as “the marginal people who get too far off the proper property/propriety line—the queer queers.”¹²⁰ But prison sexual culture could be more capacious, heterogeneous, and troubling in its queerness than could be easily accommodated by an emerging gay rights politics. The community-building project of gay prison activism, radical in its vision and productive in many of its manifestations, confronted sexual codes and renegade forms of homosexuality that mixed awkwardly and sometimes not at all with new visions, norms, and understandings of gay identity. As Michel Foucault observed, even ostensibly liberatory discourses impose order through constructing norms of identity and practice. Activists struggled with the difficulty of assimilating some inmates into the gay and lesbian “family” being imagined into existence in the 1970s and 1980s; in doing so, they exposed the ironically normative and evangelizing impulses of gay liberation and of “modern” homosexuality more generally. Marked at various points by solidarity and a meaningful connection across the divide of prison walls, and at others by appropriation, pedagogy, misrecognition, and disidentification, the encounter of gay activists with prisoners illuminated the contours of new gay norms in the making.

In part, those new norms were advanced in the service of claims to respectability, as liberationist calls for sexual freedom and liberation gave way to liberal demands for gay rights and social inclusion. This shift locates and surveys the historical roots of a development that historian Lisa Duggan has identified as homonormativity: “A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them.”¹²¹ Anxiety about gay respectability was powerfully

at work, certainly, in warnings about the criminal designs of prison pen pals, in the ambivalence toward men attracted to minors, and in efforts to distinguish a supposedly modern gay masculinity from the purportedly anachronistic stereotypes of gay male effeminacy. Questions of respectability, in prison activism as elsewhere, were bound up with questions of race. Racial difference, rarely marked or reflected on by lesbian and gay prison activists, shaped concerns about criminality in the 1970s and 1980s as the mass incarceration of the late twentieth century and its disproportionate effects on people of color was beginning to gain momentum. Race was implicated, too, in activists' well-worn narrative of the sexually primitive and modern.

But more than respectability was at stake in these convergences and collisions between gay activists and prisoners. These encounters reveal a broader effort to shore up and stabilize not only the respectable homosexual subject but also to impose a gay paradigm posited as modern on a more multiform prison sexual culture and to enforce a homo-/heterosexual binary system on the more complex set of identities and sensibilities of prisoners. As gay and lesbian activists would come to understand, prison sexual culture exposed the limits of the range of dominant notions of sexuality presumed to be firmly in place by the late twentieth century and undermined presumptions of stable homosexuality as thoroughly as it did those of heterosexuality.

Notes

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1. The Counter Intelligence Program was an FBI program aimed at investigating and disrupting dissident political organizations within the United States. See David Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here: The New Left, the Klan, and FBI Counterintelligence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret War against Dissent in the U.S.*, 2nd ed. (Boston: South End, 2002).
2. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Alderson Story: My Life as a Political Prisoner* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15.
3. Joan Nestle, "Stone Butch, Drag Butch, Baby Butch," in *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1987), 77.
4. Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants: How Gay Liberation Began in America, 1969–1971* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 328. The Women's House of Detention was also a site of protest for activists in the early women's liberation movement. See Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 103–5.
5. Howard Blum, "Gays Take on the Cops: From Rage to Madness," *Village Voice*, September 3, 1970, 42, 44. For an account of this march, see Daniel Hurewitz, *Stepping Out: Nine Walks through New York City's Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 23–24.

6. Blum, "Gays Take on the Cops," 44. See also Frank J. Prial, "Protest March by Homosexuals Sparks Disturbance in 'Village,'" *New York Times*, August 30, 1970; C. Gerald Fraser, "'Gay Ghettos' Seen as Police Targets," *New York Times*, August 31, 1970; Hurewitz, *Stepping Out*, 23–24.
7. In February of 1971, representatives from several New York gay liberation groups picketed outside the Men's House of Detention in lower Manhattan to protest allegations of the "routine brutality" faced by gay prisoners there ("Gays Protest Brutality in N.Y.C. Prisons," *Advocate*, April 14, 1971, 20). During Boston's Gay Pride Week in 1972, activists led a candlelight march to the Charles Street Jail, where they "chanted and sang to let the prisoners know they were there" (John C. Mitzel, "Boston's Week Includes March to Jail, Capital," *Advocate*, July 10, 1972, 14). And in 1973, gay activists in Chicago sponsored a demonstration in support of gay prisoners at the Cook County Jail (Deanna I. Sava to Jeannie, *Advocate*, June 6, 1973, 32).
8. On the relationship of the radical left and the prisoners' rights movement, see Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1994); John Irwin, *Prisons in Turmoil* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).
9. Allen Young, "Out of the Closets, into the Streets," in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, ed. Karla Jay and Young (1972; New York: New York University Press, 1992), 16.
10. See John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 70, 157; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 172–73; Molly McGarry and Fred Wasserman, *Becoming Visible: An Illustrated History of Lesbian and Gay Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Viking, 1998).
11. "Behind Bars," *RFD*, no. 10 (1976): 26.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Mike Riegle, "Sexual Politics of 'Crime': Inside and Out," *GCN*, December 10, 1983, 4.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Mike Riegle, "A Brief History of GCN's 'Prison Project,'" *GCN*, October 3, 1981, 8.
16. League for Lesbian and Gay Prisoners, pamphlet, n.d., Bromfield Street Educational Foundation Records, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts (hereafter BSEF), Box 12, Fol. 37.
17. Ron Rose to Robert G. DeSantis, May 19, 1974, Robert G. DeSantis Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco (hereafter GLBT Historical Society), Box 1, Fol. 16.
18. Don Jackson, "The Daddy Tank," *Gay Sunshine*, no. 1 (1972): 3.
19. "Women Hit Jail Treatment," *Advocate*, July 10, 1972, 14.
20. "We Mean Business," *Lesbian Tide* 1 (1972): 1.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Jeanne Cordova, "Prison Reform—New Freedoms for Daddy-Tanked Lesbians," *Lesbian Tide* 7 (1977): 6.
23. Join Hands Testimony at California State Senate Committee on Penal Institutions Hearings, December 5, 1974, ms., GLBT Historical Society, "Prisoners" file, 1.
24. Jack Hoffman to editor, *RFD*, no. 10 (1976): 29.
25. *Join Hands* subscription form, GLBT Historical Society, "Prisoners" file.
26. Riegle, "Brief History," 8.

27. Prison projects like the one initiated by Boston's *Gay Community News* were initiated to forge connections between gay prisoners with gay men and lesbians on the outside. The journal *RFD* included a section titled "Brothers behind Bars" devoted to letters and pen-pal requests from prisoners. In 1972, a group of gay men in San Francisco formed the Join Hands collective and published a newsletter "to bring together members of the 'free' community with gay prisoners through correspondence and visiting" (*Join Hands* subscription form, GLBT Historical Society, "Prisoners" File). The *Gaycon Press Newsletter*, also published in San Francisco, printed articles, short stories, poetry, and graphics by gay prisoners, provided information on prison life for gay men and lesbians, and listed gay publications available free to prisoners. The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), a nondenominational Christian church with largely gay congregations founded in 1968, began conducting services in prisons in 1972 and published the *Cellmate* newsletter.
28. "Still More on P.C.," *Join Hands*, clipping, n.d., BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 2.
29. Alan Greene to Mike Riegle, April 16, 1984, BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 42.
30. Wilbert Leonard Thomas, letter to the editor, *Advocate*, August 18, 1972, 28.
31. Calvin L. Keach, "Gay Demo against Prison Censors," *Join Hands* 5 (1976): 2.
32. Louis to Mike Riegle, March 22, 1983, BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 42.
33. Danny Owen to Mike Riegle, January 27, 1984, BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 42.
34. Buddy L. to editor, *RFD*, no. 10 (1976): 29.
35. David Rothenberg, "Gay Prisoners: Fighting Back behind the Walls," *Advocate*, June 16, 1976, 11.
36. Frank O'Rourke, "Prisons: The Nature of the Beast," *Honcho*, August 1983, 61.
37. Mike Hippler, "Where the Boys Are: Gay Inmates at San Bruno Jail," *Bay Area Reporter*, December 29, 1983.
38. Jack Childers, letter to editor, *Join Hands* 1 (1976): 2.
39. Chuck Hill to editor, *RFD*, no. 13 (1977): 38.
40. Ibid.
41. Quoted in Mark Fleisher, *Warehousing Violence* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 164.
42. Charles McLaughlin, "Homosexual Living behind the Walls," unpublished ms., n.d., BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 44.
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44. William Kissinger, "View from Within," in New York Gay Activists Alliance newsletter, n.d., International Gay Information Center Archives, New York Public Library (hereafter IGIC), Ephemera, "Prison File."
45. Jon Wildes, "To Be Young, Gay, and Behind Bars," *Village Voice*, January 9, 1978, 21.
46. Jeanne Cordova, "Inside Terminal Island," *Lesbian Tide* 2 (1973): 18.
47. Ibid., 18–19.
48. "The Unpleasantries of Pleasanton," *Through the Looking Glass* 4 (1979): 13.
49. "Sissy in Prison: An Interview with Ron Vernon," in Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 107.
50. Bobbie Lee White, "Learning to Understand," *GCN*, January 23, 1982, 9.
51. "Sissy in Prison," 104.
52. Billy LaToya Lewis to *GCN*, n.d., BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 44.
53. Tyrone Gadson, "New American Cult Gay World Behavior Notice," flyer, April 20, 1983, BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 42.
54. "Self-Help Alliance Group," n.d. [1984?], BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 42.
55. Ibid.

56. Quoted in Wayne S. Wooden and Jay Parker, *Men behind Bars: Sexual Exploitation in Prison* (New York: Plenum, 1982), 220. On Men against Sexism, see "Men against Sexism," *Through the Looking Glass* 2 (1977): 18; Daniel Burton-Rose, "The Anti-exploits of Men against Sexism, 1977–78," in *Prison Masculinities*, eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Rick English, "Men against Sexism," *RFD* 14 (1977): 49; John McCoy, *Concrete Mama: Prison Profiles from Walla Walla* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 92; 136–37; "Men against Sexism: Past, Present, and Future," *Join Hands* 13 (1978): 6.
57. Rick English, "Walla . . . Men against Sexism," *Join Hands* 12 (1977): 5.
58. Martha Shelley, "Gay Is Good," in Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 32. On the importance of an analysis and critique of sexism to gay liberation ideology, see John D'Emilio, "Still Radical After All These Years: Remembering *Out of the Closets*," in *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 45–63; John D'Emilio, "After Stonewall," in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Terence Kissack, "'Freaking Fag Revolutionaries': New York's Gay Liberation Front, 1969–1971," *Radical History Review*, no. 62 (1995): 104–34; Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Love: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 322–23; John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities: A Twentieth-Century History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 327.
59. Young, "Out of the Closets," 7.
60. Billy LaToya Lewis to GCN, n.d., BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 44.
61. Henry Lucas, "We Must Unify," BSEF, Box 12, Fol. 37.
62. Johnny Crawford to BWMT Quarterly 11 (1981): 34.
63. Mike Riegle and prisoner friends, "Why Does GCN Have a Prisoner Project?" BSEF, Box 12, Fol. 37.
64. Carly to Mike Riegle, January 29, 1986, BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 42; Denver V. Sassoon to GCN, n.d., BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 44; William D. Concannon to editor, GCN, July 12, 1980, 4.
65. "Jail Guard Trainees Hear from Gays," *Advocate*, November 22, 1972, 14.
66. Ibid.
67. See Aaron H. Devor and Nicholas Matte, "One Inc. and Reed Erickson: The Uneasy Collaboration of Gay and Trans Activism, 1964–2003," *GLQ* 10 (2004): 179–209; Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 235, 237–38; Dallas Denny, "You're Strange and We're Wonderful: The Relationship between the Gay/Lesbian and Transgendered Communities," *TransSisters* 2 (1994): 21–23; Kissack, "Freaking Fag Revolutionaries," 123. Kissack underlines the importance of masculinist affirmations in new left politics and "the extent to which sexualized codes of masculinity were a highly charged component of sixties' discourse," in which gay liberationists partook (111–12). See also Richard Meyer, "Gay Power Circa 1970: Visual Strategies for Sexual Revolution," *GLQ* 12 (2006): 454–55.
68. Tracy, letter to editor, *Join Hands* 1 (1976): 1.
69. "Hard Times for Queens," *Join Hands* 5 (1976): 3.
70. M. Darrell Hay, letter to editor, *Join Hands* 2 (1976): 1.
71. "Mr. Cuddles Talks about Letter Writing," *Join Hands* 2 (1976): 7.
72. Wooden and Parker, *Men behind Bars*, 144.

73. Postcolonial theorists, anthropologists, and historians have exposed the ethnocentrism in the developmental narrative that positions a primitive other against a modern us. David Halperin, for instance, notes the “noxious political effects” of pronouncing some forms of sexual organization “modern” and others “primitive” or “backward” by comparison. Such a progress narrative, he writes, “not only promotes a highly invidious opposition between sexually advanced and sexually retrograde cultures but also fails to take account of the complexity of contemporary transnational formations of sexuality.” David Halperin, “Introduction: In Defense of Historicism,” in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 18; 14. On anthropologists’ use of temporal terms to communicate cultural difference and cultural hierarchy, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). For discussions of the intersection of white identity and homonormativity, see Roderick A. Ferguson, “Race-ing Homonormativity: Citizenship, Sociology, and Gay Identity,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 52–67; Martin F. Manalansan IV, “In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma,” *GLQ* 2 (1995): 425–38.
74. Randy Shilts, “Locked Up with the Jailhouse Queens,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 7, 1978. Marlon Ross characterizes the narrative of development and underdevelopment as “intrinsic to the project of queer history and theory,” in “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm,” in Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 163.
75. Tom Reeves, “The Hidden Oppression: Gay Men in Prison for Having Sex with Minors,” *GCN*, December 13, 1980, 8.
76. *Ibid.*, 9.
77. *Ibid.*, 11.
78. On the transition from a gay liberation movement to gay rights, see D’Emilio, “After Stonewall.”
79. Michael Serber, “Shame Aversion Therapy,” *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 1 (1970): 213.
80. *Ibid.*, 213.
81. Michael Serber and Joseph Wolpe, “Behavior Therapy Techniques,” in *Sexual Behavior: Social, Clinical, and Legal Aspects*, ed. H. L. P. Resnick and Marvin E. Wolfgang (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 247.
82. See Henry L. Minton, *Departing from Deviance: A History of Homosexual Rights and Emancipatory Science in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 256–64.
83. Don Altimus to Mike Riegle, October 7, 1982, BSEF, Box 12, Fol. 52.
84. Join Hands Testimony.
85. Rob Cole, “Behind Bars, Lessons on Being Gay,” *Advocate*, June 20, 1973, 1.
86. Join Hands Testimony, 9.
87. Michael Serber and Claudia G. Keith, “The Atascadero Project: Model of a Sexual Retraining Program for Incarcerated Homosexual Pedophiles,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 1 (1974): 95.
88. Tom Close, “A Patient’s View: A Strange New World,” *Advocate*, June 20, 1973, 2.
89. *Ibid.*
90. Close explained that AGE “is administratively a facet of the Sexual Reorientation Program but is open to all homosexual and bisexual patients in the hospital who are 18 or over. The club is designed for specific therapeutic purposes and is an integral part of many patients’

formal program. AGE will become the voice of the gay patient as well as his conscience. As acting president, I am striving to achieve our four purposes:

- Becoming more aware and accepting of our sexual identity.
- Informing members and others in the hospital about gay culture.
- Providing opportunities to meet other Gays in social settings.
- Providing useful information to members about where to go and whom to go to after release from the hospital" (ibid., 35).

91. Serber and Keith, "Atascadero Project," 93.
92. Ibid., 87.
93. Ibid., 90.
94. "Needless to say," Serber wrote, "the patients are more than grateful to receive a service that does not include stripping them of their homosexuality and personal dignity" (ibid., 94).
95. Cole, "Behind Bars," 1.
96. A class-action suit was brought by California inmates in 1973 to allow the MCC into prisons. In a decision handed down on May 20, 1975, in the U.S. District Court of Northern California, the court ruled that the MCC was a bona fide church and that the denial of MCC religious services to prisoners who requested them was an infringement of their constitutional rights guaranteed by the First Amendment. See "Court Allows MCC in Prisons," *GCN*, June 14, 1975, 1; "Gay Church Allowed in Prisons," *Lesbian Tide* 4 (1975): 19. On the MCC, see Kay Tobin and Randy Wicker, *The Gay Crusaders* (New York: Paperback Library, 1972), 19–22; Troy D. Perry with Charles L. Lucas, *The Lord Is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1972); Troy D. Perry with Thomas L. P. Swicegood, *Don't Be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990).
97. Richard R. Mickley, *Prison Ministry Handbook*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Universal Fellowship Press, 1976), 7.
98. Tom Purcell, "The Homosexual's Prayer," DeSantis Papers, Box 1, Fol. 16.
99. Mickley, *Prison Ministry Handbook*, 33.
100. Ibid., 33, 7.
101. Purcell, "Homosexual's Prayer."
102. See Gresham M. Sykes, *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 96; George Lester Kirkham, "Homosexuality in Prison," in *Studies in the Sociology of Sex*, ed. James M. Henslin (New York: Appleton Century-Crofts, 1971), 334.
103. Mickley, *Prison Ministry Handbook*, 8.
104. Ibid., 31.
105. "MCC Launching 'Prison Lifeline' Letters Program," *Advocate*, January 31, 1973, 14.
106. "Open Forum," *Bay Area Reporter*, June 30, 1983.
107. Lary Holvey, "Pen Pal Caution," *Bay Area Reporter*, August 11, 1983.
108. Teddy to Jeannie, *Advocate*, July 4, 1973, 38. Some prisoners acknowledged that some among them used pen-pal relationships to scam gay men. Exploiting the generosity of gay pen pals, one prisoner acknowledged, like that of "lonely women," was "one of the oldest games in the joint" (Jim Hogshire, *You Are Going to Prison* [Port Townsend, WA: Breakout, 1999], 90). One Michigan prisoner wrote to *GCN* offering to help gay men "sort the fakes from the real thing" (David Sidener to *GCN*, n.d., BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 42).
109. Troy Lewis to Mike Riegle, October 10, 1986, BSEF, Box 13, Fol. 42.
110. "Open Forum," *Bay Area Reporter*, June 30, 1983.

111. "Prison Pen Pals on the March," *Bay Area Reporter*, June 30, 1983.
112. M. B. to Jeannie, *Advocate*, October 10, 1974, 31.
113. Letter to editor, *GCN*, January 10–16, 1988, 4.
114. "A Concerned Lesbian Subscriber," letter to the editor, *GCN*, December 13–19, 1987, 4.
115. "Joint Venture," *RFD* 13 (1987): 65.
116. David Frey, "You Are a Criminal Too," *RFD* 27 (1980): 8.
117. The organization ACT-UP San Francisco had a small but thriving Prison Issues Group in the early 1990s that "was able to galvanize activists across the state to come together and fight for the rights of prisoners" (Rosenblatt, *Criminal Justice*, 89). See also Dawn Schmitz, "Activists Demand PWA Rights on the Inside," *GCN*, April 19–May 8, 1992, 1, 3.
118. Rebecca Lavine, "A Great Need," *GCN*, December 1–17, 1991, 7.
119. Riegle's work as the *GCN* office manager and his struggle with HIV/AIDS was memorably chronicled by his friend and *GCN* colleague Amy Hoffman in *Hospital Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
120. Riegle, "The March: A Focus on 'Justice' (as 'Political' Finally!)—and Still Gay/Lesbian Prisoners Are Invisible," *GCN*, October 11, 1987, 4.
121. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), 50. See also Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 173–94.

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