

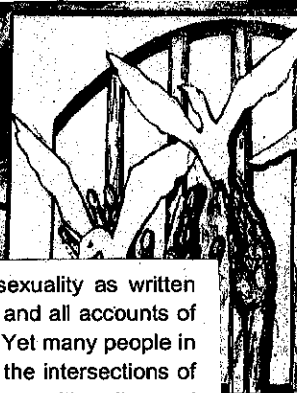

Ain't I a Prisoner, Too?

In a recent article, Dan Berger wrote, "Prison reform is now in vogue." It's so true. Right now, everyone, even Kim Kardashian, is proffering solutions to the carceral quagmire we've sunken into. Intensified public scrutiny of policing and hyper-incarceration has led to an increase in the discourse about "crime," policing, and imprisonment. Many Americans agree with the *New York Times* editorial that stated: "The American experiment in mass incarceration has been a moral, legal, social and economic disaster." People are beginning to understand that prisons and policing are repressive tools of the state, which are critical to the maintenance of power. But in this interval of seeming possibility, some prisoners have good reason to feel anxious.

The American Prison Movement is made up of a wide range of people and organizations with diverse goals, but one consistent trait still runs throughout the entire movement: privileging the straight, able-bodied, cisgender male viewpoint. When the experiences of prisoners are represented, they are typically the experiences of cisgender men, usually Black or Brown, who are straight, able-bodied and neuro-typical. However there is no monolithic prisoner experience. Our experiences with policing and imprisonment are far from universal; they have always been inflected by race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and geography. How will this one normative definition of prisoner free us all?

When prisoner is posited as cis-het, able-bodied men, the lived experiences of the most vulnerable prisoners—queer, trans and disabled folk—are at best marginalized, or at worst delegitimized and erased. We need to consider how policing and imprisonment affect particular populations. Poor, Black transwomen are not targeted, policed, and locked up in the same ways that Black/Brown cis-het men are. "Seeking to understand the specific arrangements that cause certain communities to face particular types of violence at the hands of the police and in detention can allow us to develop solidarity around shared and different experiences with these forces and build effective resistance that gets to the roots of these problems." (Bassichis, Lee, and Spade. "Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got.")


There have been interventions in the continued marginalization of the most vulnerable populations. Organizations like Black & Pink and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project vigorously advocate for and amplify the voices of queer/trans prisoners. Texts like Eric Stanley and Nat Smith's *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, Kay Whitlock, Joey Mogul, and Andrea J. Ritchie's *Queer (In)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* and Ritchie's *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* center queer/trans lives in discourses on policing and prisons. But in national conversations about policing and prisons, queer/trans prisoners are largely overlooked. We continue to live in the white spaces of books and articles on what to do about mass incarceration and policing. Our views remain absent in the debates. And what goes unheard may be of the utmost importance.



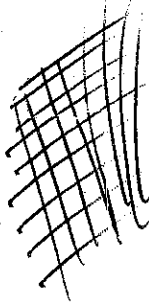
In *Captive Genders*, one reads: "gender, ability and sexuality as written through race, class and nationality must figure into any and all accounts of incarceration, even when they seem to be nonexistent." Yet many people in the American Prison Movement refuse to consider how the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability affect encounters with police and imprisonment. *Queer (In)Justice* states: "By bringing queer experiences to the center, we gain a more complete understanding of the ways in which race, national origin, class, gender, ability and immigration status drive constructions of crime, safety and justice." There is no way to bring conscious and liberatory politics to the work of our movement without focusing on all the main pillars driving the PIC, including homophobia and transphobia. It is only by centering the lives of the most vulnerable that we can ensure that no one is left behind. We have to start asking ourselves serious questions. What becomes visible when we listen to the experiences of the most marginalized people behind bars? How could that listening strengthen our movement?

Many activists, inside and outside, are reluctant to ask: what is gained from emphasizing queer/trans encounters with police and prisons? They don't question why queer/trans prisoners' issues tend to run parallel to, instead of intersecting with, other prisoners' issues. Queer/trans prisoners feel unsure that our concerns will be addressed by other activists. We wonder if our pain is taken seriously. And this should not be the case.

At every stage and moment of the American Prison Movement, queer/trans folk have been present and involved. We have struggled and suffered alongside, and often because of, straight, able-bodied, cisgender males. Our issues remain unheard. We have not been silent; we haven't been listened to. Even during the most rebellious years, prisoner uprisings linked their conditions with critiques of American capitalism, racism and imperialism, but not homophobia or sexism. We have no seat at the table. And just as former US Congressman Barney Franks said: "If you're not at the table, you're on the menu."



It is time for other prisoners to know that "All of us live in a culture that is attempting to limit the range of our humanity, and so we're all in this liberation struggle" (Rebecca Solnit). The laced-up minds of some activists prevent them from understanding that "constructive criticism and self-criticism are extremely important for any revolutionary organization. Without them, people tend to drown in their mistakes, and not learn from them" (Assata Shakur). The need for self-criticism and the role we may be playing in oppressing and silencing others cannot be overstated. "The true focus of revolutionary change is not merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us" (Audre Lorde). We are against all the systems of oppression that prop up the prison industrial complex, but are we working to uproot the oppressor in our hearts—white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, ableism, xenophobia? Are we able to acknowledge differences without devaluing them? Moreover, can we recognize differences among prisoners and use these differences to expand our visions of justice, freedom, safety, and community? This is the challenge.



The reason queer/trans prisoners have no seat at the table is because many activists, especially incarcerated ones, don't consider us part of the struggle, the movement. Those who do rarely get beyond performative solidarity: statements of support and concern. They won't struggle alongside us. Our tradition of anti-police/confinement work is often ignored. The antagonism between queer/trans folk and the state predate the current incarceration boom. "Because prisons, police, immigration officials, and psychiatric institutions have long punished people for transgressing sexual and gender norms, queer and trans people have a long tradition of resistance to institutions of punishment" (S. Lambie in *Captive Genders*). Might there be something to learn from this tradition? The self-oriented only perspective of many activists precludes them from seeing the value in queer/trans traditions of resistance and the importance, rather the necessity, of struggling alongside us for survival and liberation. It makes me wonder how they define community?

There are unspoken closures of community that many need to reflect upon. Who is included in our definition of community? Who is excluded by intent or omission? Queer/trans prisoners are not struggling in the prison movement simply to add a different viewpoint. We are challenging the fundamental definitions of freedom, safety, justice, and community. Moreover, we are challenging the very definition of prisoner and calling for the recognition of all prisoner experiences in this moment of possibility. We say loud and clear: You will not live upon our ruins.

By visibilizing the multifaceted ways the PIC affects us all, we are able to create a wider base of support. But we are stymied in our efforts because our definition of prisoner continues to exclude the most vulnerable incarcerated folk.

People are becoming more aware of the race and class-inflected aspects of policing and incarceration. We have to do more to educate them about the gender and sexuality-inflected aspects. And we need to do it as a movement. As everyone offers their solution to mass incarceration and police violence, let us remember that failing to recognize and affirm the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality erases the lived experiences of many people behind the walls. Let us remember that "reform without a vision of fundamental change, without a politics that aims to leave no one behind, can give way to new forms of captivity and containment by the state" [*The Long Term*, see introduction].

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