Queerness & Prison Abolition

Max Reynard

2025

In an environment like prison, people are strictly regulated both physically and emotionally. We're confined to our facility and told where and when we can move. Both bureaucratic and social rules also dictate that our range of emotional expressions be limited.

An outburst or meltdown can be misinterpreted as an attack, a risk of self-harm, an embarrassment other prisoners need to "correct," or another infraction against the social structure of guards or inmates.

The paradoxical result of this total regulation is a twinned physical suffering and emotional numbness. Simultaneously, one feels imprisonment bodily, yet is separated from the ability to adequately recognize the emotional effects of confinement.

Queerness only makes this emotional loss more acute. Prisons vary when it comes to non-normative sexualities and genders. Here in the federal system, both guards and residents with fascist ideas have been empowered by recent regulations authorizing official nonrecognition of diverse genders. Some state prisons, however, continue to allow for more openly building queer and trans communities.

Any expression of sexual intimacy is prohibited, regardless of the participants' identities. One might say that in prison, everyone gets to experience the structured shame of the closet. In his 1990s book, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Michael Warner lamented "how hard it is in this culture to assert any dignity when you stand exposed as a sexual being." With prisons a generation behind commonplace social attitudes, the regulated and repressive purity culture of the late 20th century is a pretty good analogy. As in that generation's blockbuster movies, violence is celebratory and sexual desire is shameful.

Recently, I was feeling particularly pulled apart in trying to maintain a safe level of self-disclosure while not obliterating my queer self. I wasn't surprised at this experience of numbness, but wasn't sure how to climb out of it. And then, coincidentally, I found some writing of mine from some years back talking about how to survive as a queer person in prison.

It began like this: When I was in my twenties, I spent a lot of time doing peer-to-peer counseling. Knowing that queer folks were often on the margins in all sorts of environments—families, schools, workplaces, faith groups, social circles—we'd sometimes use the prompt, "What would be different if you centered your queer self?"

We were putting the onus on ourselves not to deny the structural oppression we faced, but to consider to what extent we were self-ostracizing, self-isolating. Sometimes, of course, the answer to "what would happen?" is, "I'd be physically attacked."

So, we didn't pretend that publicly centering our full selves was necessarily the right choice in all situations, just that it was useful to consider. If we were being constantly terrorized by a risk of violence in showing too much of ourselves, that was obviously ongoing trauma worth processing.

At times, though, the answer we found was simply, "I'd be afraid." Not because of perceived hostility, but simply because when we had spent so much energy hiding our queer selves, we had gotten used to it.

We might have become adept at stepping around the pronouns of lovers, policing our behavior when it got "too gay," saying nothing at homophobic or transphobic jokes being told. We had adapted so well to that kind of life that

even when we encountered supportive spaces, we'd go on hiding. We stopped code-switching and gotten stuck in the performance of normality.

As Audre Lorde wrote in her 1984 *Sister Outsider*: "For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us."

I think about that a lot in prison. First, because so much of life here is a hyped-up version of middle school: the cliques, the gossip, the petty arguments and name-calling. Only with regular demonstrations of lethal oppression, and swaggering chaperons with tasers and guns.

In this place, centering anything non-normative about yourself takes guts. Some trans and queer folks are able to be out, but many cannot be. That isn't a personal failing, it's an institutional one with little daggers of homophobia and transphobia deployed by guards to divide and conquer prisoners. Geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore documented how the prison bureaucracy in California fomented racial fissures among inmates to better control them, and this is a similar dynamic at play. In an oppressive system, bigotry is a force multiplier.

This helped me give shape to my numbness, to see it as a manufactured state in a factory of trauma, rather than a personal rupture of mental health. "It makes sense for a lot of incarcerated LGBTQIA+ folks to conceal parts of themselves, entirely or to all but a trusted few," I had written. And here I was in that situation, and felt somewhat comforted.

I worry, though, what happens when we move outside of prison, for those who are able to do so. Will we still be able to center our queer and trans selves? Or will we have internalized the oppression so deeply that we go on hiding a powerful, beautiful, integral part of ourselves out in the wider world? What of our abolitionist movements, on the inside and the outside? How do they suffer without our full presence?

Audre Lorde, again: "The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves."

Residents of prison are forced to conceal the erotic parts of themselves; queer and trans people who are here, doubly so. Will we forget or curtail the full measure of our aspirations? Will we give in to respectability politics (yes, very much a thing here in prison) to excise the more marginalized: too outside the binaries of gender or sexuality, or (sometimes conversely) too unfamiliar with languages of liberation to remember to use the right pronouns?

Even the most committed abolitionists have blind spots, and the guiding principle should be that no one is disposable. Black Liberation Army founder and fugitive, Asata Shakur writes in her autobiography, "Love is contraband in Hell / cause love is an acid / that eats away bars." Are we excluding some of our most useful tools in undermining the carceral system when we hide our loves, desires, and selves?

To anyone in prison right now, it's critical to remember that the place where we live is a purposeful distortion of humanity, crystallized by oppression and curdled with violence. Prisons are meant to be dehumanizing, and even more so for those on the margins. It's not an exaggeration to say that your suffering is the fuel that keeps the apparatus of immiseration humming. You are not crazy. You are right to be outraged.

You may not be able to change it now, and you may not even be able to tell anyone, but you can nurture that spark inside that contains your whole self. You can remind your love and your desire, your intimacy and eroticism, that it is a vital part not only of you, but of abolition and liberation. You are not who prison demands you to be.

You are surviving pending revolution, not giving up. And when you can, interrogate whether silence is still your friend, or if your vulnerability can also power your greatest strength.

Max Reynard is currently incarcerated in a federal prison and is working on a zine about LGBTQ+ prisoners called *Queer on the Inside*.

fifth estate

Max Reynard
Queerness & Prison Abolition
2025

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/417-winter-2025/queerness-prison-abolition
Fifth Estate #417, Winter 2025

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net