

THE OPENING STATEMENT

of those who are supposed to remain silent



13



Dear comrades,

It's been a minute! Thanks for your patience, for your continued struggle and survival. The last you heard from us, we were sending in some questions from a nationwide coalition against book banning and censorship inside state and federal prisons. But MDOC seems to have mixed feelings about that, so maybe you got it, maybe you didn't. Thank you to those who filled it out and sent responses back. Now The Opening Statement is back with some updates from across MDOC cages, and two essays (one old, one new) by formerly incarcerated writers and activists.

This issue of TOS is a double feature of two essays that discuss solitary confinement, inside repression and methods of retaliation against all prisoners. We offer these two essays

together to think about gender, the physical and psychological isolation of prisons, and the perils of recognition. The first essay is by Leon Benson, who at the time of writing this essay was held captive by the Indiana Department of Corrections (IDOC). Leon was released in March 2023 and is currently figuring out life on the outside. His essay "The Womb of the Beast: Radical Prison Gestation" describes the hypocrisy inherent to the notion of prison as rehabilitative through an analysis of solitary confinement. Building on the idea of the prison as the "belly of the beast," he describes solitary confinement as the "womb of the beast." For Leon, the "womb" is a space of development, but the result of this process depends on the conditions in which this development takes place. The conditions of solitary confinement do serious physical, psychological, and emotional

harm. This harm isn't always visible or apparent, even to the person who has gone through the experience. As Leon puts it, "the reality of it is that I do not know how damaged I really am." In this article, Leon draws on an earlier article he wrote in 2007. He sent us this more recent version from a few years ago, and asked us to update some of the numbers and policy changes in California.

The other essay, "Female Keep Separate: Prisons, Gender, and the Violence of Inclusion," details the experiences and analysis of an anonymous trans woman based in Montreal, Canada, and her experiences in both men's and women's prisons. Though the Canadian prison system is quite different from that of the US, these two settler states and their prison systems are linked through shared commitments to racism and indigenous dis-

possession. Regionally, Montreal and Michigan are the occupied homelands of Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee nations. The border between the so-called US and Canada may seem like a divide between the experiences of prisons in the Great Lakes region, but we reject reductive and colonial divisions. Furthermore, there is much to be learned from this comrade and their analysis of so-called “progressive” reforms that would supposedly benefit trans and queer prisoners by creating more “queer-friendly” or “identity-affirming” jails. A lot of people here in the US see these kinds of reforms as a step forward. But we agree with the author of this essay: A prison is a prison, no matter if the guards use your pronouns or cage you with other LGBTQ prisoners. And against the backdrop of anti-trans state legislation sweeping the US, it may be tempting to focus on fighting for trans wings of prisons, or prisons specifically for trans people – but this is a farce, a distraction, from the overall project of abolition. As the author suggests, being able to choose whether a male or a female cop will watch you get dressed doesn’t change the fact that there’s a cop watching you get dressed. “Female Keep Separate” presents an intervention into the question of having one’s identity affirmed by a fundamentally violent and coercive system.

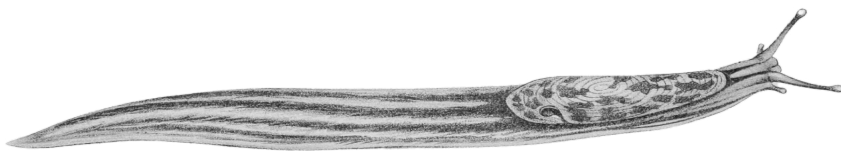
Like Leon Benson, this anonymous writer underscores how reforming the prison, or restoring some material aspect of the prison to what it is “meant to do” (create a more obedient person, punish someone for some particular action, etc.) is impossible. Both Leon and this anonymous comrade detail the damage done by solitary and by the task of identifying oneself to the prison guards and administration. We hope you find these essays provocative and intriguing – write back to us with your thoughts!

Here’s a few news items about MDOC. First off, we’ve been wondering what inflation is looking like on the inside and wanted to see if we could compare the commissary situation to what’s happening on the outside. One item we were able to compare is coffee. We learned that the price of a bag of coffee from the commissary rose from \$3.49 to \$5.24 and then again to \$5.95. Do these prices sound about right at your facility? Assuming this is generally true, the price of coffee in the commissary has increased by about 70%. (For whatever it’s worth, not all prices have increased at the same rate. For example, we learned that tuna fish was \$3.30 and now it’s \$4.75, an increase of around 40%.)

As for coffee prices on the outside, we looked it up and here’s what we found. A recent report from Yahoo Finance, dated January 31, 2023, reads:

“Retail prices in the United States for roast and ground coffee, the most popular type sold, rose as much as 50% in the fourth quarter of 2022 from a year earlier, as companies tried to offset higher costs, a report said on Tuesday. The increase of 50% was seen for Folgers, one of the market leaders, and led to a reduction of 17% in volumes sold, although the company managed to increase revenues from those sales due to the higher prices, according to a report by the research arm of Rabobank with data from IRI. Other well-known coffee brands also increased roast and ground prices sharply in the period. Maxwell House boosted them 35% and Starbucks around 15%, the report said, as they tried to maintain revenue despite higher costs with coffee beans, labor, energy and packaging (...) Overall in the United States, prices for coffee in all categories increased on average nearly 20% in the last quarter year-on-year. Volumes sold fell around 5% as a result.”

So an average price increase of 20% from the end of 2021 to the end of 2022, though it seems like some brands are increasing prices more than that. And something else that’s complicated about this kind of comparison is that the quantity being sold can affect the price (it can be cheaper to buy in bigger quantities). But the bottom line is that even the biggest increase reported in this article (50%) seems to be less than the price increase on the inside (70%). So it’s worth asking... where’s the extra 20%+ going? Does it all go to the Prisoner Benefit Fund? Are there kickbacks to the MDOC, or are the extra profits going into the pockets of the private vendors? Research from the Prison Policy Initiative estimates that jail and prison commissary sales in the US top \$1.6 billion. They also point out that prison vendors don’t have to spend anything on advertising or retail – they have a captive customer base, plus a legal monopoly



All slugs have both female and male reproductive organs. Once a slug has located a mate, they encircle each other and sperm is exchanged through their protruded genitalia. A few days later, the slugs lay approximately thirty eggs in a hole in the ground, or beneath the cover of an object such as a fallen log.

without price competition. Last but not least it's important to recognize that Michigan prisoner wages haven't increased in decades. So we imagine that rising prices in the commissary could be making life difficult for folks and even creating tensions among prisoners. Let us know if you've seen anything like this.

They're adding new fencing at Cooper Street CF, between all the units and buildings, and erecting a new layer of fencing inside the razor-wire outer fences. They claim it's to prevent "contraband" from being thrown over the fence. Have you seen these fences or new walls or anything like this happening at other facilities?

Finally, the Detroit Free Press reported the tragic news that Angela Renee McConnell, a prisoner at Women's Huron Valley, died on Feb. 26 from an apparent suicide. She was the last woman in Michigan sentenced to life without parole for a crime committed while she was a juvenile, and she was still awaiting her court-ordered re-sentencing. We want to remember McConnell as well as other prisoners at WHV who have died in similar circumstances in recent years: Shikisha Monet Tidmore (2022), Natasha Roark (2021), and Janika Edmond (2015). (There could easily be more – there's no official reporting about this.) Prisons are death machines. These deaths by suicide at WHV also

bear a resonance with "Female Keep Separate": the exploitation, the torture, and the dehumanization of these death machines are what drive people to end their life, not merely feelings of isolation. To claim otherwise is sexist.

Let us know if there's something happening at your facility that you think would be helpful to include in the next newsletter.

In solidarity,

MAPS

THE WOMB OF THE BEAST: RADICAL PRISON GESTATION | Leon Benson

"When a person is made to have a defect

It is considered a tragedy, but when defects

are made into thousands then it should

be considered a systemic epidemic...."

Some time ago a journalist contacted me through the mail requesting my feelings and views about the use of solitary confinement. Because i had spent 10 consecutive years (2001-2011) in a couple of Indiana's notorious solitary confinement units, my initial thoughts were: Shut 'em down in every city, every state, and every federal penal institution!

However, my initial thoughts did not touch on the deepest levels beneath the "systemic epidemic" issue of the use of solitary confinement; nor mass incarceration; nor how these epidemics disproportionately affect the poor, people of color, and the mentally dysfunctional; nor the detachment and desensitization of the general public to the horrors of being locked in a cage alone for too many years to comprehend.

Therefore, i needed to go to a much deeper and sublime level. By the end of my answering the journalist's many questions, i summed my personal observations, experiences, and limited formal education into a simple metaphor: THE WOMB OF THE BEAST. Simplistic, only in my connecting with people in the most accessible mediums: through symbolic thought and emotion. Here's what i wrote:

"i realize that i have accomplished a lot while i gestated in solitary for a decade. However, in such high spiritual and mental accomplishments you may discover my deepest shortcomings. After i walked away from the prolonged experience, i did not feel rehabilitated, but rather def with a Janused feeling: (1) by resisting the oppressions of a system created and backed by the wealthy and powerful, the prisoner is then systematically villainized as a psychopath of the deadliest kind and (2) the frustrations of not understanding the real damage to my mind until i am released from prison altogether.

In the latter context, the pendulum of

the psychological effects of long-term exposure to solitary confinement can swing between two extremes of "Broken and Docile" to "Radical Psychopath" with "Peaceful Social Agent" being the healthy middle. Who can predict the type of person or monster these isolation units will rebirth back into society? What nation with conscience would afflict and allow such degrees of affliction on its own citizens, and not expect to taint its own national security?

We have all seen the mass shootings on TV news becoming more common. In 2015, i read somewhere that there were over 300 mass shootings in the U.S. alone. In 2022, there were 647 and in 2023, there were 71 by Valentine's Day. Nearly all of the suspects involved in those crimes were reported to feel like social outcasts, feel like misfits, and feel alienated. So then could the hallmarks of the "radical psychopathic personality" be found in the theme of actual and perceived social alienation?

So where do the possibilities for destructive behavior leave the people

THE WOMB OF THE BEAST | Continued from page 3

who are forced into being outcast, misfitted, and alienated through their subjection to prolonged solitary confinement? The prospects are eerie and endless to me. Especially when isolation units can be seen as some type of matrix or womb that prisoners are forced to gestate (develop) in.

Think of it like this, an elephant has one of the longest gestation periods during pregnancy of all mammals at 23 months. A woman's average gestation period is 9 months. But when we observe the figurative gestation periods of isolation units carrying prisoners, they exceed 23 months by years and in unique cases—The Angola 3 of Louisiana (40 years), Hugo “Yogi Bear” Pinnell of California (40 years), and John “Balagoon” Cole of Indiana (35 years)—by decades.

The word “womb” is defined as “a place of organization or development.” Typically, this place is something biological. But the word “matrix” is defined as “an environment or material in which something develops; a surrounding medium or structure.” In Old Latin, “matrix” means “breeding female” or “sense of a womb.” Finally, the word “gestation” is defined as “the process of carrying or being carried in the womb between conception and birth.”

With the above definitions applied to prisoners left to languish within an isolation cell for prolonged periods it becomes clear that it's a place of development. But nothing about this development period is constructive to the mind and spirit. Where the environment is made of cold metal and concrete; where the air waves are either imposed with perpetual noises of screams and pounding on cell doors, or in unpredictable moments of dead silence; where there is little to no compassion from guards (caretakers) or from other prisoners; where communication with the outside world is

gravely limited or nonexistent through phone calls and visitation; where the cell door's opening act is as an umbilical cord that the Beast uses to maintain the prisoners' lives (with food, mail, medications, etc.), which if not provided they'd die.

While a baby in the biological womb of his or her mother is surrounded by warmth and nourishment of amniotic fluids. Doctors can perform a procedure called amniocentesis where they extract samples from the womb's amniotic fluids to determine the fetus' health. In contrast, the WOMB OF THE BEAST has no amniotic fluids, rather it has psychopathological pressures attacking those it carries from all angles. These pressures are the horrors, anger, wrath, loneliness, hate, and sadness caused to the psyche by the surroundings. How then can prisoncrats properly test prisoners' personalities as to predict their health on rebirth?

Some prisoners may come out strong, others broken, but all affected. Many will get lost in the psychological labyrinth and come out part human and part beast—psychopathic Minotaurs!

Since the 1980s the urban slang for prison has been “The Belly of the Beast.” Through the last several decades the term has stuck, mainly through popular culture and hip-hop, artists from KRS-One, Wu-Tang, and Nas to Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole have made reference to the Belly of the Beast in their music. But the concept of the Belly of the Beast originated from the ancient Hebrew Israelite Bible, in the Book of Jonah, where Jonah was swallowed by a giant fish for disobeying YAHWEH and then spat out after he repented.

The earliest use of the term can be traced to the late Argentine revolutionary, Che Guevara, where in the '60s he referred to the U.S. as the Bel-

ly of the Beast due to its heavy influence of capitalism on the world. However, the term pertaining to prison, as it is mostly known today, probably came from former prisoner Jack Abbott's 1981 book, entitled “The Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison.”

But why THE WOMB OF THE BEAST now?

Let's say the Belly of the Beast is only describing prisons' general population. While its WOMB is its solitary confinement units, whether the state's security housing units (SHU) or the Federal ADX. Because solitary's restrictive conditions are radically different in harshness than general population's, I officially termed its Womb condition as RADICAL Prison Gestation and define it as:

“1. Relating to the process that causes psychopathology to develop in prisoners who are subjected to prolonged solitary confinement. 2. Also characterized by solitary confinement's harsher conditions that greatly or radically departs from normal and traditional confinement practices of general prison populations.” (LB, 2007)

When exposed to the radical prison gestative conditions of the WOMB OF THE BEAST, prisoners are more prone to developing mental and personality disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Post Incarcerated Syndrome, Dependent Personality Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, etc. While suffering such mental and emotional traumas, these prisoners are most susceptible to staying in or joining gangs, or worst, becoming psychopathically radicalized for religious or political causes. All of which makes these subjects more likely to commit more crimes upon their release, even the extreme kind, like mass killings. But this could be the goal of the Beast (i.e., the Prison Industrial Complex)

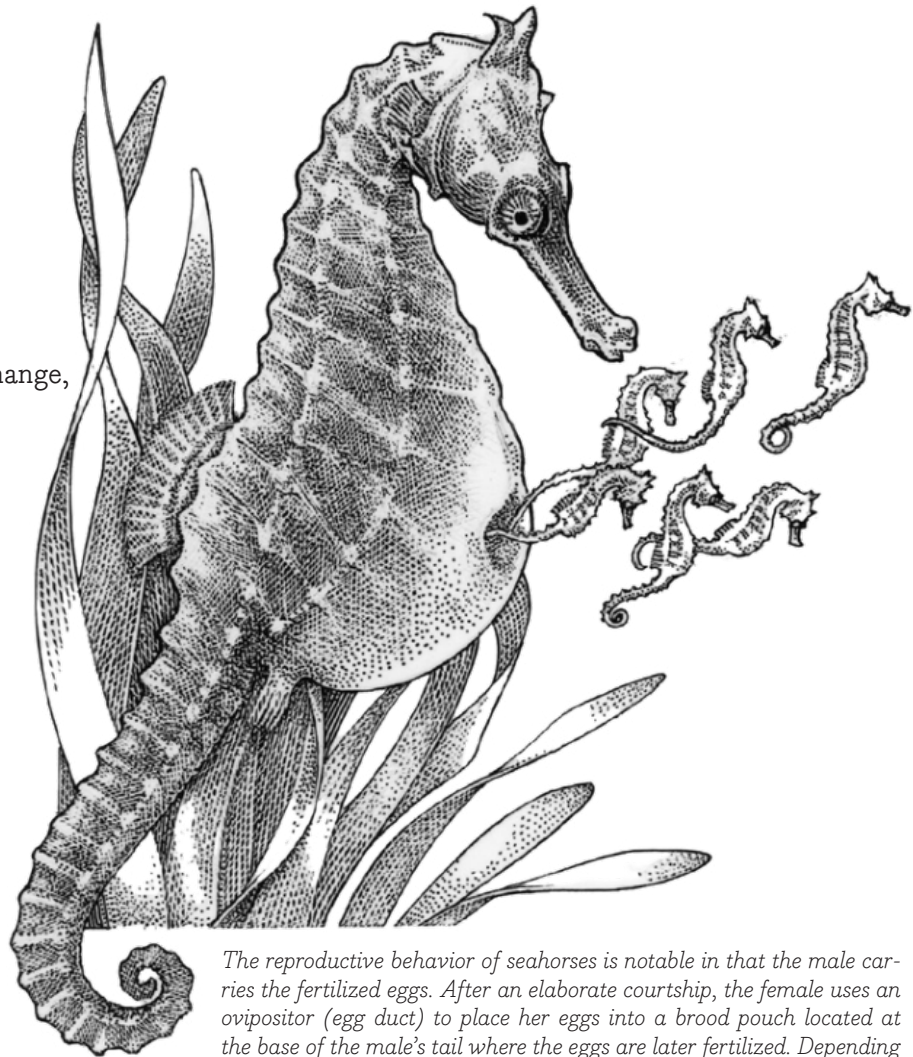
THE WOMB OF THE BEAST | Continued from page 4

and its many minions (i.e., investors and employees). Because if the recidivism rate goes up it refeeds the Beast with more profit. We must stop it or we will continuously see:

Illegitimate Trick Babies
conceived of the blood of society's lust,
forcing thousands into an underworld
that never gave a fuck,
one way or another,
D.N.A. make ups
of crooked cops, prosecutors, and judges,
who wear the masks of equality
knowing damn well
they never loved us!

Its toxic womb's constructed
of barbed-wired labyrinths of unforeseen change,
too many years developing
within the womb of a fiend,
drowning us in the fathoms of tattoo-tears
while constantly stabbing our soul
with infected syringes of loss and pain,
depriving the many caterpillars
held within its concrete cocoons,
slowly killing the moths
before they can reach
the lights of truth!

While never preparing
its offspring to breathe
the polluted air of society:
"The deceit of nature!"
Designed to systematically
scrape you,
of all your humanity
sanity
and class,
while it proudly welcomes you:
"C'mon, man!"
Before its billy-clubbed hands
smack numbers on your ass,
pushes you back inside
for the labor process
to start all over again.
WITHIN THE WOMB OF THE BEAST!



The reproductive behavior of seahorses is notable in that the male carries the fertilized eggs. After an elaborate courtship, the female uses an ovipositor (egg duct) to place her eggs into a brood pouch located at the base of the male's tail where the eggs are later fertilized. Depending on the species, the eggs remain in the pouch between 10 days and six weeks. During this time the male nurtures the developing young by regulating the chemistry of the fluid inside the pouch, slowly transforming it from that of his internal body fluids to that of salt water as pregnancy progresses. To nourish the growing young, the male also produces inorganic compounds and releases the hormone prolactin, which helps break down the proteins contributed by the female. Once the eggs hatch, the male convulses his body and expels the young through a single opening in the pouch. The young are miniature versions of their parents that receive no further care.

As you can gather at this point, I am not an educated person, nor a certified psychologist or behavior scientist, but my experiences and my descriptions of them are truthful and authentic. Which has afforded me the valuable perspectives of the damage caused to anyone exposed to solitary units for prolonged periods.

In 2016 the state of California set a great precedent, although forced to do so by its concerned citizens and the loved ones of prisoners, in restricting the amount of time prisoners could be confined in solitary units. Other states like Indiana, where I am confined at, need to adopt California's current standards on this issue. While we as a collective continuously move toward abolishing the use of solitary confinement in all U.S. prisons.

THE WOMB OF THE BEAST | Continued from page 5

While in general population people often look at me strange when they realize I'm one of the guys who has spent 10 or more years in solitary. Many have asked me, "Did you lose your mind while you were in there, bruh?"

I always reply, "Hell nah, I'm too strong to go out like that!"

But the reality of it is that I do not know how damaged I really am. Because I suffer underneath my soldier's mask of strength and fortitude. Where I whisper to myself in the mirror some

days, "They got me fucked up!"

"But who isn't messed up in some type of way?" My thoughts rationalize against my deepest internal crisis.

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Contact information:

Leon Benson
www.freedombenenson.org
www.facebook.com/freeleonbenenson

FEMALE KEEP SEPARATE: PRISONS, GENDER, AND THE VIOLENCE OF INCLUSION | Anonymous

*First, a warning: This text is written by and for queers and their friends. It is meant as part of a conversation around inclusion and identity where the validity of queer people isn't in question. Anyone using this text to contribute to homo- or transphobia is a fucking goof. ****

When finally the cell door closes, when the jangling keys recede, you've arrived as far as you're going that day. Then you can exhale alone with your mattress and be in your own body again, your body no longer a problem to be solved or a question to be answered. Just your own familiar weight under the blanket, where you can just shake and shake and try to sleep and get ready for whatever happens next.

1 Here's bill C-16's summary as it's laid out in the bill: "This enactment amends the Canadian Human Rights Act to add gender identity and gender expression to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination. The enactment also amends the Criminal Code to extend the protection against hate propaganda set out in that Act to any section of the public that is distinguished by gender identity or expression and to clearly set out that evidence that an offence was motivated by bias, prejudice or hate based on gender identity or expression constitutes an aggravating circumstance that a court must take into consideration when it imposes a sentence." <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/bill/C-16/first-reading>

2 My experience isn't everyone's, I can't speak for all trans experiences. A few notes about me to help contextualize:

-I'm white, and so don't face the same level of criminalization in my daily life or the same level of hostility within the prison system. Black and Indigenous trans prisoners I interacted with had often experienced more violence and refusal from the prison system around their identity than I did, which just makes sense considering they also experience more violence and exclusion on the street.

-I've only ever been inside for anarchist activity, so that's a big difference in experience from basically everyone I ever met inside, and I get far more outside support. I've gone in five separate times that have totaled about year, which is in some ways long, but compared to a lot of people it's really not. -

-Also, transmen are in quite a different position than what I describe in this text - the transmen I talked to were forced to choose between stopping taking testosterone and staying in seg, so the inclusion question is not the same for them.

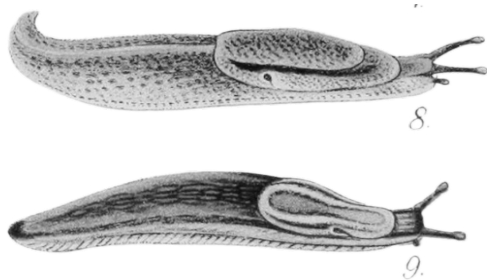
-I intend this text just as a starting point and hope others will add to it. This text is not signed, even though I know it's not very anonymous. If you want to get in touch with feedback, you can reach me at jusomerabbit@riseup.net

GETTING IDENTIFIED

Prison is one of those rare remaining spaces where the state is openly involved in categorizing people by gender and exposing them to differentiated treatment on that basis. When I lay on that shitty mattress, I was in a cell in the seg unit of the women's section of my local jail after having been identified as trans. I had been grilled about my gender and sexuality for about two hours until I was in tears, which felt horrible since I normally try to not show much to the guards.

On a human level, I don't think their actions were at all malicious. The process was new, most of them hadn't dealt with it before, and they probably don't know any trans people. And a lot of it wasn't the official questions – when the guard behind the desk paused to type something, one of the ones off to the side would chime in with curiosity, “So you won't identify as anything, but do you like men or women? You gotta make up your mind.” Then the desk guard would continue, “So if you're on suicide watch and we've taken your clothes away, who do you want to be watching you on camera, a male or a female?”

How do you identify. Identify yourself. There are two metal detectors leading to two different incarcerations, you need to identify yourself so we know which to use.



The pressure to identify had started just before dawn that day, not long after our door got kicked down and the flashbangs went off. I was zip tied naked under a sheet by a masked and armoured cop carrying an assault rifle, then a more normally dressed cop came in. He told me some charges, and then asked if I wanted a male or female cop to watch me get dressed. I said I didn't care. He went and got a female cop and then cut the zip ties off. I sifted through my clothes for something both femmy and warm, then ignored their calls to hurry as I slapped on some makeup.

In the police station, I kept my face blank as the detective showed me pictures and documents and asked me questions. When the time came to get transferred to court, the court officers asked who should pat me down, a male or a female. I said I didn't care. They said I had to answer. I said whoever wanted to could, I couldn't stop them. They decided to have the male officer grope my bottom half and the female my top.

After court, I was loaded into a transport van, a single-prisoner box, classified as FKS, “Female Keep Separate.” A bunch of men were in the other boxes, and one of them started joking, calling me his girlfriend. We got moved one after the other into the men's section of the jail, put in cells beside each other, and the joking continued. I nervously played along. I've been in men's prison before, I sometimes got identified as gay there, but I looked pretty different at that time. The guards saw what was happening and pulled me out after a few minutes. They asked me where I wanted to be. I asked what my options were and they said probably men's seg or women's seg. The other prisoners were still talking about me. I said women's. It was the first affirmation in answer

to a question I'd given that day.

Constructing and affirming an identity, on instagram like in the interrogation room, is a way to get us talking. The prison has to be inclusive of gender diversity, and to be included is to be invited to participate: “Where do you want to be?” Should I be happy to be included in a prison, affirmed as a trans person, whatever that means? Of course I'm glad I didn't experience more violence, but does this actually represent a win for those who have demanded inclusion?³

It's easy and nothing new to make critiques of inclusion, because there's so much we'd rather ask for – I come from an anarchist tradition where that's what the word “queer” means. It's different to start from what inclusion feels like in our bodies though, how it shapes us. The ways that exclusion is violent are often obvious, but is there a violent dimension to inclusion too, something from which we rightly recoil?

A starting point then is to ask how the state sees gender. What does the word “woman” in the phrase “woman's prison” mean? What are the consequences of being included as a woman in such a prison? How does the state understand “trans” and how does that understanding manifest itself through walls and bars?

Identity has two parts, a positive and a negative. The negative refers to oppression and violence, the positive to affirmation and belonging. I was first exposed to this distinction around blackness (I'm white) where “Black” refers at once to a history and ongoing experience of racist violence that produces certain people as Black, as well as an affirmation of a resilient identity, a shared struggle, and the culture that emerges from these⁴. A

3 I don't blame the prisoners for my bad experiences as much as I do the dehumanizing institution that puts all difference under such intense pressure.

4 Beyond the identity element, I wouldn't have the analysis of prison I do without the writings and example of Black radicals. Reading Assata Shakur, George Jackson, and Kuwasi Balagoon in men's prison and discussing it with other prisoners was pretty formative for me.

FEMALE KEEP SEPARATE | Continued from page 7

similar conversation is going on in my region around indigeneity and the role of lineage, culture, belonging, violence, racism, and struggle in forming those identities.

The discussion of trans inclusion and the state's official discourse focuses heavily on the positive side, on affirmation — self-identification as a basis for membership in a recognized class of people (for me, women). But that positivity is just a veneer, which is especially obvious around prison where our positive affirmation, our self-identification, is precisely the thing that exposes us to identity's negative side — the gendered violence of women's prison.

BEING REAL

In the context of prison, women exist as an other. Prison is for men, the prisoner is male, even as the rate at which women are incarcerated continues to increase. In the context of patriarchy, to have a gender-blind prison would expose women to additional violence of a kind this society doesn't officially endorse. So in a spirit of bourgeois equality, the prison system produces a separate institution for women, grouped together on the basis of an experience of sexual violence. When the state starts seeing its legitimacy threatened by queer and trans peoples' experience of similar violence, they can be added to that existing category without having to fundamentally change what prison is.

Men and women are meaningful categories in as much as there is an experience of patriarchy distinct to each; transwoman may be a distinct identity

in as much as it too has a specific relationship to the violence of patriarchy⁵. Prison then functions as a factory, sorting bodies, exposing them to differentiated treatment, and violently reproducing them as gendered beings in a world that requires such beings.

Separate is not equal. The way people are treated in women's prison is not the same as in men's prison. Some of this is to accommodate different needs — clothes with separate tops and bottoms instead of a jumpsuit, access to pads and tampons, more social workers, less emphasis on anger and more on trauma in programming. Some of it is clearly sexist and is the prison enforcing gender norms — strict dress codes and rules against touching, discouragement of exercise, low tolerance for conflict and fighting.

Beyond different treatment though, even things that are the same between men's and women's prisons don't produce the same effect — standardized meal trays, visitation, surveillance and searches, the presence of both male and female guards. The two experiences of these identical features end up strikingly different. Let's quickly flesh out one example:

The men's and women's provincial prisons in Ontario get exactly the same food. In men's prison, this is usually experienced as insufficient, in part because a big part of prisoner culture there is working out — it's common for prisoners to be released fitter and more muscular than when they went in. In women's prison, working out is strongly discouraged between prisoners and is sometimes even treated as a rule violation by guards. It's normal

for prisoners to quickly gain weight while having overall fitness erode due to enforced inactivity. Society as a whole treats fatness super differently for men and women, so this weight gain often comes along with shame and interacts with eating disorders or other mental health challenges.

The equal meals in a deeply unequal society produce a very negative impact overall on prisoners in women's facilities — prison harms and controls as much by what it gives as what it takes away. In that way the women's prison reproduces a specific vision of patriarchy through the forms of harm it causes and the toxic dynamics it encourages. We could make a similar analysis for how women's experiences with sexual violence and objectification make the frequent strip searches more harmful, as well as the presence of male guards observing you at all times. Or how the intense restrictions around visits and phone calls interact with women prisoners having much less access to resources and outside support than do prisoners on the men's side.

Continuing my story, I ended up in women's seg at the end of that first day. Which is more or less the same as men's seg, superficially at least. The cell is about the same size, the layout is the same, as are the strange rules about not being allowed shoes and the TVs out beyond your cell door having no volume. I did eventually end up on a regular women's range with other prisoners the system considered women, but it took some time.

A lot of horrible things happen inside prisons. Most of it never emerges,

⁵ Although I understand why this framing exists, insisting that “transwomen are women” is too simple. Most of us grew up with male privilege and don't understand what it means to be produced as a woman from birth; as well, the exclusion and violence transwomen face in society isn't the same as what ciswomen face, and no one would claim ciswomen understand it simply because “we're all women”. We don't need to argue if one form of violence is worse than the other, it's that they are different. Difference doesn't mean that inclusion shouldn't occur (this is not an argument in favour of having to hold your pee until you get home). It's an argument against letting the necessity of inclusion, because of similar needs for safety in the world as it is, lead us to an idea of gender that has been reduced to its positive dimension. Similarly, there's a difference between identifying as something and being identified as that — whether or not the two of those coincide for a given person will also lead to a different experience of violence. Problematizing categories like man/woman (or cis/trans) is useful, but I don't want us to flatten things out and actually end up with less ability to talk about our different experiences of systemic violence.

never becomes visible to those outside. There are exceptions though, the most notable being death. Currently, provincial prisons in my area are restructuring themselves to reduce drug overdose deaths – this isn't because they care about prisoners, but because having a body emerge as a corpse is unignorable. Therefore they'd prefer prisoners have no programs, no books, and no letters rather than risk fentanyl getting inside. Pregnancy is another thing that prison can't hide.

In its business of sorting bodies, the prison considered my body to be a potential source of the violence women's prison exists to avoid (or at least manage). In my early days of women's seg, I was told I could only move out of there if I could prove that I couldn't get an erection. I didn't rise to the bait (no pun intended), so I don't know what "proving" that would have entailed. But there are other ways that prison tries to satisfy itself that you aren't a threat – they look at whether you're taking hormones and what the doses are, they look at how you present inside and on road, at what you fight them for ("How many times will you beg at the window of your seg cell for a razor?"). They also assess how other prisoners react to you.

At one point, a sergeant came and told me I had ten minutes to get ready, I was going to visit a range. I resisted, saying I hadn't been given a razor yet, so they brought me one but didn't budge on the ten minutes. Fortunately I'd been in for a month by then and there were people sending me money, so I had already been able to get some makeup off canteen. So I rushed shaving with the shitty razor and dumped foundation over all the cuts before being marched over and deposited on a range with thirty other prisoners.

I've never experienced anything quite like walking on to a new range for the

first time. The only thing that changes in prison from day to day is the people, so everyone scrutinizes each other, and new people especially are curiosities. You need to make yourself uninteresting, but I was clearly brought there to be a subject of conversation.

I was only on the range a few minutes for my "visit". Some people talked to me, everyone looked, and then I was pulled off again. It was deeply awkward and embarrassing. I passed the test, which was later explained to me as being about the sound of my voice, if I tucked, how I looked and moved. I'm pretty small and I was told that helped too. The prisoners who the guards talked with agreed that I was "real", and I was moved on to the range that night.

I've heard a lot of stories about "fake" transwomen. This might mean transwomen who didn't pass, but usually meant those who were considered not to be making an effort to. I heard my fellow prisoners describe being assaulted or propositioned by transwomen while inside. I have no reason not to believe their experiences – we spent months together and got to know each other pretty well. A number of the people who told me these things were also the ones most welcoming to me personally. It seemed that scorn for "fake" transwomen was directly proportionate to how strongly my fellow prisoners felt that the "real" ones should be included.



"Real" transwomen don't fight, yell in masculine voices, do pushups, or hit on women; on the other hand, "fake" transwomen like to bully, force their voice high except when its convenient to intimidate, don't want a feminine body, and their sexuality is that of a straight man. It feels gross to repeat this narrative, which echos the worst anti-trans propaganda. I do believe though that in the context of prison, it was also a way that people who I know don't hate transwomen were trying to keep each other safe.

The distinction between "real" and "fake" is even more garbage than gender itself, but I want to own the way I ended up playing into it. I was incarcerated three times over the course of a year and a half, and during that time I moved from femmy non-binary to trying my best to pass as a woman. In some ways this process was very fulfilling and is maybe what I would have done anyway. In other ways, a big part of my motivation was to not spend months and months in solitary confinement. I still understand my gender identity as being essentially coerced and I still try hard to pass, even though it's been almost a year since I last heard a cell door slam shut.

However, I don't think the problem is one of individual attitudes – not mine, not my fellow prisoners', not even the guards'. I think the liberal understanding of gender as being purely positive is false and harmful, and I see this especially clearly in the prison system's adoption of gender self-identification. I intend to dig into this in more detail, but I'll have to circle back to it since first I'd like to tell a story I heard while I was inside.

IDENTITY AS ACCESS

The state has a rule where it has to provide meals appropriate to religious diets, and the most complicated one is

FEMALE KEEP SEPARATE | Continued from page 9

kosher, since it's not just a question of replacing one thing with something else. So Ontario prisons contract out for kosher meals, and they typically end up being of much higher quality than the standard fare. This means that prisoners are constantly trying to convince the institution they are Jewish in order to access the better food. The prisons are thus in the role of policing Jewish identity and throw up all sorts of blocks to people who are actually trying to meet religious needs.

I heard recently that a range in the adjacent men's prison tried to solve that problem once and for all by bringing a human rights challenge in court about access to kosher meals. They argued that the dietary rules followed by Jewish people are also laid out in scripture honoured by other religions, so all devout people of the book should have access to food compliant with those rules. Their challenge was successful, and suddenly hundreds of prisoners were exercising their new-found right to kosher food. This caused the supply of kosher meals to collapse (or at least the budget the prison system had for them) and resulted in most Jewish prisoners being told to take the vegan diet, since kosher meals were scarce.

I have no idea if that story is true. I can't find any record of it in google. But I've witnessed, both as a prisoner and as a person in solidarity, several moments where access to kosher food became a flashpoint for prisoner struggle in Canada, as a stand-in for better food for all. Even if this story is a fable, it highlights some dynamics of how change on the basis of identity occurs.

The prison system was forced to accept an expanded definition of a

recognized class of people and, because of this, to provide the accommodations associated with that class to many more prisoners. Both the system and the prisoners understood these accommodations as privileges, and obtaining them represented an improvement in conditions for many prisoners, along with an increased financial obligation for the institutions. The prison then transferred the burden onto another group of prisoners (in this case, Jewish prisoners who are observant on road) while moving to restrict access to the accommodation/privilege on a different basis, rather than challenging anyone's identity.

You can probably guess where I'm going with this, but I'll lay it out. The system is required to expand its policing of gender to accommodate self-identification, resulting in a greatly increased number of people who were assigned male at birth landing in women's prison.⁶ It also creates an easy pathway for anyone to move between men's and women's prison. The conditions in the two facilities are different, as I described above, and the basis of that difference is to reduce or manage the violence faced by people the system sees as women.

The violence in men's prison, in Ontario like many other places, can be intense, and many people have reason to flee it, not just transwomen. The men's prison system attempts to accommodate this need (because hospital visits, like corpses and babies, are products the prison has a harder time hiding) through Protective Custody (PC), which is basically the same as General Population (GP) except everyone there didn't feel safe on a regular range.⁷ Typically, a lot of queers

end up in PC, but it is also where people accused of sex crimes or violence against children go, as well as people with too much conflict, who are in the wrong gang, who have a bad reputation, who were in law enforcement... Admission to PC is voluntary, prisoners just have to ask, but once you are in PC you can't usually switch back. Over time, the result is that the numbers of prisoners in PC and GP get closer together, as do their levels of violence.

So where do people go who then need to escape the violence of PC? There has been an expansion in recent years of new forms of segregation.⁸ More and more queers were finding them-



selves doing all their time in seg. Ontario prisons are already overcrowded and this makes that worse, since these seg units often can't be populated as densely and the prison system wants space there to use at its discretion. Trans people in particular usually end up being in a cell alone, instead of two or three to a cell, as is standard for others.

Being able to move trans people to a different institution where they are put on a regular range is thus partly a response to overcrowding. It also means that identifying as trans can give prisoners who may not have identified as

⁶ There have been occasional transwomen in women's facilities since at least the 80s, but the majority of transwomen were in men's prisons.

⁷ I know all the classifications can be a bit confusing if you haven't done time before, so I want to explain here. PC and GP are both very similar in terms of how your time is structured – same schedule, same level of crowding, same (lack of) access to programs. It is not segregation, you're still with lots of other people and sharing a cell.

⁸ This is also partly in response to Canadian court rulings that have limited the prison system's ability to use solitary confinement as a punishment

trans otherwise an additional option to escape the choice between violence and isolation. I don't think very many people do this wholly cynically – for many, it seems more similar to my process of moving from non-binary towards a way of presenting that more neatly fits the prison's (as well as the broader society's) understanding of a "real" (trans)woman. Add into this that prison violence disproportionately falls on those whose mental health makes them unable to conform to the rigid social environment, which in turn a response to overcrowding and incarceration itself.⁹

The pressure to identify your gender to the prison starts to resemble more and more the pressure to identify yourself to a cop who's arresting you. It is an invitation to participate in having the process of controlling your body move smoothly, causing you the least physical harm. I remember myself crying in the intake room because it was no longer that I was refusing to tell them which gender boxes to tick, but that I just didn't have the right kind of answers. In the end, I came up with an answer that got me what I needed at the end of that very long day – a safe place to sleep.¹⁰

Some people do identify as trans cynically, more like those prisoners fighting to be identified as observant people of the book so as to access the better kosher meals. This seems to be a very small minority. Regardless, women's prison comes to operate as a kind of "super PC" for the prison system as a whole.

ALWAYS AGAINST PRISON

I spent a lot of time talking about this with other prisoners, both cis and trans. Maybe it's not a problem that women's prison is also the super PC. Coercion and violence is a part of identity anyway, so maybe it's just up to the culture among prisoners in women's prison to accommodate this shift. That is the liberal ideal no? That enlightened rulers determine peoples' rights and then our freedom is limited only by the requirement to respect those rights? Because oppression is just individual behaviour, yeah? So thank goodness the prison system put up copies of the GenderBread Person™ poster on all the ranges in the women's prison, so prisoners can educate themselves and keep the space safe.¹¹ I'm not joking, it's right there next to the obligatory printout of our rights, a dozen pages behind a plastic panel whose characters are so small as to be illegible.

Everyone who cares about trans inclusion as a project, who struggled in the campaigns that were recuperated by the state and regurgitated as federal Bill C-16 should take an honest look at how their project has been taken up by the prison system. Seeing it in this grotesque form should challenge our analysis of gender and inclusion to become richer and more nuanced. Because self-identification as a basis for inclusion in prison is unsustainable. When there is an anti-trans backlash on a legislative level, you can be sure there will be no shortage of horror stories from prison to fuel the outrage.

This is not because some transwomen are "fake" and it is not because some

transwomen reproduced predatory behaviour of a kind that ciswomen prisoners do too. It is obviously wrong to hold a whole group of people responsible for the fucked up things some individuals in that group do. The backlash will come because stapling a positive understanding of gender identity onto the prison system is totally inadequate.

It feels important to me that there be a critique of Bill C-16 and how it has been implemented that comes from queers and from people who carry a liberatory project — not just from opportunists who hate trans people, like Jordan Peterson. I don't see the state as an agent of positive social change, but even those of you who do should ask yourself if we really have nothing to critique in C-16, as if Trudeau just got it perfect on his first try.

For those outside of Canada, perhaps seeing how liberal trans inclusion has played out here can be useful for avoiding some of the pitfalls that we have run into. It's a subject for another day, but the starkness of prison might mean that analyzing how trans inclusion has played out there could reveal certain weaknesses with self-identification as the basis of gender in other spaces too.

There are a few ways the prison system might react to these contradictions, but first a quick story. There were a couple of queer guards I interacted with in the women's prison. One was a transwoman who, while strip searching me, said "We've been making huge gains these last few years, things are getting better." But the one I interacted with most regularly

⁹ To be clear, women's prison isn't some kind of safe space for queers. For instance, I saw situations where AFAB queers got passed around by tough cis women who were straight on road. The queer folks thought at first they were in some sort of gay summer camp, but they eventually realized they were in situations it wouldn't be easy to leave or change.

¹⁰ This pressure on prisoners' gender identity isn't just a trans issue. I've seen the ways that men in men's prison experience pressure to perform hypermasculinity, as well as how women's prison reproduces people as powerless victims by stripping prisoners of their options and supports and playing on trauma. Almost everyone's gender is scrutinized and changed by prison. There is a distinct experience of this related to being trans though, and that's what I'm most concerned with here.

¹¹ The Genderbread Person is a teaching tool poster for explaining differences in gender, sex, and sexuality that is very much within a liberal understanding of gender: <https://www.genderbread.org>.

FEMALE KEEP SEPARATE | Continued from page 11

worked on my range and they were pretty friendly towards me. One day, they brutalized one of my friends by emptying a can of pepper spray into her eyes from an inch away while another guard held her down. We gave them a mean nickname based on the incident, and they complained to management to make us stop “bullying” them. Later they got top surgery and enthusiastically told me about it while I was standing in line for meds, and I regret that I ended up congratulating them.

The first way the system might react is by doubling down on improving its project of inclusion, fine tuning their trans policies and working out the kinks in implementation. I hope stories like this one can help convince us that their efforts in this direction have nothing to do with meeting our needs. I don't care about the gender identity of the guard brutalizing me

¹² It's a weird irony that the prison guards' union managed to get acceptance for the gender identity of their workers before the system got around to doing the same for prisoners. There have been transwomen guards in women's prisons since well before Bill C-16.

just like their accommodation for my gender identity didn't make me any more free.¹²

Alternatively, the prison system might react by falling back on its origins and applying a model of control through separation. There is a lot of talk of queer-specific units, or possibly even a separate facility. Gender queer people will thus exist in a status not midway between the men's and women's prisons, but between the regular and psychiatric prisons, which are already the system's way of managing forms of deviance that we can't be blamed for. We should oppose this as we do all expansions of the prison system.

As an anarchist, I am of course against all prison and I'm not going to offer any policy suggestion. I'm writing shortly after the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis po-

lice and the massive rebellion that followed, in a moment when critiques of the police and prison have spread in a way I never thought I would see. This motivated me to actually finish this text instead of just carrying these experiences around inside, because I think feminist and queer spaces could do more to build hostility to cops and prisons in their own way. I live for the day when all those whose lives are impacted by prison will gather together to destroy them, turn them over to the pigeons and rain. We will plant the ruins with fruit trees and have a bonfire of all the prisoner and guard uniforms. I know the smoke will carry away some of the gendered nightmare we are all living both inside and outside the walls.

THE OPENING STATEMENT is an abolitionist newsletter driven by the voices and visions of Michigan prisoners, as well as those on the outside impacted by the prison system. **THE OPENING STATEMENT** hopes to foster ongoing discussion against the violence of incarceration.

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CONTACT:

The Opening Statement
c/o MAPS
PO Box 8011
Ann Arbor, MI 48107

FAMILY AND FRIENDS can find us at www.michiganabolition.org