

## REPORT FROM PRISON

### **OF STUDBROADS AND STRAP-ONS: THE CONFLATION OF GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION BY FEMALE PRISONERS IN TEXAS AS A DISCIPLINE OF HETEROPATRIARCHAL NORMALITY**

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Halloween Day 2013: The pod's butch lesbians (a.k.a. "studbroads") are scurrying to find tight pants to replace the loose ones they usually sag. Several are in the process of having makeup applied and hair styled at the dayroom tables. Officer V assists with the acquisition of tight pants—despite the fact that tight clothing violates Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) policy. Officer V is amused by the "costumes" of femininity that this cohort is concocting.

As we head out to the evening meal, some of the "transformed" sashay suggestively. Others put up a limp wrist and squeal. Staff who know these women hoot and laugh. "Show us your sexy walk," exhorts Mr. R to M. M shakes her booty as she waits in the dinner line.

This incident is one of many that I have encountered here in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice where the attachment of gender presentation via external appearance is linked to the sexual orientation of the woman. I have been "out" as bisexual since 1994 and guest co-edited a volume on being "queer and dis/abled" (Atkins and Marston, 1999). However, my experiences here in TDCJ have led me both to understand a new prison-based lexicon of terms that prison dykes and others use and to realize that prisoners conflate and confuse gender and sexual orientation. I see this as problematic and argue that it constitutes what French social theorist Michel Foucault (1995) would call a "discipline of normality" inflicted by the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC).

Let me juxtapose this prison experience with my "freeworld" experience. I sported a pixie-type haircut shaved down to 2 inches at home. While I was in the county jail, the staff helped me assert the right to maintain that hairstyle as the inmate beauticians wanted to argue with me. However, when I got to TDCJ, they kept me from having a haircut for years. This was done with disciplinary cases as retaliation for exerting my First Amendment rights to use internal and external channels of grievance. For male inmates, haircuts are MANDATED. For women, haircuts are a PRIVILEGE.

In this way, the staff maintain gender boundaries, via sexist notions of appropriate hairstyle. Thus, it's no surprise that the inmates do, too. When I got one inmate to cut my

hair after years of nonstop growth, an officer tried to give me a disciplinary case. Fortunately, I found a sympathetic sergeant who tore up the case when she saw my short hair on my I.D. card.

After I was finally able to go to the Beauty Shop to get shaved with electric clippers down to my pixie cut for the first time in years, my dorm mates began referring to me as “he.” I corrected them: “I’m a WOMAN.” In one conversation on the rec yard, an inmate responded, “But aren’t you gay?” I told her I was and added: “But there’s a difference between gender presentation and sexual orientation.” She and the others present nodded their heads thoughtfully. They understood.

But the heteropatriarchal idea that there must be a “he/she” dualism in a relationship—even a female-to-female one—persists. This is also evident when messages are being passed between lovers. Here the courier will deem one of the pair “she” and the other “he.” On one occasion, the courier was hollering out the window on her side of the run for Little G; and she kept calling G “he.” G finally said, “Look, I’m a woman!”

“Well, but it’s confusing to pass the message and say, ‘she’ and ‘she,’” replied the messenger. Finally, first names were used to avert the gender crisis of the communicator. The courier’s response, perhaps, simply explains why gender presentation and sexual orientation are being conflated here in TDCJ.

In our heterosexist society, no matter how open we are to LGBTQ relationships, our cultural socialization still leads some to want to see a male and a female in our relationship or to call someone with short hair a male. Prison by itself cannot entirely be blamed for that. In 1999, I shaved off my golden blond locks that cascaded halfway down my back so that I could try out the pixie cut (that I’ve worn since then). I stopped into a coffee shop that weekend and immediately drew the attention of a leatherdyke who I’d seen many times before with my long hair. Why did SHE assume I was gay with short hair, when I was just as gay with long hair?

Let me delve into another prison scenario that occurred this winter with the same Officer V and an inmate fairly new to TDCJ. “Cassie” (a pseudonym) sees a friend of hers from a former unit in the vestibule and hugs her wholeheartedly and platonically. Office V yells, “Hey! Bring me your I.D.!”—suggesting she’s going to write a disciplinary case: a “Code 20” for sexual misconduct. H and I defend Cassie: “She’s new, Ms. V! She doesn’t know any better!”

What Cassie doesn’t know is that we’re not supposed to hug or touch each other here in TDCJ. When I first met her, Cassie extended her hand to shake mine. I had to explain that if staff saw us shake hands, we could get a “sex” case and be sent to medium custody.

Please note that an inmate can BEAT UP another inmate and REMAIN in general population. Administration may claim that that discrepancy is because of the Safe Prisons laws and Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), but the studbroads often get away with the sex—and I mean NAKED IN THE SHOWER WITH SOMEONE ELSE sex—without a case.

This unfairness is to maintain yet another boundary, another discipline of heteropatriarchal “normality”: we’re not supposed to LOVE each other in here—we’re supposed to FIGHT. Or, if we love each other in here, we’re supposed to otherwise shed our femininity (or become hyper-feminine) to do so.

### References

- Atkins, D. & C. Marston (1999). Creating accessible queer community: Intersections and fractures with disability praxis. *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity*, 4(1), 3-21.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Vintage.