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THE EMERGENCE OF LESBIANISM FROM WOMEN'S PENAL INSTITUTIONS:
INCARCERATED WOMEN-LOVING WOMEN, INTERRACIAL COUPLING, AND
WOMEN'S BLUES MUSIC, 1895-1935

Sidney Wegener

May 2021

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Women's History
Sarah Lawrence College

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the early-twentieth-century emergence of lesbianism as an identity label, an understanding of relationships between women-loving women, and a set of subcultures in the United States. Penal and medical professionals' influence on the development of language surrounding and contributing to social and scientific meanings of lesbianism is analyzed as a response to the hypervisibility of women-loving women confined in women's penal institutions. In this context, relationships between incarcerated white women and Black women received the most attention and condemnation from observers, such as reformatory administrators and research psychologists. A focus on interracial relationships between incarcerated women, especially on the voices of Black women in these relationships, facilitates a reimagination the evolution of U.S. lesbianism. In this endeavor, the thesis relies heavily on secretly written correspondence between incarcerated women-loving women and on the lyrics of blues songs written, performed, and recorded by Black women who gave birth to blues culture. Moving beyond historical narratives of lesbianism which focus on white middle-class women, the thesis explores the emergence of lesbianism through connections between incarcerated, working-class, and Black women's spaces wherein women-loving women cultivated diverse identities and subcultures.

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The research and writing of this thesis were conducted while living on land historically stewarded by Munsee Lenape and Wappinger Native peoples in New York and on land historically stewarded by Nisenan and Patwin Native peoples in California. While land acknowledgement is critical, I encourage taking action in the LANDBACK movement for collective Native liberation by engaging with and supporting landback.org.

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Introduction:

The Women's Penal System, Science Professionals, and Working-Class Black

Women's Voices in the Blues

In 1913, Dr. Margaret Otis, a resident psychologist at the New Jersey State Home for Girls in Trenton, established on Lenape Native land, wrote, “A form of perversion that is well known among workers in reform schools and institutions for delinquent girls, is that of love-making between the white and colored girls.”¹ Her four-page article, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” was published in *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology* just one year prior to a state investigation at the New York Bedford Hills Reformatory for Women and displayed acute concerns about interracial relationships among female inmates.² The investigation records were public and made the newspapers, contributing to a new definition of lesbianism that was emerging during the early twentieth century in the United States. Publications about and documentation of interracial relationships between incarcerated women notably increased as the Progressive Era (1890s-1910s) took hold of popular culture in the United States, particularly in the urban Northeast. In 1929, Charles A. Ford, a psychologist at the State Bureau of Juvenile Research on Hopewell, Kaskaskia, and Myaamia Native land,³ in Columbus, Ohio, authored an article which cited and expanded upon Otis’s theories.⁴ What Otis derived from her observations

¹ Margaret Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 8, no. 2. (1913), 113.

² See Hannah Walker, “From a Whisper to a Rebellion: Examining Space, Race, Sexuality, and Resistance within the Confines of the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility” (master’s thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2017).

³ Throughout this thesis, specified geographic locations will be identified as land historically stewarded by Native Peoples. The purpose of utilizing Indigenous peoplehood land identification is to work towards decolonizing academic writing of U.S. history and recognize that all cities, states, and institutions occupy Native People’s land. See Eve Tuck, “Rematriating Curriculum Studies,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 8, no. 1 (2011): 34-37, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2011.572521>.

⁴ Charles Ford, “Homosexual Practices of the Institutionalized Female,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 23, no. 4 (January 1929): 442–448, doi:10.1037/h0070699.

at the State Home for Girls is telling of the concerns carceral institution and medical professionals had about women's sexual morality and the preservation of white supremacist racial purity.⁵

The focus on relationships between white women and Black women in Otis's article perhaps set a precedent for the surge of concern among medical and penal professionals about female homosexuality and interracial relationships. Though the reach of her influence is unclear, Otis makes an assertion which links Black women and deviant sexuality together that grew into a dominant observational narrative regarding incarcerated women-loving women who coupled interracially during the early twentieth century.⁶ Her article asserts that "The difference in color, in this case, takes the place of difference in sex, and ardent love-affairs arise between white and colored girls in schools where both races are housed together."⁷ In this, she makes a direct connection between the interracial nature of "ardent love-affairs" and "homosexual relations" as a "perversion." Her words reveal underlying assumptions that Black girls, who for generations

⁵ Throughout this thesis language is an obstacle in regard to identifying past people's gender, racial, and sexual identities. While it is problematic to use language which perpetuates the ideology that, in the absence of transness, cisgenderness exists innately, for the purposes of this thesis individuals should be assumed to prefer cisnormative gender identities and expression unless otherwise specified. Similar to women's prison populations today, not all inmates incarcerated during the early twentieth century in women's institutions necessarily identified as women. While the word "transgender" cannot be applied to those of the past who could not identify as such themselves, it is critical to acknowledge that there were individuals who were assumed to be male at the time of arrest and discovered to be female after the criminal encounter. These individuals who refused to perform gender, more specifically womanhood, in a socially acceptable manner are deserving of much more scholarly attention than can be afforded in this work. Just as women-loving-women have always existed, so have people who refuse gender normativity. For a thorough understanding of U.S. transgender history, see Julian Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

⁶ While women of various races and ethnicities were incarcerated along with white women, this thesis identifies "colored" women as Black, as opposed to "women of color." The purpose of this specification is to emphasize the concerns that medical and penal professionals developed regarding the perceived influence Black women had on white women's sexuality. The case is not that only Black and white women were coupling together, but that these particular interracial relationships solicited the most attention from those who observed incarcerated women-loving women. Throughout this thesis, "interracial relationships" specifically refer to those between Black and white women.

⁷ Otis, "A Perversion," 113.

had been stereotyped as innately aggressive, masculine, and hypersexual subhuman beings, are the parties responsible for sexual deviance and corruption. Observers of interracial relationships between incarcerated women established a theoretical link between deviant female homosexuality and race by categorizing Black women as temptresses whose race substituted for masculinity. This bolstered the belief that white women involved in cross-racial same-sex love affairs were heterosexual at heart and their Black sweethearts were merely stand-ins for white men. From a heteropatriarchal perspective, their interracial engagements, did not proceed from a sexual desire for Black women but from a sublimated desire for sex with men. Professionals who studied interracial relationships between incarcerated women developed new definitions of female sexuality through the use of rhetoric such as “perversion,” “homosexuality,” and “lesbianism.”⁸ Many observers published their studies in medical and scientific texts and journals which were often read by fellow professionals, resulting in the circulation of theories and language among psychologists, sexologists, and penologists.⁹

Relationships between white women and Black women became not only more common over time but also more visible as reformatory staff diligently monitored contact and communication between the two populations. Despite efforts to suppress such couplings, administrators noted that interracial relationships flourished in women’s institutions. As Otis observed, “In this particular institution the love of ‘niggers’ seemed to be one of the traditions of

⁸ Bernard Talmey, *Woman, A Treatise on the Normal and Pathological Emotions of Feminine Love* (New York: Practitioners Publishing Company, 1908).

⁹ Some observers who published their studies in medical and scientific contexts include Bernard Talmey, *Woman, A Treatise on the Normal and Pathological Emotions of Feminine Love*; Havelock Ellis and John Symonds, “Sexual Inversion,” in *Studies of the Psychology of Sex*; Charles Ford, “Homosexual Practices of the Institutionalized Female,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*.

the place.”¹⁰ Although Otis postulated that love between Black and white inmates was particularly common in the New Jersey State Home for Girls, interracial relationships were documented by many who observed incarcerated women-loving women. Joseph Fishman, a senior-level administrator who worked at numerous different institutions throughout his career, asserted in the early 1930s that, “Problems in women’s prisons are frequently complicated by the fact that white women who play the passive part in homosexuality are more likely to have affairs with colored women.”¹¹ Administrators and medical professionals produced various theories as to why women engaged in relationships with one another interracially; however, most of these theories were based on pre-existing assumptions held by the observer. Perhaps most frequently, theorists assumed that Black women’s inherent masculinity substituted for the role a man might play in a relationship with an inherently submissive white woman. Many also alleged that coupling interracially added an element of excitement because it was explicitly forbidden; as Otis stated, “The motive of ‘the forbidden fruit’ was added.”¹²

One of the earliest publications in the United States which offers a medical definition of “lesbianism” with specific regard to sexual relations between women is a 1908 book written by Dr. Bernard Talmey, *Woman, A Treatise on the Normal and Pathological Emotions of Feminine Love*.¹³ Talmey, a German-Polish immigrant and gynecologist at New York City’s Yorkville Hospital, states, “Sensual love among women is called Lesbianism.”¹⁴ His European origin

¹⁰ Otis, “A Perversion,” 113.

¹¹ Joseph F. Fishman, *Sex in Prison: Revealing Sex Conditions in American Prisons* (New York: National Library Press, 1934), 29.

¹² Otis, “A Perversion” 113.

¹³ Bernard Talmey, *Woman, A Treatise on the Normal and Pathological Emotions of Feminine Love* (New York: Practitioners Publishing Company, 1908).

¹⁴ Talmey, *Woman*, 141.

connects him to the well-known slightly earlier works of British medical doctor and sexologist Havelock Ellis and German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing who both published some of the first Western scientific research on human sexuality during the mid to late-nineteenth century.¹⁵ While these physicians have been credited for producing a new meaning of lesbianism related to female homosexuality, it would be a stark historical oversight to credit these white, educated professionals with the emergence of women-loving women's identities, relationships, and subcultures.¹⁶

A tight-knit relationship between the emergence of modern Western medical sciences, such as psychiatry and sexology, and that of the United States women's penal system played a profound role in the evolution of lesbian identities, relations, and subcultures. Medical and scientific professionals seeking to study women for research on deviant sexuality, hereditary immorality, and psychological illness often located the perfect subject population in women's penal institutions. In turn, as women's penal institutions began to be established in the Northeast and Midwest, a "medical model" became part and parcel of facility structures and routines, which included vaginal examinations upon commitment to an institution.¹⁷ The women's penal system became more robust in the early twentieth century, as women with college degrees and

¹⁵ Havelock Ellis, "Sexual Inversion," in *Studies of the Psychology of Sex*. Vol. 1 (1897): III- 299. Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct, a Medico-Forensic Study* (1st ed., 1886), translated by Franklin Klaf, 12th ed. (New York, NY: Stein and Day Publishers, 1965).

¹⁶ My use of "women-loving women" to describe women of the past who shared intimate, romantic, and sexual relationships with other women is deliberate in that I aim to linguistically liberate these women from the tangle of terminology which was developed in an oppressive response to their existence and visibility. To center "loving" is to de-center genital, inherently phallogocentric, sex in our understanding of lesbianism. To bookend "loving" with "women" is to demonstrate that men have no part nor place in lesbianism, the love is literally between women. Each time I use women-loving women in this thesis, I call attention to love between women in an attempt to counter definitions of their sexuality, gender, selfhood, and relationships based on the opinions of observers and intrusions upon their privacy and personhood.

¹⁷ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th Century America* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), 40.

professional career experience became prison administrators. Many of these professional women were educated in psychology and their approach to women's incarceration often hinged on contradictory ideologies regarding sexual morality, eugenics, and inmates' reformability.

A separate penal system for women was established in the United States as a result of the Women's Prison Reform movement, which began in the 1870s and dissolved by the 1930s. Women's prison reformers were predominantly white, middle-class women who volunteered as suffragists, abolitionists, or temperance activists during the Civil War. Several key factors bolstered the Women's Prison Reform movement in the Northeast including an increase in urban industrialization, a new wave of European immigrants, and strong enthusiasm for eugenic ideology, which swept through medical and scientific communities. Without the unpaid women reformers who took up the incarcerated "fallen woman's" suffering as their new collective charity cause, the women's penal system would not exist as it does today.¹⁸ Prior to the establishment of separate institutions for female inmates, incarcerated women were held in special sections of facilities designed for men, surrounded by much larger numbers of male inmates and by an almost entirely male staff of guards, administrators, physicians, and others. Deprived of all protection and privacy, women incarcerated in men's prisons were subject to sexual abuse and violence.¹⁹ While the Women's Prison Reform movement did not create the perfect penal system for women, if women reformers had not taken up this cause, incarcerated women would likely have continued to be held in facilities which were already overcrowded with men and where the threat of sexual violence loomed over them constantly.

¹⁸ Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons, 1800-1935* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1985), 53-82.

¹⁹ Estelle Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1981).

At the beginning of the Women's Prison Reform movement, many of its proponents were women who had community-based experience in what we might now call grass-roots activism. These reformers called for separate institutions for women inmates on the grounds that, unlike their male counterparts, incarcerated women were redeemable; therefore, it was necessary that women be held in separate facilities geared to the needs and potential rehabilitation of female criminals.²⁰ Their visions of reformatories for women included educational and vocational training aimed towards transforming the inmate into an ideal woman according to white middle-class standards of domesticity.²¹ These advocates for women's reformatories did not focus on felons, but on a group yet to be distinctly criminalized: vagrants, unwed mothers, prostitutes, and other "fallen" women. A key underlying factor in the push for women's reformatories was the eugenics movement, which thrived during the early twentieth century among a variety of elite and educated professionals in fields such as sexology, psychiatry, sociology, and penology. Proponents of women's prison reform often leaned on eugenic reasoning for separate female facilities, arguing that the new reformatories needed to sort out salvageable women from those who should be confined through their childbearing years.²²

As the Women's Prison Reform movement evolved over the decades, its participants began to position themselves in careers of medicine, politics, and prison administration in an effort to more effectively mobilize the reformatory efforts. Key professional leaders such as Katherine Bement Davis, Florence Monahan, and Julia Jessie Taft secured college educations

²⁰ Rafter, *Partial Justice*, xxii. Reform activists also argued that if women were to be segregated in a separate facility geared toward domestic reformation, then their labor would be more efficient, and institutions would be more profitable.

²¹ The key difference between reformatories and prisons is that reformatories were set up as residential, often open-air institutions while prisons were structured as walled-in penitentiaries.

²² Eugenia C. Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women in the United States* (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1931), 79.

and careers as superintendents, commissioners, and more.²³ Josephine Lowell, a nineteenth-century pioneer in the Women's Prison Reform movement, played a critical role in the establishment of New York's first three women's reformatories due to her position as a member of the State Board of Charities. She held intensely eugenicist ideologies, which severely impacted the foundation of New York's women's reformatories and penal institutions as her stance was strongly supported by many members in the State Charities Aid Association.²⁴ Women who held similar professional positions often aligned themselves with the eugenic movement, sometimes out of desire for state or private funding from elite parties who valued women's rehabilitation.²⁵ Although institutional leaders of women's reformatories focused on sexual immorality, female homosexuality had not yet become a concern for the world outside of the reformatory walls.

In early-twentieth-century America, very few incarcerated women were sentenced to life in a penal institution; however, many women were incarcerated repeatedly. Whenever these women returned to life outside of prison, they took with them experiences and knowledge gained on the inside. Many returned to husbands or sex work, but some continued to engage in romantic relationships with other women in the free world. Despite women's movement back and forth between free society and incarceration, penal institutions were considered spaces completely

²³ During the early twentieth century, women who had college degrees were often considered unwomanly and therefore married at far lower rates than their domestic counterparts. However, it should be noted that many women of such professional stature partnered or cohabitated with other professional women, sometimes for life. See Lillian Faderman, *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

²⁴ Rafter, *Partial Justice*, 44.

²⁵ "\$50,000 Fund From J.D. Rockefeller, Jr.: He Will Finance Study of Women Convicts With a View To Their Moral Regeneration. White Slave Work Result Observatory May Be Established At Bedford Under Plan Suggested by Kate Bement Davis," *New York Times*, January 23, 1912, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1912/01/23/archives/50000-fund-from-jd-rockefeller-jr-he-will-finance-study-of-women.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

isolated from the outside; as if what happened in prison stayed, in prison.²⁶ In part, this is true in that prisons did cultivate unique subcultures; however, the notion that prison culture and free society culture remained entirely separate is untrue. As Regina Kunzel explicates in her book, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*, researchers such as Charles Ford exploited women in confinement as subjects who were already considered criminal, thus solidifying the link between deviance and homosexuality.²⁷ Kunzel asserts this observation as she explores why pioneering sexologists and researchers studied homosexuality among incarcerated people, and coined the term “situational homosexuality.”²⁸ Historically, homosexual relationships have been noted as common within an array of homosocial institutions during the early twentieth century and before. Colleges and boarding schools cultivated unique subcultures of romantic and sexual same-sex love among middle and upper-class white women and girls; yet, penal institutions became the primary site for research on female homosexuality.

Pioneers in the field of gay and lesbian history who began publishing their work in the late twentieth century predominantly provide large-scale historical narratives which, while quite expansive, are limited in regard to analysis of race and class. During the 1980s and 1990s, historian Estelle Freedman authored multiple books and articles on gay and lesbian history, including a monograph on women’s prison reformers and inmates in *Their Sisters’ Keepers: Women’s Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930*.²⁹ However, Hannah Walker’s recent master’s

²⁶ Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 94.

²⁷ Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy*.

²⁸ For more on “situational homosexuality” see, Regina Kunzel, "Situating Sex: Prison Sexual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 3 (2002): 253-270.

²⁹ Freedman, *Their Sisters’ Keeper*.

thesis, “From a Whisper to a Rebellion: Examining Space, Race, Sexuality, and Resistance within the Confines of the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility,” sheds light on Freedman’s “inadvertent oversimplification of the archives” through her examination of interracial relationships amongst incarcerated women.³⁰ Lillian Faderman, a historian of sexuality in the United States and a contemporary of Estelle Freedman, displays a similar lack of analytical attention to aspects of race in her pioneering work, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th Century America*.³¹ Emily Reed asserts in her 2019 senior thesis, “Wayward Women and Lady-Lovers: Same-Sex Intimacies Between Women in Progressive Era New York City, 1901-1930,” that Faderman’s focus on middle and upper-class white women “remains disconnected from the development of a visible lesbian culture and community” of Black and working-class lesbians.³²

Interdisciplinary historians of the twenty-first century, such as Saidiya Hartman, have authored inspiring historical reimaginings of the experiences of Black women in the early twentieth century by creatively unearthing their voices in and out of the archives. To provide an intimate retelling of the Black lesbian experience, Hartman utilizes recorded interviews with Mabel Hampton, a Black lesbian who resided in New York City during the 1920s, and was briefly incarcerated at the Bedford Hills Women’s Reformatory, and was well connected to queer communities and cabaret nightlife.³³ Christina Anne Woolner’s dissertation, “The Famous Lady

³⁰ Walker, “From a Whisper to a Rebellion,” 8.

³¹ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*.

³² Reed, “Wayward Women and Lady-Lovers,” 74.

³³ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 297-343. Mabel Hampton is featured in or is the focus of many historical accounts on Black lesbians in early-twentieth century New York City because she was able to leave behind oral and written archived documents which give intimate details about her life from childhood to late adulthood. Mabel Hampton’s oral and written records are held at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY. While the archives are currently closed to in person visitation, the volunteer archivists have been working hard to meet the needs of researchers and historians. Website, <https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org>

Lovers:’ African American Women and Same-Sex Desire from Reconstruction to World War II,” also weaves Mabel Hampton’s story into her retelling of the histories of southern Black women who migrated to cities in the North at the turn of the century. Woolner captures the importance of Black women’s self-told narratives through an analysis of Mabel Hampton’s oral history preserved by the Lesbian Herstory Archives, emphasizing “how single black women and queer women were regulated by their communities and conflated with prostitution and criminality.”³⁴

Mabel Hampton’s career as a chorus girl in New York City coincided with those of many well-known Black women-loving women musicians and performers, such as the blues singer Gladys Bentley. Historian Daphne Harrison, a contemporary of Faderman and Freedman, investigates the lives of Black queer women blues singers, such as Bentley, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey in *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. Harrison’s writing sheds light on the ways in which the experiences of women-loving women were shaped by race, class, and criminality as she briefly recounts how “Ma Rainey’s escapades with some of her chorus girls got out of hand at a party after a show in Cincinnati and the police raided the place.”³⁵ These historical retellings of women-loving women’s experiences in cities during the early twentieth century decentralize white middle-class women in dominant narratives of lesbian history produced by pioneering scholars. This thesis’s reconstruction of lesbian history in the United States positions working-class women-loving women, who coupled interracially while incarcerated, at the center of the narrative. While women-loving women of the past have always

³⁴ Christina Anne Woolner, “‘The Famous Lady Lovers:’ African American Women and Same-Sex Desire from Reconstruction to World War II” PhD diss. (University of Michigan, 2014), 30.

³⁵ Daphne Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 33.

existed in a vast variety of spaces, the establishment of women's penal institutions opened up a homosocial space unlike that in girls' boarding schools or women's colleges. A unique element of early women's penal institutions was the fact that they were not race segregated; hence, interracial relationships between inmates were more accessible than they were in any other sex-segregated institution.

Decentralizing middle-class whiteness in historical narratives of lesbianism in the United States requires searching for the voices of Black and working-class women both in and outside of the archives. Black women-loving women blues singers and performers unintentionally graced twenty-first-century historians with written and auditory records of self-told narratives in the form of music. Ma Rainey, a popular blues singer during the early twentieth century who was known to have relationships with other women, recorded and performed songs such as "Prove It On Me," which tell stories of women-loving women.³⁶ As women blues singers expressed their desires for travel, love, and sex through their lyrics, incarcerated women-loving women would pass one another secret notes, called "kites," expressing sexual and romantic passions, plans to live together after release, and detailed tales of betrayal.

Few kites have been preserved in their original form due to their extremely fragile physical nature and the fact that the vast majority of them were destroyed by inmates or prison administrators. On occasion, however, early twentieth-century researchers came into possession of kites confiscated and preserved by administrators and, more recently, researchers have found some kites preserved in prison records. Publications by these researchers often include excerpts from kites and sometimes full reproductions. For example, Charles Ford includes unedited

³⁶ Ma Rainey, "Prove It On Me," (Paramount Records, 1928). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRyaUcVfhak>.

excerpts from notes passed between a “colored” girl and a white girl in his article, “Homosexual Practices of the Institutionalized Female,” to analyze their relationship dynamics and rituals.³⁷ Overlap in research on homosexuality conducted in fields of psychology and penology was common during the early twentieth century. This is evidenced by larger studies, such as Dr. Samuel Kahn’s *Mentality and Homosexuality*, which contains fifteen pages of kites copied into an appendix.³⁸ Kites that incarcerated women wrote to one another in secret correspondence allow for a brief and precious glimpse of unobstructed history—words uninterpreted, unfiltered, unedited, and uncoerced.

Perhaps the most critical primary sources for researching interracial relationships between incarcerated women in the early twentieth century are their kites.³⁹ The secret notes passed from woman to woman expressing love, jealousy, heartbreak, and devotion are the only words left which belong to the lovers alone. Kites were not written for a researcher’s interview or tailored for a questionnaire. Kites were private and intimate. In some ways, it is a continued violation of these women’s lives and relationships to use kites as historical artifacts. Yet, in the sea of scholarly work produced by white, heterosexual, educated men and women, it seems these

³⁷ Ford, 442–48.

³⁸ Samuel Kahn, *Mentality and Homosexuality* (Boston, MA: Meador Publishing Company, 1937), 145-160. Khan’s work was collected on New York’s Blackwell Island at the Women’s Workhouse over the course of five years, roughly, from 1931 to 1936. In the Foreword, Khan credits part of his inspiration and knowledge for his own research to Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Khan was a doctor of psychiatry and spent most of his professional career working in psychiatric and penal institutions.

³⁹ I encountered extreme difficulty in accessing the kites that preceding historians, such as Hannah Walker, were able to see in state archives due to the COVID-19 pandemic which closed access to archives across the country at the beginning of my research in spring of 2020. Due to physical obstacles in accessing kites in archives, the kites that are presented in this thesis have been taken from primary source publications which used them as evidence in research and a few have been found in secondary historical sources. One issue in this form of access to kites is that I must trust that those kites which were transcribed and copied into primary sources were truly unedited and that the often difficult to discern handwriting was correctly interpreted. For an extensive exploration of my difficulties in navigating digital archives, see Sidney Wegener, “Changes and Challenges of the Archives: Researching Early-Twentieth Century Lesbianism in United States Prisons During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (2021): 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2021.1891850>

scraps of paper torn from library books and written with stolen pens are the last remaining fragments of unfiltered intimacy. As such, they are immeasurably valuable to a reconstruction of U.S. lesbian history. Written by and for incarcerated women-loving women, kites provide unfiltered glimpses into their lives and love. Such intimate love letters were never meant to be seen or read by anyone but the women writing to each other. However, the intense surveillance and explicit forbidding of interracial relationships in reformatories resulted in constant invasions of what little privacy incarcerated women-loving women were able to create for themselves. The mere preservation of their secret notes is an ongoing intrusion of privacy these women sought to establish in an institution structured to strip them of all personal agency. Therefore, the use of kites in this thesis presents an ethical dilemma to the historian. Without these preserved scraps of women's private lives, documented in their own words, the opinions produced by outsiders are nearly all that is left of incarcerated women-loving women's history. On the other hand, presenting kites as historical evidence perpetuates the invasion of incarcerated women's privacy.

The goal of this thesis is to reimagine the history of lesbianism in the United States in a way that decentralizes white middle-class women as the dominant agents in the emergence of lesbian identities, relationships, communities, and subcultures during the early twentieth century.⁴⁰ To analyze the role that race played in the production of historical narratives written into existence by white professionals, such as Otis, and later written about by white academics, such as Freedman, is to displace the focus on whiteness in lesbian history. In my writing, which

⁴⁰ The verb "reimagine" is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as "to imagine again or anew," and "especially : to form a new concept of : re-create." Much of my inspiration for the use of reimagine is drawn from Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, in which she describes her method: "This book recreates the radical imagination and wayward practices of these young women by describing the world through their eyes." p. xiii.

is also authored by a white lesbian academic, I strive to demonstrate that the emergence of lesbianism is intimately connected to incarcerated women-loving women who coupled interracially. The emergence of lesbianism from women's penal institutions will be linked to blues culture and Black working-class spaces in cities, such as cabarets, where interracial mingling was uniquely common. This reimagination of lesbian history centers the self-told stories of Black and working-class women-loving women, who made up the majority of women's penal institution populations, through their expressions of love and sexuality in kites and blues lyrics.

My pursuit of the history of lesbianism in the United States, as it is rooted in the women's penal system, has been much like navigating a house of mirrors: some historical sources are transparent; others are reflective. Kites are a transparent source which allow the historian to know what a woman was thinking and feeling because we have the words she used herself. On the other hand, inmate registry records are reflective in that they may reveal more about the record-keepers than about inmates. As I explored each new corridor of lesbian history and opened doors to different sources, a conversation arose among those who observed women in confinement who coupled interracially. Much of this conversation took place via the exchange of research findings and various interpretations of observers; however, such conversation would be non-existent without the opportunity to study women-loving women in the context of women's penal institutions. Incarcerated women-loving women were caught passing notes, whispers amongst prison administrators were overheard by curious sexologists and psychiatrists, and eventually interracial same-sex coupling among incarcerated women erupted in publicized scandals.

The Women's Prison Reform movement first spurred the establishment of several women's facilities in the Northeast; however, the geographical development of the U.S. women's penal system was uneven in regard to structure, ideology, resources, and inmate populations. Those reformatories established in the early years of the Women's Prison Reform movement were closest to the vision of movement pioneers; however, the more time which stretched between the opening of a reformatory, the further the institution strayed from original intentions. Regardless of when or where a women's reformatory was established, the incarcerated women engaged in romantic and sexual relationships with one another, often interracially. I have imposed no geographical boundaries on this thesis as the aim is not to investigate women's prisons per se but, rather, the complicated relationship between the women's penal system and the emergence of lesbian identities, relationships, communities, and subcultures.

This historical reimagining of the relationship between lesbian history and women's prison history in the United States weaves the narratives produced by observers together with incarcerated women-loving women's stories and music made by Black women blues singers of the early twentieth century. In Chapter One, the theories and motives of those who observed incarcerated women-loving women is excavated in order to analyze the circumstances under which these women were labeled. Medical and science professionals in fields ranging from psychology to sexology will be analyzed in comparison to penologists and Women's Prison Reform activists and administrators. The first chapter also discusses the importance of the parole system as it was implemented as an extension of institutional control over women impacted by the carceral system. Chapter Two begins by setting the scene for interracial relationships between incarcerated women by laying out the physical grounds and inmate demographics across

various institutions and geographic locations. Incarcerated women-loving women who coupled interracially are then brought to the forefront of this chapter's historical narrative in which their kites play a critical role. Through these kites, Chapter Two also reaches to reconstruct how incarcerated women-loving women valued their relationships with each other in and outside of the institution. Finally, in Chapter Three I connect the constant exchange of experiences and knowledge gained by incarcerated women-loving women who coupled interracially as they moved in and out of penal institutions to the birth of blues culture through Black women musicians. The purpose of bringing Black women's blues music to the center of lesbian history in the early twentieth century is to demonstrate how the emergence of lesbianism as a concept, identity, and set of subcultures is intimately rooted in Black, working-class women's history. The third and final chapter of this thesis leans into similarities and differences between the kites incarcerated Black and white women wrote to one another and lyrics in Black women's blues songs which express the desires and lives of women-loving women.

As the white, cisgender, middle-class, non-incarcerated, and educated lesbian historian, researcher, and author of this thesis, my positionality is inherently contradictory to the goal of decentralizing white middle-class narratives of lesbian history. Throughout this thesis I seek to subvert my perspective by putting the self-told narratives of Black and working-class incarcerated women-loving women at the forefront of reconstructing early-twentieth-century U.S. lesbian history. Where my voice as a white, educated, non-incarcerated lesbian assumes the most authority is in Chapter One, in which I thoroughly critique the perspectives and motives of those white professionals who studied incarcerated women-loving women. As I write a historical reimagining of lesbian history, I strive to utilize the privilege of an academic platform to bring to center stage the voices of Black and working-class women-loving women impacted by the

carceral system. However, my privilege as an author of this history inevitably impacts the ways in which such a scholarly stage is structured and how the space allocated to the voices of women in this thesis frames their lives, experiences, identities, and communities. It is my hope that future historians reimagine the historical narratives I offer in this thesis from different perspectives to continually resituate Black, working-class, incarcerated women-loving women's critical role in U.S. histories of lesbianism, the penal system, and more.

As we embark on a journey through the “terrifyingly difficult birth” of lesbianism during the early twentieth century in the United States, I would like to offer the reader a note on lesbians from historian Lisa Duggan that I have found to be inspiring: “Lesbians do not come from outside culture, outside history, or outside class, race, and gender to raise the flag for a self-evident version of freedom, justice, and equality. Rather, lesbian resistance consists instead of our determination to dissent- to retell our culture's dominant stories with an eye to reorganizing its distribution of cultural and material resources.”⁴¹

⁴¹ Duggan, “The Trials of Alice Mitchell,” 811.

Chapter 1:

“Dearest, please remember that this is not a passive fancy or infatuation for you”¹ :

How Outside Observers Responded to Incarcerated Women-Loving Women

After a lengthy career in the penal system during the early twentieth century, Joseph Fishman published *Sex in Prison: Revealing Sex Conditions in American Prisons*, which detailed his observations as an administrator in multiple institutions. While the text focuses on incarcerated men, a brief section on women asserts, “Problems in women’s prisons are frequently complicated by the fact that white women who play the passive part in homosexuality are more likely to have affairs with colored women... Some administrators of women’s prisons think it is because white women associate masculine strength and virility with dark color.”² Fishman’s statement highlights several critical factors in the emergence of lesbianism from women’s penal institutions including language, the role of race, and the exchange of theories among professionals in the penal system. His use of “homosexuality” to describe relationships between incarcerated women was shared by many of his professional colleagues in closely related fields.³ Fishman also asserts that racialized understandings of relationships between incarcerated women are shared among administrators in the penal system. *Sex in Prison* was published after many other professionals in fields of medicine and penology exchanged observations, language, and interpretations of incarcerated women-loving women, particularly

¹ Samuel Kahn, *Mentality and Homosexuality* (Boston, MA: Meador Publishing Company, 1937), 145.

² Joseph Fishman, *Sex in Prison: Revealing Sex Conditions in American Prisons* (New York, NY: National Library Press, 1934), 29.

³ Some of Fishman’s colleagues who used “homosexuality” to describe relationships between incarcerated women include: Charles Ford, “Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 23, no. 4 (1929); Eleanor and Sheldon Glueck, *Five Hundred Delinquent Women* (New York, NY: A.A. Knopf, 1934); Samuel Kahn, *Mentality and Homosexuality* (Boston, MA: Meador Publishing Company, 1937).

those who engaged in interracial relationships. However, Fishman's analysis of "affairs" between these women illuminates the circulation of knowledge production among medical and penal communities that had been in motion since the late nineteenth century.

The circulation of rhetoric describing and defining women-loving women among professionals in fields psychology, psychiatry, sexology, and gynecology can be understood as an example of heteroglossia. Known as a language theory developed by the mid-twentieth-century Russian theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin,⁴ heteroglossia refers to "linguistic centrifugal forces and their products... that continually [translate] the minute alterations and reevaluations of everyday life into new meanings and tones, which, in sum and over time, always threaten the wholeness of any language."⁵ Social communication constantly flows away from common understandings of language's meaning. This process drew the meaning of "lesbian" from its original association with the Island of Lesbos and towards a description of women-loving women. The engine of heteroglossia is the interplay of two or more voices.⁶ When words are exchanged in dialogue, they take on new connotations, from each party through exchange constantly revising their meanings in response to one another. Various professionals in fields of science, medicine, and penology shared language describing women-loving women and theories about their relationships and identities, words such as "lesbian" and "homosexual" repeatedly took on new meanings and tones. Throughout this thesis, discussion of heteroglossia plays a

⁴ "Mikhail Bakhtin," *Wikipedia*, last modified April 1, 2021, accessed April 18, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Bakhtin.

⁵ Gary S. Moroson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 30.

⁶ For an additional, and shorter, definition, see, "Heteroglossia," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heteroglossia>.

central role in analysis of the emergence of women-loving women's identities, subcultures, and relationships from penal institutions into non-incarcerated working-class Black social spaces. This chapter explores the processes by which heteroglossia among penologists and medical professionals generated new understandings of women-loving women.⁷

Women-loving women of the early twentieth century almost never referred to themselves as lesbians or homosexual, as will be explored in Chapter 2. Therefore, an investigation of the emergence of lesbianism and U.S. lesbian history must acknowledge that “lesbian,” or “lesbianism,” was language produced by non-women-loving women as a label rooted in the perspectives of white professionals. Incarcerated women-loving women lived under the extreme surveillance of institutional administrators and staff. This surveillance created hypervisibility of incarcerated women-loving women that attracted substantially more attention from psychologists, psychiatrists, sexologists, and penologists than non-incarcerated, non-working-class women-loving women. Attention paid to incarcerated women-loving women, specifically relationships between Black and white women, resulted in researchers and observers publishing studies on their bodies, identities, and relationships. Heteroglossia serves an analysis of these publications by illuminating the flow and evolution of descriptive language used by professionals in fields ranging from medicine to penal systems administration.

Bakhtin's definition of heteroglossia notes “the minute alterations and reevaluations of everyday life into new meanings and tones” that contribute to a constant evolution of language's meaning through conversation. What is not specified in this condensed definition, is the

⁷ Professional perspectives will include those of medical professionals and penal institution administrators.

distinctly unorganized nature of continual reevaluation of rhetorical meanings and tones. The evolution of linguistic meaning is not linear, as we might imagine rungs on a ladder leading to a clear-cut definition. The meanings of labels produced and applied to women-loving women emerged chaotically through various theories that contradicted and built upon each other. In reality, understandings, theories, and label meanings ascribed to incarcerated women-loving women who coupled interracially conflicted with one another at various points. The different perspectives of professionals contributed to these conflicts. While sexologists might look to physical differences between women-loving women and non-women-loving women, psychologists might assess women's emotions and behavior. Differences in gender among professionals in different fields added to contradictions in opinions and theories as many late nineteenth medical practitioners were men who conducted physical examinations. On the other hand, women's penal institution administrators were often women who focused on controlling inmate behavior and curbing relationships between women, particularly those which were interracial. Ultimately, the purpose of analyzing studies and publications on women-loving women is to explore how the meanings of labels evolved through chaotic and non-linear conversations among professionals who focused their attention on incarcerated women-loving women.

Medical Professionals and Female Homosexuality

Before "lesbian" was redefined to describe women-loving women and female homosexuality, it had multiple meanings, from a name for residents of the Greek island Lesbos to a name adopted by clubs at women's colleges. The use of Lesbian to identify people of Lesbos is present in many newspaper articles during the early to mid nineteenth century. A distinct

connection was made between Lesbians and the fourth century Greek poet, Sappho, who was well-known as a woman-loving woman. In 1865, *The Daily Milwaukee News* published an article written by a professor Felton who recounted his travels in Greece and briefly noted that his guide was “a Lesbian, and therefore the countryman of Sappho.”⁸ Lesbian was also used as term by which to identify organizations of collegiate women. For example, Mississippi College at Clinton’s 1869 commencement ceremony featured a speaker from the Lesbian Society of the Central Female Institute.⁹ By the twentieth century, city newspapers were spotlighting stories involving women-loving women and used language published by researchers, such as Krafft-Ebing. Lisa Duggan, a lesbian historian, summarizes this relationship, which had a severe influence on lesbianism’s evolution in the United States,

Mass circulation newspapers fashioned stories out of living women’s relationships, how sexologists then reappropriated those stories as “cases,” and women themselves reworked them as “identities” in an extended battle over the meaning of women’s erotic partnerships at the turn of the century. Out of this battle, the first publicly visible forms of modern lesbianism were born; as we shall see, it was a terrifyingly difficult birth.¹⁰

Analyzing the use of “lesbian” in newspapers through the lens of heteroglossia calls attention to the role that non-professional publications played in the evolution of its meaning. Different definitions of “lesbian” produced and understood by the general public entered into conversation with medical professional who attached new meanings to “lesbian” that starkly deviated from those used in mid-nineteenth-century newspapers.

⁸ “From Prof. Felton’s Familiar Letters from Europe. The Greek Professor in Greece,” *The Daily Milwaukee News*, January 10, 1865, p. 2, accessed April 2, 2021, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/9119460/?terms=percent22lesbian%22&match=1>.

⁹ “Commencement Week at Clinton,” *Tri-Weekly Clarion* (Meridian, Mississippi), July 10, 1869, p. 1, accessed April 2, 2021, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/242031657/?terms=%22lesbian%22&match=1>.

¹⁰ Lisa Duggan, “The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject Turn-of-the-Century America,” *Signs* 18, no. 4 (1993): 793.

“Lesbianism” accumulated new meaning during the late nineteenth century through its association with “inversion,” a term used by professionals in medical fields who sought to establish connections between masculine physical characteristics and female homosexuality. Two of the earliest and most influential medical practitioners to investigate female homosexuality were an English sexologist, Havelock Ellis, and a German psychiatrist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing.¹¹ Their studies and publications played a prominent role in the development and meanings of “lesbian(ism)” and “homosexual(ity).” Women who engaged in homosexual relations or expressed sexual desire for other women were often categorized as “sexual inverts,” by scientific professionals who relied on binary understandings of gender and sex, expressed through language like “masculine” and “feminine.” Krafft-Ebing uses the phrase “inverted sexuality” in his 1886 *Psychopathia Sexualis*, stating, “The chief reason why inverted sexuality in woman is still covered with the veil of mystery is that the homosexual act so far as woman is concerned, does not fall under the law.”¹² A female “sexual invert” had to be masculine internally, if not externally.¹³ Women were extensively dehumanized in medical studies of homosexuality, which were often based on physical examinations of women’s bodies, with a focus on genitalia. Ellis recorded details like, “The breasts are of fair size, and the nipples readily

¹¹ Ellis and Krafft-Ebbing’s work has been widely studied from a multitude of academic perspectives and further analysis of their work does not necessarily serve the purposes of this thesis. However, references to their research and publications do contribute to a demonstration of how new conceptualizations of sexuality were being shared transnationally and interdisciplinarily. See Havelock Ellis and John Symonds, “Sexual Inversion,” in *Studies of the Psychology of Sex*. Vol. 1 (1897): III- 299. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hc1gsg> and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct, a Medico-Forensic Study* (1st ed., 1886), translated by Franklin Klaf, 12th ed. (New York, NY: Stein and Day Publishers, 1925).

¹² Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct, a Medico-Forensic Study* (1st ed., 1886), translated by Franklin Klaf, 12th ed. (New York, NY: Stein and Day Publishers, 1925), 262.

¹³ Ellis and Symonds, “Sexual Inversion.”

respond to titillation. Titillation of the sexual organs receives no response at all.”¹⁴ Without definitive record of the women who Ellis was conducting these studies on, we cannot know who they were, what they thought, or how they felt about such examinations. Did women-loving women consent to these examinations or were they forced? If women endured these examinations against their will, where did Ellis locate them? Were these examinations physically painful or psychologically scarring? Were women-loving women completely naked, strapped to stirrups while men investigated their bodies? What instruments did Ellis use to test response to “titillation?” How did these women feel about Ellis labeling their bodies and desires as “inverted” and “homosexual?”¹⁵ Ultimately, studies conducted and published by medical professionals, such as Ellis and Krafft-Ebing, contributed significantly to conversations among non-professionals and professionals molding the meanings and definitions of women-loving women’s bodies and identities.

Ties between European and American medical professionals, mainly psychologists and sexologists, were well established by the twentieth century. One of the first studies of women-loving women which offers a definition of “lesbianism” was published in 1908 by Polish-German sexologist, Dr. Bernard Talmey.¹⁶ Talmey was a gynecologist at the Yorkville Hospital in New York City where he had access to women confined in psychiatric and penal institutions. Throughout his career, he published numerous studies on mentality, sexuality, and sexology regarding men’s homosexuality and genital organs as well as a case study on five different

¹⁴ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵ For more details on physical examinations conducted by early sexologists, see Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 268-279.

¹⁶ Dr. Bernard Talmey was a Polish-German gynecologist and sexologist who moved to the United States with his brother, Max Talmey, in 1894 after they established successful careers as doctors in Germany.

people identified as “transvestites.”¹⁷ Talmey copied information from studies published by both Ellis and Krafft-Ebing into his own work, stating that he had “often taken whole passages from other writers to prove his case, without fearing accusation of plagiarism. The opinions laid down in this treatise are thus based upon the experiences of hundreds of writers in various countries and at different times.”¹⁸ Talmey, who practiced gynecology and sexology, and wrote extensively on lesbianism in *Woman, A Treatise on the Normal and Pathological Emotions of Feminine Love*. His work connects women impacted by the penal system to medical theories about female homosexuality and offers definitions of women-loving women that illuminate a critical moment in the evolution of labels applied to them. Talmey’s publication on women’s sexuality differentiates between two different types of women-loving women: “From the prevalence upon the island of Lesbos, sensual love among women is called Lesbianism, while sentimental homosexuality is called Sapphism.”¹⁹ The differentiation between sensual lesbianism and sentimental sapphism indicates that Talmey was attempting to categorize women-loving

¹⁷ See “A Gender Variance Who’s Who: Bernard S. Talmey (1862-1926) gynecologist and sexologist.” *Zagria Blog*, December 27, 2015. For more on his case studies, see, Bernard Simon Talmey, *Love, a Treatise on the Science of Sex-attraction: For the Use of Physicians and Students of Medical Jurisprudence* (United States: Practitioners' Publishing Company, 1915).

¹⁸ Bernard Talmey, *Woman, A Treatise on the Normal and Pathological Emotions of Feminine Love*, 2nd ed. (New York: Practitioners Publishing Company, 1908), iv. Both Ellis and Krafft-Ebing traveled to locations in the Southern Hemisphere, such as Bali and Zanzibar, to study bodies and practices of indigenous women-loving women. Talmey copied over a page of theories about female sexual from other researchers’ work, whom he did not cite. The information he implemented into his own publication discusses comparisons of relations among animals, such as monkeys, to women-loving women observed in foreign locations, who are described as “savages excessively addicted to homosexuality.” (140) Although Talmey did not travel to such places nor witness the relationships between women of non-westernized cultures, he cited these observations as evidence in his own arguments which essentially recycled the same. Given that Talmey lifted entire passages from other research studies without citing their work, tracing the exchange of language and theories back to the original producers is nearly impossible. For more on descriptions of women-loving women in countries foreign to Europe, see Talmey, *Woman, A Treatise* (1908), 140.

¹⁹ Bernard Talmey, *Woman, A Treatise on the Normal and Pathological Emotions of Feminine Love*, 2nd ed. (New York: Practitioners Publishing Company, 1908), 141. Talmey’s reference to the Greek island, Lesbos, is interesting because this is where he locates the origin point of lesbianism. He asserts that lesbianism comes from Lesbos due to an excessive number of lesbians on the island, which is not historically supported.

women based on separate understandings of romantic friendships and sexual relationships. His definitions demonstrate the overlap in linguistic understandings of “lesbianism” and female homosexuality as they relate to the earlier definition of “Lesbian” as a resident of Lesbos. Talmey also established a connection between Sappho, the famous Lesbian woman-loving woman poet and female homosexuality. In reference to the criminalization of homosexuality among men but not women, Talmey states, “Women’s attachments are considered friendships by outsiders.... We are, therefore, less apt to suspect the existence of abnormal passions among women.”²⁰ Here, Talmey asserts that men were generally ignorant of women’s private sexual lives, which illuminates the importance of incarcerated women-loving women’s complete lack of privacy in relation to professionals studying female homosexuality.

The exchange of language describing women-loving women among administrators of penal institutions and medical professionals did not emerge at a single point in time. However, incarcerated women became central to the development of rhetoric defining identities and relationships as “homosexual” and “lesbian.” Psychologists, psychiatrists, sexologists, penologists, and medical professionals produced and shared language like “inverted,” “perverted,” and “homosexual” in relation to “lesbianism.”²¹ The circulation of this specific

²⁰ Talmey, *Woman, A Treatise*, 143.

²¹ Some medical and penal professionals who used “inverted,” “perverted,” and “homosexual” in relation to “lesbianism” include Havelock Ellis and John Symonds, “Sexual Inversion,” in *Studies of the Psychology of Sex*. Vol. 1 (1897); Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct, a Medico-Forensic Study* (1st ed., 1886), translated by Franklin Klaf, 12th ed. (New York, NY: Stein and Day Publishers, 1925); Maurice Chideckel, *Female Sex Perversion: The Sexually Aberrated Woman as She Is* (New York, NY: Eugenics Press, 1935); Joseph Fishman, *Sex in Prison: Revealing Sex Conditions in America Prisons* (New York, NY: National Library Press, 1934); Eleanor and Sheldon Glueck, *Five Hundred Delinquent Women* (New York, NY: A. A. Knopf, 1934); Samuel Kahn, *Mentality and Homosexuality* (Boston, MA: Meador Publishing Company, 1937); Eugenia Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women in the United States* (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1931); Ellen Potter, “The Problem of Women in Penal and Correctional Institutions,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 25, no. 1 (Summer 1934): 65-75; Frances Strakosch, *Factors in the Sex Life of Seven Hundred Psychopathic Women* (Utica, NY: State Hospitals Press, 1934).

language is evidenced in publications by professionals who cite each other in their studies of women's sexuality and women-loving women in penal institutions. These citations demonstrate how labels and theories applied to incarcerated women-loving women were adopted, appropriated, and redefined by researchers in various fields. Decades after Ellis and Krafft-Ebing published medical studies on homosexuality in various contexts among both men and women, psychologists who based their research in penal institutions incorporated the same language and theories into their publications.

Several words emerged as particularly core contributors to the evolving definitions of women-loving women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including: "homosexual," "perversion (or "pervert")," and "inversion (or "invert")." As these words were defined by medical professionals in various publications, meanings and theories were implemented into other professionals' studies. As two of the leading medical practitioners who studied female homosexuality, Ellis and Krafft-Ebing's work was cited in publications by psychologists, psychiatrists, sexologists, and penologists. Talmey's work demonstrated the ongoing circulation of language among medical professionals studying homosexuality in penal and psychiatric institutions around the turn of the century. However, publications by psychologists who focused on female homosexuality among incarcerated women increased in the spheres of professional conversation during the 1930s. In Ford's psychoanalytic study of homosexuality among incarcerated women, Otis, Ellis, and Krafft-Ebing are cited as influential sources in his investigation of female homosexuality. Ford incorporates Otis's concern about interracial relationships as a peripheral aspect of his research and findings, noting that her study

“was concerned with but one phase of it [homosexuality].”²² However, he established distinct differences between his study of “temporary or pseudo inversion” among incarcerated women and Ellis and Krafft-Ebing’s focus on female homosexuality which is “truly pathological, usually superimposed upon a neurotic constitution and represents the sexual desire of a lifetime.”²³ Ford’s citations of Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, and Otis reveals how the exchange of theories and definitions of female homosexuality continued to nuance observers’ understandings of women-loving women. Additionally, Ford’s article demonstrates the shift away from studies of the physical characteristics of “inverted” women and toward psychological analysis of incarcerated women-loving women’s thoughts and behavior.

During the 1930s, new studies expanded the conversation about women-loving women, and language defining female homosexuality continued to evolve. Frances Strakosch’s study, *Factors in the Sex Life of Seven Hundred Psychopathic Women*, asserts that the contributions of authors such as Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, and several others “are not to be underestimated.”²⁴ However, Strakosch explains how her research adds to early theories, stating, “This study is, in the main, a preliminary exploratory investigation of the sex drive as it manifests itself in *overt behavior*... we are interested in the *incidence* of certain forms of sexual overt activity.”²⁵ Her emphasis on “overt behavior” indicates a shift in professional understandings of women’s sexuality away from the “pathological” approach of early psychiatrists.²⁶ Closely related to Strakosch’s study, was Samuel Kahn’s psychiatric research conducted at New York City’s

²² Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” 442.

²³ Ford, “Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females,” 442-443.

²⁴ Frances Strakosch, *Factors in the Sex Life of Seven Hundred Psychopathic Women* (Utica, NY: State Hospitals Press, 1934), 11.

²⁵ Strakosch, *Factors in the Sex Life of Seven Hundred Psychopathic Women*, 13.

²⁶ Ford, 443.

penitentiary on Blackwell's Island. In his book, *Mentality and Homosexuality*, Kahn identifies Ellis and Krafft-Ebing as inspirational to the "casual observer" of homosexuality in penal institutions. His assertions as to how common homosexuality is in penal institutions echo those of Ford and Otis; he states, "certain situations [are] prone to bring about a milieu in which homosexuality seems to flourish."²⁷ Although Kahn's book focused mainly on male homosexuality, his "Brief Description of a Female Homosexual," based on research at the Blackwell's Island's workhouse for women prisoners, echoes concepts and categories earlier deployed by psychiatrists. Specifically, Kahn relies on the same binary understandings of femininity and masculinity which Ellis and Krafft-Ebing described in their theories of "sexual inversion" among women-loving women based on physical characteristics. Kahn divides female homosexuals into three categories: "first, the masculine type who has masculine traits; second, the feminine type which lacks the masculine traits; and third, the mixed type which has both the masculine and feminine traits," adding that "The latter type is the commonest."²⁸ These definitions of different types of female homosexuality nuance Ellis's earlier claim that, "The chief characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity."²⁹

This exploration of language and theory that circulated among physicians and psychologists who studied women-loving women for over fifty years reveals the disorderly exchange of rhetoric from which evolved modern meanings of "homosexual" and "lesbian." From this disorder, however, there emerged a noteworthy continuity. Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, Talmey, Otis, Ford, Strakosch, and Kahn studied women-loving women at various points and

²⁷ Samuel Kahn, *Mentality and Homosexuality* (Boston, MA: the Meador Press, 1937), 5.

²⁸ Kahn, *Mentality and Homosexuality*, 67-68.

²⁹ Havelock Ellis and John Symonds, "Sexual Inversion," 94.

from varying professional perspectives. Throughout this literature, however, incarcerated women were placed under the microscope more often than any other group.

The Women's Prison Reform Movement and Women-Loving Women

As the Women's Prison Reform movement gained momentum, its leaders looked to scientific professionals for guidance in how to address emotional instability and homosexuality. By the early twentieth century, institutions began hiring on-site psychologists and physicians, often with educational backgrounds in penology and psychiatry, who kept records on inmates and sometimes conducted their own studies. As reformers looked to science for solutions to perceived social ills affecting the "fallen woman" as well as those who were irreversibly deviant the worlds of penology and science merged in women's reformatories.³⁰ The chaotic circulation of language, bodies, and ideologies among professionals in medicine and penology was a frenzied response to incarcerated women-loving women's hypervisibility. Talmey's definition of lesbianism as "sensual love" alludes to observers' increased awareness of physical intimacy among women-loving women. Yet the need to separate sapphist "sentimental homosexuality" from lesbian "sensual love" reflects the confusion outsiders encountered when grasping for scientific evidence that love between women was lesser than heterosexual relationships emotionally and sexually. Lesbianism came to be associated with images of hypersexual, aggressive incarcerated women, while sapphism faded into the periphery of rhetoric surrounding

³⁰ For some more general information on relationships between reformatories and science professionals see, Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons 1800-1935* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985); and David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1980)

women-loving women.³¹ One cannot pinpoint the exact moment lesbianism was written into life by professionals; however, observers' linguistic struggles are evidence of the rhetorical wrestling over how to define lesbianism.

Trends in theories and understandings of lesbianism among incarcerated women-loving women established at the beginning of the Women's Prison Reform movement and the emergence of new branches of science were reiterated and expanded upon as the turn of the century melted into the 1930s. The stock market crash of 1929 delivered a new wave of women to the doorsteps of penal institutions as higher poverty rates led to increased amounts of illegal, or putatively illegal, activity. Leading up to the Great Depression, Black folks began to travel out of the South to northern cities often in hope of industrial employment. However, cities became social settings where Black women were at far higher risk of incarceration compared to working-class white women. Overcrowding in women's reformatories created more opportunities for women to couple interracially and the overwhelming number of women being committed to penal institutions led administrators to call for additional resources to curb interracial relationships. By the 1930s, severely under-resourced reformatories were overflowing with white, Black, and immigrant working-class women which sharply intensified the struggle to eliminate relationships between white and Black inmates.

Published studies about incarcerated women-loving women are generally more telling of the authors' assumptions as theories were produced from their observations; however, some studies include the words of incarcerated women themselves, captured through interviews,

³¹ Today, sapphic or sapphism are terms still used by women-loving women to identify by as opposed to gay or lesbian. However, the majority of women-loving women individuals and communities who identify as sapphist are white, middle-class women with some degree of post-secondary school education.

eavesdropping, and stolen love letters. Citing Otis's work in his article, Ford reiterates her theories and expands upon them: "her [Otis's] study describes conditions not unlike the ones that have come to the writer's attention in an entirely different location and fifteen years later. The colored relationships, the martyr feeling, the notes, the sexual significance, and the jealousies have all persisted."³² This quote demonstrates that early scientific understandings of interracial relationships between incarcerated women were built upon one another over time. Additionally, the concerns of incarcerated women's overseers remained the same as they continued to obsess over women-loving women's bodies, minds, and behavior. Outsiders' desperation to grasp and define women-loving women indicates underlying anxieties regarding the instability of gender, race, and sexuality as they were defined by a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist social hierarchies.³³

Many advocates of women's reformatories asserted that inmates needed a domestic space to be "cured" before release. Such assertions were often argued through rhetoric that emphasized femininity "The unhappy beings we are speaking of need, first of all, to be taught to be women; they must be induced to love that which is good and pure... they must learn all household duties; they must learn to enjoy work."³⁴ The aforementioned "unhappy beings" were considered to be

³² Charles, Ford, "Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 23, no. 4 (1929): 442.

³³ To this day, lesbian women's existence and visibility elicits anxious responses from cisgender heterosexual men. Lesbianism poses a threat to male privilege; interracial lesbian relationships pose a threat to white supremacy and heterosexual privilege. If women do not need men for financial support, emotional romance, or sexual satisfaction, then what power does white supremacy and patriarchy really hold? White professionals' definitions of women-loving women leaned into theories that situated homosexuality as temporary and limited to incarceration, which simultaneously criminalized women-loving women and their relationships.

³⁴ National Conference on Social Welfare Proceedings, *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Conference of Charities, "One Means of Preventing Pauperism"* (Boston, MA: A. Williams and Company, 1879), 198. Josephine Shaw Lowell presents an argument for the establishment of women's reformatories during the very early years of organized reform efforts among middle-upper class women in the Northeast which assumes inherent differences

of a lower social order from the perspective of reformers, who defined reformability by factors defined by age, class, reason for arrest, and perceived sexual morality. These standards coincided with the increasing popularity of eugenics reasoning, championed by reformers like Lowell, which permeated the professional fields of medicine, psychology, psychiatry, penology, sociology, and education.³⁵ In the proceedings of the 1879 National Conference on Social Welfare, Lowell states, “‘Reformatories’ should be established, to which all women under thirty, when arrested for misdemeanors, or upon the birth of a second illegitimate child, should be committed for very long periods (not as a punishment, but for the same reason that the insane are sent to an asylum).”³⁶ Lowell’s argument reflects the rise in Social Darwinism and eugenics as her reference to the “reason” women are committed to state institutions refers to efforts to prevent them from becoming pregnant and reproducing undesirable characteristics thought to be hereditary.

Scientific connections between working-class and incarcerated women’s physical characteristics and behavior became an integral part of how the women’s penal system was structured. Medical and psychological theories were intensely influential in how observers of incarcerated women interpreted and responded to interracial relationships among women-loving women. The first women’s reformatories to be established during the late nineteenth century

between sexes. Note that this paper was written under Mrs. C. R. Lowell which may have been a strategic decision on Lowell’s part under the assumption that her audience may find her more respectable as a married woman.

³⁵ For some general history on the Women’s Prison Reform movement and early reformers, see Estelle Freedman, *Their Sisters’ Keepers: Women’s Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1981) and Nicole Hahn Raftier, *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons 1800-1935* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985).

³⁶ National Conference on Social Welfare Proceedings, *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Conference of Charities*, "One Means of Preventing Pauperism" (1879), 197. Parallels between treatment of women sent to asylums and those sent to penitentiaries reflect elitist attitudes toward working-class women who were defined as non-woman, unhappy beings, and diseased mentally and physically.

were embedded in ideologies that prioritized racial and sexual purity related to control over women's reproduction. Such attitudes aligned with Social Darwinism prefaced the eugenics movement as reformers looked to scientists and physicians for explanations of women-loving women and methods to eliminate their relationships.³⁷ Early reformatory administrators often attempted to restrict inmate admittance to young, white, first-time-offenders, non-immigrant, able-bodied, neurotypical girls and women who were arrested for minor crimes and had family support in their "reform efforts." By the turn of the twentieth century, New York State's laws governing commitment to reformatories allowed institutions to exclusively accept inmates aged sixteen to thirty years old. These state regulations strategically empowered administrators to detain women through the majority of their child-bearing years.³⁸ Women in confinement who engaged in romantic relationships with other women were at increased risk of extended incarceration as they were categorized as hypersexual and deviant.

As a Dutch sociologist, Dr. Eugenia C. Lekkerkerker, observed in a 615-page study of women's reformatories in the United States in the 1920s, the majority of women who found themselves incarcerated during the early twentieth century were arrested for "offenses against property," "offenses against chastity," and alcohol-related incidents.³⁹ Between 1924 and 1929, women incarcerated for property offenses comprised up to 58 percent of the total inmate population.⁴⁰ Property offenses most often related to violations of loitering laws which became

³⁷ The women considered "unhappy beings" and degenerate likely did not see themselves in the same light. It is critical to displace these assumed truths and instead examine them as a response from elite society to the visibility of working-class women's bodies and sexuality. Josephine Shaw Lowell was among many reformers who defined sexual immorality and imposed such standards upon economically disadvantaged women in a manner which ascribed negative characteristics to women who likely rejected such categorizations.

³⁸ New York, *Laws of 1890*, Ch. 238 (Albion) and New York, *Laws of 1892*, Ch. 637 (Bedford).

³⁹ Eugenia C. Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women in the United States* (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1931) 195.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 195. Lekkerkerker reported that 58% of the reformatory of Minnesota inmates had committed offenses against property.

more common as populations of working-class and Black women in cities sharply increased during and after World War I. During the 1920s, women committed to reformatories for morality offenses averaged roughly 40 percent of the total inmate population at institutions across the United States.⁴¹ The large portion of women incarcerated for perceived crimes against sexual morality further reflects the role that class played in women's incarceration. Working-class women, who lacked access to private spaces for love, sex, and expressions of sexuality, were targeted by law enforcement officers, who were almost always white men.⁴² Eugenicians and prison reformers responded to the increased public visibility of working-class women's bodies and sexuality, which were associated with alcohol-related crimes, by arguing women with such vices were not fit to procreate due to undesirable characteristics assumed to be hereditary.

While working-class women targeted as those in need of reform from the beginning of the Women's Prison Reform movement, racial demographics of working-class women in confinement shifted significantly between the 1870s and the 1930s. The first several women's reformatories were established in northern locations where Black women migrated at a steadily increasing rate.⁴³ Therefore, the vast majority of women in reformatories during the late

⁴¹ Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women in the United States*, 195. From 1924-1930, Dr. Lekkerkerker traveled to fifteen women's reformatories in 13 different geographic locations in the United States, resulting in a 615-page publication of her observations, data collected, and interviews with administrators and incarcerated women. I state the average percent of women incarcerated for perceived sexual immorality as roughly 40% based on her statistics table for "Distribution of Offenses in the Reformatory Populations," on page 195.

⁴² For a closer look at prostitution and Black women's arrests, see Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2020).

⁴³ Some of the first women's reformatories were built in Joliet, Indiana, established on Kaskaskia Native land; Framingham, Massachusetts, established on Nipmuc Native land; Hudson, New York, established on Mohican Native land; Albion, New York, established on Wenrohronon Native land; and Bedford Hills, New York, established on Munsee Lenape Native land. Research on which Native peoples stewarded the land women's reformatories were built upon was done via "Native Land," <https://native-land.ca>. The webpage specifies that Native lands were not clearly defined in comparison to current U.S. state boundaries; therefore, the Native peoples who traditionally stewarded land which reformatories were built on may likely expand past those listed.

nineteenth century were working-class white women and European immigrants. However, by the 1910s, Black people, who were freed slaves or among the first generations to be born into the post-Emancipation era, began to exercise historically denied and limited agencies, such as travel and sexual freedom.⁴⁴ As the Great Northward Migration came to fruition during the second half of the 1910s, Black people's increased presence in urban, working-class communities resulted in an increased population of Black working-class women in reformatories.⁴⁵

Race as a social concept and identity was very unstable during the early twentieth century, which is reflected by how administrators categorized and studied incarcerated women. Dr. Katherine B. Davis, one of the most prominent figures in the women's reformatory system, expressed the importance of analyzing inmate population racial statistics using labels including, but not limited to, "foreign, native, native white, and native colored."⁴⁶ Davis asserts that foreign women were arrested for felonies at a higher rate than white women born in the United States. The sharp increase of Black women in northern penal institutions was followed by a push among eugenics advocates for new measures to restrict delinquent women from reproducing undesirable traits. Dr. Ellen Potter called for action from women's penal institutions: "Has the time not come for a serious consideration of selective sterilization, as one method of social control of the

⁴⁴ Black folks have been present in the Northeast far before the twentieth century whether as slaves or as escaped slaves. However, the end of the legal chattel slavery following the Civil War, formerly enslaved and first generations of Black folks born free were afforded additional liberties. Additionally, World War I resulted in restrictions on immigration and thus urban employers began advertising jobs for Black folks to replace immigrant labor. For more on the importance of travel and sexual liberation for Black folks, see Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 3-41.

⁴⁵ Women who immigrated to the United States from countries such as Italy and Ireland were considered "other" by white people born in the United States and intensely discriminated against by socially elite white people.

⁴⁶ Ethel M. Elderton, Mabel R Fernald, Mary H. S Hayes, Almerna Dawley, Beardsley Ruml, and Katherine Bement Davis, *A Study of Women Delinquents in New York State* (1920; repr., Montclair: Patterson Smith Publishing Corporation, 1968) 167-168.

propagation of the unfit, and thereby the elimination of one of the serious problems in a women's prison?"⁴⁷ Potter's declaration followed the establishment of eugenics organizations, such as the American Eugenics Society, and reflects the lasting influence of elitist, white supremacist science on the evolution of the women's reformatory system.⁴⁸ Involuntary sterilization of women was encouraged through legislature and twenty-four states and the District of Columbia legally barred delinquent and feeble-minded women from marriage by 1913.⁴⁹ Unable to marry, working-class women impacted by the carceral system often engaged in extramarital romantic and sexual relationships and, therefore, were at high risk of re-arrest for crimes against sexual morality.

Reformer proponents of eugenics were often white women who held professional positions as superintendents, commissioners, and psychologists where they observed and documented the incarcerated women they oversaw. Some of these women, such as Florence Monahan, were able to travel to numerous institutions to further advance their studies on women in reformatories. Monahan published a book-length report on women's reformatories across the United States and the inmates which brought several aspects of outsider concerns to light. A key observation that she made regarding women-loving women in confinement states:

Our biggest difficulty was with the Negro and the white girls. The color makes enough difference between them so that in the absence of natural association with boys they substitute each other. This was particularly true of the white girls, who in most cases

⁴⁷ Ellen C. Potter, "The Problem of Women in Penal and Correctional Institutions," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 25, no. 1 (Summer 1934): 71.

⁴⁸ The American Eugenics Society was founded in 1922 as an organization dedicated to promoting eugenics education and legislative change. See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1997), 62-65.

⁴⁹ For more on history of sterilization of Black and African American people, see Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1997).

were the aggressors. By segregation we were able to eliminate the major portion of the trouble. Nevertheless, we had to intercept countless love notes and efforts to meet.⁵⁰

Monahan traveled to reformatories across the country at the same time of the Great Northward Migration, when unprecedentedly large numbers of Black women from the South began relocating to northern cities.⁵¹ Although relationships among women in confinement were considered common, the increased visibility of interracial coupling among incarcerated women became the focus of administrative concern.

Although Monahan's publication came over twenty years after Margaret Otis's, it repeats the same theories produced by observers of incarcerated women-loving women who attribute relationships between Black and white women to a lack opportunities for of heterosexual interactions. In some cases, differentiations between permanent and temporary "inversion" reinforce the validity of compulsory heterosexuality. Other professionals, such as Charles Ford, looked to science to categorize incarcerated women as "truly pathological" compared to those who may exhibit "temporary or pseudo inversion."⁵² An alternative approach to affirming compulsory heterosexuality among incarcerated women was asserted by Lekkerkerker, who stated that, "it is of importance to remember that, with few exceptions, they are rooted in perfectly natural urges, and that it is the abnormal conditions of life rather than the depraved natures of the inmates, which are responsible for these deviations."⁵³ It may be discerned that observers of women-loving women in confinement perpetuated an understanding of these

⁵⁰ Florence Monahan, *Women in Crime* (New York: I. Washburn, 1941), 224.

⁵¹ Monahan, *Women in Crime* (1941). Although Monahan's work was published in 1941, her research was conducted through the 1920s and 30s and therefore reflects reformatory conditions and inmate demographics from the early twentieth century.

⁵² Ford, "Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females," 443.

⁵³ Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women*, (1931), 400.

relationships which reinforced compulsory heterosexuality by situating relationships in confinement as temporary. Monahan's claim that "color makes enough difference" neglects to specify that Black women were defined and perceived by professionals as inherently more masculine than their white counterparts. Although the consistent validation of compulsory heterosexuality is shared by the vast majority of professionals, their observations and theories were often self-contradictory. While, publications, such as Monahan's, define white women as inherently heterosexual, they also identify some white women as aggressors in interracial relationships.

Professional white women in positions of power in women's reformatories consistently denounced interracial relationships among inmates, referring to such engagements as "immoral relations" and "sex trouble,"⁵⁴ but many of these professional women maintained romantic relationships with their female peers.⁵⁵ A 1915 New York State investigation into allegations of severe punishments and disciplinary malpractice shed light on interracial relationships at the Bedford Hills women's reformatory, established on Munsee Lenape Native land. During the investigation, the assistant superintendent, Julia Jessie Taft, was questioned about "the sex trouble there [Bedford Hills] and especially between the white and colored girls."⁵⁶ Taft responded by admitting, "There is no question but that that is the foundation of most of the

⁵⁴ "Report of the Special Committee of the State Board of Charities Appointed to Investigate Charges Made Against the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, N.Y.," appended to [New York State Board of Charities], *Annual Report of the State Board of Charities for the Year 1915*, Volume One (Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon Co., 1916), 864. Hereafter cited as, "Report of the Special Committee," *State Board of Charities* (1916).

⁵⁵ I have not discovered any evidence of relationships between Black and white professional women. Their absence from archives does not indicate interracial relationships among educated women never occurred; however, it does reveal that the majority of relationships between women-loving women professionals were among white women.

⁵⁶ "Report of the Special Committee," *State Board of Charities* (1916), 864. The individual posing questions to Taft in this report is not specified; however, they show a clear concern with relationships between white and Black women. This section of the report is recorded in question-and-answer format as transcriptions of oral interviews.

trouble along disciplinary lines,” although, she pointedly adds that “it is a romantic attachment rather than any immoral relations... I think there is as much of this romantic attachment between white girls as there is between white and colored girls.”⁵⁷ Taft’s response affirms the prevalence of love between incarcerated women as a challenge reformatories face; however, she also mentions that relationships between white women are as common as interracial relationships. Additionally, Taft clearly differentiates between “romantic attachments” and “immoral relations,” alluding to the presence of physical intimacy and sex between inmates. Neither Taft nor the interviewer acknowledged same-sex relationships between incarcerated women of color, yet the interviewer followed Taft’s first response by further inquiring about Black inmates: “You find the colored girls have an unfortunate psychological influence upon the white girls?”⁵⁸ She offered a concise but nonspecific answer: “They are undoubtedly very attractive.”⁵⁹ This interview reveals that relationships between white and Black women were more concerning to elite observers than those between white women alone. Although Black women were consistently rhetorically framed as sexually corruptive by observers, white women were often noted as the initiators of interracial relationships. Ultimately, the presence of Black women in same-sex relations is what defined them as harmful and sexual.

Despite her condemnation of relationships between white and Black women incarcerated at Bedford Hills, Taft had a lifelong relationship with Virginia Robinson, a white professional social worker. Partnerships of this sort were not uncommon among white middle-class women

⁵⁷ “Report of the Special Committee,” *State Board of Charities* (1916), 864. Taft’s response might suggest that relationships between white women in confinement were considered relatively benign compared to interracial relationships.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 864.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 864.

who obtained college and graduate degrees and worked as professionals during the early twentieth century. In part, this was due to the fact that highly educated women's likelihood of marrying a man was significantly lower than that of a woman who was trained to fill the traditional domestic woman's role.⁶⁰ On the other hand, many women who pursued college and graduate degrees to enter a professional field chose not to marry as well. Taft's disapproval of interracial relationships between incarcerated women reflects her own perspective as a socially elite, white woman-loving woman, but it also demonstrates the active process of "othering" on the part of women professionals in the penal system. Regardless of their own personal relationships, professional women in the field of penology generally upheld ideologies that categorized homosexual relationships as innately deviant. Ultimately, relationships between professional, middle-class white women did not induce elitist anxieties during the early twentieth century, such as those between incarcerated white and Black women, and thus the lesbian limelight fell on those in confinement.

Although women's penal institutions in different geographic locations had differences in physical and practical aspects, the parole system stitched the worlds of confinement and freedom together and seemed to arrive as the final development in the penal system. As each reformatory differed from the others in facility layouts, disciplinary standards, and inmate population demographics, so did each parole program. Inconsistencies in parole systems across the country created critical challenges for penal institution administrators and authorities who were concerned with interracial coupling among incarcerated women. Lekkerkerker noted two

⁶⁰ There is some irony in that the professional women who served as reformatory administrators prioritized reforming inmates into the ideal domestic woman; yet, these professional women functioned almost entirely outside of that very traditional domestic sphere. See Lillian Faderman, *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

significant issues with the women's reformatory system: severely overcrowded state institutions and parole conditions that varied vastly.⁶¹ The rampantly overpopulated reformatories often relied on parole in order to relieve the pressure to maintain control over incarcerated women in confinement, despite the severe lack of resources, such as housing. The parole system was designed to create an additional layer of surveillance and custodial control over women who had been incarcerated so that even after being released from confinement they were still under supervision. However, the effectiveness of parole was largely determined by the number of individuals who volunteered to be parole officers and which inmates they accepted as parolees.⁶² Parole officers were far less likely to take on Black parolees; therefore, a disproportionate number of white women were released on parole while Black women often spent more time in confinement.⁶³ Katherine B. Davis proposed that women's eligibility for parole should be determined by age, history of offenses and incarceration, physical and mental conditions, and living circumstances they would be released into.⁶⁴ Housing and family circumstances weighed heavily on access to parole as many institutions would not release women to apartments or rented rooms, especially without family to support their reform efforts.⁶⁵

The implementation of the parole system was meant to extend the reach of custodial control over women who were incarcerated beyond the institution walls; however, parole

⁶¹ Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women in the United States*, 126.

⁶² Katherine B. Davis, "Probation and Parole (Report of the Committee of the American Prison Association)," *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 7, no. 2 (1916), 165.

⁶³ Ethel M. Elderton, Mabel R Fernald, Mary H. S Hayes, Almena Dawley, Beardsley Ruml, and Katherine Bement Davis, *A Study of Women Delinquents in New York State* (1920. Reprint, Montclair: Patterson Smith Publishing Corporation, 1968), 171.

⁶⁴ Katherine B. Davis, "Probation and Parole" (1916), 166.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 166. Refusal to release women to apartments and rented rooms further targeted working-class women who could not afford approved housing.

impacted women still in confinement collectively, individually, and interpersonally.⁶⁶

Relationships between incarcerated women also extended past the reformatory grounds as navigating life in confinement bled into the carceral limbo of parole. Although women's relationships while incarcerated were often considered temporary based on the time women spent physically restricted from a non-sex segregated world, the parole system opened up a space which was neither free or confined. This created an intimate connection between budding communities and cultures of lesbianism in urban areas where reformatories were established, such as New York City, and incarcerated women-loving women's coupling culture. Women who coupled interracially while in confinement were rarely released on parole simultaneously. This was due to disparities in the likelihood of parole officers accepting Black women as parolees as well as Black women being punished more frequently for misbehavior and engaging relationships with white women while incarcerated. Although white women were released on parole at faster rates than Black women, couples continued to write to one another while in separate spheres of the carceral system. As they did within the penal institutions, women-loving women learned how to create opportunities for communication and rendezvous while under surveillance on parole and continued to undermine the original purpose of the penal system inside and outside of reformatory walls.

⁶⁶ For more specifics on how parole functioned as a tool of extended surveillance and actively worked against Black women's access to release from confinement, see Emily Reed, "Wayward Women and Lady-Lovers: Same-Sex Intimacies Between Women in Progressive Era New York City, 1901-1930," B.A. sr. thesis (Barnard College, 2019) 49-69.

Chapter 2:

*“If you love me or I love you what has the world to say”¹ : Women-Loving
Women Existing and Resisting in Confinement*

Prior to the establishment of women’s reformatories and the separate penal system, women were incarcerated in the same state penitentiaries as male offenders. Often comprising less than 10 percent of the total prison population, women inmates were extremely vulnerable to abuse and violence inflicted by male staff, administration, and fellow inmates.² Such abuse was rarely if ever documented. However, evidence of its existence can be found in officers’ rules, such as that at the Illinois Joliet Women’s Prison, established on Kaskaskia, Kiiikaapoi, and Peoria Native land, which noted, “No guard will be allowed to speak to or converse with any convict woman.”³ These circumstances were part of the reasoning behind the women’s prison reform movement as middle-class women took up the cause of fallen women in penitentiary confinement.⁴ Penitentiaries established during the early to mid nineteenth century predominantly held white and immigrant working-class women, as the vast majority of Black women were still enslaved and thus rarely committed to a state penal institution and rather dealt with as personal property of slaveholders. As the early populations of incarcerated, or “fallen,” women began to be transferred to women’s reformatories, the demographics of incarcerated

¹ Charles Ford, “Homosexual Practices of the Institutionalized Female,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 23, no. 4 (1929): 444.

² J. D. B. DeBow, *Statistical View of the United States, Embracing Its Territory, Population - White, Free Colored, and Slave - Moral and Social Condition, Industry, Property, and Revenue*, United States, Census Office. 7th census, 1850 (Washington: Beverley Tucker, 1854): 165.

³ Mara Dodge, *“Whores and Thieves of the Worst Kind”: A Study of Women, Crime, and Prisons, 1835-2000* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University, 2002), 40.

⁴ For more information about motives behind the women’s prison reform movement, see Rafter, *Partial Justice*, 3-21.

women clearly indicated that regardless of race, the overwhelming majority of incarcerated women were working-class or impoverished. Regardless of geographic location and inmate racial demographics, romantic and sexual relationships between incarcerated women became a well-known pillar of life among women in confinement.

By the turn of the twentieth century, relationships between incarcerated women became a “tradition,” shrouded in rituals, unique relationship dynamics, secrecy, and resistance.⁵ Despite being acknowledged as a “well-known form of perversion,” women’s relationships with one another were an issue secondary to homosexual relationships between incarcerated men, and thus lesser explored until the early twentieth century. Joseph Fishman, an early-twentieth century American career penologist and institutional administrator, noted, “Women, generally speaking, are more reserved in speaking of sexual matters than men. Sex topics are not discussed in women’s prisons as eagerly as they are discussed in men’s institutions. Therefore, there is not the constant prurience which comes from harping on this subject.”⁶ Still, the hypervisibility of women-loving women in reformatories created space and opportunity for penologists and medical professionals to observe individuals and relationships they often documented, sometimes in great detail. Such documentation reveals critical aspects of women-loving women’s relationships as they functioned as modes of resistance and agency for women in confinement and offer raw data on inmate demographics regarding race, age, and reason for arrest via inmate intake records. Inmate case files written up by staff and administration at

⁵ Ford, “Homosexual Practices of the Institutionalized Female,” 443.

⁶ Fishman, *Sex in Prison: Revealing Sex Conditions in American Prisons*, 28.

women's institutions provide details on women's histories of engaging in relationships with other women while incarcerated.

In a reconstruction of women-loving women's lives and relationships in confinement, kites play an integral role in displacing the dominance of outside voices writing individual women and their relationships into history. Kites were written between incarcerated women most frequently for the purpose of romantic or sexual expressions. Unmediated communication between inmates, particularly between Black and white women, was forbidden by institutional authorities and kites were certainly against the rules in nearly every reformatory.⁷ Nevertheless, incarcerated women found ways to write and send each other letters confessing love, jealousy, heartbreak, strategies to rendezvous on reformatory grounds, and plans to continue their relationships outside of confinement. As this chapter explores the lives of women-loving women while incarcerated, kites offer some of the only glimpses of their relationships which were not perverted by the opinions and assumptions of their observers. After setting the scene for women-loving women's lives inside penal institutions, this chapter resituates their relationships as ongoing modes of survival and resistance, as opposed to temporary forms of emotional and sexual satiation, thus bringing to light the importance of interracial relationships.

Inmate Demographics and Facility Layouts

The United States census of 1850 revealed that incarcerated women averaged 3.6 percent of total inmate populations counted in 34 different state and county penitentiaries.⁸ Although this

⁷ Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women*, 400.

⁸ J. D. B. DeBow, *Statistical View of the United States, Embracing Its Territory, Population - White, Free Colored, and Slave - Moral and Social Condition, Industry, Property, and Revenue*, United States, Census Office. 7th census, 1850 (Washington: Beverley Tucker, 1854): 166.

average accurately reflects how few women were incarcerated in penitentiaries, further attention is due to specific geographic locations and institution types. While New York's penitentiaries received the highest portion of women at 5.6 percent the Massachusetts state prison did not hold women offenders because they were sentenced to local institutions where they comprised 19.5 percent of the inmates in county jails and houses of correction. In the South, Alabama's Wetumpka state facility reported only one female out of 117 total inmates; however, for many of the county jails, there is no data for women inmate populations. Fifteen slaveholding states held a total of eighteen women in state penitentiaries whereas seventeen non-slaveholding states held a total of 97. Census data breaks down inmate demographics into "Whites," "Native," "Including Colored," "Colored," and "Foreign," indicating that immigration of European women had begun to complicate the hierarchy of white supremacy in the United States.⁹ At this point in time in United States history, "Native" was not a reference to Indigenous women, but rather to women who were born on land already colonized by European settlers who established states and cities. These statistics reflect the number of women present in state prisons and penitentiaries during the year of 1850; however, alternate institutions for incarceration, such as jails and workhouses, were more heavily populated by women.

Various types of penal institutions were operated on state and county levels during the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in the eastern half of the U.S.-colonized North America.

⁹ All statistics for this paragraph are extracted from J. D. B. DeBow's *Statistical View of the United States* (1850): 165-167. "Mulatto" referred to women who were notably lighter in skin tone, almost always due to white or mixed-race parents. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "mulatto" as a "usually offensive term : the first-generation offspring of a black person and a white person." In this historical context, mulatto women were nearly exclusively born of enslaved Black women who were often raped by their white slave owners. See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1997), 22-55.

Institutions were mostly categorized as state prisons, penitentiaries, jails, houses of correction and refuge, and almshouses, which were typically established locally by cities and counties.¹⁰ The census clearly shows that women were more frequently sentenced to institutions governed by local authorities as opposed to state. This is evidenced by Massachusetts which recorded zero women incarcerated in state prisons during 1850; however, 237 women were reported as inmates in the state's county jails and houses of correction.¹¹ Furthermore, these records indicate that 212 of these inmates were classified as white, while the "free colored" section documented seventeen "Black" women and 8 "mulatto" women.¹² It is critical to note differences between non-slaveholding state records and those of slaveholding states as national tensions over slavery were escalating leading up the Civil War. Maryland, a slaveholding state in 1850, documented five white women and 21 "free colored" women held in state prisons, compared to three white women and seven "free colored" women held in jails and houses of correction.¹³ Statistics vary significantly between each state recorded in this federal census, reflecting not only the inconsistency in incarceration regulations but also the differences in inmate demographics among women incarcerated in state prisons as opposed to city jails. By 1920, New York, reported a total of 587 women incarcerated in county institutions with classifications including

¹⁰ Differentiating between prisons, penitentiaries, jails, houses of correction and refuge, and almshouses is primarily based on whether or not the institution was established by the state. However, further specification on the differences between these institution types is difficult to clearly articulate because very little consistency was extended across different states and counties regarding where a criminal would be sent for sentencing. Each state had its own regulations and guidelines for incarceration of women which often differed from such regulations established by other states. Additionally, city and county penal institutions within a state also varied in conviction rates and sentencing regarding women offenders.

¹¹ J. D. B. DeBow's *Statistical View of the United States* (1850): 165.

¹² *Ibid.*, 165.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 165.

“native white, native colored, and foreign born.”¹⁴ Illinois, a non-slaveholding state, recorded an increase in the population of Black women in penal institutions from 2 percent to 25 percent during the 1860s.¹⁵ As women’s reformatories began to open up in states in the Northeast, followed by the South and the West, the demographics of incarcerated women changed significantly as much larger numbers of women were institutionalized.

Depending on the state, city, and year, the number of women incarcerated at any given penal institution was in constant flux, as were categorizations of race and ethnicity used to document inmate demographics. Massachusetts Reformatory for Women inmate intake records from 1877 to 1926 recorded race in a single column labeled “colored,” which was left blank for the majority of inmates with the exception of the occasional “B” or “M.”¹⁶ The records give no clear indication of what the letters stand for, but given the context of similar records, such as the 1850 census, they may signify a woman as Black or “mulatto.” Although there were fewer Black women than white women incarcerated upon the turn of the twentieth century, the extremely limited state financial resources available to women’s penal institutions were insufficient to effectively racially segregate the facilities. Penitentiaries, jails, and houses of correction and refuge were usually walled in with cell-styled living; although, county jails and workhouses were generally far smaller compared to state prisons. Reformatory institutions were not walled in and often opened in rural areas where there was enough space for farming and livestock as well as separate facilities for living, eating, classes, healthcare, labor, and punishment to be spread out.

¹⁴ Ethel M. Elderton, Mabel R Fernald, Mary H. S Hayes, Almena Dawley, Beardsley Ruml, and Katherine Bement Davis, *A Study of Women Delinquents in New York State*, 1920 (Reprint, Montclair: Patterson Smith Publishing Corporation, 1968): 86, 169.

¹⁵ Mara Dodge, *“Whores and Thieves of the Worst Kind”: A Study of Women, Crime, and Prisons, 1835-2000* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University, 2002), 42.

¹⁶ Massachusetts Women’s Reformatory, “Inmate Registers 1877-1926,” *FamilySearch.org*.

Open-air reformatory layouts were meant to provide an environment that supported “self-activity” and “self-development,” often through reformatory industrial departments, agricultural and farming labor, childcare in the nursery, and educational classes.¹⁷

While women incarcerated in penitentiary institutions pursued romantic and sexual relationships with one another, the open grounds and cottage-style reformatory institutions offered a number of additional opportunities for engaging in relationships, including those which were interracial. Cottage-style reformatories were arranged as small home-like structures scattered across facility grounds, with individual rooms in which women kept their personal belongings and slept. Reformatories were often co-titled as “schools” and “industrial farms” thus, some institutions referred to the facility grounds as a “campus.”¹⁸ Sleeping cottages usually consisted of rooms with one or two beds, a chair, sometimes a table, minimal furniture for clothing, and a door. Some cottages were larger in structure and featured sleeping porches with beds lined up in long rows, occasionally separated by makeshift partitions for privacy. Both of these sleeping arrangements were navigated as opportunities incarcerated women who planned to meet in secret at night.

Cottages were not only used as sleeping quarters, but also for nurseries, sewing rooms, domestic classes in cooking and laundry, recreational rooms, libraries, dining commons, and punishment facilities. Women might finish breakfast and walk across a large grassy field to a sewing class in another cottage under the supervision of reformatory staff members leading the way and following behind them. Although grounds were open and individual cottage rooms

¹⁷ Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women*, 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

complicated how women were surveilled by staff, efforts to be sure women were under supervision at all times were constantly bolstered by the women's continued efforts to engage in relationships with one another. Agriculturally based reformatories were more common in geographic locations where farming was a main source of sustenance and labor for non-incarcerated communities.¹⁹ The Kansas State Industrial Farm for Women in Lansing, built on Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo) Native land, occupied 640 acres, much of which was dedicated to agricultural space where women labored in farming fields, livestock facilities, gardens, and more. In 1928, the Kansas State Farm held 149 women, a large number of inmates to effectively monitor on open reformatory grounds, in cottages, and in livestock sheds.²⁰ It was in the process of plowing fields, treating each other in hospital cottages, playing games in recreation rooms, and sitting next to each other in tightly spaced sewing rooms that incarcerated women created opportunities for love, agency, resistance, and communication out of the sight and earshot of overseers.

Relationship Dynamics and Women Loving Women as Resistance

Ocean was able to secretly procure a piece of scrap paper and a spare pencil from the library to write a letter to Gloria in the privacy of her room during the night expressing her unconditional love and desire for her "dearest Wife."²¹ Both women were incarcerated in the

¹⁹ I use "non-incarcerated" to refer to individuals and communities of people who created a labor culture based on farming. Women incarcerated in reformatories, such as the Kansas State Industrial Farm, were extensions of non-incarcerated communities, which relied on agricultural labor as the crops they harvested, and their labor production generated monetary revenue. See Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women*, 470.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

²¹ Ford, "Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females," 444. These letters were transcribed uncorrected into Ford's article.

Ohio State Reformatory for women, established on Hopewell, Kaskaskia, and Myaamia Native land, during the 1920s and likely resided in separate cottages, although, reformatory records are not consistent enough to verify the exact spans of time of their incarcerations or their sleeping quarters in the reformatory. Oscean, a Black woman, signed her letter, “from your love husben / Oscean love to my wife Gloria love,” at the very bottom in hopes that the note would be successfully delivered, which it was. Gloria, a white woman, wrote back, addressing the letter, “My dearest and Only husben Oscean,” and continued to profess her mutual love and desire. In their letters, the two made plans to sneak into each other’s rooms at night for sexual intimacy under the cover of darkness and continue to love one another after leaving the institution. While we do not know what became of Oscean and Gloria’s love for one another, we do know that they were able to steal kisses, share intimate stories of their pasts, and plan a future together outside of the reformatory.

It was not uncommon for coupled incarcerated women to refer to each other as husband and wife as relationship dynamics while in confinement were cultivated by women who had lived their entire lives moving through a world of unrecognized heteronormativity. Many women also referred to their lovers and “friends” as “daddy” and “mama.”²² Such rhetoric was used by observers, like Ford, to assert these women were engaging in relationships to fill the void of opportunities for heterosexual relationships. However, one must ask what language was available to incarcerated women-loving women to create understandings of their relationships outside of the heterosexual gender binary. Did it occur to women-loving women that both partners could be

²² Sarah Potter, ““Undesirable Relations’: Same-Sex Relationships and the Meaning of Sexual Desire at a Women’s Reformatory during the Progressive Era,” *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 401.

wives? Or were labels like husband and wife adopted to express how these women felt about themselves in terms of masculinity and femininity? It is perhaps tempting to assume that a woman who identified as a husband in her relationship thought of herself as a man; however, regardless of the gendered label used, women were consistently referred to by she and her pronouns. In addition, a woman may be a “husband” but still referred to as a “girl” by the counterpart “wife,” revealing that while heteronormative language was used to rhetorically navigate relationship dynamics, both parties acknowledged each other as women.²³

Regardless of institutional design, facility layouts, sleeping arrangements, labor schedules, leisurely activities, geographic location, inmate demographics, and potential punishments, women-loving women were forming romantic and sexual relationships with one another. At each reformatory, women-loving women cultivated communities within the general inmate population and these communities generated culture and tradition within the institution. As Ford noted in his observations of incarcerated women-loving women, “‘Friends’ are a sort of tradition in the school and have been a part of the order of things as long as it has been established. When a new girl arrives, she finds these ‘friendships’ everywhere.”²⁴ Certain commonalities in incarcerated women-loving women’s culture spanned across the majority of reformatories. Rhetoric based on heteronormative relationship roles was consistently used, letter-passing was a present in all institutions, and interracial coupling grew more common as reformatories began receiving an increased number of Black women inmates.

²³ Ford, “Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females,” 444.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 443.

In an isolated social environment of women under constant surveillance and threat of punishment, wherein there is little to no racial segregation, one may reimagine interracial relationships between incarcerated women as modes of resistance and agency. Incarcerated women-loving women cultivated their own dating rituals and practices which were predominantly based on gift giving and written expressions of love and desire. Oscean once received a “handchief” from her wife, Gloria, which she considered to be so meaningful she claimed she would take it with her upon being released from the reformatory.²⁵ Relationships were instigated by both white and Black women who might send a letter or a small trinket to a love interest. Communities of incarcerated women-loving women were often tightly knit and much information travelled by word of mouth through whispers in the library or lively conversation during recreational activities, such as swimming in a lake. When a new woman arrived at an institution, she might receive a lock of hair and a note from a woman who wished to be her lover. Usually, notes and gifts were delivered via a chain of co-conspirators who hid kites in brassier pockets and handed off the small packages in secrecy until they, hopefully, reached the intended recipient. If two women were already engaged in a relationship, one might leave a note or gift hidden in a library book or wedged between window casings for the other to pick up in a stolen moment of privacy.²⁶

In an institution designed to reform “anti-social” women into “law-abiding and self-supporting citizen[s],” reinforcing a woman’s place in society was a core pillar of life in a reformatory.²⁷ Classrooms and cottages for “domestic science” courses, nurseries, teaching

²⁵ Ford, 444.

²⁶ See Otis, 113-114 and Ford, 446.

²⁷ Katherine B. Davis, “Probation and Parole (Report of the Committee of the American Prison Association),” *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 7, no. 2 (1916): 168.

kitchens, and sewing were common facilities found on reformatory grounds. Some institutions segregated classes and recreational activity groups; however, keeping women separated by race in all aspects of life at a reformatory was nearly impossible. Gloria wrote her “husben,” Oscean, “if you love me you will go to the Hospital for something for I go every morning, did you see me this morning in school. I saw you Honey you are the sweetest thing I ever lad my eys on.”²⁸

Romantic and sexual connections between incarcerated women were incredibly strong as women fell in love through eye contact made in passing, secret notes, occasional late-night rendezvous, holding hands in the dark during movie nights. When caught by administrators engaging in any suspicious behavior, women-loving women faced physical punishment and time in isolation; yet they remained committed to each other, often sneaking kites out of disciplinary cottages.

In a way, the “forbidden fruit” theories produced by observers were right on par.²⁹

Incarcerated women perhaps engaged in interracial relationships because only in reformatories or similar penal institutions were cross racial relationships between women possible. In the non-incarcerated world, segregation was based on race and not so much sex; therefore, being confined to a strictly feminine environment with little to no racial segregation was an entirely new experience to most women who arrived at the reformatory. Otis reported, “many of the girls saying that they had never seen anything like the kind outside.”³⁰ With such limited raw information on what incarcerated women thought or felt about their interracial relationships, it is difficult to determine exactly how much excitement from breaking reformatory rules motivated their willfulness to couple with one another. Certainly, some women engaged in relationships

²⁸ Ford, 445.

²⁹ Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” 113.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

while incarcerated and returned to husbands and families upon release. However, expressions of devotion to each other and intentions of continuing relationships outside of incarceration are clearly present in their kites.

Interracial relationships were diverse in dynamics and while some women considered them relatively meaningless modes of passing the time, others took their relationships quite seriously. Upon questioning white women who engaged in relationships with Black women at the New Jersey State Home, Otis relayed that, “some insist that they do it just for fun. One said that the girls would wave to the ‘niggers’ just to ‘see the coons get excited.’”³¹ Throughout Otis’s article, she consistently collects statements from white inmates on their experiences in relationships with Black women, rarely are the voices of Black women documented by observers who took an interest in interracial relationships. While common relationship rituals spanned all different types of reformatories, each relationship was unique to the reformatory, inmate communities, and the individual women. Not all women were particularly faithful to their wives, husbands, or “friends” in fact, jealousy and break-ups were frequently noted in letters written to one another. One letter between inmates quoted in Otis’s article read, “This morning when you were going to the nursery you threw a kiss to Mary Smith. If you care for her more than you do for me, why, don’t hesitate to tell me.... I certainly will regret the day I ever wrote or sent my love to you if this is downright deceitfulness does not stop.”³² Some researchers noted that

³¹ Ibid., 114. It is important to note that although white women were frequently engaging in relationships with their fellow Black inmates, racist sentiments were often very much present.

³² Ibid., 114.

jealousies between women who took an interest in the same woman, or a woman who was engaging in more than one romantic relationship at once, even turned violent.³³

The intensity of relationships between incarcerated women was often quite high as passionate professions of love were mixed in with heartbreak and betrayal. Communities of women-loving women at various reformatories were constantly complicated by new relationships, break-ups, and those who sought to maintain relationships after their release. Communication between women often came in the form of secret letters and quiet conversations wherein relationships were challenged by love triangles, physical separation, and jealousy. In a letter written to a non-romantic friend, one woman proclaimed, “Oh, sister dear, now this is between you and I. Lucy Jones asks me to give Baby up, for she tries to tell me that Baby does not love me. Don’t you see what she is trying to do? To get my love back.”³⁴ It is unknown whether or not this letter was successfully delivered to the intended recipient. However, if it was, the loyalty of this friend would be tested as the author shares private information about her love life. Would the dear sister have responded with new information on Lucy Jones’s motives? Would she support her friend, the author, in her commitment to Baby? Although the author, Lucy Jones, and Baby’s races are left unspecified, it can be determined that all three of them were a part of the women-loving women community within the institution.

The subcommunities of women-loving women who engaged in interracial relationships faced additional obstacles as differences in race during the early twentieth century created strong social divisions between white and Black inmates. There was a distinct subcommunity of

³³ See Ford, “Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females,” 446 and Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women in the United States*, 399. I was unable to find evidence produced by the women themselves which directly proves these observational claims regarding violence and jealousy.

³⁴ Otis, 115.

incarcerated women who engaged in interracial relationships and they were frequently considered lesser than white women who did not engage in such relationships. Upon questioning white inmates, Otis notes that “among these self-considered high-class girls the ‘nigger-lovers’ are despised and condemned. They are held as not good enough to associate with... Certain sets and cliques appear, and those who are ‘high up’ scorn the ‘common kind.’”³⁵ Despite the general lack of resources for racial segregation, reformatory administrators attempted to keep Black and white women physically separated; therefore, opportunities for physical intimacy across the color line were more difficult to finesse. Relationships between women who resided in the same cottage were more likely to allow for physical intimacy as one woman might sneak into another’s room late at night. On the other hand, relationships between women staying in different cottages relied more heavily on communication through kites, especially if they were to devise a plan for late-night romance.³⁶

Incarcerated women-loving women were determined to create opportunities for love and intimacy, despite surveillance and the possibility of punishment. In Gloria’s response to Oscean’s letter, she wrote, “Honey if you love me as much as I love you you will wate for me to night at the doorr. After the other girls have gone and I hope you will, for honey I sure to do love you and you only and I want you to unstand it to.”³⁷ If caught waiting at her door, Oscean would likely have been placed in a disciplinary cottage, where she might face not only isolation and deprivation of food and water, if not physical punishment as well.³⁸ However, for many

³⁵ Otis, 115.

³⁶ Ford, 446.

³⁷ Ford, 445.

³⁸ Black women were far more likely to face physical, violent punishment if caught engaging in a relationship with a white woman. If a Black woman was caught waiting outside a white woman’s door, she would be held predominantly accountable for the co-opted misbehavior. However, if a white woman were to be waiting outside of

incarcerated women-loving women in interracial relationships, the risk was overwhelmingly worth the reward of not only personal agency but also sexual intimacy. Bodily autonomy was extremely restricted in women's penal institutions as inmates had little to no choice in clothing, food, or hygiene habits and masturbation was prohibited.³⁹ Interracial relationships between incarcerated women who achieved opportunities for sexual intimacy were perhaps some of the strongest forms of exercising emotional and physical autonomy which adamantly undermined the purpose of women's reformatories. Oscean wrote, "angle face if I could sleep with you I would not only hough and kiss you. But I will not take the time to write it for I guess you can read between the lines."⁴⁰ Whether or not Oscean and Gloria were ever able to rendezvous late at night is unknown; however, their relationship as it is represented by the letters they authored, offers a glimpse at the thoughts, emotions, and intents of incarcerated women-loving women in interracial relationships.

Kites and Interracial Relationships

Secret notes, such as Oscean and Gloria's, soon became known as "kites" among incarcerated women, professionals in the penal system, and scholars.⁴¹ Kites, secret love notes, are perhaps the most critical pieces of primary evidence left of incarcerated women's

a Black woman's door, the Black woman would likely be held at fault for tempting the white woman, for somehow causing her to misbehave. Due to a lack of access to inmate case files on account of an inability to visit archives, evidence to these truths is limited to the perceptions of administrators in penal institutions which defined Black women as the aggressors in interracial relationships. See Mara Dodge, *Whores and Thieves of the Worst Kind*, 147.

³⁹ Ford, 448.

⁴⁰ Ford, "Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females," 445.

⁴¹ See Helen Bryan, *Inside* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), 279-280 and Rose Giallombardo, *Society of Women: a Study of a Women's Prison* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1966), 116, 143-154.

relationships with one another. Their importance lies in the fact that their words were written of women's free will. Love letters were not a response to oral interviews; they were not solicited by outside observers seeking to apply their biased understandings of incarcerated women's lives through a layer of subjectivity between women-loving women and the production of historical knowledge. Otis's 1913 theory that "The difference in color, in this case, takes the place of difference in sex," was not necessarily a truth evident to incarcerated women in interracial relationships.⁴² While some women, mainly white inmates, may have agreed with such ideologies, kites exchanged between Black and white women-loving women reveal complexities and diversity of interracial relationships in penal institutions.⁴³ How would Oscean and Gloria feel if they knew their love letters were shared with so many outsiders? What would they think if they knew that one hundred years later, their private professions of love and desire would be used as evidence in historical narratives of U.S. lesbianism? Obviously, we cannot know. However, resituating kites in this historical reimagination of incarcerated women-loving women's interracial relationships reaches to liberate their words from the authorial power of observers, such as Ford, and create a space in the historical narrative of lesbianism in which these women's voices are placed at the forefront.

Aspects of interracial relationships between incarcerated women revealed in their kites range from professions of unconditional love, explicit sexual intimacy, plans for life together beyond of incarceration, and more. The only generalization that can be asserted regarding kites, their content, and the women who wrote them is that kites were methods of exercising agency

⁴² Otis, 113.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 114.

and undermining the authority of prison administrators. Each and every surviving kite is unique as was its author, but it is nonetheless illuminating to select some of them for close reading and deep analysis.

We begin in 1920, with a kite that Lena, a white woman, wrote a kite to Elsie, a Black woman, at the New York Bedford Hills Reformatory for Women reading:

Some fine day I'm going to grab you and make you warm me up and fuck me and I'll be willing to get punished every day in the week for *you* and you *only*... I cant not get enough jazz- but youd have look out for I bite awful when I am cumming You don't blame me do you sweetheart Ill be getting some sweet when I take a bite on you... Indeed I never cared or had such a feeling toward any other woman on these grounds dear as I have for you, I do think that we were just made for one another and that is why I intend to be a good time mama to you now and out in the big world... I never even had such passion for a man, so it wont be hard to stay away from those dam pricks... I wouldn't give a dam if I had do all my time in this hole as long as Id have you here to love me up, indeed I scream that I am daffy about my woman, and I shall never be with another man as long as I live, so please take my word, and what i mean if it takes me a year to locate you Ill tell the world I'll find you and be a sweet love little mama to you... now daddy sweet heart you can judge for your self now that I am a pretty good kid, and when I love anybody Ill do all in my power for them, and what I mean I could never do enough for you.⁴⁴

Although she had knowledge of severe consequences for sexual intimacy between women, especially those who were coupled interracially, Lena's love and sexual desires for Elsie were worth the risk of getting caught. Abuse committed against incarcerated women, particularly those which engaged in interracial relationships with one another, entailed handcuffing women and hanging them by their wrists for hours as their toes barely reached the floor, beating them

⁴⁴ Sarah Potter, "'Undesirable Relations': Same-Sex Relationships and the Meaning of Sexual Desire at a Women's Reformatory during the Progressive Era," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 401-403. Lena and Elsie's names are pseudonyms as using real names of inmates is often a violation of historical ethics and legal regulations. Although my research led me to over twenty kites from different women in different institutions, the use of this single kite allows for a deeper analysis of interracial relationships between incarcerated women-loving women.

with hoses and similar weapons, tying them down to their cots, and total isolation in disciplinary cottages where they were deprived of food and water.⁴⁵ It is clear from Lena's letter that women were acutely aware of the punishment they would face if caught, specifically that of extended incarceration in a "hole." Lena's kite brings to light not only knowledge of sexual acts and desire between incarcerated women, but also that she and Elsie had likely been unable to engage in a sexual relationship at the time this note was written. Her note also provides insight into how relationships between incarcerated women impacted understandings of their own sexuality as Lena writes, "I never even had such passion for a man, so it wont be hard to stay away from those dam pricks... and I shall never be with another man as long as I live."⁴⁶ Does her statement indicate that she might have identified as homosexual or lesbian if she had had access to such language? Perhaps. However, it seems that Lena's understanding of her own sexuality lies in her expressions of love and "passion" for Elsie, which translated to sexual intimacy.

Although the language Lena uses to describe her love and passion for Elsie does not employ labels attributed to women-loving women, such as homosexual and lesbian, the rhetoric used to describe her sexual desire is notably explicit. Wording such as "fuck me" and "when I am cumming" reveals a certain extent of knowledge which incarcerated women had regarding physical sexual intimacy. Where did Lena learn this language? Do her words mean that she was aware of and planned to engage in same-sex intimacy that included genital contact? Do these expressions indicate that Elsie also had knowledge of sexual intimacy between women that included orgasms? Lastly, did "fuck " and "cumming" mean the same things to Lena and Elsie as

⁴⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2020), 265.

⁴⁶ Potter, "Undesirable Relations," 402.

they mean now? There is strong evidence both in kites and in observers' reports that women were indeed engaging in sexual intimacy that included genital contact. Ford described such sexual intimacy as "mutual masturbation" and "cunnilinctus"⁴⁷ and Julia Jessie Taft stated that white women's attraction to Black women "rarely leads to immoral conditions at the institution, I think."⁴⁸ Neither Oscean, Gloria, or Lena used the same language as professional observers, such as Ford and Taft, as they did not consider their relationships immoral nor did they refer to sexual intimacy as "masturbation" or "cunnilinctus." In fact, these incarcerated women-loving women felt strongly that their love for one another was unconditional and lasting. As Gloria declared, "You are the only girl I have ever loved and the only one I ever will love if you go out before I do I will not have any friends for I am true blue to you and you had better be to me."⁴⁹

Despite the general claims made by penal administrators and researchers that women engaged in romantic and sexual relationships with one another only while incarcerated, many of the kites women wrote to one another indicate that they planned to continue their relationships together after release. Lena writes to Elsie, "I do think that we were just made for one another and that is why I intend to be a good time mama to you now and out in the big world... if it takes me a year to locate you Ill tell the world I'll find you."⁵⁰ As a white woman, Lena had considerably more freedom to pursue Elsie, a Black woman, "out in the big world," where the general public was racially segregated, rather than sex-segregated. Outside of women's penal institutions, Black people were rarely allowed to occupy the same public and private spaces as

⁴⁷ Ford, "Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females," 443.

⁴⁸ "Report of the Special Committee, Consisting of Commissioners Kevin, Smith and Mulry, Appointed to Investigate Charges Made Against the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, N.Y.," (Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon Co., 1916): 864.

⁴⁹ Ford, "Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females," 444.

⁵⁰ Potter, "Undesirable Relations," 401-403.

white people, unless in a position of servitude, which would make it incredibly difficult for a Black and white woman to live together as women-loving women. While incarcerated at the New York Blackwell Island's Women's Workhouse, established on Munsee-Lenape and Wappinger Native land, Lillie wrote a kite to her lover, Bubbles, that includes the words: "the day, I meet you on the bridge I shall right to our home and when I get you *inside* I shall lock the door and throw the key away."⁵¹ While the racial identities of Lillie and Bubbles remain unknown, Lillie's letter suggests that the women not only intended to find each other after release, but had a logistical plan to meet and live together. White women were more likely to be released from incarceration on parole, thus, kites written by white women to Black women who were still incarcerated are more prominent in records of intercepted correspondence.⁵²

As women-loving women's kites written to each other while incarcerated clearly indicated intentions to continue romantic and sexual relationships after release, their communication while one of them was on parole also indicated that after release the love and desire for one another persisted. After being released on parole from Bedford Hills around 1920, May Palmer, a white woman, wrote to her still-incarcerated lover, Mildred, a Black woman, "Baby. You know I don't care who watches me or reads my letter because is any one don't like it why they can go their way and I mine but it is you that worries me."⁵³ May's worry was perhaps rooted in a concern that Mildred would develop a new love interest while still in confinement as some incarcerated women-loving women described relationships as habitual to their institutional lives. One young white woman, whose statement was taken by Otis, declared that, "When you

⁵¹ Samuel Kahn, *Mentality and Homosexuality*, 148.

⁵² Elderton, Fernald, Hayes, Dawley, Ruml, and Davis, *A Study of Women Delinquents in New York State*, 1920 (Reprint, Montclair: Patterson Smith Publishing Corporation, 1968), 171.

⁵³ Potter, "Undesirable Relations," 407.

have been in the habit of having a girl love, and she goes way, you have to get another; you just can't get along without thinking of one girl more than another."⁵⁴ Could May be worried that her relationship with Mildred would not survive physical separation beyond different cottages? Pointedly, May is unafraid of the potential consequences she could face for having her letters read by an administrator, as she certainly risked re-incarceration.

It is also possible that May was aware of the risks, socially and physically, that might come with continuing their relationship outside of the reformatory, given the fact that Mildred was a Black woman. However, May's claim that she did not care who read the letter may reflect her unrecognized privilege as a white woman who was likely at less risk for severe punishment. Additionally, May's devotion to Mildred was expressed throughout the kite as she proclaims, "[I] will never lead you wrong if I no it."⁵⁵ May's whiteness afforded her a great deal more of social privilege than Mildred and her statement seems to express confidence that she would be able to care for and perhaps protect her Black lover in the world outside of incarceration. The letter was confiscated by staff at Bedford Hills and whether or not Mildred received the letter is unknown; therefore, her voice as a Black woman is absent from this historical narrative of interracial love between women impacted by the carceral system. Did Mildred feel as devoted to May even as her white lover moved through the non-incarcerated world? Did Mildred spark a new relationship with a woman who was still incarcerated? Did Mildred also have intentions of continuing her relationship with May outside of the reformatory? Did May's white privilege in the racially-segregated world outside of the penal institution weigh on Mildred's confidence in

⁵⁴ Otis, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted," 116.

⁵⁵ Potter, "Undesirable Relations," 407.

their love and devotion to one another? There are innumerable questions to ask, countless possible answers, and slender certainty regarding what happened to each of them and their relationship after this letter was written and stolen. What is clear from May's letter, is that some women who engaged in interracial relationships while incarcerated strongly desired to remain coupled in the non-incarcerated world, despite obstacles posed by homophobia and racial segregation and the risk of being recommitted to a penal institution.

When Oscean and Gloria saw each other in the laundry room at one of the cottages built on the Ohio Reformatory for Women's 259 acres, the opportunity to make eye contact inspired Gloria's words in her kite responding to Oscean, "You looked so sweet yesterday at the laundry. Sugar dady if I could sleep with you for one little night, I would show you how much I hontly and truly love you You are the only girl I have ever loved."⁵⁶ Planning to sneak visits with one another came in the form of trips to the "hospital," at school in the mornings, and at each other's cottage doors. As Oscean writes to her wife, "Honey If you love me you will brake out your dam door and come an sleep with me," Gloria directly responds with, " Honey if you love me as much as I love you you will wate for me to night at the doorr. After the other girls have gone and I hope you will."⁵⁷ As incarcerated women-loving women who were committed to one another in an interracial relationship, Oscean and Gloria's reciprocal expressions of love, devotion, and sexual desire illuminate the creativity that confinement cultivated and romantic relationships as forms of resistance against reformatory repression.

⁵⁶ Ford, 445.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 444-445.

Staff and administrators of women's penal institutions paid special attention to interactions between white and Black women due to several different factors. Constant surveillance was a condition of life in confinement for all incarcerated women; however, the threat of disorder that romantic and sexual interracial relationships posed to the institution, and to non-incarcerated society, was regarded as a serious concern among administrators in various positions of power. When Julia Jessie Taft was questioned during a state investigation of Bedford Hills, she was not simply prompted to speak about relationships between incarcerated women, rather, she was specifically asked about the "sex trouble there and especially between the white and the colored girls."⁵⁸ Administrators and their superiors among state authorities seemed hyper-focused on these interracial relationships and almost always considered Black women to be "forbidden fruit"⁵⁹ who had "an unfortunate psychological influence upon"⁶⁰ the white women they were in relationships with. Such racist and heteropatriarchal sentiments held among those of authority in the women's penal system shaped the physical spaces incarcerated moved through. Following investigations into the conditions of women's reformatories, a tsunami of concern over interracial coupling resulted in increased attempts to racially segregate women's institutions. Ultimately, the investigations, development of language, research publications, and endeavors to separate Black and white women were responses to women-loving women's visibility in penal institutions, and the perceived social dangers of interracial coupling.

⁵⁸ "Report of the Special Committee," *State Board of Charities*, 864.

⁵⁹ Otis, 113.

⁶⁰ "Report of the Special Committee," 864.

While women-loving women have always existed in a countless number of spaces and contexts, those who were incarcerated lived through particularly severe circumstances of repression and surveillance. As was previously noted, no two relationships between incarcerated women were the same. Oscan and Gloria's kites provide intimate insight into a single interracial relationship between incarcerated women in which both voices are present. What these two letters reveal is a relationship of devoted love and sexual desire, which authorities of the institution actively sought to disrupt and destroy. Incarcerated women-loving women's interracial relationships with one another speak to their determination to exercise agency and resistance in an institution designed imposed complete control over their lives. Women like Lena were aware of the punishment they faced if caught engaging in interracial relationships, yet they continued to write to each other, arrange for secret rendezvous, and planned to live with one another in the "big world."⁶¹ Relationships between white and Black women were not necessarily conscious acts of rebellion against the reformatory system or administrators who regulated their lives. However, their determination to love one another, and to express such love through secret kites and physical intimacy, inherently undermined the circumstances of oppression to which they were confined. In her kite to Gloria, Oscean writes a powerful statement which reflects her awareness that their relationship was viewed negatively by others, but more importantly, that she loved her wife anyway: "I don't care what you use to be but I know what you are to day if you love me or I love you what has the world to say."⁶²

⁶¹ Potter, 401-403.

⁶² Ford, 444.

Chapter 3:

*“I mean to follow everywhere she goes”¹ : Connecting Incarcerated Women-
Loving Women’s Subcultures and Black Women’s Blues Music*

In Oscean’s kite to Gloria she wrote, “angle face if I could sleep with you I would not only hough and kiss you. But I will not take the time to write it for I guess you can read between the lines.”² These words call to mind the lyrics of blues songs such as “B.D. Woman’s Blues,” by Bessie Jackson, in which sings, “They [B.D. women] got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man.”³ Kites exchanged by incarcerated women were often penned in a lyrical manner and those authored by Black women contained lines echoing the lyrics of contemporary blues. There was an intimate connection between the language used in love letters written by women-loving women in penal institutions and blues music sung and performed by Black women. It seems that most institutional authorities who confiscated and analyzed kites did not recognize similarities between blues lyrics and love letters exchanged by Black and white incarcerated women. This may be due to the unlikelihood that white professionals attended blues performances or listened to blues music. When reconstructing how women-loving women lived after release from incarceration, it is critical to recognize that the vast majority of them reentered working-class social spheres of Black and white communities. Examining connections between incarcerated women-loving women’s kites and blues lyrics sung by Black women illuminates how lesbian identities and subcultures emerged from penal institutions and were cultivated in

¹ Ma Rainey, “Prove It On Me Blues,” *Paramount Records* (1928).

² Ford, 444.

³ Bessie Jackson, “B.D. Woman’s Blues,” *Paramount Records* (1935)

Black working-class nightlife spaces. Circulation of the language women-loving women used to describe themselves and express their romantic and sexual desires flowed between incarcerated women's kites and Black women's blues lyrics and, eventually, into communities of white women-loving women.

By the 1920s, some of the most prominent blues singers were given opportunities by wealthy white music producers and companies to record their songs on vinyl records. However, these records were specifically categorized as "race records" and were sold nearly exclusively in Black neighborhoods.⁴ Race records were a sector of the emerging music industry which included the blues and gospel songs performed by Black people and were marketed specifically to Black audiences.⁵ As such, very few white people were exposed to or listened to blues music and those who were aware of the emergent genre often considered the blues quite distasteful.⁶ Even before race records were sold, Black blues singers performed in cabarets, bars, and makeshift stages outside, sometimes under tents.⁷ These spaces were established by Black folks in predominantly urban communities in the South and Northeast to which ex-slaves and the first generations of free-born Black people migrated, often in search of employment in industrial labor. Black women blues singers who became famous during the early twentieth century often migrated from the South and sometimes traveled to various cities across the country to perform for predominantly Black audiences. These women's lives as travelers were unique as they migrated from the South not in search of industrial or domestic service employment but to

⁴ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998), xiii.

⁵ Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (1998): 476.

⁶ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 282-284.

⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 194-224.

pursue careers as musicians and performers. Few women rose to such fame which afforded them the liberty of travel and public performances. Those who did, often sang about and performed expressions of Black sexuality, collective experiences of discrimination and violence, travel, and love. The glamorous performances and sexually explicit music of women blues singers, such as Ma Rainey, Gladys Bentley, and Bessie Jackson, opened up spaces for working-class Black folks who likely had little access to the extravagant lifestyles these women led.⁸ In a racially segregated, white supremacist, anti-Black, and heteronormative society, Black women blues singers ability to perform on a stage created spaces not only for Black sexual liberation, but also for working-class Black folks to find joy in communal spaces mostly uninhibited by white people.

White people present in cabarets to see Black musicians and singers perform were sometimes those who were brought into the space by Black community members. It was not uncommon for policemen to raid cabarets and bars filled with predominantly Black audiences, and such invasions usually resulted in a significant number of arrests. Audiences of women blues singers were almost entirely Black and working-class. Given that the vast majority of incarcerated women were working-class and those at the highest risk of arrest were Black women, it was likely that people impacted by the carceral system were present in any cabaret where a Black blues singer was performing. Incarcerated white women were also predominantly working-class and from the same cities that Black women were arrested in; however, due to racial segregation, they most often resided in separate neighborhoods. New York City's Harlem

⁸ Bessie Jackson was a pseudonym used by Lucille Bogan, born Lucille Anderson. "Lucille Bogan," *Wikipedia*, last modified March 29, 2021, accessed April 14, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucille_Bogan.

neighborhood, established on Munsee Lenape and Wappinger Native land, became home to a variety of vibrant Black communities, whose residents ranged from working-class industrial laborers to socially elite figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Women blues musicians were rarely considered high-class by the standards of Harlem Renaissance communities, who were championing respectability politics.⁹ Bessie Smith is widely considered one of the greatest pioneers of blues music by today's scholars and historians; however, she was rejected by Black Swan Records, the first Black-owned record producing companies, due to her “grassroots sound.”¹⁰

Women blues singers of Bessie Smith’s generation leaned into sexual explicitness and expressions of sexual freedom in their music and performances to the point where a subgenre came to life: the dirty blues. Women blues singers, such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Jackson, were considered as some of the greatest classical blues artists as well as creators of the dirty blues. Some of their song lyrics included language describing queer understandings of gender and sexuality as well as sexual intimacy between women. Ma Rainey’s “Prove It On Me” and Bessie Jackson’s “B.D. Woman’s Blues”¹¹ are often noted as some of the earliest musical expressions of women-loving women’s desires and actions.¹² While famous women blues musicians sang about

⁹ For more on respectability politics among Harlem Renaissance communities, see Emily Reed, “Wayward Women and Lady-Lovers: Same-Sex Intimacies Between Women in Progressive Era New York City, 1901-1930” (B.A. sr. thesis, Barnard College, 2019) 53-63.

¹⁰ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 152.

¹¹ B.D. stands for “bull dyker” or “bull dagger,” both slang terms for women-loving women who were particularly masculine-presenting. See Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 77-78.

¹² Some sources that cite Rainey and Jackson as pioneers of blues music and the dirty blues genre: Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*; Daphne Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*; “Blues,” *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blues>; “Dirty Blues,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirty_blues. There were numerous other Black women who pioneered the blues and dirty blues genres during the early twentieth century, including: Mamie Smith, Louise Johnson, Bessie Smith, Julia Lee, Lucille Hegamin, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, Mary Stafford, and Edith Wilson. This list does not include every early woman blues musician.

and performed experiences shared by Black folks across the country, these artists also had access to freedoms of expression which women in their audience likely did not. Working-class Black women-loving women in the audiences, a number of whom were likely on parole, perhaps found escape and freedom in cabarets where queer relationships went predominantly unchallenged and undiscriminated against. Harlem became a hotspot of sorts for the cultivation of queer communities.¹³ Although the neighborhood was populated by Black folks, it was not uncommon for white people from surrounding neighborhoods to engage in queer nightlife as voyeurs and participants.¹⁴ Cabarets and other performance spaces established by queer Black folks were tourist attractions for curious white people; however, they were also one of the only public spaces where Black and white women could meet and engage in relationships with one another. Incarcerated women who coupled interracially and planned to continue their relationship after being released on parole would be unable to do so in white and middle- or upper-class social spaces as racial segregation of the non-incarcerated world was strictly enforced. Therefore, as urban subcultures of women-loving women began to come to fruition during the early twentieth century, Black working-class spaces where nightlife was filled with blues music became central to the emergence of lesbian subcultures flowing out of sex-segregated women's penal institutions and into race-segregated public society.

¹³ For more on Black queer life in Harlem and general histories of gay and lesbian culture related to New York City, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994); Hugh Ryan, *When Brooklyn Was Queer* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2019); Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*; Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

¹⁴ For more on queer white tourism in Harlem, see Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 69-77; Hugh Ryan, *When Brooklyn Was Queer*, 109-114; Emily Reed, "Wayward Women and Lady-Lovers: Same-Sex Intimacies Between Women in Progressive Era New York City, 1901-1930," 46-74.

Working-Class and Black Queer Spaces

Women's penal institutions were overwhelmingly populated by working-class women, regardless of race. By the 1920s, many cities created loitering laws that criminalized daily aspects of working-class peoples' social life, such as standing together in front of apartments, which further increased working-class women's risk of arrest. Working-class women in urban settings were rarely afforded the same degree of private spaces for both socializing and residing in as middle- and upper-class women. Many lived with families in single room apartments or rented rooms in houses.¹⁵ Laws and law enforcement officers specifically targeted working-class women, particularly Black women, whose increased presence in cities such as New York perhaps triggered an increase in their incarceration. An unknown but significant number of Black working-class women who were incarcerated were arrested based on a white, male police officer's perception of their bodies and social relations.¹⁶ Often, Black women would be arrested based on the officer's assumption that they were committing crimes not readily visible, that they actively intended on breaking the law, or would do so the near future.¹⁷ Police officers, who were almost entirely white men during the early twentieth century, might see a Black woman standing on a sidewalk and decide, at their discretion, to question her as to why she was standing outside or where her children and husband were.¹⁸ Regardless of how women responded to the

¹⁵ See Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 217-228.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 161-175.

¹⁷ Hartman, 222-223.

¹⁸ Black girls and young women were often viewed as adults even if still children. A young teen aged Black girl could easily be arrested on charges of prostitution on account of white male officers' racism and misogyny. See Hartman, 280-281.

harassment, officers often arrested them under the assumption of future crimes and sexual immorality.¹⁹

Cabarets packed with Black folks and bars in white neighborhoods known for queer patrons were also subject to police raids and mass arrests at any time. The experience of Harriet Powell, a Black working-class woman residing in Harlem, exemplifies the power of authority white law enforcement officers exercised over Black working-class communal spaces and people. On the smoky, hot, and crowded floor, she was perhaps dancing with a friend, acquaintance, or lover as the music drowned out the noise of armed, uniformed white men infiltrating the dance floor. As they began arresting Black folks, and sometimes white audience members, seventeen-year-old Harriet was among the masses of people who ended up incarcerated.²⁰ She was likely sent to Bedford Hills, where she perhaps engaged in relationships with other incarcerated women as many of her sister inmates did. Would she meet another woman like Lena, a white inmate who pursued numerous relationships with Black women? Would she send kites with words reminiscent of blues music lyrics? Would she learn through information and experience about the ways women-loving women created opportunities for seeing each other, stealing secret kisses, and late-night jazz? Would she emerge from the institution carrying all these experiences with her back into the cabarets where queer and interracial relationships were relatively accepted compared to the public sidewalks and labor spheres? Over the next decade, Harriet would be re-arrested and institutionalized numerous times, as was common for many working-class women who entered the penal system. As women

¹⁹ Hartman, 243-244.

²⁰ Ibid., 217-218.

like Lena and Harriett moved in and out of penal institutions, so did their knowledge and experiences of women-loving women's relationships and culture.

Women's penal institutions were isolated and inverted social spheres relative to non-incarcerated social spaces in that they were homogenous in sex and class but heterogenous in race. Incarcerated women of different races shared intimate spaces in confinement, such as bathrooms and laundry rooms, that were racially segregated in the larger society. In the "big world," class inequity was a force which positioned the working-class as susceptible to re-incarceration and women re-entered a society structured upon heteropatriarchy.²¹ White women, working-class or not, were predominantly unable to bring Black women partners and lovers into the social spaces they occupied. Black folks were usually barred from white-only spaces unless there to serve the white people who existed in them. That Black folks were legally barred from entering white spaces and white people were not is significant in a reconstruction of lesbian history in early-twentieth century United States. These specific racial limitations on physical movement through non-incarcerated spaces defined how and where interracially coupled working-class women-loving women were able to share space as romantic partners.

One significant exception to the limitations of Black folks entering into spaces established by elite white people were the private parties hosted in buffet-flats or private apartments. These parties were often attended by a racially mixed slew of famous artists performers, and patrons of the arts such as A'Lelia Walker, where folks engaged in drinking, drug use, and sex in open spaces, such as living rooms, wherein various folks participated and

²¹ Potter, "Undesirable Relations," 402.

looked on.²² An escape for women-loving women who coupled interracially, these private parties were some of the only spaces where queer folks could engage in sexual intimacy without fear of persecution. However, very few working-class women who labored outside of the music and arts industries had access to these spaces of refuge.

Thus, for the working-class woman impacted by the carceral system, nightlife spots established by Black folks in Black communities were perhaps the best option for interracial mingling and loving outside of reformatories. There were very few, if any, laws barring white folks from entering Black social and private spaces, which were incessantly invaded by white authorities. Black women had a considerable amount of agency when it came to bringing their white lovers to the cabarets; although, white people looking to indulge in queer Black culture might invite themselves into such spaces regardless.²³ While cabarets built by Black musicians and performers often catered to mixed race audiences and patrons, few social spaces opened by white people did the same. If Lena, a white inmate who consistently pursued relationships with Black women, lost Elsie's love while on parole, perhaps she would find her way to the Garden of Joy, a Harlem cabaret, to find another Black woman-loving woman to fall in love with under the cover of dimly lit and smoky cabarets with blues music filling the room.²⁴ If Elsie were released on parole and in search of women-loving women outside of Bedford Hills, she might go to a cabaret with some of her Black working-class friends who were also impacted by the carceral system looking for freedom and fun. No matter the circumstances of their relationship post-

²² Ibid., 320-324.

²³ White people who attended nightlife events in queer, Black social spaces referred to their often exploitative sexual and racial tourism as "slumming." See Hartman, 320-321, for more.

²⁴ Potter, "Undesirable Relations," 401.

incarceration, if Lena or Elsie wished to find a mixed-race community of women-loving women outside of the reformatory, the cabarets might be their best bet.

The Garden of Joy was a popular cabaret for queer Black folks where interracial mingling was not uncommon and dancing to live music performances in dark crowded rooms provided social shelter and physical shelter for women-loving women, including those coupled interracially.²⁵ Perhaps Bessie Jackson was performing “B.D. Woman’s Blues” for a crowd of lively and intoxicated women dancing and cheering in the audience. In the crowded and dimly lit cabaret, Jackson’s voice rang clear and deep as she sang “Comin’ a time, B.D. women ain’t gonna need no men / Comin’ a time, B.D. women ain’t gonna do need no men.”²⁶ Audience members may have been dancing body-to-body doing the Slow Drag with strangers or lovers on the floor in front of the stage.²⁷ The audience Jackson might have seen past the stage lights would have resembled a rhythmic sea of Black folks and a scattered number of white people dancing with partners or watching from the perimeter of the room. The women in the crowd may have had experience in the carceral system given that working-class Black women were at high risk of arrest and incarceration. Incarcerated Black women likely would have engaged in or been exposed to subcultures of women-loving women in penal institutions. Some likely coupled with white women while incarcerated where they may have fallen in love and made plans. Perhaps upon release on parole, Oscean found her way to a nightlife scene similar to the Garden of Joy where she was able to mingle with other women-loving women at the bar and on the dance floor.

²⁵ The Garden of Joy was owned by Mamie Smith, who recorded the first blues record in 1920.

²⁶ Bessie Jackson, “B.D. Woman’s Blues.”

²⁷ The “Slow Drag” was a dance created by Black communities who attended cabarets and musical performances. It is described as a dance in which two people partnered to dance glued at the hips slowly moving to the music together, usually in one spot. For a more detailed description, see Hartman, 302.

Maybe, Oscean and Gloria continued their relationship after they were both released on parole. Perchance, Oscean brought her dear wife along to dance pressed close together in a queer mixed-race sea of bodies packed in front of a stage where a Black woman signing the blues brought the crowd to life.

Kites, Lyrics, and Language

Kites written by incarcerated women-loving women often resembled songs in their structure and used language similar to blues lyrics. The majority of kites which contained language reminiscent of blues lyrics were those written by Black women. In Oscean's letter to Gloria, she writes, "up ther, if I were in cuba and you in spain the love I get for you will make a bool dog break his chain, and I don't care what you use to be but I know what you are to day if you love me or I love you what has the world to say."²⁸ These lines stand out in the kite because they rhyme as a poem or song might and can be read lyrically. While it is possible the rhyming is unintentional, it is also a significant element in the style of Oscean's writing. If restructured into shorter lines as blues lyrics would be, it might appear as: "up ther, if I were in cuba / and you in spain / the love I get for you / will make a bool dog break his chain, / and I don't care what you use to be / but I know what you are to day / if you love me or I love you / what has the world to say." Oscean's line about a "bool dog break[ing] his chain" could reference collective historical experience of Black folks, particularly from the South, who were chased or tracked by dogs used by slave catchers. This holds tremendous significance as Oscean chose to express the degree of

²⁸ Ford, 444.

her love for Gloria through a metaphor of distinctly Black experiences related to attempts at escaping slavery. An additional reference to Oscean's unconditional love for Gloria can be noted in the following line as she declares that Gloria's past bears no influence on her love for her when she wrote the kite. Her reference to what Gloria "use to be" opens up a realm of questions regarding Gloria's reason for incarceration. Was she involved in prostitution or extramarital sexual relationships with men? Was she convicted of crimes such as stealing or larceny? Perhaps she was arrested for public drunkenness or drug use?²⁹ Without access to Gloria's inmate case file, her reason for arrest and incarceration remains a mystery, as does Oscean's.

In the kite Oscean wrote to Gloria, she addresses the letter, "You can take my tie / You can take my collar / But I'll jazz you / 'Till you holler / My dearest Wife Gloria:," lines which call blues lyrics to mind. For example, in Ma Rainey's song "Prove It On Me," which is cited as a song attesting to Rainey's relationships with other women, a line reads, "It's true I wear a collar and a tie."³⁰ This comparison is not meant to prove that Oscean was copying or using Ma Rainey's lyrics in her love letter to Gloria, but rather to demonstrate an overlap in rhetoric used by Black women-loving women in reformatories and on the blues stage. The exact same lines used by Oscean are noted in histories of women-loving women incarcerated at the Bedford Hills women's reformatory where Black women would break out into collective song.³¹ The imagery

²⁹ Prostitution, theft, public drunkenness, and drug abuse were some of the most common reasons for arrest of women. See Eugenia Lekkerkerker, *Reformatories for Women*, 195.

³⁰ Ma Rainey, "Prove It On Me." Rainey's song is analyzed through a woman-loving women's lens in Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.

³¹ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 283-284.

of a woman wearing a collar and a tie was a way of queer coding women's identity.³² Gladys Bentley, a famous singer and performer in Harlem, and notorious women-loving woman, was well known for dressing in tuxedos and top hats when she performed in cabarets.³³ The presence of lyrical lines in kites written at multiple reformatories indicates an intimate connection between women's blues music and incarcerated women-loving women, specifically Black women.

Just as a woman's wearing a collar and tie indicated she was a woman-loving woman, the application of the word "jazz" in Oscean's kite highlights the sexual nature of her relationship with Gloria. While "I'll jazz you 'Til you holler" does not explicitly describe sexual intimacy between women, the word jazz is frequently used to reference sexual intimacy. When Lena wrote to Elsie at Bedford Hills she stated, "I cant not get enough jazz- but youd have look out for I bite awful when I am cumming," indicating that "jazz" is a direct reference to sexual intimacy.³⁴ Jazz was also a music genre closely related to blues culture as it was birthed through many of the same pioneering blues.³⁵ Women such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Jackson were also regarded as jazz singers as blues music melted into jazz through the mid-twentieth century.³⁶ Rhetorical overlap in the use of the word "jazz" in musical and sexual contexts demonstrates close ties between understandings of sexual intimacy and music made by Black women-loving women blues singers. The etymology of the word jazz is complicated. As with "lesbian," different

³² Queer coding is used here to describe a way of dressing in a certain way to indicate queerness among women. It was not uncommon for women-loving women to don attire which was normally worn by men to wordlessly communicate to others that she was interested in romantic and/or sexual relationships with other women.

³³ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 191-202.

³⁴ Potter, "Undesirable Relations," 401.

³⁵ One core difference between jazz music and the blues is that jazz is ensemble based and does not always include lyrics, while blues songs almost always have lyrics. See "African American Music: Jazz and Blues," *Smithsonian Music*, <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/african-american-music/jazz-blues>.

³⁶ For additional information on jazz music and Black women's history see, Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 166-168.

contexts gave the word different meanings, ranging from an adjective for excitement in sports journalism to the name of a new genre in the world of popular music.³⁷ Jazz as a synonym for sex, however, seems to have originated in penal institutions— including, as this thesis demonstrates, in the language produced and exchanged by interracial coupled women-loving women.

In an effort to reconstruct early-twentieth-century relationships between working-class women-loving women, who were impacted by the penal system, a dialogue will be crafted out of blues lyrics from songs about and kites written by women-loving women. Language expressing women-loving women’s identities, relationships, and desires flowed between reformatories and cabarets through working-class and Black women’s cultures. The purpose of crafting this imagined conversation is to demonstrate the cross-fertilization of blues language and rhetoric of incarcerated women-loving women. Oscean’s kite was written in the early to mid 1920s, Florence’s kite was written between late 1919 and early 1920, Bubbles’s kite was written between 1922 and 1926, and Lena’s kite was written in 1914. Bessie Jackson’s lines are from her 1935 song, “B.D. Woman’s Blues,” and Ma Rainey’s lines are from her 1928 song, “Prove It On Me Blues.”³⁸ The lines are structured as a conversation between all six women, meant to reconstruct how working-class, incarcerated, and Black women-loving women might speak about themselves and to each other.

³⁷ Lewis Porter, “Where Did ‘Jazz,’ the Word, Come From? Follow a Trail of Clues, in Deep Dive,” *wbgo.org* (February 26, 2018), accessed April 12, 2021.

³⁸ Although I have been unable to locate a record of incarceration for Bessie Jackson (Lucille Bogan), Ma Rainey was arrested in 1925 for participation in a lesbian orgy party. She was bailed out of jail the next day by sister blues singer and woman-loving woman, Bessie Smith. See “Queers in Jazz History: Gladys Bentley; the Bulldagger who sang the Blues,” *queerculturalcenter.org*, last modified September 28, 2020, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131110051946/http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/Bentley/QueersinJazz.html>.

Oscean: You can take my tie / You can take my collar / But I'll jazz you / 'Till you holler

Florence: Sweetheart I'm calling you.

Bubbles: and when away from you, I am so unhappy longing to be back with you again

Oscean: if I were in cuba and you in spain the love I get for you will make a bulldog break his chain

Ma: It's true I wear a collar and a tie, / Makes the wind blow all the while / Don't you say I do it, ain't nobody caught me

Lena: I can't not get enough jazz- but you'd have look out for I bite awful when I am cumming

Bessie: B.D. women, you sure can't understand / They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man

Florence: I love you best of all / when shadows of / twilight are falling

Lena: Indeed I never cared or had such a feeling toward any other woman

Bessie: Comin' a time, B.D. women ain't gonna need no men / Comin' a time, B.D. women ain't gonna do need no men

Bubbles: I have thought it all over seriously, and cannot picture any happiness without you

Ma: Folks say I'm crooked. I didn't know where she took it / I want the whole world to know.

Oscean: angle face if I could sleep with you I would not only hough and kiss you. But I will not take the time to write it for I guess you can read between the lines

Florence: your sweet face I can see. / You'r all of my heart / so don't let us part

Lena: what i mean if it takes me a year to locate you Ill tell the world I'll find you and be a sweet love little mama to you

Bessie: B.D. women, they all done learnt their plan / They can lay their jive just like a natural man

Bubbles: I never tire just looking at you, every caress and kiss is like electricity

Oscean: Honey If you love me you will brake out your dam door and come an sleep with me

Florence: I miss you most of all / sunshine of joy in your / smile I can see / in each winking star

Bubbles: Dearest, please remember that this is not a passing fancy or infatuation for you, no dear, it is something much bigger and goes much deeper

Lena: I never even had such passion for a man, so it wont be hard to stay away from those dam pricks... and I shall never be with another man as long as I live

Ma: Went out last night with a crowd of my friends, / They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men.

Oscean: I don't care what you use to be but I know what you are to day if you love me or I love you what has the world to say

Lena: I do think that we were just made for one another and that is why I intend to be a good time mama to you now and out in the big world

Ma: Where she went, I don't know / I mean to follow everywhere she goes

These lines might appear to be contradictory and incoherent, and true enough these women's words were likely never meant to enter into conversation with one another, but common themes stand out nevertheless.

Each lyrical expression of love and desire was created under different circumstances. Oscean's kite was a private message for her white lover, Gloria, passed to her while both women were confined to the general population of inmates at the Ohio Reformatory. Lena's kite was written in a similar context, but was from a white woman to a Black woman at New York's Bedford Hills Reformatory. Florence's kite to an unidentified white woman was snuck out to her lover while Florence was in isolation as punishment for engaging in the interracial relationship, also at Bedford Hills. Although the circumstances of Bubbles's kite to Lillie are unclear, it seems likely that her kite was not written from isolation punishment. The blues songs included in this

dialogue also present different narratives of women-loving women from different perspectives. Ma Rainey, whose main location was Chicago, sang “Prove It On Me Blues” for thousands of folks in mostly Black, but mixed race, audiences in different cities. She also recorded the song for thousands of people to listen to on vinyl sold in Black urban neighborhoods. Ma Rainey sang and performed the song from the first-person perspective, expressing her own experiences and desires as a Black woman-loving woman. Bessie Jackson’s “B.D. Woman’s Blues” was less popular than Ma Rainey’s song; however, it was also recorded on vinyl for Black folks to purchase from local establishments. Bessie Jackson’s blues career was primarily based in New York City, and her song, “B.D. Woman’s Blues,” presents a narrative about “bull dyker” women, as opposed to identifying the singer as a woman-loving woman herself. Some key differences between kites and blues songs are that music was publicly performed and preserved for folks to listen to for decades to come. On the other hand, the kites were preserved by chance after being confiscated in a penal institution, not meant to be a lasting testament to the love and desire interracially coupled incarcerated women had for each other.

A close comparison of Ma Rainey’s and Oscean’s words illuminates the complexities of loving women in compulsory heteronormative social environments. The desire each woman has to be with her woman lover is expressed through lines like Ma Rainey’s “I mean to follow everywhere she goes,” and Oscean’s “if you love me or I love you what has the world to say.” The notion of pursuing a relationship with a woman seems to be expressed through grand statements which position women-loving women’s love as an inherent act of rebellion against the world. At the same time, navigating loving another woman meant balancing secrecy with passion. Ma Rainey’s song is titled “Prove It On Me Blues,” a taunt of sorts to those who may call attention to her relationships with other women. With lines like “folks say I’m crooked,” her

song reveals some of the extent to which women-loving women could face discrimination in social spheres outside of reformatories. Yet the lyrics also declare “I want the whole world to know.” The listener, or reader, might infer that Ma Rainey wants the whole world to know she loves a woman, but this seems to contrast starkly with her repetitive challenge to the audience that they had to “prove it.” While Ma Rainey’s “Prove It On Me” was performed for audiences and recorded for thousands of listeners, Oscean’s kite was written in an almost opposite context as the blatant expressions of love for another woman were meant to be entirely secret. The purpose of each woman’s expression of love for another woman is also very different in that Rainey’s song is about a woman whom the audience is to understand as her romantic interest. On the other hand, Oscean’s kite is written to her “Dear Wife,” Gloria, for the purpose of private and intimate communication.

Despite these differences, there is a considerable amount of overlap in the authors’ use of lyrical expression and ambiguity in their expressions of love and desire. Oscean writes, “I would not only hough and kiss you. But I will not take the time to write it for I guess you can read between the lines,” leaning into aspects of relationships between women-loving women which went unsaid or unwritten. Ma Rainey’s and Oscean’s expressions of their thoughts and sexuality as women-loving women display a careful rhetorical balance between expressing desires for other women and acknowledging the risks they confronted as Black women navigating spaces where same-sex love was forbidden.

Blues Music and Women-Loving Women

Travel and incarceration became prominent components of women’s blues narratives which conveyed collective experiences of Black folks in the United States. Women blues singers

who performed in the cabarets often came from working-class backgrounds in the South and gained fame through their music and ability to record and travel to perform. Their on-stage professions of heartbreak, love, sexuality, and collective Black experiences opened up spaces of escape for audience members. Black women blues singers' lyrics reached working-class women-loving women in the audience who had perhaps never heard such daring expressions of sexuality but lived them while incarcerated. In the time that World War I came and ended, larger numbers of Black women migrated out of rural southern areas and often traveled to cities in the North.³⁹ Many of these women were in their late teens and early twenties when they chose to travel north and often left family behind. Not only did young Black women exercise their power to travel, but in their relocation to far away cities they began to cultivate new worlds of Black working-class culture, including the blues.⁴⁰

Many of the early blues women musicians became famous in northeastern cities after moving away from home in the South. Ma Rainey was born in Columbus, Georgia, Mvskoke (Muscogee/Creek) Native land, and Bessie Jackson was born in Amory, Mississippi, Chickasaw and S'atsoyaha Native land. Rainey and Jackson were two great women blues singers, out of many, whose experiences with travel and sexuality were expressed through their music and performances. Identifying travel and sexuality as two of the major themes in women's blues music is critical in connecting blues culture to the emergence of lesbian identities, relationships, and subcultures from women's penal institutions during the early twentieth century. Ma Rainey chose to purchase a train ticket out of the South and travel north as she pursued a career in music

³⁹ Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (1998): 472.

⁴⁰ Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime," 474-476.

which led her to new sexual experiences with women and perhaps the development of her identity as a woman-loving woman. Contrary to her voluntary physical movements through spaces in which she was exposed to and cultivated Black, working-class, women-loving women's culture, incarcerated women were forced into isolated spaces where women-loving women's subcultures were flourishing.

After Emancipation, Black women's increased access to travel from the rural South to cities in both the South and the North produced narratives of migration which strongly related to desires for freedom on the part of incarcerated working-class and Black. Several blues songs by Black women directly centered upon narratives of incarceration which spoke to widespread experiences of Black folks regarding encounters with policemen and moving through the penal system. Songs such as Ma Rainey's "Cell Bound Blues," allow for a closer look at the connections between experiences of Black working-class women-loving women who involuntarily moved through the women's penal system. Ma Rainey's music reached wide audiences of Black folks as she not only recorded records but also went on tours to perform in numerous cities, including New York. "Cell Bound Blues," recorded by Ma Rainey in 1924, tells a first-person story of a woman being incarcerated. With lines such as, "Hey, hey jailer, tell me what I have done" and "cold iron bars all around me, no one to go my bail," Rainey's refrain offers a narrative which was likely relatable to many of her listeners. The desire for freedom was an expression shared by incarcerated women waiting for parole and women-loving women who planned for life together outside of the reformatory. Bessie Smith, a blues singer contemporary to Ma Rainey, recorded "Jail House Blues" in 1923, which expresses the loneliness and desire for

company while incarcerated.⁴¹ A couple lines in the first verse read, “Thirty days in jail with my back turned to the wall / Look here, Mr. Jail Keeper, put another gal in my stall.” This song by Bessie Smith remarks a different experience in the women’s penal system than those women sentenced to longer stays in reformatories, yet, her desire for a companion during her time in confinement is reminiscent of those women in reformatories who find comfort in each other’s arms. Not only were there strong connections between kites and blues lyrics, but songs by Black women about incarceration were prominent during the early twentieth century and likely often performed for an audience that included many previously incarcerated women-loving women.

Writing and performing songs about travel and incarceration, Black women blues singers made music which struck a chord with many working-class women, particularly Black women, who were likely to have a run-in with the law at some point in their lives. Very few working-class and Black women were safe from police surveillance in cities where arrests were made based on assumed criminal activity. Women who wound up in reformatories or other types of women’s penal institutions were likely to be reincarcerated after release. Sometimes this was due to the nature of release on parole during which time any behavior perceived as suspicious by parole officers could result in reincarceration. For Black women, being incarcerated multiple times was a result of simply existing in cities where standing on the street could warrant an arrest by a white policeman passing by. Many Black women experienced their first arrest before their twenties; therefore, after being released they had many years left of life and youth to be arrested once again. After Harriet Powell’s first arrest at a cabaret, she would be forced back into the

⁴¹ Bessie Smith, “Jail House Blues” (1923).

women's penal system several times over the next decade of her life.⁴² While we do not know the full extent of her carceral experiences or life after her first arrest, we can imagine that Harriet returned to the cabarets when released from the reformatory, where she could have been caught up in another police raid.

The constant flow of women in and out of women's penal institutions is critical to the emergence of women-loving women's subcultures in working-class urban Black communities where blues culture flourished. Women's blues singers were also arrested during cabaret police raids and even became subjects of newspaper articles that reported on their time in incarceration. In 1917, cabaret singer, Loretta Jackson, was arrested for violating the Sullivan Law, which regulated gun ownership, and sentenced to at least a year at Bedford Hills where she was known to engage in relationships with white inmates.⁴³ Perhaps the incarceration of blues singers bolstered the influence blues music had on women-loving women's kites and culture as they moved in and out of penal institutions. The revolving door of working-class women in and out of penal institutions created a constant exchange of knowledge and experiences among women-loving women, many of whom were Black, and a significant number of which were coupled interracially.

The interracial aspect of incarcerated women-loving women's relationships is critical to the emergence of women-loving women's culture in Black working-class spaces where a secondary revolving door of proto-lesbian knowledge and experiences emerged. As working-class white women-loving women entered and exited working-class Black queer spaces, perhaps

⁴² Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 218.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 281-283.

with Black women they had coupled with while incarcerated, they carried new knowledge and experiences with them as they returned to their white communities. As women-loving women who experienced re-incarceration carried their knowledge and experiences between carceral and non-carceral social spheres, white women-loving women traversed racially segregated spaces and brought knowledge and experiences from working-class Black women-loving women's nightlife with them back into the daylight of white working-class neighborhoods. The subcultures of women-loving women which emerged in non-incarcerated society during the early twentieth century were separated by race as white and Black women rarely shared spaces as equals, let alone as lovers. Subcultures of women-loving women which began to take shape among white women's communities were undoubtedly influenced by Black queer culture in neighborhoods where white women might go "slumming," but were unlikely to reside. Black women-loving women were predominantly barred from white women-loving women's spaces, especially those which were middle and upper-class. Therefore, white women who attended cabarets inevitably appropriated working-class Black women-loving women's language and culture into their individual and communal understandings of what would soon become known as lesbianism.

Conclusion

Margaret Otis's article, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted," underscores how important relationships between Black and white incarcerated women were to the birth of lesbian identities, relationships, and subcultures in the United States. The language Otis used to describe the young women she studied illuminates concerns that observers had not only about same-sex coupling, but, also and more specifically about same-sex relationships that were interracial. Her four-page article serves as a snapshot of the emergence of lesbian history from women's penal institutions. Otis observed their behavior, documented relationship rituals, interviewed them about their thoughts and emotions, and reprinted excerpts from their kites. The presence of incarcerated women's voices in the form of oral responses to Otis's questions and in the words written to each other in secrecy adds unique value to this primary source. As a whole, the article encompasses a multitude of perspectives, including a white woman professional psychologist and resident physician at a women's penal institution, incarcerated Black and white women-loving women, incarcerated white non-women-loving women, and medical professionals outside of women's institutions. Otis's publication exemplifies this thesis's reconstruction of U.S. lesbian history through the tangled mass of voices which contributed to the labeling of women-loving women, their behavior, and their communities.

"Where are the lesbians?" is the question that marked the beginning of an exploration of how lesbian history came to life. My initial investigation of where and when lesbians have existed in history brought narratives of white middle-class women to light. Women in situations similar to that of Julia Jessie Taft and Virginia Robinson, who met during college and established professional careers, took up the most space in scholarly texts on lesbian history. Some of the

first published histories written about lesbians that I came across included Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Estelle Freedman's *Their Sisters' Keepers*, and Judith Schwarz's *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy*, all of which provided critical information for a reconstruction of lesbian history. However, each of these also centered white women-loving women in their research and writing. As I pieced together a collective narrative of lesbian history from late-twentieth to early twenty-first century scholars, I began to notice connections between how historians labeled the women they studied, and which particular groups of women were written about the most. As many scholars of queer history have acknowledged, labels used to describe women-loving women were developed by late nineteenth century psychiatrists and sexologists who had the authority to define the meaning of homosexuality. This thesis reconstructs lesbian history with the understanding that women-loving women did not name themselves. However, "lesbianism" is a concept that was conceived by women-loving women, grew through their relationships and communities, and was born into harsh visibility in women's penal institutions, where love between incarcerated women was seized by those in professional power and defined by deviance and perversion.

Language plays a central role in this historical retelling of lesbianism as I trace the meaning of women-loving women's identities, relationships, and subcultures through the evolution of language that not only developed to describe them but was also developed by them. Incarcerated women-loving women created methods of secretly communicating and meeting under the intense surveillance of institution administrators, who were particularly suspicious of relationships between Black and white women. The sex-segregated and mixed-race world of women's penal institutions was an inversion of the non-incarcerated world which allowed for interracial mingling to extents that would have been impossible outside of institutions. Interracial

relationships between incarcerated women were common, despite all efforts made by their overseers to prevent and eliminate them. This thesis makes no direct or general claim as to why women coupled across racial boundaries but, rather, acknowledges that regardless of their reasons, interracial relationships were a form of resistance to the constant state of oppression which incarceration imposed.

Every single relationship between incarcerated women was uniquely defined by the participants' races, ethnicities, ages, life experiences, motives, and desires. One cannot say all incarcerated women who coupled interracially did so out of love, rebellion, or just to pass the time. However, Black and white women who engaged in relationships while incarcerated overwhelmingly received the most attention from observers who took interest in women's homosexuality. For some, such as Florence Monahan, overseeing women in confinement was a professional career. On the other hand, researchers, such as Charles Ford, located the subjects of their studies in women's penal institutions for the purpose of investigating women-loving women's identities and behavior. No matter how many different motives women-loving women had for coupling interracially, the observers who had the authority to write them into research studies and history consistently focused their attention on why white women engaged in relationships with Black women.

The importance of interracial coupling among incarcerated women-loving women lies not only in their pinnacle position in research on female homosexuality during the early twentieth century, but also in how relationships between Black and white women-loving women shaped the development of lesbian subcultures *outside* of penal institutions. In the non-incarcerated world, women blues singers, and the working-class Black cultural spaces they gave life to, take center stage in historical narratives of lesbianism. If a Black woman and a white woman were to

find love with one another while incarcerated and intend on pursuing their relationship after release from confinement, they would have a very limited number of spaces to share together. Although the odds that both women would have been working-class are extremely high, the intensity of racial segregation which defined the world outside of women's penal institutions imposed strict social boundaries. In reformatories, women of different races often shared the same bathroom or laundry space, where they stole moments of privacy. However, in the non-incarcerated world, these spaces generally did not exist. Therefore, cabarets, where Black women sang the blues for mixed-race crowds of folks dancing in the audience, became crucial to interracial couples on parole. In addition to cabarets being one of the only spaces where Black and white women could romantically mingle with one another, they were also one of the only public spaces where Black women could tell and perform narratives of travel, romantic relationships, and incarceration. Blues singers, some of which were women-loving women, would take the stage to fill the room with melodies of sexual desire while the stage lights illuminated their presence as artists, performers, and storytellers. Black women blues singers contributed significantly to cultivating spaces of Black working-class and queer culture that were open to white people who would join the audience as tourists, voyeurs, and lovers. The evolution of Black women-loving women's culture and identities as lesbians, bulldykers, and homosexuals undoubtedly influenced white women-loving women's subcultures through relationships that perhaps began while incarcerated and continued in the big world.

This reconstruction of the emergence of lesbianism in the early twentieth century displaces the centrality of white middle-class women-loving women and shines the light on relationships between Black and white working-class women-loving women who were impacted by the carceral system. While Julia Jessie Taft partnered for life and raised two children with

Virginia Robinson, she was not labeled a “lesbian” or “homosexual” like the women she oversaw at the Bedford Hills Women’s Reformatory were. Blues singers, such as Ma Rainey, who became well-known as women-loving women, have been included in histories written about the blues and Black lesbians of the early twentieth century but marginalized in general histories of queer women. In an exploration of where lesbianism originated from, this thesis offers a retelling of lesbian history which argues that incarcerated women-loving women of the early twentieth century, particularly those who coupled interracially, are the mothers of modern lesbian identities and communities.

This thesis is far from a complete reconstruction of lesbian history and was severely limited by the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic shutting down in-person access to archives for historical research, I was only able to visit the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York, established on Munsee Lenape Native land. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to study at the Lesbian Herstory Archives and for the time Deb Edel, a co-founder, spent with me to discuss my research inquiries. However, very little of the research done for this thesis was conducted during that time frame. Due to an inability to access archives that I would have conducted research in under normal circumstances, the sources and evidence I was able to utilize for this thesis are limited to what was available digitally. In regard to archival information that might have altered this retelling of lesbian history, there is much that I am unaware of. My hopes are that future scholars, researchers, and students of queer women, the penal system, and blues culture will find this version of lesbian history useful in new historical narratives of women-loving women.

Thank you to Oscean, Gloria, Florence, Lena, and Bubbles, whose kites allowed for a disruption of lesbian history that has been written by non-incarcerated white professionals.

Although their intent was for these kites to remain unseen by anyone except the woman they were written to, without the non-consensual preservation of their secret love letters, this thesis would rely entirely on the words of those who described them and the transcriptions of incarcerated women-loving women's oral responses to interview questions. The privilege of reading these women-loving women's kites has brought genuine joy to my heart as a lesbian and scholar. I am honored to have had the opportunity to allocate space in narratives of lesbian history to the voices of incarcerated working-class Black women-loving women and their white counterparts. The centering of these marginalized women-loving women's voices in the history of U.S. lesbianism is the core contribution this thesis makes to the academic field of queer history.

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