One of the most important insights in the history of sexuality has been that “sexual identity”—the notion that the direction of one’s sexual desire determines and reveals the truth of the self—is a relatively recent production. Most historians locate the formation of modern Euro-American sexual identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Around this time, so the argument goes, sexual acts became newly constitutive of identity: what one did, and with whom, came to define who one was. In Michel Foucault’s famous words, “The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, . . . with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. . . . The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”

During the last fifteen years or so this insight has become a guiding truism, a mantra even, for historians of sexuality, inspiring work that highlights the alterity of sexual systems remarkably different from our own, as well as explorations of the emergence of this new “species” in the relatively recent past. But some sexual acts and actors confound this historical narrative. Practices associated with certain sex-segregated spatial settings—prisons and other carceral institutions, the armed services, boarding schools—and performed by those who understand themselves and are understood by others as “normal” or “heterosexual,” stand in an awkward relationship to sexual identity formation as outlined by historians. Apparently unmoored from identity and resistant to the taxonomic pressures of the twentieth century, these sexual acts and their practitioners can seem curiously outside time. The term that evolved by the mid–twentieth century to describe same-sex practices produced by circumstance, architecture, and environment, situational homosexuality, aimed to distinguish these practices from a “true” or authentic homosexuality, presumed to have a somatic or psychic origin.
In 1976 Jonathan Ned Katz warned historians against joining psychiatrists, sociologists, and criminologists in giving life to this midcentury distinction. “The term [situational homosexuality] is fallacious,” Katz wrote, “if it implies that there is some ‘true’ homosexuality which is not situated. All homosexuality is situational, influenced and given meaning and character by its location in time and social space.”2 We might assume that anyone committed to exploring the historicity of sexual meanings and expressions would agree. But with few exceptions, historians have lent credence to the boundary between “situational” and “real” forms of homosexuality by their disinclination to consider the former appropriate for study. That disinclination is usually left unsaid. In a recent recounting of the essentialist–social-constructionist debate among historians, however, Vernon A. Rosario remarks that these warring camps are united by their disinterest “merely in any same-sex sexual activity (for example, the ‘situational’ homosexuality of prisoners or sailors restricted to a single-sex environment). It is the more elusive issue of same-sex desire or sexual orientation (‘true’ homosexuality or ‘gayness’) that is the matter of concern.”3 This essay interrogates that disinterest. Exploring the shifting responses to prison sexual culture, in particular during the mid–twentieth century, I argue for the payoffs as well as the productive challenges of cultivating historical curiosity about sexual practices assumed to have no history.

How are we to understand the tendency of historians to explore some sites in which same-sex sexuality flourished—cities, bars, resorts, political movements—but not others? This near-complete silence—above all on prisons, where situational homosexuality arguably takes its quintessential form—may reflect historians’ reluctance to include less-than-salutary subjects in lesbian and gay ancestry. Donna Penn has observed that “evidence from prisons, like that from the annals of psychiatry, has been shunted aside with arguments that it does not represent the lives of ‘normal,’ ‘well-adjusted,’ ‘average’ lesbians.”4 The question of who counts as a proper subject in queer history has long been a vexed one; the prison’s associations with criminality and especially with sexual coercion and violence push against the parameters of a history often motivated by the impulse to recover and celebrate gay identity and community.5

Even as historians have held situational homosexuals at arm’s length, the larger subject of situational homosexuality may seem beyond historians’ purview. Historians have explored and debated the conditions that gave birth to modern sexual identities, including the decline of a family-centered economy and the rise of industrial capitalism, the new possibilities of urban life, and sexological attention to “inversion.” Situational homosexuality, by contrast, may seem peculiarly,
even obstinately, ahistorical, produced by spatial arrangements that appear, at least in part, to transcend the historical.

The curious way in which some sexual acts and actors seem to stand outside history is underlined by the remarks on “timelessness” that fill accounts of incarceration. Prison observers writing from various vantage points, as sociologists, staff members, and prisoners themselves, have long represented the prison as standing outside time. Some placed prison sexual culture, too, in time immemorial. In his classic 1940 study of inmate culture, sociologist Donald Clemmer considered “abnormal sex conduct” among prisoners a “natural phenomenon,” because “it has appeared not in any one time or place but has existed since the facts of man’s behavior have been recorded by man.” “Abnormal sex practices,” Clemmer wrote, “have probably always existed within prison walls.” Ancient Greece served as a touchstone for others addressing homosexuality in prison. In his popular 1933 memoir, *Prison Days and Nights*, former inmate Victor F. Nelson opened the chapter “Men without Women” with the following observation: “Since the days of Ancient Greece, and very likely long before that, students of human behavior have known that wherever men or women are deprived for very long of the normal means of sexual satisfaction, they almost invariably resort to such substitutes as masturbation, oral copulation, sodomy, and various bodily and mechanical substitutes.” Subordinating an impressive list of nonreproductive sexual acts to “normal” ones, Nelson’s hierarchy tamed the implications of deviant sexual practices by posing them as timeless.

In part, this insistence on the *longue durée* of prison sex should be recognized as a rhetorical strategy to render it nearly inevitable and somehow therefore less troubling, an expression of nature rather than of a particular culture. But timelessness was more than a trope of prison representation; by many accounts, prison sexual culture does seem to exist strangely out of time. In reports by a wide variety of observers, prison argot and the sexual roles and mores it delineates have remained remarkably static. Otherwise “normal” girls and women paired up with masculine partners sometimes known as “pals” and “butches” at the twentieth century’s opening and at its close. The many more descriptions of sex between male prisoners early in the century, in which putatively normal men, known as “wolves” and “jockers,” had sex with men recognized as “punks,” “kids,” “fairies,” “queers,” and “girl-boys,” are echoed at the century’s end. For many men who assumed a masculine persona and a penetrative role in sex with other men, same-sex sexual acts often did not (and do not) confer or connote a homosexual identity. Nelson told his readers that “the ‘wolf’ (active sodomist) . . . is not con-
sidered by the average inmate to be ‘queer’ in the same sense that the oral copulist . . . is so considered.” Nearly half a century later, in 1981, Jack Henry Abbott wrote to Norman Mailer from the state penitentiary where he was incarcerated about his relations in prison: “I took it, without reflection or the slightest doubt, that this was a natural sex that emerged within the society of men. . . . it never occurred to any of us that this was strange and unnatural. It is how I grew up—a natural part of my life in prison.” As a result, it was difficult for Abbott “to grasp the definition of the clinical term ‘homosexual’”; when he did, “it devastated me.”

Struck by the dissonance between the sexual culture behind bars that Abbott described and that of the world outside, David M. Halperin proposes that “there are even sectors of our own societies to which the ideology of ‘sexuality’ has failed to penetrate.” Certainly, the implicitly evolutionary and teleological trajectory that historians have posited—from a premodern regime in which sexual acts were not constitutively linked to a notion of identity, to a modern one in which sexual object choice bears a privileged relationship to identity and selfhood—fails to account for the complexity of Abbott’s experience and that of many others. His- torians have argued persuasively that sexuality “as we know it” has not always existed; situational homosexuality calls into question the sexual present we presume to know. At the same time, I propose, the relationship of situational homosexuality to modern sexuality should not be understood as simply marginal or oppositional. Instead, it has been occasionally buttressing, often disquieting, and always revealing of the fissures and fault lines of a modern sexual system in the making.

From “The Vice of Prisoners” to “Faggot Factory”

If prison sexual culture stands in an oblique relationship to that of the outside world, the discourses that have taken shape around it have been firmly entrenched in and richly illuminating of the assumptions of their historical moments. The few reports of sex in nineteenth-century prisons, for instance, echoed notions in wide circulation. In perhaps the earliest reference to sex in American prisons, Louis Dwight, secretary of the Boston Prison Discipline Society, wrote in 1826 about conditions he had observed in visits to prisons along the eastern seaboard. Dwight’s alarmed report that “the SIN OF SODOM IS THE VICE OF PRISONERS” reflected an understanding shared by his contemporaries. In representing sex between men as sinful, unnatural, and revolting, and describing those who partook of it as “guilty of Sodomy,” Dwight wrote from a transitional moment in
which same-sex sex was understood as both a sin and a crime. Yet nothing in his report suggested that this kind of perversion shed light on its practitioner’s identity or essence; sodomy was initiated by the older, “lustful” party but did not characterize him further. By alternating professed reluctance to discuss a sin “so revolting that we should gladly omit the further consideration of it” with detailed descriptions of that very sin, Dwight also followed a narrative convention in which reticence to speak about sexual vice was professed loudly and publicly.11

In the early decades of the twentieth century, “constitutional perverts,” members of the “third sex,” and “confirmed homosexuals” made their predictable appearance in prison studies, reflecting the influence of an emerging medicoscientific discourse that defined homosexuality, however unstably, as a congenital trait with somatic causes.12 For prison administrators, these figures were subjects of concern, posing a constant temptation to other prisoners and a threat to institutional discipline. As Joseph F. Fishman, the first federal inspector of prisons, remarked in 1934, the presence “of so many ‘fairies’ with their feminine carriage, gestures, and mannerisms . . . tends to keep aglow the fire of sex in even the most heterosexual of the prisoners.” Prison doctor Louis Berg also made it clear that “all normal men, no matter how good their pre-prison background, will find themselves torn by this natural hunger where satisfaction is denied for any length of time.”13

The expectation that “normal” men would be tempted by “fairies” underlay the decision of officials in nearly every large penitentiary to classify and segregate prison populations. Although prison reformer Thomas Mott Osborne did suggest that aggressive, masculine “wolves” should be segregated to protect younger inmates from their predatory advances, prisons typically singled out “fairies” or “overt homosexuals,” identified as such by their effeminacy, for segregation.14 In New York City’s jail on Welfare Island, for example, the authorities placed any man convicted of homosexual solicitation or cross-dressing, as well as any whose dress or mannerisms suggested that he leaned in that direction, in the “South Annex.” The logic implicit in this policy, of course, was that “fairies” would entice “normal” men to “take advantage of their favors.”15

Although early-twentieth-century investigators occasionally noted the peculiarity of prison sexual geography, the sexual characters they identified in men’s prisons—“wolves,” “fairies,” and “punks”—were recognizable figures in the urban working-class milieu from which prison populations were disproportionately drawn. Far from insulated, singular, and timeless, the sexual customs that evolved inside the prison roughly followed those on the outside. In prisons and on city streets, those referred to as “queers,” “fairies,” and “pansies” were under-
stood to be constitutionally different from other men not in their sexual object choices but in their gender inversion. The men they had sex with, “wolves” or “jockers,” conceived of themselves and were conceived of by others as normal so long as they “abided by masculine gender conventions” and performed the penetrative role in sex.16

Unremarkable, for the most part, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the line between the sexual culture of prisons and that of the street attracted growing, increasingly uneasy attention from the 1930s on. The explosion in criminological, sociological, reform, and popular writing on prison homosexuality reflected a new urgency about homosexuality in the culture at large. Homosexuality was more unsettling in part because there appeared to be more of it. In 1934 Berg situated his account of sex in prison in the context of concern that “perversion was becoming an ever-increasing problem in modern society.”17 The new visibility of gay life and culture in early-twentieth-century New York City, complete with gay neighborhood enclaves, widely publicized social events, and commercial establishments, as well as the representation of this culture in literature and onstage, provoked a powerful backlash in the late 1920s and the 1930s. That backlash, encapsulated in the notorious 1929 obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall, author of The Well of Loneliness; forced closings of Broadway shows with gay and lesbian content; and police raids on gay establishments had the ironic effect of making homosexuality more visible still.18 In the 1940s and 1950s the newly manifest presence of gay men and lesbians in American cities, combined with Alfred C. Kinsey’s revelation in 1948 that “perhaps the major portion of the male population has had at least some homosexual experience,” fueled a growing concern about the pervasiveness of perversion and a vigilant commitment to stigmatizing homosexuality and persecuting homosexuals.19

The perception that homosexuality was on the rise, and that prisons were its breeding grounds, expressed itself anxiously in the metaphors of disease that writers began to employ to describe its pernicious effects. In 1937, for instance, one physician stated that prisons provided “the culture medium in which the bacillus homosexualis . . . flourishes.” The notion that homosexuality was catching resonated loudly for Americans worried about sexual and political contagions threatening the national body. Indeed, fear of contamination was the structuring phobia in the 1950 U.S. Senate investigation of homosexuality in the government, which concluded that “one homosexual can pollute a Government office.” In the world outside the prison, the fantasy prevailed that homosexuals could be effectively cordoned off. In prison, however, one journalist wrote ominously in 1951, “homosexuality creates an atmosphere of rottenness and depravity that becomes
part of the air all inmates breathe.”20 For the first time, investigators began to consider the possibility that prisons made homosexuals.

Seized by these new concerns, prison writers began to speculate about the sexual fate of inmates after their release. A question that had generated no previous interest now consumed postwar sociologists, psychologists, and prison administrators. While a few offered reassurances that homosexuality would be shed along with prison garb at the gates on release, most were less sanguine. Benjamin Karpman warned in 1948 that homosexual practices in prison “‘grow’ or get so fixed in the individual that even on discharge from confinement he often finds himself unable to return to normal sex activities. One knows of young boys, of whose heterosexuality there was no previous doubt, who after a confinement of several years, have become confirmed homosexuals.” To social worker Katharine Sullivan, “The most tragic inmates are the ones who lived normal lives before being sent to prison and who after ‘doing time’ have not the slightest interest in leading normal lives again.” In her sensationalist exposé of New York City’s Women’s House of Detention, Sara Harris worried that women in prison “may be ruined for a life of heterosexuality,” because prison butches “have a fascination that drab women, like the majority of those who land in the House of Detention, find hard to resist.”21 Some inmates confirmed these fears. “I was rehabilitated right out of heterosexuality,” wrote one woman. “I was normal when I went to prison, but while I was serving my term, I became a lesbian. Who didn’t? . . . Now, while I’m straight as far as the law is concerned, it’s the only way I’m straight.” Another former inmate put it even more plainly, when he referred to the prison where he had served his time as a “faggot factory.”22

As late as 1940 Clemmer still relied on late-nineteenth-century concepts of congenital abnormality and gender inversion in his description of the male homosexual, in prison and out, as “an individual who presents some feminine characteristics in the bone formation, the deposits of fat, the high voice, absence of beard, or other physical traits common to the female.”23 But what to make of the man who had sex with him? This question was newly troubling. Sex in prison had long posed a problem of discipline and morality; by the 1940s and 1950s, when the homo/heterosexual binarism was growing more rigid, it posed an epistemological problem as well: how to understand the same-sex desires and actions of those, long ignored by prison observers, who otherwise identified as heterosexual.24 Writers in earlier periods had cultural means by which to understand why otherwise “normal” people might be tempted by same-sex acts: nineteenth-century observers might attribute this temptation to the sin of “lust”; a few decades later, in the 1920s and 1930s, it could be dismissed as the reprehensible but predictable
attraction of “normal men” to “fairies.” But the changes of a few short decades, during which individuals began to be classified primarily according to sexual object choice rather than gender style, rendered prison sexual culture stranger and stranger.

A Single Swallow Does Not Make the Summer

Mid-twentieth-century investigators who found prison homosexuality newly unsettling employed a range of strategies to render it less so. Depicting the prison as a strange, exotic world unto itself might be understood as one such strategy, following the ethnographic convention that allowed writers to titillate readers with prison stories as they deflected their implications for the larger culture. In *Revelations of a Prison Doctor*, published in 1934, Berg offered one of the first detailed, and one of the most vertiginous, descriptions of prison homosexuality as he encountered it at New York City’s Welfare Island prison. He had earlier boasted of his familiarity with what he euphemistically called “the facts of life,” gleaned from excursions into Berlin’s gay nightlife and American “Bohemian affairs.” Of homosexuals, he wrote, “I even numbered some among my acquaintances.” But nothing in those experiences prepared Berg for his first sight of the “fairies” segregated in Welfare Island’s South Annex: “Looking back now, it seems as if when the outer gate slammed to behind me . . . I left behind all the world that I knew and could understand, and entered into a strange land whose symbols and language I had difficulty in comprehending.” Robert M. Lindner likewise stressed “how truly *terra incognita* is that land beyond the ken of the average citizen, how exotic and strange its geography.”

Investigators positioned themselves as guides with privileged access to the foreign world of the prison and as translators of inmate argot; indeed, many included glossaries in their published work. Implicitly, prison sexual culture was a world apart, safely thrilling to contemplate and reassuringly without a correlative in the outside world.

Depicting prisoners as inhabitants of a foreign world pulled awkwardly against another strategy by which prison writers attempted to ease the troubling implications of prison homosexuality. Sometimes the same writers who described bizarre prison customs also underlined the fundamental normality of homosexuality in prison. The same Louis Berg who found prison sexual culture so mystifying wrote, barely skipping a beat, that “in the end, all normal men . . . will find themselves torn by this natural hunger where satisfaction is denied for any length of time.” To Lindner, the inmate who engaged in homosexual activity simply responded to “the agonizing call of his biology.” Some prisoners explained the
sexual culture behind bars in similar terms. As one inmate wrote of himself and his fellows (using the oddly distancing *they* to refer to a prison population of which he was a member): “These are men in their physical prime. They have the same drives that young men on the outside do, but they don’t have the same opportunities for satisfaction. They crave sex, but there are no girls. So, of necessity, prisoners turn to each other.”

Prison sex was simply the inevitable expression of a normal sex drive temporarily and understandably rerouted. In their defensive insistence on using drives, nature, and biology to explain situational homosexuality, instead of psychology, personality, or identity (increasingly the province of “true homosexuality”), these accounts inadvertently revealed the pressure of new ways of thinking about sexuality that were beginning to take hold in the mid-twentieth century.

While men’s prisons were often depicted as anarchic spaces seething with sexual tension, in which “the sight and smell of naked bodies” and the natural male sex drive combined to create a “miasma of homosexuality,” women’s prisons assumed a distinctly domestic and asexual cast. Investigators took special interest in the elaborate family relationships forged by women in prison, brushing awkwardly past (and often denying) the romantic and sexual nature of husband-wife pairings and emphasizing instead the range of emotional resources offered by prison families. Because so many shared the belief that women “tolerate the absence of overt sexual activity far better than do men,” they attributed women’s prison relationships to a desire for companionship, stability, and comfort. Human warmth, not sexual desire, was cited again and again as the motivation behind women’s prison relationships.

Some women inmates concurred. About sex with other women, for instance, one prisoner told an investigator, “It’s not really a sex thing, even when it’s sex.” But prison observers’ insistence on the essentially asexual nature of women’s prison relationships was sometimes sharply contradicted by the women themselves. This was undoubtedly most disconcerting to investigators in the case of interracial attraction, described in some of the first accounts of women’s prisons and observed in the decades that followed. As early as 1913 Margaret Otis wrote of “a perversion not commonly noted”: relationships between white and black girls in the New Jersey State Home for Girls, where she was the resident psychologist. Otis offered the first in a long line of accounts of the tendency of black and white women to form relationships in institutions. While some writers resorted to the supposedly natural libidinousness of black women to explain these “unfortunate attachments,” most reluctantly acknowledged that they were often initiated by white girls. “This bizarre form of behavior we have rarely found to be mutual,”
J. L. Moreno wrote in 1953; “it is a one-sided attraction of the white girl for the colored. . . . As long as it lasts, she is as if in a trance.”

To account for the attraction of white girls to black girls, Otis speculated that “the difference in color, in this case, takes the place of difference in sex.” For decades writers followed her lead, explaining interracial lesbian attraction through racialized gender inversion. Fishman attributed interracial relations between women to white women’s association of “masculine strength and virility with dark color.” In 1941 prison superintendent Florence Monahan wrote that “the color makes enough difference between them so that in the absence of natural association with boys they substitute each other.” Similarly, psychologist Theodora Abel remarked in 1942 that “the aggressiveness of the Negro girls is interpreted in some way by the white girls as ‘maleness.’” This impulse to heterosexualize interracial lesbian sex also found expression in a 1941 women’s prison pulp novel, *House of Fury*, whose heroine described the allure that black girls held for white: “They were forbidden. There was a legend of evil around them, as there was around men.” These accounts attempted to tame anxieties about race mixing and lesbianism by depicting interracial relations between women as essentially heterosexual. As historian Estelle B. Freedman notes, “In this interpretation, white women were not really lesbians, for they were attracted to men, for whom Black women temporarily substituted.”

Investigations of prison sex forced midcentury social scientists to accept, and even promote, explanations that were, quite literally, difficult to keep straight. Homosexuality was heterosexuality; the unnatural was natural. Not surprisingly, the seams of these strained constructions sometimes showed. “It is an anomaly to speak of ‘normal sex perversions,’” Negley K. Teeters wrote uneasily in his 1937 history of the Pennsylvania prison system, “but that is a fairly good descriptive term to apply to what occurs when persons of the same sex are deprived, for long periods of time, of normal relationships with members of the opposite sex.” The midcentury imperative to distinguish between “true” homosexuality and “situational,” “circumstantial,” or “acquired” forms led investigators to insist that homosexuality in prison was altogether different from its manifestations in the outside world. Lindner deliberately confounded the expectations of his readers when he prefaced an article devoted to the problems of sex in prison with the breezy claim that “homosexuality is not an outstanding problem in prisons.” In a surely unintended double entendre, Lindner explained that “the adventitious and transient sex exchange[s] between members of one sex do not constitute homosexuality any more than the single swallow makes the summer.” “The whole thing is a matter of definition,” he wrote, and observers did what they could to distinguish homosexuality in prison from its presumably truer form.
Precisely at the moment that social scientists sought to evacuate prison sex of meaning or consequence for the outside world, the outside world became newly fascinated by it. As prison homosexuality increasingly contradicted dominant understandings of sexuality, its representation in popular culture, ironically, grew more widespread. Beginning in the late 1940s, prison sex became a popular subject of pulp novels, magazine stories, and B movies, as well as of “higher” literature and stage productions.

Social-scientific and popular depictions of prison sexual culture often shared broad concerns, but tensions implicit and quickly eased in sociological literature were given freer rein in popular domains. While social scientists’ efforts to shore up the differences between the “real” and the “situational” homosexual threatened to break down under the weight of their own contradictions, popular culture exploited those contradictions for their titillating appeal.

This dynamic was on dizzying display in the 1954 *True Confessions* story “I Lived in a Hell behind Bars.” The story is narrated by “Lola,” sentenced to a year in prison for forging checks. Lola confronts “the strange and evil code of the prisoners” on her first day, when she is forced to fend off the advances of the most predatory prison butch, “Faye.” When Faye’s attentions turn to attractive and naive new inmate Julie, the only way Lola can think of protecting her is by posing as her girlfriend. Faye is left to believe that her mistake was not in assuming that Lola would be a willing participant in prison sex but in misreading her as fem.

Over time Lola takes on the prison nickname “Tex” and becomes comfortable with the ruse:

After the first embarrassment and shame . . . it became increasingly easy for me to pretend a relationship with her which did not exist. It had been necessary to caress her for others to see so as to establish my claim to her as against Faye’s. Now, unconsciously, my hands would touch her hair when she would lean her head on my shoulder. My arms were tighter around her at night, without my being aware of it. (50)

The martial art of jujitsu once served Lola well as she defended herself against Faye, and one day on a prison outing she decides to teach Julie a few fundamentals. But the lesson gets out of hand; Lola flips Julie to the ground and, overwhelmed by “an amazing flood of tenderness,” kisses her on the mouth: “I could no more have stopped that kiss than I could have halted the outgoing tide of the ocean. That was how my love flowed to her then, and the second kiss was long and rich with feeling. Julie’s amazing response was warm” (51).
Lola’s actions and feelings compel her to question her true nature. “What of me?” she asks. “Was I, I asked myself fiercely, in the same category as Faye?” (51). Her excessive defensiveness betrays her doubts: “I was a normal, healthy woman with a normal woman’s impulses. I had always found men desirable. I had never before had even close friendships with women.” But by the next day Lola is able to place her relationship with Julie in “its proper perspective.” Shaped by “remarkable circumstances,” the relationship was “tender” but not “evil,” “unless I chose to make it so, which I certainly did not” (52). Like “temporary insanity,” situational homosexuality, or at least Lola’s brush with it, could be explained by appealing to circumstances, not nature.

The story might have ended there, reproducing in spicier language and juicier detail the social-scientific account: Lola was pulled in unnatural directions by unnatural circumstances. Her feelings for Julie were rooted not in sexual desire but in feminine sympathy and maternal instinct. But pulp conventions led True Confessions readers to expect loopier twists and turns, and the story continued. After some awkwardness Lola and Julie resume their performance as lovers, and the night before Julie’s release a matron catches them in bed together. Absolving Julie of all responsibility, Lola takes the fall, and her sentence is extended. Julie is released from prison; falls in love with Lola’s brother, Pete; and marries him.

Despite Lola’s emphatic assertion that the kiss was never repeated, its meaning and the questions it compels reverberate throughout her life after her release from prison. While she professes to be pleased with Julie’s marriage to Pete, Lola worries about her brother’s reaction to her “strong feelings” for his new wife, tellingly conveyed in the present tense (55). But Pete apparently knows about the kiss, and in a queer moment of brother-sister boy bonding, Pete gives Lola the equivalent of a high-five. Tapping Lola lightly on the chin with his fist, he tells her, “It must have been good, considering [Julie’s] reaction to it” (55).

“I Lived in a Hell behind Bars” plays with the slippages between heterosexuality and homosexuality and then goes to some lengths to restore the boundary between the two. Lola takes solace in her brother’s assurance that her relationship with Julie was “normal” and, in a final paragraph, announces that she is engaged to marry Julie’s uncle. But the attempt at heteronormative closure, hasty, halfhearted, utterly lacking in narrative attention and detail, fails to recoup Lola’s suspect sexuality. By the end it is difficult not to read her self-assurances about the normality of her love for Julie as obsessive. Most important, her prison experience has had permanently stigmatizing consequences: while Julie is identified in the police report as an “unwilling victim of homosexual attack,” Lola is classified as a “self-admitted pervert” (54).
Perhaps inadvertently, “I Lived in a Hell behind Bars” revealed what social scientists had tried to repress: concern about homosexuality in prison masked a deeper fear about the fragility and instability of heterosexuality. Sexual practices observed in prison unsettled the public’s convictions about “true” homosexuality; inevitably, and potentially more catastrophically, they called true heterosexuality into question as well. Revealing that the border between homosexuality and heterosexuality was slippery and permeable, prison sexuality suggested that desire and even sexual subject positions were fleeting and unstable, produced at particular moments, in particular circumstances, rather than inherent in the psyche or the body. In the midcentury United States, where gender and sexual norms were rigidly enforced, where nothing less than national security seemed to be at stake, this was heresy indeed.

Tracking the fascinations and fears excited by prison sex from the 1930s to the 1960s draws our critical eye away from the stigmatized margins of midcentury America and toward its more elusive center. Historians have recently insisted that heterosexuality is as constructed as its marked counterpart. But while deviant sexuality—forced out of hiding, interrogated, surveyed, and policed—leaves a paper trail, the normal covers its tracks. Indeed, the power of the natural depends on the invisibility of its own constructedness. In his study of whiteness, for instance, film scholar Richard Dyer notes the difficulty of capturing a subject that deflects attention from itself so effectively that it “seems not to be there as a subject at all.”41 Heterosexuality is at least as evasive. But naturalization does not happen naturally; it requires cultural work. Social scientists’ sometimes intense efforts to evacuate prison sex of its corrosive meaning for the broader culture exposed the framing beneath the edifice of heterosexuality at a key moment in its construction. Exploring efforts to sever the connection between perverse desire and identity, to unburden sex of the significance it came to assume, reveals some of the work that was necessary to construct heterosexuality as natural, normal, and stable at midcentury.

Situational homosexuality must be understood, then, not as a description of sexual acts produced by the presumably ahistorical forces of circumstance and environment but as a rhetorical maneuver by which midcentury social scientists sought to contain the disruptive meanings of sexual acts apparently unlinked to, and therefore unsettling to, sexual identity. If homosexuality and heterosexuality are products of the late nineteenth century, situational homosexuality is a distinctly mid-twentieth-century invention. Elaborated at a moment when the boundary between hetero- and homosexuality was supposed to be hard and fast, situational homosexuality was designed to shore up that distinction. Instead, it threatened to dissolve it.
Prison sex made serious trouble for a mid-twentieth-century American sexual culture that was fast solidifying around a homo/heterosexual binary. It has continued to make trouble of a different sort for historians and for the practice of history generally. Even as I have argued here for the payoffs of a historical approach to the discourses circulating around situational homosexuality, I continue to wrestle with the fugitive status of prison sex as forged by prisoners themselves—with its apparent resistance to the historical project and with the meaning of this resistance to our understanding of the construction of modern sexuality. For midcentury Americans brave enough to see it, and, I hope, for historians, the phenomenon of sex in prison (as well as in myriad other sites and spaces) reveals the surprisingly diverse ways that sexual practices could be linked, or not linked, to identity during the twentieth century. Loosening the grip of the identitarian framework on our historical and cultural imagination will, I think, reveal a messier, more various recent sexual past and present.

Notes

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3. Vernon A. Rosario, “Homosexual Bio-histories: Genetic Nostalgias and the Quest for Paternity,” in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. Vernon A. Rosario (New York: Routledge, 1997), 7. It is striking that historians have been so ready to situate prison sex outside time (and therefore outside the realm of their interest) and, in particular, outside the historical narrative of identity formation outlined by Foucault, when these very historians have learned from him (and others) how much the carceral system itself has evolved over time.


10. Robert McKee Irwin criticizes the “view that male homosexuality has historically followed, in different societies, a certain ‘evolutionary’ . . . pattern in which relationships move from ‘age-stratified’ to ‘gender-stratified’ to ‘gay’ or ‘modern’” (“The Famous 41: The Scandalous Birth of Modern Mexican Homosexuality,” *GLQ* 6 [2000]: 375 n. 45).


12. The etiology of homosexuality and its purportedly fixed distinction from heterosexuality was muddied from the first. Havelock Ellis, for example, was perplexed by the “tendency for homosexuality to arise in persons of usually normal tendency who are placed under conditions (as on board ship or in prison) where the exercise of normal sexuality is impossible,” a tendency that, to Ellis, meant that “the old distinction between congenital and acquired homosexuality” ceased to have meaning or significance (“Sexual Inversion,” in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 3d ed., vol. 2 [Philadelphia: Davis, 1928], 83).


14. Osborne recommended segregating “wolves” because “they are likely to debauch the weaker natures with whom they come in contact” (*Prisons and Common Sense* [Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1924], 90). Berg recommended segregating “the constitutional type, the one the man in the street recognizes under the optimistic title of ‘fairy’” (*Revelations of a Prison Doctor*, 163). Fishman noted that the policy of segregating known homosexuals was in place in “almost every big penitentiary” in the United States (*Sex in Prison*, 68–69). There is evidence that some institutions segregated lesbians as well. At the Sybil Brand Institute in Los Angeles in the 1960s, for instance, they were housed in what inmates referred to as the “Daddy Tank” (Kathryn Watters, *Women in Prison* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973], 374). But in many institutions for female offenders, a “homosexual orientation” was considered “so common that no attempt [could] be made to separate these individuals from the seemingly heterosexual group” (Harvey Bluestone, Edward P. O’Malley, and Sydney Connell, “Homosexuals in Prison,” *Corrective Psychiatry and Journal of Social Therapy* 12 [1966]: 14).


16. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 13. In his study of the sexual culture of predominantly working-class men in turn-of-the-century New York City, Chauncey found extensive evidence of sex between “normal” men and “fairies.” While the latter conceived of themselves and were conceived of by others as “queer,” their masculine partners retained the status of “normal” men. “Queerness” was defined by the “fairy’s” effeminacy, not by his solicitation of male sexual partners.


24. Chauncey argues that the “hetero-homosexual binarism, the sexual regime now hegemonic in American culture, is a stunningly recent creation,” taking shape only around the middle of the twentieth century (*Gay New York*, 13). In his study of gay life and culture on Chicago’s South Side, Allen Drexel finds that “by the 1930s, this conceptual distinction between the practice of having sex with a ‘fairy’ and the identity of being gay was becoming blurred.” In this period Drexel discerns a new anxiety in men who have sex with men but identify as “normal” (“Before Paris Burned: Race, Class, and Male Homosexuality on the Chicago South Side, 1935–1960,” in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn [New York: Routledge, 1997], 125).


37. Freedman, “Prison Lesbian,” 400–401. For a discussion of criminological literature on race and sex in reform schools for girls see also Kathryn Hinojosa Baker, “Delin-


