

QO TI

Queer on the Inside

by Max Reynard



ABOUT MAX REYNARD

Max Reynard is currently incarcerated in the U.S. Federal prison. Prior to incarceration, Max worked as a community organizer, website developer, non-profit staffer, produce-monger, fundraiser, and semi-professional musician. Max is a cis white man who identifies as queer and bisexual. He's also had some things published in Fifth Estate and the Rain Shadow Review. Max would love to hear from you; contact QOTI for his mailing address.

Welcome to Queer on the Inside

To be queer on the inside - inside a prison, inside yourself - is a challenge. While the carceral system excels at dehumanizing anyone in its clutches, it is particularly adept at deploying homophobia and transphobia, alongside white supremacy and misogyny, to fracture prisoners from one another. It's an unfortunate truth that many LGBTQ+ people who are incarcerated face isolation, humiliation and violence from fellow prisoners as well as staff. Ultimately this is the carceral system at work: Framing prison life as a zero-sum, scarcity-filled environment in which the only way to survive is by destroying others.

Queer on the Inside rejects that path. This zine is rooted in the contention that the death-dealing oppression of the prison-industrial complex and anti-queer transphobic violence are bound up together. We want to provide moral support and connection to queer and trans folks behind bars but also offer ideas and strategies for radical, intersectional, abolitionist solidarity.

QOTI is designed by and for current and past prisoners (see "Why I use the term 'prisoner'" for more on that) but of course we hope it'll be of interest to those outside of the prison industrial complex too. We use "queer" and "queer and trans" as umbrella terms, while recognizing that no singular word or acronym will fully represent every person.

who have little affinity for the once-pejorative "queer", and others who are coining new phrases that better capture their experience of sex sexuality and gender. If you are asexual, bisexual, demisexual, gay, gender-expansive, gender-fluid, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, gender variant, intersex, lesbian, non-binary, pansexual, trans, two-spirit, or have other non-mainstream sexual or gender identities, you are welcome here.

This first issue contains articles written by me, Max Reynard, but my hope is future issues will feature contributions from many others—perhaps you!

QOTT grounds itself in a long history of both queer/trans and radical activism. It's my hope that queer on the inside will stand in the line going back through zines like Anti-Racist Action's "Love and Rage," the radical Toronto queer publication "J.D.'s" and even earlier underground periodicals like "ONE" and "The Ladder" in the 1950s. (For those on the outside, many of these are available for free on the excellent queer zine archive project, qzap.org, and the internet archive, archive.org). Similarly, we take inspiration from prisoner publications like the Angolite and San Quentin news, as well as radical newspapers like the Abolitionist and Slingshot. The idea behind scenes has always been do-it-yourself improvising, a strategy prisoners know well.

Currently, there aren't many organizations or publications focused specifically on queer and trans prisoners (see our resource list for -literally- all the ones we know of), and the ones that do exist are often, understandably, overwhelmed. Thus we hope Queer on the Inside helps address folks who are often starved for support. (If you're a free-world reader, please take a look at the groups listed and consider getting involved with one!)

Finally, we would be remiss if we didn't note the societal context into which this zine is being launched. Climate anxiety is met with billionaire dismissal; needless human catastrophes rage in Ukraine, Palestine and Sudan; refugees are demonized and caged. In the United States, a reactionary, openly-fascist regime is targeting trans folks (especially trans youth) and reproductive rights—critical to women generally, and so many queer families in particular. What was often described as an obviously more tolerant Society in the 2010s has rebounded with book bans, drag bans, history bans, violent targeting of Pride celebrations, and intensified

criminalization of sex work and homelessness. But queers, trans folks and anyone justice impacted know that this new wave, while high-profile, builds on decades of monstrous attempts to destroy communities: police murders of people of color, trans women of color especially; xenophobic and vigilante obliteration of migrants lives condemnation of the love, support and vocations of queer and trans folks; unacknowledged white supremacy that erases the survival of Black and Indigenous people from centuries of slave holding settler-colonialism; the exploitation of anti-Semitism, anti-Arab bigotry and Islamophobia in a calculated dance of death; Christian Nationalists who seek to support democracy with their specific, punitive flavor of theocracy and then export it abroad to places like Uganda; and the lengthening shadow of “law and order” and austerity measures that plunder the storehouses, starve the people, and then criminalize their hunger. In short: it's grim, but hasn't it ever been thus?

Yet queer and trans people have a mettlesome habit of surviving, and even thriving in the bleakest of environments. Sometimes we attack our oppression with rage, sometimes with joy—both camp and clenched fists have their roles to play. Our hope with QOTI is to make life inside a little more joyful, while we explore how to make our rage a little more strategic. Thanks for coming along with us!

Why I Use the Term Prisoner by Max Reynard

In the past decade or so, there has been an important shift toward “system-impacted language” to describe people placed in marginalized positions. Instead of using “homeless person,” for example, which implies being homeless is a part of a person’s identity, we might use the term “person experiencing homelessness” instead, to underscore that the term is situational, not part of that individual’s essence.

Similarly, there has been an increased use of terms like “adult in custody” (or AIC) in place of “prisoner” or “inmate,” not only among advocacy groups but even in some prisons and jails. (AIC also serves as a more widely-inclusive, encompassing people who have not been convicted, or are being held on civil matters of immigration issues, and are thus technically “detainees” rather than prisoners.) Reflecting this shift, I often use the term “prisoner”, and you might be wondering why.

While I agree that being in prison should not be seen as part of a person’s immutable nature (the vast majority of people in prison will, at some point, no longer be), I also think that it’s important for us to recognize our shared interests, and the way we are classed by society and the system. To take the latter point first, I think it’s clear that for most incarcerated people, regardless of the term used, staff treatment has not noticeably improved. If the use of “AIC” is simply semantics, adopting that use ourselves implies we see some value in what is really just an empty gesture. This is virtue signaling (an idea lately coopted by authoritarians) and I don’t think we should be propping up any notion of the prison-industrial system’s virtue. “Prisoner” more accurately captures how staff see us, as something other than a person with inalienable rights or human dignity. Disability activists often note their use of the term “disabled” indicates not that they see themselves as flawed, but that society disabled them in ways in which it fails to fully accommodate or actively erases their presence. Similarly, the force of imprisonment comes from a carceral society, but the effect is that we are nonetheless cut off from full lives – we become prisoners, not simply adults who happen to be in custody.

Using “prisoner” also emphasizes what we have in common in shared struggles. Prison staff separate and categorize us, officially and unofficially, as a way to divide and weaken us. But prisoners, collectively, have shared oppressions and shared power, regardless of their individual identities.

I don’t disagree with anyone using different terminology in their own writings, especially when talking about themselves. For me, I’ll continue to use “prisoners” to emphasize how we’ve been separated from society, and consequently what we have in common in our fight.

Queers are contraband

by Max Reynard

To be queer in prison is to directly challenge the prison-industrial complex and the logic of the carceral state. This is not my unique contention – Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith's book Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex (2011) is a classic.

As a zine, Queer on the Inside is meant to explore how to sharpen this inherent way of being to support prison abolition in both our expensive long-term dreams and in those small day-to-day interventions that make the lives of queers in prison a little more bearable.

OUT OF PLACE, OUT OF SOCIETY

A writer named Mary Douglas is known for her description of dirt as “matter out of place.” In other words, what we call “dirt” is something in a place it shouldn't be. A clump of soil in the forest is expected, but the same soil on the living room carpet is a mess. Clothes in a dresser or a hamper are in the right place, but if your clothes are on the floor you might say you have a dirty room.

Importantly, the identity of the thing hasn't changed. When you track mud from a garden indoors, the mud hasn't changed, only its location – it's become dirt.

What we call crime can be looked at in the same way. If you hit someone in the street, it's assault, but if you hit them in a boxing ring, it's a sport. Sometimes social location is as important as physical location, like in the saying that stealing \$10 makes you a thief, while stealing \$10 million makes you a banker. In either case, crime is “action out of place”: out of context, out of sanction, out of social acceptability. Queer sex itself, of course, has flickered in and out of criminality as social conventions have shifted throughout history. Again, the nature of the action hasn't changed, but its context has.

Another writer, Orlando Patterson, talked about the “social death” of people who were enslaved, in his 1982 book Slavery and Social Death. Black folks under U.S. chattel slavery, and others in different historical locations, were treated as if they were non-persons by the law and the slaveholding society. Later,

the analysis was extended to imprisonment – not a far stretch given that in the United States the Thirteenth Amendment continues to allow enslavement “for the punishment of a crime.”

People who are incarcerated experience a social death: we lose many basic rights, we are in most ways not considered citizens (if we were before), we have names genericized or replaced by numbers, we’re mandated a uniform dress code, and we are physically removed to a location where our loved ones cannot join us.

I don’t want to over-analogize – prison contains aspects of enslavement, but it’s not the same as chattel slavery. Yet the ways in which people in prison experience a social death can illustrate our complex relationship with families, communities, and movements elsewhere in society. In prison, outside life is often referred to as “the world” or “the real world,” as if we are in some other existence, on some other plane of reality. Is it any wonder many residents of prisons describe the experience as a kind of “walking death” or even an afterlife, in the cemetery of the cell block?

Despite this social death, our essence hasn’t changed. We’re still the same fully-human people we were before being incarcerated. Only our location and our context serve to redefine us as less than completely alive.

COMPLICATED QUEER(NESS)

Queer prisoners are doubly displaced, while trans, nonbinary and gender-nonconfirming residents are displaced in multiple ways. (Although I reject the logic of gender, I’m socialized and privileged as a cis man, so I don’t claim to speak for the trans experience of incarceration – I recommend the book mentioned at the top for a good analysis).

Like everyone incarcerated, queer prisoners are “matter out of place” in this environment. All prison residents are in this sense the “dirt” in prisons – the only clean prison would be an empty one!

But queers also confound the basic principles of the carceral state: that people can be identified, categorized, “corrected,” and for those with less than life terms, modified into the looming specter of the “productive member of society.”

In the 1970s, faced with cross-prisoner solidarity, the California prison system explicitly introduced racial and ethnic segregation and "fomented discord" purposely "designed to foster inter-prisoner distrust." That's from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, author of Golden Gulag, in an interview with the blog Historical Materialism in 2018. So that divide-and-conquer strategy of prison control is hardly new, and not confined to people who are queer and trans.

Categorization is baked into incarceration – some, like the writer Michel Foucault, see categories as necessary for prisons to exist at all. Male or female, "violent" or "nonviolent" convictions, gang "affiliated" or not, ad-seg or genpop: Prison is the ultimate enforcement of binary, backed up with violence.

Many prisons will ask new arrivals if they identify as LGBTQ+. In my case, upon entering the federal BOP, it was a barked "straight or gay?" from the "counselor" working intake. As I am neither – I'm queer in not basing love on gender binaries, and bisexual in that I'm attracted to gender presentations both similar to and different from me – I was already complicating their process of identification. (For the record, I chose "gay" for the minimal protection from homophobic violence I then thought it might theoretically afford).

Queers disrupt all manner of prison separations. We're grouped with "our" gender on the presupposition that we won't be attracted to them, and thus will be at a lower risk of sexual violence. Meanwhile, connections on the outside to chosen family can be and are weaponized as "gang history," while at best our loved ones will fall under extra scrutiny when writing or communicating with us, for existing outside social norms.

'BE GAY, DO CRIME'

Queerness and criminality have long been bound up together. In the United States, uprisings and rebellions such as Compton's Cafeteria and Stonewall resisted police violence and murder; the targeting of drag queens and sex workers; and the structural violence of apartheid laws meant to keep us from employment, housing and health care. In the 1990s and 2000s, groups like the Lesbian Avengers, Transexual Menace, and Bash Back! continued these fights in the street—building on the confrontational tactics of ACT-UP, Gran Fury, and the Gay Liberation Front from the 1980s.

More recently, we have laws in the United States re-criminalizing drag shows, gender-affirming care and student sports participation by trans, nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people. Abortion and reproductive care, so critical to our lives' flourishing, is outlawed across vast swaths of the country. And with a hefty assist from U.S. evangelicals, we see the prohibition of queer existence, on pain and death, in places like Uganda. This zine begins in the shadow of these revanchist forces.

Nor did the pro-carceral movement a decade ago to pass "hate crime" legislation arrest any of these developments. Indeed, as authors like Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore and Ryan Conrad warned us back then, the laws were used against us. In the intersections of gendered violence and homophobia, queers who resist assaults from partners, parents, and passer-by are regularly charged with the "crime" of survival. Mandatory-arrest domestic violence laws enable police and prisons to do additional harm under cover of "protection," and guards will carry out or authorize "corrections" of expansive ideas of gender or sexuality.

Too often, the closet into which queers are forced legitimizes the cage into which we are locked.

RETHINKING SUCCESS - AND DANGER

While incarcerated, the limited extent to which people are meant to be rehabilitated is grounded in a capitalist, Protestant-work-ethic idea of "productivity" – in the sense of both labor and reproduction. We earn "programming" credit by attending heterosexist courses on being a good father or mother (never, of course, both). We're inundated by Christofacist "volunteers" bearing literature about the freedom of "surrendering" – no coincidence there – to a patriarchal God. Release planning focuses on ending "criminal thinking: about what society might owe us after trying to destroy us, and guarding against returning to "bad influences" like chosen family or underground economies of sex work or drugs.

In all these situations, all these modes of conformity under which we are rated, queerness violates the ideals of penal correction. The continued existence

of queer communities inside and outside – as well as queer love, queer desire, and queer rebellion – challenges notions of what “success” looks like.

One type of prison contraband is material that could be used as a weapon. We are the contraband. We are the objects waiting to be dangerous, as poets Sheila Black and Reginald Shepherd write. We are the crowbars and pickaxes and white-hot melting rage-and-love that undermines the foundation of prisons, and the carceral logic of the state.

And we are not alone. In the long history of political prisoners; in the unflinching revolutionary strategy of Black, Latine, Native and other prisoners of color; in the overlooked resistance of women in prison; in the refusal by disabled and neurodivergent prisoners to be sedated – and in the ways all the lives of prison residents intersect, all the ways these categories have always included queers, too – in these we ground our fight.

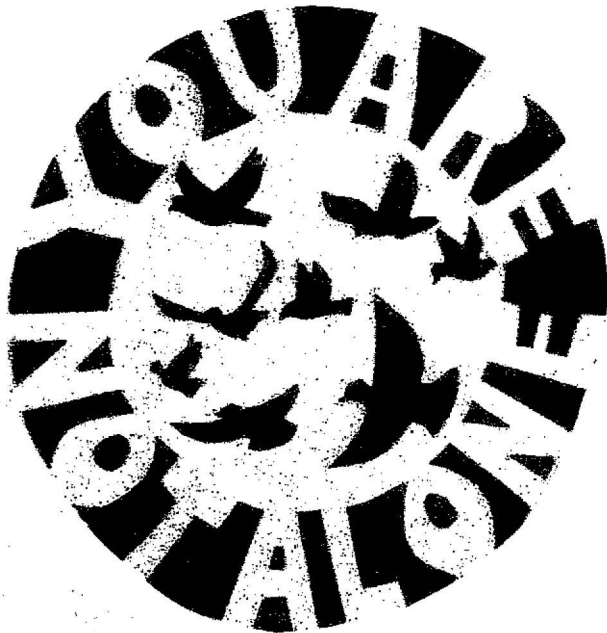
REVOLUTIONARY QUEER JOY OVER REPRESSIVE QUEER SUFFERING

We face a lot of hurdles, and we have reasons to be discouraged. But queers have always faced long odds for survival, and yet generation after generation we refuse to disappear.

Amidst suffering, we draw upon wells of irrepressible joy. In the numbing dream-state of prison tedium, we insist on passionate life.

Being queer on the inside can threaten to destabilize us. Yet at the same time, being queer on the inside destabilizes prisons themselves. Queers, after all, know something about confined spaces. With work, care, risk and solidarity we can hone that inevitable tendency to spill out of the box. Our joy can be the tip of the spear. We can, quite literally, help show the way out.

Let's get started.



Recommendations for Books

with prison, abolition, and/or queer & trans themes

NON-FICTION

Sister Outsider by Audre Lorde

(intersectionality pushing against white feminism & white gay activism)

Gender Outlaw by Kate Bornstein

(landmark trans autobiography)

Excluded by Julia Serrano

(radical trans theory)

Captive Genders by Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith

(carcerality in gender and society)

That's Revolting! by Matilda Bernstein Sycamore

(activism & art with a queer focus)

FICTION

Blackouts by Justin Torres

The Dream Hotel
Laila Lalami

Martyr!
by Kaveh Akbar

Giovanni's Room
by James Baldwin

The Sunflower Boys
Sam Wachman**

Vagabonds!
by Eloghosa Osunde

Detransition, Baby
by Torrey Peters

The Price of Salt
by Patricia Highsmith

Young Mungo
by Douglas Stuart*

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous
by Ocean Vuong

A Boy's Own Story
Edmund White
by Edmund White

*Trigger Warning: Sex Abuse

**Trigger Warning: War, "off-screen" rape

Country Queers by Rae Garringer
(photography project of rural queer life)

Against Equality by Ryan Conrad
(radical queer politics)

The Trouble with Normal
by Michael Warner
(more radical queer politics)

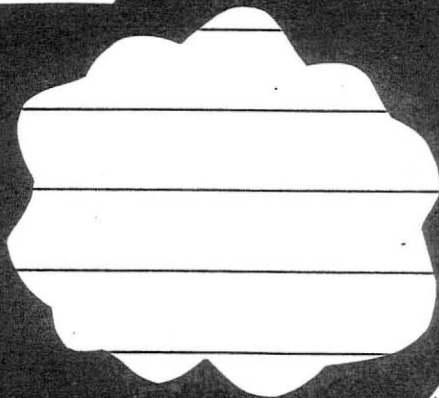
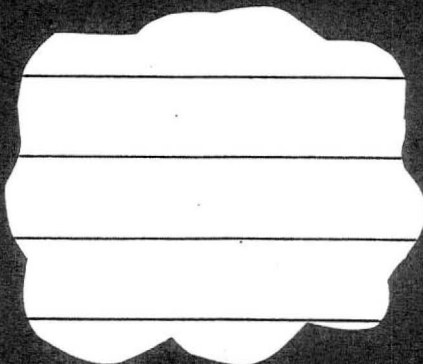
Rattling the Cages Edited by Eric King and Josh Davidson
(testimony from political prisoners in the US and Canada)

Queer (in) Justice by Kay Whitlock & Joey Mogul
(the prison industrial complex and queer prisoners)

The Disordered Cosmos by Chanda Prescod-Weinstein
(astrophysics, race, sexuality and gender)

How Far the Light Reaches by Sabrina Imbler
(marine biology, race, sexuality and gender)

Other Titles to Add:



Zine Titles

all of the following zines are free to prisoners

Queer Fire: The G.J. Bridge, Men Against Sexism
and Gay Struggle Against Prison (BB)
Burn Down the American Plantation:
Call for a Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement (BB)
STAR: Survival, revolt, queer antagonist struggle
by Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson and others (BB, EB)
Race Treason Behind Prison Walls
by Lorenzo Komba Ervin & Straughton Lynd (EB, SC)
Toward the Queerest Insurrection (EB)
Anarchist Influence on Queer Youth Cultures (EB)
Feminism: It's a Black Thing by Bell Hooks (PB)
You Are the Resistance by Sean Swan (MD)
Don't Tell me Prison Saved Life by Pepe/Scott (MD)
We Who Will Destroy the Future by Maragaret Killjoy (MD)
The Invisibility of Women Prisoners' Resistance
by Vikki Law (SC)
The Social Prisoner: Evolving Toward Resistance (SC)

Other Zines Distros That Send Free to Prisoners

Inside Books Project (TX only)

PO Box 301029

Austin, TX 78703

Redbird Books to Prisoners (OH only)

PO Box 10599

Columbus, OH 43201

Uncivilized Distro

PO Box 72

Seymour, IL 61875



Prisoner Correspondence Project

QPIRG % Concordia University

1455 de Maisonneuve Ouest

Montreal, CA QC H3G 1M8

(\$1.70 postage - also has penpals)

Zine Sources

write to them requesting specific zines or to receive their full lists

(PB)

Prison Books Collective
PO Box 625
Carrboro, NC 27510

they also have books!
only in NC and AL though
zines are nationwide

(EB)

East Bay Prisoner Support
PO Box 22449
Oakland, CA 94609

(SC)

South Chicago ABC Zine Distro
PO Box 721
Homewood, IL 60430

(MD)



Mongoose Distro
PO Box 220069
Brooklyn, NY 11222

(BB)

Blackbird Zine Distro
PO Box 11142
Durham, NC 27703

Highly Useful, Free Directories!

National Prisoner Resource Directory
Prison Activist Resource Center (PARC)
PO Box 70447
Oakland, CA 94612



National Prisoner Resource List
Prison Book Program
1306 Hancock St. Suite 100
Quincy, MA 02169

Resources for Queer & Trans Prisoners

National Center for Lesbian Rights
870 Market St. Suite 370
San Francisco, CA 94102

Transformative Justice Law Project
203 N. La Salle, Suite 2169
Chicago, IL 60654

Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund
20 W. 20th Street Suite 705
New York, NY 10011

Paracosm Press
PO Box 3365
Bloomington, IN 47402

Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex (TGI) Justice Project
370 Turk St. #370
San Francisco, CA 94102

ACLU LGBT Project & HIV Project
125 Broad St. 18th Floor
New York, NY 10004

Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP)
Behind Bars
1032 E. Brandon Blvd. #1217
Brandon, FL 33511

GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders (GLAD)
18 Tremont St Suite 950
Boston, MA 02108
Lambda Legal
120 Wall St. 19th Floor
New York, NY 10005

Black and Pink National
2406 Fowler Ave. Suite 316
Omaha, NE 6811

penpals, newsletter,
may take time to hear back

LGBT Books to Prisoners

% Social Justice Center Incubator

1202 Williamson St. #1

Madison, WI 53703

free books to queer and trans prisoners

not available in TX

Sinister Wisdom

2333 McIntosh Rd.

Dover, FL 33527

Lesbian literary/art magazine

Tranzmission Prison Project

PO Box 1874 Asheville, NC 28802

Reese Halden LLC

PO Box 189

Brattleboro, VT 05302

publisher of sci-fi, fantasy and general fiction books

with queer characters

LAGAI/Queer Insurrection

3543 18th Street #26

San Francisco, CA 94110

free, radical, snarky newspaper focused

on queer and trans issues

A.B.O Comix

11584 Oakland California

anthologies, resources and penpal

for queer and trans

incarcerated artists and poets

MORE...

Submit your work
to QOTI

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