

Gay Voices From Prison/cont. from page 3

Women prisoners do not face the threat of rape, murder and stabbings, according to Assata Shakur, formerly a prisoner at Riker's Island in New York, who has written a copyrighted article in which she says, "Basically the women are not looking for sex. They are looking for love, for concern and companionship. For relief from the overwhelming sense of isolation and solitude that pervades each of us."

"About 80 percent of the prison population engage in some form of homosexual relationship. Almost all follow negative, stereotypic male/female role models," Shakur said.

She describes women filled with self-hatred and little involvement with feminism or the gay liberation movement.

"Men prisoners constantly refer to each other as brother. Women prisoners rarely refer to each other as sister. Instead 'bitch' and 'whore' are the common terms of reference. Women, however, are much kinder to each other than men, and any form of violence other than a fist fight is virtually unknown."

'Platform Shoes and Angora Sweaters...'

One of the most detailed accounts of gay men in prison can be found in Susan Sheehan's A PRISONER AND A PRISON (Houghton Mifflin, 1973), an account of Green Haven, in Beekman, N.Y. -- the newest of the state's five maximum-security prisons.

While some 20 percent of the men there practice homosexuality, Sheehan reports that there are only a handful of "queens" at Green Haven at any one time -- "men with feminine characteristics they do their best to enhance."

The queens have been exceptionally innovative: "All prisoners must wear the state-issued green prison pants and are forbidden to alter them; the queens wear altered pants, nevertheless -- tapered and tight-fitting. Instead of the state-issued black shoes and green shirts (the wearing of which is optional), they wear platform shoes and angora sweaters. Makeup is contraband, but the queens improvise, using Coricidin to redden their lips and black shoe polish around their eyes in lieu of mascara."

"The queens usually lead charmed lives at Green Haven, with many men vying and paying dearly for their favors, although they are occasionally abused. One queen's 'husband' asked her to 'produce' for four of his friends and stabbed her when she declined.

"A number of men who are heterosexual on the street practice homosexuality in prison, some by choice, some not. The involuntary homosexuals tend to be good-looking young men, who are usually forced into becoming jailhouse 'punks' by older men serving long sentences." However, "most men at Green Haven take care of their sexual needs by masturbating," Sheehan writes.

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At Raleigh's maximum-security Central Prison, the subject of queens brought a smile to the face of guard Odum C. Christenbury, who said a group of gay prisoners recently dressed up as best they could and made it clear they were ready for sex. They weren't in physical danger by admitting their preference, he said.

Christenbury also said he didn't see a danger in prisoners receiving gay literature, which is available to state inmates through the mails.

But Norman Carlson, director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, imposed a ban on federal prisoners' access to gay printed materials in December, 1976.

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