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Project Description

“Don’t let them bury us”: lesbian revolutionaries in the genealogy of the prison abolition movement

In 1988, the *Gay Community News*, a LGBTQ newspaper out of Boston, Massachusetts, printed a call to action in solidarity with women political prisoners incarcerated at the Lexington Control Unit (LCU), an underground security unit in Lexington, Kentucky. This call to action, paid for by Out of Control: Lesbian Committee to Support Women Political Prisoners (OCC), focused on three of the five incarcerated women in LCU: Alejandrina Torres, Susan Rosenberg, and Sylvia Baraldini.¹ Rosenberg, a lesbian political prisoner, described her transfer to Lexington as “common knowledge” and explained how the prison was locked down in anticipation of her arrival to the underground security unit. As Rosenberg arrived she recalled an incarcerated woman yelling out to her, “Hello, Susan, we know it’s you,” to which Rosenberg defiantly exclaimed, “Don’t let them bury us down there!” as another person replied, “we won’t.”² Rosenberg feared that she and the other women in the LCU would, like so many other criminalized communities, disappear into the U.S. prison system.

My project is an interdisciplinary analysis of the intersections between lesbian activists and the prison abolition movement in the 1980s - 2000s. Although the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) officially banned LGBTQ content from entering federal prisons in 1975, incarcerated lesbians still acquired and utilized these queer magazines, newspapers, and newsletters to develop inter-community care networks with activists outside of prisons. Many lesbian activists viewed their sexualities as central to their revolutionary politics and their collective liberation. My research focuses on lesbian revolutionaries committed to anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and anti-prison organizing. Like the histories of other marginalized communities, the organizing efforts of these lesbian revolutionaries has been overlooked, or buried, particularly as scholars reflect on the expansion of policing and prisons over the last forty years

In an effort to illuminate these histories, I am proposing two articles for *The Gay & Lesbian Review*. The first article will examine revolutionary lesbian activists organizing to free political prisoners in the 1980s to 2000s. This article will primarily focus on publications by groups such as Revolutionary Lesbians, Out of Control: Lesbian Committee to Free Women Political Prisoners (OCC), and Queers United in Support of Political Prisoners (QUISP). These queer publications highlight the collective effort to make lesbian political prisoners legible and to

¹ Jane Segel, “Out of Control, Lesbian Committee: Timeline,” *Sinister Wisdom: A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal*. Fall 2022, 31-32; *Gay Community News*, Vol. 15, No. 48, 1988, 6.

² “Arriving at the High Security Unit,” 11-12.

garner support among the mainstream Gay and Lesbian movement for incarcerated populations. Through archival research and oral histories with formerly incarcerated lesbian political prisoners, this article will focus on the activists, organizations, and publications that organized the LGBTQ community in an effort to free political prisoners.

The second piece will center the visual art and poetry of incarcerated cis and trans lesbian activists published in leftist, lesbian, and prison abolitionist print media in the 1970s-2000s. This visual art and poetry was a conduit for the voices of incarcerated lesbians resisting the institutional racialized and gendered violence of the prison system, illuminating the experiences of those incarcerated for political organizing and those who became organizers while incarcerated. LGBTQ+ presses such as *The Gay Community News*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *Out Inside*, as well as organizations dedicated to incarcerated women's art, such as Remembering Our Sisters Inside (ROSI), created by Sherron McMorris, an indigenous, working-class and formerly incarcerated lesbian, amplified their voices amid LGBTQ censorship from prison administrations. These publications and organizations were a lifeline for incarcerated lesbians, providing them with a place to publish their work and remain in solidarity with social movements on the outside.

I have conducted research for this project at several community archives such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the Chicago Leather Archives and Museum, Gerber/Hart Library and Archives, and the LGBTQ Community Center, as well as institutional archives at Duke University and Northeastern University. This project contributes to 20th-century LGBTQ history, the history of the prison abolition movement, and leftist activist movement history. As of now, the only other project I am working on is my dissertation, which I hope will eventually be published as a book. I have completed the majority of the archival research for this project and am seeking funds for living expenses as I follow-up with oral histories and dedicate time to write.