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Power in Transition

The prison-industrial complex is the epitome of oppression. And for many incarcerated individuals, prison is a bloody gladiator school. Gratuitous violence influenced by toxic masculinity within prison culture is reminiscent of Rome's Coliseum; however shanks and scalpels are the weapons of choice for this warrior class. The mass-media often depicts male prison culture through a hierarchy with hyper-aggressive thugs (predators) at the top and effeminate gay males (prey) at the bottom — no pun intended. But, if we zoom in sociologically, the intersection of gender identity, sexual orientation, and toxic masculinity reveals a spectrum of

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power that is far more nuanced. In fact, there is a demographic of incarcerated individuals that skew the oppressive power relations within New York's prison culture — transgender women.

Incarcerated transwomen may appear to be a powerless minority, however their social status is highly predicated on their gender presentation, which certainly includes surgical and hormonal body enhancements. For example, there are incarcerated transwomen throughout N.Y.'s prison system who have garnered a quasi-celebrity status, especially some latinx transwomen with the attributes of beauty, curves, confidence, and long hair. These 'trans-divas' turn heads everywhere they go, evoking transphobia and curiosity, simultaneously challenging the constructs of gender and heteronormativity. And, when they arrive at a facility they are catered to with more welcoming

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gifts than notorious gang leaders! Offerings may come in the form of food, clothing, T.V.'s, cigarettes, drugs, etc. The transwomen who warrant this type of welcoming are often experienced in survival sex-work coupled with substance abuse, and thus, prison is simply a continuum of their autosexploitation and drug influenced consent. However, casual encounters via organic sexual attraction appears to be more common. Thus, the new girl on the block can cause quite a stir, especially those known to be flirtatious, seductive, and promiscuous. Fortunately, the threat of rape in N.Y. prison culture is a thing of the past — for the most part — however, the mere presence of transwomen is often the cause of violence.

Homosexual activity is taboo in N.Y.'s male prison culture, and it is a cardinal sin for members of gangs and organized religions to engage in any kind of sexual activity with other incarcerated individuals. Those who

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defy this rule are cancelled, violently! Some gang-members try to denounce their affiliation prior to going on a sexual caper in attempts to insulate the gang's reputation from being sullied, and to escape the mandatory sanctions that jeopardizes one's safety. However, that sleight of hand is obvious to the blind, and thus, someone's weapon will be colored with blood! Normally, the transwoman involved in the scandal remains unharmed, although she may be aggressively interrogated. As for the god-fearing-good-brothers, who are caught with more than their hand in the cookie jar, they will be excommunicated; occasionally, an ultimatum is given, which at times places the bretheren in the rearview! Lust often trumps loyalty. This can lead to an attack, however it is less common for the religious group to go beyond ostracizing their former brother. Nonviolent expulsion can appear to send a mixed message, however there are those who are entitled to a reprieve.

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Neutrals (nongangmembers) with low social status are indirectly granted a pass if and when it is revealed that they indulge in the above mentioned risky behavior, although there are many neutrals who are extremely violent and highly respected who may become sexually active with transwomen without being ostracized. However, they do lose a tinge of respect, behind the scenes, but they are never disrespected publicly, especially if they are secure, and interact with transwomen openly. This visibility slowly deligitimizes the demonization of transwomen in prison, and the cavalier attitude projected by the men who are comfortably attracted to them appears to be influential on those whose desires are closeted. In fact, there are even male correction officers who are attracted to transwomen; some c.o.s have put their career on the line for an occasional sexual rendezvous. Sometimes collaborative efforts between incarcerated individuals and c.o.s pave the way to blindspots and backdoors.

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Just as these men have their eyes on transwomen, transwomen may have their eyes on multiple guys which can invoke competition, creating a dynamic akin to mating season in the animal kingdom. Moreover, a clash of titans occasionally erupts between two brutes with fire in their loins, armed with murder weapons to stake their claim of war-booty! This battle may be public, as in the yard or messhall, or it may be more discreet with little to no witnesses. As long as the victor gets away and his victim — if still living — does not 'snitch,' then a monogamous relationship is further solidified, until these lovers are separated by a transfer to another facility, or if they happen to break up. Unfortunately, a relationship of this nature certainly does not exclude the potential for domestic violence. Furthermore, combat may even invite these lovebirds to team up against adversaries. If and when they're caught, transfers will take place then she'll be sought after

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all over again at the next facility now with her status enhanced as a 'ride-or-die' chick!

It is not my attempt to oversimplify or trivialize the experiences of incarcerated transwomen. They face a deadly amount of oppression, violence, hate, and systemic injustice, further evidenced by the tragic death of Layleen Polanco, a latinx 'transdiva' who died while in custody at Rikers Island. Unfortunately, it was the 'system' who aided and abetted in her death — not transphobic incarcerated individuals and the normalization of institutionalized violence. There's no telling where Layleen's journey would of brought her had this corrupt system not failed her. May Layleen rest in power.