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Where Were the Lesbians in the Stonewall Riots?
The Women’s House of Detention & Lesbian Resistance

In June 1969, the New York City House of Detention for Women stood next to the Jefferson Market Courthouse, just 2 blocks on Christopher St., shouting distance from the Stonewall Inn.

In the late 1950s and early 60s, Joan Nestle passed the ‘House of D’ on frequent trips to the Sea Colony. On “hot summer weekend nights ... I stood and watched and listened to the pleas of lovers, butch women shouting up to the narrow-slitted windows, to hands waving handkerchiefs, to bodiless voices of love and despair, “Momi, the kids are okay...” Nestle continues, “Here, my sense of a New York lesbian history began, not a closeted one, but right there on the streets. Tourists ... stopped and wondered at the spectacle of public women lovers in the midst of negotiating a hard patch in their lives, but neither stares or rude laughter interrupted this ritual of necessary and naked communication.”¹
Audre Lorde, too, points to the House of Detention as the epicenter of 1960s Greenwich Village. “Information and endearments flew up and down, the conversants apparently oblivious to the ears of the passersby as they discussed the availability of lawyers, the length of stay, family, conditions, and the undying quality of true love. The Women’s House of Detention, right smack in the middle of the Village, always felt like one up for our side -- a defiant pocket of female resistance, ever-present as a reminder of possibility, as well as punishment.”

The Village’s Mafia-run queer bars were tucked behind darkened windows and closed doors of its winding streets. The House of D was an 11-story art deco stone structure that towered over Village rooftops. Billed when it opened in 1932 as a ‘school for citizenship’ with hospital wards, vocational training, and sinks, toilets, and windows in the cells, claims to its reform mission had faded by the 1960s.

Lesbians caught up in frequent bar raids, charged with prostitution or drug use, or cornered by the mob or the police who controlled queer turf, well understood that entrance to the House of Detention meant brutal, repeated cavity searches (‘exams’ deployed to demean and to control), vermin-infested cells, filthy beds, overcrowded spaces, inedible food, and countless humiliations.

Village residents deplored the commotion and clamor around the House of D. The Encyclopedia of New York City describes the “strong opposition from the surrounding neighborhood for the shouts of inmates, which could be widely heard.” Mrs. Mary Landis, a long-term resident of West 9th St., said “It was terrible, the screaming and yelling that went on through the windows of that place. ... And not only could you hear them scream at each other in the most profane way; they’d also scream profanities down at people walking in the streets. And they’d throw things out of the window, lighted matches, for instance. ... the people gathered outside the jail any time, any hour of the day, were a terrible bunch. Pimps and prostitutes and homosexuals. And you’d hear them screaming up to the girls in the jail as though they were in their own back yards, instead of on a public thoroughfare.”

Women were held for violations unavoidable in 1960s New York queer life. Standing in a queer bar or on a street corner could land a woman in jail. So could
a stop-and-frisk if police claimed not to find three required pieces of gender-conforming clothing.

Inside the House of D lesbians stood their ground as boldly as they did outside. Confined in the ‘skyscraper prison,’ inmates and their visitors dominated the streets with their voices, their gestures, and with their shouted intimacies. They drew their loved ones to them on the street. Affections flew back and forth in a courageous, unapologetic performance. What was normally whispered had here to be roared. Stolen privacy led to a public, flaunted queerness that required bold defense in hostile territory outside. Confinement did not contain lesbian ferocity.

The House of D spawned defiant outlaws, inside and outside. The accidental orators at the windows in the House of D, both those imprisoned and those exposed outside, were queer docents of Greenwich Village. The lesbian visibility movement was born of confinement.

Chris Babick told Stonewall chronicler David Carter “that whole week [of the Stonewall Riots] the women were screaming, cheering us on…. The whole jail, it seemed like, was alive with people, with activity, because the streets were alive with activity. Everything vibrated.” Doric Wilson told Carter that the Saturday night of the riots, he ‘saw red sparks falling from on high, through the night air, as in a gentle rainfall. … The prisoners were setting toilet paper on fire and dropping it from their cell windows to show their support for the rioters.”

Carter’s witnesses reported about the initial raid that “the cops were roughing up the lesbians” and that the butch dykes were among the first to fight back. Carter recounts that the crowd cheered one butch who fought with police who beat her, cuffed her, and threw her repeatedly into a police car she twice escaped. Reacting to many points of outrage, the rioters seethed “when the lesbians were thrown in.” Every lesbian arrested at Stonewall, if she did not escape, churned through police booking and ended up a couple blocks away in the House of Detention.

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Lesbians may not have been roaming the Village streets in the numbers their gay and trans comrades were. But there were hundreds of dykes in the House of Detention for Women during the Stonewall Riots. The lesbians of Stonewall were arrested. They were in jail. They were not silenced or hidden or still. They were the nerve center of the Riots, the critical mass, the motor spiriting the resistance. They were shouting from the windows. They were raining fire onto the streets. They were floating sparks up into the sky.

The House of D symbolized righteous struggle and resistance to queers who streamed to Greenwich Village. The lesbians imprisoned in the Women’s House of Detention were the audio, visual, and metaphysical engine of the Stonewall Riots.

The House of Detention was razed in 1974 after high profile movement activists jailed there drew media attention to its tortuous conditions. The Jefferson Market Courthouse building has become a New York Public Library branch. Next to it, where the prison stood, is a community garden tended by a committee of local residents.
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5 Carter, David. Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution (New York: St. Martin’s, 2005), 188.
6 Carter, 153.