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Author(s): Sarah Potter

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*“Undesirable Relations”:
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and the Meaning of
Sexual Desire at a
Women’s Reformatory
during the Progressive Era*

Sarah Potter

IN A LETTER CONFISCATED BY prison authorities in 1920, Lena Lebofsky, a white inmate of the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, wrote black inmate Elsie Freeman, “Some fine day I’m going to grab you and make you warm me up and fuck me and I’ll be willing to get punished every day in the week for *you* and you *only*.”¹ Like many of their peers, these women engaged in passionate relationships with one another while confined within the walls of Bedford Hills. Mostly young, poor, and convicted of sex-related crimes, reformatory inmates often refused to restrain their sexual desires while in prison, and their actions evoked considerable concern on the part of prison authorities.

These relationships likely occurred in many institutions of this kind, and officials at Bedford Hills had noted their existence for years. At Bedford, they became uniquely visible to the public when a 1914 investigation into the prison’s practices documented “undesirable relations” among inmates. The scandal that ensued brought together Progressive Era discourses about the deviant heterosexuality of female delinquency with those about love between women. Close study of this controversy highlights the very different sexual cultures of middle- and working-class women that came into conflict during the first decades of the twentieth century. On the one hand, it provides a glimpse into a sexual world that is only rarely revealed—that of love and desire between poor women. On the

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other hand, it reveals the ways in which Progressive Era reformers' efforts to prevent female delinquency ultimately pathologized working-class women's sexual passion toward both women and men, making class differences in attitudes toward sexuality rather than same-sex love the touchstone of their analysis. Forced by the investigation to publicly acknowledge the relationships at a moment when ideas about love between women were in flux, officials at Bedford Hills pointed to working-class sexual passion, rather than homoeroticism, as inmates' underlying pathology. Apparently uninfluenced by the sexological literature of the time, officials defended feelings of love between women and instead chastised inmates' sexual autonomy and unrestrained desires for the threat they posed to social hierarchies of gender and race.

Bedford Hills, New York State's second reformatory for women, opened in 1901 and was designed to house primarily urban inmates from New York City. Alongside other institutions of its kind, it grew out of the women's penal reform movement of the nineteenth century. Reformers believed that through domestic training, education, and the sympathetic attentions of an upstanding female staff and administration, young female offenders would be rehabilitated to self-sufficiency and moral propriety. The Progressive Era reformers who ran Bedford Hills, like their contemporaries, increasingly recognized and worried about the sexuality of poor and working-class young women. As Ruth Alexander demonstrates in her study of Bedford Hills, many inmates of Bedford during the Progressive Era were "active participant[s] in the nation's emerging urban youth culture." In the streets and the consumer marketplace, these young women were "reinventing female adolescence . . . [by] rejecting Victorian standards of girlhood virtue to lay claim to sexual desire, erotic expression, and social autonomy." However, it was these same qualities that led to their being labeled as "female delinquents" and sent to prison. Similarly, in her study of the policing of young women's sexuality at this time, Mary Odem argues that one of the primary distinctions between Progressive Era reformers and their nineteenth-century predecessors was their recognition of the sexual agency of young women and their concern that young women's sexuality was a danger that needed control and containment. Odem suggests that these reformers routinely relied on the criminal justice system to restrain young women's sexuality, remove them from poor environmental influences, and punish their indiscretions.²

Bedford Hills supports Odem's claim. In its first twenty years of operation, most of the women committed to Bedford Hills were there on sex-related charges. For example, in 1915, Bedford had a total of 184 new commitments, 102 of whom were imprisoned for sex-related crimes. Some were there on explicitly sexual charges, such as common prostitution, violation of the 1901 Tenement House Law, or soliciting. Others were charged with crimes that implicitly assumed sexual promiscuity, such as vagrancy with no known occupation or place to live, frequenting disorderly houses, or running away from home as an "incorrigible daughter," who presumably offered men sex in exchange for shelter. Drawn almost exclusively from poor or working-class neighborhoods in New York City, many inmates were either immigrants or the daughters of immigrants, and a sizeable percentage—nearly 20 percent by 1921—were black. By law, the institution could house women aged fifteen to thirty, but in practice the bulk of the inmates were at the younger end of the spectrum, usually averaging twenty to twenty-one years old. They served an indeterminate sentence of no longer than three years. The typical stay for inmates was approximately two years inside the institution, with the final year spent on parole.³

Just as their heterosexual activities outside of Bedford Hills challenged conventional structures of authority about dating, romance, familial deference, and the proper behavior of young women, inmates' homoerotic relationships inside the prison posed a similar threat to authorities. Existing scholarship on these relationships provides compelling insights into the ways in which inmates' assertion of sexuality inside the prisons walls, and the interracial nature of the relationships, served to challenge the values and expectations of prison officials. For instance, in her work on the prison, Alexander argues that "the homoerotic relationships between inmates signified young women's interest in creating scandal and disapproval. The relationships were a form of behavior through which young inmates tried to give evidence of their own power; that is, they used their capacity to shock and offend to deny their defenselessness against the demands of the reformatory staff." Similarly, Estelle Freedman notes the importance of race in reformers' understanding of the relationships. She argues that Bedford officials' response "echoed the sexual fears that underlay Jim Crow institutions in the South." Although "these homosexual relationships did not lead to the kind of amalgamation most feared by

white supremacists, namely mixed-race offspring, the thought that white women would reject heterosexuality entirely—and thus reject their racial duty to reproduce—was intolerable.”⁴

Although these analyses are persuasive readings of the controversy, the evidence can be further mined for information about the meaning of sexual desire and passion for both inmates and reformers. Just as analyses of “smashing” and schoolgirl crushes have helped us understand the possibilities and limitations of upper-class women’s relationships at this time, relationships between women in prison offer a glimpse into the sexual culture of urban poor and working-class women.⁵ The few scraps of evidence about the meaning of these relationships to inmates raise more questions than they are able to answer; however, evidence of this type is so rare that it deserves to be placed and understood in context. Doing so reveals some of the needs and expectations inmates brought to these relationships and perhaps their sexual lives outside of prison walls. Overall, inmates expressed and embraced passionate desire and a need for love regardless of the sex or race of their partner.

In addition, authorities’ public and private responses have more to tell us about the public meanings and dangers of working-class sexuality and love between women during the Progressive Era. Historians such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Lillian Faderman, and Nancy Sahli have argued that for much of the nineteenth century close emotional bonds between women—particularly upper-class women—were understood as culturally acceptable, compatible with heterosexual marriage, and likely lacking any sexual content. They suggest that these relationships began to be viewed with more suspicion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Due to the growing influence of sexological literature, as well as the threat to existing power relations posed by the educational and occupational advances of independent women, these relationships and those who partook in them slowly became labeled as gender and sexual deviants. Some women who loved women likely internalized these morbid depictions of themselves and felt shame about their homoerotic activities, whereas others used these labels to develop identities, find one another, and build subcultures.⁶

Although historians agree that the decades around the turn of the century were an important period of transition in sex and gender relations, several have questioned the neat trajectory of women’s relationships from acceptable to pathological. Martha Vicinus has suggested that historians

have overemphasized the acceptability of romantic friendships during the nineteenth century. Further, in her opinion, in their attempt to define how and when sexology and other social factors made these relationships unacceptable, scholars have failed to pay enough attention to the social meanings, ideological underpinnings, and personal experiences of these homoerotic bonds in and of themselves. Understanding these relationships is critical to unraveling why they were eventually deemed dangerous and gradually diminished over the course of the early twentieth century.⁷

Close study of the relationships at Bedford Hills reinforces Vicinus's point, because it significantly complicates our understanding of the ways women's sexuality, and particularly their same-sex sexuality, was understood at this time. Bedford officials' reactions to the scandal indicate that even in the mid-1910s, a period in which some historians have argued that the "morbidity" of women's relationships was well underway, reformers understood the relationships to be sexual in nature, but were more critical of working-class passion and lack of sexual restraint than they were of feelings of love and romance between women. Participation in the relationships was likened to the behavior that landed inmates in the institution to begin with rather than a unique, deviant condition. Rather than making distinctions between gender inversion, homosexuality, and heterosexuality, reformers made class-based distinctions between sexual passion and control. The interracial character of these relationships only further signaled the degree to which inmates refused to restrain their sexuality and highlighted the implicit dangers in sexual desire. Reformers understood inmates' sexual passion toward other women much as they understood their heterosexual transgressions—as threats to the existing gender and sexual order because it led them to ignore middle-class conventions of courtship, racial endogamy, and sexuality confined within marriage.

Interracial relationships and friendships between inmates were a longstanding occurrence at Bedford Hills. First noted in the reformatory's *Annual Report* in 1908, officials considered them to be a typical aspect of prison life. Available inmate records indicate that relationships were an ongoing disciplinary problem in the institution from the 1910s onward. Disciplinary reports from this period described some white inmates as "very fond of colored girls" or "friendly with colored girls."⁸ Women were most often punished for these relationships after passing notes to their

chosen partner, an intentional violation of regulations that sought to isolate inmates by prohibiting most communication among them.

The relationships first came to public attention in 1914 when Dr. Rudolph F. Diedling, a member of the State Commission of Prisons, filed and publicized a report criticizing Bedford's disciplinary procedures as cruel. Diedling reported that the inmates told him of inhumane punishments and inadequate food and facilities. The State Board of Charities, which administered the institution, immediately launched an investigation into conditions at Bedford. In their March 1915 report summarizing the investigation, a special committee of the State Board of Charities concluded that the institution had not performed unduly cruel punishments, but they did find that Bedford was severely overcrowded and that occasionally officials had used poor judgment while handling the stressful conditions this created.⁹

However, throughout the investigation, one charge that was not part of the initial allegations eclipsed all the others: that the mixing of races in Bedford led to "vice" in the form of "undesirable relations" between inmates. Julia Jessie Taft, the assistant superintendent in charge of discipline, was intimately aware of the existence of the relationships inside the institution and saw them as an ongoing disciplinary issue. In her public testimony about the "harmful intimacy among inmates," Taft stated, "I ought to know about it if anybody does. I have to deal with it all the time. There is no question but that it is the foundation of most of the trouble along disciplinary lines."¹⁰

When asked to elaborate on the "sex trouble" at Bedford, "especially between the white and the colored girls," Taft replied "that the attempts between girls, white and white, or white and colored, are usually between girls who are not in the same house but in separate houses; it is a romantic attachment rather than any immoral relations; it takes a romantic form."¹¹ Her response acknowledged the possibility that sexual relationships between women—in the form of "immoral relations"—could exist. However, to counter that possibility, she felt able to defend the morality of a "romantic attachment" between women. Her response suggests that she believed it was acceptable to publicly endorse nonsexual romantic love between women—and that to frame the relationships as a matter of romance rather than sex would provide an adequate defense of their existence at the institution. Apparently sexological literature had not so pene-

trated public consciousness at this time that officials believed they needed to condemn relationships between women simply because they were possibly sexual in nature.

Alongside this defense of romantic love between women, however, reformers deeply considered the possible sexuality of the relationships. Significantly, they saw no need to distinguish inmates' homosexual activities within the prison from the heterosexual improprieties that landed them there in the first place. Both types of behavior indicated to reformers that their charges were unable or unwilling to control their sexual energies and herein lay their pathology. For instance, in response to the charge of "certain vile practices found among some of the inmates," the president of the prison's Board of Managers, James Wood, gave his explanation:

The practices referred to have obtained to a greater or less extent during the whole existence of our institution. They are known to be not uncommon among the people of this class and character in the outside world, and when inmates addicted to these practices come into the institution it is practically impossible to prevent them finding opportunity in some way or other to continue them.¹²

His answer indicates that he saw a longstanding connection between the general sexual delinquency of women of "this class and character" and homosexual activity. Wood understood their behavior as integral to a more generalized working-class perversity, which often included an inability to control and contain one's passions.

Although Wood's comments do not echo sexological claims about the pathologies and dangers of homosexuality, his response does note the link some sexologists' suggested between working-class prostitutes and lesbianism. As George Chauncey has argued, for Havelock Ellis and others who noted this correlation between prostitution and lesbianism, "prostitutes seem to have embodied the sensuality and sexual immorality of the working-class."¹³ For Wood and his colleagues, it was an inability to control one's sexual urges and the oversexed, crowded environment of poor and working-class neighborhoods that caused the women to be sent to Bedford Hills—and to engage in homosexual relationships when they arrived.

Reformers consistently interpreted inmate behavior as indicating their inability to contain their sexuality toward both women and men. They particularly confronted inmates' exuberant sexuality in the love letters they confiscated from those who engaged in relationships while inside. Close examination of the letters highlights the very different sexual cul-

tures of working-class inmates and middle-class reformers at this time, clarifying why reformers reacted to the inmate relationships as they did. The letters suggest that the most salient aspect of the relationships for both groups of women was their sexual passion, rather than their same-sex character. For the inmates, their notes contained explicit descriptions of sexual desire and a longing for sexual satisfaction alongside a real need for emotional intimacy—regardless of the sex of one’s partner. For the reformers, who had been socialized with middle-class expectations about the proper limitations on sexuality within marriage as well as with the tradition of same-sex romantic friendships and Boston marriages, the inmates’ overtly sexual language was likely shocking—and indicative of a much greater moral problem than simply a willingness to engage in a relationship with another woman.

The most striking expression of an inmate’s sexual desire appears in the letter of Lebofsky, a white woman who frequently became involved with black women. Convicted because she left “home, associate[d] with vicious and disorderly persons, and was in danger of becoming morally depraved,” the orthodox Jewish Lebofsky was eighteen-years-old when she arrived at Bedford in 1918. She faced repeated punishments when caught writing notes to her romantic interests. Her disciplinary report for her first few months in the institution noted her general behavior was “silly, foolish, more or less trouble about colored girls all the time,” and that she had received five punishments for “notes, colored girls, screaming.” Her interest in black women continued in the following months: “Truthful, willing, is interested in some colored girl every few weeks.” Six months into her stay at Bedford, she was still punished for passing notes to black women and still had a “colored girl for friend.” Finally, in mid-1919, it appeared the reformatory’s efforts had been successful, with her disciplinary record commenting that she “has been a model girl these 3 months. Has given up colored girls. . . . No punishment.”¹⁴

Apparently, officials misjudged Lebofsky’s conversion. On November 11, 1920, a love note from Lebofsky was taken from an African American inmate, Freeman. The note articulates Lebofsky’s passionate sexual desire. For example, Lebofsky repeatedly described explicit sexual fantasies throughout the note. She wrote that “some fine day I’m going to grab you and make you warm me up and fuck me and I’ll be willing to get punished every day in the week for *you* and you *only*. . . . I cant not get

enough jazz—but youd have to look out for I bite awful when I am cumming You don’t blame me do you sweetheart Ill be getting some sweet when I take a bite on you.”¹⁵ She was completely willing to express her sexual desires and was willing to endure punishment to have them satisfied.

Lebofsky’s note gives us some insight into the feelings and romantic expectations of poor young women at this time. Overall, it suggests that more than anything she wanted to be close to someone on whom she could count to both care for her and satisfy her desires. For example, she assured her loved one that she wanted to be with her on the outside, writing, “indeed I never cared or had such a feeling toward any other woman on these grounds dear as I have for you, I do think that we were just made for one another and that is why I intend to be a good time mama to you now and out in the big world.” She added that she much preferred Freeman to any man:

I never even had such passion for a man, so it wont be hard to stay away from those dam pricks. . . . I wouldn’t give a dam if I had do all my time in this hole as long as Id have you here to love me up, indeed I scream that I am daffy about my woman, and I shall never be with another man as long as I live, so please take my word, and what I mean if it takes me a year to locate you Ill tell the world I’ll find you and be a sweet love little mama to you.¹⁶

Lebofsky’s words indicate that she felt significant pride in and dedication to her current choice of a black female sexual partner. She did not feel shame within the institution and did not plan to hide her commitment to another woman outside of it. Although she might have originally expected to love a man, she did not see her choice to love a woman to be one of great consequence.

Similarly, when she swore her loyalty to Freeman, she described the sexual climate of her arrest and explained that she protected the man with whom she was caught: “they were looking for him, and my old lady said if I told I’d be free, so I said fuck it ill do my three years, and when I broke my parole I went back with him, he dropped his gal for me, and Ill be a bitch I was arrested with him down Coney Island, and I wouldnt say a word or tell who he was, for he was so good to me.” Lebofsky continued to profess her love, but suddenly used the gender-unspecific term “anybody” to explain her feelings for Freeman: “now daddy sweet heart you can judge for your self now that I am a pretty good kid, and when I love

anybody Ill do all in my power for them, and what I mean I could never do enough for you.”¹⁷ For Lebofsky, who knew the importance of emotional support in both the risky world of the streets of New York City and amid the loneliness and isolation inside Bedford Hills, loyalty and devotion were more important than the gender identity of her partner.

Similarly, a letter confiscated in late 1919 or early 1920 from Florence Thomas, a black inmate whose file noted repeated involvements with white women, contained unabashed expressions of a longing for emotional and physical closeness. Written on toilet paper while she was in punishment and “Dated with the Fondest of Friendships,” the note primarily recounted the day’s experiences. Apparently used to communicating with her loved one through notes, Thomas remarked, “Well sweetheart I have nothing much to tell you as your missive was a friendly one and my own is a friendly one.” Thomas closed her “uninteresting missive” with a poem to her “devoted pal”:

sweetheart in dreams
I’m calling
I love you best of all
when shadows of
twilight are falling
I miss you most of all
sunshine of joy in your
smile I can see
in each winking star
your sweet face I can see.
You’r all of my heart
so don’t let us part
Sweetheart I’m calling you.¹⁸

Her ardent desire for her female “sweetheart,” her tender recollections of her face, and her hopes that they never part were her final thoughts before falling asleep that night.

From the limited evidence available from other sources, the strong desires and explicit language found in the notes at Bedford Hills were not unique to the institution. The only two published inquiries into relationships between women in prison from this era both emphasize the relationships’ unrestrained sexuality. For instance, in his 1929 consideration of the “Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females,” Charles Ford

provided multiple excerpts from inmate love notes to argue that “in all the relationships the sexual side is stressed.” His evidence included the following, which was written by an African American “love husben” to her white “dearest Wife Gloria”:

You can take my tie
 You can take my collar
 But I'll jazze you
 'Till you holler.

and

Honey If you love me you will brake out your dam door and come an sleep with me and angle face if I could sleep with you I would not only hough and kiss you. But I will not take the time to write it for I guess you can read between lines.

Gloria replied, in a letter she dated “Hot Lips”: “Sugar daddy if I could sleep with you for one little night, I would show you how much I hontly and truly love you.”¹⁹ A commitment to sexual pleasure seems to be an ongoing and consistent aspect of the sexual culture of poor and working-class women at this time.

Similarly, in her 1913 article, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” Margaret Otis asserted that “love-making between the white and colored girls” was “a form of perversion that is well known among workers in reform schools and institutions for delinquent girls.” She likened these relationships to “the ordinary form that is found among girls even in high-class boarding-schools.” However, in contrast to the more refined passions of bourgeois schoolgirl crushes, Otis argued that lower-class inmates’ notes “show the expression of a passionate love of a low order, many coarse expressions are used and the animal instinct is seen to be paramount.” Although some girls entered these relationships for lack of any other emotional excitement, with others “it proved to be a serious fascination and of intensely sexual nature.”²⁰

Otis’s contrast between “the ordinary form [of relationships] that is found among girls even in high-class boarding-schools” and that of female inmates is particularly significant. There is a striking contrast between the explicit sexuality of inmate letters and the more sexually restrained passions found in letters between middle-class romantic friends and schoolgirl crushes. Historical work on these nineteenth-century bourgeois relationships has suggested that, although emotionally powerful

and passionate, they were described by their participants in language that was relatively chaste. This difference in language suggests very different, class-stratified sexual cultures between working-class women and their middle-class counterparts. For example, in her article on schoolgirl “smashing,” Sahli’s racier excerpts from love letters between women include: “I have an irresistible desire all through this letter to make love to you;” “I kiss you a thousand times;” and “I am *so* glad that I have *got* you for my darling that I can’t find words to express my delight in my new love.” Although this evidence dates from a slightly earlier period than the letters from Bedford Hills, the real contrast between these expressions of desire and those of the inmates gives us a window into the ongoing difference in sexual cultures that existed between women across classes.²¹

As part of a milieu of Progressive Era reformers who attended women’s colleges and frequently lived in communities of women, the middle-class women administrators and staff at Bedford Hills were likely to be familiar with schoolgirl crushes and well-versed in the language of romantic friendships between women from their personal and educational lives.²² For instance, Taft’s experience with love between women was not limited to the “romances” she publicly defended at Bedford Hills. She met her lifelong partner, Virginia Robinson, at the University of Chicago in 1908 and the pair set up a home together in 1915. Given the limitations of the available evidence, it is impossible to know how Taft understood her own relationship with a woman in comparison with those she saw among the inmates. However, it seems likely that, having been socialized into the more chaste expressions of love in bourgeois romantic friendships, Taft and her colleagues read the passionate assertions of carnal desire in inmate letters with some degree of dismay. Just as they came to the problem of the sexual delinquency of poor and working-class young women informed by their middle-class values about the importance of restraining sexuality within marriage, they also approached same-sex relationships with a body of knowledge created by an ongoing middle-class tradition of love relationships between women. In this context, it makes sense that the same-sex nature of inmate relationships was likely to be less troubling to reformers than the rampant sexual desire their working-class charges persistently expressed. In both instances, it was a difference in understanding about the importance and proper place of sexual passion and pleasure that differentiated women across class.

The interracial character of the homoerotic relationships inside Bedford further supported officials' convictions that they stemmed from inmates' ongoing inability to control their sexual desires. In a segregated society, in which blacks and whites were rarely friends, any degree of closeness between people of different races was likely to be interpreted by reformers as implying a sexual relationship. In Taft's analysis, race was a key factor for understanding the sexual content of the relationships:

I think there is as much of this romantic attachment between white girls as there is between white and colored girls, but there is no denying that the colored girls are extremely attractive to certain white girls and the feeling is apt to be more intense than between white girls alone.

Seconding the "intensity" across race, investigators also found that a "contributing cause to the difficulties of the institution is the housing together of the white and the colored inmates." Although "the committee makes no objection to this because of the color line, it is undoubtedly true that the most undesirable sex relations grow out of this mingling of the two races."²³

For investigators and reformers, part of the danger of working-class sexual passion was the possibility that it would corrupt racial hierarchies. They feared that interracial "acquaintances are formed in the institution which lead to mutually undesirable relationships after discharge" and that white inmates might move into "colored neighborhoods" after their release. Taft suggested they had cause and effect reversed: "I know a good many of the white people have been with colored people outside and they are always friendly with the colored girls in the institution."²⁴ It was inmates' ongoing willingness to break social convention, rather than simply their racial mixing within the institution, that garnered authorities' reprobation. Like Wood, Taft saw a correlation between practices common to the "class and character" of the inmates before conviction and their behavior within Bedford Hills.

Fulfilling the authorities' fears, some inmates did attempt to continue their interracial relationships even after leaving the institution. Just as Lebofsky intended to locate Freeman after her release, May Palmer Williams, a white inmate on parole, wrote Mildred Hill, a black inmate also on parole, in early 1920 in hopes that they could live with one another. Williams referred repeatedly to Hill as "baby" and sought desperately to

meet with her. She shunned anyone who would read and judge her poorly typed letter: "Baby. You know I don't care who watches me or reads my letter becuae is any one don't like it why they can go their way and I mine but it is you that worries me." She called herself "someone who realy has a spark of love for you, and who will never lead you wrong if I no it."²⁵

In seeking to understand the meaning and nature of interracial attraction between female inmates, officials presented a convoluted picture of gender, race, and agency. Several historians of women's sexuality have argued that Progressive Era reformers and psychiatrists viewed black women as morally deficient, aggressive, and often masculine, whereas white women were presumed heterosexuals whose deviance resided in their overly strong sex-drive or inclination to prostitution. However, at Bedford Hills reformers did not pose a clear-cut dichotomy between aggressive black women and oversexed, passive, white women, further suggesting that sexological theory had not penetrated daily practice at the prison. For instance, Taft's depiction of black women as being "extremely attractive to certain white girls" suggests that black women were objects of desire for white women. On the other hand, Taft also clearly attributed a great deal of power to this type of "attractiveness," concurring with the investigator's suggestion that it could influence white women in dangerous ways:

Q. You find the colored girls have an unfortunate psychological influence upon the white girls?

Taft. They are undoubtedly very attractive.

Q. That must be along sex lines?

Taft. It would lead to that, but it very rarely leads to immoral conditions at the institution, I think.

Q. That is because you watch them so closely?

Taft. Yes, sir.²⁶

As Taft and her colleagues struggled to explain the nature and content of inmate sexuality, they often wavered on whether white women actively pursued black women or if they were the powerless objects of black women's seductive efforts.

In either case, they were concerned primarily with the specter of white, rather than black, women's passionate desire and sexuality. There is a general absence of any consideration or speculation as to the character of African American women throughout the report. Officials never considered

the possible psychological and moral implications for the black women. In fact, although they did note that these relationships also occurred “between white girls alone,” none of the investigators or prison officials mentioned relationships occurring between black women only. This absence could be interpreted in multiple ways: perhaps officials paid so little attention to black women’s interactions with one another that they failed to notice their relationships; or officials implicitly assumed that black women engaged in lesbian relationships and did not think it important enough to remark on; or black women were considered undesirable except to a few white women of dubious character who fell under their sway.

Inmate letters offer a similarly complex depiction of gender identity, race, and sexual agency. In the relationships at Bedford Hills, as well as those documented by Otis and Ford, black women consistently assumed masculine personas and were referred to as “daddy” or “husband” by white partners. However, it also seems that none of the women expected a strict dichotomy of gender roles and did not understand themselves to be “inverted” or deviant in their gender behavior. For example, Thomas, who was African American, used distinctly gendered language in her descriptions of her frustrating experiences while in prison. She assumed a masculine gender identity as part of her resistance to the authority of the institution. As she put it,

Really I get so utterly disgusted with these g-d- cops I could kill them. They may run Bedford and they may run *some* of these pussies in Bedford but they are *never* going to run:

Florence Thomas

not if I know it. It is true dear it doesnt pay to lie a good fellow in a joint of this kind, but I don’t Regret anything I ever done

By referring to herself as a “fellow,” Thomas implicitly rejected the label of “girl,” which prison officials used to refer to all the inmates, regardless of their personality or age. She similarly contrasted her tough masculine persona with the weaker and more effeminate “pussies” in the institution. She also reminisced in her note about old friends from her stay at Bedford—a “good gang” of “women” who routinely stood up to prison officials.²⁷ She was keenly aware of variations and fluidity in gender attributes among women. For Thomas, being a woman with masculine traits was a point of pride to be embraced rather than a shameful expression of deviance or inversion.

White women often embraced a feminine persona in the notes—but one which routinely demanded love and pleasure from their black partners. Lebofsky, who was white, repeatedly referred to her black partner, Freeman, as “papa” and “daddy” and herself as “mama Blondie” or “little love mama.” Despite the overall masculinization of Freeman, Lebofsky still clearly saw her as a woman, on occasion describing her as a “pretty doll” with “cute little arms.” More importantly, in the sexual fantasies throughout her note, Lebofsky strongly asserted her sexuality and sexual desires even as she described Freeman as the sexually dominant partner who would “fuck [her]” and win her devotion.²⁸ The substitution of racial for gender difference suggests that inmate relationships in some respects paralleled heterosexual dynamics; however, even if this was the case, the white inmates’ commitment to being both feminine and sexually assertive suggests that working-class heterosexuality did not necessarily follow the same conventions as middle-class heterosexuality.

The gender classifications of both reformers and inmates complicate existing historical work about the place of mannishness in signaling lesbian desire during this period. Lisa Duggan and Esther Newton have noted the ways in which the assumption of mannishness by middle-class women provided a way for the women themselves, as well as those around them, to make visible and comprehensible a commitment to primary love and sexual relationships with other women.²⁹ However, at Bedford Hills, mannishness was not the only marker to signal sexual desire among the inmates themselves nor among the reformers who confronted their relationships. Although inmates adopted racialized gender personas, a commitment to passionate sexual satisfaction, rather than gender non-conformity, prevailed as the necessary marker of relationships among women. For instance, as a “little love mama,” Lebofsky did not require mannishness to access her passion for Freeman. Similarly, reformers did not need to see Lebofsky or Freeman as strictly mannish to understand their relationship as sexual. The racial difference within the relationships, alongside the presumed unrestrained sexuality of working-class women, provided reformers enough evidence already. Although perhaps mannishness was required to make relationships between middle-class women visible as sexual, neither middle-class reformers nor working-class inmates required mannishness to read inmate relationships as sexual.

To eradicate the relationships, Taft, along with the superintendent,

Wood, and the members of the investigating committee, concluded that establishing “two institutions . . . [was] the only thing that could really take care of it; . . . separate institutions [for black women and white women] in separate places.” Renowned Progressive reformer Katherine Bement Davis, who had been the superintendent at Bedford Hills for its first thirteen years, had insisted the institution remain integrated during her tenure there. She defended her racial policy at a public hearing about the investigation in 1914:

It was proper in a public institution of this kind and in accordance with the best reformatory methods to classify the colored like the white girls, in groups according to age, character, and mental and educational classifications. This rule has accomplished reforms and has been followed successfully since I was first connected with the institution thirteen years ago. It is the only fair rule to follow. But anyway, I came of good New England abolition stock and my theory and practice are dictated by principle.³⁰

However, Davis’s successors, particularly Taft and Wood, could find no justification for maintaining an integrated institution. Echoing widespread racial retrenchment at this time, and holding the relationships as necessary justification, they desired as much racial separation as possible among inmates to at least squelch the overt sexuality of interracial relationships.

This model of complete separation mirrored the very principles on which Bedford was founded—the segregation of women who were sexually delinquent from men. The inmates’ heterosexuality was completely contained within the institution because very few men were employed there and none were imprisoned there. The reformation of the inmates’ sexuality—encouraging them to be more chaste and choose suitable husbands with whom to settle down and raise a family—was deemed possible only in a single-sex environment. However, prison officials found that sexuality directed toward other women was difficult to contain in Bedford. Officials’ decision to segregate was the only option within the paradigm of reformatory work—remove the objects of temptation from the institution and show the women how much more useful it was to learn to sew. It was their desire to control a sexual passion that threatened to widely disrupt gender, racial, and sexual conventions—not simply disgust with feelings of love between women or racial prejudice—that informed their decision.

At the conclusion of the investigation in 1915, officials seemed committed to doing everything in their power (and financial capabilities) to segre-

gate the institution. Still, it was not until the *Annual Report* for 1917 that the board could report: "During the past year and for the first time in the history of the institution, two cottages have been set apart for the colored girls. This experiment, if it can be called such, has been successful beyond our hopes or expectations." The only other note about segregation occurred in the superintendent's report for that year: "With the opening of the new cottages of the Farm Group it seemed desirable to reclassify the population, separating by cottages the younger and older high grade girls, the low and medium grade morons, the psychopathic group, the broken paroles, and the colored girls. The two cottages for colored girls were established upon the written request of a number of these girls, and the experiment has proved beneficial to the colored and white girls alike."³¹ We can only speculate as to why officials claimed it was at the request of the black inmates when they already had ample justification from the 1915 investigation. Perhaps the black inmates really did desire a space of their own in which to develop social support based on intraracial friendships, or they may have been persecuted in mixed-race cottages. More likely, however, officials were purposely misrepresenting the situation altogether to deflect attention away from the recent scandal over the relationships.

Either way, inmate letters from the 1920s indicate that segregated living quarters did not put an end to interracial homoerotic relationships. Racial segregation, alongside the wave of racial strife that swept the nation in 1919, also perhaps heightened racial tension in the institution. In July 1920, Bedford erupted into a race riot that was, according to newspapers and authorities, remarkably violent for a women's prison. During the uprising, inmates took over the prison grounds—both fighting with one another and resisting the authority of prison officials. Less violent but increasingly frequent, inmate rebellions plagued the institution in the late 1910s, and in 1921 the first man, psychiatrist Amos T. Baker, was appointed superintendent of Bedford Hills in the hopes that he might be able to restore discipline and order.³²

Progressive Era efforts to control female sexual delinquency are an often-overlooked part of the turn-of-the-century pathologization of erotic and romantic relationships between women. However, in practice at Bedford Hills, it was working-class passion, rather than homosexuality per se, that was deemed unacceptable in these efforts. Sexological theories about love

between women had apparently not penetrated the practice of reformers who, given their professional and personal concerns, might be most expected to have been aware of them. Although inmates expressed a commitment to sexual pleasure, embracing a variety of sexual experiences and gender behaviors, prison officials did not construct a dichotomy between homo- and heterosexual desire, or a model of sexual inversion, but instead linked all of these behaviors under the rubric of unrestrained sexual passion. Differing sexual cultures between working- and middle-class women came into conflict over the expression of both same-sex and opposite-sex sexuality. Prison reformers defended same-sex romance, but explained homoeroticism between women as but one danger of a working-class female sexual autonomy that also led to prostitution, interracial liaisons, the spread of venereal diseases, and disobedient and delinquent daughters. The meaning of these relationships, and sexual passion itself, for the inmates and authorities at Bedford Hills, points to the complexity of early twentieth-century shifts in constructions of women's sexuality.

NOTES

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1. Emphasis in original quote. Lena Lebofsky, file 2538, letters, series 14610-77B Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Inmate Case Files, 1915-1930, 1955-1965, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives and Records Administration, State Education Department, Albany, N.Y. Many of my sources, such as this one, are case files from Bedford Hills. These files were formed for every inmate and included many documents relating to their time in the institution. These files are, by New York state law, restricted records, and I therefore must protect the privacy of the women. I have assigned each inmate whom I name in my article a pseudonym that attempts to convey her ethnicity and will cite the file by that pseudonym. In addition, my citations include a case number which was assigned to each inmate upon her admittance to Bedford Hills. I have maintained the chronology of admittances through these case numbers, although I have altered these numbers to further pro-

- tect privacy. Further references to these Bedford Hill case files will be identified by inmate's pseudonym, the file number I have attached to the case (for chronology), and description (letter, disciplinary report, etc.).
2. Ruth Alexander, *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 12. Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 95-184.
 3. New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford, N.Y., *Annual Reports* (Albany) from 1914-1921. On the Tenement House Law of 1901, see Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 302-3.
 4. Alexander, 96. Estelle B. Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965," *Feminist Studies* 22 (Summer 1996): 399-400; Alexander makes a similar argument (92). In her earlier work on Bedford Hills, Freedman also attributed the reformers' reaction primarily to racism but noted that increasing taboos against lesbianism might have played a role in the controversy. See Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 140.
 5. "Smashing" was the practice of courting a crush among female college students during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It involved the bestowal of gifts and love notes on one's beloved in hopes of winning her heart. See Nancy Sahli, "Smashing: Women's Relationships before the Fall," *Chrysalis* 8 (Summer 1979): 17-27; and Martha Vicinus, "Distance and Desire: English Boarding School Friendships, 1870-1920," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 212-29.
 6. See Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981) and *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991); Sahli; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 53-76.
 7. Martha Vicinus, "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity," *Feminist Studies* 18 (Fall 1992): 467-98, and "Distance and Desire," 212-29.
 8. Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 13, 220n45; New York State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee Consisting of Commissioners Kevin, Smith, and Mulry, Appointed to Investigate the Charges Made against the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, N.Y.* (Albany, 1915), 18. Hereafter cited as State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915). File 2402, disciplinary report; file 2532, disciplinary report.
 9. State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915), 5-7, 25-29.
 10. *Ibid.*, 18.
 11. *Ibid.*, 18.
 12. *Ibid.*, 8.
 13. George Chauncey also notes that doctors were apt to view poor women's deviance as

willful and perverse, in contrast to the diseased state of middle-class patients. However, it appears that, in contrast to the medical literature studied by Chauncey, neither the concept of a "homosexual" identity (be it chosen or an illness) nor gender inversion were influential in practice at Bedford Hills. Chauncey, "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," *Salmagundi* 58-59 (Fall 1982-Winter 1983): 135-36.

14. Lebofsky, 2538, disciplinary report.
15. Many of the quotations written by the inmates contain numerous grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors. Because to note each error would make the quotes even more difficult to read, I have chosen not to note each mistake. All of the inmate quotes cited here are replicated from the originals. Lebofsky, 2538, letters.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Florence Thomas, 2525, letters.
19. Charles A. Ford, "Homosexual Practices of Institutionalized Females," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 23 (January-March 1929): 446, 444-45.
20. Margaret Otis, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 13 (June-July 1913): 113, 114.
21. Ibid., 113; Sahli, 18. In her analysis of an erotic relationship between two working-class African American women during the 1860s, Karen V. Hansen cites love letters between these women that contained explicit references to sexual contact with one another's breasts. Her evidence further suggests that there were likely ongoing class and cultural differences in the nature and expectations of love relationships between women dating from at least the mid-nineteenth century. Hansen, "'No Kisses Is Like Youres': An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Gender and History* 7 (August 1995): 160-61.
22. In her biography of Taft, Robinson refers to Taft as her "lifelong companion." From 1915 until Taft's death in 1960, the two shared a home and raised adopted children. Virginia Robinson, *Jessie Taft: Therapist and Social Work Educator, a Professional Biography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), 28, 45.
23. Siobhan Sommerville, "Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body," in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*, ed. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 252. George Chauncey also notes this correlation in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 139, 407n21; State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915), 18, 26-27.
24. State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915), 26-27, 18.
25. May Palmer Williams, 2537, letters.
26. See Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian," 400-1; and Elizabeth Lunbeck, "'A New Generation of Women': Progressive Psychiatrists and the Hypersexual Female," *Feminist Studies* 13 (Fall 1987): 535-36. Alexander also notes that reformers' responses did not correspond to recent historical work on this issue (92). State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915), 18.
27. Florence Thomas, 2525, letters.
28. Lebofsky, 2538, letters.

29. Lisa Duggan, "The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century America," *Signs* 18 (Summer 1993): 791-814; Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyff Hall and the New Woman," in *Hidden from History*, 281-93.
30. State Board of Charities, *Report of the Special Committee* (1915), 19. "Doctor Davis Defends Bedford's System," *New York Times*, 18 Dec. 1914.
31. New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford, N.Y., *Seventeenth Annual Report for the Year Ending July 1, 1917* (Albany: J.B. Lyon, 1918), 8, 16.
32. See Alexander for more on the relationships from 1920-1930. See, for instance, "Women Riot in Reform Home: Scores of Bedford Inmates and Several Police Hurt in All Day Battle," *Sun and New York Herald*, 25 July 1920; "150 Women in Race Riot at Bedford: Fight with Knives, Clubs and Flatirons, Defying Police and 25 State Troopers," *New York Times*, 25 July 1920; "16 Are Injured in Race Riot of Bedford Girls," *New York Tribune*, 25 July 1920; "Bedford Post for Dr. Amos T. Baker," *New York Times*, 13 Apr. 1920; "Conventions Bill Signed by Governor," *New York Times*, 4 May 1921. See also Alexander, 93-95.