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On the Yard

Katy Ryan

Malcolm Braly’s fourth novel begins simply enough: “Society Red was the first man on the yard that morning” (3). An account of men living slow days in San Quentin in the 1960s—their fantasies, interactions, supreme boredom—On the Yard (1967) continues in this direct, unembellished style for well over three hundred pages. Braly’s novel is, as Jonathan Lethem notes in his fine introduction to the most recent edition, as “temperate and unhysterical as its title” (vii). Our need to have “prisons be one simple thing—either horrific zoos for the irretrievably demented and corrupt, or inhumane machines which grind down innocent men”—is unsatisfied by Braly’s writing (Lethem, vii). Praised by critics and declared by Kurt Vonnegut “the great American prison novel,” On the Yard has been out of print twice and has received little scholarly attention.1 In 2002 the New York Review of Books republished the novel as part of its lost classics series.

Braly, who spent much of his adult life in prison for burglary and armed robbery convictions, composed three novels while incarcerated: Felony Tank (1961), Shake Him Till He Rattles (1963), and It’s Cold Out There (1966). After his final release from San Quentin, he published, in addition to On the Yard, an autobiography, False Starts: A Memoir of San Quentin and Other Prisons (1976), and another novel, The Protector (1979). At the time of his death in 1980, he was, according to H. Bruce Franklin, “beginning to attain recognition as one of the finest novelists to emerge from America’s prisons” (Prison Writing, 217).

On the Yard emerges at a critical moment in U.S. American literary history. The Autobiography of Malcolm X, published in 1965, marks the beginning of what Franklin calls “an unprecedented surge of prison literature” (Prison Writing, 12). Among the more well-known of these works are Piri Thomas’s Down These Mean Streets (1967), Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice (1968), George Jackson’s Soledad, Brother (1970), Robert Beck’s The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim (1971), Manuel Piñero’s Short Eyes (1972), Huey P. Newton’s Revolutionary Suicide (1973), James Baldwin’s If Beale Street Could...
Talk (1974), and Angela Davis: An Autobiography (1974). Franklin identifies the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s as the motivating context for this literature; Dylan Rodriguez develops his theory of “radical prison praxis” from the same time period; and Michael Hames-García engages with this body of literature in order to theorize and put into practice its ethical and moral insights.

Yet Braly’s novel is not political in the way much of this writing is. It does not provide an exposé or analysis of the dire failings of the criminal judicial system. Nor does it attempt to explain, or even represent, the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on racial minorities. In a 1971 New York Times op-ed piece on George Jackson, Braly expressed his impatient with “the mistaken assumptions, exaggerations, and, sometimes, outright lies on which liberals and radical writers base their current outrage at prison conditions” (35). Braly maintained that there was no “systematic political prejudice” against black Americans in the justice system, though he admitted individual instances of bias in the California prison system. His inaccurate assessments of both the role race plays in judicial processes and the cultural significance of black liberation struggles arguably interfere with his ability to tell a reliable tale about U.S. American prisons. Franklin summarizes, “Because his vision did not encompass the historical significance of the changes going on both in the prison and on the outside, Malcolm Braly remained limited in range as a novelist, despite all his profound insights” (Prison Literature, 206). What contributions, then, can Braly make to American literary and cultural history?

It was to the novel that Braly first turned, a genre utilized less often by writers dealing with prison than autobiography, poetry, oratory, and essay. And it is precisely the dialogic structure of On the Yard that generates its most important social commentary. Franklin credits the artistic success of On the Yard to “Braly’s ability to get inside the heads of many different kinds of prisoners” (205)—and, I would add, different kinds of nonprisoners as well. Driven by multiple perspectives and contact zones, this “restless narrative” (Francken, 19) that “barely centers anywhere” (Lethem, ix) exploits the mandate of the novel to compose a space between fact and fiction, now and then, author and character, reader and writer, inside and out. On the Yard can help us rethink what Michel Foucault calls “the history of the present” by rendering permeable a number of specific borders: the historical ones that demarcate premodern and modern prison systems, the cultural ones that separate prison from the outside world, and the ideological ones that divide sexualities into natural and situation-al, heterosexual and homosexual. The novel brings into focus a series of cultural divisions, clarifying, on the one hand, their illusory nature and, on the other, their formidable hold.
Anticipating Foucault’s disciplinary history, the narrator of *On the Yard* remarks of San Quentin, “Here, everything was hushed and informed with an air of high seriousness similar to the atmosphere of hospitals, police stations, courthouses, the unmistakable flavor of responsibility and power, the control of life and death” (277). In Braly’s novel the apparatus that claims to rehabilitate subjects coexists with old-fashioned sovereign power over life and death. Foucault acknowledges that the captive body under state surveillance remains under physical duress in the modern prison, but his emphasis on a material and conceptual shift toward “treatment” and away from corporal punishment understates, as Joy James and others have argued, the physical violence to which prisoners remain subject. *On the Yard* thus demands that readers reflect on the continuity between old and new prison systems, between punishments aimed at the body and the soul.

The premodern corporal model is represented in the novel by dungeon-like isolation in solitary confinement, beatings from three feared guards, and routine violence between prisoners. “[B]odily violence,” writes Hames-García, “is a central disciplinary technique of the penal system, whether that violence is carried out by guards or by prisoners” (148). This “known consequence” of imprisonment is no less a part of the punishment system because it has not been officially ordered. Braly’s narrative eventually concentrates on a lethal power struggle between two white inmates, Paul Juleson and Chilly Willy (Billy Oberholster). Known and named for his cool, Chilly is a “habitual criminal” in his mid-twenties with a list of multiple armed robberies. He runs the yard, managing bets, loaning cigarettes at high interest, and smuggling nasal inhalants. Juleson, who pled guilty to the second-degree murder of his wife (“an ordinary man who beat his wife for all the ordinary crummy little reasons” [187]), wants to be left alone. He spends his time reading, but one day Juleson borrows cigarettes from Chilly. When Juleson cannot pay back on time, Chilly orders his heavy, Gasolino, to beat him up. The warden suspects that Juleson is in danger and offers him protective custody. Juleson refuses it. To avoid an ambush, Juleson attacks Gasolino, and the fight is broken up by guards. While recovering, Gasolino drinks, rather than sniffs as he usually does, the contents of a fire extinguisher and dies (the first of several possible suicides). Chilly taps a new arrival for the job of attacking Juleson, a young neo-Nazi of powerful delusions, Stick (Sheldon Wilson). Stick goes beyond Chilly’s orders, killing Juleson “in less than three seconds” with a metal pipe (274). The response from the administration makes clear that this level of violence is nothing new.
The novel also portrays the modern correctional system with its constant surveillance, psychological testing, talk of rehabilitation, and atmospheric sterility. The first line of the fourth chapter aptly summarizes the new prison: “The prison is never at rest” (53). Doors open and shut mysteriously, “hurled by mechanical hands” (55). Prisoners are trained to watch themselves, their imaginations enlisted in their surveillance. In Braly’s panoptic prison, “rail guards are required to wear crepe-soled shoes, and they try to move silently, not, as any con is quick to say, out of consideration for inmate sleep, but to cause those who might plot at night to think of the gun bull as drifting like a shadow—a phantom who in as many imaginations could silently keep all the thousand cells under simultaneous surveillance” (54). Outside San Quentin a “cyclopean gaze” of lights meets newcomers, and inside artificial light dominates, especially on the condemned unit, which is “drenched with light” (59).

Will Manning, a forty-four-year-old white accountant, guilty of statutory rape and sentenced to one to fifty years, passes his first imprisoned days “submitting himself to various measurements,” physical and psychological (123). He meets with a psychologist and is assigned to group therapy, which is depicted as a failure. Chilly Willy explains that, in the past, prisoners who violated rules were issued a red shirt: “Then whenever there was trouble on the yard the gun bulls had orders to shoot the cons in the red shirts first. But that was fifty years ago. The old cons took it as a mark of respect. Maybe it was. Now they assign you to group therapy” (300). For Chilly, even the deeply qualified dignity of being targeted physically is denied prisoners in the new arena; his comment also suggests that the source of violence has simply been relocated.

All contact with the outside world is tightly controlled, including the visual. From his cell, Chilly can see through three narrow windows twenty feet away, and each one “framed three almost identical views of San Francisco Bay. . . . Chilly looked at them with the same dreamless detachment with which he viewed his own face in the mirror” (227). Chilly, whose name also conjures the insistent atmosphere of the modern correctional facility, is cut off not only from the outside, but from his own face. Everything is detached from him, his face in a mirror, life across the bay. When his co-defendant Caterpillar expresses sympathy for Chilly’s indeterminate but assuredly long sentence—”Jesus,’ Caterpillar said in an awed tone, ‘They killed you”—Chilly offers a characteristically clipped and historically accurate response: “That’s what they’re supposed to do” (239).

In addition to blurring the borders between premodern and modern forms of punishment, *On the Yard* captures in fiction a threshold moment in recent American prison history: before Attica, mandatory minimum sentencing, supermaximum prisons, and the explosion in our prison population to upward of two million people. David Garland analyzes the
extraordinary changes that have taken place in the past thirty years with the move away from penal welfarism toward a more exacting model of control. The signs in the novel of the now largely displaced system include routine educational opportunities and job training, group and individual therapy sessions, and indeterminate sentences. In the 1970s and 1980s, growing public skepticism about the efficacy of therapeutic programs in prison—galvanized by energetic misreadings of Robert Martinson’s 1974 article, “What Works in Prison Reform?”—led to drastic reductions in these programs. Garland traces how a radical, thoughtful critique of the “individualized treatment model” was pushed into service for punitive retrenchment. The reasonable goal of correcting the arbitrariness of indeterminate sentences gave way to inflexible sentencing graphs and fixed-term punishments, curtailing judicial discretion and producing longer sentences. Pell grants for prisoners were eliminated in 1994, effectively wiping out college courses as well as most writing programs and prison magazines.\(^6\) The well-trafficked library established by Herman Spector, the senior librarian at San Quentin from 1947 to 1968, dwindled from 36,000 volumes in 1974 to 8,902 in 1990.\(^7\) In On the Yard, Dr. Smith, a popular and respected psychologist, quits his job because a “prison is a nearly impossible setting for any therapeutic program” (189). This was precisely the sentiment that would be repeated by academics and legislators—without accompanying context or qualification—to justify the abandonment of needed programs. We continue to struggle with these uncivil developments, despite ample evidence that educational opportunities are the most effective ways to reduce recidivism.\(^8\)

**Borders of Cultures/Alien Places**

Although the majority of On the Yard occurs inside San Quentin, the first numbered chapter takes place “[t]wo hundred miles to the south in the Delano County jail” (11). Here we meet Manning who, after sentencing, is transported to prison. Manning first sees San Quentin through bus windows.

The actual prison bore little resemblance to Manning’s fearful preconception, a blurred projection formed in his mind from the hundred transparencies of fiction and legend which had somehow combined to form the illusion of substance. All the components of the motion picture prison were evident—armed guards, high walls, the cyclopean gaze of waiting searchlights—but they seemed diminished, without harmful vitality, sapped by the fresh green lawns, the numerous beds of bright flowers, even by the walls themselves, which were painted a pastel green trimmed in a dusky pink. (30–31)
With Manning, readers are transported from outside to inside—to bright flowers, pastel green and dusky pink walls. Located on prime real estate in the bay north of San Francisco, this dungeon has pretty grounds. Inside, we will be witness to torturous injuries and death; a cold, killing atmosphere; the entrapment and punishment of homosexual activity; and the crushing sense of futility that defines so much of life in a maximum-security prison.

*On the Yard* calls into question the assumption that prison walls separate different cultures, a nonviolent world from a violent one, an imprisoned world from a “free” one. (Braly always uses the quotation marks around “free.”) Franklin points out in the most recent introduction to *Prison Literature in America* that prisons not only resemble the outside world but the outside world increasingly resembles prisons: schools with metal detectors and permanent police; gated communities with advanced surveillance equipment (xii); high rates of suicide; the Patriot Act and the steady erosion of civil liberties. The expansion of private business interests into prisons, in terms of services provided and labor extracted, also insures that the prison system, in Juda Bennett’s words, is “always strangely connected and economically linked to the larger system of American culture, politics, and business” (208).

Even when these connections and linkages were not writ quite as visibly as they are today, Braly was determined, in his fiction and nonfiction, to unsensationalize incarcerated life; he saw prison as “a microcosm of the ‘free’ world” (“A Thief’s Primer,” 6). In *False Starts* Braly wonders “if the death toll at Quentin was as high as that of an average town the same size and decided it wasn’t, if for no other reason than because we weren’t killing each other with automobiles” (188). (Braly was killed in a car crash in 1980. He had been out of prison for fifteen years.) He describes in *False Starts* how he felt rereading *On the Yard*: “I was satisfied to discover I had put in little of my bitterness and less of myself. It was the story of an alien land where I had been visiting for some time, which I held not to be alien at all” (368). The word “alien” appears frequently in *On the Yard*, throwing into relief what only appears as different or unknown. One exemplary use occurs when Juleson, in solitary, meditates on a quotation from Marcus Aurelius: “There is nothing human which is alien to me” (186). At night in the prison, guards “sip black coffee, read girlie magazines, or watch the moonlight slowly shifting on the empty concrete seventy-five feet below them. The prison seems like a walled city, smothered under a rigid curfew, governed by an alien army” (53). Yet, this “alien” army is doing the same things as those imprisoned. Everyone is fantasizing, drinking coffee, waiting for time to pass. And everyone is, differently, on guard. Juleson recognizes that he and a young guard are “both small fry under the same
distant authority” (185). Donald Thompson, imprisoned at Maryland State Penitentiary, explains how guards are also under surveillance in the panopticon: “now, after I’ve been in the security chief’s office, I see that the officers know how much of the yard the chief can see. And as a result of that, they apply more pressure and act out roles they wouldn’t normally act out” (Baxter et al., 212).

*On the Yard* reckons with the expanding borders of disciplinary structures without detracting from the specific suffering that occurs as a result of the massive U.S. American penal system. Manning arrives at San Quentin worried about how old he will be when he regains the “right to wage economic war” (45), but he quickly learns that the economic war continues in prison, with a different set of currency. Physical violence also persists on both sides of the wall. When Juleson is summoned before a disciplinary court to explain what he knows about Gasolino’s poisoning, the warden wants to know why he refused his offer of protective custody. “’A man is dying,’” the warden says. “’If you had allowed me to help you the fight on the yard could have been avoided.’” Juleson assures the warden, “’I have been ordered to commit far greater violence for reasons that were much less clear to me, and then if I had disobeyed I would have had to face a similar court and they would have been equally sure they were right’” (184). Although this reference is largely unexplained—we know only that Juleson “had faced bullets with nothing of the same terror” as he felt at the thought of Gasolino’s “intimate” knife (163)—it seems clear that Juleson is comparing a military court to the disciplinary court at San Quentin, and his own action in an unnamed U.S. military conflict to his recent action on the yard. What the warden sees as brutal senseless violence, Juleson sees as less senseless and less brutal than that required by federal law. Juleson contextualizes his Bartleby-like refusal to be protected by the administration by implying that there are many kinds of criminal demands placed on people, and those made by governments result in “far greater violence” than those made by men in prison.

The story of Juleson’s death and Chilly’s decline is punctuated by another: Stick’s attempt to escape from San Quentin by the fantastic, stolen means of a hot air balloon. After killing his roommate and stealing the materials he needs, Stick blasts the balloon off the prison roof, setting the prison on fire in the process. Eighty-six people are killed in the blaze (unless a few escaped in the confusion), and Stick is paralyzed from the waist down by his fall. We are told that the warden’s responsibility for the fire was “nominal since the building had been condemned for years, and the appropriation for razing and the construction of new units had been passed over many times” (323). This explanation is perfectly unexceptional, the standard response: “the disaster was not relevant to the prison, but could have happened anywhere, in any public or private facility” (323).
No one is responsible because conditions are no more deplorable here than anywhere else.

*On the Yard* captures the “normalcy” of prison life, or what Michael Taussig calls the “normality of the abnormal” (18). “It was true,” the narrator comments, “facilities throughout the state were dangerously overcrowded, but the cynics maintained they would be housed three to a cell before a single man was released early” (38). During Braly’s time, San Quentin housed 5,000 inmates. Today that number is 6,000, twice the capacity the prison was designed to hold when it was built by prisoners in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1983, Judge Beverly B. Savitt ordered an end to overcrowding and the “cruel and unusual conditions,” which “fall far below basic standards of human decency” (Associated Press). After another court-ordered inspection, this one focused on health care, Robert Sillen, California’s new Corrections Department Inspector General, announced in April 2006 that San Quentin is operating “at about 200% capacity” and called the present conditions “shameful”: “There is needless death, and there is needless illness being created by either the lack of medical care in the prison system, or the receipt of medical care in the system” (“New Prison”). The stress, disease, and injury under these conditions, as Braly so clearly understood, cannot be considered an unanticipated or even unplanned event. The novel makes suggestive comparisons between an unaccountable Department of Corrections and the U.S. military, between a ruthless capitalist system and its lethal practitioners on the yard, between public and private building violations that insure injury or death. Details coalesce into a portrait of routine violence and catastrophic disregard. Lethem refers to the novel’s “deceptively casual architecture” (vii). The politics of the novel are also “deceptively casual,” quietly surmising the violence fundamental to the design of prisons and prison-based cultures.

**Borders of Sexuality/Standard Procedure**

Toward the end of the novel, the narrative zeroes in on Chilly, and a final border, the intimate one separating homosexuality and heterosexuality, comes into focus. Against his bribed arrangements, Chilly is assigned a cellmate, a “small, slender, good-looking” drag queen named Martin and known as Candy Cane. Initially Chilly intends to have Martin moved out of his cell, but after Chilly is beaten by the Goon Squad for his refusal to cooperate with the investigation into Juleson’s death, Chilly becomes receptive to Martin. They fall into a stereotypically hierarchical, domestic arrangement, Martin cleaning the cell and Chilly’s boots while Chilly reads the paper. One night they get high, and Chilly begins to talk to Martin “on an entirely different level, telling old jailhouse stories” (301). He notices how beautiful Martin’s skin is:
As the moment expanded he had a diffuse sense of his own multiple selves, he could be anyone, anywhere, changing identities on each heartbeat. It became clear to him that as a child he had nourished himself at a witch’s tit, and the volatile fluid hissing from the hot nipple had turned cold as it entered him, searching through his body to fill the large cavities, where it froze into the permanence of a malignant enchantment. Now he had a vision of how he might be free of it. (301)

In this vision, Chilly encounters a sense of his “multiple selves,” a protean subjectivity unfettered by place or time: “he could be anyone, anywhere.” He traces his loss of such knowledge back to “a witch’s tit,” which poisoned his body, filling his cavities and freezing “into the permanence of a malignant enchantment.” The passage offers a stunningly precise phrase to describe compulsory heterosexuality, “a malignant enchantment,” but does so through a misogynist metaphor that lays total responsibility for imposed desire on the mother, notably the toxic, invasive mother’s body.9

In his depiction of sexual and erotic lives, Braly offers a fictional take on the “fugitive status of prison sex as forged by prisoners themselves” (Kunzel, 266). As he becomes attracted to Martin, Chilly feels marvelously detached from his surroundings and sees himself from a new vantage point:

He was observing everything, even his most intimate self, from the vantage of one of his other existences, and he had lost the feeling that what was happening to his body was necessarily happening to him. He was prepared to recognize that there were entire continents of his spiritual geography which were still alien to him . . . [N]ow he was ready to learn, because beyond the jungle he sensed mountains where it was possible to climb and climb into a cold clear light. (301–02)

Chilly imagines an ascent to a desired and elusive place of natural light, his mind temporarily free from the restraining orders of a heteronormative culture and hostile prison environment. He maps unfamiliar geography, the “alien” within, and places Martin’s hand “where he wanted it and where it wanted to be” (302). When he realizes the “nature of the collaboration his hands were involving him in,” Chilly panics and resorts to his usual mode, hitting Martin with an open hand. Chilly apologizes, and Martin responds with “the patient fatalism of someone who lives by a difficult and dangerous job” (303).

This “fatalism” line allows a rare and telling glimpse into Martin’s perspective. The narrative does not provide access to Martin’s thoughts, so there is only dialogue and action, occurring in an uneven power dynamic, with which to interpret his motives. (See the “it” in the above quotation,
referring to the desire of Martin’s hand.) Even knowing how to refer to Martin/Candy is difficult. He says he dislikes both “Martin” (which means “warlike”) and “Candy” (which was forced upon him), but claims to prefer “Candy.” After they have sex for the first time, Chilly switches from using “he” (“Martin”) to “she” (“Candy”)—and the narrative voice follows, so to speak, his lead. (As a way of signaling and resisting the narrative’s definition of this character through Chilly, I will continue to use “Martin.”)

Sent by his parents to a juvenile facility to be “cured” of homosexuality, Martin tells Chilly that he was “done more ways that I thought was possible, whether I wanted it or not. They treated me like property, handing me around from one to another” (296). Some of the imprisoned men, including Chilly, threaten similar abuse. Caught within, to borrow from Howard Cunnell, a “conservative social policy that might be said to be compulsively masculine in its iteration of a harsh, ‘get tough’ sensibility towards crime” (97), many of the white male characters in On the Yard reflect this same kind of authoritative, punishing zeal in their control of others. They argue over who is going to “get” “Candy,” and Martin continually has to assert his humanity, telling Chilly, “I’m a person. You can’t take that away from me. I’m a person” (252).

It is possible to see Martin’s interest in Chilly as strictly a self-preservation move, a way of gaining a limited kind of protection by seducing the most powerful man on the yard—“a difficult and dangerous job.” In addition to protection from others, Chilly gives Martin commissary goods, a rhinestone watch, and access to drugs. It is also possible to see Martin as attracted to Chilly. When Chilly asks why Martin would not want to live on queen’s row—a segregated space for men deemed effeminate—Martin replies, “I know what moves me” (300). And Martin refers affectionately to a friend on the outside who is “very butch.” Although Martin’s personal interest in Chilly is never articulated, the Department’s desire to entrap Chilly is. Sanitary Slim accurately predicts, “You’ll get yours—you and your pretty punk. Your time’s coming” (299). Oblivious to his vulnerability, Chilly begins “feeling good on and off cotton,” and he and Martin spend all their time together.

In the beginning, Chilly watches Martin “moving with a studied gracefulness that was somehow too exaggerated to be truly feminine. It was mimicry” (248). Later, the “element of caricature in her walk had increased, but Chilly no longer saw it, and Red never had” (330). Chilly partially unlearns his gendered vision, and Society Red, who has spent almost his entire life behind bars, never had it, had never been fully initiated into the “normal” gender taxonomy. Chilly crosses a line that he thought he never would; the line “had fallen away like a strand of cobweb the first time he touched it, and he had pitched into an area of awareness that had either been beyond or forbidden to his imagination. He no longer
ined when his hands, or even his mouth betrayed him” (308). With one touch, the border between heterosexuality and homosexuality falls away, and Chilly finds “some expression of life” by welcoming Martin into his bunk (336).

Sexual relations in prison have long confounded attempts to make strict sexual distinctions. “Situational homosexuality” is the phrase often used to describe the practices of putatively heterosexual men and women in sex-segregated locales. Jonathan Katz stipulates, “The term is fallacious if it implies that there is some ‘true’ homosexuality which is not situated. All homosexuality [all sexuality, Katz specifies more clearly in The Invention of Heterosexuality] is situational, influenced and given meaning and character by its location in time and social space” (qtd. in Kunzel, 254). George Chauncey similarly refers to “situational homosexuality” as a “culturally blind concept” (91).

Regina Kunzel argues that sexual experiences inside prisons force us to reconsider the “sexual present we presume to know” (256). According to the prevailing history of sexuality, in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States, sexual acts that had not previously been constitutive of identity became determining; a machinery of scientific classification emerged and invented the “homosexual,” then the “heterosexual.” (The “situational homosexual” appeared in the mid-twentieth century.) As with premodern and modern systems of punishments, this discursive shift was not decisive. Eve Sedgwick argues that earlier conceptions of sexual activities are not simply displaced by newer categories but inhere in later formulations. And incautious applications of terms retroactively in historical analysis can result in what Katz calls a “distorting effect” (7–8).

Kunzel calls attention to an academic disinterest in sex-segregated spaces, a reluctance to complicate further the study of sexuality by including scenes that can be dismissed as unnatural, coerced, and/or temporary. Definitional difficulties are amplified in a locked culture of violence. Alan Elsner argues that abusive relationships between men in prison are often misinterpreted as consensual or simply ignored by officials. Terry Kupers suggests, “It may appear to be sex between consenting adults but many men only ‘consent’ to being penetrated out of fear that refusal will lead to more beatings and rape” (qtd. in Elsner, 64). Elsner cites numerous studies that offer a similar conclusion: “prison rape in the United States is a devastating human rights abuse of massive proportions” (62). A former inmate, Roderick Johnson, described in a deposition the sexual assaults he suffered in a Texas prison. He was called by a woman’s name and referred to by other inmates as a “she”: “If you are homosexual, you are considered a female among these men and you will take on the name of a female. You do not have a right to have your own name used. . . . And if you’re considered female in the general population, then you are considered someone
that’s available for sexual exploitation’” (qtd. in Elsner, 64)—a rather dev-
astating comment on what it means to be female anywhere.

In a complex move in False Starts, Braly casts doubt on the percep-
tion that rape in prison is a common occurrence. With regard to sexual
assault of young men, he writes, “I’m sure this has happened, I’m sure it’s happen-
ing somewhere today, but in my own experience . . . it always happened somewhere else in another town, and it seems clear these stories
describe more of our sexual ambivalence than they do any common real-
ity” (106). Braly recognizes that public outrage over (or fascination with) rape in prison results more from “sexual ambivalence,” or homophobia,
than from serious concern about human rights abuses. The accuracy of
Braly’s observation should not, however, obscure the reality of sexual
crimes in prisons.12

In the work that has been done on sexuality in sex-segregated spac-
es, primarily by social scientists, Kunzel identifies a couple of rhetorical
tendencies. First, the sexual practices of people living in prisons, boarding
schools, and the armed services are described as if they were somehow
outside of history. The significance of these relations is minimized precisely
(and oddly) because they have “always” happened. Secondly, some social
scientists have attempted to “make sense” of homosexual activity in prison
by invoking a heterosexual paradigm—one dictated by gendered and ra-
cialized hierarchies: in male relationships, effeminate men (“fairies”) are
the “women,” and masculine men (“wolves”) are the “men”; in interracial
relationships between women, white women are the “women,” and black
women are the “men.” Kunzel summarizes:

Homosexuality was heterosexuality; the unnatural was natural. Not
surprisingly, the seams of these strained constructions sometimes
showed. “It is an anomaly to speak of ‘normal sex perversions,’” Negley
K. Teeters wrote uneasily in his 1937 history of the Pennsylvania prison
system, “but that is a fairly good descriptive term to apply to what oc-
curs when persons of the same sex are deprived, for long periods of
time, of normal relationships with members of the opposite sex.” (262)

This realignment was needed to prevent the potentially “corrosive” effects
of prisoners’ sexual experience on larger cultural assumptions about hetero-
sexuality (265). David Halperin reminds us that “prominent psychologists,
sociologists, and jurists today” continue to contrast “pseudo-homosexuality,”
“situational” or “opportunistic” homosexuality with “what they call, for lack
of a better word, ‘real’ homosexuality” (114). Homosexual activity in prison
has to be seen as entirely detached from “normal” relations, and a confident
line drawn between what goes on inside, “circumstantially,” and what goes
on outside, “naturally.”
Chauncey identifies the speciousness of this argument by examining the early twentieth-century New York City Jail. He documents how sexual attitudes and practices inside were closely linked to those on the outside (91). Braly depicts San Quentin as this kind of borderland, a zone apart that participates in wider cultural patterns. Like the men in Chauncey’s study, characters in Braly’s novel use familiar sexist terms to describe gay men—"sissy," "stuff," "pussy," "fairy," "freak"—while casually accepting sexual acts between men. Society Red tries to fool Chilly with a picture of a man in drag, asking him if he’d like to "'stick this fine freak bitch.'" Chilly flips to the front of the magazine, sees the title, *Gay,* and replies that he would begin to worry about himself if he couldn’t tell "'a sissy from a broad.'" Red retorts, "'As far as I’m concerned there ain’t no difference. Action’s action'" (90). Red maintains this line throughout the novel, vying for Martin when he arrives and on occasion flirting with men. Chilly, who (at first) makes it clear that he "don’t play" (253), calls out to his departing friend, "'Hey, Red, let me look at that freak book'” (94). Likewise, Caterpillar flirts with Chilly and echoes Red’s take: "'Ah, what the hell, Chilly,' Caterpillar said equitably. ‘What difference does it make? Hips, lips, or armpits—I don’t turn nothing down’” (253).

Since not all twentieth-century spaces have been equally defined by modern sexual ideologies, Kunzel wonders how the actual experience of those in prison—"where situational homosexuality arguably takes its quintessential form” (254)—fits into the prevailing theory of sexual history. Kunzel cites a passage from Jack Henry Abbott’s letters in which Abbott refers to his sexual relations with men in prison: "'I took it, without reflection or the slightest doubt, that this was a natural sex that emerged within the society of men . . . it never occurred to any of us that this was strange and unnatural. It is how I grew up—a natural part of my life in prison’” (qtd. on 256). Like Abbott, Braly speaks in his autobiography frankly and undramatically about his sexual activity with men in prison. Such experiences reveal the permeability of the border between homosexuality and heterosexuality, making clear that “desire and even sexual subject position [are] fleeting and unstable, produced at particular moments, in particular circumstances” (Kunzel, 265).

At San Quentin, Braly was suspected of being “a latent homosexual” and forced to undergo specialized tests that were designed to uncover “deviance” and smart enough, he was warned, to detect when someone was lying. The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) consisted of over twelve hundred questions. Here is Braly’s description:

I began to notice a series of questions that appeared tautological. *I would like to be a flower arranger.* That was easy to answer. No. *If I were a reporter, I would like to cover the ballet.* This was on the edge, but I said No. *If I were
a reporter, I would like to cover sporting events. I told my first outright lie and said Yes. I would enjoy the work of a forest ranger. I could say Yes to this, I would like to write poetry. Here I abandoned myself and said No. (164)

Braly scored “firmly in the safe male zone of the M/F index” (165).

At his discharge hearing years later, Braly was questioned again by prison officials: “Once again they asked if I was homosexual, and once more, I wearily denied the charges. Why did they ask? They weren’t dull men. But if this was my problem, they could hardly imagine all these years in prison had cured me. And if I had said, ‘Yes, I am. I admit it.’ Would they have said, ‘Well, don’t be like that’” (False Starts, 365). Braly satirizes the absurd futility of the sexual surveillance mechanism while hinting at the inapplicability of the identity-based term to his experience. In his writing, he arrives at Halperin’s recognition that the study of sexuality, “at its most adventurous, can be a history of erotic subjectivity, not simply of sexual classifications, categories, or representations” (89).

With the same alacrity with which the narrative breaks down perceived borders between old and new prison systems, between captive and “free” cultures, it explicitly takes on the conceptualization of sexual borders. Society Red asks Nunn what they should do about Chilly and Martin, who have rarely left their cell in three weeks.

“Is Chilly doing anything you wouldn’t do?” he [Nunn] asked.
“That’s different.”
“Maybe not so different . . .” For a moment Nunn fell silent with a diffuse vision, as if one of Chilly’s educations had lingered in his mind, and he considered how circumstances might draw an identical response from each of a thousand individuals as if the illusion of difference was all in how the matter of their lives had been reflected through the prism of experience. (312)

Nunn reflects on the claim of situational homosexuality, yet he does not stop with a simple nod to compelling circumstances. His “diffuse vision” leads him away from the social scientists’ conclusion that circumstance is a departure from the norm, from an altogether different sexual nature. Instead, Nunn suspects that the difference itself is illusory, that circumstances reveal the arbitrariness of the categories—or, to paraphrase Katz, circumstances reveal the unavoidability of circumstances.

To live in prison is to be subject to a particular mode of control, which includes the power of the state to intervene, literally, in sexual relations. After being implicated in several deaths, Chilly is set up by the prison administration to be “apprehended in the performance of a homosexual
Guards barge in on Chilly and Martin having sex, and one of them flashes a picture, “a blow aimed directly into his eyes” (337). The violence of the diction is clear, and aimed at the eyes, the source for the alternate vision the text has been introducing. Caterpillar later complains to Red that “that bitch spoiled a boss hustler.” Red responds, “Chilly just found something he dug more than stacking up piles of butts and playing big man in this crummy side show we live in” (343). Red’s normative response crystallizes what has been missing from modern sexual histories: a theorization of erotic lives not defined by a binary or third term but shaped by the complexity of sexuality, the force of “erotic subjectivity.”

None of this is of interest to the other party we see responding to the relationship—the prison administration. Standard procedure (another hallmark of the modern prison is its professionalism) requires that a form letter be sent to female family members from the Correctional Captain.

Dear Madam,

Your son/husband [son had been x’ed out, but on Chilly’s own it would be husband that would be struck] has been apprehended in the performance of a homosexual act. It is felt that you have a right to this information, since it may someday have a bearing on your welfare and safety. Rest assured, though this constitutes a serious infraction of the institutional rules, subject will also receive the best treatment it is within our power to provide. (brackets in original; 339)

Here is the official, disciplinary machinery that patrols privacy, defining normal and abnormal, healthy and unhealthy. Monika Fludernik describes its impact on the imprisoned body: “Complete lack of intimacy as in Bentham’s *Panopticon* (or in the prison cages of present-day U.S. American penitentiaries) destroys the boundaries of the body. Confine-ment is no longer experienced as a restriction of (centrifugal) physical movement but as an (ingressive) invasion of the private sphere, an invasion that renders both the actual cell and the prisoner’s very body transparent to external forces” (62). In this way, Fludernik suggests, all prisoners are to some degree feminized. Indeed, after humiliating proctological exams to determine who was “pitching” and who was “catching” (338), Martin is sent to queen’s row, and Chilly is placed under psychiatric treatment.

Writing and Resistance

*Take this hammer, take it to the Cap’n,*  
*Tell him I’se gone, boy, tell him I’se gone.* (341)

—Epigraph to final chapter of *On the Yard*
Mikhail Bakhtin concludes “Discourse in the Novel” with this reminder: “great novelistic images continue to grow and develop even after the moment of their creation; they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their original birth” (422). On the Yard continues to “grow and develop,” reminding us of how far we have not come with regard to justice in the United States. The narrative ends where it begins: on the yard with Society Red viewing his surroundings, counting days. The last word is “nothing,” Red’s response to Caterpillar’s reverberating question, “‘What else is new?’” (348). This final conversation gestures toward the brutal cycle of imprisoned lives that remains a central part of U.S. American contemporary culture. Still, the aesthetic, political, and, I would presume, personal achievement of the novel lessens some of the despair. Braly began to compose On the Yard while living under conditions designed to break minds and bodies, and he continued to write, against parole orders, after his release. The act of writing itself was a form of resistance to a corrections system that assumes the right to dictate appropriate subject matter: “the fiction is what saved Braly’s life,” Franklin concludes (Prison Literature, 183).

Braly gives us a multitiered, multi-perspectival narrative about culture, power, emotions, sexualities, and imaginations—alien places with high walls, watch towers, occasional windows. On the Yard confirms the inadequacy of thinking too narrowly about the borders of (prison) culture, (modern) history, and (homo) sexuality. The novel enables the phenomenological work of unmasking the obvious and the political work of exposing “the normality of the abnormal.” The very mundanity of Braly’s San Quentin reveals the terror that underwrites our contemporary moment, which makes all but inevitable a diminished concern about human rights violations and, perhaps more devastatingly, a diminished capacity to recognize such violations at all.

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NOTES

Many thanks to my colleague, Professor John Ernest, for his invaluable comments on a draft of this essay.

1. In 1977, H. Bruce Franklin published an overview and analysis of Braly’s writing in Contemporary Literature, now also in Franklin’s Prison Literature.

2. For the history of black Americans in the U.S. prison system, see Oshinsky, Davis, Mauer, Franklin, Hames-García, and Miller.

3. The black male characters in On the Yard occupy a complicated narrative space that warrants a full analysis, as does Charlie Wong who pulls on the mask of the “Chinaman” when needed. Franklin speculates that before his death Braly had
moved toward greater insight in the area of race consciousness. The publisher of his unfinished novel had insisted that Braly remove the black revolutionary characters because “otherwise they wouldn’t sell it in the South” (Prison Literature, 206).

4. See James, Resisting, 29–30; Conquergood, 341; Bunyan, 174. For further critiques of Foucault’s history, see Alford, Whitmer, Miller, and Hames-García.

5. See Fludernik for an extensive analysis of metaphors associated with premodern and modern prison systems.

6. Men in Angola, a maximum-security prison in Louisiana, continue to publish the impressive magazine Angolite, and in 2004 Renaldo Hudson and Bill Ryan founded Stateville Speaks, a quarterly newspaper with contributors from prisons across Illinois.

7. See Joseph T. Hallinan, 79–81, and James Francken. For a critique of Spector’s use of bibliotherapy, see Megan Sweeney, 604–06.

8. Garland argues that progressive critiques of penal-welfarism were adopted by mainstream parties to agitate for the elimination, rather than improvement, of educational and therapeutic programs. Also see Hallinan (32–38); Franklin Prison Writing (14–15) and Prison Literature (xi–xiii). For a review of studies on rehabilitation, see Hames-García, 148–65; for recidivism and education, see Daniel Karpowitz. Bell Gale Chevigny uses the phrase “meaningful rehabilitation,” then adds, “I used to mistrust the word—rehabilitation belonged to the bureaucrats. But it has fallen into such disuse that its honorable potential seems restored” (503–04).

9. Braly’s indirect free discourse conveys anti-woman scapegoating at other moments as well. Chilly thinks of brutal, remote San Francisco as a “Lesbian Whore” and of a long prison sentence as the “bitch.” Juleson, whose wife died of internal hemorrhaging after he had beaten her, rationalizes that “she had provoked him, as she had many times in the past, until he had done just what she wanted” (270). Manning insists to a therapist that his fifteen-year-old stepdaughter “responded” to him the night he raped her: “He had been both shocked and delighted at the vigor of her response” (127).

10. Chilly’s actions recall Halperin’s description of premodern sexual hierarchies. The more powerful man, in terms of age or status, received his sexual satisfaction without jeopardizing his gendered or sexual status. Presumably on the giving end, the junior partner must be rewarded, as Martin is, “in currencies other than pleasure, such as praise, assistance, gifts, or money” (116).

11. See Kunzel for the history of this kind of segregation in prisons: “The expectation that ‘normal’ men would be tempted by ‘fairies’ underlay the decision of officials in nearly every large penitentiary to classify and segregate prison populations” (257).


WORKS CITED


