Years before Rocky Graziano, the fiercely competitive boxer with a powerful punch, became middleweight champion in 1947, he was just another anxious teenager awaiting transportation from the Tombs to Coxsackie. An older prisoner, perhaps to taunt the younger Graziano, warned him: “Don’t kid yourself . . . that’s a state prison, that ain’t no reform school. They put kids in there for life, kids that are too young to send to the chair.”1 While no one actually went to Coxsackie for life—nearly everyone had a three-year maximum term—the warning echoed the general tenor of pre-arrival advice: be careful, be aware of how little you are prepared, focus on survival, and understand that you are headed to a real prison. For all of their legal entanglements and institutional experience, few new arrivals to Coxsackie had ever been in a state prison before, and few had been as far removed from family, neighborhood, and home as they were when they reached the reformatory nestled in the rural Hudson Valley. Graziano recalled the train trip up from New York City: “I suddenly felt sick . . . They were taking me away from New York City for the first time in my life. Every minute I was farther away from the East Side . . . It would be a beautiful day on the East Side. It was almost June. The sun would be beating down on the roofs, shining on the wings of all the pigeons. The streets would be full of stick-ball games and everybody’s windows would be open and the crap games would move outdoors to the stoops and you would feel wonderful.”2 Feelings of being uprooted from home mixed with anxiety about the institutional life ahead of new arrivals.

For the teenage boys sent on “the big train ride,” finding and maintaining their place in the social system of the prison became the key to survival.3 This struggle, far more than any educational or vocational program, defined life behind bars at the reformatory. In this respect, the “rehabilitative” prison at
Coxsackie looked very much like its more punitive contemporaries. Historian David Rothman once observed that progressive prison reforms were ultimately “up against the wall”—by which he meant that efforts at rehabilitation were inevitably subordinated to the demands of secure custody and discipline. As a way of expanding on this insight, it may be helpful to observe that, at Coxsackie, the inmates were literally up against the prison wall. Every day, they gathered along the walls of the prison yard during their outdoor time, in space starkly divided by race and ethnicity. Against these walls, prisoner survival required constant displays of toughness and masculinity, preying on the weak without violating the boundaries set by institutional authorities.

Just how reformatory life at Coxsackie came to be defined by a racially segregated and violent social system is the sort of question that has occupied correctional researchers for many decades. Some of the earliest and most important work on prison life stressed what would come to be known as “deprivation,” or “prisonization,” theory: that the artificial world of the prison created its own distinct (and equally artificial) social system. Prison life, from this perspective, could be accounted for solely by reference to prisons themselves. Later scholars rightly challenged the overly determined character of deprivation theory, making the case that a richer account of prison life had to consider the values and identities that prisoners imported into the institution. Importation theory emphasized the pre-prison context, arguing that social experience and individual personality were more determinative of behavior behind bars.4

Coxsackie’s history suggests that historians can most profitably try to integrate elements of both models, taking care to understand the historically dynamic elements of each. On the one hand, what Graziano and his fellow inmates carried with them into Coxsackie mattered a great deal. As chapter 3 has already shown, they brought with them pronounced ideas about school, family, work, and authority. They imported into Coxsackie models of dominant masculinity that would define power relations between them, filtered through deep interracial hostility. On the other hand, Coxsackie was another world from the one they knew. The reformatory gave young men precious few outlets for expressing masculinity, offered near-constant challenges to its maintenance, and responded with brutal violence to those who became too assertive or resisted authority. In the very act of removing thousands of adolescent boys from across New York and housing them in a rural upstate prison, the state created an environment that could not help but represent a distinct lived experience.

Every prison was not Coxsackie, and Coxsackie was not every prison—what it came to be emerged from a specific mixture of adolescent experiences and
attitudes, prison space, and institutional policies (both formal and informal). Life behind reformatory bars is told here, as much as possible, in the words of those who lived it. They include a surprising number of well-known figures, but also many prisoners known only through the words and actions recorded in their case files. Individual voices, brought together once again, tell a story far removed from the ambitions of the liberal reformers who built Coxsackie. Their accounts include memories of abuse, humiliation, and victimization that constitute a shameful legacy for New York State. This legacy remains largely hidden from public memory; we have forgotten not only the painful consequences of imprisonment at Coxsackie, but also what the experience itself was like.

**Quarantine: Adolescents Uprooted**

Every prisoner spent the first two weeks in quarantine at Coxsackie, during which time he tried to assess what the prison experience would mean. The process certainly emphasized the distinctiveness of reformatory life. New arrivals came into Coxsackie and immediately exchanged their street clothes for a state prison uniform (brown or green or gray at varying times over the years) and their number—a number that “none of those who spent time at Coxsackie would ever forget.”5 As for quarantine itself, it was, in the words of Rocky Graziano, “a two-week deal, while they give you medical exams, shots, interviews, all that.”6 For all the care that reformers took with the planning of the quarantine period, few prisoner accounts acknowledge much more to its rehabilitative aspect than Graziano’s indifferent summary.7

Prisoner accounts of quarantine do not dwell much on the vocational interviews or the psychological assessments because, for new arrivals, these were far from the most salient matters to which they had to attend. More than anything else, the young men in quarantine worried about their survival at Coxsackie, and the process by which they could navigate a social universe as novel as it was artificial. Few brought with them definite ideas. Some had been given advice by older friends, gang members, or neighborhood ex-prisoners, advice that usually emphasized how tough the place was compared with the experience of a juvenile reformatory. Coxsackie inmates sought to get the word back home to friends, even as they remained behind bars. Two inmates attempted to communicate with a mutual friend in New York City by adding a message to a letter written to one inmate’s mother. The advice was direct and to the point: “Take it slow old man because this is tough slammers [sic] to be in, its hard.”8

Like so many letters by and for Coxsackie’s prisoners, this word of warning was confiscated by prison censors and placed in the case file. The great physical
distance between prisoners and home was accentuated by the rigid limitations on contact with networks of friends and family on the outside. Every inmate was allowed to include a short list of immediate family members on a visitation and correspondence list; institutional authorities forbade prisoner contact with anyone else while in prison. The case files suggest that even the family members on the visitation list were not able to visit often. Travel from New York City, or upstate cities like Buffalo and Rochester, involved considerable time and expense, and few prisoners’ families had enough of either to allow for frequent visits. Dhoruba Bin Wahad had only a single visitor at Coxsackie before being transferred to another prison, and he recalled: “The Bureau of Prisons [sic] made it so difficult and costly for a person of limited means to navigate the prison bureaucracy and get to the facility that visits were rare to nonexistent.” Past lives and imagined futures were, for the most part, replaced by the overwhelmingly alien and forbidding present of the quarantine cell.

The experience of quarantine emphasized the new sense of isolation, and their only contacts with the general prison population reinforced their sense of entering a new world. Frankie Moreno encountered this sense in the daily trips to and from the mess hall, “marching in columns of two (military style with an angry guard barking orders, ‘eyes front,’ ‘about face,’ ‘halt’).” As the new arrivals marched, Moreno recalled, “we were eyed by the hawks looking for easy prey . . . Anyone showing too much sensitivity was a target; the ones wearing their fear on their sleeves would have it the hardest. I marched with just enough of a ‘screw you’ swagger that I hoped they got the message not to mess with me.”

One inmate thought about the cars passing by on highway 9W as the gate closed behind him, hopefully imagining that their drivers, given a chance to go behind bars, would sympathize with Coxsackie’s “sorry load of humanity.” Another young prisoner found no such comfort in an imagined solidarity with the drivers in the distance: “All I could do was think and look out to the open area before me, where I saw crops growing on a farm and seven houses that I thought were farmhouses but found out later were the residences of the warden and the staff. The best view of all was of highway 9W where the cars rushed by, all having destinations, oblivious to this one black soul who could do nothing but look and wonder where they were off to.”

**In the Yard: The Shock of Segregation**

Inmates began their first day in general population by moving their personal items to the assigned cell block or dormitory space, and then heading to their school or shop assignment for the morning (most new arrivals divided the day
between school and vocational shop, with one assignment in the morning and one in the afternoon). After the morning’s educational and vocational work had concluded, new prisoners joined the rest of the prison population in heading to the cafeteria for lunch. After lunch, it was time to move outdoors to the prison yard, the space that—more than any other—would define the Coxsackie experience for inmates.

Although Coxsackie was touted at its opening as a prison without walls, the with-or-without walls distinction must have been lost on the prisoners themselves, as few of them ever had much time to spend outside (those assigned to work the prison farm were the biggest exception). Instead, Coxsackie fashioned its outdoor space from a massive courtyard (about the size of a football field) formed by the surrounding cellblocks. The outdoor space was just as walled off as any prison space could be, probably more so given the great height of the imposing cellblocks that surrounded the hundreds of young men who gathered below. And to reinforce the point, armed guards patrolled the rooftops, looking down on the gathering prisoners.13

The yard, then, was hardly the pastoral setting one might have imagined from how the new reformatory had been promoted. The real shock of the yard, however, had less to do with the grimness of the space. Rather, young arrivals were taken aback by the absolute racial segregation imposed in the yard. Long-time Brooklyn-based activist Abubadika Sonny Carson, who was launched into black nationalist politics by his experience in the reformatory, described “the [segregated] way the inmates gathered there” as absolutely shocking. In his memoir, Carson recalled, “All of the blacks were concentrated on one side and all the whites, with Puerto Ricans intermingled, gathered on the opposite side. As I walked down the steps, I perceived what segregation was all about. So I headed into a particular direction on the side of the yard where all the blacks were located.”14 Prisoners gathered against the walls of the yard, and all new arrivals found themselves forced to assume their assigned place in the racial geography. Former inmate, and later political activist, Ronald Casanova recalled the futility of resistance to the racial order as a black Puerto Rican: “When I first went into Coxsackie I even walked the middle for a little while because I didn’t believe in segregation. But as a means to survive, once again I decided I’d better join a group.”15

Casanova’s reluctance to submit to the racial division at Coxsackie highlights some important interpretive questions: Was the yard’s organization a product of the prisoners or their keepers? Was Coxsackie’s yard historically contingent or part of some more timeless and universal way of ordering prison space? To the
former question, the racial segregation does not seem to have been imported into Coxsackie by the prisoners; at least, the separation of the reformatory yard was unlike anything that most adolescents had ever experienced. On the contrary, most accounts suggest that the yard seemed, in the words of one inmate, “like a sick kind of joke” at first encounter. Eric Schneider’s insightful work on postwar gangs in New York City reminds us that “interethnic” gang conflicts were often waged by gangs with a multiethnic composition, and that in rapidly changing environments, “rigidly drawn lines demarcating one ethnic group’s turf from another’s simply could not be maintained.”

At Coxsackie, on the other hand, racial lines appear to have been rigidly drawn and aggressively maintained, as they had been back in the House of Refuge, and this almost certainly had the approval of the institutional administration, particularly the custodial staff. One inmate saw prison segregation as an instrument of survival, but one that was distinctly sharpened in the prison environment: “You talk about segregation, prison is the place to find it because that’s how you stay alive.” Every prisoner account of Coxsackie from this period makes at least some reference to the race and racism behind bars as well as the overwhelming barriers the institution raised between white and black inmates. A black prisoner from Buffalo recalled Coxsackie as his “first experience with segregation that was officially reinforced and encouraged.” A white prisoner at Coxsackie recalled that he and black inmates “could not talk to each other. Couldn’t look at each other at one of these institutions. They have separatism right down to the water you drink. You have separatism in your eating and job areas . . . I was very fortunate. I was white, for one thing, and this is status in a prison.”

Separation bred hostility. Ronald Casanova observed: “Coxsackie was a very prejudiced place. Not only were there guards against the inmates, but also the inmates against each other. You lived under that pressure all the time.” The racial divisions among the inmates, and their use of violence to enforce solidarity, were an essential fact of life from the moment the reformatory opened. A visiting researcher in 1937 took note of the “constant antagonisms that prevail between the two color groups.” “If a colored boy hits a white guy, even a creeper,” the researcher reported, “all the white guys, regardless of benches, go over and beat the Negroes.” The domination of the white inmates was easier to maintain at Coxsackie, where black inmates were a minority of the population throughout this period. Charles McGregor, who went on to have an active career acting in films such as Super Fly and Blazing Saddles, recalled that when he entered the reformatory in 1940, “there weren’t enough of us blacks to win any fights
against the white inmates, so for a long time we didn’t pick any fights. . . . In New York State, racism is institutionalized in prisons.”

Puerto Rican inmates, universally referred to as “spicks” at Coxsackie, suffered from both their small numbers and their ambiguous racial status in the prison. As one terrified young inmate confided to an investigator, “They don’t like fellows they call Spick.” Their side of the prison yard was called “Spain,” in keeping with the habit of Puerto Rican youths in New York City self-identifying as Spanish, at least in part to reject any common identity with the city’s African Americans. The case file sample includes only thirteen Puerto Rican inmates (3.5% of the total sample), reflecting what appears to have been a deliberate policy of steering Spanish-speaking inmates away from Coxsackie and toward institutions for inmates of lower intelligence. This trend continued after the period covered by the case file sample. By the mid-1950s, nearly 25 percent of new commitments to the Woodbourne reformatory—for adolescents of “borderline intelligence”—were Puerto Rican, as opposed to roughly 6 percent of new commitments to Coxsackie. Those who did make it to the Coxsackie reformatory found themselves dealing with the hazards of their unstable place in the institution. Their status, recalled one inmate, “was like a pendulum and when the system had a problem, say [with] one pole, Black or white, the pendulum would swing one way or the other depending on what the onus was. So the Puerto Rican was either white or Black given the circumstances . . . And this was sort of a control mechanism because there was no unity.”

Bop City: Masculinity, Violence, and Inmate Life

For Coxsackie’s inmates, life in and beyond the prison yard involved a series of challenges to their masculinity. Reformatory boys took advantage of every opportunity, therefore, to demonstrate their manhood and earn the respect of their peers. In the yard, this took the form of constant bragging and storytelling, either about crimes committed (or to be committed in the future) or sexual exploits. One young braggart was future middleweight boxing champion Jake La Motta. LaMotta recalled in his memoir *Raging Bull*, “All we did was gather up in little groups and yak—even in a place like that the guys break up into gangs, most of which hate each other’s guts, and they talk about breaking out or lie about the number of broads they’ve laid or other things they haven’t done.”

Clothing and personal style were, as on the outside, the other great signifiers of status. In the fifties, the “diddy-bopper walk”—the defiant strut of the gang member—became known on the streets of New York City as the “Coxsackie shuffle” in honor of the reformatory where it was so well practiced. Disciplinary
reports in the case files show constant thefts of oil for prisoners to use in slicking back their hair, as well numerous citations for inmates modifying their uniforms in unapproved fashion. These small gestures of independence carried real meaning in the reformatory environment.

Two prisoners from the case file sample, both transferred from Coxsackie as “incorrigible” in 1945, show the maintenance of a masculine identity at work. Donald M., sent to Coxsackie in 1943 for auto theft, had attempted an escape. While in solitary, he attempted to pass a series of notes that were confiscated and placed in his case file. They reveal Donald’s efforts to maintain his peer status. His note to the superintendent was pleading and full of remorse, while notes written to fellow inmates were full of bravado. In them, he bragged about how thoroughly the guards had been beating him and threatened the prisoner responsible for informing authorities of his escape plan: “If I get the rat, he’ll get knifed.” In another letter, Donald urged someone to smuggle him “smokes” and some lard from the prison kitchen so that he could slick his hair. Prison guards also confiscated a booklet of poems Donald had written. Entitled *Prison Songs 1944*, they included a number of reflections on taking prison discipline with courage, including “21 Years in Sing Sing.”

Gary R. was also a prison poet, though his work played up his dominance over women, including “Pimping Sam” and “Miss Bitch”—both of which were also confiscated. Like Donald, Gary had been sent to Coxsackie in 1943 for stealing a car—though unlike Donald, a white inmate from Duchess County who had been adjudicated a wayward minor, Gary (a black inmate from Brooklyn) had been given a ten-year sentence for grand larceny. Like Donald, his file contains threatening notes to other inmates (including short communications like “I will get you”) side by side with pleading notes to the prison administration for release from solitary: “I am trying to get out of here. I have a wife who’s going to the hospital on the 5 of September to have a baby do you think I would go out of my way to start trouble that don’t make any sense.” Declared “an agitator among the colored inmates,” Gary was declared “not a fit subject for this institution” and transferred to Clinton Prison.

During Coxsackie’s early history, boxing was the highest legitimate form of expressing toughness at the reformatory. In odd contrast to the underfunded classrooms and poorly equipped shops, the reformatory opened with a completely finished, top-of-the-line gymnasium. Jake LaMotta began his boxing career at the gym, encouraged by the reformatory priest, and he marveled at the quality of the space: “a real, full size gym, with polished hardwood floors, a regulation ring set up in the middle, a whole series of punching bags down at one end,
plenty of weights and barbells and dumbbells and those pulley weight systems all along one wall and even a row of rowing machines. In other words, the whole works.” LaMotta recalled that the gym was “one of the favorite spots for the guys” and that “you almost always found someone there and a few of them were pretty good at fighting.” The reformatory organized bouts between inmates, and between prisoners and visiting groups of young fighters through groups like the Catholic Youth Organization. Cheering on the reformatory boys against the CYO fighters proved a rare, ultimately illusory, moment of solidarity for keepers and kept at Coxsackie.

Most of the fighting at Coxsackie took place outside the ring. To maintain a reputation for toughness was essential to defend oneself against abuse, the primary currency in the economy of prison social life. Conversely, displays of fear and weakness marked a young man as vulnerable prey for stronger inmates. One prisoner explained, “You are on trial” at Coxsackie: “Prison don’t break a man, but if he has any yellow it will show.” Another observed, “New fellows are tried out in a variety of ways in the first days of admission to the yard . . . Within a week they know what kind of guy you are. If you pass, they invite you to a bench.” Passing that test required at least some public display of a willingness to use violence to defend oneself. Piri Thomas made the point directly: “At the first sign of shit coming your way from a con, bust him in the mouth. Better to win or lose fighting than cop out and earn a punko rep.” As another inmate told prison officials, “Even if God hit me, I’d swing back.”

Frankie Moreno, spending his first night in general population, overheard some other inmates “talking in low, gravelly voices, messing with another guy’s head, threatening what they were going to do to him, how they were going to do it to him; and I thought I heard this guy kind of whimpering, like a scared dog, and I thought how I had to make it clear fast how I was not to be messed with.” The next day, Moreno picked out a large African American inmate and, without provocation, began punching. For this, he earned two weeks’ solitary, but “what I wanted was achieved; the other inmates sized me up as someone not to be messed with, and that was all that mattered to me in my first days in general population.”

For white inmates, who made up the majority of the population throughout this period, fighting was first and foremost a way to shed the status of “creep.” New arrivals at Coxsackie (save for those prisoners with strong preexisting gang or neighborhood ties to other inmates) were classified as creeps until they proved otherwise. This classification system appears to have been in place from the opening of the prison in 1936, and it continued to be used through the
1960s, particularly among the white inmates. The goal of the creeps was to join the “gees,” who gathered along the walls, while the creeps had to wander the middle of yard. The gees dominated prison life. Joseph Sullivan, a white inmate, recalled that the gees “were not permitted to speak to the so-called Creep at all. That was immediate expulsion!” The creeps had, Sullivan noted, “no wall to lean against and no place to sit.” Instead,

they stood in the middle of the yard . . . When they got bored standing still, all they could do was keep walking in circles, even in the winter when all the snow was pushed out in the middle of the yard. It really hurt me to look at them on the really bitter cold days; no wall to protect them from the cutting winds or galoshes to protect their feet when the snow piles they stood in began to thaw. We didn’t have to go through this because we shoveled all our snow out on them. In reality, we treated ourselves with more disrespect as human beings than the cops did, but it was a result of what they and their fathers created for years.

For a long time at Coxsackie, the gees’s policy for the creeps was simple—they could join the gees at the wall by attacking a black inmate in the yard to prove their courage. As Sullivan observed, “most of them did, usually by japing the dude when he wasn’t looking.” All Coxsackie inmates, white and black, were keenly aware of the policy. Lucky, a dark-skinned Puerto Rican inmate at Coxsackie, knew that creeps were “generally white inmates who had not proved their toughness, who were preyed upon homosexually or beaten regularly or made to run errands for the dominant prisoners. A creep could shed his humiliating role by picking a fight with a tough black.” One day, Lucky was walking in the prison yard when a creep spotted him walking along the prison wall and yelled, “Get the hell back where you belong, black boy.” He knew a confrontation was inevitable, and later, when the creep walked by Lucky’s open cell door, Lucky “hit him hard in the face, knocked him down and jumped on him.”

The effects of prison violence should not be understated. Although many of the confrontations involved little more than a few thrown punches or wrestling another inmate to the ground, weaker or more vulnerable inmates could face terrible acts of physical harm. William Rodriguez’s story seems notable more for having been recorded in some detail than for being truly exceptional. On the day before Thanksgiving 1936, William had been left alone in his cell by a guard who, for reasons unknown, kept the door unlocked. An inmate named Inglis entered William’s cell, while two other inmates kept watch for the returning guard. William was beaten with an iron pipe and knocked unconscious. His jaw fractured and several teeth missing, he spent a month in the prison hospital. Paroled the
following year, William was returned for a parole violation—he had gotten married in defiance of the parole officer’s instructions not to do so. Distraught at having to return to Coxsackie and the scene of his attack, he attempted to commit suicide not long after being re-imprisoned. A Greene County judge declared William to be mentally ill and ordered him sent to the Hudson State Hospital.44

If fighting was a means of proving one’s toughness and shedding creep status, it was also the chief mechanism by which yard turf was defended. Every section of the wall was “owned” by a small group of inmate leaders, and it was their job to ensure that no one crossed into their section of the yard without a physical challenge. As Sullivan recalled, each area of the yard (called “pads” by the time he was in Coxsackie) were defended by “five to twenty guys” whose duty it was to “go up on any dude who crossed that line unless he had permission from the ‘pad owner’ to do so.” Coxsackie officials were for many years tolerant of these yard arrangements; at best, they proved themselves utterly incapable of penetrating the social networks of the yard, as in this fruitless exchange from a 1957 parole board hearing, concerning Lloyd G., who had twice been in fights over violations of pad boundaries:

Q: What was that [fight] over?
A: A colored guy came up on me.
Q: Was the fight over that section of the yard you control?
A: I don’t control no section of the yard.
Q: Who does?
A: The guy who owns it.
Q: Are you a part owner?
A: No, I don’t own anything in the yard.
Q: They don’t let you stand there unless you are a member.
A: You have to be a member of the group, but you don’t own it.
Q: How do you get in?
A: A guy brings you in.
Q: What do you pay him?
A: Nothing.
Q: But once you are in, nobody else comes in unless somebody brings him?
A: Yes, unless you ask somebody you know in.
Q: Who asked you?
A: The guy who owns it.
Q: Who owns it now?
A: I don’t know.
An early critic of Coxsackie pointed to the reformatory’s “yard culture” as “a good example of the horns of the dilemma with which the administrator . . . is faced . . . Either he utilizes the repressive, controlling measures which are natural to the type of institution he must run, or he attempts to introduce a degree of individual freedom that is the prerequisite to effective treatment, and then he reaps the consequences of having a population which is too large and too heterogeneous and which is reacting to the total repressive atmosphere at the institution.”

Punking: The Prison Sexual Economy

Fighting constituted one of the primary fields of action in the social system of Coxsackie’s inmates. The other was same-sex sexual intimacy and same-sex sexual violence. Here, too, scholars have sought to comprehend inmate behaviors by reference to deprivation and importation theories. Studies employing deprivation theory are far more common in the corrections literature, in part because incarceration rather obviously results in the deprivation of different-sex sexual intimacy. Scholars, therefore, long defined same-sex sexual behavior behind bars to be as unnatural as the institutional conditions within which it takes place.

Regina Kunzel’s insightful work on prison sexuality, however, challenges the “timelessness” of deprivation theory and the curious way in which it makes prison sex “stand outside history.” She makes a compelling case that sexual behavior behind bars at mid-century was far more “imported” than prison officials and scholars were willing to accept; indeed, she argues that it was fear of accepting just this proposition that pushed observers toward the deprivation model. The sexual characters in men’s prisons—“wolves,” “fairies,” and “ punks”—were, Kunzel writes, “recognizable figures in the urban working-class milieu from which prison populations were disproportionately drawn. Far from insulated, singular, and timeless, the sexual customs that evolved inside the prison roughly followed those on the outside.”

Kunzel presents a compelling importation argument and an important corrective to the literature on prison sexuality. As I suggest in chapter 3, the young men of Coxsackie did indeed bring with them distinct ideas about, and experiences with, same-sex intimacy. Most notably, they carried with them the idea that dominant masculinity (the “wolves”) and same-sex relations could go hand in hand, as long as one performed the dominant or penetrative role in sex. What Kunzel understates in her work, however, is the extent to which adolescent offenders also regarded sexual violence as normative, as well as the ways in which
institutional authorities played a role in channeling behavior by rewarding, ignoring, or punishing certain conduct. The great paradox of Coxsackie was that consensual intimacy, and there was a great deal of it, was strictly disciplined, while the perpetrators of sexual violence and coercion were all too often tolerated or ignored.

Consensual sexual intimacy between prisoners at Coxsackie makes little or no appearance in published accounts by former inmates, but it shows up repeatedly in prison disciplinary reports and in the confiscated notes that made their way into case files. A prison guard disciplined Alfred D. after walking to the rear of a dormitory and finding Alfred and another inmate “lying together”: “They were definitely ‘in the mood,’ for I stood there fully two minutes before either of them saw me.” The fact that the guard chose to watch the two young men without making himself known is itself suggestive of the prurient interest officers took in the relationships between prisoners. Love notes were regularly confiscated and filed. Warren D., known to officers as a “big shot around the yard,” was written up for passing notes regarding “immoral and sexual perversion,” and it was noted with some concern that he had prostituted himself to men before coming to Coxsackie. Leonard P.’s case file contained what officials described as “love letters”: in one, the writer declared, “You are the sweetest thing I have ever seen. I would like to know the answer to that question I asked you the other night . . . your loving one,” and a second letter writer signed his note, “dearest of all.”

Jake LaMotta recalled a time when he “almost triggered off a riot”—by which he meant a race riot—by confronting a black inmate over his sexual demands on a white inmate: “There was this white kid that used to hang around the gym, one of those kids that the world is always picking on because he doesn’t fight back enough and he looks like he’s dying in front of your eyes, and I found out that one of these black kids is forcing him to be his girl. I dug up the black kid and told him, ‘If a guy wants to do it, that’s okay by me, but any of this forcing and I’ll personally take you apart bone by bone, you understand that?’” LaMotta’s threat, of course, explicitly acknowledged that it was “okay” by him if a white inmate wished to “do it” with a black inmate at Coxsackie, and that those wishes were entirely comprehensible within their social world.

Locating consensual sexual intimacy is complicated by the fact that it constituted a disciplinary violation. Being caught by prison authorities meant having to come up with a way of excusing sexual behavior and passing blame. In such cases, stories of bullying and victimization could serve a useful purpose, by allowing a prisoner to deny desire and consent and thus avoid penalty.
Terrence B., for example, had already been cited for performing acts of masturbation and “oral sodomy” when he was interviewed by prison officials. Terrence protested that other inmates in his dormitory were threatening him with a “frame-up” that would cost him his upcoming parole unless he complied with their sexual demands; they also threatened to spread lies among prisoners in the yard that he was “queer.” Even ordinary gestures could demand explanation. Marco W. patted another inmate on the rear end only to be stopped by a guard and questioned as to whether “he was bothering the inmate along sexual lines.” Marco protested that “this was all in fun,” and he was warned to “quit clowning around and acting in a childish manner.”

Sexual coercion, however, was commonplace at Coxsackie. In a prison economy that left inmates with little to bargain with, or for, sex became a primary currency, along with magazines, cigarettes, food, and protection. Piri Thomas recalled being warned not to accept “loans or presents from stranger cons” at the risk of incurring obligations that could only be paid off in sexual favors. Guards cited Vincent C., serving time in Coxsackie for assault and robbery, for “homosexual activities”: he had been paying for money owed and for cigarettes by masturbating various inmates, having anal intercourse with others, and performing “sex shows” for others.

To occupy the subordinate position in the world of prison sex was, as it was on the outside, to be a “punk.” In Coxsackie, to be called a punk was a grave insult, and even a remark that one “travelled with punks on the outside” was enough to spark fights among inmates. Although prison did not create the role of the punk, it attached to it a particular idea of punking, in which punks were not simply taking on the passive or feminine role as sexual objects but were subject to acts of sexual violence. New arrivals were immediately sized up as potential punks. Jake LaMotta recalled the taunts he received as a new inmate: “Hey, boy, they’re gonna soften you up good, then you’ll be a nice little girl for somebody here . . . Yeah, she’s ugly enough to be my type. Boy, you gonna be my girl, you hear?” Confiscated notes in the case files could strike a similarly threatening tone, as did the note Frank W. sent to another inmate: “Are you prepared to get down with the action the last period. I mean are you prepared to drop your pants. Now remember no bullshit because I want some ass. I have the place already picked out.”

Gang rapes of young, vulnerable prisoners figure prominently in the retrospective accounts of Coxsackie prisoners. Ken Jackson stated that, “In this institution there were a lot of things that weren’t mentioned. You learn about gang rapes and maybe take part in them.” Charles McGregor echoed the sentiment,
observing that Coxsackie taught him about just two things: “gang rapes and racism.” Felipe Luciano recalled one incident in vivid terms: “Though I never saw him, I heard a newly arrived inmate raped by several guys on my floor. The screams were unbearable, high-pitched, furious and then suddenly, there was silence. I heard the grunts of their passion. I heard the body hit the floor.”

The role of the prison guards and Coxsackie administrators in dealing with prison rape seems ambiguous at best. On the one hand, punking and rape were disciplinary offenses within the prison, and the case files contain several instances in which inmates wrote to prison officials for help in defending themselves. Jerry O. wrote a note in 1939 to the assistant superintendent, complaining that inmates in his division were “bulldozing” him “for cigarettes and desserts” and that a “sex maniac” had asked him to “do a hand job and to punk him.” He expressed a fear that they would find him out to be a “squealer” and would beat him up, so he asked to be moved to another division. Howard G. asked to be sent to solitary confinement for his own protection in 1943: “I would rather stay locked up in a cell block than to get my ass beat every night and that is that . . . they want to make me give them hand, and they say they are going to fuck me and I am no girl . . . that new guard doesn’t know what is going down.”

On the other hand, punks do not appear to have been regarded as anything but a problem by prison staff, and the victims of serious sexual violence found little or no recourse. Piri Thomas put the matter bluntly: “Nobody from the warden on down gives a damn, as long as it’s just cons eating up cons.” Fighting back meant certain punishment by prison authorities; Stanley Telaga, a former Coxsackie inmate, recalled being placed in solitary for eleven days for defending himself from an attempted rape. Thomas believed that “the victims had no recourse. If they complained to the guards, they would condemn themselves to the lowest wrung [sic] on the prison ladder . . . if they had to endure the contempt of the guards and inmates alike for having succumbed to being girl-boys, being squealers was even worse.” Weaker inmates were described, as Peter Y. was in his case file, as “very meek . . . no pride whatsoever . . . absolutely spineless.”

Disciplinary notes regarding predatory inmates were matter-of-fact regarding their role, giving the impression that little thought was given to attempting to seriously control their behavior. Vernon K., sent to Coxsackie from Buffalo for auto theft, was a “ring man”—the term used for inmates who played a dominant role in the underground economy. Vernon had been cited for having a “bad influence on younger boys” and for his sex activities. He was also known in the case file as the prisoner who ran the “Buffalo pad,” collected “tribute” from Buffalo inmates while he was there, and controlled the trafficking of contraband
cigarettes. Although he was cited five times while at Coxsackie, he was never placed in a punishment cell.69

Ring men often attained that status by virtue of choice institutional assignments that allowed them to bestow favors and to aid fellow inmates. One Coxsackie ring man recalled being given the position of hospital clerk by the officer in charge, “as he hated to see a nice Irish lad like myself in trouble.” From this position, he admitted, “I was in a position to admit men to ward x of the hospital and keep them there (by crooked means of course) as long as I wanted to . . . I have gotten ‘punks’ into the hospital to be used by other inmates, when my whole being revolted at the idea of young kids that couldn’t stand the gaff, yellow, just without friends and willing to do anything to keep from getting beat up.” One punk was kept for sixteen days, during which time approximately fifty other inmates had sex with him. Coxsackie officials learned of this and did send the ring man to solitary but, inexplicably, later promoted him to the prison’s number one ring man position, chief clerk of the record office.70

Faced with little aid or sympathy from the prison administration, some inmates broke down entirely. Frankie Moreno recalled two victimized inmates, on different occasions, committing suicide, while another rape victim killed his attacker, turning his three-year sentence into a life term.71 Leonard P. was identified as an “overt homosexual” in his case file, because he had assumed a “fairy” identity even before being sentenced to Coxsackie in 1940.72 Paroled in 1941, he was returned to Coxsackie for homosexual behavior in his rural hometown (“immoral actions” was the euphemistic charge). During his second stay at the prison, he was repeatedly the victim of sexual assault. Depressed and suicidal, the young man told Coxsackie officials, “I have nothing to live for. It is hopeless. I have nothing to lose by dying.” After a suicide attempt, he was transferred (as suicide attempters often were at Coxsackie) to a state mental hospital. Returned after a short time, he attempted to hang himself, and on another occasion, he broke a window and slashed his wrists. Leonard’s case file notes “unstable, impulsive, hysterical, and at times destructive behavior” before authorities sent him back to the mental hospital (and eventually on to another prison).73

**Ceaseless War: Prisoners Face the Guards**

Within a day of arrival, often in the afternoon of the first day, new prisoners would be taken from quarantine to the administrative offices for an interview with the warden. Coxsackie’s first warden was Frederick Helbing, a longtime veteran of institutional work (he started in 1899) and the final superintendent of the House of Refuge on Randall’s Island. In talking with new arrivals, Helbing
tried to make clear that the promise of rehabilitation could only be fulfilled by the observance of prison rules and a respect for uniformed authority. When Jake LaMotta refused to make eye contact during his interview, Helbing made it clear where institutional power lay: “There’s only one tough guy up here, and that’s me. And I’m undefeated. I’ve had a lot of young punks in here who thought they were tough, and I’m undefeated.”

Helbing’s interview reflected his personal vision for the young men under his supervision. What they lacked, he felt, was male authority and strong masculine role models. “If only,” Helbing said of his new arrivals, “some real he man had gotten hold of this boy a year or so ago.” His views on their behavior were simple—every young man had the choice to behave well or to behave poorly. Addressing the prisoners on the occasion of his retirement, Helbing told them, “Many of you have been arrested three or four times and I don’t understand why. There isn’t a feebleminded fellow in this room . . . Every lad in this room has something in the upper story that God gave him and I don’t understand why lads get into trouble when they know the difference between right and wrong.”

Helbing’s vision, in which young men needed the strong hand of male authority to help them choose between right and wrong, was one he repeated many times in public speeches and lectures, and it served as the basic philosophical framework for the custodial staff of the reformatory. Although Helbing was publicly sympathetic to the reform program at Coxsackie, his version of institutional governance was not entirely consistent with that anticipated by the educational reformers, who had always intended for the prison guard to play a quasi-therapeutic role. The Central Guard School (see chapter 2) was to be the cornerstone of this effort, a place where the reformers themselves could train new generations of custodial officers to fully participate in the process of correctional rehabilitation. There is evidence that some officers did take on these roles at Wallkill Prison, at Elmira Reception Center, and even at Coxsackie, but in many instances, members of the custodial staff at the reformatory engaged in patterns of behavior that exemplified the most regressive traditions of punitive prisons.

One might account for this failure of the reform project by the rapid demise of the Central Guard School, but this is only one part of the story. Perhaps as important was the importation of the custodial principles of the old House of Refuge, along with many of the former House of Refuge custodial staff. A state board of inquiry had blamed the 1934 riot on Randall’s Island (described in the introduction) on the “custodial environment” at the institution, an indirect way
of expressing their view that conditions were overly repressive. The board urged the state not to import the House of Refuge custodial staff to Coxsackie, singling out assistant superintendent and principal keeper George Cochrane for criticism.77

Of course, the custodial staff were brought into the new prison at Coxsackie. As for George Cochrane, although he did not assume the title of principal keeper at Coxsackie, he was captain of the guards and stayed on at the new prison until his retirement in 1949. Sonny Carson recalled the old man clearly:

I beheld an old, old man in a uniform not unlike the other uniforms of the guards . . . this honky had gold braid and captain’s bars on his shoulders. He was so old, he stooped with age but I later found out that this old man was deceiving and could move with the speed of a jackrabbit when he wanted to get his point across. His name was Captain Cockroach. He was in charge of all the hacks, and the only person that had more authority was Assistant Superintendent Conrad [Conboy], who next to Cockroach was, for most, the most hated man in that institution . . . Captain Cockroach and Assistant Superintendent Conrad were to shape my thoughts of white people in years to come.”78

Not every guard at Coxsackie embraced the old Randall’s Island focus on maintaining order through force and dominance; some officers wrote hopefully of a time “—and not in the too distant future—when the old-time prison guard with his stringent rules and set demands, his hard demeanor, and even his brutality, will be a thing of the past.”79 But at Coxsackie, where one early evaluator observed the manner in which “ceaseless war is waged with the keepers, their natural enemies,” neither side ever called a halt to the hostilities.80 Coxsackie guards treated the “resisters” among the prisoners with physical brutality, and this was true of black and white inmates alike. Jake LaMotta was given a thorough and brutal beating by a group of three guards: “The trouble is when guys are afraid maybe they’re going down they start fighting for their lives, and then when they’ve got it won, they got so much adrenalin running that they can’t stop, they just keep on beating.”81 Ken Jackson remembered Coxsackie (which in his time was known as Cack or the Bucket of Blood) as a place where “they use lumber to educate you when you step out of line”:

Coming from Brooklyn I have a bad habit of saying ‘yeah’ in response to a question. I did, anyway, until that point in my life when a so-called correction guard asked me a question, and I said ‘yeah’ and he hit me in the face with a bat, and I
had to have most of my teeth taken out. So that started my introduction to ‘rehabilitation,’ at the end of this stick . . . I went through Coxsackie as an incorrigible, I was termed that on release because I didn’t become the vegetable like they make most guys in the institutions. I fought their system inside, and they didn’t like it.82

One of Rocky Graziano’s first encounters with a Coxsackie prison guard resulted in what might be best described as a modified version of the superintendent’s lecture: “I thought you were one of them East Side Guinea punks. Well, kid, you open your mouth around here and you’re dead, understand? The warden got a personal dislike for East Side Guinea punks, understand?”83

From the outset, Coxsackie’s guards relied on punishment cells as a device for disciplining resistant and troublesome prisoners. Although most prisoners never went to solitary, the use of punishment cells was not exceptional but was part of the basic disciplinary framework of the reformatory. In the case file sample, fully 49 of the 370 cases (13.2%) explicitly record an assignment to a disciplinary cell at some point during incarceration, a number that almost certainly undercounts the actual percentage of inmates who received such an assignment.84 Disciplinary cases were sent to C3, which was one step above being sent to pure solitary confinement. C3 prisoners occupied cells with nothing but a toilet; they slept on the cell floor; and they were provided one meal a day (lunch, with bread and coffee substituting for the other two meals). Moving to the most extreme level of discipline involved going to solitary, or “the hole,” as it was universally known. Here, prisoners were given bread and water for all three meals, allowed no contact with other inmates, and given no clothes save for a pair of underwear.85

The idea of solitary at Coxsackie was to break down the tough, resisting prisoner. “Let’s see how goddam tough he is when he comes outta there” is what Jake LaMotta heard as he was taken to solitary. Frankie Moreno gave this account of two weeks in Coxsackie solitary:

Solitary—two weeks. Solitary—fourteen days. Solitary—three hundred and thirty-six hours. Solitary—twenty thousand one hundred and sixty minutes. Stripped and left in your underwear in the cell behind the sliding iron door, in the cell with no furniture, no bed, no lights, no newspapers, no cigarettes, no toothpick to chew on for those hours when you give in to cursing through your clenched teeth—whatever else it is, it’s enough time to see every calculation of your time alone. Two weeks was one million two hundred and nine thousand and six hundred seconds.
Solitary, sitting on the cold concrete floor shivering in winter only in your underwear, waiting for the night when they toss a thin blanket into your cell, which they’ll take out the next morning.\textsuperscript{86}

The solitary aspect of disciplinary confinement was rigidly policed, as Stanley Telaga later testified: “You have no mirror. You have nobody to look at. If you hum, whistle, or talk to yourself you are beaten by the guards. The only time you see a face is about every two days when toilet paper is given to you.”\textsuperscript{87} John Mack, recalling the “sadistic savagery I had to live through,” would years later observe that “a nervous tension enters my system whenever I think back to the terrible beatings, the many 30 days I spent naked in a ‘stripped cell,’ with only one meal every third day, the rest of the days with only bread and water, and the long silence of day and night, and all of this when I was just a teenager.”\textsuperscript{88}

Nearly every account describing the punishment cells at Coxsackie in this era confirms that prisoners were routinely beaten while being taken to solitary. The case file of Melvin H., a frequent occupant of solitary in 1944 and 1945, contains a confiscated note written to another inmate, which indicates that prison officers “jacked me three times yesterday my face is cut up pretty bad . . . I got the shit kicked out of me.”\textsuperscript{89} Joseph Sullivan described the process in painful detail:

For serious offenses like a bad fistfight, you were automatically beaten up with clubs from the place the fight took place to the “box” up in “A-3.” There, surrounded by eight or ten officers, you were made to strip (if you were still conscious), get down on all fours and bark, meow or moo, according to what type of animal Capt. Follette desired to hear. When they all tired of this, everyone that was in the box would be told to get up on their doors and watch another of their “Gees” slide by. They didn’t want you to simply crawl on your hands and knees, you were beaten until you got on your belly and pulled yourself along the floor with your hands and forearms while they continued to beat you across your back and legs. If you didn’t scream, “I’m a punk, a faggot and a motherfucker” for everyone to hear, they’d feel cheated and indignant. This is the point where many kids, 16 or 17 years old, could get their heads split open, crying not from the pain but the unbelievable humiliation. I was in the box on a number of occasions when this took place, and cried like a baby every time I was forced to watch it. If you didn’t watch, you were forced to join them out there.\textsuperscript{90}

Sullivan noted that several of “that one sadistic crew” at Coxsackie later became wardens in the New York State prison system by the early 1970s. “I would bet
that they are proud and their families are proud of how they ‘worked’ their way to the top,” Sullivan bitterly recalled. “My God, how they worked!”

Racism among some Coxsackie prison guards was as overt as the violence and left a lasting impression on the prisoners. John Mack reflected on the extent to which the Coxsackie experience “made me aware of the fact that I am an outsider, that I am alienated and permanently exiled from ever becoming an integral part of American society.” At age 18, Mack got into a fight with a white inmate who had called him a nigger: “When I was brought before the warden, and when I told him the fight started because the white inmate had called me a nigger, he rose halfway out of his seat, leaned over his desk, and with his eyes blazing with hatred, screamed in my face, ‘Well, I call you a nigger! You’re a nigger, nigger, NIGGER! Now hit me! Hit me!’ I had never seen such an open, naked, official hatred before, and the impact of it crushed me. I have never forgotten it.”

Claude Brown, in his memoir *Manchild in the Promised Land*, remembered that his friend Dunny, who served time in Coxsackie, “told me a lot things” about racism within the reformatory:

> The guards—the hacks, as they called them—were hillbillies. These hillbillies disliked anybody who came there and acted too suave or had handkerchiefs that were expensive, anything like that. According to Dunny, a Negro who was too suave had a hell of a hard time to go. The hacks were always kicking his ass for no good reason . . . he described a fellow Coxsackie inmate who had spent time in Texas and Alabama, who said that “the jails in New York were no better, and maybe a little worse, than some of those he’d been in in the South.” Dunny said, “Yeah, Sonny, don’t ever go to jail in this state, because they even have segregated jails.” I didn’t know this about New York State, but I believed he was telling the truth. He said, “Yeah, they put the white boys in one place and they put the niggers in another section. The niggers get all the shitty jobs, and white boys . . . man, they live good. It’s just like it is out here . . . everybody isn’t doing the same kind of time. There’s white time in jail, and there’s nigger time in jail. And the worst kind of time you can do is nigger time.”

Another detailed account of racism comes from Dhoruba Bin Wahad, who was sent to Coxsackie (“a prison full of gangbangers”) in 1962 on a felony assault charge (stemming from a gang shooting) for a five-year indeterminate sentence:

> The racism that existed in the prison system was an advanced stage of what existed in the street; it was overt. The guards and commissary employees were mostly inbred country boys from upstate, and they were racist to the core. They
had no problem calling you nigger, but they would only do that when they were 
all massed together in a goon squad. “Nigger, get in that cell!” They only said that 
when there was a whole group of them whipping on you. One on one, they wouldn’t 
dare use the word. Because if they said nigger to a brother who was a Nation of 
Islam militant, they got knocked the fuck out. A brother would submit to the 
group ass-whupping he knew was coming later just to land one good blow.94 

Prisoners believed that Coxsackie guards generally tolerated interracial fi ght-
ing as a means of keeping inmates’ hostility directed toward one another. As 
Sullivan wrote in his account of life at Coxsackie: “This fucking place destroyed 
any sense of feeling I had in me for quite some time to come. It was a racist in-
stitution because it was kept that way by a sick administration. Their philosophy 
was that as long as they can keep blacks and whites at each other’s throats, stab-
bping, fighting and fucking one another like animals; they knew we would never 
have the time to wonder why certain things were as they were or who our real 
enemies were.” The toleration of interracial confl ict had limits, however, and 
was quickly stopped whenever it threatened to spread beyond one-on-one vio-
lence and endanger the order of the reformatory. Above all, reformatory offi cials 
f feared systemic or organized racial confl ict, race riots, and anything that threat-
ened to fan the flames of racial hostility into uncontrollable institutional con-
fl ict. Prisoners worried about being accused of “instigating a race riot.”95 Even 
before World War II, case fi les from the sample reveal reformatory offi cials con-
stantly working to head off uncontrolled racial confl ict. Several cases from the 
prewar period highlight disciplinary action designed to head off wider confl icts: 
a black inmate from the Bronx was punished for having “attempted to turn an-
other colored boy against the white boys,” and a white inmate was sent to a dis-
ciplinary cell for “instigating trouble between blacks and whites.”96 

By 1940, the tensions among Coxsackie inmates exploded into a series of ra-
cial incidents. The case fi les record the experience of Gino M. at the center of 
one such incident in the summer of that year. Originally sentenced to Coxsackie 
in 1939 for having stolen “cigarettes, gum, and pie valued at fi ve dollars,” Gino 
and another white inmate had given orders to the black inmates not to go to the 
counter in the dining room for seconds; the black inmates went anyway and 
precipitated a serious melee in which several inmates were apparently injured. 
Superintendent Helbing found Gino’s behavior to be so serious, he took the 
highly unusual step of writing to the commissioner of corrections. Noting that 
“the result of this disturbance has caused bad feeling between the white and 
colored boys,” Helbing asked that Gino be transferred to a state prison, a serious
step for a young man who had stolen five dollars’ worth of pie. Commissioner John Lyons refused the transfer request; Gino’s case file indicates that he instead spent a remarkable nine months in a disciplinary cell at Coxsackie.97

By the start of the 1950s, the tenuous racial and disciplinary order that Coxsackie’s officers tried to maintain would come crashing down around them, and the reformatory system would drift toward ungovernability (see chapter 7). Increasingly, the threats of prisoner violence would direct themselves toward the prison system itself. The rage that burst into full public view in the 1971 Attica riot had been near full boil within the reformatories for years, and it would ultimately destroy the reformatory system and liberal prison reform. Until then, the racism of the yard and the brutality of the custodial regime at Coxsackie made confinement a transformative experience, but only in a profoundly negative sense. It was within this disciplinary context, then, that the agents of the rehabilitative program would undertake their efforts at realizing the transformative power of education, vocational training, and counseling. It is to their efforts that we now turn.