World War II resulted in a substantial reduction to New York’s prison population, as military service drew away thousands of men who might otherwise have been incarcerated, including large numbers of parolees. As that population fell from a prewar peak of 18,400 prisoners to a wartime low of 14,894 in 1945, New York found itself able to lease a newly completed big house prison, Green Haven, to the federal government for confining deserters and soldiers convicted of crimes. In the midst of this decline, a worrisome counterrrend of rising inmate populations emerged at Coxsackie and the other reformatories. A wave of adolescents came into the reformatory system, propelled by a rise in wartime delinquency and the resulting efforts to increase policing of youth crime and gang activity.¹

At Coxsackie, the annual population survey recorded a rise from 1944 to 1945 of 25 percent (from 543 inmates to 680). Reformatory officials began purchasing additional dormitory beds and army cots that could be set up at night and taken down during the day. Coxsackie’s dormitories were packed with new arrivals, their average population rising from forty to over seventy young men. Superintendent Scarborough complained of the many problems caused by the overcrowding, observing that “the general inmate morale has suffered considerably in those sections of the institution.”²

Neither the practical challenge of finding beds and space, nor the challenges to inmate morale, troubled Coxsackie officials as much as their perceptions of the changing nature of the inmate population. Coxsackie during wartime began to shift its concerns from the problem of the uneducable inmate to the threat posed by the ungovernable inmate. As with the Napanoch solution to the uneducable inmate (see chapter 5), Coxsackie attempted to transfer away those young men who appeared to threaten the order of the institution. As they did,
they began shifting ever-larger numbers of adolescents to other parts of the prison system. Even before World War II, a substantial minority (between 15% and 20% of the case file sample, for example) found themselves the subject of a transfer to another prison or state institution. Starting around 1944, Coxsackie employed transfers more aggressively; as many as one in three reformatory prisoners were transferred in the postwar period. In fact, institutional transfers were one of Coxsackie’s most important resources for maintaining order and discipline.3

The practice of transfer also allows us to consider what aspects of inmate behavior and identity were most threatening to the institution. Just what could cause a prison like Coxsackie, which hardly shied away from tough, even brutal, internal discipline, to exile young men to other parts of New York’s institutional system? This chapter shows that two issues emerged with particular force after World War II. First, the growing numbers of youth gang members, mostly from New York City, threatened to upset an already fragile racial order behind bars. Second, young heroin addicts, part of an epidemic of heroin use that swept New York City in the late 1940s, were being sent to Coxsackie after police crackdowns. Like the feeble-minded inmate, addicts were readily framed as the antithesis of suitable reform material.

As discipline problems grew, Coxsackie and state officials expanded their use of disciplinary transfer. In 1950, with the prison in a near-constant state of crisis management and grappling with the twin problems of youth gangs and heroin addiction, the state committed itself to designating a new “end of the line” prison at Great Meadow. This was a critical moment, as the state abandoned the idea, in place since the start of the reform movement in the 1930s, that there was a rehabilitative option for every adolescent offender. Designed to receive transfers from the reformatory populations at Coxsackie, Woodbourne, and Elmira, the Great Meadow prison would truly become the “fire” to the “frying pan” of reformatory life. Exiled together in one brutal, racist institution, the young men who disrupted Coxsackie helped to make Great Meadow ground zero of organized inmate resistance and political activism. New York’s experience brings to mind Peter Zinoman’s observation regarding Vietnamese colonial prisons: “By subjecting . . . colonial subjects with diverse regional backgrounds, social identities, and political commitments to the same terrifying ordeal, the prison system encouraged fraternal affinities and a sense of shared predicament that contributed to the formation of a national community.”4 Long before the Attica riot of 1971, even before the birth of a formal and organized movement for prisoner rights, the young men of the Coxsackie and Great
Meadow reformatories displayed an emergent political consciousness that, at times, came close to transcending the boundaries of race and ethnicity.

The Ungovernable, Part One—Coxsackie and Postwar Youth Gangs

The arrival of a new kind of youth gang member during World War II added a new layer to the social geography of the reformatory yard. Abubadika Sonny Carson recalled that the dominance of gang associations was something that prisoners “soon knew if you wandered there.” Formerly divided largely by race, and to some extent geography, subsections of the yard’s wall were now carefully divided around a Coxsackie-specific mixture of race, home city, neighborhood, and gang identifications. A teenage Sonny Carson quickly learned the vernacular map:

On the righthand side of the yard, where the first group of blacks were located, you were told it was The Turks’ turf. The Turks were from 118th Street in Harlem. A few feet on, the area belonged to the Brothers from Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and all other upstate areas. Beyond them the area belonged to the Imperial Lords from the city. Next to them the Socialistics from downtown Harlem. Next to them were The Bachelors from 126th Street in Harlem. Next to them the Copians from Harlem.

Then the widest sector in the center of this black-populated area was set aside for all the Brooklyn groups. Even though we were not united in Brooklyn, we were united in this place: The Robins, Beavers, Bishops, Socialistics, both Dukes and Gents, and every other gang from the Brooklyn vicinity. We intermingled and stood together against our foes.

Next to our Brooklyn area were the Sabers; a few feet beyond them were The Chancellors and beyond them, ending our black area, The Slicksters, hated foes of the Sabers from 139th Street.

Carson, making his first trip into the yard, heard someone yell his name. He was “confronted with two of my fellow gang members, Brother Hassie, who already had a reputation for using his hands in combat, and Crip, who wasn’t really crippled at all but walked as if he was.” Hassie and Crip introduced Sonny to “all the people from Brooklyn . . . it was like old home week.” He recalled later, “I was in good company, and when the whistle blew, I knew I had arrived.”

Nearly every postwar account of time served at Coxsackie mentions the prevalence and power of youth gangs in the reformatory. Coxsackie was recalled as “a prison full of gangbangers,” serving a role that was an extension of what young
men had experienced growing up: “Back then, before heroin came to dominate illegitimate capitalist activity in the ghetto, gangs served a different kind of purpose—especially for black males. They were an organization that taught young men codes of manhood; i.e., your word is your bond, loyalty—if someone lied to you, you confront them. That might seem like macho posturing in this day and age, but the gang did serve that purpose.”

Lumumba Shakur, a leader of the New York Black Panthers, recalled much of the same when he arrived at the Woodbourne Reformatory in 1960, which he called a “gang-fighting haven.” “I thought I stopped gang fighting in 1959,” Shakur wrote, “but Woodburn [sic] changed all my thoughts about gang fighting again. During my first ten minutes in Woodburn the shit began.”

It was in the postwar period that Coxsackie acquired a new nickname—Bop City—that celebrated not just to the similarly named nightclub in the heart of Manhattan’s commercial bebop jazz scene, but the “bop culture” that these new prisoners brought with them to the reformatory. As Eric Schneider and others have explained, the language of bopping was embraced by gang members (and adolescents) of all ethnic groups; to “bop” was to walk in the style of one listening to bebop itself, while “bopping” meant engaging in gang violence. If it was true, as Schneider argues, that “bop culture allowed adolescents to defy school and the labor market” and “to mock the symbols of the dominant culture,” nowhere was this more intensely so than against the walls of Coxsackie.

The surge of gang members into Coxsackie brought the already simmering racial tensions of the prison to a boil. Byron L., a member of the Harlem-based Turks, was denied parole in 1948 and the board took the unusual step of delaying his next hearing for one year (six months would have been typical) because of his conflicts with the “many Copians” in the prison yard. But it was interracial conflict that spurred a decision, a year earlier, to begin transferring some of the Turks to the Elmira Reformatory. James J. was one of those identified for transfer. Sixteen years old and identified as “a leader of the colored group in the yard,” James J. and several other Turks had been “trying to take over the [white] basketball court.” The other Turks were shipped to Elmira. James remained at Coxsackie because he had been sentenced as a wayward minor, but his case file judges him to be “a problem case in anti-social attitudes,” and concludes, “this present gang affair indicates he is not fit for release.”

The case file sample reveals the emergence of these new disciplinary transfers in the form of missing file numbers in the Coxsackie inmate records—these missing files were simply transferred, whole, to the new institution. The earliest disciplinary transfers appear to have been older parole violators, whom
the reformatory began shipping out to the big house prisons. These seem to have begun in the fall of 1944, according to Coxsackie authorities, “to relieve the overcrowded conditions at this institution.” Wallace T., who lasted only a single week on his parole, and whom authorities described as “cold, calculating,” was transferred to Attica Prison. Leon W., an “agitator among the colored inmates,” was sent to Clinton Prison. By the following year, with young men continuing to flood into the reformatory system at war’s end, Coxsackie began transferring inmates in small groups; Melvin H. shipped out to Elmira in November, along with seven other prisoners, all of whom were designated “incorrigible” at Coxsackie.11

The Ungovernable, Part Two—Coxsackie and Heroin Users

The transfer solution was shortly applied to a second group of “ungovernable” reformatory inmates, young men who arrived at Coxsackie as heroin users. The first wave of postwar heroin-using reformatory inmates arrived between 1948 and 1951. By the time Francisco R. arrived at the Elmira Reception Center in April 1951, the professional staff there had already developed a great many ideas as to how a reformatory sentence could serve the interests of young heroin addicts. Francisco, 18, had been using “three or four caps” of heroin a day since he was 16. He had been arrested in his Bronx neighborhood, along with a “mixed race group” of boys, for robbing and trashing a grocery store. Francisco’s mother felt he was “insane” and had brought him to the attention of the Community Service Society when he was only 10, because of his behavioral problems. The Reception Center sent Francisco along to Coxsackie, with a comprehensive set of treatment recommendations: “intensive and extensive psychotherapy . . . by a trained psychotherapist”; “extensive psychotherapy on the outside after release . . . psychotherapeutic social case work with the family to give them insight into the boy’s real problem”; remedial education; social education “to feel secure”; and vocational “encouragement.”12

Needless to say, Coxsackie was ill equipped to provide anything close to the intensive therapeutic program for Francisco that the Elmira Reception Center urged on them. Few if any public agencies were in that position as of 1951. Overwhelmed and uncertain how to respond, New York’s network of social service provision often gave way to the criminal justice system. That year, for example, Angelo C. joined the Henry Street Settlement—one of Manhattan’s best-known social work agencies for children. Angelo had a reputation as a “wise guy” veteran of state institutions, having served time at Warwick. He quickly attached himself to the older and rougher crowd at the settlement, got into several fights,
and at one point threatened to “mop the floor” with any settlement staff that tried to keep him out. Most troubling for the staff, Angelo brought heroin into the settlement; he and his friends would lock themselves in the boys’ toilet while they shot up. One evening, Angelo and his friends forced their way into the office of a young female social worker. While his friends taunted and heckled the young woman with sexually suggestive remarks, Angelo sat in the corner, his face flushed and his eyes glassy, watching the show. Not long thereafter, he robbed a man on the steps of the settlement, was reported to the police, arrested, tried, convicted, and sent to Coxsackie.13

By the early 1950s, Coxsackie housed about one hundred known heroin users at a time. Plans to segregate addicts within the reformatory were abandoned, largely because separate confinement of the young heroin user “only emphasizes his drug usage and leads to constant exchange of experiences about drugs.” Although some of the addict prisoners were serious discipline problems, the more troubling aspect of this population was their propensity to be quickly returned for violation of parole. One-third of all parole violators (roughly twice their proportion of parolees) were drug users, and within a few years their numbers began to place some pressure on the system.14 William G. was typical of the users caught in the revolving door of the criminal justice system. Paroled in 1952 to his father’s custody, William had a postrelease job secured for him through the New York Employment Bureau, a job for which he had “little enthusiasm” or appreciation “of the interest in his behalf to obtain this job for him.” Warned to stay away from his Coney Island hangouts and his old girlfriend, William appeared for his first day of work, but not his second or any other day of work. Skipping his first week’s parole reporting, William was declared an absconder within two weeks. Tracked down in a neighborhood bar two months later, back on heroin, and with his now-pregnant girlfriend, William was quickly returned to Coxsackie.15 This rapid rate of return led Coxsackie and the Division of Parole to set up an experimental project in 1956, in which heroin users returning to New York City would be specifically identified and tracked.16

In the meantime, the reformatory system struggled to understand just what addict prisoners needed, and whether or not they could—or should—be confined in traditional reformatories like Coxsackie. One case in particular highlights the great challenge heroin posed to the system. Miguel M. had arrived in New York City from Puerto Rico in 1936, when he was just 2 years old. By the summer of 1950, when Miguel was 15, he had begun using heroin with some friends in his Bronx neighborhood. His mother, as was so often the case, was the first line of response to Miguel’s drug use. She had heard about the U.S.
Narcotics Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky, and tried to persuade Miguel at age 16 to voluntarily commit himself for treatment. He refused. Miguel’s mother next turned to the New York City Youth Board to see if he might participate in an experimental program in individual psychotherapy. Once again, Miguel displayed no interest in the program, so his mother had him committed as a wayward minor. The court, apparently with the agreement of his mother, placed Miguel on probation and sent him to live with his father. The new arrangement proved no more satisfactory, and Miguel’s father eventually threw him out of the house. Living on the street, stealing to support his habit, Miguel was arrested for breaking and entering and sent to the Elmira Reception Center in 1952.17

For Glenn Kendall and the reception center staff, Miguel was one heroin addict too many. Fed up with the revolving door, and no longer convinced that the reformatory system had much to offer users who were so quickly returning to drugs after release, the reception center staff poured out their feelings in Miguel’s assessment. Their recommendation began by flatly asserting, “An experience in a correctional institution is not the solution to this youth’s social adjustment problems.” Why not? Miguel had no record of delinquency “prior to drug taking,” the “present offense was motivated by money . . . for drugs,” and he was “not basically a delinquent personality according to the psychiatrist.” Instead of the reformatory system, Kendall and the ERC looked hopefully to Riverside Hospital on North Brother Island, where New York City had recently begun committing noncriminal adolescent heroin addicts for treatment.

In effect, the ERC staff signaled that they were done trying to manage heroin addicts, and that addict management should be the business of the public health system. But Miguel could not be transferred to North Brother Island. He had been convicted of a crime, and there was no alternative but to keep him in prison. What is more, Coxsackie authorities were strongly moved to disagree with Kendall and the ERC. “Further study of this case,” Superintendent Donald Scarborough wrote to the ERC, “leaves one to feel that the Reception Center was not exactly justified in suggesting that this is the kind of case that should have gone to North Brother Island Hospital for treatment.” Scarborough argued that Miguel was not “a case of drug usage alone,” but that he had been “doing petty stealing over a considerable period” to support his habit. The superintendent also imagined that “further investigation” would almost certainly reveal that Miguel had sold heroin, as well as using the drug. “It is not within the intent of the North Brother Island project,” he concluded, “to have persons of that kind there. That place is strictly for persons who have committed no offense other than the use of drugs alone.”18
Scarborough’s view of what qualified an adolescent for North Brother Island was exceedingly limited, and it is hard to imagine many young heroin users meeting the criteria of having never stolen to buy drugs or having never resold any of their supplies. But if his view was that heroin use was largely a problem for the criminal justice system, it did not follow that heroin users were somehow appropriate for Scarborough’s particular corner of that system. In fact, Miguel was transferred after eight months at Coxsackie, sent to the Matteawan State Hospital after he began to hear voices and “act as if he is in a dream.”\footnote{19} Released in late 1954, Miguel was arrested just a few months later on another breaking and entering charge, with his parole officer noting a suspicion that the young parolee was back on heroin—another turn of the revolving door that would continue to frustrate the state’s efforts to manage addicts in the reformatory population.

**The End of the Line—Great Meadow**

By 1950, the twin problems of gangs and heroin could no longer be managed through the limited numbers of institution-to-institution transfers that Coxsackie could arrange. That year, Governor Thomas Dewey authorized, under pressure from the Department of Corrections, the creation of an interdepartmental working committee on youthful offenders. The committee was stacked with longtime DOC reform figures, including Walter Wallack, Donald Scarborough, Price Chenault, and Glenn Kendall.\footnote{20} Their final report, not completed until late 1952, proposed that Great Meadow Prison at Comstock be converted into a facility to handle those inmates who were “too tough” for Coxsackie and the other reformatories.\footnote{21} In early January 1953, Governor Dewey put the proposal in his annual message, and the legislature passed the requisite legislation in March.

The Great Meadow decision marks a momentous break in the history of the reform movement, which began after the riots of 1929. For the first time, reformatory officials—including many of those responsible for its original design—abandoned the pretense that there was a rehabilitative space for every adolescent prisoner and instead proposed the creation of an end-of-the-line facility.\footnote{22} The unrelenting campaign against youth gangs and heroin users had overwhelmed the reformatory system.\footnote{23} Now it was time to start removing inmates in large numbers, to expel the un governable along with the uneducable, in the hopes of saving the rest of the reformatory program.

The case files from Great Meadow (more often referred to as Comstock by prisoners) are invaluable in revealing what happened next, as each of the Wood-
bourne, Elmira, and Coxsackie case files they received reveals the patterns of experience and behavior that precipitated transfer. The first group of eight inmates sent from Coxsackie give a preview of what was to come: a severe alcoholic serving a longer-than-average prison term of five years; a local boy who had helped plan an escape attempt (the idea was to move him away from the Coxsackie area); a heroin-addicted parole violator; three prisoners coming from long stays in isolation cells (including one who had gone “off his rocker” after having his parole deferred for nine months); and two file jackets that are now empty, the prisoner records having been transferred to adult prisons after subsequent criminal convictions.

The second group of transfers from Coxsackie consisted almost exclusively of heroin addicts, while many of the other early transfer groups included epileptic and mentally ill inmates. When one of these transfers, suffering from schizophrenia, arrived at Great Meadow, the institution’s psychiatrist noted, “I cannot refrain from expressing my shock at seeing a boy like this in prison.” A younger black prisoner had only recently returned to Coxsackie from Matteawan, where he had been sent with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Transferred back to Coxsackie, he had become active in interracial conflicts, which was the immediate cause of his subsequent transfer to Great Meadow.

Interracial conflict at Coxsackie proved to be one of the main predictors of transfer to Great Meadow. By early 1954, the Commission of Correction was reporting an “inflamed atmosphere” at Coxsackie, with “considerable racial friction under the surface.” Not long thereafter, Coxsackie experienced a serious race riot on the baseball field between thirty-five black inmates and forty-five white inmates. The black inmates had possession of the softball field, while the white inmates claimed that the field was then theirs to use. The teams on the field refused to yield their ground, so one white inmate strode out on the field and lay down on the ground between the pitcher’s mound and home plate. When the black inmates attempted to remove the white inmate, a general melee erupted between both groups. Five of the ringleaders of that battle were transferred to Great Meadow within two weeks of the fight. Other transfer files from the period indicate similar issues: “involved in a racial problem at Coxsackie”; “instrumental in some of the difficulty they had at that institution regarding racial difficulties”; and, “this inmate is one of several who have recently participated in racial agitation in the institution to the extent that there have been a number of black-white fights, reports of impending demonstrations, and other evidences of a tense situation.” During 1955 alone, Coxsackie transferred (exclusive of mental hospital transfers) seventy-five prisoners,
about the same number as departed at the maximum expiration of their sentences.26

Transferring all the most troubled, aggressive, and defiant adolescent offenders to a single prison created an explosive situation. Longtime Great Meadow warden Vernon Morhous retired at the end of 1954, unwilling or unable to take on responsibility for managing the prison as an end-of-the-line transfer institution; he was replaced by Joseph Conboy, the hard-nosed chief of custody from Coxsackie.27 The young transfers understood just what Great Meadow was intended to be and, having already resisted the reformatory regime at Coxsackie, immediately began to organize further acts of resistance. Older inmates at Great Meadow claimed that the new, younger men “made them nervous” with their fighting and aggressive talk, which by the summer of 1955 began to include talk of a prison strike. Piri Thomas recalled “a grim-faced kid-con about eighteen or nineteen years old” saying, “Why won’t it work? We stage a sit-down strike and demand to see the governor for better changes in this fucking prison.”28

The strike came to pass on August 17, 1955, when 174 inmates gathered in an outside yard along the west wall and refused to go to dinner or to return to their cells. Piri Thomas (who appropriately observed that “a prison riot explodes like a boiler that’s built up steam from a long way back”29) recalled “a few old-timers among the rioters” but that most were “grey-eyed, healthy kids looking for a rep or a blast out of boredom”—in other words, the transfer products of the reformatory system.30 Thomas recalled “the struggle going on inside each inmate as we faced the decision of whether or not to tear loose from our lines and charge across to join the striking inmates huddled against the wall.” Most did not. Those who remained up against the wall demanded to speak with the governor or with the commissioner of corrections. Commissioner Thomas McHugh arrived around midnight and got on a loudspeaker to promise inmates that he would speak with each of them individually the next morning, if they would return to their cells. He gave them five minutes. After counting down the minutes, McHugh then gave the signal for a contingent of more than two hundred New York state troopers and prison guards to move in and subdue the striking prisoners.31 Thomas described the scene:

A unified roar from both sides as they crashed together with the force of hate, anger, and frustration. The guards and troopers believed they were dealing with subhumans. I could see it in the carriage of their bodies and in the way they swung their clubs and rifle butts with deadly intent. The inmates met the onslaught manfully but were swallowed up in an ocean of guards’ blue and troopers’
brown. Fighting was hand to hand. Gray bodies crumpled up and crashed limply on the green grass. The air was filled with screams and curses and a medley of orders being shouted on both sides.

The firm hand of prison authority, in suppressing the strike, had only begun to strike back. A wave of retributive violence was said to have continued “for hours, for days . . . the fury of reprisal was a monster unleashed . . . many inmates who had not participated in the strike, but who had at any time annoyed a guard, got broken heads and bruised bodies from surprise visits to their cells. It was the ideal opportunity for the guards to take care of past antagonisms.”

As for the strikers, they were marched to cells, methodically beaten along the way—the injured and unconscious were laid out in a line—kept in a segregated part of the prison, their heads shaved, barred from doing anything but looking straight ahead and prohibited from talking with anyone. The conditions of their confinement were a haunting echo of the worst of the old nineteenth-century silent system, an almost instinctive reversion to the very conditions that had provoked early twentieth-century prison reformers.

The young inmates of Great Meadow, including the many transfers from Coxsackie (three of whom were among the strike leaders), clearly intended to be heard beyond the walls of the prison. Their choice of a strike, of physical resistance to the prison authority, grew out of what must be understood as a clear-eyed assessment that, in the reformatory world of 1955, there was simply no other immediate tool of resistance at hand. That they demanded to see the governor or the commissioner of corrections shows that they understood the political nature of their actions as well as the political nature of potential solutions. That Commissioner McHugh arrived from Albany in the middle of the night shows just how close they came to upsetting the entire institutional regime, or at least to having their voices reach out and beyond the reformatory walls.

But as much as these young men wanted their voices heard, they were not. In the immediate aftermath of the uprising, prison authorities assured reporters that, while prisoners had a “variety of complaints,” these complaints had no coherent pattern. In fact, Commissioner McHugh went out of his way to render the strike unintelligible, observing to reporters that the trouble originated when the reformatory inmates heard radio news reports of a revolt at a Nebraska penitentiary; McHugh later assured the governor that the strike was “in large part spontaneous with little prior organization or planning.” McHugh also suggested that most of the strikers were unwilling participants, too fearful or cowed by a handful of leaders to break ranks and return to their cells. Media coverage
of the Great Meadow strike largely reflected the state’s version of events and applauded the vigorous repression of the uprising. Stafford Derby, New York bureau chief for the Christian Science Monitor, was hardly alone when he concluded, “Penologists may well check off the date of August 17, as one of their own in which a firm hand that was needed, was supplied.”

**Building Separate Systems**

In the wake of the 1955 Great Meadow uprising, the trends toward creating separate spaces within the reformatory system accelerated, as part of an increasingly desperate search for order. Almost immediately after the strike, Coxsackie resumed sending to Great Meadow a series of parole violators, heroin addicts, and the mentally disturbed. Above all, transfers continued to come from those prisoners who displayed too much hostility to prison authorities, or who participated in interracial fighting. One of the first poststrike transfers was Tom C., a parole violator “opposed to general education” and possessing “no vocational interests.” Tom was ordered sent to Great Meadow following three fights in a row with black inmates at Coxsackie. Another poststrike transfer, Bradley S., went to Great Meadow after having been keeplocked indefinitely for interracial fighting and for “promoting racial agitation.” Bradley’s case file indicates that he “had been involved in a racial problem at Coxsackie . . . having been instrumental in some of the difficulty they had at that institution regarding racial difficulties . . . a ring leader in trying to stir up trouble . . . if any racial difficulties arise, he will be one of the first inmates to be held for questioning.”

When Bradley arrived at Great Meadow, he became one of the first prisoners at the prison to be given daily doses of Thorazine to control his behavior. Superintendent Conboy registered his dissatisfaction at the drugging, which seemed to him an unnecessary departure from the tried-and-true methods of physical discipline with which he was so familiar, but Bradley and others were soon on a daily regimen of pharmaceutical discipline. Like Bradley himself, the use of Thorazine to try to stabilize the racial order of the reformatory was transferred to Great Meadow from Coxsackie, where the practice was already well under way. Among those whose behavior precipitated drugging was 18-year-old Edward D., a white prisoner sent to Coxsackie from a Brooklyn court in 1955 for breaking and entering an office building with two friends. Like many prisoners at Coxsackie, Edward had been troubled and in trouble for many years. A “neglect case” since the age of 9, Edward spent five years at the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin on Staten Island. He accumulated a reputation for “vandalism and mischief” in the neighborhood and dropped out of the Williamsburg
Vocational High School after only a single term, working odd jobs prior to his arrest.

Edward quickly joined in the racial conflict at Coxsackie, accumulating fourteen formal disciplinary reports for “agitating his dormitory” and for interracial fighting. For an instance of the latter offense, Edward was keeplocked in his cell; his file contains the brief observation that this was the standard “policy when a negro and white inmate are involved in a fight.” Just days after the fight, Edward was sent to the prison psychiatrist and placed on a daily regimen of 250 milligrams of Thorazine. Prison guards reported that while medicated, Edward “seems to be doped up, in a daze.” Edward himself protested: “Pills don’t help; make me sleep, is one thing they do, but I’m still going out of my mind.” Eventually, Edward was moved off Thorazine and sedated with daily doses of Luminal (a barbiturate). According to the Coxsackie psychiatrist, these interventions hardly seemed to help. If anything, they intensified his already furious anger directed at the reformatory system. The psychiatrist described Edward as “belittling toward medication, towards psychotherapy, towards food, towards the institution.”

Whether out of animus toward the prisoners or desperation to save their reformatory program (or perhaps both), Coxsackie staff increasingly came to embrace the hope that it could transfer its way back to whatever prewar order it had once enjoyed. In 1958, the prison identified for transfer roughly two hundred inmates who had served two years or more. One of those transferred in that group recalled Captain Follette explaining to them that they were regarded as a bad example for the newer prisoners. In this instance, young men were sent all over the New York State system, including to Great Meadow, Napanoch, and several adult maximum-security prisons, including Auburn, Green Haven, and Attica.

The result of this aggressive disciplinary transfer was that, by the 1960s, Coxsackie began to take on aspects of a demographic island within the New York reformatory system. White inmates were more than 60 percent of Coxsackie’s inmates, even as the reformatory system neared parity between white and black at the start of the decade. In fact, the proportion of the white population at Coxsackie actually increased during the 1960s, even as black and Puerto Rican prisoners became a clear majority in the reformatory system as a whole.

Table 7.1 makes clear that Great Meadow continued to house a disproportionate number of black and Puerto Rican reformatory inmates. Half of all Puerto Rican reformatory inmates were housed in just two institutions by the
mid-1960s, Great Meadow and Catskill Reformatory. The latter institution operated on the site of what had been the Napanoch institution, which had closed when New York courts determined that the separate and indefinite confinement of defective delinquents was unconstitutional. Catskill replaced Woodbourne in 1967 as the reformatory of choice for adolescent males of “borderline or low normal intelligence,” when Woodbourne was taken over by the Narcotic Addiction Control Commission as a treatment facility.

Consistent with the demographic shifts in reformatory populations, Coxsackie also became an outlier in terms of its proportion of prisoners from New York City. By 1962, only 45 percent of Coxsackie prisoners had been committed from New York City, compared with 57 percent at Elmira, 70 percent at Great Meadow, and 73 percent at Woodbourne. Remarkably, these differences also continued to grow during the sixties: by 1966, the proportion of New York City inmates at Coxsackie had dropped to 38 percent, and then to just 30 percent in 1968, astonishingly low compared to every other state reformatory. In short, as Coxsackie aggressively moved to purge its ranks of the uneducable and the ungovernable, it increasingly focused on housing white, upstate youth, leaving minority and New York City adolescents to fend for themselves at the end of the line.

Meanwhile, at Great Meadow, the strike of 1955 did nothing to change that prison’s status as an end-of-the-line home for reformatory inmates, nor did it substantially modify the disturbing brew of racism, brutality, and conflict there. As at Coxsackie, prisoners being taken to disciplinary cells were routinely beaten (in a freight elevator, away from view) and held under the same stark conditions that had prevailed at Coxsackie. When Stephen Chinlund arrived at Great Meadow in 1964, in conjunction with his work for Exodus House and the

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**TABLE 7.1**

Reformatory populations, by race, 1962–1968

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38 When Stephen Chinlund arrived at Great Meadow in 1964, in conjunction with his work for Exodus House and the
East Harlem Protestant Parish, he knew it as a prison with “a reputation for being particularly tough,” and a “well earned reputation for being more gratuitously tough than some other places.” Chinlund recalled the vivid stories told of life at the end of the line:

There were frequent confrontations between Officers and staff, since the youngest inmates were the most likely to rush into fights. Even then, there were stories about the Gladiators at Comstock, a group of Officers who would challenge an inmate to fight with fists. They would go to the basement and one of them would strip to the waist to fight the prisoner. If the prisoner chose not to fight, he would still be beaten up by the Officers. There were variations on that theme, but it was a tale retold for decades, a sad long chapter in the book of macho mania. Bones were broken; prisoners were killed. This was partly about sadistic revenge, fueled by public acceptance of the belief that prison should be hell.

Chinlund’s account includes his first encounter with Warden Conboy, the man who had defined the custodial regime at Coxsackie before assuming the head position at Great Meadow. Conboy was, in Chinlund’s account, “an angry man” who believed that it would be “better to have inmates and staff more frightened of him than of each other.” Chinlund recounts the dialogue that followed his late arrival for an appointment with Warden Conboy:

When I walked into his office, I extended my hand, but he just glowered.
“Sit down,” he shouted. I sat down. “Who the hell do you think you are?”
“I’m Stephen . . .”
“I know what the hell your name is!”
“I realize I’m late and . . .”
“You’re goddam right, you’re late! Do you think we are here to wait on you?!?
“No sir. I’m ready to stay over and come back tomorrow.”
“This is a fucking tough place to run and I don’t need jerks floating in from New York City to make my life more complicated.”
“Yes sir, I understand, so I’ll wait.”
“You’re goddam right you’ll wait, maybe forever!”
“Yes, sir. I realize I’m here only if you . . .”
“I don’t know what the hell good you think you’re doing visiting this human garbage in here. They aren’t worth the powder it would take to blow them all to hell!” He was standing, glaring at me, waving his arms.
“Their mothers, sir, have given me . . .
“I don’t think they have mothers, these sons of bitches, and you make me as sick as they do!” I started to get up.
“Sit down! I didn’t give you permission to leave!”
“Yes, sir.” I sat back down.
“You call yourself a minister.”
“Yes, sir.”
“What about all the good people you’re supposed to be taking care of? What are they supposed to do while you’re here wiping the asses of these rotten guys?”
“Sir, it’s part of my job to . . .”
“I don’t want to hear your bullshit.”
I remained silent and let him go on talking. Slowly, he calmed down. Then, suddenly he said, “OK, you can see your list. Get the hell out of my office.”

Chinlund’s account is consistent with another assessment of Great Meadow: “The prison officials’ attitude was that inmates were commodities, subhuman—a means of employment.”

Great Meadow remained the focal point for political agitation among reformatory inmates, though the most serious conflicts were black against white rather than expressions of interracial prisoner solidarity. Retrospective accounts of life at Great Meadow during this period suggest that the official racism was as bad, perhaps even worse, than what prisoners were experiencing at Coxsackie. Lumumba Shakur, transferred to Great Meadow in 1961, at age 18, recalled that the “racism at Comstock was naked,” with numerous work assignments—including the bakery, clerk positions, machine shop, and auto shop—effectively closed to most black inmates. As at Coxsackie, black inmates were vastly overrepresented on assignments like the labor gang and the laundry. “There was,” Shakur recalled, “a dual set of rules for everything in Comstock—one black and one white.”

Piri Thomas reflected on the 1955 Great Meadow uprising, “If the majority of inmates had joined in organizing the strike for prisoners’ rights on that day in August, 1955, it would have been an Attica, sixteen years before.” Whether that was true is a question that has divided scholars. Ronald Berkman’s account of fifties-era prison riots de-emphasized politics, observing that, “what was at stake in the riots of the 1950s was not the architecture of the house, but the way it was kept.” On the other hand, Marie Gottschalk has observed, “The Nation
of Islam began organizing in an atmosphere that was already quite racially charged. Indeed, the state helped to politicize prisoners, especially around the issue of race.” The reformatory experience in New York reveals quite clearly that racism and harsh treatment behind bars helped spur the development of a collective political conscience.

Graduates of Coxsackie and Great Meadow came to link the reformatory system with systems of racial oppression and to believe that “rehabilitation is a myth and a lie,” a pattern clearly visible by the time of the 1955 Great Meadow uprising. Claude Brown recalled asking his friend Alley Bush, an ex-Coxsackie inmate and a Muslim, in the mid-1950s: “Damn, Alley, what the hell is going on in the jails here? It seems that everybody who comes out is a Muslim.” Bush replied: “When you’re in jail, man, you’ve got a lot of time to think about it. Then you can really see how this white man is fucking with you. The white cats in jail, man, they don’t have to take all this shit that we have to take. They get the better jobs, and they get everything. It’s just the black man, the black man, wherever he is, they’re gon try and fuck with him.”

Reformatory inmates smuggling in copies of *Muhammad Speaks*, and the disciplinary cells became focal points of Muslim and black nationalist activists. “My first political education came at Comstock,” recalled Sekou Odinga, who spent time in that reformatory before he joined Malcolm X’s Organization of Afro-American Unity in 1965, then going on to organizing work with the Black Panther party in 1968. Other New York Black Panther leaders experienced similar forms of political education in the reformatory system. Over the course of Dhoruba Bin Wahad’s journey through both Coxsackie and Great Meadow, he “began to reckon with a world he had not known existed—a world of theory, logic, and righteousness that, when combined with action, had the power to ignite a revolution.” Lumumba Shakur believed that “the brothers became very nationalistic in Comstock,” and that this was primarily concentrated among the reformatory-age transfer inmates, rather than the smaller population of older offenders from before Great Meadow changed status. “We would call the older brothers Uncle Toms,” Shakur recalled, “and tell them that only uncivilized people and devils would run Comstock the way it was being administered.”

Claude Brown’s old friend Alley Bush, who told him so many things about racism at the upstate reformatories, turned up at a raucous demonstration at the United Nations following the death of Patrice Lumumba in 1961. Reflecting on the publicity accorded the UN protest, Brown concluded, “It was a good thing for Alley, I suppose, because he was heard. He made the goddamn white man know that he was angry.” In his own way, Alley Bush was working on fulfilling
the commitment to be heard made by a “youngblood” strike leader at Great Meadow facing transfer to an adult prison back in 1955: “They’re doing us a favor by spreading us around. Wherever they send us, we’ll get the shit going on again. It’s a matter of dignity.”

By the early 1960s, the tensions and political unrest at Great Meadow were once again reaching the boiling point. Lumumba Shakur recalled that inmates “began talking about formulating some kind of action to redress and change the racial conditions of Comstock.” He later wrote, “I must confess that we talked about action for a year, because somebody would always disagree with any method of action.” As had happened prior to the 1955 action, inmates debated just what to do to make themselves heard, and older inmates warned the young men against any sort of action against the system. Internal grievances against the reformatory system were increasingly linked to events occurring outside. In mid-September 1963, news of the terrorist bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, “had a tremendous effect” on black inmates at Great Meadow. In response, a group of young men agreed to request shop and work assignments from which blacks had traditionally been excluded. None of the requests were granted, and the prisoners were told that the traditional reformatory policies would remain unchanged. A few days later, according to Lumumba Shakur, black inmates met and concluded, “The only way we are going to redress or change Comstock’s racial situation is by violence—so let the shit hit the fan.”

One month after the March on Washington and two weeks after the Birmingham bombing, a black inmate fought a white inmate over possession of a “white” handball court. At Great Meadow, the handball courts were the major site of outdoor recreation; twelve were reserved for white inmates, two for black inmates, and two for Puerto Rican inmates. The decision by one prisoner to deliberately violate the racial geography of Great Meadow’s outdoor space was the trigger, intentional or not, for a major riot involving roughly 450 black and white Great Meadow inmates. Prisoners demolished a guard house in the prison yard, using the timbers as weapons to battle each other and the officers.

This time, even the Department of Corrections acknowledged (briefly) the more explicitly political dimensions of the conflict, with a spokesman indicating to at least one reporter that the underlying motivation was an expression of solidarity among black inmates for “the general movement of their race outside the prison walls.” This brief acknowledgment changed nothing about the prison system’s response. “The next day,” Shakur recalled, “everybody was locked in their cell all day and the correctional officers began beating brothers
in their cells systematically.” This time, a visit by the commissioner of corrections, Paul McGinnis, ended the beatings, and a decision was made to begin transferring the ringleaders of the action. The Department of Corrections ordered thirty Great Meadow inmates—black and white—to be transferred to various adult maximum-security prisons. The department began planning the construction of yet another end-of-the-line prison, to be built from the ground up with the sole purpose of housing young men too tough for the current end of the line.

By 1963, nearly three decades had passed since the opening of the New York State Vocational Institution. Within the Department of Corrections bureaucracy, the educational reformers of the New Deal-era system still held most of the critical positions. The reformatory system, still ostensibly organized around trade training and social education, remained at the center of New York’s plan for dealing with the problem of the adolescent male under confinement. But the efforts to protect that legacy had produced disturbing consequences. Coxsackie itself increasingly tried to isolate itself from the larger system, removing various classes of inmates, in the hopes that somehow the institution could realize the reformist promises made at its opening, even as actual practice continued to mock the ideal. Along the way, New York abandoned the pretense that reform and rehabilitation were for every young man and created end-of-the-line institutions whose racism and brutality helped politicize a generation of prisoners.

Felipe Luciano, who served time in Coxsackie in the sixties, movingly describes his personal version of this larger process. As a young boy growing up in postwar New York City, Luciano reflected, “I was in love with Doris Day. I believed in Dwight Eisenhower. I loved Superman, Mighty Mouse, and My Friend Flicka. I didn’t have a father, but Robert Young was my great daddy surrogate on the daily TV show, ‘Father Knows Best.’ We couldn’t have dogs in NYC projects, but, in my fantasies, I lived with Lassie in the country and Rin Tin Tin on the frontier of America’s West, fighting those evil Indians . . . For me,” recalled Luciano, “America was a meritocracy and you could rise to any heights if you had the brains, the will, the talent.” The reformatory at Coxsackie, on the other hand, offered a transformative experience of a different kind, one that came not from vocational training, but from watching “a young Jewish guy clasp his hands around a searing, hot steam pipe in his cell and burn his palms off just to get into the infirmary and not hear the silence of his jailroom,” or seeing “a friend, Itchy, beaten so badly by prison guards his thigh and shin bones were broken.” Coming home, in 1967, “for a young, black Puerto Rican like me . . . it was time to shit or get off the pot . . . I decided to shit and throw it at this government.”
As it had for so many other young men, Coxsackie instigated a political awakening for Felipe Luciano. After the reformatory, Luciano helped advance the radicalization of Puerto Rican activism in New York City as a founder of the Young Lords. In 1969, he gave a speech explaining the political position of the group, whose themes resonate with the experiences of many reformatory youth: “The conspiracy is evident, they want to chop us up. They don’t want to let Puerto Ricans, they don’t want to let New Yorkers or anyone else think that Puerto Ricans can think . . . So understand that this conspiracy is very related to you—I don’t care who you are. But understand, when the repression hits, it may hit me, and then what the system tries to do is to isolate you from the masses of the people and then begins to knock you down as they did with the Panthers.” As much as the reformatory experience may have helped crystallize this vision of repression, it also highlighted the need to recognize mutual humanity, to let voices be heard. “I believe,” declared Luciano, “that everyone has the potential for being human—not Puerto Rican, not white, but human . . . Without that belief,” he concluded, “revolutionaries cannot survive.”

Not every response to the reformatory system was explicitly political. Some expressed a powerful and profound rejection of what the state was doing to young offenders. At age 17, Armand Schaubroeck was sent to the Elmira Reception Center in 1962 to begin an indefinite three-year term, and he eventually served eighteen months in the reformatory. Upon his release, Schaubroeck poured out his feelings into his music, starting with garage-band recordings like “Lord My Cell Is Cold” (1963, with the band Kack Klick—a name that played off the prisoner nickname for Coxsackie, Cack) and “Babe We’re Not Part of Society” (1965, with the band The Churchmice). By the late 1960s, Schaubroeck was developing an entire project around his Elmira experience, which at one point was to be the basis for an Andy Warhol film, and which eventually appeared as a pioneering proto-punk album, A Lot of People Would Like to See Armand Schaubroeck . . . Dead. The project’s semi-autobiographical tracks (twenty-three in all) systematically dismantle the legitimacy of the reformatory system, while painting a haunting picture of the fight for survival. The protagonist declares, “I can beat this place” and “You won’t find me swinging by my belt,” but comes to the ultimate conclusion that “you can beat everything, but you can’t beat time.”

Reformatory inmates were among the first to reject the thirties-era reformism on which Coxsackie was built, but they would not be the last. The rehabilitative framework that helped to perpetuate New York’s reformatories was nearly out of time when Felipe Luciano, Armand Schaubroeck, and other young men
returned home to describe and to fight the system. Already under siege by the start of the 1960s, the reformatory would be intellectually discredited and politically abandoned by the start of the 1970s. During that troubled decade, Coxsackie would lose its identity as a reformatory and undergo wrenching transformations.