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What is This?
Reassessing resistance
Race, gender and sexuality in prison

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Abstract
The relationship between power and resistance behind prison walls has long animated sociological discussions of imprisonment. In this article we advance a fresh understanding of resistance that recognizes the multi-faceted dimensions of prisoner agency while acknowledging the dangers in simply valorizing the strategies of the confined to subvert penal power. For us the importance of resistance is that it makes explicit the connections between everyday actions and broader inequalities. Nevertheless we identify three limitations in conventional characterizations of resistance. First it is understood as a privileged quality in the human spirit. Second, is the assumption that those who do not challenge authority accept the legitimacy of the institution. Third is the equation of resistance with rudimentary political action. Though drawing on our empirical research conducted in male and female prisons in the UK we refine the concept to overcome these limitations. In particular we indicate how social identities mediate prisoner agency and are crucially implicated in acts of contestation. Our more general ambition is to place at the centre of prison sociology the still marginalized issues of gender, race and sexuality.

Key Words
gender • power • prison • race • sexuality

INTRODUCTION
Prisons are sites of great power inequalities. Hierarchies inside them exist among staff, between officers and inmates and within the prisoner population itself. These relations of domination and subordination are not, however, fixed. Rather, prison life is characterized by ongoing negotiations of power. In this article, we will describe examples of inmate experiences in a number of penal establishments in England, in order to understand further the manner in which power in prison is constantly contested. We hope to show how a variety of acts, from very ordinary discussions of institutional life, to more dramatic and sometimes drastic events that occur during riots can be considered as strategies of resistance. We seek to draw attention to how seemingly entrenched and
unchangeable power relations are dependent, to some extent at least, upon the performance of those small-scale and everyday aspects of life which are frequently taken for granted.

In our examples of prison life we will be drawing on fieldwork and research we each completed in the mid-1990s. Combined, our work covers both male and female experiences of incarceration (Bosworth, 1999; Carrabine, forthcoming). Like many other commentators before us, we find that, rather than experiencing incarceration passively, prisoners actively engage in interpreting the legitimacy of their punishment, their peers and their opportunities (for classic accounts, see, inter alia, Sykes, 1958; Mathiesen, 1965; Cohen and Taylor, 1979 [1972]; Sparks et al., 1996). In order to engage actively with the regime and with one another, prisoners must successfully construct themselves as agents, despite the restrictions placed upon them. To do so, they draw upon their lived experiences outside the prison walls. In turn, the strategies of resistance they select or reject, and the issues they try to subvert or support, reflect their race, gender and sexuality, allowing us to place these issues at the centre of an understanding of power relations in prison.

Rather than simply celebrating the ability of the confined to resist, however, we also wish to explore the limitations and problems inherent in studies and ideas of resistance. In particular, we will address questions of intent and success in strategies of subversion by asking to what extent are individuals knowing agents, and to what extent must they be for their actions to have effects? Can prisoners disrupt the status quo without a clear articulation of their aims? Is the meaning of any act fully determined by the individual actor? By refining the idea of resistance through such interrogation, we hope to reclaim it for criminology and use it to clarify how socio-cultural identities are imbricated in all performances, subversive or otherwise. In this way we will demonstrate how power relations in the prison rest on ideas, experiences and representations of race, gender and sexuality.

THE POWER TO PUNISH

Prisons hold a population under sufferance. In order to maintain these women and men who do not wish to be there, and to persuade them to follow prison rules, prison staff must have some means of coercion available to them. They must, in other words, be able to wield power. Complicating matters, the penal population, members of which stay for varying lengths of time, is composed of individuals who frequently have no desire to be so closely quartered with one another. As a result, there is frequent jostling and tension among them, suggesting that the balance of forces is never entirely fixed.

As much criminological literature has revealed (Sykes, 1958; Mathiesen, 1965), power negotiations in prison, whether among inmates or between them and staff, are rarely strictly linear. Other than in extreme circumstances, such as perhaps in a situation of complete lock-down, nobody's authority is entirely fixed. Instead, there are everyday, ongoing negotiations occurring among prison inmates and between them and the staff over food, visits, education, lock-up time, drug dealing, sexual relations. Early radical descriptions of imprisonment such as those produced by Stan Cohen and Laurie Taylor (1979 [1972]) and Mike Fitzgerald and Joe Sim (1979), reveal the extent to which conflict over such matters constitutes key moments when the pains of imprisonment are
countered. This radical work, which was conducted when the legitimacy of British prisons was under fierce attack by many inmates, provides moving accounts of how the interaction between small-scale and larger power relations can define the prison experience. In addition to direct conflict between prisoners and staff, inmates continually solicit the prison administration to increase authorized allowances and to challenge official decisions such as those made by parole boards. The archetypal example in sociological literature of this sort of interaction may be found in accounts of US jailhouse lawyers (Milovanovic, 1988), or more recently in Britain in descriptions of how prisoners deal with incentives and privilege schemes (Liebling et al., 1999).

Finally, power also flows from the other direction. Uniformed staff, upper management and the administration all endeavour to control prisoners in both legitimate and illegitimate ways, as officers coerce them through incentive schemes, or sometimes by force, to follow rules, to be obedient, to be peaceable, to do as they are told. This last topic has recently been the subject of many criminological studies (Adler and Longhurst, 1994; Sparks et al., 1996; Liebling, 2000). This work, which is most closely associated with criminologists Richard Sparks, Tony Bottoms and Will Hay, examines the extent to which prisons function with an accepted set of rules, values and ideas. These authors point out that prisons cannot be run by coercion alone but rather that the prisoners themselves must, to some extent, comply with the practices and ideas to which they are subject. While stressing the contingency of prison life, however, this body of literature falls short of considering how issues of legitimacy or order are culturally and socio-economically constructed. The authors do not ask, in other words, whether legitimacy is the same for women and men, or for prisoners of different ethnicities, but instead emphasize consistency and forms of administration as the source of power’s legitimacy (Bosworth, 1996).

Building on, yet diverging from all of these schools of criminology, we wish to examine how a variety of actions taken by prisoners – both small-scale and more dramatic – may be read as strategies of resistance. Our reason for using this particular term, rather than any other, lies in its capacity, we believe, to make clear the connections between everyday actions and broader social inequalities. By proposing that individual challenges to power are of sufficient significance to include in an analysis of the prison, absolute success or instrumental control may be diminished in importance. Moreover, by suggesting that the ability and desire to reject domination is related in part to broader social inequalities, the criminologist is able finally to place at the centre of prison sociology the still often overlooked issues of race, gender and sexuality. Power and resistance, in this view, rest, at least in part, on identity.

RECLAIMING AND RETHINKING RESISTANCE
So, what exactly does resistance signify? Must the actor intend his or her activities or ideas to be subversive? How, if at all, does resistance relate to the issues of race, gender, class and sexuality? And what new ideas might a study of resistance contribute to understanding power relations in prisons?

Resistance is a term that has many meanings, advocates and opponents. In the field of history, for example, it underlay many Marxist accounts of law and society, most famously in the work of E.P. Thompson. Both in his analysis of the Black Act
(Thompson, 1975), and in his account of the development of the English working class (Thompson, 1964), Thompson pays particular attention to the variety of ways in which ‘common’ people managed to resist, circumvent or subvert the control of the dominant classes. In two very different areas, therefore, Thompson suggests that power relations are subject to challenge on some level.

More recently, resistance has been popularized by feminists and other social theorists as a means to take on board some of the insights of postmodernism about the constructed nature of power and reality, without losing sight of a more partisan and ideological struggle. The term suggests, above all, that power is relational rather than absolute and therefore that alternative interpretations and arrangements of it may be possible. Such scholars reveal both the expressive and instrumental nature of power. They also contextualize activity within broader, structural, relations of dominance and subordination.

Recently, as one of us has set out elsewhere (Bosworth, 1999: 128), feminist and critical scholars in the USA have applied the notion in different fields of criminological research. Many of these scholars have been intent on exploring the dialectical relationship between the victimization and resistance of female offenders. Lisa Maher, for example, has documented women’s roles in the sex and drug industries of Brooklyn, claiming that, despite overwhelming (and often violent) oppression, most women find some avenues of personal agency within the drug economy (Maher, 1997).

Such an approach may offer a new vision of women’s imprisonment. Criminologists commonly analyse how experiences of imprisonment for women are conditioned by discourses, or ‘regimes of femininity’, which seek to regulate behaviour through policing women’s appearances, labour and behaviour (Carlen, 1983). Scholars frequently discuss how female prisoners are offered predominantly gender-specific tasks and activities like sewing, cooking and cleaning courses, and tend to be disciplined more harshly for minor infractions of prison rules. Likewise, they point out that women tend to be overmedicated both in the community and in prison if they are perceived to be refractory (Sim, 1990; Liebling, 1994).

Criminologists have been less interested in the ways that the women themselves interpret the gendered restrictions they face, and their means of dealing with, or resisting, their control. In particular, they have tended to ignore the manner in which female prisoners themselves often recognize the gendered machinations of power and punishment (although see Shaw, 1992; Bosworth, 1999). Yet, such self-awareness may be crucial for action as one woman, ‘J’, demonstrates in and account of how she dealt with poor medical facilities in prison:

When I was come in here I was on Diazepam. Diazepam is a really addictive medication. When I came in here the doctor said they didn’t have anything in here. So I really suffered for 2 weeks, electric shocks coming up my legs. Then he called me back to see how I got on, then I was really down in the dumps, really depressed, so I said ‘how do you think I feel? It was a strong drug, and I’d been on it for 15 months? And all of a sudden it just stops’. So he said ‘how do you actually feel? Do you feel suicidal?’ And I said ‘no I don’t feel suicidal, but to tell you the truth, I feel like going out there and kicking the fuck out of someone to take the frustration out of my body’.

Since the doctor agreed to put her back on Diazepam to avoid fighting or battering
someone, the aggressive, albeit hypothetical, claim of J’s convinced him in an unlooked-for way. J now was faced with a variety of options. Initially she rebelled privately, by thinking ‘you fucking juvenile bastard you had me suffering for two weeks. You’re a doctor, but you took me off them like that’. However, after two days back on the drug, J selected a more combative response by going back to him and saying ‘stuff your diazes, I don’t want ‘em’, since according to her ‘I knew I’d have to come off ‘em again sometime’. Finally, when the doctor attempted to prevent her from carrying out her decision, she lodged an official complaint.

This example of J’s negotiation of conflict with a prison doctor is typical of much daily prison life and of the process of reading everyday, routine interactions as strategies of resistance. Although initially it seemed as though she had no control over the provision of her medication, once J could articulate why the doctor had treated her in that way, she was able to act. Not only did she confront him she also pursued more official grievance mechanisms. Most provocatively, this example suggests that power is not necessarily fixed, even in situations of sharp hierarchies, since J was able to redefine the situation and present herself as the winner. She demonstrated not only that resistance may occur from a relatively weak position, but also that women are able sometimes to counteract restrictive and traditional notions of passive femininity despite their practical vulnerability to forces of discipline and control.

Resistance has also been enthusiastically appropriated by postmodern and critical socio-legal scholars as a way of conceptualizing experiences and voices previously marginalized in the legal process (Merry, 1990; White, 1991; Yngvesson, 1993). In this literature, power relations are considered as discursive and material expressions. Power is not seamless, and small acts of speaking can and do disrupt the status quo. As feminist legal scholar Lucie White puts it, ‘[a]lthough dominant groups may control the social institutions that regulate . . . languages, those groups cannot control the capacity of subordinated peoples to speak’ (White, 1991: 55).

As in these other areas of criminological analysis, resistance may be a useful term for understanding imprisonment since it highlights the struggle prisoners undergo to retain a sense of choice and autonomy in a situation where they are relatively powerless. In theory, after all, a sentence of imprisonment suggests that the inmate will have his or her daily choices and actions controlled to a significant extent by the state. Clearly, the extent and type of this control will differ depending on the establishment. Super-max US-style prisons are obviously vastly more restrictive than British open prisons. Yet, in neither case are inmates allowed officially to exercise significant amounts of power or autonomy. Even though the official penal rhetoric of Scotland and England and Wales has, since the 1990s, emphasized the need for inmate ‘responsibility’, implying that prisoners shape their own prison experience, in reality such ideas generally require the incarcerated subject to participate in his or her own self-control (Garland, 1997). While it is important to recognize some improvements in prison policies and programmes since the Woolf Report, it is equally necessary to recognize that the new language of rights, responsibilities and justice maintain prison order by subjecting inmates to a more detailed and scrutinized arrangement of self-governance.

Nonetheless as we have already stated, in all prisons, there is substantial negotiation of dominance and control, and in most, the inmates may, for various reasons and at differing times, be more or less empowered. Resistance, then, is itself a form and use of
power. All too frequently, however, it is characterized as a privileged quality of the human spirit that manages to evade relations of domination. Such a characterization sets resistance up as a purely reactive, instrumental activity thereby disguising the complexity of agency. On this view, people challenge their oppressors in order to ‘stand up to’ and reject relations of simple inequality: guerrillas bomb occupying forces, ordinary citizens mislead and hinder the Nazis, children stay out beyond their curfew. Such a view clouds the possibility that many human actions, whether subversive or not, have meaning – both for the actor and for his/her audience – which are largely separate from their effects. Clearly not all individuals like to challenge authority. Some may obey rules from fear, while others might support them out of habit or loyalty. They may even be obedient because they believe in the legitimacy of regulations in their own right. Moreover, any assumption about the inevitability of resistance requires that it is always visible to an outside audience, thereby precluding an appreciation of more personal or intimate challenges to authority, such as those entailed in the harbouring of certain religious beliefs or disallowed forms of sexuality. In short, the supposition that resistance is somehow inescapable in situations of power inequality can disguise the complex issues of intent, consciousness and motivation and may obfuscate whether or not the actor intended an act to be dissenting, and if so for whom the dissent was intended.

A second troubling conjecture that can be found in many accounts of resistance is the idea that those individuals who do not appear to challenge authority, can be assumed to be coopted or coerced into accepting the legitimacy of the institution. Such a belief implicitly criticizes those who perhaps seek only to avoid conflict. As a result, it fails to do justice to the ways in which imprisonment is experienced as an external, brutal, social fact for all of the incarcerated, when life is made bearable through making do. Some prisoners, either because of personal reasons such as an upcoming parole hearing, or to safeguard access to their children in the community, may feel unable to challenge authority. Others may be incapable of doing so because of debilitating effects of their medication or in response to the threat of violence from others.

The third problem relates to the politics of protest and how we confront the issue of violence in prisoner resistance. Terms like disturbance, disorder or riot are hardly value-free concepts and tend to be deployed by the Right to conjure up images of pathological and dangerous individuals. The terms preferred by the Left to describe instances of collective prisoner action against oppressive institutions – such as rebellion, protest and resistance – are hardly neutral either. Yet as Stevenson reminds us, ‘one of the subtler forms of condescension in historical writing is to see all violence as “protest” and all the participants in riots as sober-sided and self-conscious proletarians’ (1992: 4). Consequently, we need to advance a way of thinking that recognizes that resistance should not be simply equated with rudimentary forms of political action and transformation.

Perhaps a more sophisticated approach to the issue of violence as resistance could have been gained through a consideration of the 1970s British Cultural Studies tradition (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). In this literature, we are invited to read, or deconstruct, symbols in a way that emphasizes an underlying signification of opposition, using a theoretical vocabulary that draws on Roland Barthes, Antonio Gramsci and Claude Lévi-Strauss (see Hebdige, 1979; Cohen, 1980). This school of thought argued that spectacular forms of youth cultures, such as the Teddy Boys, Mods, Punks and so on, in post-war Britain were a symbolic resolution, by the young, of the problems imposed by growing
up in an unjust capitalist society. In this analysis, styles of dress and behaviour are interpreted as more or less successful forms of historically informed political resistance to the hegemony of the dominant class. Yet, at the same time, it is suggested that such practices do not confront the real sources of oppression and do not constitute genuinely political acts of subversion since they ‘fail to pose an alternative, potentially counter hegemonic solution’ (Clarke, 1976: 189).

In many respects, the exemplary statement in this work on resistance can be found in Willis’ (1977) *Learning to labour*. In his study, he describes how working class boys developed a culture of opposition in school through the construction and performance of a particular form of masculinity that was an unwitting homology to their eventual destinations in manual labour. Thus, while the ‘lads’ acts of rebellion – as expressed in skiving, sexism and horseplay – constituted a rejection of the ideologies of school, they in fact prepared them for unskilled labour on the shop-floor. Resistance, in this case, may have been intended as a rejection of the status quo, but it turned out to be necessary for its maintenance.

It has become increasingly recognized in cultural theory that simple metaphors that involve binary oppositions of inversion, reversal and substitution are unlikely to capture the complexity of social and symbolic practice. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s (1988) landmark text, *The politics and poetics of transgression*, provides us with a metaphor of transformation (through transgression) that manages to convey the hybrid, impure and profane implications of the reversal of order. The book explores the persistent hierarchical mapping of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in Europe and ‘the process through which the low troubles the high’ (Stallybrass and White, 1988: 3). This process is transgression, and it is grounded in the work of the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), and his notion of ‘carnival’. Carnival is a Rabelaisian metaphor for the temporary, licensed suspension and reversal of order – when the world is turned upside down and inside out, when the low becomes high and the high, low – on occasions of popular festivity at fairs, festivals and mardi gras. As Stuart Hall recognizes, it is the ‘sense of the overflowing of libidinal energy associated with the moment of “carnival” that makes it such a potent metaphor of social and symbolic transformation’ (1996: 291). For, in Bakhtin, the notion of carnival is not simply a metaphor of inversion, whereby the ‘low’ replaces the ‘high’, it is instead the purity of this binary distinction that is transgressed, blurred and made ‘grotesque’.

It is this shift in the metaphors of transformation that Stallybrass and White (1988) explore as a means of overcoming binary thinking so that relations of antagonism can be defined in terms of both excess and absence. According to them, the contradictions of ambivalence, hybridity and interdependence disrupt and transgress the hierarchical ordering of social formations. Such work helps elucidate how forms of counter conduct, whether at school as in Willis’ study, or in prison as in ours, will be motivated as much by anger, rage, exploitation and injustice as by pleasure, play and boredom.

In the following example we want to indicate how this theoretical work can help us make sense of complex social interactions in a non-reductive manner. In particular, we are concerned with the horrific attacks on ‘Rule 43 (a) prisoners’ (i.e. inmates who were segregated ‘for their own protection’) who were understood to be sex offenders during the Strangeways protest in April 1990. As is well known, this local prison in Manchester was the site of the largest prison riot in English penal history. While it is clear that a
dozen or so prisoners had planned a protest, the fact that it escalated into a four-week occupation had more to do with the reactions of the authorities than the actions of the prisoners. The riot indicates, in other words, that strategies of resistance are uncertain and may have unanticipated, transgressive effects (Carrabine, forthcoming).

During the early days of the Strangeways occupation there were widespread tales in the media of mass murder, torture and butchery. While these accounts were subsequently found to be gross exaggerations, some prisoners did actively seek out and torture Rule 43 prisoners. Instead of interpreting such actions as outbursts of pathological fury they may more usefully be seen in the context of the gendered meaning of violence, and how gender is reinforced through the routine operation of prisons. They also demonstrate that masculinity is a contested terrain – rather than a fully hegemonic one – for not every prisoner chose to assert their agency through such violent displays of domination.

A number of prisoners gave evidence to the Woolf Inquiry, relating their treatment at the hands of other prisoners. Perhaps the most harrowing experience happened to Prisoner N who was sharing his cell with another inmate on Rule 43 on the fourth landing. Once the riot had started N and his cellmate barricaded their door but four prisoners, two masked, started breaking the door down, shouting they were going to kill them. When they broke in they found a set of objects, which did not belong to N. They did not believe his account of why they were there, and he was hit with a table leg and stabbed with a pair of scissors. He was eventually thrown over the balcony from the fourth landing on to the wire netting between the second and first landing, where various objects, including a cell door, were dropped on him and he fainted. As he regained consciousness he found himself being dragged off the netting by prisoners, who threw paint over him. Another prisoner came to his rescue and took him to the A1 landing, where he was able to get out and was carried away on a stretcher (Woolf and Tumim, 1991: para. 3.205: 72).

These acts of violence may be interpreted as performances of an aggressive, hegemonic masculinity because of their overt displays of power and domination against the most vilified group of individuals in the prison community. That such activities routinely occur in prison riots (Useem and Kimball, 1989), suggests that, prisons sustain and reproduce cultures of masculinity, which emphasize force and domination and ostentatiously condemn deviant sexualities, above all 'non-masculine' ones such as paeophilia. Yet, the fact that other inmates were prepared to help those suffering at the hands of these men illustrates that hegemonic masculinity may be contested.

How the prison ‘reproduces normal men’ (Sim, 1994: 108) and thereby perpetuates gender divisions has yet to be adequately addressed. As Collier (1998: 22) recognizes, there is a tendency for the concept of hegemonic masculinity to be deployed in a reductive, causal manner in criminology. Yet for Gramsci, the term hegemony implied a contested terrain and it is this formulation we wish to emphasize here. For while prisoners bully, intimidate and torture each other, these actions should not be understood simply as contradictory and doomed attempts at resolving the existential problems imposed by imprisonment and an unjust society, since such action does not confront the real bases of oppression. Instead the metaphor of transgression is particularly important here as it manages to convey the excess of actions accompanying prison protest.

Again, we should emphasize that we are not arguing that the 'causes' of the discontent are to be found purely in some version of 'protest masculinity', which Connell
defines as ‘a response to powerlessness, a claim to the gendered position, a pressured exaggeration (bashing gays, wild riding) of masculine conventions’ (1995: 111). Instead, it is an attempt to understand some of the contradictions that collective dissent engenders without simplifying complex events and characterizing protesters as a homogenous entity, acting with one, unified will to resist. In other words, this episode is used to demonstrate the importance of going beyond binary oppositions into the messy detail of social interaction to understand that there is no originating, ahistorical engine of resistance. Rather we need to excavate the diverse ways in which action is made possible. Clearly, the violence, in this instance, was informed by understandings of masculinity – though, crucially, these understandings were contested. In other words, one of the most important ways in which action was made possible in this example, was through social identity as it was variously constituted and understood.

PERFORMING RESISTANCE: RACE AND SEXUALITY

Such contingency of power relations and resistance, and their relationship to identity, has become the focus of much recent feminist, queer and critical race theory. Writers in these fields argue that gender, sexuality, or race/ethnicity are not bound irrevocably in formations of inequality. Rather, authors like Judith Butler (1990) suggest that, to some extent at least, masculinity and femininity, and heterosexuality and homosexuality, are performed and so are inherently subject to change or subversion. Likewise, critical race scholar Paul Gilroy (1995) writes of the need to appreciate a ‘double-consciousness’ in which racial categories of black and white are no longer perceived in opposition, but rather as interconnected. Such authors help to forge, in other words, a dialectical relationship between ideas of hierarchy and contingency. By demonstrating that racial, gender and sexual identities are contested they draw attention to the performative and expressive nature of much social life.

The role played by race and ethnicity in the negotiation of power in prison is rarely considered. Given the over-representation of people of colour in British and US prisons as inmates, and the fact that they are typically guarded by white prison officers, it seems that colour and culture are indices of certain positions within a power hierarchy. The hierarchy is not, however, fixed. Rather, race relations are frequently structured, if only in part, by class and geography. Thus, women form alliances and friendships with others from similar areas and backgrounds that can and do shift, suggesting that power and allegiances are somewhat transitory (Bosworth, 1999: 136–7).

These patterns are also evident in prisons for men. For example, one former black prisoner from Strangeways explicitly drew out the connections between locality, ethnicity and practice through saying that the staff tended ‘to leave the boys from the Moss alone’. The name Moss Side, which is an inner city district in Manchester, is widely understood to connote the ravages of the drug economy, rampant gang warfare and an area abandoned to the periphery. Yet, in prison, it provided the basis for some type of prisoner unity indicating how, in certain respects, the over-representation of specific ethnic populations may lead to forms of solidarity that make the pains of incarceration that little bit easier to bear.

Nonetheless, despite the influence of geography or class, in our research we observed that race and ethnicity were frequently sites of localized debates over identity. In the
women’s prisons, such discussions took many forms, and were complicated by the presence of many foreign nationals who practised very different cultural and social mores from all British prisoners. Often race and ethnicity featured in debates about seemingly banal or unimportant issues. For example, in an interview, two Afro-Caribbean young offenders describe an argument about hair as a conflict over the ownership, knowledge and boundaries of ethnic identity.

In response to a question about whether the prison catered for minority women, the first young woman, P, claimed with some vehemence ‘they don’t cater at all. At all. At all.’ She then went on to back up her claim with an example that relied also on her friend S’s testimony:

P: A beautician came the other day

S: We were talking about hair, and... I told her that my hair is black and she goes ‘no it’s not’. It is, it's not; it is, it's not. Until she got the chart and contradicted herself and found out that it was black. I think she was mistaking the extensions... Ha ha ha...

This same beautician, after becoming the target of S’s ridicule, went further to incur her ire and that of P since, at least according to the young women, she made the claim that ‘black people’s hair is tough. We could never have long hair.’ Interpreting these twin statements of the white beautician as some kind of challenge, P took matters into her own hands:

I said ‘excuse me’, and she said ‘can I help you?’ and I goe ‘yes you can...’ I’d like to know if my hair’s tough,’ and she went ‘Oh I can’t see cos you got them plaits in’, So I says ‘you can feel the roots if you like,’ and she does. Then I said ‘is my hair short?’ and she says ‘I can’t tell cos you got them plaits in, but yeah, it probably is’, so I says, ‘OK, do you know anything about black people’s hair? Or anything to do with it?’ No. ‘So don’t tell me nothing’.

For these young women, the debate over hair became a dispute over the hairdresser’s (read the institution’s) knowledge about themselves. Perhaps influenced by the gender of the offending individual – would the young women have acted the same way if the beautician had been male? – Or perhaps simply the temperament of the women concerned, they both sought to humiliate her in public. Once again despite their actual relative lack of power, their resistance succeeded, at least to the satisfaction of the prisoners themselves, since they were able to prove the teacher wrong.

This example also chimes with the arguments advanced by the cultural theorist Kobena Mercer (1997), who states that hair is a ‘key ethnic signifier’, which functions both semiotically and politically for black Americans. He states that, while dominant ideologies of race (and the way they dominate) have changed, the legacy of this biologizing and totalizing racism is traced as present in everyday comments made about our hair; ‘Good’ hair, when used to describe hair on a black person’s head, means hair that looks European, straight, not too curly, not that kinky. And more importantly, the given attributes of our hair are often referred to by descriptions as ‘woolly’, ‘tough’ or, more to the point, just plain old ‘nigger hair’. These terms crop up not only at the hairdresser’s but more acutely when a baby is born and everyone is eager to inspect the baby’s hair and predict how it will ‘turn out’. (Mercer, 1997: 421)
In this manner hair is politicized by racism, as it is burdened with a range of negative connotations. As a result of being characterized as a ‘problem’, Mercer argues that many different hair styles, such as Afros, Dreadlocks, Beaded Corn Rows and so on are ‘solutions’ to this devalorization. As he puts it, ‘through aesthetic stylization each black hairstyle seeks to revalorize the ethnic signifier, and the political significance of each rearticulation of value and meaning depends on the historical conditions under which each style emerges’ (Mercer, 1997: 421, emphasis in original).

Mercer’s overall concern is with how diasporic innovations ‘from below’ become incorporated and commodified into mainstream fashions within the dominant culture, thereby losing their political significance, which, as we have argued, is the major preoccupation in Cultural Studies’ treatment of resistance. However, for the young women in prison, hair and conflict over it, appeared to cover a rather different struggle. The strategy they used had less to do with commodification and more to do with knowledge as they sought to delegitimize the authority of their perceived critic. In this example, the young women appear to achieve their goal and thus to be successful actors. Yet, in light of their original criticism of the absence of choices offered to ethnic minority prisoners, it is clear their success could only have been partial.

As the above example demonstrates, taking identity as a site of the negotiation of power requires a smaller-scale approach to questions of inequality, and, perhaps most significantly, places the voices and experiences of individuals at the centre of analysis. Such an approach allows the incorporation of a range of human actions and emotions into the discussion of power. It also reveals the relationship between socio-economic and cultural characteristics and the capacity for agency. In other words, it shifts an exploration of power from a purely instrumental capacity to ‘get things done’ to the much more subtle and complex circumstances involved in expressive gestures that try to ‘get things said’. In this way, it becomes possible to appreciate the agonistic nature of power and its subjective, expressive elements, rather than its purely instrumental effects. Succeeding in ‘getting one over’, winning an argument, amusing oneself at an officer’s expense – these are all minor forms of resistance that play a part in shaping the overall balance of forces in the prison. If it is to understand the agonistic play of power in the prison context, our analysis must pay attention to these expressive, everyday forms of subversion and dissent.

Sexuality provides a further and final example of this approach to power. Whereas resistance may be open and identifiable as in the examples of violence and conflict over medication and in the young women’s humiliation of the beautician, so, too, can it be more subtle and hidden. Intimate relations in prisons, both those of a sexual nature and more platonic ones, fall under this second category. Although early sociological studies describe lesbian and homosexual relations in great detail (Sykes, 1958; Ward and Kassebaum, 1965), sexuality in prison today is often overlooked (although see Pollack, 2000). Such failure to discuss the effects of intimacy, love and desire in prison, even from feminist criminologists, has further limited an understanding of the influence of gender since sexual orientation and sexual practices are vital to constructions of masculinity and femininity. Lesbian and homosexual relations in prison can be understood as strategies of resistance not only to the pains of imprisonment as traditional sociologists would have us believe, but also to stereotypical constructions of gender put forward by the institutions themselves.
In the prisons visited by Bosworth, many women claimed that others engaged in sexual and intimate relations. Such relations were interpreted as both positive and potentially damaging for the individuals concerned. For example, M claimed that:

‘There are people, who are together in a relationship, and there are a lot of people who would not normally have any lesbian tendencies, but because they’re in prison . . . they need somebody’.

For these women, physical intimacy could be comforting. However, as M goes on to point out, unless the couple are serving the same time, problems can arise because ‘then one of them goes home, and the other suddenly realises “oh, I’m on my own now” and prison is harder to bear’. Both because of official rules banning sexual relations and because of inmates’ inability to alter their sentence length, the prisoners have limited control over their capacity for personal resistance. As a mode of resistance, in other words, sexuality is difficult to interpret both because it is so intimate and because it is so subjective. Clearly however, it flouts prison rules – since sexual relations are disallowed – at the same time as it contradicts many fundamental assumptions about femininity. Women are meant to aspire to marriage, children and men, not to one another. Thus, as a strategy of negotiating power on a small scale, it deserves to be studied further.

In men’s prisons, the picture is even more clouded since sexuality has been discussed almost exclusively in terms of rape rather than in regard to intimate, consensual relationships. Here, sex once again demonstrates that disempowered individuals may do terrible things to achieve dominance or control. Considering the circumstances under which prisoners have sex reveals how socio-economic qualities intersect to shape power relations as shown by Leo Carroll’s early (1974) study of race relations in prison, where he claims that rape was used as a racialized strategy of violence. It also points to the interconnections between gender and power on both an individual and institutional level. Thus, Plummer (1984: 46) argues that rape in any situation is an expression of gender, power and insecurity, while Sim examines the many connections between ‘institutional and sexual violence and broader cultures of masculinity’ (1994: 106). Rape, in his view, divides the prison population against itself through fear, and reinforces those qualities of hegemonic masculinity associated with violence and supremacy which are crucial to the maintenance of inequality between the sexes (Sim, 1994: 107).

While we would argue that sexual relationships in prisons need to be understood in a vocabulary that goes beyond resistance and violence, they also serve to remind us that penal institutions enforce norms of heterosexuality. As feminists, queer theorists and others have persuasively demonstrated ideas of femininity and masculinity rest upon assumptions of sexuality and desire. When such expectations are thwarted, as they are in lesbian and homosexual relationships, the whole gender order is challenged.

CONCLUSION
The relationship between power, punishment and the prison is a complex one, which needs to be investigated from many perspectives. Irrespective of whether prisoners’ actions are interpreted as acquiescence, resistance or violence, understanding prisoners as agents who, to some extent at least, make choices and actively negotiate power
relations, challenges the tendency to view power in prisons as conditioned by an all-or-nothing set of binary relations. It facilitates, in other words, a more nuanced account of how small-scale, ‘everyday’ activities contribute to the maintenance or disruption of the status quo.

In this article we have indicated how a versatile range of actions can be understood through a reworked conceptualization of resistance that does not simply valorize the ability of the confined to exert some notion of themselves. For us, it is clear that the main driving force of what we are calling resistance may also be usefully understood as subjective identity. However, we have not argued that the individual is the centred author of social practice. Rather we have simply shown how actions in prison are structured in part by identity. While we would not wish to minimize the distinct capacity that groups and individuals may have to make their interpretation stick, nor do we wish to downplay the capacity of seemingly disempowered individuals to come up with subversive performances. In particular, as we have shown, prisoners often draw on ideas and practices of race, gender and sexuality in their performances of self to create alternative meanings and thus to resist the instrumentally superior nature of the institution’s power.

In short, while there are undeniable power inequalities in prisons, prisoners actively create their own space. This space, as we have seen from the example of Strangeways, can be problematic for other prisoners. On occasion it may be dangerous or provocative for staff. Our fundamental point is that resistance is always contingent upon a nexus of local and societal circumstances in which certain scripts that make existence possible, like gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and so on, are drawn upon and performed. In this manner, agency is a practical accomplishment that can challenge or maintain prevailing power relations, providing the possibility that prisons may be altered from the inside out by those very individuals who are subject to its control.

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Notes
1 Mary Bosworth conducted qualitative interviews of inmates in three women’s prisons in England. She visited a ‘closed’, medium security and an ‘open’ minimum security establishment as well as a remand centre. Eamonn Carrabine analysed life inside Strangeways prison from 1965 to 1990.
2 See McRobbie (1978) for a parallel argument with reference to working class girls and their destinations in domesticity.

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