

Dear Dawn: Aileen Wuornos in Her Own Words

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Against Equality: Prisons Will Not Protect You

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Everyone wants something from Aileen Wuornos. In her ten years of letters to her good friend Dawn Botkins, it is clear that people are drawn to the “first female serial killer” for all sorts of reasons: some want to make money off her story, some demand to know the truth, some want to pray for her, and still others want her to be the new face of feminism or an emblem of radical queerness. *Dear Dawn: Aileen Wuornos in Her Own Words* is a composition of complexity. In reading what amounts to a significant sampling of her letters (edited primarily to cut out repeated ideas), we are not given a linear autobiography; instead, we see someone who is surviving, who is screaming to be heard by her own lawyers and supporters, who reads and quotes the Bible, who at turns embraces or questions being a lesbian, and who occasionally says racist things. Without being able to read Dawn’s replies, we are left with the dizzying sense that we may have missed something crucial—yet Wuornos clearly understood that her existence fucked with the order of things in an important way, even if she sometimes contradicted herself as to why.

The benefit of time allows us to understand that much of what Wuornos wondered about was probably happening; a lot of people sold and told her story. Cops involved with her cases were reprimanded for selling their versions of her arrest before her cases even went to court. Wuornos contextualized this within other systemic abuses, writing, “if exposure in corruption done over on my cases can help even a tid bit . . . Then so be it.” (*Dear Dawn* intentionally preserves Wuornos’s writing as it appeared, or as close as possible to how it appeared, in her letters.) She tried to use her infamy to bring changes to the conditions faced by those incarcerated. In one such example, she offered to share the details of the killings in exchange for allowing women on Death Row to smoke. Wuornos also wrote on a number of occasions that the guards were trying to poison her or kill her, which was exactly what was happening, under the guise of justice and through the broader mechanisms of the state, if not also in the more direct ways Wuornos feared. A prison-abolition framework demands that we support the efforts of those on the inside advocating for better conditions, like Wuornos, while continuing to critique the role of the state as sole distributor of life chances.

The third and final *Against Equality* anthology, *Prisons Will Not Protect You*, “interrogates the gay community’s unquestioned loyalty to the prison industrial complex,” both broadly and by offering a targeted analysis of hate-crimes legislation. Despite the pocket size of the anthology, *Against Equality* manages a broad scope, engaging in several hard conversations, including how to address sexual violence while challenging the state’s framework of sex offenses. Erica Meiners, Liam Michaud, Josh Pavan, and Bridget Simpson capture this exactly, by naming increased queer vulnerability and imprisonment while “the most significant forms of sexual violence (intimate and familial violence) become obscured by the state’s focus on ‘stranger danger’ and ‘dangerous sexual offenders.’” Their piece follows James D’Entremont’s history of queers imprisoned on false sex-abuse charges, an important and under-told story that occasionally loses focus, citing drug use and schizophrenia as reasons to question the believability of witnesses. The problem is not that a person who uses substances or has a mental-health diagnosis is less likely to accurately name child sexual violence, it’s that the state-sponsored responses to this violence only serve to further harm. Here, again, Meiners, Michaud, Pavan, and Simpson expand on this point: until the root causes of sexual violence are addressed, those who are viewed by the state as “deviant” will always be targeted, whether gay men, lesbians, trans women, Black men, or other racialized or criminalized groups. Merely shifting the framework of who is “deviant” does not disallow the policing of deviance.

A repeated call is made throughout *Against Equality* to support queer and trans people, inside and outside prison, who are targets of the police state. As mainstream gay organizations intentionally ignore locked-up queer and trans people, *Dear Dawn* shows how to do exactly the opposite. Dawn reconnected with her childhood friend through near-daily letters for ten years, in addition to visiting and providing other support, throughout all of the events she had going on in her life on the outside, including losing her house and managing a significant illness. Dawn says she did this not because she had the time, but because she “made the time.” While we’re doing the important work of dismantling the systems that are every day expanding, we need to keep connecting with each other, reaching out for conversations and relationship building, as well as making sure we amplify the efforts of those on the inside.

—Alex West