Maina wa Kinyatti's Kenya: A Prison Notebook opens on a chilling scene:

The conditions that prisoners in Kenya endure are extremely barbaric. Every morning at 5 a.m., male prisoners are ordered out of the cells stark naked for internal body searches. The guards search their mouths and armpits, ears and nostrils. They pull, twist, and squeeze their genitals. They order the prisoners to face the walls with their legs spread apart to examine their anuses for concealed weapons, money and other contraband. They use sharp sticks to probe the prisoners' rectums. In a sense, the guards are more interested in prisoners' buttocks than in the search. They make sexual remarks:

'Look at this one, his buttocks are two mountains, it is difficult to mount him . . . and look at this one, his arsehole is shaped like a woman's cunt . . . This one has a soft arse like his mother . . . ' This monstrous drama is repeated every morning. It is a humiliating and degrading experience.

These ritual, sexualized humiliations emphasize prisoners' gendered and sexual vulnerability. For instance, the comment that a prisoner's "arsehole is shaped like a woman's cunt" suggests that prisoners are neither male nor female. Their body parts approximate gendered configurations, yet fail to achieve them. To be "like" is not "to be". The guards' ritual inspections manipulate the prisoners' gendered possibilities and emphasize that prisoners are subject to the
The man has been away from the outside world for so long that he has forgotten women; his desire has forgotten its proper object.

changing relationship to politics and sexual identity - he enters prison relatively apolitical and leaves as a prison reformer.

When Kiriamiti first enters the prison system, he cannot imagine intimacy between men. In his first extended description of such intimacy, he claims that the man - an inmate at Mathare Hospital where Kiriamiti does a brief stint as a prisoner - has been away from the outside world for so long that he has forgotten women; more precisely, his desire has forgotten its proper object. The sense that homo-desire is caused by prolonged absence from women and is a kind of forgetting predominates through Kiriamiti's narrative. But it is not simply forgetting how desire should be directed - ostensibly only toward women - but also forgetting that proper masculinity depends on having proper desire for women. A masculinity that forgets or abandons its proper desire is tainted. This notion of taint is apparent when Kiriamiti discovers that a friend in prison practices same-sex intimacies, and henceforth drops him as a friend.

The relationship between sexual desire and tainted, compromised masculinity becomes more explicit when Kiriamiti contemplates creating an ad-hoc social welfare institution among prisoners designed to ensure prison security and wellbeing. As he muses on which prison groups - the 'queers', the politicians, the business-
Men with homo-desires are politically suspect, if not impotent.

Kiriamiti’s argument would be idiosyncratic, were it not for the important role prison narratives have played in shaping our ideals about the relationships among politics, masculinity and heterosexuality. Some of our most compelling national memories are of Mama Ngina visiting Kenyatta while he was imprisoned. Winnie Mandela’s devotion to her husband helped to keep his memory alive in apartheid-era masculinity; Dennis Brutus’s beautiful sequence of poems addressed to his wife while he was in South Africa’s apartheid-era prison, *Letters to Martha*, remains one of the cornerstones of modern African literature. In Kenya’s independent-era history, political prisoners, the most vocal and well-known of whom have been men, have emphasized that prison is a torturous place in large part because it breaks up heterosexual domestic units. Simultaneously, these authors have registered their disdain for the same-sex intimacies that go on in prison, labelling them unfortunate perversions created by the prison system.

Maina wa KinyattT’s *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* testifies to the author’s incarceration under the Moi regime for political insubordination and also defines the parameters of progressive political masculinity. A historian of Mau Mau, KinyattT draws clear parallels between the imprisonment of political radicals in independence-era Kenya and the detention and capture of Mau Mau-activists. As the historian Louise White has suggested, Kenya’s war for independence in the 1950s was simultaneously a war over masculinity, a war that helped to distinguish the men who fought from...
those who collaborated and those who did not fight, with the fighters emerging as real men, if not necessarily politically or economically powerful. By aligning himself with the men who resisted and fought, Kinyatti embeds himself within a tradition of political, revolutionary masculinity.

That political, revolutionary masculinity is closely tied to the forms of sexuality that are desired and practiced, especially within the space of the prison, a space that relies on rituals of humiliation and shame to maintain order. Throughout Kinyatti’s narrative, he expresses his sexual frustration, indicting the political system that separates men from their wives and lovers. In his capacity as an heir to Mau Mau revolutionaries, he metonymically embodies the spirit of revolutionary and politically progressive masculinity and sutures that masculinity to heterosexual desire.

In narrating his life as a political prisoner and modelling himself after Mau Mau fighters, Kinyatti tells at least two narratives. The first is about the relationship between politics and class-based activism in postcolonial Kenya. The second is about the kind of masculinity it takes to survive the horrors of imprisonment, a masculinity that is embodied in the spirit of Kenya’s freedom fighters and heroes. Within his narrative, Kinyatti represents this kind of political masculinity and is a metonym, a part that stands in for a whole, for the kind of politically progressive masculinity that has the ability to transform Kenya. An essential element of this masculinity is the desire it expresses and the intimacies it cultivates.

Of all the non-fictional Kenyan prison narratives, Kinyatti’s has the most detailed information on prison same-sex intimacies, both in narrative passages and, most extensively, through a detailed glossary of terms used to describe same-sex intimacies. Of these terms, the most provocative is *mende* (cockroach), used to refer to so-called passive partners. In a broader, metaphorical context, *mende* refers to these prisoners’ roles within a political imaginary. Implicitly, Kinyatti contrasts his own virile masculinity—attested to by his constant desire for intimacy with his wife—with the de-fanged, indeed, de-humanized, un-gendered state of these *mende*. More crucially, if, as I have suggested, Kinyatti embodies the necessary virile masculinity required to enact social and political change, these *mende* represent the negation of political masculinity, the dearth of social and political change, a political sphere of dread and despair.

Indeed, the treacherous homosexual, one who serves prison authorities to repress fellow prisoners, is a character that runs through prison fiction such as Wahome Mutahi’s *Three Days on the Cross* and Charles Githae’s *Comrade Inmate*. These men follow a line of thinking that can be traced, in its modern incarnation, to Dennis Brutus’s *Letters to Martha*, in which same-sex prison intimacies are humiliations visited upon vulnerable prisoners by their fellow inmates, and these actions are part of the State’s repressive apparatus. For Brutus, Mutahi, Githae and other writers of prison narratives, how one reacts to such intimacies, preferably with disgust and anger, is a measure of one’s heterosexuality, one’s masculinity and one’s dedication to a truly liberatory politics.

Kenyan prison narratives thus open a small window onto how politically progressive masculinities are defined and disseminated both within the space of the prison and elsewhere. From within the space of the prison, we learn which forms of desire and intimacy are acceptable for those who would engage in the politically necessary work of constructing a liberatory politics. And we also learn which forms of masculinity we should praise and which remain politically suspect.