"Utopia is on the horizon," Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano once wrote. "When I draw near two steps, it retreats two steps." Working towards the abolition of the prison industrial complex (PIC) can feel like seeking utopia. We organize, educate ourselves and each other, we take steps and gain political ground. But at every turn we struggle against the entrenched oppressive structures, the many arms of a system that is well-funded, politically empowered, and fueled by violence. It can seem like the type of world we seek remains elusive, despite our progress. "So what good is utopia?" Galeano returns to ask. His reply is like fuel to a fire: "It is to keep us walking."

As we step ever onward toward a world without the violence of policing, surveillance, prisons and the social and economic violence they support, art and culture can give us both the vitality to keep moving as well as visions to color the horizon. Issue 21 of The Abolitionist explores the world of "Art and Abolition," and the way artistic and cultural expression nourishes the spirit of our movement and amplifies our collective power. In the steps we take towards PIC abolition, creativity and imagination are essential tools that energize and create space for the growth and development of alternatives to a system that is meant to crush the human spirit. In this issue, we see the ways in which movements have utilized images to further political messaging; we read about how fiction and storytelling allow us to do everything from conjuring with the rich cultural expression nourishes the spirit of our movement and healing, just as it can be a powerful organizing tool.

In thinking about all the inspiring ways in which communities across the world have been fighting against the violence of the prison industrial complex, many of our readers are likely very interested in the historic protest against solitary confinement led by thousands of Californian prisoners. With 30,000 prisoners participating in the first days, many people throughout the system went on to refuse food for 60 days before suspending their protest. While this struggle is certainly far from over, we believe that the spirit of hope and the potential this protest has inspired us to do everything from conjuring with the rich cultural expression nourishes the spirit of our movement and healing, just as it can be a powerful organizing tool.

We are largely influenced by many different social movements and 1930s Black Feminist Blues, among many other philosophies of revolution and resistance. "So what good is utopia?" Galeano asks. His reply is like fuel to a fire: "It is to keep us walking."

As we step ever onward toward a world without the violence of policing, surveillance, prisons and the social and economic violence they support, art and culture can give us both the vitality to keep moving as well as visions to color the horizon. Issue 21 of The Abolitionist explores the world of "Art and Abolition," and the way artistic and cultural expression nourishes the spirit of our movement and amplifies our collective power. In the steps we take towards PIC abolition, creativity and imagination are essential tools that energize and create space for the growth and development of alternatives to a system that is meant to crush the human spirit. In this issue, we see the ways in which movements have utilized images to further political messaging; we read about how fiction and storytelling allow us to do everything from conjuring with the rich cultural expression nourishes the spirit of our movement and healing, just as it can be a powerful organizing tool.

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Critical Resistance seeks to build an international movement to end the Prison Industrial Complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe. We believe that basic necessities such as food, shelter, and freedom are what really make our communities secure. As such, our work is part of global struggles against inequality and powerlessness. The success of the movement requires that it reflect communities most affected by the PIC. Because we seek to abolish the PIC, we cannot support any work that extends its life or scope.

Letter to the Editor

I’ve been receiving The Abolitionist for about seven years and a lot of my inspiration comes from your work. The articles aren’t just informative but they let us know that our situation isn’t some localized event; that it’s not simply the way things are and to be accepted. The resistance that you provide gives a lot of us encouragement to pull together. The system which oppresses us cannot be overcome unless and until we—the people—learn to cooperate among ourselves. We must overcome all of the divisive schisms. We must build bridges by opening dialogues coming to agreement on what the problems are as we develop strategies to combat the ignorance and oppression which plagues us. Your articles have helped me (in my personal development) more than you can imagine!

In our efforts to build a level of unity among the poor and oppressed within my immediate community (in prison) we developed a small pilot program that I’m enclosing. In each barracks we have a pin-up style board for announcements, etc. The enclosed letters will be pinned up one a day for seven consecutive days. Meanwhile a couple of us more activist types will encourage positive feedback among the 50 guys. At the end of the period we’ll attempt to have a sit-down of those interested. What will happen? How may will show interest? Can we come together at all? I don’t know. But we’re going to make an attempt to see what happens. Wish us luck!

I’ll leave you with a clenched fist raised high and a defiant scream on my lips!

—Guerrilla Shareef

Send your letters, submissions, and subscription requests to:

The Abolitionist
c/o Critical Resistance
1904 Franklin St., Ste. 504
Oakland, CA 94612

Please be sure to let us know if we have permission to print your full name and address along with your submission. See p. 14 for more instructions on submitting writing or artwork for publication.

The Poet in the Box

We have a problem with Brandon, the assistant warden said. He’s a poet.

At the juvenile detention center, dour poetry fired Brandon’s fist into the forehead of another inmate. Metaphor, that cackling spirit, drove him to flip another boy’s cafeteria tray onto the floor. The staccato chorus rhyming in his head told him to spit and curse at enemies bigger by a hundred pounds. The gnawing in his rib cage was a craving for discipline.

Repeatedly two guards shuffled him to the cell called the box, solitary confinement, of great-grandmothers and sharecropper bluesmen whenever sleep began to whistle in his breath.

So the cold was a blanket to him.

Tonight there are poets—whom verse infests; poets who stare at computer screens and imagine cockroach powder dissolved into the coffee; poets who drain whiskey bottles of the committee that said no to tenure; poets who versify vacations in Tuscany, who drain whiskey bottles of the committee that said no to tenure; poets who stare at computer screens and imagine cockroach powder dissolved into the coffee; poets who versify vacations in Tuscany, who versify vacations in Tuscany, the villa on a hill, the light of morning; poets who stare at computer screens and imagine cockroach powder dissolved into the coffee; poets who versify vacations in Tuscany, who versify vacations in Tuscany, the villa on a hill, the light of morning; poets who star...
Building Community, from the Ground Up

An Interview with Mikey Muscadine and Ruben Leal of the Aztlan Beautification Movement

BY JESS HEANEY

In 2011 while the City of Oakland was targeting neighbor- hoods with gang injunctions, Mikey Muscadine and Ruben Leal formed Aztlan Beautification Movement (ABM), a project that sought to build with their families and neighbors, to reclaim their community, and to make it stronger. Growing out of many years of work in Xicana Moratorium Coalition (XMC), Mikey and Ruben seized the seized to “set the roots real deep” with visible arts and cultural work through Aztlan Beautification Movement. ABM and the membership of XMC organized barbecues, mural painting, and block parties as a way of building up community resilience to resist police and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) repression, and the threats of gentriﬁcation. The vision of ABM built on people’s momentum to work “with the community, by and for the community.”

This June, Jess Heaney, a member of Critical Resistance, met up with Mikey and Ruben in the Fruitvale Community Garden, a neighborhood-run garden spot that began a year and a half ago as a collaboration by ABM, Stop the Injunctions Coalition (STIC), and community members.

The garden, which is now ﬂourishing with corn, papas, tomatillos, basil, cilantro, and chayote planted by the neighborhood, is the site of one of ABM’s murals, a twenty by ﬁfty foot full-wall piece in brilliant color that reads “Building Community from the ground up.” In front of the mural now grow rows of peppers and chilies. The following is an excerpt of their conversation about Aztlan Beautification Movement and their reﬂections on the past two years of this visionary project.

Jess Heaney (JH): Can you talk a bit about where the idea for the Aztlan Beautiﬁcation Movement came from and what it is about?

Mikey Muscadine (MM): It really kicked off with the gang injunctions. We met up with [our lawyer] Tolanda one day. We met on Fruitvale and Foothill and we just walked around. We’ve always talked about murals; we would talk about why would every city have it in the city have histories blasted up of their culture, of the struggles? Was it the Mexicans, the Americans and their histories? They have it in San Diego at Xicano Park. You have it in the Mission District. You have it in New York. You have it in Chicago. But in Oakland we lacked that. We were surrounded at La Clinica la Raza. As long as I could remember, at three years old, just walking around San Juan Park seeing art on the walls and walking in that mural and being of being from Oakland, of being from Fruitvale, and being surrounded by political activists and Xicana—and knowing that my grandfather’s friend’s painted that mural. That’s something I cherished, and I was like, “Why are there no more?”

We needed more—so we started talking, and we started hitting up local businesses. The ﬁrst mural was with Stop the Injunctions Coalition. We had the youngsters come out and paint that, and the city said it was ﬁne to put something up—anything that was good for the community. So we put “Stop the Gang Injunction” on there. We put “Barrio Unity” on a body shop. I talked to the body shop because there they painted my car and they gave us a little space right there, and we had a barbecue.

Then we did one on 34th and Foothill. We had a block party and we had everybody come out. It took just a little bit more organized and the words with Eastside Arts Alliance and a lot of different folks. We started Aztlan Beautiﬁcation Movement, and we got a stipend of $500. We were just trying to get walls, to get our story out there. Then we came to the garden. This mural here at the garden was supposed to be another one at the body shop—but they said “no” the night before we were supposed to show up, and everybody was pissed off. But the owner didn’t want us to put the message. So we came to the garden when there was really nothing here. We said, “Well, we’ve got some mural murals at the garden. We’re gonna turn some thing that’s negative into a positive, and still put the mural somewhere.” So we had the youngsters come out—a lot of Xicana Moratorium Coalition youth. High school students got down on that. No matter what, even though we got those run-ins, dead ends, we came and put this mural up. So that’s like four murals now.

JH: How does it work and how do you get people involved?

MM: We don’t have to be pictures. We want it to have a message on it. So we just local people. We just say “come, bring your art and come paint. We don’t want it to be pictures. We want it to have a message on it. So we just local people. We just say “come, bring your art and come paint. This project is our way of fighting back. This is our way of combating the worst. This is our way of forming this resistance.”

We were already talking about doing murals. We had the idea, but this wouldn’t have happened without the support of Eastside Arts Alliance and Stop the Injunctions Coalition and the community as a whole.

JH: How do you come up with the messages for your murals? Do you think about who you are trying to see them?

RL: We don’t want it to be pictures. We want it to have a message on it. So we just local people. We just say “come, bring your art and come paint. We don’t want it to be pictures. We want it to have a message on it. So we just local people. We just say “come, bring your art and come paint. Then we get scared. We were gonna put ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] on there and we were gonna put the United Farm Workers ﬂag on there. I want the message to relate to the folks coming into the community so they know where they’re at, and so they know who’s been here, and for the youngsters who are coming out of school we haven’t taught that history in school, in textbooks. I want them to take that on their own—to say to their mom or dad: “Who’s that?” And then their mom will tell them and they’ll do more research on their own. That’s why we do murals with Pancho Villa and the young girl from the Brown Berets, and the natives and the Spanish and the sailors, and people selling tomatoes, basil, cilantro, and chayote. I want that to speak to the whole community who lives here.

JH: How does that add on the building?

MM: What it adds is that we haven’t forgotten and that we’re still going through the struggle, from way back in the day—what our grandparents went through, our great-grandparents. We’re still dealing with those same issues, the same struggles that our parents are going through, being pushed out of our neighborhoods, being Black and Brown walking in Oakland, being suspect…We’re from here and we’re not going anywhere. Our families still own it. All the impacts people make will culminate into something much bigger.

Melanie Cervantes, a member of Digni dad Rebelde, is a Chicana graphic artist who creates images that reﬂect the hopes and dreams of social movements and that challenge people to action.

You’ll ever get is two of us working together. And that’s just the beginning, because we also believe that it has to build beyond this.

In 2010 we invited people in the coalition that organizes the May 1st mobilizations in Oakland to produce handmade art that we would pass out to marchers. This was after Arizona Governor, Jan Brewer, had signed Senate Bill 1070 into law I wanted to make art so that folks didn’t get scared. We were gonna put ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] on there and we were gonna put the United Farm Workers flag on there. I want the message to relate to the folks coming into the community so they know where they’re at, and so they know who’s been here, and for the youngsters who are coming out of school we haven’t taught that history in school, in textbooks. I want them to take that on their own—to say to their mom or dad: “Who’s that?” And then their mom will tell them and they’ll do more research on their own. That’s why we do murals with Pancho Villa and the young girl from the Brown Berets, and the natives and the Spanish and the sailors, and people selling tomatoes, basil, cilantro, and chayote. I want that to speak to the whole community who lives here. }
ABOLITION SAYS WE CAN OPERATE FROM THE PRINCIPLES OF WHOLENESS AND HEALING, RATHER THAN RETRIBUTION AND VENGEANCE.

brown and I have found justice, incarcerations can offer strong themes in many of the stories written for Octavia's Brood. In Autumn Brown's story "small and bright," a member of an underground post-apocalyptic society is punished with "surfacing," forced into exile on the barren surface of the devastated Earth. Punishment from a community is something many community accountability grapple with as a concept. My own story in the collection, "Black Angels and Blue Roses," uses the power of resistance to "sling" humans a second chance in life as a means of exploring our collective responsibility in the healing of one another.

and she's not the only one asking these questions. Poet

brown and her colleagues at the Stop the Injunctions Coalition, an annual gathering in Detroit of radical activists, artists and media makers. The facilitator, Michaela Pinckney, broke participants into small groups and each one got a fictional land: Ot, the Death Star, Hog- world, and the Birds. Participants then analyzed the conflicts plaguing these lands and came up with direct-action tactics to advance their struggles for justice.

"A successful direct action is like creating a good fan story," Phillips said emphatically in the introduction. "There is a conflict, compelling characters, a good plan, build-up, swings and turns, adversity, the climax, and then the 'win,' where everyone goes home satisfied. If you do it right."

As Phillips demonstrated, many of the lessons to be taken from science fiction (or speculative fiction/fantasy/horror) are incredibly useful when building community-based systems of accountability and abolishing the prison system.

The first and fundamental lesson is that all organizing is science fiction. The question of how we ensure communities are held accountable for a prison system that created to criminalizes and incarcerates many of our communities is a central focus in social justice work. And it is a central question in science fiction as well.

Together with vision- ary movement strategists Adrianne maree brown, I am currently co-editing an anthology of radical science fiction written by women of color, to be called Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements. This principle lies at the heart of our anthem: When we talk about a world without prisons, we are talking about a world where everyone has food, clothing, shelter, quality education, a world free of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism—we are talking about a world that doesn't currently exist.

But while being able to envision these worlds equips us with tools to begin making these dreams reality.

Adrianne maree brown calls science fiction "an exploring ground," saying it offers a perfect medium for organizers to begin making these dreams reality.

This is one of the most exciting and far-reaching topics in science fiction.

Imagine a World Without Prisons: Science Fiction, Fantasy, Superheroes, and Prison Abolition

by Waldamir Marish

and organizer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, also

This leads to another important lesson for those of us who believe in alternatives to incarceration. There is always the potential for a quest to be hijacked for nefarious purposes. For example, though superheroes were the first encounter most of us have had with alternative systems of justice, it does not mean that they embody radical or transformative politics. Just like in the real world we have the Minute Men as alternatives to police, in the superhero world we have folks like Marvel Comics' Punisher, who just kills anyone who gets in his way. Debuting at a time when this nation was debating the death penalty (1974), Punisher speaks to the skeptical Darius this way: "Someone breaks the law, you can bet they got their reasons—reasons they can explain. Don't call me a vigilante: I'm a team player." This quote highlights the need for understanding, to hear motivations and intentions, while still holding people accountable for the harm they do and the damage they cause. Another important lesson I have personally learned from science fiction is that quests are the work of a community, never just one person. Without allies and community support, there is no chance of winning. I have relearned this in my organizing work, as well as working on this anthology. Octavia's Brood has been one of the most inspiring and happiest projects I've worked on, in collaboration with visionary I consider family and mentors as we re-imagine

M.M. We have a lot of rich history with the Black Panther Party, which supports Farm Workers, with being active. People who are reading this could start doing this in their own community—the African-American community, the Asian community—starting up murals in the places where there are a lot of walls. There is no chance of winning. I have relearned this in my organizing work, as well as working on this anthology. Octavia's Brood has been one of the most inspiring and happiest projects I've worked on, in collaboration with visionary I consider family and mentors as we re-imagine

Continued on next page, "Science Fiction"
There is no grass
no trees
no children throwing stones
into puddles
no laughter
no tears.

There is no peace
no silence
no world of dazzling colors
no sun
no moon
no weather at all.

Living without
blowing winds
gentle rains
day or night
my internal clock
is deprived of Nature’s power.

There is only the beat of my heart.

—Marilyn Buck, December 1989

There is no grass

When this poem was written, Marilyn Buck was locked up in the Washington D.C. County Jail. She was awaiting trial as part of the Resistance Conspicacy Case along with her companion (at Alan Berkman, Tim Blunk, Linda Evans, Susan Rosenberg) and Laura Gómez. Charges included sedition with seditious conspiracy (attempting to overthrow the government by use of force), Marilyn and her comrades were facing upwards of 70 years in prison.

D.C. County Jail is a multi-story, sealed concrete box. There is no outside exercise yard, no windows that open, definitely no peace, no quiet, no privacy. All visits are behind thick Plexiglas shields—no touch. Noise ricochets off the steel and concrete interior 24/7. In 1990, after facing four trials in five years and being locked up in three separate prisons and jails, Marilyn was facing a combined sentence of 80 years.

Marilyn had already spent four years in prison, including being locked up in one of the first control units for women in the U.S. at Alderson Federal Prison in West Virginia. In 1977, Marilyn earned a furlough from prison from which she did not return. She was recaptured in May 1978. It was under these conditions that Marilyn wrote this poem, There is no grass.

Why do I tell you these details? Because I hope they will help you to understand—a specially those who have never lived inside a prison or jail—the miracle of any person who keeps their humanity intact. It speaks to the strength, dignity, courage and perseverance of our loved ones who are subjected to the inhumanity—and in the case of solitary confinement, the outright torture—of incarcerations.

After 30 cumulative years in prison, Marilyn Buck was finally released on parole on July 15, 2010. She enjoyed 20 days of freedom, and passed away on August 3, 2010 from an incarcerated. The outright torture—of incarceration, Marilyn fought for her voice and her humanity to be heard along with the other “voices of the voiceless,” as Mumia would say.

Can you hear the heartbeats of all the California prisoners now on hunger strike? Marilyn’s heart still beats...can you feel it?

To find out more about Marilyn, and read more of her poetry, go to: http://www.marilynbuck.com.

Marilyn Buck (December 13, 1947—August 3, 2010) was a poet, a revolutionary, a feminist, a political prisoner who spent 30 years in U.S. prisons and jails. Born in Texas, Marilyn was an anti-racist activist in her teens, joined Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and in 1973 was arrested in California on charges related to her solidarity with the Black liberation movement. After escaping prison in 1977, Marilyn worked clandestinely until her arrest in May 1989. Marilyn lived her life to the fullest, not defined by prison walls. She was a generous person, with a big laugh and a beautiful, wide smile. She wrote, “For prisoners, writing is a life raft to save one from drowning in a prison swamp...In defiance, I turned to poetry; an art of speaking sparingly...but flagrantly.”

Pam Fadem is an anti-racist prisoner support activist living in the Bay Area. She has been a member of California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) for over 15 years. Pam first met Marilyn back in the Students for Democratic Society days. Pam was a grand jury resistor in 1976, refusing to collaborate with a federal grand jury investigating the Puerto Rican independence movement.

THE ABOLITIONIST

Continued from previous page, “Science Fiction”
in his excellent dissertation, \( \text{H3}, \) along with being a historically detailed account of the strike, delves deep into how resistance isn’t only important to putting a good fight to the state, but also changes up those who resist.

First to go on strike. (Prisoners decided to stagger the beginning of the strike so as to prolong it.) A powerful leader, gifted writer and poet, Sands became a household name worldwide, and was elected a Member of Parliament while on strike. After 66 days of hunger strike, Sands died of starvation. He was followed by Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Michael Monahan, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee, and Michael Devine. Just before the credits roll in Blair’s \( \text{H3}, \) we catch a glimpse of two years of ending the hunger strike the prisoners’ demands were met.”

Several films have depicted the Irish prisoner hunger strikers. According to Terry George’s \( \text{Some Mother’s Son} \) (1996) is a solid group of films \( \text{H3} \), we learn a bit about how the Irish prisoner hunger strikers struggled to break a fighter’s spirit. But, of course, their struggle was (and continues to be) linked to the struggle of Third World peoples’ fights against colonialism and imperialism in other parts of the world. By taking a moment to examine the films we can get a better sense of how the Irish prisoner hunger strikers’ story, how they remember and tell the story of the strike, and how the strike in the form of an art gives us an opportunity to see the present and future differently.

\( \text{H3}, \) tells us a powerful story about violence, determination, political mobilization, struggle, and cultural revival amidst inescapable odds. It is all the more powerful if we think about it as a piece of art made in part by someone who actually lived that story. The war doesn’t end with their capture. Prison is a space to educate and politicize. And it is a main character in the story, the day by day, the back and forth, and the cycle of a prisoner’s life and struggle. Time is an important consideration. That’s why the film has been described as having a tragicness that is quiet and impressionistic. It offers an unflinching and sobering look at the realities of life in prison. It is all the more powerful if we think about it as a piece of art made in part by someone who actually lived that story.

The Blanket protest was staged by Republican prisoners in Long Kesh and other republican prisoners in the North of Ireland in 1981. Thousands of Irish people were imprisoned at Long Kesh after their capture in the war. The protest was a massive show of support for the prisoners and the struggle against British colonialism and imperialism in other parts of the world. By taking a moment to examine the films we can get a better sense of how the Irish prisoner hunger strikers’ story, how they remember and tell the story of the strike, and how the strike in the form of an art gives us an opportunity to see the present and future differently.

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Doin' Time: Through the Visiting Glass

BY ASLEY LUCAS

This is an excerpt from Dr. Ashley Lucas’s play Doin’ Time. The play is a monologue performed as a one-woman show throughout the U.S., in Ireland, and Canada.

—The Interviewer—

Hi, my name is Ashley. I am writing this play about the families of prisoners. With over two million people locked up in the U.S. today, there had to be more families like mine. I didn’t know if they would talk to me, but I knew that I wasn’t alone.

—Soledad—

Soledad is picking up toys thrown around on stage and folding laundry. Her radio plays a fast Feliciano song. A knock at the door. She turns off her radio and answers the door. The person at the door is never seen, only heard in voice overs.

SOLEDAD:Hola. S. Of Course. Come in. Sit here. Dis-culpa por favor. I was just cleaning the house before you came.

I have just one child: un hijo five years old now. We’re in the other room watching TV. We haven’t told him the truth about his father yet because he’s too young. I take him with me when I go to visit Mauricio in the prison. We tell him that his papa is in school and that he’ll be home when he... ¿como se dice? gradúa. Oh yes, when he graduates.

I visit my husband every week. I take my son to see Mauricio because I want him to know his father, and I want Mauricio to know Miguelito. Pero no lo conozco bien. How much can you know somebody from across a wooden table and just on the weekends? Right now it’s the best I can do for my son.

For us, it’s very different from now. Before he went to prison, we were just starting our life together. Mauricio and I worked very hard. Es chicano mi esposo. He was born in Chula Vista, so when we got married, I became a resident. We worked very hard. We barely made ends meet. We worked very hard. We barely made ends meet. We barely made ends meet.

—Waiting for the Visit—

A woman with four children enters the waiting room adjacent to the prison visiting room. She is putting herself together back after having been searched on her way into the prison. She sits down to wait, and after a while, someone we neither see nor hear addresses her. Sounds of muted conversations, laughter, and children’s voices play in the background.

LUCY:There’s not enough chairs for us all to sit together. Johnny, you go on over there, and take Andy with you. I don’t care if you hate him. He’s your brother, and you have to sit together. Ollie, you sit here next to me. Sit down, Annie. You want to look pretty for your daddy. Don’t chew on your dress. That’s disgusting.

Excuse me? Oh, well, that depends. What kind of a visit are you having? Regular or a contact visit? You’ve never been here before have you? A regular visit is when he sits on the other side of the glass, and you talk to him on one of those phones. Payment? They’ll call his name once he is in one of the booths and take you over to him. If you’ve got a contact visit, we sit at one of the tables over there, and you’ll see him come around that corner to meet you. If you don’t know what kind of visit you have, you’ve probably got a regular, so just wait until you hear his name called.

Sure. You’re welcome. It’s no problem. I know how hard the first time is. Who are you waiting for? Oh, your son. Sit still, Ollie. You are driving me crazy! So you’re waiting for your papá? Right? Sure. You’re welcome. It’s no problem. I know how hard the first time is. Who are you waiting for? Oh, your son. Sit still, Ollie. You are driving me crazy! So you’re waiting for your papá? Right?

—God Is a Prisoner—

My brother’s an artist. He draws and paints, but mostly he does graffiti. Now he’s doing seven years—for graffiti. What did he do? I can’t imagine. Now he’s going to see his kids, and the others who have never seen him. He’s going to see his kids. I’m not going to cry. I’m not going to cry. I’m not going to cry.

Dios es un mojado. God comes from the barrio. God hangs out at Tito’s. God sleeps on the walls all over the place. God is a Chicana. Dios es un mojado. God comes from the barrio. God hangs out at Tito’s. God sleeps on the walls all over the place. God is a Chicana. Dios es un mojado. God comes from the barrio. God hangs out at Tito’s. God sleeps on the walls all over the place. God is a Chicana. Dios es un mojado. God comes from the barrio. God hangs out at Tito’s. God sleeps on the walls all over the place. God is a Chicana. Dios es un mojado. God comes from the barrio. God hangs out at Tito’s. God sleeps on the walls all over the place. God is a Chicana. Dios es un mojado. God comes from the barrio. God hangs out at Tito’s. God sleeps on the walls all over the place. God is a Chicana. Dios es un mojado.
Midnight Dreams: Abolition and Black Feminist Blues in the 1930s

By Sarah Haley

A chorus of women imprisoned at Mississippi’s Parchman Penitentiary in the 1930s were known to sing songs that contained within Rosie’s midnight dream in a song they wrote entitled Go Way Devil, Leave Me Alone. The song never covered the contents of Rosie’s midnight dream, but it speaks to a black feminist blues world that developed at Parchman and about the violence of imprisonment during the Great Depression. The record simultaneously challenges state supremacy and gendered violence and urges the dismantling of the southern penitentiary.

Although prison blues and work songs have long been a part of the history of imprisonment in the South, Black women’s blues of the 1920s and 1930s constituted a culture of opposition to southern punishment that often gets overlooked. In fact, famed folklorists John Lomax and Herbert Halpert almost left Parchman without recording the women who were serving time there in the late 1930s. The songs created at Parchman Penitentiary existed within a larger culture of black women’s voices circulated on the outside, amounting to a powerful critique of the prison regime’s central role in the maintenance of white supremacy and gendered violence in a moment of capitalist disaster not unlike our own.

It is important to understand this musical creation as a black feminist culture of abolition, even if the tone of this piece and the songs themselves speak to a southern punishment that often gets overlooked. Indeed, the songs created at Parchman expressed in the song Penitentiary Blues, when they lambasted the “peas and cornbread” that served as food, which might kill them, the horribleness of the sentencing judge, who forced them into deadly conditions; and the horribleness of the superintendents and their disciplinary will: “my brother Willie keep on ridin’ me. My brother Willie keep on ridin’ me.”

Black women’s blues critique of imprisonment gave expression to the magnitude and complexity of carceral violence, exposing the forms that violence took and the intersecting nature of physical, emotional, cultural, economic, and gendered harm. Female blues artists told stories (or to be more accurate, they told histories), which illuminated the economic exploitation that imprisonment imposed. For example, Go Away Devil, Leave Me Alone portrayed the difficulties of escape through the figure of the bloodhounds that were illustrated most directly in the song “No Mo’.” Women’s blues of the 1920s and 1930s demanded an end to what had been articulated by the leadership of Roscoe T. Pigman, who in California’s San Quentin Prison was the chief of the prison from 1932 to 1934. The prison system was based on the belief that the system was “more kind and efficient than anything” in the South. Yet Parchman, like all other southern prisons, was a brutal catastrophe, which portrayed Parchman as an inhumane and violent place.

Freedom demands. Freedom orders! Freedom can be reformed or transformed into a docile and submissive animal if MUSIC IS PLAYED! Make it play! Let me hear it play!”

From January to March 2013, the San Francisco Print Collective partnered with the Prison Arts Project of the Williams Jubilee Association to facilitate a screen-printing workshop at San Quentin State Prison. The San Quentin artists designed posters on the theme of alternatives to incarceration and their views and personal experiences of the prison industrial complex. The artists hand drew their designs using ink on acetate to create negatives. San Francisco Print Collective Members Danya Alhadeff and Anja Knesek Monrad transferred the images to screens and brought the screens and printing equipment inside. The artists printed approximately 200 one and two-color prints on hand-printed paper using several versions. At the end of the class, the fifty-two prisoners at the front of the room at the Main Branch of the San Francisco Public Library received a copy in a box that featured pieces from the wide range of William James Association art that was created by incarcerated Californians. The project was supported by donations from the San Francisco Print Collective, Artist & Craftsman Supply, and Anthem Screen Printing.
We sat down with Critical Resistance Los Angeles members Mary Sutton and Hans Kuzmic to discuss how the art they do relates to, inspires, and uplifts their organizing work.

MARY SUTTON (MS): I've been with Critical Resistance Los Angeles since 2004. I've been an activist since my early 20s and have a degree from the University of Minnesota in fine arts. As an activist in the anti-sapartheid movement in Minnesota, I became the one that would help design the fliers and put together the promotional propaganda for the events in Minneapolis. I was also involved in Minneapolis in the Pathfinder poster collective, and that's where I really started combining my art with the idea of graphic design and the idea of political posters.

I feel like I actually neglected my art as an activist. I found it hard to do both except for in the context of organizing work, so kind of by default I turned into a graphic designer although that's not where any of my training or expertise was. Now in my older age, I'm starting to call myself an artist again and starting to produce some fine art, but all along the way I've had the opportunity to do imagery and graphic design for the anti-apartheid movement, for the women's movement, and in Los Angeles now, in the movement to stop prison and jail expansion across California as a member Critical Resistance in the No More Jails Coalition.

When I came out to LA I met the Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG) and formed an organization that represented all of my interests and everything I do. CSPG is an archive of over 80,000 social movement posters. We do exhibitions and we're preserving the posters as primary historical documents. Within the context of this work—yes, I've been out of school now, I'm the program director—I was able to propose an exhibition, "Prison Nation: Posters on the Prison Industrial Complex."

The exhibition was initiated and produced in 2006 and premiered at the Watts Towers Art Center, and has since become one of CSPG's most popular exhibitions. It has traveled to almost a dozen venues. We've updated it and created an "exhibition-to-go" model, containing laminated reproductions of 75 posters about the PIC. We're traveling with it in the Inland Empire and the San Joaquin Valley, to at least six different venues. We're doing educational workshops and poster making workshops in conjunction with each venue. With the exhibition-to-go format, we are able to give much broader access to our CSPG exhibitions, because unlike vintage posters that need to go on display in a formal gallery with the right lighting and insurance and all that, this can be on display in community centers and libraries. The best example is that we hung it on the prison fence at Chowchilla prison for the Chowchilla Freedom Rally in January. So that gave access to the posters to over 400 people who were there for the rally and could see the exhibition. It was a great context to be able to hang this exhibition on the fence of the women's prison in Chowchilla.

HANS KUZMIC (HK): I joined CR three years ago when I moved to Los Angeles from New York. With CR, I help fight the jail expansion in LA and participate in statewide anti-expansion work. I'm also an artist that just finished an MFA program at UCLA, which is why I moved here originally. I've had quite a bit of overlap between art and activism in the past three years, and the project that I spent most of my time on came out of some of the work that I was doing as part of CR's coalition work.

CR participated in the Coalition Against State Violence initiated by Los Angeles Community Action Network to protest the Safer Cities Initiative, and the police violence that's rampant on Skid Row in LA. As part of the Safer Cities Initiative, the city established a walking tour by business advocates in downtown to promote further gentrification and to celebrate the "accomplishments" of the Safer Cities Initiative. In response, the coalition used that tour as an organizing moment, leading counter-tours that followed the city-sponsored tour.

I was really interested in the form of the tour, which is always ideological in constructing or reconstructing history. There was also something about being at that place as a story projecting into its past and future was being told that interested me, so I started to video-document the actions and attend the planning meetings.

I then created a script, also using radio broadcasts, and constructed eight positions that seemed to be most prominent in the group in relation to life chances in Skid Row. So, there was a lawyer, a longtime resident, a social justice activist, a cop, a business advocate, a politician, a criminologist, and a private service provider. I ended up making a sound installation in which a speaker that represented each position was mounted into the back of a chair. The audience member sitting in the chair had to kind of twist their body in order to hear. If they were leaning back in the chair they were not able to hear, but the sound waves were reverberating in their body so they felt it as vibration, but silencing the voice.

David P. Stein (DPS): Artists are often asked to pose questions about how the world works and activists are often asked to answer some of those questions. Do you agree with that assessment?

MS: Artists certainly can ask questions but really what being an artist gives you the permission to do is to pose the question, but also to make a very powerful statement. The permission the artist has is to pose the statement in the way they feel it or assess it without having to back it up necessarily. Obviously, a good artist will have done some research, but you would understand that they are clearly inspired or motivated to put down in paper or through sound or put something together based on some passion and motivation they have to make a statement, whether that's in a question format or not. That's why I love the role the artist can play to make suggestions that perhaps an academic person could not, or could not safely do, so it challenges the viewer or observer to ask the questions. I think that's the role of the political artist—to challenge the viewer, to make people look up and question, and look to the next thing and see if they're nudged in any direction or not.

HK: I feel like there's a lot of overlap. As you asked the question I was thinking about my ability to focus in the project that I just described on the role of desire and how when we speak—especially when we make demands in political speech—we are articulating not only need but also desire. As Mary was saying, artists have more permission to imagine the things that are untenable or seem untenable or aren't the same kind of time constraint. There's a very strong temporal constraint, there's an urgency in campaign work. As an artist it's a huge privilege to just slow things down and look at a very small element. With the Skid Row project, the campaign was happening very fast and I was able to slow down and think about the role of the voice in articulating these demands. It's not necessarily something for which there would be space within a campaign, but both really depend on each other.

We are pleased to share this interview with the Organizer-Artists of Critical Resistance Los Angeles. For more information about Critical Resistance, visit their website at: http://criticalresistance.org. To support Critical Resistance, please send a tax-deductible contribution. Your gift will help us remain independent and free to pursue our mission. Thank you for your support!
T
his year’s California prisoner hunger strike served as a rallying cry for abolitionists across the nation. While prisoners across California and the broader nation joined the protest by going on hunger strike, scores upon scores of people on the outside supported the demands of the strike by making calls, organ-
izing rallies, and joining solidarity fasts. This current moment of organizing reminds us of the crucial role of imprisoned leadership in building sustained movements for a world beyond prisons.

Imprisoned people’s knowledge has long played a key role in developing an analysis of the prison industrial complex. Yet, too often activists and organizers on the outside are cut off from these insights. Through locating prisons in geographically remote areas, states have actively sought to isolate imprisoned people from society. This isolation is fundamental to the production of the public forgetting of imprisonment. Prison journalism and art has been an important space for breaking down these walls and building connections to the outside world.

The ANGOLITE CHALLENGED THE IDEA THAT INCARCERATED PEOPLE’S LIVES Halted ONCE LOCKED AWAY AND DEMONSTRATED THE CREATIVE WAYS THAT PEOPLE CONTINUE TO BUILD MEANING OUT OF THEIR LIVES.

One example of these connections is the work of The Angolite—the prisoner publication of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, more commonly known as Angola. As discussed by former Angolite editor Wilbert Rideau in his memoir, In the Place of Justice, The Angolite was published as an uncensored prisoner news magazine from 1975-1995. During this era the magazine received national recognition for its reporting winning several awards including the George Polk Award, the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award and several awards from the American Bar Association and the American Penial Press.

This unusual set-up was the result of imprisoned people challenging the conditions of Angola via a federal lawsuit in the 1970s. The courts instructed the state of Louisiana to given the space to conduct in-depth investigations and news reporting. As the Louisiana prison system collapsed in the 1980s, individuals locked away at Angola recognized the shifts occurring years ahead of outside activ-
ists. According to former Angola organizer Norris Henderson, one of the first ways people inside and outside saw the expansion of the prison was with the dramatic increase in life sentences. “We went from handful of lifers in the prison to all of a sudden ‘boom’—everybody has life now…Something is wrong with that picture.”

Rideau and his staff utilized their resources to make the case for prison reforms that would expand people’s opportunity for release. Working closely with the imprisoned activists of the Angola Special Civics Project, The Angolite argued for an end to life without parole and encouraged those on the outside to vote as a bloc for state officials they believed to be more likely to implement prison reforms.

The publication strove to galvanize its extensive readership as well as to educate officials on prison issues towards policy change. Complementary copies of each issue were sent to state legislators, the governor, and other key officials.

Watching the rise in life sentences and the build up of new prisons across the state, The Angolite staffers researched and publicized the policies driv-
ing the prison boom. The Angolite became a bastion of cutting edge report-
ing on the state of incarceration. Challenging the prevailing argument that the growth in the penal system was in response to a rise in crime, article after article showed that the skyrocketing rate of incarceration was in fact due to the rise of tough on crime politics, slashes to social service budgets, and structural racism. Cover stories in The Angolite began forecasting that the US would soon be a “prison nation” with over a million people behind bars.

While The Angolite reported extensively on the structural forces contrib-
uting to the rise in imprisonment, there was also a focus on the inhumane conditions prisoners were living under. From overcrowding to prison rape, The Angolite illustrated how such conditions were not accidental but were the result of deliberate negligence. This year’s prisoner hunger strike served as a rallying cry for abolitionists across the nation.

I Bear Witness

They sound like a B movie script
They read like cheap fiction
This mottled group of pseudo-revolutionaries.
Once they were housewives, career-women, girl-cops, embezzlers,
the passers of funny money, stolen credit cards, and bad checks
Once they were junkies, singers, whores, musicians, women of the world.
Their men had split - - to - - somewhere.
And they had put on the gloves,
And resumed the fight.
And slept by day,
And roamed the night
As cats with 9 lives,
And unlimited sight.
They played, they paid, they grew silver, and grayed.
And they failed.
Weaving in and out of the joint,
And through the doors,
of every county jail in every state.
Wayne Co., Bridewell, The House of D.
Harris Co., 101B, and Sybil Brand
They became a not-so-silent sisterhood
And could quote names, places, and remember faces,
of every plainclothes cop, every narco,
Could tell you what year the mountain in West Virginia exploded,
And how the two-legged rat was found
What river his body was in.
Even, what the body was weighted with.
If you run into any of this mottled group,
You unbewilders, who think all knowledge comes from books,
They may make you - - - believers,
They are not deceivers.
They speak the truth
Perhaps you, in your shell of status-quo
Either won’t or can’t face it from the nightmare
But believe, believe, I was there!
It is written across their skies, in tears
You probably haven’t participated, and cannot conceive (very quietly and softly)
Even in retrospect - - -
A scarce atom of this, which was reign upon reign.
You could not have faced it.
Left alone, done battle with them!
Call it what you will, blaspemhy, rhetoric - - - or bullshit!
Believe me, how you scoff.
At the two-fisted peace sign, or the raised fist
For I Bear Witness!
I was there!
We did exist!

Pauline Collins

Pauline Collins is an inmate at the Federal Correctional Institution at Fort Worth, Texas. Her poetry has appeared in various prisoner magazines.

Continued from page 8, “Blues”

be heard through the many moments of laughter, verbal exchanges about the blues, and in the union that makes these recordings. Over time and through repetition the power of these lyrics and their collective affirmation would have magnified.

Make it to the bushes/’You go free/’The Sergeant cant’t do me no harm/’You go free!/Weep up Rosey, tell your midnight dream/Paws and cornbread, lord is killing me/A wick and a blanket/No mo’ good times/What you gonna do/babe when they tear your jailhouse down/I’m gonna treat all you people like you treated me/And jailhouse on the ground….

The twenty-three songs that were recorded at Parchman worked together and circulated through the course of the day and night, as the songs we can’t get out of our head tend to do. The women who created them were part of a broader women’s blues repertoire disseminated by Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Martin, Victoria Spivey and other famous blues artists on the outside, and a commitment to detailing the harms of polic-
ing, injustice, unfairness, and incarceration was central to this blues cul-
ture. This black feminist blues culture of abolition refused to accept the criminalization of working-class Black women, exposed the harsh reality of racism and sexism in the free world, situated punishment as a system of harm that only caused and exacerbated the interlocking structures of violence that they named. They imagined a world without prisons. They sarcastically demanded to know, what their captors would do (now), when the prisons are on the ground? How, then, will you maintain the power that enabled pervasive rape, the relegation of African American women to low-wage domestic service, the systematic exclusion of African Amer-
ican men from decent work, the surveillance of black women and men on southern street corners, disempowerment, Jim Crow? In our time, capitalist systems changed dramatically, but nevertheless still require racial and gender subordination through policing and imprisonment in order to function. Thisarchive urges us to imagine a future beyond prisons, asking “what now?” as we dismantle them.

Sarah Halyer is assistant professor of Gender Studies at UCLA, where she is a faculty affiliate of the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies and the Institute for Research on Labor and Employ-
ment.
Dranke

I drank the sun slowly, from morning to twilight, so that I could burn dreams, throughout the night.
As I invented memories, and erased my reality. No longer caught between, the stone walls of my misery.
Escaping behind closed eyes, from my dolphin urine, running without chains, as I out-race passing time.
Foudning on a drum of lightning, tearing open the veil, wearing a thread of moons, with stars set inside.
The flesh of prison stripped away from blood and song. Nothing more to hold its bones of steel, to the ground.
As I drank the sun slowly, from morning to twilight, so that I might forget for one moment, this prison life.
Driving my self between the drops, I had to slip, until eternity’s final season, slipped from my lips.

—Robert C. Fuentes

Continued from previous page, “Prisoner Journalism”

Part of the punishment regime at Angola. Because of this, the Kent State understandings, editorials and new articles on overcrowding, for example, argued for letting people out and adding more beds to Angola or building new prisons.

Additionally, The Angolite reported on the nuances of communication within the Louisiana legal system. Since the primary audience of The Angolite has always been imprisoned people in Angola and other Louisiana prisons, it was important to explain how new laws could impact prisoners’ chances for freedom. With the passage of hate and sentencing laws, many imprisoned people learned that they had become ineligible for the opportunities they had been promised upon their sentencing. In detailing the legal challenges prisoners felt were being set, The Angolite provided prisoners with legal facts and analysis to use in their own appeals.

At times the staff of the magazine focused their energies on trying to support the release of specific prisoners. Over several years, the staff highlighted the plight of “long-termers” who were now elderly behind bars in profiling these individual men, the reporters hoped to humanize them in the eyes of the public and prison officials as a strategy to support them in obtaining parole or a pardon.

While much of the work of The Angolite was directly targeted at broad-based prison reforms, the publication’s leadership also recognized the importance of reporting on the lives of people held captive within Angola. Each issue covered the activities of incarcerated men—from sports to religious gathering to club events. In documenting such happenings, The Angolite challenged the idea that incarcerated people’s lives halted once locked away and demonstrated the creativity and resilience prisoners continue to build meaning out of their lives.

Space was also carved out for the words of anyone who wanted to be published in the magazine. In the “Bounding Off” and “Expressions” sections, prisoners as well as free people’s contributions, stories, and poetry would be published as much as room permitted. In particular, the poetry published on topics ranging from freedom, love, death, and injustice offered a glimpse of the emotional damages of imprisonment. By including these poems, The Angolite challenged the dehumanization of prisoners that justified the denial of their freedom.

The Angolite’s success and impact can unfortunately be measured by the eventual shutting down of the open press policy. When Burl Cain became warden in 1995, he implemented many new restrictions. These included having final say over the magazine’s content and drastically reducing the staff’s access to information for their investigations. While we should not discount the ongoing work of The Angolite, these restrictions have impacted its potential to galvanize change. The institutionalization of such limitations fortifies the barriers between us, splintering the opportunities to build collective knowledge and struggle across prison walls. Communication from beyond prison walls, including the prisoners’ journalism, art and poetry published by The Angolite, are vital to our breaking down of these walls and discovering new ways of constructing an abolitionist world.

Special thanks to Norris Henderson and Kenneth “Buggy” Johnson for sharing with me their stories on the relationship between The Angolite and prisoner organizing. Additionally, this article drew on the memoirs of Wilbert Rideau and over 20 years of Angolite archives.

Lydia Pelot-Hobbs is a writer, facilitator, and activist scholar living between New York and New Orleans. She is currently working on researching the rise of the Southern carceral state and prisoner organizing that emerged in response. Lydia is also a founding member of AORTA (Anti-Oppression Research and Training Alliance).

Continued from page 9, “Interview”

from University of California Los Angeles and participat-
ed in the Whitney Independent Study Program in 2009-10.

David Stein is completing his PhD in American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California, where he studies working-class history, African-American studies, policing and imprisonment, and political economy. He has spent a decade in social justice move-
ments opposing policies and practices of law enforcement with Critical Resistance and other organizations.

Action Committee for Women, Prison Facts—this is how I met Lydia Johnson. They were a meeting in 2000 that talked about the themes and the topics. Once these posters come together, they make such a powerful, universal statement, because they’re from artists from around the country and even the world speaking about the same topic even though the themes might be different. There was this oldest poster in that was from the ’60s and the newest was from the month before. Together, they make a really strong statement. I think that somehow makes it current, and makes it so it’s speaking to the very contemporary moment.

For example, the opening sec-
tion of the exhibition are posters that have taken the stripes of the American flag and transformed them into prison bars demonstrating the contradiction of democracy in the country that imprisons the most people in the world. There’s a poster from Attica with a guy with his fists. There’s another poster, no statement other than that, the poster says “Attica” and really speaks for itself. That’s the power of the posters. Even though that’s from the ’60s, this guy breaking out with his fists going through the bars of the flag demanding freedom, it just speaks to us today as strongly as it did then, but also makes someone say, “Who was Attica?” who might not know.

All art is political. It can be totally apathetic, it can be hate-
ful, or we as political activists can use art as a tool to project the movement forward. We artists have the same responsi-
bility in society as anyone to do what they will with their art. We think could not define our movement more colorfully and this could not define it more along more quickly, if we use art.

Mary Sutton is the Program Director at Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG) she is a poster artist, writer, politician, and Life-long activist. In May 1971, she was involved in the fight to end the University of California’s open press policy. She is now, as a member of Critical Resistance and Californians United for a Republic, a Board member of the Budget (CURB), a passionately engaged in the movement against prison and jail expansion in California.

Hana Kozumich is a member of Critical Resistance and an artist working in video and in-
stallation. She received an MFA

DDB: In thinking about some of the artwork that you do that is being created in pertaining local prisons, have you learned that could be applied to broad-er social situations, that the themes and the topics. Once these posters come together, they make such a powerful, universal statement, because they’re from artists from around the country and ever weakness and they’re from artists from around the world. It’s amazing to see the work that’s been done, and what it means to bring them into the present day.

MS: I don’t know how it got involved in CR—I insisted we reach out to a New Way of Life, Critical Resistance, Youth Justice Coalition, activism committee for women, prison facts—this is how I met Lydia Johnson. They were a meeting in 2000 that talked about the themes and the topics. Once these posters come together, they make such a powerful, universal statement, because they’re from artists from around the country and even the world speaking about the same topic even though the themes might be different. There was this oldest poster in that was from the ’60s and the newest was from the month before. Together, they make a really strong statement. I think that somehow makes it current, and makes it so it’s speaking to the very contemporary moment.

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Hana Kozumich is a member of Critical Resistance and an artist working in video and in-
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kinds of punishment. It is believed in our society that by punishing people, by mistreating them, a sort of transformation will take place, an internal change, a kind of catharsis. And that's why I think that these techniques are so useful for working inside prisons. The first step is to identify with each other, we humanize ourselves by doing that, by listening with respect, trying to understand and accept their vision of who they are. And that is a very important aspect when we are working with ex-combatants from Protestant and Catholic groups. I also had the good fortune of going back to Colombia where I have worked with the leaders of the internally displaced movement (the largest in the world) as well as groups that are working against the militarization of the country and seeking alternatives to the existing social inequality.

So, I first developed my work in Colombia and after that I was forced into exile I worked in Los Angeles. But since 2008 I have been working mostly with communities around the world, dealing with post-conflict situations, as in Northern Ireland where ImaginAction teamwork with ex-combatants from Protestant and Catholic groups. I also had the good fortune of going back to Colombia where I have worked with the leaders of the internally displaced movement (the largest in the world) as well as groups that are working against the militarization of the country and seeking alternatives to the existing social inequality.

I have also done some of that work in Guatemala, Palestine, Nepal, and India among other places.

MC: You've worked with people all over the world in different situations and who have very different experiences. How do different groups approach the work based on their cultural background and experience? How do you design the workshops?

HA: My idea is that methodologies are there to serve people. I follow some kind of framework, but it has to be applied in an organic way. It cannot be applied as a formula for every situation. It has to be adapted to the specific context. For many years I worked as a psychotherapist but even then when appropriate I used psychodrama and rainbow of desire methods (from the awareness theatre) to involve these groups to process the psychological aspects as well as the political aspects of their ordeal. Theatre—in particular the techniques of Theatre of Oppressed developed by Brazilian visionary Augusto Boal, Playback theatre from Jonathan Fox, and Theatre of Witness developed by Teya Sepinuck—offers methodologies that I find very useful when working with communities that are not only oppressed in the sense of social justice, but also have been marginalized, communities whose voices have not been heard and understood by others. When I work with young people in prisons, I invite them to show up. Theater and art in general are not the panacea, but they create a place not only to hear and understand, but also to be heard and understood, to have your story and be heard without being judged, and you can connect your stories to other people's stories and begin to weave those scenes together into short plays in a modality called Forum Theatre, in which we ask a question but we don't offer solutions. We show characters struggling with different kinds of oppressions and trying to overcome those oppressions but unable to do so in the short play. Once the play is rehearsed we perform it to a large group of people, including the characters in struggle and engaging in a different action in an effort to change the situation. So it's not about finding “the solution,” but it is about explicating various alternatives to how to approach any conflict. And in the meantime, we listen to each other's stories, we identify with the characters in the plays, and the characters in the audience identify with the characters in struggle and engaging in a different action in an effort to change the situation. And sometimes, we invite the audience to write and create scenes, through rituals, story telling and mythologizing. I invite them to re-stand in whatever way they want their current ordeals to be symbolized as a chance to reflect on who they are, what they want with their lives, and what they will do after surviving this difficult ordeal. And we accomplish all of this through games and other dynamics. I have no problem when people think that they're not doing it as I want them to do it. I think that the most important thing is the discovery of life. To create joy in a dehumanizing environment is subversive. I also don't think that creativity is a luxury, I think it is essential for the survival of the soul. We need to reconnect to the most basic human attribute.

So after the games, we introduce people to the power of Image Theater, which connects us to our own inner power and the inner power of the group. In the image theater, the participants create both individual and collective images of their realities using their entire bodies and the resources of your ancestors whose voices and spirits still have an important bearing on your story and the narrative in which you live. For example when we're doing an improvisation, and the character that we're playing chooses to be violent towards another character in order to satisfy their needs and desires, we can sit down immediately and ask ourselves: what is it that is making me want to do this? Sometimes it's the shadow of the community which you're representing as a captive audience, when you treat them with humanity, they will show you incredible humanity. Prison is the most powerful laboratory I have found to look at all that is dysfunctional and unjust in the society at large.

And that's why I think that these techniques are so useful for working inside prisons. The prisoner is someone who for one circumstance or another has been condemned by their society, their family, their neighborhood, their churches, their systems, their culture, for any number of kinds of punishment. It is believed in our society that by punishing people, by mistreating them, a sort of transformation will take place, an internal change, a kind of catharsis. And that's why I think that these techniques are so useful for working inside prisons. The first step is to identify with each other, we humanize ourselves by doing that, by listening with respect, trying to understand and accept their vision of who they are. And that is a very important aspect when we are working with ex-combatants from Protestant and Catholic groups. I also had the good fortune of going back to Colombia where I have worked with the leaders of the internally displaced movement (the largest in the world) as well as groups that are working against the militarization of the country and seeking alternatives to the existing social inequality.

But I have also done some of that work in Guatemala, Palestine, Nepal, and India among other places.

MC: Can you tell me a little bit about your current work with ImaginAction and how you came into this work?

HA: ImaginAction is a traveling theatre company that I created in 2000 and since then we have worked with many diverse communities. At the beginning, I worked mostly in Los Angeles. But since 2008 I have been working mostly with communities around the world, dealing with post-conflict situations, as in Northern Ireland where ImaginAction teamed with ex-combatants from Protestant and Catholic groups. I also had the good fortune of going back to Colombia where I have worked with the leaders of the internally displaced movement (the largest in the world) as well as groups that are working against the militarization of the country and seeking alternatives to the existing social inequality. I have also done some of that work in Guatemala, Palestine, Nepal, and India among other places.

MC: One thing we talk about in Critical Resistance, as a group working towards aboli- tion of the prison industrial complex, is imagination and the possibility of conceiv- ing a world without prisons and systematic violence. Does that even come up with prisoners?

HA: The collapse of imagination in the culture is one of the biggest issues that we're dealing with. There is no imagination in our government when they have to confront the challenges of the world by using weapons of mass destruction and keeping every citizen under constant surveillance. In our educational system, arts are the first thing to be cut off when there are budget issues because art is the most subservive capacity we have. It is our most basic human right because we need imagination to be able to imagine another world than what we have. Intelligence is the capacity for imagination. Imagination is what hold the intensity of conflict as long as we can until a third way, something that we have not yet imagined, can show theater and play are tools that can be used to negotiate meaning. It is not my purpose to resist but to denounce what is happening inside society in a beautiful way that can be used to negotiate meaning. And we accomplish all of this through games and other dynamics. I have no problem when people think that they're not doing it as I want them to do it. I think that the most important thing is the discovery of life. To create joy in a dehumanizing environment is subversive. I also don’t think that creativity is a luxury, I think it is essential for the survival of the soul. We need to reconnect to the most basic human attribute.

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• Legal strategies and important cases that impact prisoners
• Updates on what’s happening at the prison you’re in (for example: working conditions, health concerns, lockdowns)
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SEND US YOUR WRITING AND ARTWORK!
Sometimes Freedom Means You Have to Burn It Down: Harriet Tubman and an Abolitionist Vision That Don’t Quit

BY ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS

On June 2, 1863, Harriet Tubman, called the Moses of her people for her multiple successful journeys to help enslaved African escape to freedom, navigated the Combahee River and South Carolina’s rice plantation stronghold in the time organizing for the better treatment of slaves on plantations and in individual households. She took major risks to help enslaved people escape from the South to the North and to Canada and she put her body on the line to help the escape of thousands of African Americans by the Fugitive Slave Act to escape their captors in the North. Harriet Tubman was about politics and leadership by every means available and by any means necessary. She strategized with John Brown, a white abolitionist who believed that armed insurrection was the only way to free slave family members who refused to claim their own freedom. The moment of the Combahee River Uprising required the bravery of those people who were still enslaved, most of whom may have been living on plantations their entire lives. The moment of the Combahee River Uprising required these people of all different ages and roles within the plantation to give up everything they had known without looking back and to burn down the places they had lived in the service of a freedom they had never experienced.

When we visited the Combahee River we thought about those patterns in our own lives that do not necessarily make the tweedledee or tweedledum, but actually need to be abandoned completely in order for us to be individually free. In this moment it makes me wonder what our prison abolitionist movement needs to turn its back on and use as kindling in order to earn the world that we deserve, which is beyond the prison state and police state that we are locked in. After the Combahee River Uprising, Harriet Tubman is said to have had a prophetic dream where she saw the end of slavery and the freedom of her people. She woke up full of joy and repeated over and over again the words “My people are free. My people are free.” In the present tense, I believe that was her strong belief that the end of slavery and the freedom of her people was already destined that enabled her to have the courage to do whatever it took to fight for freedom. Remember that even well into the Civil War, most people never thought the United States would ever exist without slavery, but Tubman maintained her revolutionary vision.

For those of us who are contemporary abolitionists, who believe that all our people should be free and that the prison state and police state fundamentally disrespect all human beings and must be dismantled, Harriet Tubman’s vision is instructive. Do we believe that our peas are fundamentally free? Do we really believe in a world without prisons? What will it take for us to act on the promise we see in the service of our visions? I think that it takes us to do what Harriet Tubman did and actually see a world after prisons in which our people are free. It is our role as visionaries, artists, organizers and activists to imagine the world we desire in detail, so that we can say that we and our people are free, right now, and then act in accordance with that freedom.

Leadership from the Inside

One of the most important lessons of the Combahee River Uprising for the contemporary prison abolitionist movement is that leadership must come from those most impacted by the prison, policy and surveillance systems. Without the success of the Combahee River Uprising it is very possible that the Union would have lost the Civil War and the Confederate States would have continued to practice slavery as the core of their labor system. Let me say this as clearly as possible. The leadership of enslaved people and escaped slaves was crucial in ending slavery in the United States. Without the bravery and action of enslaved Africans, slavery could not have been destroyed. Harriet Tubman herself was an escaped slave and a fugitive criminal with a bounty on her head when she planned this uprising. The majority of the soldiers who she led through the Confederacy was composed of those black soldiers who had taken advantage of a recent shift in policy that allowed enslaved people who escaped and made their way to the Union Army to be freed. These bodies never returned to slavery.

In 1977, inspired by Harriet Tubman and the Combahee River Uprising, the Combahee River Collective made the provactive statement that “If Black women were free all people would have to be free, because our freedom requires the destruction of all the systems of oppression.” On the 150th anniversary of the Combahee Uprising, black feminists affirmed that our dreams and our tangible visions, our interpersonal practices and our political statements, the way we frame our organizing and the ways we use our time, are all crucial to our collective liberation. They say that the freedom of prisoners and the end of the prison system will only be achieved if we are interconnected we are despite oppression’s systematic ways of fragmenting us. The world we deserve requires us to be free than we ever imagined.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs is a queer Black troublemaker, a Black feminist love and activist poet, a cultural critic, and a cultural strategist. She co-founded the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind and the co-founder of the Mobile Homecoming experiential oral tradition and Europe’s first all-Black LGBTQ+ Brillance. She Lives in Durham, NC.
FREE THE PEOPLE

CLOSE THE S.H.U.

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ART BY JOSE VILLAREAL