A PUBLICATION OF CRITICAL RESISTANCE

THE ABOLITIONIST

FALL 2013

FREE TO PEOPLE IN PRISONS, JAILS, AND DETENTION CENTERS • ESPAÑOL AL REVES

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

Welcome to Issue 21 of *The Abolitionist!*

"Utopia is on the horizon," Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano once wrote. "When I draw nearer two steps, it retreats two steps." Working towards the abolition of the prison industrial complex (PIC) can feel like seeking utopia. We organize, we educate ourselves and each other, we take steps and gain political ground. But at every turn we also confront deeply 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 histories that make us who we are, to putting forth worlds vastly unlike our own; we hear echoes of the songs sung 80 years ago by imprisoned women decrying their oppressive conditions, while maintaining and casting out the resistance that always meets repression. Throughout this issue, we see how art can be a means of personal expression 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 California 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 created, like the liberatory imagination explored through political art, opens up new horizons for what is possible—both in resisting oppression and in dreaming a new and better world. Right at the surface of the prisoners' protest action are vital questions that lead us to think about what is at stake in peoples' struggles for freedom (even what freedom there is to be had while imprisoned): What is the state attacking when it attacks and criminalizes peoples' cultural expression? What is the role of art in fighting for meaningful social contact among groups of people? How do we tell the story of peoples' resistance to being ground into dust using all different types of tools? How do the images and stories of our current struggles connect to the ones that came before us? And how does our fearless imagination—both in how we express ourselves and how we take action together—have profound effects on how the future unfolds? History has shown us that cultural struggle and transformation are necessary to create social change. In turn, being able to *see* that change in as many different ways as possible, not only fills us with hope, but gives us the strength to fight another day, and to keep us walking.

In solidarity,
The Abolitionist Editorial Group

ISSUE 21: ART AND ABOLITION

Drawing Inspiration

BY MELANIE CERVANTES

This piece is taken from CR's Drawing Inspiration *event in 2011, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Attica Rebellion and the assassination of George Jackson.*

In 2007 my partner Jesus Barraza and I founded a graphic arts collaborative called Dignidad Rebelde. We don't do art for art's sake. We do it to recover the dignity of our people and our communities. This is our purpose. We believe art can be an empowering reflection of a community's struggles, dreams and visions. We are largely influenced by *Xicanisma* and *Zapatismo* amongst many other philosophies of revolution and change. We produce art in order to transform people's stories of struggle and resilience into a graphic visual language that gets put right back into their hands.

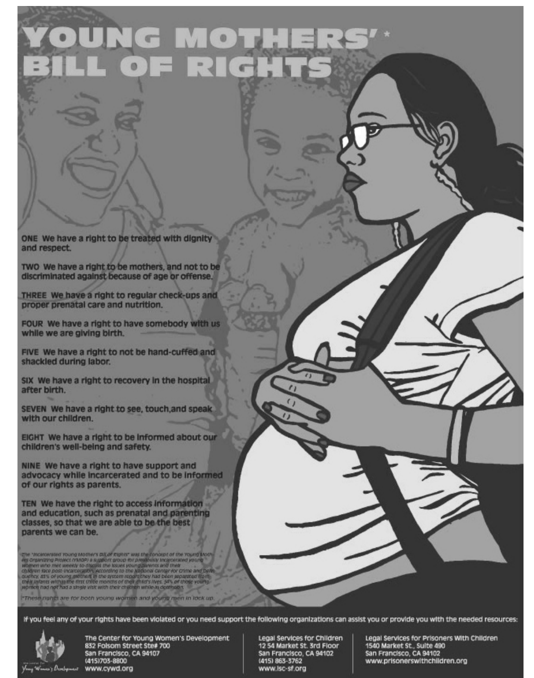
ART BY MELANIE CERVANTES AND JESUS BARRAZA

This image is the first image we created the day before the first rally to protest the murder of Oscar Grant by BART police officer [Johannes Mehserle]. This is how it was adopted, how people made it their own, and an example of how we see art being put back into people's hands.

WE PRODUCE ART IN ORDER TO TRANSFORM PEOPLE'S STORIES OF STRUGGLE AND RESILIENCE INTO A GRAPHIC VISUAL LANGUAGE THAT GETS PUT RIGHT BACK INTO THEIR HANDS.

We believe that movements are necessary to transform the conditions we face in society. Our analysis understands what the root causes are: colonialism, genocide, exploitation, capitalism. The challenge for us is, how do we represent these movements in visual art in a way that doesn't just reflect our racial or ethnic community but really reflects the complexity of who we are and who our communities are, and that connects those dots between movements?

How we integrate our values into our practice is important. One of the values that we have around depicting movements is actually reflecting real people. That means reflecting people that are organizing and fighting for a better world. It's critically important to move people that are often marginalized from view into the center.



ART BY MELANIE CERVANTES

This is a piece I designed for Center for Young Women's Development (CYWD) [in San Francisco]. They wanted to create a piece that would popularize and help make evident the fact that they had won this young mothers' bill of rights and to give young mothers and young fathers tools and information about their rights. When making palm cards and posters I felt it was important to reflect some young people that had come through CYWD, so the piece includes representations of their members.

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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.

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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.

__Martín Espada__ was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1957. He has published more than fifteen books as a poet, editor, essayist and translator. His award-winning work has been widely translated; collections of poems have been published in Spain, Puerto Rico and Chile. His book of essays, Zapata's Disciple, *has been banned in Tucson as part of the Mexican-American Studies Program outlawed by the state of Arizona. Espada is currently a professor in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.*

"The Poet in the Box" is based on a true story, based on my encounter with a young incarcerated poet at a juvenile detention center in Boston, where I gave a reading some years ago. This poem is not only about the ways that art can resist the "prison-industrial complex," but the ways in which incarcerated people can use art to empower and defend themselves against the system from within.

The Poet in the Box

for Brandon

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

At the juvenile detention center
demonic 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,
masonry of silence fingered by hallucinating drifters,
rebels awaiting execution, monks in prayer.

Then we figured it out, the assistant warden said.
He started fights so we'd throw him
in solitary, where he could write.

The box: There poetry was a grasshopper in the bowl of his hands,
pencil chiseling letters across his notebook
like the script of a pharaoh's deeds on pyramid walls;
metaphor spilled from the light he trapped
in his eyelids, lamps of incandescent words;
rhyme harmonized through the voices
of great-grandmothers and sharecropper bluesmen
whenever sleep began to whistle in his breath.
So the cold was a blanket to him.

We fixed Brandon, the assistant warden said.
We stopped punishing him. He knows
that every violation means he stays here longer.

Tonight there are poets
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
of the committee that said no to tenure;
poets who drain whiskey bottles
and urinate on the shoes of their disciples;
poets who cannot sleep as they contemplate
the extinction of iambic pentameter;
poets who watch the sky, waiting for a poem
to plunge in a white streak through blackness.

Brandon dreams of punishment,
stealing the keys from a sleepy jailer
to lock himself into the box, where he can hear
the scratching of his pencil
like fingernails on dungeon stone.

–Martín Espada

Letter to the Editor

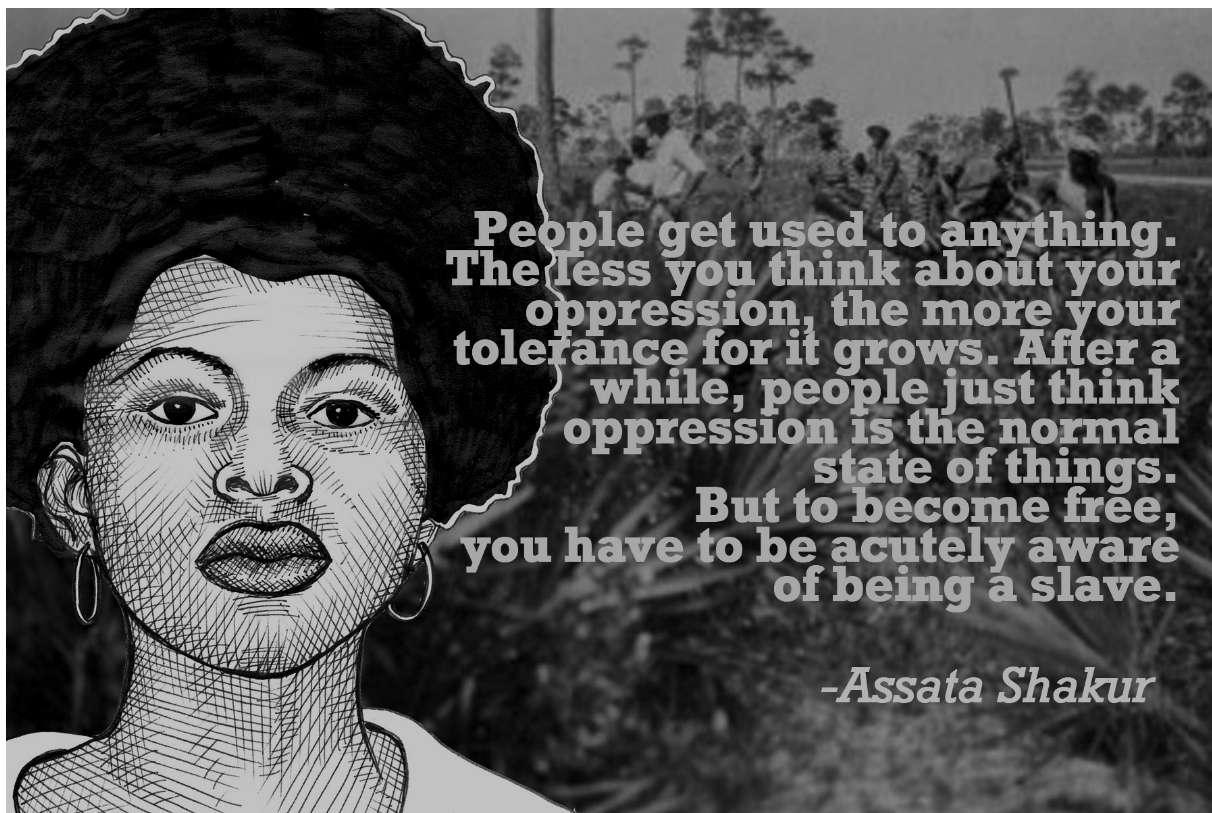
I've been receiving *The Abolitionist* for about seven years and a lot of my inspiration comes from your work. The articles aren't just informative but they let us know that our situation isn't some localized event; that it's not simply the way thins are and to be accepted. The resistance that you provide 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!

–Guerilla Shareef



ART BY PROJECT NIA

Building Community, from the Ground Up

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

BY JESS HEANEY

In 2011 while the City of Oakland was targeting neighborhoods with violent policing policies such as gang injunctions and threats of city-wide youth curfews and anti-loitering laws, Mikey Muscadine and Ruben Leal formed Aztlán *Beautification Movement (ABM), a project that sought to build with their families and neighbors, to reclaim their community at the grassroots, and to make it stronger. Growing out of many years of work in Xicana Moratorium Coalition (XMC), Mikey and Ruben seized the time to "set the roots really deep" with visible arts and cultural work through* Aztlán *Beautification Movement.*

ABM and the membership of XMC organized barbecues, mural paintings 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, tomatoes, basil, cilantro, and chayote planted by the neighborhood, is the site of one of ABM's murals, a twenty by fifteen foot full-wall piece in brilliant color that reads "Building community from the ground up." In front of the mural now grow rows of hot peppers and chilies. The following is an excerpt of their conversation about Aztlán *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 *Aztlán* 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] Yolanda 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 other city have histories blasted up of their culture, of the struggle—the Xicanos, the Native 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 had some murals at La Clinica de la Raza. As long as I could remember, at three years old, going to San Juan Park and looking at that mural, and being proud of being from Oakland, of being from Fruitvale, and being proud of being Mexican and being Xicano—and knowing that my grandfather's friend 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 they painted my car and they gave us a little space right there, and we had a barbecue.

THIS PROJECT IS OUR WAY OF FIGHTING BACK. 'CAUSE THE CITY IS SAYING WE'RE THE WORST OF THE WORST. THIS IS OUR WAY OF COMBATING THAT. THIS IS OUR FORM OF RESISTANCE.

Then we did one on 34th and Foothill. We had a block party and we had everybody come out. It took a lot just to organize that and we collaborated 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 up the messaging. So we came to the garden when there was really nothing here. We said, "Well, we're gonna put some murals at the garden. We're gonna turn something 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 get those run-ins, dead ends, we came and put this mural up. So that's like four murals now.

Ruben Leal (RL): We always had this idea, but when the gang injunction hit, we had the support of a lot of people. 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? Who are you thinking of? Who do you want to see them?

RL: We don't want it to be pictures. We want it to have a message on it. So we just look at what's going on. This mural right here that we're standing in front of, for example, it's from the community—it says "Building community from the ground up"—that's what we're trying to look at. When we look at these top-down policies from the Oakland City Council, like gang injunctions and all their plans, they don't get input from the people who are directly impacted. Our project is an example—building community from the ground up, organic, it's all organic. That that's how we got that message, and real shit was happening at the time. A lot of our work is controversial, and a lot of people are kinda scared. We run into that. Some people don't want to put political art on their businesses. They're scared of getting targeted by the cops or by the city. That's tricky too.

MM: There are people moving into our community, folks who are doing murals, but they're not putting any messages in. It seems like they're just changing some of the culture, but you don't really know what the message is. Our stories are untold—untold in schools, untold even to the youngsters out here in the community. We get a lot of folks out there working with us. Some of the businesses 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 who aren't taught that history in school, in textbooks. I want them to figure that out 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 oranges for a living, getting stopped by ICE. I want that to speak to the whole community who lives here.

JH: How does that add and build on the struggle?

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 issues—being oppressed by gang injunctions, 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

Continued on next page, "Aztlán Beautification Movement"

Continued from page 1, "Drawing Inspiration"

Another value that is important to our work is collaboration. A lot of people ask why we have a name for ourselves when it's just the two of us. Our analysis of the problems we face today includes how hyper-individualism is key in maintaining dominant culture. Creating the space that Dignidad Rebelde holds is like saying to the world that our interconnectedness is important and the least 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 see the streets flooded with art on May 1st. Everyone was struggling, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was knocking on people's doors, and those without the documentation of permitted migration were ending up in detention or being deported. Young people were really struggling with the cuts in their programs and their schools. It was just a very depressing moment and I wanted to do something different. This is one example of how we encourage collaboration. About 40 people from five different organizations showed up and together we collectively produced 500 handmade prints that were given out for free at that May Day march.

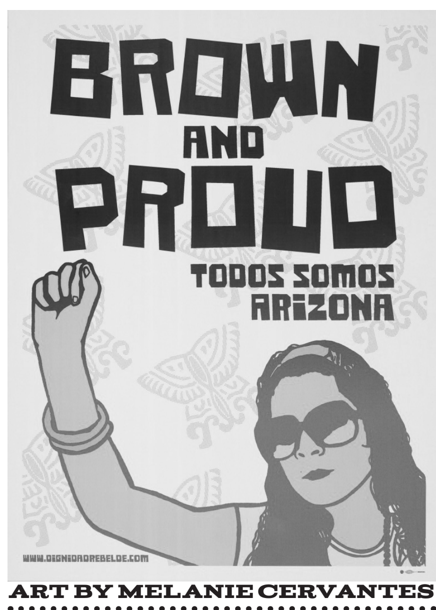
WE KNOW IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE ARTISTS THAT ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO MORE THAN OURSELVES.

A week later a group of artists did another run of four different artists' posters to send to Arizona. Within two or three months we sent 3000 handmade posters to Arizona. All funded by grassroots fundraising, all "pass-the-bucket foundation" fund raising, and all just really the labor of love; people putting their hands to the work.

The most obvious layer of collaboration is the collaboration that we do with base building or community based organizations. We know it is important to be artists that are accountable to more than ourselves. By creating these works in collaboration we create a mechanism for being accountable, for putting images out that are speaking to a group of people who have actually been through what's reflected in the images.

I don't really consider myself an organizer. I see myself as providing an arm of work, within a larger movement, that's necessary to support the organizing. I have these moments when I'm holding my camera taking a picture and imagining a poster and it's so clear to me that as bad as it gets, it's going to get much better, because in that moment of clarity—although it's fleeting—I feel like all the impacts people make will culminate into something much bigger.

Melanie Cervantes*, a member of Dignidad Rebelde, is a Xicana graphic artist who creates images that reflect the hopes and dreams of social movements and that catalyze people to action.*



ART BY MELANIE CERVANTES

ART BY JESUS BARRAZA

Imagine a World Without Prisons:

Science Fiction, Fantasy, Superheroes, and Prison Abolition

BY WALIDAH IMARISHA

And then the orcs stage an uprising and seize the means of production, since they are not only the soldiers, they are also the exploited labor of Middle Earth. If they rise up, Mordor grinds to a halt!

This unlikely strategy came out of a workshop called "Imaginative Fiction and Social Change," at the Allied Media Conference, an annual gathering in Detroit of radical activists, artists and media makers. The facilitator, Morrigan Phillips, broke participants into small groups and each one got a fictional land: Oz, the Death Star, Hogwarts, Springfield (of The Simpsons fame). 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 fantasy story. It's like a quest," Phillips said excitedly in the introduction. "There is a conflict, compelling characters, a good plan, build-up, twists 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/take your pick) 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 safe, whole and accountable outside of a criminal justice system created to criminalize and incarcerate many of our communities is a central focus in social justice work. And it is a central question in science fiction as well.

ABOLITION SAYS WE CAN OPERATE FROM THE PRINCIPLES OF WHOLENESS AND HEALING, RATHER THAN RETRIBUTION AND VENGEANCE.

Together with visionary movement strategist adrienne maree brown, I am currently co-editing an anthology of radical science fiction written by folks involved in social justice, to be called *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements*.

This principle lies at the heart of our anthology: When we talk about a world without prisons, a world without police violence, 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 being able to envision these worlds equips us with tools to begin making these dreams reality.

adrienne maree brown calls science fiction "an exploring ground," saying it offers a perfect medium for organizers to explore different outcomes and strategies in theory, before we have to deal with the real-world costs.

She asks, "How do we handle the worst of our own behavior? How do we stop perpetuating our fears and assumptions? What are the long-term outcomes of applying models like truth and reconciliation, and transformative justice?" This is one of the most exciting and far-reaching topics in science fiction.

And she's not the only one asking these questions. Poet and organizer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, also an *Octavia's Brood* contributor, says, "As a transformative justice organizer, some of my earliest (and current) inspirations for imagining worlds that create safety and deal with violence and harm without prisons are radical science fiction books."

The Transformative Justice Reader came out of a workshop Piepzna-Samarasinha co-organized at the AMC two years ago exploring these very intersections. "Over the past few years we found each other out," she adds. "As people thinking about TJ, and as sci-fi geeks seeing interesting examples of potential futures rooted in TJ approaches in our isolated reading experiences. Many organizers cite books like *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *Dhalgren*, *Midnight Robber*, *Futureland*, *The Dispossessed*, *Fifth Sacred Thing*, *Who Fears Death?* and *Lillith's Brood* as important texts to study for anyone thinking about building alternatives to incarceration. In fact, *Octavia's Brood* is named to honor the legacy of Octavia Butler, author of *Lilith's Brood*, among her many books that carry important lessons for social movements. brown has been leading Octavia Butler emergent strategy sessions around the country, gathering groups to study Butler's writing and apply it to their organizing.

It's not just books either; Piepzna-Samarasinha facilitated a workshop at this year's AMC that pulled lessons from the film *Born in Flames*, directed by Lizze Borden, which focuses on alternative systems of justice for women in a post-democratic, socialist revolutionary New York landscape.

brown and I have found justice, incarceration and community accountability to be 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. Banishment from a community is something many folks working on community accountability grapple with as a concept.

My own story in the collection, "Black Angels and Blue Roses," uses the tale of a fallen angel with the power to "sing" humans a second chance in life as a means of exploring our collective responsibility in the healing of one another.

adrienne maree brown's piece "The River," one of the Detroit-based science fiction pieces she was just awarded a Kresge Fellowship to create, explores the concept of what justice looks like for crimes the current criminal justice system does not even have language for, or even acknowledge as a crime: Gentrification, displacement, economic devastation, and generational institutionalized oppression.

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 dangerous reactionary dystopias that can be created if we are not strongly rooted in healthy principles and values.

A powerful counterpoint to this mentality is the young adult fiction novel The Adventures of Darius Logan Book One: Super Justice Force, by Octavia's Brood contributor David F. Walker. In Super Justice Force, a young Black teenager named Darius Logan is offered the choice between going to prison or going to a program run by the world's greatest team of superheroes, a team that also includes former super-villains. One powerful subplot is the relationship between Nightwatcher and Otto Rekker (nods to Batman and The Joker), once arch enemies and now close teammates who attend each other's summer barbecues.

Manny, another former mad villain, explains Otto's presence to the skeptical Darius this way: "Someone breaks the law, you can bet they got their reasons—reasons they can justify… Hell, Doc Kaos can probably make a compellin' case for tryin' to destroy the human race." 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 visionaries I consider family and mentors as we re-imagine

Continued on next page, "Science Fiction"

Continued from previous page, "Aztlán Beautification Movement"

houses here. We're still going through it. There are all these little laws they're bringing up—gang injunctions, stop and frisk. There are new laws coming up. I would like to paint something about Stop and Frisk, or gang injunctions flat-out, or a picture of youngsters being arrested by the police for the way they look.

RL: This project is our way of fighting back. Cause the city is saying we're the worst of the worst. This is our way of combating that. This is our form of resistance.

JH: You mention bringing out other organizations to participate in these murals—Eastside Art Alliance, Xicana Moratorium Coalition, other organizations from the Stop the Injunctions Coalition, everyday people. Why is this important?

RL: It's like a collective. We're trying to get the whole community together and build these murals with input from everybody. We want them to be by everybody, not just the people that paint them. Back in the 70s when the Xicano movement was building in Oakland—the Xicano arts movement—they would have town halls and people would come together and say what they wanted on the murals, together. That's kinda like what we've been trying to do. Have everybody come together—take ownership.

OUR IMAGES COME FROM THE WHOLE COMMUNITY—THEY COME OUT AND PUT THEIR TIME IN. THEY COULD BE ELSEWHERE.

MM: We've organized this but it wouldn't have happened without organizations like Eastside Arts bringing artists in, investing their time. Nobody's getting paid. They're bringing images to life—stuff we thought of when we were kids. Mikey and I aren't artists, but we put up primer, we did anything we had to do. We went out there and talked to the business and the owners and showed them sketches and got their input. Going out there, working with the artists, I felt kinda like, "Damn, I'm not painting. They got the hard job." But then the artists said, "You got the hard job, having to go back and forth getting input, 'no, yes, no, yes.' That's the real hard part. So just keep doing what you're doing and we'll paint the images." And when the artists got tired, the youngsters came over, filling in the gaps. The mural on 34th and Foothill—100 hands touched it, 100 people, filling it in, dot for dot. We can't leave nobody out. Our images come from the whole community—they come out and put their time in. They could be elsewhere.

JH: Even though your work is very local, the politics certainly stretch beyond Oakland. For people reading this who are locked up or who might live in another city, or another country, what are you saying to them?

MM: We have a lot of rich history with the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, with the United Farm Workers, with being active. People who are reading this could start doing this in their community—the African-American community, the Asian community—start putting up murals in their community because there's a lot of walls out there that could be hit up, with your art, your culture, your history. That's something that nobody can take from us.

RL: We got a lot of our homeboys and a lot of our family members behind the walls, and so it's personal to us. I just want to send my love out and tell them that they're still part of our community even though they're locked up.

Jess Heaney *is a member of the Oakland Chapter of Critical Resistance.* ***Ruben Leal*** *and* ***Mikey Muscadine*** *are the co-founders of the* Aztlán *Beautification Movement and also work with Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ). Jess, Ruben, and Mikey and their organizations have all worked together for the past several years in the Oakland-based Stop the Injunctions Coalition (STIC).*

STOREFRONT MURAL OF MARILYN BUCK (SAN FRANCISCO) PHOTO BY GARY SOUP

There is no grass

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

The beat of a heart

BY PAM FADEM

When this poem was written, Marilyn was locked up in the Washington D.C. County Jail. She was awaiting trial as part of the Resistance Conspiracy Case along with her companer@s Alan Berkman, Tim Blunk, Linda Evans, Susan Rosenberg and Laura Whitehorn. Charged 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 1985. 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—especially 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 incarceration.

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 aggressive cancer that had been diagnosed eight months earlier while still in prison.

Marilyn lived almost half of her life locked up, often in solitary and control units. While she was battered both physically and emotionally by government repression and 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 1985. 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." ¡Marilyn Buck presente!*

***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 resister in 1984, refusing to collaborate with a federal grand jury investigating the Puerto Rican independence movement.*

Continued from previous page, "Science Fiction"

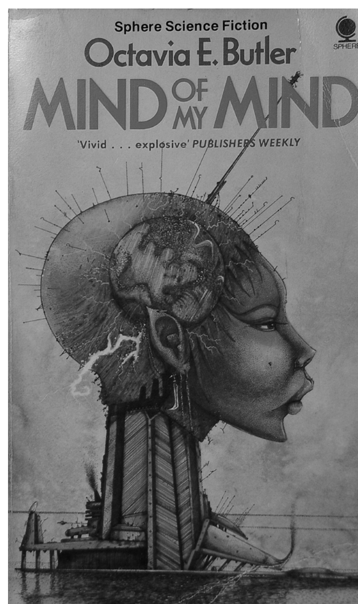
the world around us.

Returning to Phillips' fantasy quest, perhaps his most relevant lesson for the work of abolishing the prison system and creating community accountability is just how difficult this work is. Quests are never neat and easy. Quests test everything you know about yourself, everything you think you know about the world. You have to make some of the hardest decisions of your life, and sometimes you choose wrong. Sometimes you make things worse. But you keep going.

I often think of a scene in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, when the hobbits Frodo and Sam are at Osgiliath, where the immense power and resources of the enemy become clear and Frodo says he can't go on with the quest:

> Sam: "Folk in those [epic stories we listened to as children] had lots of chances of turning back only they didn't. Because they were holding on to something."
> Frodo: "What are we holding on to, Sam?"
> Sam: "That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it's worth fighting for."

This is what so much of our organizing work, especially around prison abolition, is based on: Faith. A faith, sometimes in the face of powerful evidence to the contrary, that there is positivity and healing to be had on the other side of pain and suffering and hurt. That is what keeps us moving through those times when all hope is otherwise lost.



Prison abolition says we know inherently that we have the ability to be the best of ourselves. Abolition says we can operate from the principles of wholeness and healing, rather than retribution and vengeance. When I asked poet, Black feminist thinker, and Octavia's Brood contributor Alexis Pauline Gumbs how abolition and science fiction intersected for her, she said, "For me, prison abolition is a speculative future. It imagines a species with a set of fully developed powers that are right now only fledgling. We are that species."

And even when there is a positive resolution to the epic quest you undertook, you know it is just part of a larger ongoing struggle. This is not the end—it is merely the waiting period for the next book in the series to come out, when the work begins anew, and you use the hard-won lessons from book one to move ever towards justice in the sequels.

Walidah Imarisha *is an educator, writer, poet and organizer. She is the co-editor of* Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements, *to be released June 2014. She has taught in Portland State University's Black Studies Department and Oregon State University's Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies Department.*

HAVE YOU BEEN GASSED?

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WRL Campaign Against Teargas
339 Lafayette St.
New York, NY 10012

Resistance and Culture Inside:

A Review of Les Blair's *H3*

BY ISAAC ONTIVEROS

In early July 2013, a day after 30,000 prisoners went on hunger strike and work stoppage throughout the California prison system to protest the horrendous conditions of their confinement, strikers at the notorious Pelican Bay State Prison issued a statement:

> We have taken up this hunger strike and work stoppage, which has included 30,000 prisoners in California so far, not only to improve our own conditions but also as an act of solidarity with all prisoners and oppressed people around the world.

The authors of this statement, representatives of the Short Corridor Collective—an interracial group of prisoners locked in isolation (some for decades) in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay—have played a key role in calling for protest against the use of solitary confinement (and its attending policies and miseries), as well as in igniting the imagination and activism of thousands of their fellow prisoners, and widespread support on the outside. While the California prisoners' strike was taken up around very specific practices in the state prison system—pushing specific demands vis-à-vis specific conditions and targets—their protest can give us an opportunity to understand prisoner-led organizing against the violence of imprisonment more generally. At the same time we can also work to think historically about how this sort of organizing is related to the liberation struggles of oppressed people. The Short Corridor Collective has sent messages of solidarity to hunger strikers at Guantanamo prison. Recently released Palestinian political prisoner and former hunger striker, Sheikh Khader Adnan, sent a message of solidarity to the California hunger strikers several days into their action. The New Afrikan Revolutionary Nationalism (N.A.R.N.) Collective Think Tank in the SHU at California's Corcoran State Prison saw the protest as part of the "struggle to liberate ourselves from the groups of patriarchal, authoritarian, sexist, colonialist, fascist, homophobic tyranny." This last round of hunger strike went on to last 60 days before being suspended by the prisoners. Its participants endured incredible retaliation from the state's prison regime, garnered unprecedented international attention and support, and compelled significant movement from elected officials in the California legislature.

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 OPPRESSOR, BUT ALSO CHANGES AND BUILDS UP THOSE WHO RESIST.

While the time, place, and conditions are different—and the shifts in conditions are yet to be seen—it is not surprising that people would think about the California prisoner hunger strike alongside the Republican prisoner hunger strike in the North of Ireland in 1981 (along with recalling Attica, or Folsom, or Walpole, or the fight to end the Marion Lockdown). The Irish strike was part of a national liberation struggle that had lasted generations. Their actions united prisoners around demands specific to their isolation and also gained worldwide support for both their strike and their struggle against British colonialism. And of course their struggle was (and continues to be) linked to Third World peoples' fights against colonialism and imperialism in other parts of the world. By taking a moment to examine Les Blair's film *H3* (2001), we can learn a bit about how the Irish prisoners organized their strike, how people remember and tell the story of the strike, and how history in the form of art gives us an opportunity to see the present and future differently.

H3 is named for one of the cell blocks in the notorious Long Kesh prison run by occupying British forces in the North of Ireland. Thousands of Irish people were imprisoned at Long Kesh after their capture for either participating in armed struggle against British occupation, supporting the Republican movement, or simply being *accused* of supporting it. *H3* starts its story in 1981, several years into the Blanket and No Wash protests, led by captured fighters. Feargal Eamonn Mac Ionnrachtaigh puts it succinctly in his excellent dissertation, *"An Ghaeilge faoi Ghlas:" Republican Prisoners and the Irish Language in the North of Ireland*:

> The Blanket protest was staged by Republican prisoners in Long Kesh prison, in the new high security... Maze H-Blocks, between 1976 and 1981 in opposition to the British government's criminalization policy which removed political status from republican prisoners. Prisoners who refused to wear prison uniforms and do prison work lost all privileges and subsequently found themselves locked naked in their cells, 24 hours a day with only blankets as clothing.

A couple years into the protest, in resistance to abuse by guards, prisoners began the No Wash protest, refusing to leave their cells to shower and empty their chamber pots, instead smearing their excrement on the walls—both to dissipate the smell and irritate the guards. After a 53-day mass hunger strike in 1980 failed to compel the British to meet their five demands (the right not to wear a prison uniform; the right not to do prison work; the right of free association with other prisoners, and to organize education and recreation; the right to one visit, one letter and one parcel per week; and no retaliation for the protest), Republican prisoners initiated a new hunger strike in 1981 that saw the death of 10 prisoners.

The strike galvanized prisoner organization, international support for the strike and condemnation of British occupation of the North of Ireland, and involvement in the above and underground Republican struggle. Bobby Sands, an Irish Republican Army (IRA) leader in the prison, organized the strike and was the 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, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee, and Michael Devine. Just before the credits roll in Blair's *H3*, we read on the screen: "Within two years of ending the hunger strike the prisoners' demands were met."

Several films have depicted the Irish prisoner hunger strike. Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* (1996) is a solid portrayal of the inner workings of the British government's strategy against the strikers, the negotiations process, the political transformations of the strikers' families, and the massive solidarity efforts organized by them. Aside from a challengingly complex political and ethical debate between Bobby Sands and a priest that lasts nearly a third of the entire film, Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008) is very quiet and impressionistic. It offers an unflinching depiction of the strike, contemplating the extremes of the prisoners' conditions and their political decisions, and the endurance of the human body. Where one should appreciate *Some Mother's Son*'s scope and focus on the strong women leading the strike solidarity work, one could questions some of its political conclusions. And where it would be hard to film a more realistic depiction of both the hell of imprisonment at Long Kesh and the profoundly serious act of hunger striking, one can also wonder how much *Hunger*'s existentialism blurs the politics of its characters and the historical moment in which they are living.

STILL FROM H3 (2001), DIR. LES BLAIR

Les Blair's film, *H3* tells the story of the strike as a profoundly important moment in the freedom struggle of Irish people. Its characters are committed and skilled fighters and organizers whose sense of sacrifice is made stronger by the love of life and freedom. That this comes off so intensely probably shouldn't be a surprise as *H3*'s writers, Brian Campbell and Laurence McKeown were both Republican fighters and political prisoners. Indeed McKeowan took part in the hunger strike. *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 oppressor, but also changes and builds up those who resist.

In his book *"An Ghaeilge faoi Ghlas"* Feargal Eamonn Mac Ionnrachtaigh describes how Irish political prisoners "demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to transform their sacrificial circumstances into an innovative and transformative arena that educated them and politicized their defiant acts of resistance. The daily struggle... forged more participatory and horizontal forms of prison leadership and organizational structure." We see this in *H3* in the ways the young character Declan is developed from a recently imprisoned cadre to a skilled organizer, especially as he takes up the role of smuggling messages from prisoners to the outside in support of Sands' parliamentary run. Sands is certainly portrayed as a key leader (with his electoral victory marked as a triumph and his death as a tragedy) but isn't a central character—matching Ionnrachtaigh's descriptions of horizontal power among prisoners. If there is a main character it is Seamus Scullion, whose character is shown as heroic across the board—orienting new prisoners; negotiating with their captors; helping fellow prisoners through moments of doubt and despair; coordinating the movement of messages and contraband; taking over organization of the strike; and, most vividly, teaching and using the Irish language.

Throughout the film, prisoners are shown speaking Irish to one another through the doors, out the windows, and through cracks in the cells. Sometimes they are shown simply telling stories, other times making plans for and strategizing their resistance. These scenes are powerful because they depict how prisoners used the bigotry of the guards (none of whom seemed to bother learning the language) against them—organizing right out in the open—while also getting in touch with the very roots that colonial violence was attempting to destroy. Mac Ionnrachtaigh quotes former political prisoner Jim McCann in his book:

> I realize that I wasn't a political person until about two years into my time in prison. I always joked that it wasn't until that time that I actually became a republican... Republicanism actually only revealed itself to me when I was in jail, not only did I learn the language but I learned why I had went to jail and what was keeping me in jail and more importantly we learned how to begin breaking all these things down...

Indeed, the film ends with these sorts of transformations. Earlier in the story a prisoner reaches the breaking point and agrees to wear the prison uniform and join the general population. This is seen as a sad, sad moment—the breaking of a fighter's spirit. But, in the last moments in the film he rejoins the movement, and is taken back into the fold by his fellow prisoners, showing how liberation is a long and meandering struggle, full of fits and starts, drawbacks and victories, death and rebirth.

Former hunger striker and *H3* cowriter Laurence McKeowan says: "Republican political prisoners understand their imprisonment as just one more arena of struggle... The war doesn't end with their capture. Prison is a place to educate and politicize themselves for the day they will once more be on the outside..." Mac Ionnrachtaigh's entire book drives this point home as he illustrates how the Irish language used by the Republicans in prison went on to spawn an entire movement of Irish language regeneration in the North of Ireland that is alive and strong today.

H3 TELLS US A POWERFUL STORY ABOUT VIOLENCE, DETERMINATION, POLITICAL ORGANIZATION, STRUGGLE, AND CULTURAL REVIVAL AMIDST INDESCRIBABLE 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.

H3 tells us a powerful story about violence, determination, political organization, struggle, and cultural revival amidst indescribable 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. Bobby Sands famously said about resisting the violence of British occupation: "Our revenge will be laughter of our children." Hopeful the seeds of optimism, fortitude, and liberatory vision in Sands' words, and in the film *H3*, can find fertile ground in our own times.

***Isaac Ontiveros** is the Communications Director of Critical Resistance and a member of* The Abolitionist*'s editorial group.*

Doin' Time:
Through the Visiting Glass
BY ASHLEY LUCAS

This is an excerpt from Dr. Ashley Lucas's play Doin' Time: Through the Visiting Glass, *which she has performed as a one-woman show throughout the U.S., in Ireland, and Canada.*

—The Interviewer—

Hi, my name is Ashley. I'm 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 José 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. Sí. Of course. Come in. Sit. Sit here. Disculpame por favor. I was just cleaning the house before you came.

I have just one child: un hijo five years old now. He's 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 papá is in school and that he'll be home when he. . . ¿como se dice? se gradua. 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 conoce 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. 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. Then I got pregnant, and we were so happy together. But I was alone when I gave birth to my son. Mauricio got arrested three days before Miguelito was born, and I had no one to help me. Toda mi familia estaba en Mexico. Estaba bien solita, and my husband's family didn't help me. They never wanted him to marry me. Me llamaban una mojada desgraciada. Now I see them because they want to see Miguelito, so they help me sometimes. I work from very early in the morning until 4 PM, and mi suegra takes Miguelito to school and brings him to me at work in the afternoon. Then we go home together, my son and me, and we eat dinner, and I put him to bed. This is the time that I feel most alone. I think of my husband and how much he is hurting porque no tenemos ningun idea de cuando va a salir de la carcel. He has a life sentence, but it's my life and Miguelito's, too.

Mauricio's going to tell him the truth by the time Miguelito turns seven. By then he needs to know. He's going to tell him not to trust anybody. Mauricio is in prison because he trusted people. People he thought were his friends. Now we don't trust anybody. I don't have any friends anymore since Mauricio went to prison, and it's better that way because I want Miguelito to learn that he can't trust anybody but me and his father. He can't trust anybody except the two of us because he could go to prison, too.

I think about my husband late at night while mijo is sleeping. I listen to music and think of my husband and how much love I have to give him when he gets home. I imagine my husband with me and what we will do cuando regrese.

—Waiting for the Visit—

A woman with four children enters the waiting room adjacent the prison visiting room. She is putting herself back together 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 contact? 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. For that kind of visit, they'll call his name once he's in one of the booths and take you over to him. If you've got a contact visit, you get to sit at one of those 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. (beat)

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 on your boy. That's rough. We're here to see my husband Randy. It's bad enough to have a husband in here. I can't even imagine what it would be like if it was one of my kids. I had those two boys before I met Randy, and Ollie here is Randy's from before he met me. I was pregnant, nine months, with my little girl when Randy was arrested. Yeah. This one's name is really Oliver, but I call him Ollie so that he feels like one of us. My husband's Randy. I'm Lucy, and that's Johnny, Andy, Ollie, and Annie. That's our little family. (beat)

Huh? How much time you get to visit depends on how far you came from. If you came from over 300 miles away, you'll get a four hour visit today and the same thing tomorrow. If you came from somewhere closer than that, you just get two hours today and no visit tomorrow. Oh good. Good. You'll get the long visit then. That's good. The short one is just sooo short, you know. The first visit's always the worst. You can ask anybody. I was so scared. After the guards searched me all over, I felt just like a criminal myself, and to watch them do that to my kids for the first time, my God! And here I was with Annie just a couple of months old, and you can't take a baby bottle with milk in to visit. All I did was cry. I could barely look at him without tears. I didn't want that to be the first time he saw his newborn daughter. He couldn't even hold her. All I could do was hold her up to the glass for him to look at. Me and my boys cried all the way home.

Andy, don't kick your brother. If you don't stop that right now, I will leave you in this prison when the rest of us go home! Kids. These long visits are hard because they have to sit still so long. You know, we drive six hours to get here. Then we wait half an hour to an hour for them to bring him out for the visit, and then we sit there and visit for four hours. Then I gather up all my kids, go to the motel up the road for the night, and then we do it all in reverse the next day. All my kids do all weekend is sit.

Yes, Annie, don't stand on your chair like that. You're gonna fall and crack your head open before your daddy even sees you. Go sit on Johnny's lap. Go on. Momma's trying to have an adult conversation with these nice people. I'm so sorry. You look just terrified to be here. I shouldn't have said all those things. It does get easier with time. You figure out how things work, and then the whole visiting ordeal isn't so intimidating. Johnny, do not give her that bubble gum! Oh God. Give that to me. Give me all of it. You, too, Andy, right this minute. You are going to get us thrown out of here before our visit even starts. Sorry about that. It's just that if they catch you with gum, they'll take away your visit. Prisoners aren't allowed to have gum because they might stick it in the locks. I've seen people lose their visits for much less.

VOICE OVER: Sandoval. S-A-N-D-O-V-A-L. Sandoval.

LUCY: I guess that's you guys. Follow that guard who called your name. Have a good visit. Nice talking to you. Stop it, Ollie! Settle down. It'll be our turn in a minute.

—God Is a Prisoner—

My brother's an artist. He draws and paints, but mostly he does graffiti. Now he's doin seven years—for graffiti. Can you imagine? Seven years of your life for a crime where nobody got hurt. Who's it helpin for him to be in prison? The guy whose wall he wrote on? Shit. It woulda helped that guy more if the court gave my brother community service and made him clean up the pinche wall.

I think mostly they locked him up because he's a smart ass. We saw a mural once when we was kids that said "God Is Mexican," and Danny, my brother, loved that shit. When we got back to Phoenix, he started writing it on walls all over the place. God is a Chicana. Dios es un mojado. God comes from the barrio. God hangs out at Tito's. He went on like that for years. Got really good, too. He didn't just paint the words. He made them beautiful.

We were raised Catholic, but my mother was real nontraditional. She took us to church every Sunday, and we prayed like everybody else, but during the rest of the week Amá talked to God like he was her compadre or somethin. She talked to Him like he was right there washing the dishes and doin the laundry with her. She got mad at God, too. Told him when he was bein stupid, and then she'd apologize to God later when she wasn't mad no more. She'd say, "Perdoname, Diosito. I'm sorry, but I was angry with you this morning for sending rain on the day of Lolita's first communion, pero I realize now that you send the bad weather so that the wind would blow Doña Violeta's ugly dress over her head on the steps of the church to punish her for being una vieja chismosa. Now that your plan has been revealed to me, I apologize for yelling at you and for stealing five extra communion wafers porque tenía hambre durante la misa. Ya no quiero hablar más de eso."

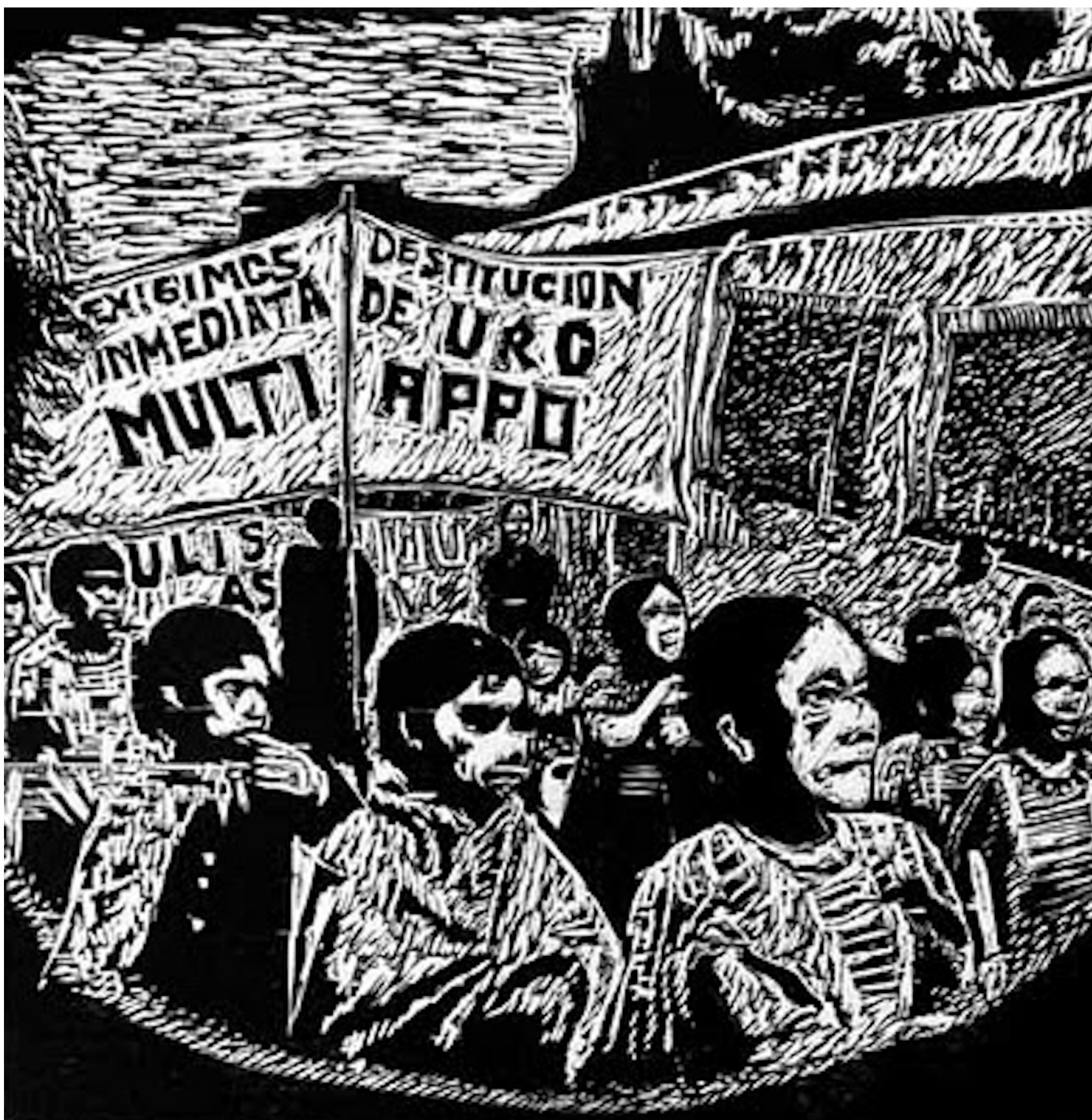
Anyways we grew up having an unusual relationship with God because of my mother, and then a bunch of my brother's friends got arrested, and if Danny'd been with them that night, he woulda got picked up, too. That really freaked him out, and he started goin to all the places where he used to paint "God dances cumbias" and "God is an undocumented immigrant," an he started writing all his friends' names instead. Aldo Gutiérrez is in prison. Israel Cienfuegos is in prison. Freddie Ramírez is in prison. The day the cops caught him he was writing, "David Archuleta is in prison. God is with him. God is a prisoner."

Danny tried to run when he saw the cops, but they caught him. Three of them beat him until them gave him a concussion and broke his right hand so that he don't write so good no more. Amá stopped talking to God for a week, and now Danny writes us letters in real shaky handwriting. At the bottom underneath his signature he always writes, "God is a prisoner."

—The Interview—

ASHLEY: Hi, my name is Ashley. I'm the one who called you about the interview. I'm writing this play about the families of prisoners. My father is in prison, and I was hoping you would share your story with me. So if you don't mind, just speak slowly and clearly and talk into the microphone. Now which member of your family is in prison?

Ashley Lucas *is Associate Professor of Theatre & Drama and Director of the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan. Along with Jodi Michelle Lawston, she writes the blog* Razor Wire Women *(http://razorwirewomen.wordpress.com), which offers essential readings for organizers and scholars—both inside and outside of women's prisons and detention centers.*



ART BY ASARO COLLECTIVE

Midnight Dreams:
Abolition and Black Feminist Blues in the 1930s

BY SARAH HALEY

Wake up Rosie, tell your midnight dream.
Wake up Rosie, tell your midnight dream.
Midnight dream good Lordy, midnight dream. Wake up Rosie, tell your midnight dream.

A chorus of women imprisoned at Mississippi's Parchman Penitentiary in the 1930s requested the knowledge contained within Rosie's midnight dream in a song they wrote entitled Go Way Devil, Leave Me Alone. The song never uncovers the contents of Rosie's midnight dream, but despite this absence, the black feminist blues world that developed at Parchman reveals volumes about the violence of imprisonment during the Great Depression. This extraordinary record simultaneously challenges white supremacy and gendered violence and urges the dismantling of the southern penal regime.

Although prison blues and work songs have long been studied as 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 blues circulated on the outside, amounting to a powerful critique of the prison regime's central role in the maintenance of white supremacy, sexism, and class oppression in a moment of capitalist disaster not unlike our own.

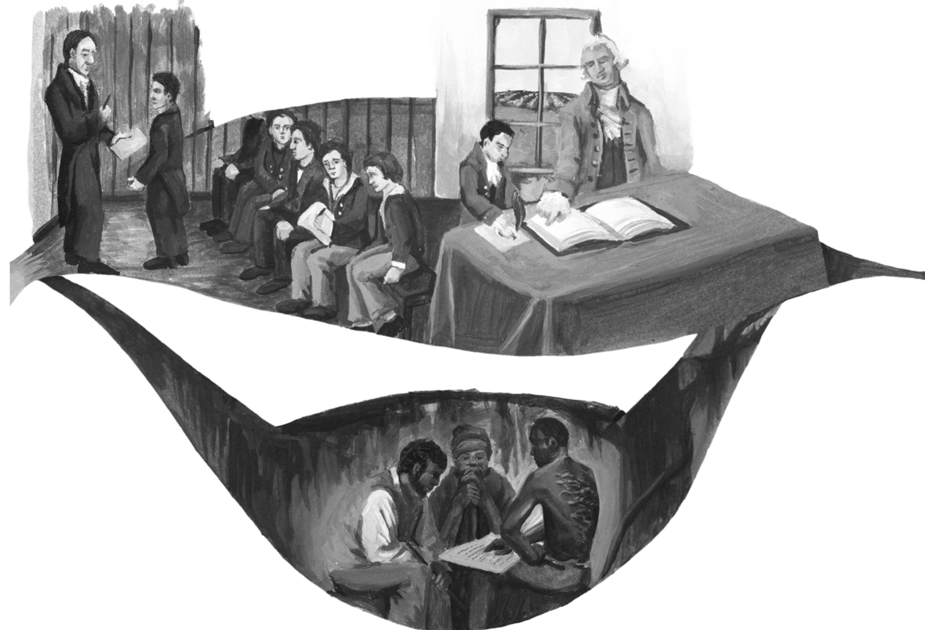


IMAGE FROM THE KNOTTED LINE , AN INTERACTIVE PROJECT BY EVAN BISSELL

It is important to understand this musical creation as a black feminist culture of abolition, even if the artists produced these songs before the terms prison industrial complex abolition and black feminism were coined. Black women's blues critique of imprisonment gave expression to the magnitude and complexity of carceral violence, exposing the specific forms that such violations took and the intersecting nature of physical, emotional, cultural, economic, sexual, racial, and gendered harm.

Tracking Class Oppression and Carceral Deprivation

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 protested bitterly, "I come to Parchman just to pull these hoes." Famed blues singer Sara Martin also sang about the labor imposed by violent force:

Guards all around me with their guns.
Shoot me down like a rabbit if I start to run
Five long years, lord, in a state stockade
Working from sun to sun

Evening goes, morning comes
My daily task is never done
Chippin' boxes lord, on a turpentine farm
At night, can't raise my arms

Martin's song expressed the reality of women's imprisonment in Georgia, where African American women disproportionately suffered in that state's convict camps, forced to perform work in a wide range of industries, from railroad and public road construction, turpentining, brick-making, mining, farming, cooking, mending tattered uniforms, and cleaning the camp. They worked alongside men, and were often forced to undress before they received whippings that guards inflicted in front of men. Such brutality was clearly intended to add humiliation to the physical pain of the lash. We know that women were whipped in this way, largely because men imprisoned alongside women made sure to expose these horrific gendered whipping rituals in addition to their own experiences of extreme violence.

The blues recorded at Parchman blues does not limit its condemnation of prison violence to any one guard or bad actor, but instead challenges the entire system, from the rations that barely disguised their deadliness in the cloak of sustenance, to the corrupt legal system, to the general condition of being caged:

Oh sergeant, sergeant, sergeant can't you see
That these peas and cornbread
Lord is killing me

Well the judge that sentenced me
Ought to be here his self, his self
'Cause I'd rather be dead lord, than to be in this lowdown place

Although it would be more than seventy years until Ruth Wilson Gilmore would define racism as the "state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" in her book *Golden Gulag*, this is precisely the idea that women 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 extreme lowdown-ness of the generalized environment of captivity that defined Parchman. (Gilmore, GG, 28)

Tracking Carceral Violence

Like *Penitentiary Blues*, which portrayed Parchman as a brutal catastrophe, Eva White's song *No Mo' Freedom* emphasizes the brutal emotional toll of imprisonment at Parchman as well as a refusal to concede to its disciplinary will:

When those jurors found me guilty
That old mean old clerk he wrote it down
I could tell by that paper that I was Parchman bound

No Mo' Freedom No Mo' good times
In this wide, wide world for me
Oh I'm beat for my freedom
and I'm sick as I can be

But some day, yes someday
Some day I will go free
I'm gon' treat all you people
just like you treated me

White's lament conveys the emotional devastation of incarceration in a way that is unyielding, refuses sanitization, and does not promise forgiveness to those who treated her horribly. In this way she rejects the mandate of rehabilitation; she is not the problem and she will not be reformed or transformed into a docile girl who accepts white supremacy and sexism when she is out. No, the sickening emotional violence of imprisonment has instilled justifiable anger, which will not be suppressed in the someday of her freedom. Black women's blues refused the narrative of criminalization, which sought, as Gilmore has argued, to "individualize disorder." Instead, they told histories of hostile juries and racial terror. For example, in *Dangerous Blues*, Mattie Mae Thomas connected the scorn that women "who won't cook no breakfast" and "won't wash no clothes" faced on the outside to gendered racial terror on the inside: "Said Mattie had a baby and he got blue eyes, Said must be the captain, keep on hangin' around." Under the conditions of sexism and white supremacy that transcended prison walls she told her audience, "I may get better but I won't get well." The expectation of docility and the demand that imprisoned people be contrite and content pervades the legal system, manifesting in parole hearings, sentencing hearings, and upon release. Eva White and Thomas refuse to concede to these oppressive expectations when they vow to treat others as they were treated and explain that they will never get "well."

The blues recorded by working-class Black women on the inside of Parchman's plantationesque prison and performed on stage and in juke joints by their counterparts like Martin on the outside, named the truth of criminal injustice, detailed its physical and emotional harm, and expressed outrage about its greedy extraction of unpaid labor, which caused injury, fatigue, disease, and sometimes death for those who were locked up in the wood carriage, metal, and tent cages that littered the U.S. South in the early twentieth century.

Tracking Freedom

Yet perhaps the most powerful element of this blues culture was its insistence on freedom. While Martin's song *Georgia Stockade Blues* conveyed the difficulties of escape through the figure of the bloodhounds that hunted her, historical records reveal that some women in southern prisons did manage to get past the dogs and the guards. Others fought back through daily transgressions, arguing with guards, slowing down their work, and burning their uniforms. These acts of defiance are revealed in the (often untrustworthy) records of violence, the "whipping reports" that the administrators of southern convict camps and chain gangs maintained to document infractions.

In addition to seeking answers to unnamed questions that could be revealed through Rosie's midnight dream, *Go Way Devil, Leave Me Alone* portrays the hardship that prison imposes on romantic love and family, bonds that were reinforced through loyalty in a bittersweet pact: "My brother Willie keep on ridin' me. My brother Willie keep on ridin' me. Ain't gon' marry 'till you go free." The song repeats the refrain "You go free good lordy, you go free. You go free good lordy, you go free." As Angela Y. Davis has argued, a central feature of the blues is the naming of social problems, allowing them to be understood as shared forms of oppression that can be addressed within collective context. The collective incantation of "you go free" changes its meaning. Surely, it is the condition under which Willie will marry, and a reflection of loyalty and the connections that prison walls could not destroy. Yet the meaning of "you go free" was also fluid and flexible. Freedom hopes? Freedom demands. Freedom orders! Freedom plans….

The freedom plans of women imprisoned at Parchman were illustrated most directly in the song *Ricketiest Superintendent*:

What you gon' do babe when they tear
Your jailhouse down
What you gon' do babe when they tear
Your jailhouse down

Go get me a wick and a blanket
And jailhouse on the ground

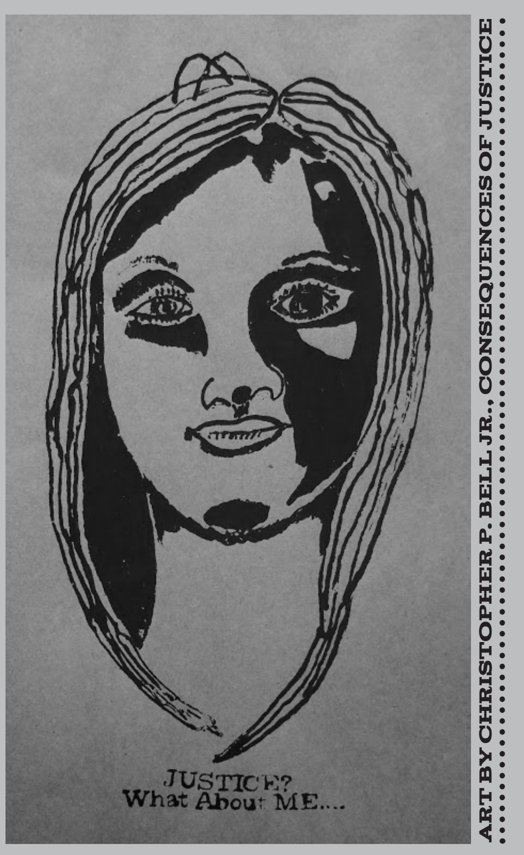
Got the ricketiest superintendent
Got the worst sergeant on the farm
Got the ricketiest superintendent
Got the worst sergeant on the farm

And if I make it to the bushes
My sergeant can't do me no harm

Women at Parchman improvised the lyrics as they went, learned them by heart, and sang the songs often. They were sung and heard in succession by the same group of women whose long sentences meant familiarity, closeness even, with each other and with the song's messages over time. The closeness and deep knowledge of the songs can

Continued on page 11, "Blues"

From January to March 2013, the San Francisco Print Collective partnered with the Prison Arts Project of the Williams James 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 Dunya Alwan and Amy Vanderwarker transferred the images to screens and brought the screens and printing equipment inside. The artists printed approximately 200 one and two color posters, many printing several versions. At the end of the class, the posters were displayed at the Main Branch of the San Francisco Public Library in a show that featured pieces from the wide range of William James Association art programs inside California prisons. The project was supported by donations from Speedball, Artist & Craftsman Supply, and Anthem Screen Printing.



ART BY CHRISTOPHER P. BELL JR., CONSEQUENCES OF JUSTICE

“To Propel the Movement Forward:”
An Interview with the Organizer-Artists of Critical Resistance-Los Angeles

BY DAVID P. STEIN

We sat down with Critical Resistance Los Angeles members Mary Sutton and Hans Kuzmich to discuss how the art they do relates to, reflects, informs, and uplifts their organizing work.

MARY SUTTON (MS): I’ve been with Critical Resistance Los Angeles since about 2007. I’ve been an activist and an artist since my early 20s and have a degree from the University of Minnesota in fine arts. As an activist in the anti-apartheid 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 involved in Minneapolis in the Northland 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 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.

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 found 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—I’ve been there 12 years 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 Arts 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 KUZMICH (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 to me, so I started to video-document the actions and attend the planning meetings. I had to move back and forth between two different groups [the city and the protestors] and there was a very physical way in which the official tour became impenetrable, so I did some work around that and just started to use the sound. I became interested in the voice, and eventually dropped the video and transcribed the sound.

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.

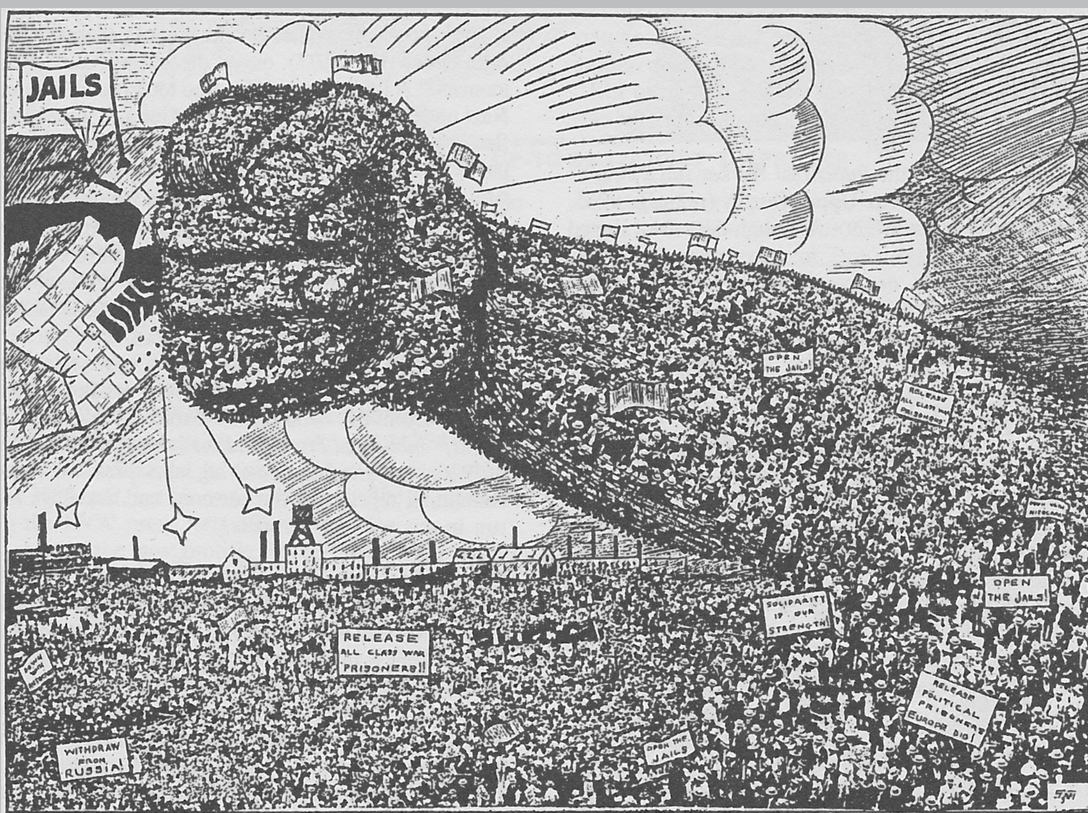
ART, ACTIVISM, AND PEDAGOGY ARE IN A RELATIONSHIP TOGETHER THAT CAN BE USED TO STRENGTHEN EACH AREA.

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 a 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 and there’s not 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.

Continued on page 11, “Interview”



“THE GENERAL STRIKE,” PHOTOMONTAGE BY SAM (ONE BIG UNION MONTHLY, JULY 1919)

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Writing Across the Walls:

Prisoner Journalism for Freedom

BY LYDIA PELOT-HOBBS

This 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 led by individuals locked up in solitary housing units at Pelican Bay, scores upon scores of people on the outside supported the demands of the strike by making calls, organizing 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, all 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 prison 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 Penal 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 overhaul the Department of Corrections pushing then governor Edwin Edwards to appoint more reform-minded officials in 1975. One such official was C. Paul Phelps. He believed that freedom of the press was a right that should not be denied upon one's imprisonment, and this right guaranteed that *The Angolite*'s imprisoned reporters would have access to information necessary for their journalistic work.

Under the leadership of Wilbert Rideau as the publication's first Black editor, *The Angolite* staff took full advantage of the opportunity presented them in their development of the magazine. Not only were they given editorial control of the magazine without censorship from wardens and other prison administrators, they were given the space to conduct in-depth investigations and news reporting. As the Louisiana prison system ballooned in the 1980s, individuals locked away at Angola recognized the shifts occurring years ahead of outside activists. According to former Angola organizer Norris Henderson, one of the first ways people inside recognized the expansion of the prison was with the dramatic increase in life sentences. "We went from a 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 driving the prison boom. *The Angolite* became a bastion of cutting edge reporting 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 contributing 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

Continued on next page, "Prisoner Journalism"

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-cons, 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 laid.
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., 1010, 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 unbelievers, 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 fathom 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 reigned upon them.
You could not have faced the terrorists
Let alone, done battle with them!
Call it what you will, blasphemy, rhetoric - - - or bullshit!
Be careful, though, how you scoff
At the two-fingered 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.

PUBLISHED IN THE BLACK SCHOLAR 4, NO. 2 (OCTOBER 1972)

Continued from page 8, "Blues"

be heard through the many moments of laughter, verbal exchanges about the correct lyrics, and in the unison that marks 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 can't do me no harm/You go free/ Wake up Rosie, tell your midnight dream/Peas and cornbread, lord is killing me/A wick and a blanket/No mo' good times/What you gon' 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 policing, judicial unfairness, and incarceration was central to this blues culture. 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 American men from decent work, the surveillance of black women and men on southern street corners, disfranchisement, 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. The Parchman recordings urge us to imagine a future beyond prisons, asking "what now?" as we dismantle them.

Sarah Haley *is assistant professor of Gender Studies at UCLA, where she is also a faculty affiliate of the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies and the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.*

Drank

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
dungeon life,
running without chains, as I out-race
passing time.
Pounding on a drum of lightning, tearing
open the sky,
weaving a thread of moons, with stars
set inside.
The flesh of prison stripped away from
blood and sound.
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 myself between the drops, I had
left to sip,
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 politicized understanding, editorials and new articles on overcrowding, for example, argued for letting people out versus adding more beds to Angola or building new prisons.

Additionally, *The Angolite* reported on the nuances of changes to 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 people's chances for freedom. With the passage of harsher sentencing laws, many imprisoned people learned that they had become ineligible for the parole opportunities they had been promised upon their sentencing. In detailing the legal challenges and new precedents being set, *The Angolite* provided prisoners with legal facts and analysis to be used 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 life 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 creative ways that people 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 "Sounding Off" and "Expressions" sections, prisoners as well as free people's complaints, 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 behind prison walls, including the prisoner 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 "Biggy" Johnston 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 the anti-prison organizing that emerged in response. Lydia is also a founding member of AORTA (Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance).*

Continued from page 9, "Interview"

DPS: In thinking about some of the artwork that you do that goes into supporting local campaigns, what lessons have you learned that could be applied to broadening out from the local to something bigger? How might people outside that local campaign use the art that gets created for a campaign?

MS: The format of the poster makes this question easier, because the posters I've created have applied to the statewide struggle or very specifically to the local LA struggle against prison and jail expansion. Posters play a role very similar to commercial marketing, and I think that's what good organizers seek to imitate in order to take control of media. We're creating our own media. In terms of CSPG being an archive—we're preserving these posters as primary historical documents—many of them are going to tell the stories and be the only record of a particular local struggle or international struggle. We're cataloging and digitizing them, and they'll be available online to an international community, so it's an amazing resource that can be shared internationally.
HK: I haven't done a ton of work that was explicitly for CR's campaigns. I have mostly done video documentation, which feels really important. I have a drive with an archive of actions that CR has organized, like press conferences and other events that coalitions that CR works with have organized. I have a hard time putting stuff out and editing things immediately, so I kind of imagine it more as an archive to draw from in the future, and that other people can draw from.

MS: I have a question for Hans. As an artist, when did you decide to integrate your politics, or was that just a natural occurrence for you?

HS: No, I think that happened for very specific reasons. When I was an undergrad student, I was also taking a citizenship test, because I am originally from Russia and I was getting naturalized. So I was studying U.S. history for that test and when U.S. history came up in class discussions, it became an area I felt I could contribute to. Also studying with particular professors made me think differently about the way that art that deals with politics often gets disparaged as didactic, and how art, activism, and pedagogy are in a relationship together that can be used to strengthen each area. I think this was a moment when I was looking at my politics and there were certain artistic camps within the school, and that was the most exciting camp for me.

HK: I have a question for you too, Mary. I was interested and excited when you described bringing the prison nation posters to Chowchilla. CSPG is always thinking about the present when you mount exhibitions, so Prison Nation is obviously a very prescient topic for California and the U.S. at the moment. How do you think about the demands that were voiced historically and what it means to bring them into the present?

MS: When CSPG puts together an exhibition, we put together one that has a time frame within it, so usually post-WWII to the present. We also put out a call whenever we do a new exhibition to get new posters, not necessarily newly created, but we ask people to send in posters on the topic, whether they're from back in time or contemporary. So when we're creating an exhibition from 200 to 300 posters, we go through that process. And where we can we bring in local organizations working on the issue. This is how I got involved in CR—I insisted we reach out to A New Way of Life, Critical Resistance, Youth Justice Coalition, Action Committee for Women, Prison Facts—this is how I met everybody. They came to a meeting and helped us talk 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. I think the 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 viewers.

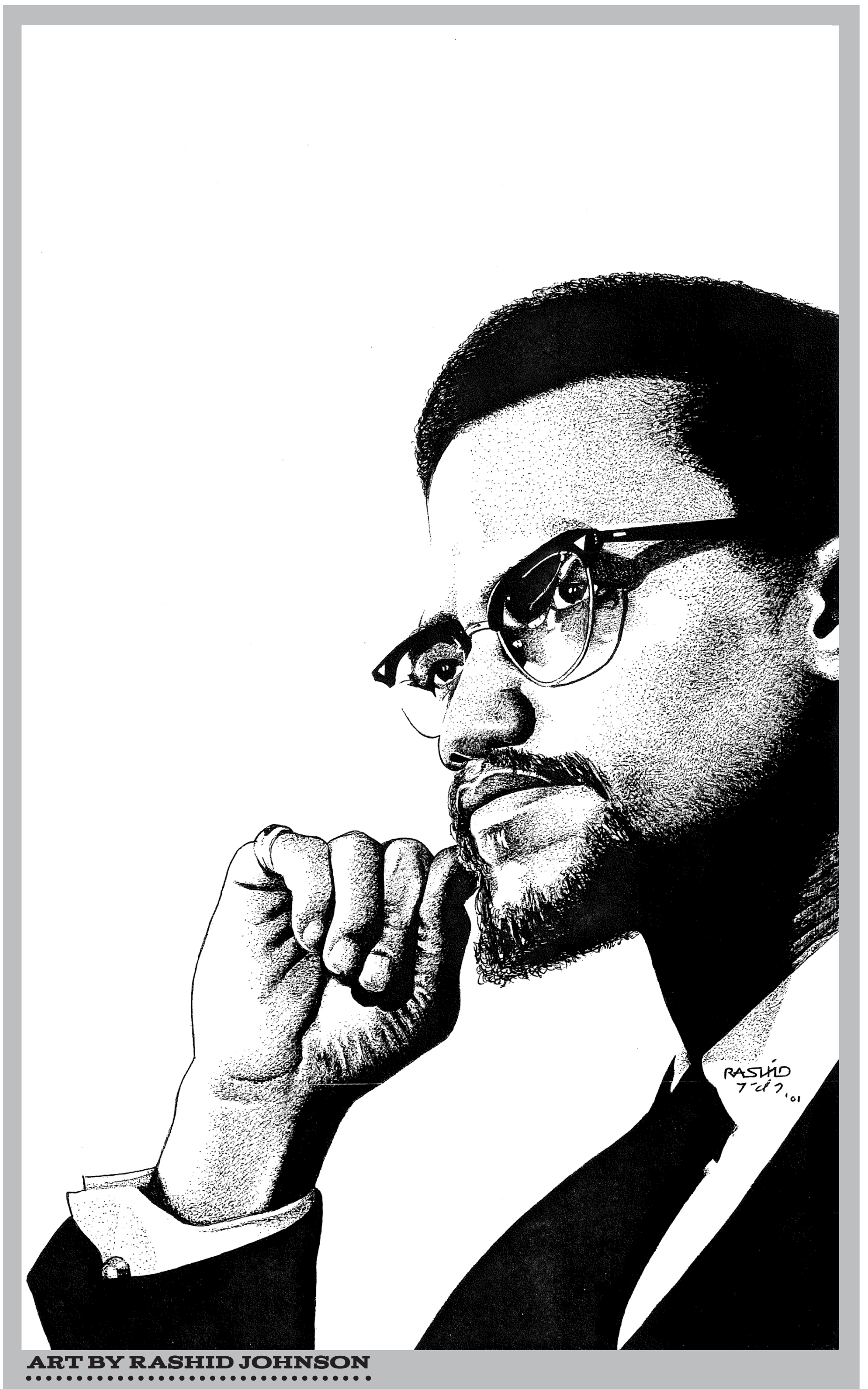
For example, the opening section of the exhibition are posters that have taken the stripes of the American flag and transformed them into prison bars demonstrating the contradiction of democracy in the country that imprisons the most people in the world. There's a poster from Attica with a guy with his fists. There's really 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, "What was Attica?" who might not know.

All art is political. It can be totally apathetic, it can be hateful, or we as political activists can use art as a tool to propel the movement forward. We artists have the same responsibility in society as anyone to do with what they will with their art. I think we could definitely make our movement more colorful and more inspiring, move it 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 feminist, poster artist, and life-long activist. In Minnesota, Sutton was involved in the fight to end apartheid in South Africa and now, as a member of Critical Resistance and Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB), is passionately engaged in the struggle to stop prison and jail expansion in California.*

Hans Kuzmich *is a member of Critical Resistance and an artist working in video and installation. He received an MFA from University of California Los Angeles and participated 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 movements opposing policing and imprisonment with Critical Resistance and other organizations.*



ART BY RASHID JOHNSON

ImaginAction: Theatre for Transformation and Social Change

An Interview with Hector Aristizábal

BY MARI CASTALDI

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 with immigrants, refugees, torture survivors, people affected and infected with HIV/AIDS and with gang members in and out of the juvenile justice system. I also worked with groups of parents that were referred by the courts because their kids were having difficulties with the judicial system. For many years I worked as a psychotherapist but even then when appropriate I used psychodrama and rainbow of desire methods (from the arsenal of Theatre of the Oppressed) to invite these groups to process the psychological aspects as well as the political aspects of their ordeals. Theatre—in particular the techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) 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 are not invited into the mainstream dialogue, in short communities that have been significantly wounded. Art used to be understood as the place in which the community heals, as therapy is seen as the place where the individual heals.

So, I first developed my work in Colombia and after 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 teams work 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 *lideres y liderezas* 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 everybody. I always start with theater games to conjure the group's spontaneity. I trick people into singing, dancing and acting before I tell them that we are going to do any of that. Through games, people become more present and more relaxed by engaging their entire bodies and sharing their energy and awareness with each other. I don't know any human being that is unable to connect to the power of play. Playing games is the fastest way I know to democratize a room, meaning once we're playing we're no longer black and white, adults and youngsters, Protestants and Catholics, or MS 13 or 18 Street, we relate as human beings. Why? Because all of us learned to walk, talk and socialize, through playing. Games allow groups to reconnect to this most basic human attribute.

So after the games, we introduce people to the power of Image Theater, which connects us to our collective embodied knowledge. Spontaneously and without much thinking participants create both individual and collective images of their realities using their entire bodies. From those images, we go into small scenes, role-playing, getting a sense of what is in the group's psyche. I invite people to create scenes of conflict from their lives, and we 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 larger group of members of the same community. After seeing the play we invite the spectators to become spectactors. They go from being passive spectators to getting involved in the play by replacing 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 exploring various alternatives to how to approach any conflict. And in the meantime, we listen to each other's stories, we identify with each other, we humanize ourselves by doing that, by listening with respect, by seeing each other, and no one in the room is the expert, no one knows the answer. We engage in a democratic dialogue. It's not a monologue, but a dialogue in which we politicize the personal, meaning we all participate, analyze, and get creative in thinking about different ways to deal with the issues. Theater becomes a laboratory for social justice and a rehearsal for change.

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 freedom has been taken away from them and he or she has to endure all kinds of punishment. It is believed in our society that by punishing people, by mistreating them, by dehumanizing them, by torturing them with practices like solitary confinement, somehow that is going to deter them from committing more crimes. Theater allows us to offer these people a true encounter with their own humanity and the possibility to reflect not only on the crime they might have committed, but also about the response of their society to that crime. I think theater is a wonderful way to reflect on our actions and behaviors as well as the social structures we have created to deal with them.

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, in theater, as a character, you can be very violent towards someone and no one will get hurt. You can even kill someone but no actor will have to die! So then we can reflect and say, man, do you really think killing that other character was a true solution to your problem?

After such interventions we can also reflect on what brings about such extreme expression of human behaviors and attitudes. When these social tendencies are enacted in a scene, in theater we can go back, and explore what other alternatives could have happened and why did we choose one instead of the other, why did we choose to resolve the problem through violent means, and not through negotiations or agreements. It usually leads us to look at what social structures have been internalized by young people who constantly see the hypocrisy in the society that is condemning them for being violent while they constantly see violence being perpetrated from the White House down to their neighbors, teachers and parents. Young people see the moral bankruptcy of most social institutions. And in prison, 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.

MC: One thing we talk about in Critical Resistance, as a group working towards abolition of the prison industrial complex, is imagination and the possibility of conceiving a world without prisons and systematic violence. Does that ever 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 subversive capacity we have. It is our most basic human right because we need imagination to be able to imagine another world than the one we have. Theater is conflict, but in theater what we do is hold the intensity of conflict as long as we can until a third way, something that we have not yet imagined, can show up. Theater and art in general are not the panacea, but they create a place not only to resist but to denounce what is happening inside society in a beautiful way that can be heard and understood by others. When I work with young people in prisons, I invite then to symbolize their present situation through the creation of scenes, through rituals, story telling and mythology. I invite them to re-signify in whatever way they want their current ordeal of imprisonment 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 what they're doing is having fun. Humor is part of the humus that makes us humans. To create joy in a dehumanizing environment is subversive. I also don't tell the people in my workshops, "Okay, we are going to be political now." I mean, in our society, just to treat a prisoner not as a prisoner but as a human being is in itself extremely political. I also don't tell people, "Okay, what we're doing is healing." Healing is a welcome accident in my work. I invite them to do theater. In theater as in all art, there is healing, there is therapy, there is politics. When you are treated with humanity and allowed to tell your story and be heard without being judged, and you can connect your stories to other peoples' analogical experiences, you can connect to resources that you may not have been aware of, resources in the community, resources in the group that you are working with, and the resources of your ancestors whose voices and spirits still have an important emotional and psychological role in our lives. Is it their love to their kids or their love to the family or their love to their gang? It doesn't matter what it is. For some people it's their imagination, their capacity to create art, their passion to work for social justice. The healing aspect comes when we join together as a group and it becomes like a cauldron to cook emotions and stories, it becomes a community effort to make something together and engage in the soul's work. The soul is the part of us that goes into the dark places to find the light. I invite people to connect and to see what in them is keeping them alive and as a group we celebrate each other that way and embrace the desire to participate in the ongoing creation of life.

***Hector Aristizábal**, born and raised in Colombia, is the founder and artistic director of ImaginAction, a theatre group committed to art and activism. Since arriving in the U.S., he has won acclaim and awards as an artist and also worked as a psychotherapist. He has combined his training in psychology and the arts with lessons gained from life experience in his therapeutic work with torture and trauma survivors, incarcerated youth, immigrant families, and people affected by HIV/AIDS. He is also co-author of the book* The Blessing Next to the Wound: A Story of Art, Activism, and Transformation.

***Mari Castaldi** is a resident of Oakland, California and member of Critical Resistance.*

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- Try to write an outline before you write the piece. Ask yourself: does the first paragraph tell the reader what the article is about? Do the middle paragraphs support and strengthen the main argument. Does the last paragraph have a conclusion and some suggestions for action?
- Even if writing is difficult for you, your ideas are worth the struggle. Try reading your piece out loud to yourself or sharing it with someone else. Doing this might help you clarify the ideas in your submission.

Send your submission to:
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1904 Franklin St., Suite 504
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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 Africans escape to freedom, navigated the Combahee River in South Carolina's rice plantation stronghold with some of the first Black soldiers ever allowed in the Union Army and a colonel who had fought alongside white anti-slavery radical John Brown. That night they were joined by almost 800 enslaved Africans who claimed their own freedom, burned down the plantations where they had been captives and dealt a blow to the slave economy of South Carolina that historians agree was decisive in turning the Civil War around and ending slavery in the United States.

FREEDOM DID NOT COME FROM THE OUTSIDE, IT CAME FROM THOSE IMMEDIATELY AND RECENTLY INSIDE THE TRAP OF SLAVERY.

On June 2, 2013, the 150th anniversary of Harriet Tubman's Combahee River Uprising, twenty-one Black feminists returned to the Combahee River. We wanted to celebrate that victory. We got in the river. We made sound circles out of Harriet Tubman's words. We spent a weekend affirming each other and challenging each other to actualize the breakthroughs we needed in our lives. We wanted to see for ourselves the place that inspired the Black Lesbian Feminist Socialist Combahee River Collective to point out in 1977 that oppressions based on race, class, gender cannot be eradicated one at a time because "the major systems of oppression are interlocking." And we needed to ask ourselves: What needs to be burned down today? What is required for the full freedom of all of our people now?

Combahee Legacies

Harriet Tubman was an abolitionist. She did not spend 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 people being re-enslaved by the Fugitive Slave Act to escape their captors in the North. Harriet Tubman was about the end of slavery by every means available and by any means necessary. She strategized with John Brown, a white abolitionist who believed in armed insurrection to overthrow slavery who was ultimately hanged for his efforts to fight the slave state. She found Abraham Lincoln's wishy-washy stances on slavery as he sought to appease the southern states disrespectful and refused to ever meet with Abraham Lincoln, even when he asked fellow abolitionist Sojourner Truth to invite her to the White House.

MAY WE NOT FOR A SECOND FORGET THAT THE PEOPLE CURRENTLY LOCKED IN PRISON IN THE UNITED STATES ARE AMONG THE MOST POWERFUL PEOPLE ON THE PLANET BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE INSIGHT AND POTENTIAL TO MAKE PRISONS IMPOSSIBLE.

But by the time Harriet Tubman planned the Combahee River Raid she had already helped most of her family escape out of Maryland and had left behind those 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 need to be tweaked or revised, 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 what all of us who have lived our lives in a police state can even imagine. Do we need to give up our belief that people should be punished, even when they hurt us? Do we need to give up our belief that the state can evolve when it was founded on forced labor and captivity? Do we need to give up our need to get individual rewards for our action like Harriet Tubman did when she worked underground under the name Moses for so many years? Do we need to be willing, as Harriet Tubman was, not only to challenge unjust laws, but to break them? Do we need to give up the small feelings of power and privilege that we have even as oppressed people inside of an oppressive system? Do we need to imagine the future more rigorously?

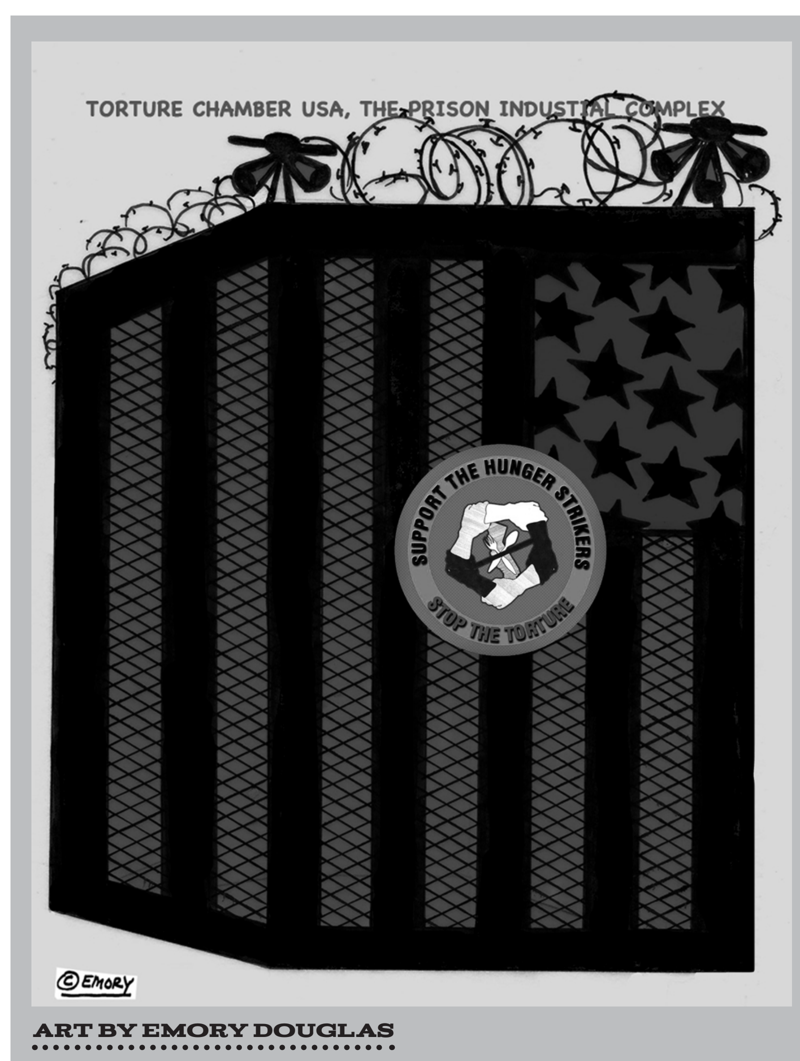
"My People Are Free"

Three years before the successful Combahee River Uprising, Tubman is said to have had a prophetic dream where she saw the end of slavery and the freedom of all formerly enslaved 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 it 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 liberation. 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 people are fundamentally free? Do we really believe in a world without prisons? What will it take for us to act boldly in the service of our visions? I think that it takes doing what Harriet Tubman did, actually seeing a world after prisons in which our people are free. It is our role as visionaries, artists, organizers and activists inside and outside of prisons to plushly imagine the world we deserve 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, policing 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 whom she led through the Confederate-held Combahee River were new 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 base to become soldiers and continue to fight to end slavery. So they were also former slaves who had broken the law in order to gain their own freedom and to fight for the freedom of others. And the vast majority of the people involved, those almost 800 enslaved people of all genders who flooded the rice fields, burned over 30 plantation buildings down and brought themselves and their children to freedom were *enslaved at the time* that they enacted this rebellion. Freedom did not come from the outside, it came from those immediately and recently inside the trap of slavery.

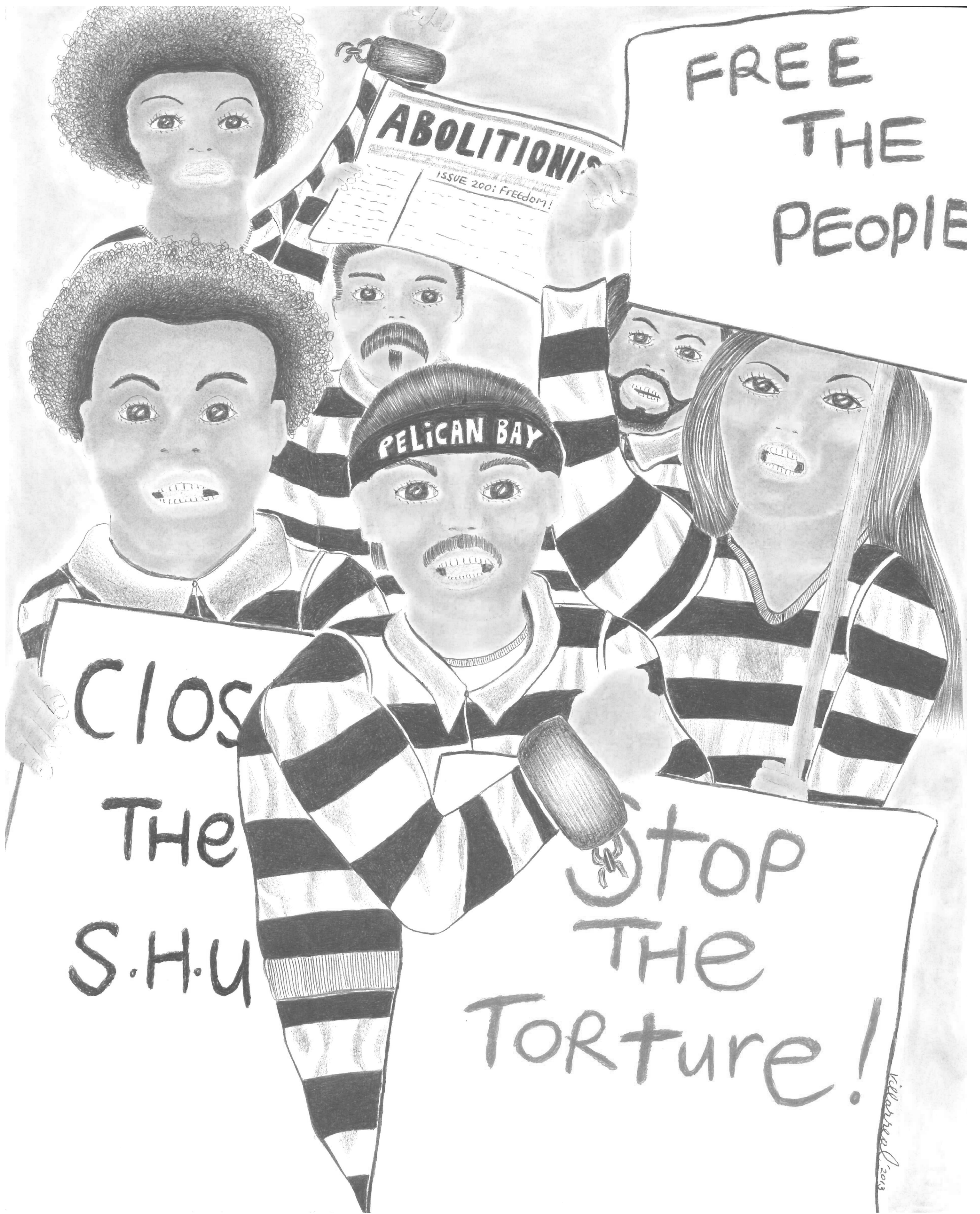


ART BY EMORY DOUGLAS

The obvious point here is that the leadership of people who are currently in prison and former prisoners is key to any movement to end a prison state. The leadership of those who are most watched, harassed and persecuted by the police is key in any movement to end a police state. All of us who are outside prison walls and who are inside prison walls must remember that fact (which is intentionally obscured by popular historical accounts and films like *Lincoln*). May we not for a second forget that the people currently locked in prison in the United States are among the most powerful people on the planet because they have the insight and potential to make prison impossible and to enact a society where we are all more free. How can this reality transform solidarity work with prisoners by people outside of prison? How could Harriet Tubman's work as a fugitive slave with a reward on her head change the ways we think about the roles of former prisoners on parole and of former political prisoners in exile? What does Harriet Tubman's infiltration work with scouts who found out the location of Confederate Torpedo boats say about relationships with prison guards and other workers inside prisons within our abolitionist work?

In 1977, inspired by Harriet Tubman and the Combahee River Uprising, the Combahee River Collective made the provocative 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. Today, with Combahee in mind I say that the freedom of prisoners and the end of the prison state requires us to remember how connected we are despite oppression's systematic ways of fragmenting us. The world we deserve requires us to be freer than we ever imagined.

***Alexis Pauline Gumbs** is a queer Black troublemaker, a Black feminist love evangelist and a poet, educator and scholar. She is the founder of the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind and the co-founder of the Mobile Homecoming experiential archive amplifying Black LGBTQ Brilliance. She lives in Durham, NC.*



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