

THE ABOLITIONIST

SPRING-SUMMER 2025

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

ISSUE 43: Seeds through Concrete

FEATURES ANALYSIS

“RETURN to SENDER”: Grounding Thoughts

By Mariame Kaba With an Introduction for reprint by The Abolitionist Editorial Collective

This issue’s feature article reprints Mariame Kaba’s “Grounding Thoughts,” originally published in 2023 as the political grounding for the *Return to Sender* art exhibition, a collaboration with PEN America’s Prison and Justice Writing Program.

Since then, the repressive forces Kaba names have only grown. The rise of fascism in the US and globally has intensified right-wing attacks on education, dissent, trans and queer life, migrant communities, and liberation movements of all kinds. Simultaneously, we’re seeing a wave of state repression—books banned or removed, histories distorted, organizers criminalized or deported, and radical movements targeted for erasure.

As we argue throughout Issue 43, these aren’t new developments, but their reach and intensity are expanding alongside the prison industrial complex (PIC). Kaba offers a crucial insight: These forces are not isolated—they’re interconnected strategies designed to suppress radical thought, sever collective resistance, and normalize control through fear, fragmentation, and silence.

For those behind prison walls, this struggle is not theoretical—it’s a daily reality. And in the years since Kaba first published this piece, we’ve watched the tools of repression continue to be honed behind bars and then exported and scaled across society. Today, the prison is not just a site of harm—it’s a **laboratory for broader systems of authoritarian control, “a testing ground for tyranny.”**

This is why we turn to imprisoned people as both frontline experts and strategists. When we fight to reconnect and share ideas, we disrupt the system’s most effective weapon for control: isolation. On both sides of the walls, we know that **disconnection is the condition that oppression relies on**. As the forces trying to fracture our movements intensify, our task is to keep lines of connection open and make sure our messages reach those who need them. We don’t just tear down cages—we build bridges that make liberation real. “Grounding Thoughts” names what we’re up against while centralizing the experiences and histories of imprisoned people and mapping how we stay connected across walls. The rest of this issue offers tools, more histo-



Image from “The People & the Library” pack by Erik Ruin. Courtesy of Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

ries, and inspiration to help us move together through the terrain Kaba maps.

We must remember that the people have always organized under conditions meant to crush us, sneaking knowledge through walls and burying seeds under rubble. No matter how many barriers are built, the current of resistance always finds a way through. With that, we offer “Grounding Thoughts” by Mariame Kaba.

Please note: The editorial collective made some edits to the original word choices in hopes of passing the paper through more mailrooms. For the opening quote, see 9 Across in the Crossword Puzzle on page 14 of Issue 43 to finish Buck’s insight that Kaba grounds us in.

RETURN TO SENDER: GROUNDING THOUGHTS

By Mariame Kaba

“Imprisonment is an extreme form of []”
-Marilyn Buck

In March 2022, historian Heather Ann Thompson filed a lawsuit against the New York prison officials who had banned her book *Blood in the Water*, contending that the ban was a violation of her First Amendment rights. A few months later, New York prison officials reversed course

and decided that New York’s “incarcerated population” could now receive the paperback edition of *Blood in the Water*—or most of it, anyway. They announced that the book’s two-page map of the Attica Correctional Facility would be excised for “security reasons”.

Prisons exist for the purpose of total authoritarian social control, and systematic [suppression of] information and communication is one tool for its maintenance, a way to deny intellectual freedom alongside physical freedom. Decisions to ban books and reading material do not happen in isolation; they are part of the larger mechanisms of control that dictate every aspect of a prisoner’s life. In particular, information and communication [suppression] normalizes and highlights the extent of authorities’ capricious and subjective control over incarcerated people—as when New York authorities permit a particular book but cut out some of its pages.

What is so dangerous about books in prisons? Books can give prisoners tools to analyze and understand their own lives and situations, and to identify and protest against injustice. Malcolm X’s 1965 autobiography describes how the prison library at Norfolk Prison Colony in Massachusetts transformed him from a small-time “criminal” to a passionate civil rights advocate and leader during his incarceration from 1946 to 1952. “Available on the prison library’s shelves were books on just about every general subject,” he wrote. “Any college library would have been lucky to get that collection.”

“Prisons exist for the purpose of total authoritarian social control, and systematic [suppression of] information and communication is one tool for its maintenance, a way to deny intellectual freedom alongside physical freedom.”

Reading can help prisoners overcome feelings of alienation and isolation and can even reduce the chance of recidivism or being returned to prison. **But it can also bring about intellectual and political transformation. For incarcerated people living in a system that disproportionately targets Black people, Brown**

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Letter from the Editors

Dearest Readers,

This issue is for everyone who has ever found themselves surveilled, silenced, or told they couldn't speak for themselves. It's for those who already know what it means to have their letters intercepted, their art returned, their lifelines cut. And it's for those just beginning to realize how deeply state repression operates—not only behind bars, but in classrooms, movement spaces, at the borders, in book bans, and in the tightening grip of "law and order" rhetoric everywhere.

In Issue 43, we confront the accelerating attacks on expression, dissent, organizing—and on anyone and everyone brave enough to demand a life worth living. But more than that, we document the cunning, creative, and collective resistance that has always risen to push back.

For this issue's **Feature Analysis**, we reprint **Mariame Kaba's "Grounding Thoughts,"** originally written for the **Return to Sender exhibition**—an urgent take on how systems of confinement target meaning-making, memory, and connection both historically and in our current landscape. In our extended editors' introduction, we draw connections across the issue: how repression is intensifying, and how people continue to conspire, create, and connect across hostile conditions.

From surrealism as strategy in the Black radical tradition—where dreamscapes and symbolism refuse the logics of surveillance and state legibility—to subversive, peer-led health education in prisons and **organizing against immigrant detention in New York**, this issue traces how our movements and communities maneuver through surveillance and control. Issue 43's **Feature Reflection** with **kai lumumba barrow** reminds us that when the state demands clarity and confession, surrealism offers coded refusal and resistance. Her work through **Gallery of the Streets** embodies that legacy: art that cannot be flattened, commodified, or easily contained—art that insists on freedom, even when it must travel underground. **Emily Hobson's** research on **HIV/AIDS activism inside prisons** highlights how imprisoned people built life-saving peer education programs under conditions of intense scrutiny in the 1980s-1990s. Using role-plays, layered messaging, and radical care, they protected each other from both illness and oppression—even when state recognition came with costs that threatened to neutralize their work.

The repression we document here is not past tense or limited to prisons. As we go to print, Trump is openly pursuing deporting US citizens criminalized as the "worst of the worst" to authoritarian regimes like **El Salvador** under Nayib Bukele, where over 75,000 people have been disappeared under a militarized "state of emergency." These policies aren't hypothetical. In this issue, we feature a powerful article from El Salvador's **movimiento de familias**, relatives of imprisoned people in Bukele's dungeons where tens of thousands have been disappeared without charge or trial, who resist repression in support of their loved ones and for collective liberation.

And here in the US, the roots of repression run deep, too. As we write, student encampments across the US continually face raids and various attacks for demanding an end to the US-fueled-and-financed genocide in Gaza. The crackdown on Palestine solidarity organizing, and the weaponization of antisemitism to justify it, echo the criminalization of Black, Indigenous, and Third World liberation movements throughout history.

Meanwhile, the housing crisis worsens daily. Over 650,000 people in the US are unhoused while luxury units sit vacant and police budgets balloon. Rent strikes, mutual aid, and housing takeovers are met with militarized evictions and surveillance. We are witnessing the criminalization of poverty as part of the same continuum

that locks people up for surviving, remembering, and refusing abandonment.

As the global tide of fascism swells, we know we need to turn to imprisoned people. Prisons have always been where repression is refined, tested, and made routine, and, where resistance strategies—subtle, poetic, collective—are forged and passed along. What happens behind the walls reveals not just where we are, but where we're headed, unless we fight to change course.

For Issue 43's features, then, we took several responses to the Cross-Wall questionnaire we printed in the previous anti-war issue (42 in December 2024) and synthesized the experiences of several of our imprisoned subscribers with research by **Prison Policy Initiative** on the rapid spread of mail restrictions and surveillance across the US prison system. This **Feature Data** is presented alongside **two feature resources**: a reprint of Orisanmi Burton's open letter responding to prisons rejecting his book *Tip of the Spear*, and an excerpt from *AK Press* of Garrett Felber's forthcoming biography of Martin Sostre. Together, **these pieces trace the growing architecture of repression**—not just to name it, but to equip our movements with what we need to outmaneuver it and build worlds beyond its reach.

To our imprisoned readers: You know this terrain intimately. Some of you have lost access to this paper. You've taught us how to speak through the barriers, to build with limited tools, to stay sharp. We can't publish every strategy in these pages, but we hope you'll feel the subtleties—the clues, tributes, and tactics embedded between the lines. This paper exists because of you.

To our readers outside: This is not the beginning, and it doesn't stop at the walls. The same forces now threatening your books, your protests, your loved ones' messages, and your safety have long tried to disappear entire communities. If you're only now waking up to this reality, don't panic. Get organized. Lean into community. Learn from those who've been resisting for decades—because repression is not only a warning sign—it's a blueprint. And so is our resistance.

Whether inside or outside: We're in a moment of deep clampdown—and also renewed coordination, creativity, care, and struggle. This issue isn't just a routine edition. It's a wakeup call: to strategize, to share tools, to study our histories, and to refuse disconnection and isolation. Our lives depend on it.

We hope this paper continues to be a lifeline. A signal. And a bridge.

Until all are free,
- The Abolitionist Editorial Collective ♦

THE ABOLITIONIST

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Critical Resistance (CR) seeks to build an international movement to end the prison industrial complex (PIC) 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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By imprisoned artist Jose Villareal, 2011.



"Gathering the Sparks" by Erik Ruin. Courtesy of Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

people, and the poor, reading can help them understand the structures of inequity that shape their lives. On those well-stocked shelves, Malcolm X found many volumes of American history. "I never will forget how shocked I was when I began reading about slavery's total horror," he wrote; reading "changed forever the course of my life."

Malcolm X's experience illustrates the power of the informal prison education that happens through reading—and its potential for radical transformation. [Suppressing] information and communication is an effort to control prisoners' communal political education and radical organizing, as the experiences of other people incarcerated after World War II attest. At the same time that Malcolm X experienced relatively unfettered access to information, people who had been incarcerated at other prisons across the country for acts of conscientious objection and war resistance lodged complaints about restrictions on information and communication in prison libraries. Nearly two decades later, Angela Davis had a similar experience: She was allowed to have political texts during her incarceration in Manhattan's Women's House of Detention, but she was not allowed to share them with the women and trans men incarcerated with her.

A radicalized Malcolm X was an aberration, an example of a time when the system failed to control and [repress resistance from] those incarcerated within the prison's walls. Today's prison book policies represent much stronger attempts to control individuals' access to radical ideas—or, for that matter, any ideas at all. The long-stated aim of rehabilitation through education and preparation for employment and civic life after release was never fully pursued, but it has now been almost entirely abandoned. Today's prison administrators and staff know that knowledge is dangerous, and they attempt to keep prisoners from accessing it—often in direct contradiction to their stated policies.

In theory, those incarcerated in federal prisons are only supposed to be denied access to books "detrimental to the security, good order, or discipline of the institution or if it might facilitate criminal activity." That covers texts like instructions for making [contraband], martial arts training guides, and maps of the prison area and grounds. In addition, states often ban material that includes bigotry or sexual or violent content, depicts "criminal" activity or prison escape, or encourages resistance to authority, according to a 2019 PEN America report.

In practice, these categories are broad enough, and prison authority capricious enough, that they can be used to ban almost any book. In Florida, the prison list of banned books runs to more than twenty thousand titles, including *Nutrition for Dummies* and *PCs for Dummies*. The Texas list of nine thousand banned books includes a collection of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. New York prison officials who clipped the Attica prison maps out of Heather Ann Thompson's book were guided by an apparent belief that *all* maps "present risks of escape"—including historical maps of the moon and other planets.

lina banned literally every book, magazine, and newspaper except the Bible. According to legal scholar David Shapiro, a Virginia prison had tried to ban particular pages of the Bible just a year earlier.

Bans on individual books are bad enough, but prisons find innovative ways to further restrict access to books. Today, many prison systems won't allow any books to be shipped to prisoners unless they come from approved vendors, like major bookstores and publishers. In New York, for instance, only three publishers were allowed to send books into prisons. In Michigan, only three vendors have the right to send books into prisons. Such restrictions create monopolies, allowing vendors to increase prices and forcing an impoverished population to pay exorbitant rates for access to ideas. These restrictions also mean that books not carried by approved vendors are *de facto* banned too.

Books are not the only targets of prison [surveillance and control practices]. In some states, even when there is no written policy banning them, prison staff routinely confiscate printouts of articles or other media, claiming copyright infringement. Other states, such as New York, restrict the circulation of articles by limiting the number of printed pages that can be sent in one envelope. Nearly every prison system bans correspondence between people incarcerated in different prisons; many utilize that ban to reject books, magazines, and zines that include writings by incarcerated people. There is no limit to the ways in which prisons seek to [block, suppress] and constrain ideas in order to enforce total control on those within their walls.

"Such restrictions create monopolies, allowing vendors to increase prices and forcing an impoverished population to pay exorbitant rates for access to ideas."

Advocates have had some success in rolling back bans and restrictions when they have managed to catch and focus public attention. For example, the 2010 South Carolina ban that allowed only the Bible was repealed and the prison was forced to pay a settlement. New York's three vendor restriction was modified after public pressure. In June 2023, New York prison officials hastily rescinded a directive from just a month earlier that would have barred incarcerated writers and artists from publishing their work.

However, these cases are exceptions. Information about banned materials is theoretically a matter of public record, but such requests are usually denied (which makes the Marshall Project's recent publication of a large database of titles banned in state prisons all the more remarkable). Generating public interest is difficult, in part because the public is typically op-

posed to defending prisoners' rights. Moreover, because public scrutiny of what happens in prisons and jails is rare and uneven, officials often enact bans quietly without fanfare.

Prison [surveillance and suppression are] also difficult to address from within prisons, where prisoners struggle to get information about their living conditions to family and friends on the outside. Prisons routinely prevent prisoners from speaking or connecting with family by putting prohibitive charges on phone calls, banning emails, blocking incoming mail, and even banning holiday cards. And when prisoners do manage to speak up, they are often punished. This is not to say that prisoners do not find ways to subvert bans; informal "libraries" and "librarians" offer ways of sharing banned materials, though this sort of subversive activity is undertaken at great personal risk.

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[Communities and movements outside of prisons] should worry about book restrictions in prison because books improve the daily lives of prisoners and expand their connections beyond the confining walls of the prison. But this [suppression] is also dangerous more broadly—a testing ground for tyranny. As scholar-activist Garrett Felber contends, "Understanding [surveillance and suppression] in prisons helps us grasp its broad purpose, which is authoritarianism. It also illustrates the role of the prison: To cage, incapacitate, and defang radical social movements. Both [restrictions on information and communication] and prisons are fascist projects, and they are intertwined."

It is blatantly obvious today that book bans are used as a form of social control far beyond prison walls. They have seeped into libraries and schools, our supposed bastions of the freedom of information. Florida has issued a blanket ban on books that deal with LGBT issues or racism. Texas has banned over eight hundred books from its schools. Other states have followed suit.

"But this [suppression] is also dangerous more broadly—a testing ground for tyranny."

[The states] ban books because they want to make the nation more like a prison. As with prison [surveillance systems], state book bans are broad, vague, and confusing. They call for bans on "age-inappropriate" content without carefully defining the term, or they insist that there must be "balance" in classrooms without specifying which viewpoints must be balanced. As in prisons, the goal is not really to ban this or that book. Rather, it is to create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty around all ideas and all books—to sow the idea that knowledge is a threat that must be contained and limited to the "acceptable" forms dictated by those in power. The goal is totalitarianism and absolute social control; the prison is simply the model for accomplishing this.

[Surveillance and suppression] can never be eradicated from prisons because they are intrinsic to the prison's role in society. The focus on individual titles or any given state's policies is a distraction from the broader truth that prisons exist to [maintain control and repress resistance] and will adapt and expand the ways in which they implement [surveillance and suppression tactics]. It's not just that incarcerated people are [restricted] in prison; imprisonment is a way to control who has full access to—and recognition within—society. To desire the end of [such restrictions on information and communication] is to desire the end of prisons, and to desire the end of prisons is to desire the end of a society that seeks authoritarian social control. ♦

About the Author: Mariame Kaba is an organizer, educator, librarian, and PIC abolitionist who is active in movements for racial, gender, and transformative justice. Kaba is the founder and director of Project NIA, a grassroots abolitionist organization with a vision to end youth incarceration. Kaba co-leads the initiative Interrupting Criminalization, a project she co-founded with Andrea Ritchie in 2018.

Charging the Air: Abolitionist Art & Radical Imagination

A Conversation with *Gallery of the Streets*

By *kai lumumba barrow* with *Molly Porzig* for The Abolitionist

In this conversation, Project Coordinator of *The Abolitionist* Molly Porzig chats with longtime bestie and co-conspirator **kai lumumba barrow**—visual artist, cultural strategist, founder of **Gallery of the Streets** and co-founding member and former director of Critical Resistance (CR) with over 50 years of organizing experience building liberation movements—as they explore the intersections of art, abolition, and the Black radical tradition. Together, they dig into the power of visual operas, collective agency, and the necessity of “charging the air” with political imagination for a world without walls. From cotton and concertina wire to jazz and coded messages in storm drains, barrow’s practice blurs the lines between aesthetics and insurgency, surrealism and absurdism, offering a glimpse into the poetic and practical labor of liberation through art and abolition.

Molly Porzig (MP): One of the reasons we wanted to talk to you for this issue is because your work with **Gallery of the Streets** isn’t just about visual art—it’s about multigenerational struggle, imagination, and making abolitionist politics tangible. You often describe your work as “surrealist”. *Can you talk about your approach as an artist and an abolitionist organizer?*

kai lumumba barrow (KLB): Right, yeah. I started doing political work as an artist, because I wanted to use art as a tool for liberation. I was really inspired by **Elizam Escobar**—you know, his piece, “**Art as an Act of Liberation**” and just his thinking about what it means to be an artist inside, exhibiting work outside. Escobar’s influence was huge for me—I started thinking politically about art *not* just as propaganda. There’s a difference—**making art can do more**. Cultural organizing—while fundamental to transformation and revolutionary struggle—often is infused with hierarchical, binary, at times authoritarian or otherwise limited tendencies; it is beholden to a particular tradition, often tied to identity or place—where you come from, where you live—that culture you’re organizing to generate and maintain must reflect that reality. Cultural organizing asks us to preserve something. While that can be necessary—there’s power in preserving—sometimes that preservation becomes a cage. Like, we end up reproducing what we know, instead of imagining what we haven’t seen yet.

MP: Right, and an abolitionist vision—imagining a world without walls, cages, or borders—isn’t just about reflecting our current reality of state violence, oppression, inequality, and powerlessness, but a different, new reality. But this work isn’t without contradictions. In CR’s grassroots or people’s media, which as you know comes more from the cultural organizing you’re problematizing, we embrace still the **multifold challenge of artistry**—using art not only as a form of communication but a vehicle to fortify our *will to struggle*, to lay bare contradictions and to envision what we want, to imagine what the world we want looks like, to imagine a better future and *a process of struggle* to get there in the *here & now*.

KLB: Exactly! **Art asks: “What if we let go and imagine something new?”** Using art *expands* radical imagination; you’re not confined in the same way as cultural organizing though. **Art is more about where and how far we can go**, right? Diving into the art, going into the form, you can go into boundless and diverging depths and directions—you can go into the unknown. It’s rooted in culture, but it’s not limited by it. And yeah, people confuse art with propaganda all the time. But propaganda is meant to convince. Art doesn’t have to convince—it evokes. **Art that’s truly working doesn’t tell you what**

to think. It makes you feel. It challenges and inspires you to think on your own.

Propaganda tries to convince you. Art tries to evoke something in you.

For me, working from Blackness—as a political identity forged in struggle against white supremacy and capitalism—that’s a very invocative place. So, **how is Blackness expressed in action?** It has to be abstract, it has to be jazz, it has to be sensual, it has to be able to hold discourse, it has to be public and collective. Feminist. Queer. It has to be either huge and visible, or super opaque and elusive. Sometimes both, or everything in between.

MP: That pivot you’re naming—from culture as something fixed and restrictive to art as something expansive and inherently freeing—*how do you do that in your projects, like Gallery of the Streets? And how do you make sure it doesn’t become apolitical or just “everything is everything”?*

“Propaganda tries to convince you. Art tries to evoke something in you.”

KLB: I don’t think you can totally prevent that cooptation, honestly. That shouldn’t be your main concern going in. Instead, I ask: *Does the work reflect the values and conditions I’m trying to bring forth?* For me, that’s abolition. So, *what does abolitionist art look like?* It might not look like a protest sign—but it might look like reconceptualizing carceral landscapes.

One of our projects, for example, **Abolition Playground** considers the relationship between the harms of the past and imagined possibilities. The temporary installation was sited on the “Neutral Ground” in Mid-City New Orleans, a neighborhood that encompasses the Orleans Parish Prison, the remains of the Jefferson Davis monument, and a still-standing bust memorializing a confederate general. The work invites active engagement interrupting the normalcy of the carceral landscape.

Commissioned by Prospect New Orleans for the Artists of Public Memory series, September 2023 to March 2024, Abolition Playground covered three blocks. One block had the plinth for the former Jefferson Davis monument covered in rubble. Folks loved it—locals would honk when they passed by. People added Indigenous and Palestinian flags at different times. Another block we transformed into a part of the playground we call **Harriet’s Dilemma**. We were gonna call it Harriet’s Dash, like a 100-meter dash, and make it a track, but it was too expensive, and we didn’t want Harriet running around in circles. First dilemma. Also, there was this statue of a confederate general that was planted in the middle of the site. Second dilemma.

So, we asked: *What do you do when the state is immovable, right in your path?* We dug some trenches and made a series of desire trails that lead away from the confederate statue. The trails are made with red clay, cornmeal, river rocks and pebbles, and weathered wooden planks, inviting “spect-actors” to take their own path—what are the different ways around an obstacle? It was a metaphor. Or maybe not even a metaphor. It just was.

MP: And the third part?

KLB: That was the doors. I think there were 78 of them. **Abolition Worlds** was a series of found, donated, and weathered doors, gates, fencing, and shutters arranged in linear, horizontal, and diagonal rows. People interpreted the doors from many different perspectives; little kids loved walking through the doors and making up stories about the other side. And that’s part of the point—**to engage with material that allows**



Abolition Worlds of the Abolition Playground installation by kai lumumba barrow. Photo by Jose Cotto.

you to make meaning. You could also read the signage posted on site if you wanted more background. But I wanted the experience of **walking through the piece to be the engagement.**

MP: That speaks to the texture you often talk about—like, movements needing to be evocative, fun, charged.

KLB: Yeah! Like **what’s the soul and texture of our movements?** When I was coming up, I was drawn to bohemians in the Black radical tradition—the ones who disrupted, who didn’t behave. Hedonists, maybe. Tricksters. They were annoying, but magnetic. I want our movement to carry that energy.

Too often, our moments of big energy are relegated to consumerist concerts or parades, spaces controlled by the state where our joy is monetized and commodified. **But what if protest was our concert?** What if our organizing charged the air *like that*? If you’re trying to ignite radical imagination, then you’re not out here trying to numb people—you’re trying to wake them up.

It could look like another project we’re doing now at Gallery of the Streets: **Radio Outlaw**—a low-powered mobile micro-broadcasting radio station that we are using to amplify voices of our communities and doing this broadcasting while playing and giving some theater at carceral sites of punishment, state violence, and places of extraction and environmental harm. Rolling Radio Outlaw, we are broadcasting through airwaves of our own making, outside the mainstream media’s control. It’s not only fun, but a way of disruption. Disrupting a carceral space, a space where communication and expression is hyper-controlled, we make a radical spectacle. Passionate. Unscripted. In this way it’s not only art as collective protest but abolitionist art as direct action.

MP: I love that! These shifts you’re offering feel especially urgent now—when repression is high and imagination feels so stuck and targeted.

KLB: That’s the thing. When repression tightens, people cling harder to what they know. But abolition is about moving past what we know. And art is one of the only tools we have that lets us do that in real time. It’s practice. It’s feeling. It’s improvisation. It’s refusal and invitation at once.

MP: And it connects to this theme of coded communication, to seep through or transverse the various obstacles and barriers to communication and connection that the prison industrial complex (PIC) uses and engineers, getting as creative as we possibly can with the subversive

Continues on next page

and hidden ways people communicate. *What do you see happening here?*

KLB: Art is a great cover. Nobody pays attention to artists. Art becomes a way to do really radical and transformative work. But also, people—especially people locked up inside—have always found ways to communicate and take care of each other. Abolitionist art draws from this. It’s fundamental to Gallery of the Streets especially. We started in the early 2000s, around 9-11. Our first visual opera was called **EcoHybridity: A Lovesong for NOLA**. We considered 10 years after Katrina and how New Orleans was looking in terms of ecological crisis, housing, the PIC, gender liberation, and everything.

Our lives have become operatic—no longer just dramatic. So, I’m playing with this idea of a visual opera to express visions of life under carcerality, hierarchy, fascism, imperialism, and the ways we manage to resist and defeat the destruction and violence of empire. And in yours and my conversations, a point you keep coming back to is how our movements outside need to be doing more to learn, grow, and move in joint struggle with prisoners and prisoner-led resistance. **Turning to the expertise of imprisoned people, we can see those of us on the outside need to conduct more experimenting with what happens when empire cuts the cord.** We saw after 9-11 and Katrina that the power literally goes—the electricity, the satellites—all this WiFi everywhere now—it gets shut off. Prisoners show us outside what to do when the lights go down. *How are we available to our communities who don’t have immediate access to electricity and the state turns off our power?* It’s this sort of dialectical thinking and envisioning and struggle that abolitionist artists need to engage in—and need to prioritize building creative relationships and brainstorming collaborations with imprisoned people.

Recently, I was looking out of my window and saw someone hang a plastic bag on a mop stick over a fence. Half an hour later, someone else came and picked it up. That was a drop. I started noticing other drops—storm drains, gutters, under porch benches. People leave things for each other in those spaces. A whole new world opened for me. It reminded me of **how maroons used landmarks to leave messages for each other**. It’s not about tech. It’s about **whether the other person knows where the resource is**.

Those coded practices are everywhere if you’re paying attention. And people inside do that constantly. It’s survival. Like, folks use candy wrappers to pass notes. They use kites, literal people who move between inside and outside. There’s so much to learn from that.

MP: You also pay such close attention to the materials in your installations. Can you talk about that?

KLB: For an artist, **materials are everything**. I remember the first time I saw cotton—in a florist shop window on the Upper East Side in New York. I was horrified. Visceral response. Later I picked cotton myself, just to understand how



“We Begin with Play” Collage by kai lumumba barrow, Gallery of the Streets.

it feels in the body. It’s hard on the back, on the fingers. I brought a big batch to a performance piece once and asked people to sit around it. One Black woman refused to participate. **That kind of refusal is powerful**. It opens something up.

More recently, I made a piece called **About Time, based on Thelonious Monk’s composition “Ugly Beauty.”** It used concertina wire, barbed wire, and broken glass—inside a museum. I wanted people to *feel* those materials. They say something. They’re violent. You can’t just aestheticize that. If you look at that and don’t see something political, that’s on you.

MP: So, there’s no such thing as neutrality in art?

KLB: Ain’t no neutrality in anything. Everything is political.

MP: That brings me to jazz. You and I talk about jazz a lot in our relationship, about how abolition should move like jazz—unpredictable, alive, in real time. *What does it mean to you in this work?*

KLB: Jazz is the foundation. It’s improvisation, collaboration, collective movement. It can’t be controlled, and that’s what makes it powerful. **That’s what abolition should be like**. Unpredictable. Alive. Not some fixed model. *And when you’re in a room with live jazz, that charge in the air?* That’s what I want our organizing spaces and movements to feel like.

MP: Jazz has also been commodified and diluted, right? So *how do you hold that tension?*

KLB: Yeah, jazz has been bought and sold like everything else. But the practice of it—especially improvisation in intimate spaces—in the basements turned speakeasies, the tiny bars struggling to keep on the lights, the street corners and grandmas’ parlors—jazz still holds that liberatory potential. You can’t mass-produce improvisation. That’s why the system hates it. It might go off-script. It might lose them money.

We have to intentionally choose the margins, like bell hooks says. I don’t want to meet people where they’re at. I want us all to move farther away from where we are. That’s transformation.

MP: It makes me think about jazz as both vision and method. Not something you consume, but something you *do*—*how* you move.

KLB: Exactly. It’s generative. Regenerative. It requires love, commitment, community. You don’t just phase in and out of it like a trend. Abolition is like that too. It’s not something you try on. It becomes a core part of how you move in the world. **It requires years and years of constant practice**. And yeah, this world doesn’t reward that. It punishes it and snuffs out that dedication. But we need to do it anyway.

MP: What do you want to say to artists and organizers right now, in this moment of heightened repression?

“I don’t want to meet people where they’re at. I want us all to move farther away from where we are.”

KLB: First, **I want to see artists show up**. I want to talk with you, build with you. If you see art as a serious site of struggle, then organize from that place. Let’s open the dialogue. *What do you see happening? What do you propose?*

Then let’s experiment. Let’s try some shit out. Maybe we write librettos in code, use music notes as language. Maybe we send pictures and get lyrics back. **Let’s collaborate, especially with people inside**. Let’s document and archive it so it keeps moving. Let’s make demands on our organizations to support this work.

Because if we don’t, we keep turning this terrain over to pop culture. Then we wonder why our folks aren’t radicalized. Let’s change that.

MP: And you want to deepen connections with folks inside through Gallery of the Streets?

KLB: Absolutely. Always have. I’ve never done this work without thinking of prisoners as co-creators. We just haven’t had the structure to make that real in the way I want. But that’s where we’re headed. I want to do writing exchanges. I’ll send images, you send thoughts, poems, ideas. Let’s figure it out. Let’s make new forms. Let’s charge the air. ♦

Author Bio: *Born at the tail end of the fifties into a Chicago community of scholars, artists, and advocates, kai lumumba barrow is a child of the Black Power movement, a red, black, and green diaper baby raised with the principles, values, and aspirations of the Black radical tradition. For over 50 years, she’s worked to end structural oppression through campaigns and projects to stop jail expansion; confront police violence; free political prisoners, and experiment with abolitionist models for shrinking carceral logics. Interested in the praxis of radical imagination, experiments with abolition as an artistic vernacular. Her sprawling paintings, multimedia collages, site-specific installations, and found object sculptures incorporate materials associated with Black people’s labor to perform queer, Black feminist theory. Check out more of her work at kailbarrow.com or galleryofthestreets.org*

TO COLLABORATE, WRITE TO:
Critical Resistance:
Attn: Gallery of the Streets
PO Box 22780
Oakland, CA 94609

FEATURES ACTION

The Expanding Machinery of Silencing Resistance

By Critical Resistance (CR) with the Prison Policy Initiative (PPI) and imprisoned subscribers of CR’s newspaper, The Abolitionist.

Across prison systems in the US, a silent war is being waged—not just against the bodies of imprisoned people, but against their voices. From shredded letters and silent mailrooms to digital surveillance, and efficient computing coding to policing e-messages and retaliatory transfers, communication restrictions and hurdles across prison walls are strategically intensifying. It is targeted, political, and repressive. This article compiles testimony from those directly affected—many of whom contributed over 50 separate responses to our questionnaire for a Cross-wall Strategy Retreat in Issue 42, printed

in December 2024. The voices and experiences of imprisoned subscribers of *The Abolitionist* are contextualized with recent findings from the PPI and other watchdogs to expose how prisons are furiously working to tighten their ability and efficiency to isolate, control, and punish imprisoned resistance through intensified surveillance, mail scanning, and other communication restrictions and barriers.

TECH TOOLS FOR CONTROL

Far from relics of analog repression, prisons now harness modern technologies to surveil and suppress. PPI reports that federal and state facilities use tools like MailGuard, which tracks

senders’ GPS locations, IP addresses, and device information under the guise of mail “security”. Meanwhile, e-messaging platforms restrict imprisoned users to incoming messages only, and any effort to use social media—even through outside proxies—can result in punishment or solitary confinement.

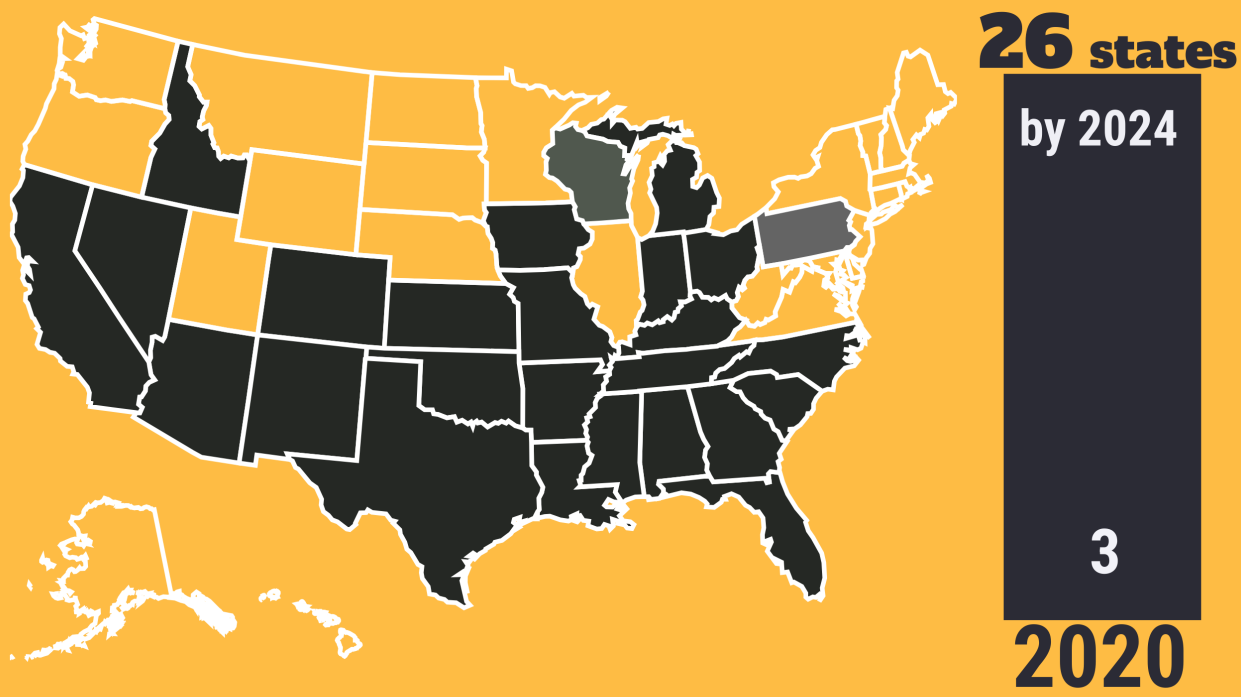
Jack Morgan, who writes manga comics to share political ideas, has had his work destroyed with no due process. *“Why create if your work will be destroyed before it even has a chance to enter the public world?”* he asks. For those with access to tablets, apps like Securus’ email sys-

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Growth of Mail Surveillance

Since 2020, prisons have increased surveillance and communication barriers through rapid expansion of mail scanning centers and practices.

The 26 black and gray states below have implemented mail scanning to various degrees by the end of 2024, an exponential increase from only 3 states in 2020—indicating a growth of 71.6% per year.



Source: Critical Resistance with data compiled by Prison Policy Initiative

tems make digital communication exorbitantly expensive and tightly restricted.

SNUFFING OUT RESISTANCE

Imprisoned writers, organizers, and artists describe how imprisonment operates as a form of political repression. At the State Correctional Institution (SCI) at Albion, Charles Reiland was placed under surveillance, had mail intercepted, and was eventually transferred to a more punitive facility—all explicitly because of his organizing with the Coalition to Abolish Death by Incarceration (CADBI). His experience is not unique.

"I received three misconducts for unauthorized use of the phone, mail, or kiosk. My supporters were asking why I hadn't written, and I realized none of my outgoing mail was leaving. . . . I was told that it is per central office orders and that was due to the rallies at the [state] Capitol. I was advised to disassociate myself from all 'radical' organizations. . . . I didn't heed the warning, and I will not."

—Charles Reiland, SCI Albion / SCI Greene

These stories echo broader findings: According to PPI, many prison systems explicitly monitor incoming and outgoing mail for "threats to the order," including affiliations with outside activist groups. In practice, this means banning communication with abolitionist media projects, threatening imprisoned people for submitting grievances, and using misconduct writeups to isolate jailhouse lawyers and organizers.

Suppression is not incidental. As recent testimony shows, it is a targeted and political strategy used to disrupt abolitionist work. Prison staff routinely tamper with, delay, or destroy correspondence, especially from known activists. Charles Reiland's story of targeted watch listing due to his involvement with CADBI in Pennsylvania is echoed across many states.

Institutional distrust, technophobia, and movement gaps on the outside all exacerbate the prison-manufactured communication barriers, further severing imprisoned people from outside lifelines.

"The greatest obstacle is lack of an effective communication medium." —Jack Morgan, USP Terre Haute

"Outreach is critical. Most of us don't even know who to contact or what the options are."

—John Santoro, Jr, Elmira Correctional Facility

"When people on the outside commit to the work, it makes a huge difference—but often, they can only support one or two of us at a time." —Jacinda Lee Allenbough, SCI Greene

PPI confirms these trends as well.

A SYSTEM OF MISDIRECTION AND DISAPPEARANCE

Mail "disappears" routinely. Letters never arrive. Lessons and publications are returned without explanation—or not at all. James Bauhaus describes a manuscript of over 300 pages stolen by prison staff. *"The mailroom kop never tells us when he refuses mail from outsiders,"* he writes. *"It vanishes."*

Some prisoners like James Pierce in Colorado are aware of outside-allied organizations like *"Prison Journalism Project and Prisoner Express News, who give the incarcerated population a voice,"* he explains. But if prisoners attempt to contact outside organizations *"that will benefit us or that will help the world know the truth about what goes on inside, it would never leave the mailroom."*

This erosion of basic communication rights is codified through opaque policies and hidden behind digital bureaucracy. In a 2023 PEN America report, only a few Departments of Corrections (DOCs) even tracked how many books or letters they banned, let alone offered transparent appeal processes.

BEYOND BANNED BOOKS

Book bans remain a front line of carceral control. Across 50 states, most Departments of Corrections (DOCs) limit access to books by requiring purchases through "approved vendors"—effectively blocking access to free or donated materials. Prisons routinely reject books on racial justice, LGBTQ and gender liberation, or political history as "security threats". According to PPI, some states even restrict legal texts or religious materials.

But restrictions on knowledge don't stop at banned publications. Kareem Cobbins, an imprisoned activist in Illinois, explains how access to educational resources is also shaped by punishment and control. *"Due to an individual's MSR (Mandatory Supervised Release) date—we may be barred (or placed toward the bottom of the waitlist) from programming,"* he writes. That includes clinical services, mental health classes, and college-level education programs like Higher Education in Prison (HEP), which technically still operate in Illinois DOC.

Christopher Harbridge, a long-time jailhouse lawyer, emphasizes strategy over broad messaging: *"The best approach is to have a pinpoint focus on the building blocks of the prison industrial complex (PIC)."* His insight challenges us to see how mail restrictions, program access, and book bans are not just logistical barriers—they are foundational mechanisms of the PIC's control. These practices aren't side effects—they are structural. If surveillance and suppression are central to how the PIC maintains its power, then organizing around those pressure points, as Harbridge urges, becomes not just strategic—but essential.

THE CHILL OF RETALIATION

Communication crackdowns and surveillance are often accompanied by targeted retaliation. Dozens of prisoners reported to CR about experiencing routine yet unwarranted cell raids and searches after filing grievances. In Colorado, Christopher Baker was singled out by staff and therapists after submitting grievances. His participation in outside organizing was labeled a "risk factor". Another imprisoned person, John Santoro, Jr, describes severe and repeated torture, including prolonged solitary confinement,

The Price of a Voice: Cost Inside vs Outside

Prisons charge imprisoned people steep fees for basic communication. Meanwhile, wages for prisoners often top out at \$5/month.

"Could you afford to keep going if each text cost a dollar? Probably not, unless you're fabulously wealthy."

—Jack Morgan, USP Terre Haute



beatings, and starvation—explicitly in response to his legal complaints and media outreach.

"Every time I file another complaint attempting to assert my legal rights, another act of retaliation would follow. Or I'd be starved. Or raped. Or beaten."

—John Santoro, Jr, Elmira Correctional Facility

At times, guards have planted contraband in prisoners' cells as retribution or placed specific prisoners in solitary confinement. Travis Jordan was thrown into solitary after planted weapons were found in a search in retaliation for his re-

Continues on next page

sisting oppression and subscribing to *The Abolitionist*. Jordan speaks out:

"I had two cell frisks that were labeled suspicious and both incidents the guards purposely placed weapons within my cell. I was escorted to the segregated housing unit both times and was wrongfully found guilty. When they searched my cell, the guards left all my personal property and escorted me to the segregated housing area without bringing me my personal property. I later found out that the correction officers gave all my personal property to a prison informant. I also had incoming items such as hygiene products, food, and clothing stolen from me from multiple different facility package rooms by correction officers. I'm also being prevented from participating in my recommended programs because I keep getting set up by the correction officers with weapons. The New York State HALT [Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement] Act is being violated by all DOC staff, and all of us incarcerated individuals need outside help."

These also aren't isolated incidents. PPI's 2025 disciplinary policy analysis found that rules governing communication are among the most frequently weaponized in misconduct charges. Even expressing an idea can be punished. It is clear through PPI's findings that prisons document how mail scanning, contact bans, and targeted discipline are used to dismantle resistance and cut off prisoners from outside movement partners.

The cost of sending 20 messages via a prison email system can be more than triple a prisoner's monthly income. This barrier hits hardest when someone's loved one or organizing contact is waiting to hear from them.

"Everything has to be written by hand, which multiplies the cost of sharing ideas. Pens, stamps, envelopes, and copies all take money and time."
—Jack Morgan, USP Terre Haute

"I had written CR a letter about the [suppression and surveillance] my nonprofit faced in 2023, when a change in mail policy resulted in our organization's newsletter being returned without notice or explanation. The DOC's explanation: 'Sorry, wasn't supposed to happen.' So, thousands in postage lost in the original mailout, thousands more lost in return postage, then thousands more spent mailing them out again, as well as several dozen 'just lost.' . . . The DOC determined there were no violations, just that the ban should not have applied to us."

—Tim Branot, Texas prisoner

WHAT IS TO BE DONE? TURN UP THE VOLUME

As mail scanning expands and communication restrictions tighten, it is crucial that we listen harder—not just with empathy, but with strategy. From growing letter writing projects outside for prisoners, to other media efforts and mutual aid, imprisoned people offer clear suggestions on how movement groups can better support resistance inside. As every confiscated letter, every banned book, and every silenced prisoner is not just a violation of rights but an attack on our communities, resistance, and movements, we must understand—whether inside or outside—that suppression thrives in silence. It thrives when we don't talk about it, fight it, or organize around it. And it is most effective when we allow the state to isolate our people inside from our people outside.

If the state fears the voices of imprisoned people this much, we must amplify them louder than ever. This project—the Cross-Wall Strategy Retreat, PPI's research, this article and the letters that birthed it—is a call to do just that. To be louder. Smarter. Faster. More coordinated. If the system is working this hard to mute them, we owe it to every imprisoned comrade to make their voices too loud to ignore.

"If [CR's cross-wall convening] is about building strategy, let us help shape it. We're living the [conditions] you're organizing against."

—Christopher Baker ♦

Generate Cross-Wall Strategy with CR & Movement Partners:

CR is getting ready to bring together movement partners to generate shared cross-wall organizing strategies. Support our August strategic planning retreat by participating in more research interviews with CR or connect with retreat plannings to be a part of the weekend-long discussions this summer. Call CR on our phone lines or write to *The Abolitionist* Project Coordinator, Molly Porzig:

CR Cross-Wall Retreat Attn: Molly Porzig PO Box 22780 Oakland CA 94609	Call CR's phone lines any Friday–Monday, 9am–6pm PT / 11am–8pm CT/ 12–9pm ET 510-444-0484.
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About the Contributors: *The Prison Policy Initiative (PPI) is a non-profit research and advocacy organization that focuses on challenging mass incarceration and over-criminalization through research, advocacy, and organizing. They aim to document and publicize the harms of mass incarceration and advocate for criminal justice reform.*

Charles Reiland, Christopher Baker, Christopher Harbridge, Jacinda Lee Allenbough, Jack Morgan, James Bauhaus, James Pierce, John Santoro Jr, Kareem Cobbins, Tim Branot, and Travis Jordan are all imprisoned subscribers of CR's newspaper, and all responded to our Cross-wall Strategy Questionnaire in Issue 42 on anti-war organizing, published in December 2024.

FEATURES ACTION

Creative Tactics from the HIV/AIDS Movement Inside

By Emily Hobson

The prison industrial complex (PIC) fuels disease and cuts people off from decent healthcare both inside and out. This means that the people targeted by the PIC—especially Black, Latiné, and Indigenous communities—generally have higher rates of health problems, including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Simultaneously, the criminalization of drugs and sex work, and the difficulty of surviving while queer or trans, make practicing the kinds of harm reduction that stop HIV transmission, such as using condoms and clean needles, much harder.

Because untreated HIV severely harms the immune system, people with HIV who are imprisoned are also at higher risk for developing other diseases, such as hepatitis, pneumonia, and tuberculosis. Poor healthcare in prison can make it harder than it should be to address HIV, and practices like transfers and solitary confinement can interrupt access to HIV medications altogether—weakening those prisoners' immune systems and impeding their recoveries from infection and illness. But people with HIV and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and their supporters have put up a fight. **Since HIV/AIDS was first discovered, imprisoned people have organized against the epidemic with many forms of resistance.**

In the 1980s, prisons first responded to AIDS with isolation, punishment, and stigma. Even though HIV cannot be spread through casual contact, people with the infection were placed in isolation cells or segregation units; in addition to being even more confined, they lost access to basic



"Comprehensive Sex Ed" by Meredith Stern, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

rights, such as recreation and the chance to earn time off their sentences. Guards often wore unnecessary protective equipment around people with HIV/AIDS, and many prisons made them wear special clothing (usually red or pink) or use only disposable plates and utensils. All this furthered stigma and misinformation.

Through these tactics, and through denial of basic information or preventive measures, prisons encouraged harassment and violence against people with HIV/AIDS — and then turned

around and claimed that isolation and segregation were forms of protection. As a result, one of the main ways imprisoned people first resisted HIV/AIDS, and prisons' exploitation of the epidemic, was by organizing **peer education**.

Peer education projects started in New York prisons, and the projects' founders drew knowledge not just from the HIV/AIDS movement on the streets but also from longer traditions of prisoner-led organizing, anti-imperialist struggle, queer liberation, and the feminist health movement. At Auburn Correctional Facility, **Kuwasi Balagoon** was a well-known New Afrikan political prisoner who had written numerous articles, zines, and underground newsletters from an anti-colonial and abolitionist perspective, detailing the repression and organized abandonment of prisoners and condemning **medical neglect as a form of state violence**.

Balagoon's death in December 1986 from complications due to AIDS shook those who knew and admired him and pushed many of his comrades to change their views of sexuality; today we recognize Balagoon as a queer ancestor. In 1987, shortly after his death, three people at Auburn—David Gilbert, Mujahid Farid, and Angel Nieves—submitted a proposal to the prison administration to create an organization called the **Prisoner Education Project on AIDS (PEPA)** and partner with a local outside AIDS organization to train imprisoned people as AIDS peer educators.

The prison administration resisted PEPA because it showed **multiracial unity**, addressed drugs and queer sex, promoted harm reduc-

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tion instead of punishment, and held the potential to shine a spotlight on conditions inside. At first, prison administrators responded to PEPA’s proposal with delaying tactics and gave inside organizers the runaround. Activists then contacted lawyers and outside AIDS activists, who made phone calls and wrote letters of support. Because of this pressure, the prison shifted to tactics of co-optation, convincing the staff of the local AIDS organization to trust them instead of the PEPA leaders.

Further, **prison administrators tried to destabilize PEPA with threats of violence**, publicly “thanking” project leaders when they integrated people with HIV/AIDS into general population. Given the prevalent fear of AIDS this put a target on the backs of both PEPA leaders and imprisoned people with HIV/AIDS generally. PEPA leaders undermined these attempts by talking on the yard about HIV transmission and discrimination, which helped garner support for people with HIV/AIDS.

PEPA was able to **train over a dozen people as HIV/AIDS peer educators**. But Auburn shut PEPA down by repeatedly transferring its leaders to other prisons, sending many of them far upstate, where it was more difficult to maintain ties with the outside. Despite the prison’s attempts to crush resistance, imprisoned activists subverted transfers by working to organize HIV/AIDS education everywhere they were sent. Over time, that helped seed projects that took root in prisons across New York state.

The HIV/AIDS peer education project that gained the greatest space to operate was called **AIDS Counseling and Education (ACE)**, located in the women’s prison in Bedford Hills, New York. Inside activists such as the late, great **Katrina Haslip** and **Kathy Boudin**, along with **Judy Clark**, **Marilyn (TJ) Rivera**, **Carmen Royster**, and many others, started the project the same year PEPA came into existence. And while they too met suppression, they won greater space to operate by becoming a formal prison program with funding, an office, and recognition of peer education as a prison job. ACE shared curricula and other tools with AIDS peer education programs in other parts of New York and in federal prisons.

These programs saved lives through information-sharing, provided care and support to people who were sick, and created certification systems that allowed people to get hired in HIV-related and other public health jobs after their release. In ACE, the presence of prison staff helped imprisoned people place less-restricted phone calls to outside organizations and agencies for AIDS resources, housing, and re-entry plans. Katrina Haslip, Marilyn Rivera, Carmen Royster came home from Bedford Hills between 1989 and 1991 and continued to organize as formerly imprisoned people with HIV/AIDS. As Haslip said before she died in December 1992: *“We emerged from the nothingness with a need to build consciousness and to save lives. We made a difference in our community behind the wall, and that difference has allowed me to survive and thrive as a person with AIDS.”*

A closer look at AIDS peer education projects in the 1980s and 1990s provides many examples

of the ways people subverted prison control. Though ACE was able to perform roleplays and facilitate discussions on safer sex, it was not allowed to openly address sex inside. As a result, to address safer sex between women, they staged their skits as if they were happening in a nursery. Doing so drove home the point that people do what they do (since nuns are not supposed to have sex either!).

In another example from an AIDS program in a federal prison, political prisoner Marilyn Buck and imprisoned activist Dimitria Simmons wrote a play about AIDS that illustrated the prison’s failures and the might of imprisoned people’s power. They opened with a scene in which someone portraying a prison official made a generic statement about healthcare and then disappeared from the stage, symbolizing the prison’s lack of any meaningful response. That left the rest of the play to focus on the real work of the program: imprisoned people building a community of support to educate each other, fight stigma, and improve the lives of people with AIDS.

“We emerged from the nothingness with a need to build consciousness and to save lives. We made a difference in our community behind the wall, and that difference has allowed me to survive and thrive as a person with AIDS.”

In the California prison known as Vacaville, people fighting AIDS led some of the most forceful prison organizing anywhere in the early 1990s. At that time California segregated people with HIV/AIDS from other prisoners, but the prison’s Catholic chaplain supported the creation of a pastoral care program, which allowed HIV-negative imprisoned people to visit the HIV/AIDS unit to give their peers emotional support. People from inside and outside Vacaville’s HIV/AIDS unit also communicated with each other during services in the chapel (the only space in the prison where the segregation policy did not apply) and by sending kites across the fences that divided their yards. In other words, both through the pastoral care program and outside of it, they shared information and began to organize.

People at Vacaville wrote extensively to activists outside, particularly members of the **AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)**, which was one of the largest and most vibrant protest organizations of the AIDS movement. They also built relationships with journalists by writing to thank them when they wrote newspaper stories addressing prison HIV/AIDS issues and connected with legislative staff who began to investigate the conditions at Vacaville. Leaders at Vacaville included Brian Carmichael, Charles Perry, Michael Haggerty, and Law Wilson; some of these activists came home after shorter sentences and continued to organize in solidarity, **strengthening inside-outside activist ties**.

After a brief period of improvement in HIV/AIDS care at Vacaville in 1991, conditions declined when the prison hired a new, more “security”-minded warden. People inside began

to plan for more action. A handful of activists from ACT UP got permission not only to visit Vacaville but to go beyond the visitation area by registering themselves as religiously affiliated volunteers. When the ACT UP visitors reached the chapel, the imprisoned activists made creative use of a mop bucket. Someone assigned to janitorial work poured water on the floors near the chapel, mopped the floors with it, and set up “caution—slippery when wet” signs to discourage guards—or anyone else—from entering the chapel. That allowed the activists enough time for a meeting to discuss conditions and plans in greater detail than they could securely do over phone calls or in letters.

In the fall of 1992, several people at Vacaville died of complications from AIDS over the course of just a few weeks, with guards ignoring one person when he called out for help and a nurse refusing to enter the HIV/AIDS unit to provide care to another. People in the HIV/AIDS unit began a medication boycott and then a smaller hunger strike. The members of ACT UP staged demonstrations, made phone calls and sent letters of protest, and helped ensure regular media coverage of the crisis. When the prison threatened the people who had started the hunger strike with force feeding if they did not accept food after 10 days, the strikers shifted to a rolling action rotated among a larger group. Several days later, they won their demands, which included access to qualified infectious disease doctors, better conditions in the HIV/AIDS unit, and the creation of a hospice program that would allow bedside family visits and around-the-clock accompaniment by pastoral care volunteers.

From state to state, as many of the people who led these programs acknowledged, the benefits of official administrative approval came with certain costs. Orisanmi Burton, in his book *Tip of the Spear*, defines “**programmification**” as a weapon in prisons’ arsenal of war, describing how prisons “co-opt the prison movement, to steer it toward status-quo-oriented institutional policies,” including efforts to suppress transformative demands. At the same time, Burton acknowledges that programs in education, training, arts, and health are an important means of survival and that people have been able to subvert administrative control even while working in officially permitted groups and spaces. At their best, **programs can be a type of what many call “non-reformist reforms.”** They help people get through life inside, build ties with people outside, and stay alive to organize toward abolition.

While imprisoned HIV/AIDS activists met significant suppression and red tape, the persistent and creative organizing of imprisoned people no doubt offers lessons for subversion inside and for solidarity across prison walls. ♦

About the Author: *Emily Hobson is a historian of radical movements in the US, focusing especially on movements for queer/LGBTQ liberation, racial justice, and international solidarity and on activism against HIV/AIDS and the carceral state. She is the author of Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left and co-editor (with Dan Berger) of Remaking Radicalism: A Grassroots Documentary Reader of the United States, 1973-2001. Her current book project examines the history of HIV/AIDS activism by, for, and with people in US prisons in the 1980s and 1990s.*

FEATURES ACTION

“No One Is Disposable”: On Migration and Collective Defense

A conversation with Dignity Not Detention organizers by The Abolitionist

*In this conversation, Dylan Brown of The Abolitionist Editorial Collective and Critical Resistance’s New York City (CRNYC) chapter speaks with organizers **Samah Sisay** and **Tania Mattos**—partners in the primary coalition CRNYC is organizing in right now—about the fight to end immigrant detention, the challenges of speaking out under pressure, and how cross-movement solidarity*

*can grow in this moment of political crack-down. Through personal stories and sharp analysis, they reflect on how resistance continues inside and outside of detention facilities, and why our struggles are more connected than we often acknowledge. This dialogue is part of the **Dignity Not Detention campaign in New York**, a collective effort to end immigrant detention once and for all in New York state.*



Dignity Not Detention mobilization to the state capitol Albany, New York. January 2025.

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Dylan Brown (DB): *Can you both share a little bit about what politicized you into becoming an abolitionist, and why it's important for migrant defense work to be rooted in an abolitionist politic and organizing strategy?*

Samah Sisay (SS): Thank you so much for this question, Dylan. When I was six, almost seven years old, my family was forced to flee our home in Monrovia, Liberia, in search of safety in the US. So, I grew up in the US-South, just outside of Virginia. Being Black in the South, being an immigrant, being from a Muslim family, I always felt like “something just isn’t right here.” But I wasn’t an abolitionist then. It was around the time of the killing of Trayvon Martin, and later when Mike Brown was murdered, that I really started to put together the issues of anti-Blackness, police violence, and my own lived experience with migration and other inequalities here in the US.

When I moved to New York I got to know Mariame Kaba and started working with **Survived and Punished**, organizing with mainly Black women who were criminalized for survival — some of them migrants who, after we would fight to get them out of prison, would end up in ICE (Immigration & Customs Enforcement) custody and in deportation proceedings. I think that really impacted my idea of abolition and helped me see how coming together, fighting for each other, and that no one is disposable is what helps us ensure people have what we need for truly fulfilling lives.

DB: Thanks, Samah. *Tania, what about you?*

Tania Mattos (TM): I was born in La Paz, Bolivia. We came to the US when I was four years old. My father was politically active with unions in Bolivia, so I grew up hearing stories at the dinner table about union organizing. I grew up undocumented. I didn’t really realize it ‘til I was about fourteen years old. That was always just a constant in my life. I went on to work at an immigration law organization but grew very frustrated working within the realm of the legal system. I knew that abolition existed, but I wasn’t in tune with it then.

In 2018, I attended a conference organized by **Detention Watch Network**, and I heard about people working to end detention, and I said, “Well what the hell, why can’t we do that?” I was like, “Who makes these rules?” Somebody created this whole system. Why not flip the script on what they’re trying to build and instead build what immigrants or other marginalized communities need? Let’s get rid of things that are actually killing us. That’s how we started the coalition **Abolish ICE New York/New Jersey**.

DB: Thank you both for those thoughtful reflections. Often when I hear about someone’s abolitionist origin story, it starts with a feeling that things aren’t right, and abolition is what gives that feeling a name and a voice. So that really resonates with me. In our current political moment, there is a lot of focus on ICE expansion across the US, but that is also connected to a larger, global pull towards the right wing. *Can you speak to that element of global rightward movement?*

SS: I can try [laughing]. Both in the US and globally, we are seeing a renewed focus on criminalization as a tool of the far-right. Othering and scapegoating have always been tools of the far-right because it offers such an easy narrative, blaming certain people or groups for social problems instead of dealing with what is causing those problems. And people love a narrative. If people are feeling that grocery prices are high, or housing is unaffordable, or their kids aren’t getting the education they should be — all the problems that exist in this country can be put on the shoulders of immigrants and other marginalized groups.

You know, a lot of people think that ICE expansions are about private prisons trying to make money out of imprisonment. That may be part of it, but I don’t think it’s the main reason. There are a lot of ways to steal people’s labor and to subjugate people and make money in this world. Criminalization and imprisonment work to ensure that people in our society don’t fight back against those systems of subjugation. When we

fight back against detention, we need to ensure that, even if people are put in these cages, we will continue to fight for you, to uplift your story. Participatory defense can do that, by making sure that that people’s voices are heard and that they know people on the outside care about them. This is so important, because it counters that whole narrative of fear, and fear is the greatest tool of the right wing. It is so important that we push back against those things and do not see the system as inevitable.

“Othering and scapegoating have always been tools of the far-right because it offers such an easy narrative, blaming certain people or groups for social problems instead of dealing with what is causing those problems.”

TM: In these past couple of years, we’ve seen more of a shift to the right from many countries around the world. But at the same time, I see countries in Central America resisting the turn to the right; many people are seeing the human rights violations happening — seeing their own family members get dragged out of their houses and disappeared with no information as to when or if they will be released. In Bolivia, in Brazil, in Mexico there is resistance. It’s our job, as advocates for abolition, to be loud and to show the world that there is resistance even in this unprecedented moment, that there are people in this country that do believe another way is possible and that abolition is the answer.

DB: *As a follow up question then, are there any geographic differences with regard to ICE expansion or detention that you think are important?*

SS: One thing that has been interesting regionally, I think, is the shifting of the narrative that certain areas like the Northeast are safe havens, or much safer than the South. Whether there is anywhere that’s safe, in terms of mass criminalization of immigrants and dissent being criminalized, is debatable. We’re seeing spaces that people thought were safe or open are not as safe and open as they thought they were before. You have the mayor of New York City (NYC) openly saying that he’s “very happy and willing to work with ICE” and the governor saying, “you know, sure, if they’re criminals, yeah, we’ll work with ICE.” We have universities saying, “we have to follow these procedures and turn in students who engaged in protests” — so I think we’re seeing that our institutions are pre-complying to right-wing fascism.

DB: You’ve both spent many years organizing around the abolition of ICE, to end ICE contracts and eliminate immigrant detention. I’m curious what challenges, threats, and opportunities you are seeing in this moment—with the Dignity Not Detention (DND) campaign or with other work that you’re involved with.

TM: It’s only been a month and two weeks [at the time of this interview] since the change in administration, but things have already become a lot more severe. There’s lots of threats for people inside detention, that if they speak out, there will be serious consequences. But it’s my belief that under so much pressure, that’s where things bloom. There are opportunities that are going to arise, and I’m already starting to see New Jersey and New York organizers pushing for the end of immigration detention in both states once and for all. There is an opportunity, but it’s going to take all our strength and all our might.

DB: Thanks so much, Tania. Wild to believe that it’s only been six weeks.

SS: Yeah! Time is wild. But also, while we often talk about Trump or Republicans vs Democrats, all these issues just continue regardless of who’s in power. In NYC, around 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of people locked up in Orange County jail in New York were protesting because of conditions in the jail. They were not being given enough food, adequate medical care, COVID precautions, things like that. So the coalition organizers did a lot of work to raise awareness. The people on the in-

side were brave and skilled organizers who got together and coordinated a hunger strike. They did city council testimonies, they spoke to reporters, they did everything possible to really push back against this system that was trying to silence and disappear them. And in retaliation, they got disciplinary tickets. They got put in solitary confinement. People didn’t have access to their tablets, which is how they communicated with their lawyers and loved ones. A few months later, many of them were transferred to detention centers in the South which were known to be even more horrible — and also your chances of winning your immigration case in those jurisdictions is much lower. So it is retaliatory when you are transferred to those locations from a location like New York. And all of that just to stop this group of people from speaking out about conditions that are well known!

DB: Thank you both for really addressing the first part of the question, about significant challenges our movement faces in this political landscape. *Tania, is there anything you want to add about the second part of the question: how have organizers resisted the themes of Issue 43 in ICE detention?*

TM: Yeah, I do think the tactics may have to change a little bit under this fascist regime. And understanding that, at least for now, there is a higher risk for people being detained. I think we’re going to need heavy coordination between inside and outside organizers.

“There’s lots of threats for people inside detention, that if they speak out, there will be serious consequences. But it’s my belief that under so much pressure, that’s where things bloom. There are opportunities that are going to arise.”

DB: Thanks for that, Tania. It’s important to remember as organizers that we might not achieve the goal of successfully beating a retaliatory transfer or deportation, but that’s not the end of the fight. Those relationships don’t end, they extend. As abolitionists, we’re thinking about how we can sustain those long-term relationships and shared fights and build stronger connections between different areas of struggle. *Where do you see opportunities for collaboration and solidarity between anti-prison activists and folks on the front lines resisting ICE in this moment of crack-down, where migrants are a very clear target for criminalization?*

SS: I think the danger at this moment is that people will be so focused on the issues that they think are most important, and feel so swamped by that, that those connections you named will get pushed into the background. Something that I’ve been thinking about is how do we do rapid response work that is urgently necessary, while still taking the time to build with each other and be in solidarity with each other and create strategy together. To be honest, I really haven’t seen it working. Because for the longest time, organizing against the criminal legal system and organizing against immigrant detention has sort of just followed separate paths. There are people in both who understand how they cross and are super connected. But when people are running campaigns or doing rapid response, we’re not really consulting with each other, which makes it difficult.

For example, the **Center for Constitutional Rights** has been working on the issue of migrant detention at Guantanamo. Some of the groups we work with will use messaging like “these people are not criminals” and really emphasize that their clients have never been convicted of anything. That narrative creates such a rift in our movements and can be quite harmful. It doesn’t challenge the system of imprisonment itself. It can even reinforce the system by promoting the idea that people need to be locked up — as long as it’s the “right” ones. This is often-times the go-to narrative within immigration spaces, to focus on “we’re not criminals,” when

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what we need to focus on is how the system as a whole uses imprisonment to target specific people and groups, to “other” them in the service of broader systems of injustice.

This is a challenge, but it is also an opportunity to struggle together and fortify our movements. There is some amazing student-focused organizing happening at **Detention Watch Network**, centering immigrants who have had contact with the criminal legal system, ensuring that their stories are uplifted. And organizations like the **Black Alliance for Just Immigration**, who are centering Black migrants and doing great solidarity work, bringing together immigration, the criminal legal system, the racial justice movement, the youth justice movement.

FEATURES ACTION

The Movement of Families: In Defense of the Life of Imprisoned People Under State of Emergency in El Salvador

By Yanci López and Grazzia Grimaldi

March 2025 marked three years of imposition of a state of emergency in El Salvador. In 2022, the Nayib Bukele Administration declared the “war against gangs,” imposing an exceptional regime that has suspended constitutional guarantees under an authoritarian framework. Imprisonment has played a key role in this process; since the declaration, mass arrests have resulted in the imprisonment of more than 81,000 people—around 2.6 percent of the total population—without due process, resulting in the highest imprisonment rate in the world.

This authoritarian consolidation, however, is not simply a return to military strongman rule. It is the outgrowth of decades of US-backed neoliberal governance that has hollowed out public institutions while expanding the repressive apparatus of the state. Bukele’s regime marries authoritarian populism with a neoliberal austerity model that diverts public resources into policing, surveillance, and imprisonment while disinvesting from social services. This model doesn’t just punish the poor; it disappears them through imprisonment, erasure, and death.

Bukele’s so-called state of exception is not an exception at all. Rather, it is the logical consequence of global patterns of governance that manage poverty and dissent through militarized control. The regime’s use of prolonged pretrial imprisonment, mass trials, and communication blackouts in prisons is a laboratory for punitive social control, cloaked in the language of security. These tactics parallel the carceral strategies used across the Americas to criminalize racialized and working-class communities under the guise of public safety. They are also the latest iteration of US imperialism, including the export of counterinsurgency tactics and the “war on gangs” as a proxy for the “war on terror.”

“This model doesn’t just punish the poor; it disappears them through imprisonment, erasure, and death.”

It is paramount to understand the current state of emergency as the extension of a history of more than 20 years of “tough-on-crime” policies that have criminalized people accused of being “gang” members and youth from marginalized communities. In fact, the repression we see today is intimately linked to the US export of its so-called war on terror and decades of regional destabilization. Its most recent iteration and confluence is exemplified in the deportation of Venezuelan nationals to the prisons of El Salvador.

In this scenario, communication blackouts in prisons have largely gone unnoticed; however, they have been essential for the violation of life

Bringing all of those issues together to show how, when we talk about family separation, all of our movements need to really care about this issue. This kind of solidarity work is so important, because it’s the only way we’re going to be successful in our fight.

TM: Yeah, I agree that a lot more work needs to be done and there are more opportunities for us to continue to make those connections. In New York there have been spaces created intentionally to prevent governments from dividing our movements. I also think the language that we use, outwardly, is the first step. How we communicate is the number one step because if the immigrant rights movement continues to focus on people not being criminals or being hard

inside and outside of prisons. In 2016, communications were suspended in maximum security facilities for persons prosecuted as “gang members”; in 2019 and 2020, Bukele’s administration extended this measure to regular penitentiary facilities.

THE MOVEMENT OF FAMILIES OF IMPRISONED PEOPLE

For the families of prisoners in El Salvador, this new anniversary of the state of emergency is marked by the memory of five years of communication bans with their loved ones inside. The social movement of families came about in 2019 as a means of protesting against Salvadorean imprisonment policies and looking to organize to defend the lives of those affected by them. It emerged as a direct outcome of rapport building among women lined up outside prisons in queues, who would strike up conversations about the reshuffling of their lives because of their family members’ imprisonment, their economic difficulties and emotional challenges, and the hopes of freedom for their relatives inside. After getting in touch with local human rights organizations working on imprisonment-related issues, they established the first digital space among themselves to address the disruption of familial bonds and the impunity of the regime in light of the suspension of all inside-outside communication.

These bans are not just technical restrictions; they are deliberate strategies of dehumanization and disappearance. In a society where state violence is normalized and legal recourse is eroded, communication becomes both a lifeline and a form of resistance. One of the main demands the movement has fought for has been the resumption of inside-outside contact because communication bans have not only disrupted familial bonds, but they have also laid a shroud of uncertainty and impunity over the imprisonment system as a whole.

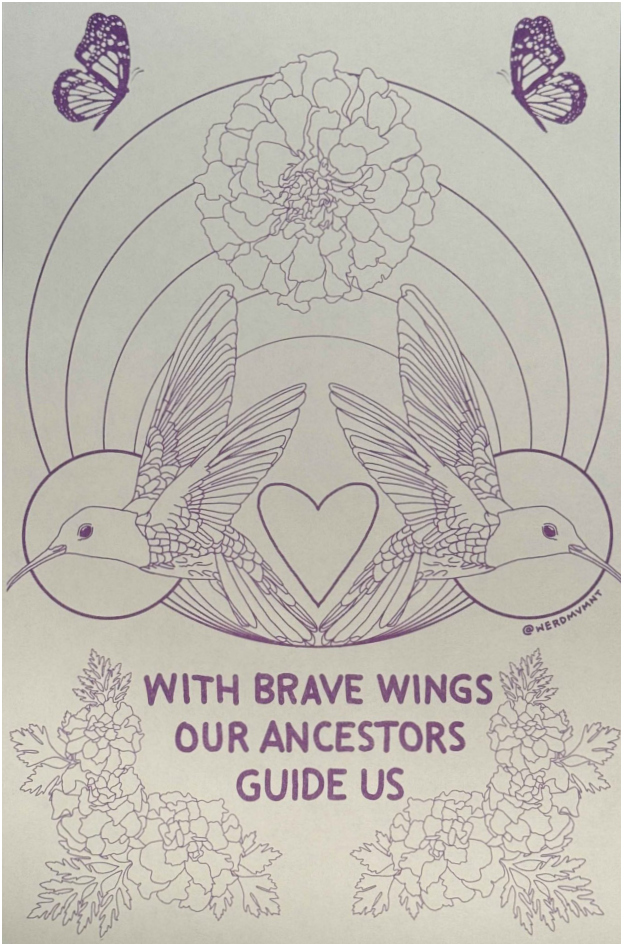
Local organizations have reported multiple human rights violations in prisons, torture practices reminiscent of the Salvadorean armed struggle period (1980–1992), medical malpractice, and even deaths under the state of emergency regime. **These acts echo the legacies of military dictatorship**, yet today they are carried out under the guise of so-called modern governance and national security. The use of anonymous judges and mass trials serves as a juridical theater that strips individuals of any semblance of due process, reflecting a deeply anti-democratic use of the legal system to maintain state control. Three years after the state of emergency was declared, local organization **Socorro Jurídico Humanitario** (Humanitarian Juridical Aid) has confirmed the **deaths of 380 people under state custody** and suggested that the actual figure may be over a thousand because of the gov-

workers to legitimize their humanity, then we’re never going to win. I think that’s a hard lesson learned from the anti-carceral movement. ♦

About the Authors:

Samah Sisay A Liberian-born abolitionist attorney and organizer, Samah is a staff attorney with the **Center for Constitutional Rights** and a member of **Survived and Punished NY**, where she works to support criminalized survivors and fight the carceral systems that target Black women and migrants.

Tania Mattos is a Bolivian-born movement strategist and longtime immigrant rights organizer. A founding member of the **Abolish ICE NY-NJ** coalition, Tania has led campaigns to end immigrant detention contracts and support directly impacted communities across the region.



A Coloring Poster by William Estrada. Courtesy of Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

ernment’s concealment of clandestine **mass graves inside prison** grounds.

These conditions of inhumane treatment and death inside prisons are critical under a politicized judicial landscape in which a penal subsystem hinders access to due process. Judicial reforms under the state of emergency regime have led to the incorporation of anonymous judges and hearsay witnesses, as well as the implementation of mass trials of up to 900 people imposing a single process to those prosecuted for their presumed membership to the same “terrorist” structure or illegal association without the need for the prosecution to present individual evidence. These new evidence policies related to so-called criminal investigation processes are coupled with brand new interpretations of the “crime of illegal association” outlawing gang membership and further extending preventive imprisonment periods.

Mass arrests have affected families who, in many cases, already had someone in prison because of the association established between marginalized communities and “gang” structures. This has overwhelmed families that already suffered from economic limitations, for it is they who support those inside by means of highly feminized, unremunerated labor. Moreover, this adds to expenses related to the judicial process of a person under investigation and in preventive imprisonment. And of course, these economic burdens are not incidental. Rather, they are the privatization of punishment, outsourcing the cost of incarceration to women and families already dispossessed by structural inequality. In this way, the regime weaponizes poverty as part of its broader project of social cleansing. Note that the provision of free legal counsel by the state is severely strained, given the rise in indiscriminate arrests and the downsizing of staff.

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Families must also provide clothing, shoes, a certain number of groceries, medicine, personal hygiene supplies, and general cleaning items for the cells, much in spite of all budgetary reinforcements destined to prison expenses, such as food, since 2023, and the production of most of these supplies as part of prison labor under the framework of **the Yo Cambio (I Change) prison program**, rebranded under Bukele’s first term as Plan Cero Ocio (Zero Leisure Plan).

In 2020, the government’s official propaganda underscored the role played by the Apanteos prison in Santa Ana in the struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic for its production of hand sanitizer, liquid soap, bleach, and detergents used by security personnel and doctors across the country. This year, the government has also highlighted the work of the clothing shop in La Esperanza prison complex in San Salvador, stating that 6,600 prisoners engage in 8-hour shifts, producing more than 600,000 clothing items per month, including uniforms for state workers, school centers, sports leagues, and even staff working in the prison. Despite the government highlighting the prison’s production capacity, families are required to provide essential supplies to their loved ones inside every month, with no certainty if they will ever reach them.

Moreover, **these contradictions reveal the regime’s dual strategy**: On one hand, showcasing labor of imprisoned people as a neoliberal solution to public needs and on the other, relying on the unpaid, invisible labor of families—particularly women—to sustain the very lives they endanger through imprisonment. In closed-regime prisons, investing in supplies and demanding communication have turned into ways of looking after imprisoned relatives and seeking confirmation of whether they are alive inside. This turns even more complex when, in the process of supporting their loved ones, many women who carry out this work are also seen as “gang” collaborators; the so-called gang support networks enjoyed the participation of up to half a million collaborators in 2021.

IN DEFENSE OF LIFE

In the face of risk of imprisonment under the state of emergency regime, the family members’ movement has organized itself around both defending the lives of their imprisoned loved ones and building up systems of community support that have been fundamental for this endeavor. For quite some time, this task was organized through street protests and legal means, filing different recourses—habeas corpus, unconstitutionality demands, and judicial complaints—to put pressure on authorities in view of human rights violations within prisons.

While many of these legal avenues are grounded in rights-based frameworks, the families’ fight is fundamentally abolitionist—centered not just on reforms but on exposing the structural violence of imprisonment and demanding the return of their loved ones. This strategy seeks to exhaust all legal remedies at the nation-

al level to push the movement’s demands to the **Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR)**. Even though the Salvadorean state does not have a history of compliance with international decisions, this strategy aims to exert pressure on governments that are indeed bound by international agreements.

The progressive deterioration of judicial independence in the authoritarian regime, along with the growing persecution of activists and collaborators fighting for imprisoned people, has led to the shutdown of many of these organizational avenues. Facing an increasingly repressive regime, the movement of families has learned to search for the blind spots of the prison industrial complex (PIC). This refusal to be erased is itself an act of rebellion. The families’ work maps out an alternative infrastructure of care, truth-seeking, and memory-making in the face of authoritarian control.

For instance, if the government restricts access to information inside, families manage to get hold of information through workers and residents from nearby areas, asking those recently released, as well as guards in prison centers. If prisons hide their relatives, families look for them in photographs, videos, or shared official material when taken outside of prison. While the government has co-opted judicial institutions, families have managed to single out those institutions or judges that do respond to legal recourses, albeit outside of the capital. If the government goes after dissident voices, the movement openly denounces it on social media while changing their mobilization strategy via judicial institutions.

In the context in which life is more at risk inside prison centers, looking after prisoners’ health conditions has been vital for families on the outside, as well as other subtle means of denunciation: Each petition entails an implicit accusation of medical malpractice, unhealthy living conditions, and violence inside prisons. On the other hand, the **Movimiento de Víctimas del Régimen de Excepción** (MOVIR, Emergency Regime Victims Movement), which emerged simultaneously and is composed of families of persons detained specifically under the state of emergency regime, has the support of the leftist organization **Bloque Popular Revolucionario** (Popular Revolutionary Bloc) and has been engaged in a struggle centered on the liberation of their family members.

CREATING SYSTEMS OF CARE AND POPULAR EDUCATION

In the process of building the movement, creating and sustaining a community support pillar among relatives has been key. Since its inception, El Salvador’s movement of families has kept a community focus based on prisoner support by slowly creating a process of popular education to teach communities how to resist and protest the disappearance of their loved ones. **This is political education as survival:**

A deeply feminist and abolitionist praxis that equips communities to challenge the expansion of carceral power, not only through advocacy but through embodied solidarity and collective learning. Through social media, families share knowledge about how to move through the PIC. This involves logistical and practical details such as identifying opening hours in prison centers, preparing supply packages, reporting issues such as irregular transfer, navigating the judicial and imprisonment system, and pursuing legal recourse to sue and defend the rights of imprisoned family members.

In 2024, this knowledge was institutionalized through the creation of the first school of popular education organized by and for relatives of those imprisoned in the city of Santa Ana. It emerged with the goal of offering families in the western areas of the country the chance to participate in educational processes within a space of embodied solidarity, or *acuerpamiento*, in which to share practical and legal resources. In this process, challenging the PIC, raising awareness, and denouncing prison authorities’ decisions has been of utmost importance. Faced with fascist tendencies that value social order over human life, the movement continues to build a politics rooted in radical care and grassroots autonomy. **Its work reclaims power from the state’s grip and redirects it toward collective healing, survival, and liberation.**

This work will be crucial in questioning how the PIC expands at the expense of its economic downturns, as well as in teaching how to recognize and demand the defense of prisoners’ rights. In the same vein, it is also worth understanding how the intensification of imprisonment impacts the families and increases the load of invisibilized and unremunerated care work that has historically fallen on women, now forced to accompany their relatives into prisons, sometimes by obligation, unwilling to, or imposed upon them by their own families. Led mostly by female relatives, **the movement is also aiming to generate a consciousness of how the system extends beyond the walls.**

Certainly, the Bukele Administration’s expansion of the PIC is not simply a security strategy—it is a pillar of its neoliberal authoritarian project. As the government extends the prison system at the expense of working-class families, it invisibilizes the reinforcement of its neoliberal project, which creates methods of dispossession while dismantling the public system. The families’ struggle is a direct challenge to this strategy and deeper logic. The movement will move forward until it overwhelms the international protection systems and will not back down until all our families are reunited. ♦

About the Authors:
Yanci López is family of imprisoned loved ones and activist of the movement of families of imprisoned people.
Grazzia Grimaldi is an anthropologist and member of the movement of families of imprisoned people.

FEATURES RESOURCE

An Open Letter by a Banned Author

A Reprint by Orisanmi Burton

Editors’ Note: In the fall of 2024, renowned Anthropology professor and author Orisanmi Burton wrote an open letter to prison officials published in The Black Agenda Report and Public Books that challenged the silencing of his new book covering the prison’s strategies for repression and how people inside—particularly Black prisoners—have persevered and resisted for generations. The letter circulated online is a sharp example of how authors of banned books can work to challenge prison rulings in solidarity with imprisoned people. The Abolitionist Editorial Collective selected this letter for reprinting as a feature resource for Issue 43, given its connections to the issue’s focus, and made some copy edits per our organization’s language and editing guidelines,

as well as to help improve chances for this issue to pass through prison mailrooms (including shortening the book’s title). The author also made some slight updates to his original writing for this reprint.
Please also note that the letter mentions a radical leader and imprisoned intellectual of the radical prisoner movement. Because some departments of corrections use prisoners’ identification with this figure for gang validation and other political repression, the editorial collective omitted this person’s full name and replaced it with his initials “GLJ.” Long live GLJ!

To Whom it May Concern,
The purpose of this letter is to address the intensifying effort on the part of prison officials to prevent imprisoned people from reading my



By Erik Ruin for “The People & The Library” pack, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

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book—*Tip of the Spear* [...]. The book is currently banned from prisons in several states, including New York, Florida, Michigan, and California, where it was “placed on the Centralized List of Disapproved Publications” and is now considered “contraband,” meaning imprisoned people found with it in their possession can be punished. Decisions such as these are why prisons have been deemed the most restrictive reading environments in the US.

Tip of the Spear is a work of historical ethnography that builds on over a decade of painstaking research. Its primary argument is that prisons in the US are best understood as technologies of domestic warfare masquerading as apolitical instruments of “crime” control. The book demonstrates that in response to the urban uprisings of the 1960s and the growth of anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist organizations, state actors at various levels of government weaponized prisons as part of a broader counterinsurgency against the possibility of radical social transformation within and beyond the US. It shows that rather than debilitating these movements, as the state had expected, the resulting increase of politically active prisoners precipitated new movements that evolved behind prison walls. It is in the praxis of this imprisoned struggle that the roots of contemporary abolitionist politics are to be found. Conversely, it is in the state’s attempt to transform the prison into an instrument capable of crushing this movement and destroying this knowledge that a key impetus for massive growth of the prison system after 1970 can be found.

The primary setting for the book is the New York State Prison system during the 1970s, which allowed me to offer a radical re-narration and re-theorization of the well-known, but poorly understood, Attica prison uprising of 1971. While Attica is typically framed as a four-day uprising by incarcerated people for improved prison conditions, I stretch the temporality and geography of Attica and recover its radical, anti-colonial, and abolitionist dimensions. I also show how, to neutralize this incarcerated prison movement, prison administrators, or what I call “prisoncrats,” integrated colonial theories of counterinsurgency into the normalized routines of prison management. In doing so, I show that a primary driver of prison expansion, reform, and innovation, and thus a primary driver of US historical and political development is an anti-Black and anti-radical imperative.

I reject the notion that my book “advocates ... lawlessness, state force or unrest, disorder, or uprising against governmental authority”, or that it “spark[s] disobedience,” as was claimed in a memo from New York prison officials who rejected the book from Mohawk Correctional Facility. A close reading of *Tip of the Spear* will reveal that it advocates only that people think in radically different ways about the historical role of prisons in US society. It is deeply revealing, however, that prisons so readily confuse advocacy of unorthodox forms of thought with the promotion of state force or unrest, for it lays bare the totalitarian impulse at the core of its enterprise.

What prisons find disturbing is not the book’s alleged advocacy of state force or unrest as such, but how it explicates the primary source from which most of the prison-based state force or unrest flows: The state. The prisoner-led uprisings of the 1970s erupted within a pervasive atmosphere of racist and political repression, systematic dehumanization, psychological warfare, sexualized terror, and medicalized torture carried out by a broad network of state actors who were operating with near total impunity. This is attested to by copious and well-cited evidence. I invite prisoncrats to engage my sources and to think about why only certain forms of harm are coded as state force or unrest.

While it does not advocate uprising, *Tip of the Spear* refuses to denounce, condemn, and pathologize the imprisoned Black activists of the 1970s, many of whom at various moments not only advocated but actively engaged in “lawlessness,” “state force or unrest,” “disorder,” and “uprising against governmental authority”. This too is the source of the prison’s dismay.



By Monica Trinidad, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

Against the tendency to flatten and pathologize prison rebels as manic “extremists,” I narrate them as highly intelligent and rational beings who were thinking strategically about the role of state force or unrest, not only in the maintenance of their subjugation, but also in their collective political struggle within and against one of the most repressive institutions of the racist capitalist state.

“It is deeply revealing, however, that prisons so readily confuse advocacy of unorthodox forms of thought with the promotion of state force or unrest, for it lays bare the totalitarian impulse at the core of its enterprise.”

What prisoncrats call “state force or unrest,” I call “counterstate force or unrest”: A countervailing force exerted by people whose only other option was to allow themselves to be abused and destroyed with little to no opposition from communities beyond the walls. As jailhouse lawyer Martin Sostre wrote in a law review article from 1972, “Attica [...] was the result of recognition, after decades of painful exhaustion of all peaceful means of obtaining redress, of the impossibility of obtaining justice within the ‘legal’ framework of an oppressive racist society which was founded on the most heinous injustices: murder, robbery, slavery.”

In line with Sostre’s productive rethinking of justice, I cannot help but reflect on the irony of the fact that your charge that *Tip of the Spear* advocates state force or unrest emanates from a site of institutionalized state force or unrest named after a Native American tribe whose land was stolen by the US government and whose members are the historical victims of the state-orchestrated crime of genocide. The counterstate force or unrest of oppressed people is quantitatively and qualitatively different from the state force or unrest prisons perpetuate. As historian Walter Rodney explains, “Violence aimed at the recovery of human dignity and at equality cannot be judged by the same yardstick as state force or unrest aimed at maintenance of discrimination and oppression.”

I was much more impressed by what Florida prison officials had to say when they rejected my book. In capital letters, they wrote: “Book depicts prisons as a racist institution designed to repress Black communities and voices.” Arguing this point was indeed one of the major tasks of my book. I marshaled a considerable amount of archival research to demonstrate that in 1971, in the wake of Attica and the state administered massacre that followed, prisons began to integrate international techniques of counterinsurgency warfare into their normal operation. As Florida officials seem to have recognized, not only do these techniques target Black populations (communities), they also aim to eradicate

Black radical theories, narratives, and ideas (voices). Banning my book attests to the ongoing-ness of these historical imperatives.

The above acknowledgement notwithstanding, I take exception to the second and final sentence of the Florida officials’ explanation (again all capitalized): “May lead to [certain acts of protest] within the prison.” This claim is consistent with a centuries long tradition whereby those who enforce systems of domination attribute discontent, protest, and resistance to “external influences.” Just as plantation owners of the 18th century employed this discourse to explain slave uprisings, and segregationists employed it to explain civil rights and Black Power movements, prison officials employ it to explain prisoner resistance. For example, during Vincent R Mancusi’s 1971 testimony regarding Attica, the beleaguered warden attributed the uprising’s cause, in part, to “unconventional writings and propaganda.” Building on similar “evidence” two years later, Missouri Congressman Richard H Ichord bemoaned before an audience at a conference of the conservative Daughters of the American Revolution that “unconventional writings is flooding prisons today [and]... possibly as a consequence, prison state force or unrest is accelerating at an alarming rate.” Note the mental gymnastics needed to celebrate the so-called revolution of US slave owners against the British Crown while simultaneously demonizing the Black anti-slavery revolution in US.

Notably, Congressman Ichord was then acting as chairman of the House Internal Security Committee—which had recently changed its name from the House Un-American Activities Committee—the Cold War institution that infamously criminalized and harassed countless people accused of harboring communist sympathies. By recycling the well-worn “external influence” trope, you reveal the prison’s role in reproducing anti-Black racism and anti-radical hysteria, mutually reinforcing ideologies that constitute what Dr Charisse Burden-Stelly terms “The Black Scare/Red Scare.” Furthermore, your rationalization for denying imprisoned people access to my book is a facile attempt to abdicate your responsibility for creating environments conducive to uprising, and to obscure the fact that oppressed people have the capacity to comprehend and develop effective responses to their own oppression. So said Richard X Clark, an elected spokesman of the Attica brothers, who challenged Mancusi and Ichord’s assertions, proclaiming, “I’ll tell you what caused the disturbance at Attica: [...] The conditions that existed there made it inevitable.”

Blacklisting my book must be understood within the broader context of an intensifying US-based propaganda war that is aggressively silencing critical, internationalist, and anti-imperialist perspectives. Examples include but are not limited to: the brutal, nation-wide repression of pro-Palestinian voices and activism; the various school and library book bans and curriculum restrictions enacted as part of the coordinated right-wing attack on so-called critical race theory; the suppression, demonetization, and banning of left voices from YouTube, Meta, and other social media platforms; the persecution of the “Uhuru 3”—Florida-based activists whose organizing for Black self-determination was smeared with the false charge that they were acting as “foreign agents.”

“Blacklisting my book must be understood within the broader context of an intensifying US-based propaganda war that is aggressively silencing critical, internationalist, and anti-imperialist perspectives.”

Many frame these curtailments to free speech as a threat to democracy and as evidence of rising authoritarianism that could, at some future moment, take hold in the US. In contrast to this view, imprisoned Black radical intellectuals like

Continues on next page

GLJ have long argued that “fascism is already here.” GLJ and others did not see the prison-based rituals of suppression, state force or unrest, exploitation, and white supremacy as exceptions to the norms of liberal democracy. Rather, they saw them as a distillation, the very essence of society that was founded on genocide and slavery and that continues to be ruled by monopoly capital. Under such conditions, elite control over the flow of knowledge is imperative. “The [modus operandi] of the fascist arrangement is always to protect the capitalist class by destroying the consciousness, the trust, the unity of the lower classes,” GLJ wrote in *Soledad Brother*, which is also considered restricted material in prisons throughout the US. You honor me by placing my book in such esteemed company.

The real issue is not that my book may spark disturbances, but that the prison’s hold on power

is so fragile, so tenuous, so devoid of legitimacy that mere words on a page may be enough to make cages of concrete and steel go up in flames. Given this reality, it is obvious why my book is restricted. The thesis of *Tip of the Spear* was not invented in a library. To the contrary, it was developed through archival and oral history methods that center the consciousness of imprisoned Black revolutionaries like Martin Sostre, GLJ, the Attica Brothers, and many others. The text is an act of radical recovery that stitches together previously discredited and imprisoned formations of knowledge and reads them against official narratives.

This means that while most of the people in cages may not be privy to all the history the book lays out, they will certainly be familiar with the notion that prisons are a domain of war, because this is something I learned from prisoners. Imprisoned people did not need to read *Tip of the*

Spear in 2016 or 2018, when they collectively challenged governmental authority by organizing national strikes to coincide with the anniversaries of GLJ’s August 21, 1971 assassination by California prison authorities and the Attica uprising three weeks later. Efforts at thought control are futile, because they both misrecognize the source of the knowledge contained in *Tip of the Spear* and overestimate prison’s capacity to effectively control ideas and behavior. As political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal explains, “A people can never acquiesce to the state’s imposition of mental restricted material.”

In fierce opposition,
Orisanmi Burton ♦

About the Author: Orisanmi Burton is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at American University and author of *Tip of the Spear* [...], published in October 2023 by The University of California Press.

FEATURES RESOURCE

“A Single-Minded Struggle for Prisoners’ Rights”

Excerpt from *A Continuous Struggle*, a new book on Martin Sostre by Garrett Felber, published by AK Press

Editors’ Note: CR’s longtime movement partners at AK Press are publishing a new book by Garrett Felber on the revolutionary life of Martin Sostre and asked CR to publish an excerpt to help promote the book launch. The following comes from Chapter 7, pages 139–140 and 160–161. Contact AK Press directly to order a copy of *A Continuous Struggle* or to sign up for monthly free book shipments through the Friends of AK Press program.

The night following his sentencing, Martin Sostre was isolated on an otherwise-empty cell block at Attica. “The whole block was dark,” he said. “It was abandoned, so I hollered out . . . and there was no answer.” Fearing that his presence at the prison would cause unrest, prison officials requested he be shipped the next day to Green Haven Prison outside Poughkeepsie, nearly 400 miles from his supporters and defense attorney in Buffalo.

Prison officials were as anxious about Sostre’s presence as state police had been when he arrived in Buffalo years earlier; they kept him under close surveillance, punished him for his political views, and isolated him from comrades on both sides of the walls. During his year in solitary, Sostre was held in a single six-by-eight-foot cell 24 hours a day “in virtual incommunicado.” He was permitted one hot shower and shave a week, and one hour a day of recreation in an enclosed yard. To receive these “privileges,” he was required to submit to a “strip frisk” that included stripping naked, bending over, and undergoing a rectal examination, ostensibly to prevent contraband. He refused the rectal search, forfeiting his hour outside his cell. As Sostre pointed out, the “examination” was a pretext for dehumanization, as he was not allowed to have anything inside his solitary cell besides law books, toothpaste, and a toothbrush.

Sostre responded in the ways he knew best—with collective organizing, revolutionary optimism, and unrelenting efforts to use the law against the state. We are “militants at war with the vicious power structure,” he reminded his defense committee secretary, Jeanette Merrill. “In war against [Governor Rockefeller] we must be just as vicious as he is. . . . I am going after Rockefeller and his top goons.” In August 1968, Sostre filed a pro se complaint seeking \$1.2 million in injunctive relief and damages from the governor of New York and three other state officials for their violations of his constitutional rights: Freedom of political expression, the bar on deprivation of liberty without due process of law, effective assistance of counsel, and freedom from cruel and unusual punishment, which

were guaranteed in the Bill of Rights; and racial segregation in prisons, which transgressed the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments’ guarantees of equal rights regardless of race. Sostre’s lawyer, the radical attorney Victor Rabinowitz, described the case as “an encyclopedia about what is wrong with prison systems.” — Pages 139–140

Despite [the eventual] restoration of Sostre’s communication with the outside world, political [suppression and surveillance] remained a central mechanism of repression. It soon became the basis of his next and final major lawsuit against the state, *Sostre v Otis*. When Sostre arrived at Wallkill, he received 120 birthday and Christmas cards withheld during his year in solitary. He demanded back copies of weekly and monthly publications that had also been withheld. Although he was given copies of *The Liberator*, *Afro-American*, *Negro Digest*, and the *Buffalo Challenger*, prison administrators refused to release *Workers World*, *Muhammad Speaks*, and the *Criminal Law Bulletin*. Undeterred, he renewed his subscription to *Workers World* and subscribed to *Claridad* (a Spanish-language weekly published by the Puerto Rican independence movement in San Juan), *Ramparts*, the *Guardian*, and the Black Panther Party newspaper. His committee mailed him Kwame Nkrumah’s *Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare*, Robert F Williams’s *Listen, Brother!*, Mao’s writings, and his own pamphlet *Martin Sostre in Court*. Almost all of these were either seized or denied. An entire year of *Muhammad Speaks* was thrown away because Sostre was not registered with the prison as a Muslim. A decade earlier, he had been held in solitary confinement for possessing “contraband” writings because the state did not recognize the Nation of Islam as a legitimate religion. Then, as a result of his litigation, prisons were forced to allow this material. Now he was told he could not access it because records indicated he was “not a Muslim.”

Sostre’s defense committee responded by surveying publishers, requesting the dates of mailings and notification of any rejections. “As soon as you get confirmation from publishers that above publications are being mailed to me,” he explained, “I will sue officials in Federal Court on First and Fourteenth Amendment grounds—freedom of press and political beliefs and racist discriminatory banning of Black literature.” Sostre published an open letter addressing Governor Rockefeller directly about the censorship:

“Although prisoners are freely permitted to receive white racist, Zionist, and right-wing reactionary books, newspapers, and magazines at Wallkill Prison, and such literature is ordered and received by the prison library for prisoner use, prisoners are not allowed to re-



“The People & the Library” by Eric Ruin, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative.

ceive liberal, anti-racist, and progressive literature. Your racist right-wing agents who run Wallkill concentration camp are as zealous in banning, obstructing, and destroying all political literature that opposes their ingrained white racist ideology as was the Gestapo in their book-burning of anti-Nazi writings... In short, your outlaw agents have arbitrarily set themselves up as political and religious censors despite the protection of religious and political literature by the First and Fourteenth Amendments.”

In March 1970, Sostre again sued the state in Judge Motley’s district, seeking an injunction and \$20,000 in damages from the warden of Wallkill and Commissioner McGinnis for their interference with his receipt of literature through prison mail. A year later, the Department of Corrections established a review committee and adopted a new screening procedure. The courts ultimately found this system deficient and affirmed the constitutional right of incarcerated people to rudimentary due process, including notice of censorship and an opportunity to appeal. These rights, although regularly ignored by prisons, remain one of Sostre’s most important legacies to prisoners. — Pages 160–161 ♦

About the Author: Garrett Felber is an educator, writer, and organizer. He is the author of *Those Who Know Don’t Say: The Nation of Islam, the Black Freedom Movement, and the Carceral State*, and coauthor of *The Portable Malcolm X Reader*, with Manning Marable. Felber is a cofounder of the abolitionist collective *Study and Struggle* and is currently building a radical mobile library, the *Free Society People’s Library*, in Portland, Oregon.

A Crossword Puzzle



Art by Patrick Bakatarski, imprisoned in Illinois.

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DOWN

1. "To desire the end of such restrictions is to desire the end of prisons, and to desire the end of prisons is to desire the end of a society that seeks _____ social control." -Mariame Kaba
2. The explicit focus of Issue 43 (1 topic + and + 2nd topic = 3 words total).
4. Puerto Rican political prisoner Elizam Escobar greatly influenced CR co-founder kai lumumba barrow, especially through his work "_____ as an Act of Liberation." For this issue's Feature Reflection, kai explains how Gallery of the Streets uses _____ as direct action.
8. A leader of the radical prisoners' movement who we can't name due to gang validation practices and the themes of Issue 43. While in prison, he read and wrote extensively on racism, Black liberation, radical political strategy, capitalism, fascism, and internationalism. (Hint: His middle name is "Lester")
10. In addition to suppressing information and communication through tactics like book bans, a tenet of 13 ACROSS is _____-ing immigrants, or blaming migrant communities for society's problems.
11. Trump has threatened to deport US citizens with convictions to this country (where the movement of families is also organizing).

12. A risk imprisoned people take when exposing the themes of this issue (Hint: Two words that describe what happened to Stevie as he explains in this issue's 9971).
14. This pivotal moment in movement history was significantly informed by two imprisoned figures referenced through this issue: 8 DOWN and another leader of the radical prisoners' movement who's mentioned in multiple pieces this issue (including the focus of the new AK Press book sampled) even though he was no longer at that exact prison in 1971.

ACROSS

3. A tactic prisons have used to co-opt movement advances by imprisoned people, as argued by Ori Burton and referred to by Issue 43 author Emily Hobson.
5. In researching peer education groups imprisoned people led in the 1980s and 1990s, Hobson reveals how these prisoners are some of the most surveilled, isolated, controlled and stigmatized.
6. Trump's new administration has prioritized attacking this group of imprisoned people, especially in the federal prison system. This targeting mirrors broader strategies Trump has used—like rolling back access to education and public restrooms—to erase this community not only from prisons, but from public life.

7. This issue - particularly the Feature Reflection but all articles - call for the need for us to be as _____ as possible in order to overcome the hostile conditions we're in.
9. "Imprisonment is an extreme form of _____" (Hint: Also one of the themes of this issue's features).
13. The intensification discussed throughout the features is not new or an isolated occurrence. These trends are happening in tandem with the rise of _____ globally. (Hint: A topic explored in Issue 34 of this paper, and that 8 DOWN wrote a lot about).
15. The legislation that organizers like Tania and Samah are working to pass in New York state.
16. This issue's Inside-Outside Fishing Line casts a conversation about how collective liberation requires forging alliances and solidarity across this aspect of our positionalities, and that imprisoned people of all identities have a role to play in interrupting oppression that uses or targets this aspect of people's humanity.
17. "_____ is the foundation. It's improvisation, collaboration, collective movement. It can't be controlled, and that's what makes it powerful. That's what abolition should be like. Unpredictable. Alive. Not some fixed model." - lumumba barrow
18. In order to overcome the focal problems explored in this issue, we need to build what kind of power, which CR is also doing a strategy retreat to generate this summer? (Hint: this is also the theme of our next issue 44).

9971:

Calculating Risks in the Belly of the Beast

Editors' Note: The author mentions a revolutionary leader and imprisoned intellectual of the radical prisoner movement. Because some departments of corrections use identification with this figure for gang validation and thus cause for political repression, the editorial collective omitted this person's full name and replaced it with his initials, GLJ. Long live GLJ!

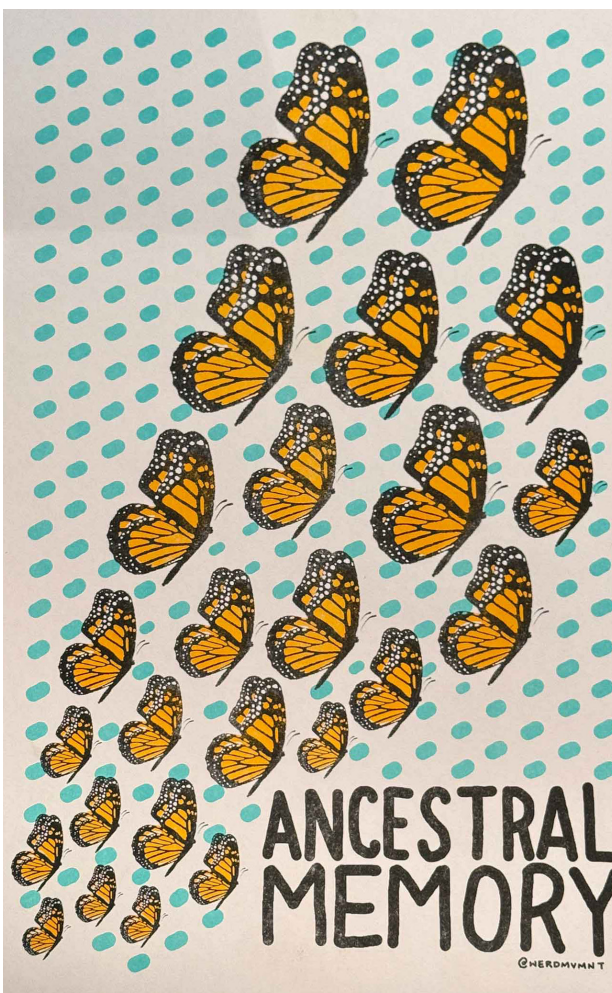
In February, I sat, excitedly, in front of the Parole Board. Twenty-seven months had passed since my last appearance and denial. After that hearing, I was told three factors would be considered at my next hearing: completion of prescribed programming, absence of misconduct reports, and the recommendation of the Department of Corrections (DOC). Since I had completed my programs, stayed misconduct-free, and received the DOC's recommendation for parole, I was sure I would be released. But as soon as I sat down, I was accused of being part of a security threat group (STG)—a gang. I was told my institutional record said I belonged to an STG, namely "the abolitionists." I was stunned. *Was this a joke? When had abolition become a gang?*

For over ten minutes, I debated a board member who had no clue what abolition is. I knew any chance of release upon parole was over. Slowly, it dawned on me that there never was any chance of my being released upon parole. No matter how many programs I had completed, misconducts I had avoided, or recommendations I had received, I was still a prison (dis)organizer, an antagonist of the prison industrial complex (PIC). For over ten years, I had been doing popular and political education and mutual aid work inside. I had been building relationships behind and across the walls. I had been shedding light on the most opaque and closed institution in the country: Prison. These acts would not go unpunished.

For more than a decade, I had endured retaliatory transfers, placements in solitary confinement, destruction of personal property, [targeted surveillance], and denial of mail. The denial of parole was merely a continuation of the state's desire to punish me for organizing behind the walls.

After the hearing, I was angry. At myself, mainly. *How had I allowed myself to forget what could happen to imprisoned organizers and activists? How could I have fallen for the state's false promises?* In the past, whenever I was enduring retaliation and oppression from the state, I would turn to movement histories and biographies to gain perspective and encouragement. This time was no different. I reread the letters of GLJ. Year after year, parole was dangled in front of him. And no matter what he did, he was denied. I thought about Martin Sostre. He maxed out his first prison bid, 12 years, after repeated parole denials. His organizing and legal fights against the system were the reasons he was denied release. The PIC will use many tools to punish and deter imprisoned people from organizing and activism. The Angola Three, founders of a Black Panther chapter behind the walls, were not only framed for murder by prison officials, but also buried in solitary confinement for decades. *Was I to expect anything different? Why would the state treat any imprisoned organizer differently?*

The fact is that organizing behind the walls comes with great risks. We often talk about the barriers and challenges of organizing behind the walls, but we rarely talk about the very real risks involved. Parole denial is one such risk. But there are many others: solitary confinement, retaliatory transfers, destruction of property, being held incommunicado (no phone or mail), physical assault, sexual assault, and yes, even death.



By William Estrada, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

Imprisoned organizers must be aware of these risks. And so should our allies and comrades.

“For more than a decade, I had endured retaliatory transfers, placements in solitary confinement, destruction of personal property, [targeted surveillance], and denial of mail. The denial of parole was merely a continuation of the state's desire to punish me for organizing behind the walls.”

Imprisoned organizers should never be naive about how far the state will go to stop them from building collective power behind the walls. Grasping the reality of the terrain we are struggling in helps us better prepare, physically and mentally, for what the state will try to do to us. Knowing what imprisoned organizers are truly up against will better equip our allies when engaging in acts of solidarity. And solidarity is what every imprisoned organizer needs from outside allies.

After learning about my parole hearing, I received an outpouring of support from friends and allies everywhere. Some of them even crafted a letter of reconsideration, an attempt to have the Parole Board change their decision. The outpouring of support emboldened me. Fortunately, I have less than a year until my max date. February was the last time I would have to sit before the Board. But there are many other imprisoned organizers and activists behind the walls, many with no date in sight. Each day, they risk punishment from the state. They put freedom and life on the line. And they need our support and solidarity. It is imperative that we get and stay connected to imprisoned organizers. It is imperative that we do whatever we can to mitigate the risks they face. It is imperative that we show up when the state moves against our comrades behind the walls.

From the very beginning of my organizing inside, I knew I would face retaliation from the

state. When people ask me how I withstand the repression, I tell them: *“Every fighter knows he or she will be hit. It comes with getting in the ring. So I expect to take some punches. But what keeps me in the fight is my corner. I have a great corner, a great support system, so I can go the distance.”*

“Imprisoned organizers should never be naive about how far the state will go to stop them from building collective power behind the walls.”

I am clear-eyed about the risks involved in organizing. And I have been hit quite a few times. And yet, I am going the distance. The support and solidarity I have received have mitigated those risks and enabled me to stay in the fight. ♦

About the Author: Stevie Wilson is a Black, queer abolitionist who is writing, (dis)organizing, and building study groups and community behind the wall in Pennsylvania. A subscriber of *The Abolitionist* for a few years now, Stevie became a columnist of our newspaper in 2020. “9971” is his column focused on radical study for abolition named after a network of autonomous study groups behind the wall.

KITES TO THE EDITORS:

The following contains letters and submissions from imprisoned people to *The Abolitionist Editorial Collective*. Printed as “Kites to the Editors,” some reference this issue’s anti-war theme or content from previous issues of *The Abolitionist*, while others address different topics of the authors’ choosing.



Letter to The Editor Responding to Issue 42

By John Santoro Jr

Dear Critical Resistance (CR),

I’m recently in receipt of Issue 42 of *The Abolitionist*. It’s my very first issue of the publication and I must say it is incredibly informative, educational, brutally honest, coherent, comprehensive, on-topic, relevant, and extremely powerful. I enjoyed every single moment of reading the material. Not only is the information itself meaningful, but I feel personally connected to each subject and the writers themselves. This is where I feel like I belong in my heart, and I only regret not being made aware of CR sooner.

I would just like to reiterate that the information you provide in *The Abolitionist* is critical. It is highly organized and accurate. CR is obviously an extremely capable and competent organization with deep networks and tons of history. The work you’re doing towards prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition and freedom in general is amazing. You should all be very proud of yourselves for your hard work, sacrifice, and dedication to the cause(s) you serve. I look forward to becoming more and more involved with CR and your work as I become more informed and capable.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention Masai Ehehosi. I send my regards for his passing and acknowledge his amazing dedication to the greater struggle with CR. I never met or knew the man but based on the little I read of him he

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INSIDE-OUTSIDE FISHING LINE: Our Liberation is Bound Together: Cross-wall Solidarity to Interrupt Gender Oppression

By Roberta Bell, Anastasia Franco, Talib Williams, and Hugo Gonzalez with Mar Golub and Liz Atkins-Pattenson of The Abolitionist Editorial Collective

Editor's Note: For this issue's "Inside-Outside Fishing Line", Critical Resistance (CR) and The Abolitionist Editorial Collective brought together imprisoned and recently released organizers for a roundtable on how our people resist gender oppression and sexual violence across walls. Together, they discuss how we need to build stronger cross-wall solidarity to end gender oppression and abolish the prison industrial complex (PIC).

The conversation was facilitated by CR members **Liz Atkins-Pattenson** and **Mar Golub**, who interviewed four organizers inside and outside of prisons: **Roberta Bell** (imprisoned at Federal Correctional Institute or FCI Waseca in Minnesota who organizes with **California Coalition for Women Prisoners - CCWP**); **Anastasia Franco** (formerly imprisoned member of **Flying Over Walls - FOW** - and CR's Prisoner Correspondence Coordinator); **Talib Williams** (imprisoned at Soledad State Prison in California, who is the chairman of **Success Stories**); and **Hugo Gonzalez** (formerly imprisoned organizer and current Director of Public Outreach for Success Stories). Sharing their expertise about how cross-wall solidarity interrupts gender oppression inside prisons, these fierce organizers offer tools for how people inside and outside of prisons can be engaged in the struggle for gender liberation as an intersectional fight for abolition.

The Abolitionist: Most of our readers (of this newspaper) are in prisons for men. Thinking about connections between gender violence inside and outside of prisons, enlisting men in the fight against sexual violence is crucial.

Hugo and Talib, your strategy at Success Stories for eliminating gender oppression starts with reaching out to people in prisons for men. How does that work?

Hugo: **Success Stories** is playing a strong role within prisons where people are living for an idea of "what a man is," an idea enforced by prisons. We're tearing down gender construction from the inside. If the PIC is a beast that needs attacking, we're going for "the Achilles' heel," by going to men that have caused harm and connecting with them—getting deep about why they've done so. We utilize something called the "Top Five" exercise, which helps individuals prioritize what's most important to them. Laying it out that way helps us see when we're practicing self-betrayal, because we are not living up to what we say is most important to us.

While I was doing time in prison, I was living how I thought I needed to survive. This idea of self-preservation led me to doing things I told myself I had no choice not to, that—despite any negative impacts—would make me more of a man. I didn't realize at the time that I was practicing self-betrayal by going against what was most important to me, like valuing the people that I love, or being able to see people as human beings rather than obstacles I had to overcome. Trying to prove I was a "man" put me in the worst position. Honestly, I feel like I was incarcerated before I was physically put in prison. Mentally, I was imprisoned by this rigid blueprint, a distorted definition of what a man is. I was running for it so wildly by the age of 16 that once I got to the end, I was facing a triple life sentence.

At Success Stories, we don't start with the topic of feminism—we're simply talking about how true you've been living by your own standards, or how committed you've been living what you say is most important to you. Over time, it be-



Poster by Roger Peet. Courtesy of Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

comes clear that upholding the stereotypes of what being a "man" is necessitates the oppression of women, queer, trans, and gender non-conforming folks, and ultimately, ourselves.

"Honestly, I feel like I was incarcerated before I was physically put in prison. Mentally, I was imprisoned by this rigid blueprint, a distorted definition of what a man is."

Talib: I was introduced to **Success Stories** as a participant by two friends of mine, Richie Reseda and Charles Berry, who I met shortly after arriving at Soledad back in 2014. A part of a large influx of young (mostly) people of color arrived at the prison, our needs were not being met by self-help groups that were primarily focused on parole preparation rooted in ideas that perpetuate carceral thinking—overly focusing on the responsibility of the individual, presenting ourselves in a certain way in front of the board, which, in my experience, is harmful, even if it results in someone being found "suitable" by the parole board.

Success Stories was different. Charles and Richie (in collaboration with an entire community) developed a 12-week curriculum that addresses the beliefs about us as incarcerated men and revises the script so that we understand why people do the harm they do. Then, we build more clarity around what success means and looks like for us. As participants, we learn that the beliefs society teaches us are none other than toxic masculinity, which Success Stories understands as "the belief that one's manhood is defined and measured by the practice, promotion, or willingness to be violent, the ability to accumulate, the objectification of women, and being emotionless."

The Abolitionist: **Anastasia, what is FOW's approach to cross-wall solidarity and gender liberation with queer, trans, and gender-expansive people locked up in cages? Why is strengthening cross-wall solidarity with queer and trans prisoners especially important in this moment?**

Anastasia: At **FOW**, we fight alongside imprisoned people, not only through advocacy but also by building direct relationships, organizing inside-outside solidarity, and building infrastructure that strengthens imprisoned trans and queer people's ability to survive and resist while caged. This includes direct correspondence to reduce isolation, supporting trans prisoners in advocating for themselves through legal and public pressure, working with abolitionist organizations to uplift the demands of queer and trans people inside, disrupting the state's ability to disappear trans people in prison by amplifying their stories and fighting for policy changes that reduce harm.

FOW understands that gender liberation and abolition aren't separate struggles—queer and trans people inside and outside of cages are fighting for survival every day. Every organization can play a role in resisting the PIC's anti-trans violence, whether that's providing direct support, building pressure, or disrupting the narratives that justify these attacks.

The Abolitionist: In putting this column together, we initially planned to use the language of "sexual and gender-based violence" to emphasize that sexual violence is caused by social structures and systems of oppression rather than isolated instances of individualized harm.

Anastasia, can you share your thoughts on "gender-based violence" (GBV) as a term for our organizing?

Anastasia: Absolutely. Language shapes power, and we're in a moment where GBV is being weaponized to justify anti-trans policies. Trans people in prison are hyper-punished, often tortured in solitary confinement by prison administrators for their so-called protection or for the "safety" of other prisoners, and GBV is used in these transphobic and hetero-patriarchal justifications. What was once a term used to name structural and systemic violence is now being manipulated to frame trans women as a threat, rather than recognizing them as targets of gender violence. Right now, we're seeing this in prison policy fights like California's proposed senate bill SB 311 and assembly bill AB 1464, where arguments about "protecting women" are being used to push trans women out of women's spaces and into even more dangerous conditions, justifying discriminatory housing policies and creating segregated units based solely on gender identity and conviction history, all in the name of "public safety."

This erasure is incredibly dangerous. The reality is that trans women—especially Black trans women—are among the most vulnerable to sexual violence both inside and outside of prison. The data is clear: Trans women are far more likely to be assaulted in men's prisons than cisgender women are to be harmed by trans women in women's prisons. Yet, bipartisan policy makers are leveraging GBV language to pass exclusionary laws that fuel transphobic violence through incarceration. Abolitionist work requires us to be vigilant about how we use language in power and to refuse frameworks that erase the reality of state violence.

The Abolitionist: Thank you for that explanation. It's striking how the PIC justifies violence in the name of "protection" when in fact prisons are inherently violent.

Roberta, what has been your approach in resisting gender oppression as an imprisoned organizer with CCWP?

Roberta: I've been imprisoned for 32 years and have approached the violence I've experienced and witnessed in a lot of different ways over these years. Having done so much time inside,

Continues on next page

I feel a duty to help people navigate the system, and most importantly, to encourage young women to know their worth and believe that they deserve better. This was the spirit of our fight to demand justice for survivors of sexual abuse at California’s Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) Dublin. One of the approaches **CCWP** takes is supporting people in prisons for women to wage the fights needed for us to defend ourselves from the different harms, violences, and mistreatment we’re forced to endure, and to be treated with dignity while inside. My role has been to help others navigate these conditions and figure out their options for defending ourselves against the system that abuses us in some way every day.

The Abolitionist: Yes, the organizing that you’ve been a part of with other imprisoned people at FCI Dublin—to expose years of rampant staff and guard rape, sexual violence and torture of prisoners there—has really been remarkable and brave.

Can you tell us about what was happening at FCI Dublin and how CCWP and the Dublin Prison Solidarity coalition (DPS) challenged these conditions?

Roberta: Forgive me for not wanting to elaborate much on events at FCI Dublin. A lot of us are still processing things and healing from the trauma of sexual harm and abuse that took place over decades. Let’s just say things were spiraling. Guards and prison staff started getting arrested and confessing, and things just went off the rails. Being like the collective “mother” figure, I was confided in by many people who were also harmed, and holding all of us was heavy. I had to make a choice: To keep my reputation intact with prison officials, or to show these young women that we deserve better and to help us decide what we wanted to do based on our experiences. I decided to support the women. We filed a class action lawsuit and took prison administration to court.

As a result of my decision, I was thrown in “quarantine” several times. On one occasion, they gave me nothing. I just had a bare mattress. When I say nothing else, I literally mean that. I slept in the clothes I went in with on the green, bare mattress. No shower or change of clothes until the third day. This type of punishment puts fear in people. When I came out, I did not stop, however. I carried on as if to ask, “*Is that all you have?*” People saw that no matter what they did to me (and others), I kept speaking out and doing what I knew was right: standing up for and with these brave women. We knew we were getting somewhere, because the more we spoke out and showed proof, the angrier they got. The more they did.

After the Special Monitor was appointed and things were turning around, the prison quickly shuttered to evade full accountability. Instead of being released, the women, including me, were transferred to other prisons. Despite the prison’s closure being controversial, CCWP and the lawyers helped us make a difference and dispel people’s fear and trepidation. We won because we stuck together. We had to stay the course, and even now we continue the struggle forward.

The Abolitionist: We are living in a period of intensified targeting and violence against queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming people, inside and outside of cages.

Anastasia, how does FOW understand these tactics? What are some of the most severe threats queer and trans folks are facing right now?

Anastasia: The PIC has always been a tool for enforcing gender conformity and violently punishing those who don’t fit within rigid, binary gender roles. But right now, we’re seeing an escalation in explicitly anti-trans policies targeting incarcerated people. **A major tactic is the administrative disappearance** of trans people in prison. Some states are making it harder for trans women to be caged in women’s facilities, while others are systematically misclassifying them to prevent them from accessing necessary healthcare or legal protections. Prisons

are also using bureaucracy to deny name and gender marker selections, making it easier for the system to ignore and erase trans existence. Another urgent threat is the rise of anti-trans legislation under the guise of GBV prevention. Bills like *SB 311* are using sexual violence as an excuse to block trans women from gender-affirming housing, while claiming to “protect” cis women, as I mentioned before. These policies don’t protect anyone—they make trans people more vulnerable to harm while reinforcing criminalization.

Additionally, barriers and repression through suppressing communication, education, and connection for imprisoned people are ramping up. Prisons are increasingly blocking letters, books, and resources that support trans prisoners, preventing them from accessing legal advocacy, community support, or information for basic survival. Outside of cages, queer and trans communities are being attacked as well, especially trans youth, through bathroom bans, healthcare restrictions, and drag bans. It’s all connected. The PIC is escalating its anti-trans repression—criminalizing transgender identity for merely existing, in every way the PIC knows how. We need to be clear: These attacks are a coordinated effort to disappear trans people from public life—both inside and outside of prisons.

The Abolitionist: In all these responses, cross-wall organizing plays a central role in building solidarity to resist sexual violence and gender oppression. Returning to the FCI Dublin campaign, the DPS coalition and individual survivors won a \$116 million settlement, the largest settlement in the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) history. Roberta, you mentioned the closing of FCI Dublin was controversial. **Can you tell us more about the results of the campaign and how it felt to see FCI Dublin closed?**

“We won because we stuck together. We had to stay the course, and even now we continue the struggle forward.”

Roberta: Yes, we won. For myself with a life sentence, it was never about money. When I got involved, it was all about the violent policies and what needed to change. I was fighting for my life inside; when things like this happen, we catch hell.

It was not a good feeling to see the prison close in the way it was. If the prison had been closed in the thick of things, as a part of meeting our demands, I am sure there would have been a sense of relief. But they didn’t. They chose to shut it down to not be responsible for the harm and abuse they committed. The whole process was horrible. The staff they brought in to shut the prison down were *NASTY* too. They dogged us out. They were going to send us to safer places, but not home? BS!!! Rather than release people, we were spread all over the country. We were separated from our core support system—each other. For the most part, the new institutions we were transferred to have not been welcoming. Transferring us proves that issues at Dublin are not an anomaly. What was happening at Dublin is EVERYWHERE in the US prison system.

“We need to be clear: These attacks are a coordinated effort to disappear trans people from public life—both inside and outside of prisons.”

The Abolitionist: What strategies and tools for resisting toxic masculinity and gender oppression does Success Stories want other imprisoned men and men outside to know and use?

Talib: At Success Stories, vulnerability and storytelling are used to reveal to participants what really happens when we are harmed. Prison is filled with people acutely aware that trying to survive in this society led them to prison, especially those who have done harm. But in order to be accountable and transform our choices and behavior, we have to get to the root cause of it.

Success Stories gets extremely personal. We talk about the things that most people shy away from, because we know that’s where the healing is. This generates self-transformation for collective liberation by getting people to interrogate their worldviews and slowly align themselves as close to an abolitionist’s perspective as possible, understanding deeply that the systems that hurt people are created by people who believe it is okay to hurt people. As long as people believe it is okay to hurt people, harmful systems will exist. Participants leave our program understanding all this, and commit themselves to healing and finding other ways to survive and resolve conflict.

Hugo: As men—whether in prison or outside—we have a responsibility to heal ourselves and each other from the harmful blueprint of toxic masculinity. It’s important that we stand in solidarity with women and our queer, trans, and gender non-confirming siblings as we work to transform ourselves. This is how we can transform the world. Gender liberation is essential in that transformation, and in the fight for PIC abolition. It’s what’s going to get us—every gender—all free.

Talib: People can get involved by either writing to Success Stories and signing up for our newsletter (23638 Newhall Ave Ste 6 #356 Newhall, CA 91321), or get a family member to check out our website (successstoriesprogram.org), and reaching out to your Community Resource Manager to inquire about bringing Success Stories’ program to your institution. ♦

About the Authors:

Roberta Bell has been imprisoned for more than 32 years. A proud mother, she has three children and five granddaughters. An organizer with CCWP, she was one of the plaintiffs in the class action lawsuit against prison staff at FCI Dublin.

Anastasia Franco coordinates prisoner correspondence nationally for CR. She’s also deeply involved with FOW, a queer and trans prisoner solidarity project that works to build networks of support and resistance with imprisoned LGBTQ+ people, particularly transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive individuals who face extreme violence and isolation inside. As a trans woman of color who has been imprisoned, Anastasia knows firsthand how the PIC is designed to erase and brutalize trans people.

Hugo Gonzalez: As the Director of Public Outreach, Hugo is a co-founder of Success Stories, which he helped create while doing a triple life sentence at Soledad State Prison. His case fell under the notorious Youth Crime and Gang Prevention Act, or Proposition 21 in California, that extended three strikes and allowed for children 14 years old and up to be tried as adults. In 2017, Governor Jerry Brown commuted his sentence, in part due to his work with Success Stories. Gonzalez also works as a forensic expert representing youth who are being charged as adults. Through Success Stories, he works to create an alternative to punishment that builds communities of integrity by delivering transformative feminist political education for youth and adults with an emphasis on people who have caused harm.

Talib Williams: In prison for 21 years now, Talib is the current chairman of Success Stories, and is currently imprisoned at Soledad State Prison in California where he’s been locked up since 2014. An author, journalist, and Imam, Talib is also the founder of the Asmau’u Project, an Islamic outreach community program dedicated to providing culturally relevant education rooted in abolitionist strategies to eliminate harm in all its forms.



“Izzy” by imprisoned artist, Michael Eaton. Courtesy of ABO Comix.

Continues from page 15

was an incredible force, and an awesome human being. Condolences, my friends.

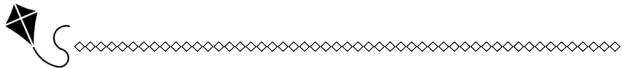
It is in this spirit that I now wish to assist in continuing this effort of so many who have come before me, and to help lay the groundwork for those who shall come after. I thank you for the opportunity on behalf of both myself and all similarly situated.

With love, peace, and in solidarity,

-John N Santoro Jr

About the Author: John N Santoro Jr is currently imprisoned at the Elmira Correctional Facility in Elmira, New York. You can write to him at:

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Elmira, New York 14901



Making a Lasting Mark

By Tutankhamon E Waterman

The greatest thing someone can do is help others when they're down. This especially was true for Calvin Arey, who fought against the cruel conditions of his imprisonment in the 1970s, and continues to help prisoners to this day by creating the Albert Woodfox Memorial Mini Freedom Library for prisoners.

As a prisoner, Mr Arey was housed in the notorious Virginia State Penitentiary in Richmond, also known as "The Wall." Prisoners there faced harsh conditions and were punished with solitary confinement and bread and water diets for speaking out or assisting other prisoners with legal matters. In a landmark civil rights case *Landman v Royster*, Arey and four other plaintiffs joined forces to fight back against Virginia's Department of Corrections' treatment of its prisoners. Mr Arey and his co-plaintiffs proved to the federal courts that Virginia prisons violated their Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments, and their case established the rudiments of a national Prisoner's Bill of Rights.

Nearly 50 years after that groundbreaking victory, Mr Arey discovered his story in a book by Dale Brumfield on the history of the Virginia State Penitentiary. He reached out to Mr Brumfield and an article came from their encounter ("The Unbroken" in January 2022's issue of *Richmond Magazine*). That article, detailing Mr Arey's battle against Virginia's abuse of prisoners, landed in the hands of Shebri Dillon, a prisoner of the Virginia system. The impact of what she read led to a correspondence between the two parties, and a friendship was born from it.

As Mr Arey understood about the lonely times spent in a prison cell, he asked Ms Dillon did she read and her answer was yes. He suggested a few authors for her to check out. But not a single one of those books was in the Fluvanna Correction Center's (FCC) library. Like most prisons, reading material was limited due to funding, politics, and other things that keep a prisoner from striving for more than a respectful prison reputation. So, Mr Arey decided to invest in sharing his love of reading with a woman he'd never met. His motto was "each one teach one."

Just as Mr Arey continued to send books to Ms Dillon, she would loan them out to other women at FCC, making a kind of mutual aid library run from her cell. Mr Arey continues to send in books to uplift Virginia prisoners and support the fight against injustice. The library has since grown to six different prisons around Virginia.

The namesake, **Albert Woodfox Memorial Mini Freedom Library**, is a tribute to another freedom fighter. *Solitary*, by Albert Woodfox, tells the story of his Black Panther ties and his activism in Louisiana's Angola prison, where he spent 44 years in solitary confinement as a political prisoner. Mr Woodfox eventually won his fight, walking free after enduring unimaginable suffering. Mr Arey was so moved by the story that he reached out to Mr Woodfox who, sadly, had died from COVID-19 that very morning. As



By Alex Aldrich Barrett for the People's Paper Co-op, courtesy of Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

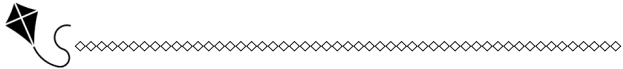
a way of honoring him, Mr Arey named the library after him.

Albert Woodfox, who became known as one of the Angola Three, never gave up the fight for liberation. He never gave into what the prison system attempted to siphon away: his humanity. Now Calvin Arey does that each day as he ships out a new book to his librarians throughout Virginia. He wants each of them to know their humanity wasn't taken from them when they were cuffed and shackled.

The imprisoned mind can be sharpened into implements able to pierce the prison industrial complex with knowledge, value, and purpose. Thanks to heroes like Albert Woodfox, Calvin Arey and the librarians of the Freedom Libraries, a lasting mark has washed the system of old, creating new thinkers, simply because knowledge of the past makes them powerful.

About the Author: Motivational speaker, screenwriter, and author, **Tutankhamon E Waterman's** novels foray into science fiction, fantasy, and urban literature. In addition to his writing, he has spent years tutoring and supporting men in prison with skills gained from his own experience with imprisonment. Tutankhamon E Waterman is currently imprisoned at the Nottoway Correctional Center in Burkeville, Virginia.

You can write to him at:
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Burkeville, VA 23922



Letter to the Editor

By Gary Farlow

Dear Friends,
I'm writing to you from South Carolina, a very "red" state, red as in Republican. In fact, it's the *only* state in the US that recognizes "Confederate Memorial Day" as an official state holiday to honor the Confederacy. I think these people labor under the delusion that they won the Civil War! As an LGBTQ man with a background in state politics, I think my story might interest you.

As you can imagine, I've had to endure a lot of persecution from both fellow prisoners and staff at virtually every facility I've been in since I entered the abyss of the US prison system in 1991. While I was imprisoned in the North Carolina (NC) system, I endured attempted rape and verbal harassment due to my LGBTQ status and conviction. Not only will I have to navigate the trauma I've experienced while in prison as well

as the stigma our society places upon people with felony convictions, but I will also be required to register as a sex offender and wear an ankle GPS (global position systems) device.

Prior to my arrest and subsequent imprisonment, I was very active in my community, city, state, and even on the national level. In total honesty and in the interest of transparency, I was a Republican, a supporter of Ronald Reagan, and a nominee of both Reagan and Bush (HW) to positions in their administrations. I even served in Governor James Martin (R-NC) administration on the state level. You see, my background is a bit unusual for a person in my situation.

While I served in the Republican Party, I also served as Chair of the Greensboro Human Relation Commission and was instrumental in helping to establish the Commemoration of the sit-ins that took place in Greensboro, NC in 1960. We opened in the International Civil Rights Museum in the former Woolworth's where those first sit-ins occurred, and I also wrote a column for *The Greensboro Sun*, a local and liberal weekly in which I advocated for LGBTQ, senior citizens, minorities, and local government accountability. It's no surprise that I often incurred surveillance and suppression by the GOP for my independent streak that saw me in conflict with established party platforms.

I say all this to not only give you some personal background but more to say that I now realize just how blind I truly was. I am now quite ashamed of my work on behalf of a system that has been built on the oppression of so many, which continues to thrive globally. I watch the rise of the far-right (again!) in Germany, France, through the re-election of Trump (!) and ongoing genocide in Palestine. Our own nation faces new tests in 2025, as women's rights, LGBTQ equality, legal measures to advocate for affirmative action, and economic equality will all be under attack – and already are. *I* was part of the problem; *I* helped contribute to this.

Despite being imprisoned unjustly for 34 years, I still feel at fault. Since entering this system, I have labored to atone for my misguided loyalties. I currently contribute to the Prison Journalism Project, the Justice Arts Coalition, the Marshall Project, ABO Comix, Let's Get Free, Shining Light, and at several colleges and universities. I have authored several books, including *A Survivor's Guide To Prison Slang* (a dictionary of prison slang), *America's Toxic Prisons*, and have completed two comic books that deal with climate change. In addition, I have authored several poetry collections, *Fragments of a Dream*, *Into The Abyss*, and *Conferring With The Moon*.

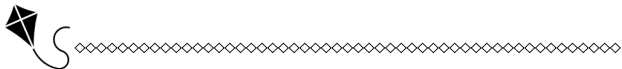
I am now neither a Republican nor a Democrat as I believe *both* are simply after the same ends – a perpetuation of the status quo and the continued oppression of millions worldwide. Despite my past, it is my hope to perhaps contribute, even in some small way, maybe through my art or writing, to the universal cause of freedom.

Yours In Unity,

- Gary

About the Author: Gary Farlow is an imprisoned artist and writer who is currently imprisoned at the MacDougall Correctional Institution, in Ridgeville, South Carolina. You can write to him at:

Gary Farlow #00222136
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1516 Old Gilliard Road
Ridgeville, SC 29472



Growing Fascism in Prisons

By Dave Annarelli

Mainstream media outlets are starting to notice and report on the growing spread of fascism, globally and in the US. While the "hidden in plain sight" fascism in the US should be of grave concern to anyone who values freedom—as the entire prison industrial complex (PIC) functions as a beachhead for fascism—Virginia

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prisons offer concrete examples of what may soon be imposed in your own backyard.

A clear example of this can be seen in the attack on the First Amendment, which is currently under assault from every angle across the country. In the Virginia Department of Corrections, the open constitutional assault is in full swing with regular mass violations of both the spoken and printed word at the Pocahontas State Corrections Center. It is widespread and too often based solely on the whim of a mail room worker. Political and religious texts are under heavy assault; those of a political nature are being falsely labeled as "personal correspondence" then quickly denied for being "too many pages."

The US Supreme Court has stated, explicitly, that the First Amendment "does not end at the prison gates. It is ABSOLUTE." Yet every day of every year and in every prison (37 total in Virginia), the attack on what prisoners can read, think, write, say, and share with the outside world continues. Prisons have always been a testing ground for what those in power are able to impose and get away with. And as the violations of our rights in here continue to become permanent casualties, we can expect to see these casualties spread beyond prison walls, spilling into every home, store, and street corner as they become prisons holding more people captive and in thrall.

Most of the staff here are from the same small town, deep in the mountains, and many are family by blood or marriage, sharing the same sorts of behaviors and sentiments of this geographical bias. We are only a couple of hours from where the "Unite the White" rally happened in Charlottesville, Virginia. It's no wonder these officers willingly and openly carry out threats, verbal abuse, and targeted acts of violence against us, particularly those of us with progressive political ideologies who refuse to be silenced. However, while they continue using their power to silence, control, and suppress us, they fail to recognize that they are being used as tools by the very systems that will come for us all, engulfing all of our communities, hidden in plain sight.

Apparently, history has taught us nothing, because the worst moments of human history are repeating themselves. As conservatives rally to "protect their individual rights," fascism and the PIC continue to spread, along with every other form of pestilence. While prisons are a testing ground and are very much the foundation from which this process begins, they are not where it ends.

Our communities need to do what is necessary to protect not just our rights, but our humanity. When writing letters, complaining online, and elections are not enough, it can feel like nothing will change. But the status quo is unacceptable. Action is needed! We must fight for abolition!

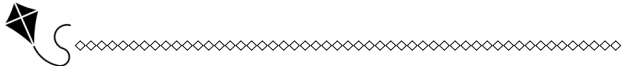
Resist & Disrupt,

- Dave Annarelli

About the Author: David Annarelli is a father, musician, activist and political prisoner. He is wrong-

fully convicted and unlawfully imprisoned in occupied Virginia. He is a contributing writer at Prison Journalism Project: prisonjournalismproject.org/ our-writers. You can learn more about his work on his website davidannarelli.wordpress.com and listen to his song, "Reflections from a Concrete Box" on YouTube. You can write to him at:

David Annarelli #1853637
Lawrenceville Correctional Center
1607 Planters Road
Lawrenceville VA 23868



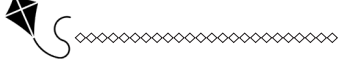
"Rest in Glory"

Poem dedicated for Brother Masai for Issue 42

By Devante Gilbert-Bey

"Rest in Peace." The phrase for you is too ordinary
I'd rather say "Rest in Glory"
That's more fitting for someone extraordinary
Praise be to Allah for the world to be blessed with your knowledge
One conversation with you would make me feel like I've been to college
When times were hard you knew there wasn't no stopping
'Cause when you live for the cause giving up is never an option
Even though I don't know you, we are brothers through Islam
With the same revolutionary goals, stopping for nothing to push the cause
Critical resistance to all oppositions who want to bear arms
Long live Masai who showed it ain't hard to reach for the stars!
Rest in glory, Masai Ekehosi!

About the Poet: Devante Gilbert-Bey was imprisoned at the Correctional Industrial Facility in Plainfield, Indiana at the time of submitting this poem. He has since been released. Welcome home, Devante!



"A Real Girl"

Poem by Jeri Shawah Pyrson

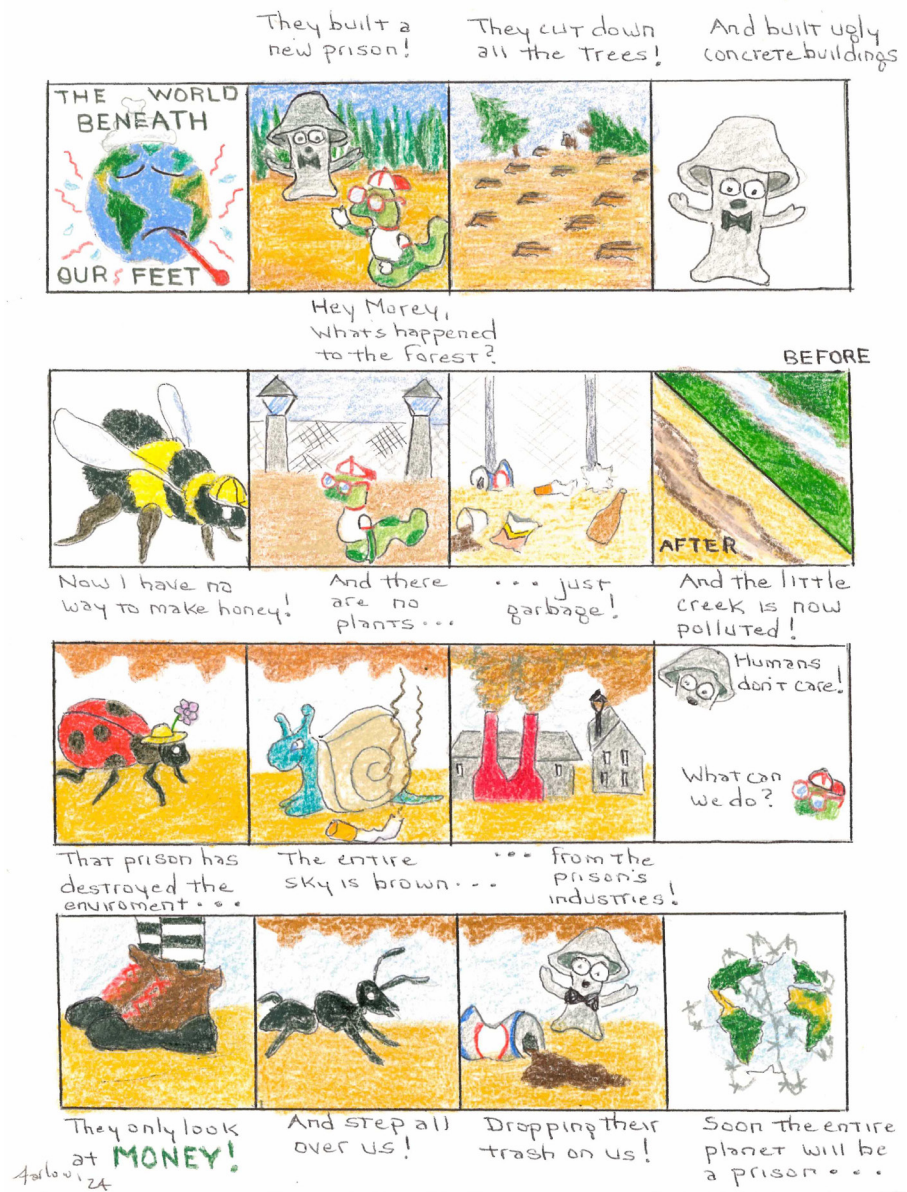
Just a real girl-
Hides inside
Fearfully trembling in her corner.
Always wondering
When she can escape...
Let out of her cage
Allowed to be free

From the chains crafted
By fears wielded in rage.

Just to be a real girl
With her emotions displayed
For all to see without bias.
To be a part of something
Greater than average-
Something that gives life
and not death- Air to breathe
And not smoke and mirrors.
I maybe have a masculine
Form outside, but inside
I am very feminine and
Just want to be
A real girl.
No attachments
To cloud the real me
Inside.

About the Poet: Jeri Shawah Pyrson is currently imprisoned at the Snake River Correctional Institution in Ontario, Oregon. You can write to her at:

Jeri Shawah Pyrson
SID 5616018
Snake River Correctional Institution
777 Stanton Blvd
Ontario, OR 97914-8335



"The World Beneath Our Feet" by Gary Farlow. Courtesy of ABO Comix.

Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association: A Conversation with Critical Resistance

Critical Resistance (CR): Currently in the US, there is widespread attention and organizing around policing and imprisonment, with many increasingly making connections to struggles in Palestine. Yet, the relationship and solidarity between liberation movements in the US and Palestine has existed for a long time, particularly visible in the 1960's and 70's.

Do you see that solidarity being practiced inside and outside of prisons differently from the past, and how so?

Addameer (APS): In recent events, and in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter campaign,

Continues on next page

ABBY THROWBACK:

Editors' Note: The following selected reprint for this issue's Abby Throwback is an original interview conducted by a Critical Resistance (CR) member in 2016 with Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association in Palestine. The conversation was hosted for **Issue 26 of The Abolitionist**, which explored the theme of "Obstacles and Opportunities" as CR weathered a shifting terrain with the rise of Trump and intensified conditions of state repression due to right-wing consolidation during the onset of Trump's first presidential term.

We are republishing this 2016 interview with Addameer because the insights it offers remain alarmingly urgent. As the Israeli-apartheid state carries out a genocidal campaign in Gaza and expands its project of carceral domination across historic Palestine, the use of imprisonment, surveillance, and administrative detention as tools of occupation is more visible—and more globally legitimized—than ever. As of April 2025, Israel has been torturing 3,498 Palestinians in administrative detention without charge or trial—the highest number ever recorded by Addameer. Despite ongoing attacks—including raids on its offices, arrests of staff, and smear campaigns—Addameer continues its critical work defending Palestinian prisoners and exposing the carceral arm of settler-colonialism. **Free Palestine, Free 'em All!**

Addameer has witnessed growing solidarity between the Black movement against racially motivated violence and excessive police force, with the movement against exclusionist policies and extra-judicial killings in occupied Palestine by Israeli police and soldiers. This comes as no surprise, given that the movement for equality and justice in the US is linked with the movement for Palestinian fundamental and human rights in a political context of repression. This is a historical connection. As Addameer wrote in the event of Black Lives Matter solidarity work:

“Like Palestinians today, African Americans in [the US] were disenfranchised, segregated, oppressed. The Jim Crow laws banned them from train cars, from classrooms and legislatures. These laws, which enforced racial segregation have piercing links with the current laws in occupied Palestine, where roads continue to be for Israelis only, where Palestinians are forced to go through degrading checkpoints, where the right to movement is ever absent, and where the value of Palestinian human life and human dignity is devalued.”

“The lynching of Emmett Till, a 14 year old child in Mississippi in 1955, draws disturbing parallels with the burning alive of 16 year old Palestinian Mohammad Abu Khdeir from Jerusalem in 2014. The impunity and lack of accountability is in marked and distressing similarity.”

CR: As people across the US continue to call for reforms to reduce imprisoned populations, the use of electronic ankle monitoring has become a widespread practice and is often referred to as an “alternative” to imprisonment. We know it is used on youth in Palestine, with Israel being one of the largest producers of ankle monitors in the world.

How does Addameer understand surveillance, electronic monitoring, and restriction in movement with relation to imprisonment? And how do you understand those things in relation to Israel’s occupation more broadly?

APS: Addameer considers ankle monitoring and other forms of monitoring and surveillance as a form of control and domination. Surveillance, electronic monitoring, and restriction in movement are intrinsically linked to government repression of Palestinian youth, in occupied Jerusalem, the occupied West Bank, and historic Palestine. The Israeli occupation forces use such surveillance to actively repress Palestinian calls for basic fundamental rights – and an end to the occupation. The Israeli government has contracted with a security company G4S which provides such equipment, despite the systematic and widespread torture and ill

treatment that takes place within Israeli prisons, where children are threatened with the arrest of family members, refused basic food and water, and physically and mentally tortured. This has in no way brought greater security or brought basic fundamental rights to Palestinian children who are systemically deprived of such in these detention centers.

“Surveillance, electronic monitoring, and restriction in movement are intrinsically linked to government repression of Palestinian youth, in occupied Jerusalem, the occupied West Bank, and historic Palestine. The Israeli occupation forces use such surveillance to actively repress Palestinian calls for basic fundamental rights – and an end to the occupation.”

CR: Over the years Addameer has played a significant role in advocating on behalf of prisoners and their struggles to get free, including hunger strikers. In California, inside-outside organizing blossomed during and after [prisoner-led resistance against solitary confinement] in 2011 and 2013.

Can you talk about the organizing that prisoners are engaged in and how that connects to organizing efforts outside of prison walls? What are ways that people on the outside reach and engage prisoners in political organizing, and vice versa?

APS: Palestinian political prisoners have a common solidarity – they find themselves in these prisons and detention centers as a result of repression, occupation, domination. Having said that, Palestinian prisoners are generally limited to attorney meetings – which are often denied on security grounds – and visits with family members – which are also often denied on security grounds. This severely limits their communication and interaction with the outside world. Despite all these restrictions prisoners managed all these years to initiate joint hunger strikes and succeeded to communicate internally and with the outside, they played role in pushing for the unity government so they are always connected politically and trying to take active role, the Palestinian society is still sensitive to the issue of political prisoners and they show solidarity especially on time of hunger strike. All the efforts of the prison authorities’ ambitions to totally disconnect the prisoners from their society failed.

CR: On International Women's Day this year, you put out a report about Palestinian women prisoners.

“All the efforts of the prison authorities’ ambitions to totally disconnect the prisoners from their society failed.”

Given the infamous use of torture used in Israeli prisons, women in Palestine have often been at the forefront of the prisoner movement. What are the conditions facing women prisoners today? Can you talk about resistance to the imprisonment of women?

APS: The conditions for female Palestinians prisoners inside Israeli interrogation, detention and prison centers and even hospitals are very bad and inhumane. The abuse, ill-treatment, and torture of Palestinian women and girls take place within the context of ongoing occupation and annexation of Palestinian lands. Female prisoners are often denied attorney access, and kept for several days or months under interrogation where they are subjected to torture and ill-treatment. A significant number of female detainees currently imprisoned are either wounded or ill. Some of them taken in the mass arrest campaigns starting in October 2015 were injured by bullets during their arrest, and have received little, if any, medical treatment.

Also, prison conditions are not very hygienic, prison cells are very dirty and there is no special sensitivity for the needs of women in detention. Female prisoners have been subjected to sexual abuse whether physically or verbally, which impacts them negatively. The imprisonment of women and girls is a practice used by the Israeli government to repress Palestinian women, who resist the occupation, across sections of society, including students, mothers, political leaders, and children. In Israel there is just one prison for women. Still, the Palestinian women prisoners are [caged] in two other facilities because they were attacked by Israeli women prisoners in the past in the facility for women. And still, even if they would be separated in a women’s prison, they will be discriminated against in most of their rights since they would be considered “security prisoners.”

CR: Khaled al-Azraq, a former Palestinian political prisoner, wrote while in an Israeli jail: "In prison I found what I was not expecting to find: I found inside the prison what I could not find outside of it. In prison I found Palestine's political, national, revolutionary university. It was in prison that I realized that knowledge is what paves the road to victory and freedom."

How does education among Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons remain grounded by a vision of collective liberation. Or is it?

APS: Education for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention is made conditional on security considerations. Accordingly, the prison commander may disqualify a prisoner from studies at any time for security, discipline or other reasons. And since 2012, the high court decided that continuing study on the open Hebrew university is not allowed any more for political prisoners. After admission, only paper books are permitted, and the contents of each must be checked for security and noted in the prisoner’s file for surveillance purposes before the prisoners are permitted to receive the book.

While education plays an important role in forming a collective identity and collective ways of thinking about liberation, it remains highly restricted among prisoners. Since most political prisoners have nothing to do other than reading books, they become very well educated and aware of their surroundings. Some of them have written books while they are in prison and have stressed the importance of collective liberation, rather than individual. For most of them I would say, the prison becomes a school where they learn from books and from each other more than learning outside of prison. Although the prison is really bad, they are able to create space to construct and share their ideas of identity and liberation. ♦

About the Author: A Palestinian non-governmental, civil institution that works to support Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli and Palestinian prisons, **Addameer** (Arabic for conscience) **Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association** was established in 1992 by a group of activists interested in human rights. The center offers free legal aid to political prisoners, advocates their rights at the national and international level, and works to end torture and other violations of prisoners' rights through monitoring, legal procedures and solidarity campaigns. **Learn more at addameer.org.**



By Rommy Torrico, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative, 2024.

Critical Resistance (CR) Bulletin

Quick announcements from CR's chapters and national workgroups

Welcome to our newest chapter: CR Central Appalachia!

CR launched a new regional chapter in Central Appalachia in the New Year in 2025: **CRCAPP**. Through the Building Community Not Prisons (BCNP) coalition, CRCAPP has already made historic advances in its national campaign to stop federal prison expansion in Letcher County: Most recently, organizers worked with the Indigenous-led Rekindling Project to halt prison construction by returning the land to Indigenous stewardship. *Let's go, CRCAPP!*

CR Los Angeles (CRLA) pushes forward

In 2025, CRLA has been working hard to support the Close CA Prisons campaign with its sister chapter CR Oakland, as part of the Californians United for a Responsible Budget coalition (CURB). After a disappointing election in November, the campaign is focused on consolidating past victories by keeping closed prisons closed and resisting efforts to turn closed prisons into immigrant detention facilities.

Chapter members have also played an important role in helping CR's Prisoner Solidarity Phone Line conduct surveys to learn more about our imprisoned comrades' views of Governor Newsom's proposed "CA Model" reforms. CRLA has also joined the LA-based Community Self-Defense Coalition and is helping to mobilize volunteers for neighborhood patrols to spot immigration enforcement (ICE) vehicles and alert the community to potential raids. The patrols have successfully stopped some community members from being kidnapped by ICE and are raising awareness, sharing resources, and building power to keep our people safe from state violence.

Farewell, Mohamed Shehk, and congrats on the new position <3

After almost 11 years as a Co-Director at CR, Mohamed Shehk transitioned out of the organization in March 2025.

In his farewell message, Mohamed wrote: *"I'm deeply honored to have worked alongside CR's dedicated membership base as well as many movement allies to further the fight against imprisonment, policing, surveillance, criminalization, and the other tentacles of the prison industrial complex (PIC). We've made some truly inspiring gains and achieved significant abolitionist campaign victories together over this time, and I look forward to the strength we will continue to build in the struggle for abolition and liberation."*

Having worked at CR first as the organization's National Media Director (from 2014-2020) and then as the National Campaigns Director (2020-2025), Mohamed's leadership helped usher the organization into a new era of member growth and higher public profile of our work and politic. CR is immensely grateful for Mohamed's work and dedication to our organization and movement for the past decade, and we are excited to continue working and struggling with Mohamed as he transitions into a new staff position at Arab Resource & Organizing Center (AROC).

If you corresponded with Mohamed in the past, please make note that he is no longer reachable through CR's national office at this time.

Want to Talk to CR? Call CR's Prisoner Solidarity Phone Line!

CR's Prisoner Solidarity Phone Lines are a volunteer-run initiative to build political relationships and break the isolation imposed by

imprisonment. Our goal is to create abolitionist solidarity — not to serve as a service hotline.

Call CR to politick with us and connect with a volunteer between 8 AM–6 PM PST, Friday through Monday.

8am-6pm PST / 10am-8pm CT / 11am-9pm ET
Any Friday-Monday
☎ (510) 444-0484

Write to CR's National Prisoner Solidarity Mail Program!

CR volunteers from across our chapters collectively respond to letters through our National Prisoner Mail Program. We work together to build political relationships, share abolitionist resources, and resist the isolation caused by imprisonment.

Write to us at:

✉ Critical Resistance
Attn: Prisoner Mail Program
PO Box 22780
Oakland, CA 94609

While we strive to maintain consistent correspondence, response times may vary due to our collective process.

The Abolitionist Newspaper: Project Updates

2025 marks 20 years of CR publishing our cross-wall bilingual newspaper! Thank you for being a part of this vital project <3

Cross-wall Strategy Retreat: this Black August 2025

Thank you to the over 50 inside subscribers who have shared their input with us on our Cross-wall Questionnaire in Issue 42 already.

Due to our assessment of our movement conditions throughout the fall of 2024 and into the winter of 2025, we've decided to scale down the cross-wall convening from a summit to a strategic planning retreat. We'll still be pulling together movement partners who organize various prisoner solidarity media, political education, and organizing projects across the US to come join us for a weekend and strategize around the central focus of this issue (#43). We'll be hosting the retreat in the beginning of August, as part of our Black August tradition deepening our shared discipline, training, rigor, collective strategy, and resolve for liberation and abolition. We'll also be sure to include an in-depth report back in the next issue of the paper, Issue 44, on cross-wall organizing, printing in December of this year.

Before the printing of Issue 43 in June, we've spent the Winter and Spring reaching out to and connecting with prisoners nationally to solicit input on the retreat and figure out ways to collaborate on the program or share their insights in specific discussion sessions. If you receive your copy of Issue 43 before July 15, there still might be time for you to contribute your analysis, vision, and perspective. **Write to us your thoughts of how we can build stronger cross-wall strategy and power through this difficult terrain of increased prison suppression and global repression by July 30!**

Write to us at:

✉ Critical Resistance
Attn: Retreat Input
PO Box 22780
Oakland, CA 94609

CALL FOR CONTENT

Help shape the content of *The Abolitionist*
**Write a piece for either our Features section OR
one of our columns!**

The features of Issue 44 will focus on cross-wall organizing. It will be our last issue of 2025 and will print in December. The Editorial Collective is still deciding on feature topics for our 2026 issues. *Stay tuned!*

Send us an essay, article, research, a poem, a story, a play, a comic, art, personal reflection, and any questions by the following deadlines for our upcoming issues:

- **Issue 44 Submission Deadline: Friday, August 15, 2025**
- **Issue 45 Submission Deadline: Friday, March 6, 2026**

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES: SEND US YOUR WRITING AND ARTWORK!

We accept articles, letters, creative writing, poetry, interviews, and art in English or Spanish.

IDEAS FOR ARTICLES AND ARTWORK

- Examples of prisoner organizing
- Practical steps toward prison industrial complex abolition
- Ways to help keep yourself and others physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually healthy while imprisoned
- Updates on what's happening at the prison you're in (for example: working conditions, health concerns, lockdowns)
- Legal strategies and important cases that impact prisoners
- Alternatives to policing, punishment, imprisonment, and surveillance
- Experiences of life after imprisonment (or before!)
- Creative or reflective writing with an abolitionist message
- Freedom dreams and imaginative pieces with radical vision
- Your opinion about a piece published in a recent issue
- Reflections on how you've used the paper (in your conversations, work, study groups)
- Empowering, liberatory art of resistance and community power (that will print well!)

LENGTH

- Articles should not be more than 1500 words (about five hand-written pages)
- Letters should not be more than 250 words

HOW TO SUBMIT

- **If you want your name and address printed with your article, please include it the way you would like us to print it.** If you do not wish to have your name or address included, please let us know that when you submit your piece. Instead of your name, you can choose an alias, publish your piece anonymously, or use your initials.
- If possible, send a copy of your submission (not the original)

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

- 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. .

Notes on Editing: We edit all pieces for content and grammar. We will send you a copy of the piece before printing it. ***As an abolitionist publication, we do not print material we find in some way perpetuates oppression or legitimizes the prison industrial complex.***

As institutional mail can be slow, purposefully delayed at times, or even disappeared, please note in your submission the phrases or sections you would like the editorial collective to print untouched.

Send all written or art submissions to:
Critical Resistance
Attn: The Abolitionist - Submission
PO Box 22780
Oakland, CA 94609-2301

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Prisoner Number: _____

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