

*Yours in solidarity: Alternative Media Projects with North American Political Prisoners*

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**ABSTRACT**

*Yours in solidarity. Alternative Media Projects with North American Political Prisoners*

Sara Falconer

Several years ago, I became aware of a network of international groups that is working to raise awareness of imprisoned activists, largely through the use of alternative media. These projects take many forms, including books, pamphlets, websites and films, but are often notable for the fact that they are created by political prisoners and prisoners of war (PP/POWs) themselves, while their distribution is facilitated by people outside of prison. In looking at a selection of these projects, I ask PP/POWs and outside facilitators to reflect on alternative media both as prisoners and as activists. I concentrate primarily on media projects involving PP/POWs in North America from the 1960s to the present, discussing the successes, potential weaknesses and the future of these initiatives.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Janet Hollaway Africa, Marilyn Buck, David Gilbert, Robert Seth Hayes, Alvaro Luna Hernandez, Sekou Cinque T.M. Kambui, Jaan Karl Laaman, Raymond Luc Levasseur and Ojore Nuru Lutalo, in the hopes that it will reflect at least a fraction of what you have taught me, and the possibilities that you present to us all.

And revolutionary love to Mike, always.

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building relationships with several of the millions of people in prisons across North America. And if we don't get to see each other face to face very often, it doesn't feel like it. We have used various communication technologies, from pen and paper to the Internet, to forge a community, despite the walls between us.

Several years ago, after a close comrade was brutally arrested at the G8 summit in Genoa, Italy, I became aware of a network of international groups that is working to raise awareness of imprisoned activists, largely through the use of alternative media. These projects take many forms, including books, pamphlets, websites and films, but are often notable for the fact that they are created by political prisoners and prisoners of war (PP/POWs) themselves, while their distribution is facilitated by people outside of prison. The incredible power of such alternative media is little understood, even among the politically conscious. I sensed a need to step back and look at the whole thing: where we have come from, who we are, and where we are going. The difficulty I had finding written material on prison media projects at all, let alone with political prisoners, confirmed my suspicions.

Investigating a small selection of the aforementioned projects, I concentrated primarily on alternative media involving PP/POWs in North America from the 1960s to the present. Through written interviews, I asked PP/POWs to reflect on alternative media both as prisoners and as activists. I expanded the analysis through similar interviews with local and other North American PP/POW support groups, filmmakers and small publishers that have facilitated these projects. I felt that this was the best way to gain insight into the strengths and



weaknesses of past and current media projects, which can help shape future initiatives. This research is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather a survey of the types of efforts that have taken place and continue to grow.

As a point of departure, I should explain a bit about my own work with prisoners. When my friend in Genoa was helped by a group called the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC), I discovered that ABC collectives are part of a diverse international movement to support political prisoners. In "Yelensky's Fable," Matthew Hart traces the origins of the ABC to the turn of the century in Tsarist Russia (Hart). Today, there are thousands of political prisoners worldwide, including the hundreds of activists in jails and prisons across North America. Upon moving to Montreal and learning that the former ABC was no longer active, I started one of my own with my partner Mike and a few other recruits. We joined the Anarchist Black Cross Federation (ABCF), an association of autonomous collectives that work to provide nonpartisan support to North American PP/POWs.

Reshaping the term "political prisoner" in a North American context is a rejection of the narratives imposed by the state. The ABCF defines Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War as those persons who are "incarcerated for action carried out in support of legitimate struggles for self-determination or for opposing the illegal policies of the government or its political subdivisions" (Anarchist Black Cross Federation 2001 1). This definition was created at the 1990 Special International Tribunal on the Violation of Human Rights of Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War in the United States Prisons and Jails. Although

we believe that all imprisonment is political, we choose to focus on certain prisoners because we feel that it is important to have a network of support in place for those who chose to take conscious political action.

Various PP/POWs were active in the Black Power, Puerto Rican, Asian, indigenous, white anti-imperialist, anarchist and anti-authoritarian movements. With the increasing criminalization of dissent in the past few years, more and more activists are facing jail time. However, many PP/POWs were active in the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s, and have already spent as long as 30 years in prison.

Canada has had its share of political prisoners too, most famously the Vancouver 5 and First Nations prisoners from the conflict at Kahneseetake in 1993. Activists here often spend years and thousands of dollars they cannot spare fighting trumped-up charges, although sentences are not typically as long as those served by their counterparts in the United States. Canada's "Secret Trial Five" are all Muslim men who are being held indefinitely—and without charges—under "security certificates," a questionable provision of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act bred by post-9/11 hysteria.

Currently, the Montreal ABCF works closely with nine prisoners in the United States: Janet Hollaway Africa, Marilyn Buck, David Gilbert, Robert Seth Hayes, Alvaro Luna Hernandez, Sekou Cinque T.M. Kambui (slave name William J. Turk), Jaan Karl Laaman, Raymond Luc Levasseur and Ojore Nuru Lutalo.

We do not do things top-down on behalf of prisoners, which I feel is one of the main strengths of the ABCF. We communicate with PP/POWs regularly to

determine what they need, and we work on projects together with them. Support is different for each person, but it always involves staying in touch with them and it always involves getting the word out about their situations. We sell books, pamphlets, t-shirts and videos by and about them, which doubly serve as fundraisers for some of their legal, educational and other expenses. Often prisoners lack even the most basic necessities like stamps and soap, so every little bit helps. We can help contact lawyers and other supporters, and work to fight the unjust censorship of mail that frequently occurs in prison. Sometimes individuals need help with appeals and parole, or gaining access to proper medical care, so we lead letter-writing campaigns to pressure authorities and let them know that someone is watching. We do try to visit PP/POWs occasionally, but the distance makes it difficult.

The Internet has greatly increased the ability of independent media producers to network together more easily and spread information to a wider audience, and it has been a major focus of the Montreal ABCF. One of our big projects has been our website ([www.montrealabcf.org](http://www.montrealabcf.org)). We update information, in French and English, about our activities about once a month, and each of the nine prisoners we work with has a section to develop however they want, with writings, pictures and news.

The prisoner who has been most involved in this initiative is Jaan Laaman. PP/POWs are activists not just prior to arrest but now, and they need help facilitating their work. Laaman came up with the idea for a zine called *4strugglemag*, both online ([www.4strugglemag.org](http://www.4strugglemag.org)) and in print, that lets

PP/POWs contribute to discussions on politics, culture, music, and other social issues. He did all of the preparation soliciting contributions and designing the site, and we helped him produce it. It has also served as a space for other politically conscious prisoners to be activists. Although the ABCF focuses on PP/POWs, our efforts are tied to building a larger prisoners' justice movement. Our correspondence with "social prisoners" grows each day, as they learn of our efforts and begin to participate in our dialogue.

While exciting, this project has also been hampered by mail delays and repression from prison administration, both of which are disturbingly regular factors in prison support work. Our collaboration on the zine has contributed immeasurably to my understanding of PP/POW media projects, and I will reflect on the experience in greater detail later.

Of course, many organizations and individuals outside of the ABC are helping PP/POWs make their voices heard too. The campaign to free Mumia Abu-Jamal from death row is tremendously visible online, in print and on film. The PP/POW support groups Jericho and Break the Chains have a number of North American collectives that produce websites with resources for activists, PP/POW writings and news updates. The film group Cohort Media has recently produced a film on the MOVE 9. Former political prisoner Ed Mead founded several publications and websites with very wide circulation, including *Prison Legal News* and *Prison Art Newsletter*. Two local groups have also been extremely active in media projects: Abraham Guillen Press (formerly Solidarity), a small publisher of PP/POW books and videos, and Montreal's PP/POW Calendar

project, now in its third year. Amazingly, most of these projects are facilitated by only one or two people outside of prison.

While some groups focus on getting material out of prison, others devote themselves to the equally important task of sending material in. Many prisoners have difficulty obtaining any books and magazines at all. For that reason, free books to prisoners programs exist in many North American cities, such as Open Door Books in Montreal.

Despite all of this encouraging activity, there is a disappointing dearth of in-depth research, not just on political prisoners, but on media projects in prison as well. Nonetheless, Joy James, an incredibly insightful writer on the relationships between gender, race, incarceration and resistance, offers an important framework for understanding these issues. In such books as *Imprisoned Intellectuals*, *Shadowboxing*, and *Resisting State Violence*, she presents unique historical accounts of radicalism and repression in the United States. If it seems that I rely on her analysis to excess, it is partially because so few academics synthesize these subjects in such a meaningful way. Other writings on alternative media in the civil rights movement, and studies of prisons today add to this analysis.

Many civil rights groups, in particular the Black Panther Party (BPP), Black Liberation Army (BLA), American Indian Movement (AIM), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Weather Underground Organization (WUO) and the United Freedom Front (UFF) have a rich history of the use of their own media in their work. Many were also targets of J. Edgar Hoover's counterintelligence

programs (COINTELPRO), which aimed to neutralize political dissidents through infiltration, false imprisonment and executions. In *Digital Resistance*, Critical Art Ensemble explains how communications were used to subvert the Panthers:

The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] used a similar means of subversion by employing hyperreal communications in its attack on the Black Panthers. Much like the CIA's intervention in Guatemala, the FBI's infowar had a strong infrastructure. The Bureau had infiltrated the Black Panther Party (BPP) and was close to the high command, so it knew the nature of (and the players in) the party's internal struggles... As a result of a simple letter-writing campaign that fanned the flames of mistrust between east and west leadership, the party collapsed amid its own internal fighting (Critical Art Ensemble).

The capitalist corporate media—which I will also refer to as the mass media, or mainstream media—played a functional role in COINTELPRO by negatively portraying the leaders of liberation movements and student demonstrators. As a result of these experiences, many PP/POWs are highly media savvy. While some are critical of engaging with the corporate media on any level, others believe that it can be manipulated or used strategically to gain visibility and support for protests and other actions. This may be unrealistic, considering the fact the PP/POW support movement positions itself against much of what the state's media apparatus is in place to protect.

Media has long been utilized in prison struggles. Writing from prison, Antonio Gramsci, leader of the Italian Communist Party, came to realize that culture had to be tied to concrete political organizing, coining the term “counterhegemonic culture.” Imprisoned civil rights leaders, including Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, wrote some of their most important works from prison. In her excellent collection of prison writings, *If They Come in the*

*Morning*, former political prisoner Angela Y. Davis reprints a selection of communiqués, letters and poems that were widely distributed during the 1960s. “The Folsom Prisoners Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform,” which accompanied their 1970 general strike, indicates that the issue of PP/POWs in North America was a major priority for the general prison population: “We demand that such celebrated and prominent political prisoners as Reis Tijerina, Ahmed Evans, Bobby Seale, Chip Fitzgerald, Los Siete, David Harris, and the Soledad Brothers, be given political asylum outside this country as the outrageous slandering of the mass media has made it impossible either for a fair trial or for a safe term to be served in case of conviction” (Davis 1971 61). George Jackson wrote his pivotal book, *Soledad Brother*, as a series of letters to family, friends and supporters, sparking a passionate movement among prisoners and riots when he was killed in 1971. These are the roots of PP/POW media projects today.

You do not have to support militant tactics or subscribe to a particularly radical ideology in order to recognize the importance of media projects with prisoners. The issue at stake is the right to communicate. Prisons are a form of censorship, silencing the voices of millions. For that reason, communication—both political and interpersonal—is at the heart of my research.

As Michel Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, the rise of industrial capitalism in the eighteenth century was accompanied by the rise of the modern prison. Corporal punishment was increasingly replaced by confinement as the object of penal repression moved from the body to the mind. Even early reformist

literature exhibits an awareness that one of the major problems with prisons is the effect of long-term lack of access to communication. In *Prison Life and Human Worth* Paul W. Keve discusses "the meaning of noncommunication" at length. Prisoners are allowed to communicate, but only in a highly regulated and formal exchange of information, which deprives them of a large part of human communication: "It is this poignant togetherness and nonverbal touching of the spirits that constitute the real quality and need of communication, whether or not any substantive information is exchanged" (Keve 34). The deprivation of communication also has legal ramifications: "The defendant is innocent until proven guilty, we have always proclaimed. A magnificent concept, but a defeated one when we do not permit the prisoner the simple means of communication to obtain the help that he cannot give himself while behind bars" (35). Keve suggests that the need for human communication is so basic as to escape notice, seeming trivial, while actually essential to interpersonal relationships and psychological health: "Personality health requirements so basic as these cannot be tampered with except at serious risk. Sooner or later the prisoner must lose his spirit, or he must rebel" (42).

When something so fundamental as human touch is almost entirely absent from a person's life, written communication becomes all the more essential. In this realm too there are constant barriers. Prison labour wages are so low that many prisoners have difficulty obtaining stamps, paper and other basic necessities. Censorship of both incoming and outgoing mail is rampant and all too often arbitrary. Even then, because prisoners are forbidden from writing to



each other or anyone on parole, they are isolated from many of their comrades, sometimes for decades. Phone calls, frequently over a dollar per minute, are a rarity. The situation is even more stressful for those in solitary confinement or “administrative segregation,” as the most current euphemism would have it. Political organizing is labeled “gang” behavior, and many PP/POWs languish in solitary. Nor is this a new development, according to the Folsom Prisoner’s Manifesto: “We demand an end to the segregation of prisoners from the mainline population because of their political beliefs” (Davis 1971 59). These labels—“gang member,” “terrorist” and “criminal,” among others—are part of a system of language that seeks to exert control through definitions.

The importance of giving PP/POWs and other prisoners a chance to tell their own stories in their own words, and to create new—alternative—definitions through their own media has long been recognized. The multitude of anthologies reprinting prison writings from the civil rights era attests to that belief. In her introduction to *Imprisoned in America*, Cynthia Owen Philip describes how writing in prison can contribute to self-understanding and emotional health:

The mental effort demanded by communication helps combat the stultifying efforts of prison life and provides a vehicle for discharging some of its tensions. Prison authorities have long recognized the therapeutic value of inmate expression and in many facilities actively encourage prison magazines and newspapers. These, of course, are subject to varying degrees of censorship... (Philip xiii).

In addition to writing, a variety of artistic forms such as painting, drawing and song have been used by prisoners to communicate. Philip explains the importance of publishing such efforts. The personal letters, articles, legal pleas and poems that she reprints have a humanizing effect on their unseen authors:

“And so I have taken the role of listener and collector in hopes that, through their communications, prisoners might begin to break down the barriers that so falsely exist between them and those who are not in prison” (xiv-xv).

She attributes these false barriers to society’s “out of sight, out of mind attitude” towards prisoners: “Not content with mere physical isolation, free society has wholeheartedly supported the erection of extensive barriers to inmate communication. Depriving criminals of the Constitution’s guarantee of free speech, it has condoned unchallenged censorship by prison authorities of incoming and outgoing written matter” (ix). Most people don’t want to know the reality of prison—just as they don’t want to know the reality of oppression. To fully comprehend the extent of human suffering would demand action, and more than suffering, many people fear instability in their lives. This makes it difficult but all the more important to raise the voices of those behind walls.

The first legal cases involving inmates’ communication rights emerged in the 1960s. These efforts were tied to larger movements around human rights. Communication rights in prison are still not well protected, despite what the laws might officially say: “To prison administrators, inmate communication with the outside world is a privilege, not a right, and is therefore subject to whatever controls they see fit to apply” (ix). There are generally only vaguely stated rules about what materials are and are not permitted: “Incoming books, magazines and newspapers, radio and television are also monitored, usually according to the taste and intellectual capacities of the presiding official” (x). Such censorship attests to the perceived power of the media as a tool of resistance for prisoners.

Yet Philip's collection of writings shows that prisoners do communicate, despite these formidable obstacles—either legitimately, or by secretly smuggling their missives out to the “free” world. While some prisons provide small libraries and access to corporate media such as newspapers and television, prisoners certainly do not have a voice in it. Independently produced alternative media is generally the only means of public expression for PP/POWs and other prisoners, who are variously maligned or merely forgotten by the corporate media. Prisoners do not merely have access to alternative media; they are able to participate in its production.

Conceptions of alternative media have developed in exciting new directions in recent years. John Downing's *Radical Media* refers to “self-managed” media, which are not owned by the state, corporations, church or political groups and thus “not merely radical in their political communication, but also in their very organization” (Downing ii). As it is commonly understood, alternative media has developed alongside a certain leftist or libertarian ideology. But not all independently produced media falls so neatly into this category. Could you call the American government's attempts through COINTELPRO to produce newspapers that appeared to belong to the underground “alternative,” for example? Right-wing, racist factions have long used small media like pamphlets and the Internet to promote their message. Small or independent media are a set of tools that can be used to any end. I would argue that the term alternative media “belongs” to the tradition of social justice and dissent that developed it. This is clearly a debate that will not end here, but for the sake of convenience, it

is possible to distinguish between the more general category of “independent” or “small” media, which can be produced by any individual or group, and “alternative,” which has developed within an activist context.

In *A Trumpet to Arms*, David Armstrong outlines an essential feature of alternative media, regardless of medium:

First and foremost, they are used as tools for community action and organizing. They have an activist rather than passive relationship with their constituents... Alternative media are not neutral. They are, instead, highly partisan media enterprises that make no attempt to disguise their partisanship. Alternative media activists frequently participate in the stories they cover. Sometimes they even help instigate those stories. (Armstrong 21-22).

I like this definition in particular because it rejects the false pretense of objectivity that is implicit in a lot of corporate media. Both my work with the ABCF and my analysis of PP/POW projects is visibly situated as personal, political and devoted to the struggle for liberation. This self-location is an integral part of my research. I am not simply an outside academic, but a facilitator, participating in the very networks of communication I am exploring.

This position has vital implications in terms of power. Paolo Friere’s writings, which intertwine theory, research and political action, have strongly influenced my thinking on this subject. Friere, a Brazilian theorist, was exiled for his theories on education and liberation after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was released in 1968. He rejected the prevalent “banking” model of education in favour of “problem-posing,” focusing on the importance of dialogue in the dialogical process: “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world

from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action” (34). The understanding of power and identity as fluid is for him the cornerstone of action.

He explains the process of *conscientizacao*, recognizing social, political and economic oppression, and the need to take action: “It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be praxis” (52). This praxis, the cycle of reflection-action-reflection, is key to Friere’s vision. One cannot exist without the other. If praxis is an endless cycle of action and reflection, then conscientization is itself a continuous process.

Over time, Friere’s ideas have been developed into a model known as Participatory Action Research (PAR). There have been many significant contributions to this approach, but essentially it is a way to deal with issues of power in research with oppressed peoples. The investigator or facilitator’s role—my role, in this project—lies not in presenting his or her own agendas but helping to promote discussion of themes developed by the oppressed. In this process, I am one who learns too, and I want this thesis to be a moment of reflection that is moving towards action.

Participatory media projects can help prisoners build and maintain identities as activists, not criminals. Through alternative media, they can actually

engage with others inside and outside. Such interaction can help all prisoners see outside the identity society would impose on them to understand larger relationships of dominance and struggle. Projects such as these also have exciting implications for the identities of those on the outside who support prisoners. If prisoners are the others that confirm the normalized self, what does it mean to express solidarity with them—and to try to get others to identify with them?

I did not begin my work for social change as a PAR project. However, as I learn about PAR, I am increasingly intrigued with its potential for integration as a tool with existing movements. The first step in this process involves addressing my own power. Locating myself subjectively is more than an academic exercise; it is a reflection of my personal commitment to combating the relationships of power that oppress others. This power dynamic is part of the reason I feel it is so essential to include the voices of PP/POWs in alternative media, and in my thesis.

So how can I position myself as a white, working-class academic woman in relation to a group with major racial, gender and cultural differences from not only myself but also each other? I am obviously not a prisoner, not Native, not black, not brown, and not a man as so many prisoners are. It is impossible to say that we are even part of the same 'movement' because the social justice movement is so fluid. It is often based on temporary tactical alliances, such as at the recent global protests uniting minorities, labour, students, homeless, anarchists, feminist, and other groups. How can we work together?

This question is inextricably bound to the question of power that underlies all research. As Patti Lather puts it in *Getting Smart*, "Given the postmodern tenet of how we are inscribed in that which we struggle against, how can I intervene in the production of knowledge at particular sites in ways that work out of the blood and spirit of our lives, rather than out of the consumerism of ideas that can pass for a life in the mind in academic theory?" (Lather 20). It is possible to use your heightened awareness of your personal, structural and cultural power to create change. My position of privilege allows me to provide a resource base to support an action, and I do what I can "to lift the barriers which prevent people from speaking for themselves." In doing so, I attempt to displace a totalizing discourse of liberation that "perpetuates monolithic categories of dominant/dominated" (47).

In her reflection on alternative media projects in the Third World, *Fissures in the Mediascape*, Clemencia Rodriguez challenges traditional assumptions that shape much existing communications theory, borrowing from Chantal Mouffe's feminist theorizing of radical democracy. Like Lather, she rejects a binary, static understanding of domination and subordination: "Our theorizing uses categories too narrow to encompass the lived experiences of those involved with alternative media." Her own work with what she calls "citizens' media" suggests a much more complex process:

It implies having the opportunity to create one's own images of self and environment; it implies being able to recodify one's own identity with the signs and codes that one chooses, thereby disrupting the traditional acceptance of those imposed by outside sources; it implies being one's own storyteller, regaining one's own voice; it implies reconstructing the self-portrait of one's own community and one's own culture..." (Rodriguez 3).

Rodriguez also draws on Downing's principles for rethinking media democracy:

These are: first, the need to acknowledge oppression as a heterogeneous and fragmented reality; second, the need to build lateral links between fragmented movements against oppression(s); third, the need to visualize the struggle against oppression in terms of movements and not as institutions; and fourth, the need to think of liberation as an everyday process that disrupts immediate realities (14).

As identities are not static, neither is power. This idea of changeable, active identities helps explain how people could become part of a movement. In "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Québécois," Maurice Charland describes how a subject is created through what he calls a series of narrative ideological effects, building on the contributions of Kenneth Burke, Stuart Hall and others. Once audience members are interpellated, the logic of constitutive rhetoric must necessitate action in the material world. Narratives lead audiences to fill in the blanks, aiding the movement towards closure. This understanding of the rhetorical process reiterates that identities are flexible, the rhetorical process is ongoing, and the possibility of alternatives exists. Because "we can live within many texts," contradictions between various simultaneous subject positions create conflict, and a subject position can be rearticulated that resolves the tension, working upon previous discourses (Charland 221).

The reappropriation of media technology is one way to develop new senses of identities, and thus power:

The importance of contesting social codes, identities, and social relations—that is, the 'symbolic,'—is explained by Mouffe as she explores the multifaceted nature of oppression. A community can be oppressed not only by exploiting its labor force, but also through the imposition of symbolic systems. Thus, democratic struggles have to be understood as processes of change that also include practices of dissent in the realm of the symbolic (20).



Such alternative media practices are not secondary but key to struggles for liberation. These attempts at redefinition are political actions.

I wonder though, if there might be a point at which such conceptions become too apolitical. This is a pitfall encountered by many researchers who have worked with prisoners. Yet certain conditions of repression, prison included, are not so fluid, and I believe that such work cannot be separated from the very real power dynamics of imprisonment. A feeling of “empowerment” does not help a person escape from beyond prison walls, just as it does not provide food or shelter to poor families. Thus, Rodriguez’ proposal of a shift to the term citizens’ media rather than alternative media, while intriguing as a way of thinking outside of certain binaries, is not satisfactory. Alternative, to me, denotes a variety of alternatives. “Citizens’ media” undermines very real power imbalances, however changeable they may be.

An anarchist and feminist analysis, which is both flexible and aware of power dynamics, is particularly useful in understanding alternative media projects with underrepresented communities, including the poor, minorities and prisoners. Alternative media can lead by example, showing while telling that other ways of organizing are possible. Downing calls this “prefigurative politics, the attempt to practice socialist principles in the present, not merely to imagine them in the future” (Downing 23): “Liberated communication channels do offer the chance to begin breaking down the divisions among us *now*, not after the conquest of state power. It is precisely in the realm of everyday consciousness in the world of immediate realities, that these media can function at their best (24).”

As you have likely surmised from this introduction, my reporting will not be strictly chronological or technology-based, but rather a working-through of some of the ideas I have encountered while exploring alternative media projects with prisoners. This is in part a reflection of several transformations my thesis underwent over time. At first, I struggled to divide my time between my research on alternative media and my prisoner support work. When I decided to combine the two, I was able to progress in promising directions. By seeing my research and my work with prisoners as part of the same project, I could see how they had important implications for each other. I grew closer with both the PP/POWs and outside comrades, and learned things that helped strengthen my commitment to this struggle.

This thesis was then going to centre around interviews with several PP/POWs and outside facilitators who had worked together on media projects. However, as I was doing preliminary research, I began to realize how little had been written on the history and significance of PP/POWs and alternative media. In order to do justice to the interviews, I felt I had to put them in social and historical context. I was going to have to delve deeply into the story of prison media and political prisoners myself.

Largely relying on anthologies reprinting communiqués from the sixties and seventies, I learned that underground media, civil rights struggles, and prisons were tied together in ways that are rarely explored. In a bloody cycle, the gains of social justice organizing were responded to by state repression, which in turn fuelled more militant resistance, which was met with even more extreme

repression. In my first chapter, "Where We Have Come From," I will offer an overview of early alternative media and its role in the civil rights movement—as both histories pertain to prisons. It will be an opportunity for a closer look at the publications of political prisoners from that era, and the part COINTELPRO played in the decline of the movement.

Since then, there have been dramatic changes in the prison system. As of 2001, more than two million people are imprisoned in the United States alone, many of them poor and minorities. Even as the PP/POWs of the civil rights era remained in prison for decades, dozens more were imprisoned as a result of their activism. The need for alternative media projects under these new prison conditions is more important than ever, and the prisoner support movement is growing again. Because I wanted to address projects outside of those created by my interview participants, I collected a sampling of books, pamphlets, films and websites that various groups have produced with political prisoners since the eighties. In my second chapter, "Who We Are," I will discuss some of these alternative media projects, introduce new North American PP/POWs from the past two decades, and examine the rise of the new prison system and the rise of a new movement against it.

Finally, after this rather elaborate stage has been set, I can return to the discussion that I originally planned with PP/POWs and outside facilitators, and focus in detail on their collaborative work. Although the position and function of the interviews differs from my original intent, I still feel that they are the most important feature of this thesis. In my lifetime, these fourteen people will never be

in a room together, which is truly a shame; they have so much in common, and so much experience, that it could be an extremely productive dialogue. So, I conceptualized my third and final chapter, "Where We are Going," as a conversation between a group of people who are normally not allowed to communicate with each other, with myself participating as one of the facilitators. I will let my interview subjects do most of the talking as we explore how they feel about the media projects they have been involved in, what the benefits and limitations of alternative media are, and what changes need to take place for the movement to go forward.

A radical movement is clearly needed—radical both in deed and in its analysis of the conditions of society. Communication and action are at the heart of revolutionary movements, which is why Friere's participatory action research, devoted to both of those things, is so appropriate as an approach. Dissent in the realm of the symbolic must be accompanied by active struggle in the realm of the real, daily. Consciousness raising and movement building will come through the act of helping prisoners to develop their own themes, identities and demands. Those of us who hope to facilitate such work from the outside must try to increase possibilities and spaces for reflection and encourage dialogue between prisoners who are kept apart: "But to substitute monologue, slogans and communiqués for dialogue is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication... To achieve this praxis, however, it is necessary

to trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason" (Friere 53).

## WHERE WE HAVE COME FROM

In order for us poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed... But one of the things that that has to be faced, in the process of wanting to change that system, how much have we got to do to find out who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going.

- Ella Baker (James 1999 73)

America has a legacy of political prisoners. Dissenters and subversives have long been silenced by death: the Haymarket anarchists in 1887, Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, the Rosenbergs in 1953. In the 1960s and 70s, the number of people arrested for political reasons rose exponentially: thousands of anti-war protesters and draft-dodgers, black, Puerto Rican, Chicano and First Nations leaders. In many ways, prison became the front lines of the civil rights movement. Social justice movements were growing all over the world during that time period. Although many gains were made, institutional violence, infiltration and cooptation were routinely employed to combat progressive organizing.

Civil rights history never strays far from jails and prisons. Ella Baker organized against police brutality. Rosa Parks, a former National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat in 1955. Malcolm X became politicized and discovered the Nation of Islam in prison in the late fifties, which inspired him to write the seminal *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Sit-ins at segregated lunch counters began in 1960, with 2000 black students and white supporters arrested in the first three months alone. Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested at a demo in Alabama in

1963, and wrote the influential "Letter from Birmingham Jail" on civil disobedience. The 1965 Watts riots were sparked by police violence. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense was harassed from its beginnings in 1966 and infiltrated by the FBI by 1967. Fittingly, in their case "self defense" refers to the need to defend the black community from abuse and killing by racist law enforcement. George Jackson wrote *Blood in My Eye* and *Soledad Brother* from prison in California before his murder by guards in 1971 sparked a militant prison movement.

As Joy James explains, the construction of revolutionary icons through the media was gendered: "Nationally and internationally, the most prominently known black political prisoners or prison intellectuals are male... Such racial rebels propelled the presence of black male prison intellectuals into the larger America during 'The Movement' Era" (James 1999 96). Basing her analysis on bell hooks' definition of feminism as opposition to racist-capitalist-patriarchy, James cites antiracism as the root of black feminism, even though women are often given less credit for their historical role as organizers in groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Student National Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Organization for African-American Unity (OAAU) and the Black Panther Party (BPP).

Although women were less visible, some female icons emerged from the BPP, including Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and Kathleen Cleaver. Notably, most of these women first gained fame for their relationships with black male leaders—Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, George Jackson—a further rejection of

their black female militant selves. James suggests that the mainstream media intentionally offers depoliticizing representations of black women: "Rising public recognition for their contributions has led to a celebrity status—one that can transform the radical iconoclast into a deradicalized icon" (xiii). This is a problem that can, to an extent, be countered by alternative media that offers its own framings of revolutionary figures.

In *Prisons, Protest and Politics*, Burton M. Atkins and Henry Robert Glick chart the growth of the new prison protest movement that emerged between 1960 and 1970. There were "75 separate prison disturbances" in that decade (Atkins and Glick 1). Riots were not uncommon previously, were in fact "virtually as old as prisons themselves," but demands started to center around bigger issues, as prisoners began self-conceptualizing as "political prisoners of an unjust and corrupt political system" (1, 2). Prisoner complaints were no longer aimed at prison administrators alone, but also at police, courts, and the racist underpinnings of society as a whole: "In short, complaints about bad prison food have been joined by more basic attacks on fundamental values and assumptions of American life" (2).

On September 9, 1971, inmates took over Attica prison in New York for four days. The uprising was spontaneous, but built on the growing consciousness of oppressed inmates. As Philip suggests, "Rioting is an extreme form of communication" (Philip 183). Ten hostages and 29 inmates were killed during the retaking of the prison.



Wendell Wade, one of the original members of the Black Panther Party, identified one of the main reasons for this shift in the tone of prison protests: "The prisons are now filling with political prisoners, those brothers who were active in opposing the occupation of the black community by the exploitative businessmen and tyrannical politicians" (Atkins and Glick 3). Members of the student movement had a radical analysis of the power disparities in society and were experienced in protest. Their appearance contributed to strong organization inside: "One source of leadership is the middle-class, often college-educated inmates convicted on drug charges or draft evasion" (8). Even more important was the presence of Black Muslims and BPP. The increasing imprisonment of politicized people had a huge impact on all prisoners. It was a significant oversight by the state, laying the groundwork for the prisoners' justice movement to thrive.

The state has, quite cleverly, learned from its "mistake," and today political prisoners are much more likely to spend decades in solitary confinement than to teach political education classes to other prisoners in the yard. But is it too late? Can the movement begun be stopped?

Unfortunately, prisoners saw little response to their new demands. Hence, Atkins and Glick say, the need for a more "extreme" form of communication arose: "One way to understand the development of political protest in prisons is to view protest activity as a political resource that is used by disadvantaged groups to gain political power and influence when more traditional sorts of political activity are unavailable or unsuccessful" (3). In the ghetto riots of 1960s

in Watts and other areas, the same principle applies. Protesting is a way to bring demands into the mass media, although it carries the risk of negative portrayal.

These early prison protests established the importance of making sympathetic connections with outsiders. As the Zapatistas have so excellently demonstrated in the past decade, a movement that is not being closely observed is easily crushed. Protests on the inside are only met with greater repression and punishment unless authorities are held accountable by wide support outside.

When New York City jail inmates rioted in 1970, their list of demands included television coverage of negotiations with the city: "The publicity of the confrontation was important in mobilizing the local blacks and Puerto Ricans who demonstrated at the jails in support of the prisoners' demands." Similarly, during the 1971 Attica uprising, "prisoners demanded the presence of newsmen of their own choice during the negotiations between inmates and officials in hopes of generating widespread support in the community" (6). Building public support in such a way is crucial:

Enmeshed in the routines of the ongoing system, few prison officials have found it possible or desirable to make extensive changes in administration. Furthermore, since most middle-class white Americans and political elites are by disposition either indifferent or hostile to prisoner demands, it has not been difficult for prison administrators to run their own institutions without a great deal of interference from outside officials (7).

The general policy of noninterference from the outside will be one of the toughest obstacles to overcome. If prisons function to make people invisible and silent, visibility and the raising of their voices is the key for their opposition. Pressure from those outside is essential, but it must be guided by those inside. However,

simply getting mainstream media coverage of prisoners' cases and demands is problematic, and does not allow for control over the way they are presented.

Written in 1972, Atkins and Glick's introduction speculates great potential for the prison movement. But what happened to organizing inside? Was it abandoned by people outside? Prison activists on both sides of the walls were met with tremendous state resistance in the late stages of the movement era, and many were actually killed. A closer look at some of the most well-known political prisoners from that era will reveal some of the causes behind the rise and the decline of the movement.

Samuel Melville wrote *Letters from Attica* while he was serving eighteen years in prison for a series of "politically-motivated" bombings in New York City, including the United Fruit Company, Marine Midland and Army headquarters. He helped lead the massive Attica rebellion of 1971, and was one of the first men killed by state police during the takeover. He is an ideal example of a man politicized on the outside bringing his radical views into the prison, where the movement was already beginning to take hold.

His good friend John Cohen's introduction to the book emphasizes the importance of reading and writing to survival in prison for Melville: "To me it seemed that, since imprisonment was a consequence of his previous political commitment, Sam was redoubling that commitment in order to make prison less intolerable" (Melville 59). It seems that the creative exercise of writing can be used to strengthen political commitment. Or, it may be a way to work through and solidify political beliefs in one's own mind. Melville's letters to his friends and

family indicate that he was desperate for radical periodicals like the San Francisco-based *Ramparts* and *Rat*, and the SDS paper *New Left Notes*:

The prison administration, of course, frowned on the literature Sam wanted, and they exploited his need for it as a vulnerability through which he could be harassed. They delayed the arrival of books, denied him several that were important to him, never allowed him to receive underground newspapers, forced him to use lawyers to get even *Ramparts* (60).

After he had a letter printed in *Rat*, "i was also told that if any more of my letters are printed my correspondence privileges will be stopped" (106).

Reporting a guard attack on a Panther that ended with a fractured skull, Melville hinted at cryptic methods employed to get political materials in and out of the prison: "to avoid the tombs stupid censor I'm having this mailed out without their seeing it" (113). In late July of 1971, Melville began distributing his secret underground newsletter, *The Iced Pig*. He completed three issues before his death.

He also helped to author "The Attica Liberation Faction Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Depression Platform," which was modeled after the Fulsom manifesto of the previous year, and included many virtually identical demands:

3) WE DEMAND AN END TO THE SEGREGATION OF PRISONERS FROM THE MAINLINE POPULATION BECAUSE OF THEIR POLITICAL BELIEFS... 4) WE DEMAND AN END TO THE PERSECUTION AND PUNISHMENT OF PRISONERS WHO PRACTICE THE CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT OF PEACEFUL DISSENT... 5) WE DEMAND AN END TO POLITICAL PERSECUTION, RACIAL PERSECUTION, AND THE DENIAL OF PRISONERS' RIGHTS TO SUBSCRIBE TO POLITICAL PAPERS... (177).

In addressing the whole spectrum of rights, Melville and his comrades were trying to build solidarity between diverse groups: the Panthers, the Five

Percenter, the Young Lords, Muslims and whites. They organized a letter-writing campaign to pressure authorities to recognize their demands. Instead, the administration cracked down on those in contact with the media through harassment and solitary confinement, as Cohen explains: "And by refusing the prisoners access to the media the pigs actually *encouraged* riots. As Sam wrote, 'We are left with nothing except riots to bring our plight to the public'" (70).

Cohen emphasizes the role of the mainstream media in suppressing prison protest: "The press, like the prison administration and the state, felt the need to misrepresent and totally discredit Samuel Melville. I first heard about Sam's death on radio station WINS, which said, while 'reporting' the massacre, 'One prisoner who was killed no one will miss—Mad Bomber Melville'" (74).

George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, also a series of letters to his loved ones, charts his self-education and political development while in prison serving a "one year to life" sentence in California for stealing \$71 from a gas station when he was sixteen. Studying the works of Mao Tse-tung, Frantz Fanon and Fidel Castro, Jackson came to view capitalism as the source of the oppression of people of colour, and became a leader in the politicization of black and Chicano prisoners. Through his text, and his other book *Blood in My Eye*, he invites—one might say, interpellates—his readers to develop too. His writing, which grows more sophisticated as the years pass, is about racism, torture, the death penalty and most especially love.

In 1970, Jackson was accused of killing a guard, along with two other prisoners, Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette, who came to be known as the

Soledad Brothers. By that time, Jackson had become part of the BPP. In 1971, Jonathan Jackson, George's younger brother, was killed trying to free three prisoners. Later that year, after being transferred to San Quentin, three days before his trial, George Jackson was killed—many believe assassinated—by prison guards in a supposed uprising. In 1972, the Soledad brothers were acquitted of the charges against them.

Jackson's intense need to communicate is evidenced in both the volume of his letters and his deep interest in languages, including Spanish, Swahili, Arabic and Chinese: "With four languages plus English I'll be able to communicate with three-fourths of the people on earth" (Jackson 112). He makes powerful, eloquent arguments, many of which still ring plenty true today. In his virulent and often unkind letters to his father, he stresses the importance of alternative media: "You should read some of the stuff you have subscribed to for me. *The New Republic* is good. So is *Ramparts*. If *Ramparts* went any further, it could not be published. Those news weeklies are all published by ultraright-wing conservatives, people of the establishment, who feel they have something at stake in the present order" (125). Like Melville, he is extremely critical of the dominant media: "You sound like a high-school civics textbook with that thing about free speech. You couldn't believe stuff like that. 'Freedom of the press is for *those who own one*.' Even they are kept in line by economic pressure from above. Very little of the repression is done overtly, my friend" (133). Alternative media opens up great potential for agency, especially appealing to those who, like Jackson, recognize state domination but not its inevitability.

Ironically, Jackson, who motivated so many, first doubted that it was possible to organize blacks for their own liberation. Later in his writings his thinking changed:

The leadership of the black prison population now definitely identifies with Huey, Bobby, Angela, Eldridge, and antifascism. The savage repression of blacks, which can be estimated by reading the obituary columns of the nation's dailies, Fred Hampton, etc., has not failed to register on the black inmates. The holds are fast being broken. Men who read Lenin, Fanon and Che don't riot, 'they mass,' 'they rage,' they dig graves (36).

Towards the end of his life, as people increasingly heeded his leadership, Jackson complained more and more of mysteriously 'disappeared' mail. As he wrote to Angela Davis, "I am certain that they plan to hold me incommunicado" (212).

Touchingly, and tragically, he was most worried about Davis' safety: "Do you know (of course you do) the secret police (CIA, etc.) go to great lengths to murder and consequently silence every effective black person the moment he attempts to explain to the ghetto that our problems are historically and strategically tied to the problems of all colonial people" (234). He was right. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. had both been killed at their most radical moments, and a huge wave of bloody repression against the civil rights movement lay on the horizon.

Davis and Jackson had become close during her tireless efforts to coordinate the support committee for the Soledad Brothers. From a middle-class family, she had grown up during the racist attacks on "Dynamite Hill" in Birmingham. She was an educated Marxist who studied with Herbert Marcuse in Europe before returning to organize with the black community in California. In the

late sixties, while Davis was fighting to save her job teaching at UCLA from Governor Ronald Reagan, she began raising support for Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins, two members of the Los Angeles BPP accused in 1969 of conspiracy to murder. The charges were eventually dismissed when a judge ruled that sensational press coverage made a fair trial impossible. Both Huggins and Seale were prolific writers from jail.

Davis actually became interested in the Soledad Brothers case because of its negative portrayal in the mainstream media, via a *Los Angeles Times* piece: "The article reeked of deception and evasiveness. It seemed that the *Times* was trying to turn public opinion against the accused men even before the trial got started" (Davis 1974 251). She and Jonathan Jackson worked together to raise awareness of the Soledad Brothers. The guns he used in the ill-fated breakout were registered to her. Charged with conspiracy and murder, and fearing assassination by police, Davis went underground, becoming the target of one of the largest FBI manhunts in history. After she was arrested, she remained more concerned with the plight of the prisoners around her than her own, as her autobiography attests:

If you wanted books which were not in the library, they had to be mailed directly from the publisher. I decided to have as many books sent to me as possible, so as to provide, for succeeding prisoners, literature that was more interesting, more relevant, more serious than the trash on the shelves of the library. Apparently, the jailers saw through my scheme, especially when ten copies of George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* came in... (52).

Following an enormous international protest movement in her support she, like the Soledad Brothers, was cleared of the murder charges in 1972.



During sensational media coverage of these events, Davis learned that the notion of visibility cuts both ways; the same photographs that were used to mobilize activism around her case helped the FBI find her and criminalize her to the public: “The *Life* magazine expose (which Davis saw as free publicity for the FBI) reached 40 million readers, internationally and nationally” (James 1999 110). James suggests that negative media coverage of the civil rights movement is part of why it is still regarded negatively by the majority of the public today.

Many of the journalists writing the history of this era have tended to offer simplifying narratives that conform to their motives. For example, Davis is primarily associated with the Black Panther Party, although she was much more active in the Communist Party. She is widely accepted as a heroic icon, in part because she was acquitted, and also because she has continued to be an academic. Her former co-defendant Ruchell “Cinque” Magee, has been all but forgotten by the majority of the public as he suffers in prison even now. Clearly, there is a need to move away from the mainstream’s tidy presentation of history, so that more complex, multiple stories can emerge.

Even from jail, this goal was a high priority for Davis. She began editing a book with the help of outside facilitators Bettina Aptheker and the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis. (NUCFAD). It was envisioned as an organizing tool:

I insisted that the content of the book should not only revolve around my case, but had to relate to other political prisoners as well—George, John, Fleeta, Ruchell and the many incarcerated sisters and brothers throughout the country... The book had to provide a voice not only for political prisoners in the strict sense of the term, but also for those who were

victimized in one way or another by the racism of the police-court-prison apparatus (305-306).

She describes the challenges of collaborating from jail, "rendered difficult by the glass and telephones or the mesh of metal between us (306). It was a slow process, thwarted at every turn by administration, and Aptheker was unable to even bring material in to show Davis. When it was finally finished, the collection, *If They Come in the Morning*, reprinted a selection of the tracts, articles, letters and poems that circulated in the late sixties and early seventies in magazines like *Ramparts* and *The Black Scholar* by and about political prisoners. During that time, a series of high-profile trials involving the BPP and other organizations were in court, simultaneously indicting large groups like the Panther 21 and the Panther 14 on questionable charges to hinder their activities. Davis used her own very public case to call for freedom for all political prisoners, including the Soledad Brothers, Huggins, Seale, Magee, Chicano activist Reies Tijerina, Puerto Rican Lebron, student protesters and peace activists. *If They Come in the Morning* tells their stories using their own documents, with some of the 500,000 letters and public statements of support that Davis' defense committee received. One of the earliest such collaborations, it was released while she was still imprisoned.

In their preface to the book, Davis and Aptheker focus on the successes of the popular movement in bringing attention to political trials. It is an overt attempt to counteract the prevalent mass media portrayal of these cases:

Coupled with an exposure of the prison system as an appendage of the capitalist state—as an instrument for class, racial and national oppression—and the demand for the abolition of that system in its present

form, the offensive thrust of the movement is still further enhanced. We believe that it is for all of these reasons that Angela's arrest is directly attributable to her tireless commitment to the defense of the Soledad Brothers and other political prisoners, and her efforts to expose the prison system (4).

They are careful to position activism around political prisoners within a larger struggle for social justice: "A critical aspect of this movement to free political prisoners is seen not only in its ability to free the individual victims of the repression. Even more, due to its relationship with the liberation movements and the revolutionary and democratic movements, the political ramifications of each victory transcend its immediate objectives to free specific individuals" (7).

Partially through the writings of and interaction with political prisoners like these, social prisoners were undergoing a marked radicalization during the 1960s and 70s. Etheridge Knight sent his book, *Black Voices from Prison*, to Roberto Giammanco in Italy as a series of correspondence. Knight understands "so-called crime" to be very much a product of a long history of colonization and racist oppression: "From the time the first of our fathers were bound and shackled and herded into the dark hold of a 'Christian' slaveship—right on up to the present day, the whole experience of the black man in America can be summed up in one word: prison" (Knight 5). He shares his politicized outlook with the other inmates of Indiana State Prison that contributed to the book: "When it was suggested to them that they might suffer some kind of reprisal for telling it like it is they—to a man—replied: 'Fuckit—straight ahead'" (7).

Knight describes a redefining of self as central to the process of political awakening: "though they accept—up to a certain point—their own personal

responsibilities for being here, they no longer accept whitey's definition of their selves. They use a new frame of reference" (10). He calls his collection of self-recorded interviews, poems, essays and stories "testaments." He is heavily influenced by Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X and other leaders of the black movement. He demonstrates that, somehow, he has had access to a recent issue of the newspaper *The Black Panther*, in which H. Rap Brown writes from prison in New Orleans: "I am a political prisoner, jailed for my beliefs that black people must be free" (13). These precious encounters with the voices of political prisoners through—often contraband—alternative media continued to fuel the prisoners' justice movement.

Former *Berkeley Barb* editor David Armstrong describes the explosion of small presses, underground radio, newspapers, film, video, magazines and community television in the sixties. Today's alternative media is heir to the sixties underground: "The many strands of the underground, each with a unique history, had come together in a way that none but the most driven media visionary would have predicted to form a new media environment. Without it the counterculture and the New Left would not have taken root and flourished" (Armstrong 93). Early conceptions of alternative media were remarkably prescient about what could be accomplished: "Visionaries such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger advocate 'emancipatory' media—decentralized, controlled by the users, with a built-in, two-way capacity in which every receiver is a potential transmitter. In such a media democracy, the process of communicating would be more important than the consumption of media products" (22).

As Armstrong explains, these new possibilities were spawned by the creative use of technological developments in the sixties. The advent of cheap, quick offset printing allowed activists to produce newspapers. A new generation of electronic media-savvy activists spread the same approach to community television, radio, video and film. Most of the projects that emerged were used for consciousness-expanding purposes (in more ways than one). Anti-war protesters were at the heart of the liberation movements of the sixties; it was an issue that galvanized many different groups in society. Tellingly, the anti-war movement was also at the heart of the first underground media projects, which eventually developed to cover other topics like women's lib and healthy lifestyles. Many publications, while not conceived as collaborations, focused on the writings of prisoners with outside activists distributing.

One extremely successful example of such a project was *The Black Panther*, a weekly publication of the Black Panther Party, which at its peak had a circulation over 100,000: "Third-world journalists, like white media activists, participated in the events they covered... Perhaps the best known Third World paper, *The Black Panther*, was founded by Black Panther Party leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland in 1967" (50). The wide variety of historical materials available on the BPP to a certain extent denotes its acceptance and safe recovery by larger society. While there have been useful writings on media coverage of AIM and Wounded Knee, the relative scarcity of material on, for example, Chicano and Puerto Rican alternative media, is one practical reason for their absence in this research. Also, recognizing its value in reaching people, the

Panthers were exceptionally active in alternative media. Cleaver, who originally wrote *Soul on Ice* from Folsom Prison in California while serving a sentence for rape, was later editor of *Ramparts* magazine.

However, the tone of such publications began to shift over time: “[T]he paper experienced direct physical repression by an establishment bent on silencing it. This context of often real, imminent threat fostered the emotional and seemingly paranoid tone that characterized the publication” (50). The paper *Right On!* Was published by the new Black Panther Party in New York when internal splits and police repression led to creation of Black Liberation Army (BLA). Taking its style from *The Black Panther*, it features crude drawings of dead cops, discussion of conflicts within the BPP and a step-by-step guide to “expropriations” from banks and “Big Time Dope Dealers.” Even by today’s standards it seems very radical. The BLA was influenced by underground media from Latin America, and *Right On!* reprints the widely distributed “Minimanual of the Urban Guerilla” pamphlet, a section taken from Carlos Marighela’s *For the Liberation of Brazil*: “It is ironic that the old Black Panther Party was one of the major sources responsible for the printing and distribution of the Minimanual in this country, yet banned its members from putting these revolutionary theories into practice” (The Black Panther Party B).

In order to really understand the angry, almost hysterical pitch that pervades *Right On!*, it is necessary to consider at length the war that was being waged on the civil rights movement and its media by the United States government. On November 5, 1968, the day Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew

were elected President and Vice President, J. Edgar Hoover issued a directive ordering the surveillance of underground newspapers. FBI tactics against alternative media outlets included monitoring personal finances, arrests, assaults, pressure on printers and distributors, and more alarmingly “the release of ‘disinformation’ attributed to underground media; publication of ‘underground’ papers secretly funded by the government; the bombing, burning and ransacking of newspaper offices” (Armstrong 138). Thousands of groups and individuals were targeted. According to Armstrong, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and police joined in:

Together, they effected systematic violations of First Amendment freedom of the press and Fourth Amendment freedom from unreasonable search and seizure... Of the many eulogies to the death-of-radical activism delivered since the early seventies, only a few barely noticed accounts have given full weight to the attack of the movement’s means of communication as a leading reason for its collapse (138).

In 1972, activists calling themselves the “Citizen’s Committee to Investigate the FBI” broke into FBI offices in Media, Pennsylvania and published what they found—evidence of counterintelligence programs (COINTELPRO) that had existed since 1940. Now verified by the Freedom of Information Act, more dirty secrets were uncovered by the hearings of the Senate Select Committee to Study Government Operations 1974 to 1975, released as the Church Committee report on abuses in the FBI and CIA. Heavily censored documents provide only a taste of the full extent of their activities, then or now.

COINTELPRO targeted the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, the Puerto Rican independence movement, the black liberation movement, the

student movement and the American Indian Movement (AIM). Ward Churchill, as a former coordinator and spokesperson for AIM, has experienced first-hand COINTELPRO as nothing less than psychological warfare. Together and separately, he and Jim Vander Wall, among others, have produced a huge and painstakingly thorough body of work dedicated to its history and effects. *The COINTELPRO Papers* usefully reprints hundreds of previously classified documents, with accompanying historical analysis.

Joy James situates COINTELPRO in the context of historical violence, such as lynching, in response to black resistance: "In the post-civil rights movement (called the 'second reconstruction' by some), that policing takes the form of racialized incarceration and COINTELPRO, the FBI's clandestine and deadly campaign to undermine radicals and revolutionaries" (James 1999 112). And the violence of this "second reconstruction" is no less real: "In 1968, when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover designated the Black Panther Party as 'the greatest threat to the internal security' of the United States, imprisonment as well as executions or assassinations of dozens of Panther leaders followed" (112). The brutal murder of 21-year-old BPP leader Fred Hampton and Mark Clark by Chicago police as they slept is but one of these horrifying instances.

COINTELPRO produced its own media, too. Agents authored entire articles that "cooperative" news media ran as their own. They created cartoons mocking different groups and individuals, as well as forged letters to activists' families, employers, landlords and schools. These efforts were definitely most



aggressive against "black nationalists." Hoover's August 25, 1967 memo aimed to destroy support for them among radical and conservative, black and white:

When an opportunity is apparent to disrupt or neutralize black nationalist, hate-type organizations through the cooperation of established local news media contacts or through such contact with sources available to the Seat of Government, in every instance careful attention must be given to the proposal to insure the targeted group is disrupted, ridiculed, or discredited through the publicity and not merely publicized (Churchill and Vander Wall 93).

They officially considered Martin Luther King, Jr. to be "the most dangerous Negro in the future of this Nation from the standpoint of communism, the Negro, and national security" and at one point sent him an anonymous letter in an unsuccessful attempt to convince him to commit suicide (96-97).

As Churchill and Vander Wall outline, "Considerable COINTELPRO attention was also focused on *The Black Panther* newspaper because, as was observed by FBI headquarters in 1970, 'The BPP newspaper has a circulation of... 139,000. It is the voice of the BPP and if it could be effectively hindered, it would result in helping to cripple the BPP'" (159, 161). People involved in its publishing were subjected to threats and IRS investigations. The deaths of Panthers in that era included Walter Pope and Sam Napier, circulation managers for the paper.

COINTELPRO did not, however, limit itself to the BPP alone, as this memo confirms: "One of the most important aspects of our current investigation of the New Left involves the movement's propaganda activities. We must afford this phase of New Left efforts close attention so that we can keep abreast of current New Left activities, take advantage of situations which could embarrass

the New Left movement and counter the New Left propaganda” (144). Aside from sounding like it was written by some stereotypical meathead that thinks of himself as the Law, this passage underlines the significance of COINTELPRO’s focus on alternative media, and evidences an understanding of its potential to organize against the state.

Hoover’s gang was nervous about communication between student organizers and black nationalists: “The FBI expressed keen interest in any signs of cooperation between underground papers, especially if it involved the Black Panthers and their newspaper” (145-146). The combination of the radical, educated left and the militant black movement was a volatile mix, leading to the SDS offshoot the Weather Underground Organization (WUO). Such cooperation among diverse groups presents a real threat to state oppression, and nothing is reacted to more strongly.

Not everybody sees it this way. Todd Gitlin—former president of SDS and rabid Democrat—has repeatedly asserted that the Black Panther Party hijacked the black movement. More recently, he has been openly critical of what he sees as the glorification of the Weather Underground and the movement to support Mumia Abu-Jamal.

Gitlin actually points out the problem with his own criticisms in *The Whole World is Watching*: “The media were now at pains to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable opposition” (Gitlin 1980 274). This is a typical pretense of supporting ‘legitimate’ political struggles, while belittling those that threaten the national elite: “The liberal media quietly invoke the need for reform—while

disparaging movements that radically oppose the system that needs reforming” (Gitlin 1980 4).

While living clandestinely, the Weather Underground was not content to let the mainstream media represent it without challenge:

Faced with the increasing difficulty of transmitting their messages through the media, the fugitives of the Weather Underground came up with a logical solution: start media of their own. Thus began a strange episode in the history of American media in which the media ventures themselves were perfectly legal, but the people producing them were not (Armstrong 156).

This solution is the basis of all alternative media; these individuals go beyond a critique of the corporate media to create their own. The Weathermen’s two main efforts were the quarterly magazine *Osawatomie* and the documentary film *Underground*, made with above-ground filmmakers Emile de Antonio, Mary Lampson and Haskell Wexler. In 1975, the FBI tried to coerce the directors into revealing information leading to the WUO fugitives, but “the Hollywood film community—mindful of its collapse before McCarthy’s pressure tactics in the fifties—circulated a statement of support for the filmmakers and assembled a high-powered legal team. The FBI backed off” (156). Unfortunately, neither the film nor the magazine lasted long.

Cynic that I am, even I find it amazing that after COINTELPRO came to light, documented by the FBI’s own files, it remained largely unknown (or unchallenged) in polite society. It is a powerful testament to the strength of the program in defaming its victims. The mainstream press routinely collaborated with police for tips and portrayed civil rights activists as dangerous. Armstrong explains that the mass media refused to even cover the repression of the

underground: "This hurt antiestablishment media even more, and it largely restricted news of their suppression to their own still limited circles, ensuring that the secret war remained secret from most Americans" (149). James also comments on the disturbing absence of public outrage over the scandal:

The lack of concern was partly tied to ignorance and partly the consequence of negative media depictions of black revolutionaries. According to the U.S. Senate's 1976 Church Commission report on domestic intelligence operations: 'The FBI has attempted covertly to influence the public's perception of persons and organizations by disseminating derogatory information to the press, either anonymously or through 'friendly' news contacts.' Media stigmatization and state disinformation continue to influence American cultural perceptions of black militants (James 1999 112).

This is one reason why it is difficult to mobilize a mass movement around political prisoners today: the public has been subjected to decades of negative information about these groups, and about radical organizing in general. As a result, many do not see victims of rights violations, they see bra-burning, acid-smoking, free-loving, race-mixing terrorists. Others, even if they are free of such biases, do not realize that dozens of COINTELPRO targets remain in prison today, more than 30 years later.

COINTELPRO was formally active only from 1956 to 1971, but it is laughable that we are to believe such operations have ceased. Certainly, the FBI is less likely to keep incriminating records where they will be found, and they have sneakily discontinued use of word COINTELPRO. One important thing the political prisoner movement can do, and is doing, is work to expose the government's reactionary repression of activists, then and now.

The growth of the militant Black Liberation Army, Weather Underground and similar groups was partially a response to threat of COINTELPRO. Assata Shakur (formerly JoAnne Chessimard), a target of COINTELPRO surveillance, was incarcerated for the 1973 killing of New Jersey State trooper Werner Foerster, who pulled over a car full of BLA members for a “faulty tail light.” Shakur was shot immediately, and unable to lift her arms. Both she and Sundiata Acoli were shot multiple times—were in fact beaten further after the shooting, and Zayd Shakur was killed. Assata, sentenced to life plus 33 years and fearing for her safety, escaped in 1979.

In “An Open Letter from Assata Shakur,” she describes the role of the media in vilifying herself and Acoli: “We were both convicted in the news media way before our trials. No news media was ever permitted to interview us, although the New Jersey police and FBI fed stories to the press on a daily basis” (119).

Shakur spent her childhood in the South, then attended Manhattan Community College, where she became politicized. In her autobiography, she remembers when Emory Douglas introduced her to *The Black Panther* in California: “It was a trip! The papers wouldn’t get picked up from the printer until late in the evening, and people would work until the wee hours sorting them out and preparing them for distribution to the Panther offices all around the country” (Shakur 205). She discovered the Jonathan Jackson, the Soledad Brothers and Angela Davis via the mainstream media: “It was splashed across the papers, blaring on the radio, and yet i still couldn’t believe it. The face of the serious

young man with the gun refused to leave my thoughts" (206). Despite the negative coverage of their case, she was motivated to learn about the situation and get involved.

As part of COINTELPRO's harassment, Shakur was charged with a series of bank robberies and shootings in separate trials that lasted until 1977, always released due to flimsy evidence. She was in total isolation in a men's jail the entire time. At one trial, "They had taken a bank picture of a woman robbing a bank, printed my name under it as being positively identified, and then placed that picture in newspapers, subway stations, and, i think, even on the sides of buses... The public had been so saturated with that image that i felt it was crazy to take this trial seriously" (212). Even later when the photographic image was discredited in court, the damage was done, and the image has continued to be used against Shakur in media reports throughout her life. That image was part of the reason for her arrest, part of the reason for her final conviction and part of the reason for her fear for her life.

From her hiding place in Cuba, Shakur has continued to appear in documentaries and give interviews, refusing to let history rest, raising awareness of all political prisoners. Released PP/POWs are among the most vocal and active organizers in the ongoing struggle to free their comrades. There were many victories to celebrate during that "movement era": freedom for Davis, the Panther 21, Seale, Huggins, and others. But many were not so lucky:

An estimated ninety activists from the Black Liberation, Puerto Rican Independence, and the white anti-imperialist movements exist in a precarious Cuban exile while over one hundred of their counterparts remain incarcerated in U.S. prisons. Most are anonymous to the general

American populace in the 'Free World' and even to the progressive communities that revere the names of political prisoners and icons Abu-Jamal or American Indian Movement activist Leonard Peltier (James 1999 122).

There has been a lot of academic work on the role of the mass media in the decline of the movements of the sixties and seventies. Yet only a handful of researchers—Downing, and Armstrong, in particular—have given serious consideration to the role of alternative media in the rise of this movement, and in its persistence today. Likewise, despite its great significance in the civil rights movement, there has been little study of the role of the prison struggle and its communication networks historically. The documents that have been reprinted in various forms and the stories that are told by the survivors of COINTELPRO are part of a narrative that cannot be erased. They, and not just the “victors,” are writing history.

## WHO WE ARE

You can jail the revolutionary, but you can't jail the revolution.

- Fred Hampton

The number of people behind bars in the United States nearly doubled in a single decade, from 1.1 million in 1990 to over two million in 2001. Prison, which was already a racist, classist, deeply corrupt institution in the middle of the twentieth century, has since gotten dramatically worse. With the rise of conservative economics, multinational profiteering and private prisons, conditions inside have declined sharply. In the face of the socially accepted warehousing of a nation's undesirables, an opposition movement has struggled to draw attention to injustice. Alternative media and the voices of political prisoners continue to be vitally important to this movement.

*The Prison Index*, compiled by Peter Wagner, gives a succinct overview of the crime control industry using reliable, recent statistics—a rarity and thus a valuable resource for activists and researchers. Growing out of his website PrisonSucks ([www.prisonsucks.com](http://www.prisonsucks.com)), Wagner's work is jointly funded by the reform-oriented Prison Policy Initiative and Western Prison Project. According to his calculations, as shocking as the idea of two million people in prison may be, it's just the tip of the iceberg: "Total population under control of the penal system (prison, jail, probation and parole) in 2001: 6,594,000" (Wagner 24). Although the U.S. represents only four percent of the global population, it accounts for 22 percent of the world's incarcerated population (40). Almost one in 25 adults is sent to jail per year.



These numbers do not reflect crime rates, which have actually dropped over the last few decades. The vast majority of men and women are imprisoned for non-violent crimes. For example, only 16.8 percent of felony convictions in 1996 were for violent offenses (15). America spends more money on building prisons than colleges, and more African-American men are currently in jail or prison than higher education (33). Indeed, Wagner makes a harsh comparison: "Incarceration rate per 100,000 Black adult men in South Africa under apartheid (1993): 851." In the U.S. under George W. Bush: 7,226 (41). The prison population is actually more racially skewed now than it was in 1930 (28).

Although Canada has fewer prisoners overall—105 per 100,000 compared to 700 per 100,000 in the U.S.—the system is similarly plagued with racism (40). As the Canadian Race Relations Foundation (CRRF) outlines in its report "Racism in the Justice System," the problem exists at every level of the legal system:

Studies show that provincially, First Nations peoples are incarcerated at rates that are 6-7 times the overall provincial rate... [P]ersonal racism is seen in statistics such as First Nations peoples are 3 times as likely to be charged and sent to court after arrest than non-natives... These problems are echoed in the judicial system, where almost all judges are white, and less than 1% of lawyers are First Nations Peoples... At the systemic level, it is found that only 18% of First Nations inmates are released on full parole, compared with 42% of the general inmate population (Roy).

What this means is that an overwhelming percentage of prisoners in North America are minorities—especially black, Native and Latino. Death penalty sentencing is equally racialized. Fifty percent of those on death row are people of colour, most accused of killing whites.

Women represent a small but growing percentage of the prison population. According to the Prison Activist Resource Center, the majority of women are imprisoned for non-violent crimes such as drug use and cheque forgery, or self-defense against abusers. Black women are more likely to be convicted and serve longer sentences for the same crimes as white women. An incredible 90 percent of women in prison are single mothers, and 92 percent reported an income below \$10,000 before incarceration (James 1999: 29).

Equally alarming are the numbers of prisoners who are poor, mentally ill or illiterate. As many as 80 percent of people on trial are not able to afford a lawyer and must rely on overworked and frequently uninterested public defenders. Nineteen percent of the incarcerated population in the United States is completely illiterate, and 40 percent are functionally illiterate (Wagner 19). With only four percent of the total population illiterate, this raises grave concerns. How are almost half of prisoners in the U.S. supposed to represent themselves legally, or even communicate with people on the outside?

Racially biased drug sentencing laws and the criminalization of poverty have contributed to a situation that is nothing less than a human rights emergency. Americans are made complicit in this discrimination through "tough on crime" rhetoric that preys on fear. 37% of the public thought that crime control was "the most important issue facing the country" in 1994. Three percent thought that in 1982, when the murder rate was actually higher (12). Perceptions of law enforcement have been shaped by race and class, too: "Percentage of Whites reporting a great deal of confidence in the police, 2001: 59%" The percentage of

African-Americans who have the same confidence? 38. (13). 66% of people with income over \$75,000 feel it. 48% of those with an income under \$20,000 do (14). It is not a “war on crime” or on drugs so much as a war on the poor and minorities.

There’s little question about where many of these perceptions are coming from: “Percent of the public that forms their opinions about crime based on what they see or read in the news: 76%” (12). As Noam Chomsky and others have amply demonstrated, there is no liberal bias in the media—quite the opposite. In *We the Media*, Julie Winokur addresses the mass media’s role in distortion of crime rates:

Despite the fact that members of the press perceive themselves as watchdogs, the facts tell a different story. Biased reporting is the rule rather than the exception. In the news, African-Americans are portrayed most often as the perpetrators of crime while whites appear more frequently as victims... And when more than half of the stories that top local news involve violent crime, despite that fact that such crime has fallen in many cities, the press has not only skewed our picture of the world, it has contributed to the fear and anxiety of the citizenry (Hazen and Winokur 97).

Only five percent of American journalists are black. Winokur suggests that alternative media can oppose these misrepresentations: “At its best, the independent press is aware of the bias and distortion in mainstream media and tries to give a voice to the very people who are usually voiceless” (98).

The mainstream media, which has contributed to the criminalization of millions and the spread of prisons, also has a place behind those walls. Yvonne Jewkes’ book *Captive Audiences* is quite a unique study of the role of mass media, including television, radio, newspapers and magazines, in UK prisons.

While her audience research approach has limitations in terms of its analysis of the power relations in prison, and there may be significant differences between media in the British, American and Canadian prison systems, Jewkes offers some thoughtful insights into the relationship between prisoners and media, focusing in particular on gender and the culture of masculinity.

To the extent that ostracization from society can be alleviated by contact with outsiders, prison walls are “permeable by external forces” (4). Media can provide a fantasy: “In the confined context of prison, the illusion of escaping to another place takes on an even greater intensity” (5). Media can also impart cultural norms and a sense of community. As a “normal” activity done on the outside, it is a connection to one’s old life and routine. Media such as television do provide a sense of connection to time and space outside through news and culture. Prisoners can even be consumers, buying their own magazines, paper, pens and other commissary items. Contrary to “the tradition of pessimism founded by the Frankfurt School,” Jewkes insists that media provide a sense of agency to prisoners through active consumption, choices and rejections (91).

Media, along with its other functions, also serves as a form of control by staff. Television, radios and newspapers may appear to be to inmates’ benefit, but their presence can pacify and their withdrawal can punish. It is hence possible to manage large segments of the population with little staff, or any human interaction. Jewkes recognizes this contradiction—the media is used by prisoners to “empower” themselves and also by authorities to control them—but

she does not see the way out: removing the authorities from the equation as much as possible.

Building on the idea of the Cold War's military-industrial complex, activists popularized the term "prison-industrial complex," to describe the war on crime and the convergence of private and governmental interests that contribute to the growth of the prison system. Capitalism and prisons are inextricably bound, and some theorists have suggested that they constitute a modern form of slavery. This is not an abstract or casual use of the term slavery; it is a reference to the way that companies actually directly profit from the suffering of human beings.

Joy James posits that slavery is so essential to capitalist society that it has never really disappeared. She makes a crucial distinction with respect to the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution following the Civil War:

While ostensibly abolishing it, that amendment in fact legalizes and demarcates prisons as the areas in which slavery, or 'involuntary servitude,' is permissible... One of America's great intellectuals, W.E.B. DuBois, notes in *Black Reconstruction* that, after the Civil War, Southern planters who earlier had used slave labor began to rely solely on convict labor because of profit margins, as African Americans were imprisoned for minor infractions of the law... (James *Shadowboxing* 25).

The ongoing criminalization of minorities, then, is tied to the ongoing need for slaves. Private prisons, which had been common, were abolished around 1925, "when newspaper exposés brought public attention to brutal beatings, malnourishment, and labor exploitation" (25). They reemerged in the 1980s, and in the 1990s many states legalized the contracting of prison labour to private companies: "Sales from prison industries rose from \$393 million in 1980 to \$1.81 billion in 1995" (26). Today, prison labourers are lucky to make a dollar an hour.

In *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Y. Davis tackles the ideological factors that have led to this deplorable new prison system. Massive prison construction began during Reagan's era of "tough on crime" rhetoric:

The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues affecting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in disproportionate numbers... We live in an era of migrating corporations... Because the economic base of these communities is destroyed, education and other surviving social services are profoundly affected. This process turns the men, women, and children who lived in these damaged communities into perfect candidates for prison (Davis 2003 16).

The boom in prison population is directly related to the decline in education rates—why train a workforce that is unneeded in the modern economy? It is possible to see, with this analysis, why many branches of the radical prison movement are abolitionist rather than reformist. It is all but impossible to speak of reforming a system that is so fundamentally corrupt: "Are prisons racist institutions? Is racism so deeply entrenched in the institution of the prison that it is not possible to eliminate one without eliminating the other?" (26).

There are powerful conceptual barriers to abolition. Prison is thought of as inevitable and permanent despite its relatively new existence and growth in past 20 years. The state has used the media to convince the public that it has always been so and must continue so for their own safety: "The prison is considered so 'natural' that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it" (10). So, with little public debate on the subject, North Americans acquiesced to the imprisonment of millions of minorities and poor. Yet Davis stresses that abolition attitudes have not been static over time. Social movements played a major role in transforming

public beliefs about such widely accepted institutions as slavery, lynching and segregation.

Independent media are essential sites for working through the problems with and alternatives to incarceration. Prison communication initiatives are therefore more important than ever. James McGrath Morris' *Jailhouse Journalism* charts the mostly untold story of the rise and decline of the prison press in North America. Prison journalism is a tradition that is more than 200 years old. Even as modern prisons emerged, so too did the early prison press, beginning in 1800 with *Forlorn Hope*, "born in the squalor of an eighteenth-century debtors' prison" (Morris *Jailhouse* 19). Between 1930 and 1960, there was an explosion of prison publishing. Morris estimates that there were hundreds of papers circulating at one point. By the early 1980s, around 100 prison papers were active. That number has unfortunately declined sharply in the past fifteen years.

Today, the largest paper is the *Angolite* from Louisiana. *Prison Legal News* (PLN), begun in 1990 and the second largest prison publication in North America, is edited by inmate Paul Wright, serving a sentence for murder in Washington. He and attorney Tara Herivel compiled the provocative anthology *Prison Nation* from PLN articles and other sources. Wright is aided in printing and distribution by his wife and supporters outside. Morris remarks that "this new hybrid of the prison press—a publication produced for and by inmates but with enough footing outside the walls to put it beyond the reach of prison administrators" can take advantage of legal protections and outside funding not available to most other prison papers (ix). PLN was thus able to resist the "wave

of repression” against prison journalism: “Wright, having it printed in this fashion, overcame the main cause of the demise of America’s best prison newspapers in the 1970s and 1980s” (ix, x).

Most prison publications are what Morris calls the “old style,” printing mainly fiction, poetry, news clippings from the mainstream press, prisoners’ artwork and cartoons. Left-wing politics “previously had been confined to underground prison publications” (xi). When PLN’s radical analysis and advocacy began circulating, it was a target of heavy censorship: “Its first three issues, thin photocopied newsletters were panned in all Washington prisons, and guards ransacked Wright’s cell, removing all his writing materials” (x). The threat of a lawsuit from Wright’s outside supporters got it back in circulation, and it is now distributed nationwide. Some prisons have since tried to ban PLN, but with pro bono help Wright has won over ten cases so far.

Prison journalism, including PLN in 1998, has made its way online: “But, while the Internet has profoundly altered the media, it has had little overall effect on prison media. The reason is simple. Inmates are barred in virtually all circumstances from accessing the Internet” (xv). Many prisoners, like Wright himself, “have never seen a website or sent an email” (xv). Still, the Internet is one way to gain public support and raise awareness of free speech issues by showing people articles that have been arbitrarily censored.

Victims’ families and law enforcement are frequently outraged to find a prisoner presence online: “The controversy over inmates’ access to radio broadcasts or the web is only a new version of an age-old conflict concerning the



extent to which those who break the law lose their right of free expression” (xvi). While many people view prison as a stripping of rights—to vote, to move, to express oneself, even to safety and medical treatment—prisoners are indeed nominally protected by the First Amendment. In practice, courts often defer to prison administration, and prisoners are not able to advocate their own interests successfully due to poverty and lack of education.

The deterioration of prison journalism even as inmate populations rise may seem strange, but it actually makes a great deal of sense. “Security” measures, widespread illiteracy, overcrowding, lockdowns and the cutting of almost all educational and social development programs are byproducts of the new system. Skills and supplies like pens and paper are scarce. Even if individual prison administrators wanted to support journalism programs, most have little resources except for daily management.

While the importance of the press has arguably diminished in the age of electronic media in the “free” world, it is still as important as it was in 1800 on the inside—no newer technology is generally allowed—so why has it been allowed to decline? The Internet might allow us to organize and spread the word to others, but it is really essential to get the word going again inside prisons.

The same state that sent almost a million more people to jail within ten years also reacted harshly to anyone who dared resist it. After the unmasking of COINTELPRO, when it became clear that openly targeting individuals or groups for their political beliefs (even for being suspected communists!) would not be warmly received by the public, a new tactic was advanced. Ward Churchill and

Jim Vander Wall show that the term “terrorism” has been increasingly employed to repress dissent. This is quite a perceptive observation, considering that *The COINTELPRO Papers* was published eleven years before this plan was really put into its full use by the current Bush administration. They provide a memo dated as early as April 1972 indicating the shift in terminology:

The word selected was ‘terrorist,’ applied here to members of the Black Panther Party *cum* Black Liberation Army who had only months earlier been designated as ‘agitators’ and ‘key extremists...’ The public, which experience had shown would balk at the idea of the FBI acting to curtail political diversity as *such*, could be counted on to rally to the notion that the Bureau was now acting only to protect them against ‘terror’ (Churchill and Vander Wall 306).

This tactic was solidified in 1980 with the formation of the Joint Terrorist Task Force (JTTF), a combination of FBI agents and New York City detectives—and a replacement for COINTELPRO. During the 1980s, the JTTF conducted huge investigations of supposed terrorist networks, and some activists were imprisoned for up to three years for refusing to provide information. These massive sweeps led to the arrest of many PP/POWs, including the Puerto Rican Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), Revolutionary Armed Task Force (RATF), the Ohio 7, and the Resistance Conspiracy prisoners.

In the ensuing decades there has been continued growth in the prisoner support movement, partially due to the massive alternative media mobilization around the cases of Mumia Abu-Jamal and Leonard Peltier. In “Race, Resistance and State Repression,” Gabriele Gottlieb calls Mumia Abu-Jamal, who was convicted in 1982 of killing Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner and sentenced to death, “the world’s best-known political prisoner” (Gottlieb 175).

One of the strengths of the Free Mumia campaign has been its connection to issues like police brutality, the death penalty and the prison-industrial complex: "Mumia Abu-Jamal's fate has become part of a cultural critique of capitalism and state-inflicted terror, a protest that has been expressed in music, paintings and poetry" (175).

An incredibly prolific writer known as the "voice of the voiceless," Abu-Jamal routinely contributes to academic and activist journals, to the extent that it is rare to come across a leftist zine, website or anthology without some words from him. As James Morris notes, "unlike most prison journalists... he was a professional journalist before being sent to prison" (Morris xiv). He was a contributor to *Prison Legal News* even before his arrest, and continues to be one.

But his alternative media empire stretches way beyond newsprint. It encompasses two official websites ([www.mumia.org](http://www.mumia.org) and [www.freemumia.org](http://www.freemumia.org)), hundreds of smaller sites in dozens of languages, the 1996 film *Mumia Abu-Jamal: A Case for Reasonable Doubt?*, the books *Live from Death Row*, *Death Blossoms* and *All Things Censored* and a series of spoken word CDs. Huge events were organized in his name, including the Millions for Mumia march in April 1999 and Justice Now: The Concert to Free Mumia. The *Fifth Estate* article "Stop the Execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal!" spread across the entire front page of its Winter 1999 issue, is typical of these efforts. It includes a brief summary of his case and its political context, a quote from New York City Mumia Coalition organizer Safiya Bukhari, and a list of ways to help. In this single article, a wide variety of media tactics are proposed, including demonstrations, phone, fax and

email campaigns—directed at the Pennsylvania government, the court and National Public Radio affiliates who refused to play his commentaries—and the website [www.mumia.org](http://www.mumia.org): “COUNTER MEDIA DISINFORMATION by confronting the networks, writers and broadcasters who publish lies and police propaganda” (*Fifth Estate* 1). The article encourages supporters to read Abu-Jamal’s books and essays, listen to his radio commentaries and CDs, and watch the film.

But not everybody wants to hear the things that Abu-Jamal has to say. Censorship is an obstacle both within and outside of prison. In 1996 National Public Radio cancelled a series of his commentaries due to pressure from conservative politicians like Bob Dole and law enforcement. Pacifica, an alternative news alliance of stations begun in Berkeley in 1949, has since made his radio broadcasts available on the air and online.

Like Abu-Jamal, Leonard Peltier is still very active in the movement, years after his 1976 arrest for the deaths of FBI agents Jack Coler and Ronal Williams during a COINTELPRO-coordinated attack on the American Indian Movement at Wounded Knee: “Peltier continued to function as an activist within the ‘super-max’ prison. He, his family, and his supporters participated in the struggle for prisoners’ rights and were in the forefront during the hunger strike, work stoppage, marches and rallies of the early 1980s” (45). As a gifted painter and writer, he produces works that speak to many issues:

Peltier’s uncompromising resistance fueled the growth of an international movement which has focused attention not only on his case but upon broader issues of indigenous land rights and POWs/political prisoners in the U.S. Millions of individuals have written letters and signed petitions demanding a new trial, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Nobel

Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu, fifty members of the U.S. Congress, and fifty-one members of the Canadian parliament (45).

*Spirit of Crazy Horse*, the official newsletter of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, is released monthly. In the May 2004 issue, Peltier reflects on the Supreme Court's most recent denial of his appeal. He develops a relationship with his many supporters through updates, announcements, and poetry, even highlighting the "support person of the month." On the back page there is a notice to the 2004 presidential candidates that Peltier's release should be a critical issue in the election: "Want my vote in 2004? FREE PELTIER" (Leonard Peltier Defense Committee 9). The official website of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee ([www.freepeltier.org](http://www.freepeltier.org)) is used to coordinate dozens of support groups internationally.

The vast alternative media campaigns around both Peltier and Abu-Jamal's cases helped to build a movement supporting political prisoners in North America. Many members of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army have now been imprisoned for as long as 30 years, and are joined by white anti-imperialists, the MOVE 9, Puerto Rican, Chicano and Cuban independence fighters, environmental activists and hundreds of protesters at the School of the Americas (many of the latter nuns, priests and teachers, all jailed for trespassing at the counterinsurgency training camp for Latin American soldiers at Fort Benning).

Many people support Abu-Jamal and Pelter, as they did Angela Davis, because of their presumed innocence. As Joy James explains, they are kept ideologically separate from militant prisoners: "The 'cultural dialectic' in a society

that was expanding to embrace past radicalism (and in some ways to contain it) coupled with her class background and education to elevate Davis' status to American icon; yet this same dialectic has not evolved to encompass incarcerated and fugitive revolutionaries" (James 1999 106). It is, however, possible to fight to free wrongly convicted political prisoners while still upholding the legitimacy of militant struggle. While Abu-Jamal, Peltier and Assata Shakur continue to assert their innocence, they do not reject the potential of armed struggle.

Even a very limited sampling of the alternative publications and films from the 1980s and 1990s reveals that a political prisoner support movement continued to thrive during that era. Looking at the yellowed pile of radical newspapers in front of me, I am overwhelmed by the volume of writing and art that has been produced by and in support of PP/POWs. The Internet has also expanded the possibility of this sort of archival research—reprints of rare underground and alternative papers, non-academic fandom and commentary. One of the most interesting exercises with this material is to chart the dissemination of a particular piece of writing across space and time through different publications and even different media.

From 1975 to 1976, the radical black organization MOVE ran a column in a local African-American newspaper, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, that attempted to counter their negative portrayal in the mainstream by explaining their beliefs and activities. It was well-received and community support for MOVE grew, especially in the local black community, where, as Gottlieb notes, police harassment of the

black community in Philadelphia was endemic. An uneasy year-long standoff with MOVE ended on August 8, 1978, when police threatened to enter their house on 'health violations.' Police opened fire on the house, and in the ensuing firestorm officer James Ramp was killed: "Delbert Africa was severely beaten by four police officers, which was captured on several TV cameras... All twelve adults arrested after the shoot-out were charged with the murder of James Ramp and quickly convicted by the media and city officials" (186). The nine who were convicted are known as the MOVE 9.

The infamous Mayor Frank Rizzo made no attempt to disguise his bias: "The only way we're going to get rid of them is to get the death penalty back in, and I'll pull the switch myself" (187). In 1985, police dropped a bomb on MOVE headquarters, leaving eleven dead, including five children, and sixty row houses burned. Abu-Jamal covered all of these events: "He was highly critical of the tactics used by police, the evidence presented against MOVE, and the beating of Delbert Africa" (187).

The MOVE organization, which helped coordinate much of the support around Abu-Jamal, also employed widespread media techniques in the defense of the MOVE 9, beginning with their newspaper *First Day*. Issue 11, released in August 1996, is a special "Spotlight on MOVE Political Prisoners" to mark their eighteenth year in prison. Abu-Jamal and several of the MOVE 9 write articles from prison. The issue also features an advertisement for their first book, *25 Years on the MOVE*. They also participated in the making of two low-budget films called *The MOVE Organization* and *The Bombing of West Philly*, comprised of

student and news footage of the events. More recently, the organization puts out the modest photocopied newsletter *On the MOVE* for friends and supporters. As the February 2004 issue of the newsletter indicates, "Friends of MOVE" chapters are active in the United States, Belgium, Spain, France, the Czech Republic, Africa, Italy, the U.K. and Canada. MOVE regularly adds news and analysis from the prisoners to its website ([www.onamove.org](http://www.onamove.org)).

The circulation of small newspapers about specific cases was common in left circles in the eighties and nineties, and if you got your hands on any of these you would almost definitely see the name Ohio 7. Following the most intensive JTTF manhunt on record, a group of white activists who had been living underground were captured and accused of being members of the United Freedom Front (UFF), also known as the Sam Melville-Jonathan Jackson Brigade. They were charged with a series of bombings in early 1980s against the U.S. government's ongoing support of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Although careful steps were taken to ensure that nobody was injured during these actions, the Jaan Laaman, Barbara Curzi-Laaman, Richard Williams, Carol and Tom Manning, Pat Gros Levasseur and Raymond Luc Levasseur were given extremely long sentences. The defendants were then charged with "seditious conspiracy" and RICO for the same charges. Thankfully, this ridiculous attempt at "double jeopardy" didn't stick.

When they were first arrested, they were interviewed by a supporter and the result was the short film *Ohio 7 on Trial*. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a decent copy in circulation. Despite the poor quality of the images,



complete with wavy lines across the screen, the Ohio 7 come across as very human, eloquent and passionate, and this video continues to be sold and screened even today.

During the conspiracy case, the Toronto Anarchist Black Cross produced a tabloid: "The Ohio 7 are being charged with RICO (racketeering) and seditious conspiracy laws which are very powerful weapons the state uses to outlaw dissent in society" (Toronto back page). Significantly, the paper prints Levasseur's opening trial statement. In political trials throughout history, defendants have often used their statements to the court to make political arguments to a wide audience. As a form of alternative communication, it is exceptionally selfless because it can affect sentencing. Levasseur's are some of the most well-known, and they have reappeared in numerous papers, zines, anthologies and websites. In addition to statements from each of the Ohio 7, the paper includes an emergency callout the denial of Abu-Jamal's appeal, indicating that all of these efforts are part of a wider movement.

The paper also prints a short statement from the Resistance Conspiracy defendants, several already-imprisoned white activists accused of a bombing campaign in early eighties following the American invasion of Grenada: Marilyn Buck, Susan Rosenberg, Tim Blunk, Linda Evans and Dr. Alan Berkman—the latter sentenced to twelve years for allegedly giving medical aid to Buck after the Brinks robbery. Laura Whitehorn, who was not serving a sentence, was kept in "preventative detention" without bail for over four years. Evans, Buck and Whitehorn were former SDS/WUO members, and Berkman was associated with

their above-ground support group, the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee. Like the Ohio 7, the government charged the Resistance Conspiracy defendants with same crimes twice in an obvious attempt to set an example for other dissidents.

Also like the Ohio 7, the defendants gave interviews during their trial for a documentary called *Resistance Conspiracy*, which was released in 1990. Directed by leftist filmmaker Lisa Rudman, their interviews are intercut with screens of text about the case, social justice struggles and PP/POWs as a whole. Each of the men and women seem extraordinarily calm and focused on the positive. Their enormous love for others, in their own words, shines through. The film is a bit outdated now, with everyone except Buck released, but still very moving and a solid introduction to white anti-imperialist PP/POWs.

Both of these cases reappear often in the alternative media of the nineties, whether it is exclusively focused on PP/POWs or not. *Resistance*, a Vancouver-based newspaper on militant social justice movements, prints an enormous four-page interview with members of the Resistance Conspiracy case as part one of a two-part feature. It provides ample space for in-depth coverage of their beliefs and actions, which would never be offered by the mainstream press, even if it was sympathetic to their cause.

The prisoner support movement in Canada was vibrant during that era. The Toronto-based *Prison News Service* (PNS), a quarterly with a circulation in the tens of thousands, was founded in 1980. Jim Campell, one of the founding members of the Bulldozer collective that produces it, reflects on its history in the January 1995 issue:

The first issue of *Open Road*, a kick-ass, and very well produced, anarchist news-journal came out of Vancouver in August of 1976, transforming radical politics in Canada. Many of the articles in that first issue—Leonard Peltier's impending extradition to the U.S., George Jackson Brigade actions, an interview with Martin Soastre, a Puerto Rican anarchist and former POW, coverage of Native and prisoners' struggles—would not look out of place in the PNS today (Campbell).

Campbell, who was already working on a paper with political prisoner Bill Dunne, based PNS on that experience:

We've never written long essays telling prisoners what they should think. Rather, we've tried to provide a forum in which prisoners, individually and collectively, could articulate and develop their politics. We were always more interested in what we could learn, rather than what we could teach. If individual prisoners could learn from us, so much the better, but that would come from ongoing dialogue and communication. The political direction of the paper would be determined by prisoners, even if the decision as to what would or would not be printed was always ours (Campbell).

The Winter 1996 issue, in fact, is not such a far cry from the issue of *Open Road* that Campbell describes. It features a letter from Peltier's Canadian defense committee, several news pieces on prison abuses, as well as pages of writings by prisoners. It also has a short article about the raiding of the Jacksonville ABC offices by police and the arrest of three members (Prison support organizers, as Angela Davis and other PP/POWs know too well, are not exactly immune to harassment by the state).

This particular issue of PNS carries "A call to action on Control Units," written by the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons, a group that formed in 1994 at a conference on the subject: "[P]olitical prisoners and other dissidents are especially targeted for incarceration in control units, the purpose being to dehumanize and criminalize them, and separate them from other prisoners and the movements they represent" (*Prison News Service* 2).

— Also known as special handling units, or SHUs, control units heralded the advent of supermax prison, beginning with the United States Penitentiary at Marion where political prisoners and minorities were locked up for years. Beginning in 1983, the entire prison, located in Illinois, was locked down, and prisoners were confined to their cells 23 hours per day. There are now 60 of these prisons, and smaller supermax units in many federal prisons.

The Chicago-based Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (CEML) formed in 1984. Their efforts spread from articles to a book and finally to the Internet. In their fifth edition of *Can't Jail the Spirit*, the Committee reflects on how the book came into existence:

As we were preparing for the 1988 program the United States was criticizing the Soviet Union for human rights abuses and the Soviet Union responded in part by accusing the U.S. of holding political prisoners and other human rights abuses. The U.S. responded by asserting that it had no political prisoners and, of course, the U.S. media faithfully supported this position. We thought that one way of proving the United States wrong and catching it in its lie would be to print biographies of these prisoners and even show their photographs (Committee to End the Marion Lockdown 6).

Originally produced for a conference, their collection of biographies was later published as *Can't Jail the Spirit*, an excellent resource and introduction to over 50 U.S. PP/POWs. Over the years, the book has been the product of various collaborations between the CEML and the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Prisoners of War and Political Prisoners, Freedom Now!, Jericho and the Crossroad Support Network.

The Anarchist Black Cross Federation has been an active producer and distributor of pamphlets, films and a regular newsletter called *Update*. As Puerto

Rican POW Dylcia Pagan indicates in "Thoughts on the Anarchist Black Cross," an interview released by the Winnipeg ABC in 1997, this type of propaganda has long been a focus of the organization:

And I truly believe the ABC Federation is not an organization that just talks about us, they do things and it's unbelievable with the limited amount of resources your organization has, the kinds of literature you come up with, your monthly update, it's open, it's honest... I feel a part of ABC, because in reading your update and reading your position papers I feel I'm a part there struggling with you all. And I have the freedom if I disagree or I have a different viewpoint, I can openly write to you and communicate with you guys my opinions of what is happening (Winnipeg 3).

Although the ABCF does not release material at the incredible rate it did in its early years, it continues to be a source of writings and films by and about PP/POWs. The *Update*, which is now released quarterly, prints updates on cases and callouts. The most recent Spring 2004 issue focuses on the parole efforts and abuse of several prisoners, as well as a commemoration of the tireless organizer and former political prisoner Safiya Bukhari from Assata Shakur and several PP/POWs.

The materials distributed by the Fed are mostly low-budget and becoming outdated. Many of them are copies of copies of copies. Still, they remain valuable because there is relatively little information, and especially few video records of political prisoners. Since I have never even been face to face with some of the prisoners I support, it means a lot to me to see them on film.

A new, slicker generation of materials is emerging now. For some people, this is an issue in itself—it's perceived as too much like advertising to appeal to the "consumer's" aesthetic sensibilities. Yet even hardened anarchists gravitate towards the glossy materials on our table rather than the photocopied flyers

when we fundraise. As John Downing argues, it should actually be a priority for alternative media projects to develop appealing products:

Of all the aspects of the relation of radical media to large-scale media, perhaps the aesthetic question is the most problematic. How far do your media fail to sustain conviction or interest, not because of repression, financial problems or distribution difficulties, but quite simply because not enough imagination or creative power have been involved in their making? ... If the artistic energy and talent which goes into those media, if the same energies so terribly misdirected in the advertising industry, could harness themselves at least in part to radical media, it would certainly improve the latter (Downing 354).

He cites Cuban poster art as an example of this approach. The art of *The Black Panther*, too, had wide-ranging appeal.

Some groups have already recognized the need for these efforts. Montreal's Abraham Guillen Press (AG Press, formerly Solidarity) is "a revolutionary left anti-authoritarian publishing house." Arm the Spirit, a Toronto-based information collective with a focus on militant and revolutionary struggles, collaborated with both Solidarity and AG Press regularly. Together and separately they have produced many professionally bound interviews, books of poetry and reflections on tactics, lessons learned and current situations, with a particular focus on PP/POWs. Arm the Spirit also runs a listserv of writings. The cooperatively-owned radical publisher and distributor AK Press in San Francisco has helped to spread these materials internationally.

AG Press, Arm the Spirit and the ABCF have worked together to facilitate a number of exciting collaborations with PP/POWs, including a book of writings by former Panther Jalil Muntaqim, *We Are Our Own Liberators*. Arm the Spirit/AG Press reprint many of the pamphlets and articles that circulated in earlier prisoner

support publications, including *25 Years on the MOVE*, in both English and French, and *The Trial Statements of Ray Luc Levasseur*.

Tracing just one of these pieces over time and space reveals how many lives it must have touched. "Enemies of the State," originally published by Resistance in Brooklyn (RnB) in 1998, is a long interview with white anti-imperialists Marilyn Buck, Laura Whitehorn and David Gilbert, covering how they became politically active, the decline of the civil rights movement, their experiences in prison, and the future of the movement. Meg Starr and Matt Meyer, members of the New York affinity group RnB, were committed to spreading the word about their cases: "The government and mainstream media have used their formidable powers to prevent real information about political prisoners Marilyn Buck, David Gilbert, Laura Whitehorn and others from getting out" (Starr and Meyer 3). A shorter version of the interview was printed in the anarchist newspaper *Love and Rage* in 1998, and reprinted as a pamphlet by Arm the Spirit/Solidarity in 2001. In 2002 Arm the Spirit/AG Press did a third edition. It makes an appearance yet again in Gilbert's new book, *No Surrender*, along with previous Solidarity/Arm the Spirit pamphlets, like "SDS/WUO," "Looking at the White Working Class Historically" and "AIDS Conspiracy Theories."

Gilbert appears in the 2003 film *The Weather Underground*, directed by Sam Green and Bill Siegel. A project of Berkeley's Free History Project, the documentary was screened in mainstream theatres and an Oscar nominee for Best Documentary Feature. It is narrated by Lili Taylor, with interviews with Bill

Ayers, Kathleen Cleaver, Bernatine Dohm, Brian Flanagan, Naomi Jaffe, Mark Rudd, Laura Whitehorn and Todd Gitlin. While the film has raised positive interest in the Weather Underground and its movement, it also at times portrays its survivors as apologetic. Even worse, it doesn't once mention Gilbert and Whitehorn's identities as political prisoners in the eyes of many. Interestingly, the DVD goodies include the excellent Freedom Archives interview with Gilbert, *A Lifetime of Struggle*, along with clips from *Underground*.

AG Press distributes *The Weather Underground*, as well as materials from the Freedom Archives ([www.freedomarchives.org](http://www.freedomarchives.org)), a media project run by former political prisoner Claude Marks:

The Freedom Archives contain over 5000 hours of audiotapes. These recordings date from the late-60s to the mid-90s and chronicle the progressive history of the Bay Area, the United States, and international solidarity movements. The collection includes weekly news/poetry/ music programs broadcast on several educational radio stations; in-depth interviews and reports on social and cultural issues; diverse activist voices; original and recorded music, poetry, original sound collages; and an extensive La Raza collection (*The Freedom Archives*).

Using the materials in the collection, Marks and his group have produced several high-quality CDs and videos, such as *Jalil Muntaqim: Voice of Liberation*, released in 2002. The audio CD *Prisons on Fire: George Jackson, Attica and Black Liberation* was sampled on a new release by the political hip-hop act Dead Prez and by a Portuguese punk group. The website recently added a searchable database of materials that are in the Freedom Archives.

Dee Dee Halleck, in "The Undisciplined and Punishment," charts the growth of online prison activism in the late nineties, beginning with listserv sites. Today, the Internet remains a way for people to publish information, callouts and



articles cheaply, promote discussion and network with other activists, find statistics, work on strategies and ask for help. Ex-prisoners, families, peace activists, religious groups, academics and lawyers are part of this online community.

The Berkely-based Prison Activist Resource Center (PARC, [www.prisonactivist.org](http://www.prisonactivist.org)) helps keep track of it all, and hosts several sites too: "The center was one of the central organizers of the successful Critical Resistance Conference in Berkeley in September 1998, a gathering of over 4,000 prison activists and spokespersons" (Halleck 378). Attendees of that conference, which was the inspiration for Davis' *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, formed the organization Critical Resistance, which has chapters in several American cities and its own fantastic website of resources and links ([www.criticalresistance.org](http://www.criticalresistance.org)). Several organizations, in fact, have sprung from conferences on prison issues. Conferences as a form of communication are favored among prison organizers. The ABCF and other groups meet, often yearly, to commune with comrades from other cities and countries that share similar commitments to support work. Are they alternative? They're usually organized collectively, with alternative content.

1998 was a banner year for organizing around PP/POWs. When a call went out from Jalil Abdul Muntaqim, a New York 3 political prisoner and former Black Panther, ex-PP/POWs Safiya Bukhari and Herman Ferguson answered. The issue of *Love and Rage* that printed "Enemies of the State" also reported on the thousands of people who attended the ensuing Jericho '98 march on

Washington to demand amnesty for political prisoners: "Paulette, a long time political prisoner support activist and anti-authoritarian who worked with the Jericho '98 National Coordinating Committee said it was the 'first truly diverse multinational work done around political prisoners" (*Love and Rage* 1). Like the PARC and Critical Resistance events, Jericho resulted in an organization and a website for activists ([www.thejerichomovement.com](http://www.thejerichomovement.com)). It is still one of the most frequently updated PP/POW news sites. Sadly, the news lately is harassment and parole denials: for Muntaqim, for Sundiata Acoli, for Robert Seth Hayes, and others. But it helps to know what work needs to be done.

Halleck indicates another potential resource in online communications: "E-mail campaigns have been used successfully to get medical attention for sick prisoners or to obtain eyeglasses, and there is always hope that a flood of messages will startle a governor or member of the state supreme court to take notice and review a capital case" (Halleck 379). In 1998, African American intellectuals circulated "An Open Letter to New Jersey Governor Whitman" protesting the \$50,000 "slave" bounty on Assata Shakur via email. At the same time, "An Open Letter from Assata Shakur" was circulating online. It is difficult to gauge how many people are reached by these missives, but it surely rivals those reached by indie papers and flyers. Online there is a greater chance that someone who would not be exposed to alternative publications might stumble across the message.

In the age of the ubiquitous forward, Shakur's letter traveled fast. *Raze the Walls! Quarterly*, a magazine published by a prisoner support group in Georgia

that attended the Jericho '98 march, prints Shakur's entire letter at the end of their Spring 1998 issue. Part of the missive showed up in the September 1998 issue of *Out of Time*. It draws attention to her status as "a 20<sup>th</sup> century escaped slave," a victim of COINTELPRO and former political prisoner: "All I have is my voice, my spirit and the will to tell the truth. But I sincerely ask, those of you in the Black media, the progressive media, those of you who believe in truth and freedom, to publish this statement and to let people know what is happening" (*Out of Time* 1998 2).

The Out of Control Lesbian Committee to Support Women Political Prisoners has been producing its newsletter, *Out of Time*, bimonthly since 1989:

Out of Control is a small, self-supporting committee of ten women in the San Francisco Bay Area. We formed in 1986 to organize resistance to the Lexington Control Unit for women. This was a subterranean, high-security prison in Kentucky that used sensory deprivation, mind control methods, and small group isolation in an attempt to "break the spirit" of the women prisoners. Out of Control joined with a national grass roots campaign of activists, churches, and various other human rights organizations to expose the brutality of the Lexington Control Unit. A lawsuit was brought against the federal prison by the ACLU. After 18 months the prison that housed two women political prisoners, one Puerto Rican Prisoner of War, and two social prisoners was closed (*Out of Control*).

Out of Control produced a book called *Sparks Fly* in 1998, which was distributed by AK Press. The artwork, biographies, and writings by fifteen female political prisoners included Shakur's letter.

Since Halleck wrote her essay, there has been a noticeable growth in resources online for people who want to know more about political prisoners in North America. One of the first that I explored was the ABCF's site ([www.abcf.net](http://www.abcf.net)), which provides biographies of almost 100 PP/POWs, as well as

useful information about starting prison support work. The Anarchist Black Cross Network's site ([www.anarchistblackcross.org](http://www.anarchistblackcross.org)) is meant to be a communications base for ABC collectives worldwide who are not members of the ABC Federation. American Gulag ([www.infoshop.org/gulag](http://www.infoshop.org/gulag)) offers frequent news updates about political prisoners and struggles in prison. A Montreal book distributor, Kersplebedeb ([www.kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/powpp.html](http://www.kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/powpp.html)), offers a wide range of writings, links and timely commentary by PP/POWs.

There are also various sites devoted to individuals and particular campaigns. The National Committee to Free the Cuban Five's site ([www.freethefive.org](http://www.freethefive.org)) gives lots of information about the case, including commentary from supporters like Alice Walker, and a critique of the mass media's coverage. One beautiful section showcases murals in support of the Cuban Five in Toronto, Havana and Venezuela. The ProLibertad Freedom Campaign maintains a more basic site ([prolibertadweb.tripod.com/page2.html](http://prolibertadweb.tripod.com/page2.html)) that nonetheless provides some background on Puerto Rican political prisoners. Ray Luc Levasseur's "Letters from Exile" ([home.earthlink.net/~neoludd](http://home.earthlink.net/~neoludd)) is a simple site with a collection of his writings and links to information about his comrades, facilitated by the December 16<sup>th</sup> Committee. Supporters of other individuals, like Jeffrey "Free" Luers ([www.freefreenow.org](http://www.freefreenow.org)) and Sundiata Acoli ([sundiata.afrika.net](http://sundiata.afrika.net)), also maintain websites about their efforts.

You won't find unanimous support for political prisoners online or anywhere else. There are more than a few sites, mostly run by law enforcement, like Stop Sundiata ([www.stopsundiata.com](http://www.stopsundiata.com)) deriding them as shameless cop

killers and calling their supporters deluded traitors. Still, it seems that the majority of independent sites about PP/POWs are devoted to their freedom.

Like the civil rights movement, this era too is commemorated in anthologies collecting important works by political prisoners. *Hauling Up the Morning*, edited by political prisoners Tim Blunk and Ray Luc Levasseur, is a selection of essays, poems, stories and gorgeous color illustrations by 65 North American PP/POWs and their families published in 1990. In Blunk's introduction he perfectly explains why it is so important to print such works:

To tell the truth about the U.S. political prisoners is to reclaim our history—the real history of the progressive social movements of the past 25 years... To maintain the fiction of social peace, the US ruling class cultivates social amnesia. The penitentiaries are essential to this project. Branded 'criminals' or 'terrorists,' social activists and militants are removed from our movements, communities and families and exiled to human warehouses. We are *disappeared* from the American consciousness along with our histories. Our identities are denied; our very humanity is thrown into contention... But as in so many struggles around the world, we will not be denied. We organize. We fight. We dream. We create (Blunk and Levasseur xix).

Prisoners were invited to contribute anything they liked to the collection: "The pages of this book are filled with the works of those who now must discover new ways to communicate our transforming love for this world and its struggling peoples" (xx). Despite barriers such as long hours working for little pay, the cost of supplies, overcrowding and disruptive searches, what emerges is startling, moving and possibly the best collection of PP/POW expressions released to date.

The Network of Black Organizers (NOBO)'s 1995 collection of writings, *Black Prison Movements*, takes the form of a thick "bookazine" of "African

American Dialogue.” Many of the writings are by PP/POWs, although not exclusively so. It represents a conscious effort to include prisoners in ongoing dialogue with those outside, and hopefully academics will recognize the need to continue doing so.

In 2003, Joy James, long a crusader in the name of PP/POWs, released *Imprisoned Intellectuals*, collecting the writings of imprisoned activists across decades and movements. The book is in part a product of the conference that James helped organize at Brown University in 2002, *Imprisoned Intellectuals: A Dialogue with Scholars, Activists and (Former) U.S. Political Prisoners on War, Dissent, and Social Justice*. Speakers included Safiyah Bukhari, Ward Churchill, Laura Whitehorn, Claude Marks and Rob McBride of PARC. Rather than rare or new pieces, it mostly reprints seminal tracts that have been key to civil rights and prison struggles. James rightly cautions that such work must be approached with a certain attitude:

Author and academic Barbara Harlow cautions, “Reading prison writing must... demand a correspondingly activist counterapproach to that passivity, aesthetic gratification, and the pleasures of consumption that are traditionally sanctioned by the academic disciplining of literature...’ If the circulation of rarely referenced or vilified ‘resistance literature’ reflects the growing public interest in incarceration sites, intellectual and political dissent for social justice, and the possibilities of democratic transformations, then collections such as this should spark new debates about ‘reading’ and activism and political theory” (James *Imprisoned* 4).

She envisions the book as an “encounter” between those in prison and those outside concerned with liberation.

As she observes in *Shadowboxing*, some of the most progressive theorizing comes from political prisoners: “Predictably such discourse and

activism send alarm signals throughout corporate and middle America, which respectively seek and acquiesce to greater state police powers" (James 1999 17). The rise of a vocal prison movement has been met with increased repression: "Recent legislation in some seven states, including Pennsylvania and California, prohibits prisoners from granting interviews. Consequently it is increasingly difficult for prisoners' voices to be heard" (27). Not surprisingly, both of those states are notorious for having widespread and deeply corrupt police, court, and prison systems. It means that death row prisoners die in silence. It means that people like Marilyn Buck and the MOVE 9 will find it to collaborate on certain projects in the future. They would not, for example, be able to participate in a film like Lee Lew Lee's *All Power to the People: The Black Panther Party and Beyond*, which gave insightful interviews with Kathleen Cleaver, Abu-Jamal, Peltier, Bobby Seale, Dr. Mutulu Shakur, Jim Vander Wall, Bukhari and ex-FBI and -CIA agents about many of the topics I have been trying to explore: "Consequently, some of the most controversial and incisive analyses of political resistance and state dominance have disappeared from conventional American culture" (27-28).

The victories of the past twenty-five years are a testament to the incredible organizing that has taken place on both sides of prison walls: the end of Marion Lockdown, the closing of the Lexington Control Unit for women, freedom for Black Panther Geronimo ji Jagga (formerly Elmer Pratt) in 1997 after 25 years in prison as a result of "prosecutorial misconduct," and the release of Laura Whitehorn and Kathy Boudin, to name a few. President Clinton's end-of-term

pardons on September 10, 1999 included clemency commutations of the sentences of Linda Evans, Susan Rosenberg and eleven of fifteen Puerto Rican political prisoners. These successes owe a lot to strong alternative media campaigns to organize resistance, coordinated in part by former political prisoners like Safiyah Bukhari, Ashanti Alston, Bo Brown, Laura Whitehorn and Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin. But there have been great losses: Kuwasi Balagoon, Nuh Washington, Teddy Jah Heath, Merle Africa, and many more. Even Peltier and Abu-Jamal, the most well-known and widely-supported political prisoners, remain in prison. We must remain committed to the constant process of analyzing and improving our efforts in the future.



## WHERE WE ARE GOING

*For Fear Of  
Being Called*

In Peru a demonstration  
against a rise in bread prices  
is stopped  
because of threats to renounce  
those who demand bread  
as terrorists

we fear language  
an electric cattle prod  
to drive us into corners  
where we cower  
for fear of being called  
terrorists or communists or  
criminals

why do we allow  
capitalists and congressmen  
to rob us of our language  
to intimidate us into cutting out  
our tongues  
to paralyze our movements?

why are we more afraid  
to be called terrorists  
than to die in the dark  
leaving no one to speak for us?

- Marilyn Buck (Out of Control 1998 30)

I am lucky enough to know a handful of the hundreds of people who have committed themselves to alternative media with political prisoners—from one side of the wall, the other, or both. This conversation began in early 2004, when, after informal discussions with some of the participants, I sent out a list of questions to generate dialogue around alternative media projects with PP/POWs. I asked everyone to describe a project they had been involved with, and to reflect

on its successes and weaknesses. To what extent was it a collaboration between PP/POWs and outside facilitators? What did you hope to accomplish? How did you feel about the experience? What are the challenges facing these types of media projects? What benefits can alternative media offer PP/POWs? What are possible limitations of alternative media? How has your understanding of alternative media changed over time? With this barrage of questions, we began a collaboration of our own.

The overwhelming majority of research in prison, even that which is basically well-meaning, takes a top-down approach. Consider Yvonne Jewkes: she is concerned with maintaining a balance between the favour of guards and prisoners, and found it useful to be viewed as an expert. Because her study is not geared at social change, she is not interested in confronting the power dynamics between prisoners and outsiders. It is with respect to these issues that Paulo Friere's model provides a better approach to research with prisoners. An interesting side note, and one that I'll be sure to test the limits of, is that Jewkes found that women are perceived as harmless by authorities, and thus have greater access to prisoners.

Following the tradition of prison studies, Jewkes notes a particular bias in her test group: "[T]he majority of my respondents might be said to have demonstrated levels of articulation and intellectual depth beyond what might be expected from an 'average' sample of prison inmates" (Jewkes 75). Political prisoners also tend to be more educated and thus more "accessible." But while

they may not be representative of the entire prison population, she concludes that these types are more willing to participate in research.

My approach is based on Friere's Participatory Action Research (PAR), asking subjects to reflect on their experiences as they pertain to media as a means of enacting positive social change. All interviews were written, by mail or email. Geographical distance from my subjects, including prisoners and facilitators in other locations, was a consideration in this decision, but I also asked local participants to write their responses. In addition to the benefit of convenience of analysis, I felt it would give my interview subjects the leisure to carefully consider and review their comments. In creating interview questions, I hoped to provide some focus on the themes I have mentioned, while not overdeveloping the topics that arose. Seven prisoners and seven facilitators returned the questionnaires I sent out. Although all participants were given the opportunity to remain anonymous, only one chose to do so.

The answers that emerged are as diverse and insightful as the participants themselves. The composition of project facilitators is not uniform. While many are young, white and often students, others are ex-prisoners, older and people of colour. In an attempt to be inclusive, I sent my questionnaire to as many PP/POW support groups as I could find contact information for, but most of the seven respondents were people I had a pre-existing relationship with. Understandably, many people active in prisoner support are wary of misrepresentation by strangers—or of infiltration by authorities. In the cases where people responded that I did not already know, I have tried to use those

connections to build new bonds in our work. Had I not stepped back to look at the big picture, I might not have become aware of the excellent work and comradely spirit of groups like Break the Chains and Cohort Media. Some facilitators, while not comfortable answering the questionnaire, nonetheless got me in touch with other useful contacts and shared their one-of-a-kind libraries with me.

Conversely, for the purposes of this academic project, I chose only to work with PP/POWs I had a pre-existing relationship with. I wanted genuine trust to exist between us, and I did not want to create a misconception that I was merely using prisoners for research. I was well aware that there was risk involved in the potential vulnerability of prisoners. They are in a disempowered position, but the aim of the interviews was to empower them by including their voices in my writing. My real concern lay in the possibility that they would face reprisal from prison administration for their participation. For that reason, I took care not to draw attention to the work we were doing at that stage. I also made sure not to ask personal or potentially incriminating questions.

Of the nine PP/POWs the Montreal ABCF supports, seven participated in the interviews. Robert Seth Hayes expressed interest in the project but needed all of his energy to maintain his fragile health during his recent parole bid. Ray Luc Levasseur was in a tenuous position with his approaching release, and I did not want to compromise his standing. As for the rest of the respondents, I will only be able to provide only brief outlines of their work for social justice and the charges against them. In all cases, more complete details can be found in *Can't Jail the Spirit* or on the Montreal ABCF website ([www.montrealabcf.org](http://www.montrealabcf.org)). In

addition to the projects they describe, each of these prisoners has contributed in various ways to our site. Unless otherwise noted, all of the following quotations are taken from the participants' written responses to my interview questions.

Jaan Karl Laaman has been an activist since the sixties, when he was involved with groups like the United Steelworkers of America, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other anti-war and anti-imperialist groups. In 1984, he was arrested as one of the Ohio 7, and is serving a total 98-year sentence. From prison, he has contributed to socialist and revolutionary journals, and was involved in the publication of the New England Prisoners Association (NEPA) paper. More recently, he has been concentrating on our collaborative project, *4strugglemag*: "It is primarily a voice of Northamerican p.p.'s, dealing with significant topical issues." From the very first page of the zine, Laaman makes his interest in ongoing dialogue clear: "While *4strugglemag* is primarily electronic, hard copies are available for prisoners and others who can't access the Internet. We encourage readers to respond, critique, and carry on the discussions in the magazine. Emails sent to *4strugglemag* will be frequently posted and permanently kept up with each issue" (Laaman 1 i). In 2004, we produced two issues, but next year we hope to put it out quarterly. Laaman stresses the dual goals of the project: "I hope *4strugglemag* will become a way for at least some p.p.'s to further contribute to the anti-war, social justice and revolutionary struggle. At the same time this will remind readers that p.p.'s do exist and languish in U.S. prisons. It will help raise our profile as we contribute to ongoing struggles."

As the outside facilitator of *4strugglemag*, the Montreal ABCF transcribes submissions, sends copies of them to Laaman for his consideration, puts together the issue, gets it online and mails it out. I do the website ([www.4strugglemag.org](http://www.4strugglemag.org)) myself, despite my low level of computer expertise, as I found it too difficult to rely on outsiders to keep the material up to date. One of the other collective members with some experience in layout does the paper version, and she has done a fantastic job.

And the most amazing thing has been happening with *4strugglemag*: people are reading it. Laaman got feedback from California well before his own copy had even made it past the prison censors and into his hands. One prisoner submitted an article, and I had already sent him a routine response before it clicked in that a copy of the first issue had not been sent anywhere near his institution. ABC Stockholm emailed us to ask for copies to distribute. By the time we tabled at Montreal's Anarchist Bookfair in May, some people from all over Canada and the United States were already familiar with the project. This is proof that there is a huge demand for such material, and that there are ways of getting around the draconian mail restrictions. A creative and carefully guarded communications network exists inside, and prisoners are instrumental in photocopying, trading and distributing *4strugglemag* across North America. Plus, we've never had a publication rejected so vigorously by prison mail censors—we must be doing something right!

The first issue in Winter 2004, at a modest 33 pages, boasted a colour cover with a breathtaking painting of a mourning Arab woman by anti-imperialist

PP/POW Tom Manning. It focuses on the war and occupation of Iraq, with articles by Laaman, Manning, Oscar Lopez Rivera, Sundiata Acoli and Bill Dunne. Bold black and white graphics throughout complement the in-depth discussion. It was such a success that the second issue garnered enough submissions to almost triple in size. At a whopping 88 pages, we decided to make the cover black and white to keep photocopying costs down, using the ubiquitous, disturbing image of a hooded Iraqi prisoner forced to hold wires. The issue provided analysis of situation in Iraq including the breaking prisoner abuse scandal, along with the upcoming U.S. election and Black August, a grassroots commemoration of the New Afrikan struggle. Previous contributors were joined by political and social prisoners Alvaro Hernandez, Ron Del Raine Albert Woodfox, Ali Khalid Abdullah, Ernesto Santiago, Marilyn Buck, Ojore Lutalo and Leonard Peltier. I was especially thrilled to see how many social prisoners jumped at the opportunity to participate in political discussion.

New Afrikan anarchist POW Ojore Lutalo is serving concurrent 14-year and 40-year sentences for "expropriating" funds from a bank and a drug dealer:

I was influenced and highly motivated by the Black Liberation Army (BLA) here in America. These sisters and brothers were New Africkans just like me from the streets of the ghettos who took the initiative militarily, to start assassinating members of the state's security forces who were murdering black people in our communities (Committee to End the Marion Lockdown 132).

He was locked down in the Management Control Unit (MCU) of New Jersey's Trenton State Prison, 23.5 hours a day, from 1986 to 2002. He helped to found the MCU Monitoring Project in 1986 along with lawyer Bonnie Kerness.

In 2002, he was able to give an interview, produced by the December 16<sup>th</sup> Committee, *In My Own Words*. Seen through the thick shatterproof glass of a non-contact visit cubicle and heard through a grainy phone, Lutalo's passion and commitment are still obvious. Available on both VHS and CD-Rom, the insert includes a poem written about him by one of his visitors and collage he did about his experience in the MCU. Lutalo is also a recipient of the ABCF's Anarchist Subsistence Program, which provides stamps and a small cash allotment each month to help him maintain his links with the outside world. He recalls the role of alternative media in building early support around his case:

**THE FIRST ALTERNATIVE MEDIA PROJECT THAT I WAS INVOLVED IN WAS THE NOW-DEFUNCT "REALITY NOW" PROJECT THAT WAS BASED IN MONTREAL, CANADA... REALITY NOW PRODUCED MY FIRST BIO SHEET IN ENGLISH AND FRENCH. THE SISTERS AND BROTHERS IN REALITY NOW WERE MY FIRST SUPPORTERS— THESE SISTERS AND BROTHERS SUPPORTED ME WHEN AMERIKAN-BASED ALTERNATIVE MEDIA PROJECTS REFUSED TO DO SO!**

Growing up in Texas, Marilyn Buck devoted her life to solidarity with oppressed peoples:

As an anti-imperialist activist and advocate of socialism, she was a target of the FBI Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), particularly because of her support for the Black Liberation struggle. In 1973, she was arrested and convicted of buying two boxes of handgun ammunition. The FBI accused her of being a member of the Black Liberation Army; she was sentenced to ten years, the longest sentence ever given for such an offense at that time (Committee to End the Marion Lockdown 193).

Granted furlough in 1977, Buck decided not to return and went underground. She was recaptured in 1981 after the unsuccessful and highly publicized "expropriation" of a Brink's armored truck. She was accused, along with Dr.



Mutulu Shakur, of helping Assata Shakur to escape and conspiring to bomb the capitol. Her sentence totals 80 years.

Buck's penetrating, inspirational poetry has been published internationally. This year, the Freedom Archives and her support committee, Friends of Marilyn Buck, joined to make the CD *Wild Poppies: A Poetry Jam Across Prison Walls*: "It is a gathering of poets to celebrate the work of sister poet Marilyn Buck, who has spent more than 20 years in US prisons for her anti-imperialist politics and actions" (Freedom Archives). The poet contributors read Buck's poems and their own. As she explains, alternative media has been a primary interest:

Early on in my radical political life I became involved in alternative media. I worked with the *Austin Rag* when I was first in SDS; then I worked on *New Left Notes*, the national SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) monthly newspaper. On leaving Chicago in early 1968, I moved to San Francisco where I volunteered for several months at *The Movement* newspaper (formerly a Friends of SNCC publication) until I joined the newly beginning San Francisco Newsreel. Newsreel as a radical media project (begun in NY) had a strong, clear political point of view that it was critical to build radical and alternative media as part of opposing imperialism and supporting radical social change. We both made films and showed films from all over the world in support of organizers and organizations.

Alvaro Luna Hernandez is an internationally recognized Chicano political prisoner imprisoned in Texas. While spending sixteen years in a Texas prison for a crime he did not commit, he became a leader of the prison rights movement, earning him eight years in solitary confinement. Once released, he was a speaker and organizer with the National Movement of La Raza, and a delegate of a nongovernmental organization before the 1993 United Nations Commission on Human Rights: "Before the UN General Assembly, he exposed the U.S. government's dismal human rights record and its human rights violations of U.S.

political prisoners” (Committee to End the Marion Lockdown 46). He was national coordinator of the Ricardo Aldape Guarra Defense Committee, which successfully led the fight to free an innocent man from Texas’ death row.

Like Mumia Abu-Jamal, he was targeted by law enforcement for his work with prisoners and against police brutality. Hernandez has already served over seven years of a 50-year term for alleged aggravated assault on a deputy, which was an act of self-defense. He has been placed in long-term “administrative segregation”—solitary confinement—as a result of his struggle for the rights of other prisoners. He is currently involved in various media projects like websites, a postcard campaign and bumper stickers with Jericho, the ABCF, PARC and his Barrio Defense Committee:

The U.S. government refuses to recognize our existence because to acknowledge that we exist will begin to reveal the gross inequities and injustices of its social, economic and political system. Instead, it is more convenient for functionaries to “criminalize” us and the ideas and activities that we represent. To acknowledge our existence is to shatter before the world the U.S. government’s self-created image as the “champion of human rights,” when in all reality it is the world’s chief human rights violator.

David Gilbert joined the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1962 and started the Committee Against the War in Vietnam at Columbia University in 1965: “I was one of the founding members of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) chapter there, and in 1967 I wrote the first national SDS pamphlet that named the system as “U.S. Imperialism” (Committee to End the Marion Lockdown 202). He spent ten years in the Weather Underground before being captured during the Brinks robbery and sentenced to 75 years to life. He was active in AIDS education and advocacy after his co-defendant Kuwasi

Balagoon died in 1986, and part of the collective that produces the PP/POW calendar. For years he has worked closely with the former Solidarity and Abraham Guillen Press to publish his writings:

Since the mid- or late- 90's they've published several of my pamphlets and are now in the process of producing a book length selection of my prison writings. They've also published material from and on deceased New Af. POW's Kuwasi Balagoon and Nuh Washington. They've published pamphlets and now a book by Jalil Muntaqim, as well as other valuable lit.

Sekou Cinque T.M. Kambui, who is of Afrikan/Cherokee heritage, began his activist work in Alabama by providing security for civil rights marches and meetings, which included those of the SCLC, SNCC and CORE: "Sekou was convicted in the 1975 murders of two men: a KKK official from Tuscaloosa and a multi-millionaire from Birmingham. Despite immense pre-trial publicity, the court denied a motion for a change of venue" (Committee to End the Marion Lockdown 111). Convicted by an all-white jury in 1975, Kambui has now spent nearly 30 years in prison. As a jailhouse lawyer, he has brought several successful civil actions against medical neglect and abusive conditions, particularly in segregation.

He continues to move forward, forming the Social Consciousness Development Group (SCDG) to maintain a tradition of politically conscious black activists organizing with younger prisoners. To our great delight, the SCDG recently conducted classes using articles from the Summer 2004 issue of *4strugglemag*. Like most PP/POWs, Kambui has contributed articles, essays, poems and information about his case for various websites, books and publications: "I have also submitted articles to underground newspapers, and the

newspapers and newsletters of different groups and organizations sympathetic to the plight of political prisoners/prisoners of war (PP/POW) being held hostage in one Amerikkkan prison \$lave warehouse or another.” He has been exploring the potential of online communications, and with the help of the Montreal ABCF established an experimental petition calling for his release ([www.petitiononline.com/sekou/petition.html](http://www.petitiononline.com/sekou/petition.html)).

Janet Hollaway Africa and the rest of the MOVE 9 are aware of the role that the mass media role in their criminalization: “Front page coverage from these bias news papers, before we were arraigned, tried or sentenced was, “OH MY GOODNESS THEY SHOT A COP.” As she explains, they learned to rely on alternative media early in the case:

The media coverage of the Move 9 trial was bias and slated against us. We represented ourselves and reporters deliberately twisted up our words and statements... Mumia Abu Jamal was one of the only reporters who covered our trial fairly, when he did his radio comments about the daily court proceedings, he stated what the judge, D.A. and witness said, then he'd state what Move said.

MOVE wanted to show that its struggle was the struggle of the oppressed black community:

Move began publishing our own news paper, “THE FIRST DAY” which enabled us to educate people first hand about what Move was about our purpose, and to expose what the city of Phila. was doing to us. We also did interviews with other people who had been brutalized by police or mistreated by politicians, even eye witnesses who saw these brutalities against Move and others.

Hollaway Africa describes how this goal has been carried over into their alternative media projects today: “The most recent alternative project we have been involved in is the making of a documentary film done by a supporter. The

coverage is very detailed about Move's history, with extensive interviews with people inside and outside of Move."

The documentary, *MOVE*, was released by Cohort Media this year. It reuses some of the archival footage that was circulating in the earlier videos, *The MOVE Organization* and *The Bombing of West Philly*. But while those films were hampered by poor technical quality and slow pace, *MOVE* is a well-produced, thought-provoking and dramatic retelling of the story, complete with a great soundtrack and narration by Howard Zinn. At the film's website ([www.movefilm.com](http://www.movefilm.com)), Cohort offers trailers, screening schedules and discussion boards.

Benjamin Garry, who directed and produced the film along with Ryan McKenna, describes how they wanted to include the voices of everyone involved in the case—even the Philadelphia police and city officials: "While taking a look at their case we did interviews with the MOVE prisoners themselves, MOVE members on the streets, journalists, neighbors of MOVE, and the defense attorney for the MOVE 9 (we also tried to interview all types of city officials and law enforcement officials, but all declined)." He adds that he hoped to combat the mass media's presentation: "The main focus was to take a look at the case of the MOVE 9, a case that I truly feel doesn't have enough attention surrounding it and a case that is widely misunderstood by the public." Reception of *MOVE* has been favourable so far, and when the Montreal ABCF invited Garry to screen it as part of our Prisoners' Justice Day events in August, it generated an unusually lively discussion about overcoming racism amongst the diverse audience.

The *Political Prisoner/Prisoner of War Calendar* is a unique attempt to reshape the narrative of history. Instead of marking the fourth of July as a time to celebrate Independence Day, it invites us to observe that date in 1977: "Washington: George Jackson Brigade plants a bomb in main power substation in state capitol in support of striking segregation prisoners" (Calendar Committee 24). More than merely a calendar, it is a richly detailed resource, a constant reminder and a true collaboration. Published by a collective in Montreal, the project was suggested by BLA prisoner Herman Bell, who helps shape with Robert Seth Hayes and David Gilbert. The 2005 edition, which we gleefully unwrapped just days ago, is their fourth.

The full-colour, graphically adventurous calendar provides profiles of PP/POWs and the movements they come from. Each month has a different theme with art and an accompanying writing by a political prisoner. In 2004, the range was impressive: the anti-war movement, the Cuban 5, the Sun Peaks resort boycott, a reprint of Marilyn Buck's poem "Incommunicado" from *Imprisoned Intellectuals*, post-9/11 repression, Chicano liberation, the criminalization of resistance, Arab and Muslim immigrant detentions, music, the imprisonment of women, the occupation of Palestine and more. As Calendar Committee member Helen Hudson admits, they try to squeeze as much in as possible:

The date pages list significant anniversaries, be they particular events in struggles (e.g. Attica rebellion), birthdays or deaths of PP/POWs or other revolutionaries (anyone from John Brown to Ho Chi Min to Mumia), or dates that PP/POWs were captured, tried, freed or escaped. Also, in the spaces at the beginning and end of each month (i.e the empty space that

results when a month starts on a weekday other than Sunday or ends on a day other than Saturday), information or small images are included.

She sees the calendar in part as a means of uniting the older and newer movements: "Generally I find that there's a lack of consciousness amongst radicals my age and younger (I'm 29) about the history of the struggles we're involved in, and a part of that is that we're largely cut off from the generation(s) before us. This is one of the goals of imprisoning revolutionaries, and I feel a responsibility to resist it."

Former George Jackson Brigade political prisoner Ed Mead co-founded *Prison Legal News* while serving an eighteen-year sentence at Washington State Penitentiary. Now, he has become an outside facilitator of prison media projects such as the newsletters *California Prison Focus* and *Prison Art Newsletter*. Together with their online incarnations ([www.prisons.org](http://www.prisons.org) and [www.prisonart.org](http://www.prisonart.org)) they help prisoners, families and advocates keep track of news and legal developments, and sell their arts and crafts online. Mead has also participated in the "creation of online organizing tools such as document sharing, e-mail server [and] video conferencing" to help expand these projects. His attitudes towards alternative media are shaped by his long history of work on such projects: "I saw the 'alternative media' wither from the late 1960s and early 1970s to the sorry state it is in today. While my understanding of the media has not changed, the media itself has."

Michael Novick has edited and published *Turning the Tide: Journal of Anti-Racist Action, Research & Education* (TTT) for seventeen years. He now administrates a website and email news and discussion list for the Jericho

Amnesty Coalition-Los Angeles ([www.geocities.com/jerichoamnestycoalitionla](http://www.geocities.com/jerichoamnestycoalitionla)). According to Novick, the incorporation of writings by PP/POWs has been a goal of his since the start:

For example, beginning with the first 8-1/2 X11 xeroxed versions of *Turning the Tide*, we started publishing material by and about Mumia Abu-Jamal. At the time (1988) we were probably the only publication outside of MOVE's own publications to be doing so, certainly on the west coast... Material about the Puerto Rican struggle and the PR PP/POWs was similarly almost unique in TTT among publications based on the west coast... We also published material from other PP/POWs including north american anti-imperialists over a period in which support for them was pretty dormant outside of small circles of activists who had known them personally. Part of what kept TTT going was a commitment to the readers behind the walls.

10-12,000 copies of every issue of TTT make their way around southern California, the U.S. and Canada, and hundreds are sent free to prisoners.

Break the Chains (BTC), a locally-focused prisoner support collective in Portland, Oregon, outlines many of their projects on their website ([www.breakthechains.net](http://www.breakthechains.net)): correspondence efforts, a parole campaign for Jalil Muntaqim, a day of action for eco-activist Jeffrey "Free" Luers. One of their most ambitious initiatives so far has been the Break the Chains conference in August 2003, which brought activists from many different groups and places together in Portland. Before the event, BTC produced a short tabloid, *A Manifesto for the Break the Chains Conference*, exhorting people to attend. It provided bios of speakers like Rita Bo Brown, poet and Peltier supporter Chrystos, Ward Churchill, Ed Mead, and Dacajeweiah/Splitting the Sky, a leader of the Attica rebellion at the age of nineteen and later coordinator of the support campaign for members of the Mohawk nation who were arrested during the RCMP siege of



Oka. BTC also produces a quarterly newsletter, *Break the Chains*, that is devoted to news and analysis of police repression on the West coast. Their Winter 2004 issue, published three months after the BTC conference, includes reflections and criticisms on the event by the BTC collective and Mead.

Steven Gidev, a member of BTC, describes how they strove to include prisoners in the event:

Most of the people in the Break the Chains collective correspond with one or more political/politicized prisoners and we make an effort to get their feedback on our activities. Political prisoners such as Jeff "Free" Luers, Eddie Hatcher, and Jalil Muntaqim, amongst others, were consulted during the beginning stages of the organizing for our conference and were asked for feedback on how our conference could be most effective. Jeff Luers, Jalil Muntaqim, and ten other prisoners submitted statements of solidarity for our conference which were included in our conference manual so that conference attendees could see for themselves what some prisoners are thinking. Oregon political prisoner Rob "Los Ricos" Thaxton did a recorded phone interview with some of his supporters prior to the conference and this recording was played to the audience before the keynote speakers.

One of the people who attended the BTC conference was Twitch, a member of Austin's Anarchist Black Cross. He also participated in the ABCN conferences held every mid-summer beginning in 2002. They, too, prioritized prisoner involvement: "Political Prisoners/Prisoners of War were asked for updates, suggestions, critiques, and solidarity statements at conference-time, to help us with the Network and the Collective member's projects in the future." Indeed, it seems well understood in activist circles that it is necessary to consult with PP/POWs before proceeding with such an event. My friend Jacob Leach, a Massachusetts organizer of a conference and benefit concert for PP/POWs, relates his attempts to include their voices:

U.S. Political Prisoner Jaan Laaman contributed an essay that was read aloud at the conference. Another U.S. PP, Marilyn Buck, contributed one of her poems to be shared with the audience. The poem was read aloud as an introduction to the conference. A third U.S. PP, Mike Africa, participated in a recorded phone interview from SCI Gratorford in Pennsylvania. The interview was played at the conference for the audience to hear.

The aforementioned projects are among the most exciting PP/POW efforts in existence today, largely because of their level of collaboration between prisoners and facilitators. The value of the alternative media as a tool for organizing around political prisoners is great, as Hernandez says: "Had it not been for the power of alternative media struggles, Nelson Mandela would still be in a South African prison labeled a "terrorist." Lutalo puts it even more succinctly: "WITHOUT OUTSIDE SUPPORT—POLITICAL PRISONERS AND PRISONERS OF WAR ARE DOOMED." Mead describes how alternative media projects can lead to wider support for PP/POWs: "In addition to being a part of the alternative media, progressive prisoners can also benefit by having their cases exposed to a greater audience on the outside and thus increase the likelihood of developing more outside support for their personal cases and political struggles." Hollaway Africa certainly finds that to be true:

There have been more avenues opened with alternative media as the years have gone on, revolutionary, activist, underground magazines have developed, that has done articles about Move that have been fair and supportive and favorable. We are asked all the time now to write for various magazines and book projects. Also internet projects have been very productive means of getting information out to people...

Gidev emphasizes the positive effects such interaction can have on prisoners:

Prisoners really not have a voice in this society unless alternative media projects exist to provide them with a forum to express their views. Prisoners who are given a voice by alternative media projects are more

likely to feel included by the outside community, and they are less likely to suffer from the isolation and repression that characterizes the prison experience.

Gilbert adds that there are positive effects for those outside of prison too: "In many ways they achieved the goals better than I expected under current conditions. More of my writing got into printed form, and in more presentable format, than I expected. And it seems like the pamphlets have gotten out to hundreds of young activists, the group I most prize for dialogue."

But is there potential in working with both the alternative and mainstream media? Laaman believes so, with caution:

Alternative media, including e-media today, is the primary media available to p.p.'s. It is the main, often only way p.p.'s can speak and reach beyond their walls. This is not to say that the corporate media shouldn't be used. It's usually not an option and when it is, the focus is often hostile. In fact it is necessary to evaluate the pros and cons of each contact with the corporate media, when it is available.

Buck seems less hopeful that the mass media can ever be useful to the movement:

As you might imagine I continue to advocate for alternative media as an important political tool. Now more than ever. If progressive and radical folks did not believe this before the current U.S. administration, they should believe it now. The U.S. political machine has the most sophisticated and at the same time blatant disinformation machine in the world. On the one hand they are covert; on the other hand, they figure, it doesn't matter how blatant or obvious they act.

Garry agrees: "The alternative media system is so necessary to combat our mainstream media system."

There are formidable challenges to alternative media production, both inside and outside. When Ed Mead ran a piece on *4strugglemag* in a recent issue of the *Prison Art Newsletter*, we were almost overwhelmed by requests for

prisoners for free copies—although of course overjoyed too. We quickly came to understand why so many PP/POWs and facilitators list funding constraints as their biggest obstacle. Gilbert outlines a typical scenario:

The challenges and limits clearly center on \$, staff, and distribution. While I referred to AGP as 'they' above, it's essentially a 1-person operation—and he has to work a regular job for survival. It makes producing a book a very formidable job, and then there are limits on additional editorial work such as fact-checking, documents, lots of graphics. Probably the main way that lack of \$ hurts is around distribution—very hard to get the word out widely and to get the publications into a wide range of venues.

Kambui observes that lack of funding is a concern especially for prisoners: "There is always the need to be able to finance such endeavors, and if you are incarcerated with limited financial resources, or a limited support unit outside, you are hampered in your efforts to get the word out and distributed about your plight..." As impossible as it may seem at times, media projects can actually be a source of funding, according to Hudson: "There were (and are) several goals. Concretely, we want to raise much-needed funds for front-line PP/POW support: parole & amnesty campaigns, medical support, visits to PP/POWs by their families, and so forth."

There are, Novick notes, advantages to not getting funding from certain sectors:

The ability to put out a publication that has never been dependent on any partisan subsidies, government grants, etc has been vital, because it doesn't get bogged down in the intramural bickering and sectarianism of the left or the timidity and reformism of the NGO-non-profit type groups. Nobody to answer to is the positive flip side of nobody to back you up ... I pay about half the \$6-7000 a year it costs to put the paper out from my own pocket; the rest comes from subscribers, donors and occasional benefits. Over 17 years, that comes to a pretty hefty sum that probably would have allowed to be own a house (except I don't really believe in property ownership anyway).

Gidev too stresses that lack of funding does not have to be entirely negative:

It really depends on how much access to resources you have. If your group is poorly funded, over worked and under staffed, chances are your potential to make an impact is severely limited. But that is obviously not always the case considering that well-funded, large scale organizations often restrict themselves to rather tame activities in order to avoid potentially hurting their "professional" credentials, whereas small, poorly funded groups are often more willing to engage in creative, exciting tactics that generate attention and interest.

Yet as Twitch notes, funds aren't the only thing lacking. The prison support movement is also in dire need of lawyers and others with legal expertise: "Legal networks and legal representation opportunities for political prisoners, as disdainful as the existing criminal justice system is to some Political Prisoners & Prisoners of War, and their Anarchist supporters; little victories are also important without being reformist."

Funding is far from the only hurdle that alternative media in prison must surmount. State repression of such projects takes a thousand different forms. On July 30, Laaman was locked in solitary confinement because he released a statement in support of the Democracy Uprising! march from the Democratic National Convention to the Republican National Convention, which stopped briefly outside of his prison in Walpole, Massachusetts. He was finally released to his regular level of confinement on October 1 after a concerted phone, fax and letter campaign to question prison authorities on the legitimacy of his segregation.

Leach sums up the problem: "The challenges that I see with these types of projects are the barriers put up by prison officials around forms of communication

between PP/POWs and the public in order to limit the amount of information that is put out by these prisoners.” Hernandez knows this only too well:

Because of the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. government is now using “fear” tactic to go after anti-war activists, and other militants, to discredit them and to jail, or eliminate them, with the authority of federal laws such as the so-called ‘Patriot Act...’ Even in prison, the federal government is acting in concert and collusion with prison authorities, specially the so-called ‘Security Threat Group Gang Intelligence Units,’ to identify activist prisoners, and their outside facilitators and support groups, to monitor our communications and legitimate activities. Activist prisoners like myself, are labeled ‘gang members,’ and relegated to solitary confinement indefinitely...”

Garry explains how the state can impede media projects in particular:

What people need to understand is that the government runs our media system, so when you make a piece that is critical of the government it is hard to get that piece out to the public. The MOVE story doesn't just apply to the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania government, it applies to American government as a whole. What our documentary does, is tell those deep dark secrets about our judicial system. Every problem after that stems from this original challenge of government. Problems like: finding funds, exposure, doing interviews with government officials, and the list goes on.

Hudson says that the Calendar Committee encounters such problems:

For example, sometimes we'll send in copy to be edited by prisoners and they never receive it. Some copy we can't send in because it contains references to other PP/POWs in ways that would be considered indirect communication between the two prisoners and thus not allowed. The simple fact of dealing with all the other day-to-day forms of repression faced by PP/POWs creates a challenge in being able to focus on such projects.

And yet, these projects continue to thrive, and both prisoners and facilitators generally report that they have had positive experiences with alternative media, as Leach does: “I felt that the experience was extremely positive in the sense that as organizers, we were able to provide a forum for PP/POWs (currently and formerly) to share their perspectives and provide

valuable insights with those of us who are working for social justice outside of prison walls.” Overall, prisoners do feel like the projects are genuine collaborations. Buck explains how this can be the case with a film, when the prisoners have little control over the production: “The Resistance Conspiracy documentary, made in 1989-90 was a very positive collaboration with Lisa Rudman and those with whom she worked in the Bay Area. She and they were completely responsive to our political views, our parameters. We were given much editorial control. The project was an exemplary act of solidarity.” Hollaway Africa had a similar reaction, despite the fact that she was not even allowed to grant an interview for the *MOVE* film: “The experience was very productive, while the prison does not allow interviews, the producer of the documentary came to visit us and we got the opportunity to put out a lot of information that he used in the film.” These perceptions might be based on the expectations that prisoners have about the extent of their involvement, as Gilbert suggests: “My limited communications meant that I made a choice not to even try to be as involved in production and distribution decisions as would otherwise be desirable.”

If anything, the facilitators are harder on themselves on the issue of inclusion. Although some prisoners who contribute writings to publications consider the act a collaboration, Novick disagrees in regards to his publications: “I don’t think either of those efforts could be considered a collaboration. Editorial policy was always set outside, although that policy has always included printing material written by the pp/pows themselves.” Hudson suggests that while

practical problems like funding and mail censorship make it difficult to involve prisoners at all levels, it is still possible for them to actively collaborate:

As the project was envisioned, the editorial process (ideas to final copy) would be a collaboration between the three aforementioned PPs and the collective in Montreal, but it has proved difficult to achieve this... That's on an editorial level. More broadly speaking, there is a lot of PP/POW involvement. A lot of the content (written analysis, poetry, artwork) comes from PP/POWs, and a number of PP/POWs have written to the collective with suggestion for topics, or info to include. The pattern of mail orders we receive from prisons suggests that several PPs quite actively promote the calendar by word of mouth.

Buck clarifies why such editorial involvement is essential to projects with PP/POWs:

It is very easy to be censored, despite the media people's goodwill. The question of censorship has to be conscious—that the media project has the power to project what they understand or feel to be important... This plays out with most difficulty where white radicals are, out of good intent and political support engaged with political prisoners from oppressed nations. There are different world views and understandings of history and how things work. Consequently utmost caution and much struggle must take place in order not to either appropriate the political prisoner or her/his struggle; not to speak for the pp/POW, and not to “whitewash” her or him.

Any attempt to allow prisoners to speak for themselves must avoid such censorship. Hudson believes that potential can be countered by building solid foundations with PP/POWs:

If anything, it feels like there's been less involvement by the three PPs with each year, although that may be just my perception. If this is in fact the case, I attribute it to the fact that the original outside collective consisted of people who already had established relationships with each of the prisoners. As the project has developed, more people have joined the collective out of interest in the project itself but who in most cases didn't know any of the PPs involved and in some cases have not previously done any prisoner justice work.

Developing relationships with prisoners has to entail a long-term commitment. As Hernandez asserts, the success of any project hinges on it: “The



heart and soul of these alternative media projects depends on the principled support and solidarity of outside facilitators.” Kambui confirms that it is a source of concern for prisoners: “There is also the fact that you might not have a reliable outside facilitator to assist you...” Laaman points out that even a few committed individuals can accomplish a great deal:

The more and better organized projects are the more effective they'll be. Wherever there is an organization or at least a collective that commits for a project, the more the work will succeed. More resources, money certainly, are needed just to make projects happen. We definitely should use new technologies to get more done with fewer people. Also to reach people in new ways, the internet being the main 'new way.'

This need is recognized by facilitators, especially those who, like Novick, have been doing support work for years: “I have seen a lot of publications come and go in that period of time (not to mention organizations). My willingness to go it alone when and as necessary has been as outlined above both a weakness and a strength.” Garry encourages others to remain committed in the face of obstacles: “People need to keep creating alternative media projects and don't back down due to lack of funds. You don't need millions of dollars to do these projects, you just need motivation and a creative mind. The more people makes these projects and the more people watch them, there will be a public demand to hear these stories.” Twitch, too, is prepared to buckle down: “It's going to be a long haul. When you come to prison support work, you can see this right away after the idealism wears off; you see that the bureaucracy is thoroughly entrenched and has built on this infrastructure for easily the past 140 years... To be honest, it's a day-by-day, year-by-year, increment-by-increment of accomplishment we have to be prepared for.”

One thing that can foster long-term commitment in the prisoner support movement is communication between facilitators. It is in this area that we are most clearly lacking, and outside facilitators report that they feel frustrated and isolated from other activists, as Novick does: "Generally speaking, keeping TTT going has been an often lonely experience. I have done it most often single handedly, in area in which there is not a lot of generalized support for pp/pow issues or the larger anti-colonial, anti-imperialist politics out which their efforts arose. I have tried to make up in diligence what is missing in numbers." Leach agrees that better communication between is the key to combating this gap:

The main changes I believe should take place are for the individuals and organizations that have taken part in these types of projects to find time (or make time) to communicate with each other about the challenges and limitations that each have experienced in doing the work. From there, we could attempt to formulate and develop strategies to overcome or try to work through some of the common obstacles.

Twitch has experienced the benefits of such interaction at the yearly ABCN conferences: "It's like a re-invention of ourselves... It's encouraging and emboldening to be with, and meet new people of like-mind and direction; and to continue the process." Hudson also proposes that better networking can lead to useful skill-sharing: "Greater collaboration and/or networking amongst various groups doing this kind of work would no doubt help as well, as would building the media production skills of people doing PP/POW support work from outside prison. Maybe that's stating the obvious, but there's a certain learning curve or level of comfort involved in media production." Gidev adds that there needs to be closer communication with other radical movements:

Well, for one, I think there needs to be more effort between PP/POW supporters to strategize and collaborate together. I also think that social justice activists in this country need to start to take the issue of PPs/POWs much more seriously, especially given the repressive political climate that exists in this country right now. Radical and progressive publications should not ignore these issues, and those of us who are doing support for PPs/POWs should not have to pressure other activists to take an interest in these issues but unfortunately sometimes we have to so that these issues are not ignored.

Gilbert, who would like to see radical publishers work together in order to more widely distribute their works, identifies another advantage to such a strategy: “[Alternative] media need, over time, to develop a strong enough popular support and financial base to be able to withstand the type of Cointelpro disruptions that decimated the radical media of the 1960’s.”

While all of these PP/POWs and outside facilitators recognize potential in alternative media, each of them also questions its ability to reach the wider public, as Lutalo does: “MUCH OF THE ‘ALTERNATIVE MEDIA’ HAS A ‘PREACHING TO THE CHOIR’ AUDIENCE AND ARE, THEREFORE, OFTEN INEFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR ORGANIZING.” This is why Laaman does not categorically reject the use of mainstream media whenever possible: “The main limitation is it doesn’t reach enough people. Use of the internet and new technology adds to outreach and feedback, so this is an important area to work with. Newspapers and magazines, and radio and TV where possible, should still of course be used as well.” Kambui wonders if the wider public would be sympathetic, given the extent of the mass media’s misrepresentation of PP/POWs:

There are a number of obstacles and challenges facing these type of media projects. Such as, you too often reach only a limited audience, and

not always the one you would prefer to target, in your desire to attract solid, meaningful support. There is the challenge of correcting the miseducation most ordinary citizens (people) have been made an innocent, unknowing victim of, where they have been force fed one stereotyped image of the political prisoner/prisoner of war after another.

There is a critical link between understanding and action. Lutalo, never one to mince words, strikes at the heart of the matter: "IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE PROJECTS A LOT WAS ACCOMPLISHED AND RESULTS WERE ENCOURAGING, BUT NOTHING LED TO THE LIBERATION OF POLITICAL PRISONERS AND PRISONERS OF WAR SUFFERING IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS OF NORTH AMERICA." Mead raises the same issue: "Well, unless attached to a political organization of some sort, it can only inform and educate, not organize." Gidev also insists that information must be tied to action: "...I've realized that dogma and rhetoric means very little to most people. Anarchists, and other radicals, tend to learn that the hard way, if they ever learn it at all. I think alternative media projects ultimately only have worth if they are accompanied by tangible, day-to-day revolutionary work. There's really no point in promoting ideas if they can't be applied in the real world."

Friere's concept of praxis is central to this debate. It is possible, as Hernandez says, "to reach the people and raise their level of consciousness, and, thereby, their power of resistance to change conditions." Hudson thinks it will require actively engaging with people on issues, rather than just dumping information on them:

Another limitation, I suppose, is the fact that media is simply a set of communication tools. To a certain extent, the usefulness of media is limited by the ability of people to *organize* using these tools. People can be very informed, but that doesn't necessarily mean they will act. It takes

more than media alone to get people to act, but media—particularly alternative media—can play a vital role in moving people towards action. This depends on the particular piece of media (the magazine, the video, in our case the calendar), but also how it is mobilized as a project: do you sell it in a store, hand it to people and walk away, or do you make it part of an active campaign or process?

At their best, alternative media projects can in fact help create positive action, as

Novick relates:

I think TTT was instrumental in bringing the issue of political prisoners and POWs to consciousness among many younger anti-racist activists and breaking some of the historical disconnect between generations that results from repression and capitulation. We played a role in helping generate coalitions to free Mumia Abu Jamal in Los Angeles and the upsurge of support that helped beat back his first death warrant, and in helping build the Jericho Amnesty Movement (and later the Jericho Amnesty Coalition LA) which has been fairly unique in connecting the cases of all the pp/pows from many different US-based movements.

Certainly, there are things to be proud about in current organizing with PP/POWs: prisoners feel involved, and have had mostly positive experiences working with outside facilitators. It's funny, in a way, that we have found it harder to build healthy relationships with people out here, where technology and freedom of movement should lend themselves to the relative ease of contact. We need to focus on strengthening the communication networks within the prisoner support movement.

There are new directions to be considered for our alternative media projects, too, for we still have miles to go, as Buck says:

In relation to political prisoners. The official information sources demonize and criminalize us. Some alternative media has sought to counter that. At the same time, most alternative media has been mostly led by white progressive or radical journalists or activists. Thus a certain white blindspot tends to be present as to conception of projects. Sometimes that has been overcome by the interviews with the prisoners; sometimes it has not, from my point of view... In particular, I believe that alternative media

has shied away from political prisoners who have not said they were framed, except insofar as there was another angle to approach their case.

As my good comrade Twitch puts it, "To win the kind of world we want, we will have to push ourselves to new levels of imagination in media."

## CONCLUSION

Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to other men. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical.

Paulo Friere (Friere 78).

On Friday, August 6, after spending eighteen years in federal prison as a member of the Ohio 7, Ray Luc Levasseur was released. The ABC affiliate in Maine, WMTV, wasted no time in issuing a screaming headline: "Terrorist bomber returns to Portland" (WMTV). Portland Police Chief Michael Chitwood offered a dire warning to area residents in the *Portland Press Herald* describing Levasseur as "truly a revolutionary" (Goodman). I actually got in a bit of a tiff with a WMTV stooge who contacted us for information, but it was difficult to stay mad as I, along with Levasseur's supporters outside and friends inside, rejoiced over his return to the community—something that happens too rarely.

As even a cursory look at civil rights history reveals, the portrayal of dissidents as a threat to national security is not a new tactic. But it is one that is being vigorously employed in recent years. Harvard instructor and lawyer J. Soffiyah Elijah describes how repressive conditions have escalated for PP/POWs:

In concluding its review of COINTELPRO, the Church Committee wrote: 'The American people need to be assured that never again will an agency of the government be permitted to conduct a secret war against those citizens it considers threats to the established order.' Just over twenty-five years later, the American people are again in need of such assurance. In the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 the use of the nation's jails and prisons for political repression was renewed. Within hours of the attacks, several of the political

prisoners were rounded up and put in administrative segregation, generically known as the hole. No charges or allegations were levied against them. Some of them were told that they were being placed in the hole for their own safety... Some, like Marilyn Buck, Sundiata Acoli (both represented by the author), and Richard Williams were held incommunicado for weeks without access to legal counsel (Elijah 4).

In a turn of events almost too predictable to be ironic, Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), who are outspoken critics of COINTELPRO, recently had two members charged under the USA PATRIOT Act, COINTELPRO's unholy progeny. Dr. Steven Kurtz, Associate Professor of Art at the University of Buffalo, and Dr. Robert Ferrell, Professor of Genetics at the University of Pittsburgh, were accused by the FBI and the JTTF of attempting to manufacture bioweapons. According to CAE, they were in fact engaged in projects that aimed to bring attention to the biotech industry and the history of U.S. involvement in germ warfare experiments:

When the Joint Task Force on Terrorism searched Kurtz's home, he was in the midst of researching the issue of biological warfare and bioterrorism, to assess the actual danger these weapons pose and to bring U.S. policy on such threats into public dialogue. To do this research, he had many books on the subject and had legally acquired three bacteria commonly used as educational tools in schools and university biological departments (*Critical Art Ensemble Defense Fund*).

Seeming to recognize their error in judgment, the government suddenly downgraded the charges to mail and wire fraud, which each carry a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison: "Historically, these laws have been used when the government could not prove other criminal charges" (*Critical Art Ensemble Defense Fund*).

The mainstream media continues to play a central role in framing leftist political organizers as dangerous. Just before the Republican National



Convention (RNC), the *New York Times* and *New York Daily News* ran stories that were so full of irresponsible fabrications and errors that Montreal journalist and activist Jaggi Singh was compelled to respond. Under the *Daily News* headlines "Police Intelligence Warning: Anarchy Inc." and "Anarchists hot for mayhem," Singh, who did not even attend the RNC, was identified by the New York Police Department as a potentially violent threat, along with Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC), the avowedly pacifist International Solidarity Movement (ISM) and... wait for it... the Anarchist Black Cross:

Fifty of the country's leading anarchists are expected to be in the city for the Republican National Convention, and a handful of them are hard-core extremists with histories of violent and disruptive tactics, according to police intelligence sources. Police said each of the 50 have up to 50 followers who are willing to be arrested during disturbances at the convention (Singh).

While both articles accused Singh of receiving weapons training from Ohio 7 ally Kazi Toure, the *Times* took it a step further: "However, accompanying my profile, under the title 'Here's trouble,' is an undated photo of someone who is dark-skinned and vaguely resembles me shooting a gun at some sort of outdoor range. I'm referred to as a 'key anarchist leader who has become increasingly militant.'"

The ongoing harassment of activists illustrates the necessity of incorporating radical civil rights history into modern movements. It should be a major goal of the prisoner support movement to help the public make these connections. This should not be a glorification of the past; issues like the sexism and sometimes totalitarian violence of the Black Panther Party towards its own members must be addressed. In such critical explorations there are lessons for

current activists about the internal and external communication problems that shut down earlier movements.

Even the mass media has found it difficult to entirely ignore the most recent wave of control directed at organizers. When hundreds of peaceful protesters were summarily rounded up during the World Trade Organization talks in Montreal in August of 2003, the mainstream press across Canada reported the brutality of the arrests. Somewhat amusingly, this sympathetic coverage was due to the fact that several "real" journalists were caught in the net, and got to experience the treatment of demonstrators firsthand. But in *Necessary Illusions*, Noam Chomsky explains why such media outlets cannot be reformed in any meaningful way:

The concept of 'democratizing the media has no real meaning within the terms of political discourse in the United States. In fact, the phrase has a paradoxical or even vaguely subversive ring to it. Citizen participation would be considered an infringement on freedom of the press... Putting it in plain terms, the general public must be reduced to its traditional apathy and obedience, and driven from the arena of political debate and action, if democracy is to survive (Chomsky 2, 3).

He argues that covert programs like COINTELPRO are the last resort for government when people are not being adequately controlled through the media: "If the population is out of control and propaganda doesn't work, then the state is forced underground, to clandestine operations and secret wars; the scale of covert operations is often a good measure of public dissidence, as it was during the Reagan period" (19). The increasing violence of the state towards the end of the civil rights movement can therefore be seen as directly related to the strength of the alternative media efforts that existed at the time.

Angela Davis and Bettina Aptheker see possibility in such moments of instability in the system:

It seems to us that the most important fact to be considered in the midst of this repression is that together with its attendant paraphernalia for coercion, manipulation and control, reflects serious infirmities in the present social order. That is, while we do not underestimate the coercive resources available to the state, especially the police and military forces for the suppression of all forms of opposition (and the centralization of control over these forces), we think that the necessity to resort to such repression is reflective of a profound social crisis, of systemic disintegration (Davis 1971 3).

Many political prisoners sacrificed their freedom in the belief that revolution was just around the corner. And maybe it was. Physical state repression is at its strongest when opposition is strongest, and radical movements should be on the offensive when it is in that damage-control phase. What can we learn that will help us take advantage of the situation during these unstable times and bring us closer to liberation?

For a start, no realistic challenge to human rights violations by law enforcement, either on the streets or behind bars, can ignore the root of these abuses. We are not dealing with a few "bad apples," either here or in Iraqi prisons. New developments like the abuse of Iraqi POWs can become sites/ruptures/fissures to promote a more radical analysis. Sumoud, a new political prisoner support group in Toronto, recognized this immediately, and put out a pamphlet called "Occupation, Prisons and Torture." We reprinted their analysis in *4strugglemag* because we feel it is so crucial. The soldiers involved in these highly publicized incidents are no more isolated "bad apples" than George W. Bush is:

At home, more subtle means are required: the manufacture of consent, deceiving the stupid masses with 'necessary illusions,' covert operations that the media and Congress pretend not to see until it all becomes too obvious to be suppressed. We then shift to the phase of damage control to ensure that public attention is diverted to overzealous patriots or to the personality defects of leaders who have strayed from our noble commitments, but not to the institutional factors that determine the persistent and substantive content of these commitments (Chomsky 19-20).

While not granting the state any undue powers of omnipotence, it is important to recognize its incredible talent for recovery. Recent developments in the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal provide a telling example. Finally giving in to the primary demand of the Free Mumia movement—which was somewhat narrowly focused on freeing him from death row—took a lot of the steam out of the PP/POW movement that had grown around him. And now that several years have gone by, Abu-Jamal again faces the death penalty, and it has gone almost entirely unnoticed by the majority of people to whom he is a household name.

In *Notes from the Underground*, Stephen Duncombe identifies a major problem with zines and other forms of alternative media, and one that emerged as a primary concern of the PP/POWs and facilitators I interviewed: "Witnessing this incredible explosion of radical cultural dissent, I couldn't help but notice that as all this radicalism was happening underground, the world above was moving in the opposite direction" (Duncombe 4). How effective is alternative media? The cathartic act of writing can be pacifying, and for some the act of creating alternative media in and of itself sates the desire to resist. Radical activism of any type can be an insular scene: "In the virtual world of zines, creators and readers can pick and choose who to call on and who to entertain. This means you can

visit and be visited by people who have interests and experiences outside your own. But it can also mean that you limit your interaction to people *just like you*" (72). There is a danger of preaching to the converted, of masturbatory hyper-specialization. Conversely, the appropriation of alternative culture by the mass media for profit removes any vestiges of radicalism. For these reasons "rebellious through culture becomes increasingly problematic" (6).

Is it so naïve to believe that the majority of people, if they really understood the conditions in prison, if they really understood what it means to be exploited and abused in society, would not stand for it? Can merely providing that alternate experience of reality lead to action?

The powers that be do not sustain their legitimacy by convincing people that the current system is The Answer. That fiction would be too difficult to sustain in the face of so much evidence to the contrary. What they must do, and what they have done very effectively, is convince the mass of people that *there is no alternative* (6).

Alternative media is alternative not just because it is organized and disseminated alternatively, but because it presents alternatives. And they are not mere abstractions: "But they do something else as well, for the world of zines is not entirely imaginary—it is built, and in the building of this culture political lessons are learned. Initially ignored by the mainstream culture, zine writers have created vast networks of independent communication in order to share the ideas and thoughts they feel are not being expressed elsewhere" (178).

Speaking out against oppression, no matter what the cost, is a deeply radical act. Ellen Willis, an early women's lib activist, calls for the reappropriation

of that radicalism in a 1998 article in *the Nation*, "We Need a Radical Left." Her insights are worth quoting at length:

No mass left-wing movement has ever been built on a majoritarian strategy. On the contrary, every such movement—socialism, populism, labor, civil rights, feminism, gay rights, ecology—has begun with a visionary minority whose ideas were at first decried as impractical, ridiculous, crazy, dangerous and/or immoral. By definition, the conventional wisdom of the day is widely accepted, continually reiterated and regarded not as ideology but as reality itself. Rebelling against 'reality,' even when its limitations are clearly perceived, is always difficult. It means deciding things can be different and ought to be different; that your own perceptions are right and the experts and authorities wrong; that your discontent is legitimate and not merely evidence of selfishness, failure or refusal to grow up. Recognizing that "reality" is not inevitable makes it more painful; subversive thoughts provoke the urge to subversive action (Willis).

Just a few radicals, like the political prisoners I have discussed here, can inspire broad movements:

When militant minorities also have radical ideas, they capture people's imaginations by presenting another possible world that appeals to the secret hopes of even the resigned and cynical. They mobilize people by providing the context in which winning small changes is worth the time and effort because it is part of a larger project. They attract publicity and make it difficult for the authorities to keep on telling the lies whose credibility depends on uncontradicted repetition. The people in power know all this and are quite wary of the potential threat posed by an organized minority; their impulse is to make concessions (albeit as few as they can get away with). As a result, radical movements that articulate a compelling vision have an impact far beyond their core of committed activists.

As Joy James argues, it is this willingness of the state to make small concessions when necessary that has contributed to the development of a liberal left that rejects the need for radicalism—even if it is what led to the small concessions:

Multiracial and working-class feminist and antiracist groups are superseded by middle-class concerns because elites possess the resources to shape debate and agendas. Such elites have promoted a

liberalism that has transformed the radical intent of civil rights and feminist movements, mainstreaming demands into institutionalized politics (James 1999 71).

The widespread acceptance of working-class millionaire Michael Moore's nationalist *Fahrenheit 9/11* is based on his liberal analysis. He does not present capitalism and imperialism as primary sources of the conflict, but instead offers a half-baked "bad apple" story about George W. Bush and the Bin Laden family. In Moore's vision, America is fundamentally democratic and free. It is this liberal stance that allows him to make damaging claims that Mumia Abu-Jamal "probably did kill that guy" in *Dude, Where's My Country?* Dave Lindorff, author of *Killing Time: an Investigation into the Death Row Case of Mumia Abu-Jamal*, reveals that Moore even claims to support Abu-Jamal:

...It would be interesting to know how or why Moore--who back in 1997 wrote in *the Nation* magazine, "I want Mumia to live, I've signed the petitions, I've helped pay for the ads -- hell, I'll personally go and kick the butt of the governor of Pennsylvania!" and who in 1995 signed an ad in the *New York Times* saying Abu-Jamal was "probably sentenced to death" because of his political views--came to this peculiarly incongruous conclusion (Lindorff).

Much of the perceived stagnation of current liberation movements—as reported in interviews with both facilitators and prisoners, as well as other materials—can be traced to the de-radicalization of the earlier civil rights movement and the domination of liberalism since then. Today's challenges call for a radical approach: an understanding that oppression is deeply and irrevocably rooted in state and capitalism. This will involve a) direct communication with earlier organizers including PP/POWs, b) an associated understanding that the prison struggle is a primary site of resistance, c)

publishing radical analyses from prisoners and d) building a stronger network of communication between outside facilitators.

Part of the overall project for the political prisoner support movement must be to reclaim earlier movements from the safe, liberal left and reassert their fundamentally militant character—and interaction with those militants is a good start. In the course of this work, we are going to have to address the general public's distaste for radicalism, which is deeply rooted in white middle class spin-doctoring of revolutionaries into goofy bra burners and crazed cop killers. This simultaneous ridiculing and fear-mongering is why many PP/POWs from the civil rights movement are still in jail. We must be careful to maintain a radical analysis in this recovery of revolutionary heroes. The elite have nothing to fear from a rebel that has been safely sanitized and removed from historical context: a Che shirt in le Chateau. We must make prisoners' voices heard, so that they are humanized and not merely abstract representations.

As a result of liberal tendencies, even between PP/POWs there are significant gaps between "have-nots" and "have-even-lesses." Often, the more militant prisoners lack supporters. But radicals like Abu-Jamal, Leonard Peltier, David Gilbert and Marilyn Buck, with widely published writings and books receive far more support than others. Buck herself pointed this out in her interview, reasoning that as an educated white woman, she may be "easier" to present. I am certainly not suggesting that anyone should receive less support, but that our projects must seek to include underrepresented PP/POWs.



The most radical approach to prisoner support takes the form of abolitionism. Several people, including Davis and James, have suggested that the abolition of prison would be a step towards the true abolition of slavery. James provides a powerful argument that an antiracist, profeminist movement must be prison abolitionist, and vice versa; the prison abolitionist movement must be antiracist and profeminist. There is little chance of the liberal left finding it appealing or even possible to co-opt a militant prison abolition movement. This line of reasoning is not a digression, as it may seem. There is no room for half-measures here. Any analysis or work with prisoners, with communities of colour, with the poor and with women should of necessity be abolitionist—and work with political prisoners just brings that into sharper focus. Women PP/POWs bring antiracist feminism to the forefront of the movement.

Ironically, those of us who work with political prisoners are sometimes accused of privileging them over other prisoners, but the two struggles are not divisible. Perhaps, since these criticisms keep arising, we need to make our links with other prisoners and with prison abolition not only more visible but a more central part of our work.

As the Black Panther Party found, radical politics are not only accessible, but appealing to the oppressed and uneducated. This is contrary to a popular perception that people are too busy struggling through daily life to be politically active. Rather, we must unite the political with improvements in daily life and empowerment through communication. The BPP community medical clinics and

the Victory Gardens Project in Maine that was started by political prisoner Herman Bell are just two examples of how this can be done.

James suggests that Davis functioned as “a ‘bridge’ between academia and street politics” (James 1999 109). But if PP/POWs are to provide a bridge, it must truly be a bridge, not just observed but crossed. There must be theory on the street and action in theory.

Many of these ideas are not new. So what has prevented a broader movement in support of PP/POWs from emerging? There has been no small amount of conflict between prisoner support groups, including the ABCF. The relative anonymity and potential for misinterpretation through mass communiqués and the Internet have in part contributed to these arguments, but I will say that too often petty personal power struggles—almost exclusively between men—are masked as ideological differences. This is no way to work for change, and no way to present our movement to the public. A commitment to constructive dialogue, so central to PAR and any learning process, should be central to our movement.

George Jackson repeatedly stressed the need to build a united front to challenge capitalism: “We need allies, we have a powerful enemy who cannot be defeated without an allied effort” (Jackson 201). There is a reason that the FBI’s COINTELPRO intensified as the Black Panther movement began to coordinate with the largely white anti-war movement: organizing across boundaries is an incredibly powerful challenge to state hegemony. Keeping opposition groups divided is one of the main ways the ruling system stays in power. The prisoner

support movement is doomed if it is not a multi-racial, multi-gender, multi-class, multi-ability and multi-nation movement. This is not, however, meant to be an artificial imposition of a single ideology or organization. As Clemencia Rodriguez learns from Subcomandante Marcos, there is a benefit to solidarity between decentralized groups: “[T]raditional analyses have declared alternative media a failure because they have never been able to join forces, to organize their action around one single agenda, or to identify one single adversary... However, Marcos’ words point in a different direction: They suggest that the multiplicity of resistances is not only something to accept, but also something to celebrate” (Rodriguez 156).

Only by really embracing the struggles of revolutionaries in North America can we create international solidarity. As Ward Churchill has amply demonstrated in *Pacifism as Pathology*, the left too often supports militant rebellion only in theory, and only in other countries. Yet if the black bloc and so-called “militant” contingents are the response to calls by Churchill and others to escalate the level of resistance, they are mistaken. Minor property damage and direct confrontations with armed state power are ineffective both as a tactic and as a means of movement building. The strongest militant organizing of the previous generations of PP/POWs, whether public or covert, have always been more closely tied to existing movements.

While it will be important to strengthen communication within the international PP/POW movement, we must also learn to communicate better locally, with other activists and communities of colour, poverty coalitions,

prisoners' families and refugee and immigrant groups. This is not a matter of presenting ourselves in a certain public relations way, but of attempting to make meaningful connections.

In suggesting these changes, I do not mean to imply that our existing communications networks are entirely flawed. When Robert Seth Hayes was denied emergency medical treatment for his diabetes after a series of blackouts earlier this year, the prisoner support community came together immediately. Together with Sumoud, the Montreal ABCF sent a callout via email and postings on websites, and activists Dee Le Comte and Tom Keefer did interviews with Hayes for the A-Infos Radio Project ([www.radio4all.net](http://www.radio4all.net)). The word spread like wildfire. The result was a flood of letters to prison authorities and to Hayes. Although he would have ideally preferred a transfer to a more medically equipped institution, he was moved to a better wing and began receiving treatment.

The New York State Task Force on Political Prisoners is another great example of networking between groups. It is a collaboration of former PP/POWs, lawyers and activists, including the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the New Afrikan Liberation Front, the Jericho Movement and Resistance in Brooklyn. Montreal's Calendar Committee has also decided to collaborate with a New York collective this year. These are signs that prisoner support organizing is heading in the right direction.

In my own work, I see the need for an increased focus on local organizing. The skills and experiences that I have been building in my work with established PP/POWs in the U.S. will help me support Canadian prisoners too. Although the

Montreal ABCF produces materials in French and English, I would like us to be more bilingual, and more inclusive on that level. My focus so far in my projects with PP/POWs—and consequently, in my research—has been mostly on print media. I'd like to experiment with different media, recognizing that not everyone will read political pamphlets and websites. Pirate radio and independent film in particular seem to have great potential, especially with the popularity of *The Weather Underground* and *MOVE*.

While long-term commitment is important, I also want new activists to find easy ways to get involved, such as email campaigns like Shakur's, online petitions and postcard campaigns, which were attempted successfully by the *MOVE 9* and Alvaro Hernandez this year. One challenge of alternative media with prisoners is the length of time between issues or episodes. I think that encouraging lively, positive discussion of PP/POW writings online and in other media will help keep people interested over time. It is definitely useful to have a good online presence in terms of disseminating current information, as well as communicating with other groups. But a major limitation of the Internet is the digital divide, which excludes vast communities of the poor and people of colour, not to mention prisoners.

And yeah, I do think the movement needs a kick in the ass. But I believe that starts by recognizing the very, very solid foundation we have to build on. Countless groups and individuals have devoted themselves to alternative media projects with PP/POWs. By focusing on the examples I am most familiar with, I do not wish to ignore any of those efforts. These facilitators and prisoners are

working to publicize truths that have struggled to escape since the advent of prison. Perhaps, more than anything, I am trying to overcome a tendency of the prisoner support movement to forget to step back and look at the big picture every so often—to see behind and ahead of us, what works and what doesn't. Understandably, we are often bogged down in the quotidian mechanics of survival, support and individual cases. In fact, this research itself frequently took the back burner to the pressing demands of a living, breathing human being who needed stamps, help with a campaign, a listener. But in order to move forward we owe it to them and to the larger movement towards liberation to actively critique and develop our ongoing projects.

We are actually very fortunate right now, in a strange way. Rapidly and visibly deteriorating conditions in society could motivate previously complacent people to act, if organization is available to them. The explosion of the prison population, the ensuing overcrowding and unrest inside and post-9/11 repression outside creates new interest in parallel repressions of earlier political prisoners. Just as the first reports of massive civilian casualties in Viet Nam motivated action against the war, so too could reports from political prisoners today spark resistance to the massive casualties inside the nation's prisons. There is a crucial connection between prisoners and the anti-war movement. In the sixties, some became prisoners because of the war. Many revolutionaries, from Assata Shakur to the Ohio 7, began as anti-war activists. Organizing resistance in wartime may be more possible than usual, when the public's safety and complacency are already shattered; on the other hand, they may cling to it even more fiercely.

As people committed to winning liberation for the oppressed “by any means necessary,” we must learn to use media, one of the most powerful weapons in state hegemony, for our own ends. Alternative media can help the public overcome the deliberate misinformation and biases that contribute to human rights abuses like medical neglect, control units, violence and torture. These media projects can also help PP/POWs to maintain their identities and contribute to dialogue and action outside. Political prisoners are men and women who continue to struggle, although it would be easier not to. Whenever I am frustrated, I think of them, their perseverance and positiveness and I am humbled. Their revolutionary spirits are not broken by their own imprisonment or by the murder of their comrades. They are still open, loving, helpful, hopeful. I know that together we can move people emotionally. Move them to move, to act physically. We can build a popular movement against the imprisonment of revolutionaries.

I honestly do not understand how a PAR project could have a beginning or an end, except in the most arbitrary sense. The struggle for liberation of which my work with the ABCF is only a small part has existed for a long time, and whether or not individual efforts succeed or fail, will continue to do so. It is an ongoing process of communicating and deepening understandings of ourselves and each other. This type of work should also serve as an example to academic researchers on prison issues and work with other oppressed populations. Anyone who is truly committed to understanding the nature of prison and the experience of prisoners must do so in collaboration with the prisoners

themselves, not the administration. Alternatives to prison—treatment, victim therapy, and beyond—can only be developed in the context of PAR.

The importance of active prison organizing within the anarchist movement and other social justice movements cannot be overstated. It can help us to build solid links with the most impoverished and exploited sections of society, allowing them to set their own agendas and combating racism. We can nurture more committed, sustained relationships of resistance to oppression worldwide. If prisons are a microcosm of society, then attacking prison injustices allows us to attack the fundamentally corrupt underpinnings of capitalist society.

Work with PP/POWs makes abundantly clear the lengths to which the state will go to suppress dissent. For that reason, it is also important to have a support network in place for activists who are imprisoned. By tying together examples of historical and ongoing alternative media projects, I want to help strengthen the decentralized network of alternative media that is in place to aid in the mobilization around PP/POWs. I hope that my research will be able to highlight productive ways of organizing, struggling and building community through a greater understanding of media.

Let's make a network of communication among all our struggles and resistances. An intercontinental network of alternative communication against neoliberalism... [and] for humanity. This intercontinental network of alternative communication will search to weave the channels so that words may travel all the roads that resist... [It] will be the medium by which distinct resistances communicate with one another. This intercontinental network of alternative communication is not an organizing structure, nor has a central head or decision maker, nor does it have a central command or hierarchies. We are the network, all of us who speak and listen.

- Subcomandante Marcos (Rodriguez 155).



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