

MAY - JUNE 2014

# MISSOURI SPRING HAPPENINGS

A PUBLICATION FOR PRISONERS IN MISSOURI & BEYOND

## "AFFIRMATION"

BY ASSATA SHAKUR

I BELIEVE IN LIVING.  
I BELIEVE IN THE SPECTRUM  
OF BETA DAYS AND GAMMA PEOPLE.  
I BELIEVE IN SUNSHINE.  
IN WINDMILLS AND WATERFALLS,  
TRICYCLES AND ROCKING CHAIRS.  
AND I BELIEVE THAT SEEDS GROW INTO SPROUTS.  
AND SPROUTS GROW INTO TREES.  
I BELIEVE IN THE MAGIC OF THE HANDS.  
AND IN THE WISDOM OF THE EYES.  
I BELIEVE IN RAIN AND TEARS.  
AND IN THE BLOOD OF INFINITY.  
I BELIEVE IN LIFE.  
AND I HAVE SEEN THE DEATH PARADE  
MARCH THROUGH THE TORSO OF THE EARTH,  
SCULPTING MUD BODIES IN ITS PATH.  
I HAVE SEEN THE DESTRUCTION OF THE DAYLIGHT,  
AND SEEN BLOODTHIRSTY MAGGOTS  
PRAYED TO AND SALUTED.

I HAVE SEEN THE KIND BECOME THE BLIND  
AND THE BLIND BECOME THE BIND  
IN ONE EASY LESSON.  
I HAVE WALKED ON CUT GLASS.  
I HAVE EATEN CROW AND BLUNDER BREAD  
AND BREATHED THE STENCH OF INDIFFERENCE.

I HAVE BEEN LOCKED BY THE LAWLESS.  
HANDCUFFED BY THE HATERS.  
GAGGED BY THE GREEDY.

AND, IF I KNOW ANY THING AT ALL,  
IT'S THAT A WALL IS JUST A WALL  
AND NOTHING MORE AT ALL.  
IT CAN BE BROKEN DOWN.

I BELIEVE IN LIVING.  
I BELIEVE IN BIRTH.  
I BELIEVE IN THE SWEAT OF LOVE  
AND IN THE FIRE OF TRUTH.

AND I BELIEVE THAT A LOST SHIP,  
STEERED BY TIRED, SEASICK SAILORS,  
CAN STILL BE GUIDED HOME  
TO PORT.





# HEY THERE

Well, hello on a warm and breezy spring day here in the Midwest. It is awesome to get your letters and zine requests. Know that you are not forgotten, and we will fill your requests as soon as we can. Please keep passing the publication around, and also let people know about our zine distribution, if you think they would be interested in getting some alternative reading material. One person in Texas wrote this past month saying they were able to put the last issue of the newsletter in the prison library for other women to read!

This is our fifth issue. We started out with the goal of a six-month project, hoping to connect with some of you about prison resistance and spread the word about our zine distro. We have been blown away and energized by the correspondence it has created between us on the outside and you who are caged by the State that we hate. We want to keep going, and it may look a little different or we may take a short break, but we will still be here hoping to be a bridge to connect the struggle we all share for a world without control or cages.

This past month we heard about further repression that folks at Menard who were previously on hunger strike received. There is a letter in this issue that someone there wrote us after the High Security Unit had metal boxes put over their windows to block their view. This repression came soon after some of us did a noise demo in solidarity with the hunger strikers outside the prison. Despite such repression, our solidarity can't stop and won't stop.

In this issue, there is an article by Vikki Law that gives exciting examples of community responses to gender violence around the world spanning from the late 1920's until the present day. Including this article is relevant to continuing the dialog put forth in previous issues about how to respond against rape culture and State violence.

Also another moment in prison history is highlighted in an article about the convict lease system in Tennessee, an attempt by the rich and powerful to carry on the economic benefits of slavery until it was not-so-politely shut down by some angry workers who weren't havin' it. All these examples of collective responses to those who dominate us paint a picture of the variety of options available, and allow us to weigh the tactical value of different actions that have been successful in different times and places. What application do these stories have to our situation here and now?

Please pass this newsletter around, discuss it with friends, and engage with us on the topics brought up. Our conscious engagement, tenacity and bonds of solidarity are our only hope.



# Eastern Tennessee, 1891

*The following history tells the story of coal miners in Tennessee banning together to directly challenge the convict-lease system, through which inmates were leased out to private companies in a continuation of slave labor. The workers attacked company property and freed the prisoners in order to protect their own livelihoods as coal miners, and seeing that they could unite with those they were supposedly in competition with in order to confront the real enemy: the prison system and the coal companies. How does this story apply to the modern day prison system in the U.S.? What potential allies do we have in our struggles against our real enemies? Let us know what you think.*

On the night of July 14th, 1891, a band of about one hundred armed coal miners and local citizens in Eastern Tennessee marched on a newly built prison stockade owned by the Tennessee Coal Mining Company. The miners and their allies compelled the guards to release the forty inmates imprisoned there, put them on a train, and sent them to Knoxville. Without firing a shot, the miners disappeared back into the darkness.

Over the next 13 months, the workers would repeat this tactic constantly, eventually torching company property, looting company stores, and aiding the prisoners' escapes. The miners were in rebellion against the use of convict labor in Tennessee mines, which was being used to cut company costs and disastrously undermine the employment prospects and solidarity of free laborers. In the words of president of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, "We were right in calculating that the free laborers would be loath to enter upon strikes when they saw that the company was amply provided with convict labor." But, as David Oshinsky writes in his book about the development of early Southern prison systems,

"Something happened in Tennessee, something almost unimaginable to the mine owners and politicians of that state. When the companies tried to intimidate their workers by bringing in convict labor to take over their jobs, the workers responded by storming the stockades, freeing the prisoners, and loading them onto freight trains bound for Nashville and Knoxville and places far away.

What began as an isolated protest in the company town of Coal Creek spread quickly across the Cumberland to engulf most of eastern Tennessee. Thousands of miners took part in these uprisings, and thousands of armed state guardsmen were sent to face them down. The Tennessee convict war was one of the largest insurrections in American working-class history. And yet, unfolding at exactly the same time as the more publi-

cized labor wars in Homestead, Pennsylvania, and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, it was largely ignored."

At a time when the post-Civil War South was trying to reinvent its economy, penal institutions, and racial caste system, the actions of the miners and their allies combined with the clandestine resistance of convicts to create a perfect storm. Within a couple of years of the rebellion's beginning, it was clear that the brutal system of convict leasing, by which state and county prisoners were literally sold off to private railroad and coal companies, had become totally unsustainable. Again and again, all across east and mid-TN, miners released prisoners and burned company property to the ground. The costs of militiamen paid to guard the prisoners, along with the sabotage, work slow-downs, and rebellions of the convicts, made the system cost-prohibitive both to the state and the coal companies. By December 31st, 1895, Tennessee became the first state in the South to abolish the tremendously lucrative convict lease.

The convict wars symbolized the continually violent transition from the Old South to the New South, both in terms of the Southern states' attempts to industrialize after the Civil War, as well as in the violent reactions of a newly industrialized proletariat to such attempts. Miners' participation in this insurrection also catalyzed a change in thinking in many poor whites, who went from idealizing forms of rhetoric traditional to a Republic and commonwealth to the perspectives of class war. As shown by much of the modern homegrown resistance to mountaintop removal mining in the Appalachian coalfields, an uneasy combination of these different modes of thinking still remains to this day, creating the potential for movements that are at once quintessentially American and yet simultaneously radical, violent, and autonomous in nature.

As the convict lease was essentially an attempt to preserve the benefits of enslaved black labor in the "New South," this insurrection can also be seen as an indirect assault by white and black miners upon older notions of white identity and loyalty to the racial caste system. Though this form of race treason never became more than a secondary factor in the miners' economic self-defense, it would be wrong not to consider the meanings of such a self-interested racial solidarity, particularly in a time when the racist prison-industrial complex has now grown to such gargantuan proportions, and neoliberalism has eliminated so many of the industrial manufacturing jobs once occupied by white workers. For those of us interested in kindling future insurrections, there are many things worth considering in the convict wars.

*The full version of this history is available in the zine The Stockade Stood Burning: Rebellion and the Convict Lease in Tennessee's Coalfields 1891-1895 by request from Oak Root Press.*





*By defining the words we use to describe what we love and what we hate, we build the common language we will need to communicate through struggle.*

## **Recuperation // re•cu•per•a•tion**

**n 1: the process of recovering from sickness or exhaustion; regaining health or strength. 2: the process of restoring the systems by which we are governed to their proper functioning order, esp. by absorbing and neutralizing the ideas and actions that were previously a threat to it.**

Recuperation is a process by which ideas and actions that challenge the status quo are incorporated and pacified by the very things they go against. Examples of this are punk, bicycling, organic food and graffiti. All of these were once unique expressions of rebellion against a status quo, but now they have or are becoming things to be bought and sold on a market.

Capitalists make millions selling punk, revolutionary symbols, hip-hop, organic food, and graffiti. Punk and hip-hop, once vibrant subcultures, have been pacified and come to mean a particular aesthetic (a status symbol, a hairstyle or a type of dress) instead of a safe place to rage against authority and injustice. Organic food is something that is easily available or grown, but is sold to us at extreme prices at places like Whole Foods. Hip-hop, once a voice of anger and rebellion created by Black and Latin@ youth in the South Bronx and Harlem, has become a multi-billion dollar industry, widely disconnected from its poor and rebellious roots. And so on...

It may seem illogical to think that something that goes against the status quo could be pacified and even embraced by the status quo, but it happens rather often. In fact, it's a very good strategy, one that is used very well by all the authoritarian systems and roles that seek to keep us in check. Systems like capitalism or the State. Roles like the politician or the police. It's a good strategy because it realizes that it's easier to wear an idea or a powerful movement down with diversion than it is to

fight it head on.

Once the elements of a movement begin to be incorporated into the systems of power and control that rule us, they are no longer able to be used as tools against that system. Another example of recuperation is the elections of the first Black mayors of major U.S. Cities in the 1980's, and the election of the first Black president in 2008. Rather than fight the masses of working-class Black folks head on in the streets (as the State attempted to do during the civil rights movement), those in power determined that it was much more useful to them to allow Black people to become apart of the ruling order. This way, the status quo continues just with a different face. Recuperation is often mistaken for "progress."

In any struggle or movement against the state of things, there will always be forces at work that will try to stifle the authenticity or power of the ideas and actions behind it for their own gain. The ways we strive to act in this world and the ways we strive to act against the systems that hold us from our potential can all easily be recuperated or pacified unless we stick together and refuse to give in. It is not about refusing reforms that our enemies concede to us per se; it's about fighting for humanity, it's about taking our lives back with compete disregard for the authority of the State. It's about taking anything that gives us more self-determined lives and not backing down. Because as long as the State (whether in communist or capitalist clothing) exists there will always be those on top and those on bottom, and with that there will always be economic and social struggles against the State.



## **WRITE TO US**

**IF YOU WANT TO RECEIVE A ZINE CATALOG//  
BE ADDED OR REMOVED FROM THE MAILING  
LIST//TELL US WHAT'S GOING ON THERE!**

**OAK ROOT PRESS  
PO BOX 775006  
ST LOUIS, MO 63177**

We do not know anything about the law so we cannot help with legal support. We are also not a dating service. So please do not ask us for those kind of things. If you are a rapist of any kind, and you don't think that is a problem, do not bother writing to us. We dream of a world where rapists, along with prisons, do not exist.

# WE HEARD FROM YOU

## A LETTER *from an Indiana Prisoner*

To My Friends at Oak Root Press:

Once again thank you for the newsletter, zines and podcasts. They provide me with excellent food for thought. As I read them I feel like I have so much to say, but afterwards I am unable to express what is on my mind.

Maybe it's because I've been in and out of prison since 1993 that I have learned to accept institutional conditions: that the guards are assholes, the administration just goes through the motions instead of fully fulfilling their job requirements, the food sucks, the housing units and kitchen are infested with vermin and serve as breeding grounds for disease, dirty dope fiend needles and unprotected intercourse is a haven for the spread of A.I.D.S., beef from the streets spills over and onto the yard, etcetera, etcetera, ad infinitum.

Television, fictional novels, recreational activities, religious meetings, and even "anti-establishment" organizations and activities serve as temporary escapes, but at the end of the day when it's "lights out" reality strikes and every single one of us knows for a surety: "I am locked the fuck up." Then we escape through our dreams.

To do time is to suffer. To survive is to find some meaning in the suffering. All prisoners, all prisoners all over the world are in prison because of one common cause: we are all in rebellion. We rebel against a world that tries to tell us what to do, who to be, and how to live. We are all anarchists. Some of us are just more aware of this fact than others.

The States of the world may differ in their philosophies on how to oppress but on one point they are all in cahoots: the rebel must go, he must be eradicated from society. So the landscapes of the earth are littered with penitentiaries. Dismal crypts designed to break the will and spirit of all who disregard and disrespect the "law," for all who dare to defy the fuhrer.

As a spiritual man, I find meaning in knowing that the cell is not only the abode of the prisoner, but also the home of the monk. Through diligent study and prayer I've come to the realization that it is natural to be free and social, and nature is my witness. But a "Freak of Nature" occurred. The people who used to care for, serve, and love

one another all became devoted to the Freak, the Freak whose name was "Superiority." This Freak would be embodied in many different entities: individuals, ideologies, cultures, nations, races, and his throne would become the object of worship for all mankind. We turned on one another in pursuit of something deemed "better," but only a few of us could see that there is nothing better than freedom.

This evil has trickled down and found a spot in the psyche of every single individual, yet freedom continues to struggle.

From my cell I can see the day when, through all of the schisms and -isms, a single drop of that toxin is going to touch the true Spirit of Freedom and like a Mad Lion it is going to assert and exert itself, destroying everything in its path as once again it takes its rightful place and reigns supreme.

Until then it doesn't matter if I am in the White House or the "Big House" there is no freedom. I actually prefer my cell. I can see things better from in here.

Thanks to my Comrades at O.R.P.



## A LETTER *from one inmate at the High Security Unit (HSU) at Menard Correctional in Missouri, encouraging continued acts of solidarity despite retaliation.*

I am sorry to report that the guys here at Menard, HSU have again been subjected to oppressive, retaliatory acts at the hands of these evil, sadistic pigs.

On April 12, 2014 at approx. 8 a.m. a construction crew showed up outside of our windows w/ large, metal square boxes with slots in the front. By 11 a.m. they were attached to our windows. We can not see outside anymore, nor do we get any sunlight, or air circulation. These taken in conjunction with our solid steel cell doors are going to make it unbearable this coming summer.

These shutters were placed on our windows specifically for our communication with you brothers and sisters during our "peaceful protest." DO NOT let this retaliatory act prevent you from future protest, though we can't see you, we will still be able to hear you and "that type" of support motivates the brothers in here like nothing else!

Please don't let these retaliatory acts discourage you. You must understand that actions like this actually ENCOURAGE all of us 'cause it's clear that what we are doing is working! So keep up the good work, and know this without a doubt. They can shutter our windows, but they can NOT shutter our minds!



*In past issues we have talked about our stance against rape culture and the enemies it creates such as the rapist and child molester. This article by Vikki Law addresses the strong need for community response to gender violence, as the State itself is a tremendous purveyor of exploitation and violence and thus we need other alternatives. Undermining and destroying the State and Capital require more than simply not calling the cops; it requires us going on the offensive. Women's self-defense, as a communal as well as individual response, is more than just a practical necessity, it is a strategy. Law gives many exciting examples of such spanning from the late 1920's to the 1970's until the present day -- the eco-defense of the Vancouver 5 to anti-debt struggles of Bolivia's Mujeres Libres. The more our community efforts are connected with such offensives the stronger they will be. Real "abolitionism" is an offensive as well as defensive endeavor.*

## FROM ABOLITION TO ACTION

An Excerpt  
By Vikki Law

During the last decade, the growing movement toward prison abolition, coupled with mounting recognition of the need for community responses to gender violence, has led to increased interest in developing alternatives to government policing. Moving away from the notion of women as victims in need of police protection, grassroots groups, and activists are organizing community alternatives to calling 911. Such initiatives, however, are not new. Throughout the twentieth century, women have organized alternative models of self-protection. This piece examines past and present models of women's community self-defense practices against violence. By exploring the wide-ranging methods women across the globe have employed to protect themselves, their loved ones, and communities, this piece seeks to contribute to current conversations on promoting safety and accountability without resorting to state-based policing and prisons.

### **The 1970's: Women's Liberation, Defending Themselves and Each Other**

. . . In 1992, women in Taos, New Mexico, responded to police indifference to gender violence by forming the Taos Women's Self-Defense Project. Within two years, the Project had taught self-defense to over 400 women, presenting classes in public schools and health departments (Giggans, 1994, p. 41). Although much of the 1970s rhetoric and organizing around gender violence presupposed that women were attacked by strangers, women also recognized and organized against violence perpetrated by those that they know, including spouses and intimate partners. In Neu-Isenburg, a small town near Frankfurt, Germany, a group of women called Fan-Shen

decided that, rather than establish a shelter for battered women, they would force the abuser out of the house. When a battered woman called the local women's shelter, the group arrived at her home to not only confront her abuser, but also occupy the house as round-the-clock guards to the woman until her abuser moved out. When the strategy was reported in 1977, Fan-Shen had already been successful in five instances ('Women's Patrol,' 1977, p. 18). Communities of color in the USA also developed methods to ensure women's safety without relying on a system that has historically ignored their safety or further threatened it by using gender violence as a pretext for increased force, brutality, and mass incarceration against community members.

In 1979, when Black women were found brutally murdered in Boston's primarily Black Roxbury and Dorchester neighborhoods, residents organized the Dorchester Green Light Program. The program provided identifiable safe houses for women who were threatened or assaulted on the streets. Program coordinators, who lived in Dorchester, visited and spoke at community groups and gatherings in their areas. Residents interested in opening their homes as safe houses filled out applications, which included references and descriptions of the house living situation. The program screened each application and checked the references. Once accepted, the resident attended orientation sessions, which included self-defense instruction. They were then given a green light bulb for their porch light; when someone was at home, the green light was turned on as a signal to anyone in trouble. Within eight months, over 100 safe houses had been established (Dejanikus & Kelly, 1979, p. 7).

*The full version of this text is available in the zine On Women and Violence by request from Oak Root Press.*





# PARLOUR GAME

## “PSYCHIATRIST”

*A parlor game is a group game played indoors. It is a fun way to engage your friends and pass the time. Often requiring no more than a few scraps of paper and a sense of humor, these games are perfect for the prison environment. You can play them in large or small groups. “In the Manner of the Adverb” is but one of many of these games. Three or more can play this game. The larger the group, the better.*

Here are the instructions.

1. One person who has never played the game volunteers to be the psychiatrist.
2. The psychiatrist leaves the room.
3. Everyone remaining is a “patient.” They are all afflicted with the same ailment: They believe they are the person to their right.
4. After everyone knows who’s who, call the psychiatrist back in the room.
5. The goal of the psychiatrist is to guess what that certain ailment is. To do this, the psychiatrist asks each patient a different question. For example, “What is troubling you these days?” or “What do you spend most of your time thinking about?” or “Do you prefer breakfast or dinner?” or “Do you get enough exercise?” or anything at all. And the patient must answer as if they are the person to their right.
5. The psychiatrist continues asking different questions to each patient in no particular order until they figure out what is going on. When the psychiatrist figures it out, the game is over.

Variations: Instead of “the person to your right,” other ailments the game could be played with include “the person across from you,” “fear of bridges,” “fear of the dark,” “seeing things that aren’t there,” “believing you’re George Bush,” and so forth.

## INCARCERATION NEWS DIGEST

### ON THE INSIDE

Zoo officials reported that seven chimpanzees escaped for the Kansas City Zoo in Missouri. “One of them either found or broke off a 5- or 6-foot log or branch, leaned it against a wall and clambered to the top. Then that chimpanzee- the ‘ringleader,’ persuaded six friends to join him.”  
-*The Kansas City Star, April 10*

Attorneys for 8 prisoners at Honolulu’s Federal Detention Center, in Hawaii, relayed that those prisoners were on hunger strike to protest isolation in a segregated unit and a lack of clean underwear, loss of family visits, and maggots in food.  
-*West Hawaii Today, April 12*

Indian press reported that 42 youths from the Punjab region of India were on hunger strike at the El-Paso Processing Center (Jail) in El Paso, Texas. They were demanding their release after 10-months imprisonment for crossing the border on their own.  
-*The Tribune of India, April 13*

Prisoners in Alabama state prisons announced the launch of a system-wide work strike, which includes kitchen and laundry work, chemical and license plate production, and furniture-making. This is the second strike thus far this year. The first, in January, included prisoners at the prisons at the St. Clair, Holman, and Elmore facilities. The prisoners initiating the strike claimed, “This Movement isn’t about getting ‘some outside support,’ or having our family ‘call the politicians or mayor’s office,’ ‘call the news station’ and on and on and on. The reason for this is simple: we can’t form a movement conditioned on ‘outside’ people without first unifying the ‘inside people.’”  
-*Salon.com, April 18*

### ON THE OUTSIDE

Officials reported that 500 people rallied outside the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington in support of 60 hunger-striking prisoners inside who are demanding a stop to deportation proceedings and their immediate release. During the rally, prisoners inside were able to establish a phone connection to people on the outside and hear the demonstrators.  
-*The News-Tribune, April 9*

A crowd of people demanding the end to all deportations blocked the entrance to the Suffolk (Immigrant) Detention Center in Boston, MA.  
-*The Boston Globe, April 17*

On May Day, the international workers’ holiday, and this the 56th day of the hunger strike at the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington, 200 supporters rally outside demanding a stop to all deportations and the prisoners immediate release.  
-*The News-Tribune, May 1*

As part of May Day protests around the city, crowds gathered outside the King County Juvenile Detention Center in Seattle, Washington, with banners proclaiming “No New Juvies.” These crowds later merged with others and scuffled with police and superhero vigilantes, set bonfires in downtown intersections, and damaged a luxury BMW convertible.  
-*The Seattle Times, May 2*

DESTINY  
WILL BE CHANGED  
ONE MORNING  
WHEN, AT THE EDGE  
OF DARKNESS,  
THEY STAND UP.  
...ABOUT THEM  
IT WAS SAID  
THEY HAVE NOTHING  
TO LOSE  
BUT THEIR CHAINS.

NAZIM HIKMET

