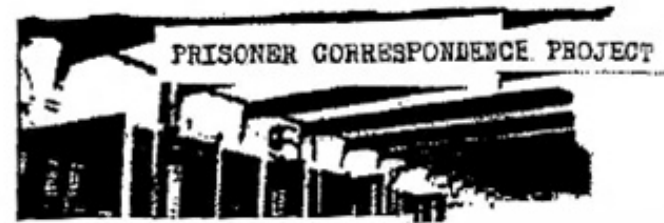


system except they really mean it. So I think it's really important for activists on the outside to know the conditions on the inside, and to ask before saying things – it would drive me crazy when people would say, “oh you know, search this on the internet” – well we didn’t have access to the internet! Or, “can you call me?” - no I can't call you you're not on my approved phone list. You know, things like that, when you're inside you sort of want to know that people on the outside see what you're up against and recognize it. And there is something I want to say also to prisoners who are reading this, that every time you do anything, organize anything, a walkathon, or a consciousness-raising group, a support group or something, please know that there are people on the outside who know how much sweat you have to put in to getting that into action, how hard it is to do that stuff in prison and it really inspires people on the outside when you do it because people do realize that.



"Hell No, We Won't Go": In Conversation with Laura Whitehorn

Since the 1960s, Laura Whitehorn has been active in anti-racist and anti-imperialist political struggles. Laura joined the Weather Underground Organization and later spent over 14 years in prison for a series of property bombings that protested racism and the imperial policies of the U.S. government. She's been an out lesbian most of her life and, since 1999, she's been out of prison. Laura now works at POZ, a magazine for HIV-positive people.

Laura is also the editor of a new book, *The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison, & Fighting for those Left Behind*. Composed of writings by Safiya Bukhari, the book traces Safiya's lifelong commitment as an advocate for the rights of the oppressed. Following her journey from middle-class student to Black Panther to political prisoner, these writings provide an intimate view of a woman wrestling with the issues of her time—the troubled legacy of the Panthers, misogyny in the movement, her decision to convert to Islam, the incarceration of out spoken radicals, and the families left behind. Her account unfolds with immediacy and passion, showing how the struggles of social justice movements have paved the way for the progress of today.

The Prisoner Correspondence Project managed to get Laura on the phone to discuss her experiences of political organizing while in prison, and her thoughts on prisoner solidarity work going on today.

This interview was conducted in 2010. For more information on the Prisoner Correspondence Project or for copies of this zine you can contact us at:

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going to start to care about prisoners, about changing the prison system, telling the stories of queers who have been locked up is really important for getting those stories out and letting people see what life is like for their sisters and brothers.

PCP: As you know, we're planning on sharing this interview with folks on the inside that we're in touch with. Do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share with these folks?

LW: Just that they're not forgotten, that there are people who think about them every day, all the time. And that, you know, I think every day about my own experience in prison, it just never leaves you. But I also remember with great love the people who reached into the bars, to touch me, to visit me, to write to me, to send me something. You never forget those people and similarly I don't forget any of the women I was with in prison and I don't think any of us ever forget each other. So at the point when you feel you're the most alone, just know that someone, somewhere is thinking of you.

And just one other thing I want to say to people who do the work: it's what I said before about knowing the conditions that are unique to prison. I just know that for me one of the most frustrating things would be when I tried to tell people on the outside, if you want to write to me this is how you have to do it or if you want to send me a book this is how you have to do it. And they would just ignore it because it didn't make sense to them. And then I wouldn't get the book. There were so many examples like that. People on the outside have to understand that what they're dealing with is not a rational system, it's a system that's determined to destroy personalities. So when you think, "but that doesn't make sense why can't I send that in if I can send this in," please know that there is no reason except to be arbitrary. It's like that joke when you were little and you would say to your mother, why can't I do that, and she would say because I said so. Well that's the prison

things like that. I just don't think that with the kind of system of government the United States has at this point that I trust them to be the ones to do that, I think those should be community based. I think that for all of us to live a decent life means moving away from hatred and permanent punishment and moving into rehabilitation and justice and communities taking control of what we consider crimes. And I certainly think that for queers that's true, I mean in the U.S., it still is illegal for queers to marry. In some states it's not but in the federal system, you just don't get the same protection as a gay couple that you do as a straight couple. And so what stake do we have in maintaining a system of "justice" that reflects that system? There's not much. Plus the U.S. criminal system upholds the broader goals of society, and those goals are not about human rights, equality, creativity – they're about amassing more wealth for the ruling class, and about maintaining an imbalance of power in favor of white people. So that system is not one that we really have a stake in, if we want a different and better kind of society.

The first part of the question about making queers invested in prison issues, I think is mostly about putting faces on who goes to prison. And that's the constant challenge. In the United States there's 7.3 million people involved in either prisons, jails, parole or probation. So putting faces on those people is very challenging – because people see a sea of criminals, that's all they see. But to try to familiarize each community with the people from their community who are inside, I think can really help. And I also think that art and wall posters and things like that are so critically important. Because the internet is everyone's billboard instead of something on the street. So I think it's time to revive the street art and street posters as a way of educating.

The last thing I would say is that you guys, and other people who do this kind of work, who don't let the people inside be left behind, are the main way that I think all of our communities are

Prisoner Correspondence Project: We've heard that many prisoner-run / prisoner-led organizations were banned in federal prisons across the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s under purported "anti-gang" initiatives. Similar anti-gang policies went through in Canadian institutions, similarly devastating prisoner-led organizing. Can you tell us a bit about when and how this happened, what effects it had on organizing, specifically queer and/or HIV/AIDS organizing inside of prisons?

Laura Whitehorn: Well you know we were very aware that we were stopped by the administration in Dublin, California where we were doing peer education and organizing around HIV and Hep C which was just really coming onto the scene at that point in the mid 90s. And it was not specifically about gangs at that point to my knowledge. I would imagine that that was probably true in other places but where I was there were women political prisoners and we were among the leaders of the organizing and so it was more directed at us. But I think the underlying issues, whether it's talking about gangs, whether it's talking about political prisoners, is about prisoner power. There's a very interesting book which I hope everyone tries to get if it's still in print called Breaking the Walls of Silence which was written by women in Bedford Hills, New York including Kathy Boudin who was a political prisoner – she's out now. And it was about their experience with AIDS organizing. The introduction to the book is written by the woman who was at that point the superintendent or warden of the prison, and she talks specifically about the challenge of empowering prisoners to do their own peer education versus security concerns. My point is that the federal prison system in the United States and many state prisons also do not want prisoners to have any kind of self-determination. The way they say it in the feds – at least in my experience – was you were not allowed to have any kind of organization meet – any kind of group meet – without a staff member. And that was a big issue because as you may know there

are a lot of things you want to talk about when you're talking about HIV or Hep C that you can not talk about with staff around. For example, having sex, which is illegal in U.S. prisons. And of course when you're locked up for the majority of your adult life, people are gonna have sex. Sex is not a privilege or a guilty pleasure. It is a human necessity, a major form of communication and creativity in our lives. So just as the prison administrations need to balance their perception of what is a 'security risk' (prisoner empowerment) against the proven benefit of peer education in preventing HIV and Hep C, and helping people survive well with those conditions, so do the systems as a whole need to face the fact that sexuality cannot be outlawed without damaging people's health and welfare. If sex were not illegal in prison, safe sex would be possible.

So, you know, it was about peer education on how to prevent transmission, stuff like that. But also in the federal system – when I was there but also in local D.C. and Baltimore prisons – the staff and the guards were the biggest gossipmongers. So if you didn't want something known, you would not tell a staff person. You might tell another prisoner, but you wouldn't tell a staff member. And they stopped us because they said that it was a security risk, that's what they kept saying, and I'm sure using the gang argument it's the same thing. Any kind of meeting of prisoners doing our own thing, getting our own information, would be seen as a security threat.

So then, I know you want to know how we got around that, and the way that we did everywhere that I was was to go through the chapel. Because we found that almost everywhere except for one place where I did time, the chaplains were much more amenable to arguments about peer education. For example, I was in the Lexington Federal Women's Prison at the point when it was 2,400 women, and all of the women in the federal system who had been diagnosed as having AIDS were there. That was in 1991 when I got there. We went through the chapel because the chaplain there was

one's fairly conservative and it's about gays in the military, and marriage equality, and stuff like that, we're just like you, and proving that gay people can be assimilated as easily as anyone else. And then there's the queer movement that says, "hell no we won't go!" We won't go into the army, and we also won't go into the mainstream society in the way that it exists now. So for me, it has actually changed since the days when I was in prison and I think that the AIDS movement kind of changed it and I think that the transgender movement is really changing it now. When I was in prison it wasn't even really realized in the broader community what a large percentage of people with HIV go through prisons. Now in the United States it's something like 25% of all people with HIV will at some point in the United States pass through the prison system. And that's huge. So it's become a little bit more of an issue.

But it's kind of hard for me to answer because I don't spend that much time in the mainstream queer movement – in fact my girlfriend [Susie Day] just wrote a satire about Don't Ask Don't Tell, called "Asking, Telling, Enlisting" - so it's a little hard for me to answer that. But in the broader left, they've adopted pro-gay language at least, because you can't not, since so many leading leftists are queer. But the whole question of prisons? Forget it. That is not a big issue in the majority of left organizations in this country.

PCP: Given the invisibilities of members of our communities who are locked up in prisons, what strategies are at our disposal to make queers invested in justice and prison issues? What stake do queer communities have in abolition?

LW: Queer communities have the same stake in prison abolition that anyone interested in social justice does. And when I talk about abolition I don't mean abolishing any system of control and punishment of, for example, people who assault other citizens,

women for the first time in their lives - whether they would end up being lesbians when they went back on the street I don't know, but they were being bombarded by conservative religious people who came into the prison to lead Christian services about how they were going to hell. And luckily because I was able to be out as a lesbian, I was publicly a lesbian, my family knew about it, I came to be a person that they would come to and ask. And I could counsel them and they would bring me their bibles and I would say, "well this is what it says," and I would try to help them understand how that didn't mean that they were going to hell! I would help them challenge those assumptions and think about why the church services said what they did. So that was really important.

Other than that, it's about getting inside, letting them know that they are seen on the outside and being really ready to provide legal support when people come up against something, either getting beaten up or being in some way targeted by the prisons for being gay.

PCP: We've read older interviews with you in which you mention the invisibility of prisoners and prison issues in most queer organizing. We're wondering whether this invisibility of prisoners has always been the case in your experience of queer or gay politics, and what shifts you have seen, if any.

LW: Well I think it's shifting a lot, and it's sort of back to what I was saying about the transgender movement and transgender queers playing a really great role, especially in the United States, it's especially transgender folk of colour playing a really leading role in raising the issue of prisons because that community is very much confronted with going to prison a lot of the time. So I think it's changing somewhat.

You know in the United States there are two strands of queer organizing at the moment, and I think there always have been -

seeing people getting sick and dying and no one would talk to them and all this stuff. And she knew that we needed to pull something together. So she allowed us to have peer education classes, support groups where women could say that they were positive in the chapel. And she would help us hang sheets in front of the windows so that other people couldn't look in and say "Oooh she's got AIDS, she's got AIDS." But that was because the chaplain there at the time understood how important it was for people to be able to have some dignity at a time when they were ill with a disease that at that point had very few treatments available. And then one other place we went to was the psychology department. The psychologist at that prison - that prison was Marianna, Florida, and the chaplains were extremely conservative and horrible so we didn't even try to go through them, but the psychologists in the unit were very open to the importance of peer education. Because there were studies that showed that it was the best way to educate prisoners and to keep people from becoming infected in prison or after they got out.

PCP: From the time you started editing POZ magazine, what sort of shifts or developments have you seen in HIV/AIDS-related prison justice work? How have shifts in the AIDS activist movements outside of prison had an effect on the kinds of work we are seeing happening (or not happening) inside prisons?

LW: That's really a huge question. But first of all, to say that I edit POZ magazine makes it sound like I am the editor which I'm not, I'm just on the staff. It was started by men with HIV in 1994. Or at that point they had AIDS. [Note: Poz magazine can be read online at www.poz.com.]

But anyway I think there are a number of ways to answer that. One way is that because there are now medications that allow people to live instead of dying these horrible deaths immediately

after your immune system fails, that has changed AIDS activism across the board. Number two, a lot of the AIDS activism on the outside is about pressuring and working with drug companies and the federal government and state governments trying to get – in the United States there's something called AIDS Drug Assistance Programs, or ADAP, which pays for medication for HIV when people can't pay for them themselves. And there are huge waiting lists now for ADAP in many states, because of course that is not where federal funds are going. So that's a huge issue about poor people in the US, and how they can afford their meds. So a lot of activism has to do with that. But there's another field of activism that is not exactly what you're talking about but is related, which is activism against criminalizing HIV transmission. I was part of starting some consciousness raising about that in 2000. I collected all the cases that I could find of people who had been prosecuted or sent to prison for "criminal transmission of HIV" and I did a survey of them. And as much as I could find out of 101 cases – which is all that I had time to find before the magazine came out – only 5 of those 101 cases even had a possibility of transmitting HIV. I mean, people were being prosecuted for things like spitting, or like having sex with a condom, or being positive and getting a blow job. And that is still going on now. And in the United States finally – you know we're now 11 years after that article came out – we're finally seeing some organizing around trying to stop using criminal statutes to prevent HIV transmission and instead using public health education.

So that's one area that I think might start to interest people on the outside who have HIV in the issues facing prisoners. But as you know – I knew this when I was in prison and I know it now that I'm out, you know I've known it all my life – people don't want to see what's going on behind bars if they don't have a family member, if they haven't been in prison themselves. So it's a constant effort. However, in the field of HIV activism there actually is more attention to people in prison than in other areas of

really recommend that article. It's called Maroon Abolitionists: Black Gender-oppressed Activists in the Anti-Prison Movement in the U.S. and Canada. The language is a little academic, but the whole concept is the fact that the queer community has changed, and that one of the most threatening things to the system right now might not be lesbians or gay men it might be transgender queers. And so a lot of those people I think who are transgender can be active against the projects on the outside and then end up going to prison and play a political role.

PCP: What were the ways that you survived prison as a lesbian or queer person? Can you share any strategies for building support networks, maintaining personal well-being, and accessing information that queers living inside prison today might find useful?

LW: I think that your work and other queer activists and just progressive activists on the outside supporting queer prisoners and being willing to come to their defense or provide community visits, things like that are really important. I think that providing queer-friendly/pro-queer literature and books are really important. I had trouble getting some of that stuff when I was in prison because some of it just got censored, because of homophobia, and that would become a good issue to talk to people about. It's a little hard to say across the board, because I think it's different in women's prisons than in men's prisons. It's a lot less dangerous in women's prisons and I also know that, in the United States anyway, there are transgender women who are in the course of transgenering, transitioning from mtf (male to female), who end up in male prisons and it's really terrifying. And those are the people who really need support from outside communities.

But the other thing that was important for me was being able to talk to the young women who were in prison with me, some of whom were coming out or at least having sexual relationships with

prison conditions - before we were in prison. You know I was organizing around Attica and the New York state system 20 years before I went to prison. The divide gets created I think because of a need to focus and allocate resources. And I think it's just a matter of people opening up their minds to what it means to be a prisoner and what it means to be a political prisoner. It's really not that different, except that in some cases when you're a political prisoner you have it harder because you're singled out for certain kinds of security treatment, and in some ways you actually have it easier because very often if you represent a political community you have the support of those people.

I always say that in my analysis you can not talk about political prisoners and social prisoners separately, because for example in the United States, social prisoners, now, represent the government's response to the struggles of the 60s. Because that was when you saw a huge rise in the number of people incarcerated in this country and the reason was to terrorize communities. Communities were flooded with drugs, which was largely done by the police and the government, and then locked up in huge numbers so they can't be on the streets going against conditions in their communities. Then you lock up the people who are ideologically trying to deal with those social issues, or are leaders of the struggles, and you take away the leadership and so therefore you leave communities that are incapable of struggling for their rights because their brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers are in prison, and the leaders of the political organizations are in prison. One other thing though is that I think it's really important for people to get to know each other and for people not to use these categories as abstractions, but to think about who we're talking about. Because when you're doing queer work it's important to recognize that there are queer political prisoners as well. Also, Julia Sudbury who's a professor now in California at Mills College wrote a really interesting paper about how the cutting edge political issue in terms of prisons right now is about transgender prisoners of colour and I

activism that aren't specifically prison-centred. People who are activists around HIV or Hep C on the street are actually more likely to include prisoners in their consciousness and in their work than people who are working on some other issue, say global warming or something, where they don't even think about how the environment impacts people who are in prison. And that has continued at a slow pace.

But there's some really great work in the United States, for example in Philadelphia there's a group that started as ACT UP that has always had a component that was people in prison with HIV. So they have all these programs that are about what people do when they get out of prison if they have HIV. It's called Philadelphia Fight, and they have a program called Project Teach. So I don't know, I think it's a very mixed bag. There's not a lot of real militant activism in general in this country at this point in history, and that's reflected in the lack of HIV-related prison justice work in the larger Left. Also, one other thing I want to say is that, when I got out of prison, all of the political prisoners, my codefendants, all the people I met, all the people still inside who are political prisoners did some form of AIDS work because it's part of social justice work. And when I got out of prison, I expected that people in the Left in the United States would mention HIV, the disproportionate impact on poor communities, on African Americans, you know, etc., etc., as part of their analysis about the state of imperialism and colonialism in the United States at this moment. And it wasn't happening and it's still not happening. It's seen as a separate issue, and people don't understand it as a political issue. And that's a big problem which reflects how the broader Left sees the issue of prisons.

PCP: We are in the process of developing safer-sex resources that address the restrictions in prisoners' ability to practice safer sex in prisons, and the kinds of strategies people have developed to gain autonomy over their sexual health.

We do some technical work to get facts from various outside health organizations, but we then write callouts and send them into prisons to solicit prisoner experience and knowledge about conditions in prison. How do you think that groups like ours can make their HIV/AIDS prevention work more relevant to the prison context?

LW: Well, I assume that you guys go in and visit prisoners. And I think that's the best way to do it, is to go in and talk to prisoners. I don't know what the prison system is like in Canada but in the United States it's really complicated because every prison has its own rules. For example, I've visited a number of people in the New York state system, every prison is different in terms of like what guys are allowed to get in the mail, and you know, what's available on the commissary. And one of the things that we found when I was inside, was I was going crazy trying to find what could be used that was a lubrication that didn't break down latex. You know because we could get from the medical department latex gloves, examination gloves. That was so easy. But then, you know, when you're having sex you want to lubricate the thing. And we could not find out from anyone – they would tell us all these things that we couldn't get. We couldn't buy hand lotions that didn't have mineral oil in it, and things like that. And so we had to figure it out for ourselves. And we finally found something by accident when someone was having surgery -- there was something for doctors and patients who were allergic to latex to use. It's called Surgilube, and the clinic had it in little packets.

So I think the main lesson of it was that the prisoners themselves are the ones who have to help with this and that you have to do that by visiting, by discussing and understanding what they want and need in their situation. If safer sex education is to have any meaning, it has to be adapted to –and by – the people who will be affected. I remember some really great discussions about safer sex in prison where I learned things about my fellow prisoners' lives on

the outside, and then we could have talks that could actually be helpful to their ability to protect themselves from HIV and other STIs once they were released. And the same was true for treatment: we were able to talk helpfully about how to avoid going off meds, or returning to harmful patterns of behaviour, after release, because we weren't telling the other women what to do, we were working it out together. When my friends from outside tried to help with our AIDS awareness and support work inside, it was the same way. They needed to let us design the plans based on the conditions we lived in. Otherwise, the plans would be useless. Any education and organizing has to be guided by the conditions and wants and needs of the community to whom it's addressed. Listening is the first step.

PCP: In doing prison justice work, we've noticed that there can be a divide between political prisoner and "social" or "non-political prisoner" support work. For instance, our group focuses on supporting queer folks on the inside, and our mandate does not specifically include a political prisoner focus. What are your thoughts on this divide, and how prison justice or prison abolition groups have been organizing within this framework?

LW: That's another one that's been a thorny issue. My own position is that if you talk about political prisoners in a way that makes it sound as if we experience things that social prisoners don't, "we get our mail separate," that kind of thing, which I have seen leftists do when they talk about political prisoners, then if I were a social prisoner or a social prisoner organizing group I wouldn't want anything to do with that because it is elitist bull. All prisoners are subject to all kinds of security procedures that make life inside unpleasant. But there are many similarities between people's situations, firstly if you look at how people became prisoners in the first place and how much, for example, the people who are political prisoners began our organizing in many cases organizing around