

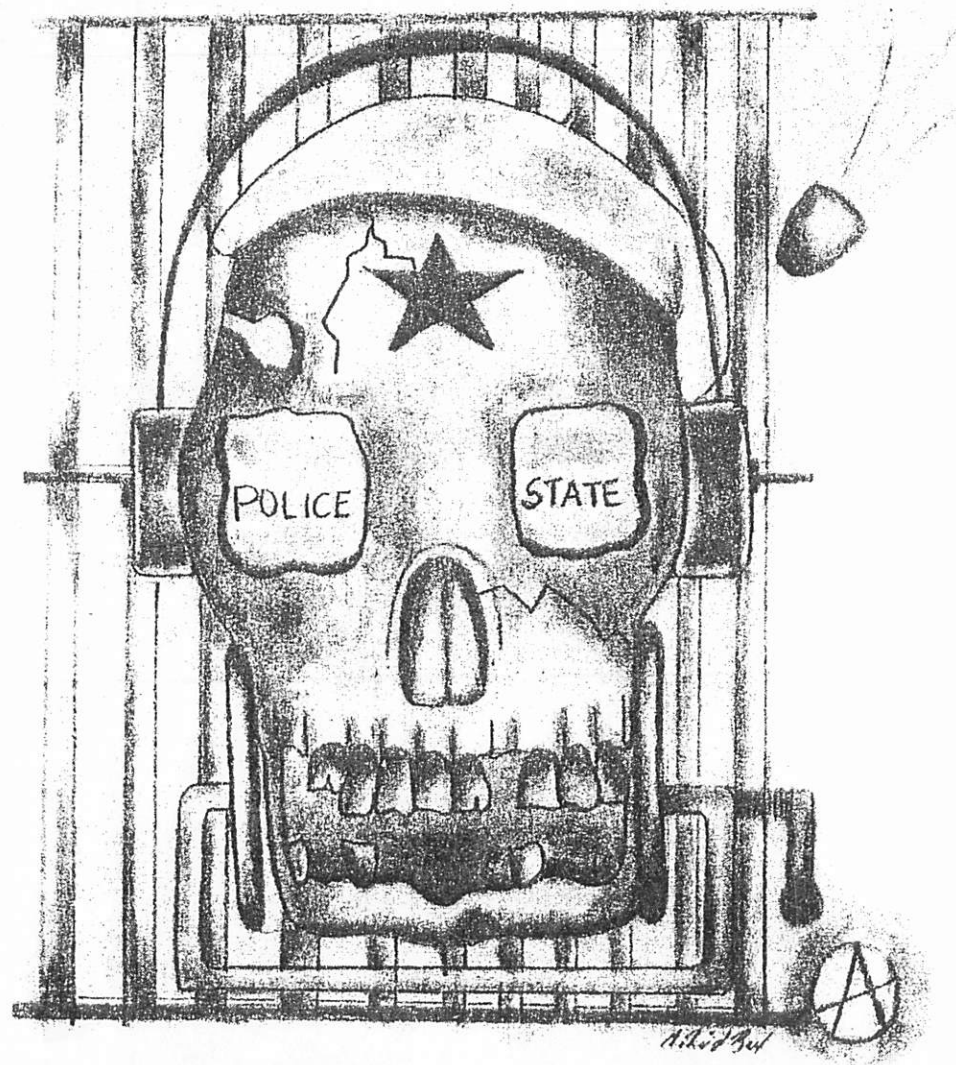


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Zine Distro  
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# PUBLISHING 'ZINES FOR PRISONERS



## AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY RAYSON



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Anthony Rayson heads South Chicago ABC Zine Distro.<sup>1</sup> He has been self-publishing for the better part of four decades. Now sixty years old, Rayson came to politics early in life as the son of Leland Rayson, a State Representative in Illinois for twelve years, from 1965-77. As a child Rayson was always attending demonstrations, rallies and other political events and would help with his father's campaigns and events. During the Vietnam era, Rayson's mother was part of Women for Peace. By the time he hit freshman year in high school, Rayson joined a campaign that his brother's girlfriend was part of to push for women to be able to wear pants to school instead of only dresses and skirts. In freezing sub-zero Chicago winters, this is no small thing to have fought for.

Anthony Rayson grew up in Tinley Park, Illinois, and regularly traveled to Chicago for demonstrations. He would try to get his high school classmates to attend these events with him:

They had demos downtown—there'd be a hundred thousand people at these demos. ... All the groups were out there. The Communists, the YSA, the [Young] Socialist Alliance, the [Black] Panthers would be hawking their paper ... It seemed like everyone had publications they were hawking and I'd always grab whatever I could find and I would always try to go to the guys with the bullhorn and grab the bullhorn off them and get my little say in ... because they would never allow a little kid that no one knew to

<sup>1</sup> ABC is an acronym for Anarchist Black Cross.

Cover illustrations: Hon. Mark A. Reid Bey, 2008 (front); McKeehan, 2011 (back)

actually address a rally.<sup>2</sup>

For 38 years Rayson, who is now retired from his day job, worked as a toll collector. He'd fill the downtime in his booth writing letters to people in prison and working on 'zines. A series of 'zines that stands out within Rayson's massive body of work are his *Each One Teach One* booklets where Anthony and a prisoner that he corresponds with interview each other.

In addition to South Chicago ABC Zine Distro, Anthony Rayson is also a co-founder and officer for Shut This Airport Nightmare Down (STAND), a 5,000 member grassroots group that consists of residents in Peotone Illinois who are "opposed to construction of, and land banking for, the proposed Peotone airport in eastern Will County, 45 miles south of Chicago."<sup>3</sup>

We take particular interest in Rayson's long relationship with people in prison whose 'zines and artwork he has published, and who are the primary readership and audience for the booklets he makes. Rayson estimates that he gets about 75 letters from prisoners every week and usually sends out a couple 'zines in each package, sending out around 150 'zines a week. Incredibly, he does this for free. Sometimes prisoners send him stamps, which they may barter with other prisoners to receive, or they'll persuade their families or others on the outside to donate to Rayson, but most of the prisoners that write to him are indigent and have nothing to spare.

Because Rayson mails zines to institutions all over the country, he has to keep track of the endless differences of what kind of content each institution will allow—sometimes testing the waters by sending out more mild material before attempting radical publications. Zines can be rejected by the prison mailrooms for a huge list of reasons. Rayson states:

It varies, and it varies by the temperament of who's on the clock at that time even. ... [I]t may depend on whether the person likes who it's addressed to. There's no rhyme or reason. There's no consistency. There's no accountability. ... Especially if it's to the author himself or herself and they are talking about the prison. That is the one thing they can't stand. They don't want what is going on in that prison to get around.<sup>4</sup>

Rayson also regularly publishes 'zines that are authored by prisoners who

<sup>2</sup> DePaul Librarian Michelle McCoy Interviews Anthony Rayson, South Chicago ABC Zine Distro., Homewood, IL, 2008. Self-published as a booklet by Rayson.

<sup>3</sup> [www.nothirdairport.org](http://www.nothirdairport.org), accessed August 27, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> DePaul Librarian Michelle McCoy Interviews Anthony Rayson, South Chicago ABC Zine Distro., Homewood, IL, 2008. Self-published as a booklet by Rayson.



Every Afrikan womyn who has won the love of her people for standing relentlessly for their freedom against a racist oppressive system has been labeled by that system an outlaw and a

Harriet Tubman



**TERRORIST**

RASHID  
C  
72  
H



ASSATA SHAKUR

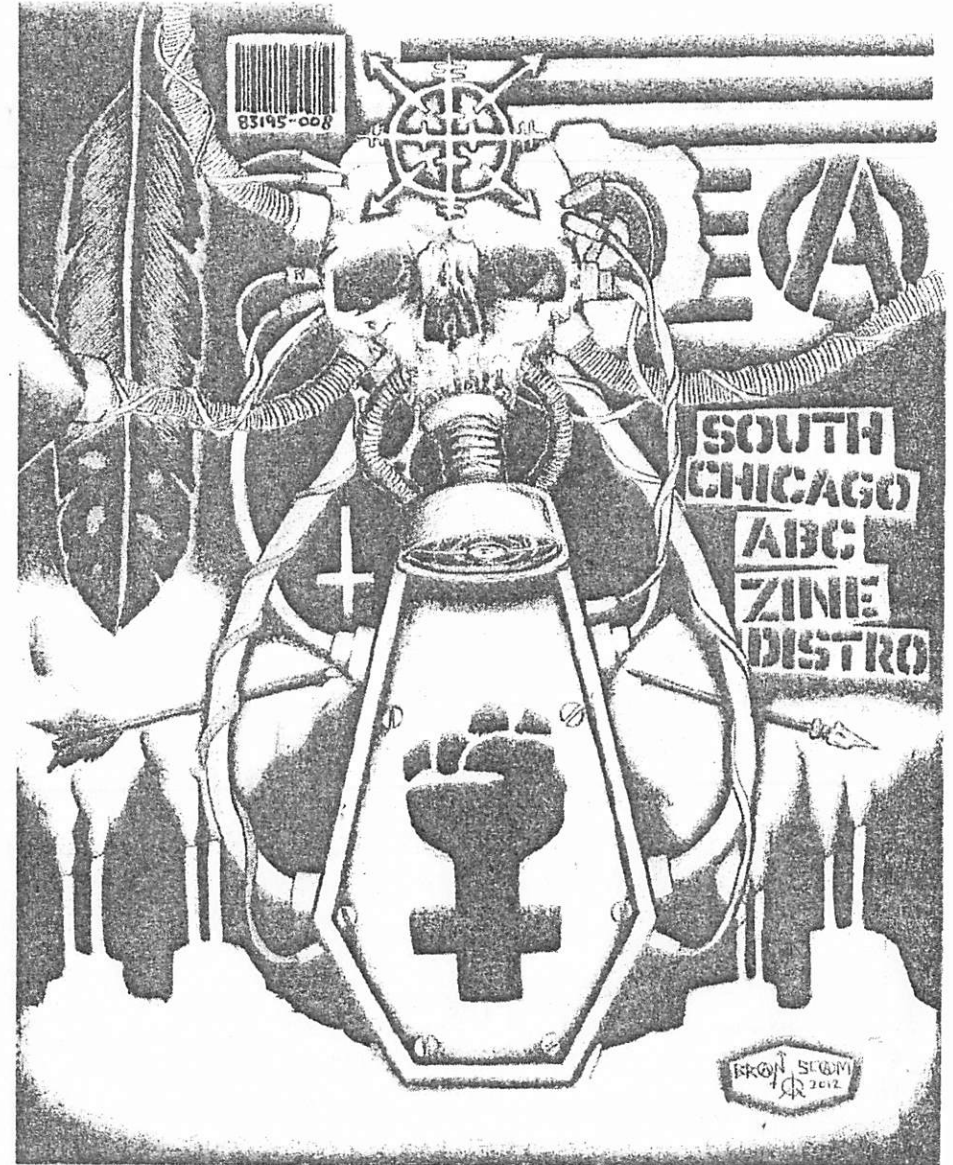


Winnie Mandela

www.rashid.com

send him their layouts for editing and design help, or simply to go straight to publication.

In August 2014, Temporary Services and our collaborator Kione Kochi drove down to Monee in South Chicago to visit Anthony Rayson at his home. His office is the kind of space that any fellow publisher would be energized by—a sunny room filled with bookshelves crammed with booklets, papers and



Drawing by Bran Scam, 2012

'zines (mostly published by Rayson), a cluttered desk with no shortage of mail and a computer to answer it, drawers of audio cassettes and stacks of CDs, and a box piled with a reassuringly large number of glue sticks. We left Rayson's house with piles of 'zines in hand—probably a year's worth of reading!

We were particularly interested in Rayson's large collection of artwork that prisoners from all over the country have sent him over the years. He has boxes of drawings, paintings and prints, many by the same artists that he has befriended and supported over the years—some already published in various 'zines, and others still waiting to find a use. Some pieces are signed but many are not. Examples from his collection flow throughout this booklet.

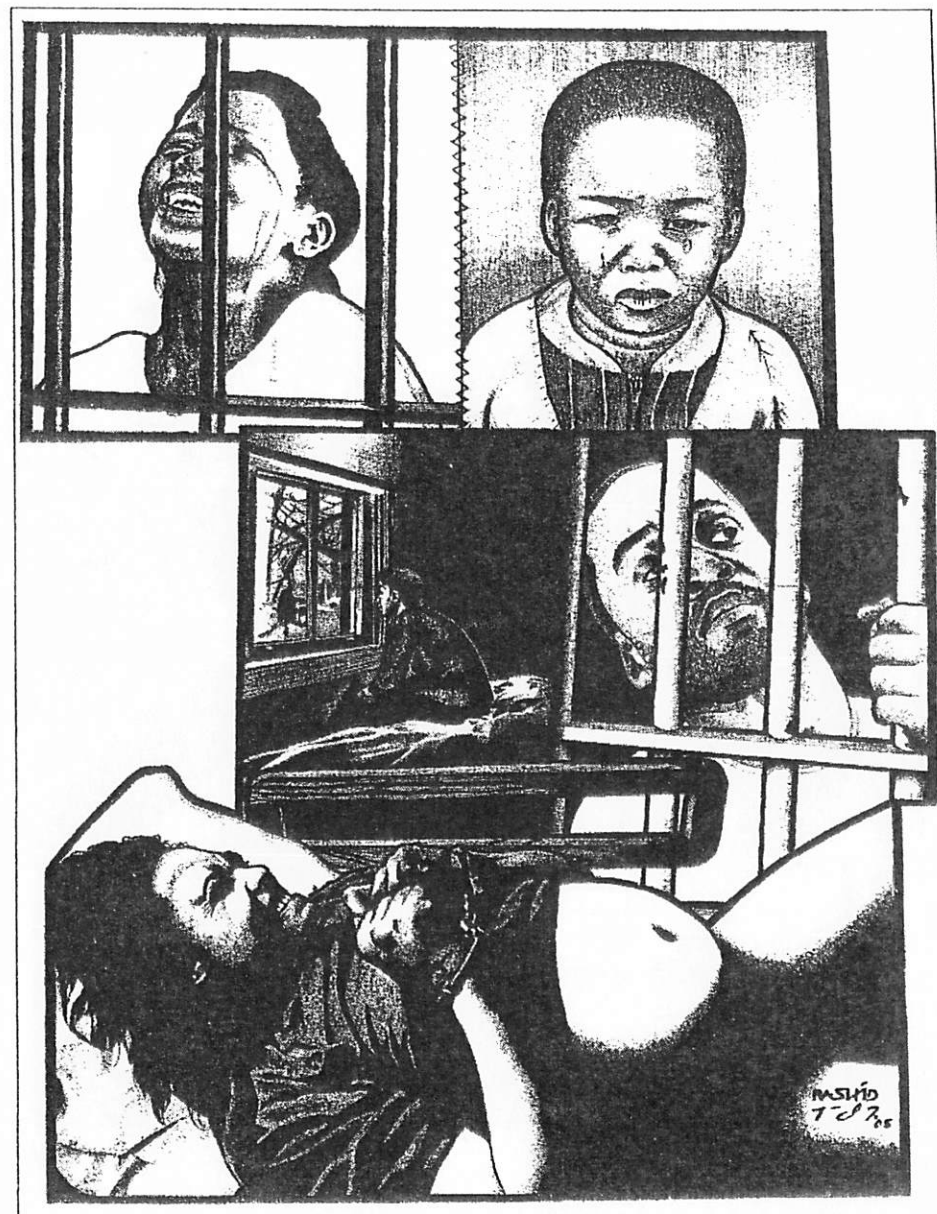
Given the hundreds of publications Anthony Rayson has made, distilling his practice down into one booklet would be an absurd proposition. Still, we felt that through our own publishing practice, which has a rather different audience and tends to be experienced in an art context rather than largely through the mail or in activist circles, we could amplify Rayson's example and highlight the work of some of the talented incarcerated artists that have contributed to his 'zines over the years.

On September 22, 2014, Marc from Temporary Services returned to visit Anthony Rayson with our collaborator Kristian Johansson. We scanned artwork for this publication and conducted this interview. Anthony sent Kristian home to Denmark with his own pile of 'zines. The interview took place in Rayson's back yard.

**TEMPORARY SERVICES (TS):** Do you remember when you first started getting mail from people who are incarcerated? When did that intersect with your self-publishing?

**ANTHONY RAYSON (AR):** It was in the mid-1990s. I had just graduated from Prairie State in 1995 and then I started writing a lot and really got into the whole anarchist 'zine underground thing. I was looking to collaborate with other writers, basically, so I was sending my material to all different kinds of people—inside and out—and gleaning all kinds of publications including letters from prisoners or whoever, and it seemed more and more obvious to me that the more in depth and insightful analysis of not only my work, but just everything in general, was coming from the prisoners.

In '98 I started the distro, I co-founded STAND, and I also co-founded South Chicago ARA (Anti-Racist Action). So I went to an ARA conference in Ohio and I saw these groups tabling from Canada or around the country and they all had their own little publications and I went around and said, "It would be nice to have all of this available from one source." And they said "Yeah, that's a good idea." It became obvious to me that if it's going to happen, I'm going to





have to be the one to do it. So that's how it [South Chicago ABC Distro] started. It started out as ARA Distro, but then I realized it was very limited and those publications were dated and who cares that you went and beat up a bunch of Nazis in Edmonton or wherever two years ago.

So it started out as ARA, but then I started getting submissions from prisoners about their work, and then there's this guy named Sean Lambert who is a bisexual anarchist prisoner supporter out of the Buffalo, New York, area who mentored me into this huge all new world of the prisons. He did these real in-depth prisoner support 'zines. So that's where I first switched my focus to the prisons and basically I've been there ever since. That was in the fall of 1998.

I would glean through all of these prisoner support publications and I would send all this material for free to prisoners that were writing letters to them and I was starting to make catalogs of what I had. And then I'd go to different conferences and you'd table and you'd see different publications you want to reprint and it's just slowly built up to the point where it's taken over this house. [Laughs]

**TS:** Were prisoners getting your address from a resource list?

**AR:** A resource list, but sometimes I'd pay to have an advertisement in a 'zine or a magazine or whatever, and just by the sheer energy of pouring it in and writing catalogs and sending them in wherever I could, I slowly got more and more letters from prisoners; over the years they realized that I'm not just one of these fly by night guys that are going to be gone in two years. Then I started working with well-known political prisoners and doing interviews and publishing their material as well, so I got more respect up and down the line. Now I get about 75

letters a week on average, 99% of them from prison. Most of them want 'zines, but some have contributions, essays, poetry, artwork, whatever, that they want me to help publish. So I have to make a determination about what I'm willing and able to do.

I make a strong point to tell them that this isn't a frivolous thing, we're very serious about this, we want political analysis, this isn't a game to us. As you can tell the artwork is very political, it's not just joking around stuff. But we do have fun with it too. There are cartoon 'zines, although they're political too, and they're banned as well. Guards don't like being made fun of.

**TS:** It's not a lucrative economic opportunity for prisoners to make something with you, but also they are personally at risk because of the content.

**AR:** I tell them there's no money in this. Everything is anti-copyright and the only person shelling out the dough will be me. I like contributions but I'm not going to deny somebody because they are indigent and don't have anything.

But usually when they [the prison] find out what they [the prisoner contributors] are doing they get into nasty trouble because of it. They'll go to the S.H.U. [Secure Housing Unit], they'll send them to a more restrictive prison, they'll assault them, they'll tear up their cell and take all of their personal pictures to make them feel horrible for doing this. It takes a lot of courage to involve themselves because I'll put their mailing address in the art so that other people can write to them and that's how a lot of times other prisoners are able to contact them because they saw a 'zine that they did. So they'll write to someone they know and say 'Hey, send this letter off to them,' or to me, and that's how we'll try to break through the restrictions they have on us.

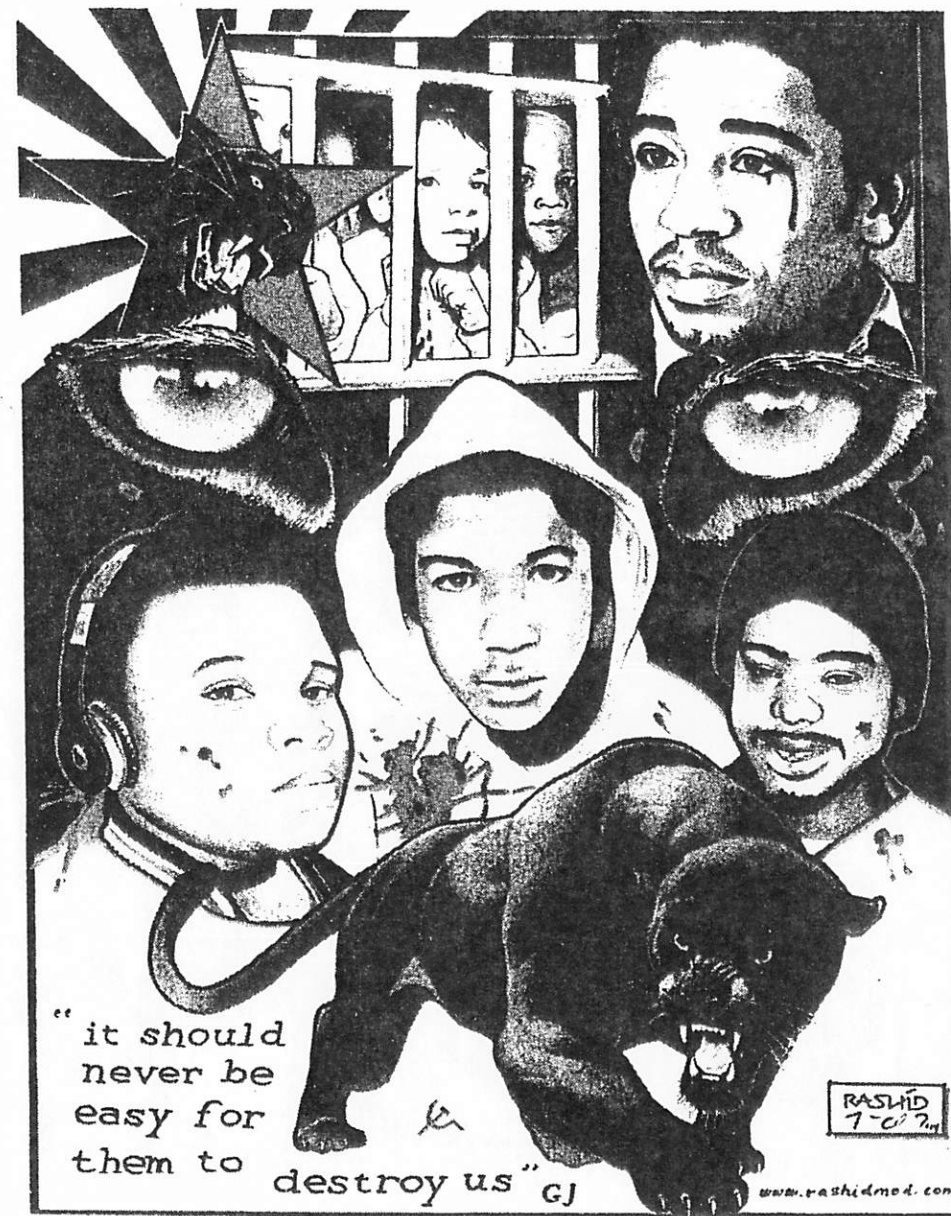
**TS:** Prisoners generally cannot write letters to prisoners in other institutions. So they are using a friend or a family member on the outside to help reach out to other prisoners.

**AR:** Yeah, any way they can. The 'zines themselves get passed all around there. They "kite"<sup>5</sup> 'zines all through the prisons. They unravel these towels and they make little clotheslines<sup>6</sup> and these 'zines are read by countless people before they are destroyed by the guards.

**TS:** Was that part of the impetus for trying to get more 'zines into prisoners—

<sup>5</sup> "Kite" is prison slang for a contraband letter, or a way of sending messages through the prison.

<sup>6</sup> Clotheslines are used to pull 'zines or other objects down the cell block from one cell to another.



# THE ART OF KEVIN 'RASHID' JOHNSON

Anthony Rayson has had a long relationship with Kevin 'Rashid' Johnson, a prisoner who is currently incarcerated in Amarillo, Texas, after multiple transfers. Johnson's stark drawings often feature intricate combinations of images from various sources, remade as elaborate drawn collages. The works lend themselves particularly well to Rayson's favored black ink on white paper approach to publishing and Rashid's work appears in numerous titles published by Rayson over the years. Kevin 'Rashid' Johnson is the Minister of Defense of the New Afrikan Black Panther Party-Prison Chapter. You can see more of his work on the website: [www.rashidmod.com](http://www.rashidmod.com)

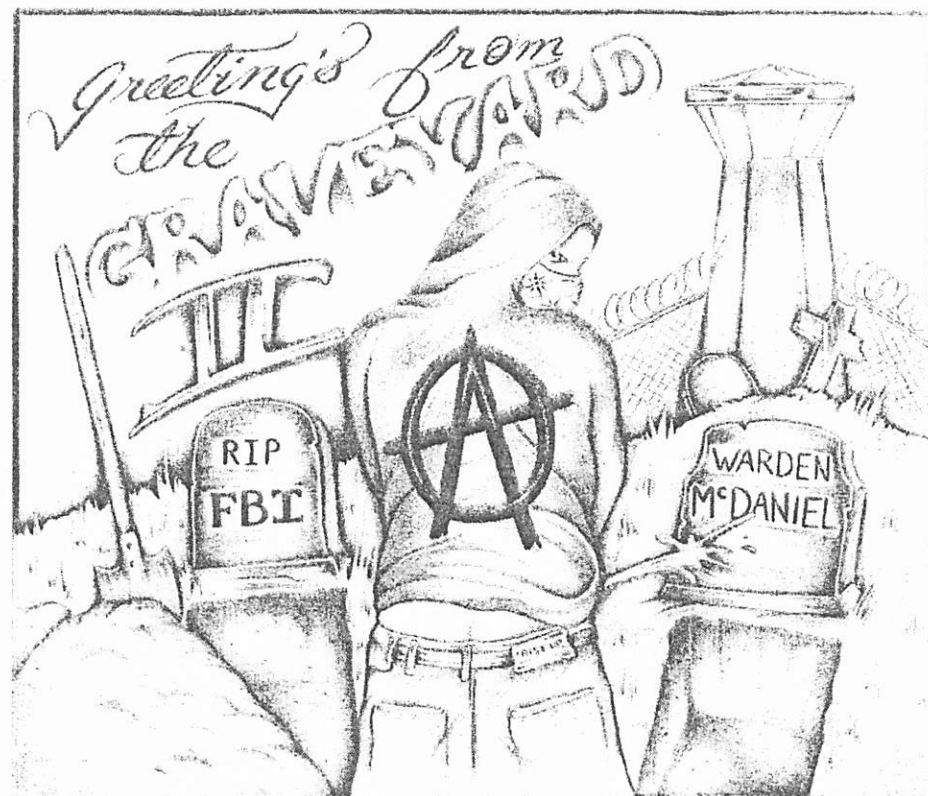


that they'll enjoy a much wider readership in prison?

**AR:** It doesn't really matter to me about who reads what of mine or whoever; I want to push the struggle forward. I want more and more people to get active and stop this government. That's where I find the more fruitful collaborators, even though they are shackled and beat down and shoved in a cage. They still find ways of being effective.

To this day it's kind of surprising to me that these powerful 'zines are let in as often as they are. I'd say over 95% of them get in without being spit back for some stupid reason. Just recently I got a letter from Florida; they want to ban my catalog, in the whole state. And this is a listing of titles. I wrote them back and said, "You mean to tell me that you guys are afraid of titles?" [Laughter] I guess so!

In prison they have horrible ways they have to communicate and move things around. It's kind of sickening what they have to go through to communicate with the outside world or amongst themselves. They have to scream through toilets, or shove shit up their ass ...



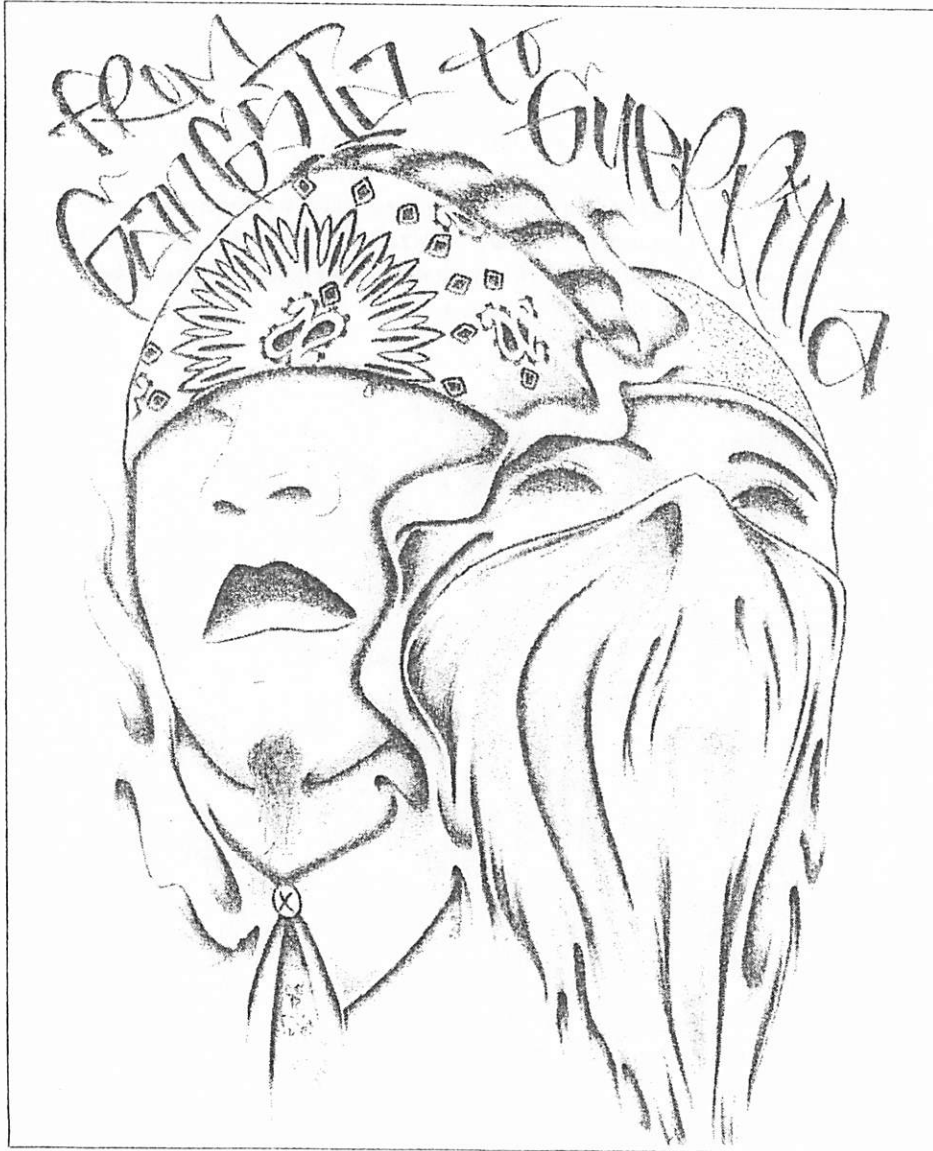
Drawing by Larry Pendleton, 2011



**TS:** To get a message to someone ...

**AR:** Yeah. To own a cell phone you pretty much have to have it up your ass, otherwise they'll find it.

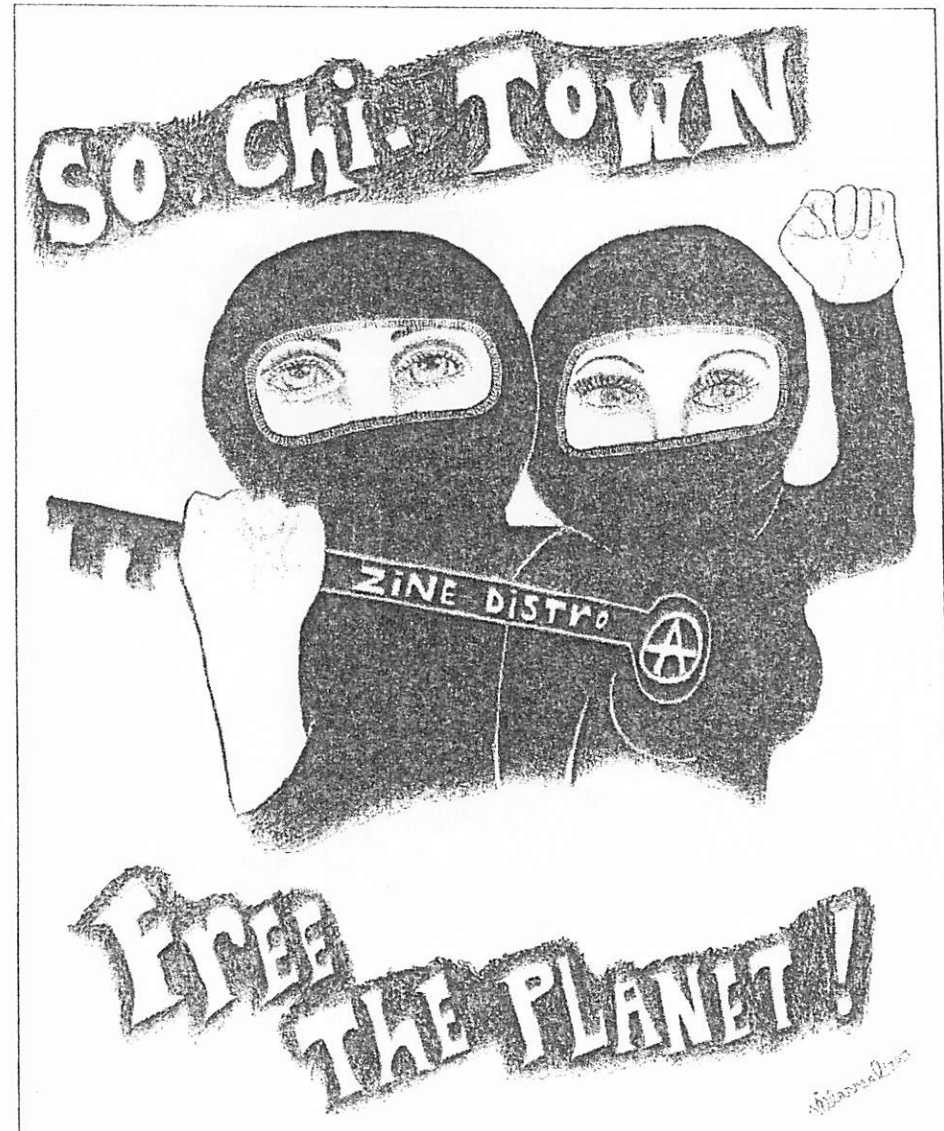
**TS:** Are there specific prisoners that you've had a relationship with over many years?



Drawing by Larry Pendleton, 2012

## SOUTH CHICAGO ABC ZINE DISTRO

To inquire about 'zines published by Anthony Rayson, write to: South Chicago ABC Zine Distro, P.O. Box 721, Homewood, IL 60430, USA.



Drawing by Jose H. Villarreal, 2010

satisfy. [Laughs] Sometimes it's hard to put their stuff together because it's such a mess; you do the best you can with it. Mainly I keep editing to a minimum. I keep what they want to say and the way they want to say it. If they want to use misspellings because that's their way of talking, I let it slide and don't change it to correct English unless it's an obvious mistake they didn't catch. I don't restrict them to a certain amount of words. I don't tell them what to say. Let them say what they want, you know? Give 'em that freedom. So some publications are not long. Some are insanely long. [Laughs] So you just go with what happens until we are both satisfied that it's a complete project.



Drawing by Todd (Hyung-Rae) Tarselli, 2002

**AR:** I'm real close with some of them and it's like a long lost brother when they finally get out of prison.

**TS:** So you've had the opportunity to meet up with people you've corresponded with?

**AR:** Oh yeah. I met this guy named Eugene Day. He was a three strikes<sup>7</sup> prisoner in California and I started publishing his stuff, and then he was able to publish more stuff in more mainstream publications out in California. And his writing, among other things, were able to soften some of those three strikes laws to allow some of these guys to get out. I met him in Sacramento when I was putting on an art show. He's doing great work now. He's got a prisoner support thing going now that he's out and it's just so great because he was doomed. He was gonna be there the rest of his life. But he got out because we were able to change the laws just enough to get him out and it was so overcrowded ... basically his third strike was a "nothing" offense

I'll go anywhere in the country and people will put me up. It's great. I like to try to work with people that have no other support. I've worked with some of these well-known political prisoners, but they already have support. It may not be the greatest, but it's better than nothing, which a lot of these guys do. And just from the letters they write you can sort of tell if they're talented or not—if they have a way with words or if they are artistically talented. And you just encourage them and suggest to them that maybe we can work something out together. And it's amazing, some of these guys are so beat down and down on themselves because of their horrible situation and all of the misery that's thrown down on them. With a little bit of encouragement and human connectivity ... Bam! They start soaring and doing incredible work and they turn into incredible researchers or artists or organizers in prison, or prison lawyers of whatever. It's like a dying bird; you just nurse it back to health and it just flies away.

**TS:** Do you provide editorial feedback on the writing?

**AR:** I do. I do a lot of handwritten letters in response to their letters, which is very important to them because hardly anyone does it. There's no real human-ness to it. Getting a 'zine is cool and you can feel what the guy's saying, but it means all the more to get a personal letter from someone that you hold in high esteem, or you don't expect to get something, but you do anyway. Maybe it'll be one page, or several pages. I was lucky I had a good job to be able to do

<sup>7</sup> Three Strikes laws mandate a sentence of a minimum of 25 years to a maximum of life imprisonment for a felon convicted for the third time.

this. I did this the whole time I was at work. I worked in a tollbooth. It's just a brain dead job. I figured you'd use maybe 5% of your brain doing that job. I still had a lot of brainpower to use—I could write a letter and still be busy with all these idiots going through [the toll]. A letter might take me four hours to write, but I put a lot of thought into it and they got a lot from it. It's important to build these personal relationships and personal letters are about the best way to do it. Also my handwriting's so horrible they have trouble reading me. [Laughs] "Oh Anthony, it took me a week to read your letter. Please type it next time." [Laughter] "I'm tryin', man!"

**TS:** Let's talk about the artwork that is sent to you. Is it a gift?

**AR:** It's always a gift. I always say: "I'm paying for all of this. It would be nice if someone can help me with stamps or a money order, or send essays, artwork, poems, whatever." So they always do that. If I have a problem in my family and someone gets sick and I mention it, the cards pour in and they'll have everyone on the wing sign it and it means a lot, you know? Because I don't even get that from my own family—no one does. You need that when you are down like that. They help me emotionally, psychologically, a little bit economically when they can—occasionally a prisoner will step up and I'll get a few hundred dollars here and there. And they'll do it anonymously sometimes; they'll say, "Hey Anthony I saw one of your 'zines, here's some artwork. Do what you want with it." I tell them right up front that everything's anti-copyright. You're not going to get any money from this and I don't sell anything. I'm not trying to sell anything. Except ideas, and that's not for sale. They're free.

**TS:** And cash doesn't circulate in prison.

**AR:** Well it probably does to some extent but mostly the currency is stamps nowadays. It used to be cigarettes, but they've pretty much banned that. It's 'zines probably too, to some extent. It's little packs of soup or coffee or whatever they get. Some people sell their services; they'll sew clothes. And they get fewer and fewer stamps. Some of them only get two stamps a month. It's pitiful. Sometimes I send them stamps too, paper to write with, envelopes. For a while when I was still working I was able to send certain prisoners stipends—money orders—to put on their books and supplement the starvation food they are given, so they could actually eat something.

**TS:** This would be a donation into their inmate account that they could use in the commissary?

**AR:** It's used as a way of supporting them politically. You can't send them money directly so you've got to put it on the books. You want to figure out how to give them money for their terrific artwork so you try to figure out a way to do that.

The more brilliant writers are pretty much locked down the most, and by that time their families abandon them. They have their own horrible problems. I'll do what I can for them.

**TS:** Are you able to visit many people at prisons or is everything mostly through the mail?

**AR:** It is mostly through the mail. Occasionally I'll visit them ... It's so depressing when you do go. It's just disgusting. They [the guards] don't give a damn; they just waste your time for two or three hours right off the bat, before you even get a chance to see anybody. And nowadays it's so bad you can hardly even touch them or see them. It's just being Skyped in; they're maybe fifty yards away somewhere on a different Skype screen. So you just see them on TV. Even my brother, who was in Will County Jail for a week for a DUI or something last month—I went to go visit him; it was Skyped. It makes it super easy on them. They don't have to do anything except bring him into this little room and they bring you into this little room, and then there are all of these other people screaming. You can't hardly hear 'em. It's so impersonal. You can't even touch 'em or anything. Like we're really going to slip them guns or whatever. So stupid. It's just pure laziness and cost cutting.

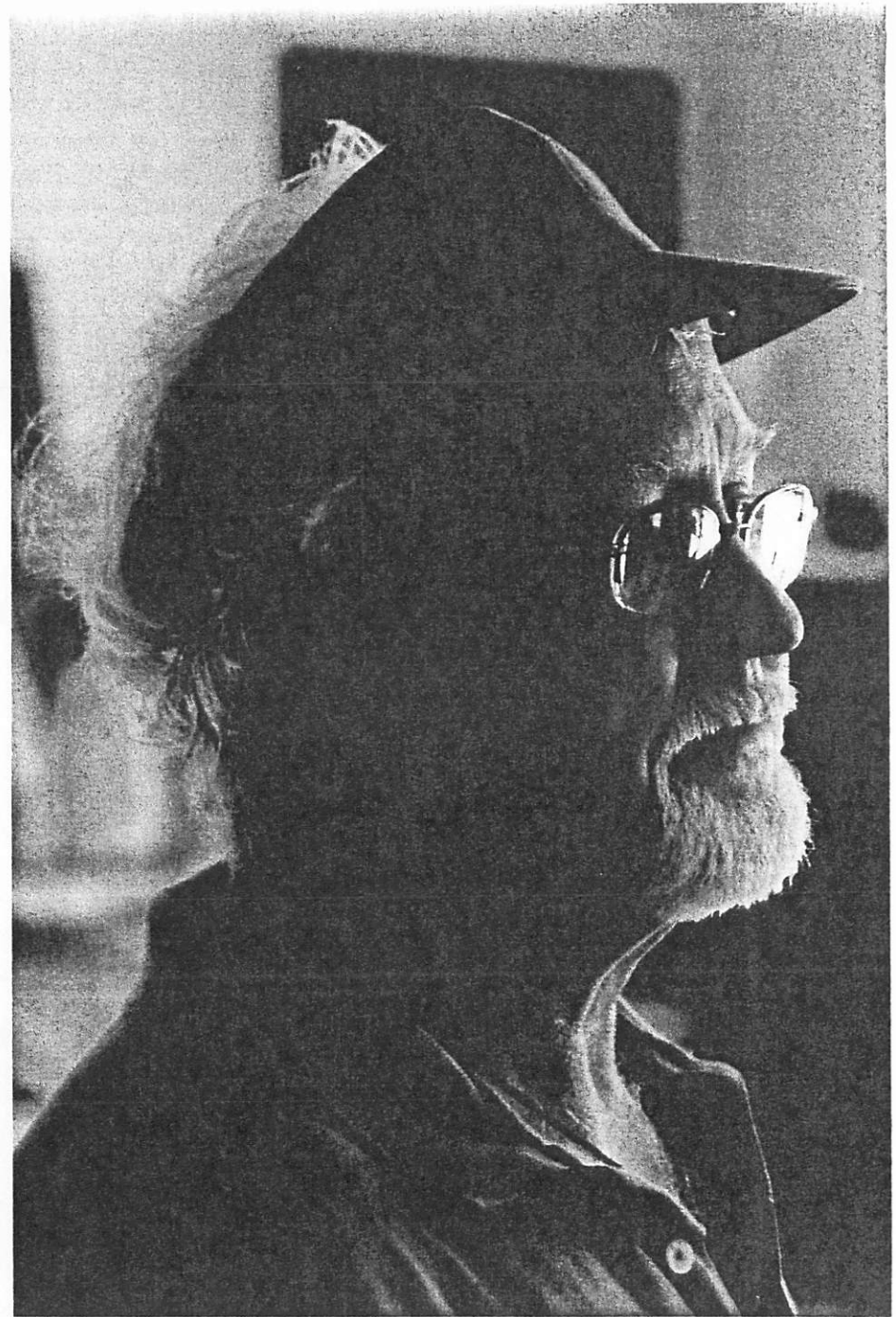
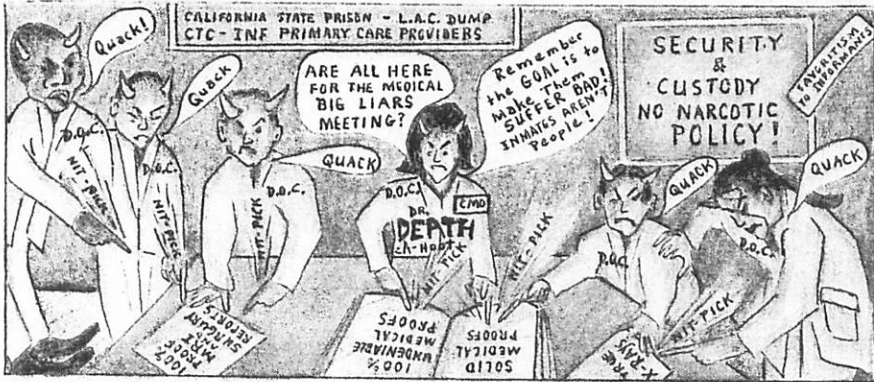
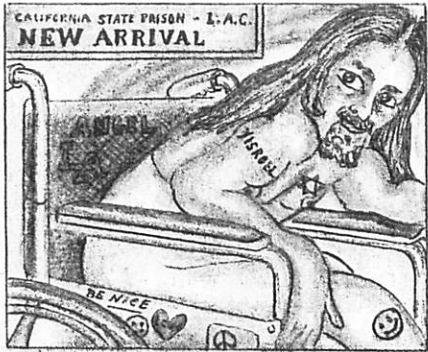
**TS:** When we were working with our collaborator Angelo on the project *Prisoners' Inventions* and I had tried unsuccessfully to visit him, I think his feeling was that the quality of experience was probably superior just to write letters back and forth. He wouldn't have to be strip searched to mail a letter like he would to receive a visit.

**AR:** Some of these guys really suffer to meet just through Skype. They make them wear these hideous painful locks, totally shackled down while they're meeting their family through TV. It's just pure cruelty ... the only consolation is that the prisoner knows that you made this effort to do this.

**TS:** Have you received feedback after the prisoners see their art or writing in print?

**AR:** Almost invariably they are very happy with it and thankful about it. Occasionally a guy will be pissed because he's one of those people you just can't

# PRISON MEDICAL SERVICE



Images: drawing by Chameleon, 2012 (previous page); drawing by J. Avzham Garzanal, 2009 (above)

Anthony Rayson, August 2014. Photo by Temporary Services.

