



CRIME, REFORM & ABOLITION

Prison as censorship: Exhibition curated by Mariame Kaba serves as an abolitionist call to action

“Because prisons are not just someplace else, somewhere else ... They are our communities”

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Prison as censorship: An abolitionist call to action

From left to right, Corey Devon Arthur's "First Amendment" (2023) and "Revolution," (2023). Photograph by Nina Poon

In recent years, Americans have witnessed escalating censorship in schools and libraries. Since 2021, lawmakers in all but four states have [introduced nearly 400 pieces](#) of legislation limiting what is taught in our public education system. “Return to Sender: Prison as Censorship,” an exhibition on display in New York

City's EFA Project Space through Oct. 28, connects these policies to our country's mass incarceration crisis, **framing prison** as the "frontline war in a society that seeks to censor and control people and ideas."

The curator behind the exhibition is community organizer, educator, and prison-industrial complex (PIC) abolitionist **Mariame Kaba**. Kaba is the founder and director of Project NIA, a grassroots organization aiming to end youth incarceration, and co-founder of Survived & Punished, a group fighting the criminalization of domestic and sexual violence survivors. "We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice," her best-selling book, has been **described as** an "entry point into the world of abolitionist politics."

Kaba organized "Return to Sender" in partnership with literary freedom nonprofit PEN America—and through close collaboration with other organizations, including the Rikers Public Memory Project, The Free Black Women's Library, and Empowerment Avenue.

"Return to Sender" centers the work of incarcerated writers and artists to demonstrate how prisons enact censorship. Although book bans are widely recognized as a form of **prison censorship**, they are merely the tip of the iceberg. The exhibition uncovers how prisons have many ways to control incarcerated people's thoughts and words—to restrict their ability to create art, to express themselves through writing, to access knowledge and education, to communicate with their loved ones.

Kaba hopes the exhibition will show that "the most extreme form of censorship is actually behind bars." Arbitrary book ban policies **were proliferating** in the country's carceral system long before their recent uptick in the public education system. And, in 2019, prison book restrictions constituted the **largest book ban** in the U.S.

"If you're going to care about censorship on the outside, you must care about censorship on the inside because actually that's where these things are perfected," Kaba explains. She frames the carceral system as the testing ground for all forms of censorship. By doing so, she disrupts perceived boundaries between political issues affecting those inside and outside of prison walls—painting us all as part of one collective struggle. "Because prisons are not just someplace else, somewhere else," Kaba continues, "They are our communities."

"War Against Censorship"

One of "Return to Sender"'s featured artists is Hector (Bori) Rodriguez, who created "War Against Censorship" (2023), a mixed-media depiction of a prison being destroyed by books. Rodriguez's primary technique is one shaped by his 27 years in a New York state prison. Unable to access paints while incarcerated, he learned to emulsify colored pencils with baby oil to emulate their look. Prison censorship policies also influenced Rodriguez's trademark surrealist style, which allowed him to disguise the meaning of

his work and avoid scrutiny from corrections officials, whom he described as quick to label content as subversive.



“War Against Censorship” (2023), Hector (Bori) Rodriguez

Rodriguez’s release earlier this year—and the expanded artistic freedom that came with it—heralds a new phase in his work. “I [can] create art the way that I want to create art. And I no longer have to hide my voice through images,” he told Prism. A closer look at “War Against Censorship” reveals that the colored-pencil pigment is interspersed with playful dabs of glow-in-the-dark paint—Rodriguez’s exploration of a medium he could not access while detained.

“War Against Censorship” is, therefore, both a testament to the heavy restrictions under which Rodriguez cultivated his artistic practice—and a proclamation of his newfound freedom.

Rodriguez’s political convictions are apparent in the piece, which spotlights radical titles from anti-prison activists—ranging from Angela Davis’ “Are Prisons Obsolete?” to Kaba’s “We Do This ’Til We Free Us.” He hopes to communicate his belief that “there’s nothing good out of mass incarceration and the police-industrial complex.” Central imagery also includes portraits of two figures from the 1970s prisoners rights movement: [Martin Sostre](#), an incarcerated activist who organized people behind bars to challenge conditions of confinement, and [Marilyn Buck](#), a Marxist feminist poet active in the Black Liberation Army.

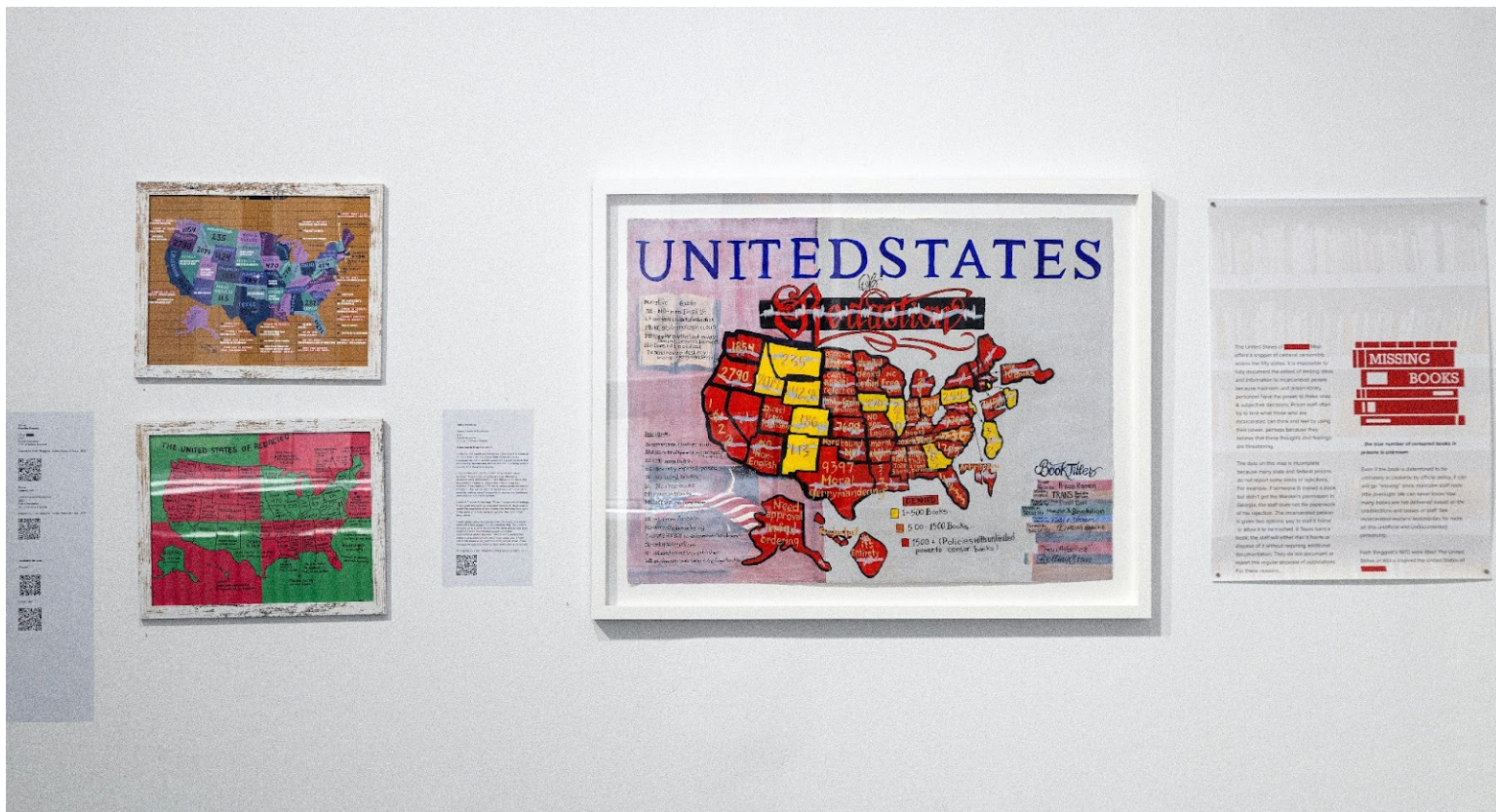
Buck’s political writing was crucial to the conceptualization of “Return to Sender.” [Her quote](#) —“Imprisonment is an extreme form of censorship”—is featured in the exhibition’s entrance. And Kaba cites it when describing her central analysis on prison censorship. Opposing the idea that censorship is merely a component of prison, Kaba [believes instead](#) that “the prison itself is censorship.” In other words, the issue cannot be addressed while leaving carceral systems intact. “The only way to end prison censorship is to end prisons,” the exhibit’s description reads.

“Return to Sender” can, therefore, be situated within a broader movement toward PIC abolition. Kaba describes her curatorial approach as deeply informed by the abolitionist convictions of her and several collaborators.

“United States of Redaction”

Today’s abolitionist movement descends from a [long lineage](#) of radical activism, especially during the leftist movements of the 1970s. Several “Return to Sender” installations pay homage to this history.

Pablo Mendoza’s “United States of Redaction” (2023) uses a series of maps to visualize book bans in prisons across the country. Its cartographical approach is modeled after Faith Ringgold’s “[United States of Attica](#)” (1972), which reconstructs the U.S. map using the colors of the Pan-African flag. Scrawled across the geography in Ringgold’s handwriting are inscriptions documenting state violence against Black and Indigenous communities.



“United States of Redaction” (2023), Pablo Mendoza, Photograph by Nina Poon

Ringgold created this seminal work to [commemorate the 1971 Attica Prison Rebellion](#), when people at the New York state prison rose up against the cruel conditions of their incarceration. The protesters seized control of the facility and crafted a set of demands for political rights. Mere days into the negotiations, law enforcement put a brutal end to the insurrection, storming the facility and unleashing relentless gunfire. They killed [39 people](#). To this day, this represents one of the [deadliest acts of violence](#) carried out on civilians by the state. Ringgold’s painting, which describes the Attica uprising as a “heroic struggle of freedom,” quickly became a [rallying cry](#) for activists fighting all forms of state violence.

The events at Attica occurred only two weeks after prison guards’ [murder of George Jackson](#), an author and activist incarcerated at California’s San Quentin State Prison. Jackson, a Black man, had served 10 years in the facility after being [convicted of stealing](#) \$70 from a gas station when he was 20. While incarcerated, he studied revolutionary theory and became active in the [Black Panther Party](#). His writing drew global attention to U.S. prison conditions, [contributing to](#) the inclusion of prison abolition as a tenet of leftist movements in the 1970s.

“Return to Sender” centers Jackson’s legacy through Kaba and Brian Carroll’s “Ninety-Nine Books” (2023). The installation displays the titles found in Jackson’s prison cell after his death, honoring the rich intellectual history that shaped his political convictions. [As he wrote](#), “You can generally tell what processes a man’s mind has gone through by what he’s studied, observed.”

Jackson's writing illustrates how incarcerated people's firsthand perspectives are crucial to our understanding of the U.S. carceral system. Fueled by this recognition, the number of prison-based newspapers in the U.S. has **risen in recent years**. However, incarcerated writers still face serious limitations on their freedom of expression.

To highlight these issues, on Sept. 27, "Return to Sender" **held a panel** discussion with incarcerated journalists, who called in from across the country to speak on their experiences with prison censorship. Kwaneta Harris, a former nurse incarcerated in a Texas state prison, recounted how guards punished her for **teaching sex education** to women in her unit, placing her in extreme isolation. Award-winning journalist Christopher Blackwell described how **officials retaliated** against him after he published writing on book bans in the Washington correctional center where he is held.

The event demonstrated the immense barriers incarcerated people face to communicate with the outside world. Prison phone calls come with strict **time limits**, forcing some panel participants to redial every 15 minutes to continue speaking. Several times during the conversation, choppy service rendered participants' voices inaudible. "Someone who's listening in [to the event] and seeing all of these barriers that are present, it becomes real," describes Jessica Phoenix Sylvia, who moderated the discussion. "It takes a team of people to try to keep incarcerated folks in communication."

For Sylvia, prison censorship is a deeply personal topic. She began organizing around the issue during her incarceration, when Washington's carceral facilities **attempted to ban** "We Do This 'Til We Free Us," Kaba's book on abolitionist organizing. This is just one example of how prison book bans often target works by **Black authors**, especially those that discuss social justice issues or critique mass incarceration. Sylvia fought the policy and won. Her activism led Kaba to bring her on as a consultant for "Return to Sender," and Sylvia played a central role in developing the written materials for the exhibition. "[I] just wanted to bring people into my world [...] and how I experienced censorship from the inside of a prison," Sylvia explained.

An interactive experience

While organizing "Return to Sender," Kaba sought to create a more participatory experience—in contrast to the passive art-viewing that is encouraged in some gallery spaces.

In addition to visual art, the show also features several immersive installations. At the center of the exhibition space, a partial set of bars recreates the dimensions of a 6-by-9-foot prison cell. Tacked above a stainless steel bed frame and toilet are colorful finger paintings—each one accompanied by a grayscale reproduction. The installation, created by Kaba, demonstrates how carceral facilities often ban incarcerated parents from receiving original copies of their children's artwork. This is one of the many ways that prison censorship interferes with people's connections with their loved ones.



“Censorship in Quarto,” 2023. Prison cell installation 6 x 9 feet, Mariame Kaba

Visitors can also step into a mock prison mailroom, where they are encouraged to sift through a heap of administrative documents. For incarcerated people, most incoming communications are **subject to prison officials’ examination**. The papers in the installation read: “Notice of Non-Delivery,” “Denial of Property Pre-Approvals,” “Notice of Changes to Correspondence Rules.” This is the sterile, bureaucratic language used to deny incarcerated people’s access to educational materials and correspondence with their loved ones. On one table, what appears to be a pile of mail turns out to be dozens of split envelopes—all that remains of confiscated letters.

The oppressive atmosphere is intentional. Kaba’s goal is for these installations to emphasize the realities of prison as a place. She explains how people not directly impacted may engage with incarceration through an abstract, detached lens. “Some of them may not have ever visited a prison,” she said. “I wanted to bring in the experience ... a hearing experience, a seeing experience, a full-bodied experience.”

Most importantly, these interactive spaces are intended to direct people toward action. In the prison mailroom, visitors are encouraged to engage with the censored materials and write letters of support to incarcerated people. “Why I make exhibitions is because I want people to take action to transform the conditions that we have in order to move us toward the abolitionist horizon,” Kaba told Prism. She [refers to a quote](#) from abolitionist-geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore: “Freedom is a place.” In other words, liberation is a physical reality that we can produce. We just need to organize ourselves and our resources to do so.

This ethos is on display through “Return to Sender”’s [Take Action Day](#), which was held at movement incubator space [The People’s Forum](#) on Oct. 7. The all-day programming trained people to provide mutual aid for incarcerated people, concluding with a banned book exchange and zine fair featuring the work of incarcerated creators.

Throughout the exhibition’s run, Kaba also organized “[abolitionist joy hours](#),” a series of creative workshops intended to facilitate connections amongst people working toward abolition. As she describes, these events make “Return to Sender” a “full experience”—one that encourages people to find community, build political consciousness, and take action.

“Revolution”

“Return to Sender” uses the issue of prison censorship to illustrate how all of us—both inside and outside prison walls—are connected in our collective struggle toward liberation. Informed by a decades-long history of anti-prison activism, the exhibition presents a call to action—for us to take steps toward an abolitionist future.

The show itself is also an act of resistance. By centering directly impacted artists and writers, it poses a direct challenge to a carceral system that aims to silence them. Every piece of artwork and writing that made it to “Return to Sender” from behind prison walls represents a small victory against the draconian policies of the carceral state.

Nowhere is this more present than in the work of Corey Devon Arthur, who is currently serving a life sentence at New York’s Otisville Correctional Facility. Arthur’s “Revolution” (2023), a mixed-media depiction of a torch-bearing hand encircled by barbed wire, is a central image of “Return to Sender.” Arthur created the work in four quadrants to circumvent mail censorship policies. Once the panels made it to the outside, exhibition organizers stitched them together. When the bottom two sections meet, words appear against a swirling backdrop of purple and blue cosmos: “Organize. Resist. Love.”

