



Return to Sender: Prison as Censorship Organizations and Participants' Bios

Partner Organizations' Bios

PEN America (Co-organizer)

For more than five decades, PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing program has amplified the work of thousands of writers who are creating while incarcerated in the United States. By providing resources, mentorship, and audiences outside the walls, we help these writers to join and enrich the broader literary community. Committed to the freedom to write in U.S. prisons as a critical free expression issue of our time, we leverage the transformative possibilities of writing to raise public consciousness about the societal implications of mass incarceration and support the development of justice-involved literary talent. PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing Program advocates for the right of imprisoned persons in the US to engage in journalism, creative and research-based writing without fear. We support policies that allow imprisoned authors to publish their writing as a basic First Amendment right to free expression that is not relinquished as a result of incarceration. We also support policies and practices that protect incarcerated writers from any retaliation, official or unofficial, that may occur as a direct result of their writing and publishing activities and challenge carceral censorship.

The Free Black Women's Library

OlaRonke Akinmowo (Ola) is a multidisciplinary artist who works in collage, printmaking, papermaking, interactive installation, and stop-motion animation. She is also a cultural worker, and Set Decorator for both film and television. In 2015 she started *The Free Black Women's Library*, a social art project that features a collection of over five thousand books written by Black women and Black non-binary folks, free public programs, a monthly Reading Club, a weekly book swap, and a community care space located in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Through the library, she offers workshops, film screenings, readings, performances, and literary conversations. All ages, races, and genders are welcome to use the space for reading, writing, working, resting, and daydreaming. In her work, she aims to illustrate and explore the joys, struggles, and complications of Blackness, madness, womanhood, and the undeniable overlap between these constructs. She makes the invisible visible and confronts stereotypical notions around race and gender while offering the potentiality of beauty, resistance, and transformation. She has received artist fellowships and residencies from the NYFA, Women's Studio Workshop, Robert Blackburn Printmaking Shop, BRIC Arts, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her work has been featured in the New York Times, Time Out Magazine, Hyperallergic, Teen Vogue, and BUST magazine. She is also a proud mom, union member, community activist, busybody, book fairy, plant fiend, and dance machine. Follow the growth of the library @thefreeblackwomenslibrary or her art life @setdressslay on socials.

Rikers Public Memory Project

The Rikers Public Memory Project collects and makes visible the stories of people most impacted by Rikers Island, to mobilize action toward repairing its generational harms and interrupting the dehumanizing narratives about people harmed by Rikers.

The Rikers Public Memory Project: A Community Truth and Healing Process (RPMP) is the outcome of an ongoing partnership between Freedom Agenda, Create Forward, and the Humanities Action Lab. Together they sought to explore how collective memory can be used as a strategic organizing tool in the movement to close Rikers Island. We document and make visible the impact of Rikers Island by asking:

- What should we remember about Rikers?
- How should we remember Rikers?
- Why should we remember Rikers?

Empowerment Avenue

Empowerment Avenue's (EA) mission is to normalize the inclusion of incarcerated writers and artists in mainstream venues by bridging the gap between them, harnessing this creative proximity as a path to decarceration and public safety. Founded by Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, who was incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison, and freelance writer Emily Nonko, Empowerment Avenue advocates for talented writers and artists in prisons across the country by providing them the resources they need to get their creative work outside prison walls and be fairly compensated for it. Nonko oversees EA's program for writers, and Christine Lashaw, a senior museum professional, oversees EA's program for visual artists.

Portraits of the writers were created by Empowerment Avenue (EA) artists. Most artist's portfolios are available on EA's website (empowermentave.com). To learn more about each artist or connect with them, email empowermentaveartists@gmail.com.

Participants' Bios

Ariel Aberg-Riger is a visual storyteller who creates engaging accessible stories about history, science, policy and other forces that shape our lives. Her work explores issues of equity and justice, on topics that range from environmental racism to the public library. Ariel's work has been published in the Atlantic, the Guardian, Bloomberg, Teen Vogue, and more, and her debut book *America Redux: Visual Stories* from our Dynamic History was released to critical acclaim in May 2023. She is a 2020 NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellow in Nonfiction Literature and lives with her wife and two kids in Buffalo, New York.

Corey Devon Arthur is an incarcerated writer and artist. His writing has been published in venues including the Marshall Project and Writing Class Radio. In March of 2023, he exhibited his art show, *She Told Me Save The Flower*, at My Gallery in Brooklyn, New York. You can check out more of his work on Instagram and Medium

Danbee Kim is a Korean American artist based in Chicago, IL who uses digital illustration and graphic design to show what's possible when we move together as a collective ecosystem. She partners with community-based organizations building alternatives to carceral solutions and fighting against corporate



interests to usher in a world where collective flourishing is not limited to just a few but for all. Her work has been displayed at the Hairpin Arts Center, Roman Susan Gallery, School of Art Institute Galleries, New Mount Pilgrim MB Church, and, most importantly, the streets of Chicago.

Pablo Mendoza is a proud father and lifelong student. He is a staunch advocate for the poor and disenfranchised with an eye towards a more equitable tomorrow. Pablo is a prison abolitionist who struggles against the privileges imbued upon him by society. Pablo is directly impacted having served 22 years within the Illinois Department of Corrections. He's currently a director with the Prison + Neighborhood Art/Education Project, Walls Turned Sideways. He is also involved with several other campaigns throughout the state including: University of Illinois Education Justice Project Reentry Guide Initiative; Freedom To Learn Campaign; Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison; Illinois Reentry Alliance for Justice; Fully Free Campaign; and others.

Hector Rodriguez, known by his artist name **Bori**, served 27 years and two months in NYS DOCCS (New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision). After his release on February 2, 2023, Hector dedicated himself to personal growth and transformation beyond his time in incarceration.

During his time behind bars, Bori found solace and inspiration through art, making it a powerful medium to express himself and escape the stresses of prison life. His artwork allowed him to delve into his subconscious, explore fantasies, and immortalize meaningful people and memories.

Kruttika Susarla is an illustrator and cartoonist from Andhra Pradesh, India currently in Rochester, NY. Her practice ranges from making comics about dogs, crows, and leeches resisting the gig economy to designing zines, books, and toolkits for community-based organisations and advocacy groups.

Empowerment Avenue Artists

Mark A. Cádiz, also known as Rev. M. Seishin Cádiz, is a 56-year-old Puerto Rican born on a U.S. Air Force base in Texas. He is the first in his family to be born on the U.S. mainland. He is a son, a brother, an uncle, a father, a grandfather, and a Soto Zen Buddhist priest ordained in 2012 and given the name "Seishin" (pronounced Say-shin), which means "Pure Heart-Mind." As an "inside" priest, Seishin serves the San Quentin Buddhadharma Sangha along with an "outside" priest. Seishin's work has been exhibited at a variety of venues including: SF 9th Circuit Court (2019), Liberation Prison Project Show (2021 & 2022), SF Opera, Berkeley Art Museum and DreamCorp's Day of Empathy and Black Future Weekend events (2022). He produced cover art for Apogee Journal (2020) and Through the Eyes of a Ski Mask 2 by Tyler Woods (2020).

Lamavis Comundoiwilla, 54, is a Compton, California native. He's currently incarcerated at the San Quentin Rehabilitation Center. Lamavis has been incarcerated 29 years and is up for parole consideration in 2024. He was awarded a First Place Prize at the 2019 Marin County Fair. His work has been featured at the Marin Civic Center Bartolini Gallery, San Francisco Airport Terminal, San Francisco Opera House Museum, the Sacramento, California, Capitol Building, University of Derby, England, University of California, Berkeley, The



Museum of the African Diaspora, and DreamCorp's National Empathy Day and Black Futures Weekend events.

Jeffrey A. Isom was born in San Jose, CA, but raised in Coon Rapids, a suburb of Minneapolis, MN. Jeff is in the 20th year of a life sentence under California's Three Strikes Law. While serving his sentence in San Quentin State Prison, he seeks to make living amends through his art. Jeff's art has been featured at Marin Civic Center Bartolini Gallery, 9th Circuit Court of Appeals U.S. Courthouse, Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery, Santa Cruz, Marin County Fair, NIAD Annex Gallery, Richmond, California, Peace Flag Project, Public Policy Institute of California, San Francisco, San Francisco Airport Terminal, San Francisco Opera House Museum, Southern Poverty Law Center, University of Derby, England. He has contributed work to organizations such as Breast Cancer Awareness and the Southern Poverty Law Center and is looking to donate to other organizations. In 2022, Jeffrey won the Sheridan Prize for Art, winner overall, Incarcerated Artists category, for his Endangered Wood Stork painting.

Elizabeth Lozano is a Latina artist who was born in Torrance, CA and currently resides in Chowchilla, CA. In 2012 Elizabeth received her A.A. in Behavioral and Social Science with Honors from Feather River College. Elizabeth's art has been exhibited in Central California Women's Facility's visiting store. Most recently the facility requested from Elizabeth to help paint affirmations on the sidewalks to uplift the community. Her portrait of incarcerated writer Kwaneta Harris is included in the exhibition *Return to Sender: Prison as Censorship*, Fall 2023.

Sarah Montoya was born and raised in Los Angeles, California with Mexican and Native American roots. From a young age, her artistic interests ranged from piano to various dance styles such as Aztec, Folklorico, tap, jazz and ballet, as well as drawing, painting, tattooing, and silk screening. At CCWF, she's drawn posters for COVID awareness, and continues to paint pictures and affirmations on the sidewalks around the facility. Her portrait of incarcerated writer Elizabeth Hawes is included in the exhibition *Return to Sender: Prison as Censorship*, fall 2023. Currently, Sarah is illustrating a children's book for terminally ill and disabled children and she makes stuffed animals and mails them out to children whose mothers are incarcerated. She hopes to continue the craft as a business endeavor when she paroles.

Mark Stanley-Bey, aka **Stan-Bey**, was born in Chicago, Illinois, in the late 1950s, then moved to California with his family where he grew up. He is a veteran who served in the U.S. Air Force during the Vietnam conflict. Stan-Bey has been inspired by and involved in art much of his life. In 1995, after studying graphic illustration at Los Angeles Trade Tech, he was hired by Subia, Inc.—a graphics company—where he did graphic designs for Subia's clients, Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), Lockheed, and other government agencies. His artwork has been featured in several exhibitions including *Meet us Quickly with Your Mercy: Painting for Justice* at the Museum of the African Diaspora.



PEN America Artists

Araya Ratanaphruks is an advocate dedicated to supporting survivors of sexual violence and sexual exploitation. With a keen focus on addressing the intersectional challenges they face, Araya works to eliminate discrimination barriers that hinder survivors' access to crucial social resources.

Through their unwavering commitment and advocacy efforts, Araya strives to create a more inclusive and empathetic society, where survivors can find the support they need to heal and thrive.

Moira Marquis, PhD, is Senior Manager of the Freewrite Project in PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing Program. Previously, she organized prison books programs, taught English and history in secondary schools and literature and writing in higher education. Her academic research and writing focuses on decolonialism and has been published in *Green Letters*, *Resilience* and *Science Fiction Studies*. She is an editor of the forthcoming collection *Books Through Bars: Stories from the Prison Books Movement* (UGA Press 2024) and is currently working on a novel titled *The Ninth Wave*.

PEN America Authors

Kwaneta Harris is a mother of three and incarcerated in solitary confinement in Texas. It has taken 49 years for her to realize she has a voice. A former nurse and expat, her essays have appeared in *PEN America* and *TruthOut*.

Elizabeth Hawes is an award-winner in poetry, memoir, and playwriting. Her play "Supernova" can be found on the *Open-Door Playhouse* podcast. Elizabeth is an actor, gardener, playwright, poet, and prisoner in Minnesota. She has received three national prison writing awards and one *Fielding A. Dawson Award* from *PEN America*. She enjoys taking college classes and watching other people cook. Elizabeth Hawes is a 2016, 2017, 2018 (double) and 2022 *PEN America Prison Writing Contest Winner* for memoir, poetry and drama.

Zhi Kai H. Vanderford is a 56 yrs old, driven activist, writer and artist for human rights. A transmale, life prisoner, he has been incarcerated 36 consecutive years between California, Oklahoma, and Minnesota prisons. Zhi Kai is a paralegal, with a Bachelor's in Communications and dual minors in Business Mgt. & Sociology. He is currently working on his MBA. Zhi Kai's works are intermittently showcased on various websites and he welcomes remote work projects.

Arthur Longworth is a contributing writer with *The Marshall Project*, a 2018 *Pushcart Prize* nominee, a 6-time *PEN America Prison Writing Award* winner and a 2019-2020 *PEN America Writing For Justice Fellow*. He has written for *Medium*, *VICE News* and *Yes! Magazine*. His work has been presented onstage by renowned literary figures *Francine Prose*, *Junot Diaz* and rapper/poet *Talib Kweli*. And he is the author of *Zek: An American Prison Story* (Gabalfa Press, 2016). However, Arthur didn't always write. He grew up in the foster care system. That is to say, Washington State raised him in its archipelago of infamous boys' homes, including one the *Seattle Times*'s dubbed a "house of horrors." The State turned him out onto the streets at 16



years old without an education, job training, or money. He has a Life Without Parole sentence and has been incarcerated for 35 years.

Born and raised in NW Indiana, **Daniel Pirkel** spent his childhood playing football, riding motorcycles and gaming. Since being incarcerated 15 years ago, he has won a favorable legal decision on appeal and earned a bachelor's degree through Calvin University (2021) in Faith & Community Leadership in Social Work. Daniel won the Honorable Mention in 2022 PEN America Prison Writing Contest for his essay, "The Unintended Consequences of Retributive Justice" and Honorable Mention in PEN's 2019 America Prison Writing Contest for his essay, "Parole Reform."

Derek Trumbo is an incarcerated writer, playwright, and freelance columnist. His literary work has received multiple PEN Awards, and his "A North Korean Refugee's Kentucky Jail Stay" recently appeared on the Vera Institute of Justice's "The Human Toll of Jail" project. He writes a monthly column, "Never eat the candy on your pillow : A commonsense guide to prison" for Prism, an online news site. His featured one act play, "Mail" was performed at the Baruch Performing Arts Center with Academy Award Nominee Michael Shannon, and actor Michael Chernus as Ronald and Hershey.

Rikers Public Memory Project Artist

Medar de la Cruz is a Brooklyn-based artist. Medar's images are defined by how the boldly drawn lines are always in constant movement. Comics and animation have a major influence on Medar, as do experiences growing up in big cities all over the States and trips to the Dominican Republic as a child. Currently, Medar uses comics as a way of bringing attention to social justice issues while also exploring new ways to tell stories that can only be told visually.

Rikers Public Memory Project Speakers

Helen Skipper, or **Skip** as she prefers to be called, has been working in peer support since her final release from years of multiple incarcerations and systems involvement in 2007. She is the Executive Director of the NYC Justice Peer Initiative, a Beyond the Bars 20-21' Fellow, and an honors graduate of St. Francis College. Skip is pursuing a Master of Arts and PhD in Criminology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. She is also a board member and participant of College and Community Fellowship who works with justice-involved women through community support and access to higher education. Skip has been a part of the Rikers Public Memory Project community since 2023, and is currently a Directly Impacted Design Advisor for RPMP's Mobile Exhibit. Her 2023 interview recorded as part of RPMP's Oral History Program is the source of the audio excerpt.

Edwin Santana grew up in Jamaica, Queens, and is currently a Community Organizer at Freedom Agenda, leading the work to Close Rikers Island and Decarcerate NYC. He is a Puerto Rican Freedom Fighter, a Spoken Word artist, a formerly incarcerated Individual, and a Social Justice Warrior. Edwin is the founder of Tuff Art Media LLC, a film production company based in New York City. Edwin has been a part of the Rikers Public Memory Project community for several years, and is currently a Directly Impacted Design Advisor for



RPMP's Mobile Exhibit. His 2020 interview recorded as part of RPMP's Oral History Program is the source of the audio excerpt.

Exhibition Advisers' Bios

Jessica Phoenix Sylvia is a formerly incarcerated abolition theorist, organizer, and writer. She organizes with www.studyandstruggle.com. You may commission her work at www.abolitionjess.org or abolitionjess1@gmail.com.

Carolyn Chernoff, PhD, is a public scholar and cultural worker based in Philadelphia. Among other things, Chernoff has worked as a professor, puppeteer, DJ, curator, and Daisy Scout leader. Her research, writing, teaching, and artwork address everyday culture, conflict, and social change.

Garrett Felber is an educator, writer, and organizer. He is a co-founder of the abolitionist collective, Study and Struggle, and is currently writing a biography of revolutionary anarchist Martin Sostre and building a radical mobile library, the Free Society People's Library, in Portland, Oregon.

Moira Marquis, PhD, is Senior Manager of the Freewrite Project in PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing Program. Previously, she organized prison books programs, taught English and history in secondary schools and literature and writing in higher education. Her academic research and writing focuses on decolonialism and has been published in *Green Letters*, *Resilience* and *Science Fiction Studies*. She is an editor of the forthcoming collection *Books Through Bars: Stories from the Prison Books Movement* (UGA Press 2024) and is currently working on a novel titled *The Ninth Wave*.

Curator's Bio

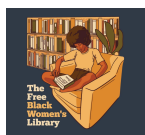
Mariame Kaba is an organizer, educator, librarian, and prison industrial complex (PIC) abolitionist who is active in movements for racial, gender, and transformative justice. Kaba is the founder and director of Project NIA, a grassroots abolitionist organization with a vision to end youth incarceration. Mariame co-leads the initiative *Interrupting Criminalization*, a project she co-founded with Andrea Ritchie in 2018.

Kaba is the author of the New York Times Bestseller *We Do This Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Haymarket Press 2021), *Missing Daddy* (Haymarket 2019), *Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators* with Shira Hassan (Project NIA, 2019), *See You Soon* (Haymarket, March 2022) and *No More Police: A Case for Abolition* with Andrea Ritchie (The New Press, Aug 2022).



Mariame has curated and co-curated a number of exhibitions including *No Selves to Defend*, *Blood at the Root* and *Black/Inside*.

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EFA Project Space, launched in September 2008 as a program of The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, is a collaborative, cross-disciplinary arts venue founded on the belief that art is directly connected to the individuals who produce it and the communities that arise because of it. By providing an arena for exploring these connections, we empower artists, curators, and other participants to forge new partnerships and encourage the expansion of ideas. The program is based on Open Calls as well as invitational exhibitions and projects. It is a home for emerging, mid-career, as well as established curators and artists. We focus our attention on community engagement and public programming. www.projectspace-efanyc.org The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA) is a 501(c)(3) public charity. Through its three core programs, EFA Studios, EFA Project Space, and EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, EFA is dedicated to providing artists across all disciplines with space, tools and a cooperative forum for the development of individual practice. EFA is a catalyst for cultural growth, stimulating new interactions between artists, creative communities, and the public. www.efanyc.org EFA Project Space is supported in part by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and additional funding from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.