SEPTEMBER 14 —
OCTOBER 28, 2023
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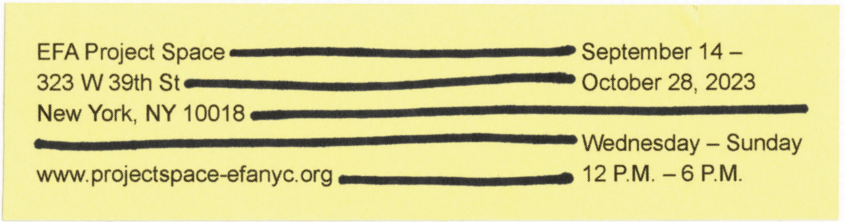
RETURN TO SENDER



The prison is the front line war in a society that seeks to censor and control people and ideas. The current wave of censorship in schools and public libraries is an extension of the more highly advanced structures of control that have and are being developed in prisons and jails. The prison has always been a testing ground for perfecting surveillance and creating unfreedom.

Return to Sender is an exhibition that maintains that the prison itself is censorship, which is multifaceted and complex. Therefore, the only way to end prison censorship is to end prisons. This is a call for prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition.

When I conceived this exhibition, I invited other voices to join in its creation. Some people agreed to contribute, and their ideas will be at the exhibition. Those ideas and visions, however, are in the service of a broader abolitionist politics that is my own. I curated Return to Sender to share my experiences and knowledge of prisons and jails. The cultural and intellectual work of incarcerated people informs my analysis. Not every person or organization that worked on Return to Sender and shared their

ideas are PIC abolitionists. However, I believe their insights help to make a powerful case for the abolition of the PIC.

I am indebted to everyone who helped to make this exhibition a reality including but not limited to…

Corey Devon Arthur
Mark Stanley-Bey “Stan-Bey”
Mark A. Cádiz
Lamavis Comundoiwilla
Jose Diaz
Jeffrey Allen Isom
Elizabeth Lozano
Pablo Mendoza
Sarah Montoya
Hector (Bori) Rodriguez
Jess Phoenix Sylvia
Dr. Carolyn Chernoff
Dr. Garrett Felber
PEN America (in particular Dr. Moira Marquis, Juliana Luna, Jessica Abolafia)
EFA Project Space (in particular Naomi Lev, Agustina Markez, Charlie Fischetti)
Rikers Memory Project (Piper Anderson, Medar de la Cruz)
Free Black Women’s Library (OlaRonke Akinmowo)
Ariel Aberg-Riger
Partner and Partners
Project NIA
Interrupting Criminalization
Andrew Mellon Foundation

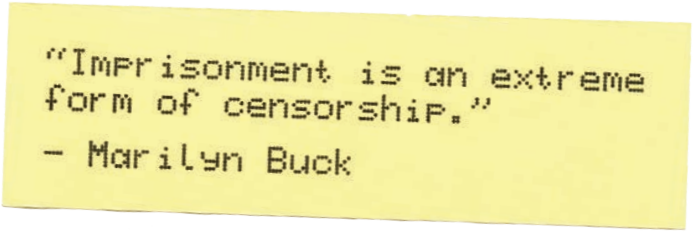
I hope that you will find the exhibition to be informative, illuminating, thought-provoking and most importantly galvanizing towards action.

In solidarity,

Mariame, exhibition curator

PRISON AS CENSORSHIP: GROUNDING THOUGHTS

MARIAME KABA



In March 2022, historian Heather Ann Thompson filed a lawsuit against the New York prison officials who had banned her book *Blood in the Water*, contending that the ban was a violation of her First Amendment rights. A few months later, New York prison officials reversed course and decided that New York's "incarcerated population" could now receive the paperback edition of *Blood in the Water*—or most of it, anyway. They announced that the book's two-page map of the Attica Correctional Facility would be excised for "security reasons."

Prisons exist for the purpose of total authoritarian social control, and systematic censorship is one tool for its maintenance, a way to deny intellectual freedom alongside physical freedom. Decisions to ban books and reading material do not happen in isolation; they are part of the larger mechanisms of control that dictate every aspect of a prisoner's life. In particular, censorship normalizes and highlights the extent of authorities' capricious and subjective control over incarcerated people—as when New York authorities permit a particular book but cut out some of its pages.

What is so dangerous about books in prisons? Books can give prisoners tools to analyze and understand their own lives and situations, and to identify and protest against injustice. Malcolm X's 1965 autobiography describes how the prison library at Norfolk Prison Colony in Massachusetts transformed him from a small-time "criminal" to a passionate civil rights advocate and leader during his incarceration from 1946 to 1952. "Available on the prison library's shelves were books on just about every general subject," he wrote. "Any college library would have been lucky to get that collection."

Reading can help prisoners overcome feelings of alienation and isolation and can even reduce the chance of recidivism, or being returned to prison. But it can also bring about intellectual and political transformation. For incarcerated people living in a system that disproportionately targets Black people, brown people, and the poor, reading can help them understand the structures of inequity that shape their lives. On those well-stocked shelves, Malcolm X found many volumes of American history. "I never will forget how shocked I was when I began reading about slavery's total horror," he wrote; reading "changed forever the course of my life."

Malcolm X's experience illustrates the power of the informal prison education that happens through reading—and its potential for radical transformation. Prison censorship is an effort to control prisoners' communal political education and radical organizing, as the experiences of other people incarcerated after World War II attest. At the same time that Malcolm X experienced relatively unfettered access to information, people who had been incarcerated at other prisons across the country for acts of conscientious objection and war resistance lodged complaints about censorship in prison libraries. Nearly two decades later, Angela Davis had a similar experience: she was allowed to have political texts during her incarceration in Manhattan's Women's House of Detention, but she was not allowed to share them with the women and trans men incarcerated with her.

A radicalized Malcolm X was an aberration, an example of a time when the system failed to control and censor those incarcerated within the prison's walls. Today's prison book policies represent much stronger attempts to control individuals' access to radical ideas—or, for that matter, any ideas at all. The long-stated aim of rehabilitation through education and preparation

for employment and civic life after release was never fully pursued, but it has now been almost entirely abandoned. Today's prison administrators and staff know that knowledge is dangerous, and they attempt to keep prisoners from accessing it—often in direct contradiction to their stated policies.

In theory, those incarcerated in federal prisons are only supposed to be denied access to books "detrimental to the security, good order, or discipline of the institution or if it might facilitate criminal activity." That covers texts like instructions for making explosives, martial arts training guides, and maps of the prison area and grounds. In addition, states often ban material that includes bigotry or sexual or violent content, depicts criminal activity or prison escape, or encourages resistance to authority, according to a 2019 PEN America report.

In practice, these categories are broad enough, and prison authority capricious enough, that they can be used to ban almost any book. In Florida, the prison list of banned books runs to more than twenty thousand titles, including *Nutrition for Dummies* and *PCs for Dummies*. The Texas list of nine thousand banned books includes a collection of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. New York prison officials who clipped the Attica prison maps out of Heather Ann Thompson's book were guided by an apparent belief that *all* maps "present risks of escape"—including historical maps of the moon and other planets.

Books by Black authors, civil rights literature, and critiques of mass incarceration are frequently targeted by prison censors. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander is frequently banned. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in which the author-protagonist describes slavers' efforts to prevent Black people from learning how to read, is also frequently banned. In 2010, one detention center in South Carolina banned literally every book, magazine, and newspaper except the Bible. According to legal scholar David Shapiro, a Virginia prison had tried to ban particular pages of the Bible just a year earlier.

Bans on individual books are bad enough, but prisons find innovative ways to further restrict access to books. Today, many prison systems won't allow any books to be shipped to prisoners unless they come from approved vendors, like major bookstores and publishers. In New York, for

instance, only three publishers were allowed to send books into prisons. In Michigan, only three vendors have the right to send books into prisons. Such restrictions create monopolies, allowing vendors to increase prices and forcing an impoverished population to pay exorbitant rates for access to ideas. These restrictions also mean that books not carried by approved vendors are *de facto* banned too.

Books are not the only targets of prison censorship. In some states, even when there is no written policy banning them, prison staff routinely confiscate printouts of articles or other media, claiming copyright infringement. Other states, such as New York, restrict the circulation of articles by limiting the number of printed pages that can be sent in one envelope. Nearly every prison system bans correspondence between people incarcerated in different prisons; many utilize that ban to reject books, magazines, and zines that include writings by incarcerated people. There is no limit to the ways in which prisons seek to censor and constrain ideas in order to enforce total control on those within their walls.

There is no limit to the ways in which prisons seek to censor and constrain ideas in order to enforce total control on those within their walls.

Advocates have had some success in rolling back bans and restrictions when they have managed to catch and focus public attention. For example, the 2010 South Carolina ban that allowed only the Bible was repealed and the prison was forced to pay a settlement. New York's three vendor restriction was modified after public pressure. In June 2023, New York prison officials hastily rescinded a directive from just a month earlier that would have barred incarcerated writers and artists from publishing their work.

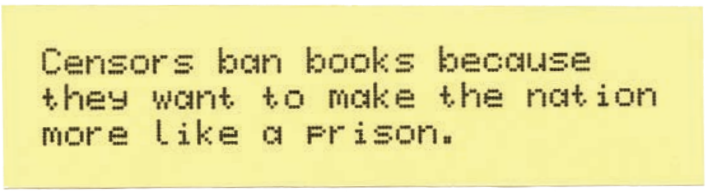
However, these cases are exceptions. Information about banned materials is theoretically a matter of public record, but such requests are usually denied (which makes the Marshall Project's recent publication of a large database of titles banned in state prisons all the more remarkable). Generating public interest is difficult, in part because the public is typically

opposed to defending prisoners' rights. Moreover, because public scrutiny of what happens in prisons and jails is rare and uneven, officials often enact bans quietly without fanfare.

Prison censorship is also difficult to address from within prisons, where prisoners struggle to get information about their living conditions to family and friends on the outside. Prisons routinely prevent prisoners from speaking or connecting with family by putting prohibitive charges on phone calls, banning emails, censoring incoming mail, and even banning holiday cards. And when prisoners do manage to speak up, they are often punished. This is not to say that prisoners do not find ways to subvert bans; informal "libraries" and "librarians" offer ways of sharing banned materials, though this sort of subversive activity is undertaken at great personal risk.

We should worry about book restrictions in prison because books improve the daily lives of prisoners and expand their connections beyond the confining walls of the prison. But this censorship is also dangerous more broadly, a testing ground for tyranny. As scholar-activist Garrett Felber contends, "Understanding censorship in prisons helps us grasp its broad purpose, which is authoritarianism. It also illustrates the role of the prison: to cage, incapacitate, and defang radical social movements. Both censorship and prisons are fascist projects, and they are intertwined."

It is blatantly obvious today that book bans are used as a form of social control far beyond prison walls. They have seeped into libraries and schools, our supposed bastions of the freedom of information. Florida has issued a blanket ban on books that deal with LGBT issues or racism. Texas has banned over eight hundred books from its schools. Other states have followed suit.



Censors ban books because they want to make the nation more like a prison. As with prison censorship, state book bans are broad, vague, and confusing. They call for bans on "age-inappropriate" content without

carefully defining the term, or they insist that there must be "balance" in classrooms without specifying which viewpoints must be balanced. As in prisons, the goal is not really to ban this or that book. Rather, it is to create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty around all ideas and all books—to sow the idea that knowledge is a threat that must be contained and limited to the "acceptable" forms dictated by those in power. The goal is totalitarianism and absolute social control; the prison is simply the model for accomplishing this.

Censorship can never be eradicated from prisons because it is an intrinsic part of the prison's role in society. The focus on individual titles or any given state's policies is a distraction from the broader truth that prisons exist to censor and will adapt and expand the ways in which they implement that censorship. It's not just that incarcerated people are censored *in prison*; imprisonment is a way to control who has full access to—and recognition within—society. To desire the end of censorship is to desire the end of prisons, and to desire the end of prisons is to desire the end of a society that seeks authoritarian social control.

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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A WORD ABOUT PRISON CENSORSHIP

JESSICA PHOENIX SYLVIA

At mail time the staff deliver mail and books. I line up to ask if I have mail and the guard hands me something. I am disappointed to see that it is only institutional mail. I am disappointed further when I discover that it is a mail rejection slip. I am surprised to see that it is for outgoing mail and not the usual incoming mail rejection.

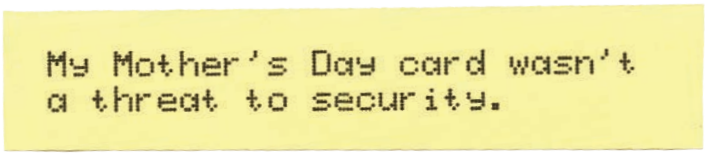
The rejection slip reads that the Mother's Day card I sent to mom was confiscated. The reason given? It was determined that the card was made with art supplies that I do not own. A prison guard opened the outgoing mail and was able to look up a list of art supplies that I had purchased in the past and there was no record that I own the art supplies used to make the card. Therefore, because it was made with unauthorized art supplies, the employee determined the card to be contraband.

I see the name of the person who signed it. This staff member has a reputation for being awful. Doesn't she have something better to do? Angry, I consider filing a complaint to get my stamp back. That stamp isn't contraband and I want it back. I decide against making the complaint.

I know that such a battle will create an administrative burden and any win would be a Pyrrhic victory. Now I have to figure out what to tell mom.

I understand that an incarcerated person's First Amendment rights are diminished. The First Amendment may be exercised as long as it does not jeopardize "safety and security." I have heard this explained as any information or communication that may include plans for escape or violent behavior. However, the term "safety and security" is subjective and offers broad latitude for prison officials to protect penological objectives and to prohibit anything that may work against those objectives. My Mother's Day card wasn't a threat to security. I have seen far too many cases where prison guards have used their position of power to eliminate anything that they don't like. This doesn't create a safer world for anyone.

Prison staff open every piece of incoming mail and inspect or read everything. Staff also open some of the outgoing mail. One of the ways this happens is **content-neutral** censorship. Content-neutral censorship isn't about the information being offensive or dangerous. Content-neutral censorship is usually about form. There may be a preferred form that prison officials decide is acceptable, while other forms are banned. For example, in the Washington State prison system and many others, only soft cover books are allowed. There can be no metal binding on a book. Books may be rejected if they are not in English, even if the book promotes well-being. Books must also be brand new, unless they are purchased from one specific vendor that many people don't know about. The governor recently overturned a total ban and allowed a books-to-prisoners organization to send used books.



Content neutrality also means that mail is only allowed if it is a particular type of paper. Sometimes only white or yellow paper is allowed. Glitter or other flashy design materials are an absolute no-no. This harsh restriction has kept many holiday and birthday cards from reaching incarcerated people. Something like the scent of perfume or the imprint of lipstick from

a kiss may cause mail to be rejected. A person expecting that card from a loved one has their hopes crushed when they receive a rejection slip instead. The form for books and letters must fit very narrow guidelines that are not commonly known.

Content-based censorship is about the information contained in the publication, book, or letter. The reasons most frequently given are safety and security concerns—that the information will incite violence—or that it is sexually suggestive or explicit. I have had several books rejected because guards say it criticizes police or could cause conflict. It may be a political view or argument that a conservative guard doesn't like. Using that standard, many newspaper articles or television news broadcasts would be banned. The last rejection I received was Ruth Wilson Gilmore's award-winning book Golden Gulag. The guard apparently didn't like Gilmore's factual account of California's current mass incarceration issue.

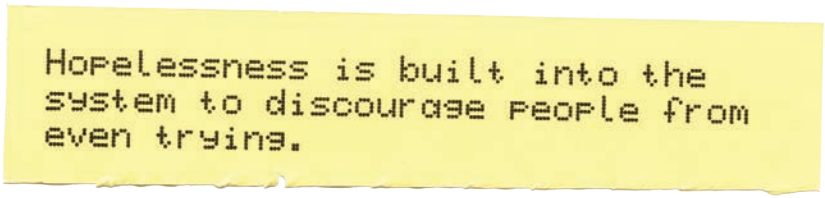
In 2004, Washington State prisons banned pornography and nudity. The ban came after complaints by female guards upset at seeing the images when conducting cell searches. Since the ban on full-frontal nudity, I have seen the rules gradually become more and more restrictive. Now, in 2023, what is acceptable is determined by whether 25 percent of a butt cheek is visible. Often innocent pictures of people at the beach or dressed for hot weather are deemed sexually suggestive and not allowed.

The content-based censorship also applies to music. Music is emotional and not intellectually driven, and language can be quite colorful at times. Sometimes, a "clean" version is available. Still, it feels degrading to know that one is not allowed to listen to music that these guards' teenage kids probably listen to at home. As if hearing a choice word is going to drive one into an uncontrollable frenzy. It isn't about keeping others from hearing one's "offensive" choice of music. We know that to be true because radios were taken away several years ago and now only headphones are used.

The Exhaustion Loop and administrative burdens are used to protect censorship and to keep incarcerated people from effectively challenging censorship and asserting their rights. In Washington State, there is an appeal process, but that process can be complicated and has strict time limits. I remember learning this after I appealed a rejection and then won.

I was thrilled that the system allowed me to be heard and that reason prevailed. However, the staff who originally rejected the intersectional feminist curricula, claiming copyright violation, appealed the appeal decision. I had no idea what to do and was not able to get the next-level appeal to the correct person within the three days given. As a result, I automatically lost.

Prison staff are often well-versed in policy and procedure. They do it for eight hours a day. When they are not knowledgeable, they have access to peers who know all of the inner workings of the system. The average incarcerated person doesn't know where to file a second-level appeal. If they want to learn, they could sign up for law library access. Chances are that will take several days, but they have only three days to respond. Hopelessness is built into the system to discourage people from even trying.



Non-distribution of mail is a tactic that I have seen used quite often. Every piece of incoming mail is opened and inspected or read. Some outgoing mail is also opened, inspected, and read. Guards have access to every piece of mail in the prison, whether it be incoming or outgoing. If a guard chooses to throw my mail away, there is virtually no way for me to prove it. Unfortunately, the burden of proof is mine and there is no way for me to gather evidence. I can only claim that I did not receive my mail or that it was not delivered.

What if someone sends me a letter and I don't receive it and do not get a rejection slip? I don't know the mail ever existed. Maybe the sender assumes I just declined to respond.

I remember several of these incidents. For example, in 2020, No New Washington Prisons sent a zine to several incarcerated people. None of us received them, nor did anyone receive a rejection slip. They simply

disappeared. I remember once an organization sent me a letter. In the letter, the person commented that they had included a sheet with information that may help us facilitate our LGBTQ meetings. The sheet was not in the envelope I received and I did not receive a rejection slip.

I have had several of these experiences over the years. The last time was the worst one. I sent away for a reentry grant of fifteen hundred dollars. The trans organization sent me the paperwork to fill out and promised that I would receive the grant. I was so excited to have the funds to help me after release. I had nothing after over eighteen years in prison. After I was released, I contacted them to discover that they never received that paperwork from me. It was likely that a guard opened my outgoing mail and just tossed it. The problem is that the burden of proof is mine. How can I make a complaint and provide evidence when I cannot collect that evidence? It is nearly impossible.

I remember a time at the Washington State Reformatory when mail issues were a hot topic for the family council. The Washington State family council had a meeting with prison staff, hoping to resolve some mail concerns. Nondistribution was arguably the biggest issue.

The head of that council proposed that the mail room install cameras. Cameras are used everywhere at the prison and there are hundreds on the compound. Why were there no cameras in the mail room? He explained that if there were cameras in the mail room, it might serve staff well because it would prove that they are doing nothing wrong. If an employee was doing something wrong, the prison could find out and correct it.

The prison staff reportedly became furious that the person would suggest cameras be used to surveil staff. The prison staff refused to consider such a thing. The family council member who brought the proposal was then afraid that he would be targeted for removal from the council after the failed proposal.

There is a grievance process for complaints at the prison. However, any process that has a built-in appeal process is deemed not grievable. Mail rejections have a built-in appeal process and complaints are not accepted.

I had a situation where one of my approved contacts disappeared from my email list, making it impossible for me to have any further email communication with her. I received no information when I contacted the mail room. I filed a complaint. The complaint was investigated. In the end, the investigator determined that the person should not have been removed from my contact list.

Usually, if someone is removed, the authorizing staff has to sign off on it and provide a reason. Strangely, there was no staff name attached and no reason given. It was determined that there was no evidence of staff wrongdoing. How can a thing like that happen and there is no evidence of who did it or why? Incidentally, the disappeared contact was a journalist who was helping three incarcerated people at that prison to publish. It took me tens of hours working on the situation to finally resolve it after several weeks.

I don't always know what to do, but I know what not to do: I won't accept censorship and I won't give up.

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.

NO NEED FOR FIRE

MOIRA MARQUIS

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* imagines a society where books are burned.

It's a compelling image of censorship but the power of the novel, I'd argue, is not the in book burning itself but in the rationale for why and which books are burned.

In *Fahrenheit 451* printed literature is not illegal. Trade manuals, informative pamphlets, and other instructional materials are all readily free to read. It's only literature that makes people think and feel that is banned.

The lead fireman, Captain Beatty, eloquently voices the what and the why of censorship. Thinking is dangerous, he says. So is feeling. Feeling and thought can create individual discomfort, which can in turn generate social instability. Beatty advocates for censorship because he believes that a stable social world is worth the sacrifice of individual self-determination and the sometimes excruciating, sometimes elating feelings we experience. He believes *Fahrenheit 451's* society is the best of all possible worlds and needs to be preserved by the forfeiture of human thought and feeling. He says,

> *Cram them full of noncombustible data, chock them so . . . full of "facts" they feel stuffed, but absolutely "brilliant" with information. Then they'll feel they're thinking, they'll get a sense of motion without moving. And they'll be happy, because facts of that sort don't change. Don't give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy.*

Beatty's reasoning is well reflected in many of the justifications for carceral censorship you'll see throughout this exhibit.

Literature is understood as dangerous—and books are handled in prison mail rooms like ticking bombs, with an extremity of caution. In the model mail room, you can peruse the lists of banned content from several states. The lists of titles include many books that would make people think and feel. Cookbooks deemed threats to security: Food often brings back memories of home and family. Food can make us feel. Two Puccini operas are security concerns: crescendoing notes in an impossible range of the human voice do reduce many to tears. Histories of lynching labeled racially divisive: making people feel the weight of hate, the depth of suffering, could prompt critical consideration of this society. The banned lists reveal how people inside aren't allowed to learn other languages, learn about human anatomy, or see maps of the sea and space. People locked up in our nation's jails and prisons are denied the opportunity to speculate, as prisons prohibit books on esoteric and occult ideas.

Histories of lynching labeled racially divisive: making people feel the weight of hate, the depth of suffering, could prompt critical consideration of this society.

In our author's gallery, you'll see renderings of incarcerated writers created by incarcerated visual artists. Next to their images, you'll see samples of their censored writings and a brief explanation of the censorship in their own words. Writers inside are often denied their author's copies because prison officials allege these artists might use their status as a published author to foment an uprising. You'll see how people are denied the right to publish their writing because it is critical of the prison system or the concept of retributive justice. You'll see how incarcerated writers are often denied the right to read other authors they want to be in conversation with. You'll also see explanations of the censorship visual artists face as they are denied materials to create with, copies of their work, and correspondence with galleries and curators.

A collage was created with actual returned mail from PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing program. We correspond with thousands of incarcerated writers and receive lots of returned mail—because we are mistaken for a third party, because we're accused of helping incarcerated people "run a business," or because we say on our information sheet that people can submit their writing to our annual contest, which has modest prize money. The collages also contain narratives written by incarcerated people that detail their experiences of censorship, their frustration and exasperation at not being allowed even the minor respite of reading as they try to do their time.

The United States of [Redacted] Map offers a snippet of carceral censorship across the fifty states. But it also acknowledges that the true extent of the limiting of ideas and information to incarcerated people can't be documented because it is in the hands of individuals who make snap decisions in mail rooms and in prison libraries. Prison staff are empowered to limit what others can think and feel—and often do, perhaps because, like Captain Beatty, they believe that these thoughts and feelings are threatening.

We hope this exhibit makes you consider the costs of censorship for those living inside our nation's prisons—the most incarcerated culture in the history of the world—but also for the rest of us. If we accept that thoughts and feelings are dangerous, that people can threaten society if we engage in these most basic of human acts, what does that mean for our culture outside prison walls?

What is the true cost of Beatty's utopia? Is it worth it?

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.

FIGHTING BACK AGAINST CENSORSHIP

CHERYL RIVERA

In the era of the internet, knowledge should be freely accessible, yet we're in a pronounced moment of reactionary restriction of materials and information. Libraries and schools are under pressure from conservative activist groups who wish to remove books that discuss race, gender, or sexuality. Corporations abruptly pull media from streaming services, relegating art to the dustbin to save a few bucks. Social media sites shake up the algorithms to prevent users from searching for and disseminating vital COVID information while platforming misinformation and conspiracy. Some of us may be wondering: What sort of censorship might we see in tomorrow's world if this is what we experience today?

We do not have to wonder. It is happening today in prisons. Around two million people are currently incarcerated in the United States, and that number is growing. Inside the prisons, the state refines its methods of oppression with a population of people who have been denigrated and disappeared from public eyes. A critical function of this system is that it serves as a warning to those of us outside: *Play your role or you, too, might be subject to spectacular violence*.

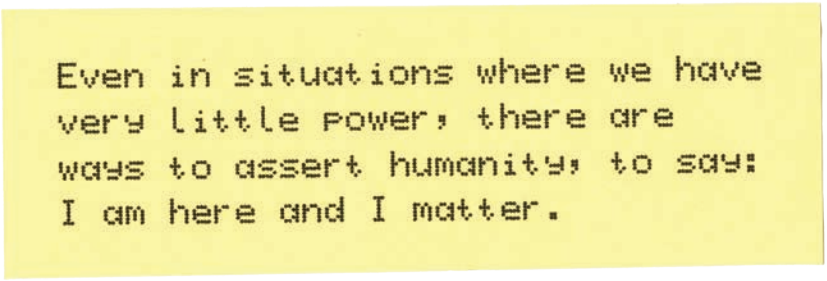
One of the violences committed against incarcerated people is the attempt to cut them off completely from the world—to censor their voices from being heard on the outside and to restrict knowledge and information from getting to them inside. This censorship is a denial of their personhood, and of their continued existence as part of our society.

Here are some—but not all—of the ways incarcerated people experience censorship:

- The Federal Bureau of Prisons bans incarcerated people from acting as journalists
- In New York, incarcerated people may receive no more than five newspaper clippings at a time unless the newspaper is sent by the publisher
- Books sent to incarcerated people may be rejected by the wardens and correctional officers in charge at their discretion
- Phone calls may be terminated for mentioning commissary funds or release dates
- Incarcerated people may be restricted from keeping a large number of books in their cells
- Emails and phone calls may be prohibitively expensive; in 2022, the average price for a fifteen-minute phone call from jail was about $3
- Incarcerated people may not receive their mail, or it may be destroyed if it is written on the wrong type of material or if the mail contains prohibited items: in New York, incarcerated people may not receive Polaroids
- People may be punished for talking about certain topics (Kwaneta Harris, for example, was punished with further isolation in her solitary confinement block for distributing information about abortion)
- Family and friends are often prohibited from sending books directly; the books must come from a publisher or authorized group, and these books may still be rejected on the basis of their content or any other arbitrary issue

Despite this non-exhaustive list of the ways the prison system grinds people down, the human spirit is indomitable, as is our hunger for

knowledge and connection to the world. Incarcerated people suffer greatly under censorship practices that prisons and jails enact, but they also resist. They resist! This resistance has many forms, from oral storytelling in the absence of books to inside-outside mailing networks and speaking through air vents when face-to-face conversations aren't possible. Even in situations where we have very little power, there are ways to assert humanity, to say: *I am here and I matter*.



Here are some—but not all—of the ways people fight back against censorship in prison.

Sending Books Through Inside-Outside Networks
Groups like Books Behind Bars and Books to Prisoners work exclusively on sending books to incarcerated people by taking book donations from people outside and requests from people inside. Noname Book Club founded its Prison Program in 2020; they send 1,312 books on a bimonthly basis to incarcerated members of their book club. While books sent by these groups may be subject to seizure by prison officials, these groups have the infrastructure to keep trying until they figure out what can be sent and in what form.

Books Behind Bars calls this work an "act of love."

Creating Inside-Outside Study Groups
Stevie Wilson, a journalist and educator inside SCI Dallas, created the Dreaming Freedom, Practicing Abolition site. It serves as a portal to a network of study groups in which people inside can coalesce around topics like the lived experiences of LGBT people. These study groups invite

asynchronous participation from those on the outside by posting their reading lists online so others can follow along.

Joining a study group while incarcerated is not without risks; those who participate in study groups or lead them are often subject to extra surveillance and punishment. Stevie is frequently sent to solitary or denied books—even his own publications.

Making New Platforms for Incarcerated Journalists

Because incarcerated people will not be silenced, there are increasing numbers of platforms to host their writing and journalism. Groups like Empowerment Avenue work to connect writers with mainstream media outlets, negotiate fair compensation, and help navigate the editorial process across limited prison communications. Empowerment Avenue, which was founded by formerly incarcerated writer Rahsaan Thomas and journalist Emily Nonko, has also coproduced with Scalawag Magazine a practical abolitionist guide on how to publish from the inside.

New platforms are also being created to host writing from inside prisons. The American Prison Writing Archive, hosted by Johns Hopkins University, is a digital repository for writing from the inside. Currently or formerly incarcerated writers are invited to submit essays; the archive gladly accepts handwritten submissions, which increases accessibility for those incarcerated in prisons with expensive digital communications systems.

Refusing to Stop Communicating

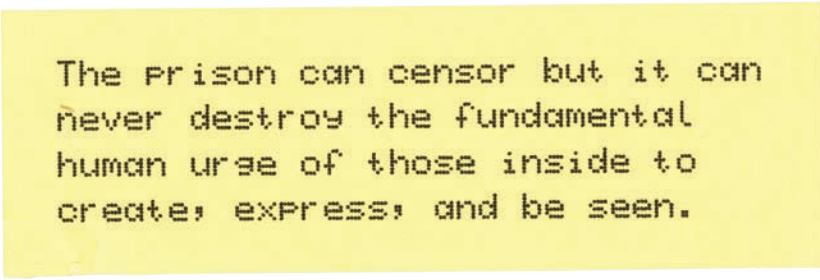
Under the worst conditions, people find ways to communicate and have their voices heard. This is true for Kwaneta Harris, who has spent the last seven years in solitary confinement in Texas and yet still found a way to talk through air vents with her unit mates about reproductive health and abortion. Harris, a nurse before her incarceration, was threatened with additional prison time even though there are no laws against passing information about abortion between inmates. She was moved further away from other people, and can now only talk to them by screaming at the top of her lungs.

Despite the punishment, Kwaneta still makes her voice heard; she went to the Nation to tell her story.

Riots

When too much becomes too damn much, incarcerated people sometimes go from resistance to rioting. The 1971 Attica Prison riot was a demand for recognition of people's humanity, and that humanity included the right not to be censored: "We Demand an end to political persecution, racial persecution, and the denial of prisoner's rights to subscribe to political papers, books, or any other educational and current media chronicles that are forwarded through the U.S. Mail."

While the Attica riot was brutally repressed and this demand has not yet been fulfilled, the spirit of that rebellion lives on.



Resistance is ever evolving; as the prison finds new ways to exert power over incarcerated people (see, for example, recent efforts in New York to restrict inmates from publishing art), people find new ways to rebel. Despite the federal ban on journalistic activity and the high costs of phone communication, more incarcerated journalists than ever are being published in mainstream outlets, and abolitionist thought is now part of the mainstream discourse. The prison can censor but it can never destroy the fundamental human urge of those inside to create, express, and be seen.

Cheryl Rivera is a writer in Brooklyn, New York. She is an editor at Lux Magazine and an abolitionist organizer with the Crown Heights C.A.R.E. Collective.

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* (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?

Since 2018, RPMP has built the largest oral history archive documenting the experiences of survivors of Rikers and their loved ones. The archive currently holds 116 recorded narratives. In early 2023, we donated the archive to the New York Public Library and many of the narratives are also available on our website.

DESIGNING A MULTIMEDIA EXHIBIT ON THE LEGACY OF RIKERS

In 2021, the concept for the RPMP mobile exhibit was developed through a co-design process with formerly incarcerated advisors, project volunteers, narrators, students, and RPMP supporters. We used a co-design process facilitated by Research Action Design (RAD) and Scaffold Exhibits to develop the exhibit design plan.

Through the co-design process we envisioned a way to document the history of Rikers Island as the shadow borough of NYC through the stories and experiences of those who have been detained/incarcerated there and their loved ones. The full exhibition, which opens in 2024, aims to take visitors on a journey in three parts:

1. **Remember:** Rikers is a site of mass death. It is also a place of deep personal loss.
2. **Repair:** To stop the trauma caused by Rikers from continuing, Rikers must close, and cash bail must end.
3. **Redress:** the experiences and knowledge of Rikers survivors are essential to understanding how NYC communities have been harmed by mass criminalization and what it will take to rebuild and reinvest in those communities.

The co-design process aims to ensure that project design, tools, and materials are driven by and are culturally and value aligned with impacted communities. Partnering with organizers, we support mobilizing and activating communities to lead the systems-changes and cultural transformations they envision for their own communities.

This year, we continue our co-design process by collaborating with a team of artists and directly impacted advisors to develop four components of the exhibit. During the fall of 2023, we will workshop these components with communities across NYC.

For *Return to Sender*, we are presenting two components of the exhibit:

1. A listening booth: visitors can listen to a series of audio clips from our oral history collection that documents the experience of censure both from the perspective of visitors and incarcerated people within Rikers Island.

2. A series of illustrated portraits designed by Medar de la Cruz that are silhouettes with QR codes you can access narratives and other content also following the same theme.

www.rikerspublicmemoryproject.org

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.

I believe art is meant to inspire, excite, nurture, confront, and invite inquiry. Artmaking is a ritual of resistance and healing. Making art allows me the sacred opportunity to create spaces of beauty, care, and consideration for others, and I hope they feel my heart through my work.

EFA PROJECT SPACE

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.

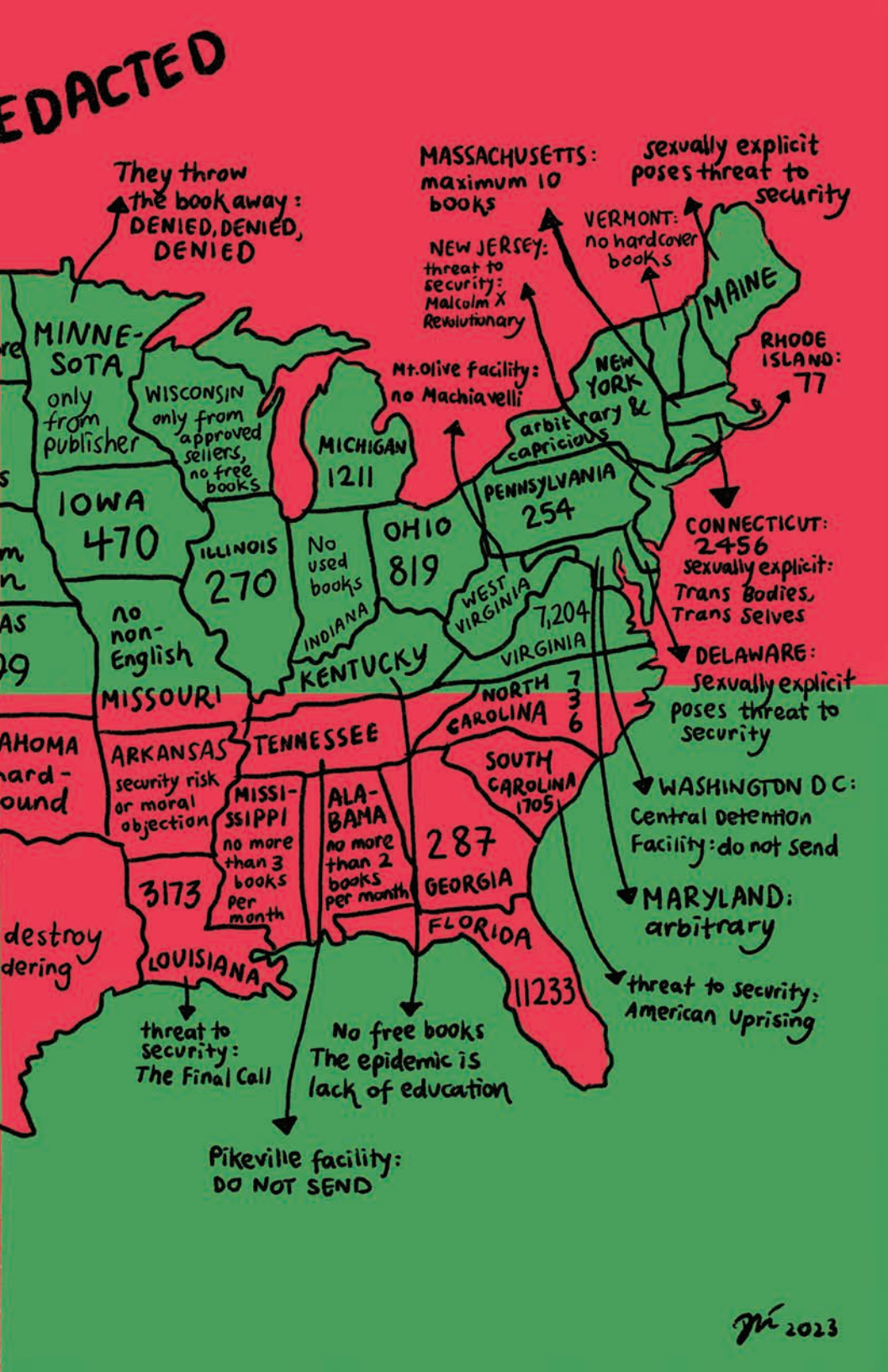
The program is based on Open Calls as well as invitational exhibitions and projects. It is a home for emerging, mid-career, as well as established curators and artists. We focus our attention on community engagement and public programming.

The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts is a 501(c)(3) public charity, dedicated to providing artists across all disciplines with space, tools, and a cooperative forum for the development of individual practice. We are a catalyst for cultural growth, stimulating new interactions between artists, art professionals, creative communities, and the public.

Jane Stephenson, EFA Executive Director
Naomi Lev, EFA Project Space Program Director and Chief Curator
Agustina Markez, Gallery Manager
Charlie Fischetti, Gallery Assistant
Mila Wong, LeRoy Neiman and Janet Byrne Neiman Foundation Summer Intern

EFA Project Space
323 W. 39th St, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10018
www.projectspace-efanyc.org

THE UNITED STATES OF R


EDACTED
They throw the book away: DENIED, DENIED, DENIED
MASSACHUSETTS: maximum 10 books
sexually explicit poses threat to security
VERMONT: no hardcover books
NEW JERSEY: threat to security: Malcolm X Revolutionary
MAINE
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Mt. Olive facility: no Machiavelli
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WISCONSIN only from approved sellers, no free books
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PENNSYLVANIA 254
CONNECTICUT: 2456 sexually explicit: Trans Bodies, Trans Selves
IOWA 470
ILLINOIS 270
No used books
OHIO 819
WEST VIRGINIA
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VIRGINIA
DELAWARE: sexually explicit poses threat to security
no non-English
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NORTH CAROLINA 7 3 6
ARKANSAS security risk or moral objection
TENNESSEE
SOUTH CAROLINA 1705
WASHINGTON DC: Central Detention Facility: do not send
MISSISSIPPI no more than 3 books per month
ALABAMA no more than 2 books per month
287
GEORGIA
MARYLAND: arbitrary
3173
destroy
dering
FLORIDA
LOUISIANA
11233
threat to security: American Uprising
threat to security: The Final Call
No free books The epidemic is lack of education
Pikeville facility: DO NOT SEND
2023

UNITED STATES OF [REDACTED]

DANBEE KIM

The United States of [Redacted] Map offers a snippet of carceral censorship across the fifty states. It is impossible to fully document the extent of limiting ideas and information to incarcerated people because mail room and prison library personnel have the power to make snap & subjective decisions. Prison staff often try to limit what those who are incarcerated can think and feel by using their power, perhaps because they believe that these thoughts and feelings are threatening.

The data on this map is incomplete because many state and federal prisons do not report some kinds of rejections. For example, if someone is mailed a book but didn't get the Warden's permission in Georgia, the staff does not file paperwork of the rejection. The incarcerated person is given two options: pay to mail it home or allow it to be trashed. If Texas bans a book, the staff will either mail it home or dispose of it without requiring additional documentation. They do not document or report this regular disposal of publications.. For these reasons…

...the true number of censored books in prisons is unknown.

Even if the book is determined to be ultimately acceptable by official policy, it can still go “missing” since mail room staff have little oversight. We can never know how many books are not delivered based on the predilections and biases of staff. See incarcerated readers’ testimonials for more on this unofficial and undocumented censorship.

Faith Ringgold’s 1970 work titled The United States of Attica inspired the United States of [Redacted].

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.

Previous: *United States of [Redacted]*, Danbee Kim.

COREY DEVON ARTHUR

The world as it was shown to me has never been enough. This has always frustrated me. One day while I was in kindergarten, I picked up a broken, dirty, black crayon and began to redraw the world the way I saw and felt it in my heart.

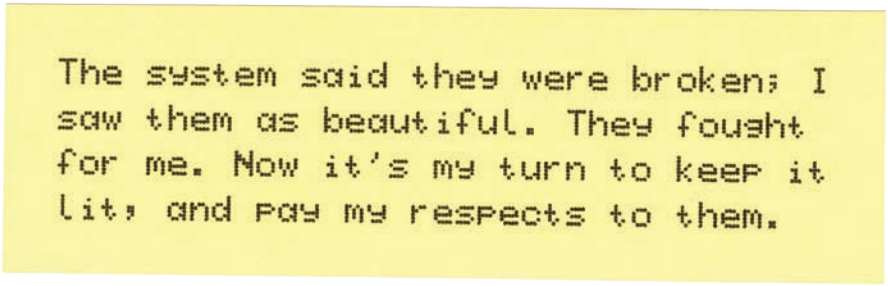
I chose the broken, dirty, black crayon, because it reminded me of how I saw myself. I chose it because it looked like me. It was the one that nobody wanted to use.

Since then I have learned to use every conceivable tool that makes and holds a mark. Growing up in the hood, I never saw anything as trash. Broken things and other folks' garbage was my treasure. Later, upon incarceration, I found a way to sketch despite the scarcity of art supplies. I found my voice while locked in solitary confinement using a three-inch rubber pen and scraps of paper, if I was blessed.

My influences were graffiti artists I saw in Brooklyn throwing up their pieces on the trains and walls. These are my folks, the bottom people.

Down here we make our heroes. I was immediately drawn to the prospect of marking something that would show the world what beauty could come from a dirty broken black crayon. I remember the first time I wrote my name on the wall of the boys' bathroom in kindergarten. I saw more of my authentic self in my five-year-old scrawl than I had ever seen of myself depicted anywhere on earth.

Recently I created a collection of five paintings titled "Blood In Eye," inspired by the late Comrade George L. Jackson's book Blood In My Eye. Since age 13, I evolved from a criminal, to an animalized prisoner, to a revolutionary, and now into a feminist. I noticed the ledge where they assassinated George. It stopped the movement. His legacy compelled me to take the evolutionary next step.



As an artist, this was the ideal opportunity to use my talents to study our bloodline of resistance. I painted Lolita Lebron, Kathy Boudine, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur with blood in their eyes. I also put a red rose in their hair. The system said they were broken; I saw them as beautiful. They fought for me. Now it's my turn to keep it lit, and pay my respects to them. The world didn't give them enough respect. So I created a way to use my art to throw it up for my sheroes.

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.


NYS PRISON SYSTEM

First Amendment, Corey Devon Arthur.

HECTOR (BORI) RODRIGUEZ

As an artist, Bori's journey took a transformative turn as he began using his creative talent to challenge societal norms and raise awareness about crucial issues. Combining his struggles, art skills, and educational pursuits, he aims to make a positive impact on the community by advocating for at-risk youth. Furthermore, he is passionately advocating for the end of mass incarcerations and the abolishment of prisons.

Through his art, Bori delves into themes of female empowerment and resilience. Drawing from his family's experiences, he re-imagines female figures as strong trees, beautiful flowers, and mountains, using vibrant colors to portray his interpretation of true beauty and power emanating from women. In his paintings, he addresses the challenges women face within patriarchal cultures and religions, challenging society's dominant lens of control over marginalized communities.

Not only does Bori's art tackle issues of gender and social justice, but it also becomes a medium to confront the harsh realities of mass incarceration and structural racism. His surrealistic imagery and vivid

War Against Censorship, Hector (Bori) Rodriguez.

palette serve as a protest against the systemic injustice faced by black and brown individuals in the prison system.

As he pursues a bachelor's degree in social studies from Bard College, Bori remains committed to using his artistic prowess, academic knowledge, and personal experiences to foster positive change in society. Through his art, he invites viewers to experience his emotions, desires, and suppressed feelings that have been unlocked after decades of incarceration.

Follow Bori's artistic journey on his Instagram page, "boricreates," where he continues to share his meaningful and thought-provoking artwork, dedicated to challenging perceptions and advocating for a more just and compassionate world.

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.

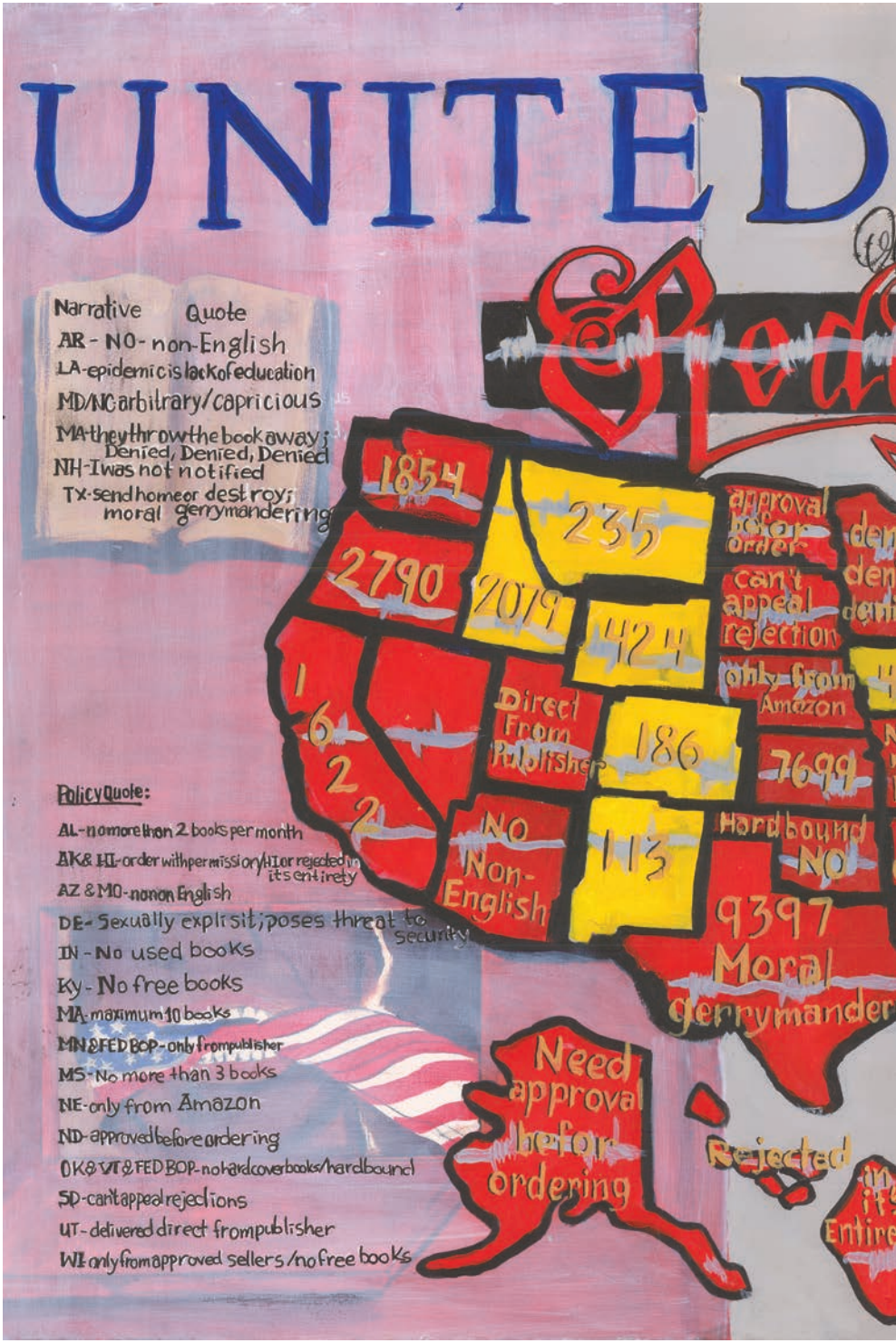
During his time behind bars, Bori found solace and inspiration through art, making it a powerful medium to express himself and escape the stresses of prison life. His artwork allowed him to delve into his subconscious, explore fantasies, and immortalize meaningful people and memories. Bori has recently been accepted into the Yale Prison Education initiative fellowship where he'll be partnered with people in the art world and in the youth justice program.

US OF REDACTION

PABLO MENDOZA

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.

Next: *United States of Redaction*, Pablo Mendoza.


UNITED
Narrative Quote
AR - NO - non-English
LA-epidemic is lack of education
MD/NC arbitrary/capricious
MA-they throw the book away; Denied, Denied, Denied
NH-I was not notified
TX-send home or destroy; moral gerrymandering
1854
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approval before order
can't appeal rejection
only from Amazon
Direct From Publisher
186
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NO Non-English
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Hardbound NO
9397 Moral gerrymander
Policy Quote:
AL-no more than 2 books per month
AK & HI-order with permission or HI or rejected in its entirety
AZ & MO-no non English
DE-Sexually explisit; poses threat to security
IN-No used books
Ky-No free books
MA-maximum 10 books
MN & FED BOP-only from publisher
MS-No more than 3 books
NE-only from Amazon
ND-approved before ordering
OK & VT & FED BOP-no hardcover books/hardbound
SD-can't appeal rejections
UT-delivered direct from publisher
WI-only from approved sellers/no free books
Need approval befor ordering
Rejected


STATES
Max 10 Books
NO Free book
NO used Book
NO free books
Do Not Send
NO more Than 2 book 3 books per month
Arbitrarily
DENIED
1-500 Books
500-1500 Books
1500+ (Policies with unlimited power to censor books)
Book Titles
Threat to security Prison Ramen
sexually explicit TRANS Bodies selves
Threat to security The Final Call
Threat to security Malcolm X-Revolution
Threat to security Field & Stream
Threat to security Oprah magazine
"Sexually Explicit"
Rolling Stone

AUTHOR'S GALLERY ARTISTS

In the author's gallery you'll see artists' renderings of incarcerated writers, created by incarcerated visual artists. Next to their images, you see samples of their censored writings and a brief explanation of the censorship in their own words. Writers inside are often denied their author's copies because prison officials allege these artists might use their status as a published author to foment an uprising. You'll see how people are denied the right to publish their writing because it is critical of the prison system or the concept of retributive justice. How incarcerated writers are often denied the right to read other authors they want to be in conversation with. You'll also see explanations of the censorship visual artists face as they are denied materials to create with, copies of their work and correspondence with galleries and curators.

PORTRAIT OF DANIEL PIRKEL

JEFFREY ISOM

My name is Jeffrey Allen Isom. I am a third striker doing life at San Quentin state prison. In my art I wish to give back to my victims or anyone I ever affected by my criminal behavior, and change perceptions about how people view incarcerated persons.

When I was a child, my mother Peggy would make little drawings, even while talking on the phone, which had a profound influence on me as an artist. That is the inspiration for my landscapes and nature portrayals. I'm captivated by the classical realism of artists like Rembrandt. I enjoy showing what I've learned, using color to achieve similar effects as in a black and white tonal scale. I like to work in oils, first creating an underpainting in orange hue acrylic, like the Old Dutch masters. I'm also inspired by Southwestern art.

I design my art around things I am passionate about. I care for the generations of those who follow me, so I create work that addresses climate change. I sincerely want to make a difference through my art. I care deeply about racism and how Asians are being attacked and even sometimes murdered due to the ignorance and hate of those who think they are the reason for bringing the pandemic on them. I reflect a political view and demonstrate the injustice in our own prison system. I do these things because I care about them and want to honor all the people I have affected negatively in my life with hopes to give back to the community in a positive way.

Jeff 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.

Read more about Jeffrey's work: sanquentinnews.com/isom-finds-therapeutic-relief-at-the-tip-of-his-brush

PORTRAIT OF ZHI KAI

LAMAVIS COMUNDOIWILLA

I began painting in prison around 2018, after joining the William James Association Arts and Correction program. There I developed my own style to create portraits honoring the beauty and sacrifice of Black women. This style, which I call Fusion, combines pointillism with at least two other genres. I blend vivid scenes of Black females inspired by biblical themes.

My art is inspired by Afro-Centric cultures, such as the Mores, Nubians and Komati.

I paint, draw, and sketch using oils, acrylic, pastels, pencil, ink and graphite, to make art that reminds viewers of places where the bloodlines of strength and power have been forgotten or misplaced.

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.

Read more about him in San Quentin News, A Journey into Afro-futurism: sanquentinnews.com/a-journey-into-afro-futurism/

PORTRAIT OF ELIZABETH HAWES

SARAH MONTOYA

When I sit down to draw or paint, I usually go with what I feel in the moment. I express my experiences, situations, and feelings through art. Other people incarcerated within CCWF have recognized my talent and put in requests for me to make them family gifts, often with calligraphy writing. I also make stuffed animals for other mothers incarcerated to send to their children at home. This has sparked a passion within me that I want to continue when I parole.

I use a variety of mediums or materials such as drawing pencils, pens, markers, acrylic, watercolors, pastels and collage with magazines. I make stuffed animals with shirts bought from vendors allowed in quarterly boxes, or donations from others. I use acrylics to paint on faces and features, or to dye the materials.

I grew up in a muliti-cultural family of artists and found inspiration from them. I explored various materials, methods, and mediums until I found drawing, tattooing, and most importantly making stuffed animals. Stuffed animals are a way I can help families reunite even while separated by barbed wire and brick walls. In this work I feel a sense of making amends with society.

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.

PORTRAIT OF KWANETA HARRIS

ELIZABETH LOZANO

When creating artwork I want to share with the audience the world I live in. In prison the normal becomes the abnormal and the abnormal then normal. My artwork is a combination of material and techniques used to express themes of incarceration and the struggle with explicit bias.

I enjoy working with acrylic paint, finding it most forgiving. However I will use any material I can get my hands on to express what I feel. I like to add texture to my work using pieces of wood, flower petals, glitter or anything that blends with the art piece. I have discovered that this technique makes my work pop out while showing prison and the spirits desire to thrive through it all.

I am the oldest and only woman of six children with parents that migrated from Michoacán and Guadalajara, Mexico to the United States over fifty

years ago. Through painting, drawing, beading, collaging and other forms of art I seek to explore, question, and bring awareness to my status as a sixteen year old that was sentenced to die in prison— excessive sentencing, and its effects. Using my own story I touch on themes of restorative justice, rehabilitation, trauma, healing, hardship, resilience, the fear of separation from loved ones, and dying in prison. With my art I hope to bring more awareness to the long history of mass incarceration, the despair in marginalization and continue to impact people.

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.

PORTRAIT OF DEREK TRUMBO

MARK A. CÁDIZ AKA REV. M. SEISHIN CÁDIZ

I began drawing around the age of 4 or 5, after having nearly died from pneumonia. When I came around, my mother brought me colored pencils, paper, and comic books to entertain myself. That was the beginning of my journey as an artist. As I grew up, I used art to express feelings and perceptions that seem beyond language. Art has provided me with a world without limitation.

Art is a creative meditation for me. To give form to a concept through my art is an expression of life. As long as I have the tools to liberate my creativity, I am free. Who we are is not limited to the perceptions of others or our physical form, nor can it be contained by them or by a piece of parchment framed by words. Art is my gateway to look beyond these seeming limitations to see true essence.

My artwork has evolved and expanded to different mediums, subjects, content, and techniques over the years. Initially working with pencils, I began to develop my illustrative style. I incorporated new techniques acquired by mistake, by observation of other artists' work, and through my exploration of a variety of genres. It wasn't until I was in my early 50s that I began working with acrylics and watercolor. My style and technique are as diverse as my artwork: from the symbolic and metaphorical, to fantasy and the natural world. My art is influenced by my personal life experiences, the spiritual nature of reality, interconnection, and my musings.

Maybe something in my artwork will speak to and inspire someone else.

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).

Read more: sanquentinnews.com/mark-cadizs-art-honors-san-quentins-covid-deaths

PORTRAIT OF ART

MARK STANLEY-BEY "STAN-BEY"

My name is Mark Stanley-Bey, but I prefer to be called Stan-Bey. I am an artist who has continued my work since my incarceration. My mantra is, "I love all things art." I agree with a fellow artist who said that as artists we are indestructible regardless of our surroundings, whether they be in prison or in a concentration camp. I am almighty in my own world of art.

I've just finished a children's book illustration of twenty-three pages including cover art in collaboration with a law student. The book is titled, "Visiting Mom." It is about a young girl who visits her mom in prison for the first time and finds it very stressful and intimidating—as any child would.

The inspiration for my recent work comes from reading steampunk graphic novels about the contributions of Africa and specifically Egypt. I aim to convey the African American's journey during the industrial era, considering the many functional devices that made production easier and more profitable. I work in watercolor, color pencil, lead pencil, Micron/Technia pens, and dipping ink for my stippling technique. I learned this stippling technique and watercolor process through a fellow incarcerated man who was an art teacher from Ohio. This teaching gave me the incentive to better myself as a person and as an artist for the art world inside and outside of prison.

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.

Read more about Stan-Bey: sanquentinnews.com/stanley-beys-pointillism-and-steampunk-styling

PORTRAIT OF DWANYE BETTS

JOSE DIAZ

10”x13” (this size is a rough estimate)
Portrait of Dwanye Betts, 2023
Charcoal and white conté on vellum

I have always been infatuated with art, yet never found a mentor to guide me. I have taken it upon myself to learn, and there is nothing to prevent me from mastering my craft.

Through my art I display a curiosity about the world, working in realism to capture my unique perspective and experiences. To achieve a realistic result, I use different shading methods — working with colored pencils, charcoal, graphite, or pastels on vellum and soft textured bristle board.

I draw portraits and make collages of varying subjects to portray a desired mood or idea. I like to incorporate famous people, pop culture references, and other artists’ likenesses . I’m inspired by old masters like Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Picasso, and Michelangelo. Renaissance paintings achieve a classical realism that I strive to incorporate into my own work, too.

Incarceration has allowed me to use my time in a positive way. It has helped me devote my energy to my art. I consider it an opportunity to learn from mistakes and endeavor to display how I’ve changed in my art. With art, I can share that we are all human beings and — instead of being viewed as a destroyer — I can create something positive.

Jose Diaz is a Mexican-American artist born and raised in Salinas, California. Empowerment Avenue is helping Jose take his first steps into the professional art world. He continues to be open to new opportunities, and incorporates different styles and subjects in his artwork.

CALLS TO ACTION

BOOKS TO PRISON PROGRAMS

Support these programs by donating books, volunteering and contributing funds: prisonbookprogram.org/prisonbooknetwork/

NYPL JAIL SERVICES

NYC Books Through Bars send books to people in NYC jails: booksthroughbarsnyc.org

ASK YOUR CONGRESS PERSON

to support the *Prison Libraries Act*

SURVIVED & PUNISHED NY'S MUTUAL AID FUND

S&P NY's mutual aid fund gives commissary and necessities directly to criminalized survivors of violence. But it's getting harder to support incarcerated members as donations have decreased, commissary costs have risen, and the New York State banned care packages. Please support this fund to continue this work: bit.ly/SPNYfund

ADVOCATE FOR YOUR LOCAL PRISONS AND JAILS

to adopt the updated American Library Association Standards for Prisons - alaeditions.org/standards

REBUILD

In January 2022, Darkness RISING launched REBUILD, a free service which connects formerly incarcerated individuals to a therapist of color. Now in its second year, the team includes 5 part-time and 2 full-time staff members. The staff is primarily comprised of formerly incarcerated people and people who have lived experiences with mental health challenges. They assist in matching formerly incarcerated (and justice-involved) individuals with therapists of color. This assistance includes finding and vetting therapists, setting up appointments, and facilitating the payment process. So far in 2023, REBUILD has connected over 120 formerly incarcerated/criminalized people of color to a therapist & covered more than 383 free sessions of therapy.

REBUILD was co-founded by Mariame Kaba. In order to continue its work beyond this year, REBUILD needs to raise $300,000. Please support if you can: bit.ly/REBUILD23

PRISON LIBRARY SUPPORT NETWORK

PLSN is an information-based collective that supports incarcerated people by organizing networks for sharing resources and building capacity for the movement for prison abolition in libraries, archives, and other knowledge-based institutions. Sign up as a volunteer and donate: opencollective.com/plsn_nyc

PUBLICATIONS ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS FROM INCARCERATED PEOPLE

I crowdsourced this publicly visible google sheets document containing a list of various publishers and publishing opportunities via Twitter last year. Support publications that welcome submissions and contributions by incarcerated people. bit.ly/IncarceratedWriters2023

The following are 2 lists compiled by PEN America. A list of literary journals that accept submissions from incarcerated writers: bit.ly/45FvctJ and a list of publications that will publish journalistic work by incarcerated people: bit.ly/3Pl9ohP

EXHIBITION ADVISERS

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.

MAJOR FUNDING PROVIDED BY:

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is the nation's largest supporter of the arts and humanities. Since 1969, the Foundation has been guided by its core belief that the humanities and arts are essential to human understanding. The Foundation believes that the arts and humanities are where we express our complex humanity, and that everyone deserves the beauty, transcendence, and freedom that can be found there. Through our grants, we seek to build just communities enriched by meaning and empowered by critical thinking, where ideas and imagination can thrive. Learn more at mellon.org.

GRATITUDES

Everything worthwhile is done with others and this was the case for this exhibition. Deep gratitude to the following people not already named:

Noah Berlatsky
Max Canner
Brian Carroll
Coz Con
Erin Glasco
Danbee Kim
Harry Kleeman
Essye Klempner
Dana Kopel
Caits Meissner
Emily Nonko
Eric Ritskes
Cheryl Rivera
Jacqui Shine
Kruttika Susarla
The People's Forum
Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop
Empowerment Avenue

All of our incarcerated comrades & their loved ones who contributed to the zine:

Bryan Panarella
Zhi Kai Vanderford
Jon G
Tiona Rodriguez
Pamela Smart
Paula Sims
Patricia Trimble
Kim Wilson
Paul LaCombe
Mr. L.U.N.O.
Leonard Wilson
Janet Jackson
George Wilkerson
Daniel Pirkel
Felix D'Allessandro

Thanks to the artists and authors included in the author's gallery:

Kwaneta Harris
Lamavis Comundoiwilla
Jeffre Isom
Mark Stanley-Bey
Sarah Montoya
Elizabeth Lozano
Mark A. Cádiz AKA Rev. M. Seishin Cádiz
Jose Diaz
Derek Trumbo
Elizabeth Hawes

SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER 14

Opening Reception, 6pm - 9pm

EFA Project Space, 323 West 39th Street, New York, NY 10018
ReturnToSender2023.eventbrite.com

SEPTEMBER 16

Abolition Joy Hours, 4pm - 6pm

EFA Project Space, 323 West 39th Street, New York, NY 10018

SEPTEMBER 23

Return to Sender Collaborative Zine Workshop, 1pm - 5pm

EFA Project Space, 323 West 39th Street, New York, NY 10018
RTSzine.eventbrite.com

Join us to make a collaborative zine (words and images) in response to prison censorship

SEPTEMBER 27

Prison Journalism and Censorship, 1pm - 4pm

Virtual: RTSJournalism.eventbrite.com

Prison Journalism and Censorship is a conversation between Empowerment Avenue incarcerated writers Christopher Blackwell, Kwanetta Harris, Sara Kielly, and Emily Nonko. Formerly incarcerated abolitionist Jessica Phoenix Sylvia moderates this virtual event.

SEPTEMBER 30

Abolition Joy Hours, 4pm - 6pm

EFA Project Space, 323 West 39th Street, New York, NY 10018

OCTOBER 7

Return to Sender: Take Action, 12pm - 6:30pm

People's Forum, 320 West 37th Street, New York, NY
Part of Banned Book Week, RTSAction2023.eventbrite.com

OCTOBER 14

Abolition Joy Hours, 4pm - 6pm

EFA Project Space, 323 West 39th Street, New York, NY 10018

OCTOBER 26

PEN American Report Release, 6PM

Part of Prison Banned Books Week

OCTOBER 28

Closing Event, 4PM - 6PM

EFA Project Space, 323 West 39th Street, New York, NY 10018