

Silencing: An Assembly on Censorship

Elizabeth Larison

Gavilán Rayna Russom

Che Gossett

Salil Tripathi

Saw Wai

This publication was developed on the occasion of *Silencing: An Assembly on Censorship* on Saturday, April 27, 2024. Organized in conjunction with Shilpa Gupta's exhibition *I did not tell you what I saw, but only what I dreamt*, October 21, 2023 – April 28, 2024, at Amant, Brooklyn, NY.

Amant

315 Maujer St. Brooklyn, NY 11206
amant.org, @amant.arts

وآه عقبال البلاد اللي تنام موا
معك جنسيه وتصبح ما معك ج

محمد بن الذيب العجمي

معتقل : 2011

Table of Contents

6–8

Patricia M. Hernández

Introduction

9–15

Elizabeth Larison

For, In Your Imagination, I Cannot Fit:

On Efforts to Limit Artistic Expression

in the United States

18–25

Gavilán Rayna Russom

WAIL: A six-part score for sounds and

movements composed in time

28–33

Che Gossett

love and flames

36–41

Salil Tripathi

Myanmar: A people betrayed

43–44

Saw Wai

Crying Babies from Hell

45–46

Contributor Biographies

Introduction

Patricia M. Hernández

On the occasion of Shilpa Gupta's exhibition *I did not tell you what I saw, but only what I dreamt*, Amant hosts an afternoon of poetry, lectures, and performances that brings friends, artists, and scholars together to delve into historical and contemporary understandings of silencing through censorship.

In keeping with the motivation of Shilpa's sound installation *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit* (2017–18), currently on view at Amant, which comprises a set of one hundred names of poets from the past and present who have been incarcerated across many geographies, this assembly presents a series of provocations on censorship in its many manifestations.

Censorship is the silencing of speech, the human ability to express thoughts and feelings through written, spoken, or signed language. Speech articulates our desires to connect through the exchange of language. Yet language rests in the hands of a singular structure defined by power, whether military, governmental, corporate, or otherwise. For centuries these powers have practiced censorship and other forms of oversight, including self-censorship and the policing of social media, as a method of control. Censorship is the violent silencing of voices, the active practice of restricting the expression of another, be they writer, poet, artist, or activist—dead or alive.

In the series of artworks that make up *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*, Shilpa centers poets from as early as the eighth century to those who are still in prison or in hiding. Many poems featured in the artwork appear in their original form, while others were translated into English from Arabic, Azeri, Turkish, Russian, Chinese, Hindi, Urdu, and Spanish, to name a few. The work embraces poets as poets, poets as thinkers, poets as translators, poets as publishers, and poets as activists. There are poets who use poetry as direct action, sometimes in protest, and those who have used poetry as oblique criticism. Some of the poems featured have become so popular and so seeped into public consciousness that the words, creating reverberations beyond the paper, have

led to their author's arrest. There are poets detained without knowing the reason, and others who live under constant surveillance, even after their release from prison. In prison, some poets are not permitted to write, and they resort to hiding broken pencil tips, scratching verses into soap, or remembering their poems line by line, until they can write again. The very act of writing a poem, as Jennifer Clemente says, is in itself an act of revolution.¹

For Shilpa, poetry is not simply a form of expression, but an act of resistance. Through this series of artworks, she names each poet—a practice grounded in protest and intended to memorialize the lives and work of each author. Shilpa writes, “poets, like writers and artists, are dreamers who speak of the nightmares of the living world. This work is about the persistence of beliefs, of dreams, which make us into what we are as individuals.”

Like the poets featured in *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*, the contributors to this assembly and publication speak to the silencing experienced today. The director of the Arts and Culture Advocacy Program at the National Coalition Against Censorship, Elizabeth Larison, discusses the more insidious ways censorship happens across the arts in the US, addressing what censorship can look like when it is legally exercised by nongovernmental organizations within the cultural field. This form of silencing occurs behind closed doors, in contracts or meeting rooms, as the result of compromises, and it rarely receives any news coverage. In a score that is both a performance and its instruction, artist, composer, and scholar Gavilán Rayna Russom approaches silencing through the binary of living and dead. They present a series of numbered prompts intended to be performed. Each prompt calls into question the non-linear temporality wherein censorship silences the voices of both the living and the dead, asking the reader to enact their score with a timer as their censor. Trans femme writer and scholar Che

¹Jennifer Clemente, “The Act of Writing a Poem is in Itself an Act of Revolution,” in Shilpa Gupta and Salil Tripathi, eds., *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit: Encounters with Prisons* (New Delhi: Westland Books, 2022), 17.

Gossett calls into question the carceral state, the massive expansion of the criminal justice system within the US, as the frontline war in our society that seeks to censor and control people and ideas. Prisons within this system are the testing grounds for the structures of control that are seen in the current wave of censorship in schools and public libraries.

Drawing directly from *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*, Salil Tripathi, who co-edited the publication of the same name, presents Burmese poet and activist Saw Wai, who is featured in Shilpa's artwork and publication. Salil recounts the historical and political context of Myanmar, a country bound by conflict, repression, and human rights abuses. He details the struggle for independence against military rule, providing the context and lens through which to read Saw's poem. *Silencing: An Assembly on Censorship* concludes with the penned words of Saw Wai. In 2008, he was imprisoned for criticizing Myanmar's military in an eight-line poem titled *February 14*. On the surface, the poem celebrates Valentine's Day, in which a broken-hearted man who has been rejected by a fashion model thanks her for teaching him the meaning of love. The poem, however, is an acrostic, wherein the first letter of each sentence reveals a hidden message when read downwards. Now in exile, Saw shares with us the unbearable pain and outrage of bearing witness to the assault on Myanmar's democracy. With each poet featured in *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*, Shilpa underscores that poetry embodies the expression of truths, even in confronting violent persecution. Together, we champion the freedom of speech, where the birth of new ideas fuels our collective imagination, and the celebration of difference becomes intrinsic to the complexities of a democracy in motion.

Elizabeth Larison

For, In Your Imagination, I Cannot Fit: On Efforts to Limit Artistic Expression in the United States

Across her practice, Shilpa Gupta engages with themes of censorship and political agency. Works like *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit* (2023); *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit: 100 Jailed Poets* (2017–18); and *Untitled (Spoken Poem in a Bottle)* (2018) summon discrete instances of state-imposed literary censorship that span geographies and centuries. In *Untitled* (2023), Gupta's voice projects through a microphone the names of such censored writers and the dates of their detentions, disappearances, exiles, or murders. Most, if not all, of those memorialized in Gupta's works have been severely punished for their words, but in Gupta's works, their dissident creative voices echo through time and space, beyond the reach of government censors. In the context of the United States, where the Constitution protects dissident speech from government suppression and punishment, the subject of these works may appear remote, like something that happens elsewhere, in militant, illiberal regimes.

On the contrary, arts censorship in the US is an ongoing occurrence, and the paucity of active discussion about it is a reflection of several factors, among them the ability of private entities to censor at will and the frequency with which censorship happens without public knowledge. Still, the fact that arts censorship here tends to be less overt than in totalitarian regimes makes it no less insidious a threat to our eclectic and open cultural field.

Indeed, throughout the final months of 2023 and early 2024, arts programs and exhibitions have been publicly canceled, and artists and curators have lost opportunities and jobs on account of expressing public support for Palestine—making it abundantly clear that censorship in the realm of arts and culture is alive and well in the United States.¹ Prominent

¹Svetlana Mintcheva, "Echoes of McCarthy: Criticism of Israel and Charges of Antisemitism," website for the National Coalition Against Censorship (blog post), January 25, 2024, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://ncac.org/news/echoes-of-mc-carthy-criticizing-israel-and-charges-of-antisemitism>; see also "Middle East Conflict Fallout: A Culture of Fear and Anger takes over US Cultural Institutions," website for the National Coalition Against Censorship, November 8, 2023, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://ncac.org/news/middle-east-conflict-fallout-a-culture-of-fear-and-anger-takes-over-us-cultural-institutions>.

artists like Ai Weiwei and Tania Bruguera, who are known for pushing back against government censorship in their native countries of China and Cuba, are now leading the ranks of artists, curators, authors, and other cultural workers in pointing out instances of arts censorship happening within liberal democracies.² Though suppressing support for Palestine is at the center of recent news coverage, it is neither the sole nor even the primary subject of arts censorship.

Private vs. Public Censorship. Arts censorship in the US often happens in the private realm where it is exempt from the First Amendment, which only prohibits direct censorship by government authorities. Beyond banning punishment for ideas that challenge government sensibilities, this limitation means that government entities may not restrict or deny access to artworks solely based on the ideas they represent.³ The First Amendment was established to safeguard the possibility for dissent, but also to protect opportunities for new truths to emerge via public debate and discourse.

Private commercial and nonprofit cultural institutions, publications, social media companies, and others enjoy their own freedom of expression rights in deciding what to showcase and when. Invariably, this decision-making requires processes of curation in which institutions determine what is worthy of their resources. This process of selection, however, can sometimes blur the distinction between what might be considered curation and what constitutes a kind of (legally permissible) censorship. Frequently, for example, a curator or an arts venue may decide to exhibit an artwork because it meets criteria of artistic excellence, thematic interest, and/or cultural relevance, but later decides to withdraw the invitation due to shifting perceptions about the ideas the work expresses or about the artist themselves. While such changes in

²Alex Greenberger, "Ai Weiwei Says Censorship in the West Is 'Sometimes Even Worse' Than in Mao's China," *Artnews*, February 5, 2024, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/ai-weiwei-censorship-west-china-israel-hamas-war-gaza-1234695044/>; see also

Ben Luke, "Is Censorship on the Rise in the West?," in *The Week in Art: The Art Newspaper Podcast*, February 9, 2024, accessed February 22, 2023, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/02/09/is-censorship-on-the-rise-in-the-west>.

³ Including those running arts programs at municipal art museums, town halls, city libraries, and federal airports, as well as those that fund arts programs at public or private institutions.

exhibition plans might not violate the First Amendment's guarantee for freedom of expression, they critically restrict artistic expression as it is practiced and made visible in the cultural sphere. Institutions both public and private are easily incentivized to avoid artworks, programs, and exhibitions that might offend specific stakeholders, such as public officials, funders, board trustees, staff, audiences, and special interest groups.

In the past year alone, for example, the Public Art of the University of Houston System failed to complete the installation of an on-campus public art exhibition in time for its scheduled opening, and abruptly postponed its planned talk with artist Shahzia Sikander after criticisms surfaced from religious anti-abortion groups claiming that the artist's outdoor sculptures were "satanic." Around the same time, Public Art UHS also published online FAQs foregrounding the work as "offensive to some people."⁴ The city of Mesa, Arizona attempted to remove a Shepard Fairey artwork from an exhibition checklist because the work was critical of policing and, it was suggested, might offend police officers employed by the city. And at Cooper Union, a private college in New York City, an exhibition about a Soviet-era design school was delayed multiple times out of concern that it would be insensitive to the nearby Ukrainian community in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In such circumstances, fear of offending particular communities often leads presenting institutions, both public and private, to conclude that it would be best to avoid sensitive subject matter entirely, rather than to devise nuanced curatorial frameworks that both preserve the integrity of the artwork and contextualize it in reference to popular interpretations or current events.

When censorship happens behind closed doors, does it really happen? Unlike the public punishments waged by totalitarian regimes, censorship in the US is often conducted out of the public eye. Decisions to cancel exhibitions or remove works from view, or efforts to pressure artists to self-censor their work, are usually communicated over direct correspondence, in-person meetings, or phone

⁴Jessica Fuentes, "Protestors Oppose Installation of Shahzia Sikander "Satanic" Sculpture; University of Houston Postpones Opening Events," *Glasstire*, February 24, 2024, accessed March 29, 2024, <https://glasstire.com/2024/02/24/protestors-oppose-installation-of-shahzia-sikander-satanic-sculpture-uh-postpones-opening-events/>.

calls, making it difficult to prove censorious motives. These actions, moreover, tend to take place just prior to a project's press announcement or opening, in an attempt to avoid controversy before a project goes public.

For example, it was just weeks before the opening of *California Biennial 2022: Pacific Gold* that artist Ben Sakoguchi began receiving questions from the Orange County Museum of Art about his decision to include three swastikas in his sixteen-panel, multi-narrative painting *Comparative Religions 101*, which contains a satirical depiction of Nazi allies in World War II. Though Sakoguchi's work had been enthusiastically invited to appear in the biennial several months earlier, the museum disinvited it, explaining only that the institution "will not show any work that depicts a swastika."⁵

And, after Evan Apodaca's multimedia work at the San Diego International Airport was prematurely deinstalled in March of 2023, it was in a private meeting that airport officials revealed that complaints about the work's critical stance on the military had influenced them to take it down.

Censorship incidents are also commonly obscured from public view if they don't clearly build upon an extant topical media narrative, such as coverage of a contemporaneous geopolitical conflict or a trending social issue. Additionally, most of these episodes happen in varied geographic locations and in response to different artwork themes, which means that these censorship incidents do not always receive extensive press coverage because they read as isolated incidents. Relative public invisibility makes it all the more important for advocates to educate themselves and speak out when they have concerns about censorship.

"But this isn't censorship." Whether it happens behind the scenes or in full public view, censorship nearly always occurs under the guise of its being something else; it is rare that a censoring party admits that they are trying to suppress artistic expression directly. Instead, we have seen

⁵Matt Stromberg, "Painting Rejected from California Biennial over Image of Swastika," *Hyperallergic*, October 12, 2022, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://hyperallergic.com/768572/ben-sakoguchi-painting-rejected-from-california-biennial-over-swastika/>.

municipal governments declare a sudden bureaucratic need to update artwork-selection criteria, resulting in the cancellation of all current exhibitions. This happened last summer in San Mateo, California. In this instance, officials did admit concerns about two paintings by artist Diego Rios because the works denounced police brutality, but rather than single out one set of works and become vulnerable to First Amendment claims, the city pulled all of the exhibitions on display and cited the need for procedural review.

We've seen institutions cancel exhibitions on account of unspecified security concerns, as the University of Indiana did in late 2023 when they decided to scrap a retrospective exhibition of abstract artist Samia Halaby that had been several years in the making. Unofficially, over a phone call with a museum official, the artist learned that the museum took issue with her pro-Palestinian statements on social media.

We've seen institutions claim building infrastructure problems, such as when Daytona State College's Southeast Museum of Photography canceled an exhibition by photographer Jon Henry on account of alleged "HVAC leaks." Months later, anonymous former employees indicated that the real reason for the cancellation was that the implied subject of Henry's work—police brutality and racialized policing—appeared to undermine the public image of the college's police training academy.

We've seen airport arts programs claim that the new work they commissioned "does not match the proposal." This was the official line from the San Diego International Airport when disclosing their reason for taking down Evan Apodaca's artwork, which was critical of the US Military. In a different case, we have seen an airport use this claim, in part, to pressure an artist to self-censor work that addresses histories of slavery, genocide, and racism in the US.

We occasionally encounter the argument that rescinding earlier decisions to exhibit an artwork does not constitute censorship, because no venue has the authority to prohibit the artist from continuing to create and display their work elsewhere. While the latter is undeniably true, withdrawing

such an invitation after it has been made still constitutes a degree of censorship that can have far-reaching consequences. If institutions routinely avoid opportunities to contextualize and present challenging work, the cultural field and public discourse will shrink. Our collective tolerance of and ability to process boundary-breaking work will diminish. This would be devastating to the creative sphere, which thrives on re-imagining what is often taken for granted.

A liberal democratic society requires forums for approaching issues of complexity, and our creative field must have the ability to experiment and challenge audiences with new ways of thinking.

The privilege of censorship and the question of compromise.

There's another issue that often makes allegations of arts censorship easy to discredit: the fact that, to be understood as "censored," an artist or cultural producer often requires a degree of legibility, access, or legitimacy in the first place. Artists must first produce a cultural output which is widely accepted as having artistic value and which satisfies the parameters of what can be understood as art. They must have the privilege of connections, invitations, and/or communications with gatekeepers. Deplatforming often requires a degree of visibility and access in the first place, and it can therefore seem like the mark of an already privileged creator.

There's also a question of self-censorship. Many artists struggle with whether they should make the art they want to make—to explore new, unpopular, or difficult ideas—or whether they should make the art that will have a higher likelihood of getting seen, trading their radical creative instincts for the possibility to reach audiences in the first place.

What is so bad that it shouldn't be seen... by anyone?

Artworks have been censored for addressing a broad range of themes: for imagery ranging from the abstract to the explicit, for subject matter encompassing direct social commentary or formalist explorations. Whatever the issue, censors routinely attempt to justify their decisions by stating their desire to avoid alienating specific stakeholders.

And yet, it is practically impossible to ensure that all displays of art will always reaffirm audience convictions, always provide comfort, and never unsettle. One might even reasonably argue—drawing on abundant examples from art history—that the most important works of art do none of these things. Wherever possible, it is important for participants in a cultural sphere to make room for dialogues through art that reflect, that destabilize, and that reimagine the world around us. This is not to say that all such ideas are inherently “correct” or “good,” but finding ways to productively present them and invite affirmations, amendments, or critiques will strengthen our culture’s ability to grapple with and address challenging ideas.

Conclusion

Though the above examples of censorship look different from those summoned across Shilpa Gupta’s practice, they illustrate how threats to artistic expression are a routine occurrence in the United States. Artistic censorship happens here, even when it’s perfectly legal and exercised by non-governmental entities; it happens even if it’s out of public view and doesn’t get news coverage; it happens here even when it’s called something else; it happens here even when it’s a result of a compromise the artist decides to make. Censorship happens here, even in the arts, often because someone makes a subjective decision that forecloses what a given artwork can mean and what *showing* a given artwork can communicate, all in a field that is otherwise highly cognizant of the instability of interpretation and context.

Left unchecked, the cumulative effect of artistic censorship risks forging a culture of fear in which artists and audiences alike are preemptively deprived of opportunities to create and engage with artwork that investigates non-normative realities, poses uncomfortable questions, and exists beyond the present confines of our collective imagination.



Shilpa Gupta, *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*, 2017–18. Sound installation with 100 speakers, microphones, printed text, and metal stands. Co-commissioned by YARAT Contemporary Art Space and Edinburgh Art Festival with support from QAGOMA. Photo by Pat Verbruggen.



WAIL

A six-part score for sounds and movements
composed in time

Gavilán Rayna Russom, 2024

1. Once you have any experiences that open your mind to the idea of non-linear temporalities you are immediately dealing with the dead.

Linear temporality

-at least as conceived in a Eurocentric framework-creates a binary:

Living/Dead.

Living = Present = Here. Dead = Past = Not Here.

Memory poses an obstinate and difficult to resolve problem for this way of thinking.

2. As soon
as linear temporality
is disturbed
in any way
-even by the smallest of sensations-
the constructed nature of the binary Living/Dead
becomes apparent,
coming apart in the process.

3. Censorship
is an attempt
to cement
a specific linear temporality
onto the wider
generally enforced
linear temporality
of the clock
and calendar
<already forms of censorship in themselves
<<they censor experiences of time
that do not correspond to the linear framework
their structure assumes>>
<<<always forwards, never back,
moments, days, voices, and lives
disappearing as they pass>>>
<<<<mechanizing, limiting,
and regimenting futurity in the process>>>>

See also Phillips, Rasheedah.
"Dismantling the Master('s) Clock(work Universe)."
Space Time Collapse I: From the Congo to the Carolinas.
Black Quantum Futurism. 2016.

Censorship
not only seeks
to silence
the voice of the censored speaker
(or writer, or artist, or spiritual practitioner, etc.)
it also seeks
to silence
the voices of the dead
and often operates
on the belief
that death
will silence

4. One example:



The province, school boards and teachers need to recognize stories like *Betty* 'bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside world,' Robertson says. (Stephanie Cram/CBC)

So far, *Betty* is one of the only young adult books to address missing and murdered Indigenous women, Robertson says.

Alberta government 'censored' Indigenous book, undermining reconciliation in schools, author says

Province added David Alexander Robertson's graphic novel to not-recommended list due to 'sensitive content'

CBC Radio · Posted: Nov 23, 2018 1:00 AM PST | Last Updated: November 23, 2018

In September, his first-ever graphic novel series, *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga*, was named on the Edmonton Public School Board's so-called "Books to Weed Out." The school board defended its decision, saying the site's purpose was to help teachers make informed decision around their use of resources and not to suggest that books be made unavailable. Outcry prompted the board to ultimately take down the book review site.

"These are the books that we need to be reading. If we're putting them on a list that we're saying, 'don't read these books,' then I think that probably matches a pretty good definition of what censorship is," the award-winning author said.

The graphic novel — for students from Grade 9 to 12 — explores the real-life story of a 19-year-old Cree woman who was kidnapped and murdered in The Pas, Man., in 1971.

"It's concerning to see books being censored in this way, especially in an era of reconciliation where we need those truths," he said in an interview with CBC Radio's *Unreserved* host Rosanna Deerchild.

Robertson argued stories about missing and murdered Indigenous women, suicide, the legacy of residential schools and reconciliation "need to be woven into the fabric of who [youth] are as Canadians." This is done in schools, he says, and serves to deepen the discussion about Indigenous issues.

But teachers can't do this with their students, he says, if they shelve some resources — like books.

5. Another:

W I F O

LILA HASSAN BUSINESS OCT 21, 2023 2:00 AM

Palestinians Claim Social Media 'Censorship' Is Endangering Lives

Alleged censorship of social media and disruptions to electricity and internet access have meant people under fire in Gaza can't get the information they need to survive.



While the blackouts and alleged blocking of accounts hampers humanitarian work in Gaza, they are also preventing Gazans from showing the world what's happening on the ground. The death toll in Gaza has now surpassed 4,200 people, with over 1 million people displaced, according to the UN Office of High Commissioner. The NGOs Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International allege that Israel has deployed white phosphorus, whose use is forbidden in heavily populated areas under international humanitarian law. But with the information flow disrupted, it's hard for people outside of Gaza to document potential war crimes and human rights violations.

On social media, shadow-banning is hard to prove. But users across the world say any posts containing Palestinian content, or mentions of Gaza, get atypically low views and engagement. In some cases, Instagram users weren't allowed to comment on other posts, with a pop-up message that read, "We restrict certain activity to protect our community. Based on your use, this action will be unavailable for you until [date]. Tell us if you think we made a mistake."

Mona Shtaya, a fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy specializing in digital rights, who is based in the West Bank, says that while this phenomenon isn't new, it becomes a particularly acute issue during moments of increased tension. "This 'technical glitch' is only happening when there are escalations in Palestine," she says. "There is a huge censorship of Palestinian content."

6.

.

What dead need to speak right now?

.

What can you remember?

Performance instructions

Set a time limit for the performance of this piece and have a timer visible that shows you seconds and minutes counting up to that time limit

Begin by reading the score through in full

The score should also be projected in the space, visible to the audience and performers, cycling through each prompt page at the speed of roughly one prompt page per minute

Respond to one of the numbered prompts using sound, movement, or another medium that occurs to you in the moment

Then respond to another

Allocate some of the time of the performance to each of the prompts

Feel through how a response to one prompt pulls you towards the next one

Feel through the moments when you are led back to a prompt you have previously responded to, and what it's like to respond to it again

When the timer reaches the time limit for the piece, stop performing the score

Do something nurturing, caring, and loving for yourself, considering the role that others/community might (or might not) play in that nurturing, caring, and loving



Shilpa Gupta, *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*, 2023. Casts of 100 books in gun metal. wooden and glass vitrines with light bulbs. *I did not tell you what I saw, but only what I dreamt*, October 21, 2023 – April 28, 2024, Amant, Brooklyn, NY. Photo by Sebastian Bach.



Che Gosset

love and flames

"It's something you can't really explain, it's something you can feel, you have to actually walk in here and feel it."— Remarks of a white guard at San Quentin three weeks after the killing of George L. Jackson.¹

"They divide you into racial groups, all the Mexicans be on one side, all the brothers on another side, all the whites... it's constant tension in this yard, it's constant tension in this institution, constant tension I imagine in every institution around the world—but I believe more so here." – Unnamed incarcerated person at San Quentin.²

An unnamed Black incarcerated person in the above quotes relays the atmosphere at San Quentin. This tension and this atmosphere are the result of the compression and racialized antagonism of the racial apartheid system that is the prison. "The simplest thing can touch off a race riot," he continues.³ Prisons perform in this account as racialized war machines. In May of 1970, George Jackson wrote from San Quentin to his lawyer, Fay Stender, following a visit and tour by Senator Mervyn Dymally. "I detected in the questions posed by your team a desire to isolate some rationale that would explain why racism exists at the prison with 'particular prominence.'"⁴ Jackson's response is to show how the question cannot be answered within the terms of its own framing, how a paradigm shift is required. His response is instructive in both its strategy and broader abolitionist pedagogy. Rather than refusing or rejecting the question, he first meets it on its own terms, within the threshold of its theoretical premises and matrix, before untethering it from its liberal and emergency thinking, a thinking from inside limits and the constraints of a crisis that addresses the immediate situation rather than the causes that underlie it. "I understand your attempt to isolate the set of localized circumstances that give to this particular prison's problems

¹ Thames Television Archive, "Death of George Jackson," September 23, 1971, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnJPwdKsljc>.

² Thames Television Archive, "Death of George Jackson," September 23, 1971, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnJPwdKsljc>.

³ Thames Television Archive, "Death of George Jackson."

⁴ George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2006), 17.

of race is based on a desire to aid us right now, in the present crisis. There are some changes that could be made right now to alleviate some of the pressures inside this and other prisons.”⁵

Having gestured towards the needed immediate practical interventions—moreover, having used the opportunity that presents itself—Jackson then shifts registers towards a radical intervention. Jackson throws the terms of the question into productive tension but, moreover, interruption, fracture, and, ultimately, breakdown. He does this by a radical undermining. “Radical” deriving from Latin for “root,” a grasping of the roots of the problem of the prison apparatus. “But to get at the causes, you know, one would be forced to deal with the questions at the very center of Amerikan political and economic life, at the core of the Amerikan historical experience.”⁶

Shifting the conceptual coordinates, Jackson redirects and sharpens the focus towards the object of analysis and ultimately offers a political economy of the prison. “The prison didn’t come to exist where it is just by happenstance. Those who inhabit it and feed off its existence are historical products.”⁷ This is the abolitionist impetus, to explain why there is both a naturalization of and a recursive return to the carceral form—to criminalization, prisons, and policing—as a supposed solution to cultural problems.

The picture that I have painted of Soledad’s general population facility may have made it sound not too bad at all. That mistaken impression would result from the absence in my description of one more very important feature of the main line—terrorism. A frightening, petrifying diffusion of violence and intimidation is emitted from the offices of the warden and captain. How else could a small group of armed men be expected to hold and rule another much larger group except through fear?⁸

⁵ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 17-18.

⁶ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 18.

⁷ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 18.

⁸ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 18.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, modifying Raymond Williams's affective notion of a structure of feeling, proposes an infrastructure of feeling that represses the gratuitous violence of the prison system, naturalizing and normalizing the incredible violence and rendering it ordinary, acceptable, seemingly unworthy of outrage.⁹ Carceral emotions are central to this infrastructure of feeling: the fear and terror that Jackson describes that saturates the inside, and on the outside, the social weaponization of shame and guilt, the idealization of so-called innocence and safety, which are always already anti-Black ideologies that underpin the social order and the calculus of life and death. Isolation and alienation are central to the affective economy of violence and trauma of the prison industrial complex and criminalization, the ways in which the criminalized are turned into what Foucault calls "social enemies"¹⁰ and abandoned, treated as disposable.

"Racism enters, on the psycho-social level, in the form of a morbid, traditional fear of both blacks and revolutions,"¹¹ Jackson writes, locating racism in the libidinal and political economy of anti-Blackness. This critical diagnostic of racism speaks to the virulent anti-Blackness of Thomas Jefferson's 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia* and the American Colonization Society. For the landless indigenous African slaves and their descendants, the British monarchy and American constitutional democracy were both symbolic functions of white sovereignty. All political forms (the king and the body politic) are governed by the meta/physical sovereignty of anti-Blackness. Such unfreedom is the plight of the emancipated racial subject. Anti-Blackness is the political substrate that underpins the shift from monarchical order to constitutional rule premised on the slave society. Racism, then, is incorporated into the infrastructure of the prison, its apartheid form and function, the dual and compacted fear of the revolution of Blackness and the Blackness of revolution. This fearful and violent phobia traces back not only to the edifice of the prison but to the subterranean hold of the slave dungeon and fort that

⁹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition geography and the problem of innocence," *Tabula Rasa* 28 (2018): 57-77, <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=39656104003>.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the College De France, 1972-1973*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt and Graham Burchell (New York: Picador Books, 2018), 33.

¹¹ George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1990), 125.

preceded and prefigured the police and the prison in both British colonial and American settler society.

Jackson was only eighteen years old when he was incarcerated, sentenced to a seemingly limitless duration of captivity, one that mirrored for him the ontological capture of the afterlife of slavery. Jackson was sentenced to a carceral limbo, between one year to life, for stealing seventy dollars from a gas station in Los Angeles. His freedom hinged on the judge and parole board and an appeal for clemency. The prison and court system hold life in a state of indeterminate suspension. "I have a very near closed future," Jackson writes.¹² He was killed at twenty-nine years old. Only a little more than a month before the book of Jackson's letters, titled *Soledad Brother*, was published, Jackson's younger brother Jonathan was killed while holding a judge hostage—the judge died from police fire during the coup—and attempting to free several incarcerated Black radicals on trial from San Quentin.

"There was no marker. Just mowed grass. The story of our past."¹³ Jackson traces the carceral afterlife of slavery throughout his texts *Blood in My Eye* and *Soledad Brother*. When Jackson transports himself, he conceptualizes, imagines, and inhabits what Cedric Robinson might refer to as an "ontological totality"¹⁴ of Blackness, except that, for Jackson, it's not an ante-ontological totality that would exceed capture, but a resistance to slavery's afterlives.

My recall is nearly perfect, time has faded nothing. I recall the very first kidnap. I've lived through the passage, died on the passage, lain in the unmarked, shallow graves of the millions who fertilized the Amerikan soil with their corpses; cotton and corn growing out of my chest, "unto the third and fourth generation," the tenth, the hundredth. My mind ranges back and forth through the uncounted generations, and I feel all that they ever felt, but double.¹⁵

¹² Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 161.

¹³ Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, vii.

¹⁴ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 171.

¹⁵ Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 171.

Here the feeling “double” might denote the redoubling of captivity in the slave as prisoner/prisoner as slave, which is the condition of carceral anti-Blackness and the anti-Blackness of the carceral—when the always already slave also becomes the prisoner. Jackson asserts that he was “born a slave in a captive society.”¹⁶ His theory of slave ethics is revolutionary and pessimist. Later, however, Jackson flips the coin and reverses the statement, which, on its face, would be contradictory, but here it substantiates the carceral continuum of anti-Blackness. Not born ready and always already a slave, but rather born in fugitivity, on the run from capture as a Black person living in the anti-Black world, the obverse side of the racial slave relation (Black as slave).

The very first time, it was like dying. Just to exist at all in the cage calls for some heavy psychic readjustments. Being captured was the first of my fears. It may have been inborn. It may have been an acquired characteristic built up over the centuries of black bondage. It is the thing I've been running from all my life.¹⁷

Jackson here shows that even as captivity is redoubled—slave and prisoner—and folded, these grammars and modalities of capture are distinctive in that existing as a slave in the world is different than being a slave in a cage.

In December of 2005, Stanley “Tookie” Williams was denied clemency by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and executed. In his statement, Schwarzenegger zeroed in on the list of people to whom Williams dedicated his book *Prison Life*: “The inclusion of George Jackson on this list defies reason and is a significant indicator that Williams is not reformed and that he still sees violence and lawlessness as a legitimate means to address societal problems.”¹⁸ Here the violence and lawlessness is not the prison, but Jackson. By specifically using George Jackson as the main justification for state sanctioned murder, i.e., the

¹⁶ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 4.

¹⁷ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 13.

¹⁸ Henry Weinstein and Peter Nicholas, “Governor Didn’t Believe Williams Had Reformed,” *LA Times*, December 13, 2005, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-dec-13-me-analysis13-story.html>.

death penalty, Schwarzenegger aimed to eliminate, along with Williams, the revolutionary specter of George Jackson and the Black-liberation struggle that haunts the socio-symbolic order of the US carceral regime. The prison both projects and protects white cis heteronormative patriarchy. The prison is a necropolitical institution, an anti-Black, anti-trans, and eugenic enterprise, as has been documented by Gabriel Arkles. This is part of the queer/trans Black radical and abolitionist critique of the prison form that expands the analysis of the workings of its technologies both within and beyond its institutionalization. The anti-Black, anti-trans, and eugenic violence of the prison extends from aiming for the epistemic annihilation of Black study i.e., Black radicalism. For an example of this anti-Black epistemicide, reading George Jackson leads to the psychic violence and torture of being put in Solitary Housing Units in Pelican Bay. Carceral technologies of trans erasure force incarcerated trans people to max out, because any act of gender self-determination is considered a disciplinary “infraction.” The ongoing treatment of Jackson, as well as Assata Shakur, as terrorist threats to the US slave estate reminds us that the racialization of the figure of the terrorist not only traces to the post-September 11th penal securitocracy, but also to the war on the Black freedom movement, which didn’t begin in the 1960s but rather with Black resistance to US racial slavery, for instance with the reaction to David Walker’s 1829 appeal to the colored citizens of the world. As Saidiya Hartman contends, “the slave was recognized as a reasoning subject who possessed intent and rationality solely in the context of criminal liability.”¹⁹ The specter of Jackson returns. Black radicalism has to be repressed for the institutional anti-Black psyche of the prison to function.

¹⁹ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 82.



Shilpa Gupta, *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*, 2023. Casts of 100 books in gun metal. wooden and glass vitrines with light bulbs. *I did not tell you what I saw, but only what I dreamt*. October 21, 2023 – April 28, 2024, Amant, Brooklyn, NY. Photo by Sebastian Bach.

RESIST, MY PEOPLE, RESIST THEM.
RESIST, MY PEOPLE, RESIST THEM.

2015

Salil Tripathi

Myanmar: A people betrayed

It was said that once upon a time the rice fields of Myanmar were so fertile, they could feed all of Asia. Given Asian preference for rice, that was a tall claim, but there was also—pardon the pun—a grain of truth in it. With lush fields and vast agricultural land besides bountiful precious stones and abundant natural resources, Burma, as Myanmar was once known, could have been a success story of Asia. Instead, the country has been riven by internecine conflict, ethnic rivalries, and raging wars, and its people have been served poorly by its political leadership for a long time.

The British gained full control over Burma after they defeated the last king, Thibaw, in the 1880s and banished him to India's west coast. (After taming the Indian mutiny of 1857, the British exiled the last Mughal king to Rangoon, Burma's capital.) The British ruled Burma until 1948.

The country drew Chinese traders from the north and Indian merchants from the east. Mandalay was known as the Chinese city, and Rangoon its Indian sister, when the sun never set on the British empire. But it did, eventually.

Political strife rose, ethnic tensions were ever present. Myanmar has many ethnic nationalities, and several ethnic groups sought greater autonomy, if not outright independence. In 1935, Burma achieved limited autonomy, in that it continued to be ruled by the British but was no longer answerable to the government in Delhi, India.

There were native nationalist movements: Dobama Asiyaone (the We Burmans Association) demanded greater freedoms for the local population. The 1935 separation from India was intended to grant Burma limited autonomy, but the movement seeking freedom only became more pronounced. When the Japanese shocked America and attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941 and later overran Asia, the Bamars (the majority community), or Burmans, were surprised. The Japanese wanted to establish what they called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a thinly disguised attempt to colonize Asia, replacing Western powers with Japanese rule. Burma became a prominent battleground. The Japanese strafed Burmese cities with bombardment and the British fled. Many immigrant communities, including

people from India, left Burma. Thousands died as they tried to traverse inhospitable jungles, a story movingly retold by novelist Amitav Ghosh in *The Glass Palace*. The Japanese took over Burma in 1942. General Aung San, a Burmese nationalist, sided with the Japanese, hoping they would help liberate Burma.

After Japan surrendered to the Allied powers in 1945, the British regained control of Burma. Aung San led the country to transition, shifting alliances and siding with the British towards the end of the war. But he was betrayed, and in 1947 he was assassinated before Burma was formally independent, creating a power vacuum from which the country has not yet recovered.

The myriad ethnic groups in Burma posed a major challenge to the inexperienced leadership that took charge, and governments came and went until General Ne Win took control in 1962. Calling for a “Burmese way to socialism,” Ne Win wanted to carve a new path, one aligned not only with the East or the West during the Cold War, but also one that stayed away from the Non-Aligned Movement. Burma’s many ethnic groups are distinct and share cross-border ties with communities in Thailand, China, and India. The government sought to establish uniformity, which was met with resistance and exacerbated conflict. The Karen, Kachin, Shan, and other groups fought for greater autonomy, and the country’s borders—and provincial capitals—became battlegrounds of never-ending wars.

The Burmese military, now known as *Tatmadaw*, responded to the insurgencies cruelly and brutally, destroying villages, killing people mercilessly, and jailing and torturing dissidents.

Communities were displaced and there were widespread allegations of extrajudicial executions and sexual violence. The government sought to “Burmanise” the society, which made the Bamar identity predominant, stoking minority resentment.

Ne Win, who was highly superstitious, took full control in 1962, and Burma was increasingly isolated from the international community. Intellectuals who could leave

the country left, and those who could not learned to seal their lips. It was only in the late 1980s, with the Soviet Union's collapse imminent and the world order changing, that it seemed as though Burma might, too, witness a transformation. In 1988, students and monks rose up against the regime, but the government brutally suppressed the protests, and Aung San's daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, emerged, returning from her home in Oxford and setting up the National League for Democracy, which became the face of the political opposition, challenging the ruling junta. She travelled the country drawing crowds and campaigning but was put under house arrest in July 1989. Aung San Suu Kyi inspired many around the world with her clear support for democracy, but as the regime re-established control, jailing dissidents and suppressing the uprising, she was immediately arrested and placed under house arrest in her family villa facing Inya Lake.

Aung San Suu Kyi gained international fame as she picked up awards from Europe and India, and, in 1991, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She symbolized Burmese resistance in the eyes of many. But the junta was relentless, even as it squandered resources, mismanaged the economy, and violated human rights.

In 2011, a new leadership in Burma, now known as Myanmar (which, while named by an illegitimate government, was at least more inclusive than "Burma," which privileged the Bamar community), took charge and decided to initiate political reforms. My engagement with Myanmar began then.

I had read about the country and its literature in the preceding years—from colonial-era writing, such as George Orwell's *Burmese Days*, to later accounts like *Finding George Orwell in Burma* by Emma Larkin, Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, and Sudha Shah's account of Burma's last king, Thibaw, *The King in Exile*, and my work in human rights had drawn me to the mesmerizing country. I went there several times after 2011, meeting former political detainees, writers who had been in exile and returned, human rights activists, diplomats, peace activists, government officials, and others. I walked through its teeming streets, along tree-lined avenues, and by the Inya Lake, and I explored old colonial buildings, seeing glimpses of an older India, recognizing some street names because of their colonial links and roots with India.

I had the good fortune of making a lifelong friend in Ma Thida, who had been an aide to Aung San Suu Kyi. She was in the notorious Insein Prison for more than six years, where she was treated harshly and suffered from ill health. From her quiet determination and stoic calm I learned the virtue of resistance and the steely perseverance of human rights defenders. I wrote about her in an extensive essay as I covered the by-elections in 2012, which the NLD won overwhelmingly.

The political liberalization process led to the junta ceding power to civilians, but only up to a point: the parliament would still have seats in which the military would appoint delegates, and they'd vote in unison, preventing any constitutional amendments that could change Myanmar in a fundamental sense. This would prevent any democratically elected government from making significant changes that eroded the military's power. And a constitutional provision preventing anyone with foreign family ties from holding the office of president meant Aung San Suu Kyi was ineligible, since her late husband was British.

Aung San Suu Kyi played along. She told the popular British radio program Desert Island Discs that she saw every Burmese soldier as a brother, since her father, Aung San, was the father of the Burmese army. (That hadn't prevented the military from arresting her and, at least once, attempting to kill her.)

But Myanmar in 2011 had a heady feeling, the kind I had experienced in South Africa in the early 1990s, when Nelson Mandela was released and I was there as a young reporter as apartheid was ending and another world seemed possible. The international community welcomed the changes in Myanmar. Sanctions were lifted and the world increased engagement with Myanmar. Foreign investment began to flow back.

But it was the lull before the storm, too good to last. Conflicts continued, and the one conflict that sullied Myanmar's reputation was in the Rakhine State (formerly known as Arakan), where the Rohingya community was targeted. Myanmar does not recognize Rohingya as their own citizens, calling them "Bengalis," saying they belong to Bangladesh.

At the same time, Bangladesh doesn't want them either.

Myanmar's Buddhist monks and elite call them foreigners; in a book about Burma's ethnic communities, Aung San Suu Kyi does not list or describe Rohingyas.

I happen to speak Bengali. When I met Rohingyas in Myanmar, I attempted to talk to them in Bengali, but not one of them could understand me. I know the variations between the Bengali spoken in India (which I know well), that spoken in Bangladesh (which I know less well but can understand), and the dialect in Chittagong, which is hard for me to follow.

When I visited Rohingya refugee camps in Kutupalong, near Chittagong and Cox's Bazar, I spoke to the refugees in broken Hindi, which they understood because they had watched so many Bollywood films. My Bengali was alien to them; their Rohingya language was closer to Burma and its languages than I could ever attempt to understand.

Rohingyas are Muslim, not Buddhist, and the majority faith in Myanmar is Buddhism. While Buddhism is known as a pacifist faith, many Myanmar monks, in particular one called Wirathu, are known to be acerbic and deeply divisive. They have spoken of Rohingyas in dehumanizing terms, encouraging the army to crack down on them. The exodus from Myanmar into Bangladesh and Malaysia, in rickety, ramshackle boats crossing the Bay of Bengal, continues. When Myanmar was taken to the international court of justice, Aung San Suu Kyi, who held the office of state counsellor, defended Myanmar. Her actions deeply alienated her from her supporters abroad, and at least two European cities rescinded honors they had bestowed upon her in the past. She did not seem to mind. Reporters from Reuters who documented a mass killing—Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo—were arrested and jailed for months without a fair trial. Other journalists, writers, and dissidents have been jailed, tortured, and, in some instances, disappeared.

The Rohingya crisis escalated in 2017 when the military launched a brutal crackdown in response to attacks by Rohingya insurgents. It has drawn international condemnation and raised questions about Myanmar's commitment to human rights and democracy. The military's actions, including mass killings, rape, and the burning of villages, have been described by the United Nations as ethnic cleansing and possibly genocide.

Aung San Suu Kyi's response to the Rohingya crisis has

been widely criticized, with many accusing her of failing to speak out against the military's atrocities and of complicity in the violence. But her defense of the military did not endear her to the generals who appear to have regarded it as self-serving politicking on her part, rather than as an effort to protect their interests. After Aung San Suu Kyi swept parliamentary elections in November 2020, the military prevented her party from forming the government in February 2021. The parliament was disbanded, she was arrested once again, and a military coup destroyed hopes of the nascent democracy, plunging Myanmar back into political turmoil and sparking widespread protests and civil unrest.

One of my last visits to Yangon, as Rangoon is now known, was in early 2017. I met several writers, including Saw Wai, the poet who had been jailed during the earlier dictatorship. I had worked on a project with my dear friend, the artist Shilpa Gupta, which led to her installation *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*, and later, Shilpa and I collaborated on editing a book which was published thanks to the generous support of the National Endowment for the Arts. The book is available at Amant. Saw Wai was not only featured in the collection, but he wrote a special piece for us, expressing his outrage over the latest assault on Myanmar's democracy, the 2021 coup. We were privileged to publish this piece, as well as an essay by Ma Thida, who took over for me as the chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee in 2021. We are glad that both are safe in western cities now, as are several other journalists and writers. But we remain profoundly concerned about the many, many more who remain in Myanmar, resisting a cruel, unjust regime.

Myanmar's history has been characterized by conflict, repression, and human rights abuses. From struggles for independence and ethnic autonomy to decades of military rule and the ongoing Rohingya crisis, the country has faced numerous challenges in its quest for stability and democracy.

While the recent transition to civilian rule gave some hope, Myanmar's journey towards peace and justice remains far from complete. The international community must continue to support the aspirations of the Burmese people for freedom, democracy, and human rights, and hold the government and military accountable. Only through genuine reconciliation and respect for the rights of all citizens can Myanmar hope for a better future.



Shilpa Gupta, *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*, 2017-18. Sound installation with 100 speakers, microphones, printed text, and metal stands. Co-commissioned by YARAT Contemporary Art Space and Edinburgh Art Festival with support from QAGOMA. Photo by Pat Verbruggen.

SaiWai

Crying Babies from Hell

1/ Can you tell?

Look at those flags from the UN,
Many countries are blind.
No one sees a country swallowed by Hell.

2/ Government

Will make love, or rape
Whether you like it or not,
And boast about.
No one sees a country swallowed by Hell.

3/ Traditional clothes,

Fancy big meetings,
Open the door,
Shut the door,
Handsome profile pictures,
Attend those meetings,
Sex in the hotel,
Dollars falling from the sky,
No one sees a country swallowed by Hell.

4/ Help!, I scream

Pretend to not hear,
Dying human with self-made gun,
So-called government and MPs
Saying "Human Rights!"
Enjoying heterosexual sex.
No one sees a country swallowed by Hell.

5/ Some seer and hearer

Pulling it up from Hell.
Old and crippled,
No feet and no hand, disabled.
Blown out from "Hell Country"
Whatever it is,
Taking a pill called
"We are all we have," every second.
Take it as long as we live,
Dying with side effects every day.
No one sees a country swallowed in Hell.

6/ Oh, Mother of Hell

I'm just a poet,
An artist with no skills,
Not a strong one with a weak heart.
For you and "Hell Country,"
I went to New York City,
Hoping that they'd see (my country),
Hoping that they'd help.
Maybe hope isn't for my country, mother.
Don't they know,
Hellfire will burn and burn for the next one,
Even after it's done with mine (my country).
So, again. . .
With those pills,
"We are all we have"
"People matter"
"You can't do it without us."
Hellfire continues to burn,
Even if 190 countries' flags burn to the ground,
No one sees a country swallowed by Hell.

7/ The world story (the moral of the story) is,
Even if there are more countries from Satan's empire
And almost nothing from God's empire,
God will always win.
Just like you said, mother?
Right, mother?
So, we shall die in peace,
Or in hell.
Because we will win after all.
God's empire will win,
Live or die.
(No one sees a country swallowed by Hell)
(May God see countries in Hell) x 2

Translated from Burmese to English by Caterpillar
on March 17, 2024

Live interpretation from Burmese to English by
Hlaing Wai on Saturday, April 27, 2024

Contributor Biographies

Elizabeth Larison is director of the Arts & Culture Advocacy Program at the National Coalition Against Censorship, leading initiatives to advise and educate artists, writers, playwrights, as well as curators and other cultural intermediaries, in how to address the presentation of controversial works. Elizabeth is also an active member of Don't Delete Art, a collaboration between free speech organizations and activists working to defend the freedom of artistic expression online. With academic degrees in Human Rights (BA) and Curatorial Studies (MA), and over fourteen years of working with and in support of artists and curators, Elizabeth brings a depth of understanding to the fundamental importance of defending artistic expression. Prior to joining NCAC, Elizabeth worked in curatorial, programmatic, and directorial capacities for arts organizations and venues such as Flux Factory, the Park Avenue Armory, the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, and apexart.

Che Gossett is associate director of the Center for Feminist, Queer and Transgender Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and is finishing their final semester

as a postdoctoral scholar at Columbia University. Che is currently completing a political and intellectual biography of queer Japanese American AIDS activist Kiyoshi Kuromiya, which brings the critique of the individuated subject active in Black studies to bear on biography as the literary genre of the human. Che has an article, "The Dark Sublime," on Blackness, aesthetics, oceanic ontology, and the work of John Akomfrah and Sylvia Wynter forthcoming in *Transition Magazine* from the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University this spring.

Gavilán Rayna Russom is an artist, composer, curator, and scholar based in New York City. Over the past two decades she has produced a complex body of works oriented towards providing alternatives to binary thought and fixed modes of categorization. In addition to an extensive discography of recorded music, she has presented solo and collaborative works in performance, video, and installation at a range of international institutions. Since her teens, Rayna has been involved with clubs, artist-run venues, and other "underground" spaces of artistic exchange and

community. She has presented her own work and curated events in and for these spaces for more than thirty years and has consistently advocated for their cultural value in her writing and public speaking. Rayna is the founding director of Voluminous Arts, a cultural organization whose mission is to foreground, nurture, and advance the experimental artistic culture of transgender people and communities. Through Voluminous Arts she co-curated and co-directed the summer 2023 residency program "Bloom How You Must, Wild Until We Are Free" at the Center for Art, Research, and Alliances, as well as the accompanying *Cooler Nights* experimental performance series and *Traces: Sonic and Material* closing exhibition.

Salil Tripathi was born in Mumbai and lives in New York. He is an award-winning journalist and the author of three works of non-fiction. Salil has reported out of Asia, Europe, and Africa. His articles have appeared in many prominent publications. He studied at the University of Bombay and at the Tuck School at Dartmouth College, and served as chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee and is now a member of its board.

Saw Wai is a poet, artist, and activist based in Buffalo, New York. He is a Buddhist. His first short story was printed in the magazine *Sar Pay Lote Thar* in 1984. In 1996, he received the Readers' Choice Award for his poetry, published in the magazine *Ma Har Thi*. In 2000, he received the Readers' Choice Award for his poetry in the magazine *Cherry*. In 2008, he received the PEN Award from the World Association of Writers. In 2009, he received an award from the Human Rights Watch, US. and was a finalist for the Freedom to Create Imprisoned Artist Prize. He has published three collective works of poems and one satire book. In 2008, he was imprisoned for 28 months and 5 days for his poem that criticized the Senior-General. During the military occupation of Myanmar, almost a hundred of his poems were censored. He is also doing installation art and performance art shows in Myanmar and in ASEAN countries. With Myanmar's current government, he received permission to write articles and poems again. Being a member of PEN Myanmar, he is involved with the social networks and micro-political movements in many regions of Myanmar.

Credits

This publication was developed on the occasion of *Silencing: An Assembly on Censorship* on Saturday, April 27, 2024. Organized in conjunction with Shilpa Gupta's exhibition *I did not tell you what I saw, but only what I dreamt*, October 21, 2023 – April 28, 2024, at Amant, Brooklyn, NY.

Lonti Ebers, Founder and CEO
Nicholas Pilato, Executive Director
Tobi Maier, Chief Curator
Patricia M. Hernández, Associate Curator
Ian Wallace, Associate Curator
Maggie Bamberg, Production Manager
Hannah Marks, Head of Special Projects
Eda Li, Digital and Design Associate
Melissa I. Rodríguez, Operations and Finance Assistant
Anna Lyman, Siena Residency Coordinator
Anthony Limauro, Head of Installations
Maggie Loane, Senior Visitor Engagement Representative
Jaira Placide, Curatorial Fellow
Aristilde Kirby, Bookstore Associate
Jesús Charris, Event Assistant and Visitor Engagement Representative
Joseph Blanco, Visitor Engagement Representative
Gracie Jeffers, Visitor Engagement Representative
Jesse Prince, Visitor Engagement Representative
Amara Egenti, Visitor Engagement Representative
Ize Commers, Visitor Engagement Representative
Abigail Gordon, Visitor Engagement Representative
Annie Winter, Visitor Engagement Representative
Jahkaya Walcott, Visitor Engagement Representative

Special thanks to the National Coalition Against Censorship's Art & Culture Advocacy Program for their generous collaboration and support.

Amant is a non-profit arts organization in Brooklyn, NY. Founded in 2019, we are a non-collecting institution that fosters experimentation and dialogue through exhibitions, public programs, and artist residencies.

Galleries

Thursday–Sunday

12pm–6pm

Café & Bookstore

Monday–Wednesday,

9am–2pm

Thursday–Sunday

9am–6pm

Free to all

