

Event: Socialism 2022 conference, Chicago
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Panel: Study and Struggle sponsoring Prison Is Censorship
Charlotte Rosen, moderator
Jessica Phoenix Sylvia
Robert Saleem Holbrook
Kim Wilson
Stevie Wilson
Safear Ness
Bryant Arroyo

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Thanks, everyone. We're going to get started. Before we begin, I just wanted to remind everyone that all Socialism conference attendees are required to wear a mask, fully covering the nose and mouth, while indoors at the conference spaces, including hallways and meeting rooms. Speakers in the front of sessions may remove their masks in order to deliver presentations, but only while actively speaking. Audience members are still required to wear masks even while asking questions or making comments. That policy is in place to protect all of us, especially immunocompromised folks from the risk of contracting Covid.

Now, on to our panel for this afternoon, "Prison is Censorship." My name is Charlotte Rosen. I'm an abolitionist and historian based here in Chicago, and a member of the organization sponsoring today's panel, Study and Struggle.

We are a collective that organizes towards abolition through political education and mutual aid and community building across prison walls. The focus currently [is] on organizing in Mississippi. We encourage folks in the audience today to learn more about our work. You can check out our fall 2022 curriculum and sign up to be a pan pal of an incarcerated person in Mississippi at studyandstruggle.com. You can also talk to Mariana afterwards who will help sign you up today if you want.

I'm really honored to be moderating this panel on issues that I think many of us in the free world don't really understand and are perhaps not angry enough about, and that is the crisis of prison censorship.

Our panelists today will be discussing the numerous ways that criminalize people struggling to receive and produce knowledge while inside, and the effects of this censorship on their organizing and their relationships.

We'll also touch on the insidious digitization of mail in prisons, such that imprisoned people in a number of states can no longer receive physical mail, and are subjected to heightened surveillance by [a? 00:02:06] private prison communications firm that, of course, also makes millions off of these physical mail bans.

In an effort to disrupt one of the most fundamental ways of prison censors and prison people, [unintelligible 00:02:20] extremely difficult if not impossible for them to

participate in conferences such as this one, we developed a conference format that maximizes participation from currently imprisoned people.

Just to give you an overview how today's going to work, in 15 minutes, one of our panelists, Stevie Wilson, who's also in many ways the brainchild behind this entire panel—coming up with the questions and the framework—will be joining us via Zoom from a state correctional institution, Camp Hill, which is in Pennsylvania.

Another one of our panelists, Kim Wilson, will also be joining us virtually [unintelligible 00:02:55] person.

They will both be with us for 45 minutes, and during that time, I hope we'll have the bulk of our discussion. After we depart, we'll then also have an around 15-minute recording with two of our panelists who are also imprisoned in Pennsylvania, Safear and Bryant. We'll hear their prerecorded thoughts on prison censorship.

Then the panelists who are with us here today, Jess and Saleem, will share closing reflections, and it will end. We apologize that as a result of this hybrid format, there's not really going to be time for substantial discussion or Q&A. I really apologize about that, but definitely encourage folks to stick around and chat if you have additional questions for the panelists certainly. Thank you in advance for your patience as we manage all the moving pieces of this. Hopefully, we won't have any major issues.

Next, I'm going to go and introduce everyone up front before we get into the discussion. First, going in alphabetical order, we have Bryant Arroyo who you'll hear from later. He is currently in prison at SCI Coal Township.

He is, according to friend and mentor [Ramia Jamal? 00:04:05], the first jailhouse environmentalist, a title he earned after successfully organizing his fellow prisoners against the construction of a \$400 million coal gasification plant that was slated to built 300 feet from SCI Frackville. This plant would have poisoned the environment around the prison as well as the nearby community. Because of [unintelligible 00:04:28] activism, the project was ultimately scrapped.

Sentenced to life without the possibility of parole for a crime he did not commit, Arroyo has since fought tirelessly for the betterment of himself and his fellow prisoners. He's currently fighting against the for-profit privatization of the prison mail system, which we'll talk about more today, encouraging fellow prisoners to boycott the mail service entirely since the 2018 implementation of these draconian new policies in which prisoner mail is sent to a for-profit third party where it is opened, photocopied and then stored on private servers.

Next, we have Robert Saleem Holbrook, who is [unintelligible 00:05:07] here today, who is the executive director of the Abolitionist Law Center, a law practice dedicated to ending race- and class-based discrimination and the criminal justice system and all

forms of state violence. He's also a lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

He is cofounder of the Human Rights Coalition, an organization with chapters in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh that is composed of family members of prisoners that advocate on behalf of the civil and human rights of prisoners. He is also a cofounder of the Coalition to Abolish Death by Incarceration in Pennsylvania. [Unintelligible 00:05:55] without [unintelligible] sentences.

While incarcerated, Saleem wrote extensively on prison abuse, social injustice, state violence and juveniles charged and sentenced as adults. His writings were featured in *Truthout*, *The Appeal*, *San Francisco Bay View* and *Solitary Watch*.

He was released from prison in 2018 after spending over two decades incarcerated for an offense he was convicted of as a child offender.

Next, we have Safear Ness. Safear is a [white? 00:06:25] Mexican Muslim practicing prison abolition at SCI Coal Township in Pennsylvania. Safear grew up in Philadelphia and has spent all of their adult life under various forms of [incarceration? 00:06:37]. Although they are held captive, they have transformed their cell into a learning center, and education is now their weapon of resistance.

Next, we have Jessica Phoenix Sylvia, who is with us here today. She is a formerly incarcerated trans woman, writer, speaker, community organizer, abolitionist and advocate for the humanization of trans prisoners. She's a self-described radical revolutionary, abolitionist thinker and musical artist.

Her writing and reporting characteristically ascribes to consciousness and the cultural reflections that highlight self-determination, resilience and resistance.

She considers herself an abolitionist first and a writer second, preferring to write only about that which supports the work that she values with the greatest passion for writing about the racist, gendered, ableist, colonial violence of the criminal legal system.

She focuses her work on power over powerlessness, [unintelligible 00:07:40] transformative justice solutions that build community accountability.

Next, we have Dr. Kim Wilson, who will be joining us via Zoom in a second. She is an educator, organizer, writer and artist. She's also co-host and producer of *Beyond Prisons*, a really great podcast on incarceration and prison abolition.

Kim has three adult children, a daughter and two sons, and both of her sons are currently sentenced to life in prison.

She has a PhD in urban affairs and public policy, and more than two decades of teaching and facilitation experience. Her current work focuses on creating abolitionist

media and teaching others how to use storytelling, research data and community voices in the fight for human rights.

Finally, we have Stephen Wilson, or Stevie Wilson. He is currently incarcerated, a Black, queer writer, activist and student. For over two decades, he was active in the [unintelligible 00:08:43] community and worked as an HIV prevention specialist and community organizer.

His work and practice inherit teachings from prison abolition, transformative and racial justice, Black feminist theory and gender and queer theory, and liberation.

Specifically, he works to end cycles of poverty and incarceration that have plagued his community. He worked to expose and dismantle the prison industrial complex, and [to build? 00:09:09] a portal in which we deal with harm without teaching or exiling other people.

While we wait for Stevie and Kim to join us on Zoom, perhaps we can get started with our first question, and then we'll loop in Stevie and Kim when they join us.

One thing that I talked about with Stevie yesterday and prepped for this panel was what we hear about censorship as an issue today, people often think about banning books. But I'm wondering for our panelists here with us today, how would you expand this idea, and what does prison censorship really mean to you?

JESSICA PHOENIX SYLVIA: I'd like to get started. I would think that censorship is more than just thinking about language or ideas. Many things are censored, including bodies. There are people who are kidnapped by body snatchers who, in my eye, are human traffickers, erasing people out of communities, censoring them out of their own community and putting them in prison.

I know that as a trans woman, I've had my body censored. I've had my health care censored. We can see that reproductive rights are censored today. And I would think of there are folks who want to actually criminalize health care for trans kids, which I think of as almost a preemptive genocide, which would erase a whole generation of individuals collectively, and generations of people cannot exist.

Censorship is very serious. I look back through the history of this country with censorship, when Native Americans couldn't actually speak their language, and couldn't practice their culture; where Black folks were not allowed to read or write.

Thinking about censorship and how it supports the criminal legal system today in mass incarceration, it's very serious. It's more than just language. It's more than just ideas. It is about bodies. It is about actions and it functions through time and through space in various ways.

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Great. Thank you so much. I just want to pause briefly to welcome Kim and Stevie. Can you hear us okay? Okay, cool. So, just so we [unintelligible 00:11:38] you both in, hopefully you can jump into that question as well. I just picked us up with a question about, what does prison censorship mean to you? What [unintelligible 00:11:50] when you think about censorship? Maybe it's just [unintelligible 00:11:53], but what it actually means. That's the question that we're discussing, and if you all want to jump in, go for it. Or Saleem, you can talk to it as well.

ROBERT SALEEM HOLBROOK: Yeah, I think that everything Sylvia had said, I agree with, [so I won't talk too much on that? 00:12:11]. I think that censorship in prison serves several purposes.

One is to erase prisoners, to erase your identity. Also, to disappear you. Prison is very adept at disappearing you, not just from society or your community or your neighborhood, but even from within the prison itself.

There's many layers of the hole that you could be disappeared in—for political content, political speech, challenging the prison, or for being different. Being queer or trans in prison can get you disappeared because that's not something that the prison system wants to deal with. [Unintelligible 00:12:56] in the prison system itself. What's convenient is disappearing people places people the hole.

That's the political side of it. If you're a prisoner that's politicized, if you were influenced by George Jackson, if you were influenced by the Black prison movement, you're going to be disappeared. You're going to be censored. You're going to be contained. You're going to be isolated.

But there's another side of it, the human side. There's self-censorship that you do to yourself. I tell people that dealing with the repression and prison censorship was something that was very easy for me to deal with. Going into prison at the age of 16, I had adjusted to that. That was my norm. Prison, cells, isolation, things like that.

But what was abnormal for me was censoring a lot of the human feelings. It's hard to explain, but I felt that being in prison, I had to kill a part of me, and I feel like every prisoner when you go in there, you kind of do that to yourself, censor yourself. You disappear a part of yourself because prison is not an environment where you can really have feelings about other people. You dehumanize yourself.

Even today, having been out of those cages for five years, after 27 years in prison, I still have to find ways to rediscover those parts of me that I censored, those parts of me that I erased in those 27 years in prison in order for me to survive, particularly the way I did my time. I did my time in a very particular way. I did it on my own terms, so I lost a lot, and so it's always a process of recovering that.

When I think back on those 27 years—10 years in solitary confinement, being transferred 20-something times to different prisons across the state, being in cells with

no clothes for three or four days with the guards pumping in cold air to my cell—I've recovered from all of that. That is what it was. I dealt with it.

What lingers most is the self-censorship, what I took away from myself that I struggle to recover every day. That's also like the human side of the censorship that we all go through as prisoners, so I think I wanted to share my thoughts on that because that doesn't stop at the door when you're leaving. It's something that you continue to carry on.

If you listen to political prisoners all across the country and Uruguay in South Africa, New York who were released from prison, you'll see that many of those [unintelligible 00: 15:48] say that that was the most brutal part of the prison experience, censoring themselves, like Marilyn Buck talks about as well.

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Stevie or Kim, do either one of you—yeah, Stevie, do you want to go first? Okay. Stevie, do you want to try talking? Can you hear me, Stevie?

STEVIE WILSON: I can hear you.

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Perfect.

STEVIE WILSON: I wanted Kim to go first [unintelligible 00:16:27].

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Okay.

KIM WILSON: Do you mind repeating the question? I caught the tail end.

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Sure. It was, what does prison censorship mean to you? Maybe how does it go beyond just simple discussion about banned books, for example.

KIM WILSON: Okay. Wow, that's a big question, and I think part of what I think about in terms of prison censorship is the docile bodies are easier to discipline. Making sure that people don't have access to legal materials, medical, information, anything that has to do with race, civil rights. Anything. Politics. Talking about the most pressing issues of our time. All of those things are being banned and have been banned from prisons across the country for decades.

Restricting that access makes it really difficult for people to self-educate. That's also connected to something that I've been thinking about and have had this conversation with a few people around higher ed in prison.

It's also the decline or the complete [chuckles] elimination of higher education in prison happening around the same time as many of these books have been banned or many books have been banned.

It's not just limited to books. We're focusing on books in part because at the end of September, we always talk about Banned Books Week, or many of us observe Banned Books Week.

We don't tend to talk about it in the context of prison. We don't tend to think about banned books in the context of prisoner rights and what the implications of that are beyond just the so and so couldn't get this book. This is really a systemic problem that we're seeing across the country.

The rules are arbitrary and nonsensical. They vary from state to state. They vary between the federal prisons and state prisons. It varies also between state prisons and jails.

The decisions are being left up to individuals, either in the mailroom or other prison officials who are, I would argue, ill-equipped on how best to make decisions about what prisoners should have access to.

I was refreshing my memory in reading a piece in preparation for today's panel around the idea of censorship in pulse in American prisons, and how this is such an under-discussed problem across the board. It's not something that [unintelligible 00:19:56] to be part of this panel and on this panel with amazing folks.

This is probably the first panel that I've been on that is actually focused on censorship in prison, and that's very telling, considering that we talk about prisons so much. It may appear or show up as a topic or a subset within somebody else's prison presentation, but I believe, in all my years of organizing, this is the very first panel that I've been on that has focused on censorship in prison, and it's not, like I said earlier, limited to books.

I think it's really important for us to recognize as [it's being pointed out? 00:20:46] how this destroys individuals, but also how it destroys ties between people and their communities. Hopefully, we can get a little deeper into that. I could go on and on about this, but I'd love to hear what Stevie has to say.

STEVIE WILSON: Thank you. First of all, I want to thank you for just being a part of a panel once again. I agree with what Kim said about should be [unintelligible 00:21:30].

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Stevie? I think you're a little bit quiet, so if you could just project as much as possible, that would be great.

STEVIE WILSON: Can you hear me now?

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Yeah, that's better. Thanks.

STEVIE WILSON: I just want to reiterate what Kim was talking about prison. For instance, censorship not being a topic that we talk about quite often. We could talk

more prisons, we could talk about what's happening, [unintelligible 00:21:55] we're not talking about. That's true. And to me, censorship is actually the denial of our connection.

[Unintelligible 00:22:07] about the fact that I cannot [unintelligible]. I cannot be in a relationship [unless the people get inside? 00:22:15]. That's [unintelligible] all of us.

[Unintelligible 00:22:19] and be yourself. [Unintelligible 00:22:21] yourself. To me, censorship is about [unintelligible 00:22:26] relationships.

This is how they're able to keep us low-profile and instead, to [unintelligible 00:22:40]. I think that [unintelligible 00:22:43] as far as access. Emailed Garrett.

Stevie Wilson: [22:00] Censorship is actually the denial of connection. I cannot be in relationship with people on the outside. I cannot be in relationship with people inside. It means you cannot learn about yourself and educate yourself (inaudible) and to me its about prison censorship being about our denial of connection and relationship.

This is how they are able to keep us docile (comments about form and procedure) These are the ways that their censorship is affecting us. And I want to talk about some of what we cannot access. We cannot access the internet. Also its about form (comments about particular form) pdf form...and it has to be in a particular form for me to get it. And there is a particular procedure. So people on the outside have to know exactly where to send it and what color of envelope, and how many pages can you put into this envelope and all these things.

So you know, when I think about it, access, content, form, and procedure and these are the ways they are restricting access to us on the inside.

Also, another thing that we are not talking about: (pauses) Who are the censors? Okay, and I say that because (comments about banned books) There was a really good article and advertisement for the (inaudible) Read program. They are actually coming into prisons, Department of Corrections, and the whole idea is that they are giving people access to books, more access to books. And it really blew my mind because they ARE the censors. The reason people don't have access to books is the Department of Corrections.

So (comments about funding) and the Department of Corrections is supposedly giving people more access to books, when really it is the Department of Corrections that is the reason people can't have books. And so I think the people in charge of that program should ask their partners at the Department of Corrections why we can't get Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and why we can't get certain books. You know it's supposed to be about freedom of expression and transformative change. Then why can't we get these books?

So we need to think about the censors, these are our targets. So I think we should talk about the censors, access, form, and sometimes procedure.

And appeal, it costs me ten dollars to appeal and only the person who the book is sent to can appeal. Forty three percent of the books appealed at (this prison) in the last eighteen months have been sent to me personally. Forty three percent of the books appealed over the last eighteen months at this prison have been addressed to me, personally. I have to appeal each and every one. If I don't appeal it, that means no one can ever get that book again. That is the rule.

So that means that if I don't appeal it and someone else goes to buy it, it will already be banned. So I must appeal it, and that costs money. I must appeal and that costs time, energy, and money to do it.

So we talk about the censors, and what can we do? What can we do about this problem? What kind of action can we take to stop this problem?

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Thanks so much, Stevie. I'm definitely going to make sure we have time to talk about, what can we do about what folks in this room knew, so that people feel like they have something to take away from this that's actionable, and I want to hear folks' thoughts on that.

But maybe to pick up on some of the themes of what you all just said and take it back a step, for folks who maybe don't know, what kinds of materials are censored? What is the process there?

You mentioned, Stevie, being able to appeal, but it costs money. Or I think some folks in here have also referenced repression, repression in response to attempting to perhaps get knowledge out into the world or something like that.

I just want to open that question to folks on the panel. Yeah, Jess, do you want to take it away?

JESSICA PHOENIX SYLVIA: Sure. I'd love to start with that. I had an issue where I was trying to start an intersectional feminist course in a men's prison with a comrade. When I had the material sent into me, a staff member rejected it, so I appealed, and I won.

However, that same staff member appealed that decision, and I couldn't figure out how to actually navigate the system, who to appeal to within a strict timeline. I had about three days to figure it out.

Restricting my access to that wasn't just about me getting access to that. It was about starting an intersectional feminist course so that we could talk about gender-based, racialized violence inside a men's prison. So, restricting my access to that, we can't have those conversations.

I just want to really think about why is it that having a conversation about racialized, gendered violence is such a threat to people. That's a very interesting question. I've seen mostly Black feminist material being rejected more than anything else.

Really, in my eyes, I think that what I've seen in terms of wanting to support penological objectives, it ends up being like a collateral consequence of a ban on Black feminists.

And, of course, I've seen that it's very random sometimes. You get, say, Simone de Beauvoir. I remember she was banned in Washington State prisons. Simone de Beauvoir, the pornographer. Why? Because the title is *The Second Sex*, And I wanted to study philosophy, wanting to study Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir. At least I still have Butler. I don't understand half of what she wrote. [laughter]

Then there's the other idea that we can get farther down in. What's happened? Who's actually banning material? What's actually happening, say, what the policies are, but then, what's actually happening, and we get into things I will probably speak on later—the exhaustion loop, what happens in non-distribution so that [unintelligible 00:30:52] folks who are told to give us material but it doesn't actually ever get there.

It was my experience that any reading material that promoted self-agency or self-expression, or anytime the prisoners decided to define themselves, that's more likely when your material was censored.

The warden had several reasons. One, the system [for a warrant? a warden? 00:31:26] did not want prisoners defining themselves. I remember vividly it being very clear to us that “You're a murderer.” “You're a robber.” “You're not even that. You're just BL5140. That's your number. You're here to just [get processed? 00:31:40].”

Once we took that power back, and said, “Actually, I'm not a number,” and you start defining yourself, that's when you're going to be targeted. That's when your political material is going to be censored, your person is going to be censored. [A lot of our writings in prison? Allowing our writings in prison? 00:32:01], really, it was almost comical that for years, I wrote for different publications, and those publications would be banned in the prison I was in for revenge.

They would tell me “It's contraband. You can't have this magazine because this article that you wrote is in it.” [laughter] And I would say, “I have the draft in my cell.” [laughter]

It's funny, but it was just really ridiculous, because they would say, “This is advocating that government is promoting violence.” Then I'd send them the article that I wrote and said, “Where in that page do you see that?”

It never was about being threatening, about promoting or advocating insurrection or violence, or one of the catch terms that they'd use. It was just, "Motherfucker, how you dare you have something to say that we didn't sanction?" In opposition to us.

Then it's whims of anyone. This is really one of the most ridiculous things because in all the years of different prisons I've been in, you have a mailroom supervisor. We filed a lawsuit when I was still on the inside. I actually drafted it, and it was the Abolitionist Law Center's second lawsuit. We won the lawsuit. It was about prisoner censorship.

But one of the things that we learned from the depositions of the mailroom supervisors [is] these are not incredibly bright people. [laughter] I'm serious! It really makes me think of the banality of evil term that you hear about; how the person that was censoring all of my writings, just like really disappearing me, making sure other prisoners did not have anything that dealt with Black history, anything that was a book, like Joy James, *The New Abolitionists*, anything about slave revolts, was just being denied.

It was like a 60-year-old grandmother, who was a very gentle, pleasant person in the deposition, but her mindset was "These people broke the law. They don't have the right to criticize the state. They don't have the right to define themselves. They don't have the right to read stuff that criticizes America."

That's one of the amazing things, but then you could go to a prison like SCI Greene where I was at where the mailroom supervisor was someone that was a former Marine reservist in the Army, the military, so he was clearcut that "We're keeping material out of here that these prisoners are going to cause an insurrection, going to try to escape, going to mobilize in the yard. [Unintelligible 00:35:10] of political prisoners going to raise an army. They're organizing to take the prison over," which really was just a bunch of nonsense.

But he was trained to see us as that. And this is what the prison system had done. It's really amazing how they just take these people, and they just process them into the system. In a sense, they become cogs in the machine, too.

We won that lawsuit, though, and I think that was a lesson because we had to do that ourselves. I'm not going to name a lot of groups out there, but they weren't really interested in taking on prison censorship against the Department of Corrections. I think the reason why we won that case [unintelligible 00:35:52].

And it did open up some breathing space, because I'm going to tell you that as long as there's prisons, there's going to be censorship. As an abolitionist, I don't believe that litigation is going to bring about the end of prisons. The only thing that's going to bring about the end of prisons, policing and the social contract that has governed the United States and these repressive institutions is social upheaval.

But the whole purpose of litigation when I was on the inside against censorship was to give us breathing space so that we could organize inside. Because this literature that

we were getting, these books, this was our ability to have political education, political classes. So, we were able to [want some? 00:36:37] breathing space.

But in America, rights that you have are only rights that you can keep and hold. So, in Stevie's case what he's going through right now, the prison is going to censor you. Regardless of whether you beat them in court, they're going to continue to try and extinguish that light from coming into the prison system.

One of the ironies about the Holbrook [v. Deloy case? 00:36:59] that I like to tell people about is that when we won the case, we were able to settle the case right before I came home. One of the good things that came about that case was people on the outside could now challenge censorship by the Department of Corrections, but a lot of people don't know about it, with books, authors, publishers. They can challenge if their book is censored, in addition to people on the inside, as well as their families. But it's just that people don't really have this information.

Also, in winning that case, in the settlement one of the ironies is that all that labor the Department of Corrections [for them?] censoring writing, the Human Rights Coalition writings. The money that we got from the censorship we used to pay my salary the first year at the Abolitionist Law Center when I came home.

I always find that there's a way of us expropriating resources from the state in order for us to build up the formations that we need to continue to push back, but I want to be clear that regardless of how many cases we bring against the prisons, the prisons are going to continue to censor reading material. They're going to continue to censor and disappear prisoners because that's the purpose of prisons.

As abolitionists, we shouldn't lose focus of this, but our challenges to censorship are advocacy, organizing against it and going around it, under it, is all [unintelligible 00:38:38] to creating a breathing space for our people on the inside so that they can mobilize, they can organize. More importantly, they can define themselves, discover themselves, discover their politics, and discover the principles that they want to live by, and the society they want to live by.

[Here? 00:38:55] is also in there because I like to tell people that we also have a society in there. We didn't allow the prison system just to have us processed and do the system as numbers. We created our own society and values inside that system that tried to suppress that and take us out of civic engagement.

STEVIE WILSON: I want to say thank you, first of all, to Saleem Holbrook for those words. Can you hear me?

SALEEM HOLBROOK: Yes, sir.

STEVIE WILSON: Thanks Saleem. You were locked up for a really long time. Thanks for all your work and the word you continue to do.

When you think about the people who decide what I can read it blows my mind. Some of my very own writing, some of my very own work, I can't have. The people who are making these decisions are very unintelligent.

The book *The Revolution Starts at Home*, which is very well-known in Abolition and transformative justice circles. They said that I can't have the book because it says revolution in the title. Anything with Black-Black Freedom Struggle-and anything that says Black Panther, because they say that the Black Panthers are a security threat group. Are you serious? So,that this is what's going on.

(inaudible- Stevie comments about his property being destroyed and rebuying books)

STEVIE WILSON: The people making these decisions are rural conservative Trump supporters and they are dictating what urban Black and brown people can read and they are unfamiliar and don't know the material. They see one word and it's banned. Radical-banned, revolution is banned. Black,that is banned. And this has been an issue. And I think about the situation I am currently going through, and Jess was talking about non-distribution. Even when I win, they don't give me the book. Even when I win, they don't give me my mail. [inaudible]

The problem with the prison regime is that they end up supporting each other's decisions. They don't want to challenge each other. So when the mailroom person says no, they rubber stamp it.

When Jess says, why are they so afraid, what are they so afraid of if we read this material? Like Saleem said, it is really about organizing, connecting, finding ways of growing. They really don't want that to happen. We cannot go forward without a political education if we are going to organize, and they know that we need these things. They know that we need these things to move forward. Well, we gotta find a way to get around them.

This is what our outside allies can do is target issues and people who are a problem and put pressure on them. I read recently that half the book challenges in 2021 were actually from elected state officials. So it is not all about the review board or the librarian, but elected officials. SO in identifying what is the problem or who can we put pressure on or leverage power, elected officials are making a big deal about books.

[inaudible] Why can't we read [inaudible book title]? My education was taken from me, can't have it. The top ten books that were challenged and removed by the ALA are books about issues of people of color or non binary. So who is being erased? WHY can't we talk about the issues? What is the problem?

So what is happening with prison censorship can be connected to what is going on out there. Those populations are the ones that are marginalized inside. You go to the library you will rarely find any books dealing with queer and trans issues. You are not gonna

find a book about the Black freedom struggle. You are gonna find a book about MLK and that is about it. So you talk about the issues and what happened in the past and what is happening now and connecting it to the past and connecting with people. They don't want that to happen.

The other thing I wanted to say is that Saleem was a part of the program [Address It?] It was a great program that was started and we used the course reader for the study group. After it was already approved I had to fight at [this prison] after it was already approved, to get it all over again, the eight course reader.

Anything that is gonna help you grow, change, and connect with people, they are like no you can't have it, and it would be the most ridiculous reason. They don't want people to grow and transform. They don't want to give people the opportunity to change. We have to fight for that.

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Thank you, Stevie. Saleem, did you want to quickly . . . ?

SALEEM HOLBROOK: Yeah, I just real quick wanted to touch on that or address it. First, I'm glad you had the chance to [think? 00:47:23] that. I didn't know that you went through those courses, but we put those courses together because of the censorship we were going through in prison. We were not able to organize together. We weren't able to congregate together for political education. A lot of us were in solitary confinement or in another prison that we put this correspondence course together that was able to serve prisoners all across the state and get around the censorship.

But, like I said, they're always going to come back. We had to fight and Stevie [unintelligible 00:47:57], but I'm really glad that you were able to take that. But also, we talk a lot about prison censorship, but we should definitely uplift when prisoners get around it. That was the way of us getting around it and beating it. That was a way of us politicizing not just each other but our outside supporters. It was about relationship building all across the country.

Actually, that was something that was really more local in Pennsylvania. When I see what Stevie and Charlotte are doing now with Study and Struggle, it's national, so it's really just great to see it explode larger. Whereas something like that we set out close to 13, 14 years ago. It was like 2010 was really when we were at SCI Greene, a supermax prison.

Prisoners that were literally 100 yards from me, I could never see because that's how the prison was set up that we couldn't interact with each other, so we had to figure out a way that we could politically educate each other, correspond with each other, and dialog with each other. We had to actually go to people on the outside to have that material sent back into the prisons.

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Kim, I want to give you a chance to speak, but also, just noting that we have 10 minutes left on Zoom, so maybe, Kim, you want to jump in. Also, we'll go to Stevie next. But if both of you want to maybe talk a little bit about what folks can do, like some strategies, or that there's a responding and resisting and supporting people inside who are dealing with censorship, that would be great. Then we'll bring it back to Jess and make sure that we don't get cut off. [laughing] So, Kim, take it away.

KIM WILSON: I just wanted to [acknowledge? 00:49:51] what was already said in terms of the censorship [unintelligible 00:49:57]. I think that one important thing is not to live in a fascist police state. Prisons are not disconnected from what is happening out here.

When we think of prison as a separate place out there, somewhere where we just put people away, that becomes part of the problem. I was in a prison recently where they have literally redecorated, separated the entire prison in the colors of *The Thin Blue Line* flag. [laughing]

People walking into that prison don't know, but the rest of us were terrified, because that's a signal right there as to who matters in that space. When books are banned, when any kind of material is banned, and what Stevie has been describing about his own particular situation, what Saleem was describing about what he went through, and so on and so forth, they target an individual because the point is to keep you distracted.

The whole point is you can't challenge the entire list of books. Texas, for example, has 12,000 books on their list that are banned. You have to challenge every single one of those books.

It's also not about content. I want to dispel this myth that it's only about content. I have spent most of the people on the inside that are blank journals, or journals that they have like little thoughts. Those are banned. Those are banned. So, it's not just about content, and that's part of the fallacy about what materials get in, what materials don't get in.

The other thing I wanted to say real quick, and I know we're very short on time. I don't know if there's a way we can call back in for the remainder of the session, Charlotte, but we at least want you to know. It's that this notion that this is about security. This is not about security. Security is the pretext that they use to continue to ban books and all the materials; that somehow these materials are a threat; that a child's drawing, because it's done with crayons or something and, I don't know, people are in their homes melting K2 into a children's book page or something, and that's what's getting drugs in.

This is nonsense. This nonsense. This is not how drugs are entering prison, contraband is entering prison, and so on and so forth. We've talked about that in other contexts.

I can go on, but I want to give Stevie time because I know, again, [unintelligible 00:52:59], and if there's no way for me to join back in, even if it's just [unintelligible 00:53:04].

STEVIE WILSON: As this panel moves on, I really want to think about what can we do? We know that Banned Books Week is coming up and I really want to talk about what can we actually do? We can create more awareness, because as Kim has said, it's not just about content.

We can talk about some of the what...white supremacist text is allowed in but you can't have a book about The Black Panthers. You can't have a book about Black Panthers and you can't have the book Black Panther because it's about a Black messiah, like it must be about Fred Hampton or something, right? (laughter)

So I really do want to talk about what we can do about censorship. (Thanks Saleem and mentions a workshop and a website that are inaudible) (comments about labor survey and a website/download the survey) from the perspective of incarcerated people...

(Thanks everyone and applause) I want to say the definition of censor is they know more and think you ought to. People that know more and think you ought to. Okay, and let's keep it about acquisition and production. And about relationships and connection. (Stevie makes goodbyes and applause) 57:14

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Kim, we do have three minutes if you want to add. Just keep going with whatever you want, really.

KIM WILSON: I always write notes and always have, way more notes than I'm ever going to be able to touch on. But I think that one of the places to turn to the Prison Legal News. They have done a tremendous amount of work. They have a non-profit actually that focuses on prison censorship.

Another resource there for people to check out is the American Library Association, which tracks banned books. They also have a vast list of resources. They've also developed a model for prison libraries, which they argue should model what is happening in libraries on the outside. Unfortunately, libraries are under-resourced because we all know who the primary users of libraries are, so that also makes sense.

But also, I wanted to go back to the point that I made earlier about the connection between the censorship and also higher ed in prisons, because I think that that's something that, for a lot of people, I know that there are people there who are part of, run, or been through college programs in prison that that's something to also have on their radar.

[Unintelligible 00:58:52], but there's no way to decouple the censorship of books from prison education. I can say that. I'm also very, very tired right now, so my apologies for that.

I don't know what else to say. No, I do know what I want to say. I think that one of the things that I've often seen when we're talking about censorship amongst our own [unintelligible 00:59:21] is that we tend to focus on incarcerated men, and we exclude women's prisons and the experiences of women or woman identified persons, and what they have to say, what they experience of terms of censorship, because that also matters.

Also, the disability rights issue. Access is not just access to the texts, but it's also for other folks. If you are blind, you're censored. There are books that can't get in. The push to have, in a lot of states, you can only purchase books through certain bona fide vendors, whatever the hell that means. We all know what that is. This really makes it very difficult for a lot of people to get the kinds of books that they want into the prisons.

But also, there are side restrictions on books. You can't send hardbacks. The list goes on and on and on, and it's really hard to keep up, because what's banned one week may not be banned the next week. It's the arbitrariness of it all [laughing] that's also part of the problem.

Obviously, I could go on and on and on, but I'll leave it there.

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Thank you so much, Kim. I'm going to see if we can try to get you in another way, but we're going to turn to showing a video of that school but thank you so much.

I thought that was going to happen soon, but anyway, okay, so give us one second. We're going to get the video up of Safear and Bryant.

BRYANT AROYO: All incoming and outgoing information has to pass through DOC or Department of Corrections gateways. That means every single transfer of information is highly regulated and has to meet stringent standards. They make it difficult. That's the point. They make it difficult to receive information in every way possible.

I can give you an example. If we want to receive books from the outside world, we are able to receive books. But you, as an individual, cannot send me a book. You have to go through the store or through the publisher.

Then, when this book gets sent in, it doesn't come straight to me at the prison. It has to go through a security processing center, which is designed to look through the book materially, but they also have a committee called the Incoming Publication Review Committee, the IPRC. This committee is specifically structured to either let books in or deny and censor books.

Once that happens, once it goes through the security processing center, and then once it's approved by the IPRC, then it will get transferred to the prison [unintelligible 01:02:33], and then hopefully I will receive that book.

That's just one example of the many ways that all transfers of information are just highly surveilled, and all with the intent to be censored. I'll just leave it at that.

BRYANT ARROYO: Most recently, I had a publication from the *San Francisco Bay View*, volume 47, issue 3, and allegedly it was due to pages 13 through 14, and they wrote out Section B, 3B and D, which contains [unintelligible 01:03:15] revolutionary advocacy.

What was the other one? They said revolutionary advocacy and . . . unauthorized organizing. I'm basically I've basically followed my agreements, and I stated, "That is protected under Article 1, Section 7, 9 and 26 of the Pennsylvania Constitution, coupled with the First and Fourteenth Amendment rights of the United States Constitution.

"The First Amendment is the bedrock principle that speech may not be suppressed simply because it expresses ideas that are offensive or disagreeable. Speech may not be banned on the ground that it expresses ideas that offend.

"For this reason, I am requesting for you office to overturn IPRC's arbitrary and unconstitutional decision and provide me with the above-mentioned newspaper."

I went through the appellate stages and then the superintendent is a facility manager, first-level appeal. He denied it and then I went to the central office, and they gave me what they call a grievance referral. It says in here that they needed more time, so they sent it to the Office of Policy Grants and Legislative Affairs. The referral date was 5/26/2022.

Last week some time, I was out doing some phone calls and the officer called me to the desk and said, "Hey, you have a *Bay View*." And it is the March edition that they denied me based on the pages 13 and 14, where they [claimed] it allegedly had something revolutionary and unauthorized group activity.

I went there and I was curious to see what all the fuss was about. When I went, of course, being as Curious George, Garrett, on this page here where my finger's at—can you see it?

GARRETT FELBER: Yeah, "know your rights."

SAFEAR NESS: There you go. They don't want you to know that. [laughing] That's what the denial was all about.

BRYANT ARROYO: The materials most likely to be censored are liberation-based [unintelligible 01:05:59], especially Black Liberation types of material. That's like public enemy number one.

Materials criticizing the prison or police. Materials that are authored by incarcerated people, or formerly incarcerated people, especially prominent authors like George Jackson. All of his books are banned in [PA? 01:06:24] prisons.

Even historical mentions of prison uprisings and organizing, something you might see on the History Channel, even those books are censored and banned at prison.

There's another thing I think a lot of people on the outside don't know. It's that photos are censored, too, meaning that photos that family, friends and comrades send in are often censored.

SAFEAR NESS: I remember years ago I received this photo. It was a group of white kids. They were in a group shot—some people I know—and somebody threw up the peace sign in this photo. And I got the photo. That was no problem. I got the photo.

Just recently, a very close friend of mine sent me a photo. From what he explains to me—because I never actually got the photo—is that it was a group shot. It was after a business dinner. They're all dressed in suits, and somebody threw up the peace sign. But I didn't get this photo.

This photo was censored, and the only difference between the two photos is that the first photo was all white kids and in the second photo, they were Black. So, when the white kid threw up the peace sign, it was cool, but when the Black guy threw up the peace sign, I had a notice of confiscation that said this was a security threat/gang-related material.

GARRETT FELBER: So, for the audience, can you describe prior to that change two or three years ago? When you used to get a book or mail, can you describe what it looked like before the process and then after?

SAFEAR NESS: Just to get, for example, Carole Seligman from the *Socialist Viewpoint*, she's always sent me some beautiful cards. There would be a card with something that she typed and attached to the card inside. Outwardly, it would be like a picture of a blue heron, something that I don't normally see that she got to see, take a picture of, and send.

There were pictures, little pieces of art or drawings that my daughter would send me. Basically, all of that now is if you don't send it, it gets photographed, and it loses its personal human touch to it. Before, there was even a time where you could have them spray some sort of perfume to make the connection more personable. All of that is gone, even the actual pictures.

The pictures that I do have, I have those as relics. There's been a lot of the cards that I do have. Some I held onto, some I've sent home because I don't want to have those lost or destroyed if, in fact, one day, unbeknownst to me, like it happened to me over

there, they picked me up and put me in a hole under investigation for whatever reason. Just in that transaction right there alone, your stuff will end up missing.

GARRETT FELBER: How does censorship affect your relationships?

BRYANT ARROYO: Hm. To keep it a hundred with you, because of censorship, I am no longer able to have a completely authentic relationship with anybody in the free world. There is always a barrier preventing me from being able to completely express myself.

Even in this conversation about censorship, I have to be mindful to censor my own self. Because if I don't, and I say something that does not fit the criteria of what they want me to say, then it's possible that I could receive punishment as a result of that, even in this conversation right here.

Likewise, people in the free world, you yourself know this that when you're talking to an incarcerated person, you have to be mindful of what you're saying because you don't want to say the wrong thing that can get us in trouble.

So, there's always somebody listening and waiting for us to say the wrong thing, and they use the surveillance as a radar for censorship. Like I said, in prison, censorship is meted out with punishment, like going to the hole.

Truly, there's a comrade that I became very close to over the past couple of years. We were building through all these methods that are highly surveilled and censored. We were talking on the phone and messaging, and we got close.

Then, about a year ago, they came up to visit me in person for the first time. In this type of visit, there is no more censorship. There is that ability to have a real, genuine insurrection. All of the things that I couldn't say before—just imagine that. You can have nobody to really connect with. You can't tell anybody your secrets. You can't tell anybody your true inner feelings. You can't talk about your organizing work in detail.

You can't talk about any of these things, and then finally, I was able to do that. Honestly, it was so deep that it really brought tears to my eyes in the midst of this conversation, and they felt the same way. After all this time of finally we can talk, and we can connect. So, with censorship, you can't be your true self.

SAFEAR NESS: I always go back to that one thing that the psychologist taught me in [unintelligible 01:12:41]. He said, "If you fail to learn to read, to write, to understand the English language, you will forever be enslaved." The sad part about it is it's enslaved to imprisonment, to a system that does not want to educate you, and refrains from doing so, and also denies you access to the benefit of what an education would do for you.

In essence, that is, I guess, the most gross way that I can put it to unconstitutionally violate a person's right is to deprive you of that education, because education means

breaking the bars and the chains of your mind and transcending them, rising above being imprisoned.

So, imprisonment is not steel, concrete, barbed wires. Those are the physical elements of what we call prison. But prison is here. It's mental. Psychological.

BRYANT ARROYO: Censorship, really, I even go into the hole certainly based on censorship. There was a time during the beginning of the pandemic when my friend, Stevie, went to the hole. When he went to the hole, it was a very oppressive and unjust situation, so I decided I wanted to write about it. I wrote a small message to just three of my comrades explaining what happened to Stevie, explaining the conditions that we were under, and I sent it out to them and hoped that they would post it on social media. Two days later, they called me down to security, locked me up, and put me right in the hole, and they gave me 16 days for inciting a petition. That's pure censorship right there.

GARRETT FELBER: I feel like people sometimes get wind of censorship and then just feel outraged. But what are some things that people outside can do to fight censorship?

BRYANT ARROYO: I always encourage people that the phone that you guys have, there's basically the world in that phone, so to collectively and individually call. Perfect example, when I was retaliated against for expressing my First Amendment and telling them to put it on YouTube, there was over 2,000 calls made to central office as a result of them retaliating against me, for censoring me and my conversation and my GTL messages to attorneys, advocates, reporters, like Joe or Carol, Betsy, yourself, Ted, numerous people. Therefore, they found that offensive. Nonetheless, it took them 11 days to consider whether they were going to execute it, but they did. Then they put me in the hole, and I was retaliated against.

Therefore, by me being under that particular status, I had access to one phone call, I think every two or three days. And in the phone calls, I told Joe, "There has to be some sort of report placed in the newspaper."

So, using the newspapers, using the e-mails, using the Web sites, and also individually and collectively notifying the taxpaying citizen that "You can make a difference. Don't think for one minute just because you don't see the results and the repercussions of that phone call, they don't like that. They don't want to be a tsunami, overwhelmed by thousands of people calling up about one person, so it does make a difference."

Nine days later, they kicked me out of Frackville. I was in [Arizona? 01:16:55]. [laughing] Thank Joe, thank Workers World, and thank all the people that actually called in, which I thank them. Because I don't know half of all those people or who they were, but nonetheless, they cared. They cared enough, and I definitely appreciated that, and was heartfelt and moved by that.

So much so that when the one officer escorted me to the shower, he said, “Hey, Mr. Arroyo, I’ve got some great news for you.” And I was like, “Uh, what? Are they releasing me?” He’s like, “No, you’re out of here tomorrow.” I was like “Whooooo!” [laughing] He’s like, “Too many calls. That’s all I’m going to say. Too many calls.”

[Video ends. Back to the panel. 01:17:46]

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: Great. I know that we only have a little bit of time left, but I just was wondering, Saleem and Jess, if you both could reflect on what you heard a little bit in the video, or maybe even if you want to [unintelligible 01:18:00] a little bit on the question before about what books can you do around censorship, or anything else?

JESSICA PHOENIX SYLVIA: I think it comes down to the fact that everything I’ve heard supports the idea that prison is dehumanizing, and it’s meant to be dehumanizing. When people take steps to humanize themselves and each other, there is going to be someone there to try to stop that from happening.

And prison is slavery in so many ways, whether you’re talking about prison labor, or the different number of ways those things show up.

I know that as a trans person, I’ve had my health care censored. I know that I’ve been retaliated against, being thrown in the hole for inciting group demonstrations.

I know that one of the things that’s happened to me is because I’ve written so much in support of the humanization of trans people. I’ve had TERFs and carceral feminists publish some really nasty shit about me, half of which is completely lies. Saying shit like I’m a pedophile, that my mother has a restraining order against me.

People read that and they think it’s true because it’s published. It’s just shit that happens to me because I stand up and want to see trans folks and prisoners humanized. When I talk about, what can actually be done, yeah, phone zaps would be great.

One of the things that we don’t want to see is for a prisoner to be isolated. When prisoners are isolated, these animals that want to torture people and get away with it, the most effective thing there is to make sure that a person is not isolated, to make sure that we’re there to find out what’s happening, what can we do to support you?

Phone zaps can be effective but I’m going to tell you right now, there’s this thing called the exhaustion loop. You can have all the policies in the world. However, what they’ll do is somewhere along the line, if you make it through all the hoops, someone will just say, “Oops.”

It's like what happened with my last book. Someone said, "Give her the book." Guess what? "We don't know what happened to your book. You can file a complaint if you want."

So, basically, these people have all the power. When it comes down to it, the only solution, besides helping people survive living in a cage for now, yes, show them support in various ways- is prison abolition. That's it. [many fingers clicking] That's the only solution because they have all the power when it comes down to it, and we're just trying to survive it.

But prison abolition, and with my other work, and if you'd like to keep up with my work, you can see during Banned Books Week. I'll have an interview with [Pen America?] on their web site. I'll also be contributing an article. If you'd like to check me out, you can find me on Instagram as Jessica Phoenix Sylvia. Thank you.

SALEEM HOLBROOK: I think what I'll say is that we've got to continue to support prisoners that are resisting on the inside. I agree with what Sylvia said that phone zaps would be effective, but you have to look at phone zaps litigation direct-action protests, and all these actions, whether you're doing legislative work, whether you're in the streets, whether you're in the courtroom, wherever your place is on the battlefield, you have to look at all of these tools in your abolitionist toolbox that we have to employ.

The thing that I would really encourage people to do is get involved with an organization that is in contact with prisoners and is supporting prisoners, because oftentimes, they're going to have the key to their chains. What I mean is they're going to know the targets, they're going to know the tactics. And a lot of times, I feel like the organizations that are closest to prisoners and their families are often the ones that are overlooked by activists.

Social media is good, but we're not going to free anyone with social media. That's where you're going to find your information about prison struggles, prison abolition and abolition in general is good, but it has to be your starting point. It has to be your on-ramp.

But I'm not here today, Sylvia is not here today, we're not going to get Stevie out of the cage or many other comrades across the country by how many times we "like" something on Twitter or Instagram, or how many times we read many of the numerous books that are being published, abolition is almost mainstream now, so I would encourage people to get involved with local abolitionist organizations that are on the ground and are actually working to dismantle and free people from prison.

I'd like to say that abolishing prisons is the horizon that we're all working to, but you damn sure better be helping free people on the way to that horizon. That's the only way you're going to get the abolition.

Harriet Tubman did it, but she was liberating people from plantations following the North Star. She didn't pass by other plantations and say, "All right, y'all, see you on the other side of the horizon." She got them out of the plantations on the way to that horizon. And that's something that as abolitionists, we should work to.

And last—and this is very important—that abolition is not about abolishing prisons and police. That's one part of abolition. At the end of the day, if you're an abolitionist, you're going to have to face the fact that in order for us to live in this society where there's no more police and no more prisons, we're going to have to start talking about abolishing the social contract that is governing the United States. [many fingers clicking]

At the end of the day, that's what this is about, so that's something really important, because then you're looking beyond the prison and the policing. Capitalism would like us to believe that that's the problem, prisons and policing; that mass incarceration, over-policing, and racist prosecutions are anomalies within American society. They're not. They're part and parcel of it. They're extensions of it.

At the end of the day, look beyond abolishing prisons and police. I don't know. I've just got a smile on my face. I'm going to put you on the spot. Imagine they just [roll their head? 01:24:55]. One of our mentors in the abolitionist space is [unintelligible 01:24:59]. [laughter]

At the end of the day, that's something that's really important for us to remember and to stay focused on. Capitalism would do away with prisons and policing if it's going to extend itself. They will find other ways to control human beings.

That's very important for us to understand. Thank you for having me.

[Applause]

CHARLOTTE ROSEN: I just want to say thank you so much to all of you for being here today. A huge thanks to Jess, Saleem, Kim, Safear, Stevie and Bryant, and thank you, Haymarket, for inviting us to have this panel.

Thanks to everyone and enjoy the rest of the conference. We'll be hanging up here if you want to chat. Thanks so much.

[Applause]

END