COMMENTARY

archiving the absences

tracing censorship as a productive force of racial-capitalist empire

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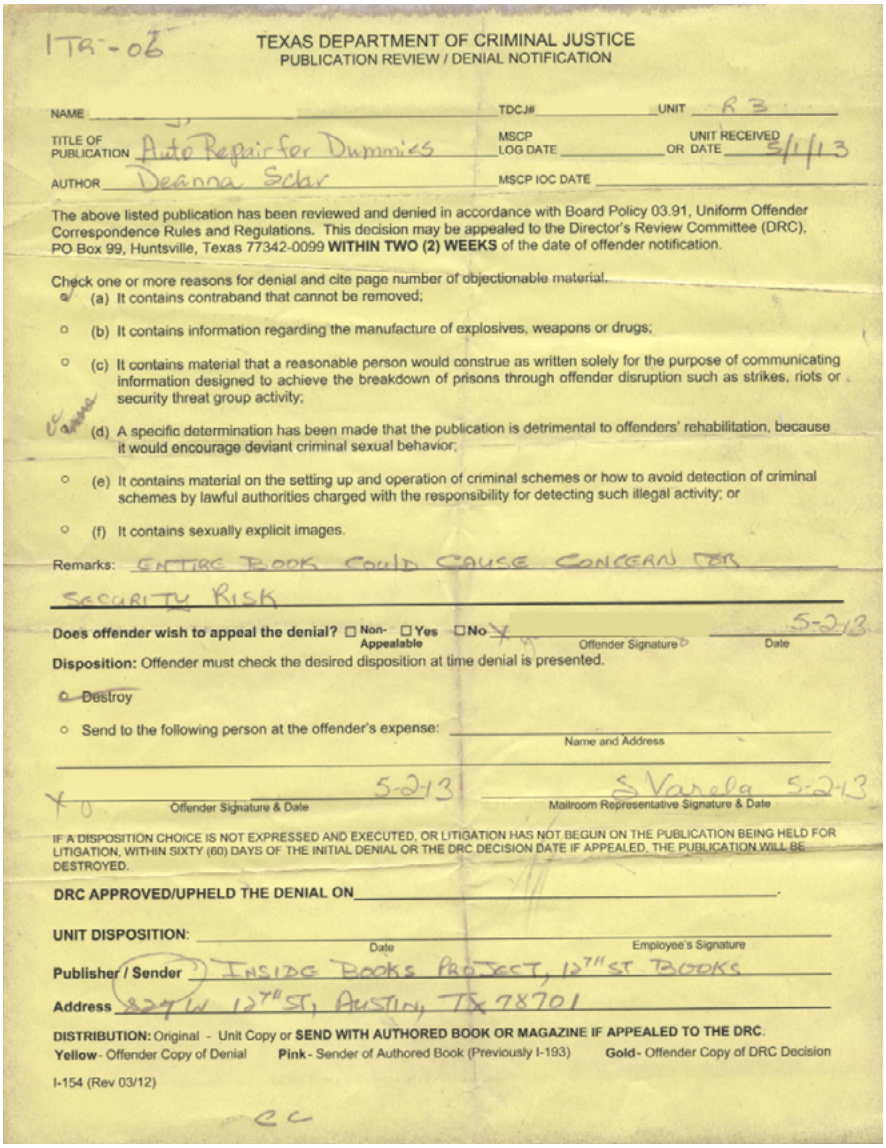
Censorship denotes the suppression of knowledge; black boxes over text, archival absences, administrative denials and dead ends. However, through my work as a collective member and archivist for a books-to-prisons project over the last ten years, I have come to understand censorship as much a production of knowledge as its repression. It generates knowledge not only of the content being censored (e.g., that it is immoral, threatening, or abnormal), but of the incarcerated patron requesting the item, the sender, the prison system, and, perhaps most significantly, the nation-state itself. Carceral epistemology attests to the material power of discourse in manufacturing violent realities out of statist imaginations. This power relies on the abstraction of words like "rights, justice and freedom" that we so often appeal to within a juridical framework that ultimately serves racial-capitalist accumulation. Instead, I wonder how we might radically revise the scope and potentiality of our demands for the present and future. How might an archive of censorship fragment what we have come to consider reality, so that we might imagine otherwise?

Censorship evokes archival absences, black boxes, bureaucratic dead ends, and other forms of knowledge suppression. Yet, through the process of archiving "denial notifications" issued by Texas prisons to incarcerated patrons of the Inside Books Project (IBP), I have come to understand censorship even more as a *production* of knowledge than its suppression. This knowledge, a carceral epistemology, is generated through racialized, gendered, and colonialist discourse and practices that course through prison policy. These practices are often opaque, arbitrary, and undocumented, making them difficult to combat. Therefore, the *Inside Books Project Archive (IBPA)* works to collect, preserve, provide access to these records, and in turn exposing the power relations at play.

The records I collect, arrange, preserve, and digitize are carbon copies, one for the incarcerated recipient of the mail, one for the sender (the books-to-prisons collective, IBP), and one for the prison, with the information and addresses of each. The notifications include whether the decision is appealable or not (if it was appealed once and denied, it can never be appealed again), and the book's "disposition," or whether the mail will be returned "at the offender's expense" or "destroyed." The incarcerated recipient, most of whom do not have funds to return mail, are generally compelled to check the latter.

In *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship,* J. M. Coetzee (2003, 6) says "state censorship presents itself as a bulwark between society and forces of subversion or moral corruption." TDCJ censorship practices starkly demonstrate this statist rationale. Employees must identify the categorical "reasons for denial," page numbers of the "objectionable material," and provide their "remarks." These comments are usually abstract, ambiguous statements like "sexual," "racial," or "risk," with no corresponding page numbers. These generic rationalizations demonstrate the tendency for employees to make subjective moralizations that can be provoked by the title, cover page, author, and back summary, before the book's contents itself are even examined.[1]

Furthermore, the evolution of the denial notification's language provides a genealogy of carceral discourse. For instance, a notification in 2013 lists "detrimental to offenders' rehabilitation, because it would encourage *homosexual* or deviant criminal sexual behavior"[2] while later versions remove "homosexual," leaving "deviant criminal sexual behavior" (figures 2–3). The discursive conflation of queerness with "criminal deviancy" (which they otherwise apply to books that contain rape and incest) points to logics undergirding censorship even while these logics are redacted in the official discourse.



ITR-06

TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE
PUBLICATION REVIEW / DENIAL NOTIFICATION

NAME _____ TDCJ# _____ UNIT R3

TITLE OF PUBLICATION Auto Repair for Dummies MSCP LOG DATE _____ UNIT RECEIVED OR DATE 5/1/13

AUTHOR Deanna Sclar MSCP IOC DATE _____

The above listed publication has been reviewed and denied in accordance with Board Policy 03.91, Uniform Offender Correspondence Rules and Regulations. This decision may be appealed to the Director's Review Committee (DRC), PO Box 99, Huntsville, Texas 77342-0099 **WITHIN TWO (2) WEEKS** of the date of offender notification.

Check one or more reasons for denial and cite page number of objectionable material.

- ✓ (a) It contains contraband that cannot be removed;
- ○ (b) It contains information regarding the manufacture of explosives, weapons or drugs;
- ○ (c) It contains material that a reasonable person would construe as written solely for the purpose of communicating information designed to achieve the breakdown of prisons through offender disruption such as strikes, riots or security threat group activity;
- ✓ (d) A specific determination has been made that the publication is detrimental to offenders' rehabilitation, because it would encourage deviant criminal sexual behavior;
- ○ (e) It contains material on the setting up and operation of criminal schemes or how to avoid detection of criminal schemes by lawful authorities charged with the responsibility for detecting such illegal activity; or
- ○ (f) It contains sexually explicit images.

Remarks: ENTIRE BOOK COULD CAUSE CONCERN FOR SECURITY RISK

Does offender wish to appeal the denial? ☐ Non-Appealable ☐ Yes ☐ No X _____ Offender Signature _____ 5-2-13 Date

Disposition: Offender must check the desired disposition at time denial is presented.

- ○ ~~Destroy~~
- ○ Send to the following person at the offender's expense: _____ Name and Address

X _____ Offender Signature & Date 5-2-13 _____ S Varela Mailroom Representative Signature & Date 5-2-13

IF A DISPOSITION CHOICE IS NOT EXPRESSED AND EXECUTED, OR LITIGATION HAS NOT BEGUN ON THE PUBLICATION BEING HELD FOR LITIGATION, WITHIN SIXTY (60) DAYS OF THE INITIAL DENIAL OR THE DRC DECISION DATE IF APPEALED, THE PUBLICATION WILL BE DESTROYED.

DRC APPROVED/UPHELD THE DENIAL ON _____.

UNIT DISPOSITION: _____ Date _____ Employee's Signature

Publisher / Sender INSIDE BOOKS PROJECT, 12TH ST BOOKS

Address 824 W 12TH ST, AUSTIN, TX 78701

DISTRIBUTION: Original - Unit Copy or **SEND WITH AUTHORED BOOK OR MAGAZINE IF APPEALED TO THE DRC.**
Yellow - Offender Copy of Denial **Pink** - Sender of Authored Book (Previously I-193) **Gold** - Offender Copy of DRC Decision

I-154 (Rev 03/12)

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Figure 1. A Texas Department of Criminal Justice publication review/denial notification for *Auto Repair for Dummies* by Deanna Sclar.

1. e.g., *Dante's Inferno* is banned because a cover of one edition features "sexually explicit images." Even editions that do not have this cover or "explicit images" are denied.
2. Publication Review/Denial Notification for *The Best of the Group of Seven* by Joan Murray, TDCJ Censorship Collection, Series C, 27 August 2013, *Inside Books Project Archive*, https://www.permanent.org/p/archive/08he-0000/08he-0039/871797/record/08he-003t.

These archival traces illuminate not only what content the prison considers objectionable, immoral, or threatening, but it simultaneously ascribes these criminalizing moralizations onto the identities of the incarcerated patrons requesting LBGTQIA+ literature. These criminalizing ascriptions are particularly applied to Black, Indigenous, and People of color (BIPOC) narratives, histories, and authors. Therefore, many notifications will check-mark "deviant criminal sexual behavior" and vaguely remark, "racial," such as the denial of *Black-Eyed Susans; Classic Stories By and About Black Women*.[3] Also common is the intersection of "racial remarks" with the category C: "contains information a reasonable person would construe as written solely for the purpose of communicating information designed to achieve the breakdown of prisons through offender strikes, riots, or security threat group activity," applied to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (figure 4).[4] That the narrative of an enslaved person pursuing liberation through, among other techniques, the practices of reading and self-education, is considered a security risk by the prison today, reveals how carceral epistemologies are rooted in the racial-capitalist genealogies of the state. Speaking on the

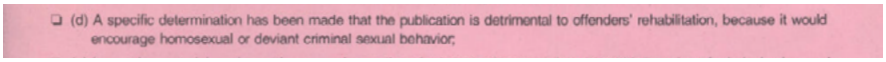

❑ (d) A specific determination has been made that the publication is detrimental to offenders' rehabilitation, because it would encourage homosexual or deviant criminal sexual behavior;

Figure 2. Category D in a form from 2013.

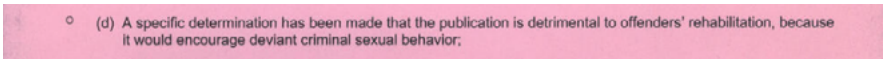
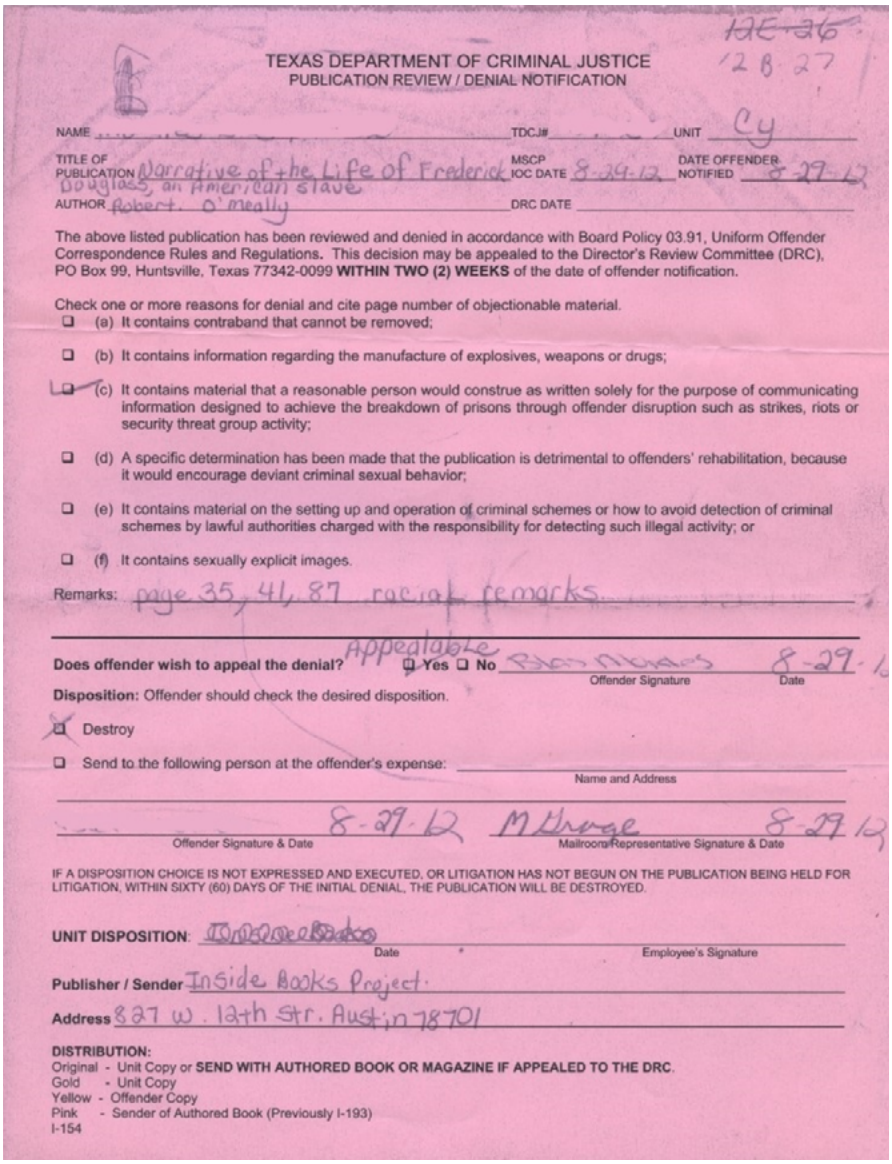

○ (d) A specific determination has been made that the publication is detrimental to offenders' rehabilitation, because it would encourage deviant criminal sexual behavior;

Figure 3. Category D in a form from 2014.


TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE
PUBLICATION REVIEW / DENIAL NOTIFICATION

NAME _____ TDCJ# _____ UNIT Cy

TITLE OF PUBLICATION Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave MSCP IOC DATE 8-24-12 DATE OFFENDER NOTIFIED 8-29-12

AUTHOR Robert O'meally DRC DATE _____

The above listed publication has been reviewed and denied in accordance with Board Policy 03.91, Uniform Offender Correspondence Rules and Regulations. This decision may be appealed to the Director's Review Committee (DRC), PO Box 99, Huntsville, Texas 77342-0099 **WITHIN TWO (2) WEEKS** of the date of offender notification.

Check one or more reasons for denial and cite page number of objectionable material.

❑ (a) It contains contraband that cannot be removed;

❑ (b) It contains information regarding the manufacture of explosives, weapons or drugs;

☒ (c) It contains material that a reasonable person would construe as written solely for the purpose of communicating information designed to achieve the breakdown of prisons through offender disruption such as strikes, riots or security threat group activity;

❑ (d) A specific determination has been made that the publication is detrimental to offenders' rehabilitation, because it would encourage deviant criminal sexual behavior;

❑ (e) It contains material on the setting up and operation of criminal schemes or how to avoid detection of criminal schemes by lawful authorities charged with the responsibility for detecting such illegal activity; or

❑ (f) It contains sexually explicit images.

Remarks: page 35, 41, 87 racial remarks

Does offender wish to appeal the denial? Appealable ❑ Yes ❑ No _____ 8-29-12
Offender Signature Date

Disposition: Offender should check the desired disposition.

☒ Destroy

❑ Send to the following person at the offender's expense: _____
Name and Address

8-29-12 _____ 8-29-12
Offender Signature & Date Mailroom Representative Signature & Date

IF A DISPOSITION CHOICE IS NOT EXPRESSED AND EXECUTED, OR LITIGATION HAS NOT BEGUN ON THE PUBLICATION BEING HELD FOR LITIGATION, WITHIN SIXTY (60) DAYS OF THE INITIAL DENIAL, THE PUBLICATION WILL BE DESTROYED.

UNIT DISPOSITION: _____
Date Employee's Signature

Publisher / Sender Inside Books Project

Address 827 W. 12th Str. Austin 78701

DISTRIBUTION:
Original - Unit Copy or **SEND WITH AUTHORED BOOK OR MAGAZINE IF APPEALED TO THE DRC.**
Gold - Unit Copy
Yellow - Offender Copy
Pink - Sender of Authored Book (Previously I-193)
I-154

Figure 4. A Texas Department of Criminal Justice publication review/denial notification for *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* by Robert O'Meally.

3. Publication Review/Denial Notification for *Black-Eyed Susans; Classic Stories By and About Black Women*, ed. Mary Helen Washington, TDCJ Censorship Collection, *Inside Books Project Archive*, 20 March 2013, https://ibparchive.texasafterviolence.org/files/original/e7d1731b75579b43355745b814021aa8.jpg.

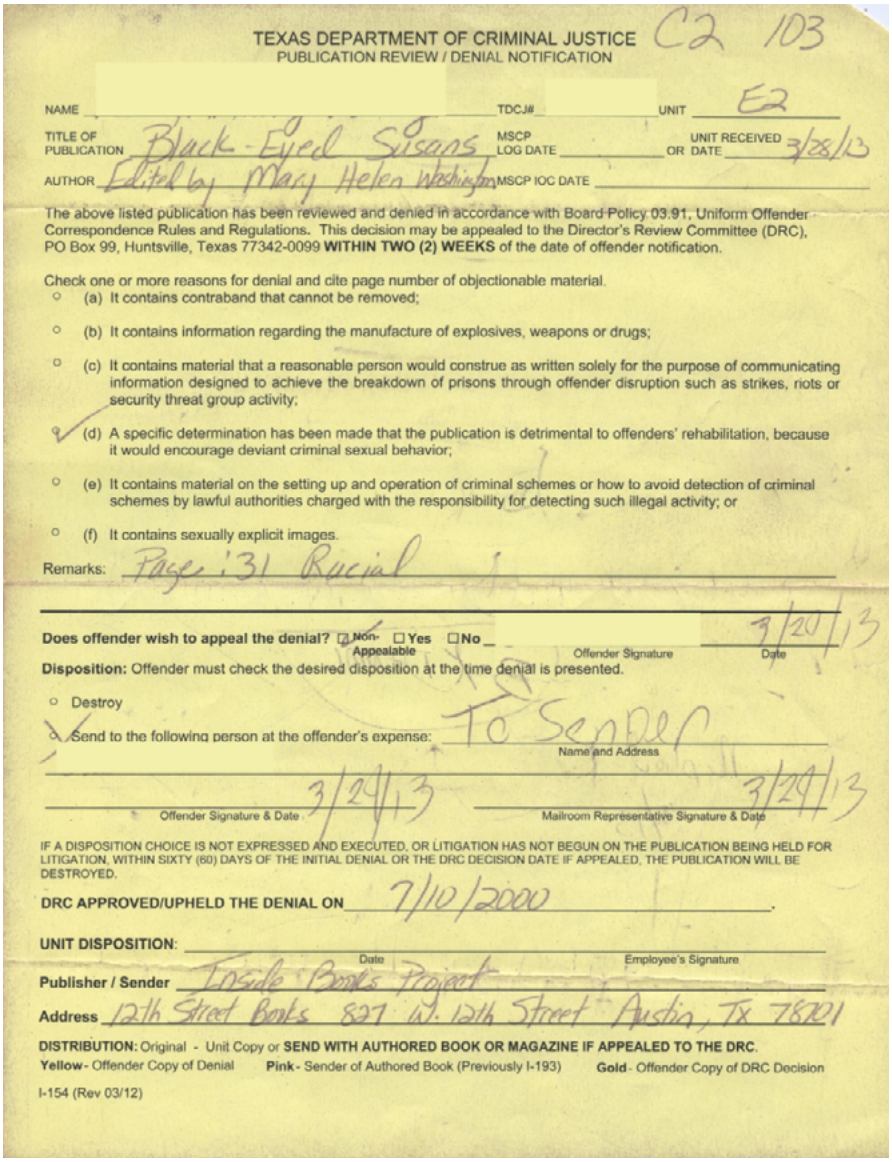
4. Publication Review/Denial Notification for, TDCJ Censorship Collection, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass, Inside Books Project Archive, 19 August 2012, https://ibparchive.texasafterviolence.org/files/original/1201dfc25ae2faf7cd0e5f6e8ac6cf75.jpg.

de-radicalization and de-Africanization required to produce "Good Americanized blacks," Mumia Abu Jamal says:

> Censorship is a tool utilized to preserve the status quo, and to "protect" people from what are deemed uncomfortable social realities. Censorship, in a white supremacist state, creates an abnormal norm, and disappears that which does not conform. (Abu-Jamal, Hanrahan, and Walker 2001, 111)

In this sense, the censorship not only disappears the content but the people who "do not conform" (those who are "criminally queer," "racial," and threatening to the nation-state) through incarceration, solitary confinement, and state-sanctioned death. Abu Jamal himself is serving life without parole.

Over the years, I have experimented with methods for archiving and providing access to these censorship records that do not replicate carceral logics and the compulsory visibility incarcerated people experience (non-consensual production and distribution of images, personal information, state assessments and judicial convictions). If the prison utilizes archival power of description, records management, and access to generate knowledge about its populations, how might we disrupt this power through counter-archival tactics? How can digitization, description, online access, and geolocation (mapping) practices be abolitionist, liberatory, and even insurrectionist? If, as Coetzee claims, "the power of the powerful to defend themselves against representations of them is surprisingly limited; and the more accurate the representation, the more limited this power" (6), can an accessible, well-described, and mapped out archive of prison censorship practices disrupt their unexamined, criminalizing mechanisms?



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE C2 103
PUBLICATION REVIEW / DENIAL NOTIFICATION

NAME _____ TDCJ# _____ UNIT E2

TITLE OF PUBLICATION Black-Eyed Susans MSCP LOG DATE _____ UNIT RECEIVED OR DATE 3/28/13

AUTHOR Edited by Mary Helen Washington MSCP IOC DATE _____

The above listed publication has been reviewed and denied in accordance with Board Policy 03.91, Uniform Offender Correspondence Rules and Regulations. This decision may be appealed to the Director's Review Committee (DRC), PO Box 99, Huntsville, Texas 77342-0099 **WITHIN TWO (2) WEEKS** of the date of offender notification.

Check one or more reasons for denial and cite page number of objectionable material.

- (a) It contains contraband that cannot be removed;
- (b) It contains information regarding the manufacture of explosives, weapons or drugs;
- (c) It contains material that a reasonable person would construe as written solely for the purpose of communicating information designed to achieve the breakdown of prisons through offender disruption such as strikes, riots or security threat group activity;
- ✓ (d) A specific determination has been made that the publication is detrimental to offenders' rehabilitation, because it would encourage deviant criminal sexual behavior;
- (e) It contains material on the setting up and operation of criminal schemes or how to avoid detection of criminal schemes by lawful authorities charged with the responsibility for detecting such illegal activity; or
- (f) It contains sexually explicit images.

Remarks: Page 131 Racial

Does offender wish to appeal the denial? ☑ Non-Appealable ☐ Yes ☐ No _____ Offender Signature 3/20/13 Date

Disposition: Offender must check the desired disposition at the time denial is presented.

- Destroy
- ✓ Send to the following person at the offender's expense: To Sender Name and Address

Offender Signature & Date 3/29/13 Mailroom Representative Signature & Date 3/29/13

IF A DISPOSITION CHOICE IS NOT EXPRESSED AND EXECUTED, OR LITIGATION HAS NOT BEGUN ON THE PUBLICATION BEING HELD FOR LITIGATION, WITHIN SIXTY (60) DAYS OF THE INITIAL DENIAL OR THE DRC DECISION DATE IF APPEALED, THE PUBLICATION WILL BE DESTROYED.

DRC APPROVED/UPHELD THE DENIAL ON 7/10/2000.

UNIT DISPOSITION: _____ Date _____ Employee's Signature

Publisher / Sender Inside Books Project

Address 12th Street Books 827 W. 12th Street Austin, Tx 78701

DISTRIBUTION: Original - Unit Copy or **SEND WITH AUTHORED BOOK OR MAGAZINE IF APPEALED TO THE DRC.**
Yellow- Offender Copy of Denial **Pink**- Sender of Authored Book (Previously I-193) **Gold**- Offender Copy of DRC Decision

I-154 (Rev 03/12)

Figure 5. A Texas Department of Criminal Justice publication review/denial notification for *Black Eye's Susans*, edited by Mary Helen Washington.

Benedict Anderson has famously traced the concept of the nation as an "imagined community" produced through techniques and tools like the census, map, and museum (Anderson 1991). Each of these leverages archival forms of power: the production of categories, typologies, descriptions and access (or compulsory visibility) that generate notions of belonging, normalcy, and worth. As Katherine McKittrick tells us, "Description is not liberation. Description is empire" (McKittrick 2021). Racial-capitalist empire seeks to instill carceral epistemology into our own understandings of the imprisoned, of justice, and the role of the state, so that we cannot imagine a world otherwise. In the same sense "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of

capitalism" (Fisher 2009, 1). However, I am fortified by Ursula K LeGuin's (2014) words:

> Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of [those] who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. . . . We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words.

The digital archive of these records is in a process of migration between platforms, and the records await more rich description. In the next years, I hope to have hundreds of them available online, where others can trace their logics and discourse, use them to combat censorship practices, and better understand how carceral epistemologies operate across and outside of prisons to criminalize and dispose of "non-normative" bodies. Prison censorship practices attest to the power of discourse in manufacturing violent realities and deprivations. This power relies on the abstractions that serve racial-capitalism, white supremacy, compulsory cis-heteronormativity, ableism, and xenophobia. I wonder how grassroots archives informed by abolitionist praxis might radically revise the scope and potentiality of our demands for the present and future; to fragment what we have come to consider reality, so that we might imagine otherwise.

References

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