

Explicit!: Coding Carceral Censorship and Social Biases in United States Prisons

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Abstract

Social practice artist Sue Jeong Ka's ongoing digital database, *Coding Carceral Censorship* (CCC) (2019-), charts the United States carceral system's publication censorship. Ka made data categories to track the knowledge production that US prison book bans target and why. Concentrating on the most common justification for this censorship, sexual explicitness, her initial data analysis reveals restrictive penal trends that devalue women's and East Asian sexual speech via romance/erotica literature and manga bans, respectively. These patterns reflect how national white cis-hetero-patriarchal values play an outsized role in determining which types of expression the government protects and prioritizes. Our article argues that through its capacity to identify such under-examined censorship patterns, CCC underscores Digital Humanities' (DH's) potential to intervene in and interpret the prison industrial complex's social biases. CCC's data indicate that US prison bans enact these biases through excessively barring content by and about marginalized groups, thereby impeding incarcerated people's access to socially marginalized perspectives and authors. In framing CCC as both critically made DH and part of Ka's socially engaged art, we further suggest that her database illuminates how DH and socially engaged art practices can be mutually enriching.

"The alphabet is an abolitionist. If you would keep a people enslaved, refuse to teach them to read... The despotic spirit which instinctively disliked free schools also sought to exclude books and newspapers except for aristocracy... It struck at the tongue. It abhorred free speech. It knew that knowledge is power, and it trembled." [Harper's Weekly 1867, 706–707]

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What is the relationship between the right to read and abolition? In the aftermath of the United States Civil War, abolitionists argued that institutions continued to disenfranchise formerly enslaved people by limiting their access to reading and education. Correspondingly, throughout US history, censors have used book bans to cut off marginalized groups (e.g., women, people of color, and queer and poor people) from the potential power of knowledge. To be clear, sources of knowledge, such as reading, are not by themselves automatically liberatory. On the one hand, both reading as a way of knowing and particular content read can reinforce ideologies that undermine marginalized peoples' points of view.^[1] On the other hand, by reading against the grain, marginalized readers can use even dominant cultural texts to serve their own interests [Ryden 2005]. In short, although reading does not guarantee empowerment, inhibiting it among any population hinders that population's access to learning, debate, and alternative perspectives. Therefore, prohibiting select groups' reading is a mechanism for minimizing their paths to power. The legacy of restricting marginalized people's right to read thrives in prisons, where publication censorship practices in the nation are most extreme and opaque [Hall 2023]. In this sense, the shackles of epistemic unfreedom connect historical abolitionist objections to slavery and contemporary abolitionist objections to the prison industrial complex.

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Book banning in the US carceral system is full of inconsistencies but, overall, it consistently favors those with the most

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power in society while disadvantaging those with the least. This system prohibits publications that its decision-makers deem a threat to orderly conduct [Thornburgh v. Abbott 1989] [PEN America 2019].^[2] Yet criteria for these bans are anything but straightforward. From individual states and prison facilities to prison officials and mailroom staff, there are multiple levels of decision-making that can determine whether a single publication's content is permissible. At each level, the judgment calls are prone to haphazard logic. Banned prison book lists vary state by state and censorship guidelines vary from one correctional facility to the next within the same region. Moreover, the appeals process is arduous for incarcerated people to navigate while the courts defer to prison administrators. As a result, prison personnel can usually deny books in hasty and unreasonable ways without challenge [PEN America 2019]. This faulty censorship system entails little recourse for incarcerated readers while limiting their resources for knowledge and self-knowledge. Marginalized groups disproportionately comprise the US prison population with the high incarceration rates of people of color, queer people, and poor people's being well documented.^[3] Marginalized groups in prison are also hard hit by publication banning biases that hinder their access to self-understanding. In recent years, PEN America and Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center have cataloged numerous instances of US prisons targeting material that addresses racial justice, LGBTQAI+ perspectives, and civil and human rights, including content related to the prison industrial complex [PEN America 2019] [Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center 2021].

The digital database, *Coding Carceral Censorship* (CCC), charts such censorship trends. Since 2019, social practice artist Sue Jeong Ka has been creating this repository of state-wide prison publication bans to visualize and analyze the data. As a work in progress, CCC's web interface now freely provides visitors structured and synthesized data about prohibited prison publications. Its database records this hard-to-find information with a broader array of publication types and more detail about each publication than any other database that we can locate.^[4] Through its breadth and depth, CCC grapples with US prison censorship patterns that reflect national white cis-hetero-patriarchal hierarchies by reframing data from government records.^[5] Ka's project demonstrates how databases can make social biases explicit.

This article argues that, in so doing, CCC underscores Digital Humanities' potential to intervene in and interpret the prison industrial complex's white cis-hetero-patriarchal biases. CCC's preliminary data indicate that US prison bans enact these biases through disproportionately barring content by and about marginalized groups, thereby impeding incarcerated people's access to marginalized social perspectives. In other words, prisons' excessive regulation of publications with content centering marginalized groups and by authors from these groups hampers incarcerated readers' opportunities to engage with views and voices beyond white cis-hetero-patriarchy. Ka's data categories make such discriminatory censorship policies and practices legible. As later discussed in more depth, these data categories include the censored publications' titles (from Department of Corrections (DOC) documentation), types, genres, and subgenres (based on American Library Association's Cataloging and Classification guidelines) [American Library Association 2024]. The categories also cover the social identities of censored publications' authors (based on the CCC team's own research into their gender, racial, and ethnic identities), and publication censorship by state and individual correctional facilities as well as the cited reasons for publications' censored status (based on state legal codes and DOC documentation). CCC's interactive web displays expressively picture many of these results by visualizing them on different scales and through design elements that connote governmental and carceral data gathering.

CCC suggests a role for socially engaged art in what the #transformDH collective calls a necessary "shift in focus of digital humanities from technical processes to political ones," via work that "center[s] on the intersection of digital production and social transformation through research, pedagogy, and activism" [Bailey et al. 2016, 71]. Socially engaged art (also known as social practice art or art as social practice) refers to process-driven and participatory work that uses the tools of art (sometimes in obvious ways and sometimes in more invisible theoretical or methodological ones) to bring about social change [burrough and Walgren 2022, 4–5]. Definitions vary, but they often attribute collaboration, dialogue, and critical, contextual understanding to this artistic mode [Helguera 2011, 1–8] [Kester 2005].^[6] Accordingly, Ka's web project operates to precipitate social change by educating its users, in her case, about prison censorship and about the marginalized content producers and consumers it affects. CCC serves as a vehicle for Ka's wide-ranging work on banned prison publications, extending to art installations and exhibitions, a collective zine series, scholarship (such as this essay), as well as behind-the-scenes and public-facing exchanges with knowledge workers,

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activists, and artists.^[7] Ka's framing of her database clarifies ways that Digital Humanities (DH) and socially engaged art can enhance one another. As a DH project, CCC presents research findings stemming from her socially engaged art in a data-based and accessible manner while, as a socially engaged artist, Ka's creative handling of her database makes its social justice concerns enticing to explore.



Figure 1. Sue Jeong Ka, *Book Repair Lab: The Jefferson Market Library and the Women's House of Detention*, 2019, site-specific installation with book cart, table, second-hand books, and artist's book, The New School's Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery, New York, New York. (Photo credit: Eat the Cake NYC)

Direct experiences activating CCC and related undertakings shape our appraisal of it. Ka's project exemplifies critical making because it departs from the model of an isolated work devised mainly for technical or aesthetic appreciation [Jentery 2017]. Far from self-enclosed, her database is a dynamic platform for artistic production, exchange, study, and activism. To borrow Critical Making Lab Director Matt Ratto's phrase, through Ka, CCC conducts "ongoing critical analysis" of its own constitutive parts and networks [Ratto 2011, 253].

Relevant literature underscores DH's role in enhancing incarcerated people's access to self-expressive, educational, and entertainment resources.^[8] Like CCC, many DH projects about the prison industrial complex harness alluring digital interfaces to raise public awareness about the systems and systematic barriers that diminish incarcerated people's humanity [Cauley 2020]. For example, the web-based American Prison Writing Archive (APWA) is the US's largest collection of non-fiction essays by currently incarcerated Americans about their experiences behind bars. The platform grants incarcerated people authorial and editorial power [Larson 2021]. A handful of other digital archives, DH mapping projects, and online pedagogical networks also foreground interactive and data-based storytelling to critique the penal system. Along with APWA, some notable archives include: JSTOR's *American Prison Newspapers: Voices from Inside the Prison*; *After Violence Archive*; *The Washington State Prison History Project*; and *Inside Books Project Archive*.^[9] In addition to building on existing projects' work with state departments' records to generate CCC's database, CCC's Geographical Information System presentation of correctional facilities (explained later) bears similarity with DH projects, such as [Million Dollar Hoods n.d.] and [Torn Apart/ Separados n.d.], which center carceral geographies to

expose their infrastructures. Other DH projects emphasize education, such as Duke University's Carceral Studies Network website of curricular resources. Together, critical prison industrial complex DH projects span different focal points and strategies but often serve at least one common purpose: to inform the public about this complex's hidden inner-workings and unjust power dynamics. CCC shares this purpose, while distinguishing itself by charting biases in US prison publication censorship patterns.

This article describes CCC's capacity for exposing these under-examined patterns and their underpinning biases. To this end, we concentrate on two findings from the CCC dataset: many states' prisons restrict romance/erotica and manga publications by labeling them sexually explicit. In what follows, we first introduce these case studies by explaining Ka's critical making strategies for building a database that renders the information about such bans visible. Our discussion then performs the kind of critical inquiry CCC can facilitate about neglected prison censorship dynamics and social biases therein. This application points to the penal system's discriminatory tendencies toward publications that are not associated with white, Euro-American, and/or cis-hetero-patriarchal cultural production. Our layered analysis of CCC resonates with its multi-pronged challenge to US prisons' discriminatory approaches through socially engaged and critically made database design.

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1. CCC as Critical Making

The CCC database evolved as part of Ka's artistic reckoning with structural barriers that drastically limit incarcerated people's access to reading material. Her ongoing examination of this topic shapeshifts in response to each iteration's analytical focal points, participants, and spaces (physical, virtual, and/or discursive). CCC stems from Ka's open-ended critical making approach to prison censorship and carceral exchange. In particular, CCC's information architecture showcases her creative and critical methods for adopting digital formats. It breaks with default web templates to aesthetically convey her database's conceptual and contextual specificities. As we will detail, CCC presents data in evocative yet orderly geometric compositions, including a matrix presentation that nods to the history of computing via the punch card matrix.

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1.1. CCC's Information Architecture

CCC aims to raise awareness about US carceral information exchange and censorship. This project leans into a data-driven format more than Ka's previous ones on the same topic, while still maintaining the expressive concerns of her social art practice. She conceived CCC not only as a methodical user-friendly representation of copious data about US prisons' banned publications, but also as a critical entry point into this topic.

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CCC's visuals refer to governmental and computational systems of meaning-making. The database uses arrangements of rectangles where each rectangle serves as a data point and signifies a single banned prison publication. Together, the rectangles map US prison bans according to different geographic scopes. For example, Ka's national display pictures individual publications together through a matrix of rectangles.

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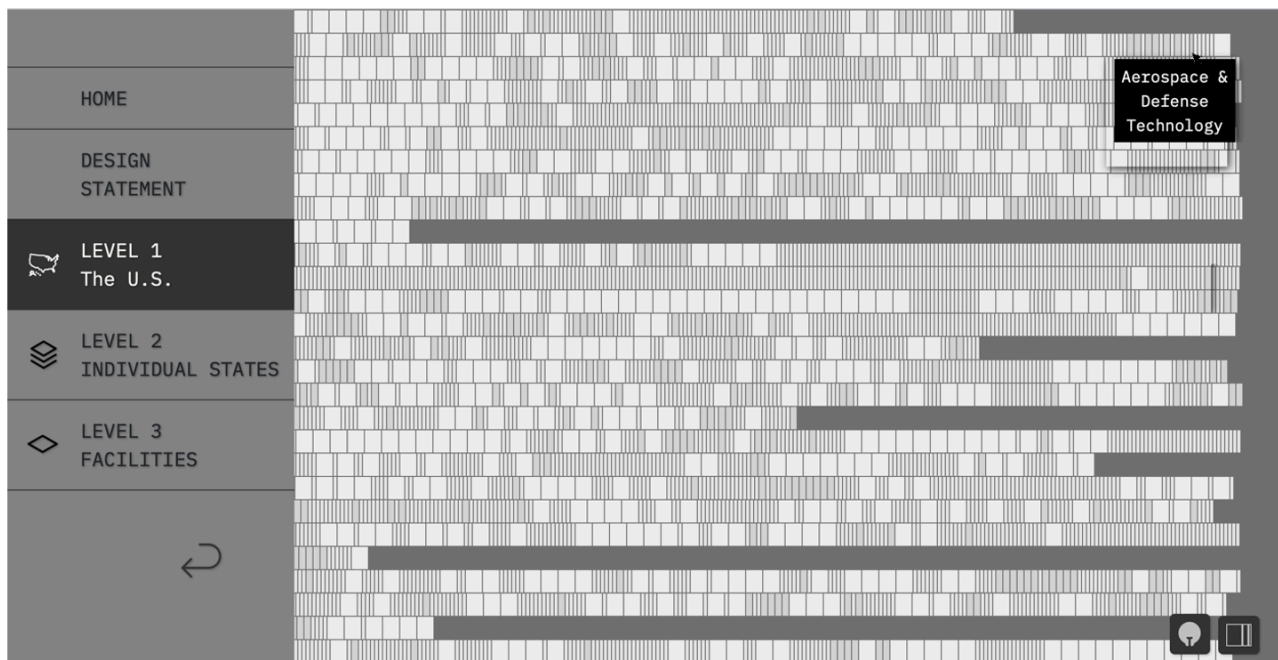


Figure 2. View of publications banned in prisons throughout the US. Combines Ka's data on all the states' prison banned publications spanning 2010 to 2024.^[10] Sue Jeong Ka, *Level 1: The U.S.* from *Banned Books: Coding Carceral Censorship*, 2019-, website screenshot.

As we will discuss further, Ka uses state legal codes and DOC banned book lists to generate data about which publications prisons in different states censor and why.

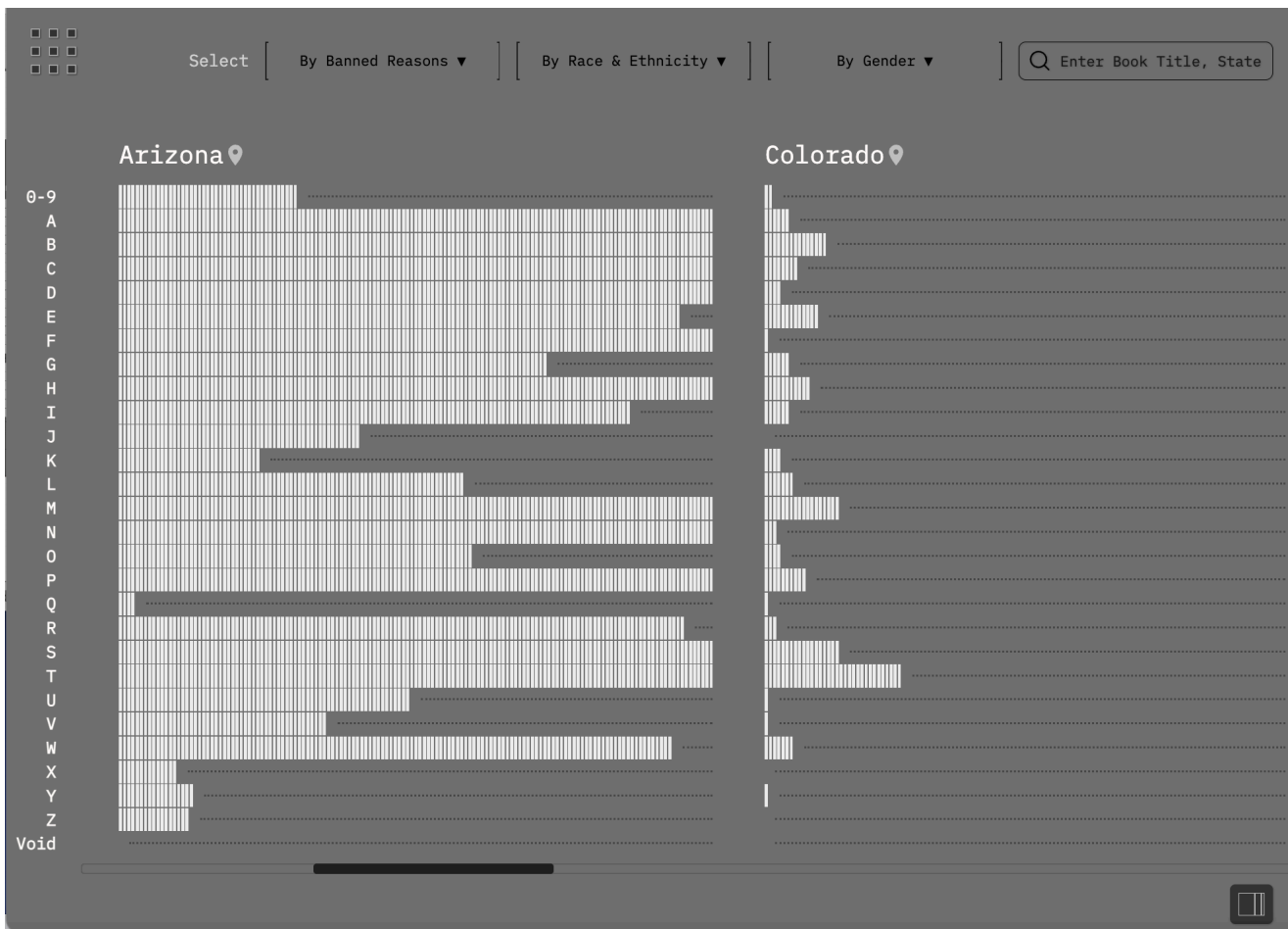


Figure 3. View of publications banned in prisons by state. Sue Jeong Ka, *Level 2: Individual States* from *Coding Carceral Censorship*, 2019-, website screenshot.

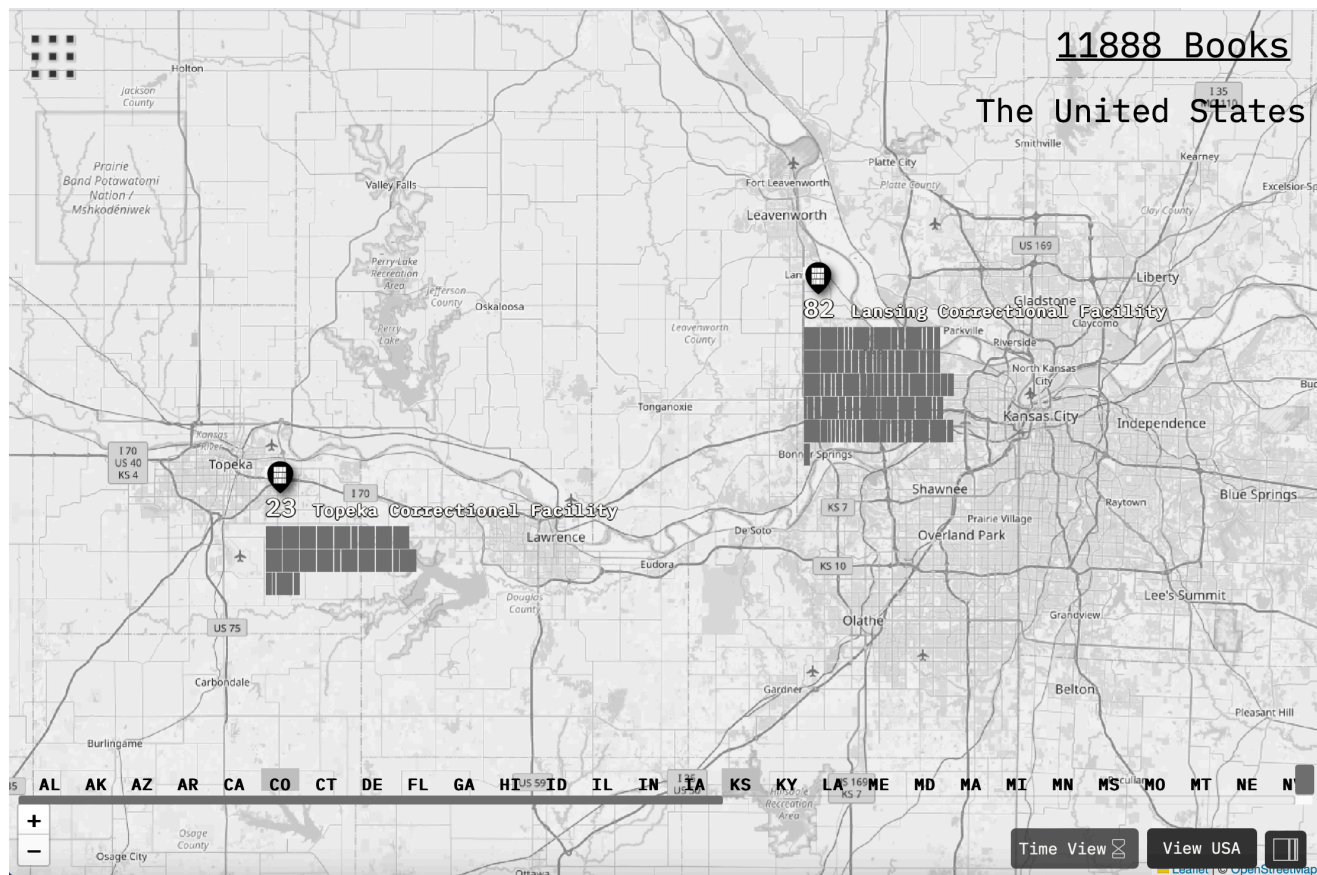


Figure 4. View of correctional facilities. Sue Jeong Ka, *Level 3: Facilities from Coding Carceral Censorship*, 2019-, website screenshot.

The database employs a rectangular visualization system to represent banned publications. Clicking on a rectangle reveals a black pop-up box containing the publication's title, and, if available, author/s, and year. The national view differentiates rectangles by width to signify three primary reasons for banning based on DOC documentation:

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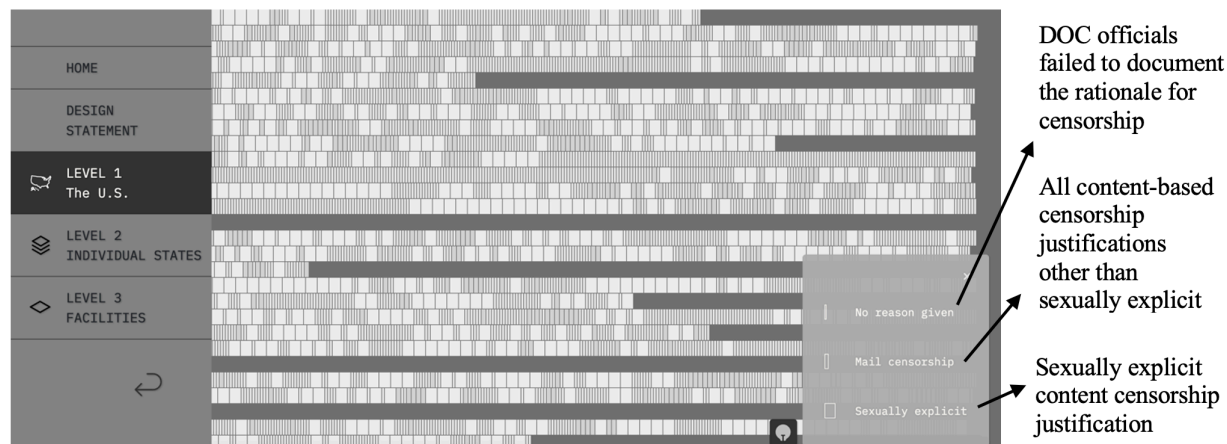


Figure 5. View of publications banned in prisons throughout the US with a legend explaining how to read the matrix's rectangles. Sue Jeong Ka, *Level 1: The U.S. from Coding Carceral Censorship*, 2019-, website screenshot.

At the state level, users can apply filters to explore DOC's additional content-based censorship reasons.

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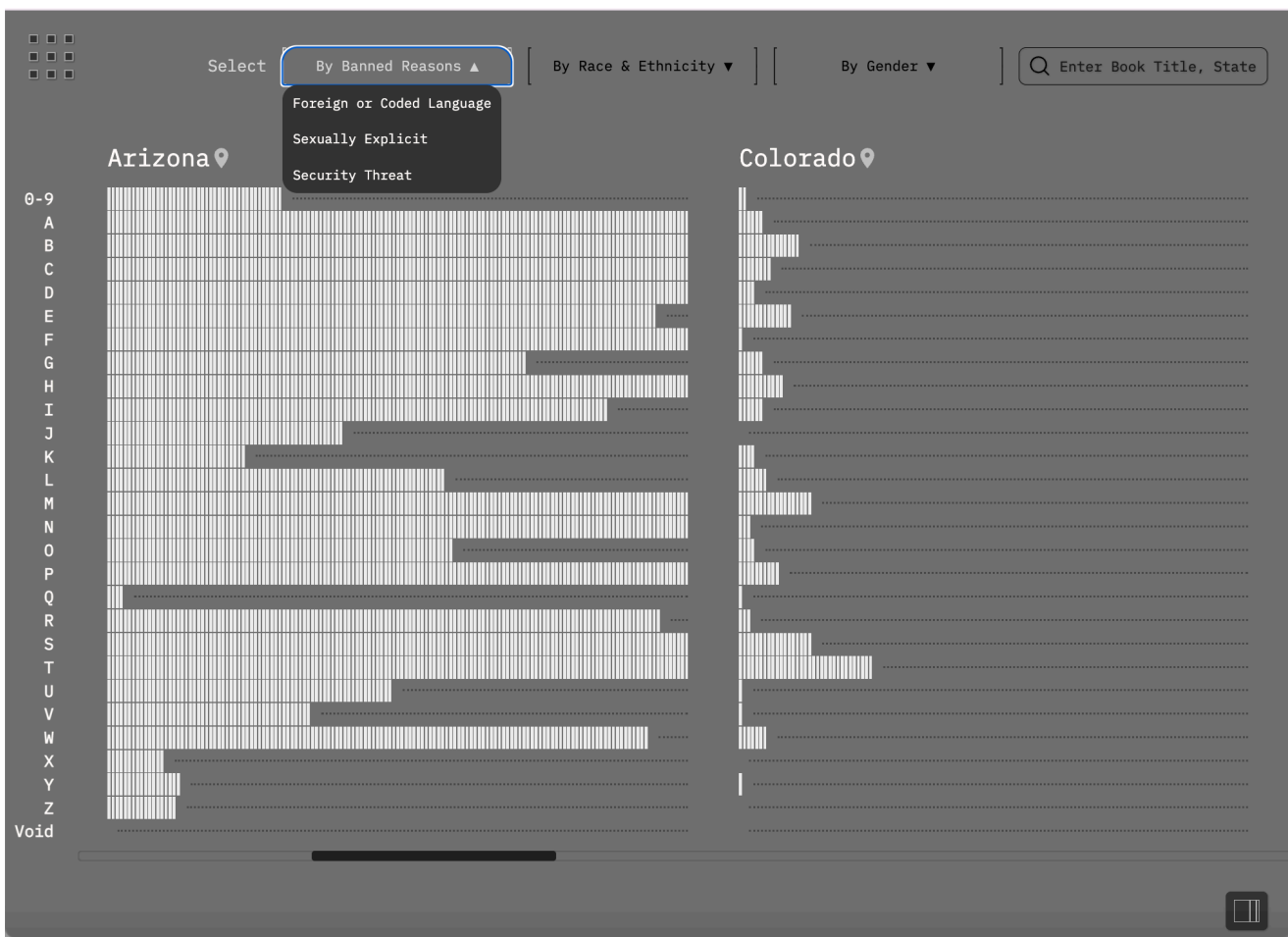


Figure 6. View of publications banned in prisons by state and censorship reason drop-down menu. Sue Jeong Ka, *Level 2: Individual States from Coding Carceral Censorship*, 2019-, website screenshot.

CCC's entirely grayscale color palette suggests the governmental paperwork behind its own data collection. Moreover, the database's matrix composition draws inspiration from the rectangular matrix of punch cards used for proto-computing data processing. Ka thought of Herman Hollerith's punch card, devised for the eleventh US census of 1890. One such machine-readable punch card represented one US resident's data. Each hole punch mark within the columns and rows on the card stood for a data point relating to that resident's characteristics, such as their sex, race, employment, marital status, etc. [Franklin 2015].

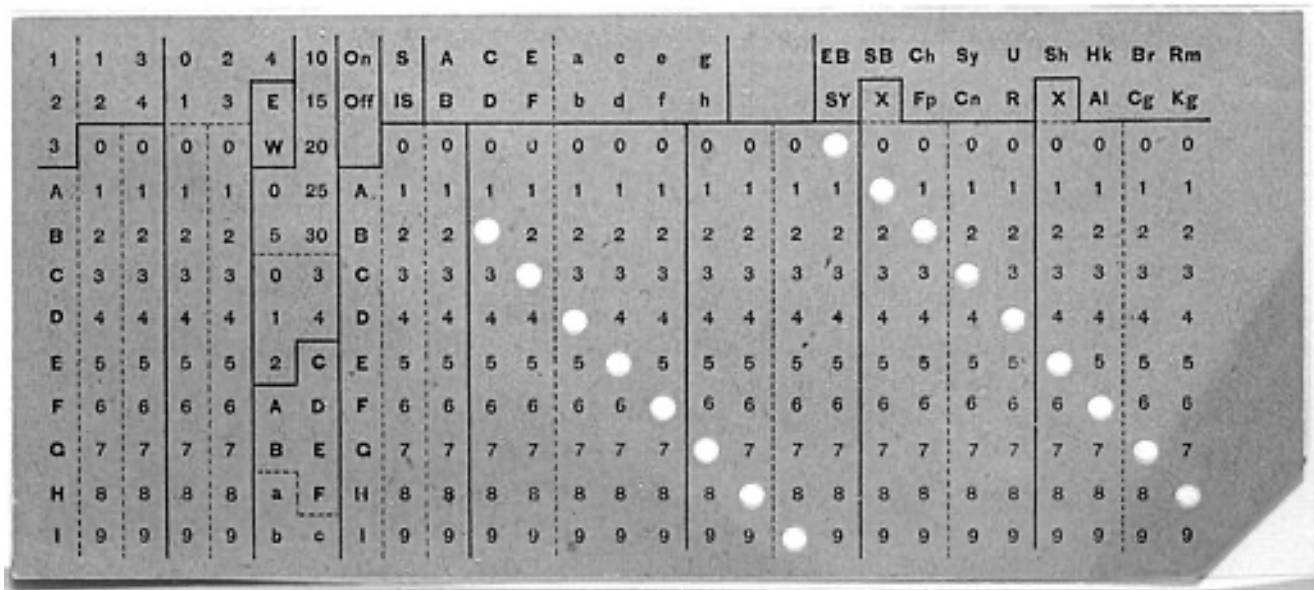


Figure 7. Hollerith punch card from the 1890 US Census of Population. Wikimedia. Creative Commons.

The 1890 census was the first to rely on mechanical punch cards. In the years leading up to this census, an upsurge in immigration and anxieties about racial mixing following the emancipation of Americans of African descent motivated the US government to adopt a more systematic process for gathering data on its changing population [Hodes 2006, 250]. The characteristic represented by each punch mark helped normalize reductive concepts of identity. Moreover, as Martha Hodes writes, this card design gave the government data to further exclude those identified with marginalized characteristics from “participation in the full privileges of national citizenship” [Franklin 2015] [Hodes 2006, 250].

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By alluding to Hollerith’s punch card data matrix, CCC recalls techniques of governmental control, discrimination, and disenfranchisement embedded within computation’s legacy — including its prehistory. After inventing his punch card-based tabulation machine for the census, Hollerith founded Tabulating Machine Company, which in 1924 became International Business Machines (IBM) [Franklin 2015]. This corporation continues to have an immense impact on computing technologies today.

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1.2. Navigating Social Identity Categories with CCC

Ka’s integration of visual traces from this punch-card-to-IBM trajectory evokes computational methods’ socio-political ramifications. In keeping with these methods, her datasets also rely on social identity categories of race and ethnicity as well as gender. She uses these categories to shed light on racist and sexist censorship practices corresponding to authors’ identities. Nevertheless, like the social categories of the 1890 census, Ka’s are based on hegemonic constructs and do not represent the vast range of ways people self-identify their race, ethnicity, and gender. A lack of preexisting structured data on publication authors’ self-identification in relation to these attributes is one of the many challenges Ka negotiates when creating her database. Here, as Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein’s remark “[t]he absence of data,” in this case, on authors’ social identities, “becomes an important takeaway, as meaningful as the data themselves” [D’Ignazio and Klein 2020, 113]. In the face of this absence, CCC’s team collects their own data on authors’ race, ethnicity, and gender via online research. The team codes each author in the database according to the latest 2020 US census categories of these properties of social identity. This coding method draws on pronouns, names, and other indicators or representations of authors that appear in the authors’ publications and basic online searches. By using such signifiers, the CCC team loosely approximates how prison officials, who are non-expert evaluators of the publications that they decide to censor or not, perceive authors’ race, ethnicity, and gender. Ka’s method for approximating prison officials’ impressions about these properties of identity follows sociological resume studies as well as theories of the perception of both gender and racial categorization [Bertand and Mullainathan 2004] [Ridgeway 2011, 78–79].

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CCC directly applies the 2020 US census categories of race and ethnicity to its author data but takes more liberties with this census's binary "sex" categories of male and female. Ka revises them as "gender" categories of men (which includes transmen), women (which includes transwomen), uncertain (for authors whose gender the CCC team cannot determine), non-binary, and publisher (when authorship is not attributed to people but instead the publisher). Whereas sex refers to how people identify biologically, Ka's shift to gender departs from reductive biologically determined definitions of identity in favor of more inclusive and complex understandings of it. Gender refers to culturally constructed notions of femininity and masculinity that reflect an interplay between a person's self-presentation and others' perception of it [Butler 1990]. With the non-binary category, CCC makes space for studying the prison censorship of authors who present as outside the gender binary of man or woman. CCC's categories still, however, simplify the nuances of gender. The database fails to capture how an author's gender might change, how people live gender on a spectrum (rather than on static terms), and the great diversity of identifications for gender beyond the binary. Even so, CCC's five less than ideal gender categories along with its US census racial and ethnicity categories (that likewise overgeneralize group identities) allow the database to highlight gendered and racialized disparities in prison censorship publication practices.

Ka also developed a website mechanism for illustrating how race, ethnicity, and gender intersect with censorship practices. To explore banned publication authors by social identity, users can select categories of gender as well as race and ethnicity. These categories each overlay texture visualizations onto the existing data. Additionally, the database includes categories that present DOC designated reasons for each publication's censorship with another kind of texture.

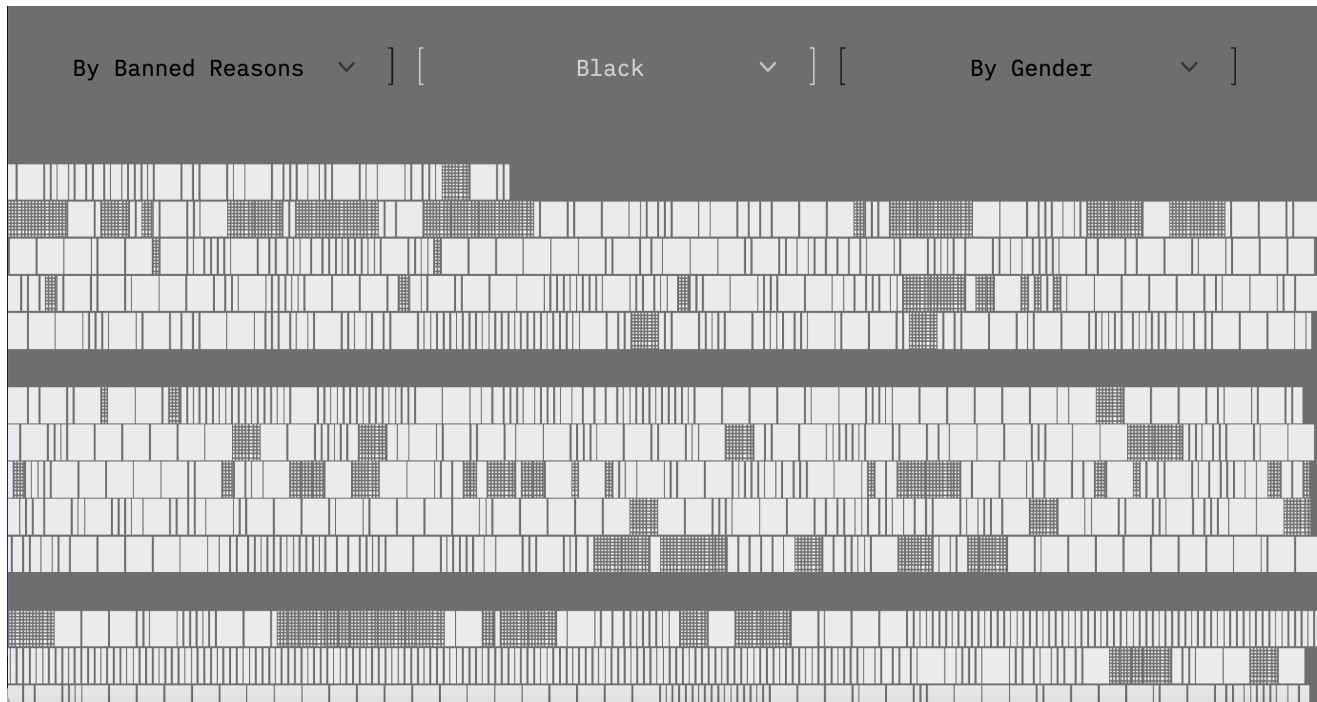


Figure 8. Close-up view of part of Level 1, showing US prisons banned publications filtered by the Black author category. Sue Jeong Ka, *Level 1: The U.S.* from *Coding Carceral Censorship*, 2019-, website screenshot.



Figure 9. Close-up view of part of Level 1, showing US prison banned publications filtered by the woman author category. Sue Jeong Ka, *Level 1: The U.S. from Coding Carceral Censorship*, 2019-, website screenshot.

Combining more than two types of categories (e.g., race & ethnicity, gender, or censorship reasons) will generate a new composite texture. These composite textures visually represent the intersectionality of censorship.

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Figure 10. Close-up view of part of Level 1, showing US prison banned publications filtered to show those banned for sexual explicitness by Black women authors. Sue Jeong Ka, *Level 1: The U.S. from Coding Carceral Censorship*, 2019-, website screenshot.

Ka adopts and adapts governmental categories of identity to hold such social disparities as well as their intersections up for scrutiny. Presently, CCC's "Design Statement" page articulates the project's goal of proposing "a new system for

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aggregating, structuring, and visualizing carceral censorship data that empowers free and incarcerated people along with banned publications' authors to challenge prison administration overreach, social discrimination, and civil rights violations." This statement establishes CCC's intent to provide data in service of marginalized populations. It also marks CCC's difference from the 1890 census punch card, which served to codify the exclusion of select US demographics. In contrast, by indexing censorship imposed on the nation's incarcerated readers, Ka's project calls attention to an excluded US demographic and the governmentally sanctioned biases that condition incarcerated people's access to knowledge.

Ka's bespoke conceptual website construction undermines the fallacy that DH work either takes up theory or method, critical thinking or technical making.^[11] CCC's information architecture intertwines these modes of production with references to the bureaucratic backdrop of its own data and computing's social legacy. Moreover, this database prompts critical social examination of prison publication bans. CCC's intersectional visualization capacities not only mark how US carceral censorship affects different identity groups of authors but also invite users to interrogate the power dynamics and biases driving DOC censorship decisions. Ka's own preliminary CCC data analysis revealed that of all the censorship reasons, DOC across the nation most frequently apply the sexually explicit designation. She found this justification is largely applied to romance/erotica literature (whose censorship mostly impacts women authors) and manga (whose censorship mostly impacts East Asian authors).

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2. Censoring romance/Erotica and Manga's Sexual Speech in and beyond US Prisons

According to our research, these under-examined censorship patterns indicate that standards differentiating between acceptable and unacceptable sexual content are rarely as neutral as they might first appear. Even when the guidelines for banning sexually explicit or obscene content seem unbiased, US authorities' application of them often devalues socially marginalized people and perspectives. The heightened prison censorship of women's and East Asians' sexual speech via romance/erotica literature and manga we see in Ka's initial findings offer two telling examples. As previously noted, CCC data derive from a synthesis of sources: DOC materials (such as their banned book lists, their censorship codes, and publication censorship reports) that provide censorship reasons, the CCC team's research on authors' identities, and the American Library Association designations for different kinds of publications (such as manga as a type of publication and romance and erotica as genres). CCC's database provides all the data for the categories and analyses discussed as well as visualized in this article, but CCC's website does not currently represent all these categories and analyses.

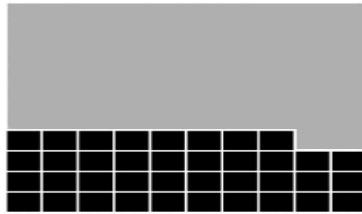
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A close look at CCC's three most-detailed state datasets reflect broader US prison ban trends. These trends align with those signaled by CCC's aggregated (if less up-to-date) national data from all states as well as other evidence discussed later in this article, such as DOC censorship guidelines from various states, case studies of specific prison publication bans, and content analysis of such publications.^[12] In correctional facilities across Virginia (2,634 banned publications), California (1,695 banned publications), and Oregon (5,936 banned publications), the CCC shows significant DOC censorship of romance and erotica for sexual explicitness, particularly regarding works in these genres authored by women. In general, most romance and erotica authors are women, so it is not surprising that the majority of these states' prison-censored publications associated with these genres are by women.^[13]

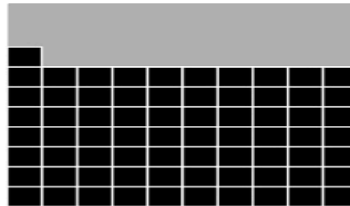
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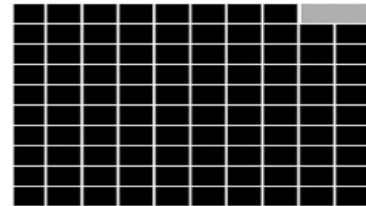
Virginia



38% romance/erotica banned



71% by women

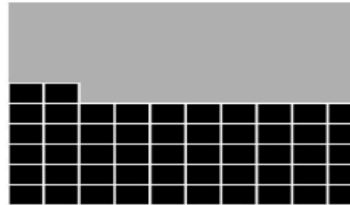


98% censored for explicitness

California



11% romance/erotica banned



52% by women

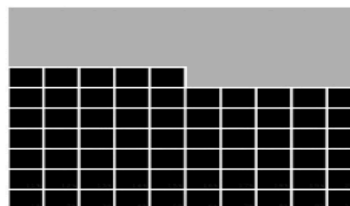


98% censored for explicitness

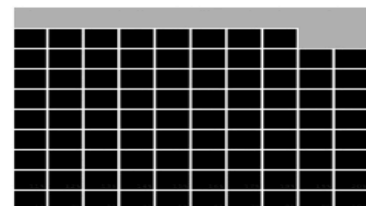
Oregon



11% romance/erotica banned



65% by women



98% censored for explicitness

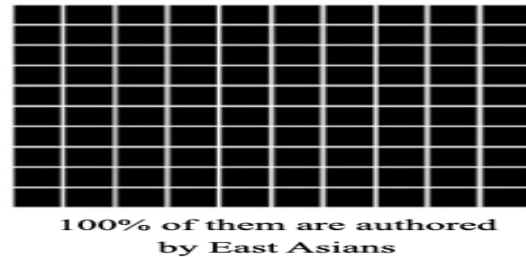
Figure 11. Prominent censorship patterns related to banned romance/erotica publications in Virginia, California, and Oregon DOC.

State DOC	Percentage of banned publications that are romance & erotica	Percentage of banned publications in these genres authored by women	Percentage of banned woman- authored romance & erotica publications censored for sexual explicitness
Virginia	38%	71%	98%
California	11%	52%	California DOC does not provide censorship reasons
Oregon	28%	65%	98%

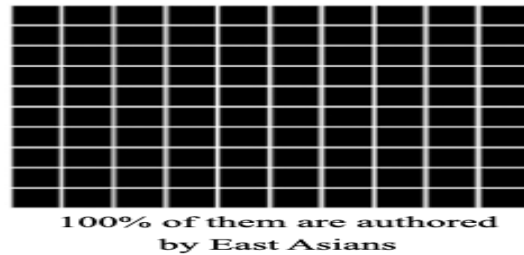
Table 1.

Likewise, these three same states' correctional facilities often target manga, a publication type primarily by East Asian authors.

Virginia



California



Oregon



Figure 12. Prominent censorship patterns related to banned manga publications in Virginia, California, and Oregon DOC.

State DOC	Percentage of banned publications that are manga	Percentage of banned manga publications in these genres authored by East Asians	Percentage of banned East Asian- authored manga publications censored for sexual explicitness
Virginia	5%	100%	81%
California	12%	100%	California DOC does not provide censorship reasons
Oregon	22%	98%	100%

Table 2.

In short, California, Oregon, and Virginia prisons most often cite sexual explicitness to justify their bans on romance/erotica and manga. These bans result in DOC censorship of mostly women authors and East Asian authors respectively.

These prison censorship patterns are novel CCC-powered findings, but biased US censorship practices in the US are nothing new. Hegemonic identity-group concerns steered early US censorship policies of sexually explicit content. The

US Constitution's First Amendment protects free speech and prohibits the government from favoring any religions. Nevertheless, throughout the nation's history, many courts have suppressed sexually suggestive material to uphold Christian morality. During the turn of the nineteenth century, Evangelicals of the Second Great Awakening introduced bans of such material beyond the pale, calling it obscenity. They attempted to use the state's power to curb what they perceived as sin [Stone 2017]. Christian anti-vice activist Anthony Comstock's crusade fortified earlier regulations with the 1873 Comstock laws, "ma[king] it a crime to knowingly mail obscene materials or advertisements and information about obscene materials, abortion, or contraception" [Steele 2020]. Comstock and other enforcers of such legislation did not differentiate between content for sex education and sexual arousal [Semonche 2007, 16]. Courts' objections to sexually explicit material are now pitched in more secular terms, but obscenity rulings' religious heritage and related cis-hetero-patriarchal legacy still reinforce discriminatory censorship.^[14]

The US Supreme Court's current guidelines for censoring obscene material constitute one of these secular and seemingly neutral mandates. Established in 1973, these guidelines are known as the Miller test. Through the test, states can designate content obscene and therefore unprotected by the First Amendment. To be judged obscene, content must fit not just one or two, but all three of the following characterizations:

1. "the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest"
2. "the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct or excretory functions specifically defined by applicable state law"
3. "the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value" [Miller v. California 1973].

Again, the First Amendment protects sexual speech, i.e., any form of communication about sexual matters, which passes the Miller test.

Yet in and beyond prison, censors frequently ban sexual speech in romance/erotica and manga even when it passes the Miller test. We propose that such double standards stem from censors' discriminatory appraisals of the sexual speech that these publications engage. To be clear, we do not assume all the enforcers of prison censorship mean to push an ideologically suppressive or anti-woke agenda. Some may, but plenty are just responding to the bureaucratic pressures of maintaining a semblance of order and efficiency in the carceral system [Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005, 36]. Many of these censors are working without much accountability, clear guidance, or literary or legal expertise, so they likely make snap judgements about what to ban informed by unconscious biases [PEN America 2019]. CCC provides a data-driven mechanism for interrupting such unconscious national biases in US prison censorship by making them conscious.

2.1 US Censorship and Romance and Erotica

As referenced in the Miller test, contemporary communities set norms for what kind of sexual content is socially acceptable. These communities have largely embraced romance and erotica literature. E.L. James' risqué romance *Fifty Shades* trilogy accounted for the US's three top-grossing books between 2019 and 2021 while selling 165 million copies as of 2021 [Aviles 2019] [Alter 2021]. Although the first book in the trilogy, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), is now one of the bestselling romance novels worldwide, it is commonly censored in prisons throughout the US. According to CCC's data, of the 26 states with available banned prison publication data, 15 states' prisons (i.e., 58 percent of these states' prisons) ban one or more books within the *Fifty Shades* trilogy and its extended series.^[15]

Outside of the carceral context, the First Amendment protects sexually explicit material if it is not obscene by the Miller test's standards. Then again, correctional facilities can go beyond the Miller test to deny such material if content threatens to adversely affect the prison environment. The non-profit legal resource and educational provider, The Americans for Effective Law Enforcement, Inc. (AELE) reports that "courts have usually upheld bans on sexually explicit materials in prisons that cite legitimate reasons, such as safety and security, prevention of crime, rehabilitation, prevention of sexual harassment and assault, discipline, recidivism and treatment, or institutional order" [AELE 2010].

Yet, in practice, DOC use of this First Amendment exception for prohibiting sexually explicit material seems less than sound. According to Ka's team's research, states' DOC documented rationales for banning romance/erotica publications as sexually explicit vary from state to state while failing to clearly explain why these publications' flagged content might compromise penal subjects' safety and wellbeing. Whereas some DOC such as Florida's and Pennsylvania's specifically permit the first three books of *Fifty Shades*, others such as the Connecticut, Kansas, and Washington DOC ban the entire trilogy. Washington DOC records provide the most in-depth account of the reasoning for banning the trilogy that we can find. For instance, Washington DOC notes — justifying its rejection of the first book *Fifty Shades of Grey* — read:

Publication contained sexually explicit depictions of sex acts including but limited to; genital- genital, oral-genital, anal-genital contact/penetration. The [p]ublication also describes, in great detail, a masochistic/sadistic relationship and includes bondage on pages 105-106, 113-122, 135- 142, 166-167, 170-175, 193-196, 231-232, 263-268, 274-275, 323-328, 349-350, 363-363, 365-366, 429-430, 437-438. [Washington Department of Corrections 2019]

Admittedly, this romance series, centering BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadomasochism) dynamics in which a virginal woman protagonist willingly roleplays the sexual servant to a billionaire man, is not, for us, an exemplar of progressive twenty-first-century sexual politics. As *The New York Review of Books* writer Emily Eakins observes, “Despite the risqué trappings, the books hew to the conventions of the nineteenth-century marriage plot” [Eakins 2012]. Yet various states' DOC reasons for censoring it, like those provided by the Washington DOC, seem to reject E. L. James' books not out of concern for their sexual politics, but instead their vivid description of sexual acts and transgressive turn-ons. In contrast, feminists critique her series for glorifying asymmetrical power between a cis-heterosexual woman and man. For instance, they lament that *Fifty Shades* feeds into some women's fantasies of sexual submission [Roiphe 2012]. At the same time, many feminists defend or even champion the series for unapologetically exploring a woman protagonist's sexual proclivities and the ways that old gender dynamics seep into modern heterosexual relationships [Rodale 2015, 14] [Chemaly 2014]. Our purpose here is not to judge whether *Fifty Shades* empowers women. Instead, we raise this romance series example (about which there is more discourse and writing than most) to underscore 1) how empowering women does not stand out as a variable in DOC documented reasoning for the censorship of sexually explicit content, and 2) the inconsistent and questionable censorship logic among state DOC that deems graphic romance/erotica a threat to order in prison.

Prohibiting graphic romance and erotica is not neutral or without consequence. Some such literature can be a vehicle for marginalized points of views and when prisons ban such publications, they further undermine the neglected perspectives this kind of romance/erotica represents. Like E.L. James, Zane is another contemporary *New York Times* bestselling author of these genres whose books many DOC reject. At the time of this writing, her Simon & Schuster publisher page advertises Zane's 38 romance books [Simon & Schuster]. Among her followers, Zane has a reputation as a Black woman writer who operates within the tradition of urban erotica/urban fiction and who discusses desire and sex acts in unvarnished terms [Stallings 2015, 82]. California, Connecticut, Iowa, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin prisons all ban multiple titles by Zane for sexual explicitness. The most detailed prison records that we can obtain regarding the censorship of Zane's books due to sexual explicitness hail from Oregon and Virginia DOC explanations of these states' prison bans of Zane's *Vengeance: A Novel*. It is about a pop star, Wicket, struggling against the temptation to get back at the people who traumatized her as a youth to instead overcome her long-held pain and suffering. The Oregon DOC cites *Vengeance's* pages 110-112 and 168-169 as those which merit prison censorship, on the grounds of the following codes:

- 1.01: Portrayal of actual or simulated sexual acts or behaviors between human beings
- 1.02: Portrayal of actual or simulated penetration of the vagina or anus, or contact between the mouth and the breast, genitals, or anus.
- 1.03: Portrayal of actual or stimulated stimulation of the breast genitals, or anus. [Oregon Department of Corrections 2020] [Oregon Laws 2021]

Indeed, both sets of cited pages describe instances of oral sex, contact with intimate body parts, and masturbation that

correspond with these codes. The Virginia DOC, however, does not cite these pages as grounds for censoring *Vengeance*, but instead identifies two other pages, 51 and 64, for violations A.1 and A.2 under criterion A, “Material that emphasizes explicit or graphic depictions or descriptions of sexual acts.” On page 51, the protagonist contemplates using the heel of a shoe as a tool of self-penetration, which counts as violation A.1, “Actual sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, or oral) including inanimate object penetration.” Both pages 51 and 64 describe characters, secreting bodily fluids as the result of sexual excitement, which counts as violation A.2, “Secretion or excretion of bodily fluids or substances in the context of sexual activity or arousal” [Virginia Department of Corrections 2024, 10].

As in the case of DOC stated reasons for disapproving *Fifty Shades*, various DOC stated reasons for disapproving *Vengeance* do not seem to reflect feminist concerns. Justifications for banning both publications target text about sexual acts rather than the sentiments behind them, such as what these acts imply relative to characters’ story arc, social power dynamics, etc. In the *Vengeance* pages that Oregon and Virginia DOC deem violations, the protagonist narrates consensual sexual encounters, where she takes charge. For example, on pages 64 and 110-112, Wicket seduces a man, declines penetrative intercourse with him, and, in response, he happily follows her lead on to other sexual activity. Also told from her point of view, pages 51 and 168-169 cast Wicket as the dom in a sadomasochistic exchange with two other eager participants.

Occasionally, DOC guidelines for prison officials stipulate that they consider material’s merit when determining whether to ban it. This censorship factor is especially notable when it comes to the romance and erotica genres, given that their worth is often subject to public and literary debate as well as social biases. For instance, the Virginia DOC guidelines state an exception for its sexual explicitness censorship category: “No publication generally recognized as having literary value should be excluded under this criterion” [Virginia Department of Corrections 2024, 10]. By banning *Vengeance*, the Virginia DOC therefore determined it lacks literary merit. Yet discussion around the worth of Zane’s books demonstrates that questions of literary or social value can favor dominant group views at the expense of marginalized ones. Critics often dismiss Zane’s books for their rough and direct writing, which contrasts with the kind of romance/erotica novel that plays up florid language, metaphors or poetic prose [Stallings 2015, 79–82]. Writerly craft and figurative writing can elevate sexually explicit romance in the eyes of literary tastemakers and potential porn censors who accept risqué content if it has redeeming social value [Wyngaard 2015, 983, 989–990]. According to these standards of articulation, Zane’s straightforward tone and lack of literary devices make her books crass and without social value. Yet L.H. Stallings argues that Zane’s blunt narration of sexual subject matter is an expression of “epistemic self-defense” and “erotic sovereignty” for Black women whose sexuality is heavily exploited and policed by both white and patriarchal forces [Stallings 2015, 62]. In Stallings’ view, Zane’s text validates the oft-discounted communication style and vantage points of the many Black women who compose its primary readership: “Zane writes about the repressed in the language of the repressed. Likewise, her audience is composed of those who speak and read in a similar manner” [Stallings 2015, 83]. By reclaiming modes of expression and sexual longing that resonate with numerous Black women and perhaps other demographics, Zane’s directness could enhance its social value. Yet prison censorship guidelines do not encourage censors to weigh such marginalized views of value when deciding what kind of sexual expression is safe for the prison environment.

On the contrary, DOC rejections of Zane’s books and *Fifty Shades* appear to reflect discriminatory value judgements. More specifically, we propose these publications’ prison censorship is symptomatic of the US patriarchal censorship of women’s sexual speech and portrayals of their sexual desire — both in and beyond prison. The history of US censorship bears out this enduring pattern and CCC’s data on romance/ erotica sheds light on this pattern’s contemporary impact in prison.

Censors’ anxieties about women’s corruptibility played an outsized role in early US obscenity legislation. In 1821, the first recorded US obscenity trial outlawed John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, popularly known as *Fanny Hill*, the name of its protagonist. As intimated by its title, the novel chronicled a young woman’s sexual awakening and observations [Semonche 2007, 13]. In the tradition of the modern romance novel, *Fanny Hill* foregrounds a love story and rewards its heroine’s erotic adventures with a happy ending [Ivanksi et al. 2022, 3]. This is not only a case of the government regulating a sexually provocative account. *Fanny Hill*’s ban until 1966 and continued challenges thereafter also exemplify US morality crusaders’ long-standing opposition to narratives in which women’s sexual pleasure goes

unpunished [Ivanksi et al. 2022, 41] [Rodale 2013]. The patriarchal impulse took literal form when, in 1923, father and New York Supreme Court Judge John Ford led the Clean Books legislative charge after finding his 16-year-old daughter with a library copy of D.H. Lawrence's sexually explicit *Women in Love*. Had it succeeded, the Clean Books Bill would have extended the definition of obscenity to criminalize a book even if it contained an isolated passage deemed "filthy" or "disgusting," regardless of whether that passage was sexually stimulating [Semonche 2007, 10] [New York Times 1923].

Along with curbing representations that affirm women's sexual curiosity, US censorship campaigns against sexual content often thwart women's sexual self-representation and expression. Although women's bodies are among the most frequently censored subject matter, through the mid-twentieth century, there were few well-known sexually explicit publications by women. This started to change with Boston Women's Health Collective's handbook first published in 1969 as "Women and Their Bodies" and then in subsequent editions with the more famous title *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Our Bodies Ourselves). Its women authors sought to provide other women with a resource for understanding their sexuality and reproductive health, not shying away from then taboo topics such as masturbation, premarital sex, and lesbianism [Semonche 2007, 44] [Wells 2008]. As the publication gained popularity, political conservatives and evangelists fought to ban it [Semonche 2007, 44]. This instance also speaks to US right-wing moralists' historical use of censorship as a tool for maintaining their power and values through policy initiatives. Over the past couple of centuries, they have attempted to prohibit the publication, production, and circulation of sexual content. To this end, such moralists turned to postal censorship acts, tariff laws, "anti-pornography" ordinances, etc. [Semonche 2007] [Blanchard 1992].

Anti-pornography measures have especially bolstered the censorship of romance and erotica, and by extension, literature about women's sexuality. In the 1980s, Christian fundamentalists, political conservatives, and pro-censorship feminists set out to ban pornography. The Supreme Court struck down resulting anti-pornography ordinances, ruling that they violated the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech in accordance with the Miller test [Blanchard 1992]. Even so, the political controversy exacerbated the national public stigma surrounding sexual speech. Attempts to restrict it through anti-pornography ordinances pivot around descriptions and depictions of women's bodies.^[16] Consequently, those pushing patriarchal agendas often leverage anti-pornography rhetoric to control representations of women, including women's representations of other women and themselves. Late twentieth-century feminists for and against porn censorship both feared that such agendas would co-opt anti-porn regulations [Strossen 1993, 1140–1147].^[17] In contrast to religious and political anti-porn conservatives, feminists Andrea Dworkin and Katherine MacKinnon, who co-authored the anti-porn Indianapolis ordinance (1984), intended to limit this censorship to expression that harms women [Blinoff 2021, 100–110]. They defined pornography not as general erotica (that represents or arouses sexual love or desire), but as nine specific types of sexual pictures and/or words that they argue degrade and dehumanize women.^[18] The ordinance's anti-degradation definition noticeably differs from the more general, colloquial understanding of pornography, which means "material (such as books or a photograph) that depicts erotic behavior and is intended to cause excitement" (Merriam Webster Dictionary). It is then not surprising that under the guise of banishing pornography, many censors attack romance and erotica publications, regardless of whether these novels fit Dworkin and MacKinnon's definition. Managing Director Jonathan Friedman at PEN America laments this phenomenon in the contemporary climate: "[a]ctivists and politicians are inflating the notion of what constitutes 'pornography' beyond all recognition... They are going after romance books, books about puberty or sex education and books that just have LGBTQ characters" [Sargent and Walden 2023]. One recent example entails various bans on Nora Roberts' romance novels in red states such as Florida. To discredit her books, right-wing activists vilified them as porn. Yet these books focus on friends pursuing love and contain accounts of only consensual sex premised on respect via "language vague enough that a child would have little idea what was happening" [Sargent and Walden 2023]. Whether or not one agrees with feminist porn censorship, we mean to establish that there is an ongoing track record of US special interest groups mobilizing charged anti-pornography language to minimize who can exercise and access sexual speech. This context likely contributes to prison bans of romance and erotica and by extension women's sexual speech since this literature is mostly by women authors.

The policing of porn and women's sexual speech raises questions about what constitutes appropriate expressions of desire. Even when content aligns with Dworkin and MacKinnon's definition of porn, parties that stigmatize and/or censor

it among adults risk dictating these standards. In this sense, anti-porn arbiters proceed as if they know what is best for a vast diversity of audiences and how these audiences experience content. Feminist porn movement advocates argue that such anti-porn tendencies are not only presumptuous, but exclusionary because they privilege “normative and constricted sexualities,” such as “sexual acts and identities” that promote “heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy, and reproduction,” while dismissing sexual expression that does not as perverse [Rubin 1984, 280]. Furthermore, when content exceeds normative and constricted sexualities and even when it stays within these bounds, audiences do not perceive expressions of desire in literal or homogenous ways. For instance, feminist porn scholars “explor[e] sexual ideas and acts that may be fraught, confounding, and deeply disturbing to some, and liberating and empowering to others” [Penley et al. 2013, 15]. Likewise, scholar Janice Radway finds that readers’ interpretations of content about desire is complex and contingent. She conducted a reception-based ethnography of a midwestern community of women who consumed romance upholding traditional cis-hetero-patriarchal values. These romance books might appear to demean women’s agency, but Radway concludes they granted their readers emotional and psychological support [Radway 1991, 96]. Plot points associated with regressive gender politics, such as “heroines in relative positions of weakness” and violent men, resonated with the readers not because the women took pleasure in these obstacles, but rather because they got to accompany the heroine as she resolved these obstacles en route to happily ever after. This process helped the readers understand and cop with the cis-hetero-patriarchal limitations that conditioned their own lives [Radway 1991, 75, 14]. Radway’s study and feminist porn scholarship, along with the previously mentioned cases of *Fifty Shades* and Zane’s books are telling. They establish that the nuanced social functions of romance and erotica should not be taken for granted.

To summarize, we believe at least three factors underlie why US prisons’ frequent censorship of romance and erotica publications most impacts women’s sexual speech. First, these contemporary genres are dominated by women authors. Banning publications in these genres means banning largely women-authored publications. This correlation bears out in Ka’s most accurate datasets of state DOC censorship (figure 12). Second, romance and erotica cater to the historically suppressed themes of women’s sexual desire and sexual liberation. Objections to these themes motivated important early US obscenity debates and more recent anti-pornography censorship efforts, including those aimed at romance and erotica. Third, the well-documented US history of patriarchal campaigns against these genres helps explain the understudied yet prominent phenomenon of US prison bans on them.

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2.2 US Censorship and Manga

In addition to revealing that numerous prison bans on romance and erotica detract from incarcerated people’s access to women’s sexual speech, Ka’s preliminary data analysis shows that prisons throughout the nation often reject manga. In so doing, these prisons reject a great deal of publications by people of East Asian descent who make up the majority of the banned manga’s authors. Just as restrictions on romance and erotica outside the carceral system relate to those inside it, prisons’ penchant for prohibiting manga reflects this publication type’s commonly censored status within US society at large.

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To some degree, manga’s comic book format accounts for these restrictions. Comics are highly susceptible to obscenity charges due to the misguided notion that they are categorically children’s entertainment [Blanchard 1992] [CBLDF(a) n.d.] [Sergi 2015, 220–224]). This perception undermines their serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value, which the Miller test requires censors to consider. Moreover, the presumption that comics target the youngest members of society rather than its adult members means that courts are more likely to apply harsher community standards to this material. The Miller test justifies harsher standards for children’s content. At the same time, censors cite anti-pornography legislation that prohibits sexualized representation of minors for both children’s and adult content to rationalize their strict appraisals of manga. Even so, as we will discuss, Americans’ tendency to misconstrue manga’s target audience and subjects often prevent US censors from applying these standards to the publication type fairly.

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Manga bans also demonstrate how US censorship policies can contain the diversification of cultural content. At the turn of the twentieth century, overall US community standards around sexual expression broadened as developments in mass media and eventually the Internet circulated suggestive and even brazenly risqué content, such as pornography [Stone 2017]. Meanwhile, the rise of the Internet and global markets helped spread Japanese popular culture. Manga is

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a kind of comic stemming from this culture with long story lines and complex graphics [Johnson-Woods 2010, 25, 1]. These publications came to dominate the East Asian comic book market. In 2007, manga started making US best-seller lists [Johnson-Woods 2010, 1]. Manga encompasses an enormous range of genres and only select subsets of them portray young-looking characters in sexual ways. Yet as national attitudes around sexual content relaxed in the aughts, US prosecutors, customs agents, and other law enforcement increasingly charged those in possession of manga publications with obscenity regardless of whether the publications belonged to these subsets [Stone 2017] [CBLDF(b) n.d.].

We believe the forces behind this uptick in manga censorship are multifold. At least three probable factors include:

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1) The 2003 anti-child pornography PROTECT Act and the flawed application of its obscene child pornography component ^[19]

The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) explains that this act strengthened law enforcement's ability to prevent and respond to child sex offenses. At the same time, it instituted the category of "obscene child pornography," which criminalizes a non-photographic visualization of any kind that depicts "a minor engaging in sexually explicit conduct and is obscene" [CBLDF(b) n.d.] [PROTECT Act 2023]. Although some adult manga entails sexual representations of characters who appear youthful, US governmental actors mistakenly equate manga in general with youth and sexual deviancy [CBLDF(b) n.d.].

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2) Different cultural perceptions of both taboo sexual expression and manga

When it comes to sexual content, in Japan, nudity, certain expressions of sensual intimacy (such as those between humans and non-human creatures), and escapist fantasy in adult cultural products are more socially sanctioned than in the US. Such distinctions can lead non-East Asian viewers who are unfamiliar with a sexual trope in manga to view it as perverse. In contrast, East Asian audiences who recognize the same trope as a well-established part of their culture's artistic and popular production might regard it as tame [Briel 2010, 201–203].

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Oregon DOC's censorship of the hit manga *A Centaur's Life* underscores how, when presented with culturally unfamiliar scenarios that involve nudity or light sexual content, US censors are quick to reject it, even when these scenarios represent socially acceptable approaches to sexual issues in Japan. The series *A Centaur's Life* (2011 —) by Kei Murayama, is *shōjo* manga (manga primarily targeted at pre-adolescent girls and young women). It is set at a high school in a world that resembles contemporary Japan but is inhabited only by mythological creatures. The protagonist is a high school-aged centaur girl [Lee 2016, 56–60]. Japanese writers and artists have long embraced human-animal hybrids from the Greek tradition and others. *Jingai* (non-human humanoid) characters in general and centaur characters in particular have enjoyed increased prominence in Japanese manga since 2010 [Lee 2016, 58] [Escande 2022, 33]. According to comparative literature scholar Jessy Escande, by centering characters that are visibly proximate to but other than human, recent manga with *jingai* often give manga creators and audiences an inviting way to grapple with the challenging "relationship between the self and the Other in a society [Japan] that still values homogeneity and conformism" [Escande 2022, 31]. *A Centaur's Life* focuses on the centaur protagonist's "otherness-related problems that are typical of a human adolescent," such as teenage puberty, dating anxieties, and queer crushes [Escande 2022, 33, 36]. On these matters, as Escande sees it, *A Centaur's Life* provides sexual education through socially palatable narratives of *jinga* with horns, halos, and tails, thereby responding to Japanese students' disappointment in their wanting high school sexual education in the human world [Escande 2022, 33, 36]. *A Centaur's Life* volume 9 directly explores teen dilemmas such as romantic feelings between friends and queer desire perceived to go against the norm. A satyr girl Nadeshiko confesses to her friend: "If only you were a boy, Akira-chan. I'm sure I'd be asking you to kiss me" [Murayama 2016]. They never kiss or touch each other in a sexual manner, but Nadeshiko encounters her crush Akira, a tomboyish part-satyr, part-imp girl, in a somewhat provocative way when picking Akira up for school. Nadeshiko finds Akira still dozing off in her sleeping gown. It is scrunched up over her neck, partially exposing Akira's not-yet-developed breasts in one panel and an undifferentiated bump between her bare legs (hinting at but not depicting her vulva) in another. Acknowledging the impropriety of the situation, Nadeshiko exclaims: "That's no way for a lady to sleep, by the way." Akira shrugs the comment off: "It's hot in here. Besides, we're all girls here, so what's the problem?"

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Nadeshiko lets it go and helps Akira get ready. This scene shows the two *jingai* girls on the cusp of adulthood navigating both increased societal expectations of modesty and new feelings of sexual tension prompted by partial nudity. Whereas this material takes on an educational tenor for adolescents in Japan, US censors are more prone to object to it as an inappropriately sexual representation of youth. Indeed, Oregon DOC prohibits this volume 9 for “portraying sexual acts of a minor” [Oregon Department of Corrections 2020] [Oregon Laws 2021].

Oregon DOC bans volume 10 of the series for this same offense as well as “simulated or threatened [sex/ual] acts” [Oregon Department of Corrections 2020] [Oregon Laws 2021]. Although this DOC report does not cite specific pages for these acts, it likely refers to the part of volume 10 where characters’ sexual curiosity is most visibly on display: when the *jinga* girls relax in hot springs together. No sex acts unfold there. The characters, however, are unclothed and, as girls undergoing puberty, they jokingly compare breasts. One even touches another’s. When the centaur girl Hime helps her friend, an imp-girl Nozomi out of the tub, Nozomi accidentally knocks into Hime’s chest. For US censors, the tub setting might instantly imply an erotic context that heightens the sensuality of this comedic run-in and the youth’s light-hearted consideration of their maturing bodies to the level of censorship. In contrast, Japanese traditions of public baths linked to ritual and religious purification (associated with Shinto and Buddhist practices) reduce communal bathing’s sexual connotations. History books, TV shows, and movies about the Edo period as well as celebrated national works from that era, such as Hokusai Manga’s *Public Bath* (1815-1849) woodblock print, visualize these settings as routine rather than risqué environments. Communal bathing in hot springs remains a popular Japanese approach to cleansing the body and easing the mind [Clark 1994, 5, 30, 88].

Reductive US perceptions of manga overall also encourage censors’ overgeneralized views of its sexual extremeness. Manga is a massive industry in Japan and elsewhere for all manner of narrative — news, education, sports, science fiction, romance, etc. — geared toward different audiences [Johnson-Woods 2010]. This publication type cannot be reduced to one sensibility or age group. Jason Thompson’s encyclopedic manga guidebook identifies over a thousand genres (2007). There is a vast array of manga publications, some feature sexual content and many do not.

DOC bans on commercially successful, sexually tame manga geared at youth such as *Life of a Centaur*, highlight dubious prison censorship practices around manga publications. We do not deny that sexually explicit manga with devastating gender politics, pornographic representations of minors, and/or sexually degrading depictions exist. They do. Some of the best-known examples can be found in *hentai* manga, which is an intentionally pornographic type, and hardcore *lolicon* manga, which sexualize prepubescent girls. Revenge porn-centered narratives with violence against women, such as *Prison Experiment* (2016) and *Redo of Healer* (2017 —), express striking forms of misogyny that some manga contain [Ellecosta 2023, 78, 111, 119–121].

Moreover, feminist critiques of erotic and non-erotic manga abound because, like countless other artistic and entertainment formats the world over, manga often marks sexist double standards. For instance, manga artists’ tendency to portray girls and women characters with enormous breasts, wide hips, tiny waistlines, and long legs risks sexually objectifying them and perpetuating unattainable feminine beauty standards [Ellecosta 2023] [Orbaugh 2003]. Yet, in recent decades manga creators increasingly either incorporate these double standards to undermine them or depart from them, offering alternative progressive views of gender [Hemann 2020].

As with romance and erotica publications, numerous manga publications include risqué elements and/or reinforce patriarchal stereotypes while also unsettling confining gendered expectations. On the one hand, the extent to which these kinds of manga publications promote views of gender equality is up for debate. On the other hand, the US prison bans on a lot of these publications for sexual explicitness are suspect. Many such manga with a combination of progressive and regressive gender politics, in our eyes, readily meet the requirements of the Miller test without evidentially undermining prison order and safety.^[20]

3) Lack of consideration for publications’ societal value (cultural, artistic, literary, etc.)

Berserk (1989-), a manga series censored in nine states’ prisons, explores matters of substance with highly skilled storytelling.^[21] In Japan and manga circles, people recognize it as an artistic masterwork. They compare the dark

fantastical beauty in *Berserk's* pages to Dante's *Inferno* illustrations and the Dutch Renaissance paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. As these artworks, *Berserk* tackles serious subject matter about the human condition that extends to eye-catching sexual content: group sex, sexual assault, and rape [Traub 2021]. *Berserk* condemns the sexual violence it illustrates and attends to characters' emotional trauma from it. While noting that original creator Kentaro Miura depicts sexual violence with more sensitivity than most of his contemporaries, some fans lament that *Berserk* still glamorizes it by drawing attention to the beauty of women victims' bodies in such scenes [o-blessed-king-of-longing 2014]. Virginia's DOC is among those which ban *Berserk* for sexual explicitness. The state's DOC overtly instructs prison censors to weigh works' overall merits, stipulating that "[n]o publication generally recognized as having literary value" should be rejected for sexual explicitness [Virginia Department of Corrections 2024, 10]. Virginia DOC prohibits all of *Berserk's* now 42 volumes anyway. This is implicitly a dismissal of the series acclaimed cultural, craft, and storytelling qualities. Virginia DOC and other states' DOC failure to wholistically evaluate a work's societal worth when making censorship decisions is noteworthy. This negligence reflects the narrow cultural thinking that informs prison censorship around sexual material.

To sum up, we believe that the PROTECT Act, cultural differences between the US and Japan (including overgeneralized US perceptions of manga as a sexual entertainment format), and US prison censorship protocols' lack of consideration for publications societal value variously promote xenophobic US prison censorship of manga. Xenophobia refers to fear of or dislike for the foreign or culturally unfamiliar. Time and time again, US censors' ignorance about manga (whether willed or not) has led them to misinterpret a manga's sexual character. They then excessively deem manga publications as harmful, as worthy of fear. The xenophobic trends of sexually-explicit-based prison bans are also bound up with white supremacist ones, given that white supremacy fuels orientalizing stereotypes of East Asians as hypersexual.^[22] The xenophobic and racist dimensions of manga prison censorship are in keeping with broader discrimination that protects US white cis- hetero-patriarchal hierarchies in the carceral context [Alexander 2010] [Davis and Shaylor 2001] [Mogul et al. 2011].

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Conclusion

Among DH projects about the prison industrial complex, CCC is distinct for its critical artistic construction led by inquiry into social bias. CCC partakes in Ka's socially engaged art practice, experiments with information architecture, and tracks the US prison censorship of numerous publication types for further inspection. Its unique web design promotes not only an interactive user-experience, but also an evocative one, as its visuals reference the governmental and computational contexts of its own data. Moreover, CCC invites users to explore perspectives that prison publication bans target and why. As the website partially now shows, the database and its categories reveal relationships between prison officials' censorship justifications, censored publications and their types, and censored authors' social identities at the local institutional, state, and national level within the US. Concentrating on the sexually explicit justification for censorship, CCC's initial findings uncover widespread banning habits that devalue views associated with women's and East Asians' sexual speech (through the prison censorship of romance/erotica literature and manga). CCC's ability to make these two overlooked prison censorship patterns detectable illustrates how Ka's database, and by extension DH more broadly, can galvanize efforts to articulate and agitate against discrimination within the prison industrial complex.

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By animating the database's inquiry into social biases through her artistic treatment of it, Ka illuminates how DH and socially engaged art practices can be mutually enriching. The former offers data-driven methods for strengthening the analytical aspects and reach of the latter beyond the art field. In turn, socially engaged art's creative means of reckoning with social justice issues can invigorate DH strategies.

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Notes

[1] For instance, critical pedagogy writers Paulo Freire, Donaldo Mercado, and Henry A. Giroux lament the ways in which formal colonial education uses literacy not as tool of liberation or democracy, but instead as one for training students "to reproduce efficiently and unquestioningly the dominant ideology" [Eldred and Mortensen 1992, 516].

[2] Federal Bureau of Prisons regulations allow for the censorship of books found "to be detrimental to the security, good order, rehabilitation or discipline of the institution." [Thornburgh v. Abbott 1989, 404–405].

[3] The Sentencing Project, a research and advocacy center with in-depth and relatively up-to-date data analysis on the US prison population,

articulates these social disparities through statistics. For instance, a recent Sentencing Project study found “Black men are six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men and Latinx men are 2.5 times as likely” [Nellis 2023] while another reported that “LGBTQ+ adults are incarcerated at three times the rate of the total adult population” [Ghandnoosh and Stammen 2022]. Such studies often discuss how impoverished conditions predispose people to incarceration. Indeed, the Council of State Governments Justice Center’s work makes clear that a significant majority of incarcerated Americans are financially under-resourced: “two-thirds of people detained in jail report annual incomes under \$12,000 prior to arrest” [McLean and Thompson 2007].

[4] Kate Cauley stressed the unmet need for a digital repository with structured data on banned prison books throughout the United States [Cauley 2020]. More recently, the non-profit news organization, The Marshall Project, launched a searchable database on US banned prison books by state. Although useful, this database has far fewer data categories than CCC and does not code authors’ gender or race while it mostly neglects publications that are not books, such as comics, magazines, and journals [The Marshall Project 2023].

[5] White cis-hetero-patriarchy refers to a system of dominance that simultaneously privileges racial whiteness, cis identity (wherein one self-identifies with the sex one was assigned at birth) heterosexuality (i.e., straight sexuality), and patriarchy (systemic sexism). The hyphenated term emphasizes how these types of dominance intersect with and reinforce one another [Muncaster 2022, 87]. White cis-hetero-patriarchal forces are forces that advantage white, cisgender, heterosexual men and/or that advantage white, cisgender, heterosexual, and patriarchal perspectives.

[6] For instance, Minerva Cuevas’ socially engaged artwork *Mejor Vida Corp.* (in English *Better Life Corporation*) (1998–) stems from her earlier public interventions in Mexico City. It is a web-based nonprofit corporation that provides a variety of public goods and services. Through this interface, Cuevas has shared “pre-validated subway tickets, pre-paid envelopes for domestic and international mailing, student ID cards that allow users to receive discounted rates, and barcode stickers that reduce the price of food in supermarkets.” *Mejor Vida Corp.* parodies codes of the capitalist market to critique its exploitative tactics while offering a small-scale, free alternative as well as grassroots inspiration to participants who act as the work’s donors, recipients, and/or observers [Thompson 2012].

[7] Ka began investigating prison censorship for the installation, *Book Repair Lab: The Jefferson Market Library and the Women’s House of Detention* (2019-ongoing). Through it, she set up a workstation in The New School’s Kellen Gallery for fixing damaged New York Public Library (NYPL) books on the wish lists of Rikers Correctional Center’s incarcerated residents before redirecting the books to NYPL’s Rose M. Singer Center jail library there. *Book Repair Lab* also traced relationships between the New School, NYPL, and NYC correctional services. This work inspired Ka to continue amassing, aggregating, and analyzing banned publication lists. As shown on her artist website, these activities inform many of Ka’s projects since 2019 [Ka 2025].

[8] DH projects that engage the prison industrial complex must, however, be vigilant to avoid exposing sensitive personal information of the parties involved and exacerbating incarcerated people’s exploitation. Many technology reporters and librarians recognize this complex’s stakeholders’ penchant for weaponizing data and digital tools in such predatory ways [Logic 2020] [PLSN 2021] [Cahn 2020] [Kaun and Stierstedt 2023].

[9] Antoni Muntadas’s *The File Room* (1994) does not focus on the carceral context, but as an artistically staged database of censorship cases, the work is a relevant digital archive precedent to CCC. First installed at the Chicago Cultural Center, *The File Room* consisted of a file-cabinet-filled room at the center of which was a computer terminal with an online, open-source database. Through it, users could browse hundreds of accounts of censorship and upload their own [Petito 2016]. *The File Room* now remains and continues to grow as a website.

[10] Of the 50 states in the US only 26 have prison banned publication lists (i.e., relatively consistent documentation of banned publications in prisons throughout the state). Consequently, CCC data represents only these states. These include Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

[11] Rather than relying on popular DH Content Management Systems such as Omeka or WordPress, Ka turned to the web platform Angular. Angular provides many kinds of visual languages for programmers to choose from while its coding language of TypeScript allows for intricate web design. Ka used the web interface application Figma to wireframe CCC.

[12] The prison censorship data for the 26 states that CCC represents are not yet all updated through 2024 nor are all the states’ datasets as clean as they could be. We feature waffle charts informed by the most accurate data possible based on Ka’s up-to-date and cleaned state datasets — those for California, Oregon, and Virginia. Ka prioritized Oregon’s dataset because its DOC currently bans the most publications of any state in the nation and provides the most detailed censorship documentation. She finalized California’s and Virginia’s datasets in preparation for CCC-related site-specific artwork commissioned for exhibitions in these states.

[13] According to a 2015 sociological study, 99 percent of romance authors are “female” [Lois and Gregson 2015, 464]. A more recent report by the non-commercial, international and research data and analytics group WordsRated found that 83 percent of romance and erotica books were written by women [Talbot 2023].

[14] After the Supreme Court first directly ruled on obscene expression and upheld the government’s power to ban it, legal scholar Louis Henkin criticized such censorship as an unconstitutional “relic... of [Americans]’ religious heritage.” He lamented that “obscenity, at bottom, is not crime. Obscenity is sin” [Stone 2017, 278] [Henkin 1963, 402].

[15] The states with available banned prison publication data and that censor *Fifty Shades of Grey* include: Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

[16] For instance, an Indianapolis anti-pornography ordinance described pornography as “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words,” declaring such content a civil rights violation against women (Indianapolis Code, 1984, § 16(q)).

[17] Anti-porn feminists claimed that banning such pornography would support women’s pathways to gender equity, by reducing men’s tendency to regard women as sexual objects [Stone 2010]. Pro-porn feminists, however, cautioned that this censorship would suppress sexually explicit feminist representation of women as well as queer expression [Rogerson and Semple 1990].

[18] Dworkin and MacKinnon write: “*Pornography* is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words that also includes one or more of the following: (i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or (iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or (v) women are presented in postures or positions of sexual submission, servility, or display; or (vi) women’s body parts-including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, or buttocks- are exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts; or (vii) women are presented as whores by nature; or (viii) women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or (ix) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture, shown as

filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual" [Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988, 101].

[19] The PROTECT of the PROTECT act stands for Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today [CBLDF(b) n.d.].

[20] One such example is the sci-fi manga *Ghost in the Shell* (1989-1990) by Masamune Shirow, censored by Oregon DOC for sexual explicitness (Oregon Department of Corrections, 2024). This manga's gender politics can be understood as regressive for fetishizing its protagonist cyborg police officer Major Motoko Kusanagi's stereotypically idealized slim, yet voluptuous feminine physique [Orbaugh 2003]. At the same time, some hail *Ghost in the Shell*'s exploration of hi-tech gender and identity fluidity for its progressive gender politics [Gerdne 2021]. Oregon DOC materials do not clearly specify what *Ghost in the Shell* content is unacceptably sexual, but it seems the DOC objects to the manga's slightly sensual yet relatively sanitized portrayal of Major Kusanagi's bare cyborg body. Even so, we doubt this portrayal threatens to ignite disorder in the prison environment.

[21] These nine states include California, Colorado, Connecticut, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

[22] Cultural critic and theorist Edward Saïd, famously explained orientalizing stereotypes as a function of Orientalism, a European colonial perspective that casts non-white Eastern people and their cultures as lascivious, strange, and irrational [Saïd 1994].

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