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Internship with PEN America

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Internship Report

Introduction

My summer at PEN America as the Membership & National Engagement intern has been a beautiful and necessary space. Everyone at PEN readily shared the ins and outs of nonprofit work, giving me a full picture of what it means to be a part of this field. PEN America operates at the crucial junction where freedom of expression meets the lived realities of writers, artists, and activists around the globe. Over the course of my internship, I was able to witness firsthand the challenges of sustaining a nonprofit organization as it intensified my knowledge on how censorship relates to hate and dissent, observe how institutions combat authoritarian tendencies but within the working capacities of the contemporary neo-liberal framework, and immerse myself in the cultural and intellectual fabric of New York City. This report reflects on these experiences and highlights the lessons I carried forward.

Mobilizing Cultural and Social Capital

Perhaps, one of the most personally transformative parts of my internship was access to cultural centers and literary events across New York City. I attended book launches, screenings, and panels at venues such as The Center for Fiction and at the Ford Foundation. These gatherings brought me into contact with intellectual circles that were, at times, intimidating. The rigor of

discussion, the ease with which participants referenced theory, history, and politics, made me aware of both my own position as a student and the possibilities of the literary and intellectual community. These spaces cordially bring about the significance of the literary arts and its commentary on power, identity, and belonging. Seeing writers and thinkers openly debate urgent issues reminded me that culture is a form of resistance. One of the most memorable moments for me was speaking with Indonesian-American playwright Dena Igusti, learning from their perspective as an Asian American New Yorker whose work brings Queer Indonesian experiences of the 1990s to life. Such encounters were extremely valuable to my understanding of how arts and performance preserve marginalized histories and resist erasure.

I appreciated the exposure to intellectual circles, however, what resonated more with me were the moments of community and solidarity. By my second week at PEN America, I was already immersed in conversations that revealed the inner workings and tensions of the nonprofit world. One conversation that stood out centered on the challenges of unionizing within an established NGO. Even organizations dedicated to justice and rights must grapple with labor struggles within their own walls. Conversations with colleagues over everyday work, brainstorming ways to reach younger or incarcerated writers, or reflecting on the role of art in resisting authoritarianism left the most lasting impression. It was in these small but profound moments that I felt most connected to the mission. I realized that although my passion lies in the rigors of intellectual debate, but more so in creating access, helping certain voices enter those very circles. The idea that literature can connect prisoners, immigrants and youth to a larger world of freedom and imagination was, to me, the heart of PEN America's work.

A theme that ran through my internship was seeing how institutions like PEN America responded to the political climate. Many of the laws and policies proposed during this period

over the summer — such as restrictions on immigration and limitations on public assembly were described as “draconian,” because they threatened both vulnerable communities and the democratic fabric of society. PEN America actively resisted by: Issuing statements and reports critiquing censorship, surveillance and attacks on journalists, organizing campaigns to protect immigrant writers and bringing forth the human costs of restrictive policies, partnering with cultural institutions to create spaces for public dialogue and resistance. Advocacy organizations can mobilize intellectual and cultural capital against political repression. Witnessing PEN America’s responses helped me appreciate the role of institutions in defending free expression and also in shaping resistance.

On (The Illusion of?) Freedom

One of the most thought-provoking, philosophically challenging aspects of my internship at PEN America was grappling with the question of freedom or free speech — what it means, who it serves, and how it is differently understood across generations. Among my peers and younger colleagues, I noticed a difference in how free speech was approached compared to more traditional liberal thought. Liberal thought frames free speech as absolute, perpetual freedom, but the younger generation tends to view freedom as inherently bounded by responsibility. Certain aspects of being human come with sacrifices, compromises and obligations toward others, within your collective and your community, meaning speech cannot always be unmoored from its consequences. This tension made me reflect on freedom itself as an idea: what is truly freedom if we never got to choose the conditions of our birth, our citizenship, or the structures into which we are thrown? In this sense, freedom can become something of an illusion, every “free choice”

you make is intricately bound by a complex web of socio-political-economic and situational factors.

Considering the concept of free speech, held up as a defining characteristic of American democracy. On the surface, citizens have the right to express themselves without government interference, a principle enshrined in the First Amendment. Yet, this right is mediated by who holds access to platforms, who has the financial and social capital to amplify their voices, and who can speak without facing disproportionate consequences. Media conglomerates, many owned by the wealthiest elites, dominate public discourse and shape the mainstream to serve corporate and political interests. The plurality of voices is limited but not impossible. Freedom of speech exists less as an inherent right and more as a privilege that comes with socioeconomic advantage. Similarly, the economic structure of the United States reflects the selective nature of American freedom. American capitalism is framed as a mechanism for individual choice and self-determination, although in practice it perpetuates hierarchies and censorship. Access to quality education, healthcare, housing, and employment opportunities is stratified. Poverty and systemic discrimination restrict the capacity to exercise the very freedoms that the state claims to guarantee. The rhetoric of “meritocracy” obscures the fact that opportunities are rarely equal and the freedom to succeed is disproportionately concentrated among those already privileged. In the United States, free speech is championed as sacrosanct, simultaneously intensified by the sheer number of journalistic houses, newspapers, and media outlets. However, big house media institutions serve the same ruling classes, reproducing dominant ideologies rather than challenging them, either because they are owned by those very elites or significantly funded and tied to them. Hence, publishing narratives that threaten the very existence of their work is not preferable. This is the dilemma where Non-profits find themselves in. The illusion of diversity of

speech obscures a consolidation of power. These reflections became important when engaging with PEN's mission to defend freedom of expression worldwide. The organization advocates against censorship and for the rights of writers at risk. I came to understand that the question of free speech is, at the surface of it, about law or policy but also about entrenched structures of power: who gets heard, who gets ignored here and who is punished for speaking, at all.

Shared Values and Constraints of Nonprofit Work

From day one, the mission of PEN America was quite clear¹: this is a writer's organization working to defend free expression and amplify marginalized voices. I also witnessed the structural difficulties that come with such a mission. Even as PEN America is highly prestigious and respected, much of its work depends on external grants, donors, and sponsorships. This creates an ongoing tension between pursuing long-term projects and responding to short-term financial needs. Many staff members wore multiple hats — event planning, communications, research, and community outreach, sometimes all at once and preferably so. This multitasking reflected both dedication and strain, reminding me that nonprofit labor requires a level of sacrifice and flexibility. The nonprofit world is almost uniquely collaborative. I noticed that even when staff disagreed, they worked from a place of shared values. That solidarity distinguished the environment from other competitive corporate spaces. Through this, I learned that passion and mission usually sustain nonprofits, but at the cost of constant resource negotiation and limited funding.

¹"The Freedom to Write." PEN America, 10 Sep. 2025, <https://pen.org/>.

The Study of Hate

Perhaps my favorite and most notable project was co-authoring an article with my co-intern, Awakhiwe Ndlovu, for the PEN Membership Spotlight Blog, interviewing writer Reyna Grande². In this interview, Grande's call for a world without borders and her interrogation of the U.S.-Mexico border as a construct of imperialism and greed challenged the dominant narratives of American history. She pushes back against the romanticized founding of the United States — its Manifest Destiny and myth of exceptionalism — by positioning Mexico as a victim of U.S. expansionism. One quote that especially struck a chord with me was: "History does not teach us that the Mexican community has been here even before the United States was the United States." Grande's reflections served as a reminder that today's crises are not unprecedented. She drew connections between current detention camps and the Japanese internment camps of World War II, insisting that patterns of exclusion and violence have existed for decades. This interview transported me back to the initial paper I submitted to the BCSH, where I reflect on how hate as an inherent component of human nature, has historically been institutionalized, sanctioned by governments, and normalized in public discourse. It bolsters the idea that prejudice, fear, dehumanization are recurring forces that shape policies, communities, and lives. Hate, here, is less about individual malice and more about collective practices that maintain hierarchies, through othering.

So much of Grande's analysis is centred on the argument that the uproar surrounding the Trump administration's immigration policies such as family separation practices and the expansion of

² egalluscio. "Breaking Down Barriers and Taking Up Space With Immigration Narratives." PEN America, 5 Aug. 2025, <https://pen.org/reyna-grande-member-spotlight/>.

detention facilities actually reveals only the latest iteration of a much longer and entrenched system³. Headlines and political outrage focused on these policies as if they were unprecedented, the reality is that these practices are already embedded within the carceral state and have roots that stretch back to the very founding of the United States. Detention facilities, prisons, and systems of confinement were not incidental creations; they emerged historically to enforce racialized hierarchies of class and labor. From the early use of incarceration to control enslaved and free Black populations, to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the architecture of confinement has always served to protect and reproduce systems of power.

ICE and Detention facilities are not anomalies *These institutions exist, in the first place, to function* as tools of social control, regulating who is allowed to belong, who can move freely, and whose labor and bodies are subjected to surveillance and exploitation. The Trump administration's policies merely intensified these existing structures, weaponizing fear and nationalism to justify the expansion of the state's coercive power. Black, Brown, Indigenous, and immigrant communities are isolated and vilified to maintain said hierarchies. Understanding this continuity reframes the outrage: it is not solely about a particular administration's decisions, but about a persistent system that has long normalized violence. The very existence of these facilities is tied to broader societal and economic imperatives, including cheap labor, racialized social order and the maintenance of political power. Detention and incarceration are tools designed to uphold these structures and recognizing this historical lineage is essential; it shifts the conversation from isolated moral indignation toward a critical understanding of how the confinement and carceral state functions, how it has been historically justified, and why it persists.

³ Saadi, A. "Understanding US Immigration Detention." *PMC* (2020).

In this light, the Trump-era crises are neither complete aberrations nor exceptions, they are symptoms of a system deliberately designed to synthesize hate, contain and control populations deemed the “other” for self-interested gains. The act of holding space for affected communities, as Awakhiwe and I attempted in our article, emphasizes that hate manifests not only in overt violence but also in the invisibility and erasure of lived experiences. Hate thrives when societies fail to recognize or confront these patterns. When the stories of those who endure oppression daily are sidelined or dismissed. Grande’s comparison reminds us that hate is resilient precisely because it adapts, reappears in new forms, and hides behind the guise of legality, nationalism, or “security.” In acknowledging this, we are compelled to confront hate not as isolated incidents, but as an institutionalized force that requires sustained resistance and solidarity.

More! On My Projects at PEN

A second project I worked on over this summer, was the “Interdepartmental Collaboration” project, designed to bridge communication and cooperation across multiple departments and assess how Membership and National Engagement (the department I interned for) can step in. Its core aim being to break down silos and create a space where diverse perspectives, skills, and expertise could converge, enabling more comprehensive solutions than any single department could achieve on its own. We followed a strict methodology by bringing together participants (PEN staff) from different departments and holding individual interviews with them. This project encouraged knowledge sharing, bridging gaps in information, but also offered my co-intern and I with an opportunity to get to know the PEN Staff better. We put together a presentation and 30-page report by the end of it — compiling a detailed analysis of our findings for each

department at PEN New York. A key feature of the project was its emphasis on coordinated planning and decision-making. How teams can work together to identify overlapping goals, streamline processes and align priorities. We took note of how this helped participants develop a more thorough understanding of how different departments operate.

I was also able to contribute directly to PEN's mission through a project aimed at connecting PEN with younger, low-income, Gen Z, and millennial writers which was a demographic underrepresented in mainstream literary circles. It essentially involved testimonials from this specific demographic to talk about how the PEN Membership might have helped them find a sense of community, upward mobility or general membership in their respective literary, artistic or academic careers. This was a project I initiated, although I was unable to see the project to completion due to time constraints, a colleague, Julia, later took it over and continued its development. During my involvement, I conducted two separate interviews with PEN members, which was a window to the Members' perspective with insight into how the organization supports young writers.

Conclusion

My internship at PEN America was a rare window into the realities of nonprofit America and advocacy, the political economy of censorship. Working alongside a team that was humble, kind, and collaborative made the experience both fulfilling and inspiring, reiterating the impact of PEN's work in the literary community. There is an urgent need to combat hate in political life, and the power of cultural institutions to generate dialogue. It gave me access to intellectual spaces that both challenged me and inspired me. Most importantly, I discovered that my own

commitment lies in self-determination of certain communities, to ensure that the circles of culture and debate remain open rather than closed. Through this experience, I learned that creative and intellectual labor is first of all about producing new ideas, but also about defending the space in which ideas can live freely. This is a lesson I will carry forward in my academic and professional journey.