Freedom begins with a book.
The Million Book Project began with a wish to share my book of poems widely with readers in prison.

A book of poems slid under my cell door
23 years ago was what set my own life on a new path...

Along the way my goal evolved.

How many books—each offering new worlds of possibility—could I make available inside correctional facilities across the country?
The Million Book Project harnesses the power of literature to counter what prison does to the spirit.

Reading is a dignity-affirming habit that we do to strengthen our sense of self and discover our authentic interests. The Project’s mission is to build a 500-book Freedom Library and place it in prisons in every state in this country and Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico. These curated libraries promise to build community, both amongst those incarcerated and the prison staff, and between those incarcerated and their friends and family. Dozens of authors will enter these prisons as literary ambassadors to discuss their work, beginning a conversation that breaks down the walls through the power of words.
At no cost to our partners in Corrections, the MBP seeks to gift our 500 book Freedom Library to correctional facilities in every state in this country and Puerto Rico. The Freedom Library is not just a collection of books and a bookshelf, but rather a custom designed micro-library built with our partners at MASS design that will radically reimagine how space is used in prison housing units.
Our partner the MASS Design Group brings experience tailoring concepts to the correctional context.
FELON
AN AMERICAN WASHI TALE

by Reginald Dwayne Betts

millionbookproject.org
Paper, perhaps surprisingly, is a key part of the prison experience. Paper gets you in and sometimes gets you free. Chasing paper on the front is the catalyst to cuffs for many; making papers, that is parole, is the hope of freedom for others. Inside, letters from family are lifelines, earning the slang moniker “kite” and there is an edge of exhilaration when a kite is slipped into a cell by a guard during mail call or under a cell door by another prisoner. For years after my release, I carried around a slip of paper in my wallet. A receipt for twenty-five dollars and seventy-one cent, the last of the money I’d earned working for 45 cent an hour in a Virginia prison. The experience is marked by paper. Transforming the paper into art complexities the experience, makes it more than loss, more than the account for crimes and prison time that seem to stalk.

**Felon: An America Washi Tale** is about re-imagining paper. A solo performance that begins with the pages of a book being slid into a cell, traverses stoves made of toilet paper, kites from a father, handwritten affidavits, legal complaints, handmade paper, certificates of pardon, & a 1,000 squares fashioned from the clothing of men serving life sentences, the variety of papers that reveals what is possible and burdened by prison. Here, Dwayne weaves traditional theater, poetry, fine art, and Japanese paper making aesthetic principles into a meditation on his own experiences of incarceration and his legal work to free friends that are still in prison. This reflection on the challenges of living in the shadow of mass incarceration, is a story of violence, love, and fatherhood. The set is a collaboration created by Kyoko from "prison paper" that Ruth Lignen constructed from the clothes of men Dwayne first met in prison, each of whom were still in prison during the earliest stages of this project. This Washi Tale moves literally and metaphorically beyond Dwayne’s own life, unwrapping the disturbing ways that prison touches us all.
is a poet and lawyer. He is the Director of the Million Book Project, an initiative out of the Yale Law School’s Justice Collaboratory to radically transform the access to literature in prisons. For more than twenty-years, he has used his poetry and essays to explore the world of prison and the effects of violence and incarceration on American society. The author of a memoir and three collections of poetry, he has transformed his latest collection of poetry, Felon, into a solo theater show that explores the post-incarceration experience and lingering consequences of a criminal record through poetry, stories, and engaging with the timeless and transcendental art of papermaking. In 2019, Betts won the National Magazine Award in the Essays and Criticism category for his NY Times Magazine essay that chronicles his journey from prison to becoming a licensed attorney. He is a 2018 Guggenheim Fellow and a 2018 Emerson Fellow at New America and holds a J.D. from Yale Law School. http://www.dwaynebetts.com/.
is a playwright, director, translator, who works cross-culturally within the United States and abroad developing new work. She has received multiple grants from ACC (2008-2015) to travel to Japan for her work on Washi Tales. Her productions incorporate the work of fine artists, musicians, poets, and are often performed in multiple languages. Hatuey: Memory of Fire her Afro Cuban Yiddish opera, based on an epic Yiddish poem, went from development at Sundance to a production at Opera de La Calle in Havana, to Peak Performances in the USA. She is co-founding artistic director of Literature to Life, a highly successful theater literacy program, now in its third decade nationwide, adapting books into verbatim solo performances with facilitated discussion and workshops to spark a passion for reading in young people. www.elisethoron.com
TITUS KAPHAR// Artist whose paintings, sculptures, and installations examine the history of representation by transforming its styles and mediums with formal innovations to emphasize the physicality and dimensionality of the canvas and materials themselves. Previously collaborated with Reginald Dwayne Betts on REDACTION, a project which explored the intersections of art, poetry and law to create an engaging narrative about incarceration and the exploitation of people as currency in contemporary America.
KYOKO IBE

Japanese paper artist based in Kyoto. Her work pushes the limits of paper, transforming a craft into an art form. Her radical new approach to paper combines a respect for tradition with technological experimentation. She is a professor Emeritus of the Kyoto Institute of Technology. 
http://www.kyokoibe.com
MBP FREEDOM LIBRARY STRUCTURE PROJECT

Thanks to a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Million Book Project has 3.9 million dollars in reserve to purchase one million books. In addition, funding from Mellon affords us three full time employees with benefits over the three years of current funding. The budget below reflects the costs hiring two additional employees and the creation of the physical space that the Freedom Libraries will create, which consists of a physical library, with custom bookshelves and a community space that cuts against the brutality of typical prison environments.

BREAKDOWN

PERSONNEL

$120,000 per/year for 3 years

$360,000

FREEDOM LIBRARY PHYSICAL STRUCTURE

We are building 1,000 structures (bookshelves & seating areas) at the rate of
5,000 per structure

$5,000,000

TOTAL: $5,360,000
# Felon Play Budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STAGING CONCEPT + DESIGN</strong></td>
<td>$43,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes Set Design, Video Design, Sound Design + Costume Design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DIRECTOR / DRAMATURG</strong></td>
<td>$41,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PLAYWRIGHT / PERFORMER</strong></td>
<td>Gratis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DIRECTOR / DRAMATURG</strong></td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STAGE MANAGER</strong></td>
<td>$40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRODUCER</strong></td>
<td>$60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TRAVEL / LODGING / PER DIEM</strong></td>
<td>$28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covers Performer and Stage Manager</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>RESOURCE GUIDE</strong></td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRODUCTION MATERIALS</strong></td>
<td>$17,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes Sets, Props, Production Laptop, etc</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total:** $239,000
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE MILLION BOOK PROJECT

- Bring the performance of Felon: An American Washi Tale into 60 prisons across 20 states

- Establish 1000 Freedom Libraries across this country and Puerto Rico

- Bring dozens of award winning authors and their books into prisons in each state of this country

- Seed dozens of reading programs in prisons and other institutions across this country
We seek leaders to partner in implementing our vision.

contact us at reginald.betts@yale.edu