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Marena Dieden, Caroline Henderson, Ashley Munger,
Steven Nicholson, Tyrone Reyes, Richard Strong, Raschid Zimmerman

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The state of our union: prison, politics, and performance within a fragile democracy

Marena Dieden¹, Caroline Henderson², Ashley Munger³,
Steven Nicholson⁴, Tyrone Reyes⁵, Richard Strong⁶, Raschid Zimmerman⁷

Abstract

From September to December of 2017, four University of Michigan students trained by the Prison Creative Arts Project facilitated a creative writing workshop at G. Ronald Cotton Correctional Facility in Jackson, Michigan, USA. Twelve incarcerated men joined the four student facilitators for weekly workshop meetings which culminated in a performance of original creative writing. This article describes the workshop framework and training provided by the Prison Creative Arts Project, introduces the individuals participating in this particular, fall 2017 creative writing workshop, and describes how their creative processes evolved to include political discourse and critique. In conclusion, the article demonstrates how creative writing and theater provide the incarcerated population with the unique opportunity to fully express political opinions and attitudes within prison walls, and highlights parallels between the current events and politics of 2017 and those of 2020. In order to complete this article, the student facilitators wrote a letter describing the project and asking for interest in co-authorship and mailed it to the incarcerated participants. The student facilitators then compiled a questionnaire and mailed it to the incarcerated participants who were interested in co-authoring the article. The co-authors still residing in prison continued to correspond to those living outside of prison via mail, producing sections of the article and providing original writing from the 2017 workshop.

Keywords: Creative writing. Incarceration. Prison. Politics. Performance.

¹ Is a first-year law student at University of California School of Law. She plans to study Public Interest Law and Critical Race Studies. In May 2019 she earned her Bachelor of Arts in Public Policy from the University of Michigan Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. During her time at the University of Michigan, Marena volunteered with the Prison Creative Arts Project for three and a half years facilitating creative writing workshops at Vista Maria, a court ordered youth residential program, and at Cotton Correctional Facility, a men's state prison. marenadieden@gmail.com

² Is a Licensed Master Social Worker who provides mental health services and advocacy to those touched by criminal legal systems. In May 2018 she earned her Master of Social Work degree from the University of Michigan, where she volunteered and completed a field placement with the Prison Creative Arts Project. Prior to moving to Michigan for graduate school, Caroline worked at a youth development non-profit organization in New York City from 2014 to 2016. Caroline graduated from Columbia University in 2014, with a joint bachelor's degree in Human Rights Studies and English Literature. carhen@umich.edu

³ Is from White Lake, Michigan. She attended the University of Michigan (2019) for her undergraduate studies and Boston University for her master's degree in education. She is now a public school teacher and hopes to attend law school to become a criminal defense attorney. anmunger@umich.edu

⁴ Is a writer who has been a member of the Prison Creative Arts Project since 2016.

⁵ Is a writer who has been a member of the Prison Creative Arts Project since 2016 and of the National Lifers Association (a leadership organization for people serving a life sentence in prison) since 2013.

⁶ Is a writer who has been a member of the Prison Creative Arts Project since 2016 and of the National Lifers Association (a leadership organization for people serving a life sentence in prison) since 2014.

⁷ Is a writer who has been a member of the Prison Creative Arts Project since 2016.

O estado da nossa união: prisão, política e atuação dentro de uma democracia frágil

Resumo

De setembro a dezembro de 2017, quatro alunos da Universidade de Michigan treinados pelo Prison Creative Arts Project facilitaram um *workshop* de redação criativa na G. Ronald Cotton Correctional Facility em Jackson, Michigan, EUA. Doze homens encarcerados juntaram-se aos quatro alunos facilitadores para reuniões semanais de *workshops* que culminaram em uma apresentação de escrita criativa original. Este artigo descreve a estrutura do *workshop* e o treinamento fornecido pelo Prison Creative Arts Project, apresenta os indivíduos que participam deste *workshop* de redação criativa do outono de 2017 e descreve como seus processos criativos evoluíram para incluir discurso político e crítica. O artigo demonstra como a escrita criativa e o teatro fornecem à população encarcerada a oportunidade única de expressar plenamente as opiniões e atitudes políticas dentro dos muros da prisão e destaca paralelos entre os eventos atuais e a política de 2017 e os de 2020. Para completar este artigo, os alunos facilitadores escreveram uma carta descrevendo o projeto e pedindo interesse em coautoria e a enviaram aos participantes encarcerados. Os alunos facilitadores compilaram um questionário e o enviaram aos participantes encarcerados que estavam interessados em ser coautores do artigo. Os coautores ainda residentes na prisão continuaram a se corresponder com aqueles que viviam fora da prisão via correio, produzindo seções do artigo e fornecendo redação original do *workshop* de 2017.

Palavras-chaves: Escrita criativa. Encarceramento. Prisão. Política. Performance.

El estado de nuestra unión: prisión, política y actuación en una democracia frágil

Resumen

De septiembre a diciembre de 2017, cuatro estudiantes de la Universidad de Michigan capacitados por Prison Creative Arts Project facilitaron un taller de escritura creativa en el Centro Correccional G. Ronald Cotton en Jackson, Michigan, EE. UU. Doce hombres encarcerados se unieron a los cuatro facilitadores estudiantiles para las reuniones semanales del taller que culminaron con una presentación de escritura creativa original. Este artículo describe el marco del taller y la capacitación brindada por Prison Creative Arts Project, presenta a las personas que participan en este taller de escritura creativa en particular, otoño de 2017, y describe cómo evolucionaron sus procesos creativos para incluir el discurso político y la crítica. El artículo demuestra cómo la escritura creativa y el teatro brindan a la población encarcerada la oportunidad única de expresar plenamente sus opiniones y actitudes políticas dentro de los muros de la prisión, y destaca los paralelismos entre los acontecimientos actuales y la política de 2017 y los de 2020. Para completar En este artículo, los estudiantes facilitadores escribieron una carta describiendo el proyecto y pidiendo interés en la coautoría y la enviaron por correo a los participantes encarcerados. Los estudiantes facilitadores luego compilaron un cuestionario y lo enviaron por correo a los participantes encarcerados que estaban interesados en ser coautores del artículo. Los coautores que aún residen en prisión continuaron correspondiendo a los que viven fuera de la prisión por correo, produciendo secciones del artículo y proporcionando escritos originales del taller de 2017.

Palabras clave: Escritura creativa. Encarcelamiento. Prisión. Política. Performance.

Introduction

“Take me to Florida.”

The taxi driver turned around, one hand on the back cushion of the passenger seat. “Man, what? This is a New York City cab, are you crazy?”

A second passenger piped up. “Look, I got cash. It’s cold here; I can’t *stand* New York in November. Let’s just go.”

“You’re insane. I got a family to go home to tonight. Get out of my cab.”

“We can make it worth your while! C’mon, man, have a sense of adventure! You just gonna stay in this city driving your cab forever, and never leave?”

The driver pulled over. “I don’t have to take disrespect in my own damn cab. I’m not taking you anywhere.” With that, the driver took the keys, slammed the door behind him, and returned to his seat at the amalgamation of pushed-together folding tables at the other end of the room.

Of course, we weren’t on the streets of New York, and we definitely weren’t in Florida. We weren’t anywhere near a cab. It was winter, and we were a group of adults assembled at G. Ronald Cotton Correctional Facility, a state prison in Jackson, Michigan, playing a theatre game in an invisible car that was actually just four plastic chairs arranged in two rows. Apart from our taxi, the room held several 1980s-issue folding tables - the kind with big sticker sheets on top that are made to look like wood - and some more plastic chairs, set up around the tables like they might be for a family dinner. A dusty chalkboard, wire mesh-reinforced windows, and a few scattered motivational quotes on aging pieces of computer paper adorned the walls.

All of us, twelve or so incarcerated participants and four university student facilitators, had been brought together as writers or aspiring writers. We came together once a week, on Thursday nights, for a semester-long creative writing workshop. That much we bargained for. What we didn’t plan for was that, when we came together, it would also be for communion, politics, and performance.

In this article, three non-incarcerated facilitators and four participants still in prison come together again to reflect on the power of what we created. We wrote and collaborated on this article by corresponding in the regular mail. In the letters we've written to each other over the last several months, we've remembered the anticipation and uncertainty we felt in the lead-up to our first workshop, how political perspectives began cropping up in our writing from that very first workshop, how we continued to use them to ground ourselves and our purpose in writing, and how our orientation as a group towards politics and social justice culminated in a performative blend of theatre and poetry that none of us will ever forget. These things are discussed here in a loosely chronological order. Although we largely came into the workshop with the expectation of a personal and educational experience, we now argue that, at least for us, it's difficult to separate personal art or education from the political context in which it takes place. Our time in the workshop together helped us use creative writing to process and express our feelings about the fraught political moment that we were experiencing in the fall of 2017--a time that felt to us then as if what we knew about democracy, truth, and justice was being shaken and threatened. The structure of our workshop allowed us to draw upon elements of theatre to communicate these feelings to others, creating a form of solidarity even in the context of prison--a highly surveilled and restricted environment. As we write this, we are living in a political moment more fraught than we could have imagined three years ago when our workshop ended. Our letters over the last several months and this article - the product of those letters - are, in addition to being a way for us to reconnect with each other during the painful era of COVID-19 and the continued destruction caused by white supremacy and the Trump administration, a reminder of the ways in which art - in all of its forms - can serve as a political tool. The performance we wrote, directed, and performed was a collective political statement that drew on the strength of our solidarity and community to criticize the power structures that contain all of us --the incarcerated and the free.

The Prison Creative Arts Project and the Origins of the Fall 2017 Creative Writing Workshop

In the fall of 2017, four facilitators came together from disparate corners of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Each facilitator had discovered the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP), an organization at the university that brings art programming into state prisons and disseminates art, in many forms, created by people experiencing incarceration.

PCAP organizes about a dozen workshops in creative writing, theatre, visual art, and music in prisons and youth facilities each semester, and trains students from across the university to become facilitators and collaborators in this programming. Four students (Marena Dieden, Caroline Henderson, Ashley Munger, and Bryce Vandenbelt) signed up to go to the same prison once a week for about twelve weeks and ended up as co-facilitators mostly by chance.

Though nearly strangers, the four facilitators headed into the semester with the expectation of a deeply personal experience. Each facilitator had heard stories or experienced past PCAP workshops, creating spaces for personal reflection for participants and facilitators alike, and we were each aware of the power of creative writing to induce vulnerability and introspection. On the evening of that first workshop, the stakes felt high; the facilitators were nervous about being able to create the personal and educational experience desired for all involved, especially in the context of beginning the workshop as a group of strangers and in a prison system where impersonality is the norm. Still, a sense of hope was in the air. Here, workshop facilitator Ashley Munger reflects on the time before the workshop began:

I had been in PCAP since January 2017 as a member of the literature review board, the body that selects creative writing pieces from submissions received from men and women experiencing incarceration all around Michigan and compiles them into an annual literary journal, the *Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing*. At this time, I had just met Marena through an organization at the University of Michigan for students interested in the law. Marena and I were fast friends; we had similar worldviews and came together around the topics of politics, law, and justice. It was from Marena that I heard that Dr. Ashley Lucas, at that time

the director of PCAP, taught courses on topics of incarceration at Michigan, and together Marena and I applied to take the *Atonement Project* class with Ashley and music professor Kathy Kelly. To be accepted into the course, we had to sit down with its two professors and assure them that we knew the responsibility we were asking to take on. Everyone in the course was to facilitate a workshop inside of a prison, along with twice-weekly meetings to discuss literature on topics related to the intersection of artistic and carceral spaces.

We went to Cotton for the first time for an orientation to the prison, which was conducted by prison staff. They told us to never turn our backs to any workshop participant or to be sitting down while any one of them was standing up, because these were signs of submission. They told us we shouldn't bother to wear makeup because "there's no one in here to impress anyway." All of this made workshop participants seem like caricatures of men to be feared. Despite this, though, my facilitator training with PCAP made me more wary of correctional officers than anyone else. In training, we had been told not to wear the wrong bra, not to wear clothes too tight *or* too baggy, to speak to guards respectfully, and not to call participants by name in front of guards.

The First Workshop

As the workshop start date neared, the four student facilitators met to discuss planning and goals for the semester. The agenda for the first workshop included a designated time to establish community guidelines and expectations. It was important to the facilitators that establishing guidelines for the workshop be a collaborative effort between facilitators and participants, particularly since incarcerated people so frequently lack power over their day-to-day environment and the rules of the spaces that they regularly inhabit. It was important that the workshop be established as a community of individuals, aiming to share a creative and empowering space that values all artists for their unique contributions. The list of community guidelines established in the first workshop included: 1) Respect everyone's opinion, 2) Take everyone's input seriously, 3) Be non-judgemental and supportive of everyone's creativity, 4) "Pass the mic" - In other words, be aware of time constraints and allow time and space for everyone to participate and share, 5) Keep what others share in the workshop confidential, and 6) Always seek growth in artistry and knowledge.

Another important task of the first workshop was introductions. PCAP

provides several different examples of introductory activities, with the goal being to establish rapport among participants and facilitators by learning one another's names and getting to know a little bit about each individual. Names are an interesting topic in prison, because all prison staff and incarcerated people address one another by last name only. In the volunteer training at Cotton Correctional, the prison authorities encourage formality and volunteers utilizing titles and last names, but they do leave it up to the individual to decide how they would like to be addressed. In this workshop, the facilitators utilized their first names, and most of the men in the workshop introduced themselves using their first names or nicknames that they prefer. This, in itself, creates a community different from many others within the prison walls.

As part of PCAP's methodology, facilitators participate in all of the same arts activities as workshop participants, rather than taking on the roles of teachers giving assignments. In this particular workshop the introductory activity utilized was a "My name is..." writing prompt, that encouraged writers to introduce themselves by writing about the meaning of their names. Some wrote about people whom they were named after and why, along with their relationships to their namesakes. Others wrote about the biblical meanings of their names or wrote about their name phonetically, adding rhythm and structure to read their piece in a performative way. Still others broke their names down into root words and expounded upon them. Here is the introductory piece written by participant Richard Strong:

My name is Richard Anthony Strong and I was named after my father, a man who wouldn't bother to live up to that title. Even though he was gone, he still was my idol. When he died, it was the last time I cried. I let my hate change my fate, now this name became something that brought me shame and something to blame. This name has been in magazines, newspapers, and on TV screens, sometimes for awards, sometimes embarrassing things. I thought coming to prison meant my name was done, but it lives on because I passed it on to my son.⁸

After establishing guidelines and goals for the workshop, and learning more

⁸ Richard Strong to Ashley Lucas, July 22, 2020.

about each individual, the workshop facilitators established some rituals within the workshop agenda that occurred each week, providing some structure and framing to shifting assignments and topics discussed. One such ritual that took place at the beginning of every workshop was an exercise called “High Low.” Raschid Zimmerman describes this weekly activity here:

Once we got settled we would each go around and give a “good” and a “bad” [...] We would each say what we felt good about. Then we would give a bad, or explain something that was wrong or that we were sad about. For example, a lot of times, most of us would express how happy we were to see each other and be back in class, (or whatever else was going on in our lives that we were feeling good about), then we would express something that may be troubling us (no matter what it was), or something that may have happened to us or someone we care about.⁹

As the workshop progressed, the sharing of these lows and highs, or good and bad moments, helped strengthen the group dynamic by centering each individual’s humanness. It helped us understand one another better and be able to support and uplift one another in times of need and celebration. This and other such rituals created a stable foundation on which the workshop was built.

Workshop Development in the Context of the Fall 2017 Political Landscape

The workshop continued to develop into an experience tailored to the unique group, with opportunities to express via poetry, prose, theatre games, and political discourse. Here, participant Steve Nicholson reflects on a typical workshop:

A typical workshop for me was excitedly preparing for the sharing of ideas and expanding our own minds [...]. We worked well together. I personally always liked to start with a game which we did during Caroline, Ashley, Marena and Bryce’s tenure [...]. We would play writing games like “What am I?” or writing what our name meant, and a copious amount of other prompts that generally rounded out the hour. At times we would engage in real world conversation sparked by our writing and influenced by real

⁹ Raschid Zimmerman to Ashley Lucas, July 25, 2020.

world problems such as Flint's water crisis or the election of Michigan's governor [...]. We generally ended with the "forecast" game or generally discussed what to be ready to do the next week. All in all, the human connection was a tremendous way to feel normal again.¹⁰

As Steve mentions in his reflection, the writing and discussion occurring in the workshop quickly began to strike a political tone. Issues of incarceration, political identity, poverty and social justice were threaded into the name writings, the highs and lows, and continued to work their way into other pieces and performances as well. The fall of 2017 was a fraught political time. This was the first year of Donald Trump's presidency, before many in the United States became inured by the administration's perpetual breaking of precedents and laws. The fall of 2017 also witnessed the first wave of the #MeToo movement, the introduction of fake news, Facebook's announcement of shutting down over 500 fake Russian troll accounts, the white supremacist march in Charlottesville over plans to remove a confederate statue, the Las Vegas shooting that killed 58 people, the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, Hurricane Maria striking Puerto Rico, and a devastating wildfire season on the West Coast. The writing produced in the workshop picked up echoes and reverberations of all of these events and provided opportunities for all involved to share sorrows, worries, and outrage.

A few weeks into the workshop, the facilitators planned a spoken word performance of a piece entitled "Somewhere in America," written by Belissa Escobedo, Rhiannon McGavin, and Zariya Allen of the GetLit organization, and notably performed at the 2014 Brave New Voices slam poetry competition. The goal of including this piece into the workshop was to exhibit how elements of theatre and performance impact how a piece of creative writing is received by listeners. This specific poem also exemplified how to combine the personal and political into a piece of creative writing--which was a skill that many in the workshop were hoping to further develop given the particular political climate of the time.

There was a sense of excitement after "Somewhere in America" was

¹⁰ Steven Nicholson to Ashley Lucas, June 19, 2020.

performed to the group; it was a turning point within the workshop--all of these political references and side conversations that were seeping into the various aspects of the workshop suddenly felt more palpable, and ready to not only be expressed through speech and written word, but shared through performance as well. Shortly thereafter, Richard Strong wrote a piece entitled “Poetic Justice” and performed it for the workshop. Here is an excerpt:

Some say the system is broken but I think that it's working just fine
 The powers that be live free while the oppressed sacrifice time.
 This is the way that it was set up
 You get held down so long that you feel like you will never get up.
 Opportunity is rare in my community
 So we've become crabs in a bucket with no unity.
 Undereducated and manipulated to look for our reward after death,
 While you live your life to the fullest,
 my people are oppressed.
 Preteens pop pills because they say they're stressed.
 Black mothers mourn over their sons killed by white cops
 And they still say that they're blessed.
 Our president doesn't treat all Americans equal
 But he compliments “Tiki Torch” Terrorists and calls them “Fine people”¹¹

Much like this piece, other works began to surface, exploring the connection between personal and political experiences, and the collective group began expanding the ways in which the written word was performed within the workshop. Trust was built among the group as writing became increasingly vulnerable, and performance risks were taken more and more liberally. Time spent sharing with one another was invaluable, and provided the affirmation and encouragement that each individual needed to continue to evolve as writers and performers.

The Culture of Sharing Leading Up to the Final Performance

Our group developed a deep-seated culture of sharing when it came to our writing. After each prompt in each workshop, every one of us would share what we wrote, even if it was just a few uninspired lines. We got into the habit of

¹¹ Richard Strong to Ashley Lucas, July 22, 2020.

encouraging each other, valuing each other's work, and pulling each other out of our shy or self-conscious moments. Often, some of us would bring pieces we had been working on throughout the week and share them at the beginning of the workshop, seeking feedback and encouragement. Our writing was both deeply personal, in that it reflected our personal emotions, beliefs, and experiences, and inherently political, in that many of our experiences and beliefs had been structured by the various trappings of a political context in which each of us, in similar and different ways, felt like our democracy wasn't working for us. Sharing, collaboration, and leaning on each other to create more meaningful art were all steeped into the work we were doing, and these things were on the forefront of our minds as we began to think about our final performance.

As our workshop wore on, our sense of camaraderie and common purpose grew each week. Participant Steve Nicholson describes our workshop community:

Working with other Adults-in-Custody that I had not known or not known in this deeper way was invigorating as well. Ultimately, most all of the men in the class felt a stronger sense of purpose in a variety of different ways...There were some men who gained new friendships and made connections such as my situation where I helped a man through his pain of the addiction that his son was severely struggling with...I always explain to my loved ones that this class is almost as good as a visit with them is. I had begun to look forward to class and the facilitators like family.¹²

As facilitators we walk a fine line between respecting the rules and boundaries of the prison and cultivating a close-knit community that is a foundation of our work. All of the rhetoric from the special activities director and staff promotes keeping walls up between us, that at the end of the day we must remember to fear and mistrust one another. Our work together as writers had the opposite effect. We value vulnerability and openness, which enable community-building and higher levels of artistic excellence in our shared work.

All PCAP workshops culminate in final performances, often attended by others incarcerated at the same facility, some of the PCAP community from the

¹² Steven Nicholson to Ashley Lucas, June 19, 2020.

free world, and the prison staff who oversee it. Typically the creative writing workshops each read individual pieces and the theater workshops perform high-energy, improvised scenes. There was a healthy, but strong competition among workshop groups at Cotton. Workshop participant, Tyrone Reyes, describes the culture of competition, stating:

Because my group knew we were a creative writing class, we knew we had to step our game up. We were performing next to theatre groups that were going to be putting on a real show.¹³

We wanted to show off all the creative work we were doing, and we often joked that we needed to blow all the other groups out of the water come performance night. We were especially proud of the deep sense of community and critical discussions our workshop built; participant Tyrone Reyes adds:

Walking our facilitators out to the officer's desk was like seeing our family leave from a visit. We weren't just in a workshop, we were like family having a discussion around a table.¹⁴

Because of the political orientation of our workshop group, it was an easy decision to have current events be the theme of our final performance. In a brainstorming session, we came up with the idea of creating a scene that resembled the press conferences we all watched on TV, where Sarah Huckabee Sanders was charged with defending every indefensible action of the Trump administration. Marena was to play Sarah Huckabee Sanders, and the rest of us would be reporters. Each reporter would ask one question, and these questions would be the recitation of a poem on the topic of a given current event. We each drafted our pieces independently, during the week between workshop sessions. We brought our drafts to class and often broke into small groups to practice performing them and to give each other feedback for revision. During the workshop, we wrote satirical lines for Marena to use as responses to each piece

¹³ Tyrone Reyes to Ashley Lucas, May 22, 2020.

¹⁴ Tyrone Reyes to Ashley Lucas, May 22, 2020.

and transition to the next reporter's topic, and we practiced the timing and flow of our pieces, placing them in an order that felt cohesive.

We rehearsed for weeks, making sure the order of reporters at our staged press conference flowed seamlessly and each piece stayed in the time limit so the staff did not cut off our performance when the strict time limit ran out. Many of us had never spoken in front of a large crowd, let alone sharing our own written work. In this time, the final performances at Cotton involved inviting around 200 men from the prison and twenty volunteers from PCAP. Steve, a very experienced writer and performer, often set an example encouraging others to break out of their shell: "I personally enjoyed seeing other men in the class grow in their [skill] with words and their confidence."¹⁵ Still many of us were nervous to share outside of the comfort of our community, to address such pressing issues in an extremely divisive climate, in a prison.

Each participant addressed a specific salient topic through their writing, picking an issue close to their heart, and presented it as if they were a reporter trying to get a word in with the press secretary. Tyrone writes:

It was easy for me to pick my topic, because the #METOO movement was at its highest peak... I wanted people in prison to take heed and to stop being enablers [...] I am disgusted at my own self, because I'm in prison for not protecting a girl, in which I'll forever regret. This performance gave me an opportunity to highlight the #METOO movement and why it's on men like me to speak up against the mistreatment of our precious other half. This workshop taught me that my voice is needed, and most men are willing to listen.¹⁶

Other topics were on issues including the Trump administration's Muslim immigration ban (Bryce Vandenbelt), climate change (Ashley Munger), and the use of unpaid prison labor to fight the California wildfires (Caroline Henderson). Richard Strong wrote a powerful piece entitled "State of the Union" addressing police brutality against Black Americans:

¹⁵ Steven Nicholson to Ashley Lucas, June 19, 2020.

¹⁶ Tyrone Reyes to Ashley Lucas, May 22, 2020.

Let's be honest, freedom should be a God-given right, but it's not.
We should be free to wear hoodies, cross the street, drive cars and not
get shot by the cops [...]
Just because my skin is dark and not pale, the chances are higher that I'll
get sent to jail.
If I reach for my license and you think it's a gun, will I get murdered in
front of my daughter or
son?
Rest in peace Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Philandro Castille: shot
down with their
hands up or hands on the wheel.¹⁷

For the most part, our pieces were about national issues; the one exception was David Hudson-Bey, whose piece was about the local Flint water crisis. The Flint water crisis was a public health catastrophe that wreaked havoc on the city of Flint, MI. As a result of government failures at all levels, Flint was switched to a water supply that lacked anti-corrosion treatment, and as a result lead from the outdated water delivery pipes contaminated drinking water city-wide. Government was slow to act, despite the fact that lead-contaminated water causes many health defects, some of which are permanent - including brain damage in children. The people of Flint are still dealing with the repercussions of this crisis today. David's piece was a condemnation of the government's failure to respond adequately to needs of a majority-black community experiencing an environmental catastrophe, and a call to action in support of the people of Flint.

Hudson-Bey, a veteran writer, PCAP participant, and member of Cotton's chapter of the National Lifers' Association, was a powerful and comforting figure within our group. A tall man in his mid-sixties, Hudson-Bey always had wisdom to impart, a warm piece of encouragement to share, and a joke to crack at our workshop table. Our friend David Hudson-Bey passed away suddenly in early February 2020 from a brain tumor diagnosed too late, and we miss him dearly. Fellow participant Richard Strong wrote, "David Hudson-Bey was a soldier for change, a mentor, a leader, a friend, and will be greatly missed."¹⁸ Tyrone Reyes added:

¹⁷ Richard Strong to Ashley Lucas, June 4, 2020.

¹⁸ Richard Strong to Ashley Lucas, June 16, 2020.

David Hudson-Bey, was everyone's big brother. His loss hurt a lot of people, because we all knew that he had so much to offer if he was given another chance to get out of prison. He was a good brother and willing to help out when called upon [...] I listened and watched him during some of our events and admired how he was able to take a hold of a room. His contribution was invaluable in our group.¹⁹

We remember his laugh and his depth, and we hope that those who saw him perform with our workshop remember his powerful words on injustice in Flint.

Final Performance and a New Kind of Communion

On the night of our final performance, the facilitators arrived at Cotton an hour early along with 15 or 20 other members of PCAP, including facilitators of other workshops being run at Cotton that semester. Getting through security takes 20 minutes on a good day, and all of the extra people in tow made the process take considerably more time. By the time everyone from the outside world made it to Cotton's gymnasium, there were barely a few minutes before the start of the event. Over 100 of the men incarcerated at Cotton were in the bleachers, waiting for the show to begin.

The lineup was set. We were to go third, being preceded by the music workshop and one of the two theatre workshops and succeeded by the second theatre workshop. Our workshop group sat in folding chairs at the edge of the gymnasium, waiting for our turn. Although we were nervous, everything fell into place when we took the floor. With our chairs arranged in rows facing a podium to set our press conference scene, we delivered poem after poem of political criticism exactly the way we had practiced it.

Our performance that evening was so many things; it was funny and sombering, it was joyful and filled with sorrow, it was both a representation of

¹⁹ Tyrone Reyes to Ashley Lucas, May 22, 2020.

reality and a performance obviously composed using limited prison resources. Most of all, it was solidarity and togetherness. The audience laughed as Marena's character fumbled to equivocate about each topic, saying things like "Enough about incarceration, let's talk about what a *great* job this administration did stopping the wildfires in California" before Caroline's poem about the inadequate response to the fires and the danger posed to the incarcerated people fighting them in California. When each new reporter stood up to recite their question for Marena, which was in the form of a poem on a given topic, the audience provided smattered snaps, claps, and whoops of agreement with the criticism expressed in each piece. It wasn't a competition, but we felt like we won.

The adrenaline of the performance was followed by the sobering realization that the facilitators had to leave. Our workshop was over. We didn't know when or if we'd ever see each other again, given the uncertain nature of prison placements and post-graduation plans. We couldn't hug so we shook hands, giving each other the thank yours and wishing each other good luck in ways that could never sum up how we felt. Although our futures were uncertain, we all knew the power of what we had done that evening. Communion isn't always an easy thing to come by, and we had created and nourished it in the harshest conditions. We spoke out together in resistance to the things that bind us, hold us back, and keep us apart. In the cold and impersonal context of prison, we came together and drew others in with us to make it known that we reject injustice and the structures that confine us -- all of us.

Today, we are faced with many of the same obstacles and political dilemmas that we experienced in the fall of 2017. Many of us remain incarcerated and continue to fight to sustain our human dignity and basic rights on a daily basis. Police brutality and killings continue to occur despite mass protests and calls for reform and abolition. Since beginning this project, we have seen the lives of numerous Black Americans violently ended by law enforcement officers and white supremacy groups, including those of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks and Ahmaud Arbery. In fact, police have killed at least one Black man or

woman in the United States every week in 2020.²⁰ Additionally, throughout the past several months we have seen a resurgence of extreme wildfires along the west coast of the U.S. and the use of incarcerated people to fight these immense and ravaging blazes, reminding us once more of the unpaid or grossly underpaid labor force made up of imprisoned Americans. Of course, the failures of the Trump presidency have also continued to magnify, including a response to the COVID-19 international pandemic that has left the United States with the most confirmed cases and more deaths from the virus than any other nation in the world.²¹

Many of us, perhaps idealistically so, hoped that the activism that inspired our fall 2017 performance would root and make change and progress possible in the coming years. As we have communed once more for this project, we see that our performance from three years ago could easily have been written and performed today. Steve Nicholson writes:

The politics during the time of our performance are even more relevant in these times. Even more so. If this country really wants to see change, our foundational infrastructure needs to change... and part of that is the way we punish people who break laws.²²

The continued relevance of our 2017 performance is disappointing in many ways, as it was not meant to be a timeless work. However, disappointment is a feeling you become used to when you are incarcerated, and when you are someone who cares about incarcerated people. Disappointment has certainly occupied much of our thoughts as COVID-19 has not only prevented the continuation of in-person PCAP workshops, along with all other in-person prison programming and visitation, but it has devastatingly killed thousands of incarcerated people as it has been a rampant, largely unchecked force in American

²⁰ "Police in the U.S. killed 164 Black people in the first 8 months of 2020," CBS News, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/black-people-killed-by-police-in-the-u-s-in-2020/>.

²¹ "The U.S. has had more coronavirus cases than some countries have people," Caitlin O'Kane, CBS News, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/black-people-killed-by-police-in-the-u-s-in-2020/>.

²² Steven Nicholson to Ashley Lucas, June 19, 2020.

prisons.²³

Yet, through our disappointment and grief, we have come together once more, sending hand-written letters in the mail to one another, reminding one another of the power of our creative voices. And once again, we are pushing back in these seemingly small, but subversive ways. We are a collective of writers who will always rise to the challenge of our times, and create something together beyond what is expected.

In 2017, Steve Nicholson ended our performance with an expressive and potent piece of writing that seemed to both contain and transcend our collective fears and intents. This final excerpt exhibits his expansive inclusion of past, present, and future, and urges us to continuously find the courage within ourselves to seek peace and justice, even amidst the most disastrous of times:

In unison we win
 One heart & one mind to destroy memories that are currently on the rise
 This past strife is current life, mounting like a mountain, I envision Pompeii
 spouting
 If people don't sit down, start talking and stop shouting
 [...]
 What hate! From 1788 to 1808 this travesty continued to be
 until the fire sale of people who was free, by people who looked like me
 Or is this 2017?
 Oh it is, obviously, see the fulfilled prophecy of the conflagration of world
 disasters that come naturally have never been seen this frequently
 Ha, wait till 2023²⁴

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²³ "A State-by-State Look at Coronavirus in Prisons," The Marshall Project, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/05/01/a-state-by-state-look-at-coronavirus-in-prisons>.

²⁴ Steven Nicholson to Ashley Lucas, June 19, 2020.

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Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina - UDESC
Programa de Pós-Graduação em Teatro – PPGT
Centro de Arte - CEART
Urdimento – Revista de Estudos em Artes Cênicas
Urdimento.ceart@udesc.br