

Artists on the inside

The Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan

[Amy Frykholm](#) interviews Ashley Lucas and Philip Christman in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue



The Prison Creative Arts Project with students at a men's prison in Rio de Janeiro. © Levi Stroud / Michigan News.

Besides being married to each other, Ashley Lucas and Philip Christman both work for the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan, which brings students and faculty together with people in prisons and treatment programs for artistic collaborations. Believed to be the largest prison arts program in the world, serving 30 adult facilities and four juvenile facilities in Michigan, the PCAP offers

programs in theater, visual arts, and creative writing. Each year it trains about 160 university students and volunteers to lead art-making programs in prisons.

What are the major parts of the Prison Creative Arts Project?

Ashley: One large project, which is our largest public face and that deals with all 30 prisons in Michigan, is a visual arts exhibit. Last year we displayed 617 works of art by currently incarcerated artists. Professional curators, students, faculty, and other volunteers—including some formerly incarcerated artists—go into all of Michigan’s prisons to meet with artists, talk about their work, select the art, and bring it back to campus, where we hang it and make it available for sale.

All of the proceeds go directly back to the people who made the art. We don’t take a profit. The show allows people to see the scope and quality of what people in Michigan prisons are creating.

Phil: The other big project is the *Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing*, for which we receive as many as 300 submissions. A group of volunteers reads them and distills about 150 pages for a book. We offer it for sale through the website, at the art show, and through a couple of local bookstores. We have two readings every year. We invite the families and friends of people who have contributed to the review to read on the writer’s behalf.

We don’t send form rejection letters like other reviews do. For those whose work we don’t publish, we provide substantive feedback.

How did the Prison Creative Arts Project get started?

Phil: It started with a class-action lawsuit on behalf of prisoners who were gutsy in advocating for themselves.

Ashley: An extraordinary woman, Mary Heinin, who is now on the PCAP staff, was incarcerated in the 1970s. She argued for the rights of incarcerated women in Michigan to have the same educational opportunities as men.

Out of this legal process a professor at the University of Michigan, Buzz Alexander, was approached to go into the prisons and teach. He was an English professor who had been doing some work in guerrilla theater, so he decided to do a theater class. Doing theater with the women in prison was a life-changing experience for him. He wanted his students to be able to have the same opportunity. He started the

program in which we train students in how to be safe and respectful in a prison environment. We send students into prisons by themselves or in small groups. I visit all of my students' workshops around midterm to see how they are going, and then I go back at the end to help celebrate the work.

What kind of workshop might prisoners participate in?

Ashley: For theater, we use an improvisation-based model, because we only have an hour to two hours each week. We can't walk in and pass out scripts, because we don't know who is going to be in the room until we get there and we don't have enough time.

Phil: And there is often turnover. Some people are released or sent to other facilities.

Ashley: In our model, the participants drive the action as much as possible. Students are trained in facilitation techniques; they know a lot of games and exercises to keep things moving, and they have their eye on some kind of creative project that can help celebrate the creative abilities of the people in the workshop.

People in prison are told all the time what to do and what to think and what they are allowed to talk about. So while we always abide by the rules of the facility, we want the people inside the prison to tell us what matters most to them.

A lot of the time, we get comedy. Sometimes there is a story line, and sometimes the events look like an episode of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* in which people play improv games in front of an audience.

"We want the people inside the prison to tell us what matters most to them."

One thing we've discovered is that laughter is a kind of contraband in prison. You don't find groups of people laughing together because the staff will think that they are laughing at them or plotting something. When an outside group is causing laughter, it is a lot less threatening.

Phil: The theater workshops make me think about Robert Altman films, in which actors get together and see if a plot evolves.

Ashley: The workshops are for the art, but even more they are for giving a sense of agency and purpose to the folks inside. They show off people's talents, but above all they build community between people who live in the prison and people who don't.

What are some of the things that have surprised you about this work?

Ashley: What surprises me is how the work changes my students. My students really have had no idea what the prison system is, who it touches. We make so many assumptions about prison and prisoners, how they got there, who is deserving, who is not. We don't ask people in our workshops how they got to prison.

A lot of people walk into a workshop, particularly a creative writing workshop, thinking they are going to be asked to produce a kind of confessional narrative—as if that is the only story they have to tell.

We don't want to hear those stories right away. And we don't want that idea to influence our students' thinking too much, especially first-time volunteers who have never had the chance to get to know anyone in prison before. We are not there to judge people. They've been judged. Our job is to find the best thing in this person that we can find.

Phil: The thing that surprises me the most is the range of content and style and genre in the submissions that the literary magazine receives. We get historical fiction, spy stories, delightful experimental poems that play around with typography; we get stuff across a crazily wide range. That is moving, because it shows how people refuse to have their imaginations enclosed by prison.

The other thing that surprises me is the generosity of prisoners toward us and toward our students. We get requests for help, certainly, but it always surprises me how many people write us just to say thank you and how kind and thoughtful they are in making that gratitude known. If I screw something up or my staff screws something up, they are so quick to forgive.

How has this work affected your own creative endeavors?

“Laughter is a kind of contraband. It's less threatening coming from an outside group.”

Phil: There is also an entrepreneurial spirit among prisoners that amazes me. As a person who has been trained in the traditional way—a bachelor's degree, an MFA—I have a learned helplessness: “Oh, nobody reads anymore! Nobody buys fiction. We are all doomed as artists.” Being around artists who have just returned from prison and haven't learned that they are supposed to have that attitude has been really

bracing: “Quit whining and go do it.”

Ashley: My work was already entwined with prisons. I am a scholar who writes about theater in prison, and my creative work as a playwright and a performer is interview-based work, and that has involved prisoners.

My father did 20 years in prison. When he was denied parole for the third time, I was overwhelmed. I couldn't do anything to bring him home, but I could do theater. I had read that there were more than 2 million people in prison in the United States, but I thought I didn't know anybody who had family members in prison.

I started telling everyone that my father was in prison, which wasn't something that I mentioned frequently before. I was actively looking for people who would agree to be interviewed. It turned out I knew all kinds of people who had family members in prison who hadn't known how to talk about it in a way that is useful or healing or safe. I came to see the families of prisoners as a community. We understand each other in profound ways because of the nature of our experience living with incarceration—not knowing how to help your loved one, not being able to bring them home, being temporarily incarcerated yourself every time you go to visit and the door locks behind you. My play became an occasion for me to talk about this and for people in the audience to talk about it.

There is an international dimension to your work as well.

Ashley: Yes, I teach a study abroad course in Brazil called “Theater and Incarceration.” The federal university in Rio de Janeiro has a thriving theater in prisons program. Michigan students collaborate with Brazilian students and do theater in prisons, hospitals, and favelas.

Ashley, you teach a class called The Atonement Project. What have you learned about atonement?

Ashley: There was a man named Shaka Senghor whom I had met during a PCAP workshop who said that he wanted to talk about atonement and promote a process of restorative justice that he felt had worked in his own life. After his release from prison, Shaka and I designed a course and taught it together for two years. The process had three steps: acknowledgment, apology, and atonement.

For him that meant that he had to fully acknowledge everything that led to the crime: his life, the circumstances, and the circumstances of those who were affected by the crime. We often think of victims and perpetrators as two radically separate groups, but that is often not how it works. Shaka shot and killed someone after he himself had been shot two or three times. He had decided that the next time a person came toward him with a gun, he would shoot first—and that is exactly what happened. That’s how he spent 19 years in prison.

The apology piece is to apologize to anyone who has been harmed and to apologize to oneself. Shaka felt that spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally he couldn’t grow until he forgave himself. He sought forgiveness from the family of the man he killed. An aunt or a cousin from that family had come to visit him in prison and that changed his life. But he also had to forgive himself.

The third piece is atonement. For Shaka that means trying to give back to the very community that was harmed and to your own family, not just to the particular victim. And to actively encourage goodness and mercy, creativity and kindness in a world that doesn’t have enough of those things. The class looks at restorative justice and how the arts have made interventions in restorative justice.

Phil: We are trying to disrupt the idea that everything a prisoner does must be atoning for the crime that put the person in prison. I am, myself, hyper-Calvinistic: there is nothing we as humans can do to atone. The more I am engaged with the prison system, the more I notice that it spectacularly does not help in atonement. More and more I am suspicious of atonement when it is applied to anything other than what Jesus does for the relationship between human beings and God.

There is a passage in Marilynne Robinson’s *Lila* that talks about how we try to treat the terrible things that we’ve done and the terrible things that happen to us like items in a ledger—as if they could cancel each other out. But there is no ledger. These are just facts about a person. Warmth and creativity are also facts about a person’s humanity.

Work in the prison has developed for me what Keats calls “negative capability”—the ability to hold contradictory information without trying to resolve it. And this has also helped my view of me. I am also a sinner—and not only a sinner.

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