Abondans: Afrofuturist Visions of a Liberatory Future
Madeline (Indigo) Wright | USA | University of Chicago | Chicago, USA | April 15th-September 15th

In Illinois and across the United States, prisons lack access to college-level educational and visual arts programming. For prisons that do offer educational programs, there are restrictive waitlists that often exclude much of the long-term population. Due to these disparities, incarcerated populations are often unable to pursue education, and they are therefore denied the opportunity to explore alternative futures, which is a form of state-imposed violence. My Davis Project, “Abondans: Afrofuturist Visions of a Liberatory Future,” serves to first, provide space for liberatory artistic education, and second, challenge the necessity of prisons, allowing for visions of new systems of safety, accountability, and care. The project consists of a physical, living exhibition along with educational training in visual and fine arts for incarcerated artists to realize imaginations of new systems of care centered in peace, rehabilitation, and sustainability.

The Problem:
Mass incarceration disproportionality impacts Black and Brown communities at an increasingly-alarming rate. Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at nearly 5 times the rate of white Americans, and 1 in 81 Black adults within the United States will serve time in prison within their lifetime. These disparities are not solely tied to the physical existence of prisons themselves, but to systems that impact our daily lives beginning at infancy. Academically termed the “School to Prison Pipeline,” criminalization often begins in grade schools with “zero tolerance” punishment policies for minor infractions of school behavior policies. It is exacerbated by substantial disparities in access to quality education and resources as well as generational, segregated poverty.

In Chicago specifically, South and West Side neighborhoods disproportionately lack access to grocery stores, public libraries, health care centers, quality public education, and overall sustainable livelihood. As a result of this, Black and Brown youth are subject to increased surveillance and policing within their own communities at an early age, developing a direct pipeline to criminalization in adulthood. Additionally, the structure of prison denies people the ability to build community, process trauma, or develop skills that prepare them for re-entry to society upon release. Thus, a cycle of criminalization continues within the same marginalized communities.

The Project:
I will partner with the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP) to provide incarcerated persons across Illinois with arts education for the course of five months (May-September), culminating in a community exhibition of their art in Fall 2022. For over a decade, PNAP has developed a mission to challenge mass incarceration by creating accessibility to art and education, providing space for processing trauma, and visualizing freedom. PNAP has developed visual art and poetry workshops with experienced teaching artists to create pedagogical and productive artwork that challenges our notions of carcerality, punishment, criminality, and how we imagine peace. Following the completion of my project, PNAP will host a convening in Fall 2022, both inside and outside of Stateville Maximum Security Men’s Prison in Illinois, engaging the free and incarcerated community with political education and a critical examination of systemic structures. Its ultimate goal is to imagine liberatory futures that expand beyond white supremacy, mass incarceration, and criminal punishment.

My Davis Project, Abondans: Afrofuturist Visions of a Liberatory Future, will partner with the 2022 convening to curate a living exhibition that showcases new sociopolitical worlds imagined by currently and formerly incarcerated scholars and artists. Through visual art, poetry, auditory art, and interactive art, the Abondans exhibition will present these visions to the public, allowing the free community to critically engage with the thoughts, perceptions, and imaginations of those who are most impacted by these systems. This exhibition will serve as a space for incarcerated artists to process the ways in which long-term incarceration has affected them, receive formal educational training in the Afrofuturist artistic genre, and articulate their visions of freedom in a way that is accessible to the public.

Not only will the physical exhibition serve as a structured space for healing and imagination, but the workshops and the working community surrounding this project will explore the peace-making and liberatory potential of arts education as well as have a lasting impact on both featured artists and the Chicago community.

**Implementation:**

In **Phase I** of my Davis Project (April 2022 - May 2022), I, with the assistance of a formal planning committee and PNAP teaching artists Sarah Ross and Aaron Hughes, will develop a series of workshops centered in: formal exposure to the Afrofuturism genre, portfolio development, and discussion, with the purpose of helping incarcerated artists envision what a future world centered in peace might look like. During this time, I will develop the logistical timeline, preparatory structure for the work behind the physical exhibition, and plan for securing a physical exhibition space.

**Phase II** (May 2022 - July 2022) will consist of constructing artist portfolios with art mediums based on seven Afrofuturist prompts to be collected and finalized by the beginning of August 2022. These portfolios will be curated by incarcerated artists, and guided by myself, Sarah Ross, and Aaron Hughes. The finalized exhibition will display reflections of the experiences of featured artists throughout the project. Timmy Chau, Managing Director of PNAP, will be the primary support person for my workshop development and logistical planning of the physical exhibition.

**Phase III** (August 2022 – September 2022): After the construction of portfolios, the physical space of Abondans will feature the work of artists at the Fall 2022 PNAP Convening. Prior to the launch of the exhibition in Fall 2022, the physical space will be transformed into an archival living work. This will take the form of a virtual gallery, featuring document submissions of art in zine format that can be reproduced after the exhibit for the public and incarcerated community, as well as a chapbook, which will be accessible within incarcerated communities. Video recordings of audience engagement with the work will be added to the gallery to realize the impact the art has on those who interpret it. As PNAP has previously adapted to COVID policies within the prison, if needed, all workshops can be conducted via correspondence as well as via scheduled Zoom meetings that are approved by the principal.

**Long-term Sustainability:**

For 10+ years, PNAP’s mission has focused on developing collaborative relationships with people who are incarcerated and creating curricula that center life experiences, providing artistic expression to their experiences. Additionally, I have worked as a staff intern with PNAP for nearly two years, allowing me to develop relationships with teaching artists, politically-aligned scholars, exhibition curators, and incarcerated artists. Thus, the groundwork to create this visionary space of imaginative futures has been deeply planted.

The permanence of this exhibition project within the carceral state will impact the lives of incarcerated people long after the physical space dissolves. The processing of criminal and systemic trauma, the developed skills in visual art and exhibition curation, as well as the creation of relationships between the public and those behind bars are the timely and tangible outcomes visualized by my Davis Project. This exhibition will serve as a gateway for artistic intervention in state-imposed violence within prisons across Illinois and beyond.

**About Me:**

As the daughter, sister, and friend of Black people directly impacted by criminalization, creating access to spaces of healing, critically examining political structures, and developing skills within dehumanizing structures like prisons is vitally important in my work. I have worked with PNAP for nearly two years, and have based my studies in engaging with theoretical texts that allow for implementation into my praxis. As a Critical Race and Ethnic Studies/Creative Writing Major with a specialization in Afrofuturist Fiction at the University of Chicago, I am formally educated in the genre of Afrofuturism. My direct relationships with people inside prisons have enabled me to confidently create a space for incarcerated people to visualize their experiences and imagine new systems centered in care.