

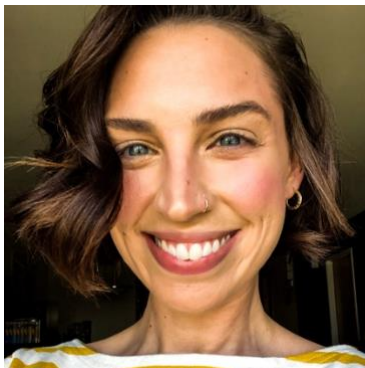
Local Roles: An Interview with Lauren Surovi, Mellon Public Humanities Fellow

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MADISON, Wis. (Jun 15, 2020)—Mellon Public Humanities Fellows are prime examples of the role that our university and the public humanities can play in black and marginalized communities locally. The Center interviewed two [2020-21 Fellows](#) to discuss the issues underlying the current protests in Dane County and how they see their public fellowship positions contributing to the fight for racial justice as well as their academic work.



Lauren Surovi, a PhD candidate in the Department of French and Italian, is serving as the Prison Education Communication Fellow with Odyssey Beyond Bars, a program with the [UW Odyssey Project](#), to teach UW-Madison courses to incarcerated students in Wisconsin state correctional facilities. Surovi will help establish a communication infrastructure for prison educators in addition to fostering relationships on campus with people interested in getting involved.

What is your Fellowship position at Odyssey Project and what is Odyssey Beyond Bars?

I will serve as the Prison Education Communication Fellow with Odyssey Beyond Bars, a program with the UW Odyssey Project. While the Odyssey Project has been in operation since 2003, Odyssey Beyond Bars is a new initiative, which endeavors to teach UW-Madison courses to incarcerated students in Wisconsin state correctional facilities. The first ever Beyond Bars course—English 100—was taught in 2019 at Oakhill Correctional Institution, a minimum-security prison located about 10 miles from Madison. This upcoming year, I will be working with the directors of Odyssey Beyond Bars, Peter Moreno and Kevin Mullen, to establish a communication infrastructure for prison educators in addition to fostering relationships here

on campus with people who are interested in getting involved with prison education. We hope to build out the number and variety of course offerings for these students as well.

How do you think education is changing in incarcerated communities and what is on the horizon for prison education in the coming year?

I think there continues to be an ever-increasing sense of hope connected to education in the prison system, following a real recognition of the power of transformative justice and the ways in which correctional facilities in the United States can engage with a moral imperative to rehabilitate and restore. While developing educational programs for incarcerated communities lies at the heart of these efforts, there's also a real need to educate the larger public, the taxpayers, about the importance and impact of prison education in order to grow support for these vital programs. A key part of my work with Beyond Bars will focus on these communications efforts so that we can build a broader coalition of community support as well.

How do you think your work will be impacted by the pandemic and the national reaction to the killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of Blacks Lives Matter?

The outbreak of COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted incarcerated individuals—we know, for example, that some of the biggest outbreaks nationwide have occurred in prisons. The Marshall Project released a recent report, following their efforts to track the number of people sickened and killed by the disease in the prison system, that breaks down these numbers state by state. While Wisconsin isn't at the top of this list, there was a recent jump in cases just this week, from 65 total cases to 258. This reality will certainly and necessarily have an impact on my work this upcoming year, and I have already been in conversation with Director Peter Moreno about what this impact might look like. We know that for the time being, prisons are essentially locked down, and so that means that non-essential programming, like Odyssey Beyond Bars, has been suspended.

This means two things: that we have to get creative (much like all educators right now) and we have to keep planning. We are currently exploring options for online delivery, but even this poses some significant challenges, as incarcerated students aren't permitted regular access to the internet, if at all. Because things can change so rapidly from one moment to the next, we will continue to adapt in order to fulfill the mission of Odyssey Beyond Bars to provide education to imprisoned students.

Recent protests following the murder of George Floyd have brought a number of these issues to the foreground, issues that Black Lives Matter has been fighting for since 2013. We know that the systemic racism of the U.S. legal system has led to the mass incarceration of Black Americans, what author Michelle Alexander has called the "new Jim Crow." 37% of prisoners at Oakhill Correctional Institution—where Beyond Bars offers its programming—are African American, despite the fact that African Americans make up only 6.1% of Wisconsin's overall population.

George Floyd's killing on May 25 is symptomatic of this unequal, unjust, and racist treatment of Black Americans at the hands of our justice system. At the same time, we know that prison

education reduces recidivism. While prison education programming does not strike at the heart of systemic inequalities, it can help mitigate some of the impacts by providing incarcerated students with educational opportunities that will hopefully improve their lives.

For those interested in learning more, the [Prison Studies Project](#) and the [Alliance for Higher Education in Prison](#) are great places to start.

The Center is actively seeking students to serve as Humanities Responders for anti-racist collaborations. These [Humanities Responders](#) will receive stipends and mentorship to use the broad tools of the humanities to support the work of Black Lives Matter and other issues of racial inequity, inclusion, and access in critical collaboration with community partners and agencies. Undergraduate students, please learn more about being a Humanities Responder and apply with our [HEX-U program](#); graduate students, please visit the [HEX program](#).