PNAP is a grassroots coalition of artists, educators, institutions and advocates who organize arts and humanities classes at Stateville prison. Each year, scholarly and creative work is developed in the prison and exhibited in neighborhood galleries.

The mission of the PNAP is to build relationships of reciprocity that bring artists, scholars, and writers together with incarcerated people and our communities. We believe that access to art and education is a fundamental human right with the capacity to transform people, systems, and futures.

The last five years of work would not have been possible without partnerships from cultural and educational institutions throughout Chicago. These partnerships have provided practical support for our work while simultaneously offering opportunities to build larger networks to resist punitive policies and create equitable access to resources, like public education, that can shrink the carceral state. Indeed, the conversations are growing. As movements like Ban the Box and resistance to sentence enhancements shape up in Illinois, our partners are vital contributors to research and organizing.
With the support of a generous private foundation, we are working with Northeastern Illinois University’s University Without Walls (UWW) Program to restart the first bachelor’s degree-earning program in an Illinois state prison in decades. The UWW Program is a competency-based degree-completion program that serves adult students who have professional, community, political, and life experiences that have resulted in significant college-level learning. NEIU (which does not ask about criminal records on its admissions application) has been incredibly supportive of this initiative. This fall Tim Barnett, the Faculty Advisor for the UWW Program, and Erica Meiners will work with a cohort of eight students to begin the UWW program – which will include establishing an advisory team and developing portfolios of prior learning, learning goals, and a learning contract – with an expected graduation date of May 2019.

Classes at Stateville are a core part of our work. We offer thirteen college-level classes each year on an academic schedule. Our classes use collaborative pedagogical models and explore a range of subjects. Classes produce visual art, writing, and scholarly projects that are seen and heard in communities through our public events.

PNAP hosts annual exhibitions and events including film screenings, performances, readings and roundtable discussions centered around work developed in the prison. This work becomes the basis for a set of questions and conversations held outside the prison about carceral policies and visions for a better future. The work has travelled to cultural centers and classrooms and has been shown in three major exhibitions organized by PNAP. We have designed and disseminated hundreds of prints and chapbooks and in 2017, we organized a community-painted billboard project in North Lawndale. Exhibitions and events bring together faculty with families and friends of those incarcerated and support movements to end our reliance on punishment to produce public safety.
In the Fall of 2012 the Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project (PNAP) started teaching art and poetry classes at Stateville Prison—a place just thirty-eight miles outside of Chicago but worlds away in so many other ways. Our goals were to collaborate with incarcerated artists, writers, and scholars to visualize and vocalize the concrete ways criminalization and punishment shape all of our lives. We imagined the collaborations would result in writing and art that would live beyond the prison walls. We believed that connections between faculty and students would produce solidarities and deepen liberatory movements across time and space, and that our projects and programs could pierce through the isolation—even if only for a few hours—often felt by families and children of incarcerated people.

After the first semester we expanded the art and poetry offerings to include a humanities course and started a guest lecture series. By our second year we were offering five classes a semester that included political theory, history, and gender studies. Our classes aimed to cultivate co-learning, critical thinking, and participatory art and education.

When classes were so in demand that we were turning away some 80 students each semester, we turned to students to co-develop policies for enrollment and classwork. When students asked for classes such as Latin American History, Criminology, Theatre, or African American History we recruited faculty to join our teaching collective. Educators and guests who entered the prison received a cursory education about the space of confinement, the tangible world of punishment, and the lives of people caught up in an unrelenting system.

However, our work together has not been without challenges. Teaching with a social justice framework is at odds with a prison system that censors teaching materials, limits communications with students and families, and arbitrarily changes rules and practices. Students express frustration that we can’t do more to support their education—and their humanity. Several times over our five years the prison administration and rules for teaching inside have changed, compelling our project to re-negotiate how we operate again and again. Faculty express frustration with the tediousness of rules and how they are treated by some officers. These experiences, which are a tiny fraction of what our students and their visiting families experience, continue to illustrate the inhumanity of incarceration.

Teaching at Stateville leaves one with no doubts that confinement and segregation extend beyond the boundary of the prison walls and into our ways of thinking, acting, and relating.

Yet, despite these persistent uncertainties and tensions, we continue. Over the past five years, PNAP has insisted that access to education and art for those behind bars is the basis for necessary and critical discourse between free and unfree worlds. This exchange is essential to understanding the deep impact of criminalization and incarceration on our neighborhoods, families, and economies, and, importantly, one way out of a system that doesn’t solve harm or make us safer. Indeed, the exchange between people in and outside of prison is imperative.
Two Classes, Travelling in Tandem
by Audrey Petty

Last fall, I taught a literature course at Stateville that focused on the theme of the journey. During this course, we studied literature with the act of travel at its center. Closely reading poetry, essays, drama and fiction, we considered how and why the journey is a prevailing event in so many works of world literature. In so doing, we explored connections between physical expeditions and internal journeying: how movement from one place to another sparks changes within the traveler.

We became travelers in the PNAP classroom last fall: rooted on the Eastern Shore of the antebellum South, alongside Frederick Douglass; traversing a tiny Swiss Village in the 1950s with James Baldwin as our guide; zigzagging the Sonoran Desert with a group of men seeking employment and new lives in the US in this twenty-first century.

Students wrote a lot for this course, alternating between personal essays and literary analysis of assigned texts. At the beginning of every class session, students generated vignettes from the many places that memory took them. One writing exercise sparked our group to sketch out personal landmarks: physical locations that held deep significance for them. Their subjects included a city park, a water tower near a small-town casino, the home of a grandmother, a candy store.

Our classroom would eventually begin an extended conversation with a classroom on the outside: Illinois Humanities’ Odyssey Project in Woodlawn (on the south side of Chicago). A month after the PNAP course commenced, I began teaching a literature course on The Journey to Odyssey students, adult learners enrolled in a free, introductory college course in the humanities. Although the schedules for these classes didn’t line up, we shared several course readings. One common text was Natasha Trethewey’s Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. As this book was read in tandem, students in the two classes exchanged questions about particular passages, and they progressed to consider the book’s larger themes and its unique aesthetics. Unified, they exchanged questions and insights about Beyond Katrina’s explorations of family, community, displacement, migration, the carceral state, disenfranchisement and memory itself. They also analyzed the book’s hybrid form, discerning how its usage of poetry, photographs and letters powerfully combine to bear witness.

For their final projects for the PNAP class, students responded to the semester’s study through a variety of extended written works. Some brought several texts into conversation through literary analysis. Others crafted personal essays sparked by a travel memory. One student took two paths, merging elements from a story from Alexai Galaviz-Budziszewski’s Painted Cities with the landscape of his own childhood. Conjuring Pilsen of the 1970s and 80s as his vivid setting, the student created a sharply observed and profoundly moving composition.

The collaboration between PNAP and Odyssey is one of many significant partnerships that sustain our work at Stateville and in Chicago communities. A chapbook featuring work from this vital partnership is now in production and shared curricula will inform future courses. Such connectivity is essential to PNAP’s ongoing commitment to fostering robust dialogue and exchange between inside and outside communities.
An Interview with Patrick Pursley

Patrick Pursley was a PNAP student from 2011-2017 when he was released from Stateville. Patrick was wrongfully convicted and spent twenty-four years locked up in IL prisons. From prison he fought his case in part by helping to create a new law around ballistics testing which eventually freed him. PNAP faculty and organizer Sarah Ross interviewed him about his experience as a student.

Before you came into PNAP classes, you were already self-educating. How did you do that?

Well my academic side or my learning side is genetic because my grandparents were a doctor and teacher on one side and a deeply spiritual woman and an electrician on the other side, and my father was a nerd. So, I believe the influence of them provided me with resources, like encyclopedias, at a very young age. Even though that kind of laid dormant until the late 80s and early 90s when I became interested in history and culture. Once I was able to observe social constructs and get my mind around the history of subjugation, slavery and modern-day subjugation, I really had a thirst for that knowledge. But it was also borne of necessity because I wanted to get out of prison. In prison, they say “no one knows your case better than you.” It was really two-fold—I self-educated to prepare my case and I became a jail-house lawyer. I actually fed myself and sent money to my children for a very long time doing legal work in prison. Working on other people’s cases also educated me because you would do research and read things and think “oh that applies to me also” and that was in me but it was also borne of necessity.

When did you first hear about PNAP classes at Stateville?

I was actually in Lori Wilbert’s House of Healing class and I was developing the Kid Culture curriculum and a faculty member came in and talked about the project. From that point on I tried to stay in tune with PNAP classes and curriculum as it developed.
What are some classes that you took? And what did you get or what was generated in the classes?

I took a Poetry Foundation class, and several other classes dealing with social justice. Over the years I really tried to stay in the classes. I probably took about five or six different classes over the years. The PNAP classes almost became like family-esque in the sense that when we were on lockdown or just in the yard we always talked about the ideas shared in there. And I watched a lot of people grow and I observed their maturation in it. So it was very much those classes, as well as Kimberly Moe's and Jennifer Lackey's, they brought a whole other level of the game when it comes to education because most of the classes up to that point were equivalent to chicken noodle soup for the soul. So the college level classes, then as far as what PNAP gave us—our ability to shine our talents to the world. That was so crucial because everyone behind bars, or almost everyone, wants credit for their work and they want to transcend the isolation and want their talents to shine. There was a high curricular standard set for these classes so people knew, for the most part, that they had to perform and that's why you'd see some people drop out but you'd see others and you'd watch their growth. I really think that's very important because even though I had been studying prior to the classes, to see other people who were not studying really develop, was important. So it was a very good platform in the sense of the family bonds that were built amongst students and then observing them share that knowledge and development. For me, when I put up my wrongful conviction exhibit, #Bullpen Diaries, to curate the exhibit I learned directly from PNAP classes.

What are your thoughts about art and education in prison?

I think it should be mandatory. I think education inside, higher education, needs to be mandatory even though the classes aren’t able to reach a large swath of the prison population, because of the waiting list and the space available. But I watched people with latent talents who didn’t believe in themselves become writers—phenomenal writers. I watched growth. I was there twenty some years and I was able to observe this difference. Certain people, once engaged in the PNAP classes or the other higher education classes, I was able to watch not just how they grew, but how they reflected what they learned to their children and families, which is also what I did. You can’t quantify that. You can’t quantify how far this stuff reaches. And a lot of them, even though they might have been criminals, they were leaders in their families, they provided for their families doing crime. Now to see them turn around and try to educate their children and push their children... I pushed my daughter, she comes from the streets. She’s my first my first child to go to college and I sent her stuff from PNAP. I stood by it and I let her know, this is what I expect, I expect change. Higher education is, to me, redemption for oppressed people because it allows you to not just understand the social constructions [we live with] but gives you a wide range of ammunition to fight back and a wide range of coping skills to be able to adapt.

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1 Patrick has been organizing a website and youth empowerment project before and after his release from prison. See the I Am Kid Culture website for more information: https://www.iamkidculture.org
My mother was my first instructor. As an infant and then toddler, she would introduce me to so many things: a bowl, bottle, cup, spoon. By 11 months of age, I knew the alphabet, and by age 2 my mom taught me how to read, to spell, and to memorize some of her college work. When she would need to recall it, she would ask me and I would recite it for her. Those times gave me a profound sense of accomplishment and started my lifelong love of learning.

At age 3, my formal education began with daycare and preschool. I learned to read, spell, write, add, and subtract, thanks in large part to my mom. I was ahead of the curve as I headed into kindergarten and from kindergarten through 8th grade, I excelled academically. This trend continued in high school. I was always a straight A student. I won spelling bees, received numerous year-end awards, and stayed on the honor roll.

Heading into high school, my informal education began to supercede the formal one. From my earliest memories, I was inundated with violence, aggression, drug use and sales, gang culture, and war. Yes, war. I was raised in a thriving crack house--a home where crack cocaine was manufactured and sold, along with other drugs. My entire family, except my mother, was gang affiliated and involved in criminal activity. By 6 years of age, I had sold drugs, smoked marijuana, and seen people shot. I was inside my home when it was peppered with bullets from a drive-by shooting. I’d witness people being robbed, brutalized, exploited, and murdered.

My informal education played a central role in my ultimately ending up being incarcerated for murder at age 17. I learned to be extremely violent and to never show mercy or weakness, to trust no one, and to only rely upon myself. These lessons, though cruel, allowed me to survive in a gang and crime infested home and neighborhood. Some still serve me well inside prison.

Upon my incarceration, I was faced with a dilemma: continue wasting my life attempting to excel in street culture or resume my education and better myself. I straddled the fence for years, alternating between gangs and the school offered in the jail. Finally, at age 21, I received my GED but my formal education halted at that point due to the jail not offering any college courses.

For several years thereafter I took responsibility for my own education. This resumed my informal education, but now of a different kind. I chose to sharpen and expand my intellect. I began to consume as much knowledge as I could, no matter the topic. I withdrew from my former associates and began to study and read voraciously. The first book I read was Blood in My Eye by George Jackson which had a profound impact on me. It engendered a sense of cultural and social responsibility inside me that is with me to this day. The next book I read was Biology 101, an introductory textbook for high school level biology. This book was revelatory as well. I learned about mitosis, meiosis, protons, neutrons, and atoms as well as the makeup of animal, plant, and human physiology.

I continued to pursue my own intellectual edification for years. I studied science, physics, debate, ethics, politics, religion, history, long-term planning, and more. As my intellect broadened, I came to the realization that to know better is to do better. Being educated is not based solely upon scholarship or vocation. Being educated is also about becoming more human--to be ever mindful of that humanity and all its prerequisites. Ignorance dehumanizes, poverty dehumanizes, oppression dehumanizes. I learned these lessons experientially, and have since made it part of my life’s work to divest myself of their bitter fruit. In this sense, my education has been redemptive--taking me from ignorance, tyranny, and self-destruction to awareness, acceptance, and love.
My formal education began once more at the age of 34, here in Stateville prison. One of my peers told me about these classes being offered down here through the Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project. He told me about the dynamic instructors who were teaching the classes; his words inspired me to sign up.

My first PNAP course was a dance/movement class. It was transformative. The class took me completely outside of my comfort zone and forced me to stretch, not only intellectually but also with regard to my self-esteem. My instructor taught me so much more than mere dance steps and stretches. She taught me to be comfortable in my own skin— to assess my body, energy, space, time, and opportunity more critically. She taught me to be open to new and sometimes uncomfortable situations. Because life is like that, right? I can now embrace the unknown with a more confident approach. I never though in a million years that I’d be caught dead doing choreography. Yet, not only did I do it, I did it front of an audience of my peers and PNAP faculty. I can thank my instructor for that.

My second PNAP course was Black Studies. This class was superb. The reading and assignments were very challenging and our class discussions were vigorous. The course dealt with the genesis and evolution of black studies, posing questions such as: Should Black Studies be taught solely in universities? Or in elementary and secondary schools as well? Who should determine the curriculum? Should Black Studies be mandatory or elective? Due to questions like these, and the discussions that ensued, I was able to examine some long-held beliefs, to refine some, and discard others. Our instructor allowed us to be critical of one another’s ideas while fostering mutual respect and intellectual camaraderie.

My most recent PNAP class was a summer writing workshop, with a focus on education and the political issues surrounding it. I signed up because I felt that this class would help refine my writing prowess, as a budding poet, philosopher, and intellectual. The class was far more than I expected. My instructor believes in what she speaks about, and she matches that with her actions. Her attitude encourages me as a student to apply myself fully to the curriculum.

PNAP allows individuals such as myself, who are incarcerated, the means and opportunity to embark upon a journey of critical self-discovery that can lead to restoration. In classes I am encouraged to think critically to create something that will transcend my current circumstance and I am encouraged to change the world. Education is a light. Light illuminates, it disables obscurity and ignorance. It exposes paths to understanding and enlightenment that push us to strive for a better future of community and hope. Education can be that scrying glass that we use to show who we are and all that we can be. I will steadfastly continue to avail myself of the opportunity to illuminate the darkness of my heart and mind and I will happily utilize the resources that PNAP provides. My education is a lifelong journey. And as such, I will measure my steps with a critical eye, discriminating forever in favor of growth, evolution, and above all else, equality and enlightenment. This is my journey so far...to be continued!
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PNAP Organization

Core faculty make up our teaching collective. A leadership committee facilitates key aspects of the project including events and fundraising. We are generously hosted and supported by Northeastern Illinois University.

We are thrilled to announce that this year we hired our first staff member, Tess Landon. Tess has a master’s in arts education and has worked with PNAP since 2013.

Organizing Committee
Tim Barnett, Alice Kim, Damon Locks, Erica Meiners, Jill Petty, Sarah Ross

Project Coordinator
Tess Landon

Honorary Board
Benny Lee, Danny Davis, Bob Dougherty, Michelle Boone, Walter Burnett

Book Purchasing
Seminary Cooperative

Book Keeper
Debra Williams

Website
Ryan Griffis

Credits
Cover: from right to left: Benny Lee at Weight of Rage exhibition; visitors to Freedom Dreams Exhibition read writing by PNAP students; Artwork: center: by Damon Locks; Weight of Rage installation; center: Artwork: center: by Devon Daniels; Beth Richie and Alice Kim at an annual PNAP faculty dinner; visitors make art with William Estrada’s Mobile Street Art Cart at the It’s Now event in North Lawndale; Marvin Tate reads PNAP student poetry at It’s Now event.
pg 4-5: Posters and flyer for PNAP events 2012-2017
pg 6: Artwork by Miguel Morales
pg 8-9: Installation at Weight of Rage exhibition, artwork by Matthew Davis, Devon Daniels, Elton Williams
Report Design: Dave Pabellon
The people of
Prison + Neighborhood
Arts Project
