

## ABOG Fellowship Application Sample 2018 Fellow Rachel Barnard

### *The Fair*

#### **Art, Social Justice, and the Criminal Legal System - In Brief**

“You can’t policy your racism away. We no longer have Jim Crow laws but we still have Jim Crow hate.”  
— Patrisse Cullors, Black Lives Matter founder, 2016

Social justice in the criminal legal context requires urgent legislation and policy changes. However, just as critical are the necessary shifts in the working cultures and relationships within police stations, prosecutor offices, the department of probation, and our courtrooms. At every point of contact one may have with the criminal legal system there is significant amount of discretionary power held by the legal professionals presiding over one’s arrest, prosecution, sentence, and probation. This discretionary power is often the deciding factor between an arrest or a warning; between being held at central bookings for 36 hours or being given a Desk Appearance Ticket; between having one’s case dismissed and sealed or shouldering a life-long criminal record; between jail or a mandated program or probation.

The implicit racial bias that exists at each point of contact with the criminal legal system is magnified as one is sieved deeper into the system. For example, in NYC 72% of 16- and 17-year-olds who are arrested are Black or Latinx, while accounting for only 33% of this age group citywide. Startlingly, 95% of incarcerated youth are Black or Latinx.

Art is a powerful tool for addressing the urgent need for cultural and relational change, as is demonstrated by my past work in the final section of this narrative. The proposed project *The Fair* could be a powerful example of the complexities and power of a socially engaged art project.

#### ***The Fair at The Department of Probation***

*The Fair* is a year-long socially engaged art project that focuses on positively shifting working cultures and client-officer relationships within the NYC Department of Probation. The project is on the request of the Department of Probation who are:

- Seeking innovative ways to strengthen relationships and improve communication and engagement between probation officers and the people under their supervision. Research shows that the relationship itself between a probation officer and client is the key to success— it’s not only what services are offered to someone, but who offers those services, and how, that makes a difference. We face challenges in building trust and learning to collaborate with clients on identifying realistic goals that they can strive towards, and in matching them to the right opportunities when they are ready and able to seize them. At the same time, our clients are challenged by the fact and the stigma of their justice system involvement, which may have damaged their relationships with family and community while also posing barriers to opportunities such as employment and housing.

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- Developing a culture that allows for empowered client-probation officer relationships is a critical step for ending mass incarceration at the local level; if a probation officer chooses to give a client a violation that client is sent to jail.

### **Driving Questions for a Socially Engaged Art Project on Belief and Belonging**

How can Probation clients believe in, and belong to, the larger Probation Community? Similarly, how can New York's community of Probation officers believe in and create a sense of belonging for their clients? And finally, how can creating a community characterized by 'belief' and 'belonging' allow probation officers and clients to build empowered, collaborative relationships that support great case outcomes and work towards ending mass incarceration at the local level?

While *The Fair* is still in the development stage, the project is composed of three main phases:

#### Phase 1. The Listening Archive – Pavilion Project

Fantastical, otherworldly pavilions (distorted versions of pavilions or stalls one may find at a fair), with enough room for two, are to be erected within The Department of Probation's dull, bureaucratic and security-focused waiting rooms. These pavilions are formulated as new terrains—or terrain vague—that allow one to leave and reflect back on the immediate environment and systems within it, while simultaneously remaining in place. As such, the pavilions are to be objects of wonder so as to sit in contrast to the Probation waiting rooms and to create otherworldly interiors so that one has the literal experience of leaving probation despite remaining within its waiting room. The pavilions' materiality is to conjure up the aesthetics of a fair or carnival but be reconfigured in such a way that evokes a fascinating uncanny effect akin to the Russian Formalist notion of making strange.

In total there will be 3 to 5 distinct pavilions constructed. They will be located in each of New York's five boroughs. The pavilions will travel between the dozens of probation waiting rooms so that the majority of probation clients and probation officers have incidental contact with *The Fair* as a matter of course of their probation visits or work life.

Inside the pavilions over a period of 2-3 months one-on-one conversations will be had between trained art-listeners and probation officers and probation clients. The inside of the pavilions will establish audio privacy and a sense of comfort. Basic needs such as water and snacks will be provided along with generous gestures, such as festive gifts or treats. This is all in an effort to begin to create an atmosphere of what social-psychologists have termed "the generosity contagion," which may build over the duration of the project.

Each conversation will be 15 to 30 minutes long and the invitation to participate will be open to all probation clients and staff. The questions prompting the conversations are designed to develop an intimate picture of who makes up the Probation community; to re-center the voices of those who are most impacted by the criminal legal system; to develop insights on the existing culture and structural barriers participants face; and to develop and invent the future via the next phases of *The Fair*.

The Listening Archive conversations will be segmented into four shifting focuses:

1. You Are Amazing: Eg. What are your strengths? What do you like about your life?

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2. You Are Wise: Eg. How old were you when you first learned about the criminal legal system? Tell us that story.
3. What Is Missing: Eg. What needs do you have that aren't always being met? What qualities—eg. ease, joy—do you think are sometimes missing at the Department of Probation? What would make a real difference if it were present at Probation?
4. Create The Future: What are some far-fetched / impossible / crazy ideas for bringing some of these missing qualities into the Department of Probations?

Critically, the listener will be re-creating what the participant is sharing by drawing a map of the conversation as it occurs. Listeners will be trained on a series of protocols that allow them to be present with the participant by “listening and adding nothing.” As the listener draws and writes they will ask for verbal confirmation that what they have captured is accurate, and make corrections as necessary. The final maps will be four-sided, representing the four phases of the conversation.

At the completion of Phase 1 the resulting maps of the conversations will be turned into an atlas, and a large scale and immersive version will be presented in Phase 3 at *The Fair*.

### Phase 2. Interventions – Connection Art

The Intervention phase of *The Fair* is to bring into existence—within the everyday working culture and working relationships of the Department of Probation—what has been identified during the Listening Archive as qualities that would promote belief and belonging. Interventions can be small- or large-scale, temporal or permanent, across the entire department, or in focused areas. Interventions are to be co-created by the participants of Phase 1. However, to demonstrate what this phase could look like, an example could be to transform a flimsy maze of windowless cubicles in which probation officers and clients meet into a comfortable or even fantastical series of spaces. Or it could be that installed in every probation officers office is a “magic” jar of cards from which clients can pull. Each card will provide a conversation starter to shift the way probation officers and clients can relate.

Ultimately, the Interventions phase moves *The Fair* beyond listening and into dialogue. Probation officers and clients should have opportunities outside of formal criminal legal interactions to connect with each other as a single community, to have fun, and to have an opportunity to more meaningfully understand each other—in short, to explore ways in which they can create ‘belief’ in and ‘belonging’ to each other.

This highly collaborative social engaged art project will explore ways to shift belief systems and create a sense of belonging in a way that is trauma-informed and with an understanding of the inherent power dynamic that is at play between probation staff and clients. I come to this project with a deep awareness of the trauma and secondary-trauma experienced by clients and probation officers, as I have been running art diversion programs for court-mandated people in the Department of Probation for over five years. During this time I have experienced secondary-trauma myself and witnessed the impact trauma has had on so many court-involved people. I have been working with clinical professionals to develop these practices as trauma-informed and with a full acknowledgment of the inherent power dynamics.

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### Phase 3. *The Fair* - Creating Belief and Belonging

The final phase will be a celebration of the year's collaborative work while demonstrating what has been learned and created within the Department of Probation community. It is open to the larger New York community.

The event will be presented as a 1- to 3-day fair, in one of the grand public spaces of the Department of Probation. It will consist of a series of the pavilions and maps from Phase 1, and the interventions from Phase 2 reconfigured as 'fair stalls.' Participants in the year-long project—Probation Officers, and clients—will host the event, running the pavilions and interventions, allowing the broader community to participate in what they have created.

### **A Note On Video Documentation**

Video documentation is possible and permission will be sought from participants. It does not harm the project goals or participants to create an external focus. In fact, in working with justice-involved young people and criminal legal professionals, my repeated experience is that participants have, on the whole, relished the opportunity to publically share their wisdom, and to be seen, heard, and known. To see examples of past videos of my similarly situated work go here: <https://vimeo.com/user27730291>.

### **Art as a Powerful Tool for Cultural Change – Past Work**

For over 5 years my socially engaged art practice has brought groups of people together from diverse criminal justice communities—many of whom are typically adversarial—to create projects that create an expanded sense of 'belief' and 'belonging.'

Since 2012, over 600 people have been sentenced to my restorative arts diversion program—Young New Yorkers—and over 100 criminal justice professionals have participated in the resulting participatory art projects.

My court-mandated participants use art to bring their voices back into the courtroom. When young people present their Aspirational Self Portraits their court appearance, I have repeatedly witnessed the judge's tired face light up as they view the artwork and consider a young person's case.

My court-mandated participants use art to advocate for social justice, specifically a transformed criminal justice system. Each 8-Week and 4-Week Arts Diversion Program culminates in a public art project that provides a platform for participants' visions for criminal justice reform. Participants invite the very criminal justice professionals involved in their sentencing to engage and participate.

These art practices have humanized the working cultures of the court rooms and lead to better case outcomes for young people. They have also contributed to more empowered work environments for criminal justice professionals.

## ABOG Fellowship Application Sample 2018 Fellow Miguel Luciano

### *Island/Inland PROMESAs*

*Island / Inland PROMESAs* is an ongoing project addressing the economic and political crisis in Puerto Rico and its impact on mainland Puerto Rican communities in the U.S. The island is currently over 70 billion dollars in debt and facing one of the worst economic crises in its history. With high unemployment rates, reduced social services, widespread school and hospital closures, and a critical lack of opportunities (particularly for young people), Puerto Ricans are leaving the island for the U.S. mainland in record numbers. To make matters worse, Puerto Rico was hit by two catastrophic hurricanes (Irma and Maria) this past September, which devastated the island even further.

Poverty rates on the island prior to the hurricanes were at 45% and growing, the highest among any group of U.S. citizens. In late 2016, Congress responded with the controversial PROMESA bill (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act). The acronym for this bill misleadingly translates in English as “promise”. However, rather than providing economic relief for Puerto Rico, it became an austerity bill that prioritized the interests of Wall Street investors, lenders and banks. Furthermore, PROMESA created a U.S.-appointed oversight board with sweeping powers to restructure the Puerto Rican economy, usurping all government authority on the island. The new fiscal board has increased austerity measures, and lowered the minimum wage to \$4.25 per hour for workers under the age of 25. As a result, many Puerto Ricans are seeking economic relief in the United States and migrating at rates not seen since the 1950’s (when nearly 25% of the island population migrated to the U.S.).

In the midst of a crippling debt crisis, Puerto Rico found itself in a human rights crisis in the wake of the hurricanes. A slow federal response left many feeling neglected and treated as second-class citizens. As I write this, nearly half of the island is still without power, four months after the storms, in what has become the longest black-out in U.S. history. And all of this occurred in a year that marked the centennial of U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans (1917-2017).

Despite these circumstances, Puerto Ricans have come together to support each other in dramatic and inspiring ways, both on the island and in the diaspora. On the island, formal and informal networks of activists, organizers, neighbors and community members formed relief brigades that were often the first responders to communities in need. These networks have grown with support from the diaspora and our communities have a history of creating innovative, community-driven solutions in times of crisis. It is within this spirit that I am proposing a project that explores expressions of resistance and resilience within the Puerto Rican community across different migration histories, from the post civil-rights era to the present.

### **Mapping Resistance: The Young Lords in El Barrio**

2018-2019 marks the 50-year anniversary of the Young Lords Party - a radical organization of Puerto Rican activists modeled after the Black Panther Party that organized for social justice in Chicago and

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New York during the late 1960s-early 70s. I have been working closely with former members of the Young Lords for several years. In advance of the anniversary, I will produce a public art project that commemorates and makes visible the history of the Young Lords Party in New York while connecting activism in the post-civil rights era with contemporary movements for social justice in our communities today.

The Young Lords were based in East Harlem (El Barrio). They organized direct community actions throughout the neighborhood around issues of food, health, housing, and education. After polling the community about the top concerns in the neighborhood, they created direct actions or “offensives”. The “garbage offensive” for example, was among their first public actions, developed in response to a pattern of city neglect that allowed garbage to accumulate disproportionately in poor communities of color. The Young Lords brought all of the garbage into the middle of the street, forming a barricade that blocked traffic on Third Avenue. They then set the garbage ablaze, forcing the police and fire departments to respond. They also mobilized the press, and created a public platform for denouncing discriminatory policies in public services, demanding equity in poor communities. They effectively shamed the city into providing better services, and influenced that change directly.

Other actions/offensives by the Young Lords included the take over of the People’s Church on 111th Street where they ran clothing drives and free breakfast programs for youth. Later, they seized a chest x-ray unit truck on Lexington and 116th in order to provide free screenings for tuberculosis. In the take-over of Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, they partnered with Black and Latino hospital personnel to force improvements in labor conditions and medical care, including maternal and child care, and drug rehabilitation services. They organized marches against police brutality, mass incarceration, and colonialism in Puerto Rico.

Mapping these histories from the South Bronx to East Harlem, I will produce a series of billboards and large-scale projections from historic documentary photos that will be installed at or near the original location that the event took place. The images will be accompanied by a street-level, public marker that tells the story of each photograph, linking to a website for an extended history and map of the site-specific exhibition. These commemorative gestures intend to honor these histories while calling into question the relationship between the issues and actions of the past and the parallel struggles of the present. In a neighborhood that is rapidly gentrifying, it is important to recognize that this is a living history. East Harlem is still the symbolic center of the Puerto Rican community in New York and voices of resistance from previous generations are still very much present. Walking tours will be organized to unpack the history, including former members of the Young Lords, educators, students and community members, with an emphasis on inter-generational exchange. In addition, the second part of the project will project will host a series of Community Action Workshops that explore actionable strategies for social justice today.

### **Community Action Workshops**

Mapping Resistance will be the springboard for a series of Community Action Workshops that bring together people working creatively towards transgressing community crisis issues today. I am particularly interested in connecting artists and activists working in post-hurricane relief efforts in Puerto Rico with those in the diaspora who are exploring alternative approaches to the same issues the Young

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Lords organized around 50 years ago - health, wellness and healing, food sovereignty and sustainability, housing/gentrification, and education surrounding our cultural and political history. I live in East Harlem at El Barrio's Artspace PS 109, an affordable housing building for artists. We have publicly accessible galleries and theater spaces in the building that I intend to utilize for both the planning and hosting of the community workshops we will offer.

As an example, Community Action Workshops that address the topic of "food" can bring together people working in support of organic farming and sustainable food culture in Puerto Rico with folks working in urban agriculture, community gardens and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA's) in East Harlem. 90% of the crops in Puerto Rico were wiped out after the hurricanes. Nevertheless, there is a strong movement in Puerto Rico around sustainable food culture, despite the fact that 85% of the goods consumed (including foods) are imported. Food education work is as important in Puerto Rico as it is in the diaspora, as we have become so disconnected from sustainable food traditions that once grounded us in both our land and culture. And we've become unhealthy from the overconsumption of processed, chemical foods. I will invite chefs that I know who are also food justice activists to collaborate in developing participatory workshops that culminate in public food events that encourage local, sustainable, food culture.

Another Community Action Workshop I am interested in developing around Health and Wellness will focus on exercise and recreation for youth, while critiquing the over-policing and criminalization of young people in our communities. All of the public housing projects in East Harlem are flanked by generator-powered, anti-crime spotlights at night that light up the buildings as if it were daylight. For many residents, it's like having a huge flashlight pointed in your windows all night. As a community action, I would like to organize an event whereby we remove the lights from the NYCHA buildings for one night and place them on a local basketball court to light up the park for a midnight basketball tournament. The project would involve collaborating with the local police precinct that controls the spotlights and time enough to organize enough young people in the neighborhood to register for the tournament. I would approach local businesses to contribute prizes for the winning teams and seek sponsorship for uniforms. The hope is that a successful event, well documented and promoted may help raise awareness towards decriminalizing perceptions of residents in public housing, improve relationships between police and community and encourage better uses of public resources.

These are just a few initial ideas for Community Action Workshops. I would use the opportunity and support from A Blade of Grass to do more research and fieldwork in Puerto Rico and further develop this series of public programs, which is the second phase of the 'Island / Inland PROMESA's' project, and builds off of the Mapping Resistance: The Young Lords in El Barrio portion of the project. I received a grant from the Surdna Foundation to initiate the project and am currently working with Hiram Maristany, who was an original member of the Young Lords and also the official photographer, to select images for the billboards. El Museo del Barrio is my organizational partner with the Surdna Grant and may offer additional support in the capacity of education and public program development in this project.

## ABOG Fellowship Applicant Resources Fit with Fellowship

To figure out if your project is a good fit, ask yourself:

1. Can I describe my project's capacity to enact social change?
2. Does the project somehow challenge, change, or invert inequitable power dynamics?
3. Does it increase the possibility for greater humility, collectivity, communication and/or care in an increasingly polarized political moment?
4. Does the project help participants or audience members engage in imaginative or restorative ways of looking and acting?
5. Does the project propose forms of action in which participants feel like they can positively affect entrenched social structures and create greater hope for the future?