

Creative Arts Programming in Brazilian and German Prisons

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Project Overview

I participated in and facilitated art, music, and theatre workshops in Brazilian and German prisons, while studying the criminal justice systems and varying experiences of incarceration within these countries.



Locations

Brazil is the largest country in Latin America, the fifth largest country in the world by area, and the sixth largest in the world by population. The official language of Brazil is Portuguese. Brazil has the third largest prison population in the world, after the United States and China, and incarcerates at a rate of 318 per 100,000 people.

Germany is in central-western Europe, and with 82 million inhabitants, is the most populous member-state of the European Union. After the United States, Germany is the second most popular immigration destination in the world. Germany has the 31st largest prison population in the world and incarcerates at a rate of 77 per 100,000 people.

Community Partners

I traveled to Brazil with Professor Ashley Lucas, Director of the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) at the University of Michigan. We first visited the city of Florianopolis, where we were hosted by the theatre department at Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina (UDESC). We then traveled to Rio de Janeiro and worked with professors and students at Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UniRio). Here, I met and worked with Brazilian theatre students and social justice advocates involved in UniRio's Teatro na Prisão program.

In Germany I worked with social workers at an agency called Gangway, which characterizes itself as a "street social work" agency. Gangway has neighborhood offices throughout Berlin and offers wraparound support for currently and formerly incarcerated youth and their families. At Gangway, I worked specifically with Olad Aden, a German-American artist, community organizer, and activist who facilitates film projects and music workshops in several Berlin-area prisons.

Classroom Connections

SW 814: Community Interventions

This course taught me how to more effectively assess models of planned social change and community practice. I became particularly interested in community based participatory research and the potential opportunities and barriers of engaging prison communities in related research and interventions.

PUBPOL 692: Thinking About Crime

This course offered me both domestic and international perspectives in criminal justice policy and theory. It guided me in the process of more deeply understanding themes of equality, safety, censure, liberty, punishment, policing, and court processes.



Career Connections

My educational and professional goals include continuing to investigate issues surrounding criminal justice systems, and further refining and specifying ways in which I can most effectively contribute to decarceration and prisoner care on micro, mezzo, and macro levels; I plan to pursue a PhD in social work in order to continue these investigations. This project extended my understanding of the prison experience by providing an international context that I had yet to access, and by further exposing me to academics and clinicians with varying perspectives on this work.

Highlights & Takeaways

- There are many historical similarities between Brazil and the United States—namely slavery and its social and political repercussions—that continue to impact the two countries' prison systems in parallel ways
- The legacy of the Holocaust and its aftermath, including the existence of the Berlin Wall, on German race relations and prison systems
- Notion of any "good" or humane prisons debunked; Western Europe is often seen as a model for social welfare and criminal justice policy, but black and brown immigrants experience little to no social mobility for generations
- The concept of "open prisons" and their existence in both Brazil and Germany
- Shorter sentencing lengths in Germany
- The importance of human touch and its impact on mental health, and the role that touch plays in both Brazilian and German prisons compared to the United States
- Prisons for incarcerated mothers and their children in Brazil
- Arts education in Brazil and Germany vs. the United States and the notion of theatre as social justice work; legacies of Boal and Brecht in their respective countries

Advice

- Start making connections for potential host organizations now.
- While planning for your study is most important, do not forget to take advantage of additional academic and cultural events occurring during your stay. You never know what may inspire you or may be connected back to your project.
- Write down detailed field notes in a journal throughout the day instead of waiting to write out all the details in the evening. However, do write a brief, in-of-day reflection each night. Thoughts, ideas and connections are often quickly forgotten!

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Office of Global Activities and the Alumni Board of Governors for financially supporting my global independent study. I also greatly appreciate the resources, connections, and mentorship provided by Dr. Larry Gant and Dr. Ashley Lucas.

