Katie Steedly Curling

BMI-Kluge Fellowship Proposal

"Artists and scientists are activists. They look at the world as changeable and they look upon themselves as instruments for change. They understand that the slice of world they occupy is only a fragment but that the fragment is intrinsically connected to the whole. They know that action matters." — Anne Bogart, What's the Story: Essays About Art, Theater and Storytelling

I currently live across the street from a renovated brick factory in Atlanta. The original owner of the brick factory, B. Mifflin Hood, led the fight against convict leasing in Georgia in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. This project will define and analyze convict leasing, explore the struggle to end the practice, and discuss its relationship to current public funding of private prisons — which includes significant investments in prison labor. At heart, this project examines the ways in which the lessons of past progress can inform and guide current social justice work.

This project will utilize a breadth of research methods to explore the life of B. Mifflin Hood. It will draw from history, sociology, law, philosophy, and political science. It will look closely at convict leasing and the struggle to end the practice. It will discuss convict leasing's relationship to current public funding of prison labor. It will analyze today's prison labor situation and offer a path forward based on past legal, political, and social progress through Hood's example. It will offer a story — going forward — of history's relevance to our current circumstance, of leadership toward social justice, and of humanity and moral clarity during difficult times.

Knowledge of B. Mifflin Hood, convict leasing, and the current prison labor situation lives siloed in academic, political, and legal spaces. Most people do not know the convict leasing story. They believe the rhetorical and constitutional end of slavery ended slavery in the United States. They struggle to connect our common humanity to a humanity that includes people who are or have been incarcerated. They do not understand the ecosystem — the depth and scope — of public funding and private profits that occurs within our criminal justice system.

As public funding of private prisons within the United States increases at alarming rates, this project will highlight an element of the otherwise (perhaps intentionally) too-big-to-understand reality and its outcomes. This project will provide a window into the larger forces at play — and the cruelty involved — in the prison labor system. This project will examine a human rights situation through a historical, political, and cultural lens.

This project presents a full-circle moment. My academic training and professional experience have utilized research to connect the fragment to the whole. In writing a dissertation and evaluation reports, books and articles, white papers and essays, I have connected the fragment to the whole. In writing newsletters and travel writing, policy briefs and curricula, podcast scripts and ghostwritten pieces, I have connected the fragment to the whole.

My personal connection to the story stems from teaching a writing class for several years in a men's federal prison in South Florida. That class gave me experience "inside the fence," an experience that profoundly informed my perspective of the United States criminal justice system. That class changed my understanding of freedom, compassion, and justice. That class gave me a front row seat to our common humanity, a fact which is often ignored and/or weaponized when talking about incarcerated people.

This project is built upon a foundation of living wide-awakeness. I have made a career of studying wide-awakeness. Wide-awakeness is not my idea. Philosophers, scholars, and artists have been exploring it for generations. I was so hungry to understand it, I focused on it during my Ph.D. and founded The Wide-Awakeness Project — https://substack.com/@katiesteedlycurling — committed to living it.

The work of Maxine Greene introduced me to wide-awakeness. Drawing from philosophers like Schütz, Merleau-Ponty, Dewey, and others, Greene asserts that imagination makes empathy possible. In that frame, wide-awakeness defines our life project and shapes a space where ideas grow, analyses flow, creativity thrives, and justice happens. I am dedicated to exploring wide-awakeness. We must intentionally create pathways for wide-awakeness — safe harbors of imagination and empathy — in our world. That is the point of the Wide-Awakeness Project of which this work is a part.