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## #BlackLivesMatter: Intersectionality, Violence, and Socially Transformative Art

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## **#BlackLivesMatter: Intersectionality, Violence, and Socially Transformative Art**

### **Abstract**

This paper is designed to elicit dialogue on the impact of the #Blacklivesmatter (BLM) movement and be a call to action in the wake of murder and sustained oppression of the Black body in America. The paper focuses on the intersectionality of the BLM movement using art, “racial” analysis, creative pedagogy, and the theatre of the oppressed. Included is a monologue of a mother whose child has been murdered by a “peace officer” that leads the audience on an emotional journey. In addition, sobering statistics of documented murders of Black transgender women are presented, as are the health effects of discrimination. The language of oppression and its use in the media are explored, as is a discussion of socially transformative art. Finally, recommendations are made to continue to use art and theatre as tools to raise awareness of injustice and to promote social resistance.

### **Keywords**

Transformative Art, #Blacklivesmatter, Intersectionality, Theater of Oppression

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# #BLACKLIVESMATTER: INTERSECTIONALITY, VIOLENCE, AND SOCIALY TRANSFORMATIVE ART

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*This paper is designed to elicit dialogue on the impact of the #Blacklivesmatter (BLM) movement and be a call to action in the wake of murder and sustained oppression of the Black body in America. The paper focuses on the intersectionality of the BLM movement using art, “racial” analysis, creative pedagogy, and the theatre of the oppressed. Included is a monologue of a mother whose child has been murdered by a “peace officer” that leads the audience on an emotional journey. In addition, sobering statistics of documented murders of Black transgender women are presented, as are the health effects of discrimination. The language of oppression and its use in the media are explored, as is a discussion of socially transformative art. Finally, recommendations are made to continue to use art and theatre as tools to raise awareness of injustice and to promote social resistance.*

In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson formed an 11-member Presidential advisory commission to investigate the causes of race riots across America. A year later the Kerner Report was issued - a warning to the American people - with its most quoted passage, “*Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal*” (1). Now, 41 years later, we are still relying on the marginalized to remind us how we have collectively failed at creating an equitable society.

Today in America, racial parity doesn’t exist where it matters. Congress doesn’t have the same racial diversity as our population. The

majority of characters in film and television and the majority owners of American media are white. Neither is pursuant to the racial distribution of the American population, and the equality narrative continues to be inaccurate. Postmodern philosopher and social theorist Michael Foucault introduced social constructionist theories widely adopted by activists. He noted that both language and practice influence society, public opinion, and collective understanding. In addition, the power that the speaker wields correlates to the measure of influence both implicit and explicit (Burr). Contextually, it is clear just how a population without representational parity could perpetuate an incorrect equality narrative: without even knowing it.

Oppression takes many forms and has many representations. At its core oppression is always about power – who is bestowed with power, who is denied power, and the continuous struggle to balance power. The U.S. culture is theoretically grounded in the language of universality and the concept of equality. Its practical cultures, though, are rich in the traditional and historical language of oppression. These power relationships are found in the language of war and conflict, economics and poverty, the discourse around religion, culture and ethnicity, gender roles, social alienation, immigration, and political extremism. The discourse around the language of oppression has been limited to the sociology and linguistics literatures. We applied it in our interdisciplinary examination of art and the intersectionality of perpetuated marginalization of Americans in the protest movement #BlackLivesMatter.

The #BlackLivesMatter movement has grown into an emotional, sensationalized, event-driven, divisive social construct. The need for parity is found in demographics that clearly show disparity in representation spanning all areas of American society. The demographics alone fuel the need for the marginalized to speak up and demand they be heard. Web 2.0 provided access to an entirely new platform on which to challenge this narrative: the simple, inevitable hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has served as the largest collective modern challenge to the false societal narrative of progress and equality. The movement began with Alicia Garza, who in 2014 summarized the need for the movement by saying, “*When black people get free, everybody gets free.*”

While counter protesters have attempted to drown out the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter by using the hashtag #AllLivesMatter, it has been claimed that the former has been used up to eight times more than the latter (Anderson). The widespread use of social media gives artists and activists the ability to meet the idealism of perceived equality. Through art, theater and storytelling, we seek to examine disparity and identify implicit bias to shine a light on the intersectionality of oppression in America since the highly publicized killing of unarmed black American teenager Trayvon Martin in 2013. It was his senseless murder that spawned the new civil rights movement #BlackLivesMatter.

The killing of unarmed black teens in America in general has drawn attention to the inaccurate equity narrative of crime. However, according to the FBI, the majority of crimes are still committed by whites in America, closely pursuant to their population distribution overall. And still, unarmed white teens live, unlike Trayvon Martin and so many others. The demographics are irrefutable. The 2018 Census reports the United States is 76.6% white and 13.4% black or African American (see fig. 1). Overall, 69% white and 27.4% black or African American committed crimes in 2018 (*Arrests*).

- Notable offenses committed by Whites in 2018 closely pursuant to population distribution are Arson 71%, Vandalism 67.6%, Driving under the influence 81.2%, Rape 68.1 %, Burglary 68.1, Larceny-theft 67%, Drug abuse violations 70.6%, and Sex offences (except rape and prostitution) 72.1%.
- Notable offences in 2018 NOT closely pursuant to population distribution of whites/black or African Americans: Murder 44.1% / 53.3%, Robbery 43.5% / 54.2%, Weapons Carrying 54.4% / 43.3%, Prostitution 55.0% / 38.8%, Gambling 40.6% / 48.6%.

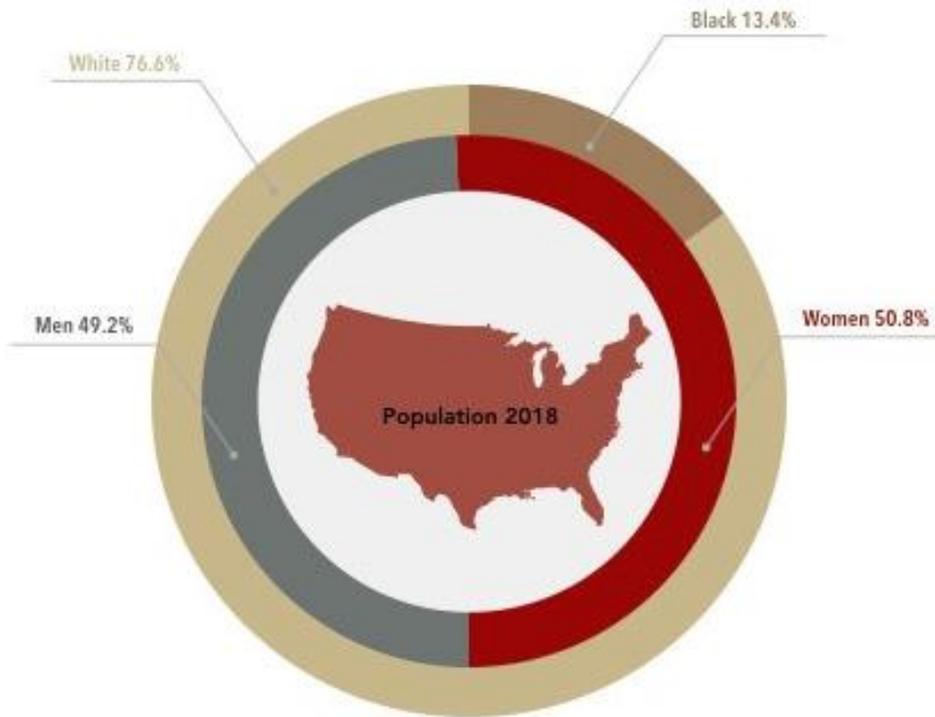


Fig. 1. Laura C. Fong. Source: “United States Population by Race and Gender” (2018). QuickFacts, United States Census Bureau, July 2018, [www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/RHI125218#RHI125218](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/RHI125218#RHI125218)

## 1. THE POWER OF STORY THROUGH MONOLOGUE

Because #BlackLivesMatter, Evonne Fields-Gould wrote the following monologue, “*Can There be Justice for TJ?*” to be read to an audience<sup>1</sup>.

*(There is a CHAIR on stage. VIVIAN sits in the chair and sets her purse on the floor by her chair. She pauses, looking at her hands. She looks up at nothing in particular. Vivian then begins to tell her story).*

He was born three months early. The doctors didn’t think he would live through the day. I kissed his tiny head and cradled his

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<sup>1</sup> Printed in entirety with permission of Evonne Fields-Gould, [cherokeerose24@yahoo.com](mailto:cherokeerose24@yahoo.com).

hand in mine. I sang “This Little Light of Mine” to him. I continued to hold him and sing to him for more than twenty-four hours. To everyone’s surprise, little TJ began to improve. I believe, to this day, that the loving care I gave TJ allowed him to beat the odds. I know deep in my heart he felt that love, which gave him the will to live.

When TJ finally came home, there were still many challenges we had to overcome. He had to be monitored around the clock, for six months. When we thought we had cleared that hurdle, at the age of two, TJ had developed chronic asthma. I had to spring into action to give him a treatment to prevent a full-blown asthma attack. He fought every day for each breath he took. He couldn’t play outside. I know in my heart, he felt isolated and alone. But he kept a smile on his face despite his illness, and he made the best out of his situation. My heart ached for my son. But to our surprise, when he turned ten, the asthma was gone. Life became easier for our family. What a blessing. TJ was a fighter and I knew he would live a long and happy life.

My son grew up to be a strong, healthy, young man who was on his way to college. The first in our family to do so. On the day he left for college, he told me, “Mama, I’m going to make you proud of me, and when I graduate, I will take care [of] you and Little Man. I love you, Mama.”

He wanted to become a lawyer, so he could fight for those who couldn’t fight for themselves. These are the less privileged people in our society. He always said he wanted to be an example to others, to have a positive outlook on the future, and to show how one can make a difference in the world.

Little did I know, TJ had only four months to live. He was coming home for winter break. I was in the kitchen, making his favorite meal, when I heard a voice say loudly, “Get out of the vehicle! Get out now!” I wasn’t sure what was going on outside. Then I heard TJ’s voice respond in a loud, agitated tone, “I didn’t do nothing, man! I’m just pulling into my driveway! What’s up?!” My heart skipped a beat. I stopped what I was doing and started to make my way to the front door. I heard a man say, “I told you to get out!” I heard TJ say, “Okay, man, okay... at least let me turn off the car.” The other man said, “Put your hands on the car!”

Then, a few seconds later, the sound of gunshots rang out. When I opened the door, I felt like I was moving in slow motion. To my horror, I saw my son lying on the curb. At that moment, it felt like a bad dream. I wanted to wake up, but I couldn't. That boy lying there wasn't my child. I couldn't process what I was seeing. The cop--That cop was standing over TJ with his gun pointed at him, telling him to get up. I don't know if he realized that TJ was dead. I didn't want to believe it was TJ lying there.

As my mind cleared, I realized my baby had been shot. I so desperately wanted him to get up from the ground. But he didn't. Adrenaline rushed through my body as I ran toward TJ. The cop pointed his gun at me, telling me to get back in the house. I screamed at him and told him that was my son he shot, and I have to go to him. But he continued to shout at me. I was a few feet away from TJ when someone pulled me back. I fought wildly to free myself.

I heard a voice saying, "Do you want to get shot, too? It will be okay, Vivian; come on let's get back in the house, please." The words meant nothing to me. I wanted to hold my son; to sing to him, "This Little Light of Mine," and to heal him back to life, but I knew he was gone. There were four bloody holes in his back. His right arm was outstretched, and next to his hand laid his cell phone and keys. That cop said he thought it was a gun. I remember seeing his blood seeping from his body, turning the white snow a crimson red and flowing along the curb.

My son's lifeblood was now nothing but waste debris being washed away with the dirty snow and street garbage. I will never forget what I saw... my baby's lifeless eyes staring at nothing. Those once bright, intelligent, smiling eyes, gone forever, along with his soul. Gone. And you know what? That cop walked away free.

And what was TJ doing to make these cops want to follow him home like a criminal? Nothing. The cop's report said he was playing his car radio too loud and ran a stop sign. But I know that wasn't true, because TJ wasn't that kind of person. He was a person who would obey the law. If I made the smallest driving violation, he would correct me without delay. That was the kind of person he was.

*(Vivian takes a bottle of liquor from her purse.)*

You see this bottle? This is what I use to medicate myself at night. I sit in the kitchen all alone and try to drink away my pain. But this only adds fuel to the fire- storm that is going on in my home. My husband couldn't handle TJ's death and my drinking, so he left. Little Man, who was once a sweet child, now has no supervision because of my drinking. He's beginning to act-out... hanging out with the wrong group of kids. I know it's because of TJ's death. He hates every cop he sees. TJ would be ashamed of me if he knew I had neglected Little Man. TJ loved him so much. My heart aches knowing that one day Little Man might become another statistic added to the list of young, black males killed by the cops.

I might have destroyed what was left of my family; I know I have to get help. But there's no help for me because my heart is broken forever. It can never be fixed. I will never recover from what I saw that day... the dead stare in my baby's eyes, the blood around his body. I died that day also. There isn't a parent on this earth who could get over the murder of their child. A death resulting from the meaningless, insensitive killings by some of the so-called protectors of our communities. Can this issue be solved? When will there be justice for black lives, transgender lives, immigrant lives, innocent victims of enslavement, the oppressed people of the world, for all lives who have been unjustly and violently taken... murdered.

What can we do? What can I do?

(LIGHTS FADE.)

*End of Play.*

Evonne Fields-Gould has shared the underrepresented voice of "TJ's mother" through her monologue "Can There be Justice for TJ." Retrieving voice for the silenced, forgotten, and erased in the mainstream history is the core of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), a community-based theatre pedagogy and methodology introduced and developed by Augusto Boal (1931-2009) (Brown). Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1931, Boal served as a theatre director in Brazil until his arrest in 1971. He believed that one can use theatre as a weapon to fight for social injustice and oppression.

His theatre was considered a “threat” by the military government for its advocacy for their free thinking and expression. Boal was imprisoned and tortured for many years (Plastow 296).

After his released in 1971, Boal was exiled to Argentina where he further developed his theatre pedagogy and training for self-awareness, self-identification, and self-expression with both theatre practitioners and those who have never participated in theatre. One of the most powerful practices of TO is its challenge of the traditionally passive role of the audience. TO expects audience involvement in each theatre piece as “active participants” to create, through a theatre project, an “educational tool for bringing about social and political change” (Ball 79).

TO pieces address social and political problems and challenges that people face. The topics can be culled from newspapers., Prior to his arrest, Boal was using Newspaper Theatre in which a group of performers creates a theatre piece using a news article from a newspaper (or any other written materials). In one of Boal’s theatre forms, Forum Theatre, an audience member is invited by the master of ceremonies (The Joker) to participate in the performance as an actor (who becomes a spect-actor) to change the course of the narrative. For example, if the play is about a police shooting of a 12-year old African American boy who is playing with a toy gun in the park, the spect-actor might be asked to play the role of the police officer to change the course so that the result would end without violence.

TO has another form of theatre called Legislative Theatre, in which the participant examines a specific problem in society and proposes a law to solve the problem. During the process, the spect-actor stops the discussion to guide participants to see multiple aspects—both pros and cons—of the proposed solution (law) as well as other people’s points of view. At the end of Legislative Theatre, the participants have a proposal they can actually bring to the legislatures. By using “Can There Be Justice for TJ,” the TO participants may discuss a law to protect innocent citizens regardless of their race and ethnicity.

Using the theatre to bring self and community awareness and to galvanize people to social and political action is not a new idea or phenomena. La Donna Forsgren, who examined the connection between the black student union For Members Only and Black Folk’s Theatre at

Northwestern University in the early 1970s, played an important role to galvanize students to action through the staging of leading Black Arts Movement playwrights (Forsgren 303). More recent TO projects include those at the University of Missouri as well as Kansas State University's Ebony Theatre after the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson. Both theatre groups use active dialogues with "spect-actors" to discuss both short-term and long-term solutions to end racially motivated oppression and violence. These are just a few examples of the incorporation of TO in #BlackLivesMatter.

## **2. THE LANGUAGE OF OPPRESSION**

The language of oppression is often implicit – it is so deeply ingrained in the U.S. culture that its meaning and effect can go unnoticed. Semantic and linguistic methods and technologies have allowed formal study of the language of oppression. These methods and technologies allow for characterization of the use of oppressive language objectively and quantitatively. This is a significant advance over our historical subjective, qualitative and manual methods. It can now demonstrate how language conveys meaning and reinforces power relationships through its use of common myths, taboos, idioms, clichés, narratives, scenarios, euphemisms, metaphors, allusions and generalizations. It can also now be explained how linguistic patterns and grammar are used to represent the expected roles and actions of the powerful and the powerless. Descriptions of how names are used to differentiate the powerful and powerless – through the power to name, to deny or to simplify one's name are possible. Language is used to define and reinforce identity – ideal and undesirable identities, inherence, stereotypes, and group characteristics. Finally, language is used to render visible or invisible "others" and to establish distance between individuals. This concept is apparent in the application of framing theory (Entman, 2001) and mass media's influence on public opinion. Mass media provides for a constructed narrative that once in place is nearly impossible to correct.

## **3. FRAMING AND MASS MEDIA**

In 1978, the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) pledged to achieve parity in American newsrooms by better aligning reporting staff with the diverse American population by the year 2000. After that deadline passed, a new one was set for 2025 without explanation as to why twenty-two years was not enough time (Guskin).

While representation by way of ownership has had some diversity, the overall lack of diversity in U.S. newsrooms (see fig. 2) and in film and television (see fig. 3) continues to have an impact on the equity narrative

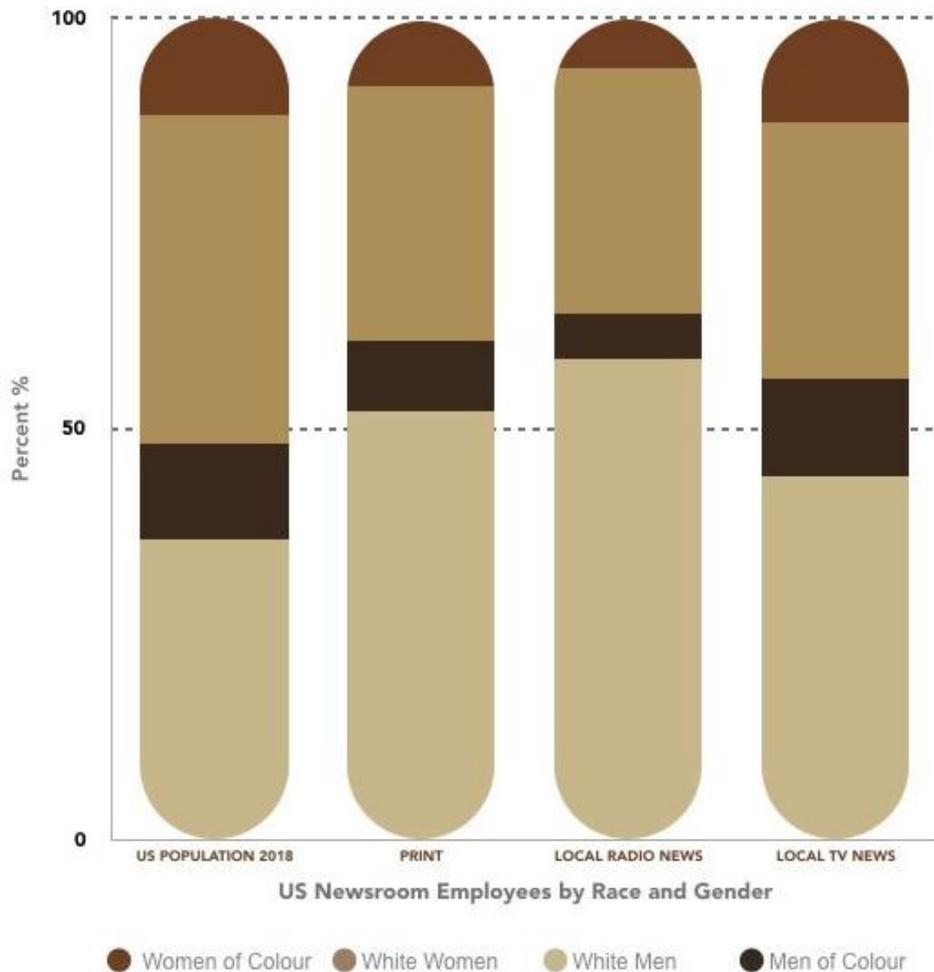


Fig. 2. Laura C. Fong. Source: Frissell, et al. "Missed Deadline: The Delayed Promise of Newsroom Diversity." *Voices*, Asian American Journalists Association, 27 Jul. 2017, [voices.aaja.org/index/2017/7/25/missed-deadlines](https://voices.aaja.org/index/2017/7/25/missed-deadlines)

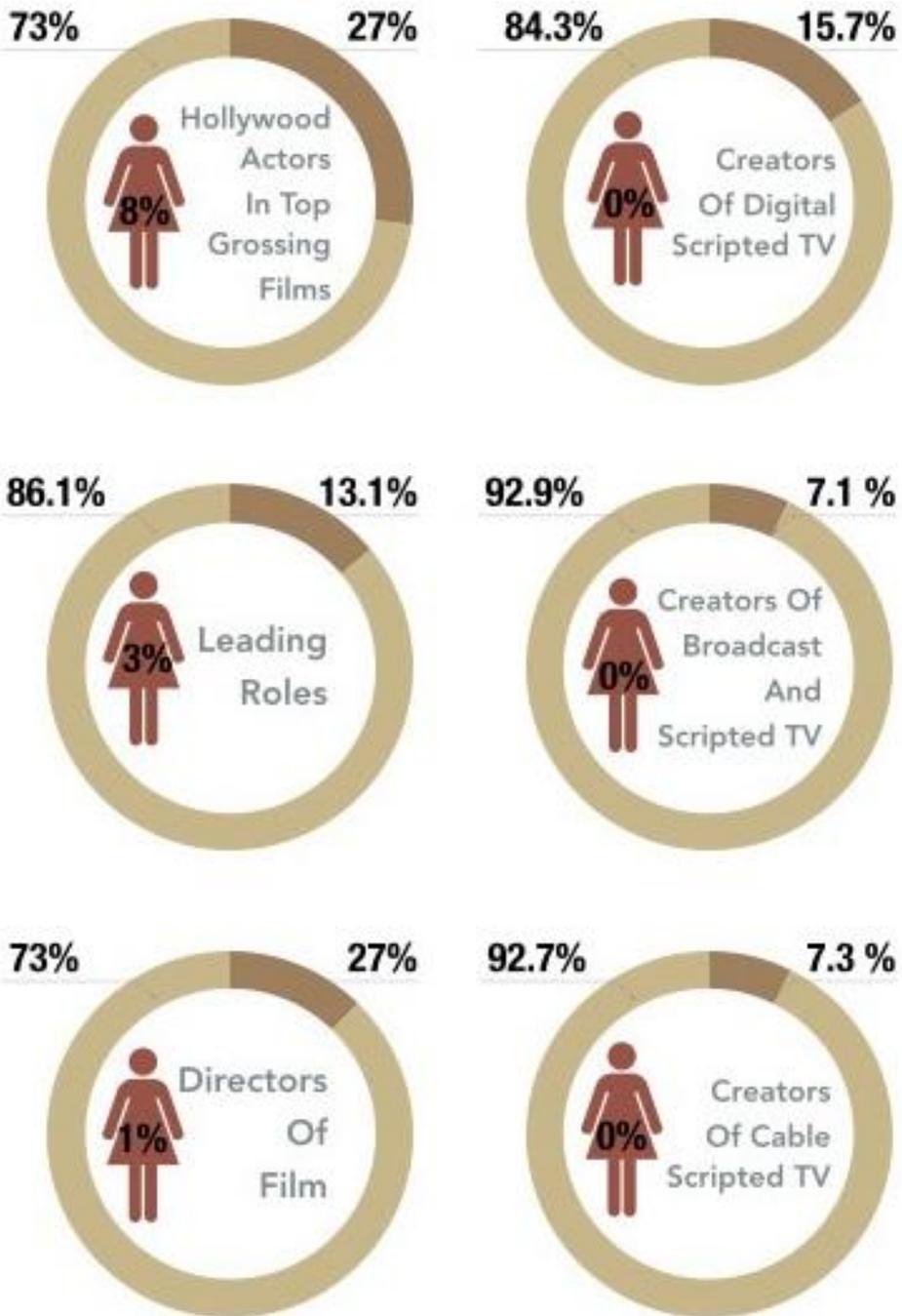


Fig. 3. Laura C. Fong. Source: “Women of Color in the United States.” *Catalyst*, 7 Nov. 2018, [www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-color-united-states-0](http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-color-united-states-0).

and on public opinion of news (Lutz). Implicit bias and lack of representation are to blame. The Creative Artists Agency's Motion Picture Diversity Index confirms that the more inclusive a film is, the more money it makes. For the most recent proof of this, one can just look at *Black Panther*, which in its first two weeks of release earned more than \$763 million worldwide. As the American movie going public becomes more diverse, it is imperative that its entertainment reflect its changing demographics. Finding diverse talent might appear to be challenging, but the real challenge lies in seeking out talent outside of traditional networks. Awards recognition will follow when such opportunities are afforded (Reign).

In 1996, the Telecom Act was the beginning of the end for black-owned and black-formatted radio stations. Backed by President Clinton, the Telecom Act lifted ownership limits and, under the guise of promoting competition in the communications market, ushered in a new era of corporate ownership and deregulation, allowing huge companies to acquire stations across the country. As a result, local programming, news, music, and voices have been systematically homogenized (see fig. 4). Six years after the Telecommunications Act went into effect, Clear Channel and Cumulus owned two-thirds of the country's radio stations. Clear Channel owned thirty times more stations than congressional regulation previously allowed (Corcoran). While consistent data has not been maintained, the *Report on Ownership of Commercial Broadcast Stations* provides a point of reference (5). In 2013, whites owned 1,070 full power commercial television stations (77.2 percent); racial minorities in total owned 41 (3%); Black or African Americans owned a mere nine stations (0.6%). The remaining 275 stations (20%), having no majority interest, are likely predominantly white-owned as well.

While lack of representation doesn't directly equal racism, it calls to light unexamined prejudice and implicit bias in the majority: those identifying as white. The challenge is that these individuals may not think they have a problem. In many cases, without these educated, well-intentioned reporters, there would be no gatekeepers willing and able to open a dialogue in newsrooms. However, when they fail to examine their own biases, all progress is stalled (Dulai). Implicit bias is unconscious and

beyond control and awareness. It informs perceptions of a social group, and it can influence decision making and behavior toward the target of the bias. Individuals can be consciously committed to equality and work deliberately to behave without prejudice, yet still possess negative prejudices or stereotypes. This is what we see reflected in the mass media, in social media news feeds, and in entertainment. Ultimately, this implicit bias is perpetuated. Most commonly found in the content analysis of mass media coverage, the implicit bias is found in word choice and language that identifies a person's race and tends to humanize whites and dehumanize persons of color.

Also, of note, is how the amount of empathy towards the subject of a news story correlates with their skin color (Johnson). For example,

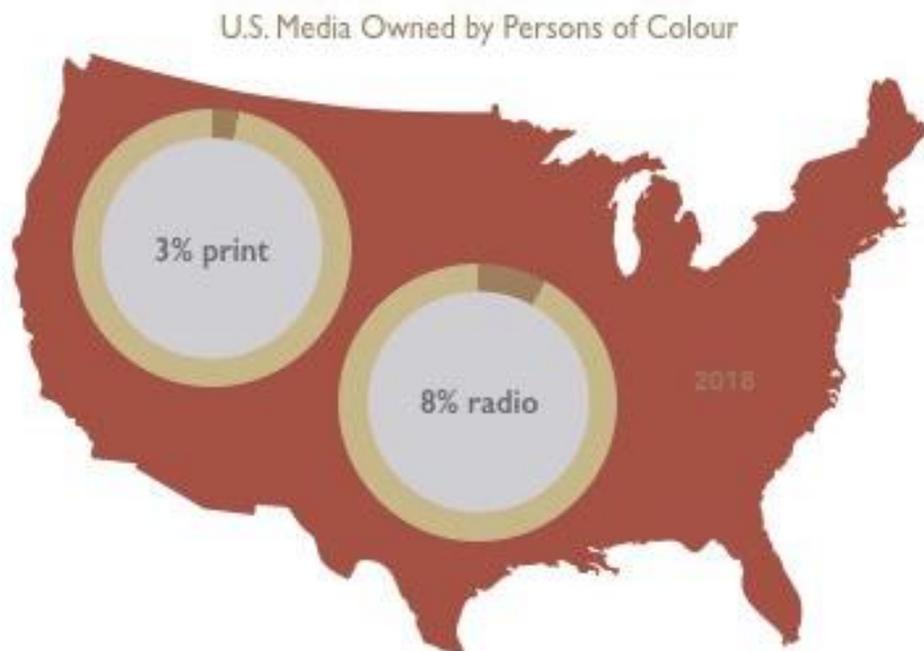


Fig. 4. Laura C. Fong. Source: Turner, Derek and Mark Cooper. "The Lack of Racial and Gender Diversity in Broadcast Ownership & the Effects of FCC Policy: An Empirical Analysis." *TPRC Conference*, 15 Aug. 2007, [papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2113819###](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2113819); Shearer, Elisa. "Hispanic and African American News Media Fact Sheet." *Journalism & Media*, 25 July 2018, Pew Research Center, [www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/hispanic-and-black-news-media/](http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/hispanic-and-black-news-media/)

photos chosen to accompany news stories are more flattering for whites, and less flattering for persons of color. When it comes to describing subjects of color, there is a lack of focus on the positive aspects of their lives, and a focus on the negative even when the subject is the victim. Racial stereotypes are disguised as humor, and more discrediting than crediting of the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Weir). The other clear bias often overlooked is the reinforcement coming from Hollywood wherein persons of color are largely underrepresented. Systemic marginalization does not just apply to persons of color; it applies also to women and transgender individuals.

#### **4. #TRANSLIFEMATTERS**

The #BlackLivesMatter movement (BLM) has been inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals since its inception, emphasizing how multiple systems of oppression intersect and reinforce one another to further marginalize vulnerable groups (Herstory). The demographic statistics are sobering for transgender individuals in particular, with one in five homeless at some time in their lives and many living in poverty due to hiring discrimination that leaves them jobless. Homeless shelters are often sex segregated, and many transgender individuals cannot stay there or are mis-gendered, which may put their health and safety at risk ("Issues: Housing & Homelessness"). Nearly "every two days a person is killed somewhere in the world for expressing gender non-conformity" ("Helen Clark"). In the U.S. there is an epidemic of violent deaths of transgender women, particularly trans women of color ("A National Epidemic").

Despite more favorable media coverage in recent years, transgender discrimination is on the rise and has been exacerbated by the Trump Administration's many attacks on the civil rights of trans people. These include attempts to roll back non-discrimination provisions in the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the Civil Rights Act, which this Administration claims do not protect from discrimination based on gender identity. President Trump has also proposed a ban on transgender individuals in the military and developed a plan to discharge current trans

troops. These attacks are well documented by the National Center for Trans Equality (“The Discrimination Administration”). The stress caused by such affronts to transgender and nonbinary individuals leads to anxiety and depression and may cost them their very lives. Toomey et al. reported that 50% of trans boys aged 11-19, 30% of trans girls, 41% of non-binary youth and 28% of questioning youth have considered or attempted suicide. More critical, homicide is prevalent among trans adults, with the vast majority among transgender people of color who account for 87 of the 102 transgender homicides in the US since 2013 (McBride). Adding insult to injury, police and the media often mis-gender trans women in incident reports and do not classify these murders as hate crimes (“A National Epidemic”). Murders of trans women are fueled by prejudice, racism, easy access to guns, and an increasingly hostile political environment that appears to have increased attacks on persons of color and gender minorities (Virupaksha et al.).

While these statistics are sobering and we are left with a feeling of helplessness, we must continue to advocate for transgender and gender non-binary individuals. We can help them to navigate an oppressive system and focus our efforts on policy change. We must educate parents of trans youth that acceptance of their trans child and calling them by their preferred name can be life changing and lead to suicide preventive. We must strengthen hate crimes legislation by including LGBTQ hate crimes as a category in every state criminal system. Systems’ change involves voting for pro-LGBTQ candidates and changing discriminatory policies. Sensible gun control would also help deter homicides and suicides among this population. We must call our representatives to advocate for LGBTQ issues, including measures to address the homicides of trans women, particularly trans women of color. #BlackLivesMatter and #TransLivesMatter!

## 5. THE POWER OF STORY THROUGH QUILTING



Image courtesy of Laura C. Fong.

In 2018, the daily assault on black people and other people of color had the artist twisting in the wind. *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matters Memoir* is a powerful narrative by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele. Khan-Cullors interrogates the ideal of democracy in the lives of black people as they live desperate lives of oppression and poverty. When the FBI named Patrice Khan-Cullors a terrorist, they indicted all black women who fight against social and racial injustice and named their activism 'Black Identity Extremist' (BIE). This designation is a cause for concern to the African

American community and some U.S. legislators as well ("US Legislators Worried") because the FBI now ranks members and supporters of #BlackLivesMatter with extremist groups such as the Klu Klux Klan and the Aryan Nation.

Trayvon Martin was a black, unarmed, teen from Florida murdered by a man claiming to be part of a neighborhood watch. The man wrestled Trayvon to the ground and shot him, claiming that his own life was in jeopardy, thus he was "standing his ground" (Fla. Stat. § [776.013\(3\)](#)). That day BLM Co-founder Opal Tometi tweeted #BlackLivesMatter, and it was retweeted by Patrisse Khan-Cullors.

Trayvon Martin was killed because he did not belong in an upper middle-class neighborhood. He was perceived as dangerous. He did not show enough difference to a non-black, wore a hoodie, and was murdered because he is a black male and black lives do not matter. Black lives have never mattered in America. Seven years after the murder of Trayvon Martin, 'living while black' can provoke any white person to call 911

because persons of color have become a threat that bears an emergency police response. Black Americans now fear a call to the police for 'living while black' (Howell et al.). For driving, shopping, eating in the school dining area, sleeping in the lounge area of their dorm hall, waiting on a friend at Starbucks, not waving goodbye to the neighbors after renting an Airbnb, barbequing, selling bottled water, or cutting the neighbor's grass while black. Their very humanity is denied by this action! A white individual's call to 911 is a true act of terrorism, because the result is law enforcement who kill black people with impunity every day in America.

Artists wanted to find a way to respond to the terror of 'living while black'. They needed to use art as a vehicle to craft a response to what they and so many of their friends, relatives, and neighbors were feeling. They needed to find a way to start a conversation about what feels like a coordinated effort to terrorize black people in the 21st century, a kind of terror that is all too familiar, like the harassment and lynching of the past.

Injustice inspires socially transformative art. A quilt like this demands a conversation about where the United States is going because it doesn't hide where it has been. Artists use quilting to promote sympathy, to take empathy and make changes in themselves and those around them. *The Flag Stories Quilt* by artist Faith Ringgold, Fanny B. Shaw's *Prosperity is Just Around the Corner*, the Gees Bend's quilters and the Names Project Quilt, have each produced quilts designed to name cultural concerns, reflect on those concerns, and begin to interrogate how these concerns impact culture.

Shaw's quilt is one of the earliest examples of quilting as a tool of anger, protest, and satire. Shaw is responding to Herbert Hoover's political slogan "Prosperity is Just around the Corner," a prosperity that was not realized by most of America's hard-working citizens. Portrait and visual artists like Amy Sherald's *Welfare Queen* and *The Fairest of the Not So Fair*, Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* and Kara Walker's *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of one Young Negress and Her Heart* have produced art, some shocking, to shake us out of our complacency. Their collective works compel reflection and response. Collective responses should lead to conversations about class, race and gender constructs in American culture.

The artist believes the first goal for the artist of color is to heal the wounded psyche of the black mind and body. The second is to expose sadness in the hope that people in the dominant culture understand the depths of the unending and continually re-lived pain of being black in America. The dominant culture must understand this pain to shift their vision of black Americans as human beings so that one day everyone can really move on. Pain is not only suffered, but chronicled and celebrated through these gifts and talents.

The quilted piece on #BlackLivesMatter (see Fig. 5) is both pain and celebration of a people coming together to resist black Americans' named and unnamed oppressors. The artist chose fabric, colors and design for a quilt that would relay these collective experiences and feelings. They chose black and yellow, the #BlackLivesMatter colors, and decided on squares that would illustrate the history of black lives that have not mattered in America. The logical place to start was with the forced migration of unpaid skilled African labor. The artist needed to choose a color and, to acknowledge the work of painter Amy Sherald, shades of grey for the quilt blocks were selected. Sherald is the American artist who painted the portrait of Mrs. Michelle Obama that hangs in the National Gallery. Sherald uses shades of grey to illustrate black skin in her paintings rather than shades of brown. When thinking about the statement this piece should make, the artist chose to invert the quilt (the art of classic quilting demands even lines stitched with  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch seams). The fabric was torn into 10  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch squares, washed to shred the edges with the conscious decision to not cut any of the threads as the seams were stitched together. This represents the fragility of black lives in America—sometimes their world is held together by threads, those threads often make unbreakable bonds, as were found with the threads hanging from the finished quilt. Then the artist quilted chalk body outlines and gun patterns into body of the quilt.

Images were collected to copy onto fabric and it is startling to see how many civil rights and social activists in the movement had been jailed. The artist then stamped the numbers in black ink on the grey fabric and found mug shots of the subjects and placed them under the numbers. It was then noted that when it came to the murders of black women



Fig. 5. Image courtesy of Laura C. Fong.

(Charleena Lyles, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Shukri Ali, Deborah Danner, Rekia Boyd, Mya Hall, Mariam Carey, Mellissa Williams and Betty Jones), often their names go unknown, save Sandra Bland whose death garnered a great deal of attention ( African American Policy Forum). Included is a block with Nelson Mandela in prison to symbolize the long road from apartheid to freedom.

After assembling 30 squares, they were bound and the quilt was backed in blood-red batik cotton. The back of the quilt looks as though it is bleeding. Protest fabric was used as a border and strands of threads are left not trimmed from the quilt. The quilt was finished by shooting it with a gun. There are bullet holes in the squares of Trayvon Martin, Tamir

Rice, and MLK. The symbol of the American Eagle is turned upside down from a flag.

This quilt tells the story of #BlackLivesMatter, including its solidarity with Indigenous, Latinx, LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters, and other people of color facing police violence and domestic persecution.

## **6. SOCIALLY TRANSFORMATIVE ART**

Socially transformative art is about hope; about solace; about rage and anger. It is about human rights. Its aim to transform society for the better comes from the fundamental belief that art can be an agent for change and for good. Milbrandt states, “In contemporary democratic societies, the arts not only function to maintain social traditions and describe the world, but also explore issues of social justice, identity, and freedom” (8). Art and social justice are indeed inextricably linked, creating a symbiotic relationship, one influencing each other, to provide a lens for deeper understanding of social injustices through visual means. What follows is a sample of black artists who create art to illuminate social injustices, reminding us that artists are indeed change agents, as well as shakers of our foundational beliefs and principles.

Known most recently because of his official portrait of President Barack Obama, Kehinde Wiley is also known for highlighting the everyday lives of black people. Power shifting results in portraits that show everyday black individuals, juxtaposed against traditionally elitist art-historical type patterned spaces of opulence. Old portraits are reimaged and our understandings of who is important in history—including in contemporary times—are reconceptualized (“Kehinde Wiley”).

Likewise, Amy Sherald—in recent headlines for painting the official portrait of First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama—shifts understandings of black lives, skin tones and hierarchies in society. Black people are given grayscale skin, juxtaposed against vibrant backgrounds, to highlight diversity and beauty within black communities. Part of Sherald’s goal is to create images that disrupt the typical whiteness associated with museums. The grayscale makes us question how black people have been represented throughout history, particularly through

photography (Sherald).

Carrie Mae Weems has long aimed to expand notions of race and gender in art. The oppression of stereotypes of black people in particular is explored in Weems' work, recovering narratives about black women for further reflection. Irony and humor displace initial reactions oftentimes to allow digging deeper and displacing the power found within stereotypes (Binlot).

Like Wiley, Kerry James Marshall addresses black bodies within an historical lens. Using African American life and history throughout his work, Marshall portrays and questions black identity historically for reconsideration. He refers to his subject in the painting as emphatically black—with no mistaking their presence as black people.

For a more ambiguous take on race relations, Laylah Ali depicts people of color through absolute graphic clarity using cartoon-like depictions. Her Greenhead series leaves the viewer making racial and social connections and questionings that are personal yet broad.

Diversity in art has always been a powerful factor. These artists force the viewer to consider the role diversity has had and continues to have in society. Black Artists do indeed matter; they did in the past, and they do now. Their voices expose and reveal, lift and transform. No understanding of both the history of art and social justice is complete without knowing the unequivocal role black artists play. Black artists do indeed matter.

Language in all of its forms of expression reflects individual cultures – basic assumptions, beliefs, and values. Culture changes slowly and only through positive reinforcement and the availability of alternatives. Teaching the language of oppression and researching the nature of oppressive language can raise awareness of basic cultures. Neither teacher, student, nor researcher is free of some powerful or powerless role in one or more of the contexts mentioned above. Teaching these concepts is revealing and disturbing because it reveals assumptions, beliefs and values – when each person ardently believes they are free of such prejudices.

The Seneca Falls Dialogues are an ideal context in which to raise awareness of these teaching and research opportunities. Changing

oppressive behavior begins with exposing oppressive thoughts in the use of language. Changing language is not a remedy, but it is a critical first step in understanding privileges and prejudices. There is considerable room for research, teaching, and further public discourse.

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