

**ASSOCIATION FOR
THE STUDY OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN
LIFE AND HISTORY**

SOCIAL JUSTICE WORKSHOP WEDNESDAYS REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The Social Justice Workshop Wednesdays were held on five consecutive Wednesdays from September 15 - October 16, 2021 in conjunction with the Association for the Study of African-American Life and History (ASALH) 106th Annual Meeting and Virtual Conference. The series was sponsored by the joint Howard University/ASALH Just Futures Grant, which was awarded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation earlier in 2021. The coordinating team was led by Michelle Pourciau, ASALH Program Coordinator for the Howard-Mellon Just Futures Grant.

Dr. Lisa Brock, was hired as a consultant, specifically to curate the Workshop Wednesdays after first communicating with Drs. VP Franklin and Evelyn Higginbotham of ASALH. Why did the leaders of ASALH reach out to Dr. Brock? She is a Chicago-based scholar-activist who has a background as an organizer in social justice movements and was the founding academic director of the highly successful Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership at Kalamazoo College. She is now working as a consultant on Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) initiatives.

Dr. Higginbotham, President of ASALH, communicated with Dr. Brock that there were two areas of focus that the Just Futures Grant principal investigators were interested in pursuing with the workshops. One was on the language and terminology of social justice activism and scholarship and the other was on the impact of and struggle against mass incarceration, especially in the Black communities. Dr. Brock mentioned that one of the goals of social justice work is to always be current with weighty issues, and so pushed for an additional workshop on the ongoing fight for voting rights, which is a crucial concern of our time. After further review and discussion, an agreement was reached on the general topics and pursuits including the added items.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

As a curator and presenter, Dr. Brock structured the workshops as building blocks. She developed the first three on language, terminology and history and the last two on current organizing. The goal was to have the first three workshops provide a baseline glossary for engaging the topics themselves, but also setting the stage for the last two workshops. Critical knowledge of systems of oppression and the ideals of liberation undergirds current activism; thus, deepening one's understanding of how and why key movements are necessary and emerge over time.

Workshops number one and two, were presented by Dr. Brock and focused on The Language of Racial Oppression and The Language of Black Liberation. The objective of these two workshops was to present the dialectic between oppression and resistance. Where there is oppression, there will always be fight back. Dr. Brock, though, presented them separately. Why? Because arguing for Prison Abolition and Reparations, for example, requires a deep understanding of the inner workings of white supremacy and racial capitalism for these two demands to make sense. Thus, it was important to study the systems of oppression before presenting resistance ideals and strategies. The current attack on Critical Race Theory and the 1619 Project, for example, are really attempts by those who support racial oppression to maintain the status quo. They too recognize as we do that knowledge is power, and with knowledge of how the levers of oppression work, most people of all backgrounds will work to upend them.

Workshop number three emerged after Dr. Higginbotham informed Dr. Brock, that the Grants team was interested in presenting a workshop on bias in policing. Dr. Brock stated that she had done work on the History of Policing in the United States and suggested she do a workshop on its foundations as it relates to Black, Brown, Indigenous and working-class people. In that workshop, Brock argued that racialized policing in the United States has its origins in the maintenance of the enslavement, Indian and Mexican removals, the safeguarding of the property of elites, and US imperialism. The ongoing use of lethal force in this country by local police officers far exceeds such statistics any other country in the world and this history helps explain why. As we are all aware, Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, per capita, are more frequently the victims of this state sanctioned violence than are white people. Dr. Brock connected the dots from the past to today.

In all three of the workshops mentioned above, Dr. Brock utilized a PowerPoint format, which in addition to text included photographs, infographics, art, and videos. For instance, in workshop one, she screened one video by the young actor Amandla Steinberg entitled 'Don't Cash Crop my Corn Rows'. This video was shown to illustrate the concept of cultural appropriation in the Hip Hop world which was one of the terms in the Language of Oppression. In workshop number two, she started with art renderings of the Black led Haitian revolution, which she called the Pan African Moment, and ended with a video of the legendary poet Amiri Baraka, reading his poem 'We Be Americans' which issues a clarion call for reparations. In Workshop number three, she showed rarely seen prints, images, political cartoons and photographs of five-point star badges of plantation slave patrols, early members of the Texas Rangers, and the 1898 US wars against Cuba, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico.

For Workshops number four and five, Dr. Brock approached frontline grassroots organizers and a storyteller to present on voting rights and mass incarceration. After numerous discussions, Dr. Serena Sebring, Executive Director of Blueprint North Carolina agreed to hold workshop number four. Dr. Sebring, who is a leader in the Movement for Black Lives, was involved in the historic get out the vote campaign in 2020 and continues to work to educate the public, especially in the South, on what is at stake at this critical moment. Her presentation, though, was broad. Entitled: "This is What Democracy Looks Like: Street Heat, Voting and Community Mapping," she deployed a Socratic method of posing a series of questions about democracy and safety, policing, and community. She encouraged the audience to think about their personal views of these issues, thereby demystifying the link between police and safety and democracy as something that happens from the top down.

Workshop number five was coordinated by Alice Kim, Director of Practice at the University of Chicago's Pozen Center for Human Rights and Emily Hooper Lansana, MA, nationally recognized Storyteller and Senior Director of Community Arts for the Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago. Interestingly, it was Dr. Brock who asked these two to work together as she knew that both had worked on the issue of mass incarceration. What Dr. Brock did not expect was that their work would not be on the prison industrial complex per se, but on the impact of that system on the incarcerated, their families and their communities.

Their workshop was entitled "Exploring the Impact of Mass Incarceration: Humans of Life Row and the work of Ethical Storytelling." Alice Kim presented her work with teaching writing at a maximum-security prison in Illinois and shared via PowerPoint, the actual handwritten writings and personal stories of inmates. This was very powerful.

Emily Hooper Lansana told of her engagement with mothers of those who are incarcerated. She was working with them to have their stories of love and tragedy become more effective in advocating for their children. She stated that after she got into this work, she was struck by how problematic it was to ask these women to share their heartfelt stories. She worried about the ethics of it; so, she developed a set of questions that might illicit hope rather than despair. One question was about the wishes each woman had and another was to tell a story of your incarcerated son or daughter that reflects who they were before they went to prison.

The presentation style of workshop number five was very innovative. After Ms. Kim and Ms. Hooper Lansana each gave their presentations, each asked the other questions. In addition, they had formerly incarcerated people on the Zoom call who spoke of their lives in prison and their humanity. One man was especially powerful. His name is Mr. Hudson and he talked about how writing, drawing, and painting while in prison saved his spirit and his life.

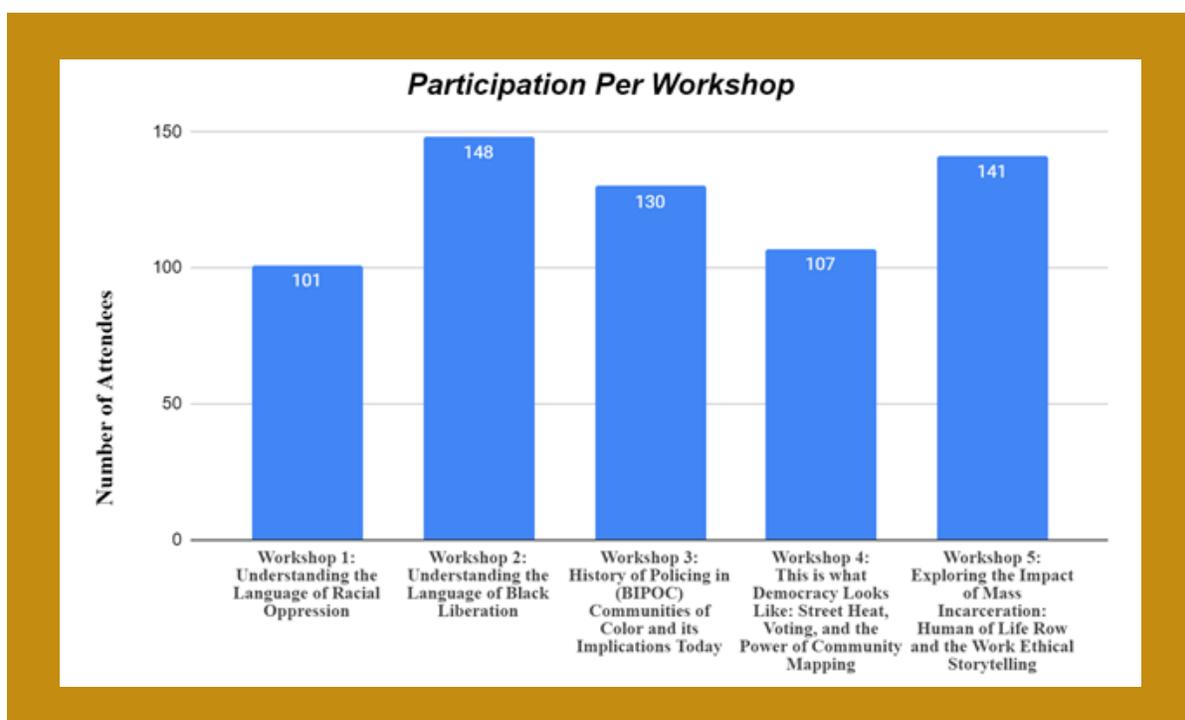
It was critical that workshops be interactive. In addition to the innovation in workshop number five, the other workshops had flourishes and special movements as well. Dr. Brock shared stories as a way to connect to the audience to tell their own stories of oppression during workshop number one and was, according to the team, a pro at answering with grace even some of the most vexing questions. Dr. Sebring wanted to poll the audience but was encouraged instead to use a method known as “waterfall” in the Chat. Christina Crawford, a member of Michelle Pourciau’s support team shared that a waterfall occurs when everyone answers a question in the chat at exactly the same time. In other words, Dr. Sebring posed a few questions and told Zoom participants to hold off pushing send. Then when time was called, all hit send at the same time, thus allowing Dr. Sebring to see and read all answers as they appeared in a column. From that she argued that it is possible to string these together in a way that speaks to the general experiences of the audience.

Ms. Pourciau and her team were extremely central to the success of the workshops. Ms. Pourciau provided supportive and decisive leadership; and her team had expertise in graphics, Zoom technology, and the webinar format. Michelle Pourciau, Terrence Friday, Nicholas Hall, Christina Crawford, and Aileen Andres were very patient, they coached all four presenters on best practices for Zoom webinars and pitched in to get conversations going when necessary. We also held two practice sessions before each workshop, which illustrated a high level of professionalism on the part of this “back of the house” support team.

PROGRAM ANALYSIS

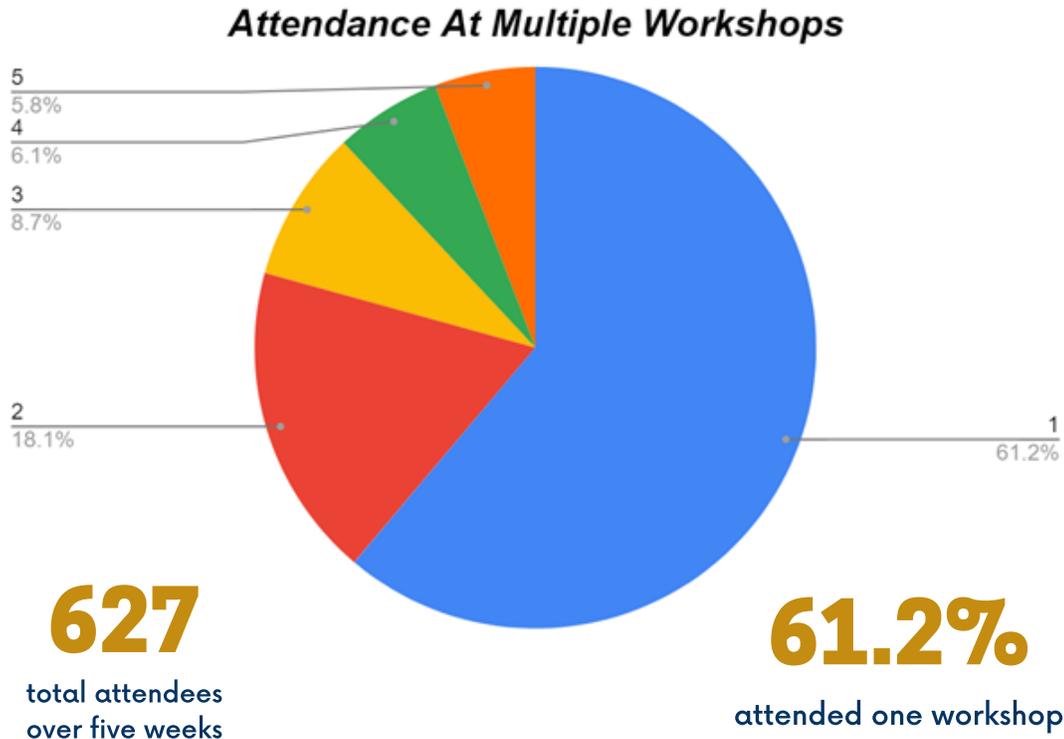
Promotion for the workshops began with creating graphics for the series and for each individual workshop. Graphics were posted on electronic and social media platforms. Registration via Eventbrite was established to track participation, gain information, and add to the ASALH database. The ASALH website was the primary platform for continuous promotion and information. Constant Contact email messages were sent to the voluminous ASALH database at strategic intervals to remind and encourage registration and participation. Flyers were produced and distributed widely at Howard University, other Washington, DC universities and local establishments. Announcements were made at all ASALH national meetings and workshops were widely promoted within the 47 ASALH chapters throughout the United States.

Given that the Just Futures Grant did not finalize its scope for Workshop Wednesdays until late Summer 2021, and that the original plan had been to hold these workshops in person, the Social Justice Workshop webinars were hugely successful. According to the data collected, there were 707 registrants over the five weeks. Over 100 people attended each workshop with a total participation equaling 627 over the five weeks.



Numerous attendees participated in multiple workshops, with 61.2% attending one workshop, 18.1% attending two workshops, 8.7% attended three workshops, 6.1% attended 4, and 5.8% attended all five workshops.

ATTENDANCE AT MULTIPLE WORKSHOPS



The data reveals two things: one is that the outreach was strong and that many people were interested in the series and took the time to register. However, like many zoom webinars, the number of registrants exceeded the number who actually attended. In addition, the ASALH virtual conference preceded the Wednesday evening workshops which may have resulted in many people being zoomed out. The second thing we learned is that a good number of attendees found the workshops so useful that they attended more than one, which was a goal of the building-block model articulated above by Dr. Brock.

Attendees noted that they were from multiple cities and towns in more than 20 states. Attendees stated that they were members of ASALH branches in various parts of the country, while other attendees noted that they were students, staff, and/or faculty from various institutions including Howard University, Texas Southern University, Shaw University, University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, Roosevelt University and Meritage College Prep. Dr. Higginbotham noted during one session that there were also high school students in attendance. Furthermore, the attendees were from diverse backgrounds vis-à-vis education, race, cultural heritage and age.

The coordinating team preserved comments from each of the five webinar chats as a way to capture what people were writing and thinking during each session. While most of the comments at the beginning of each chat were used by attendees as a check-in, stating where they were from, by the end of each session there was a plethora of statements largely of gratitude.

For instance, these are a few comments from Workshop number two "Powerful", "Was upset we had to turn it off early," "Deep," "Very, very moving," "Wasn't the usual dance, I loved it."

In Workshop number five, the final session, these were a few of the comments: "I truly appreciate the broadened awareness of the problems of prisoners--from views of othering, loss of voting rights, etc.," "Encouraged to learn of the transformative power of the writing process," "Story telling is the fundamental to counter the oppressive narratives," "Very powerful session," "Thanks for your sensitivity to this issue." "Thank you all for the work you do, for your inclusivity and the generosity you inspire."

Attendees also expressed their desire for more social justice engagement in society as a whole and for more social justice workshops. During the final chat they shared as much: "I would love to see another series of social justice workshops in the near future, the critical times in which we find ourselves call for it," "This series of workshops has been excellent," " I learned so much," It certainly added to my thinking about how I use my creative work to interact with and uplift communities and their stories..., it helps me think about ways to do more," "Free all political prisoners," "Thank you for a wonderful and informative series!"

One of the most interesting aspects of the chat comments was use of the word "powerful." This word was coined by many at each of the sessions. As an analytical frame, it means that not only did the people learn from the presentations but felt empowered by them. This is important to social justice training, having your attendees leave a learning session feeling empowered and inspired to continue to do their own work towards social justice.

The chat also illustrated that people were being challenged by what they heard. One interesting chat engagement occurred during the second workshop where Dr. Brock shared a slide on intersectionality and Black feminism. One person stated in the chat that she thought the term feminism was too weighted with whiteness to be useful to Black women. Another woman wondered that as a white person, where did she fit in to a radical vision of a transformed society, which she interpreted as all Black. This question was posed to Dr. Brock during the session and Brock responded by saying to the woman that she would be welcomed in the new society and that what Dr. Brock was arguing was a society that was not racist or sexist, one which did not exclude anyone. Dr. Brock told her that she would be more free as she would not be burdened by white supremacy.

PRESENTER & STAFF REFLECTIONS

One aspect of social justice work is that it should be as 360° as possible. What is 360°? That ideally there is a pull towards deeper social justice analysis and engagement for all those who participated in the work. This means the presenters and staff, as well as the audience, also grow and learn from the experience. This happened with Social Justice Workshop Wednesdays.



ALICE KIM

"This workshop was powerful for the survivors and all of us who participated. We typically share space where we are teaching others about the systematic injustices. Or strategizing about a campaign. This became a space where we got to share personal stories with one another. Folks appreciated being able to learn new things about each other."

Two of the formerly incarcerated persons who attended the Workshop felt that there was an artificial line between those who were perceived as intellectuals and those perceived as activists. These two also consider themselves intellectuals who have experience as well as knowledge of the carceral state. This is something to keep in mind as we continue to break down boundaries between those who work in institutions of higher learning and those who experience the deepest levels of oppression.



EMILY HOOPER LANSANA

"Too often, social justice work does not incorporate the practical experiences of artists as scholarship, which Workshop Wednesdays did. I benefitted from the intergenerational nature of the program with ASALH community members, students and academics sharing the same space. This led to a meaningful discussion and there needs to be more of that."



SERENA SEBRING

I appreciated the opportunity to talk about my personal journey and to think about democracy and safety with others. I specifically appreciated talking about domestic violence within the context of community safety and democracy, which is rarely done. In addition, learning how to do the waterfall webinar as a poll was very useful. I can now use this in other workshops and presentations.

CONCLUSION

When reflections were solicited among the staff/coordinating team, their responses showed a similar growth experience. Significantly, Nicholas Hall wrote the following:

“First and foremost, let me acknowledge how wonderful & rewarding of an experience it has been to have the opportunity to work with [Dr. Brock] and [her] colleagues. While I pride myself on trying to maintain awareness when it comes to social justice issues, it was the historical context connecting the topics that really stood out to me. I greatly appreciated the framing of previous events in Black history, whether related to oppression or liberation, as compared to the movements of today. The similarities were eye-opening, yet made me more appreciative of the grassroots efforts of today. I was also struck by the common pursuit of knowledge shared by the older ASALH audience, as well as the younger students. It provided a hopeful example, as opposed to the tension that is often portrayed between generations. Overall, it was a very balanced series, and left me wanting to learn more & be more involved. Thanks!”

Whether evident from presenter, staff or audience reflections; or even input from those directly affected by oppression, policing, mass incarceration and the many movements of resistance, who were bold enough to share their stories, a common transformative experience seems to have been shared by all who participated in Workshop Wednesdays. Participants were moved by the opportunity to learn, express, and cultivate ideas across social, demographic, and generational lines, building a bridge for a common purpose. This bodes well for the future partnerships of ASALH, Howard University, and similar institutions as we enhance our commitment to social justice studies and programming.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to conclude this report with an acknowledgment of thanks to our grant sponsor, partners, and scholar-activists who contributed to the successful execution of this series. This includes, among others:



DR. LISA BROCK

CURATOR



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