

Notes on a Cultural Strategy for Belonging

Evan Bissell

Cultural Strategy

Attributes

Workshop Tool

Insisting on humanness

1

James Baldwin wrote, “The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.”¹ When the forms and functions of this world are defined by profit, violence, consolidation of power and othering, we are left with a dwelling place at the edge of collapse, one where humanness is narrowly defined and widely delegitimated.

The vulnerability, subjectivity, fragility, and sacredness of an insistence on the dignity and humanity of all people undergirds an authentic belonging. Politics, research, and law can lack the agility to convey or acknowledge the complexity of this humanness. Humanness makes things complicated, imperfect, and slower. Without attention to all of these parts, we stand the risk of creating limited solutions that force us to exclude parts of our selves or our communities in pursuing statistics that reflect progress. For example, the push for prison reform for “good” criminals is predicated on a solidifying of the image of “bad” criminals, flattening their humanity and the history that has produced the prison system. People don’t identify or see themselves in statistical terms or a politically convenient dataset—art and cultural strategy can keep our work *insistently human*, which means we are strengthening belonging through process and outcome over the long-term. People see themselves in the work and so they return—again and again. This focus on our shared humanity adds urgency and relevance to campaigns and narrative change efforts.

1. Baldwin, James. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 315.

Walking Testimonies

Ciera-Jevae Gordon

In a 2015 Richmond, California city council meeting, a council member who opposed rent control implored the audience gathered not to listen to the few dozen testimonies that night, but rather to pay attention to the facts that he presented as the only valid form of expertise. In response to this, as well as the dismissal of resident stories of housing challenges more broadly, the Staying Power Fellowship (which was focused on housing and belonging in Richmond) developed a series of poems based on interviews with residents who had been impacted by the housing crisis. These poems were read at city council meetings and housing workshops around the city. As Staying Power fellow DeAndre Evans asked about the data on housing displacement in Richmond, “How many of us aren’t statistics?” One set of the poems was compiled alongside visuals and facts about the history of housing injustice. The work serves as an urgent reminder that the question of housing can’t be encapsulated in statistics and surveys—it includes smells, sounds, temperature, and histories of place. The book of poems is distributed alongside an accompanying policy report. By giving equal footing to resident stories and experiences, the project insists on a human frame, which gives more complexity, nuance, and power to a vision of belonging, particularly when one’s ability to be human is systematically denied.

Prologue

Based on the Gary family story, 1952

Dear Ciera,
We write this with a longing heart
the journey you are embarking on
is one of horrific tradition
and our life is your testimony
is your roadmap to justice
is your proof of the matter.
We write because we admire the stories
unfolding amongst these pages,
you might call us blown away
by their honesty and the fact
that the fight has yet to cease
in this beloved City.
Listen, Richmond was the home
we fought the hardest for.
We made a home in between Kaiser shipyards and a war zone,
one Black house on an all white block.

Against ghostly men,
out for Black blood, we,
a mass of races gathered
weaving together our place of refuge
and now we pass the torch
through this letter.
If you stand your ground long enough,
you might see the shadow of the cross burning
on our lawn, as it fades away.
Don't grow weary.
This story is merely a symbol, a note,
perhaps a scriptures all the more,
saying that this too
shall pass.

8 Walking Testimonies



1935 Federal Housing Authority Loan Underwriting Manual: "If a neighborhood is to retain stability it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes."⁹

Photo: Richmond Independent, March 5, 1952

Reclaiming Cultural Memory

2

At a conference on housing justice in 2019, scholar Laura Pulido articulated the importance of a “cultural memory of erasure” as an important element of organizing history.² Reclaiming cultural memory of attempted erasure provides strength, sustenance, and vision. It also produces an archive of injustice that can help orient and ground requirements that would make structural belonging real. In the Bay Area, Sogorea Te’ Land Trust is an organization led by urban Indigenous women. While reclaiming and returning Chochenyo and Karkin Ohlone land to Indigenous stewardship, it also acts to powerfully underscore the reality of contemporary Ohlone presence and combats the erasure of Ohlone history as the first inhabitants of that land. Artists frequently act as alternative historians in compelling and transformative ways that create spaces for learning about these histories, such as Equal Justice Initiative’s Legacy Museum: From Slavery to Mass Incarceration and National Memorial for Peace and Justice (focused on racial terror lynchings) or Dread Scott’s 2019 reenactment of the largest slave revolt in US history through a multi-year community-based process.

2. Notes from Laura Pulido’s presentation at the Housing Justice in Unequal Cities Conference, hosted by the Institute on Inequality and Democracy, UCLA Luskin Center, February 1, 2019.



Malcolm X Jazz Festival

EastSide Arts Alliance

EastSide Arts Alliance is a cultural center rooted in the San Antonio neighborhood of Oakland that hosts hundreds of events each year, classes, as well as other cultural, political and arts programming. For the past 20 years, the center has hosted the Malcolm X Jazz Festival in nearby San Antonio park. The festival celebrates diverse elements of Black cultural production and their relationship to liberation struggles over time. The work expands popular understanding of the contributions and legacy of Malcolm X as well, who saw culture as, “an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle,” and that “we must recapture our heritage and identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves and break the bonds of White supremacy.” The festival reframes and grounds the cultural heritage, identity and legacy of jazz, blues, and hip-hop and cultural production more broadly as an essential element of Black liberation, while creating a yearly, positive gathering space for the San Antonio Neighborhood and Oakland more broadly.

3

Articulating and validating alternative and marginalized value systems and ways of knowing

Against the onslaught of Euro-American attempts of Native genocide and slavery and the plantation system, Native people and enslaved Africans used ritual, culture, and art to reaffirm systems of value that articulated their belonging—to the earth, to their history, to each other, and to their collective future. Cultural theorist and writer Sylvia Wynter frames how rituals and dance served as ways to reestablish human connection to earth against the extractive plantation system. Across numerous colonial contexts—Maori healing practices in New Zealand, Candomblé in Brazil, and the Sun Dance across North America—ritual practices were banned, reflecting the power that they had to disrupt and reject colonial narratives and practices aimed at their dehumanization. Practices like these continue to emerge and produce radically different visions of value and belonging despite the presence of violent, dominant value systems.

3. Carole Boyce Davies, "From Masquerade to Maskerade: Caribbean Cultural Resistance and the Rehumanizing Project," in Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 213.



Gathering, Mount Mackay, Fort William First Nations, Thunder Bay, Ontario, 1992. Photo by Michael Beynon. Image Courtesy of the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity

Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan/Speaking to the Their Mother

Rebecca Belmore

Anishnibekwe artist Rebecca Belmore's sculptural work—a larger-than-life megaphone—creates the opportunity for witnessing and participating in alternative forms of communication and knowledge through inviting First Nations people to speak with the earth. Installed at different locations, the megaphone reorients forms of communication and the framing on who/what is able to communicate. Represented in this work, the curator and writer Jen Budney pinpoints the importance of speaking and listening to country/land/earth in indigenous communities and how this is reflected in ritual and artistic practice.⁴ The work shifts human relationship to the land as one of dialogue rather than ownership through use of ritual and symbol.

4. Jen Budney, "Other Ways of Knowing," in Franklin Sirmans, ed., *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 38.

Shifting and democratizing concepts of expertise

4

In 1982, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released *The Message*, one of the first rap hits. Though not with this specific language, in the song Flash speaks about the relationship of toxic stress to the social determinants of health. He raps, “The bill collectors, they ring my phone / And scare my wife when I’m not home / Got a bum education, double-digit inflation / Can’t take the train to the job, there’s a strike at the station / Neon King Kong standin’ on my back / Can’t stop to turn around, broke my sacroiliac / A mid-range migraine, cancered membrane...” It would take at least two decades for public health to begin seriously discussing these same ideas. While Flash may not have been invited to perform for the World Health Organization or publish his work in journals, his analysis and expertise was made public through music.

Building on the radical pedagogy of educator Paolo Freire, theater artist Augusto Boal developed theater exercises and forms that sought a dialogic relationship between performers and audience, and used theater as a way to develop understanding of and action upon the world.⁵ Cultural strategy frequently subverts the traditional pathways to expertise, too often held through infrastructures and institutions built on systems of oppression. Art provides forums and mediums that can circumvent traditional rubrics of expertise, and entry points for more people to express their truths as valid contributions to our understanding of the world.



Climate Curious

Ghana Think Tank

The premise of Ghana Think Tank is simple: ask experts in the third world to solve problems in the first world. The infrastructure of the project flips historical and paternalistic development models on their head, reframing concepts of expertise and the need to take leadership from the global margins. In the project pictured above, GTT surveyed residents of Williamstown, Massachusetts about their concerns with global warming, and then shared those concerns with think tanks that GTT convened in countries already deeply impacted with the effects of global warming. These experts conducted a series of discussions and planning sessions to devise responses and recommendations. Many of the answers reflected the need for people in Massachusetts to lessen their global footprint as a way to create a sustainable planet. The photo here is based on advice from Moroccan experts who advised Williamstown residents to begin to search out new, sustainable food sources as cultivation of protein sources like beef get harder. In developing this practice, crickets were served at the gallery opening (pictured here).

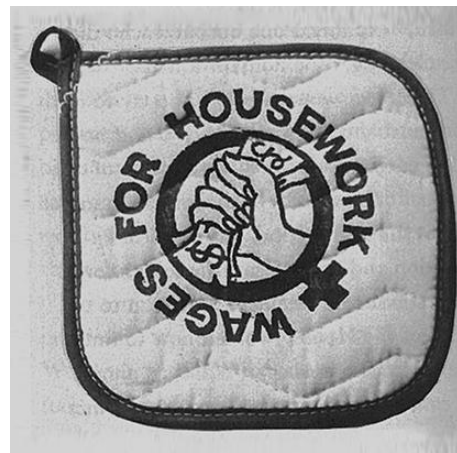
Courtesy of Ghana Think Tank, 2017

5. Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

Trespassing across sectors and silos

5

Building on reflections made by the artist Rick Lowe about the potential for artists to be trespassers across many domains, scholar Shannon Jackson reminds that, “It is of course in that trespassing that art makes different zones of the social available for critical reflection.”⁶ Sectors, disciplines, issues, and other silos prevent us from accessing the holistic imperative that is central to belonging. Structures that reward a narrow version of success in academia, the nonprofit world, and much professional practice reinforce these silos. For artists and cultural workers, who have less entrenched structures of success (and rubrics of measurement), they have a unique ability to move between and across these divides. In their movement, artists and culturemakers create profound connections and potentialities. This trespassing requires attention to symbolic overlaps and a willingness to challenge normative approaches.



Potholder
Wages for Housework, NY
Committee

Though not an art project, the organizers of Wages for Housework (particularly the NY Committee) employed cultural strategies to advance their critique of the devaluation of women’s labor and the intersection of patriarchy and white supremacy. Many of these techniques could be framed as “social practice art” today and through their process and outcome sought to revalue housework by bringing it into different frames of analysis. These techniques included the widely distributed zine *Tap Dance*, renting a Brooklyn storefront for public conversations and women drop-ins, selling Wages for Housework-themed potholders (pictured), and frequenting supermarkets and laundromats as the “shop floors” for home workers.

5. Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

Bridging across divides and differences

6

In her paper for the Haas Institute's Blueprint for Belonging project, Rachel Godsil, Cofounder of the Perception Institute notes that, "Our brain serves a social purpose, connecting us as creatures in a larger community through interwoven stories...Stories form the basis for empathy and for figuring out acceptable or unacceptable social behavior."⁷ When art tells stories, it can bridge these otherwise insurmountable interpersonal divides. These stories can also transcend physical and material boundaries, including national borders, the walls of prisons or neighborhood dividing lines. Oftentimes, art can create an infrastructure for the exchange of stories and experiences that would otherwise be impossible. For example, in *La Piel de la Memoria*, artists Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá created a mobile museum on a bus that consisted of objects loaded with personal memories. The objects were collected from individuals living in different areas of a neighborhood that had experienced ongoing violence between them. The bus then traveled between the areas as a way to reflect the shared impact and stories of these communities. Stories like these strengthen connections within and across communities that are essential for building power and for healing by insisting on the inclusion of erased stories and lives.

7. Rachel Godsil. "Mind Sciences and Creating New Narratives: The Fight to Define Who We Are," (Berkeley: Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, 2016)
<https://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/mind-sciences-and-creating-new-narratives>

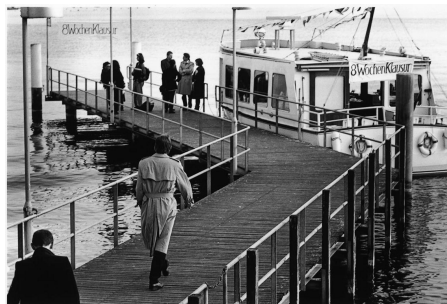


Image source:
<http://www.wochenklausur.at/projekt.php?lang=en&id=4>

Shelter for Drug Addicted Women Wochenklausur

In the mid-90s during an election season in Zurich, rightwing parties were attacking organizations and politicians that provided relief for drug-addicted people as a wedge issue around increasing law enforcement. The artist group Wochenklausur was commissioned to address the issue and set out to challenge the divisive framing by creating a new shelter for drug-addicted women. Wochenklausur began inviting experts and decision-makers into conversation through a unique strategy of hosting small conversations free from public exposure on a boat in Lake Zurich. Over two weeks, 60 experts came into dialogue with each other, including the Mayor, attorneys, oppositional political parties, and more. In addition to broader discussions on the issue, the plan for the shelter was discussed with each of the participants before and after the boat rides. The trips raised awareness of the issue and shifted the support of city officials, who soon allocated public funding for a shelter that Wochenklausur had simultaneously set up as a demonstration project. The city continued to be the primary funder of the shelter for six more years. The project used the boat-conversations as a symbol of neutral ground, untethered from the politically reactive climate to initiate fresh dialogue around the needs of an excluded demographic that resulted in material inclusion.

Convening and connecting coalitions, movements, communities

7

Culture can provide wide and inclusive entry points. It can also provide an opportunity for gathering and can retain people in a process or project when other means might not. Even when people may not agree politically or ideologically, art can provide opportunities to work towards shared goals and understanding. For example, the People's Kitchen Collective uses food as a medium to literally set tables for dialogue, convening, celebration, and organizing. For 20 years, the Allied Media Conference has used an expansive definition of media, and not a focus on issues, as the central organizing medium of the conference. This entry point has led to the launching of numerous national networks of ongoing political influence. In an interview, Civil Rights activist Dorothy Cotton described the movement as a, "singing movement" and shared a story about a young man dropping his work and jumping a fence to join a march (and the movement for the rest of his life) because he was so drawn by the music.⁸ Artistic and cultural projects can also be explicitly political, serving to provide unifying symbols and language, as with the visual work of Emory Douglas for the Black Panthers. Across many more contexts, art can function as connective tissue and a welcoming entry point.



Christсна Sot
"Footprints"

Make It Fresh Movement Generation

As a component of their Culture Shift work the ecological justice group Movement Generation has produced a number of events, videos and web series' through the program Arts and Activism for Climate Justice, led by Josh Healey. One of these projects, Make It Fresh, centered around a series of writing workshops for cohorts of staff of different social justice groups in Oakland and Richmond. The cohorts met weekly over a period of months building relationships and supporting each other's writing process. The prompts touched on broad narratives attached to the ecological justice movement and also involved workshops on ecological justice through a racial equity lens. Each cohort presented final pieces publicly at the end of the workshop series. The workshops built connections between the participating individuals and organizations and created opportunities for cross-issue collaborations.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=Kdzu5ac4lFI

8. Dorothy Cotton. "Ain't Scared of Your Jails." Video interview from Freedoms-ring.org <https://freedomring.stanford.edu/?view=Thread&id=aint-scared-of-your-jails>

Activating and provoking emotion

8

Perhaps the most commonly-held understanding of art's impact and power is that it can spark emotions that range from joy to fear, sadness to rage, reverence to sustenance. This might be experienced intimately when reading a wrenching poem alone or, as was the practice of Martin Luther King, Jr. to call Mahalia Jackson on the phone to listen to her sing in times of his own despair. It might occur in public forms such as the 2014 People's Climate March which included massive artistic production and coordination or in the joyful and inspired response to Ryan Coogler's film *Black Panther*. The emotive and affective power of art is one of its most tenacious and compelling attributes, if not also one that is most subjectively experienced. For many, it's not hard to imagine a poem, song, movie, painting, poster, or performance that has transformed how we see the world and turn to for energy, inspiration, a good cry or laugh.

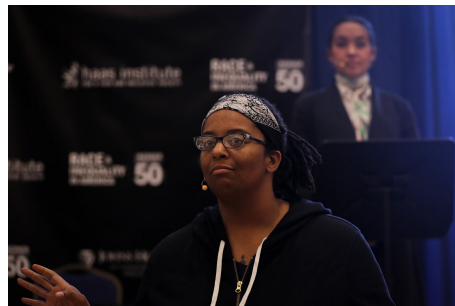


Photo by Marc Abezeid, Kerner@50 Conference, organized by the Haas Institute, 2018

Text organized by Evan Bissell and Sean San José (Campo Santo).

Performed by Campo Santo members Delina Patrice Brooks, Britney (Brit) Frazier, Ashley Smiley, Dezi Solèy

“Get on board little children, there's room for many a more”

Campo Santo

A twenty minute performance by Campo Santo of the text of the Kerner Commission and two other documents; W.E.B Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* and the policy platform from the Movement for Black Lives. The power and skill of the performers created a strong emotional connection to the three documents and provoked a standing ovation. The performance of the texts, the layering of the language and addition of elements of song and repetition revealed the ways that the artistic tools transported the written pieces that are primarily viewed through analytic lenses into an emotional, heart-space.

Disrupting the dominant worldview through interventions of worldviews from the margins

9

Disruptions of a dominant white supremacist worldview are an everyday occurrence. The impossibility of existing as an “Other” under a worldview that seeks to erase the “Other” makes these disruptions unavoidable and inevitable. In the context of poverty, anti-Black racism, and transphobia, these disruptions are met with especially dangerous and violent responses on the part of, or protected by, the state—responses that have catalyzed the Movement for Black Lives.

Recognizing the power of the margin for its radically different viewpoint and insisting on the value of oneself and worldview, artists and cultural producers have long held a role as critical interventionists. These critiques can be subversive, such as Goya revealing the degeneracy of the aristocracy in his royal portraits or Basquiat’s crowns on energetic and deconstructed figures. These interruptions can also be implicit in form, like Zora Neale Hurston rebuffing attempts to “clean up” her dialect-based writing or Gloria Anzaldúa’s bilingual, genre bending text *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Disruptions of worldview can also be direct, as with Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds’ public remembrance of Native murder in Minneapolis or Code Pink’s citizen arrest of Henry Kissinger for war crimes. And they may also take the form of radical presence; as with Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s mytho-hybrid identity constructions or Greta Thunberg’s daily Climate Strike protest outside the Swedish Parliament building. Importantly, these interventions simultaneously express and demonstrate radically different worldviews than dominant ones.



The Museum: Mixed Metaphors

Fred Wilson

Building on the institutional critiques of the Guerrilla Girls and others, which took major arts museums to task through biting posters that highlighted the deeply sexist practices of museums and galleries, Fred Wilson completed a series of works in the 1990s that challenged racism in the presentation and organization of museum collections. In the installation *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors* (pictured here), Wilson analyzed the different ways that museums commonly design exhibits for non-Euro-American and European art or cultural artifacts. To highlight the bias in curatorial design, he applied the design decisions frequently visible in exhibition designs for the arts of Oceania or Africa or MesoAmerica, for example, to modern European works. Prior to Wilson’s intervention, the works pictured here were displayed with white walls, bright lighting and ample space between each object. The reconfiguration of space and design reveals the bias built into the design of museum displays and how they reinforce the perceived importance and value of cultural artifacts.

Photo by Susan Dirk. Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum, 1993.

Building the space to imagine, play and envision

10

Equal to the ability of art to offer critical insight into dominant narratives and systems, is its ability to envision alternatives. Rachel Godsil writes that, “He who defines reality holds power.”⁹ For people excluded from social power, art and culture are forms of power that allows one to redefine the radical possibilities of reality. Activists and designers Kenneth Bailey and Lori Lobenstine frame culture as a “policy of the irrational” that allows us to move beyond the rational and agreed upon to create deep and transformational change.¹⁰ Building on this, the writer adrienne maree brown reminds that, “all organizing is science fiction,” because organizers are engaged in the effort to create a world we haven’t yet experienced.¹¹ A key radical potential of art lies in its capacity to untie itself from the pragmatic confines of political debate and act outside traditional forms of social power. Not only about re-envisioning, art can also reinforce and reflect worldviews. Parables, folk-tales, and other stories have long been principal means for expressing worldviews and meta-narratives.

9. Godsil, Mind Sciences.

10. Kenneth Bailey and Lori Lobenstine, “Cultural Tactics,” Design Studio for Social Innovation, 2016 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53c7166ee4b0e7db2be69480/t/5786671abebaf1f79b0e8b2/1468426015449/ds4sl_CulturalTactics.pdf

11. adrienne maree-brown, “All Organizing Is Science Fiction,” Arts in a Changing America (blog), March 1, 2016 <https://artsinachangingamerica.org/nyc-launch-highlight-the-response/>.

Traffic Mimes

City of Bogota

In Bogota in the 1990s, traffic was an intractable and overwhelming problem that led to numerous fatalities. When a philosopher and former professor Antanas Mockus was elected mayor, he began to use humor (particularly playful shaming) and surprise as a way to shift norms and behaviors. One of his most playful and famous initiatives was to hire mimes to replace traffic cops. The mimes began to work at busy intersections, dramatizing traffic violations, elaborately helping people cross the street, giving red cards to bad drivers and more. As a result, Bogota saw a 50 percent drop in traffic related fatalities.

Making complex concepts more accessible

11

In many ways this is the most immediate potential of the arts, summed up in the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. While art can effectively illustrate existing ideas (not only through visuals), it can also support a process of inquiry that makes complex systems and concepts more accessible and takes the work of research, policy development, organizing and academia beyond an insular audience or conception of expertise. Communications teams often take up the bulk of this task in organizations, supporting research, theory, and academic writing through design, editing, branding, and organization. Through collaboration with artists, culturemakers and storytellers, this process can be especially critical to creating deep, authentic ways of communicating that avoids and resists branding and communications techniques that are central to the corporate world.



Who is dependent on welfare?

Ananya Roy and Abby VanMuijen

In a video viewed nearly 1 million times, Professor Ananya Roy narrates an illustrated video that challenges assumptions about welfare, while illuminating the ways that government systems support wealth accumulation and wealth protection for the rich. The video uses playful illustrations to make otherwise abstract concepts concrete and meaningful. The novel form also pushed Roy to think of her writing and communication in a new way, as the backbone script for a visual story. By using an accessible infrastructure (YouTube) and an accessible form (an illustrated video) the video has greatly broadened the reach of her work on this issue, as much of academic research requires university affiliation or paid membership to access.

Illustrated by: Abby VanMuijen (www.roguemarkstudios.com). Text written and narrated by Ananya Roy, 2013.

Expanding and Broadening the Reach

12

Art and cultural strategy allows our work to be in cultural spaces that people trust, refer to, and draw inspiration from. Art can happen in popular culture, it can be public, it can exist in and speak to different cultures, and it can appeal to different literacies, languages and learning modalities. At the Haas Institute, our work targets a variety of decision-makers as well as movements and impacted communities. Arts and culture can strengthen efforts to connect with under-reached people, hard-to-reach people, and those not politically or socially engaged. We've built on the work of those in popular culture to explore intersections and overlaps with themes and topics of the Institute. This includes leveraging the power of popular media narratives by hosting Tarrell Alvin McCraney (writer of *Moonlight*) as a keynote speaker at the Othering & Belonging Conference for example, and hosting free screenings and dialogues around *Black Panther* and *Gattaca* (20th anniversary). These efforts expand reach and create opportunities for narrative shift. This broadening of audience should be viewed through a targeted universalism approach—reaching which audience will bring benefit to everyone or be most widely accessible?

Reaching targeted populations requires new ways of communicating as well as the infrastructure for promoting the work. Rashad Robinson of Color of Change describes the need for an expanded infrastructure to advance progressive change efforts, “through social and personal spaces that aren’t explicitly political or focused on issues, but are nonetheless the experiences and venues through which people shape their most heart-held values.”¹²

12. Rashad Robinson. *Changing our Narrative about Narrative: The Infrastructure Required for Building Narrative Power*, (Berkeley: Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, 2016), <https://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/changing-our-narrative-about-narrative>



Photo by Emmanuel Mbala, (insertmemories.com, @insertmemories)

The crowd at a Melbourne Black Panther screening doing the Wakanda greeting. 2018

Influencing/using/shaping Popular Culture

The most obvious form of expanding reach is through popular culture—TV, movies, music, sports, gaming and more. In recent years, popular culture has engaged and represented a wide range of issues that expands and complicates the cultural mainstream. Oscar winners *Moonlight* and *Coco*, and unconventional chart-toppers Lizzo (and her body positive lyrics) and Lil Nas X (both his country hit and coming out as gay) are only a sampling of new producers, themes, and cultural representations that are taking mainstage. These works, among others, tell stories that disrupt a single dominant narrative and cement a plurality of narratives in the mainstream. These representations and works also offer opportunities for new discussions and with new audiences, as evidenced by the number of discussion groups and articles that have engaged the contradictions and possibilities of *Black Panther* or *Lemonade*. Ongoing engagement around this work, and stronger relationships with cultural producers and cultural workers, such as the work of Harness an organization that supports action and engagement by celebrities with organizers, is essential for narrative saturation and the shape of those narratives and cultural forms in popular culture.