

# Inequality in the Arts: How Race, Gender, and Location Shape Representation

Anna Feng

St. Margaret's Episcopal High School

## Abstract

Occupational discrimination and inequality have shaped the arts industry and its workers, disproportionately affecting certain minority groups. An analysis of the art industry's workforce—categorized by race, gender, and county location across each decade from 1980 and 2000—shows that overrepresentation of white Americans has declined, while Black Americans and Hispanics remain underrepresented. The data also reveals that there is a stronger incentive to work in the arts in counties with higher concentrations of Black American or Hispanic populations. Occupational disparities in the arts reinforce the predominance of white representation and restrict the economic mobility of minority groups in the industry.

*Keywords:* Arts, Occupation, Inequality, Gender, Race

## **Introduction**

Even before the late 1900s, art has served as a tool in helping students and the working population form long-lasting relationships (Cochran, 1996). As both a mirror of culture and a medium of personal expression, art has the ability to reflect society's values and desires (Zander, 2007). Given its presence in both educational and professional spheres, it is important to confront the discrimination within the arts workforce.

In 1985, in the heart of New York City, African American artist Beverly Buchanan recalls an encounter with an art gallery. Buchanan asked whether the art gallery was accepting art submissions, only to be turned away because the gallery did not accept "black art" (Failing, 2021).

This paper explores the patterns of systematic social exclusion within the U.S. arts industry across the years 1980, 1990, and 2000. To analyze how discrimination affects minority groups differently, the number of art workers for each year is disaggregated by race and gender. Additionally, to determine the impact location has on the arts workforce participation, the geographic distribution of art workers is compared to the general residential patterns of their respective racial groups.

Overall, there is a significant reduction in the overrepresentation of white Americans in the arts between 1980 and 2000. However, Hispanics and African Americans continue to be marginalized in the industry, with women in both groups experiencing greater exclusion

compared to their male counterparts. The data also shows a growing correlation between the locations of Hispanic and African American art workers and their respective general populations, indicating the larger workforce for the two communities are driven by a stronger interest than by population growth.

<sup>1</sup>Section 2 reviews the current academic discussion on labor discrimination, focusing on how race, gender, and location influence wages and job accessibility. Section 3 presents the data sources and how it is utilized to show results. Section 4 details the results that discuss the exclusion of certain races, genders, and locations in the industry. Lastly, Sections 5 and 6 connect the results to existing literature on labor discrimination and the new directions it opens for future research.

### **Literature Review**

Marginalization within the workforce is neither uncommon nor unprecedented, and when reported, it often results in individuals seeking employment elsewhere (McLennan and Neumark 1995). Additionally, working as an artist has long proven to be a precarious economic career, characterized by low wages and instability (Abbing 2002). This paper contributes to the literature that investigates structural inequality in occupations by race. Though occupational sectionalism has fallen the past two decades, allowing Black American workers to enter formerly white-dominated industries (King, 1992), Black Americans' wages consistently fall short of

---

<sup>1</sup> Section 1: Introduction • Section 2: Literature Review • Section 3: Data • Section 4: Results • Section 5: Discussion • Section 6: Conclusion

those earned by their white counterparts (Harrison and Bennett, 1995). The paper confirms that even in the context of art-related jobs, Black Americans are overlooked for positions of power and discouraged from entering the arts workforce in the first place.

The results of this paper also speak to the literature on gender inequality in occupations. Since the passage of the Married Women's Property Act in the 19th century, women—who had been denied access to education and employment—began to experience new freedoms; but the period preceding the act had already entrenched systemic discrimination against women in the workforce (Oswald 2023). Additionally, women are often compensated less than men across various occupation fields (England 1992) and overlooked for job titles of higher power (Baron and Newman 1989). Sociologists attribute this disparity to cultural devaluation of the work done by women (England 1992). In this paper, the data shows that similar patterns are observed in art-related occupations.

Lastly, because of the paper's emphasis on the effect of geography on arts employment, it also contributes to studies interested in variation of employment across localities. From 1980 to 2000, changes in workers' wages and employment rate often varied depending on their location (Diamond, 2018). Additionally, Hispanic immigrants are more likely to experience a change of occupations due to their higher mobility (Weiss 1971), as job transitions are often related to geographic mobility (Jovanovic, 1979). This paper provides results that show employment in the arts can vary due to county location for specific racial groups.

## **Data**

This study investigates the evolution of occupational discrimination in the United States, focusing on disparities by race, gender, and location. Data is compiled from multiple sources to address this question.

For the year 1980, the demographics of populations working in the arts comes from the 1980 Census: Equal Employment Opportunity Special File. This source provides information on 12 occupations related to the arts, categorized by race and gender. The analysis of this study focuses on five racial groups: white Americans, Black Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians.

Occupational data for 1990 are sourced from the 1990 Census: STF 4b Sample Based Detailed Data with Race/Ethnicity Breakdown, while data for 2000 is from 2000 Census: SF 4 - Sample Based Data with Race/Ethnicity Breakdown. Unfortunately, for the years 1990 and 2000, the Census does not provide a distinct category for art-related jobs. <sup>2</sup>To ensure consistency, art-related jobs are manually identified from the 1990 and 2000 data sets, based on the occupations used in 1980. Lastly, the number of individuals employed in the arts is categorized

---

<sup>2</sup> The 1980 classifications from the Census that I considered in this study are the following: Art, drama, and music teachers; Authors; Technical writers; Designers; Musicians and composers; Actors and directors; Painters, sculptors, craft-artists, and artist printmakers; Photographers; Dancers; Artists, performers, and related workers, n.e.c.; Editors and reporters; Public relations specialists; Announcers; Athletes.

by race and county location and then compared to geographic distribution of the general population. County population data come from the 1980 Census: County Population by Age, Sex, Race & Spanish

Origin; the 1990 Census: STF 2b 100% Detailed Data with Race/Ethnicity Breakdown; and the 2000 Census: SF 2 100% Data with Race/Ethnicity Breakdown.

### **Main Results**

In this section, the paper presents results on the share of arts occupations, broken down by race (Section 1.1), gender (Section 1.2), and by county location from 1980 to 2000 (Section 4.3).

#### ***Race; Black Americans & Hispanics***

Figure 1 and Table 1 present the share of workers within each racial group employed in the arts. In 1980, white Americans accounted for 93.6% of all workers (column 1), despite making up only 82.4% of the total American population (column 2). Over time, the prevalence of white Americans in the arts workforce gradually aligns with their share of the overall population. By 2000, the share of white workers decreased to 87.5% while making up 84.8% of the total population. This shift raises the question: which other ethnic groups contribute to the decline?

As shown in column (8), although the proportion of Hispanics in the American population decreases from 7.6% to 6.0%—an increase of more than 20%—column (7) shows

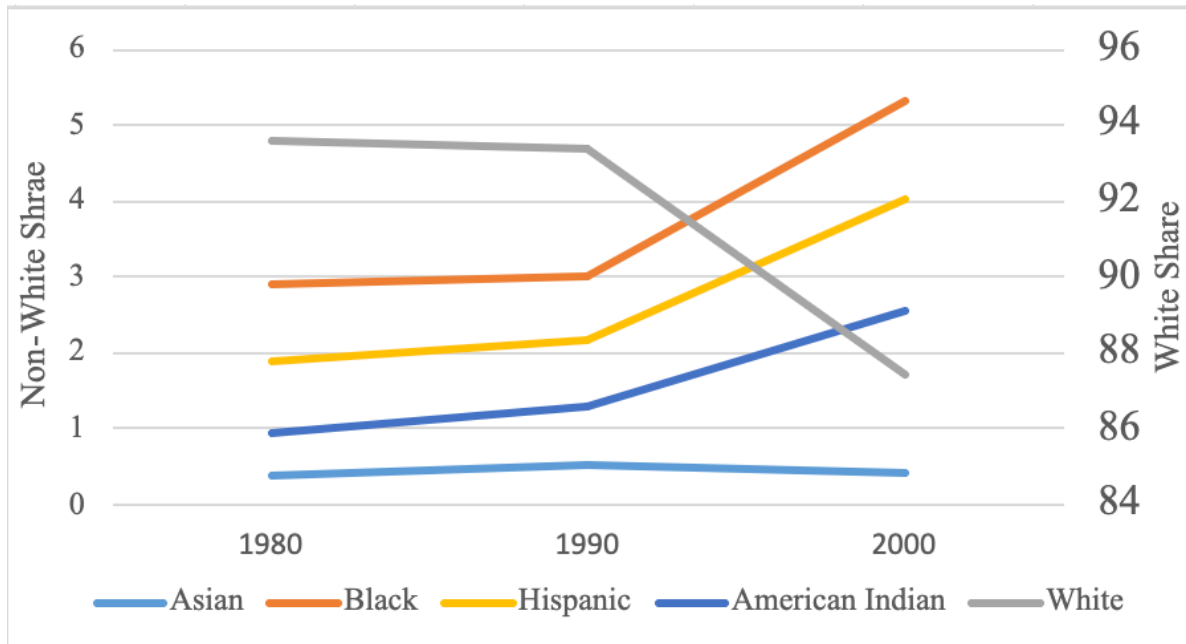
that the share of Hispanics working in the arts more than doubles, rising from 1.9% to 4.0%. Similarly, column (3) shows a steady increase in the percentage of Black Americans working in the arts, from 2.9% in 1980 to 5.3% in 2000, while Black Americans' share of the total population remains relatively stable at around 8.5%. Both sets of data indicate that the increased presence of Hispanics and Black Americans in the arts is not driven by population growth, but by a growing interest among members of these groups to pursue careers in the arts.

On the other hand, the opposite pattern emerges when examining the data for Asian Americans (columns 5 and 6). Initially, Asian Americans comprised only 0.04% of the American population and 0.38% of the arts workforce in 1980. However, over the following two decades, although the share of Asians in the total population rises more than fifteen-fold to 0.65%, their representation in the arts remains mostly unchanged at 0.41%.

The results point to the continued marginalization of Hispanics and Black Americans in the art workforce from 1980-2000 despite attempts at equality within the industry. However, the results display that the overrepresentation of white Americans in the arts has been greatly reduced between 1980-2000. These findings confirm previous studies that have shown that minorities such as Black Americans and Hispanics groups are under-represented in the labor force (Harrison and Bennett, 1995).

**Figure 1**

*Share of Workers in the Arts by Race*



**Table 1**

*Share of Art Workers by Race*

Table 1: Share of workers by race

	White		Black		Asian		Hispanic		American Indian	
	Arts (1)	Population (2)	Arts (3)	Population (4)	Arts (5)	Population (6)	Arts (7)	Population (8)	Arts (9)	Population (10)
1980	93.61	82.37	2.92	8.51	0.38	0.04	1.88	7.61	0.96	1.00
1990	93.39	87.47	3.00	8.65	0.54	0.61	2.18	4.49	1.28	1.44
2000	87.46	84.80	5.31	8.76	0.41	0.65	4.04	6.05	2.57	1.41

Notes: This table presents: i) the percentage of workers by race, relative to the total workers in the arts; and, ii) the percentage of the population by race, relative to the total population.

## *Gender*

After examining the effects of race on workers in the arts, it brings a question to mind: are the patterns uncovered in Table 1 also driven by a worker being a certain gender or are they similar for both genders?

To make progress on this question, Table 2 presents disaggregated data on art workers split by both race and gender. When examining overall employment trends in the arts (irrespective of racial composition), the industry remains male-dominated with 55.29% of workers being male in 2000. This stands in contrast to 1990, when women comprised the majority of art workers at 54.24%. This reversal prompts further investigation into the factors causing this shift in gender composition.

As shown in columns (3) and (4), this change is driven by the gender composition of White Americans, who constitute a large majority of workers in this occupation as shown in Table 1. However, the gender dynamics within other racial groups also merit closer examination.

Among Black Americans (columns 5 and 6), working in the arts is a male-dominated occupation, with 63.6% of the total Black American workers in 1980 being male. Over time, this gender imbalance diminishes slightly, with the male share falling to 58.4% by 2000.

A similar pattern emerges when considering the gender split for Hispanics (columns 9 and 20), where the proportion of male workers in the arts rose from 1980 to 2000, reaching 60.1% by the end of this period. On the other hand, gender representation among Asians and

American Indians exhibit a more balanced distribution. By 2000, women accounted for 52.2% of Asian art workers, a reversal of the 1980 when male workers held a slight majority. Among American Indians, the number of female jobholders also rises, reaching 47.45% by 2000. Despite the increase, female American Indians continue to be underrepresented compared to their male counterparts. Unlike the increase observed among Asians—where women come to outnumber men by 2000—the rise in female representation among American Indians still leaves women in the minority relative to their male counterparts.

**Table 2**

*Share of Workers in The Arts, by Race and Gender*

Table 2: Share of workers in the arts, by race and gender

	Total		White		Black		Asian		Hispanic		American Indian	
	Male (1)	Female (2)	Male (3)	Female (4)	Male (5)	Female (6)	Male (7)	Female (8)	Male (9)	Female (10)	Male (11)	Female (12)
1980	51.17	48.83	50.65	49.35	63.59	36.41	52.44	47.56	58.32	41.68	58.35	41.65
1990	45.76	54.24	45.18	54.82	57.30	42.70	49.31	50.69	52.87	47.13	50.44	49.56
2000	55.29	44.71	55.57	44.43	58.40	41.60	47.76	52.24	60.08	39.92	52.55	47.45

Notes: When considering each race, the share is computed relative to the total workers for the corresponding race.

***Location***

In the previous sections, notable patterns emerge when analyzing the racial and gender composition of workers in the art. While Table 1 highlights patterns that emerge when comparing the number of arts workers to the total population by race and gender, this section shifts focus to examine the geographic distribution of these variables.

Figure 2 depicts the geographic distribution of white American arts workers. In 1980, white Americans made up the majority of arts workers even in regions where they represent a smaller portion of the population. The correlation between the share of white American arts workers and the white population stands at 0.36 in 1980, showing a weak geographic alignment. By 1990, this correlation rose to 0.49, and further increased to 0.65 by 2000. This pattern suggests a waning overrepresentation of White Americans in areas where they make up a smaller share of the general population.

For Black Americans, the relationship between population size and number of art workers increases similarly to White Americans. As shown in Figure 3, the correlation remains at 0.54 in 1980 and jumps slightly to 0.57 in 1990, before increasing drastically to 0.77 by 2000. This pattern indicates that the growing presence of Black Americans in the arts is not solely due to demographic changes, but from an increasing interest in entering the workforce. As depicted in the maps of Figure 2, numerous counties with populations that are over 20% Black American also display a comparable or even higher proportion of Black arts workers.

In contrast to the more concentrated Southern settlement patterns of Black Americans, Hispanic populations remain more widely dispersed, particularly throughout the Southwest. Figure 4 reveals the trends of Hispanic Americans, where the correlation between population

share and share of arts workers jumped sharply from 0.28 in 1980 to 0.70 in 1990, before peaking at 0.80 by 2000. This more than 150% increase between 1980 and 1990 occurs without a corresponding shift in population share, suggesting an increase in Hispanic participation within the arts labor force. This trend continued in 2000: counties where Hispanic arts workers once made up just 5–20% of the sector now report figures between 20–100%.

The Asian American population exhibits the lowest overall population and workforce density in the arts sector. Figures from 1980 and 1990 reveal a limited geographic presence, with few identifiable regional patterns. By 2000, however, there was a particular concentration of Asian Americans in California, although less prominent than other racial groups. The correlation between Asian population share and arts workforce share begins at just 0.08 in 1980—the lowest among all racial groups—but rises significantly to 0.46 in 1990 and reaches 0.73 by 2000, indicating increasing alignment between residential patterns and participation in the arts labor force.

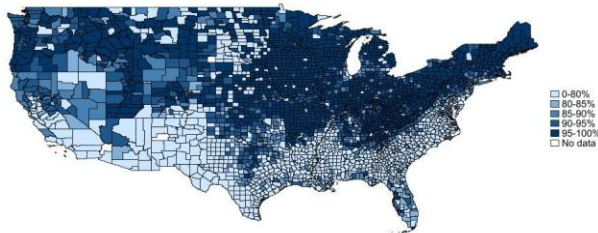
Lastly, Figure 6 shows that American Indian populations, both in general and in arts employment, are more concentrated in small western counties than their Hispanic and Black counterparts. Unlike previous racial groups, the correlation between population share and arts employment among American Indians declined from 0.79 in 1980 to 0.72 in 1990. This indicates that individuals residing in high-density American Indian counties are becoming less likely to join the arts labor force between 1980 and 1990. However, the correlation rebounds to 0.80 in

2000, exceeding the 1980 correlation slightly, only marking a minute change throughout the two decades.

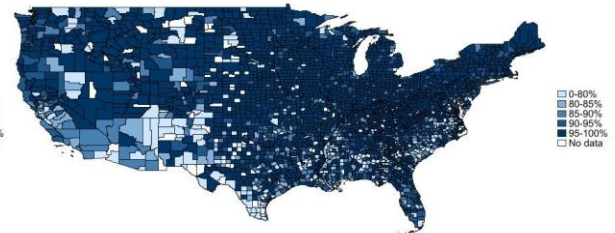
**Figure 2**

*White Population Share and Share of White Workers in the Arts*

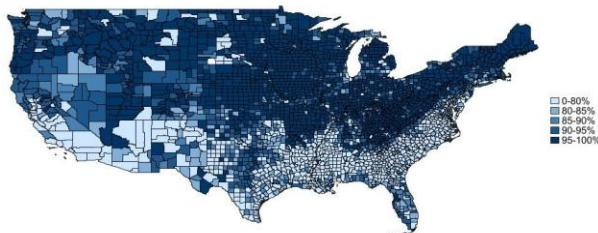
White American Population Share, 1980



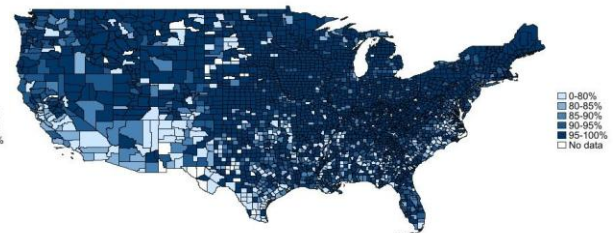
Share of White American Workers in the Arts, 1980



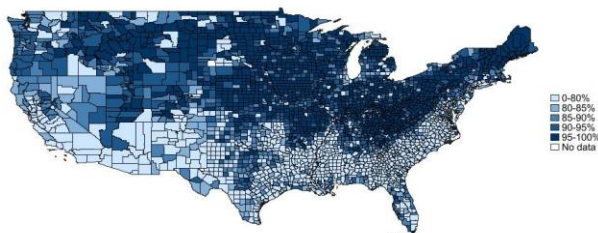
White American Population Share, 1990



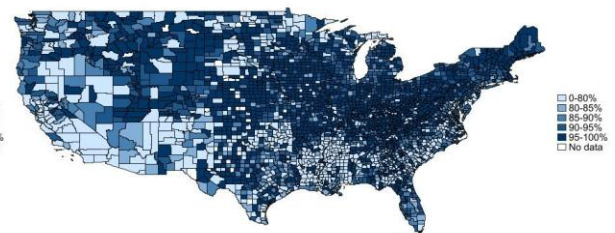
Share of White American Workers in the Arts, 1990



White American Population Share, 2000



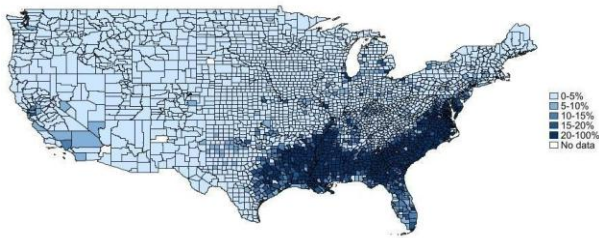
Share of White American Workers in the Arts, 2000



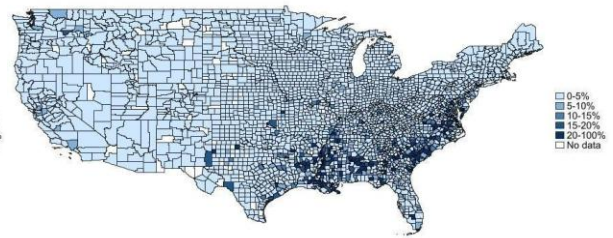
**Figure 3**

*Black Population Share and Share of Black Workers in the Arts*

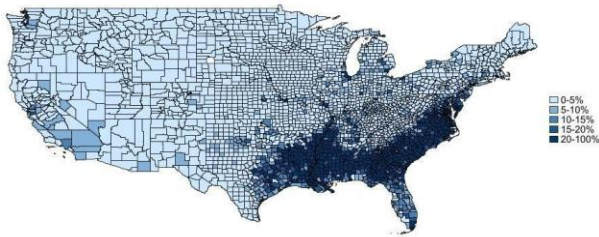
Black Population Share, 1980



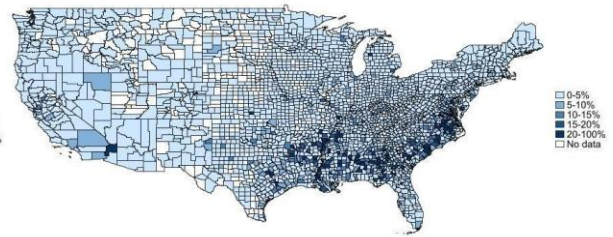
Share of Black Workers in the Arts, 1980



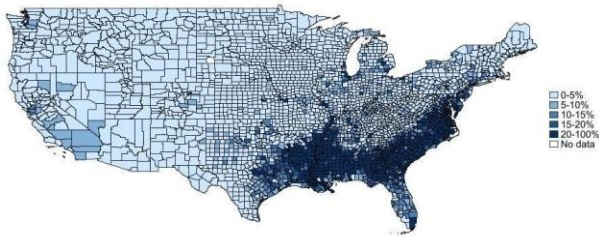
Black Population Share, 1990



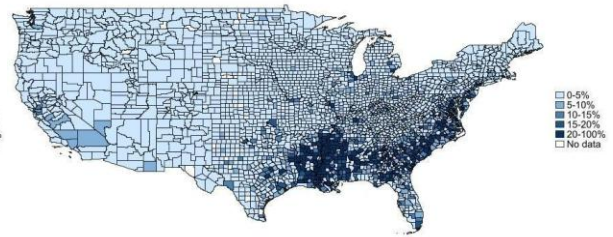
Share of Black Workers in the Arts, 1990



Black Population Share, 2000



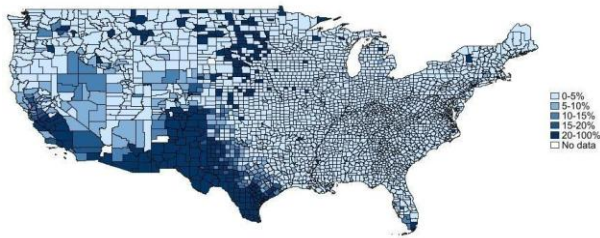
Share of Black Workers in the Arts, 2000



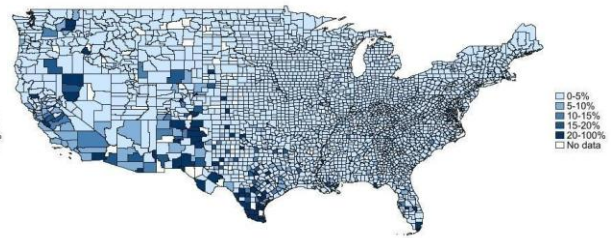
**Figure 4**

*Hispanic Population Share and Share of Hispanic Workers in the Arts*

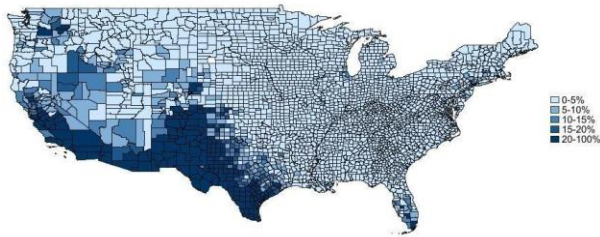
Hispanic Population Share, 1980



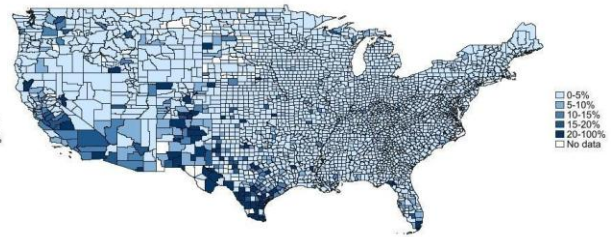
Share of Hispanic Workers in the Arts, 1980



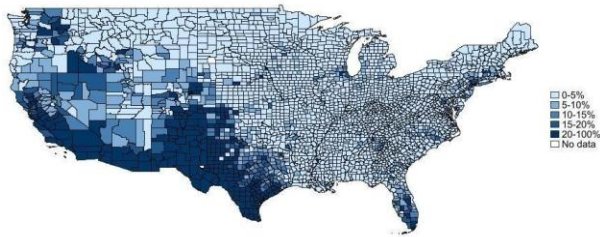
Hispanic Population Share, 1990



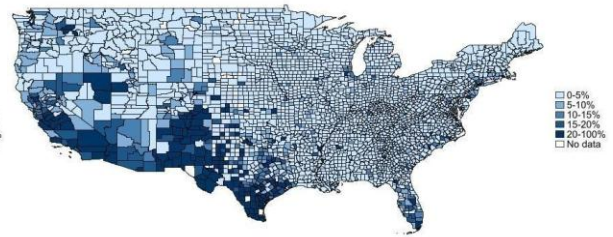
Share of Hispanic Workers in the Arts, 1990



Hispanic Population Share, 2000



Share of Hispanic Workers in the Arts, 2000



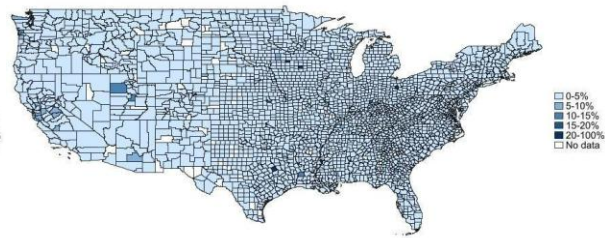
**Figure 5**

*Asian Population Share and Share of Asian Workers in the Arts*

Asian Population Share, 1980



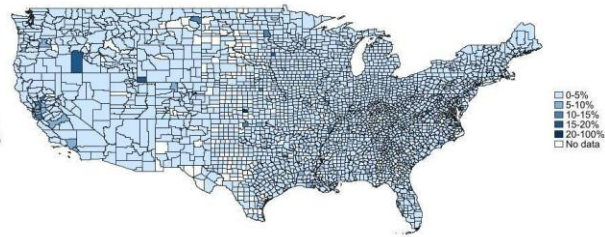
Share of Asian Workers in the Arts, 1980



Asian Population Share, 1990



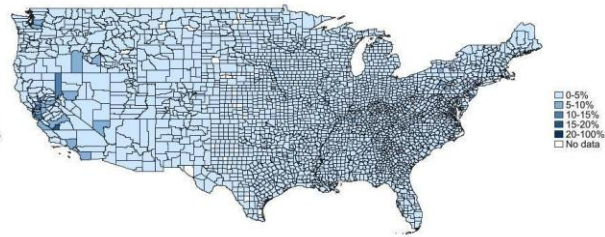
Share of Asian Workers in the Arts, 1990



Asian Population Share, 2000



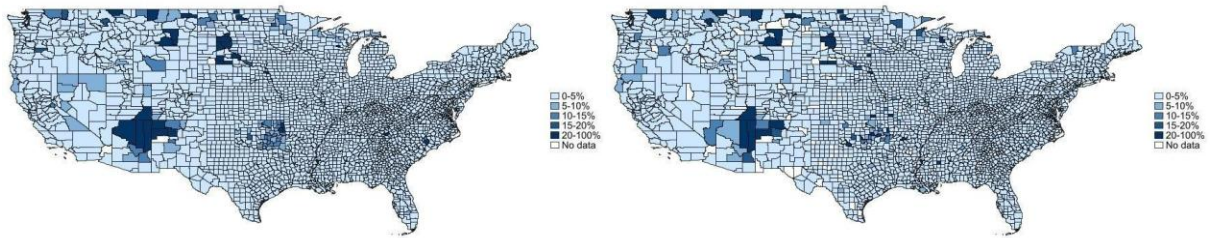
Share of Asian Workers in the Arts, 2000



**Figure 6**

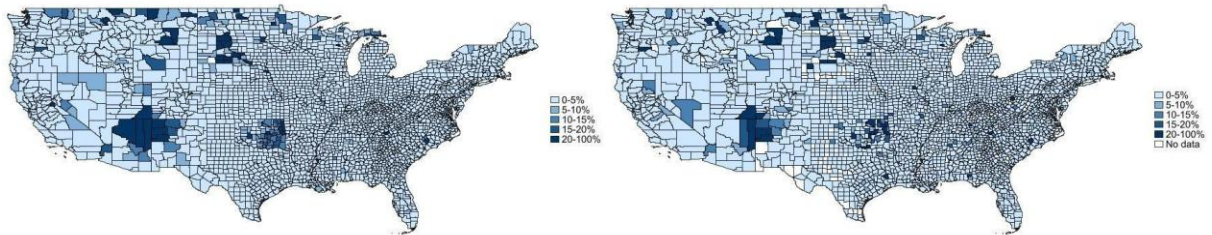
*American Indian Population Share and Share of American Indian Workers in the Arts*

*American Indian Population Share, 1980 Share of American Indian Workers in the Arts, 1980*



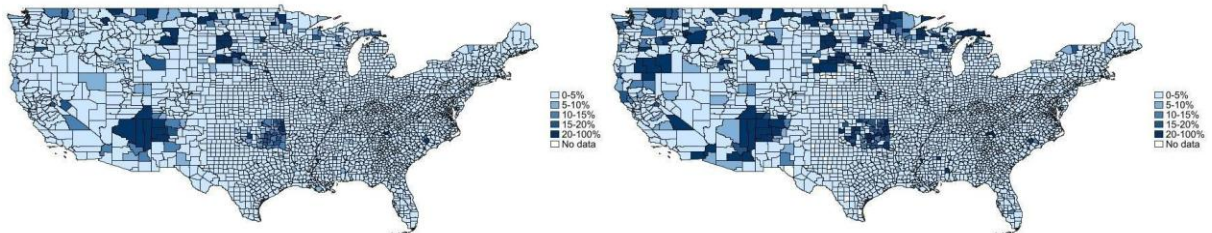
American Indian Population Share, 1990

Share of American Indian Workers in the Arts, 1990



American Indian Population Share, 2000

Share of American Indian Workers in the Arts, 2000



## **Discussion**

This study explores how race, gender, and geographic location shape participation in the arts labor force across the years 1980, 1990, and 2000, revealing several patterns in workforce representation and inequality. While White Americans continue to hold a majority presence in the arts throughout this period, their dominance gradually declines, suggesting a shift toward a more diverse industry. However, African American and Hispanic individuals remain among the most marginalized groups in the arts workforce, with African American and Hispanic women facing particularly pronounced challenges in securing employment within the field.

Geographic trends further illustrate dynamics among these racial groups. The correlation between population share and representation in the arts workforce strengthens significantly for Asian, Hispanic, and African American populations over time, indicating an increasing interest and participation in the workforce.

Additionally, the results speak to existing literature on discrimination in the labor market. Particularly, African Americans are more overlooked for leadership roles and senior positions compared to their white counterparts (King, 1992). Similarly, women continue to fall victim to devaluation of their work and wage inequality (England, 1992). Lastly, the role of geography in shaping labor outcomes supports earlier research on the influence of county location on average wages and job opportunities (Diamond, 2018).

Together, these results continue the conversation on the impact of race, gender, and location on the structure of the arts workforce, highlighting both areas of progress and barriers that arts workers continue to face.

### **Conclusion**

For years, art has been a tool for promoting self-expression and building relationships among communities of diverse backgrounds (Cochran, 1996). Yet within the arts industry itself, workers continue to face inequality shaped by race, gender, and geographic location.

This study draws from the U.S. Census data from 1980, 1990, and 2000 to examine how these factors influence representation in the arts workforce. The 1980 Equal Employment Opportunity Special File provides demographic data on arts workers for that year. For 1990, the analysis uses the STF 4B Sample-Based Detailed Data with Race/Ethnicity Breakdown, and for 2000, it sources from the SF 4 Sample-Based Data. Across all three decades, findings show that while the dominance of White workers in the arts steadily declines, African American and Hispanic individuals remain consistently underrepresented. This underrepresentation is especially pronounced for women within these groups, pointing to the effects of combined racial and gender-based exclusion.

Analysis on county location reveals an increasing correlation between population share and arts employment for African American and Hispanic communities. This growing alignment suggests a rising engagement with the arts workforce in these two communities, even amid ongoing structural barriers.

These findings prompt several questions for future research: What systemic factors lead to the persistent exclusion of African Americans, Hispanics, and women in the arts? How do individuals of different ethnicities and locations perceive careers in the arts? And how does

employment within the arts industry differs from other industries? These questions remain open for future research.

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank Andrea Bernini for his guidance and help processing the data. I am indebted to Steven Chen for inspiring me to do research. Lastly, I thank the staff at the Cambridge Centre for International Research for their assistance with formatting revisions.

## References

- Baron, J., & Newman, D. (1989). Pay inequality in work organizations: Organizational and individual determinants. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(S2), S28–S51.
- Census. (1980). *Equal employment opportunity special file*. Downloaded from IPUMS NHGIS.
- Census. (1990). *STF 4b sample based detailed data with race/ethnicity breakdown*.
- Census. (2000). *SF 4 sample based data with race/ethnicity breakdown*.
- Cochran, J. L. (1996). Using play and art therapy to help culturally diverse students overcome barriers to school success. *The School Counselor*, 43(4), 287–298.
- Diamond, R. (2018). The determinants and welfare implications of U.S. workers' diverging location choices by skill: 1980–2000. *American Economic Review*, 108(10), 2923–2963.
- England, P. (1992). *Comparable worth: Theories and evidence* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Failing, P. (2021). How top US art museums excluded Black artists during the 1980s: From the archives. *ARTnews*, 14.
- Farley, R. (1995). *State of the Union: America in the 1990s, Volume 2: Social trends*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Jovanovic, B. (1979). Job matching and the theory of turnover. *Journal of Political Economy*, 87, 972–990.

King, M. C. (1992). Occupational segregation by race and sex, 1940–88. *Monthly Labor Review*, 115(4), 30–37.

Neumark, D., & McLennan, M. (1995). Sex discrimination and women's labor market outcomes. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 30(4), 713–740.

Oswald, K. (2023). Gender discrimination: An overview of historical and contemporary issues. *Journal of the International Academy for Case Studies*.

Sugihara, M. K., & Ju, J. (2022). Media matters: Why Asian American representation in media is a social justice issue. *Asian American Policy Review*, 32.

Weiss, Y. (1971). Investment in graduate education. *American Economic Review*, 61, 833–852.

Zander, M. J. (2007). Tell me a story: The power of narrative in the practice of teaching art. *Studies in Art Education*, 48(2), 189–203.