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More than a Museum: Museums' Past, Current, and Future Involvement with Racial Issues

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More than a Museum:
Museums' Past, Current, and Future Involvement with Racial Issues

A Thesis in
Museum Studies

By
Madeline Friedler

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of:

Master of Arts
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Abstract

The year 2020 has been universally acknowledged as an extraordinary point in activist history. The Black Lives Matter organization has spearheaded a new wave of activism comparable to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. By evaluating how cultural learning centers such as museums have presented racial history in the past, an effective plan can be made on how museums should interpret this present-day history. Museums should not only recognize #BlackLivesMatter as an important part of history in an academic sense, but they should also actively promote positive racial change in the communities they serve. Research shows that museums play a large role in forming the public's view on past racial events. This study will explore how racial topics are presented in conventional museums such as typical history or art centers, as well as those which specialize in civil and human rights. By pairing this information with how museums are currently interacting with activists, there are both good and bad practices in the museum industry. It has become common practice to focus more on the traumatic violence that is part of African American history, rather than the triumphs that followed these hardships. By allowing racial groups to take an authoritative position on how their own histories are portrayed, museums can promote healing, understanding, and powerful lasting relationships through an authentic interpretation.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The year 2020 has had more than its fair share of defining moments. From devastating wildfires in both hemispheres to the worldwide Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, it was marked as a year surely meant for the history books. There is, however, one event that may seem new but has been brewing for the last four hundred years and has continued past 2020. Since the first Europeans arrived in North America, racial inequality has been escalated by the flawed systems that keep it in place. Over time, social justice activists have fought to correct these wrongs but there is still many issues that have not been faced. The political and civil unrest within the United States caused (and continues) strife for its citizens but organizations such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) have brought people together and spread their messages against racially motivated violence around the world.

Since President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, civil rights have taken a permanent place in American history. With such an important and complex history, school systems alone cannot encapsulate it. These stories have deeply personal meanings to many American citizens, and this is why they turn to the one public entity that is most trusted to accurately depict the past: museums. Museums of all kinds have had the vital job of interpreting and sharing this history not only for the sake of people of color but for all people to reflect on this immense struggle that is far from over.

I as the author was cautious at first to approach this topic because, as a White woman, I have never experienced the challenges that African Americans do. Admittedly, one can never fully understand the perspective and experiences of another group and one has no authority to determine how another group's history should be interpreted. Coming from the point of view of

a member of the museum community, everyone has the duty to help achieve social justice, but not all can have interpretive authority over it.

Within the museum industry, over 60% of employees are women and 85% of them are white.¹ Even if these racial events do not directly affect those working at the museum, it should still matter to them; not only as an ethical person, but as a professional. As these historic moments in the fight for equality are taking place, museums should be actively adapting. This way the industry will be able to support those currently fighting as well as accurately depict the events for generations to come. It is also important to note that more than ever before, recent protests against institutionalized racism have more ethnically and socially diverse supporters than ever before.

Some believe that the Black Lives Matter movement is a new era of the civil rights cause, others say it is a continuation of what came before. One thing that does set the Black Lives Matter movement apart from its predecessor is that it is not fighting for exclusively civil rights, but for human rights. This is a cause that has expanded from previous movements as activists are now encapsulating the whole range of injustices and violence that minorities face within the United States and beyond. Justified rage, grief, and frustrations are just as valuable as the non-violent methods that were predominantly used during the Civil Rights movement. The methods and messages from leaders such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. have acted as a springboard for countless new leaders. What museums can do for these new leaders is to utilize their public influence to educate communities on this Black Lives Matter as it is currently

¹ “Archivists, Curators, & Museum Technicians,” Data USA. <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/archivists-curators-museum-technicians>.

happening. Museums have, can, and should continue to use their positions as cultural learning centers to promote racial justice in the communities they serve.

Literature Review

A great deal of research has been done on how race affects people's lives. Terms such as human rights, cultural identity, trauma, and healing have been popular research topics in the Humanities field since the mid-twentieth century. All types of anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of various racial and cultural backgrounds have added their input to this ever-changing debate. The goal of this thesis is to combine these academic studies with current resources from social justice organizations and accredited news outlets to create a versatile collection of knowledge. It is only through a well-rounded approach that a comprehensive understanding of contemporary racial issues and how they are perceived within the museum field can be created. Through a better understanding, museums can hope to achieve a level of trust that not only makes them valuable allies for racial justice, but also a repository for the culturally defining moments made along the way.

Instead of simply learning about important civil rights events, museums allow patrons to see the pictures of the marches, hear the words of prominent figures, and interact with objects that reflect the essence of past experiences. Reviews of these institutions can be useful in several ways. They provide a valid critique that may tell prospective visitors whether they would enjoy such a museum, or they can provide an in-depth look at a collection that one may not be able to visit otherwise. This study, however, utilizes these reviews to see how different collections across the United States are interpreted. The way each museum depicts the topic of race and racial identity carries a unique message for its visitors. There is a marked difference between the interpretations of civil rights museums whose entire mission is focused on the struggle of African Americans and museums which have a much broader mission but may still have collections with significant racial context in their possession.

Beginning with the country's first official civil rights museum, historians Amy Wilson and Thomas J. Schlereth's review of the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee for the *Journal of American History* explains the potency of exhibits that make patrons feel like an active part of the history they are learning about. There are many places throughout where visitors can sit on a bus with a statue of Rosa Parks, sit at a lunch counter like those used in segregation sit-ins, or stand alongside cutouts of picketers calling for equality. As the museum is built onto what was once the infamous Lorraine Motel where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, it is appropriate that this museum caters to his life and accomplishments. The entire museum leads up to a point where visitors look through a glass wall into the room where King spent his last moments in 1968. The room has been recreated as it was then, with an intimate and occupied feeling, as the bedsheets are ruffled and a breakfast tray is left with food unfinished.² As the first of its kind, the National Civil Rights Museum is praised by the authors for creating a sense of personal connection through their interactive displays.

This technique can be found in other civil rights museums as well. In 2008, the journal *Southern Cultures* published Robert Hamburger's review of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. The city of Birmingham, Alabama is synonymous with the Civil Rights Movement, and with exhibits presented as a linear journey with names such as *The Confrontation Room* and *The Movement Room*, it can be expected that there is an emotional response. Videos showing the actual footage of protests and violent segregation are meant to act as a catalyst for patrons to become both aware of the past and emotionally invested in it.³

² Amy Wilson and Thomas J. Schlereth, "National Civil Rights Museum," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 3 (December 1996): 971–76. doi:10.2307/2945652.

³ Robert Hamburger, "'For Us the Living': Visits to Civil Rights Museums," *Southern Cultures* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 52–67. doi:10.1353/scu.0.0011.

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is also featured in a comparative analysis done by Dr. Lizabeth Zack and April L. Dove. By comparing the institute to the Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum in Savannah, Georgia, another common pattern found within effective museum displays came to light. Museums that highlight the local connections to their topics become much more relevant to their patrons. Both museums opened in the 1990s and they have been an effective economic opportunity for their prospective cities since then for both tourists and locals. The Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum mainly focuses on the success of Savannah's non-violent approach to achieving desegregation laws and the meetings that were held at Black churches to keep African American citizens informed about movement activities.⁴

Zack and Dove also find this sense of community within the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. The local University of Alabama utilizes the institution's many public spaces for meetings and lessons which bring in patrons that otherwise may not have considered themselves a part of that particular community. The items in the exhibits are all from local areas which creates a collective identity. This identity is made by the people within the community and includes certain events and objects linked to specific memories of a given period.⁵ It is the way these civil rights collections are interpreted that makes both museums credible community archives.

Letting the objects speak for themselves is a technique that is often seen in more conventional museums. For example, a label for an art piece may only get a brief overview of facts, as the true meaning may be different for each person. However, when tackling a major

⁴ Lizabeth Zack, and April L. Dove, "A Walk Through History: Museums of the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, Alabama and Savannah, Georgia," *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, 2006 Annual Meeting, Montreal 2006, 1, <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.buffalostate.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=26641610&site=ehost-live>.

⁵ Ibid.

topic like civil rights, exhibits must be set up in a way that communicate clear messages. The Museum of Mississippi History was critiqued for this by Georgia historian Glen T. Eskew in his comparison between it and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum. Despite their differences, these two museums share many things, including a lobby, cafe, bookstore, restrooms, auditorium, and a second-floor gallery for temporary exhibitions. Conjoining at a right angle, both Mississippi museums are actually two separate entities within one large building complex that both tell the story of the state's history, but in different ways.

Eskew criticizes the history museum for letting the objects speak for themselves and leaving the visitors wanting a more complete overall interpretation. To their credit, The Museum of Mississippi History does have more topics to cover than the civil rights museum next door, spanning from pre-colonialism to modern-day history. The aim to include as much as possible is clear, but the smattering of objects is perceived as both overwhelming and underdone. The lack of an overarching argument obscures the significance at best and comes off as ignorant at the worst. The history of the Confederacy is pushed into a display on general military service, and in an exhibit on clothing, there are ladies' church hats next to Ku Klux Klan robes as if they were both only fashion statements in 1920s Mississippi.⁶ Although at first look it may seem that the more objects are on display, the more topics are covered; however, without an equal amount of explanation, there is much left to be desired. This does not mean that every object needs a hefty label that may lose people's interest. There only needs to be a strong overarching argument throughout that can be easily found in each part of the exhibit. If both conventional and civil rights museums hope to represent the current issues faced by the African American communities

⁶ Glenn T. Eskew, "Two Mississippi Museums: Museum of Mississippi History; Mississippi Civil Rights Museum," *American Historical Review* 123, no. 4 (October 2018): 1272–75, doi:10.1093/ahr/rhy185.

they serve fairly, they must be dedicated to planning out effective displays that help, instead of hinder, or even harm, cultural identities.

The idea of identity is unavoidable when discussing racial issues within museums. Wherever it is presented it has the potential to deeply affect its viewers and it is up to the museum itself whether that the impact is positive or negative. Acclaimed sociologist Robyn Autry's 2013 study reviews several museums and found a commonality that museums tend to shy away from difficult topics (unintentionally or not) in favor of providing a comfortable mindset for tourists. Urban development challenges the status of urban museums and government funding continues to be cautious to support anything that might be too controversial. Autry combats this idea by studying the narratives across African American history museums before and after the Civil Rights era. In her publication "The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenges of Representing National Conflict at 'Identity-Driven' Museums," Autry shows that museums choosing to be selective in their narratives on the struggles of African Americans can affect people's views of their own heritage.⁷ By avoiding this important topic, people of all backgrounds are losing a valuable learning resource.

As time goes by, new museum staff are replacing the older narratives which can be good and bad. This new narrative comes with a more open and honest approach to things, but it can't be forgotten that the previous staff members may have actually lived through the Civil Rights era and have more personal attachments and perspectives on the topic. This same argument can be said for presenting Black Lives Matter history. Museums that present the topic in the present are bound to project their own emotions as they are living through the movement. Emotions are not completely detrimental though when discussing something as irrefutable as human rights. As

⁷ Robyn Autry, "The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenges of Representing National Conflict at 'Identity-Driven' Museums," *Theory & Society* 42, no. 1 (January 2013): 57–80, doi:10.1007/s11186-012-9185-5.

places of public learning, museums continuously grapple with new ways of addressing the stereotypical ideas of race. New narratives are always being created by those who are willing to go beyond the neutral mindset of traditional museum presentations.

Beginning in the summer of 2020, the stereotypes of race have been challenged more than they have since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Much stricter regard has been placed on the institutions that have been systematically unfair to people of color in America and it has created a ripple effect across the world. The phrase “Black Lives Matter” has become a common anthem for those historically oppressed as well as for the allies of the oppressed. At the time of writing this study, it has been approximately a year since the Black Lives Matter movement took the global stage and since then multiple national and international museums have responded according to each institutions’ beliefs. Arts and cultural journalist Manuel Charr compiled the public’s reaction to these responses as of June 2020. Major cities that house these museums have been the staging area for pivotal Black Lives Matter protests. The staff of these museums must choose how to interact with the protestors in a time when many museums have been temporarily shut down due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Charr compares the social media and public statements of museums in the United States as well as Europe and he chronicles if they were seen by the public as sincere in promises of support or purveyors of empty words by the public.⁸ The smaller and more local museums located closer to African American communities were quicker to express their support publicly, while larger international organizations have been criticized for keeping the cause at an arm's length. This is especially

⁸ Manuel Charr, “How Have Museums Responded to the Black Lives Matter Protests?,” museumnext.com, MuseumNext 2020, June 10, 2020, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/how-have-museums-responded-to-the-black-lives-matter-protests/>.

damaging as former colonial powers such as England are closely tied to the transatlantic slave trade.

As museums design exhibits and programs that discuss race in America, the matter often comes down to the traumatic events in America's cultural history. The terrors of the slave trade led to the violence of Jim Crow continuing to the strife people experience today. As museum professionals, we can set our immediate goal to educate ourselves in a way that is beneficial to all of our patrons, coworkers, and ourselves. *The Racial Healing Handbook* by Dr. Annaliese A. Singh is a healing tool that can be utilized by all members of cultural organizations regardless of their race. It acts as a powerful and practical guide to navigate racism, challenge privilege, manage stress and trauma, and begin to heal. Instead of forcing patrons to relive their cultural traumas through emotionally draining programs hyper-focused on the dark sides of racism, healing strategies can be put in place to acknowledge these events and learn from them in a positive way that promotes change. No matter the individual's identity, dealing with racism is a journey that often involves reliving trauma and experiencing feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety. This book takes that journey and creates it into one of understanding and unlearning the processes of racism that have inherently been a part of American systems for centuries. *The Racial Healing Handbook* offers practical tools that can be easily incorporated into staff training that navigate experiences of racism, challenge internalized negative messages and privileges, and develop a profound racial consciousness.⁹ By creating a museum industry that has a grasp on its own relationship with racism and privilege, the building blocks to creating a community of

⁹ Annaliese A. Singh, *The Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism & Engage in Collective Healing* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2019).

healing in a world still filled with racial microaggressions and discrimination can begin to take form.

Chapter Two: The Birth of Black Lives Matter

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is the name of the activist movement that was started in the United States in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors in response to the acquittal of neighborhood watch coordinator George Zimmerman after he murdered Black seventeen-year-old Trevon Martin in central Florida after an altercation. Now with over forty chapters, this ideological intervention calls for non-violent civil disobedience against police brutality and racially motivated violence against people of color.¹⁰ Working to build local powers against these violent acts, BLM is used as a platform and organizing tool for protecting not only Black men and women, but Black people of the queer community as well. This broad advocacy makes them stand out from previous anti-racism groups. While fighting to prevent further injustices, BLM also keeps alive the names of those who have been killed by racial violence such as Tamir Rice (2002-2014), Tanisha Anderson (1977-2014), and Mya Hall (1988-2015). As the organization has been steadily growing over the years it has become a vital tool for social justice activists but only just recently became a globally recognized movement in the spring of 2020.

On March 13th, 2020 in Louisville, Kentucky, police officers Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankinson, and Myles Cosgrove forced entry into an apartment as part of an investigation on drug charges. Occupant Kenneth Walker believed the police were intruders and fired a warning shot. According to officials, the shot hit officer Mattingly in the leg and the police responded with a total of thirty-two gunshots, six of them hitting and killing Walker's girlfriend Breonna Taylor who was sleeping in another room. The reason this particular case meant so much to BLM is that both Walker and Taylor were African American while all three police officers were

¹⁰ "Herstory," Black Lives Matter, September 7, 2019, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>.

White. Since the shooting, there have been numerous disputes within the courts that have delayed true justice for Ms. Taylor. At least three officers involved are no longer employed by the Louisville police and faced charges of “wanton endangerment;” but as of yet, no one has been charged with Taylor’s murder directly though there are still ongoing debates on what needs to be done to achieve true justice.¹¹ Now more than a year later, the city has banned no-knock warrants and awarded Taylor’s family a \$12 million settlement for wrongful death, but there is still many more lasting changes that need to be made.¹²

Seventy-three days after Brianna Taylor was killed, a Black man named George Floyd was killed by White police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota after Chauvin pressed his knee into Floyd’s neck in a restrictive hold for an extended period of time. The police were originally called because Floyd had allegedly used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. Floyd had been convicted of crimes before, but Chauvin also had multiple complaints on his police record for using unnecessary amounts of force while on the job. Later Chauvin and the three other officers involved, J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane, and Tou Thao, were all fired and have been charged with different crimes with varying levels of severity. Chauvin’s third-degree murder charge was eventually dropped to a lesser second-degree charge, and he was later released from prison on bail in October of 2020 and was set to have another trial in April of 2021.¹³ Eleven months after the incident, Derek Chauvin was found guilty of all charges. As it stand now, he faces up to forty years for second-degree murder, up to twenty five years for third

¹¹ Richard A. Oppel, Derrick Bryson Taylor, and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, “What to Know About Breonna Taylor’s Death,” The New York Times (The New York Times, May 30, 2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/article/breonna-taylor-police.html>.

¹² Braktkon Booker, and Rachel Treisman, “A Year After Breonna Taylor’s Killing, Family Says There’s ‘No Accountability,’” npr.org, 2021 npr, March 13, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/13/973983947/a-year-after-breonna-taylors-killing-family-says-theres-no-accountability>.

¹³ Evan Hill, Ainaro Tiefenthäler, Christiaan Triebert, Drew Jordan, Haley Willis, and Robin Stein, “How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody,” The New York Times. The New York Times, June 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>.

degree murder, and up to ten years for second-degree manslaughter.¹⁴ The American justice system is long and complicated, and all its faults have been made clear in the trials of the Floyd and Taylor murders. The fact that people with privilege can hold off serious consequences through their connections and appeals has left many unsatisfied. Both Floyd and Taylor were unarmed, and their deaths have been widely received as a result of the rampant unchecked power in and around the police force. In these two cases, and many others that involve violence against minorities, there is a pattern of unfair exceptions for those with privilege. Although Chauvin has been successfully convicted, countless more cases are still tangled up in legal battles, and many more have been looked over altogether.

Marches, protests, and memorials have sprung up for not only Floyd and Taylor but for the far too many people of color who have lost their lives and otherwise have been victims of systemic racism. From slavery, to Jim Crow, to the current violence within the United States, there has been unchecked privilege given to those who hold power, especially over minorities. These recent violent tragedies have been a breaking point for many who wanted to hope that the fight for civil rights had been won and finally achieved since the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but there is clearly more work to do.

A new generation of activists is questioning the inequalities of the world and recent events have shown that the United States is not the only country that has not yet achieved equality. For example, the commonwealth of Puerto Rico is tightly connected to the United States, but has very little political representation. The names of Floyd and Taylor, and many other political and religious martyrs were chanted at marches and a guillotine was placed in front

¹⁴ Mike Hayes, Melissa Macaya, Melissa Mahtai, Meg Wagner, Veronica Rocha, and Joshua Berlinger, "Derek Chauvin found guilty in death of George Floyd," CNN, 2021 Cable News Network, April 21, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/us/live-news/derek-chauvin-trial-04-20-21/index.html>.

of the Puerto Rican governor's mansion. Across South America, there is a call to end violence against Indigenous people through unfair representation and cultural erasure. Similarly, in New Zealand and Australia, there are over 400 Indigenous people who are believed to have died in police custody and have yet to receive justice.¹⁵ As activists are organizing, more cases of police brutality have come to light since 2020. New incidents receive more public support, and old cases that may have been pushed aside by a biased system have resurfaced for more in-depth examinations. These older cases can go back a few years, to centuries.

The shared global history of colonial conquest and slavery means that America is not the only country responsible for systemic racism. Previous colonial powers such as England and Belgium have removed monuments of past leaders who were involved with the mistreatment of people of color. In some cases, these monuments were unanimously voted to be removed by public officials, and other times they were forcibly removed by protesters. This was the case of colonialist Edward Colston's statue in Bristol, England which was toppled and thrown into the River Avon.¹⁶ Within Europe, there is a divide on how to preserve these imperial images. For some it is a part of their national history that needs to be preserved, while others state that the individual's racist ideals outweigh any progress they may have achieved in the past. Changes in the national perspective are often followed by resistance but with centuries of changes behind Europe, it is fair to say one can be optimistic.

Meanwhile, the United States, a much younger country, has faced more resistance. With the most overseas military bases in the world, the United States is deeply involved with many

¹⁵ Rodger D. Harris, "Black Lives Matter is International: Where there is oppression, there will be resistance," coha.org, 2020 COHA, June 18, 2020, <https://www.coha.org/black-lives-matter-is-international-where-there-is-oppression-there-will-be-resistance/>.

¹⁶ Rodger D. Harris, "Black Lives Matter is International."

other nations. Through trade, politics, or force, it appears that the United States still sees itself at the protector of the Western hemisphere as proclaimed in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823.

Addressing the very real issues brought to light in 2020 and “with the internationalization of the Black Lives Matter movement, this justifying ideology is being challenged, delegitimizing the US imperial project.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Ibid.

Chapter Three: Civil Rights Museums

In order to change how the museum industry depicts race and racial issues for the better, examples of how people of color are currently being depicted needs to be analyzed. The push for museums catering to the African American community began as a way to commemorate the activists and their achievements from the 1960s and 70s. As a relatively new topic in American history, many conservatives denied that the topic was worthy of a museum. However, evidence will show that there are now over two hundred institutions dedicated to civil rights.¹⁸ By studying the museums' approaches and their effectiveness through an unbiased lens, all levels of museum staff can learn how to make their institution a safe space for cultural healing.

Professional reviews of museum exhibits are a vital part of amassing a well-rounded understanding of race representation within the industry. A review steps back from any personal attachments that one may face and looks for the bigger picture within the collection. Authors of these articles often utilize the experiences from multiple visitors from different backgrounds to see how one idea may be great for one group of people but might upset another. Reviews also have the backing of academia behind them. When the author is already a historian, sociologist, etc., they understand the academic theories that are behind each exhibit. For example, one can connect the dots behind Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962). It may look like the same picture of a woman repeated, but the decisions the artist made are a direct reflection of multiple subjects. The two opposite images create a diptych, which is characteristic of Renaissance

¹⁸ Kim Severson, "New Museums to Shine a Spotlight on Civil Rights Era," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, February 19, 2012), <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/20/us/african-american-museums-rising-to-recognize-civil-rights.html#:~:text=As%20with%20many%20museums%20and,remedy%20prior%20omissions%2C%E2%80%9D%20Mr.>

religious pieces. The repetition of the portrait itself is a statement of consumerism in pop culture, and by looking at the piece through a psychoanalytic lens one sees the tragic life of Marilyn Monroe as she herself was turned into a cultural commodity, expressed through the flatness of her expression.¹⁹



Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962, acrylic on canvas, 2054 x 1448 mm, (Tate) The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. 2015.²⁰

This type of multi-dimensional study can be applied to almost any piece in a collection, including those with racial context. Whether the piece is art, artifact, or otherwise it is vital to assess it from all perspectives to create the best possible understanding of it. By examining how past professionals have reviewed these exhibits, we can achieve the full spectrum of the collection's multiple meanings.

The first official civil rights museum was opened in 1991 as an extension of what was once the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. A place already filled with emotion, the motel where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated now contains exhibits spanning from the seventeenth-century slave trade to Dr. King's final days in 1968. Visitors begin their walk

¹⁹ "Marilyn Diptych by Andy Warhol," Khan Academy, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/late-europe-and-americas/modernity-ap/a/warhol-marilyn-diptych>.

²⁰ Ibid.

through the National Civil Rights Museum with a twenty-minute movie of actors portraying the founding fathers encouraging viewers to be active in civil rights. The movie urges that anyone can participate in the political process, declaring the museum's mission from the beginning.²¹ By stating their opening message about the importance of inclusion within the country's civic representation, an overarching theme begins to emerge. After the brief movie, the visitors are ushered into the first exhibit that encapsulates much of pre-1954 African American history. It is hard to imagine that one exhibit can contain a complete record of over two-hundred years of history, and while the amassed information is impressive, it is also overwhelming. Displays in this first exhibit depict slave rebellions, early icons of civil rights such as Ida B. Wells and Booker T. Washington, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Ku Klux Klan, and a history of lynching in the United States.²² This is meant to be a preface to the rest of the museum which focuses on post-1954 civil rights exclusively but it dilutes the historic importance that each topic has in its own right.

This issue of "less is more" appears again when objects in the collection are determined to be worthy of display, but not close enough to their main mission. A feeling of disorganization is felt as visitors view the stories of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, the Black Panthers, and the Deacons for Defense all squeezed together in a single display case.²³ While there is still ample space in this large complex, other well-known historic moments such as the Freedom Marches are allotted entire rooms just for themselves. The result is a sensory overload that easily lets important details fall through the cracks. While it may seem unfair that certain moments get much more attention the powerful interactive experiences within these larger

²¹ Amy Wilson and Thomas J. Schlereth, "National Civil Rights Museum," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 3 (December 1996): 971–76, doi:10.2307/2945652. 171.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 174.

exhibits leave a lasting impression, making the National Civil Rights Museum a meaningful place for education and personal growth.

Viewers can look in the windows of a cutout of the Little Rock school to hear statements of people who were actually at the first integrated school in America. Hearing the voices in a similar setting to where they would have been spoken creates a sense for visitors to feel like they were at the school themselves. Another interaction begins upon entering a real 1950s public bus. Recordings of angry insults are hurled at a cutout of Rosa Parks sitting in one of the front seats and patrons are encouraged to move around the vehicle and sit down with her. Visitors face more recordings of angry crowds as they sit at a recreation of a segregated lunch counter, and as they walk on the steps towards a Mississippi University exhibit, emulating the fears that James Meredith might have faced as he became the only black student at the university in 1962.

Many critics of museums say that if it happened in the past, it doesn't matter anymore. The infamous "So What?" question is answered by The National Civil Rights Museum including these interactive experiences that make visitors feel like they were part of these historic moments themselves. Although each person's reaction may be different, by giving visitors simulated experiences of these past civil rights activists, they may have similar feelings as well. The challenges and lessons within these exhibits are made into living scenes, rather than static stories of the past. In fact, the architecture itself helps set the mood by creating upward slopes along the paths as visitors enter the exhibits on the March on Washington and the Selma to Montgomery March of 1965 to create a sense of hardship and overcoming. Recreating the moments of "Bloody Sunday" at the Selma to Montgomery march, the path rises over a replica of the Edmund Pettus Bridge where over six hundred marchers crossed. On the other side, unidentified

mannequin soldiers in gas masks wait to ambush the protestors, depicted by the museum visitors themselves.²⁴

These powerful tactics are highly effective when facing patrons who may need persuading on why civil rights is such an important issue. It can, however, also trigger historical trauma in their visitors. This trauma is utilized in many racial exhibits and contributes to the victimization stereotypes of African Americans and other minorities. While it is important to be empathetic for those who faced these tragedies, institutions must allow the current Black community to have authority over how they are portrayed. Instilling a sense of pride for what their predecessors have overcome acknowledges the tragedies while still presenting a hope of a better future. This is why the final portion of the National Civil Rights Museum is such an elegant blend of historical context and public education.

Built onto what was once the Lorraine Motel, the room where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stayed has been recreated to how it would have looked on his final day. Behind a glass wall, an unread newspaper lays on an unmade bed. A small meal sits between the two beds and the room almost speaks for itself, it has an emotional authority that makes everything else before it pale in comparison.²⁵ Paired with well-written plaques providing details of Dr. King's life and achievements, the room serves as a final point of reflection for patrons. Going back to the previous interactive exhibits in the building, putting people in an environment that is similar to the topic they are learning about evokes an emotional response. The academic information provided, however, brings them back to a place where they can fully process what they have seen and learn from it.

²⁴ Ibid, 174.

²⁵ Robert Hamburger, "'For Us the Living': Visits to Civil Rights Museums," *Southern Cultures* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 52–67, doi:10.1353/scu.0.0011. 57.



“Kings Last Hours,” civilrightsmuseum.org, National Civil Rights Museum, 2020.²⁶

As the first museum of its kind, the National Civil Rights Museum broke many barriers; yet it still has left room for others to surpass it. Founded one year after the National Civil Rights Museum, The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute sits across the street from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Birmingham, Alabama has been deeply connected to the Civil Rights movement. The institution's location across from the church where four children were tragically killed in a KKK bombing in September of 1963 makes it a monument to all the past unnecessary violence that happened within the city. With Birmingham's reputation as a crucial part of the history of civil rights, the institute brings the idea of learning through experience past that of the National Civil Rights Museum. The exhibits are presented as a journey with names such as *The Confrontation Room* and *The Movement Room*.²⁷ Videos of battered protesters and relics of a segregated past hit close to home for many of the museum's patrons as the institution does not hold back when presenting the reality of the situation. Public institutions often prefer to soften

²⁶ “Kings Last Hours,” civilrightsmuseum.org, National Civil Rights Museum Copyright 2020, <https://www.civilrightsmuseum.org/kings-last-hours>.

²⁷ Robert Hamburger, “‘For Us the Living’: Visits to Civil Rights Museums,” 57.

their blows when discussing violence and tragedy but the sometimes-graphic images and videos on display tell the exact truth of what happened in the American South. Again, this racial trauma must be paired with healing as it is important to allow visitors to process what they have seen so that they can learn from it instead of simply be upset by it.

But how should racial topics be presented? By having museums specified for the topic, racial stories get the uppermost treatment they rightly deserve and more of the details can come out. What about those who could learn from these exhibits, but would not typically go to a civil rights museum? Interviewing visitors is one of the most straightforward ways to measure the successes and setbacks within a museum. In a piece for the history journal *Southern Cultures*, student, and second-generation Columbian immigrant Michale Giraldo reflects, “To me this is *American* history. It makes it smaller to call it Black history.”²⁸

In an attempt to right the wrongs of the past, civil rights museums have created spaces that cater to the exact topic which many people wanted to sweep under the proverbial rug due to its tragic history. It is important to give social justice activists of the past and the future a place in the spotlight, but Giraldo’s observation makes for a good point. There is a fine line between becoming an exclusive environment, rather than a multicultural learning center. To create a proper balance, civil rights museums must incorporate their stories within the larger American experience and more general museums must include more topics that involve all cultures. The act of including collections that are relatable to everybody is a welcoming sign that often speaks louder than any outreach program.

The National Voting Rights Museum in Selma, North Carolina embraces this practice by allowing the local community to tell their narrative in the civil rights story. The *I Was There*

²⁸ Ibid.

Wall is an interactive exhibit that displays an array of handwritten notes. Visitors who were in Selma during the Civil Rights movement are encouraged to write down their personal experiences. Some tell stories of defiance as one patron writes “I also did not graduate high school due to my involvement in the march.” Another note simply states, “I was there all the time. —Velma Hatcher.”²⁹ Plaster footprints of actual local activists commemorate the 1965 marches which then lead visitors to a simple memorial across the hall in a small darkly lit room. Pedestals holding portraits and electric candles glow twenty-four hours to honor the dozen civil rights workers who were killed during these marches and protests. The faces of Reverend James Reeb, Jimmie Lee Jackson, Viola Liuzzo, and other past heroes look out from a makeshift temple that may be considered “shabby” when compared to other museum exhibits. Although small, the plywood ziggurat is the centerpiece of an institution that relies on a shoestring budget and the goodness of its volunteers. Although The National Voting Rights Museum is one of the smaller museums author Robert Hamburger writes, “One step inside and you feel that what you see truly matters.”³⁰ It does not matter what kind of museum it is, or the quality of the building it is in, the fact that The National Voting Rights Museum brings together the citizens of Selma in a way that still honors the past while looking forward to the unfinished mission of equality makes it an exemplary example for the museum industry.

Another institution that proves that a large collection or an impressive facility isn’t required to effectively promote positive racial change is The Albany Civil Rights Movement Museum in Albany, Georgia. Located in the renovated Mount Zion Baptist Church, this museum is run by a small, dedicated team that serves as both a museum and a digital oral history research center. Colorful quilts made by local residents hang in what was once the church sanctuary that

²⁹ Ibid, 62.

³⁰ Ibid, 63.

each tell a part of the community's cultural heritage. Framed photographs highlight the historic landmarks in the town and show how it has changed or stayed the same over the years. These local influences give a smaller, more intimate feeling that connects visitors to the exhibits while the personal touches influence how patrons approach these culturally charged items. The research center portion of the institution is also vital to connect patrons in a way they may have never anticipated. Made very much for the local community, instead of tourists; this research center acts as an archive that holds familial history that may have otherwise been lost. The level of trust that is involved with communities donating their personal stories to an institution reveals just how proficient the Albany Civil Rights Museum is at building relationships with the communities they serve.

Chapter Four: Race in Conventional Museums

So far, the only institutions that have been analyzed are exclusively civil rights museums. It may appear that the only museums that feel comfortable confronting the racial conflicts in the United States are ones whose mission rotates specifically around that particular issue. So how does this narrative compare when it is displayed in current conventional museums? Is there, and should there, be a difference?

The first example comes along with its own civil rights museum for comparison. At first glance, The Mississippi History Museum and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum are two completely different buildings. The history museum is adorned with Roman columns and has the classic academic look that is often associated with history museums. The civil rights museum on the other hand has a much more contemporary look with sharp edges and large windows. Different as they are, they do share an auditorium, restrooms, bookstore, cafe, and second-floor gallery. The two museums merge at a central intersection which combines both collections in an artful blend of southern heritage between two independent entities within one larger complex.



Glenn T. Eskew. "Museum of Mississippi History; Mississippi Civil Rights Museum." 2018³¹

³¹ Glenn T. Eskew, "Two Mississippi Museums: Museum of Mississippi History; Mississippi Civil Rights Museum," 1273.

The idea for the two museums to be built as one was originally resisted by (mostly White) politicians for fear that exhibiting unpleasant topics would upset the public and harm tourism. However, former governor William F. Winter led the charge and the two museum ideas successfully merged into one facility in 2010. The ninety-million-dollar building opened with great fanfare just in time to celebrate the state's bicentennial on December 9, 2017.³²

One would hope that both of these museums would provide a multi-layered presentation on the many sides of the state's history. By looking at the way the collections are presented however, it is clear that the history museum's broader mission has put it at a disadvantage. Quantity over quality is an issue that has been seen in some of the previous exhibit examples such as the opening exhibit of the National Civil Rights Museum. The Museum of Mississippi History also falls short as they try to overextend their reach. Glen T. Eskew, who specializes in southern United States history, compares the entrance to a children's *I Spy* book. The walls are covered with hundreds of photographs of the objects that lay within.³³ While it is an exciting display, by letting the objects speak for themselves without any context the significance of each individual piece is obscured. Within the history museum, there is a valiant effort to represent the state's story as a whole. While it is clear that the expansive collection has many noteworthy pieces, some parts deserve to have a spotlight more than others.

One might expect that the Civil War would warrant its own space in a museum in the American South, but is absorbed into a display on general military service. Eskew later criticizes in his review that, "here one finds ladies' church hats next to a Ku Klux Klan robe, as if both only made fashion statements in 1920s Mississippi."³⁴ Civil rights in the South are not

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

completely forgotten as the Civil Rights Act of 1866 marks the beginning of *The World Remade* exhibit which celebrates all the positive things that came from the hardships of the past, yet again there is the problem of overstimulation. With so many items, any overarching theme is muddled, and it requires a visit to the neighboring wing to understand the true significance of emancipation, reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation. So just how does the neighboring wing display this history?

The Mississippi Civil Rights Museum is as much an artistic experience as it is a learning one. The spiritual turned civil rights anthem “This Little Light of Mine” softly plays over the speakers as colors and lights flit about in the museum's signature “living sculpture.” In a groundbreaking combination of art and engineering, the sculpture, also titled *This Little Light of Mine* hangs in the center of one of the museum's eight galleries. The twisting web of illuminated fabric is most often in “ambient mode” with gentle shifting lights and audio, as well as a performance of *This Little Light of Mine* and *Ain't Gonna' Let Nobody Turn Me Around* recorded by local vocalists playing every half hour.³⁵ The real potential of this sculpture is seen when it is turned to “interactive mode” for special groups and events. The lights and sound react as the number of people in the gallery increases, sensing their movements and responding in turn. A promotional video by *Transformit*, the company involved with making the sculpture, shows young children being prompted to wave their hands to “send up their light.”³⁶ It is meant to be a symbol of cooperation and hope as the group works together to get the sculpture to “sing” to them. Points of light from its various blades build a sense of unity as they lead into the

³⁵ Sherry Lucas, “This Little Light of Mine' shines at Civil Rights Museum,” *Mississippitoday.org*, Mississippi Today 2020, December 1, 2017, <https://mississippitoday.org/2017/12/02/this-little-light-of-mine-shines-at-civil-rights-museum/>.

³⁶ Jim Ahearne, “This Little Light of Mine,” *Fabric Architecture*, <https://www.transformit.com/news/this-little-light-of-mine>.

different exhibits all circulating back to this central location. Eskew concludes his review by stating that the unique eye-catcher for the institute provides a “much needed emotional release and respite as visitors work their way through the difficult exhibitions.”³⁷



*Transformit, This Little Light of Mine, 2017, fabric sculpture, Mississippi Civil Rights Museum.*³⁸

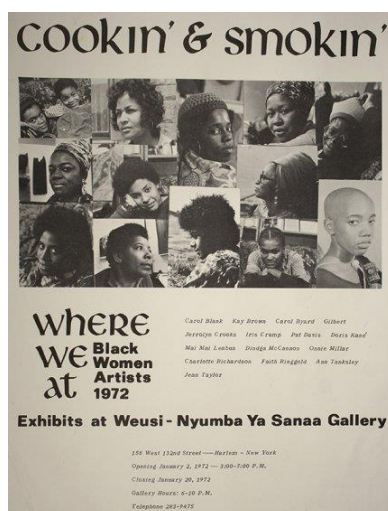
There is a more prominent message in the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum than that of its neighbor. The physical artifacts within the more conventional history museum are left to speak for themselves. Without any guidance, they act as remnants of a darker past without providing any outlook for a brighter future. This one-dimensional perspective can leave visitors feeling apathetic and uninspired. While the mission of civil rights museums is much narrower than those of conventional museums, there is a “dual history” that is too often accepted as the norm. Reconsider Michale Giraldo’s comment after visiting the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, that the history of civil rights is American history. It should be taught unapologetically in all museums that deal with the American past. Racial topics are deeply entrenched in all

³⁷ Glenn T. Eskew, “Two Mississippi Museums,” 1274.

³⁸ Sherry Lucas, “This Little Light of Mine’ shines at Civil Rights Museum,” *Mississippitoday.org*, Mississippi Today 2020, December 1, 2017, <https://mississippitoday.org/2017/12/02/this-little-light-of-mine-shines-at-civil-rights-museum/>.

aspects of American culture and museums must bring those stories out of the shadows so that they can educate and inspire the communities they serve.

As the museum industry progresses, many conventional museums have been making strides to promote positive racial change through their collections. And since racial topics can be found everywhere, it is not exclusive to history collections. Art galleries are buying more diverse works as well as creating shows for contemporary Black artists. Running from February to May 2018, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY hosted the show *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85*. Highlighting the work of black women artists, this exhibit showcased the political, social, cultural, and aesthetic ideals of Black women from the 1960s to the mid-1980s. Distinct from the primarily White, middle-class mainstream feminist movement, the art exhibition reorientated the conversation around the significant historical period.³⁹



Where We At Collective. *Cookin' and Smokin'*, 1972, Offset printed poster, 14 x 11 inches, Collection of David Lusenhop.⁴⁰

³⁹ “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85,” Albright Knox.org, <https://www.albrightknox.org/art/exhibitions/we-wanted-revolution-black-radical-women>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Featuring a wide array of art forms, this show presented an excellent blueprint for how any collection can be reimagined to bring racial topics to light. By dedicating time to research each piece and finding the multiple layers that make up their meanings, any number of themes can be created. Considering interpretation within different art movements, aesthetics, historic, and cultural significance, an astute curator should be able to see within each piece multiple ways to contextualize an artist's experience and expression. There is an ethical question to this curation process that should also be kept in mind. The racial identity of the staff should not matter as long as they are qualified and acknowledge that they cannot interpret the personal experiences of a community to which they do not belong. That being said, many people of color have rightly criticized museums that readily hire White staff when there are equally qualified Black people applying to work with these items.

A journalist for *The Guardian*, Teju Adia-Farrar published an open letter in response to the Brooklyn Museum hiring a White curator to work with their African art collection, stating that White museum staff have platforms of influence easily available to them while there is an abundance of “curators who are part of the African diaspora who are qualified and available.”⁴¹ Also, the urban areas where museums are most often found are also areas commonly experiencing gentrification. When museums turn away African American applicants, they are actively contributing to the urban displacement. What can be problematic is when no people of color apply, or there are no open positions available. If that is the case, then staff need to be diligent to allow the interpretive authority to be given to those with whom the collection is meant to resonate.

⁴¹ Teju Adisa-Farrar, “Why Are White Curators Still Running African Art Collections?,” *The Guardian*, (Guardian News and Media, April 3, 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/03/brooklyn-museum-white-curators-african-art-open-letter>.

Reflecting on the examples given by the civil rights museums mentioned before, one way to resonate with local communities is to connect with local topics directly. The Rochester Museum & Science Center does this in a variety of ways. An eight-minute ride simulates an underwater expedition in Lake Ontario, and visitors can operate a hydraulic lock on a miniature Erie Canal. In the historic collections, there are tableaux staged behind antique store windows to display how life might have been in Rochester in the late 1800s. Just around the corner from these scenes, there is a whole wing dedicated to local legend Frederick Douglass and the city's involvement in the abolitionist movement. What makes it interesting is how it is done in a way that addresses the horrors that people faced, while still being family friendly.

There are several scaled-down interactive vignettes meant for children. A hollowed-out tree complete with colorful plastic birds tells how clues were left in places such as these for enslaved people on their way to freedom. Children can pretend to row a small boat across Lake Ontario to Canada and sit inside a large crate as Henry "Box" Brown did in 1849 as he mailed himself from Virginia to freedom in Pennsylvania. The most poignant element of this exhibit is a small wooden cabin. Inside there is a table with plastic food and it is common to see younger children playing house. In the back of this cabin though, there is a door that leads to a dark crawl space where a deafening recording of a heartbeat plays. The reason this example is so significant is because it is one of my first experiences realizing my own racial privilege. As a White girl growing up in a small rural town, I had little to no knowledge about the challenges that other races faced, but fifteen years later the frightening museum experience still resonates. This goes to show that a simple yet powerful display has the potential to educate the youngest of patrons.

No matter what kind of museum or visitor background, emotions are one of the strongest tools available to museum staff. When visitors are confronted with the ordeals that minorities

have had to face, often there is a wave of empathy. This is particularly true when the lesson is achieved through an interactive experience. However, simply getting people to care is half the battle. This empathy can be over exaggerated into pity which diminishes the pride and hope coming from these kinds of exhibits. It has become the expectation that more common sources of pride are brought into the spotlight in museum collections. This can be easy for most institutions to uphold because we are all American; or on a more global level, we are all human. An art show about dogs or an exhibit on presidents is a relatable crowd pleaser for almost everyone. There is nothing wrong with entertaining, easy shows. In fact, they can be a great way to offset the seriousness of museum academia. Nevertheless, there are historic events that must not be put aside. Hard questions about race are still being asked and as trusted receptacles of culture and identity, museums must answer them through exhibitions and programs that provide a complete and well-detailed truth.

Chapter Five: Economy of Memory

As seen by the exhibits presented above, representing someone's identity can be difficult. It is important to maintain that everyone's experiences are different, while still trying to present a transformative experience for all kinds of participants. Some may question if the way museums handle race will even make a difference. It is true that one good exhibit will not magically end racism, but there is more power within these institutions than they are given credit. Museums have a reputation in truth telling. It is readily accepted that the way they present things is how things truly are, which provides a great opportunity to set things on a better path.

Dr. Robyn Autry eloquently describes the museum's place in civil rights' history in her article, "The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenges of Representing National Conflict at "Identity-Driven" Museums." While looking through a sociological lens, Autry examines how the depiction of racially motivated events directly affects the viewpoints of its audience. When adding the emotional output of racial violence, the influence of these identity-driven exhibits increases tenfold. Racial violence in America has been present long before it was officially the United States. The treatment of Indigenous peoples and immigrants over the centuries has only further solidified the Eurocentric ideals within the nation. Questioning these ideals by examining the racial violence that built the country can be understandably difficult, but it still needs to be discussed if we can hope to learn from it. Museums have the task of providing a place of understanding and healing in the face of these shortcomings. It is a place where the often oversimplified histories that are first taught should be re-examined. Whatever is presented in conventional history such as school textbooks is seen to be the whole story although in truth there may be vital parts trivialized or missing altogether.

Dr. Autry encapsulates the museum industry's place in all this in how "America's history of racial violence and oppression are refracted through the representation of black identity formation at black history museums established during the civil rights and post-civil rights era."⁴² Institutional differences within the wider museum world change how racial history is seen in each museum and how that history is taken in forms of the identities of the visitors themselves. The problem is that most conventional museums are selective about what they tell about the United States' racial past. Praising the nation's accomplishments encourages social cohesiveness and keeps tensions low. As a tourism industry, museums want to keep people happy. On the business side of things, staff do not want to make potential donors feel uncomfortable with potentially unpleasant themes. In an attempt to confront these issues while still openly acknowledging the continuing racial issues within the country, national culture and history are fragmented as it has gone through many cultural sieves, picking and choosing what is shown.⁴³ Collective editing of the past makes it malleable and creates a metanarrative that may not be as accurate as it appears.

The idea of identity throughout Dr. Autry's work calls into question just how influential museums are over their patrons. In a museum setting, people are directly immersed in their heritage and those of others. This is even more potent for patrons whose identity has included racially based conflict, and "new museology has positioned museums as theaters where identities are performed."⁴⁴ Autry's research demonstrates that histories that deal with these types of conflicts are usually found in sub-national identity museums. Sub-national identity meaning a

⁴² Robyn Autry, "The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenges of Representing National Conflict at 'Identity-Driven' Museums," *Theory & Society* 42, no. 1 (January 2013): 57–80, doi:10.1007/s11186-012-9185-5. 58.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 59.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 60.

smaller group within a larger nation. These types of museums include those within the Black museum scape meaning “that black people aren't just subject matter, but the audience as well, growing out of the black museum movement of the 1960s and 1970s.”⁴⁵ All of the civil rights museums reviewed previously were direct descendants from this movement. Groups fighting for their rights during this time not only wanted to gain equality in the present, but they also wanted, and deserved, to have their heritage equally represented in the nation's conventional museums.

It is disheartening that it is only recently that institutions are being founded on the idea that there is far more to tell about the racial past. The call for a national slavery museum in the Smithsonian complex was denied for many years by politicians and Smithsonian museum staff alike, most of whom were White. Eventually, the National Museum of African American History and Culture Act passed in 2003 and the National Museum of African American History and Culture only just opened in 2016.⁴⁶ By reviewing both African American and conventional museums since the Civil Rights era, it is evident there are successes and shortcomings in their exhibits that can provide vital information. By learning from these reviews, current museums will be able to better present the African American story.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 63.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 64.

Chapter Six: The Year 2020

Not including the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement, the year 2020 has been a historic one. Natural disasters, disease, and social and political tension have left many wondering how it all could happen within the span of twelve months. The influx in these events may not be as big a surprise as some people might think. Lecturer David Baker studies “cliodynamics, which uses dozens of case studies of civilizations over the past 5,000 years to look for mathematical patterns in human history.”⁴⁷ Written on January 2, 2020, Baker predicted worsening wealth inequality, political polarization, and more violence in the upcoming decade as a result of the previous years’ growing population and resources. Written only two days into the year 2020, it is shocking how right he was.

According to Baker there is a certain pattern or cycle that has emerged time and time again in global and national histories. The cycle begins with new technologies providing more opportunities and resources. Then with more resources, there is more stability. This leads to the population increasing and people become more prosperous as a result. Eventually, a super-elite class forms by becoming extremely wealthy as they now control the technology and have created systems to keep that control. Lower classes are kept in place with this system as well and they provide the labor necessary for profit, yet they receive very little of that profit. The resources are unevenly distributed as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. With growing dissatisfaction, there is often a “trigger event” such as a natural disaster or sickness that acts as a catalyst for uprisings and dissolution of controlling powers. This repeating cycle is what “fed the Wars of the

⁴⁷ David Baker, “History repeats itself. That’s bad news for the 2020s,” *theconversation.com*, 2010-2020, The Conversation US, Inc., January 2, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/history-repeats-itself-thats-bad-news-for-the-2020s-127116>.

Roses between the Lancastrians and Yorkists in 15th century England, the struggle between the Optimates and Populares in the Roman Republic, and countless other conflicts in history.”⁴⁸



David Baker, *The Great Acceleration*.⁴⁹

As seen in the graph above, the modern global system has been experiencing a “great acceleration” since the end of World War II that reflects the global cycle Baker focuses on. A boom in technology and globalization has made the availability and use of the world’s resources skyrocket. This means that currently there are parties that are profiting off the high demand for resources. What makes this different from cycles in the past is that globalization has made the nations of the world depend on each other more than ever. The international exchange of

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

material goods, as well as various intangible cultural, social, and political ideas makes a delicate balance between interdependent nations. If this balance were to be disrupted by a trigger event, such as the Coronavirus pandemic, it could mean an even bigger downfall than seen in previous patterns. On the downward end of these cycles, violence and disasters have typically killed “an average of 20% of the population. On a global scale, today, that would mean 1.6 to 1.7 billion people dead.”⁵⁰ While it is disheartening that we may be on the same path as European peasants right before the Black Death, we do have one advantage. Today’s rate of technological growth is the fastest it has ever been. Baker states that to begin another era of upward movement, there needs to be “generous funding, monumental projects, and bold ventures to lift humanity out of a potential abyss.”⁵¹ Not only should people focus on improving the world physically through new technologies and systems, but socially as well.

There is hope that new developments will make the world an easier place to live in. By having a healthier and more prosperous world there would be fewer tensions and therefore fewer conflicts. But how can we prevent another downfall such as this one? In order to break the system, a new set of ideals need to be put into place that protect the liberties of all people while still reaching for prosperity. To sound cliché, it would seem that to change the world, people first need to change themselves.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Chapter Seven: Museums Response to Black Lives Matter in 2020

Some would argue that the monumental growth of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) is the beginning of a new era for human rights. The systematic oppression of people of color has been boiling over for far too long and the tragic loss of life from the law enforcement system has acted as the boiling point. While this kind of violence has been occurring over generations, it is the first wave of activism that has had a fully developed internet as a tool for promoting activism. Instead of the few monumental leaders of the Civil Rights movement, the internet has allowed countless people to become powerful leaders themselves. Through social media, groups have also gained more followers than ever before and have brought the fight for human rights back into the mainstream. It is now socially expected that large institutions, such as museums; take a stance.

Through public statements and postings on the internet, museums are showing their support across the globe. Museums are mostly found within cities, especially those that have a great deal of creative culture such as Paris, New York, London, and Los Angeles. It only makes sense that these highly populated cities have also seen many Black Lives Matter protests. The Walker Art Center is located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which was the hometown of the late George Floyd. The art center used their social media to announce that they had cut ties with law enforcement and would not cooperate in any way until there had been meaningful and long-lasting changes in the police system following Floyd's death at the hands of the police force.⁵²

⁵² Manuel Charr. "How Have Museums Responded to the Black Lives Matter Protests?," museumnext.com, MuseumNext 2020, June 10, 2020, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/how-have-museums-responded-to-the-black-lives-matter-protests/>.

Following suit, European museums such as the British Museum, The Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, and the Quai Branly Museum in Paris have utilized social media to voice their support for African Americans and the wider community of people of color around the world. In a statement, the director of the Quai Branly Museum announced that his and other European museums holding African objects should provide the “colonial context by which many of the institution’s artifacts were acquired.”⁵³

Now the amount of support coming from institutions in formerly imperial countries does not come without its controversies. Their collections contain a large number of items from previously colonized countries, and some critics are finding that kind words and promises to do better are not enough. There is a public outcry for the reparations and the return of cultural objects and at the very least, to interpret them in a way that is deemed appropriate by the cultures that are being depicted.

As the Black Lives Matter movement moves forwards, the public is no longer content with words of sympathy and wants firm actions instead. The Getty and the San Francisco MOMA’s social media statements of support were seen as vague and noncommittal. Having been deemed as too little too late, both museums have now taken down those statements and replaced them with apologies and promises to do better. On the other hand, there are some museums that are taking actions, but not in favor of the activists. The privately-run Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City allowed police to temporarily use their building as a home base while patrolling the downtown area during a BLM protest, which resulted in immediate backlash.⁵⁴ This one example stands out as most museums have at minimum remained neutral on the matter. It may not have been the gallery’s intention to be counterintuitive, but their actions

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

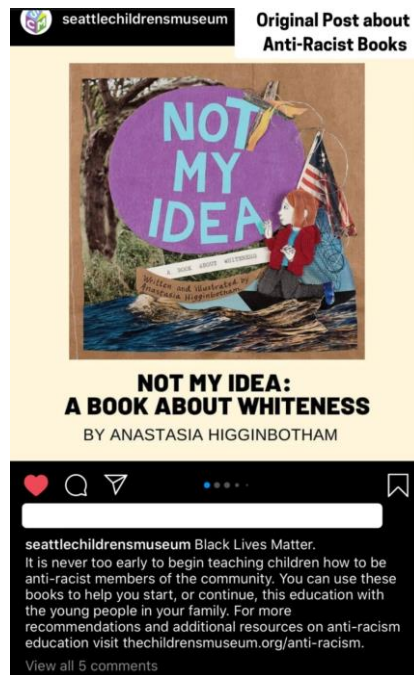
have placed them on the wrong side for many BLM supporters. Now as of May 2021, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art website currently has a page titled *Black Lives Matter* where they explain how there have been many mistakes made on their journey to become a better institution and now they are fully dedicated to the cause. Claiming they are listening to community members and striving to do better with the promise, “We stand with you now, and we will stand with you tomorrow.”⁵⁵ It cannot be said whether this is a genuine statement of growth from the museum, or simply damage control from the previous backlash but either way, it will determine how the community perceives it in the future.

Another mistake that museums have encountered while interacting with BLM is doubling back on previous statements. In May of 2020, the director of the Seattle Children’s Museum edited social media postings by removing the words “Black Lives Matter” that had previously been included in the statements. This immediately received negative feedback from the museum’s patrons and there was an emergency video call to learn what had happened and why. During the call with staff, the director confirmed that she supported the movement but removed the phrase because the message the museum sends out should be one “that the museum could all agree on as an organization.” “And what happens” she went on, “if we lose funding? What happens if we lose donors? All of those considerations have to be considered when we write the language around this.”⁵⁶ With a large institution there are always rules on what you can say and how to say it. The director may have had valid worries if the social media posts had not gone through the proper channels first. Nevertheless, the way they reacted fanned the proverbial flame

⁵⁵ “Black Lives Matter,” Nelson Atkins (2021 Nelson Atkins. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art), <https://nelson-atkins.org/black-lives-matter/>.

⁵⁶ Julia Jacobs, “Turmoil After a Museum Deletes ‘Black Lives Matter’ From Postings,” *nytimes.com*, 2020 The New York Times Company, August 4, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/04/arts/design/seattle-childrens-museum.html>.

more than put it out. This example of a public statement illustrates the lack of policy as well as repercussions of an individual's changes putting the museum at risk of being misunderstood. It can be seen in the public's opinion of postings made by the previous museums mentioned that clear support of an issue is much more appealing than any lackluster claim.



Seattle Children's Museum, *Anti-Racist Books*, Instagram, May 2020.⁵⁷

Nine employees of the Seattle Children Museum (who had been working online due to the COVID-19 pandemic) immediately went on strike and were later laid off. It has been confirmed that there had already been layoffs planned due to the pandemic but an outside investigator did look into the incident while the director was put on paid leave.⁵⁸ One would think that a children's museum would not be one of the more controversial examples in this study yet it caused a great deal of turmoil for current and past employees. The original postings

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

featured stories from local Black families and their experiences within the community as well as lists of children's books meant to help explain the concept of racism during this confusing time. These were meant to be a source of comfort for the youngest members of the Seattle community but instead, it has brought attention to the long-standing issues within the museum industry.

Remaining neutral on big issues may no longer be a viable option for museums. At least 40% of the Seattle Children's Museum's budget comes from public funding. The relationship with donors is often a lifeline to many institutions. Former employee Anthony Noceda explained in a statement to the New York Times that perhaps museums should look for other sources of funding that support activist causes and "If their values don't align with that, then we don't need their money."⁵⁹ While this kind of unapologetic stance towards those who would hinder positive social change may appear too radical for some public institutions, I believe that it is just what museums were meant for. Museums are meant to be places for human growth and cultural understanding. The recent acts of hate toward social justice movements and the people they represent are daunting. Museum staff and supporters can do their part in continuing to spread their mission in making their communities a better place and make long-lasting improvements. It is not the job of museums to speak for people of color as they are more than capable of speaking their truths. It is the job of museums to bring up the racial issues that some may not want to hear in a place where they can be safely worked out. Large ideas like race and inequality can be difficult to process, especially if someone's views have already been ingrained in them for a lengthy period. Museums can be a tool to begin the journey of learning and healing, no matter how many others may resist.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

An example of resistance to dealing with these issues happened in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania at the Clemente Museum which celebrates the late local baseball player Roberto Clemente. In September 2020, an unidentified White woman was recorded on surveillance cameras tearing down the large cloth banner that had been hung on the side of the building. The banner featured a fist raised in the air, (a symbol of human rights) holding a baseball that tied in the theme of the museum’s collection. A local news publisher had an interview the morning after with Clemente’s son, who was distraught by the act of hatred, and stood firm by his father’s morals. Clemente lived in Puerto Rico and was an active participant in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. On one occasion he even hosted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his home. The museum curator proudly told reporter Mike Elk that “Clemente would have been out there leading these [BLM] protests.”⁶⁰



The Clemente Museum, *Mural with Banner*, 2020.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Mike Elk, “Clemente Museum’s Black Lives Matter Art Destroyed by White Woman,” *paydayreport.com*, 2020 Payday Report News Co-Op, September 9, 2020, <https://paydayreport.com/clemente-museums-black-lives-matter-art-destroyed-by-white-woman/>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Sharing his own experience with police brutality in 1982 due to his darker skin, Clemente's son declared that he and the rest of the museum would continue to show their support for social justice openly despite the theft. Actions such as this unidentified woman's show that we as a human race still have a long way to go, but the city of Pittsburgh made it clear how the majority of its community feels. In response to the vandalism Clemente's old team, the Pittsburgh Pirates, all wore his now-retired number 21 in honor of Clemente Day which began in 2002 to celebrate the legendary baseball player and activist. Despite the banner being taken, local media and community members came together to show their open support for BLM. Although taking a stance may seem daunting to museum staff at first, there are more people for than against the Black Lives Matter movement.

While some resistance against the Black Lives Matter movement is purely political, some people may believe in the message, but think the actions being taken are the wrong way to go about achieving changes. Not only has the recent years provided historical moments in the fight for social justice, it has also added several changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Large gatherings of people have been discouraged due to the risk of infection spreading and new personal protection equipment such as facial masks are now a requirement in most locations. Despite these restrictions, there have still been large protests and demonstrations against racial injustice around the world.

There have been individuals who contracted the disease after attending demonstrations which have led to a media frenzy. Dubious stories reporting the dangers of Black Lives Matter protests have worked to portray the cause as one without rules or standards. Upon further research, Departments of Health across the world found that there was no evidence linking the

two directly.⁶² These people could have contracted the disease anywhere within the time frame including work, school, or any general public area. International reports of these demonstrations do show large groups enforcing social distancing, wearing masks, and obeying laws.

There have also been new and inventive ways to fight for social justice without being in person. The internet has allowed information to spread more than ever before and it is accessible to anyone even if they are in quarantine at home. By making things more accessible, the message has been spread even further. Artist Stacey Robinson achieved this with her series of billboards in the city of Buffalo. She was already planning an art show at the CEPA Gallery in the summer of 2020 but due to quarantine restrictions, a typical exhibition would not be possible. It was with the help of the CEPA Gallery that Robinson was able to quickly re-imagine her art into twelve off-highway billboards featuring original artworks. Accompanying the visuals is a series of hashtags citing #Black Joy, Education, Futures, Health, Creativity, Love, Family, Lives, Freedom, Power, Justice, and History Matter.⁶³ What is so special about these individual pieces is that they highlight the realities of institutionalized racism, focusing the public's attention not only on the issue of police violence but on the many challenges and contributions of Black people in our communities.

⁶² Kendall Meade, "Black Lives Matter protests, a Covid-19 outbreak and the 'link' that didn't exist," [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/jul/17/black-lives-matter-protests-a-covid-19-outbreak-and-the-link-that-didnt-exist), 2020 Guardian News & Media Limited, July 16, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/jul/17/black-lives-matter-protests-a-covid-19-outbreak-and-the-link-that-didnt-exist>.

⁶³ "Black Matters (2020) - CEPA Gallery: Contemporary Photography & Visual Arts Center: Buffalo, NY," CEPA Gallery | Contemporary Photography & Visual Arts Center | Buffalo, NY, October 6, 2020, <https://www.cepagallery.org/exhibit-event/black-matters-2020/#>.



Stacey Robinson, *#BlackCreativityMatter*, billboard, 2020.⁶⁴

Prints of these designs have been made available on the gallery’s website as well as links to more information about the artists and her collaboration with Jon Jennings as the duo “Black Kirby” exploring the experiences and existences within the Black community. These billboards were a stroke of genius because they are visible to anyone driving through Buffalo. If even for a brief moment, their thoughts on the BLM movement are shifted from the two-dimensional “us vs them” to reality. The reality is that the current fight for human rights isn’t just about Black lives, but a whole system of experiences.

Once one is comfortable with the easier two-dimensional view, it is more difficult to convince them to expand it. Another blow against BLM demonstrations is that there has been a skewed view on how they truly are. Depending on where one gets their information from, some say that these demonstrations are nothing more than anti-police mobs whose only goal is to cause chaos. Now it can also be determined that the sources which prefer this viewpoint are some of the most radicalized groups of the conservative side of politics. The Washington Post reported on the intense backlash Fox News reporter Tucker Carlson received after he stated on-air, “This may be a lot of things, this moment we’re living through, but it’s definitely not about Black

⁶⁴ Ibid.

lives,” Carlson said, “Remember that when they come for you, and at this rate, they will.”⁶⁵ Just by reading this one sentence out of the onslaught of media that has covered Black Lives Matter, it does not sit right with me, nor I hope with anyone who is in charge of our nation's cultural centers. The fearmongering taking place is unacceptable and has become more of a political issue than a human rights one. When looking at just the facts, 93% of Black Lives Matter protests have been peaceful. It is reported that as of September 2020 there were only 220 violent demonstrations reported including “acts targeting other individuals, property, businesses, other rioting groups or armed actors.”⁶⁶ Violent or peaceful, the majority of these demonstrations take place in urban, downtown areas. These spaces are also the homes of many museums. Through the studies shown above, one can see that how a museum supports or does not support activist movements directly affects how the public sees them. There are worries about upsetting donors or causing controversy but overall, the reactions to supportive museums have been positive overall.

⁶⁵ Allyson Chiu, “Tucker Carlson Says Protests Are 'Definitely Not about Black Lives,' Prompting Backlash,” The Washington Post (WP Company, June 9, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/09/fox-black-lives-carlson/>.

⁶⁶ Sanya Mansoor, “93% Of Black Lives Matter Protests Have Been Peaceful: Report,” Time (Time, September 5, 2020), <https://time.com/5886348/report-peaceful-protests/>.

Chapter Eight: Presenting Trauma

Turning a museum into a suitable social justice ally is a multifaceted journey. The first step is to unite all members of the institution under the same idea that this is an issue that deserves to be addressed. With #BlackLivesMatter spreading across the internet, it is no longer the blossoming activist group from 2013 but an international movement. The second step is to make your dedication to the cause known to the public and stay true to it. It can be seen through the examples of others that promising too little, or not being true to those promises is just as damaging to a museum's public image as remaining quiet on the matter. And while statements of devotion are suitable for an outside appearance, the most important thing is that there is a change within the museum as well. When presenting racial history and art, there is always the question of how to approach the unpleasant parts of it. While some museums look to highlight the challenges that Black people have overcome, it unintentionally victimizes the group and highlights the violence of it instead. Meanwhile, other exhibits subtly hide some of the more distressing facts to maintain a happy and family friendly environment. Dealing with trauma has a history of being a taboo topic because it makes people uncomfortable and is often misunderstood. There is a correct way to teach it though and like complex ideas, the answer is somewhere in the middle of these different approaches.

Looking back at the different exhibits mentioned in Chapters Three and Four, there are good and bad examples at each institution. Museums that have a large collection and a wide variety of topics to cover like the Museum of Mississippi History may let the objects speak for themselves to remove overly complicated exposition. The museums wanted to present a large

amount of information to their diverse audience, but it also removed important context from some of the more traumatic items rendering them less relevant to the average visitor.

On the other hand, providing too much information on a multitude of topics drowns everything out. For issues such as racial injustice, there is a tendency to either obscure the issue completely or make it so immersive that it can be detrimental. Shown by the emotionally powerful exhibits at several of the civil rights museums, the number one way to have visitors care about history is to have them feel like they were part of it. The upward slope of hallways at the National Civil Rights Museum represents the difficult march towards progress and allowing people to sit at the busses and lunch counters of the segregated past brings them into the moment. What some museums miss, though, is that there is a fine line between experiencing the past and reliving it.

According to the Administration for Children & Families' trauma toolkit, the term historical trauma is a moment of collective emotional harm on an individual or group at a certain point in time.⁶⁷ As a society, trauma is often misunderstood and therefore incorrectly addressed. The events that caused this trauma are often repressed as they are too upsetting for the individual and the emotional damage that occurs goes unnoticed. Adding another aspect to the issue, each person's relationship with this trauma is different and needs to be addressed at their own pace. It is a long and hard path to overcome and even then, there may still be lasting emotional damage.

What museums can do is take their emotionally charged exhibits and utilize them for understanding, rather than simply stirring up painful emotions. The director of the West Baton Rouge Museum Julia Rose has made a career in interpreting what she calls "difficult history."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ "Trauma," Administration for Children & Families, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/trauma-concept>.

⁶⁸ Julia Rose, "About the Author," interpretingdifficulthistory.com, <http://interpretingdifficulthistory.com/about-the-author/>.

It is considered “difficult” because the importance of the topic means there is much at stake for those experiencing an internal learning crisis. Providing a well-developed approach Rose states that “The audiences are learners, and they deserve effective strategies to engage in the learning of histories of oppression.”⁶⁹ The issue is that these traumatic histories can instigate all types of negative responses because not every person has the same level of tolerance for learning. When those boundaries are pushed, it creates a learning crisis, and that individual may shut down rather than open themselves up to a new perspective.

Rose’s work provides a sensitive learning strategy that can be abbreviated to “The Five Rs of Commemorative Museum Pedagogy Reception” or “The Five Rs.”⁷⁰ Following the five steps of Receive, Resistance, Repetition, Reflection, and Reconsideration an open discussion about historical and contemporary inequalities can begin. Firstly, a welcoming introduction to these kinds of exhibits gauges each person's readiness to *receive* these kinds of topics. By including a disclosure statement, visitors can be informed what parts of the presentation could be upsetting or controversial.⁷¹

When new information is seen as disruptive to the viewer’s personal understanding of history it challenges their sense of self or moral senses. This does not immediately mean that the individual lacks knowledge, but that the information is being presented to them in a new way that they need to process.⁷² Any *resistance* is a personal response that can happen to more experienced or inexperienced visitors and can be identified through changing the topic, sarcasm,

⁶⁹ Julia Rose, “Interpreting Difficult Knowledge,” in *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Max van Balgooy (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) 27.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷² *Ibid.*

or jokes. While resistance does need to be worked through, it does show a healthy ability to learn because visitors are indeed thinking about the topic.

At this point *repetition* of these difficult topics allows patrons to understand the content more deeply. It may mean that the same message needs to be presented in multiple areas or that multiple visits need to be taken to truly absorb the lessons provided. As patrons work through this knowledge, each new piece of information they find fits within the individual's preconceived concepts, therefore expanding their understanding.⁷³

Promoting these difficult lessons is important to present the full dimensions of racial history but it goes without saying that these traumatic topics are difficult to process. While learning, patrons deserve a place to *reflect* on this knowledge. This can be a place to talk with others or take a moment for themselves. This can be as simple as a few benches in a quiet area or a multi-sensory meeting place such as the This Little Light of Mine Gallery at the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum.

Although staff may not always be there to identify the moment, *reconsideration* of the topic marks a fundamental shift in the visitor's understanding. These "a-ha moments" can be seen when people want to discuss the issues further or through more subtle head nods, eye contact, and prolonged participation.⁷⁴ Although it would be convenient to have each visitor go through The Five Rs easily throughout one guided tour, each step does not happen sequentially and can take time to fully have any effects.

Museum staff may have the best intentions but cannot know how experiencing historical trauma will affect a person. This is especially pertinent to those patrons who have personal connections with this trauma as it is not the museum staffs' place to interpret it for them but to

⁷³ Ibid, 32.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

provide a safe space for learning about it. When it comes to sub-national cultures this is even more vital to remember.⁷⁵ Even if the person themselves has not experienced violence, learning about what others have faced can be emotionally draining.

The New Museum in New York City opened an art show in February 2021 that not only deals with trauma but is the main part of the show. Instead of manipulating the trauma of others for an easy emotional reaction, the exhibition *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America* tactfully displays the contemporary traumas endured by the Black community. The news outlet The Guardian reviewed the show shortly before its release. Featuring thirty-seven artists spanning from the 1960s to the present day, the show was first conceived in 2019 by the late Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor who had spent his life championing for Black artists. In a world where Black people are twice as likely to die from Covid-19 and the rising issue of unchecked police brutality the show was created in Enwezor's honor by New Museum director Massimiliano Gioni, deputy director of the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum Naomi Beckwith, and artists Glenn Ligon and Mark Nash.⁷⁶

Focusing on Black mourning and White nationalism in America, the show was originally planned to debut around the same time as the 2020 presidential election but was postponed due to Covid-19. Reflecting on Julia Rose's Five Rs, the message of grief is repeated on each of the gallery's three floor. Contemporary paintings and digital artworks surround three centerpieces. These centerpieces are historical artworks each chosen as a hallmark of the activist era in which they were made. One being Jack Whitten's 1964 piece *Birmingham* as a response to the 16th

⁷⁵ *Sub-national*: A group with a shared identity within a larger national identity. For example, African Americans within the United States. Autry, "The Political Economy of Memory."

⁷⁶ "Grief and Grievance: How Artists Respond to Racial Violence in America," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, February 4, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/feb/04/new-museum-grief-and-grievance-exhibition>.

Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963. The next being Daniel LaRue Johnson's 1963 *Freedom Now, Number 1* and ending with Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Procession* from 1986.⁷⁷



Jack Whitten, *Birmingham*, 1964, Aluminum foil, newsprint, stocking, and oil on plywood, 42.2 x 40.6 cm, Collection of Joel Wachs.⁷⁸



Daniel LaRue Johnson, *Freedom Now, Number 1*, 1964, Pitch on canvas with "Freedom Now" button, broken doll, hacksaw, mousetrap, flexible tube, and wood, 136.6 x 140.5 x 18.9 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ "Birmingham," Postwar. Haus Der Kunst, <https://postwar.hausderkunst.de/en/artworks-artists/artworks/birmingham>.

⁷⁹ "Freedom Now, Number 1," Postwar. Haus Der Kunst, <https://postwar.hausderkunst.de/en/artworks-artists/artworks/freedom-now-number-1-freiheit-jetzt-nummer-1>.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Procession*, 1986, Installation view in “Basquiat and the Bayou” at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans (photo by John d’Addario.)⁸⁰

What this exhibition shows is that there is a way to present traumatic topics in museum spaces that both encourages a healthy amount of mourning for past events while also advocating for the future. As part of a cultural learning center, the exhibit’s main goal is to teach. While an emotional connection may be a good resource in reaching out to potential learners, it should not be the only focus. The physiological effects of trauma are complex and unique to each person’s relationship with it. It is natural to feel upset when reflecting on these racial tragedies, but they should also be given the level of dignity they deserve. This dignity can be shown through a number of ways as long as it centers on the fact that these events are not the end of the story. No matter what kind of trauma, injury, abuse, or cultural inequality; the path to healing begins when there is a point of moving on. The memory of that trauma will always be remembered as it is vital to the growth and healing that will take place, but it is the healing that leads to a better future.

⁸⁰ John d’Addario, “Basquiat in the American South,” *Hyperallergic*, January 12, 2015, <https://hyperallergic.com/158724/basquiat-in-the-american-south/>.

Chapter Nine: Healing Tools

There is a duality within the museum industry that is preventing museums from realizing their full potential as places of cultural healing. Museums have become a large factor in many local economies and their focus has been turned to attracting tourists rather than learners. Many management decisions are made to maintain a low-conflict atmosphere that can appeal to the largest number of people and therefore bringing in larger profits. These “happy histories” are not as complete as they would seem as difficult subjects are mentioned, but not sustainably addressed. What Black Lives Matter and other human rights groups are aiming for is not to erase those difficult subjects, but to remodel how they are taught so that people as a collective society can make lasting improvements within the larger system. If museums provide a place where the hard questions about race can be assessed, then the preconceived stereotypes that have deterred many from healing can be confronted. These stereotypes prevent others from discovering the deeper lessons within their own self-identity. The amazing thing about museums is that with the right staff and a good plan, they provide “public spaces to counter stereotypical thinking.”⁸¹

In Chapter Five, it is seen in Dr. Robyn Autry’s article that self-identity can be influenced by external ways of thinking. Since museums are accepted as places of fact rather than opinion, whatever is presented about race is seen as the truth. What makes this even more prevalent is that besides schools, museums are often the first places young people learn about race in an academic setting. Dr. Annaliese A. Singh brings up this point in *The Racial Healing Handbook*. In this book, racial identity and racial identity development are looked at as a social construct that needs to be developed through nonjudgmental curiosity and learning. What gives this book such great

⁸¹ Autry, “The Political Economy of Memory,” 77.

potential as a healing tool for museums is that it contains various exercises and diagrams that can benefit people of all racial backgrounds. Going through each of the ten chapters brings the reader through a healing process that guides people through acknowledgment, reflection, and improvement.

Singh begins by asking readers when they first realized they had a racial identity, meaning that they realized that there were racial differences between people and they identified with one of those differences.⁸² There are spaces where readers can write down their thoughts and feelings of these experiences. Then she continues by telling the stories of a White man named Phillip and a Latina woman named Della. At three years old Phillip was riding in a car through a predominantly Black neighborhood that he was not familiar with and said “I don’t like those people” and then immediately felt shameful about it.⁸³ Della recalls when her family moved to a predominantly White area and being called a racial slur. Later after talking with her family she was told how it was a bad word to say and reminded her about all the amazing things about her racial background. Even with this encouragement Della still found herself wishing she were White instead, but then felt guilty as if she had turned her back on her culture.⁸⁴

Even with their differences both Phillip and Della held feelings of guilt and shame when they began to acknowledge their racial identities. Singh explains that these feelings came because somehow, they did not receive the explicit positive message from their family, school, textbooks, or other sources of information. In this case, museums are this other source of information. The chapter concludes by confirming that race is indeed a social construct, but it is

⁸² Anneliese A. Singh, *The Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism & Engage in Collective Healing* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2019) 11.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 14.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*.

one that needs to be learned about rather than ignored. By encouraging “color blindness” people in places of privilege are becoming complacent to the inequality faced by other races. To understand one’s own racial identity there is a list of steps depending on your race. For White people it is Conformity, Acceptance, Resistance, Retreat, Emergence, and then Integrative Awareness.⁸⁵ First White people are mostly oblivious to race as it is not something that they normally have to confront and approach the world as “color blind.” Later an incident will press them to accept that racism is real but is not a real issue to them because it brings up uncomfortable feelings. Resistance may occur when trying to justify any lack of action by saying one’s action will not mean anything but then feel hopeless if any actions go without immediate results bringing on a retreat. The ultimate goal for White people is to overcome their internalized blame and hopelessness to become more aware of their own privileges and know that being White in itself is not a bad thing and challenge themselves to learn and grow even more.

Because people of color tend to have different experiences than White people, their steps to racial identity are different as well. Starting again with the color blindness of Conformity and then leading to Dissonance, Immersion, Emersion, Internalization, and Integrative Awareness.⁸⁶ The Dissonance phase is parallel to the Acceptance phase previously mentioned as an instance of racism will create a sense of uncertainty later followed by Immersion which is when noticing the inequalities in society creates a level of distrust of White people. Emersion is a direct response to this as the individual will begin to form connections with others that share their racial identity while Internalization will result in a relationship with antiracist White people after internalizing that they are more than their race. Finally, Integrative Awareness occurs when one balances the

⁸⁵ Ibid, 20.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 21.

ideas that racism exists, and they have a racial identity, but they also have many other personal identities which can branch out to a world of other relationships and possibilities.

The Racial Healing Handbook continues with this dual approach as readers of different racial identities both require racial healing for different reasons. With a focus on the healing itself, the first half of the book reflects the first half of both racial identity development journeys. Exercises throughout ask readers to write about how they were taught about race, how people around them interacted with other races, and more specifically what they would have needed to result in a more antiracist lifestyle. By integrating exercises like these within the museum industry, new programs can become the resource that these participants may have needed.

This is especially important as Singh confirms that the healing process is also one of constant learning. In a balance of learning about oneself and one's emotions on internal and external racism to understanding how the system of race affects other identity groups means that this is both an emotional and academic journey. It can already be seen that museums are halfway there with the exhibits seen in Chapters Three and Four of this study as they have an emotional connection to the viewer as well as an overarching lesson. To further improve these museum experiences staff can improve their own understanding by two methods, education, and people.⁸⁷

In this case, the education can come from museum exhibits that have been thoroughly researched by staff utilizing books, articles, and media that promote racial healing. Museums can also be the "people" in this equation as well by inviting speakers, employing diverse staff, and creating relationships with the African American community. Building these relationships is a vital part of becoming an antiracist institution. As a collective group people within the museum need to seek out resources and educate themselves and push themselves to stand up for

⁸⁷ Ibid, 83.

injustices. For White people, this may mean that they will make mistakes but continue trying to self-improve, while Black people may have conflicting emotions as they also need to build relationships, but past racist experiences have left them frustrated and apprehensive.

Singh mentions her personal experiences with race as a woman of Indian heritage throughout the book and its exercises as a way to connect with her readers. With general questions like, “List some communities of which you are a part of right now.” it shows that it is an easy-going informal workbook that everybody can learn from while still getting its important message across.⁸⁸ Even if a museum does not discuss race at all within its collection, the current Black Lives Matter movement has raised many questions about race and as a public institution that relies heavily upon the community which it serves, understanding that community better can certainly help.

If a museum fully dedicates itself to becoming a place of positive racial change, a lasting justice community can form around it. Defined as a group of people working together on racial healing and accountability endeavors, Singh describes it in her closing chapter as a kind of symbiotic relationship where each person branches across racial identities to build relationships and create lasting changes.⁸⁹ Applying this to museums there would be three participating parties, the museum itself, the museum members, and its patrons. Patrons can hold the museum accountable for its actions and build personal relationships with staff members. Members can then influence how the museum develops and works with patrons on their own racial journeys.

The one thing that *The Racial Healing Handbook* does not touch on is the very real racist events that are taking place in the United States currently. While it focuses more on the very important introspective healing process, we must also address the external stressors such as

⁸⁸ Ibid, 189.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 191.

police brutality that show that change needs to come sooner rather than later. Like many things, the answer as to what museums can do is somewhere in the middle. By building relationships with experts, museums can create programs that call for immediate changes as they also take a step back and look at the bigger system in place.

On December 15th, 2018 musical artist Brophesor X held a performance at The Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tennessee. A video of the performance is on a page of the gallery's website titled "Black Lives Matter " and showcases a number of items in their collection by Black artists, Black staff members, local Black-owned businesses, and community organizations aimed at benefiting minorities. The video takes place in what one would interpret as a conventional art gallery. A diverse audience sits quietly in folding chairs in a well-lit room that displays nineteenth-century landscape paintings. In this type of setting one might expect a scholar to come forward as the keynote speaker but instead, three young Black men walk to the front and begin rapping. Their torn jeans and backward hats offer a contrast to the golden picture frames. As the men glance at lyrics on their cell phones, they tell the audience about the challenges they face every day: "They say racism is dead but I know they're lying,"⁹⁰ "I guess because I'm Black I'm automatically vulgar,"⁹¹ and "if I shot a White seventeen-year-old and claimed self-defense I wonder what the police would do."⁹² Their lyrics are clearly an outlet for what they have been through first hand and the tone expresses frustration and disappointment in the system. Afterward, Anthony Wiley (Brophesor X) takes the stage and instead of performing, begins a transformative dialogue on music, art, race, and inner reflection. Leading with an analysis of the hip hop song "Get It Now" by Bazanji, Wiley shares that we can change society

⁹⁰ "Black Lives Matter," [huntermuseum.org](http://www.huntermuseum.org/black-lives-matter). 2020 Hunter Museum of American Art, <http://www.huntermuseum.org/black-lives-matter>, 4:42.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 5:13.

⁹² *Ibid*, 5:28.

easily because we were the ones who created it, agreeing with Singh's argument that race is a societal construct. Any rules or preconceived notions are social constructs that are meant to change over time as long as the ones who make the rules are given a proper education on race. To "restore peace, build stability, and shift our perspectives"⁹³ Wiley leads the audience in a guided meditation where he asks participants to think about their relationships with themselves and those around them. Afterward, he then looks to the landscape painting displayed behind him as the next topic in his dialogue. Painted by Robert Sheldon Duncanson in 1851, *Landscape* looks like any other nineteenth-century Realism piece. The light reflecting off the water illuminates a serene scene, but it is the artist himself that makes this piece so special. Wiley tells how the act of painting served as a sort of meditation for Robert Sheldon Duncanson. Living in America and coming from half European and half African descent, he faced significant challenges in the nineteenth century as positive racial identity development was not a popular concept then. He likely faced harsh external racism and internal identity struggles all his life. Some art historians also debate whether his pastoral works contain racial metaphors or were simply expert recreations of what he saw, but either way, Andrew Wiley expertly uses the painting as a tool for his own metaphor for the difficult emotions that people of color face. The lone mountain and single bird show how isolating it is when there are no outlets for people to express their discomforts within society. Instead of waiting two hundred years to display these experiences, I believe that museum staff should open their museums to visitors to express how they feel without any preconceived judgment. Anthony Wiley's program is a prime example as he concludes by calling for connectedness between the patrons as they all feel these emotions in one way or another and do not have to be alone in their racial identity development. By pairing

⁹³ Ibid, 13:12.

this emotional goodwill with an artillery of positive racial knowledge and academic studies of how museums have race previously dealt with race, programs can work with patrons to understand, heal, and ultimately change these pressing issues.



Robert Sheldon Duncanson, *Landscape*, 1851, Oil on canvas, 38.1 x 55.9 cm, 2018 Hunter Museum of American Art.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ “Robert S. Duncanson “Landscape,”” [huntermuseum.org](https://www.huntermuseum.org), 2020 Hunter Museum of American Art, <https://www.huntermuseum.org/robert-seldon-duncanson-landscape>.

Chapter Ten: Museums as Activists

The civil unrest within the year 2020 and beyond, as well as the advancement of the Black Lives Matter movement have shown that we are currently living in a time of drastic change. While activists have been rallying publicly and over the internet, institutions have made their own statements as well. In Chapter Seven, many museums utilized their social media presence to show their support for BLM activists but were received differently depending on their levels of dedication. Larger institutions that often had colonial collections from various cultures were criticized as lackluster as they had a plethora of resources but mostly stayed on the sidelines of the movement. In the mindset that actions speak louder than words, museums that actively sought change by highlighting race within and around their institution in a positive way were seen as good activists and beneficial allies. When museums begin to resolutely stand by the marginalized members of their communities, they will not only help a good cause but also receive more support for their institution. Referencing The Seattle Children's Museum, management may want to downplay the museum's opinion of BLM as it might cause tension with longstanding donors. But by looking at the way museums' public presentation on human rights issues can drastically affect their public relationships, communities appear to support the pressure for change. In the overall scheme of things, it is much more beneficial to be an activist and ally rather than a neutral party.

This is the viewpoint of museum management consultant Gail Anderson. Social progress brings change and that means that museums need to change as cultural centers as well. In a 2006 issue of *The Journal of Museum Education* Anderson says, "Museums need to engage their respective communities and publics on an ongoing basis, and to listen and learn about the issues

impacting them and the challenges they need help resolving.”⁹⁵ It would appear that to find ways to be more relevant to visitors in the Information Age, museums have instead become more internally focused. Anderson’s job as a museum management consultant is to show staff to look elsewhere for inspiration, and often that inspiration is closer than they realized. If a museum is benefiting the public then it is relevant to the public. Analysis of the various exhibits in post-civil rights museums previously mentioned shows that there is a definite dedication to the topic as a historical subject. But racial inequality is still a very real issue and it is the museums that treat it like that through one unified voice that are the most relevant as they produce lasting change. Anderson reminds readers that,

*“Momentary relevancy can be achieved with an individual program in response to an event, but to play a significant and relevant role in the community requires the long-term commitment of the entire museum - trustees, staff, and volunteers.”*⁹⁶

Many museums are at risk of becoming stuck at this “momentary relevancy.” Throughout the spring and summer of 2020, it was hard to find a museum that was not involved in the Black Lives Matter movement in one way or another. As time passes however, lasting commitments are harder to find. Looking at the institutions listed in this study, as of May 2021 The Brooklyn Museum, The Albright-Knox, The Seattle Children’s Museum, and The Whitney Museum all have proclamations of their support for BLM on their websites.⁹⁷ The Nation Civil Rights

⁹⁵ Gail Anderson, "From the Guest Editor: Museums and Relevancy," *The Journal of Museum Education* 31, no. 1 (2006): 3-6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40283901>, 3.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁷ “Brooklyn Museum,” <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/>; “Standing in Solidarity, Listening to Our Community,” Learn & Discover, <https://www.albrightknox.org/learn-discover/standing-solidarity-listening-our-community>; “Because Black Lives Matter,” Race & Social Justice, <https://thechildrensmuseum.org/black-lives->

Museum includes BLM news in the news section of their website while the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute has a new mural featuring a portrait of George Floyd.⁹⁸ Other museums such as the Rochester Museum and Science Center and the National Museum of African History and Culture have begun to collect Black Lives Matter related materials and form exhibitions around them.⁹⁹

It is vital that cultural centers continue their dedication to change even after it is no longer in the headlines. Some museum leaders may be hesitant to tackle such a daunting undertaking in fear that its challenging topic may upset some of their more conservative patrons. But by looking at the numbers it is more beneficial on a business standard alone to take a stance on big issues that affect people within the museum's community.

Museum Next is a purpose-driven business founded in 2009 that focuses on the future of leaders in the museum field. Founder Jim Richardson published a poll in 2017 examining American's views on how museums and other institutions should take a stance against social issues. The majority of people wanted to support brands that were actively involved. Richardson found that "78% agree that companies should take action to address the important issues facing society, while 88% agree that corporations have the power to influence social change."¹⁰⁰ Tried and true marketing campaigns such as cause-related marketing shows that not only is activism

matter/. ; "From our Director: We Stand with Black Communities," <https://whitney.org/we-stand-with-black-communities>.

⁹⁸ Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, "Join Us In Honoring The Memory of George Floyd and the Many Others Killed by Police in America," Facebook, May 4th, 2021, https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html#cg-website.

⁹⁹ "RMSC Partners with Guest Curator Rachel DeGuzman to Highlight Contemporary Changemakers Leading the Black Lives Matter Movement," RMSC.org, March 24, 2021, <https://rmsc.org/changemakers/>. ; Nora McGreevy, "How the Smithsonian and other museums are responding to the U.S. capitol riot, [smithsonianmag.org](https://www.smithsonianmag.com), January 12, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-us-museums-are-responding-violence-capitol-180976738/>.

¹⁰⁰ Jim Richardson, "Should Museums be Activists?," [museumnext.com](https://www.museumnext.com), *MuseumNext* 2020, April 24, 2017, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/should-museums-be-activists/>.

good for the cause, it is good for business. Countless brands advertise “A portion of profits goes to charity” but museums have the capability to turn those profits into real progress. Museums are one of the most trusted institutions in the country. When questioned who was more likely to tell the truth, “politicians, brands, media, celebrities and museums. Politicians proved the least trusted while museums ranked the most trustworthy.”¹⁰¹ Reflecting on Chapter Five and Dr. Robyn Autry’s identity-driven article, we can conclude that people trust museums to teach them about their own heritage, and therefore, their own identity. With such a society-shaping opportunity, it should be clear that museum staff should do their best to design experiences that are not only relevant to their patrons, but also actively contributing to the activist cause.

There has been a long-standing stereotype that museums are neutral zones. They provide a place where both sides can be seen and give visitors a well-rounded view of things. When it comes to issues of human rights however, it is agreed that all of the details should be shown, but there are definite benefits to making a museum experience that is pertinent to the audience’s own lives. Museum director Julia Rose states in her textbook chapter in interpreting difficult histories that,

*“A common discussion among exhibit planners and museum workers is a plea for the interpretation to provide “just the facts” and an interpretation of history that is neutral and not controversial. In reality, a historical interpretation will always come from some particular viewpoint, and facts are always delineated by a history’s authors.”*¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Julia Rose, “Interpreting Difficult Knowledge,” in *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Max van Balgooy (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) p. 29.

This concept of a truly neutral museum has been hindering museums' potential as activists for decades. There is however a prospering initiative that has been slowly but surely changing the way museums present difficult histories. Aptly named "Museums Are Not Neutral" and co-produced by La Tanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski in 2017, the global advocacy initiative aims to "expose the myth of museum neutrality and demand equity-based transformation across institutions."¹⁰³ Beginning as an online t-shirt campaign and social media hashtag, Museums Are Not Neutral sold more than three thousand t-shirts within their first three years and has been raising money for social justice organizations ever since. It is in simple initiatives such as these that help museums reject the status quo. By knowing their own privileges, institutions can be an active part of the fight for social justice.

While it is true that museums alone cannot end systemic racism, making a "pledge to take "collective anti-racism action"" can unite museums of all specializations.¹⁰⁴ The Museum Association based in London published a statement in June 2020 that there should be real change on how museums address racism and diversity as a society. Promises have been made in the past, but we can hope that the globalized recognition that systemic racism has gone on for far too long shows that there is real potential for progress. Following the Museum Association's statement, museums can transform into antiracist institutions by working directly with staff, volunteers, visitors, and the spirit of the institution itself. The people involved must be dedicated to educating themselves through tools such as *The Racial Healing Handbook*. As a unified team the museum can show through its programs ways to address race and racism. Instead of presenting

¹⁰³ Mike Murawski, "Museums Are Not Neutral," Art Museum Teaching, July 31, 2020. <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2017/08/31/museums-are-not-neutral/>.

¹⁰⁴ Geraldine Kendall Adams, "Sector bodies call for stand against racial injustice amid Black Lives Matter protests," museumsassociation.org, 2020 Museums Association, June 1, 2020. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/06/01062020-call-for-collective-anti-racist-action-black-lives-matter-protests/#>.

the colorblind exhibits of conventional museums that allow overarching messages to disappear, museums can be activists by providing information. Becoming more well-informed is one of the first steps to becoming a good proponent for change as no real success could take place if the people involved do not fully understand the context. Museums are already seen as cultural repositories and if they succeed to present the full context of the Black Lives Matter movement, more people will understand, and hopefully; be proponents for change themselves.

Chapter Eleven: Museums as Allies

The important thing about being a good ally for racial change to provide advocacy to fellow activists, while trying not to upstage them. For museums to become places of positive racial change, there needs to be a shared authority of the racial past. Even if there are people of color on staff, it is unfair to expect them to speak for an entire community. Each person has had different life experiences and it affects how their story is told. The Museum of African American Heritage in Boston, Massachusetts listened to those around them and took their critiques to heart. Simple suggestions such as changing the word “slave” to “enslaved people” may be a quick fix but were effective as the subjects were now seen as fellow human beings instead of a separate group.¹⁰⁵ By listening to the input from Black communities museums can present racial history in a way that supports change in the present.

Understanding the past is the key to changing the future and with understanding comes education. It is common for staff at numerous institutions to undergo some sort of racial sensitivity training, but it can go further than a simple annual meeting. By utilizing the examples set by other social and cultural institutions, museums can learn more about how these racial inequalities began, and how they can implement ways to fix them. As a White woman, when the Black Lives Matter protests were first starting, I wanted to reach out to my African American friends to see what I could do to help. However, the more I investigated Black Lives Matter, I saw lists of things that White allies could do for the movement. One that I saw was that it was not Black people’s job to teach me, but that I should teach myself. Dedicated anti-White supremacy organizations such as the Dismantle Collective have published lists of resources

¹⁰⁵ Robyn Autry, “The Political Economy of Memory,” 65.

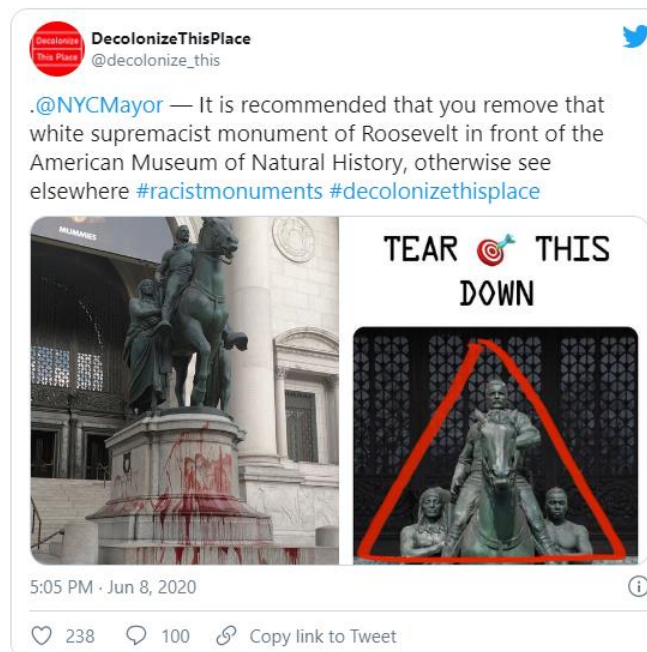
anyone can use to expand their understanding of race.¹⁰⁶ Museums can do the same thing by actively listening to the communities they serve as well as paying attention to how other organizations are promoting positive change. If one thing Black Lives Matter has shown, it is that there are countless organized groups ready and willing to work together and fight for social justice.

Decolonize This Place is one such group that has been highlighting the legacies of White supremacy, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy monumentalized in museum programs since 2016. Primarily in New York City, this action-based organization is known for their campaign to rename Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day, and for protesting at museums with lists of demands to shift focuses off of the conventional Eurocentric policies that have been in place since America's first museums. One of these first protests was at the American Museum of Natural History where the statue of known eugenicist Theodore Roosevelt stands outside. Riding a horse and followed on foot by two shirtless men, one Native American, and the other African American. The statue was unveiled in 1940 as a tribute to the Roosevelt family who had been supporters of the museum since its founding, but the symbolic hierarchy of race within the statue has prompted a large following to have it removed. To rectify this the museum has made an entire exhibit called "Addressing The Statue " discussing the original intention of the artists and how it is interpreted today.¹⁰⁷ On the museum's website, there are many expert testimonies on what the statue is exactly and how it should be dealt with, but it has not satisfied social justice

¹⁰⁶ "Resources for White Allies," Dismantle Collective, June 6, 2020, <https://www.dismantlecollective.org/resources/>.

¹⁰⁷ "Addressing the Statue," amnh.org, June 21, 2020, <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/addressing-the-theodore-roosevelt-statue>.

activists. Decolonize This Place brought the statue to the national news after vandalizing it in 2020 and after much debate, the city has officially made plans to have it removed.



Decolonize This Place, Twitter Post, June 8, 2020.¹⁰⁸

Aside from the statue, Decolonize This Place has also demanded respect through representatives of the “exhibited” populations who have authority in the display, and that human remains, sacred objects, and stolen objects of power should be returned to their rightful owners.¹⁰⁹ Decolonize This Place has taken similar stances at the Brooklyn Museum when they hired a white woman to oversee their African Art collection amidst rampant gentrification, as well as the Whitney Museum when Warren Kandors, CEO of the controversial weapons company Safariland, was on the board of trustees. When activists organize and present detailed

¹⁰⁸ Decolonize This Place, Twitter Post, June 8, 2020, 5:05 PM, https://publish.twitter.com/?query=https%3A%2F%2Ftwitter.com%2Fdecolonize_this%2Fstatus%2F1270099700880900114&widget=Tweet.

¹⁰⁹ “Organizations and Actions,” decolonizethisplace.org, <https://decolonizethisplace.org/>.

demands of what they need, it may take time, but progress has been achieved. Kanders quit his position at the Whitney, the Brooklyn Museum is currently looking for a new curator for African Art, and the statue of Theodore Roosevelt has been removed. Now some people may contradict that these actions are erasing the difficult history and only leaving the facts that are agreeable to the activists themselves. On the contrary, it is the goal of these types of demands to present a full depiction of the topics so that through better understanding, true learning and healing can occur. If museums act as allies rather than advisories, then changes will come along much easier and even more possibilities can be found.

Chapter Twelve: Building Relationships

The previous chapter shows that to be a good activist and ally, a museum must build a strong relationship with the African American community. By building relationships within the community, a shared authority can be created that allows people of color to influence how institutions handle their heritage. Unfortunately, institutions have a long history of taking advantage of minority communities. By actively listening to the community's feedback, museums can implement techniques to promote understanding and pride in the country's racial past that transcend a history of prejudice and victimization. Following Dr. Annaliese A. Singh's racial identity development for people of color in *The Racial Healing Handbook*, individuals who are suspicious of a museum's involvement with their personal history could be in the Immersion and/or Emersion phases. Instances of racism have given them justifiable cause to distrust White people and conventionally White institutions and instead take solace in surrounding themselves with others that share similar experiences. For museums to build working relationships with these people, museums must first put in the work to build a foundation of trust.

Lila Teresa Church is an archivist consultant who specializes in African American community culture through material items. Using a study called The Ethnic Communities Archival Documentation Project (ECADP) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she formed a basic guide on how museums can not only build trust with ethnic communities but create a lasting and valuable alliance. Using a group of diverse men and women from different archival centers, a comprehensive study was conducted on what approaches best suit making lasting connections with African American communities. Lila Teresa Church then compiled the

results into three separate steps. Her guide focuses more on finding new donors within the African American community but in this case, it can be utilized as a mutual support system as well.

The first step is outreach, which is already a large part of many museum programs. The goal of many museum fundraisers, galas, educational programs, and public events is to entice people to become dedicated members. To start, a person may only donate a small amount or nothing at all at a free event such as a movie screening, but there is now an open door of communication. Visitors may sign up to be notified about other events, and later possibly volunteer, until over the years the individual may decide to leave a considerable amount of money to the museum for everything it has provided. The benefits of members do not even have to be material. One volunteer may know a private collector who is looking to sell some items, and they might know a person who in their spare time does art conservation, leading to a whole network of new people that can help in their own ways. This first step though is to get their attention through good outreach.

Church explains that this can be done in two ways for African American communities in particular. The museum can either provide information about the importance of African American materials and the need for them in museums or provide information about the museum itself and the services it provides.¹¹⁰ People could have a number of historic items in their personal collections and may not even realize the good it could do in a museum. By reaching out and letting people know that their old newspaper clippings or photographs can “reconstruct certain aspects of cultural memory.”¹¹¹ Individuals who have lived through social justice

¹¹⁰ Lila Teresa Church, “Documenting Local African American Community History,” in *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Max van Balgooy (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) 62.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 63.

movements such as those of the 1960s and 70s and the BLM movement may have their own collections of items that have personal value to them, but it is the job of outreach programs to prove the institution's commitment to preserving Black history. This can be achieved through local newspapers, paper, digital media, and African American church communities. Church says that ECADP found “extending outreach to communities through local African American churches is both economical and effective.”¹¹² The familial relationships in many of these churches allow museum representatives to reach a much wider audience in a space that is perceived as safe and trusting.

This leads to Church's next step which is gaining the trust of African American communities. Regardless of the ethnic makeup of museum members, there can be certain challenges to be expected when interacting with a new group. Some may require evidence as to why the museum is interested in Black history and how it will be presented. It may take time and come with unforeseen issues, but Church finds that a mutual understanding can be formed if whoever is leading this new relationship is recognized as a member of the community itself rather than an outsider.¹¹³

Once trust is established, action can take place. Church calls this third step “Solicit and Acquire Materials According to Missions and Policies.”¹¹⁴ An institution's mission statement may articulate what the specific goals are for African American material collections and what may and may not be donated by these new donors. Looking at this final step with the perspective of social justice activism in mind, an institution’s mission statement still has its place. By being clear how exactly museums plan to depict race and racial activism, new members can have clear

¹¹² Ibid, 67.

¹¹³ Ibid, 69.

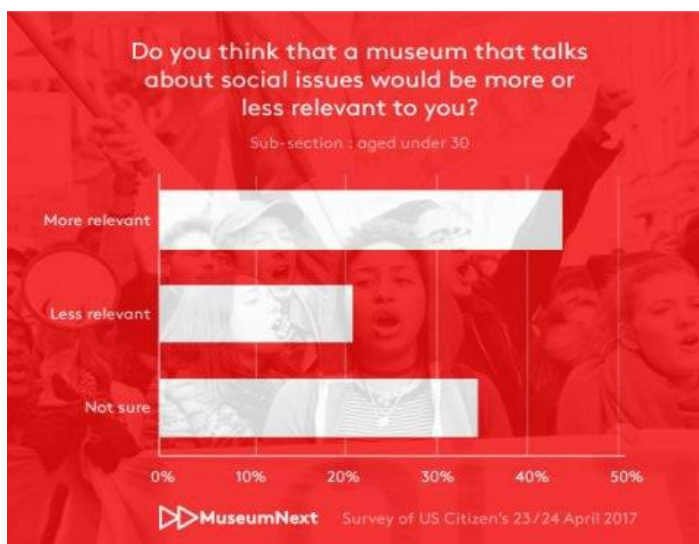
¹¹⁴ Ibid.

understandings on what to expect. This will also allow opportunities for others to share any criticism as a sense of shared authority should have already been established. As places that are stereotypically seen as austere and strict places, new changes must be made to allow a shared authority with not only African Americans but all different groups. Museums are a place of constant learning and therefore should be open to accepting the input of their patrons so they can learn themselves.

It is clear by observing those who attend conventional American museums that there is a certain unintended demographic of older, affluent, White people. For museums to attract everyone, they need to be good allies. By taking action to show that museums are a place where all are welcome, a safe space is created where racial learning and healing can occur. Museums can achieve this status as a trusted ally by openly supporting the causes that are important to the visitors. The Museum Next poll in Chapter Ten found that 44% of people under 30 “believe that a museum that speaks about social issues would be more relevant to them.”¹¹⁵ People under thirty were the most dedicated to brands that supported causes that were important to them and “51% of this age group say that they would be more likely to visit a museum that took a stand.”¹¹⁶ With people under thirty being a difficult crowd for most museums to attract, designing exhibitions with social issues in mind could be a great way for places to not only have a positive impact on their community but also find new and innovative collaborations.

¹¹⁵ Jim Richardson, “Should Museums be Activists?”

¹¹⁶ Ibid.



Jim Richardson, *Do you think that a museum that talks about social issues would be more or less relevant to you?*, Survey, 2017, MuseumNext.¹¹⁷

Forming partnerships with young people may seem like a risk for accredited institutions as it is vastly different from common collaborations with businesses, wealthy donors, etc. However, if institutions provide a solid foundation, this new wave of social leaders has proven their capabilities. For example, Project A.I.R (Art In Resistance) is an activist group based in and around Rochester, NY that makes art to advocate for the social equality of marginalized groups. With a large presence on both Facebook and Instagram, local artists have been contributing their talents and their artworks have been publicly displayed in various parts of the greater Rochester area. These were meant to be a peaceful tactic to celebrate cultures and challenge racial norms, but they were not without controversy. Two White men in the village of Fairport were recorded tearing down the artwork which sparked protests for tolerance. The large following of supporters for Project A.I.R brings one hope that the majority of people are in favor of furthering equality

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

but there is still the issue of the destruction of artist's hard work. That is where the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery (MAG) came in.

A working relationship was formed between the two and two large banners were placed on major streets near the art gallery. What is so special about this is that Project A.I.R was still a very new organization at the time of this event. At a time when the group was mostly run by a few volunteers through their private social media, this partnership with a major art gallery not only helped deal with the vandalism but propelled them even further forward. This publicity and support was backed by the genuine devotion to the BLM cause from the Memorial Art Gallery. Their website hosts a virtual black history month, an articulate proclamation of their open support for racial activists, and they recently held an event where young Black artists were invited to a virtual discussion on the current Andy Warhol exhibit including the print *Birmingham Race Riot*.¹¹⁸ The MAG as an institution performed as a good activist and ally as they have actually pushed for social changes while still giving the stage to other groups that have more perspective on the matter of race. It is through using their own privilege that this art gallery and others like it can build lasting relationships that branch off into countless other opportunities.



Project A.I.R and Memorial Art Gallery, *Art Is Resistance*, Nylon banner, June 2020.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ "Homepage," Memorial Art Gallery, March 5, 2021, <https://mag.rochester.edu/>.

¹¹⁹ Project AIR, 2020, "Project A.I.R X MAG" Facebook, June 26, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/114108450326761/posts/project-air-x-magthis-week-project-air-partnered-with-the-memorial-art-gallery-o/128872612183678/>.

Chapter Thirteen: Concluding Thoughts

The words #BlackLivesMatter has become an international anthem for positive racial change throughout 2020 and beyond. Powered by the immense sharing power of the internet and social media, social justice activists are putting pressure on institutionalized racism and calling for lasting change for not only African Americans but all minorities. While the individual activists themselves are a vital part of the BLM movement, it is the unified institutions that will be capable of influencing sufficient social change. Museums are one such institution, but they can not only change the future but beneficially use the past as well. Museums have a unique part to play in the wake of the many social justice demonstrations that took place over the course of 2020. Firstly, faithfully documenting this living history marks another step in the path for racial equality. If museums dedicate themselves to interpret these current events, there may be just as many Black Lives Matter museums someday as there are civil rights ones. The second half of a museum's duty for social justice is more challenging as it requires a critical eye on the museum industry itself. Museums must acknowledge that the communities they serve are changing and so are their views and values. By educating members, promoting capable social justice leaders, and actively supporting the struggle for equality, museums can be a racial ally for the communities they serve and provide valuable assistance for lasting changes.

The Black Lives Matter movement is not a new phenomenon. It has been an active group since 2013 and violence against people of color within the United States alone goes back centuries. What makes the events of 2020 so different is how the world has taken this cause and spread it until it was a household name across the globe. With resources such as social media, activists can make their experiences widely accessible. Now moving forward, social justice must

continue to be a priority for institutions and individuals alike. The murders of African Americans George Floyd and Brianna Taylor have reinvigorated the intolerance for brutality within government systems across the globe. Chanting their names and many others, people have taken to the media and the streets to demand justice.

This movement has so many parallels to the Civil Rights movement that it makes it a clear blueprint to see how museums may document these events in the future. Studies have shown that how one's history is displayed directly affects how that person internalizes it and that history is more often than not seen in museums. What this new wave of social justice means for cultural centers is that the conventional way of things may need to be reexamined as it is becoming increasingly clear that significant parts of minority culture have been systematically undermined by our predecessors.

Moving on from these injustices must be approached the same way people move on from any significant form of trauma. Healing as the victim of racism and healing as a former part of a racist system follow different paths but there are vital places for mutual support. Museums can be one of these places if they commit themselves to a plan that is based on education, outreach, and collaboration. Educating people outside and within the institution on the systematic nature of racism may unsettle some individuals as it is often seen as an issue of the past. However, people learn at their own pace and through repetition and reflection, it can be learned like any other lesson. Reaching out to new groups within the community that may have felt unwelcome before will see the museum as an ally that genuinely supports their cause and can act as a place of trust and healing. And once that mutual partnership is formed, leaders from both the institution and the community can come together with new and innovative ideas to confront racial inequality and enforce lasting changes locally, nationally, and globally.

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