A History of Black Museums in the United States: An Ecology of Museum Knowledges as 'Wake Work'

By

© 2022

L. Haley Bajorek
B.A. University of Kansas, 2019

Submitted to the graduate degree program in African & African American Studies and Museum Studies and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts.

____

Co-Chair: Dr. Nicole Hodges Persley

____

Co-Chair: Dr. Elizabeth MacGonagle

____

Dr. Shawn Alexander

____

Dr. Dave Tell

____

Dr. Peter Ukpokodu

Date Defended: 26 April 2022

The thesis committee for L. Haley Bajorek certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

A History of Black Museums in the United States: An Ecology of Museum Knowledges as 'Wake Work'

____

Co-Chair: Dr. Nicole Hodges Persley

____

Co-Chair: Dr. Elizabeth MacGonagle

Date Approved: 26 April 2022

Abstract

In this thesis, I track the history of African American museums in the United States to build a digital humanities-based project called *A History of Black Museums in the United States.* This project is intended to be used as a tool, a starting point, rather than a closed-circuit archive, to actively include Black museums in museological historiographies as well as situate Black culture and history within the broader dominant narrative. I propose a theoretical lens to approaching museum and digital humanities work called an 'ecology of museum knowledges' that draws from Christina Sharpe's *wake work*, Mary Pratt's *contact zones,* James Clifford's *museums as contact zones*, *Gatekeeper Theory* as explained by Laura-Edythe Coleman, Boaventura de Sousa Santos' *ecology of knowledges*, Roopika Risam's writings on *postcolonial digital humanities*, Abdul Alkalimat's explanation of *Sankofa Principle*, and Kelly Baker Joseph and Roopika Risam's collection for the *Digital Black Atlantic*. This paper calls for museum professionals, digital humanities practitioners, and scholars from across the humanities to fill the digital cultural record with the stories of communities thus far marginalized, ignored, forgotten, and erased by the dominant cultural record, and to do so urgently, critically, and with goals oriented towards cross-cultural engagement, ever-evolving archives of stories, the decolonization of storytelling within cultural heritage institutions, facilitating truth and reconciliation, and utilizing community-specific frameworks.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

Research Questions & Justification 3

Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review 6

Digital Methods for *A History of Black Museums* *9*

Chapter Overview 12

Chapter 2: Tracing the Black Museum Movement 14

The State of Black Museums 16

Representation in Mainstream Museums 21

The Shoulders the Black Museum Movement Stands On 26

Responses to Change: Conservatism and Radicalism 29

The Black Museum Movement: Chicago, Detroit, and Washington D.C. 32

Present Day 36

Chapter 3: An Ecology of Museum Knowledges 39

The State of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Museums 39

Contact Zones, Gatekeeping, and Ecology of Knowledges 42

Digital Humanities as an Ecology of Museum Knowledges 52

A History of Black Museums 60

Chapter 4: Concluding Thoughts on *A History of Black Museums in the U.S.* 66

Shortcomings and Future Work 69

Bibliography 78

Additional Influential Sources 83

Chapter 1: Introduction

Currently, museum studies programs across the country teach the history of museums, and most theory and praxis courses, from a Eurocentric standpoint without much concern for including the Black Museum Movement or the Black Arts Movement from the mid-20th century within their curricula. The Eurocentric version of museum history is limited and does not account for major cultural contributions that have continued to shape literature, music, art, performance, and other fine arts across cultures. Museum studies students are entering the workforce without a whole understanding of the rich and diverse history of museums or their larger contexts and impacts on local, national, and global heritage. Even more detrimental, museum studies students are not being exposed to the epistemologies and praxes of early and recently opened Black museums. As one of these students, I began to raise questions and try to understand this history myself. Fortunately for me, I entered into a joint M.A. program with museum studies and African & African American studies. This overlap has provided me with opportunities to expand my research horizons, theoretical influences, tools, and methods, and has ultimately shaped the direction of this project.

There is a gap in the collected history of museums—the history of Black museums is often ignored, dismissed, and undercollected when collected at all. In 2017, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History published a list of "projects, resources, events, and anything else" within the Black Digital Humanities realm put out by the Colored Conventions Project, an organization working to bring "19th-Century Black organizing to digital life."[1] Since 2007, *BlackPast.org* has served as "an online reference center [that] makes available

---

[1] @CCP_org. "Black Digital Humanities Projects & Resources: A List of Projects, Resources, Events, and Anything Else." Fire!!! 4, no. 1 (2017): 134-39. doi:10.5323/fire.4.1.0134.

a wealth of materials on African American history in one central location on the internet."[2] The closest either reference center, the Colored Conventions Project or *BlackPast.org*, comes is a search result on *BlackPast.org* for 'African American Museums'.[3] This result includes over 150 museums listed alphabetically by state, then by city, then by museum name hyperlinked to museum websites. Some of the links are broken and some of the museums are now closed, but this is still the most comprehensive list of Black museums that can be found outside the official directory of museums accredited by the Association of African American Museums due to the accreditation requirement of other associations like the American Alliance of Museums.[4] For this reason, I have worked to create the text for this thesis, *A History of Black Museums*, a digital archive including various interactive components, larger contextual information around the opening of Black museums, and an active database for listing Black museums.

This thesis aims to serve as a starting point to critically evaluate colonial epistemologies and practices within Eurocentric museums and acknowledge Black museums as institutions of community uplift that serve as better models for museum praxis. Ultimately, this project answers a call by Abdul Alkalimat to respect all forms of knowledge and find ways to represent these knowledges in digital forms. [5] This project draws from theoretical frameworks across sociology, education, museum studies, legal studies, as well as Black studies to lay the foundation for

---

[2] "About US." BlackPast.org, February 13, 2019. https://www.blackpast.org/about-us/.

[3] "African American Museums." BlackPast.org. March 2, 2022. https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-museums-united-states-and-canada/.

[4] The Association of African American Museums currently claims to have over 300 entries in their database including "museums, archives, libraries, galleries, historical societies, and cultural centers." Their database is being updated and they have calls for the public to help submit listings to add to the database. At this time, there does not appear to be an accreditation requirement to be included within the database which is a more inclusive entry point for many underfunded and understaffed Black museums short on the resources necessary to go through the accreditation process. For more see: https://blackmuseums.org/directory/

[5] Abdul Alkalimat. "The Sankofa Principle: From the Drum to the Digital." in *The Digital Black Atlantic*. eds. Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). 6

understanding the history of Black museums in the United States and how the museums were uniquely situated to create models of museum education, outreach, programming, and partnerships to preserve and reproduce Black cultural history. I analyze the ways Black museums have and continue to be community resources by looking at the early construction and practices of Black museums as well as track the significance of education post-Civil War and through the modern Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, I analyze the current state of museums as predominantly white institutions (PWI) that have contributed to the erasure, stereotyping, and dismissal of Black history and culture as well as the reasons why we do not see more Black museums across the United States. My digital humanities project serves as a paradigm case of the type of work I am calling on museums to adapt. In this chapter, I will first lay out my research questions and justification for this project. Next, I will examine the literature of the museum field paying key attention to theoretical frameworks and lenses. Finally, I will conclude with an overview of the remaining chapters in this thesis.

Research Questions & Justification

Museums have a long history of preserving and sharing valuable cultural, historical, and scholarly artifacts—their values being determined by generally homogenous staffs and curators

to share with similarly homogenous publics.[6] Colleen Dilen Schneider published a study in 2017 claiming that "museums are trusted more than the daily newspaper."[7] The article concluded "museums, zoos, and aquariums are highly trusted to produce and output content and information…Data suggest that museums may play a role in leading us all toward a more educated, connected, and inspired world."[8] In an era of mistrust and misinformation, it is not only rare to have a single institution garner so much validity, but it is important that museums take on that honor with responsibility. In a more educated, connected, and inspired world, we have to know the whole story. Yet, Black culture, history, and scholarship within PWIs continue to be undervalued and museum professionals, as well as the general public, continue to be disconnected from the history of Black museums.

My digital humanities project will serve as an example of the work I am calling on museums to do moving forward. Initially, my primary topic of interest revolved around the seemingly isolated founding of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) and the lack of Black history within museums. Throughout my readings of basic museology, there was a clear gap in literature focused on the

[6] Lonnie Bunch writes about this phenomena as a museum professional himself noting that these statistics are likely even smaller if we take out the professionals working at "racially or ethnic-specific institutions" arguing that the total makeup of directors of color may be less than 2% twenty years ago. Lonnie G. Bunch III. Call the Lost Dream Back: Essays on History, Race and Museums. (Washington D.C.: The American Association of Museums Press, 2010). 105-07. Based on data gathered by DATA USA—a project based on U.S. governmental data—less than 4% of archivists, curators, and museum technicians consider themselves Black, less than 5% consider themselves Asian, less than 1% Hispanic, less than 4% biracial or multiracial, and less than 1% indigenous. For more see: https://datausa.io/profile/soc/archivists-curators-museum-technicians#demographics For museum directors, Zippia—an employment database—shows similar statistics with only a slightly higher margin for Black people. For more see: https://www.zippia.com/museum-director-jobs/demographics/#race-statistics

[7] Colleen Dilen Schneider. "People Trust Museums More than Newspapers. Here Is Why That Matters Right Now (Data)." October 11, 2021. https://www.colleendilen.com/2017/04/26/people-trust-museums-more-than-newspapers-here-is-why-that-matters-right-now-data/#:~:text=which%20museums%20shine.-,Museums%20are%20trusted,to%20educate%20and%20inspire%20audiences.

[8] Schneider, "People Trust Museums."

founding and functioning of African American museums. To begin to answer these queries, I relied on a special issue of *The Public Historian* (2018) focused entirely on the foundations of Black museums. However, my review of this publication created further questions. As a result, I began framing my research questions for this project: Why did early Black museums function the way they did? Where were they located? Was their location and subject matter really a choice, or a product of strife? Have Black museums changed over time or remained static?

As I researched and developed these questions, I have determined a need for a comprehensive compilation of Black museums in the United States. I seek to articulate Black museological history and press PWIs as well as museum professionals to question why Black history has been pushed to the margins. *A History of Black Museums* will feature a timeline, a map, collections, exhibits, and scholarship. The project will serve as a tool to identify museums nationwide, identify geographical gaps in open museums, connect social movements, democratic victories and losses, and influential cultural figures to the growth and missions of museums. Additionally, it will provide a space to learn about the careers of many inspirational figures that shaped not only Black museums but, now, the Smithsonian Institute itself.[9]

As I work my way through this project, I am aware of my own positionality and the biases I bring to this work. I was first drawn to this study because of the communities I grew up in and in part because of the social, political, and racial weight that has shaped my collegiate experience. As a cisgender white woman, I cannot speak to the lived experiences of Black people, including those who face misrepresentation in museums. However, I was inspired to use my experience as a child growing up in poverty in the South with parents and grandparents with

[9] Lonnie G. Bunch III is now the director of the Smithsonian Institute after having a long, prestigious career in Black museums such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the California African American Museum in Los Angeles.

little formal education to bring attention to this issue. I have understood the inaccessibility that museums have created for people across race and gender lines through elitist and classist practices. I know that many people who share my background, and especially my previous education in anthropology, have approached Blackness with a savior complex that has oftentimes benefitted no one and nothing but their list of publications on their curricula vitae by parachuting in, engaging in exploitative disaster porn, and moving on without ever stopping to actually provide resources or services directly to Black communities so that they might address problems for themselves. It is my intention to create a platform that can serve Black communities and to shape the ways that PWIs should interact with and serve marginalized communities. I have taken concerted steps to make sure my project is accessible, replicable, and will continue to grow through community and individual partnerships.

Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review

The primary inspiration for this project comes Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.*[10] In addition to the growing field of scholars drawing attention to the utility of digital humanities projects to produce counter-archives and make space for marginalized histories, this project draws from Sharpe's call to annotate the margins.[11] In her book, she literally refers to the margins on the cargo records from slave ships. From those actual margins where historians have put immense labor into giving names and stories to the people

[10] Christina Sharpe. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
[11] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 113-117.

identified only as 'ditto', Sharpe expresses a need to annotate the margins of everyday life to reanimate the unnamed and disregarded.[12]

Christina Sharpe writes, "Emancipation did not make free Black life free; it continues to hold us in that singularity. The brutality was not singular; it was the singularity of antiblackness."[13] After including a Merriam-Webster definition of singularity that describes a space that is "infinitely distorted" by gravitational forces, she goes on, "The weather [antiblackness] necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies".[14] I argue museums are *infinitely distorted* by antiblackness which necessitates *new ecologies* of knowledge to 'aspirate' Blackness.[15] One of the key ways that my project works to annotate the margins is by identifying and contextualizing the history of Black museums which has been largely ignored and erased from broader American historical contexts. Additionally, I am creating collections and exhibits based on the careers of Black museum professionals that have led to the establishment and success of these museums over time while drawing attention to the vast array of expertise, ideas, and aspirations these leaders have brought to the museum field. Sharpe asks, "When the only certainty is the weather

---

[12] Though Sharpe is specifically referring to Black people in her book, I want to leave room for additional unnamed and disregarded people to be included in future projects that draw from the work I do here. Later, I propose that museums approach this work through appropriate lenses specific to the communities they are partnered with rather than lump all global majority groups together with 'minority' or 'diversity' monikers.
[13] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 106.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid, 108-109: Aspirate- Sharpe writes about the ways the state persistently chokes the life out of Black communities and Black people. "I've been thinking about what it takes, in the midst of the singularity, the virulent antiblackness everywhere and always remotivated, to keep breath in the Black body. What ruttier, internalized, is necessary now to do what I am calling wake work as aspiration, that keeping breath in the Black body?" She answers her own queries: "the breath, 'is totally subversive in the face of the kind of broad-brush brutalizing where people just get reduced to Negro man, Negro woman, and ditto, ditto, ditto'… Breathlessness and the archive: the archives of breathlessness…what might it mean to attend to these archives? What might we discover in them?" I use aspirate here to point to the counter-archival work necessary to breathe life back into Black culture, history, scholarship, and archives/museums.

that produces a pervasive climate of antiblackness, what must we know in order to move through these environments in which the push is always toward Black death?"[16] If museums are more trusted than daily newspapers, then we must challenge museums to alleviate the atmospheric pressure of antiblackness, to push society away from Black death, to center Black knowledges, and to (re)member all the ways Black communities have continued to live in the wake of slavery and antiblackness in the United States. This project seeks to expand on and highlight Black knowledges within the Museum Studies field to better serve Black communities, understandings of history, and recognize and dismantle continued pervasive antiblackness in museum spaces.

I am arguing that museum professionals should embrace an ecology of museum knowledges to move all cultural institutions towards a more inclusive and enlightened future of meaningful partnerships, exchange of stories and traditions, and forums for interracial, intergenerational community engagement. Boaventura de Sousa Santos provides a theory of an ecology of knowledges. He argues that reducing the understanding of the world down to just the Western way of seeing it while minimizing non-Western understandings has been commonplace over the centuries and serves as a weak response to difficult questions that have arisen in our lifetime.[17] He points to the numerous ways postcolonial and decolonial studies have exposed the entrenched colonialism in academia as well as public and private life to the detriment of our growth as a globalized community.[18] I am proposing museums approach the digital record with mindfulness regarding postcolonial digital humanities scholarship and pay specific attention to the communities they are working with and serving. Roopika Risam argues, "digital humanities

---

[16] Ibid, 106.
[17] Boaventura de Sousa Santos. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemecide*. (New York: Routledge, 2016). 20
[18] Santos, *Epistemologies of the South,* 26-27.

has tremendous potential for changing how public audiences know the world."[19] More pointedly, Risam calls attention to humanities scholars saying we are to blame if we do not intervene because "humanities knowledge production reflects histories of institutional racism and colonialism, and if we do not work to remediate the gaps in the digital cultural record."[20]

Importantly, postcolonial digital humanities scholarship draws attention to the ways the Global North is already colonizing the digital cultural record. Risam calls humanities scholars to action and encourages people like me to ensure "that the stories and voices which have been underrepresented in both print and digital knowledge production—those from formerly colonized countries, from indigenous communities, and from those who are marginalized in their nationalized contexts—can be heard."[21] In this project, I take Risam's call a step further and I am focusing on the Digital Black Atlantic, a burgeoning discipline still being molded by scholars such as Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam.[22] I argue museums and other cultural heritage institutions should embrace the critical frameworks presented by each individual community specifically so as not to slip into a one-size-fits-all approach for addressing the holes in the cultural and digital cultural record. The Digital Black Atlantic offers a critical framework to center African diasporic knowledges and connections to better approach digital humanities projects concerning Black communities.

---

[19] Roopika Risam. *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019). 142

[20] Risam, *New Digital Worlds*,142.

[21] Ibid, 139.

[22] Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam. *The Digital Black Atlantic.* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

Digital Methods for A History of Black Museums

To date, using the *BlackPast.org* archive, I have included 157 Black museums in the initial phase of collecting data for *A History of Black Museums*. Moving forward, I will need to continue my research to find any others that may have been left out of the dataset thus far. It is imperative to mine broad search engines, archives, and less obvious records as well as invest in community histories to uncover and annotate the full history of Black museums in the United States. Additionally, as my research expands to challenge the limitations of the definition of a museum, more spaces and moments will need to be included.

A History of Black Museums uses newspaper clippings, online articles, websites, interviews, photographs, design mock-ups, book cover images, videos, lectures, audio recordings, and it draws from various databases to create a comprehensive counter-archive in the form of digital collections, exhibits, a map, and a timeline. After determining a host site for the project, I will create collections for artifacts connected to individual museums, museum directors, museum curators, and additional influential people and movements. I will also create virtual exhibits based on common themes such as: museums of a city, museums of an era, colleagues and teachers, social justice museums, art museums, history museums, house museums, and archives and research centers. In addition to the collections and exhibits, I will feature a page listing all of the museum websites, archives, and additional platforms I have accessed to create this project with links for users to quickly access. The site will also feature consciousness-raising questions, media, scholarly works, and lessons that can be used in a classroom setting.

The initial timeline and story map for *A History of Black Museums* have both been created using templates from KnightLab: *Timeline JS* and *Storymap JS.* The timeline includes the

opening dates of Black museums throughout history alongside images of what the museum looked like in its original building, location, and time and brief descriptions of the museums. It also includes major events to help viewers connect museum openings to historical landmarks such as the groundbreaking for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), the elections of President Barack Obama (2008) and Vice President Kamala Harris (2020) Muhammad Ali's world heavyweight title (1964), Michael Jackson's Album of the Year win (1984), Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize for Literature (1993), and the Brown versus Board of Education supreme court decision (1954). In addition to singular events, the timeline features eras of social and political strife such as the Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s), the Black Power Movement (1960s-1970s), the Black Lives Matter Movement (2012-current), and more. The objective behind including these moments is to create connections in time between the opening of these institutions and what was happening in the world socially and politically to influence how, when, and why they opened.

The storymap starts with the NMAAHC in Washington D.C. and continues through the south to the west coast and back through the north to the east coast ending in Maryland. Visually, questions about why some places have only one or no Black museums become stark. Each pin on the map includes the address of the museum, the name, the city and state, the mission or background of the museum, and an image of the museum itself, of its leaders, or an exhibit housed at the museum. The question of where—and by default, where not?—is addressed in the storymap.

Mainstream museums have traditionally been defined by their collections; but Black culture, history, and scholarship have a long history of being stolen and destroyed. As within other marginalized communities, collection, preservation, and restoration of these artifacts may

have taken different forms over the years from the typical acquisitions that museums are used to accepting; some of the earliest Black histories had not been necessarily academic—meaning histories were not built through immaculate record-keeping and published studies and biographies, rather books and records were built from oral histories, legal documents with Black people in the peripheries, newspapers' obituaries and personal ads, treatises and court opinions, dockets, minute books, and case files.[23] For this project, that means the dataset has the potential to grow exponentially once the rigid definition of a museum is challenged.

Chapter Overview

To properly situate the rise of the Black museum movement in history, a study of social and civil rights movements of the time is necessary. In the second chapter, "Tracing the Black Museum Movement," I briefly summarize the struggle for African Americans to obtain an education post-Civil War and the backlash of the white majority in power. In establishing the environment that hatched the Black museum movement, I address the Modern Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Arts movement as well as the peaked interest in Black Studies programs at universities. I examine three specific museums in the pioneering phase of the Black museum movement to understand the impact of the work early Black museum leaders. I then describe the ways that the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of African American History and Culture has continued the traditions of Black museums. Through this history, I set up the necessity for knowing more about the proliferation of Black museums across the United States. Beginning on university campuses—more

---

[23] Martha S. Jones. *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). 8-11.

specifically, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)— Black museums clearly upheld educational missions.[24] Black museums as institutions separate from universities had educational missions more specific to their communities and in showing the legacy of their ancestors as well as the potential of their neighbors and friends. Black museum leaders also strived for creating spaces where Black history was not "whitewashed" or left out. Many of the leaders felt determined to change the mindset that African Americans did not have culture, did not have anything worth telling anyone about.

In the third chapter, "An Ecology of Museum Knowledges," I will address why it is so important to know the history of Black museums by looking to theoretical frameworks from digital humanities, critical museum work, racial formation, and understanding of collective memory. I argue in a time when mainstream museums are desperate to find ways of being 'relevant' and investing resources into their communities, the long history of Black museums must not be ignored. The frameworks and missions of Black museums have fostered better practices for all museums interested in community stakeholders and relevancy. To do this work, I am drawing from several theories and epistemologies including Mary Pratt's *contact zones*, James Clifford's *museums as contact zones*, *Gatekeeper Theory* as explained by Laura-Edythe Coleman, Boaventura de Sousa Santos' *ecology of knowledges*, Roopika Risam's writings on *postcolonial digital humanities*, Abdul Alkalimat's explanation of *Sankofa Principle*, and Kelly Baker Joseph and Roopika Risam's collection for the *Digital Black Atlantic* (2021).

---

[24] The oldest HBCU museum was founded at Hampton University in 1868 and continues to boast of a mission that "brings its remarkable collection to the public through an array of educational initiatives including permanent and changing exhibitions, the Children's Curiosity Room, the Center for African American History and Life, publications, lectures, symposia, art and teacher training workshops, school partnerships and the quarterly publication of the International Review of African American Art." For more see: https://home.hamptonu.edu/msm/about-us/

In the concluding chapter, I will discuss how *A History of Black Museums* is an application of each of the aforementioned theories at an intersection between museum studies, Black scholarship, and digital humanities work. I will analyze my findings from this project as well as discuss the future of museums and museum professionals who are interested in doing necessary work to alleviate pervasive antiblackness within museums. Additionally, I will address some of the potential pitfalls of work that has a predisposition to harm Black museums through the appropriation and acquisition of vital practices and artifacts from Black communities. Addressing the digital cultural record, I will discuss many of the obstacles currently in place contributing to the continued erasure of Black Atlantic and Global South stories. Finally, I will be supporting the many calls for digital humanities scholars to do this necessary work to prevent the canonization of the digital cultural record.

Chapter 2: Tracing the Black Museum Movement

> "You can tell a great deal about a country or a people by what they deem important enough to remember, what they build monuments to celebrate, and what graces the walls of their museums… Yet I would argue that we learn even more about a country by what it chooses to forget."
>
> --Lonnie G. Bunch III, Smithsonian Institute Director[25]

In 1916, the fight for the National Museum of African American History and Culture began with the *Committee of Colored Citizens* and their campaign to recognize the contributions of African Americans during the Civil War. They established the National Memorial Association, Inc. in support of the construction of a National Negro Memorial in the nation's capital. A century later, on September 24, 2016, the first national African American museum,

[25] Bunch, *Call the Lost Dream Back,* 62

rather than simply a memorial, on the National Mall was dedicated as part of the Smithsonian Institute with thousands in attendance.[26]

From 1916 to 2016, the United States of America grew through two World Wars, the Great Depression, the Modern Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, countless other international and national conflicts, the election of President Barack Obama, and the surge in museum foundations. From the mid-1960s through the late 1970s, the Black Power Movement was joined with the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and the beginnings of the Black Museum Movement as a component of BAM; "the movement was part of an international struggle against colonialism, neocolonialism, and racism."[27] Many of the artists, writers, musicians, and museum professionals of the time saw their work as essential to Black liberation.[28] "BAM was arguably the most influential U.S. arts movement ever" and eventually "served as a catalyst for Asian American, Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, and Native American cultural movements."[29] Critical to the movement was the activist and political work that shaped the creation of many cultural institutions.[30]

Over time, the call for a national museum to represent the stories of African Americans found its way on and off the floors of the Senate and House of Representatives, was abolished by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, debated for its location and funding, and ultimately studied in a survey to examine the "state of African American museums across the United States as well as

---

[26]All historical information regarding the NMAAHC from this section comes from the *Official Guide to the Smithsonian.* For more see: Kendrick, Kathleen M. *Official Guide to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2017).
[27] John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst. "Editors' Introduction." In *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Edited by John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014). 1.

[28] Bracey, "Editors' Introduction," 5.
[29] Ibid, 8-9.
[30] Ibid, 4-10

the representation of African American history and culture at the Smithsonian."[31] Finally, in 2003, Public Law 108-184 was signed by President George W. Bush, making the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) officially the nineteenth museum of the Smithsonian Institution.

In the thirteen years that followed, the NMAAHC looked to the traditions and know-how of other renowned African American museums such as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York, the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, and the African American Museum in Philadelphia to build its public programming and create a museum reflective of the many histories experienced by African Americans through time and place. Through programs like "Save Our African American Treasures" and partnering with other institutions and businesses, the museum was able to collect over 37,000 objects for its collections. Through the "Save Our African American Treasures" program, the NMAAHC was able to not only gain donations from the public for their collections, but they were able to establish a program for educating people on the delicate work of preserving their material culture across the United States and encourage donations to local and 'neighborhood' museums.

Today, the National Museum of African American History and Culture continues to develop programs and resources for educating the public and demonstrating the inherent value of Black History. Their mission claims:

> to be a place that welcomes all people to learn about how the African American experience has shaped this nation, and to be a place for all Americans to gain a fuller understanding of where we have been, and how we have reached this point in our collective journey, so that we can better move forward, together, toward a future that fulfills our founding promises of freedom, equality, and justice for all.[32]

---

[31] Kendrick, *Official Guide to the Smithsonian*, 10.
[32] Kendrick, *Official Guide to the Smithsonian,* 1.

While the museum has incredible technology for creating access to digital content, impressive collections, intricate exhibits, and extensive knowledge and experience interweaved amongst the staff of administrators, curators, designers, and collection managers, it still prioritizes the original missions of Black museums.

The State of Black Museums

In the early 2000s Black museums grew to over two hundred, [33] but many of the museums have extremely limited resources that hinder their abilities to respond to surveys available to track the state of Black museums. In 1988, the African American Museums Association was able to account for fifty-two museums. Twenty years later, in a national survey, received responses from 163 museums though at least 215 had been identified and had been attempted to be contacted various times. By 2018, the latest figure for how many Black museums exist in the United States had not grown much more to 221.

In 2000, the president of the Association of African American Museums (AAAM) commented on the economic state of Black museums after the results of their last survey had shown that there were possibly 211 museums: "for every three that open up, at least one closes."[34] The consequences of the slashes in federal funding through the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities affected all cultural institutions, but with Black museums already struggling to compete for funding, they faced drastic changes or

[33] Burns, Andrea A. *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement.* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013). 129
[34] Burns, *From Storefront to Monument,* 129

closing their doors. In the AAAM's 1988 survey, they concluded "African American cultural heritage, was consequently, being sorely neglected."[35]

To help curb the financial burden for Black museums, and other cultural institutions, Representative John Lewis proposed numerous pieces of legislation starting in 1989. Finally, in 2003, Congress approved legislation for InstituTe of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grants for African American museums as well as the "Plan for Action" for building the NMAAHC. The director of IMLS soon held a forum to figure out exactly how they could help and discovered that while "a few African American museums had applied to IMS and IMLS for support, many were unaware of the grant opportunities at the agency or were hesitant to engage in the federal grant process."[36] The first year of the Museum Grants for African American History and Culture (AAHC) program awarded $842,000.[37]

Of those initial grants, many were used to increase staff[38] and adjust for the lack of specifically trained professionals within Black museums as a result of their founding leaders' many backgrounds in anything but museums; "These founders, founding directors, and pioneers started out as social workers, doctors, artists, scholars, or ministers." [39] As a result, there as been a "lack of strong boards, lack of donor cultivation, lack of business plans, and lack of professional fundraising staff." [40] As museums made the transitions to younger, more professionally trained staff, they were also making the difficult transition from "founder-

---

[35] Nancy E. Weiss. "Lifting Every Voice throughout the Nation." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 147. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.142.
[36] Weiss, "Lifting Every Voice Throughout the Nation," 148-149.
[37] Ibid, 150.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Fath Davis Ruffins. "Building Homes for Black History: Museum Founders, Founding Directors, and Pioneers, 1915–95." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 36. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.13.
[40] Juanita Moore. "Transitions in Time." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 86. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.74.

dependent to board-led organizations"[41] which made the viability of Black museums even more dependent on resource support. Lonnie Bunch recalls a conversation with a fellow Smithsonian Institute curator about the demographics within museums today:

> Most of these employees had worked at the Smithsonian Institute for more than 30 years… except for their mass hiring in the 1960s, the museum had failed to bring mid-and entry-level African Americans into the museum. Though they applauded the recent appointment of several minority curators, they startled me by saying that once 'we leave, the professional staff at the museum will be whiter than it was in 1963.' And it is not clear that the future, if we hold to the current attitudes and practices, will be much better.[42]

Bunch goes on to describe the state of museum studies programs across the country as often only have one or two Black students.[43] Though the initial grants were helpful to jumpstart Black employment in museums, the perspectives of boards and hiring members does not seem to have shifted alongside the success of many Black museum professionals and we risk a worsened lack of diverse perspectives every year.

The AAHC grant program has been able to create strong partnerships for museums across institutions across the nation as well as create new investments for Black museums.[44] "During the period of 2006 to 2007, the AAHC grant program received 441 applications from 206 unique institutions, and IMLS has made 153 awards to 87 institutions… since the launch of the program, $15,320,735 in federal funds have been matched with $18,592,974 in non-federal funds, yielding an investment of nearly $34 million to support African American museums around the country."[45] With such a seemingly substantial amount of funding, it must be noted that the

---

[41] Weiss. "Lifting Every Voice Throughout the Nation," 150
[42] Bunch, *Call the Lost Dreams Back,* 107
[43] Ibid
[44] Weiss, "Lifting Every Voice Throughout the Nation," 153
[45] Ibid, 154.

federal government gave IMLS $200 million in grants just last year.[46] We should question why Black museums are getting such a small fraction of that sum. Numbers aside, the AAHC grant programs have supported the development of network-building to strengthen the Black museum community.[47] Hopefully, with the surge in attention to the NMAAHC, funding will continue to grow for these important institutions.

In its opening weekend, the National Museum of African American History and Culture saw over 61,000 people. [48] When the deputy director, Michael Warr, of the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco was asked what he thought the popularity of the NMAAHC would mean for other related institutions, he responded,

> When it's getting this much love from the public, that type of audience participation from around the country and from around the world… being a professional in the museum world, we're talking about that. I know how transformative it can be when you see yourself in history, and in institutions, particularly for young people, because that's what happened to me growing up… That's what art and culture can do—put you in awe.[49]

Warr points out how incredible the opening of the NMAAHC was for not just the museum staff or local patrons, but how important a museum of that caliber can be for a much larger community that has been waiting for national representation for over a hundred years. The president and CEO of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Juanita Moore, in Detroit shared similar sentiments, "It brings a lot of awareness, nationally and

---

[46] "Federal Government Invests $200m in Libraries and Museums to Stimulate American Communities." Institute of Museum and Library Services, March 11, 2021. https://www.imls.gov/news/federal-government-invests-200m-libraries-and-museums-stimulate-american-communities.
[47] Weiss, "Lifting Every Voice Throughout the Nation," 160.
[48] Moniuszko, Sara. "By the Numbers: NMAAHC Opening Attendance." NBC4 Washington. NBC4 Washington, September 26, 2016. https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/by-the-numbers-attendance-of-nmaahc-opening/114399/.
[49] Enelow, Sarah. "African American Smithsonian Sets a New Standard for Museums as Destinations." Skift, March 13, 2017. https://skift.com/2017/03/14/african-american-smithsonian-sets-a-new-standard-for-museums-as-destinations/.

internationally, to the fact that these institutions exist… It gives people great pride in our institution, the fact that we have one too… it's been really really nice."[50]

In the last twenty years, Black museums have seen an explosion in foundations, funding, partnerships, and visibility. With the NMAAHC's recent opening, they are now seeing a resurgence in popularity as well. However, none of it would have been possible without the years of struggle the Black museum movement's leaders and pioneers fought through to provide "permanent homes for Black history, chronicling African American culture in unprecedented fashion."[51] However, it is unclear if this trend will continue. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests following the prominent deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and others, many mainstream museums faced criticism for their initial silence and/or outright support of police followed immediately by a surge in Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) statements and promises to do better.[52] In the aftermath of these statements, there were surges in funding to PWIs to do the work that Black museums have been doing for decades; it is still yet to be seen if the funding actually contributed to any major changes as PWIs.[53] I fear that the only significant difference may be that Black museums and

[50] Enelow, "African American Smithsonian Sets a New Standard."
[51] Ruffins, "Building Homes for Black History," 42
[52]Alex Greenberger and Tessa Solomon. "Major U.S. Museums Criticized for Responses to Ongoing George Floyd Protests." ARTnews.com. ARTnews.com, June 4, 2020. https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/museums-controversy-george-floyd-protests-1202689494/.
[53]For more, see:
Manuel Charr. "How Have Museums Responded to the Black Lives Matter Protests?" *MuseumNext*. Jun 10, 2020. https://www.museumnext.com/article/how-have-museums-responded-to-the-black-lives-matter-protests/
Taylor Dafoe and Caroline Goldstein. "The George Floyd Protests Spurred Museums to Promise Change. Here's What They've Actually Done So Far." ArtNet. Aug 14, 2020. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/museums-diversity-equity-commitments-1901564
Naomi Rea and Eileen Kinsella. "As Museums Desperately Try to Diversify Their Collections, They Now Face Another Problem: How to Pay for It in a Financial Crisis." *Art World.* Feb 11, 2021. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-museum-diversity-collections-1942997
"Bringing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion to American Museums' $40 Billion Endowments." SOCAP Global, September 24, 2021. https://socapglobal.com/agenda-session/lightning-bolts-4/.

institutions will once again be outcompeted for funding opportunities now that PWIs see the financial incentive to doing DEAI work. It is time for mainstream museums to start working to correct and balance their contributions to the cultural record. If museums truly value diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, then performative statements on their social media are not sufficient. It is past time to recognize the work of Black museums and Black leaders throughout history for their important marks on the overarching history of museums.

Representation in Mainstream Museums

In Paul Butler's *Chokehold*, he outlines "The Ape Thesis" directly: "A surprisingly large number of Americans don't actually think of blacks as human beings. They think of us as apes. Psychologists call this 'the dehumanization thesis.'"[54] This dehumanization of Black people that contributes to the basis for high incarceration rates, police brutality, and the fixed criminal justice system that Butler writes about has been perpetuated by museums. For centuries, white American scholars have believed that African Americans were uncultured because they were brought from a continent that was assumed to be without a history and they had contributed 'nothing' since their arrival beyond physical labor. [55] In 1969 June Jordan, a poet, spoke about the critical lens that African Americans had of museums, she said:

> Take me into the museum and show me myself, show me my people, show me soul America. If you cannot show me myself, if you cannot teach my people who they need to know—and they need to know the truth, and they need to know that nothing is more important than human life—then why shouldn't I attack the temples of America and blow them up? [56]

Daniel Grant. "A $4M Grant to Increase Museum Staff Diversity Shines a Light on the Hard, Crucial Task." *The Observer.* Jan 25, 2019. https://observer.com/2019/01/museum-staff-diversity-initiative-receives-4-million-funding-american-alliance-of-museums/

[54] Paul Butler. *Chokehold: Policing Black Men*. (New York: The New Press, 2018). 25.

[55] Ruffins, "Building Homes for Black History," 50

[56] Burns, *From Storefront to Monument,* 2

To even begin to create representation for Black Americans, we have to engage in what Michael Omi and Howard Winant define as a racial project; "*racial projects* do both the ideological and the practical 'work' of making these links and articulating the connection between them."[57] The links and connections they refer to are between race and social structures. They argue that we cannot even begin to discuss race without identifying the "socially and historically demarcated set of demographic and cultural boundaries, state activities, 'life chances,' and tropes of identity/difference/(in)equality."[58] Mabel O. Wilson argues that museums and world fairs not only serve as racial projects, but can bridge the gaps and revolutionize local politics to overcome the 'imagined belonging' created by powerful individuals and social and historical structures.[59] However, it is a long process that must happen over time and in the face of setbacks.

In 1961 the definition of a museum according to the International Council of Museums was "any permanent institution which conserves and displays, for purposes of a study, education and enjoyment, collections of objects of cultural or scientific significance."[60] To not tell the stories of African Americans in these permanent institutions made for conserving and displaying objects of cultural and scientific significance is to deny the significance of African American culture. "Those in power had constructed these sites of 'imagined belonging.' In doing so, they rendered African American history and culture invisible, thereby deleting African Americans from the historical narrative."[61]

---

[57] Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. (New York: Routledge, 2015). 125.
[58] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 125.
[59] Mabel O. Wilson. *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums*. (California: University of California Press, 2012). 14-15.
[60] International Council of Museums. "Development of the Museum Definition according to ICOM Statutes (2007-1946)." n.d. http://archives.icom.museum/hist_def_eng.html
[61] Burns, *From Storefront to Monument,* 2

In 1969, at a committee meeting for the Smithsonian Institute, Daniel Boorstin, the fourth director of the National Museum of History and Technology demonstrated the impact of these embedded impacts of social and historical systemic racism in front of his colleagues. When John Kinard, the director of the Anacostia Museum for two years by this point, entered the meeting, Boorstin called him unqualified to be the director and left the room offended when Kinard stated that he had been appointed the director and chose to sit down.[62] The premise that Black people could not be qualified to hold positions of authority continued to be reflected well into the twenty-first century. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's *Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey* found that in positions "most closely associated with the intellectual and educational missions of museums, including those of curators, conservators, educators, and leadership (from director and chief curator to head of education or conservation)… 84% is Non-Hispanic White… 4% Black."[63]

The problem is not just within traditional brick-and-mortar institutions and staff decisions. The racism and misrepresentation seeps into historic sites. When Shawn Halifax went to work for the McLeod Plantation Historic Site around 2001 as an interpretation and volunteer coordinator, he remarked,

> What I know is that [plantations] are places that often purposefully hide their ugliness behind carefully manicured landscapes. Places perfect for the weddings of mostly ignorant couples who for decades have been fed misrepresentations and lies. Places that have denied their violent history and what happened there. Places that, even today, struggle to speak truth. Places that are often at the root of twenty-first century white supremacist ideology.[64]

---

[62] Ruffins, "Building Homes for Black History," 36-37

[63] Renee Brummell Franklin. "Romare Bearden Graduate Museum Fellowship Program—Outreach to Inreach—a Generation of Cultivating Tomorrow's Leaders." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 198. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.193.

[64] Shawn Halifax. "McLeod Plantation Historic Site." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 253. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.252.

At Colonial Williamsburg, in 1994, in an attempt to attract more Black visitors, its curators re-created a public slave auction.[65] This portrayal is in spite of Williamsburg being less than one hour away from where the first Africans aboard slave ships landed or the fact that the town's population is majority Black today. [66] Slavery has become the defining era of Black history and representation for most PWIs—though slavery, arguably, is still just white history since we often learn only from the perspective of enslavers and nothing of the Black experience, Black resistance, Black family and tradition building, or Black cultural artifacts throughout the era.

Congress has contributed to entrenching slavery as the only story worth telling 'for' Black people in mainstream museums. In 1989, Senator Jesse Helms opposed the approval of the National Museum of African American History and Culture because, "once Congress gives the go-ahead for African-Americans…how can Congress then say no to Hispanics, and the next group, and the next group after that?"[67] In 2011, Representative James Moran expressed the same disillusionment with multiculturalism when he claimed that by establishing both the NMAAHC and the National Museum of the American Latino,

> we are breaking up the American narrative… as much as we would like to think that all Americans are going to go to the African American Museum, I'm afraid it's not going to happen… The Museum of American History is where all the white folks are going to go, and the American Indian Museum is where Indians are going to feel at home. And African Americans are going to go to their own museum. And Latinos are going to go to their own museum. And that's not what America is all about.[68]

---

[65] Burns, *From Storefront to Monument,* 143
[66] Max Cohen. "Slavery in America: Some Historical Sites Try to Show the Horrors. Others Are Far behind." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, December 15, 2019. https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/education/2019/10/16/slavery-racism-black-history-historical-sites-historic-places-field-trip/1905346001/.
[67] Burns, *From Storefront to Monument,* 169
[68] Ibid, 177.

Apparently, neither of these Congressmen felt inclined to look into the long histories of institutions already alienating minority groups. Nor did they care to research the history of Black museums reinforcing and cultivating a "sense of citizenship and inclusion among those most often desperately searching for this measure of belonging, even as museum leaders deftly probed and dismantled outmoded and exclusionary stereotypes."[69] Fortunately, the American public and thousands from around the world found immense value in the NMAAHC because of its dedication to Black history in the U.S. It was so popular for the first few years after its opening that visitors could only access the museum with timed tickets purchased days and weeks in advance. Even now, many people dedicate whole days in their trip to Washington D.C. to spend solely at the NMAAHC and orient the rest of their stay around it.

As historian Pero Gaglo Dagbovie puts it, "The past experiences of black Americans, especially during the troublesome eras of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, do not make for friendly, lighthearted topics of conversation." [70] Yet, Black museums have been "acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges"[71] that mainstream museums have been ignoring or watering down for over a century. "Black museum leaders believed that their institutions could, if not supplant mainstream museums, at the very least offer African Americans…a meaningful alternative to mainstream America's insistence on black history's invisibility and misrepresentation." [72] Lonnie Bunch made the point crystal clear: "The notion that is so important here is that African-American culture is used as a lens to understand what it means to

[69] Ibid.
[70] Pero Gaglo Dagbovie. *Reclaiming the Black Past: The Use and Misuse of African American History in the Twenty-First Century.* (New York: Verso, 2018).vii.
[71] "Icom Announces the Alternative Museum Definition That Will Be Subject to a Vote." International Council of Museums. July 2019. https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/.
[72] Burns, *From Storefront to Monument,* 6

be American."[73] Museums have actively chosen to ignore and misrepresent American history by neglecting African American culture and history.

The Shoulders the Black Museum Movement Stands On

A substantial part of that history that is usually glossed over is education. Throughout most of American history up until the most recent generations of students, African Americans were not routinely provided opportunities to get an education. Frequently, the few African Americans that had any form of education—typically their limited educations subsisted of learning to read and write—were harassed, beaten, or even killed. Education was for many Black communities, the most valuable thing a person could attain because knowledge was power. [74]

Communities went to extreme lengths during the Antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction eras to secure spaces for education knowing that the state or local government either could not afford to build schools or did not care to.

> Until the state or locality could afford to build permanent structures, or more frequently in the absence of any such structures or commitment to build them, classes might be held almost anywhere—in abandoned cabins converted into instant schoolhouses, mule stables, billiard rooms, plantation cotton houses, warehouses and storerooms, discarded white schools, buildings owned by black fraternal orders, and most commonly, in black churches.[75]

Classes were taught multiple times a day. Communities voluntarily taxed themselves to provide funds to build structures and staff them. Parents came up with ingenious tactics to get their children off to school rather than being put in the fields alongside them. William Henry Holtzclaw recalled "when the landlord came to the workers' quarters to 'stir up' cotton pickers

---

[73] Ibid, 159

[74] Though my summary will be brief and could be expanded exponentially, I will draw largely from the primary source narratives and research of *Trouble in Mind.* For more see: Leon F. Litwack. *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998). 52-113.

[75] Litwack, *Trouble in Mind,* 62

[his] mother hid her son, then slipped him off to school. At age nine when he began to work as a regular field hand, his mother devised still another plan to educate her children: William alternated in the fields each day with his brother."[76]

After it became more commonplace for African Americans to seek out an education, there were still strict guidelines for how much they could learn. Typically, boys of field-work age were only allowed to attend school two out of the four academic months of the year because of the harvest. Students who successfully mastered basic literacy were then turned into teaching assistants without any advanced education. A journal of Hampton Institute, *Southern Workman* (1915) warned teachers to avoid controversial topics that may cause "race antagonism."[77]

When the first schools for advanced degrees—mostly meaning a high school education equivalent and perhaps a bit of trade school—for Black people were established, they served as skill institutes meant to satisfy the fear of white businessmen who believed they would lose their workforce if African Americans gained an education.[78] Hampton Institute (now University) was one of the first of these schools and later founded the first university-sponsored African American museum in 1868.[79] It would be at this institution that Booker T. Washington would graduate. While appealing to and pacifying powerful white parties, Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee University and Samuel Chapman Armstrong at the Hampton Institute would use spaces like the museum to discreetly encourage critical and free thought among their Black students. [80]

---

[76] Ibid, 65-66
[77] Ibid, 70.
[78] Ibid, 79
[79] John E. Fleming. "The Impact of Social Movements on the Development of African American Museums." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 48. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.44.
[80] John S. Welch. "Reassessing the Vocational Origins of Hampton University and Celebrating a Singular History of Arts Engagement." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 107–41. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.107.

Over time, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) became spaces for Black students to explore and produce literature, art, plays, music, dance, philosophies, as well as become lawyers, ministers, politicians, and social workers.[81] HBCUs were vital to the growth and training of future activists and members of the Harlem Renaissance as well as the Black Arts Movement that coincided with the Black museums movement.[82]

Later in 1915, when Carter G. Woodson established the professional organization, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), he empowered Black people to learn about their history to advocate against white supremacy during the Jim Crow era. Black teachers, librarians, ministers' wives, social workers, and clubwomen helped organize the ASNLH, and eventually helped to establish Negro History Week which later became Black History Month. [83]

Since the bondage of slavery, Black communities have sought out education and adapted their circumstances to make it happen. Early on, the violent protest of white people only added clarity to the notion that there was something powerful in the very nature of learning. Members of the Black museum movement also recognized the necessity of educating their communities. They informed audiences that the "ordinary material objects and artifacts of African American history—whether photographs or manumission papers or quilts—were in fact objects of immense power, worthy of inclusion in a museum." [84]

---

[81] Ruffins, "Building Homes for Black History," 23.
[82] Ibid, 25.
[83] Ibid, 16-17.
[84] Burns, *From Storefront to Monument,* 22

Responses to Change: Conservatism and Radicalism

Post-emancipation, white Southerners romanticized the idea of the "Old Negro"—the fabricated imagery of the "simple, faithful, cheerful, unresentful, deferential Negro menial who was always eager and willing to serve, even to give his life for his owners."[85] This revisionist version of history permeated public policy, education standards, social norms, and popular—dominant—culture. White supremacy shaped the ways people understood the 'race problem' and eventually kindled the Black Codes and Jim Crow laws. [86] To send a message about sovereignty and their rights to refuse to end the lynchings and denial of citizenship, several states refused to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment (1865). South Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama, and Florida were each only ratified after making serious adjustments that would hinder the ability of the federal government to enforce such a law. Florida then had to re-ratify it in 1868. Texas waited until 1870, and Mississippi delayed ratification until 2013.[87]

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing for more than 70 years, countries reinforced dominant narratives about their social classes and races through elaborate exhibits and shows at world fairs. The U.S. fairs were funded by many of the same entrepreneurs and politicians that funded major museums and "set the ideological tone for the expositions."[88] The prominent theories on display were intended to show off the progress of a nation including its praiseworthy inventions and economic pursuits. However, alongside industrial achievements, the fairs created exhibits displaying "the common sense of nation, race, and class" which, in the United States, meant reinforcing beliefs that "nonwhite peoples belonged in the lower ranks of

---

[85] Litwack, *Trouble in Mind,* 179-216; 184
[86] Carol Anderson. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017). 7-38.
[87] Anderson, *White Rage,* 22
[88] Wilson *Negro Building,* 6.

civilization" and "were deemed exploitable for their resources and labor."[89] This manifested into claims that Black people were "incapable of reason and judgment and therefore were unworthy of basic human and democratic rights."[90] As a result, many of these ideas propagated beyond cultural institutions and extravagant fairs leading to long-lasting biases that have seeped deeply into every dynamic of the American democratic system.

Carol Anderson's *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* chronicles the series of supreme court decisions, presidential executive orders, congressional bills, and state laws that facilitated the nullification of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and caused severe detriment to countless other bits of progress including housing access, hiring processes, education, districting for voting, and ample tactics to re-disenfranchise the public. Black communities were promised freedom with the Emancipation Proclamation, but steadily had to fight for the treatment of humans and the rights of citizens. As a result, the Modern Civil Rights Movement began in the 1950s as the will to fight back caught fire with the violent murder of Emmett Till and the strength to not be moved of Rosa Parks.

The modern Civil Rights Movement sparked new interest on college campuses for Black Studies departments. The culture of African Americans began to proliferate throughout the nation as ideas of racial uplift—taking new knowledge back to communities and sharing it to bring the entire community up—took off. The works of Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights authors, musicians, artists, and activists such as W. E. B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, Alain Locke, Carter G. Woodson, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Dorothy Height, Marcus Garvey, Walter White, Roy Wilkins, Sterling Brown, Billie Holliday, Bayard Rustin, and

[89] Ibid 6-7.
[90] Ibid, 7.

so many others inspired the last forty years of research forming the 'Negro Canon'.[91] The founders of Black museums were students of the Negro Canon and chose to establish independent spaces available to the public that could be controlled and explored by African Americans.

The idea of establishing independent spaces was not new to many of these leaders. In response to the world fairs, Black elites established Emancipation exposition fairs where they could tell their own history and "citizens could witness their own progress as a race and nation."[92] They fostered and grew counternarratives that rivaled the one-dimensional stories of American progress being shared at the fairs. Many of the questions and agendas that were posed at the fairs served as the foundations for eventually creating Black museums. After this experience, Black leaders knew that they would have to institute their own spaces and counter publics to share their history and culture.

Instead of waiting on white institutions to accept and integrate Black culture, many new institutions were created to disseminate literature, music, artwork, and performances. The Black Arts Movement became integral to the progress of African Americans.

> Seeking greater heritage knowledge, BAM explored African American culture and history. The emphasis no longer focused on integration, but Black Power, Black control, self-determination, and Black liberation. The Black Aesthetic movement centered art on Black culture and life. These movements led to a long-term impact on positive self-identity, racial solidarity, cultural self-definition, and self-actualization—heritage knowledge.[93]

Museums were treated no differently. Informed by the tense struggles and sustained activism throughout the twentieth century, the Black museum took hold as a space for heritage

---

[91] The concept of the 'Negro Canon' is being drawn from Ruffins' "Building Homes for Black History," 14. However, the list of community leaders and artisans is a very short list of some of the most well-known and integral figures of the period.
[92] Wilson, *Negro Building,* 7
[93] Fleming, "The Impact of Social Movements," 60

knowledge, community-centered programming and outreach, and were staffed by the very cohort of organizers that trained side-by-side with the organizers, politicians, writers, social workers, artists, preachers, teachers, and community leaders that reshaped the entire map of America.

The Black Museum Movement: Chicago, Detroit, and Washington D.C.

In 1961, the Ebony Museum of African American History (later the DuSable Museum of African American History) opened in Chicago under the guidance of Margaret Burroughs. The museum had spurred from private parties she and her husband held in their apartment on the South Side of Chicago where intellectuals came together to share stories and ideas. Eventually, they moved into a brownstone mansion that had previously been lived in by a group of working-class African Americans and Burroughs began giving small tours of books and artifacts she had collected. The DuSable's first constitution stated: "The Museum, gallery and research library shall be dedicated to the preservation of the culture and history of Americans of African descent, and Africans. Primarily, it shall emphasize the contributions of the Negro to American History, Life, and Democracy."[94]

From the start, networking was key. Critical equipment and collection pieces were donated from local businesses, libraries, and art museums in addition to personal donations from scholars and community leaders to build the foundation of the DuSable Museum. They also placed ads in newspapers for local individuals to consider donating objects that represented any piece of the narratives missing from mainstream museums. This inclusionary practice encouraged more memberships which also helped the museum's financial stability.[95] In its first

[94] Burns, *From Storefront to Monument,* 18-20
[95] Ibid, 21-23

year, the DuSable partnered with the South Park YMCA, the Negro History Roundtable Group, the Ida B. Wells Children's Art Class, the Chicago Conferences of Christians and Jews, and the African Students Reception.[96]

The programming at the DuSable targeted whom they believed were the most vulnerable to having little to no self-worth as a product of the dominant culture—schoolchildren and teenagers—but they drew in crowds of many ages and education levels. They sponsored an essay contest titled "Why Is It Important for Negroes to Know Their History?" They gave out resource packets to schoolteachers with biographies of important African American figures and trained them to teach Black History. In 1970, they sent out crews to share exhibits and newsletters with the community, but also to interview and record the stories of senior citizens. They provided internships to children to learn about museum professionals. In their first year, they reached 2,644 at just the museum itself.[97]

Three hundred miles away, Charles H. Wright founded the International Afro-American Museum (IAM, later the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History) in Detroit in 1965. Much like Burroughs, Wright's museum began in an apartment he owned. The museum functioned both as a historic site and a space for outreach programs intended to support Black empowerment. Also like the DuSable, IAM depended on the community for financial support, object donations, staffing, and Black History expertise. [98]

In establishing the museum, Wright and a committee of community members as well as activists determined what their purpose would be and how they would use the museum to debunk the myth that their culture was not worth documenting, preserving, or displaying perpetuated by

---

[96] Ibid, 73
[97] Ibid, 75-78
[98] Ibid, 25-28

predominantly white institutions. The set goals of the museum's mission were: "the museum must 'dramatize the constructive existence/contribution of America's black citizens.' African American audiences who came to the museum would realize not only a renewed 'sense of self' but also their role in the grand trajectory of the black freedom movement…to 'provide a storehouse for artifacts and heirlooms that may otherwise be lost to history' and to 'provide a valid source for research on the Negro history of the Western Hemisphere.'"[99]

In Detroit, Wright had limited space but used creative outlets for programming to reach a very large audience. He aired a broadcast, "Spotlight on Black People", on WLJB radio station. Museum staff issued a committee to go out and record the stories of elderly community members much like in Chicago. They also created a mobile museum in a van that travelled to schools and churches showing off a variety of exhibits to people that might not make it out to the museum. Partnering with local businesses and churches, the museum placed ads in the newspaper requesting spaces to park the van. In 1967, the executive director reported more than a thousand people in the Detroit area had seen the exhibitions and that the mobile museum would be partnering with Wayne State University and all of the Detroit high schools. [100]

Not far from the National Mall, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (later Anacostia Community Museum) opened in 1967 with founding director John Kinard. It originally opened in the former Carver Theater, one of the few theaters African Americans had been allowed in during segregation, thus making it a historical site as well as a museum. In an interview with John Kinard, he voiced his opinion on why the Smithsonian Institute did not attract more African Americans even though they lived so close by: "African Americans avoided museums like the Smithsonian because 'the black man did not see himself in those jobs or in those exhibits, so he

[99] Ibid, 31-32
[100] Ibid, 78-83

wasn't going to embarrass himself by paying respect to what essentially represented cultural pressure.'"[101]

In its genesis, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (ANM) essentially functioned like a scaled-down Smithsonian Institute and it nearly failed because of it. After Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, the community members involved with the museums started sharing their desires to see their interests and concerns represented. The museum created a mobile museum like in Detroit and began putting on exhibitions with interactives, Black History, relevant issues to their community, rotating collections to focus on international subjects. The real turning point for the ANM was with the exhibit titled "The Rat—Man's Invited Affliction." It showcased a real-life problem for Anacostia citizens and provided potential solutions in addition to explaining how it came to be an issue for them. [102] Kinard argued that The Rat provided an opportunity for the museum to change the quality of life for Anacostia's community members and that other institutions should take up the mantel as well. [103]

As a result, the Smithsonian began adopting successful strategies from the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum to create more relevancy in its museums for minority groups.[104] Across museums today, you can see the attempts to incorporate the culture and history of more minority groups that have been traditionally marginalized. This model has clearly been effective in Chicago, Detroit, and Washington D.C. It creates a standard for creating museums that are built from a goal of lifting people up and asking them to be a part of something that will have a far-reaching impact, and recognizing that impact is not revenue or likes and shares on social media.

---

[101] Ibid, 36-38
[102] Ibid, 90-94
[103] Ibid, 95
[104] Ibid, 96-105

Present Day

The National Museum of African American History and Culture is the latest in an upward trend of Black museums garnering the support, funding, and popularity of a national and international community seeking to learn more about the narratives of African Americans. In the true fashion of the Black museum movement, the NMAAHC serves not only as a repository for the precious objects and stories of centuries of valuable traditions and cultures, but primarily as a resource for education, community outreach, and partnerships. It is now a hub in an ever-growing network of activists, teachers, social workers, historians, Americans, and citizens of the world.

The history of Black museums does not begin in the twentieth century; it is a deeply rooted, vast, important story and it deserves a space in the historiography of museums. The scope of this paper was not broad enough to cover the vital impacts of so many other museums, but the DuSable Museum of African American History, the International Afro-American Museum, and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum each played a significant role in the shaping of Black museums and ultimately the shaping of mainstream museums today. Throughout the many missions of museums worldwide, most define themselves by their collections first, and by what they can do with their objects second. In John E. Fleming's article, *The Impact of Social Movements on the Development of African American Museums,* he recalls a conversation with a woman at a conference about starting a museum without a collection:

> a woman from Los Angeles who asked my opinion about a Black woman in her city who wanted to start a museum without a collection. I laughed. The woman looked puzzled. I said, 'Lady, don't you realize that most Black museums were started without a collection. We begin with an idea of preserving our heritage and name it a museum, not for what it is, but of what we hope it will become.'[105]

---

[105] Fleming, "The Impact of Social Movements," 72

Reflecting on the Black museums that started out as private parties in apartments or even the beginning stages of the NMAAHC—it was only an idea for nearly a century, then it received funding, then it used outreach and partnerships to build its collection—it is hard to agree that the hard and fast definition of museums starts with 'stuff'.

Even searching for 'non-traditional,' 'alternative,' 'unconventional,' or other variations of 'museum,' the results largely bring up traditional museums displaying provocative material or interactive exhibits that parallel an amusement park. The definition of a museum has remained fairly static over time and has yet to offer a space for museums that depart from the stuff-first model. As a result, generational wealth created by slavery, imperialism, exploitation, and outright pilfering has given major museums the ability to not only succeed, but set the parameters for who else can sit at the table. Despite this, Black museums and Black museum organizations have continued to do the work regardless of how much recognition or power they can wield at places like the International Council of Museums.

Today, quickly scanning the missions of notable African American museums across the United States like the Studio Museum in Harlem, the African American Museum and Library at Oakland, and the Colored Girls Museum in Philadelphia shows these museums are still fighting to establish community bonds that will shape the future of society as a whole by sharing Black history and using the museum to address relevant, contemporary issues that affect their communities. Black museums, including the NMAAHC, continue to be community resources for providing imperative educational platforms for Black history and contemporary social and civil rights issues, as well as pluralistic spaces for partnerships to thrive in creating reflections of diverse cultures within the larger culture of African Americans.

Black museums "are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures." They acknowledge and address "the conflicts and challenges of the present." Black museums "hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society." They "safeguard diverse memories for future generations." Black museums "guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing."[106]

Yet, as Lonnie Bunch points out, though the museum field is garnering much more negative attention these days for their lack of diverse perspectives and their long histories of colonialist practices, museum professionals would be better served to "look and listen" than to "duck and cover."[107] He draws from his experience in Black museums to remind us that it is not enough for museums to be expert authorities anymore; museums must be transparent and must "teach visitors more about points of view, the scholarly underpinnings of museum work, and the inherent fluidity of museum interpretation."[108] I argue Black museums are the model and digital projects can be the medium for creating the critical consciousness necessary for an informed public to take stories and information and use them to mold society towards a better future.

---

[106] "Icom Announces the Alternative Museum Definition That Will Be Subject to a Vote." International Council of Museums. July 2019. https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/.
[107] Bunch, *Call the Lost Dream Back,* 128-130.
[108] Ibid, 133.

Chapter 3: An Ecology of Museum Knowledges

> "History is not the same thing as memory. Memory is the way in which we put history to rest, especially histories of suffering, trauma and victimization."
>
> –Achille Joseph Mbembe[109]

The State of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Museums

Over the last thirty years, social inclusion and representation have been buzzwords in the museum world. Starting in the UK, government policies encouraged a shift in practices "to address the various barriers that prevent people from traditionally underrepresented groups, such as ethnic 'minorities' and individuals with cognitive disabilities, from accessing museum resources"[110] and contribute to broader social and economic policies to curb "poor health, high crime, low educational attainment, and unemployment."[111] In the US, the American Association of Museums adopted a diversity and inclusion policy in February 2014.[112]

However, in 2008 the National Endowment for the Arts found that 78.9% of visitors in the US remained non-Hispanic whites, even though their demographic accounted for only 68.7% of the national population at publication[113]. In 2015, the Mellon Foundation found that 72% of art museum staff are non-Hispanic whites while making up nearly a seven percent less ratio of

---

[109] Joseph Achille Mbembe. "Decolonizing the University: New Directions." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2016): 29–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022215618513.
[110] Rose Paquet Kinsley. "Inclusion in Museums: A Matter of Social Justice." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 31, no. 5 (2016): 476. https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2016.1211960.
[111] Kinsley, "Inclusion in Museums," 476.; The policy as listed on the AAM website reads: "The American Alliance of Museums respects, values and celebrates the unique attributes, characteristics and perspectives that make each person who they are. We believe that our strength lies in our diversity among the broad range of people and museums we represent. We consider diversity and inclusion a driver of institutional excellence and seek out diversity of participation, thought and action. It is our aim, therefore, that our members, partners, key stakeholders reflect and embrace these core values." https://www.aam-us.org/programs/diversity-equity-accessibility-and-inclusion/ It does not appear to have been updated since February 26, 2014 and lists ways the Alliance intends to implement this mission through things like awareness campaigns and professional development alongside 'museum excellence'.
[112] Kinsley, "Inclusion in Museums," 476.
[113] Ibid, 477.

the national population in the seven years since the NEA study from 2008.[114] Among visitors denoted as from minority groups that visit museums, further research showed that "members of minority ethnic groups saw science museums as 'marked by privilege and exclusion such that they felt unwelcome and found little relevance to themselves or their communities."[115] When staffs are predominantly of one demographic, it is impossible to account for the perspectives and possible connections visitors may make that do not match the staff's demographic. It is essential to follow up on the claims that museums want to diversify their audiences and create inclusive spaces by listening to and giving space to the communities museum staffs are wanting to include.

In 2019, at the International Extraordinary General Assembly, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) introduced a new definition to the world of museum professionals to be voted on:

> Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.
> Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.[116]

Key changes to the current definition, if the proposal were to be accepted, would entirely rewrite it with an incredibly strong lean towards progressivism, activism, and inclusion. The existing definition reads:

> A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches,

---

[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.
[116] "Icom Announces the Alternative Museum Definition That Will Be Subject to a Vote." International Council of Museums. July 2019. https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/.

communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.[117]

The vote was officially postponed—and has yet to be brought back to the table in nearly three years—after 70.4% of participants opposed voting in any capacity in Kyoto, citing resistance to the ideological and political stance of the text.[118] The proposed definition was debated at length with France leading the charge against it and was strongly opposed by "Italy, Spain, Germany, Canada, Iran, Israel (which said, "this might well be the first time Israel agrees with Iran" to applause), Brazil, Peru, and Argentina saw in it a fuzzy collection of political correctness and trendy posturing that would have little legal value."[119] It is important to note that with the exception of Peru and Argentina, each of the countries listed has long and bloody histories as imperialists that invaded or were aided in invading various sovereign nations and stole their children, their land, and their resources, and brought ethnocide and genocide with them.

This year ICOM has requested the votes of 116 committees by midnight on April 10, to rank five new proposals for the definition of a museum.[120] Of the five proposals, the first is nearly a verbatim copy of the current definition with the only substantial deviation coming from noting that museums are accessible and inclusive, and inspire "discovery, emotion, reflection, and critical thinking."[121] The second proposal, as well as the third and fifth, maintain that museums should be professional—which reminds me strongly of homeowners associations that

[117] International Council of Museums. "Development of the Museum Definition according to ICOM Statutes (2007-1946)." n.d. http://archives.icom.museum/hist_def_eng.html

[118] Vincent Noce. "ICOM in Turmoil after Row over New Definition of Museums." The Art Newspaper - International art news and events, September 28, 2021. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/08/13/icom-in-turmoil-after-row-over-new-

[119] Ibid.

[120] https://icom.museum/en/news/on-the-way-to-a-new-museum-definition-we-are-doing-it-together/"On the Way to a New Museum Definition: We Are Doing It Together!" International Council of Museums, February 25, 2022. https://icom.museum/en/news/on-the-way-to-a-new-museum-definition-we-are-doing-it-together/.

[121] Ibid.

dictate acceptable lawn care regardless of the single mom that works too many jobs and does not have time to get around to making sure her lawn is exactly one and a half inches high, in other words, more Western notions of respectability—and imply that museums communicate *to* the public rather than cooperate with community-based partnerships. Of the five proposed definitions, only the fourth mentions community involvement in a way that suggests genuine knowledge sharing:

> A museum is an inclusive, not-for-profit institution, open to the public, which researches, collects, preserves, exhibits, and communicates tangible and intangible heritage, facilitating critical reflections on memory and identity. Museums are in the service of society, providing educational and knowledge sharing experiences. Driven by communities or shaped together with their audiences, museums can take a wide range of formats, fostering equal access, sustainability, and diversity.[122]

However, even this definition does not evoke a clear call to confront the problematic pasts of Westernized museums like the 2019 proposal. Though inclusion has been implemented in national and international policies and suggestions, there is a severe stronghold among the vanguard to maintain traditional museum practices—perpetuating outdated ideologies, shaping public attitudes against Others, and relying on neoliberalism to firmly situate neocolonialism.

Contact Zones, Gatekeeping, and Ecology of Knowledges

In 2013, the British Museum Association published policy guidelines encouraging the explicit de-neutralizing of museums within a document entitled *Museums Change Lives*. Reasons for creating the guidelines included: museums enhance wellbeing; museums create better places; and museums inspire people and ideas.[123] Many have argued that museums have the power to shape, change, maintain, and enforce dominant social narratives, collective memory, and

---

[122] Ibid

[123] David Fleming. "Do Museums Change Lives?: Ninth Stephen Weil Memorial Lecture." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 59, no. 2 (2016): 73–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12149.

understandings of cultures. [124] As institutions, museums "are undeniably implicated in the dynamics of (in)equality and the power relations between different groups through their role in constructing and disseminating dominant social narratives." [125]

Museums are, inherently, not neutral. Richard Sandell writes, "museums, heritage sites and galleries *of all kinds*—with a variety of collections, audiences, missions, and governance structures—are caught up in, and contribute to, the processes through which human rights are claimed, negotiated and experienced."[126] Every time a curator or exhibitionist chooses to, or chooses not to, display particular objects, they are sending a message. When objects are given labels, every word written, or not written, provides an interpretation that is unique to the writer. Every hiring decision behind the scenes dictates who is expert enough and who is not, who is creative enough and who is not, who is 'museum material' and who is not.

Confronting the standpoint of museums through their practices is essential. For example, in natural history museums, visitors can typically find exhibits and sometimes entire halls or wings dedicated to the evolution of the human species. These exhibits are essential for many reasons, not limited to understanding how scientific cosmologies explain how humans came to be. However, there is at least one particular element of these displays that should be questioned:

> It's remarkable that we continue the nineteenth-century practice of putting animals and "native" peoples in the same museum, the "natural history" museum. In the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Field Museum in Chicago, the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., and many others, the implication is that premodern African cultures belonged to the history of nature rather than the history of civilization. Moreover, such treatment implies

---

[124] This is a key premise found in nearly every critical museology piece I have come across. Key writers on the subject include, but are certainly not limited to: Julia Rose, Amy K. Levin, David Fleming, Kylie Message, Richard Sandell, and Janet Marstine.

[125] Julia Rose. *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). 8-9.

[126] Richard Sandell. "Museum Work as Human Rights Work" in *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*. (New York: Routledge, 2016). 161.

> that animals and Africans can be considered separately from ourselves in our understanding of the world.[127]

When these are the types of stories being shared with the public, often presented under the guise of neutrality, they perpetuate racist ideologies and shape the image of African, and African Americans by extension. As institutions of history, it is museums' imperative to speak truth into the narratives we are taught. Africa is coded as a homogenous land of primitive people without histories, traditions, innovations, or inspirations. Dehumanizing ancient Africans and including them in the displays that imply they were nothing but cavemen hunting large game and waiting on Europeans to enlighten them is not history-telling and is not how we pursue social justice in museums.

Additionally, natural history museums drop the ball on gender and sexuality. Taxidermized animals are traditionally used to encode gender roles of the nineteenth century with the males depicted as being stronger, larger, and more powerful.[128] Many labels referring to ancient humans falsely attribute hunting solely to males and gathering solely to females. There are also often sexual innuendos used to describe human evolution rather than explicit, factual depictions of sex and human reproduction. Same-sex relationships are generally erased entirely "revealing the ways in which science itself is a construction growing out of nineteenth-century social conventions and power relations."[129]

I argue that in order for the digital record to be polyphonic, we must first address why we allow the narratives created by biased—intentionally or not—humans in museums to be regarded as objective (T)ruth. Ruha Benjamin writes, "Codes, in short, operate within powerful systems of meaning that render some things visible, others invisible and create a vast array of distortions

---

[127] Curtis Keim and Carolyn Somerville. *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind.* Fourth Edition. (New York: Westview Press, 2018). 31.
[128] Amy K. Levin. *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*. (London: Routledge, 2010). 9-10.
[129] Ibid.

and dangers."[130] Every time a label is written or a display is put together that encodes some things as acceptable and others as unacceptable, museums portray a truth that then gets disseminated into the public sphere and shapes biases and policies. Benjamin writes extensively about the coding that occurs in technology that is inherently based on human-based notions. A prevailing perception, like in natural history museums, is that algorithms and/or science are objective and therefore any information gleaned from technical data analysis or a science-based museum must be (T)rue. Benjamin argues, "By pulling back the curtain and drawing attention to forms of coded inequity, not only do we become more aware of the social dimensions of technology but we can work together against the emergence of a digital caste system that relies on our naivety when it comes to the neutrality of technology."[131]

While it may seem like I am picking on natural history museums, I am simply drawing on the museum type that is most closely associated with facts and objectivity. Museums must confront their complicity in constructing (T)ruth based on white male heteronormativity across every step of acquisition, curation, exhibition, and leadership.[132] To answer this call, some museums have determined that they should facilitate 'contact zones' as forums for the public to interact with each other and learn about this history. However, the idea of 'contact zones' buries the lead and individualizes an institutional problem.

Much of the research and praxis of contact zones is mapped onto museums from Mary Pratt's concept: "the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations."[133] The

---

[130] Ruha Benjamin. *Race After Technology*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019). 7.
[131] Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 11.
[132] Levin, *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*, 7.
[133] Bryony Onciul. "Engagement Zones." *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement. Routledge*. (2015): 78.

imperial encounter is not erased in museums. Contact zones are still spaces that allow collaboration where the facilitators *want* collaboration.[134] In reality, the premises of Gatekeeper Theory are enacted: "In an overly simplified gatekeeping metaphor, information must pass through 'the gate (passage point)', in order to reach the intended recipient. The gatekeeper monitors the gate, exercising gatekeeping mechanisms upon 'the gated', such as information selection and withholding." [135] Instead of actually de-centering the museum, "the museum as contact zone 'is and continues to be used instrumentally as a means of masking far more fundamental asymmetries, appropriations, and biases'."[136]

This failed attempt at facilitating contact zones comes from a warped comprehension of what museums should be focusing on when it comes to understanding identity. Jay Rounds writes about the use of 'identity work' in museums being "used as a variable for helping to predict whether individuals will visit museums, or what they will do there once they arrive." [137] This is a problem because this means museums are doing calculus to target the 'identity' most likely to contribute to their visitor number, which usually translates to ticket sales, gift shop purchases, cafeteria sales, and potential membership revenue. It also means that once museums determine who will come in the door, they then cater the material available to make those visitors the most comfortable. However, I have already pointed out in this paper that the majority of people going to museums do not feel welcome or comfortable if they are not of the non-

[134] Onciul, "Engagement Zones," 81.
[135] Laura-Edythe Coleman. "The Socially Inclusive Museum: A Typology Re-Imagined." *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 9, no. 2 (2016): 41–57. https://doi.org/10.18848/1835-2014/cgp/v09i02/41-57.
[136] Onciul, "Engagement Zones," 81.
[137] Rounds, Jay. "Doing Identity Work in Museums." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 49, no. 2 (2006): 133–50. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2006.tb00208.x.

Hispanic white majority. This is a slippery slope that can and has led to many echo chambers in these spaces.

In a more progressive attempt to bridge the divide between museums and their communities, many museums have implemented ideas from James Clifford's theory of museums as contact zones.[138] The idea is that museums serve as spaces for engagement across cultures, languages, ideologies, communities, and histories that do not typically intersect. Often times the engagement occurs first at a partnership level where exhibits can be put together with out-of-house input. "By sharing authorship with communities, many academics and museum professionals have claimed that museums can democratize and pluralise the histories they present. This can decentralize the traditional voice of museum expertise and enable counter-narratives to be heard through the representation of community voices in the museum."[139] By stepping away from a seemingly objective and expert authorship, museums can invite community members to take ownership of the stories being told in a way that gives them space to be seen as contributors rather than just consumers.

When museums shift their understanding of their role in the contact zone, real engagement and alternative frameworks can be embraced. Amber R. Clifford-Napoleone reflects on the shift of the role of objects and traditional museum elements within a successful contact zone in her own museum.[140] Working at the McClure Archives and University Museum at the University of Central Missouri, Clifford-Napoleone helped facilitate a special exhibition and reception for Saudi Arabia Day on campus—a new yearly holiday to celebrate the large

---

[138] Onciul, "Engagement Zones," 72.
[139] Ibid, 7.
[140] Amber R. Clifford-Napoleone. "A New Tradition: A Reflection on Collaboration and Contact Zones." *Journal of Museum Education* 38, no. 2 (2013): 187–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2013.11510769.

population of immigrant students from Saudi Arabia. In the first year post-9/11, she realized the exhibit needed to be handled with care:

> In order to make that exhibition come together, I called the leaders of the Muslim community on campus for a truly collaborative effort to (1) teach our community in the Middle West about the Middle East, and (2) create a place for cross-cultural dialogue and interaction that would hopefully make our campus a more international, educated, safer place for everyone. The exhibition was previewed by Muslim and Saudi students and modified; artifacts were withdrawn upon request by Muslim and Saudi students, the text written specifically for those with no knowledge of the history and cultural milieu of the Middle East. Then the staff and our community partners added one final component: food and drink served by Saudi students wearing their traditional dress.[141]

The event was a success and has continued over the years with more people attending from all around the region. Saudi Arabia Day quickly became much more about the fellowship and the sharing of food cultures than about the singularly interpreted objects and the exhibition. Once the Middle Eastern and Muslim communities in the area became no longer excluded, "the cultural differences that the majority community sees as foreign "problems" become local, community-based, and a legitimate social concern beyond the stereotypical "anti-terrorism" stance." [142]

This example of a contact zone was sustainable because the museum staff backed off and adapted their expectations. They had a long-term plan and a community that wanted to have agency in the perceptions created about them. Eventually, the fellowship created spaces for visitors to talk about the objects that had originally been the jumping-off point for the contact zone, but the objects were no longer centered—the community was.[143] "The lesson there is in the contact zone itself, no longer a solely museum space, or solely academic space, but a dynamic contact zone where ideas and approaches have shifted as the atmosphere has changed. If the

[141] Clifford-Napoleone, "A New Tradition," 189.
[142] Ibid, 190.
[143] Ibid, 192.

museum is a contact zone where the experiences of our cultures can be sustained by the interlocutors themselves, then perhaps the collection is negotiable after all."[144]

Instead of gatekeeping and dictating coded messages about objects, museums have an obligation to create spaces that encourage cross-cultural engagement to dramatically improve the experiences of visitors inside the museum as well as help facilitate understandings that spark change outside of the museum to uplift the experiences of visitors in their everyday life. As long as contact zones serve as imperial encounters and identity work is to control and boost traffic flow, museums will continue to fail to bridge the gap between themselves and their communities. Rose Paquet Kinsley argues "given the current interest in re-imagining the future of museums through the lens of inclusion, critically interrogating and re-envisioning what the museum field means by inclusion is a timely task."[145]

Contact zones, when decoupled from critical interrogation and re-envisioning, become projects of coloniality that survive in the social, political, and economic structures of modern society.[146] 'Westernized' institutions subscribe to Eurocentric epistemic canons that portray "colonialism as a normal form of social relations between human beings rather than a system of exploitation and oppression."[147] This way of thinking, combined with the authoritative narration, has become hegemonic—which has made it difficult to resist models based on frameworks derived from the Global North.[148]

In museums, decoloniality happens in the (re)membering of histories, including the difficult histories, and in the production of multiple narratives at the intersection of identities.

---

[144] Ibid.
[145] Kinsley, "Inclusion in museums," 475.
[146] Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni. "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa." *History Compass* 13, no. 10 (2015): 487. https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12264.
[147] Mbembe, "Decolonizing the university," 32.
[148] Ibid, 33.

Decoloniality is the resistance of and disruption of hegemonic institutional structures.[149] The space of museums will remain "deeply political as long as museums continue to think in imperial precepts and privilege particular ways of knowing." [150] Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues "after five centuries of "teaching" the world, the global North seems to have lost the capacity to learn from the experiences of the world. In other words, it looks as if colonialism has disabled the global North from learning in noncolonial terms, that is, in terms that allow for the existence of histories other than the universal history of the West." [151]

The standard narratives that can be found in museums, among many other media sources,[152] validate the "political authoritarianism and patriarchal nationalist ideology that excludes ethnic and religious groups, oppresses women or violently silences different political expressions."[153] Museums need to recognize the knowledge systems they choose to uphold. Ünsal argues that "museums should embrace all knowledges originating from the experiences of those who struggle with or have struggled under oppressive political ideologies, irrespective of who the oppressor is or where the oppressed come from."[154]

I propose modeling after Santos' counterplan for institutions that want to decolonize and embrace an inclusionary model of practice:

> We need therefore to fight for another conception of the past, one in which the past becomes a fore-reason of our rage and nonconformity. In lieu of a neutralized past, we need a past as irretrievable loss resulting from human initiatives that had a choice of alternatives, that is, a past of empowering memories, one revived for

---

[149] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa," 488.
[150] Deniz Ünsal. "Positioning Museums Politically for Social Justice." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 34, no. 6 (2019): 561. https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2019.1675983.
[151] Santos, *Epistemologies of the South,* 19.
[152] The entire second chapter of *Mistaking Africa* (2018) is dedicated to pinpointing the sources we consume in the United States to craft the images of Africa that we all seem to have. Although this source is specific to understanding the stereotypes of Africa, the same arguments can be cross-applied to numerous cultures, groups, nations, and identities.
[153] Ünsal, "Positioning museums politically," 561.
[154] Ibid.

> us by the suffering and oppression caused in the presence of other alternatives that could have avoided them… Under the conditions of the present time, such irruption will only occur if powerful interrogations translate themselves into destabilizing images. Only destabilizing images can give back to us our capacity for wonder and outrage.[155]

He calls for museums to replace the white-picket-fence versions of history with the heartbreaking, infuriating, uncomfortable, inspirational narratives that tell the whole story, and Santos claims we need to do it *now*. How can we fight to protect our neighbors or share in the grief of our community members if we are not confronted with their stories? For many, these stories cannot be put to rest until they are recognized, validated, and properly grieved. As human beings, we all have an obligation to know, question, and grieve the past.

Santos concludes that “the impossibility of grasping the infinite epistemological diversity of the world does not release us from trying to know it; on the contrary, it demands that we do.” [156] He calls this exigency the *ecology of knowledges*—“if the truth exists only in the search for truth, knowledge exists only as an ecology of knowledge.”[157] A key feature of an ecology of knowledge is that learners must always be in a state of questioning and investigating (T)ruth.[158] This means that museums must let go of the reigns of authority. As long as museums are dissatisfied with a single interpretation, they can always continue to bring value to groups that have been marginalized or previously forgotten by the dominant historical narrative. One way to continually evolve and add to the narrative is through digital work—which is why I have worked to accompany the argument I am making here with a digital project that aims to bring a multiplicity of voices to the history of museums.

[155] Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 88-89.
[156] Ibid, 111.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid, 206-211.

Digital Humanities as an Ecology of Museum Knowledges

Over the last 15 years, the National Endowment for the Arts has awarded over $45 million dollars in grant money to digital humanities projects while public and scholarly support for DH has continued to grow.[159] This year alone the National Endowment for the Humanities announced 208 grants for humanities projects totaling $24.7 million[160] and university-based programs offering fellowships, majors, and minors are cropping up across the country as well as abroad every semester.[161] In 2016, the Institute of Museum and Library Services launched a new grant program to bring museums and libraries into the fold arguing:

> The field of digital humanities is increasingly moving into the domains of library and museum professionals, such as curation, preservation, information architecture, metadata, and sustainability. We see this moment as a critical juncture for ensuring that library and museum professionals are understood as leaders in the digital humanities, and not simply as supporters in a passive role. For the digital humanities to continue to mature as a field, it is critical that library and museum professionals are equal partners in advancing the work.[162]

---

[159] Jennifer Howard. "What next-Gen Digital Humanities Looks like" EdSurge News. EdSurge, December 27, 2018. https://www.edsurge.com/news/2018-02-13-what-next-gen-digital-humanities-looks-like.

[160] Cecily Hill. "Neh Grant Release: January 2022." National Humanities Alliance. January 25, 2022. https://www.nhalliance.org/neh_grant_release_january_2022.

[161] For more, see: https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/a-survey-of-digital-humanities-programs/
Chris Alen Sula. "A Survey of Digital Humanities Programs." *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*. https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/a-survey-of-digital-humanities-programs/.
"Digital Humanities." Majors. https://majors.stanford.edu/digital-humanities.
"Digital Humanities Major." Bethel University. https://www.bethel.edu/undergrad/academics/history-philosophy-political-science/majors-minors/digital-humanities.
Fifth-Year Digital Humanities And Social Sciences Major. "Digital Humanities and Social Sciences Bachelor of Science Degree." RIT. https://www.rit.edu/study/digital-humanities-and-social-sciences-bs.
"Digital Humanities." Syracuse.edu. https://www.syracuse.edu/academics/undergraduate-majors-minors/digital-humanities/#:~:text=Digital%20humanities%20is%20an%20integrated,to%20digital%20and%20information%20technology
"Home - Digital Humanities." UCLA, March 26, 2022. https://dh.ucla.edu/.

[162] "Libraries and Museums Advance the Digital Humanities: New Grant Opportunity." Institute of Museum and Library Services. October 2016. http://www.imls.gov/blog/2016/10/libraries-and-museums-advance-digital-humanities-new-grant-opportunity.

Digital Humanities draws from history, literature, sociology, anthropology, and from various focuses throughout the humanities in addition to all of the digital forms of each of these disciplines. In recent years, even people without computer science backgrounds in coding have been able to use tools others have built to join the DH realm. Digital Humanities has the potential to bring museums into an ecology of knowledges that creates the engagement museums seek when trying to facilitate contact zones. Unfortunately, the digital record is already being canonized with the stories being perpetuated in the Global North for centuries.[163] It is up to those with the resources and capacity for digital humanities work to approach our projects with the critical epistemologies and ontologies that we have failed to bring into mainstream museums to this day.

One popular theoretical framework museums could adopt is postcolonial digital humanities. This "is an approach to uncovering and intervening in the disruptions within the digital cultural record produced by colonialism and neocolonialism."[164] It aims to investigate how colonialism and neocolonialism have impacted political, ethical, and social approaches to knowledge production and design new tools that actively resist those influences.[165] Museums would be able to take a backseat in authorship and offer spaces for communities often left out of the mainstream cultural record to produce and share their own knowledges that will ultimately lead to a more whole narrative of our history.

Due to the lack of critical approaches in traditional humanities fields and museums at large, the digital cultural record is already being flooded with Global North perspectives of themselves as well as their perceptions of the Global South.[166] As digital humanities scholars,

---

[163] Risam, *New Digital Worlds,* 6.
[164] Ibid, 3-4.
[165] Ibid
[166] Ibid, 5.

many have some of the most innovative and cutting-edge tools at our disposal, yet are still subjecting entire communities and histories to the narrow gaze of the Global North. Risam argues, "Just as with the cultural record, the digital record is implicated in structures that produce colonial discourse, devalue black lives, and, in turn, facilitate state violence."[167] To truly disrupt the entrenched practices of humanities practitioners, we must first address the "complicity of universities, libraries, and the cultural heritage sector in devaluing black and indigenous lives and perpetuating the legacies of colonialism in the cultural and digital cultural records alike."[168]

I argue as DH practitioners in museums, we must take our work a step further and adopt a framework that echoes Critical Race Theory in a digital context—the Digital Black Atlantic. Much like CRT branches into various fields such as LatCrit (Latin Critical Race Theory), AsianCrit (Asian Critical Race Theory), and TribalCrit (Indigenous Critical Race Theory), the Digital Black Atlantic could be considered a specific branch of critical digital humanities work like BlackCrit (Black Critical Race Theory). It is important that museums and other cultural heritage institutions embrace the critical frameworks presented by each individual community specifically so as not to slip into a one-size-fits-all approach for addressing the holes in the cultural and digital cultural record. For my specific project, I will be drawing on my African American Studies background and therefore applying concepts and tools from a BlackCrit, or Digital Black Atlantic framework.

Harkening to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam compiled a selection of essays in *The Digital Black Atlantic* (2021) to speak to the need for critical digital humanities framing that centers African diasporic knowledges and connections through the following:

---

[167] Ibid, 15.
[168] Ibid, 14.

> a method for incorporating and foregrounding transnationality and cross-temporality; a framework for addressing these concerns in relation to race, enslavement, and colonialism; a challenge to the European periodization of history and culture; a decentering of whiteness; a critique of a fictive 'universal' epistemology of digital humanities; and an articulation of the necessity of interdisciplinarity.[169]

Much like the core tenets of Critical Race Theory reframe the way we approach our assumptions of history, social structures, and personal bias, the Digital Black Atlantic seeks to reframe digital work through the assumptions practitioners make about what is important enough to record and who gets to make that determination.

Abdul Alkalimat opens the anthology with an explanation of how important investigating, preserving, and sharing history is and specifically how integral it is to African diasporic communities by referencing the Sankofa Principle.[170] "Sankofa is a word in the Twi language of the people who live in Ghana. Its literal meaning is to 'go back and fetch it,' referring to knowledge that one needs…"[171] He continues, "there is no more important principle in Black intellectual history than the Sankofa Principle. African American intellectual history in all disciplines follows it." [172] The digital Black Atlantic demands scholars confront the ways traditional methods "silence, stifle, and neglect Black histories, Black presents, and Black futures."[173] Instead, it is time to emphasize the importance of these stories, these communities, and their agency in asserting their "humanities, histories, knowledges, and expertise."[174]

The digital Black Atlantic situates an already interdisciplinary field within disciplines, cultures, and methods that allows for a "transformative, alchemical move, where the sum of the

---

[169] Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam. "Introduction: The Digital Black Atlantic." *The Digital Black Atlantic*. eds. Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). x.
[170] Alkalimat, "The Sankofa Principle," 3-18.
[171] Ibid, 5
[172] Ibid, 6.
[173] Josephs and Risam, *The Digital Black Atlantic*, xiv.
[174] Ibid, xiii.

parts is much greater than the whole, where analytical possibilities are opened up"[175] for scholars to "tackle large research and methodology challenges, and facilitate deep integration between thinking and making."[176] By engaging the Sankofa principle, the work of crossing time through technology[177] gives us an opportunity to not only embrace current scholarship and activism, but historical and traditional acts to preserve culture as well to create new worlds previously unattainable. Alkalimat argues, "we should reach back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us so that we can achieve our full potential as we move forward. Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone, or been stripped of can be reclaimed, revived, preserved, and perpetuated."[178]

This does not mean museums lose their key role in presenting information, even if they do take a backseat in determining what narrative is shared. Museums have the tools to share wonder with the world. Museum workers are inherently humanist and prepared to create forums for discovery and understanding. This is incredibly important. Santos insists that an ecology of knowledge cannot be communicated without *intercultural translation*. [179]

> Intercultural translation consists of searching for isomorphic concerns and underlying assumptions among cultures, identifying differences and similarities, and developing, whenever appropriate, new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication that may be useful in favoring interactions and strengthening alliances among social movements fighting, in different cultural contexts, against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy and for social justice, human dignity, or human decency.[180]

---

[175] Ibid, ix-x.
[176] Ibid, xii.
[177] Alkalimat, "The Sankofa Principle", 3: "a historical perspective is foundational and necessary at all times… We need clarity about history and who haven our friends and who have been our enemies. I call the framework that we need the 'Sankofa Principle' and by applying it, we can link the drum—a technology foundational to Black culture—with the emerging transformational power of digital technology… this activism can make use of the archival capacity of the digital and transform the utility of memory." 3
[178] Ibid, 16.
[179] Santos, *Epistemologies of the South,* 212-235.
[180] Ibid, 212.

Museums have vast collections of objects and generations of experience to help them tell the stories of other cultures, and they have been for generations. The problem is that they have claimed sole authorship and have erased the voices of Others.[181] If museums can accept their duty to their communities and their obligation to social justice, and recognize the hegemonic, colonial structures in place, there is room for an ecology of museum knowledges. Digital tools streamline academic work, research, teaching, curation, exhibition, and save time, financial cost, and storage space.[182] Alkalimat argues, "It is critical that we activate the memory institutions so that our work is preserved for generations to come. We are indeed ancient to their future."[183]

For an ecology of museum knowledges to exist, or for a digital project to build from or serve as an ecology of museum knowledges, it must draw from all of the theories, frameworks, and epistemologies I have discussed here. It must have the following criteria:

1) An ecology of museum knowledges must serve as a contact zone that centers the community over the objects and spark conversations that lead to cross-cultural engagement beyond the 'museum' space
2) An ecology of museum knowledges must be negotiable, polyphonic, and continually evolve and add to the narrative being shared
3) An ecology of museum knowledges requires practitioners, professionals, scholars, and leaders decolonize the methods of storytelling utilized, exercise humility and transparency in storytelling, and intervene in colonialistic practices
4) An ecology of museum knowledges must investigate (T)ruth and facilitate reconciliation through collection, curation, exhibition, education, and community engagement
5) An ecology of museum knowledges must be specific to the community and reject monolithic praxes that handle complex histories and cultures with broad assumptions

As in the example of Saudi Arabia Day, museums and museological digital projects must move beyond the 'stuff' and work to build bridges among their communities. It is not enough to

[181] I use the capital 'O' here to signify the categorical "Other" identified across sociology and critical studies—the marginalized, the resistant, the erased.
[182] Alkalimat, "The Sankofa Principle", 4.
[183] Ibid, 15.

draw from various cultures and display objects that may interest diverse demographics. *All* of the stakeholders of any given museum or project should be made to feel represented and welcome as visitors, creators, contributors, and members of a larger story. The conversations that begin in a museum should create affective motivation to go back out into public and private spheres and engage in further learning, supporting diverse content creators, and relationship-building among community members that have not traditionally sought each others' presence.

Learning and sharing previously untold or new perspectives, details, or whole histories should be a reciprocal and actively evolving process. When the cultural and digital cultural record become static, or fail to grow, our understanding of the past and our engagement in the present is diminished. Even within racially homogenous communities, there are innumerable layers of identity crossing gender, sexuality, education, socioeconomic status, religion, nationality, physical ability, political ideology, and geographic location on top of personal histories that fundamentally shape how individuals experience any given moment in time. It is impossible to encapsulate every voice in the first iteration of an exhibit, or even the first 100 iterations. We must strive to constantly investigate and share new stories.

If museum professionals, digital humanities practitioners, and cultural heritage scholars and leaders are to facilitate change in their spaces, they must start at the root of storytelling. It is imperative that museum spaces are defined not by 'objectivity,' but by accessibility, transparency, and humility. There has never been an object that was put on display that was objectively valuable. Someone or a group of people decided it was special for some reason or another. Visitors are owed an explanation that breaks the fourth wall and invites critique and inquiry in place of obedience or acceptance and inferiority. Additionally, it is past time that museums and museological projects disengage from Western standards of how stories are

supposed to be told. Written text, usually in English, that follows a linear timeline based on specific dates rather than contextual moments is not the only way that stories can be or necessarily should be told. Equally pressing is the lack of adaptation for visually and/or audibly impaired audiences in common methods of storytelling in American museums. To right these wrongs, we must go back to the basics and redress how we share the stories we have chosen to tell.

It is not enough to publish DEAI statements and hire more diverse staff. It is not enough to create more representation in exhibits. It is not enough to mention difficult histories in passing. Museums and museological digital projects must facilitate opportunities for painful, uncomfortable, heartbreaking stories to come to light. Mainstream museums have been wildly complicit in the events or in the telling of the stories of dark tragedies and centuries of oppression for as long as mainstream museums have existed without owning up to that complicity. Reconciliation and healing cannot happen without truth and ownership of wrongdoing. This must happen at a curation, exhibition, and education level, but it must also happen within collections and within the board rooms making decisions about repatriation. There is no path forward until museums acknowledge the long and troubled past. Until then, visitors should be made aware of the legacy of the objects they are accessing through transparent labeling that describes how and why the object was acquired by the museum and how and why it is still in the collection of the museum. Museums should not be waiting for state mandates to start this process. Museum leaders should be initiating collaborations for repatriation that offer the necessary resources including but not limited to funding and training to get cultural artifacts back to their homes.

At this point, one of the biggest problems with the cultural record is that it is monolithic. It would be folly to enter into a new ontology only to repeat the same mistake by approaching all communities and all stories with the same lens, no matter how critical. It is imperative to tailor relationships, scholarship, and praxes to community-specific critical frameworks. The onus is on non-Hispanic white professionals, practitioners, scholars, and leaders that have directly benefitted from centuries of systemic and institutional social and historical colonialism to seek out the literature and experts that already exist to learn the best frameworks to do this work. In the next section, I will discuss my own project, *A History of Black Museums*, and will explain how it serves as a demonstration of what I am calling for in the concluding chapter.

A History of Black Museums

In the era of COVID-19, many museums had to learn to use digital platforms on the fly or risk complete isolation from their communities and audiences. As a student preparing to enter an unstable field wrecked by lay offs, cuts to funding, and lingering pandemic fears, I decided to explore technical skills through a course titled "Digital Storytelling in the Borderlands" where we learned digital humanities skills and theory from the standpoint of Latin feminist epistemologies with specific attention to geographic, political, and social borders throughout the Americas.[184] I was initially drawn to the aspect of 'digital storytelling.' It seemed like an obvious fit for a museum professional. However, I ended up being interested in the ways that digital work can create spaces not allotted in museums.

---

[184] Dr. Sylvia Fernandez's "Digital Storytelling in the Borderlands" at the University of Kansas, Spring 2021.

Early on in the course, I began to identify the 'borders' that distinguish Black history and culture in the U.S. from the versions taught in classrooms and museums. I had already begun my research to chronologize the history of Black museums, but I was given the opportunity to explore new mediums to share this history and give it a platform. The more I learned about postcolonial digital humanities, counter-archives, and counter-histories, the more I wanted to make my project into something accessible beyond a museum space. I became more interested in creating a project for educational purposes that could be a central hub for Black museums—and not just the objects within in a museum or the standard definition of museum. In all of my research I had learned that Black museums are firmly rooted in their people—the leaders, the communities, the partners, etc.—and my project needed to be reflective of that foundational principle. I also wanted my project to do the necessary social justice work that was missing from my museum studies courses.

For these reasons, *A History of Black Museums in the United States* seeks to articulate Black museological history and press PWIs as well as museum professionals to question why this history has been pushed to the margins even when it has been given space and value. *A History of Black Museums* will feature timelines, storymaps, collections, exhibits, and scholarship. The project will serve as a tool to identify museums nationwide, identify geographical gaps in open museums, connect social movements, democratic victories and losses, and influential cultural figures to the growth and missions of museums. Additionally, it will provide a space to learn about the many inspirational careers that shaped not only Black museums but, now, the Smithsonian Institute itself.[185]

---

[185] Lonnie Bunch III is now the director of the Smithsonian Institute after having a long, prestigious career in Black museums.

To date, using the *BlackPast.org* archive, I have included 157 Black museums in the initial phase of collecting data. As I mentioned in my introduction, many of the museums listed are closed, have broken website links, or are missing other crucial data points. This list of museums is arbitrarily compiled. Even including the museums listed by the African American Association of Museums still only allows for accredited museums to be added to the list. As many museum professionals will tell you, accreditation requires resources and is often a very high bar to clear for institutions with small staffs and budgets. Moving forward, I will need to continue my research to find any others that may have been left out of the dataset thus far. As my research expands to challenge the limitations of the definition of a museum, more spaces and moments will need to be included. For a long time now, museums have been defined quite narrowly based on Eurocentric definitions of object-based spaces. I argue that this project offers an opportunity to do the equivalent of citational activism through actively including spaces that would not be considered museums by colonial standards. To do this work, I will need to build a network of partnerships and offer communities an opportunity to include spaces they would like to include in the archive through crowdsourcing.

Museums have traditionally been defined by their collections, but Black culture, history, and scholarship has a long history of being stolen and destroyed. Like within other marginalized communities, collection, preservation, and restoration of these artifacts may have taken different forms over the years than museums are used to accepting. For this project, that means the dataset has the potential to grow exponentially once the rigid definition of a museum is challenged.

I started building content using KnightLab's *TimelineJS* and *StorymapJS*. Both of these platforms are free to use and rely on a simple compilation of data points. For the timeline, I aimed to tell a broader story about the 'why' for Black museums. I questioned what else was

going on in the world and in the local communities of these spaces when they were founded. How did the social and political issues of the day influence their missions? Were there shifts in the goals across time? Essentially, I knew that museums do not function in a vacuum and I wanted to show how intertwined the real world was with the work these groups were doing.

To do this, I began identifying the opening dates of Black museums in the United States and identifying major moments throughout the decades. The timeline includes the opening dates of Black museums throughout history alongside images of what the museum looked like in its original building, location, and time and brief descriptions of the museums. The timeline also includes major events to help viewers connect museum openings to historical landmarks such as the groundbreaking for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), the elections of President Barack Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris, Muhammad Ali's world heavyweight title, Michael Jackson's Album of the Year win, Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize for Literature, and the Brown versus Board of Education supreme court decision. In addition to singular events, the timeline will feature eras of social and political strife such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and more. I believe it is important to not feature any one type of historical moment, but moments across pop culture, politics, fine arts, academics, science, sports, and collective memory.

The storymap began with a question that had been key to all of my research from the beginning—where are the Black museums? I wanted to showcase where Black museums could be found, but I also wanted to question the metaphorical margins. After plotting the first set of data points, there were huge swaths of space across the U.S. where there were no Black museums according to my first set of entries. I hope to engage audiences by questioning broader

social and political implications to understand where Black history and culture is valued and where it appears that it is not valued and why through integrated conciousness raising materials and discussion prompts. The storymap starts with the NMAAHC in Washington D.C. and continues through the south to the west coast and back through the north to the east coast ending in Maryland, completing a circuit across the country. Visually, questions about why some places have only one or no Black museums become stark. Each pin on the map includes the address of the museum, the name, the city and state, the mission or background of the museum, and an image of the museum itself, of its leaders, or an exhibit housed at the museum.

One of the last tools we addressed as a class was exhibition building on a website called *Omeka*. Using the free Omeka site—a web publishing platform—I began creating collections for artifacts connected to individual museums, museum directors, museum curators, and additional influential people and movements. I was inspired to focus on the Studio Museum in Harlem for my first collection due to the incredible career of Thelma Golden. Not only is it exceptionally rare for a Black person to hold a position of authority at a museum, but a Black woman heading one of the most influential art museums in the country, and arguably the world, was a call I knew I needed to answer from the jump. I drew from newspaper clippings, online articles, other websites, interviews, photographs, design mock-ups, book cover images, videos, lectures, audio recordings, and various databases to create the first collection in the counter-archive. Since then, I have envisioned other virtual exhibits based on common themes such as: museums of a city, museums of an era, colleagues and teachers, social justice museums, art museums, history museums, house museums, and archives and research centers.

The website is still in very early stages and I have spent the majority of the last two semesters exploring other platforms to house the site. In addition to the collections and exhibits, I

want to feature a page listing all of the museum websites, archives, and additional platforms I have accessed to create this project with links for users to quickly access. I have also begun building content for the site to feature consciousness-raising questions, media, scholarly works, and lessons that can be used in a classroom setting. Among the sites considered have been *WIX, CollectionBuilder, Jekyll*, and others. I am still working to figure out which sites will offer the most utility to a general public.

Chapter 4: Concluding Thoughts on *A History of Black Museums in the U.S.*

A History of Black Museums has modeled each of the tenets of an ecology of museum knowledges. First and foremost, it is a project that centers the people, the communities, and the stories over the objects. Though there is room to exhibit objects with complex histories on the site, that would be, at best, secondary to the story of how the object came to the museum, how it was interpreted, and how it was received by the community. Conversation is embedded in each step of *A History of Black Museums* starting with the name of the project—by offering up *a* history rather than *the* history, visitors are welcomed to inquire, critique, and learn. Ideally, this project can be marketed to K-12 teachers and college instructors to bring into classrooms to open dialogues about this history in spaces already geared towards interaction and curiosity.

As a counter-archive, *A History of Black Museums* starts from a story that is not routinely shared in dominant narratives. However, it is not enough to stop there. The exhibits and collections will continue to grow to tell more stories. Every time I, or anyone else working on the project, go back to a story, we should be bringing in a new perspective. For example, in the first iteration of telling the story of Thelma Golden's curatorial rise at the Studio Museum in Harlem, I have focused on her professional accolades and publications. I want, and need, to add the stories of the artists that were mentored by Golden, the leaders that inspired Golden, the perception of Golden and the Studio Museum from the perspective of community members unfamiliar with fine arts, and the day-to-day story of the artists in residency under Golden's tenure. These threads are just the beginning of the story. As new stories are uncovered, new threads will be found and must be investigated.

One of the key elements of *A History of Black Museums* that is less flashy, but arguably more important, is in the ways that I have and will continue to share my process. Fundamental to

this project is its capacity to be reproducible. *A History of Black Museums* is meant to be a tool that can be remixed, expanded upon, and replicated by others within different communities or even by more specific Black communities. To do this, I have begun the process of ensuring the project can be shared and cannot be privatized through a Creative Commons license—specifically, a CC BY-NC-SA license that requires author credit, does not allow commercial uses of the work, and requires that all further iterations must continue to do the citational work and remain public. Before launching the site, the license will be secured. Additionally, I am creating pages of the site that will provide lists of resources, publications, and citational information for visitors to refer to in the event they are interested in learning more about the museums themselves or digital humanities work.

Furthermore, I have chosen to exhibit the information on the site in a variety of ways with the intention to create additional ways for visually and/or audibly impaired, illiterate, and non-English speaking users to be able to access the site as well. Embedded within the timeline are videos, audio recordings, and links that drive people to the museums' webpages. I intend to interview many of the featured figures and their peers to build an oral history archive. Ideally, every written line of information would have an accompanying audio recording and have at least one non-English translation available. Though timelines are by default in a linear progression, I also have stories being told through spatial history in storymaps. As I learn about more ways to tell stories and bring more people into the project that know non-Western ways of telling stories, those can and will be incorporated as well.

Approaching this project through solely postcolonial digital humanities would have guaranteed that I would have produced a project that echoes the white-washed and broad-stroked illustrations that PWIs have perpetuated. By centering wake work and the digital Black Atlantic,

I made sure to draw from literature bases that call scholars to do critical work with Blackness at the center rather than as the entry point into digital humanities or the marketing point to build buzz. Key to the success of this project will be to continually check back in with updates in critical Black scholarship and the calls of Black museum professionals.

Though *A History of Black Museums* does not claim ownership of any objects and has no history of pilfering through colonized lands to take 'valuable' objects, it can and should still contribute to the larger project of truth and reconciliation. To do this, I am creating supplemental content for consciousness-raising to critically interrogate the policies and systems that surround any given contextual moment around Black museums. I want to push users to investigate how redlining practices shaped the resources available to early museums. Knowing that the NMAAHC was 100 years in the making, how did the biases of the U.S. Congress delay its opening? How did the AIDS crisis impact the types of exhibits that were approved during the last two decades of the twentieth century? I want to prompt visitors to look further back into history to identify trends that would have served as catalysts for the opening of dozens of Black museums in some cities and none in many others. I want to use the site, and provide the opportunity to others to understand how and why this history has been marginalized by mainstream museums and scholarship. Additionally, I believe the site can be an engaging forum for challenging the definitions of museums that have shut out so many Black spaces and collections.

Shortcomings and Future Work

One major pitfall of the introductory platforms I used, KnightLab and Omeka, that became more apparent after the completion of my storymap was the accessibility. Accessibility

is key to successfully pursuing the objectives of this project. Accessibility not only includes financial access and broad reach, but also includes incorporating transcriptions or auditory aides for illiterate and/or visually impaired audiences. For now, the project is in English, as most Black Americans and Americans speak English natively, but I intend to expand the project to include additional languages that would encompass common languages spoken across the United States such as Spanish, French, or Swahili. Additionally, I do not believe the work can be done solely within the United States. Long-term, I intend to create sister sites for various regions across the African diaspora to pay homage to the long history of Black people being displaced and readily ignored—or worse—around the world.

Another shortcoming I see with this project is time. Many of the leaders that helped establish some of the earliest Black museums in the United States have already passed or are getting old enough that their memories are at risk of being lost. Black history and culture has already been subjected to centuries of erasure; we as a society cannot afford to lose any more of these precious stories. We must race time to make sure this history is not doomed to the same fate.

In a similar vein, I have struggled through this project to find sources to even get my ideas off the ground. Though I can have conversations about the state of Black museums, Black museum professionals, and Black history and culture generally with many people as distinct topics, there are few scholars intersecting African & African American studies, museum studies, and digital humanities. I believe this is a time-sensitive issue with a great impact on a large magnitude of people, but the energy and resources have thus far not been targeted to do this work. I also worry about the visibility and traction a project like this may gain coming from

someone with only a graduate degree under her belt. For these reasons, I have spent quite a bit of time thinking about how to grow this project and create a foundation that will last.

I intend to partner with *BlackPast.org* to add this project to their digital archives. Currently, nothing like this project exists except for the outdated list of museums with website links. Alternative or additional partnerships I would like to discuss would be with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York, the Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City, the Association of African American Museums, and the Association of American Museums. Through these partnerships and grant support, I would like to see this project transition from the limited free sites to more engaging, robust platforms while still maintaining free access to the project. Additionally, partnering with established archives and/or associations creates more longevity for this project by finding a permanent host for the site that can maintain it beyond the limits of my academic career.

In my methods section, I mentioned that I intend to bring in more voices. I do not believe it is my right to maintain sole authorship of this project, just that it is my duty to get the ball rolling due to the benefits and resources I have acquired through my privileged status within academic institutions. Ideally, I would be able to obtain funding that could cover several residencies and/or internships for young Black artists, activists, historians, museum professionals, and digital humanities scholars to both work on growing *A History of Black Museums*, but also get hands-on training within museum professionalization. As an educator, I have a strong interest in securing opportunities for high schoolers to get training and experience within a project like this as well.

Additionally, I would like to launch various pages for community contributions on the site. I believe, due to the limited definition of a museum currently, that the compilation of Black

museums in the United States can only be finished with the support of crowdsourcing. I intend to create a page that provides an opportunity for anyone to contribute details about a museum not on the list already or offer additional details for museums already listed. TheClio.com offers users the opportunity to create historical pins correlated to geographical spaces in the real world.[186] I imagine the best version of *A History of Black Museums* offers a similar opportunity for knowledge sharing and storytelling. I also intend to establish a public forum space for people to connect, share stories, and have meaningful conversations. I am inspired by the results of the Saudia Arabia Day example and envision a virtual space with similar parameters and success.

To do all of these things, I need to experiment with more platforms that can serve multiple purposes. Ideally, there would be a main site that is active at all times to facilitate community engagement and there would be a secondary site that becomes the archive. Collections and exhibits would rotate on and off the active site and would evolve over time to include more perspectives and details.

As places of discovery, museums have key structures and practices already in place to "provide important public venues for discussion and debate about contentious topics that define contemporary discourse and enable deeper engagement than many other forms of public media"[187] When considering how museums affect lives, David Fleming argues that although collections are important, museums can change the world through the expression of ideas. [188] Objects are really just the vessels for creating dialogue and building resilient foundations of solidarity. Museums are meant to share stories and inspire people—whether that is to awe

[186] https://www.theclio.com/
[187] Jennifer Carter, Clint Curle, Angela Failler, Helen Fallding, Jodi Giesbrecht, Amanda Grzyb, George Jacob, Karen Busby, Adam Muller, and Andrew Woolford. "The Museology of Human Rights." In *The Idea of a Human Rights Museum.* (Winnipeg, Canada: University of Manitoba Press, 2015). 2114.
[188] Fleming, "Do Museums Change Lives?" 78.

visitors with the exceptionalism of nature and science, to ignite a passion for beauty and art, or to plant the seeds for empathy that will help to eradicate hate.

The postponement of the proposed new definition for museums at the ICOM conference in September of 2019 gives me doubt that museums are ready for cognitive justice.[189] However, there is a long history of research and slow change in museums to fight for inclusionary practices and 'decolonization' has become a popular phrase in recent years. Boaventura de Sousa Santos' writings have inspired many academics to challenge the system they are a part of. Museums cannot afford to fall behind the curve. The tension building between museums and the public will either force museums to adapt or force them to close their doors. It is time to denounce neutrality, relinquish authorship, de-center authority, and quit playing 'contact zones'. In a museum world that truly breaks down the remnants of colonialism in favor of giving power to the forgotten, implications of decolonization have the momentum to shift an entire society's worldview and stop injustices in their track.

Though museum professionals should immerse themselves within the digital cultural record, there is still the very real threat that due to a lack of critical engagement and a lack of diverse voices in museum spaces that the digital cultural record will only entrench the whitewashed cultural record. Risam argues, "the overwhelming whiteness of library leadership remains disconcerting as well, since libraries play a central role in constructing the digital cultural record."[190] She warns that systemically marginalized communities continue to be threatened with neocolonialism and further erasure:

> Compounding the historical and ongoing traumas wrought by colonialism, discrimination, slavery, and neocolonialism, these communities have also had to contend with essentialist modes of subject construction being wielded against

---

[189] This term—cognitive justice—is meant to encapsulate the entirety of my argument for decoloniality and ecology of knowledges. It is a common phrase used by Boaventura de Sousa Santos in his writings.
[190] Risam, *New Digital Worlds*, 15.

> them… Increasingly, substantial material on marginalized communities is being produced as paywalled digital archives or databases licensed to university libraries by corporations for hefty fees… The digital frontier is increasingly being colonized by corporations and neoliberal interests, and the digital record is in danger of becoming a product of corporate interests that determine what is worth being digitized and distributed to the small audience that can afford it.[191]

When we take into consideration who has access to this work, these tools, and the capacity to contribute to the digital cultural record, we cannot just assume that if we offer up the space it will get filled with stories from every perspective and moment in time. In spite of many projects established in recent years such as BlackGirlsCode, the overwhelming majority of people encouraged to pursue the STEM field for decades have been white men.[192] The U.S. education system has played a key role in funneling specific worldviews into the realm of record-keeping and history-sharing that will not be changed overnight. Practitioners must also keep in mind that though Black people have had access in occasional settings, the more common experience is that these technologies have been used against Black people for things like the massive surveillance initiatives that emboldened the carceral state throughout the twentieth century.[193] Alkalimat warns, "All of the major digital companies that provide the virtual environments in which we volunteer to share our information cooperate directly with the surveillance agencies of the state."[194] This warning should not be taken lightly, and should be kept in mind when white digital humanities scholars question the involvement of Black communities.

Additionally, digital humanities and the larger heritage sector face critiques of legitimacy and the constant threat of inadequate resources. The lack of resources often manifests in a paralleled lack of dollars but is matched by the overwhelming lack of artifacts as a direct result

---

[191] Ibid, 141.
[192] Josephs and Risam, *The Digital Black Atlantic*, xv.
[193] Alkalimat, "The Sankofa Principle", 7.
[194] Ibid, 16.

of racist practices over centuries that lead to the destruction of objects and the dismissal of stories that were never recorded.[195] It will be significantly harder to create the necessary counter-histories than it is to simply digitize artifacts from well-known white artists, authors, musicians, and public figures. This is another reason that mere representation is not enough. Risam reminds us that we must "intervene in the epistemologies of digital knowledge production."[196] She argues, "significant attention to the circumstances surrounding knowledge production of digital humanities projects is needed, including how projects are designed, how material in them is framed, how data in them is managed, and what forms of labor are being used to create them."[197]

Though cashflow can easily be found by putting digital humanities projects behind a paywall, we must resist. Risam points to the substantial sectors of the digital record that are already being produced about or in regard to marginalized communities and is already being made inaccessible to the communities being written about due to hefty fees.[198] Corporations are active participants in making the digital cultural record a neoliberal market—which directly translates into corporations determining which stories are worthy of digitizing.[199] We can already see this when we look at the value placed on digital humanities projects: "Projects that undertake the important work of digitizing underrepresented cultural heritage are not seen as 'innovative' despite their important intervention in the digital cultural record."[200] Josephs and Risam explain that this is amplified for scholars doing BlackCrit work because we are often "balancing two (if not more) areas of studies—African diaspora studies and digital studies—trying to find reviewers who understand the intersections of the two also presents a significant barrier to effective

---

[195] Risam, *New Digital Worlds*, 19.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Ibid, 17.
[198] Ibid, 141.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Ibid, 140.

evaluation."[201] Without financial support, community support, or even institutional legitimacy, digital humanities projects focused on non-dominant narratives have very little hope of ever gaining enough traction to make headway.

My project is only a sliver of what is missing from the cultural record. I have become familiar with many projects working at the intersections of borderlands in Latin America including the geographical border between Mexico and the U.S. There is also a strong foundation of digital humanities work coming out of the African continent. However, due to centuries of Western anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and academics of various fields in addition to racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and other discriminatory political systems, communities, and institutions, this work is not enough to recover lost histories. I could spend the rest of my life working on this project and its sister sites and still only cover a fragment of museum history across the African diaspora.

I echo the calls made by Sharpe, Santos, Josephs, Risam, and Alkalimat: "We must write, create, and fight against these omissions, recognizing that no matter how much has been made of the democratizing space of the internet, the absences in digital knowledge production speak truth to the lie of this democracy."[202] We must identify community partners and allies to resist the inequities established and continuing to be created within the digital cultural record. [203] Museum professionals must "cultivate diverse communities; challenge the myth of democratized digital knowledge" and museums spaces; "make the case for and actually *make* new tools and methods with epistemological and ontological roots outside of the Global North" with specific regard to the communities we claim to represent; "attend to the role of labor in digital humanities projects"

---

[201] Josephs and Risam, *The Digital Black Atlantic*, xvi.
[202] Risam, *New Digital Worlds*, 140.
[203] Ibid, 15.

and in the larger heritage sector; "address the hegemonic role of the English language" in all aspects of academic, cultural, and historical work; "and teach our students to do the same."[204] Risam writes:

> A digital cultural record that puts social justice at its center—a record that is postcolonial, feminist, antiracist, intersectional—is a matter of cultural survival. Access to the means of cultural production that we have as people with the capacity to engage in digital humanities praxis means that we have the tools to reshape the dynamics of cultural power and to reclaim for individuals and communities the humanity that is routinely denied by the forces that produce oppression. Humanities scholars can intervene in the channels of capital, knowledge, and power in which the academy is implicated. After all, we have the power of the world making on our side.[205]

By world making, Risam is referring to the digital worlds that are at our—anyone with internet access and some digital literacy—fingertips and that digital humanities scholars are currently fabricating. In the digital cultural record, practitioners, activists, and scholars can and should mold these new worlds in the influence of an ecology of museum knowledges to better serve all of humanity, Global North *and* South.

We have to remember, especially in a world so fundamentally shaped by the African diaspora, that the Sankofa Principle calls on us to honor the rich knowledge of our elders and ancestors "because their wisdom is wealth that our young people need to survive and prosper."[206] In today's information-revolutionary period—a time in which new worlds and new stories can and likely will have been created and recovered by keystrokes every single day—it it is up to us, as digital practitioners, scholars, and

---

[204] Ibid, 143.
[205] Ibid, 144.
[206] Alkalimat, "The Sankofa Principle", 7.

cultural institution professionals, to challenge the canons of the Global North and embrace an ecology of museum knowledges.[207]

---

[207] Ibid.

Bibliography

"About US." BlackPast.org, February 13, 2019. https://www.blackpast.org/about-us/.

"About Us." Hampton University Museum. https://home.hamptonu.edu/msm/about-us/.

Alkalimat, Abdul. "The Sankofa Principle: From the Drum to the Digital." in *The Digital Black Atlantic*. Edited by Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). 3-18.

Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

"Archivists, Curators, & Museum Technicians." Data USA. Accessed April 11, 2022. https://datausa.io/profile/soc/archivists-curators-museum-technicians#demographics.

"African American Museums." BlackPast.org. March 2, 2022. https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-museums-united-states-and-canada/.

Association of African American Museums. https://blackmuseums.org/directory/.

Bracey Jr., John H. "Coming from a Black Thing: Remembering the Black Arts Movement." In *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Edited by John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014). 650-655.

"Bringing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion to American Museums' $40 Billion Endowments." SOCAP Global, September 24, 2021. https://socapglobal.com/agenda-session/lightning-bolts-4/.

Benjamin, Ruha. *Race After Technology*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

Bunch III, Lonnie G. *Call the Lost Dream Back: Essays on History, Race and Museums*. (Washington D.C.: The American Association of Museums Press, 2010).

Burns, Andrea A. *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement.* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

Butler, Paul. *Chokehold: Policing Black Men*. (New York: The New Press, 2018).

Carter, Jennifer, Clint Curle, Angela Failler, Helen Fallding, Jodi Giesbrecht, Amanda Grzyb, George Jacob, Karen Busby, Adam Muller, and Andrew Woolford. "The Museology of Human Rights." In *The Idea of a Human Rights Museum.* (Winnipeg, Canada: University of Manitoba Press, 2015). 208-226.

@CCP_org. "Black Digital Humanities Projects & Resources: A List of Projects, Resources, Events, and Anything Else." Fire!!! 4, no. 1 (2017): 134-39. doi:10.5323/fire.4.1.0134.

Charr, Manuel. “How Have Museums Responded to the Black Lives Matter Protests?” MuseumNext, March 28, 2021. https://www.museumnext.com/article/how-have-museums-responded-to-the-black-lives-matter-protests/.

Clifford-Napoleone, Amber R. “A New Tradition: A Reflection on Collaboration and Contact Zones.” *Journal of Museum Education* 38, no. 2 (2013): 187–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2013.11510769.

Cohen, Max. “Slavery in America: Some Historical Sites Try to Show the Horrors. Others Are Far behind.” USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, December 15, 2019. https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/education/2019/10/16/slavery-racism-black-history-historical-sites-historic-places-field-trip/1905346001/.

Coleman, Laura-Edythe. “The Socially Inclusive Museum: A Typology Re-Imagined.” *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 9, no. 2 (2016): 41–57. https://doi.org/10.18848/1835-2014/cgp/v09i02/41-57.

Dafoe, Taylor, and Caroline Goldstein. “The George Floyd Protests Spurred Museums to Promise Change. Here's What They've Actually Done so Far.” Artnet News. Artnet News, September 4, 2020. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/museums-diversity-equity-commitments-1901564.

Dagbovie, Pero. *Reclaiming the Black Past: The Use and Misuse of African American History in the Twenty-First Century*. (New York: Verso, 2018).

“Digital Humanities.” Syracuse.edu. https://www.syracuse.edu/academics/undergraduate-majors-minors/digital-humanities/#:~:text=Digital%20humanities%20is%20an%20integrated,to%20digital%20and%20information%20technology.

“Digital Humanities Major.” Bethel University. https://www.bethel.edu/undergrad/academics/history-philosophy-political-science/majors-minors/digital-humanities.

“Digital Humanities.” Majors. https://majors.stanford.edu/digital-humanities.

“Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion.” American Alliance of Museums, November 30, 2017. https://www.aam-us.org/programs/diversity-equity-accessibility-and-inclusion/.

Enelow, Sarah. “African American Smithsonian Sets a New Standard for Museums as Destinations.” Skift, March 13, 2017. https://skift.com/2017/03/14/african-american-smithsonian-sets-a-new-standard-for-museums-as-destinations/.

“Federal Government Invests $200m in Libraries and Museums to Stimulate American Communities.” Institute of Museum and Library Services, March 11, 2021. https://www.imls.gov/news/federal-government-invests-200m-libraries-and-museums-stimulate-american-communities.

Fifth-Year Digital Humanities And Social Sciences Major. "Digital Humanities and Social Sciences Bachelor of Science Degree." RIT. https://www.rit.edu/study/digital-humanities-and-social-sciences-bs.

Fleming, David. "Do Museums Change Lives?: Ninth Stephen Weil Memorial Lecture." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 59, no. 2 (2016): 73–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12149.

Fleming, John E. "The Impact of Social Movements on the Development of African American Museums." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 44–73. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.44.

Franklin, Renee Brummell. "Romare Bearden Graduate Museum Fellowship Program—Outreach to Inreach—a Generation of Cultivating Tomorrow's Leaders." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 193–210. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.193.

Grant, Daniel. "A $4m Grant to Increase Museum Staff Diversity Shines a Light on the Hard, Crucial Task." Observer. Observer, January 25, 2019. https://observer.com/2019/01/museum-staff-diversity-initiative-receives-4-million-funding-american-alliance-of-museums/.

Greenberger, Alex, and Tessa Solomon. "Major U.S. Museums Criticized for Responses to Ongoing George Floyd Protests." ARTnews.com. ARTnews.com, June 4, 2020. https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/museums-controversy-george-floyd-protests-1202689494/.

Halifax, Shawn. "McLeod Plantation Historic Site." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 252–77. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.252.

Hill, Cecily. "Neh Grant Release: January 2022." National Humanities Alliance. January 25, 2022. https://www.nhalliance.org/neh_grant_release_january_2022.

"Home - Digital Humanities." UCLA, March 26, 2022. https://dh.ucla.edu/.

Howard, Jennifer. "What next-Gen Digital Humanities Looks like" EdSurge News. EdSurge, December 27, 2018. https://www.edsurge.com/news/2018-02-13-what-next-gen-digital-humanities-looks-like.

"Icom Announces the Alternative Museum Definition That Will Be Subject to a Vote." International Council of Museums. July 2019. https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/.

International Council of Museums. "Development of the Museum Definition according to ICOM Statutes (2007-1946)." n.d. http://archives.icom.museum/hist_def_eng.html

Kendrick, Kathleen M. *Official Guide to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2017).

Keim, Curtis and Carolyn Somerville. *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind.* Fourth Edition. (New York: Westview Press, 2018).

Kinsley, Rose Paquet. “Inclusion in Museums: A Matter of Social Justice.” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 31, no. 5 (2016): 474–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2016.1211960.

Levin, Amy K. *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*. (London: Routledge, 2010).

“Libraries and Museums Advance the Digital Humanities: New Grant Opportunity.” Institute of Museum and Library Services. October 2016. http://www.imls.gov/blog/2016/10/libraries-and-museums-advance-digital-humanities-new-grant-opportunity.

Litwack, Leon F. *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

Josephs, Kelly Baker and Roopika Risam. “Introduction: The Digital Black Atlantic.” in *The Digital Black Atlantic*. Edited by Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). ix-xxiv.

Jones, Martha. *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Mbembe, Joseph Achille. “Decolonizing the University: New Directions.” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2016): 29–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022215618513.

Moore, Juanita. “Transitions in Time.” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 74–89. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.74.

Moniuszko, Sara. “By the Numbers: NMAAHC Opening Attendance.” NBC4 Washington. NBC4 Washington, September 26, 2016. https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/by-the-numbers-attendance-of-nmaahc-opening/114399/.

“Museum Director Demographics and Statistics in the US - Zippia.com.” https://www.zippia.com/museum-director-jobs/demographics/.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa.” *History Compass* 13, no. 10 (2015): 485–96. https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12264.

Noce, Vincent. “ICOM in Turmoil after Row over New Definition of Museums.” The Art Newspaper - International art news and events, September 28, 2021. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/08/13/icom-in-turmoil-after-row-over-new-

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Onciul, Bryony. "Engagement Zones." *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement. Routledge*. (2015): 71-89.

"On the Way to a New Museum Definition: We Are Doing It Together!" International Council of Museums, February 25, 2022. https://icom.museum/en/news/on-the-way-to-a-new-museum-definition-we-are-doing-it-together/.

Rea, Naomi, and Eileen Kinsella. "As Museums Desperately Try to Diversify Their Collections, They Now Face Another Problem: How to Pay for It in a Financial Crisis." Artnet News. Artnet News, March 11, 2021. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-museum-diversity-collections-1942997.

Risam, Roopika. *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019).

Rose, Julia. *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

Rounds, Jay. "Doing Identity Work in Museums." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 49, no. 2 (2006): 133–50. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2006.tb00208.x.

Ruffins, Fath Davis. "Building Homes for Black History: Museum Founders, Founding Directors, and Pioneers, 1915–95." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 13–43. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.13.

Sandell, Richard. "Museum Work as Human Rights Work" in *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*. (New York: Routledge, 2016). 135-162.

Schneider, Colleen Dilen. "People Trust Museums More than Newspapers. Here Is Why That Matters Right Now (Data)." October 11, 2021. https://www.colleendilen.com/2017/04/26/people-trust-museums-more-than-newspapers-here-is-why-that-matters-right-now-data/#:~:text=which%20museums%20shine.-,Museums%20are%20trusted,to%20educate%20and%20inspire%20audiences.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

Sousa Santos, Boaventura de. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemecide*. (New York: Routledge, 2016).

Sula, Chris Alen. "A Survey of Digital Humanities Programs." *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*. https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/a-survey-of-digital-humanities-programs/.

Welch, John S. "Reassessing the Vocational Origins of Hampton University and Celebrating a Singular History of Arts Engagement." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 107–41. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.107.

Weiss, Nancy E. "Lifting Every Voice throughout the Nation." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 142–62. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.142.

Wilson, Mabel O. *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums*. (California: University of California Press, 2012).

Ünsal, Deniz. "Positioning Museums Politically for Social Justice." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 34, no. 6 (2019): 595–607. https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2019.1675983.

Additional Influential Sources

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: The New Mestiza—La Frontera*. Fourth Edition. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007).

Bakara, Amiri. "The Black Arts Movement." In *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader.* Edited by John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014). 11-22.

Bracey, John H., Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst. "Editors' Introduction." In *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Edited by John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014). 1-10.

Bhattacharyya, Sayan. "Text Analysis for Thought in the Black Atlantic." in *The Digital Black Atlantic*. Edited by Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). 77-83.

Cahan, Susan E. *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

Collins, Patricia Hill and Silma Bilge. *Intersectionality*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction.* Third Edition. (New York: New York University Press, 2017.)

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Goswami, Jeanne. "The Museum as Unreliable Narrator: What We Can Learn from Nick Carraway." *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 11, no. 1 (2018): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.18848/1835-2014/cgp/v11i01/1-11.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies." in *Essential Essays: Foundations of Cultural Studies Vol. 1*. Edited by David Morely. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). 71-100.

Hall, Stuart. "Culture, The Media, and the 'Ideological Effect'." in *Essential Essays: Foundations of Cultural Studies Vol. 1*. Edited by David Morely. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). 298-336.

Hall, Stuart. "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance." *in Essential Essays: Foundations of Cultural Studies Vol. 1.* Edited by David Morely. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). 172-221.

Hall, Stuart. "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in *Essential Essays: Foundations of Cultural Studies Vol. 2*. Edited by David Morely. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). 83-94.

Halbwachs, Maurice. "Conclusion." *On Collective Memory*. Translated by Louis A. Coser. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). 167-189.

Halbwachs, Maurice. "Preface." *On Collective Memory*. Translated by Louis A. Coser. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). 37-40.

Halbwachs, Maurice. "The Reconstruction of the Past." *On Collective Memory*. Translated by Louis A. Coser. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). 46-51.

hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress*. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Huyssen, Andreas. "Introduction." *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). 1-10.

Huyssen, Andreas. "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia." *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). 11-29.

Lorde, Audrey. "Learning from the 60s." In *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Edited by John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014). 656-662.

Marstine, Janet. *Critical Practice: Artists, Museums, Ethics*. (New York: Routledge, 2017).

McKinley, Bryan and Jones Brayboy. "Tribal Critical Race Theory." *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education,* n.d. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203155721.ch6.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

Neal, Larry. “The Black Arts Movement.” In *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader.* Edited by John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014). 55-66.

Opeibi, Tunde. “Digitizing the Humanities in an Emerging Space: An Exploratory Study of Digital Humanities Initiatives in Nigeria.” in *The Digital Black Atlantic*. Edited by Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). 162-167.

Pewu, Jamila Moore. “Digital Reconnaissance: Re(locating) Dark Spots on a Map.” in *The Digital Black Atlantic*. Edited by Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). 108-120.

Robert, Nicole. “Getting Intersectional in Museums.” *Museums & Social Issues* 9, no. 1 (2014): 24–33. https://doi.org/10.1179/1559689314z.00000000017.

Spellman, A.B. “Introduction to Theory/Criticism.” In *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Edited by John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014). 23-24.

Young, Robert R. C. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).