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“Interrupt the status quo”: How Black Lives Matter Changed American Museums

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Abstract

Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 were the catalyst for change in many institutions, particularly in museum collections and interpretive methods. This was especially true in museums located in Washington, District of Columbia; Atlanta, Georgia; Portland, Oregon; Los Angeles, California, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. Prior to the protests, most art and history museums upheld a Eurocentric worldview that diminished the contributions of Black Americans. Widespread Black Lives Matter protests, however, forced the discussion of racial equality to the forefront of the American consciousness, encouraging many museums to take a public stance and incorporate Black collective memory into their collections. This thesis analyzes case studies from five American cities that show how museums have utilized the Black Lives Matter Movement's momentum to create new content for the public.

"I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work." -Jessica Lynch

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

--Desmond Tutu

Few sectors of public life have avoided the reach of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. The Black Lives Matter movement forced racial inequality into the American consciousness in 2020 through protests and painted letters on prominent streets in Washington D.C., Atlanta, Portland, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and countless other parts of the United States and the world. Demands to remove confederate statues and rename roads and schools named after slaveholders have urged preservationists and historians alike to acknowledge representation in the physical landscape as well as in museums. Some public history monuments and historic sites have also served as gathering places for Black Lives Matter protestors to honor those who have been historically victimized by white supremacy in the United States. Washington D.C.; Atlanta, Georgia; Portland, Oregon; Los Angeles, California, and Minneapolis, Minnesota all hosted large protests against police brutality in 2020, and thereby museums had the public duty to preserve such historic events and provide an outlet for community discussion and processing. Lonnie Bunch, the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian, advances this notion by calling upon museums in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests to “help Americans contextualize this moment that we’re in.”¹ As an authority in the public history sphere and proponent of incorporating African American history and culture in all museums, Bunch’s goal for all cultural institutions is for them to be a value to “help a country deal with the challenges ... and clearly race has always been a major concern in this country.”² While the practice of diversifying museums has been carried out

¹ Sarah Mattalian, “Lonnie Bunch, AU Alum and Smithsonian Secretary, Works to Capture Tumultuous Time in US History,” The Eagle, December 14, 2020, <https://www.theeagleonline.com/article/2020/12/lonnie-bunch-au-alum-and-smithsonian-secretary-works-to-capture-tumultuous-time-in-us-history>.

² Sarah Mattalian, “Lonnie Bunch, AU Alum and Smithsonian Secretary”

by many curators and historians, museum responses in 2020 substantiate that Black Lives Matter protests have stimulated changes to a number of museums that have not previously been seen widely within the field, while others still lacked a substantial response.

This thesis examines museums in 5 American cities: Washington D.C.; Atlanta, Georgia; Portland, Oregon; Los Angeles, California, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, all of which had large protests in support of Black Lives Matter in 2020. By researching how museums responded and comparing these responses to the goals of Black Lives Matter activists and supporters, it is clear that the museums discussed in this paper responded in a timely fashion and with the intention to interpret the turbulent history and cultural aspects of American identity. Each museum succeeds in supporting the public with processing the protests and racial identity, navigating challenges posed by a health pandemic, and supporting the goals of Black Lives Matter protestors. This thesis will establish context for what happened in 2020 that resulted in the need for museums to respond and serve the public, as well as provide background for the longstanding effort to diversify collections and interpretation within museums, historically facilitated when Black Americans are in leadership positions. Case studies from each city will identify museums that have supported the goals of Black Lives Matter in contrast to their inactive, often performative, counterparts.

Contemporary Context

Black Lives Matter is a decentralized movement, but the core values of creating a world that does not systemically impose violence, oppression, or minimize Black contributions to society is foundational. The words ‘Black Lives Matter’ were first mobilized in 2013 when Trayvon Martin’s murderer was acquitted.³ Black activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi used #BlackLivesMatter to garner support for small demonstrations against police

³ “Herstory” Black Lives Matter, October 16, 2020. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

violence and continued as Tamir Rice, Tanisha Anderson, Mya Hall, Walter Scott, and Sandra Bland were slaughtered.⁴ In 2020, a slew of murders of Black men and women instigated usage of the hashtag once again, and as a video of George Floyd's death circulated social media and a COVID-19 lockdown loomed for months, people took to the streets to protest.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about enormous financial hardship onto a multitude of museums. A survey of 760 museum directors completed on June 30, 2020 revealed that 33 percent of respondents "were not confident they would be able to survive 16 months without additional financial relief, and 16 percent felt their organization was at significant risk of permanent closure."⁵ The American Alliance of Museums also found that a staggering 87 percent of museums "have only 12 months or less of financial operating reserves remaining, with 56% having less than six months left to cover operations."⁶ When museums lack the financial security to keep operations running, innovative means of creating accessible materials and/or exhibits during the pandemic fell to the wayside. The first priority for many museums was to survive such financial stress, then address the contemporary issues facing the public in the very streets the museums operate in. Staff had also dwindled at museums with a reported 44 percent of museums having "furloughed or laid off some portion of their staff, and 41 percent anticipated reopening with reduced staff."⁷ A shrinking staff results in less expertise and collaboration to address the challenges of responding to global events without being able to open the doors of the museum itself.

The lockdown closures inhibited museums from sharing tangible resources with the public, therefore forcing a shift to digital tours, exhibits, and discussions. Many museums were

⁴ "Herstory" Black Lives Matter, October 16, 2020. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

⁵ American Alliance of Museums, "A Snapshot of US Museums' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic (June 2020)," July 22, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/07/22/a-snapshot-of-us-museums-response-to-the-COVID-19-pandemic/>.

⁶ "A Snapshot of US Museums' Response"

⁷ "A Snapshot of US Museums' Response"

not equipped with the technological expertise required to rapidly reproduce their existing content for visitors who could no longer visit for the foreseeable future. These challenges certainly explain why museums were slow to respond, however, creating publicity statements that do not offer specific, quantifiable goals for the future did not support the missions of Black Lives Matter protesters and organizers. For example, The Getty Museum in Los Angeles, California released a statement on June 1, 2020 that stated, “That African Americans and other communities of color continue to experience systemic violence and oppression in our country is unacceptable and must change. Racism has persisted in our cities and communities for far too long. It has to stop.”⁸ This statement failed to detail how the Getty Museum would use their unparalleled resources to display diverse collections or support Black Americans through a traumatic time, resulting in an open letter from staff members detailing the internal racist practices of the museum and impugnation from former visitors.⁹

The fiscal calamity of 2020 demonstrates that the expensive practice of “globetrotting shows of masterpieces and starchitect expansions” may no longer be sustainable for museums and as a result, a revived focus on local communities and more permanent collections may be in order beyond 2020.¹⁰ Transforming the goal of a museum from appealing to large audiences to responding to local needs is the kind of engagement needed to actively decolonize museums and focus on interpreting a truly representative story through events and exhibits. Institutions such as the Minneapolis Institute of Art, American Swedish Institute, The National Building Museum, Portland Art Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Design Atlanta

⁸ Getty (@GettyMuseum). “ ‘Racism has persisted in our cities and communities for far too long. It has to stop.’ A new message from Getty president Jim Cuno: <https://gty.art/JimCunoStatement...>” Twitter, June 1, 2020, 9:25 p.m., accessed April 24, 2021, <https://twitter.com/GettyMuseum/status/1267628295421521921/photo/1>.

⁹ “An Open Letter to Getty Board of Trustees,” Google (Google), accessed April 24, 2021, <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScX6KnaQz6oeyx0YqmJNpnXqh7tG4RavT7Pk4HPz3oZhyAiOA/viewform>.

¹⁰Hannah McGivern and Nancy Kenney, “Museums 2020: the Year of Crashing Revenues and Anti-Racism Disputes,” The Art Newspaper (The Art Newspaper, November 27, 2020), <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/analysis/revenues-crash-and-anti-racism-disputes-bite>.

have done such work as a response to Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. With more community input and locals feeling like they have a vested interest in working with museums in their city or town to preserve what is important to them, the art and historical resources owned by the public can be diversified to include a broader range of American experiences and culture. The unprecedented extreme conditions of economic downturn, global pandemic, and blatant racism in 2020 holds the unique potential to spur change in the museum profession once museums reopen that have never been seen before as a result.

The Black Museum Movement

The work to decolonize museums, especially in times of sociopolitical turmoil, is not a new concept. The cries for museum response during Black Lives Matter reflect those same demands for museums harkening all the way back to the Black Museum Movement in the late 1960s that was built from early attempts to preserve collective memory by Black Americans. In the early twentieth century, Black intellectuals worked to disperse the production and dissemination of Black history through the founding of the Negro Society for Historical Research and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.¹¹ More organic, widespread forms of collective memory spurred to supplement this intellectual work as well, such as parades and rallies.¹²

Historically, white scholars have struggled to incorporate a history that is not their own, while Black scholars and community members have utilized neighborhood resources to preserve their own cultural resources. The Black museum movement arose alongside the Black Power

¹¹ Lara Leigh Kelland, *Clio's Foot Soldiers: Twentieth-Century U.S. Social Movements and Collective Memory*, Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018, 13.

¹² Kelland, *Clio's Foot Soldiers*, 13.

movement, which emphasized the awareness of one's cultural roots.¹³ Traditionally, cultural monoliths like the MET and Smithsonian museums illuminated eurocentric architecture and values.¹⁴ After WWII, however, African American neighborhood museums were popping up and were run by Black staff who were members of the community.¹⁵ The trailblazers of the Black Museum Movement regarded their institutions as radical agents for change in power, identity, and memory.¹⁶ In response to a need for representation, The African American Museums Association was founded in 1976 to promote the act of museum service to Black communities.¹⁷ Black communities have relied on systems that occupy both the public and private sphere like churches, clubs, and self-help groups to share ideas freely, and museums are another system that can facilitate a sense of belonging and celebration of one's heritage.¹⁸

The growth of Black museums did not occur in a vacuum, but rather arose alongside the expansion of Black Studies programs in colleges in the 1960s and 70s as well as the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.¹⁹ Beginning with the Black Museum Movement, systemic racism threatened the very existence of the unique, emerging institutions, as museums situated within Black communities were subject to destruction during Urban renewal.²⁰ These challenges further emphasize the importance of preserving Black communities ancestral heirlooms and history within their own neighborhoods to be protected from further erasure and oppression.

Within the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, activists maintained the importance of collective memory by focusing on it after community organization.²¹ Activist historians

¹³Andrea A.Burns, *From Storefront to Monument : Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 6, Accessed February 19, 2021, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁴Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 3.

¹⁵Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 3.

¹⁶Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 5.

¹⁷Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 5.

¹⁸Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 5.

¹⁹Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 21.

²⁰Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 24.

²¹Kelland, *Clio's Foot Soldiers*, 2.

connected with mainstream liberal institutions by critiquing the failure of mainstream organizations to address their communities' needs and pressured such institutions to be more inclusive when working with the community. They also utilized their positions as professionals within libraries, archives, and universities to shift policies towards multiculturalism and formed community-controlled organizations to compete alongside mainstream institutions.²²

Concurrently, activists "shifted the terrain of legitimate historical authorship" beyond the well-intentioned historians within universities and museums.²³ Black intellectuals had been preserving their history throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however these efforts mainly were a product of the elite who sought to perpetuate racial uplift and respectability politics.²⁴ Less academic means of celebrating collective memory was perpetuated in community events such as festivals and parades, which expanded into calls for more encompassing Black history representation alongside the struggle for racial equality in the 1950s and early 1960s.²⁵ Efforts to remember ancestral history and recognize Black contributions by Civil Rights activists were mainly educational initiatives that also promoted the right to vote for Black people.²⁶

More specifically in 1968 and 1969, Black students organized protests at nearly 200 college campuses to radically change higher education.²⁷ Demands dictated that public universities must serve the people in the community and Black students must have a role in the assembly of academic knowledge.²⁸ Students at this time were largely influenced by Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X, and thereby were committed to overturning hypocrisy and taking

²²Kelland, *Clio's Foot Soldiers*, 2.

²³Kelland, *Clio's Foot Soldiers*, 5.

²⁴Kelland, *Clio's Foot Soldiers*, 11.

²⁵Kelland, *Clio's Foot Soldiers*, 11.

²⁶Kelland, *Clio's Foot Soldiers*, 11.

²⁷ Martha Biondi. "The Black Revolution on Campus," Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, 7.

²⁸ Biondi, 7.

control over Black institutions.²⁹ With the expansion of Black Studies programs, Black history courses were made accessible to ordinary Americans.³⁰ Activism in the sphere of public education served as a precursor to multiculturalism to be adopted in other public spaces.³¹ The activism displayed by the movement to incorporate Black Studies has largely been erased from the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, perhaps to discourage future challenges against the status quo.³² The sweeping critiques of racial politics in the 1960s and 1970s were not necessarily “respectable” and therefore the actions of such student organizers working to change curricula are not widely remembered today.³³ This history of fighting for an education that represents and preserves Black history and culture illuminates the importance of interpreting racial politics contemporarily and historically; modern activists that push museums to change their collections and hiring practices cannot be silenced like so many activists before who were erased from history because they upended established systems of oppression.

Including narratives about Black Americans and their contributions has become more popularized in just the last decade. Numerous books have been published between 2013-2019 marking a revolution in museum activism and collection diversification. This era of public history literature marks a shift from Black museum professionals to white professionals taking more responsibility in terms of diversifying museums and challenging their biases. One publication that propelled this notion is *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, a collection of essays that detail how to incorporate African American history more complexly. The editor, Max van Balgooy, acknowledges the hesitancy

²⁹ Biondi, 7.

³⁰ Biondi, 164.

³¹ Biondi, 186.

³² Biondi, 207.

³³ Biondi, 207.

among white museum professionals to interpret a history that is not theirs, but Baloooy asserts that African American history is all of our history.³⁴

Most recently, museums have scrambled to utilize diversification techniques in the unprecedented conditions of 2020. The American Alliance of Museums put out a call to action for museums to respond to Black Lives Matter protests quickly through the AAM Virtual Annual Meeting & MuseumExpo.³⁵ Museum professionals Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III, and Lori Fogarty shared that museums must alter their mission statements to help “a country find truth, find insight, find nuance, and in many ways, what I hope that cultural institutions like this can do is that they’re better suited than most to define reality and to give hope.”³⁶ The Secretary of the Smithsonian, Lonnie G. Bunch III has been “banging on the doors of museums, clamoring for them to do better his whole life.”³⁷ The rhetoric surrounding museum activism is different in these circumstances, however, as concerns about mental health and exhaustion prompt professionals to have internal dialogues and give themselves time to be angry and exhausted with the state of society right now rather than going to “what do we do.”³⁸ Bunch maintains, “Did these folks just find their voice? Have they never had anything to say before this? But they’re speaking now. I am hearing language that I used to only hear in the Black community.”³⁹ While it is frustrating for trailblazers who have been working to change the museum space over their careers, this is a defining time for museums to move from statements of solidarity to real, substantive change.⁴⁰ It is the time for museums to reimagine their role. The

³⁴Max Van Balgooy, ed., *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, (Maryland:Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) XIII.

³⁵“Racism, Unrest, and the Role of the Museum Field.” American Alliance of Museums, June 29, 2020. <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/06/09/racism-unrest-and-the-role-of-the-museum-field/>.

³⁶ “Racism, Unrest”

³⁷“Racism, Unrest”

³⁸“Racism, Unrest”

³⁹“Racism, Unrest”

⁴⁰“Racism, Unrest”

unprecedented extremity of the racism and stress brought by 2020 has the capability to produce a kind of change that has never happened before as museums start to reopen in 2021.

Minneapolis, Minnesota

George Floyd, a 42 year old Black father, was murdered on May 25, 2020. His murderer, a member of the Minneapolis Police Department, pinned his knee on Floyd's neck for at least 8 minutes and 15 seconds while other police officers watched.⁴¹ By May 28th, Minneapolis was the epicenter of discourse about protest on Twitter, producing 19,615 tweets containing the word 'protest' as opposed to the area with the second most mentions, Los Angeles at 1,315.⁴² By June 2nd, protest-related tweets had expanded from Minneapolis to wide global usage.⁴³ Increased discourse on Twitter reflected the breaking point for Americans who were upset by perpetual police killings and prompted them to engage with protests outdoors despite a deadly global health pandemic.

Minneapolis was affected locally by protests, and additionally served as the catalyst for the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests around the world. For this reason, it is imperative that we scrutinize how public institutions in Minneapolis responded to such protests. In addition to protests in the streets of the city, social media was also largely mobilized to communicate appeals for a cultural revolution. The demands of these activists will be compared to the responses of museums in Minneapolis, Minnesota, spanning museums focused on art and history. This revealed that museums in the city did change their collections and used the momentum of Black Lives Matter protests to acknowledge their history of injustice.

⁴¹ Evan Hill et al., "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," The New York Times (The New York Times, June 1, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>.

⁴² Mary Blankenship and Richard V. Reeves, "From the George Floyd Moment to a Black Lives Matter Movement, in Tweets," Brookings (Brookings, July 10, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/10/from-the-george-floyd-moment-to-a-black-lives-matter-movement-in-tweets/>.

⁴³Blankenship and Reeves. "From the George Floyd Moment"

Broadly, the Black Lives Matter movement’s mission is to “eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes.”⁴⁴ In the quest for liberation, Black Lives Matter protesters work to “affirm our humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”⁴⁵ In museums and in the public history field, the complexity of Black lives has not been affirmed, their contributions have not been celebrated like those of white Americans, and the resilience of Black folx has been largely erased from public discourse. With all eyes on Minneapolis to respond to George Floyd’s murder, it would be shameful to see a lack of substantive change in the museums operating in the city. Fortunately, the Minneapolis Institute of Art and the American Swedish Institute supported Black Lives Matter through their responses in 2020, proving how even within financially stressful and physically restrictive times, it is possible to rectify issues of historic complacency in the professional museum sphere.

The Minneapolis Institute of Art responded to Black Lives Matter protests by remodeling their free monthly events for families into a program called “Family Day(s) for Action: Yes Justice Yes Peace,” which produced family-friendly activities and resources about Black Lives Matter throughout the month of June.⁴⁶ In line with the mission of Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc., the Minneapolis Institute of Art’s new program continued to “uplift and celebrate local Black artists, storytellers, and community members so that all children and families can truly see and feel that Black lives matter.”⁴⁷ They did this by hosting an art lesson, story times, visual diaries to remember the time, and more.⁴⁸ Facilitating the creation of diary

⁴⁴“About.” Black Lives Matter, October 16, 2020. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

⁴⁵“About.” Black Lives Matter, October 16, 2020. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

⁴⁶ “Virtual Family Day(s) For Action: Yes Justice Yes Peace!” Virtual Family Day(s) For Action: Yes Justice Yes Peace! — Minneapolis Institute of Art. Accessed February 10, 2021. <https://new.artsmia.org/programs/youth-and-family/virtual-family-day-yes-justice-yes-peace>.

⁴⁷ “Virtual Family Day(s) For Action: Yes Justice Yes Peace!”

⁴⁸ “Virtual Family Day(s) For Action: Yes Justice Yes Peace!”

entries to preserve the moment is particularly considerable because it encourages the creation of a collective memory. It also allows for young members of the public to process their feelings around the events and encourages parents to have discussions about racial identity with their children as intended by the museum when releasing the program. Black Lives Matter protests were the catalyst for the Minneapolis Institute of Art to change an existing program for families into a program that dignified racial identity.

Museums have a responsibility to preserve sacred spaces by documenting them through photography, video, and oral histories. They can also potentially collect donations of artifacts from these memorials, like signs and relics. Lastly, in exhibits about local and national protests, these cherished sites can be interpreted as public cultural projects that were created by locals, for locals to have a say in what is important to them and what should be preserved. This sentiment was brought to light in the museum sphere by Black activist and historian, Catherine Fleming Bruce, who won the University of Mary Washington Center for Historic Preservation 2017 Book Prize Award for her independently published work, *The Sustainers: Being, Building and Doing Good through Activism in the Sacred Spaces of Civil Rights, Human Rights and Social Movements*. In her book, Bruce asserts that sites where people gather to remember victims of police violence, usually the scene where the violence was committed, are integral to remembering the goodness of those lost and as a starting point for subsequent protests against police brutality. Further, these sites must be preserved because they allow people to “feel the reinforcing power of these sacred spaces as they make standing up against change possible.”⁴⁹

The 2014 slaughter of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri was the beginning of regular protests against police brutality. These sites of protest and murders have become

⁴⁹ Catherine Fleming Bruce, *The Sustainers : Being, Building and Doing Good through Activism in the Sacred Spaces of Civil Rights, Human Rights and Social Movements*. First ed. 2015, 41.

hallowed ground to the people in the community. At the site of Michael Brown's murder, a large memorial was constructed of stuffed animals and other memorabilia to remember and honor Michael Brown.⁵⁰ The erection of such sites when another Black person is murdered reveals how the public desperately craves a means of remembering those we have lost. On August 11th, 2014, a memorial to Ezell Ford consisting of a mural, candles, and stuffed animals was erected on the wall of the convenience store where he was murdered in Los Angeles.⁵¹ In the 2010s and onward, these ground zeroes provided a gathering place for mourners and activists that should be permanently protected from desecrations and have become important sites of collective memory in Minneapolis.

Members of the Minneapolis community grieved publicly, heading to the streets to paint portraits of George Floyd on the boarded up windows of businesses and at the location of his death.⁵² Young Black women Leesa Kelly and Kenda Zellner-Smith took it upon themselves to collect as many plywood boards with art on them as possible from around the city to later be donated to the Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery.⁵³ Their efforts to preserve this art and document the impressionable day that changed so many people's lives illuminates the shortcomings of local museums to preserve such art and contemporary issues. Members of this grassroots movement are "invested in ensuring that the story as expressed through art remains in the Black community—an essential narrative of the Black grief that the community suffered this summer," harkening back to the neighborhood preservation done to preserve Black history during the Black Museum Movement in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Catherine Fleming Bruce, *The Sustainers : Being, Building and Doing Good through Activism in the Sacred Spaces of Civil Rights, Human Rights and Social Movements*. First ed. 2015, 38.

⁵¹ Bruce, *The Sustainers*, 40.

⁵² Mecca Bos, "Remembering George Floyd Through Minneapolis Public Art." Meet Minneapolis. Accessed February 10, 2021. <https://www.minneapolis.org/support-black-lives/george-floyd-public-art/>.

⁵³ Bos, "Remembering George Floyd Through Minneapolis Public Art."

⁵⁴ Bos, "Remembering George Floyd Through Minneapolis Public Art."

Interpreting the stories of Black Americans and 2020 and beyond can not keep falling just to museums that are focused on African American history and culture. All museums have a responsibility to provide spaces for communities to work through historic events. *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, a collection of best practices and case studies of public history institutions that have interpreted traumatic history, reflects the ongoing discussions about the museum's role in processing historic events. One contributor to the book is Julia Rose, who discusses how Commemorative Museum Pedagogy (CMP) “provides ample time for the learning process to unfold to allow the learner to work through his or her learning crisis.”⁵⁵ Commemorative Museum Pedagogy specifically calls for public history venues to interpret and disclose the difficult knowledge contained in exhibits because audiences willingly choose to spend time reflecting on historical content in museums (as opposed to school).⁵⁶ CMP relies on providing visitors sufficient time to reflect on the difficult knowledge they are processing, and thereby “opportunities to talk about their thoughts and ask questions are important for people to work through the information they find challenging.”⁵⁷

Museums in tempestuous cities have had to respond to police murders before the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014. In 2001, Dr. John E. Fleming, then Vice President of the Cincinnati Museum Center, felt a need to respond to protests in Cincinnati after an unarmed Black man named Timothy Thomas was murdered by police.⁵⁸ He felt as though cultural resources within the city should provide space for protesters and citizens to discuss the city's racial inequities, and when other museums did not rise to the occasion, the Cincinnati Museum

⁵⁵ Max Van Balgooy, ed., *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) 30-31.

⁵⁶ Max Van Balgooy, ed., *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, 31.

⁵⁷ Max Van Balgooy, ed., *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, 32.

⁵⁸ John E. Fleming, “How the Cincinnati Museum Center Reinvented Itself after Racial Justice Protests in 2001” American Alliance of Museums, October 22, 2020.

<https://www.aam-us.org/2020/08/14/how-the-cincinnati-museum-center-reinvented-itself-after-racial-justice-protests-in-2001/>.

Center became a place “where people could come, meet, and become active participants in finding solutions to racism and its impact on the community.”⁵⁹ The event's pressing relevancy compelled the museum to develop an exhibit within 90 days.⁶⁰

The Cincinnati Museum Center is unique in that they believed they had the ability to provide racial reconciliation by giving a voice to those who had been silenced, while also having the goal to address the cause of the protests (killing an unarmed Black man) and the historical context of systemic racism in their city.⁶¹ The Center developed interactive exhibits to “think and react,” transforming a museum from a pretty building to an institution of change and resource for community dialogue.⁶² Dr. Fleming asserts that in the 21st century, museums must evaluate internally how their collections and programs have the capacity to facilitate social change.⁶³ They must also be centers for community dialogue and healing.⁶⁴ This is a rare example of museum response prior to the Black Lives Matter movement, but this progress in 2001 displays that progress spurred by the movement is possible and long overdue. The Minneapolis Institute of Art and the Swedish American Institute met this benchmark by creating new programs and exhibits that reacted to the immediate discussions about race in their city.

Instead of policy statements or empty promises, the Cincinnati Museum Center rose to the challenge to facilitate social discourse not as a Black museum, but as a city center that reflects the needs and desires of its citizens. The Cincinnati Museum Center displays how museums can acknowledge police brutality and proves that the blueprint to interpret these kinds of contemporary events has existed for two decades. Despite financial constraints and a time crunch to develop an exhibit that was relevant to the present lived experiences of people with

⁵⁹Fleming, “How the Cincinnati Museum Center”

⁶⁰Fleming, “How the Cincinnati Museum Center”

⁶¹Fleming, “How the Cincinnati Museum Center”

⁶²Fleming, “How the Cincinnati Museum Center”

⁶³Fleming, “How the Cincinnati Museum Center”

⁶⁴Fleming, “How the Cincinnati Museum Center”

Cincinnati, Dr. Fleming and his team successfully created an outlet for community concerns to be heard and created an exhibit that did not rely on stereotypes. The rapid response exhibited by the Cincinnati Museum Center is atypical for museums both historically and today. Museums in Minneapolis struggled to create new exhibits because the COVID-19 pandemic closed many doors and resulted in the firing of many people. In order to respond in the middle of the racial and public health crisis, the Hennepin History Museum of the county in which George Floyd was murdered put out a statement. The statement ratified many vague promises, including the assertions to “listen more intently and widely” and “continue to push [themselves] towards greater diversity.”⁶⁵

Statements like these have been published by countless museum directors, CEOs, and corporations in response to protests in the summer of 2020. Whenever another company publishes a statement on Twitter that they stand with the Black community and they promise that they truly believe Black lives matter equally to white lives, Twitter users respond “open your purse.”⁶⁶ This sentiment demonstrates that activists, and even those who agreed with the Black Lives Matter movement but did not necessarily support it with any resources, want substantive change. In the upward momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, it was not acceptable to simply put out statements like the Hennepin County Museum without criticism for virtue signaling. Virtue Signaling is when an individual or institution makes a public statement “in the hopes of seeing one’s moral reputation improve in the eyes of one’s peers (or potential customers); the desire to make a constructive, sincere contribution to public moral discourse is at best a secondary motivation.”⁶⁷ Hennepin County is where George Floyd was murdered, and

⁶⁵ “In Response to George Floyd’s Killing” Hennepin History Museum, November 24, 2020.

<https://hennepinhistory.org/from-the-magazine-hennepin-county-dialogue/>.

⁶⁶ Terry Nguyen, “Consumers Don’t Care about Corporate Solidarity. They Want Donations,” Vox (Vox, June 3, 2020), <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/6/3/21279292/blackouttuesday-brands-solidarity-donations>.

⁶⁷ Evan Westra, “Virtue Signaling and Moral Progress,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 49, no.2 (2021): 1-2.

even if for solely local impact aside from what would become a global headline, the history museum should have produced measurable goals detailing how they would support grieving members of the Hennepin community. The museum did not respond until months later, when they hosted a Zoom dialogue about how the events of 2020 will be remembered, the transcript of which is only available to paid members.⁶⁸ When the actions or inaction of your institution directly contradict the claim that you must ‘do better,’ the public is not likely to see you in a good light. It is not enough to acknowledge that history and contemporary events are important. Museums have been able to successfully respond to events similar to this in the past and within the city presently, while the Hennepin History Museum floundered. The Hennepin History Museum failed to uphold the positions of Black Lives Matter, as their statement did nothing to forward Black liberation.

An example of a museum that did well in pivoting to respond to protests in the city was the American Swedish Institute. Located in Minneapolis, the American Swedish Institute’s curatorial director and Women of Color Quilters Network worked together to produce a “We Who Believe in Freedom” quilts exhibition to be a part of the museum’s “We Are the Story” series.⁶⁹ Quilters were given a rapid creative timeline to produce quilts for the *Gone but Never Forgotten: Remembering Those Lost to Police Brutality and Racism: In the Face of Hate We Resist* exhibits.⁷⁰ The exhibit was expanded to be installed until June 2021 so that people could safely visit and engage with the pieces on the year anniversary of George Floyd’s death.⁷¹ The practice of quilting has been historically invaluable to the grieving process in the United States,

⁶⁸“From the Magazine: Hennepin County Dialogue.” Hennepin History Museum, November 24, 2020.

<https://hennepinhistory.org/from-the-magazine-hennepin-county-dialogue/>.

⁶⁹ Karenn. “American Swedish Institute Presents ‘We Who Believe in Freedom’ Quilts Exhibition as Part of the ‘We Are the Story’ Series.” American Swedish Institute, September 14, 2020.

<https://www.asimn.org/about-us/press-room/american-swedish-institute-presents-we-who-believe-freedom-quilts-exhibition>.

⁷⁰ Karenn. “American Swedish Institute”

⁷¹Karenn. “American Swedish Institute”

especially after 1850.⁷² A more recent survey of a modern Quilters Guild ranked the therapeutic value of quilting as the second most important reason for quilting.⁷³ This consideration of the public's need to mourn and reflect shows tremendous consideration by the Institute that could have easily argued that their focus did not include the lives and stories of African Americans. Instead, they fulfilled their public responsibility to address important events without hesitation. Interestingly, Lori Fogarty, Director and CEO of the Oakland Museum of California argues that culturally specific museums have been successful in serving the community, but all museums have to have this goal.⁷⁴ The American Swedish institute certainly affirms this notion, as their willingness to serve the community is apparent in their quick response time to establish an exhibit to honor George Floyd. Previously, the American Swedish Institute had not housed exhibits that detailed the experience of Black Americans. The Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, however, inspired them to connect the cultural identities of those affected by the African Diaspora to Swedish American identity, embodied in the quilting tradition of weaving a tapestry of identities and ideas together.

Washington D.C.

As outrage over racial injustice reached its boiling point, thousands took to the streets on June 6th in Washington D.C., where so many had protested before. As a physical manifestation of distress over a lack of political change and accountability for police forces across the country the largest group of protestors in D.C. since the Women's March in 2017 made their way towards the White House.⁷⁵ Ultimately, protests in Washington and beyond represented an "enough is

⁷² Carol Williams Gebel, "Quilts in the Final Rite of Passage: A Multicultural Study." *Uncoverings* 16 (December 1995): 199–227. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aft&AN=505719318&site=ehost-live>.

⁷³ Carol Williams Gebel, "Quilts in the Final Rite of Passage: A Multicultural Study."

⁷⁴ "Racism, Unrest"

⁷⁵ Evan Semones, "'Enough Is Enough': Thousands Descend on D.C. for Largest George Floyd Protest Yet," *POLITICO* (*POLITICO*, June 7, 2020), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/06/george-floyd-blm-protest-washington-304635>.

enough” mentality.⁷⁶ Tensions in the nation’s capital came to a head when Donald Trump called for the use of tear gas and rubber bullets to “remove protesters near the White House in Lafayette Square on Monday for a presidential photo-op in front of St. John’s Church.”⁷⁷ The momentum of the movement was building with such protests utilizing rhetoric surrounding a ‘revolution’ and marked a cultural shift was coming. The goal of the protests were to show that such disregard of the sanctity of Black Lives would no longer stand, culturally or legislatively.

The federally funded museums in Washington D.C. have a unique privilege to serve the public, and nation during and after the protests in 2020. With a budget of \$1 billion for the fiscal year 2020, the Smithsonian Institute also has many more financial resources to draw upon to preserve the events taking place in the city and nation.⁷⁸ Additionally, the Smithsonian museums and zoo were visited by over 22 million people in 2019, displaying the huge impact these museums have on the public’s understanding of history, and their engagement with art and material culture.⁷⁹ The nation looked to Washington D.C. to see what federal responses would ensue after protests erupted around the nation, including federally funded museums that establish the American narrative for a global audience. Largely, the Smithsonian Institute managed to utilize a variety of media to preserve protest art and stories, and successfully facilitated dialogues. The unique financial security held by Smithsonian museums in Washington D.C. presents some of the largest successes of immediate museum responses in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture stands as the paragon of museums that interprets Black history and art. Its opening in 2016 was long anticipated and

⁷⁶ Evan Semones, “Enough Is Enough”

⁷⁷ Evan Semones, “Enough Is Enough”

⁷⁸ “The Smithsonian Institution Fact Sheet,” Smithsonian Institution, accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/factsheets/smithsonian-institution-fact-sheet>.

⁷⁹ “The Smithsonian Institution Fact Sheet,”

paralleled a new age of interpreting violent and difficult histories in museums. To assist families with discussions about race in every aspect of American society in May of 2020, the National Museum of African American History and Culture released a ‘Talking About Race’ web portal.⁸⁰ The museum moved the release of the portal up so that the public could access it as protests occurred, revealing the weight that flooding the streets and social media has on museum progress.⁸¹ The online portal includes “digital tools, online exercises, video instructions, scholarly articles and more than 100 multi-media resources tailored for educators, parents and caregivers—and individuals committed to racial equality.”⁸² According to the interim director, ‘Talking About Race’ is the culmination of “decades of work by the museum’s educators. It is the result of extensive research, studies, consultations, and educational resources from these fields: history, education, psychology and human development.”⁸³ The portal references work from thought leaders Brené Brown, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Robin DiAngelo, Julie Olsen Edwards, Jerry Kang, Ibram X Kendi, Enid Lee, Audre Lorde, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and Tim Wise.⁸⁴ The museum’s readiness to publish such a resource for the public that represents the prior work of Black activists and historians displays how such resources have been available to draw from, but are being released more widely from the spark of tensions in 2020. Works from those listed have been available in race and gender studies contexts, but have just recently in 2020 become mainstream with social media discussions and resources such as ‘Talking About Race.’

⁸⁰ “National Museum of African American History and Culture Releases ‘Talking About Race’ Web Portal.” National Museum of African American History and Culture, November 25, 2020. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/news/national-museum-african-american-history-and-culture-releases-talking-about-race-web#.XtVY6v96Gpo>.

⁸¹ “National Museum of African American History and Culture Releases ‘Talking About Race’ Web Portal.”

⁸² “National Museum of African American History and Culture Releases ‘Talking About Race’ Web Portal.”

⁸³ “National Museum of African American History and Culture Releases ‘Talking About Race’ Web Portal.”

⁸⁴ “National Museum of African American History and Culture Releases ‘Talking About Race’ Web Portal.”

The branch of Black Lives Matter- DC specifically calls for the implementation of political education, investment into institutions that empower Black citizens, and diminish the institutions that harm Black people, such as the police force and prisons.⁸⁵ The National Museum of African American History and Culture supports these goals by creating a highly accessible resource that details systems of oppression and how to instead, encourage anti-racist actions that oppose such systems. Additionally, the online portal and institution as a whole works to empower Black citizens by telling a story of resiliency and emphasizes self care, which is especially important in the support of Black Lives during the conditions of 2020.⁸⁶ The NMAAHC successfully established a resource accessible during the pandemic to facilitate dialogues around race and support local Black Lives Matter protestors through their interpretation and rhetoric.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture also collaborated with the National Museum of American History and the Anacostia Community Museum to “document, collect and preserve the expressions of protest and hope from Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C.”⁸⁷ This action shows the impact of the protests were able to pull community and national museums’ focus. The Smithsonian stated, “recognizing that the tragic killing of George Floyd has spurred a transformative time in U.S. history, the Smithsonian Institution is collecting today so that the world, in the present and future, can understand the role that race has played in our complicated 400-year history.”⁸⁸ The public collection of materials from Black Lives Matter protests not only expanded collections to include pieces evocative of racial

⁸⁵“Black Lives Matter DC,” Black Lives Matter DC, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://www.dcblm.org/>.

⁸⁶ “National Museum of African American History and Culture Releases ‘Talking About Race’ Web Portal.” National Museum of African American History and Culture, November 25, 2020. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/news/national-museum-african-american-history-and-culture-releases-talking-about-race-web#.XtVY6v96Gpo>.

⁸⁷ “Statement on Efforts to Collect Objects at Lafayette Square,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, June 11, 2020, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/news/statement-efforts-collect-objects-lafayette-square>.

⁸⁸ “Statement on Efforts to Collect Objects at Lafayette Square”

disparities, but it also legitimized the movement itself as a significant cultural moment capable of changing the landscape. Lastly, the coalition of museums required “Smithsonian curators to work together with activists and groups on the ground to ensure that this grassroots-led community movement and pivotal moment is accurately documented.”⁸⁹ In practice, this looked like the collection of protest art from the streets by museum officials who then accessioned pieces into each museum's collections to preserve these acts of protestors typically done without compensation as a way to grieve.⁹⁰ This collaboration with grassroots organizers to preserve the protest’s cultural impact highlights the far-reaching ability for protests to change collections in the museum field.

Smithsonian museums in D.C. that are not exclusively about racial or cultural identity also responded quickly to local protests. The National Building Museum created *Murals That Matter: Activism Through Public Art* in partnership with the P.A.I.N.T.S. Institute and the Downtown DC Business Improvement District (BID) commissioned a series of murals on plywood used to board up stores alongside an exhibit celebrating leaders of the 1963 March on Washington and Black Lives Matter protests.⁹¹ The museum’s decision to change boards that conveyed unease and barriers to the businesses that once served the community into pieces of art that celebrated the Black historical and contemporary figures who fought for equal rights was supportive in maintaining an honorable image surrounding protestors. Furthermore, the art displayed on the reclaimed boards supported the Black Lives Matter- DC mission to empower Black citizens through representation of the Big Six of the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement’s Big Six include activists John Lewis, James Farmer, Martin Luther King Jr.,

⁸⁹ “Statement on Efforts to Collect Objects at Lafayette Square”

⁹⁰ “Statement on Efforts to Collect Objects at Lafayette Square”

⁹¹ “National Building Museum to Install Protest-Inspired ‘Murals That Matter’ Exhibition on West Lawn.” National Building Museum, August 28, 2020.

<https://www.nbm.org/national-building-museum-to-install-protest-inspired-murals-that-matter-exhibition-on-west-lawn/>.

A. Philip Randolph, Dorothy Height, and Roy Wilkins. Putting these figures alongside Black Lives Matter art reveals that the American Building Museum was influenced by contemporary events to connect an existing project about the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s to contemporary movements that represented millions of Americans who found themselves participating in a modern civil rights movement. Representation is important because according to a 2017 study by Colleen Dilenschneider “more than a quarter (26%) of university educated, ethnically diverse people felt that cultural organisations were “not welcoming of people like me.”⁹² A follow-up study found that 40% of millennials and 35% of the population as a whole believed history and art museums were “not for people like me”.⁹³ This is not acceptable, and does not even make sense from a financial perspective, as museums that do not provide welcoming experiences lose a large group of potential visitors. Perhaps the size and scale of the national museums in Washington D.C. allowed for them to create new content without the threat of closure. The world watched how D.C. would handle the massive protests and the federal museums were a public outlet that triumphantly provided respite for the public that was living through history.

Portland, Oregon

Oregon’s largest city, Portland, housed over 100 straight days of protests over George Floyd’s death.⁹⁴ The protests ranged from peaceful gatherings to include hundreds of fires started, at least 675 arrests, and almost 30 times, police declared a riot.⁹⁵ Federal Law

⁹² Manuel Charr, “What Can Museums Teach Us about Diversity?,” MuseumNext, March 25, 2021, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-can-museums-teach-us-about-diversity/>.

⁹³Charr, “What Can Museums Teach Us about Diversity?”

⁹⁴Mark Graves, “100 Days of Black Lives Matter Protests in Portland: Timeline and Photos Trace the Arc of Events,” OregonLive (The Oregonian, September 6, 2020), <https://www.oregonlive.com/politics/2020/09/100-days-of-black-lives-matter-protests-in-portland-timeline-and-photos-trace-the-arc-of-events.html>.

⁹⁵ Graves, “100 Days of Black Lives Matter Protests in Portland”

enforcement officers clashed with the citizens of Portland, including people driving who were caught in the crossfire of tear gas and rubber bullets.⁹⁶ The national headlines covering the incidents in Portland, increased attention from Donald Trump, and the arrival of interim Department of Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf to Portland sparked a monstrous use of force by the federal police against protestors, including the use of munitions.⁹⁷ The regime of unwelcomed federal officers, some undercover in crowds, reflected the especially violent and turbulent nature of protesting in Portland. Protestors in Oregon also struggled with separating legitimate concerns over racial discrimination from unruly vandalism and destruction of property.

Daily protests in Portland have continued over 6 months after George Floyd's death, yet activists question if their social justice movement centered on Black Lives has been supplanted by an "unfocused, anti-establishment fight against capitalism and state power."⁹⁸ Protests have even culminated into vandalism against the Oregon Historical Society, an organization that houses a museum and hosted a discussion with Jeanne Theoharis that connected the disruptive and unpopular nature of the Civil Rights movement to protests today.⁹⁹ The protests started with leadership from Black "labor activists, immigration advocates, college professors and a member of the Black Panthers" who spoke to propel the protests forward.¹⁰⁰ By November 2020, however, one Black leader in Portland described "A lot of whiteness started seeping into the forefront. A lot of white voices started seeping into the front."¹⁰¹ Founders of Rose City Justice, a

⁹⁶ Graves, "100 Days of Black Lives Matter Protests in Portland"

⁹⁷ Graves, "100 Days of Black Lives Matter Protests in Portland"

⁹⁸ Jonathan Levinson and Sergio Olmos, "In America's Whitest City, Black Activists Struggle to Separate Themselves from Anarchists," OPB (Oregon Public Broadcasting, November 26, 2020), <https://www.opb.org/article/2020/11/23/portland-protest-racial-justice-oregon-black-lives-matter/>.

⁹⁹ "A More Beautiful and Terrible History: A History of the Civil Rights Movement for Today." Oregon Historical Society. Accessed February 11, 2021. <https://www.ohs.org/events/history-of-the-civil-rights-movement-for-today.cfm>.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Levinson and Sergio Olmos, "In America's Whitest City, Black Activists Struggle"

¹⁰¹ Jonathan Levinson and Sergio Olmos, "In America's Whitest City, Black Activists Struggle"

group that led tens of thousands of protestors through Portland at the height of Black Lives Matter's popularity, noticed "Black folks that get in power or have a voice are somehow squashed or quelled by a white political leadership or white organizing."¹⁰² Racial clashes amongst protestors has sparked discussions about how privilege affects the way participants engage with rebellion in the city, as white protestors instigate police in fights while Black protestors avoid direct contact for fear of their lives.¹⁰³ Portland's museums and public institutions responsibility to interpret the Black Lives Matter protests was two-fold. Firstly, museums have to help the public reckon with the unconscionable overreach of federal force against protestors. Second, the museums have to interpret the racism within the movement, which included gate-keeping and the silencing of Black organizers. Successes in the taking down of statues of slaveholders and getting the police chief to resign affirm the importance of Portland museums to ride on the coattails of these successes to help locals reconcile with the extreme conditions of their city in 2020.

The Portland Art Museum took multiple steps to make Black leaders feel heard and celebrated. Initially, the Portland Art Museum shared a statement about standing in solidarity with the Black community, acknowledging the museum's "role in supporting systems of oppression and inequity that have historically highlighted certain stories while marginalizing others."¹⁰⁴ They enhanced the sentiments in their statement by posting multiple follow-up posts that detailed how permanent collections failed to represent Black artists and many works are in the process of being repatriated.¹⁰⁵ Without the Black Lives Matter protests in Portland, it is unclear when, or if, the Portland Art Museum would have publicly announced their goal to

¹⁰² Jonathan Levinson and Sergio Olmos, "In America's Whitest City, Black Activists Struggle"

¹⁰³ Jonathan Levinson and Sergio Olmos, "In America's Whitest City, Black Activists Struggle"

¹⁰⁴ "Tag: Black Lives Matter." Portland Art Museum & Northwest Film Center at home. <https://nwfc.pam.org/tag/black-lives-matter/>.

¹⁰⁵ "Racial Equity: The Museum and Representation of Black Artists" Portland Art Museum & Northwest Film Center at home. <https://nwfc.pam.org/racial-equity-the-museum-and-representation-of-black-artists/>

repatriate art that had been stolen and acquire new pieces that do not portray African ancestry as uncivilized. The Museum also erected a Black Lives Matter banner outside and commemorated Juneteenth via their ‘Daily Art Moment’ blog that showcased a photo of an enslaved woman with interpretation about emancipation.¹⁰⁶ These discussions are bold and new for museums. Yes, museums have been discussing diversification, representation, and multiculturalism in the decade proceeding 2020, however few museums have outright admitted their own white supremacy until 2020.

The Portland Art Museum supported Black Lives Matter over months, even when actions of protestors were broadcast as vulgar and members of the public commented on the museum’s social media that their stance went too far.¹⁰⁷ The museum appropriately managed to put Black voices to the forefront in their materials by encouraging those who did not support the museum’s position to listen to the “Black voices who have been disenfranchised and hurt within our own communities” and that they would remain “unwavering on this stance.”¹⁰⁸ With the severity of tensions within Portland, it was imperative that discussions such as the one opened by the Portland Art Museum were brought up.

The Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 brought the long postponed discussion of adding works of art and material culture significant to Black Americans to the forefront. In their statements, museums such as the Portland Art Museum reflect on how permanent and temporary exhibits alike have needed to shift away from eurocentric preeminence that flourishes in contrast to comparatively less managed collections of indigenous and African art and material culture. By explaining these discrepancies in posts viewed by the general public through blogs and social

¹⁰⁶ “Daily Art Moment: R.Poole Photography Studio” Portland Art Museum & Northwest Film Center at home. <https://nwfc.pam.org/daily-art-moment-r-poole-photography-studio/>

¹⁰⁷ “Acknowledging the role of our museum in oppression” Portland Art Museum & Northwest Film Center at home. <https://nwfc.pam.org/acknowledging-the-role-of-our-museum-in-oppression/>

¹⁰⁸ “Acknowledging the role of our museum in oppression”

media, the Portland Art Museum translated the internal dialogue about interpreting difficult histories and diversifying collections for the public to better understand how museums and other sites of public art and history have the influence to uphold or reject notions of racism and white supremacy in the United States. These actions contrast museums that are not acknowledging the practices of white supremacy in the country, such as the Portland Police Museum who refused to comment about protests locally or across the nation.¹⁰⁹ Museums and historic sites, such as the Portland Police Museum, share content that is undeniably linked with injustice and systemic racism by interpreting policing and incarceration, and therefore has a heightened responsibility to address these injustices rather than preserve them through copaganda- propaganda that supports and heroizes police.

Another means of supporting the Black Lives Matter movement's goal to liberate Black people is by providing opportunities for them to be recognized, supported, and share their art with the public. The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art in Oregon has atoned for their previous lack of representation in their collection by establishing a Black Lives Matter grant in 2020.¹¹⁰ The Grant Program apportions \$2,500 grants to 20 artists who submit "work directly responding to: the current Black Lives Matter movement; marginalized communities; experiences with systemic racism and inequality; and artists whose work thematically connects to these experiences."¹¹¹ This new program displays the positive impact that Black Lives Matter activists have had on getting large entities to reallocate their financial resources into the community. Additionally, works that have won the grant have been exhibited online at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art in fall 2020, and will be installed in a gallery exhibition in winter 2021, thereby

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¹¹⁰ "BLM Artist Project Grant," BLM Artist Project Grant | Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, April 10, 2021, <https://jsma.uoregon.edu/ArtistProjectGrant>.

¹¹¹ "BLM Artist Project Grant"

adding pieces that are evocative of oppression and social justice movements into a previously limited collection. The Black Lives Matter Grant Program started by the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art is a prime example of how the Black Lives Matter movement and local protests have activated museums to respond to contemporary racial inequalities and have the ability to establish more equitable means of appreciating art and history.

Los Angeles, California

Los Angeles holds its own history of uprising against police brutality. Almost 29 years ago, riots broke out after police officers were acquitted of the brutal beating of Rodney King.¹¹² The seemingly obvious video evidence of the police's misuse of power directly parallels the video of George Floyd's murder in 2020. A lasting turbulent relationship with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) has reared its ugly head in the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. Protests in the summer of 2020 were large, despite colossal amounts of positive cases of COVID-19 in Los Angeles. Tensions have rekindled in March of 2021, as Black Lives Matter-Los Angeles organizers have urged the City Council to reject the recommendation that the Los Angeles Police Department should strengthen its ability to collect information about Black Lives Matter protestors online.¹¹³ LA's history with protests against police and current struggle to curb their power, justifies an urgent response for the public to engage with, long term closures for museums, however, make it difficult to produce analog content.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) was able to navigate the COVID-19 restrictions to create exhibits and resources later than most museums responding to protests. The

¹¹² Anjali Sastry and Karen Grigsby Bates, "When LA Erupted In Anger: A Look Back At The Rodney King Riots," NPR (NPR, April 26, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots>.

¹¹³ Kevin Rector, "BLM-LA Says Increased LAPD Monitoring of Protesters Would Mean Further Harassment," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, March 16, 2021), <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-03-16/black-lives-matter-los-angeles-alleges-pattern-of-harassment>.

museums initially released a statement of support in June of 2020, announcing their new series of programs titled “Racism is a Public Health Issue.”¹¹⁴ Their goal to make virtual and physical spaces for “discussion and action” aligns with the BLMLA guiding principle that “we acknowledge, respect, and celebrate differences and commonalities” that can only come to light through difficult conversations.¹¹⁵ LACMA continued by posting a list of virtual resources shortly thereafter, including the NMAAHC’s “Talking About Race” portal and the BLMLA website.¹¹⁶

A never-ending list of corporations and institutions had posted a black square on social media and wiped their hands of any responsibility when it came to promising effectual change during the thick of Black Lives Matter protests, but the LACMA followed through with new exhibitions that reflected identity, history, and the politics of the moment. The discussions about race, identity, and reparations prompted on a national scale by Black Lives Matter protests and social media outreach expand their reach beyond white and Black history. This is significant for the overall diversification of museums in addition to creating materials that interpret and celebrate Black Lives Matter. LACMA’s new exhibition not only added art created by young Black artists in their new ‘View from Here: Recent Acquisitions,’ but they also highlighted art composed by queer artists, immigrants to the United States, and survivors of Japanese internment.¹¹⁷ In the greater cause for generating inclusive museum experiences, accepting feedback and criticisms from the Black Lives Matter movement, applying them to other marginalized groups, while still recognizing their differences, and implementing community

¹¹⁴ “Black Lives Matter.” Unframed. Accessed February 11, 2021. <https://unframed.lacma.org/2020/06/01/black-lives-matter>.

¹¹⁵ “Guiding Principles,” BLMLA, accessed April 2, 2021, <https://www.blmla.org/guiding-principles>.

¹¹⁶ “Art and Resistance” Unframed. June 8, 2020. <https://unframed.lacma.org/2020/06/01/black-lives-matter>.

¹¹⁷ “View from Here-Responding to the Present through LACMA’s Evolving Collection” Unframed. February 18, 2021. <https://unframed.lacma.org/2021/02/18/view-here%E2%80%94responding-present-through-lacma%E2%80%99s-evolving-collection>.

input at every step of the process is vital to keep alive the progress being made in the museum field into 2021 and beyond.

An associate curator of Western history at the Autry Museum of The American West in Los Angeles, Tyree Boyd-Pates, says curators are “seeking to rise to the occasion” within the monumental era of Black Lives Matter protests, and has been focalizing Black history within museum spaces for years.¹¹⁸ His approach to collecting community history exemplifies a huge tenet of using the museum as a site of social activism and reconciliation. Boyd-Pates has also curated the Visitors of Color project, an “initiative that pushes museums to think of visitors as active participants and not just donors or patrons of the arts.”¹¹⁹ It is important to conceive of visitors beyond the constraints of the white nuclear family or the well-off school group because museums belong to everyone, and therefore Black visitors should see their ancestors’ contributions to the country venerated like white visitors. Again, this example proves how Black professionals have been central to the cause of museums observing Black stories and the events of 2020 have expedited changes in how museum professionals share resources and ideas about changing their museums in order to reflect modern concerns and desires. Whilst consumers are scrutinizing institutions that fail to use their large platforms to address Black Lives Matter, Boyd-Pates notes how having a time when brick and mortar buildings are not open and reliance on digital connections is actually “beneficial to partner with the community in larger museum decision-making processes. So these communities, in fact, can feel reflected not only through exhibitions but public programing and other endeavors.”¹²⁰ The role of the museum has shifted to be an equal access point to history more broadly beyond in-house exhibits.

¹¹⁸ Tonya Mosley, “Black Curators Reimagine Future Of Museums During Pandemic, Protests,” Here & Now (WBUR, September 14, 2020), <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/09/14/future-of-museums>.

¹¹⁹ Mosley, “Black Curators Reimagine Future”

¹²⁰ Mosley, “Black Curators Reimagine Future”

Atlanta, Georgia

Atlanta is a site of historic Civil Rights achievements and contemporary intersectional movements for racial justice. Amidst protests in the streets of Atlanta, a Black 27 year old named Rayshard Brooks was shot and killed by police while protesting police brutality.¹²¹ Tensions grew in Atlanta as residents became frustrated victims of the very thing they were protesting. Protests in Atlanta continued into the Fall of 2020, and became increasingly dangerous in September when a grand jury in Kentucky decided not to charge Breonna Taylor's three murderers.¹²² Atlanta protestors have maintained their focus on supporting Black women who have been victims of police violence by chanting "say her name" and protesting for Breonna Taylor to posthumously acquire justice. These protests and calls from Black Lives Matter activists to start a cultural revolution pushed numerous museums in Atlanta to create new exhibits.

In response to protests, the Museum of Design Atlanta (MODA) has created a virtual lecture series called 'Design Justice' that details how accessibility and social activism can be incorporated into architectural design. The Museum of Design has remained closed to in-person visitors during COVID-19, but has successfully tied historic practices of design with issues that visitors are likely to face in their lifetimes. These lectures not only reflect a more diverse interpretation of the collections the museums choose to highlight for the public, but they also help change the profession of architectural design by making conferences about this topic more accessible to those in the field. Due to the persistence of consumers turned protestors who

¹²¹ Emma Reynolds and Melissa Macaya, "Protesters Gather in Atlanta Following Fatal Officer-Involved Shooting at Fast Food Drive-Thru," CNN (Cable News Network, June 14, 2020), https://www.cnn.com/us/live-news/george-floyd-protests-06-13-20/h_4e279782fcaa3ba16fd00cf8a70cdc55.

¹²² Brakkton Booker, "Tear Gas Deployed In Atlanta During Breonna Taylor Protests," NPR (NPR, September 24, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/09/24/916462945/tear-gas-deployed-in-atlanta-during-breonna-taylor-protests>.

demanded to see more avenues of social activism in the cities they engaged with, MODA constructed a whole new series of lectures that gave experts on incorporating marginalized voices and needs in design a platform to share their expertise.

Yet another example of a museum pushed to change their operations by the Black Lives Matter Movement in Atlanta was the High Museum of Art. The Museum of Art went on to highlight 10 artists that “poignantly and passionately acknowledge the power of protest, history of oppression, resiliency, and hope which defines the experience of being Black in the United States of America.”¹²³ It is worrying that up until this point, the museum failed to spotlight such works, however they changed their policies because they drew “inspiration from the bravery, candor, and commitment of those who have built this community of progress with their actions,” proving how the Black Lives Matter protests caused effectual change in some museums.¹²⁴

Examples of museums in Atlanta that did respond to Black Lives Matter protests are surprisingly sparse. Atlanta, Georgia houses the National Center for Human and Civil Rights, who if not for the local protests occurring in their own city, should have at least made a statement because the museum interprets protest and civil liberty movements. The Museum did not release a statement about Black Lives Matter that can be found on their website. Additionally, the Martin Luther King Jr, National Historical Park, traditionally a site for discussions and programming about civil injustices did not directly acknowledge Black Lives Matter protests. It is unclear if this is due to the closure of the site during the pandemic, or because the National Park Service tends to avoid discussing contemporary, especially political topics in their programming and social media posts. Interpretive exhibitions and programming in National Parks is more permanent than independent museums that have space for temporary and traveling exhibits,

¹²³ “10 Artists,” High Museum of Art, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://high.org/10artists/>.

¹²⁴ “10 Artists,” High Museum of Art, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://high.org/10artists/>.

which could be one reason Black Lives Matter was not connected to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Conclusion

After decades of slow progress to ensure museums host more comprehensive collections and interpretations of art and history, mainly led by Black museum professionals, the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 has caused change in a number of museums that have been uninvolved in inclusivity in the past. The adoption of new museum diversification programs and initiatives during the times of the protests act not only to respond to current events, but also highlighted a breaking point in which political neutrality and complacency would no longer be accepted by the public. The number of museums in these cities that premiered new exhibits demonstrate how the protests moved museum professionals to enact actionable, substantive change in their museums. Perhaps some museums, particularly art museums, were quicker to change their exhibits and programming as a response to Black Lives Matter protests because they were able to quickly acquire new art pieces as opposed to history museums that would have to rewrite their interpretive materials, including panels, labels, and brochures. Additionally, larger, citywide museums, such as the Portland Art Museum, Minneapolis Institute of Art, and LACMA perhaps responded to Black Lives Matter protests because they have more visitors and members than small community museums to fund reinterpretation and the acquisition of new collections. Also, the Black Lives Matter movement was highly politicized and unpopular in more conservative communities, most likely discouraging struggling museums from wanting to make a polarizing stance publicly.

The museums that did utilize the cultural environment created by the Black Lives Matter movement highlight how an array of lectures, family programs, and new exhibitions can be created despite financial and public health restrictions in the future. New inclusive digital resources show that museums can move past obligatory Black History Month blog posts and viewing diversity as an afterthought. Reopenings in 2021 provide another chance for museums to look to their successful counterparts and act to interpret the tumultuous time we lived through. This time will be seen as an example of upward trends for the museum world, a time where museums took the initiative to publicly acknowledge their role in creating a more equitable future, and relayed this theory to members of the public. This period of action honors the previous activists in the Black education and museum movements, as it shows how upending systemic oppression in public spheres can become mainstream after many years of struggle and being silenced. Coretta Scott King once said “Struggle is a never ending process. Freedom is never really won, you earn it and win it in every generation.” Certainly, this generation of Black Lives Matter protestors have won progress by pushing the needle forward in the museum sphere, with more to come in the future.

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