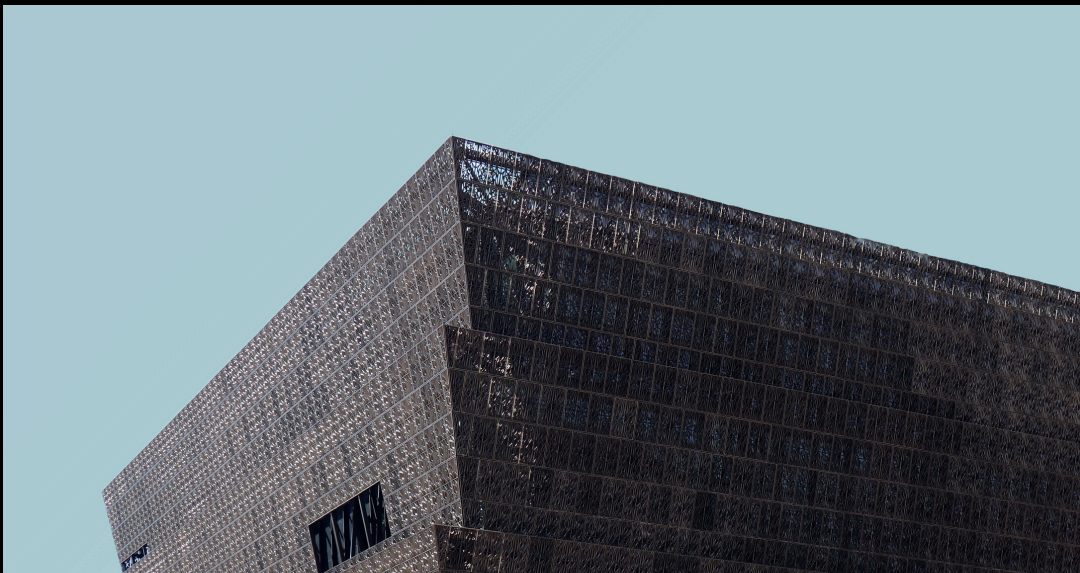


MAKING A WAY

Black Centered Institutions in Contemporary Museum Culture



Zindzi Harley
Department of Museum Studies
The University of the Arts
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Museum Studies, M.A
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To the Faculty of The University of the Arts

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of Zindzi Harley find it satisfactory and recommend it to be accepted.

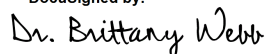
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Abstract

In the last several decades, we have begun to see a rise in the number of Black or African American professionals and artists in the museum field. Based on the Mellon Foundation's 2018 survey of 332 museums, "curatorial, education, conservation, and leadership, representation among people of color has increased five percent, from 15 percent (2015) to 20 percent (2018)." (Valentine, 2019) However, Black creatives have and continue to be systemically excluded from museum spaces and roles. Black professionals, artists, and their work are often devalued by Western colonial society and subsequently the scope of 'fine art. Historically Black material culture featured by or in mainstream arts and culture institutions exploit and devalue Black art due to a lack of understanding of Black history and culture. Black creatives are creating Black cultural spaces for their peers and themselves as a result of this long-term exclusion and violence. Today, African Americans are pioneering Black collectives, cultural sites, galleries, and museums in an effort to celebrate and educate the public on the history, community, and material culture of the Black public. As the museum field continues to pursue a more decolonial, diverse and inclusive culture we must acknowledge the past adversity Black artists and cultural institutions faced from white opposition. Understanding these struggles allows us to better understand the purpose of Black cultural organizations and how they serve the Black community as grounds for social justice and storytelling.

Keywords: *Black museum, African American museum, ethnographic museum, culturally specific institutions*

Dedication

Making a Way has continuously been not only a cheeky response but a generational lifestyle within the Black community. Despite the consistent assault against Black people of all shapes, scholarship, and shades we have persisted, pioneered, and pushed the very boundaries that were meant to confine us in all disciplines. It is often said that life imitates art, however for so long Black bodies were never in the picture let alone the room. I dedicate this thesis to all of those strong Black folks that fought to be their own muses, makers, and masters of the Black collective destiny. Without these leaders we would not have found our seat at table let alone feel worthy of our thrones. I hope that this research will inspire not just Black folks but all people of color and the global world at large. Representation matters, history matters, and most importantly Black lives matter.

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Thank you to committee members, **Dejáy Duckett** and **Dr. Brittany Webb** for taking such great interest in my work and connecting me with the resources I desired and needed to make this research possible. Having two strong Black woman and museum professionals on my committee empowered and informed my research process in the most genuine and positive way possible. It is hard finding representation of yourself in the museum field and these two women have paved the way for my success in the arts and culture sector as well as this thesis.

I would also like to thank **Karen Pollard** and **Mickey Maley** for being the most supportive advisors and thesis development professors. Without your coaching and words of encouragement I would not have sustained the momentum I had throughout the semester. Lastly, thank you to my amazing cohort that cultivated a sense of home and friendship that pushed me to strive for more throughout this program, it was a pleasure.

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Introduction

The cultural phenomena of spaces that center Black art and artists and commit to serving Black audiences in contemporary art culture are the result of the exclusion and appropriation of Black artists and professionals in mainstream practice and discourse. As we work to reform modern museum culture and institutional spaces, we must acknowledge the history of violence and segregation that have long been attached to and flourished within them. Only then will we recognize the significance of the present-day manifestation of Black collectives and cultural institutions. *Making A Way* aims to explore the history, activism, and modern-day manifestation of Black cultural institutions and Black centered cultural spaces by defining their role and importance in Black communities and global society. Too many times Black histories and culture are framed as alternative and often misinterpreted via a Eurocentric colonial lens that is built on a legacy white supremacy. This research is prompted by the increase in Black professionals and institutions moving to the forefront of the museums field, yet many are still in opposition of these professionals and collective's existence and significance. This lack of consideration, sensitivity, and respect for Black leadership and material culture has resulted in injustices against Black artistry throughout history leaving much to be understood about a culture that has contributed greatly to the fine arts from the beginnings of humanity.

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 what 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? This is one America, and after black cities have been manipulated and after something like a nigger room has been reserved in the basement of the Metropolitan Museum for us, the people who have the power and the people who count the pennies and the people who hold the keys better start thinking it all over again.

-- June Jordan, 1969 MUSE Conference

Needs Statement

The acknowledgement of the exclusion and mistreatment of Black creatives and their work in the museum field is pertinent because it allows the issue to be actualized by society and incites a call to action for change. By addressing the history of inequity, we can better understand the memory of cultural production in Black communities and share histories and oral traditions that are often overlooked or considered alternative to Western histories. Analyzing the tumultuous past of afro-institutions can aid in our contemporary comprehension of modern Black cultural spaces mission and service to the community. This acknowledgment also allows for the creation and advancement of more inclusive spaces that are socially aware and sensitive to the plight and progress of African Americans. In my research I will dive into the proliferation of Black exclusion throughout museum history from the mid 1900s to the contemporary and address the activism and resistance that has led to the past and recent emergence of Black centered art spaces. Through this research I hope to bring attention to an injustice that has persisted throughout history and inspire action amongst all aspiring Black professionals and creatives. With diversity and inclusion being an inspirational mission in many White-dominated institutions and a pillar of Black centered art spaces, this work is of the utmost importance and will drive us towards a more diverse, equitable, and comprehensive future in the museum field.

Methodology

In order to acquire more information on Black cultural institutions, their histories of activism, and contemporary existence I have interviewed museum professionals, historians, curators, and artists in Black museums, battling institution racism in the museum field, their experiences within Black cultural institutions, diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, as well as the importance and history of Black cultural spaces. For this research I surveyed and analyzed Black collectives, galleries, museums, and cultural institutions to better understand their founding histories, mission, and connection to the local arts and culture community. I have utilized scholarly databases such as JSTOR and EBSCO alongside contemporary resources like social media and online lectures to uncover more about the practice and discourse of Black centered spaces. I have compiled a case study on the Studio Museum in Harlem that speak to the founding, leadership, exhibitions and collections, public programming, and future of a historic and successful Black museum. The case study I have developed of the Studio Museum in Harlem grounds my argument for the importance of Black centered cultural spaces and their emergence in the modern context. In my research I will dive into the proliferation of Black exclusion throughout museum history from the mid 1900s to the contemporary and address the recent emergence of Black owned and operated art spaces

Introduction: Chapter 1-4

The Studio Museum in Harlem is an excellent example of an elite Black cultural institution founded in a historic Black community doing pioneering work to uplift Black artists and serve the Black public. Their creation was an experimental venture in interracial arts collaboration that not only proved the need for Black cultural institutions but confirmed their purpose, importance, and ability to lead the museum field as innovators in the arts. By chronicling the Studio Museum in Harlem's past, present, and future in their various aspects of operation we can examine their function as a necessity in the development of the Black community and their timeless contributions to mainstream discourse and practice. With a dedication to exhibiting Black artists at the forefront of their formation, the museum's collection is a living testament to their unique role as a Black museum and interpretation of objects that inhabit it. The Studio Museum in Harlem is reimagining an afro-future for Black communities in museums by building a network of Black cultural institutions engaging digitally to educate and exchange with the public. This mindfulness and participation in the construction of a more inclusive Black digital exhibition space highlights the Studio Museum in Harlem as a space maker for the incoming generation of Black cultural institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW



Literature Review

Defining Black

Since peoples of African descent were stolen from their homelands on the continent of Africa they have been forcibly made to believe that they must assimilate into Western society. In the United States we acknowledge these descendants of the diaspora through racial terminologies that were often designed to inherently incite violence against the bearers of that constructed identity. In the early United States negro was a neutral descriptor for African slaves that evolved overtime into the commonly used term, Black. Descendants of the African diaspora have endured the burden of these identifiers and the chains of colonial constructs such as racial classification on their voyage to freedom, equality, and human rights. Today, Black people are still abused by the violent past of these racial hierarchies and are forced to utilize them in our daily lives whether in academia, work, or fulfilling our civic duties. When referencing specific cultural communities (i.e., African American, Latino, etc.) it is important that one have an adequate understanding of these terminologies and the histories behind the nomenclature that creates the cultural space these identities exist within. Throughout history 'Black' has long been a cultural identifier associated with devalued or evil ideologies.

The word "black" has an extensively vexed history both inside and outside the United States. Typically used as a neutral reference to the darkest color on the spectrum, the word has also taken on negative cultural and moral meanings. It describes both something that is

“soiled,” “stained,” “evil,” or “morally vapid” and people of a darker hue.”¹ This duality creates an unequal social dynamic between the user and those of the culture being identified, a hierarchy ever-present in today’s society. According to E. Patrick Johnson the dictionary demonstrates this dual usage of Black; “one of the entries under “black” as an adjective is “gloomy, pessimistic, dismal,” while another is “of or belonging to a racial group having brown to black skin, especially of African origin: the *Black population of South Africa*.”² This classification creates a monolith of the Black community by associating it with all people of brown or dark skin tone. Johnson elaborates, “the slippage in the latter definition from “brown to black” highlights the ways in which the term’s negative cultural and moral connotations are radicalized through reference to not-quite-white but also not-always-black bodies. This slippage maintains hierarchies among the races scaled from white to black.”³ According to colonial historian and scholar Patrick Wolfe, “Black people’s enslavement produced an inclusive taxonomy that automatically enslaved the offspring of a slave and any other parent. In the wake of slavery, this taxonomy became fully racialized in the “one-drop rule,” whereby any amount of African ancestry, no matter how remote, and regardless of

¹ Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, *Keywords for American Cultural Studies, Second Edition* (New York University Press, 2014).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

phenotypical appearance, makes a person Black.”⁴ This characterization makes Blackness expansive in the settler colonialism context.⁵

In order to talk about Black institutions and spaces we must first take the time to make a definitive statement as to what Black means here, for this thesis. With the Black Power Movement and Black Arts Movement ushering in more uplifting and empowering ideologies related to the value of the Black public and culture, the overall definition of Black continues to shift towards more righteous designations such as beautiful, expansive, and admirable. In my participation in North American discourse as a student and citizen, Black is a racial terminology that I have exchanged in scholarly infrastructures and my own daily communications. In a high populous and heavily racially and ethnically diverse city like Philadelphia, Black is a common descriptor for persons of a darker skin tone. As a woman that identifies racially as Black and ethnically of West Indian descent, I have informed my own perspective of Black from my formal and informal interactions. I respect the diversity and power of Blackness and give it this veneration in my discourse by capitalizing the ‘B’ in Black as a mechanism for reclaiming Black agency and humanity. The arts have historically allowed Black creatives a means of resistance to the oppression of white supremacy and colonial taxonomy. For the means of this research, I define Black as a person of African heritage or descent deriving from the continent of Africa in their lineage. Peoples of African descent live throughout the America’s, but not all are dark-skinned, and many prestigious

⁴ Tuck, Eve & Yang, K.. (2012). Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor. Decolonization. 1.

⁵ Ibid.

Black institutions in the U.S. were founded by light-skinned Black people who had cultural and financial privilege and used that privilege for racial uplift projects.

Black Cultural Institutions

HBCU's have been collecting, exhibiting, and contributing art history far before the mainstream could be challenged by a Black museum movement. From the late 1800s to the 1900s HBCU's such as Clark Atlanta and Howard University began founding galleries and collections on their campuses. The oldest Black museum in the country, Hampton University Museum was founded in 1868 in Virginia. Black colleges and universities allowed a space for Black material culture to be documented and interpreted when mainstream collection wouldn't. This prompted curators to revitalize their collections due to the knowledgeable influences of HBCU's archival and educational initiatives in early years.⁶ In the last decade there has been a reemergence of Black or African American professionals and artists in the field. Black creatives are often rejected from mainstream museum spaces and roles due to the colonial legacy of the Western art field and its exclusionary traditions. Black artists and their works have been historically overlooked in the scope of what we define as art and art practice. However, Black creatives are making a way to exhibit their culture and stories on their own terms not just for African Americans, but all people of color.

⁶ Conversation with Dr. Brittany Webb

Today, Black professionals are sponsoring their own Black collectives, cultural spaces, galleries, and museums to define their own history and aesthetic. In 2016, Togolese artist Clay Apenouvon expressed this need for visibility at the Seattle Art Fair. Apenouvon utilized black trash bags in an installation to conceal the public's view of an exhibition including Black artists. The *Film Noir* installation at the Black owned Mariane Ibrahim Gallery made a statement by challenging the white gaze. Gallery owner Ibrahim recalls, "it was mostly about making visible what is invisible...that's the discrimination that has resulted in the exclusion of Africans and African-Americans in the collections of museums and in the art market," said Ibrahim, adding that visitors who asked to see behind the plastic bags were told "I won't show you unless, you eventually buy."⁷ Ibrahim not only reaffirms the value and sacredness of Black art by being selective of how viewers engage with it, he creates a dynamic space where Black material culture simply can't be consumed without a price, a circumstance not often for Black artists in the violent mainstream art markets and museum collections. Nonetheless, this is not a new occurrence. Since the early 1950's and 60's Black artists have fought for representation and rights in the arts.

To understand the importance and purpose of these Black culturally specific institutions we must acknowledge their turbulent journey to conception. African American museums are not an old convention, contrary to popular belief, "throughout much of the twentieth century, de-facto segregation produced a separate world of African American art

⁷ Artsy Editorial and Antwaun Sargent, "How Black Artists, Dealers, and Collectors Are Boosting the Careers of Their Younger Peers," Artsy, December 14, 2017

centers and museums.”⁸ In fact, the community of Black museums is a, “relatively young, energetic, and expanding cultural community.”⁹ Black cultural institutions consist of museums, galleries, historical sites, and other forums for art making such as studios or collectives. Black cultural institutions are physical or digital spaces that utilize a collection of assets and the diverse narratives of people, art, and artifacts as produced by Black peoples to engage visitors with Black humanity and cultural production. According to *The Emergence of the Field of African American Museums*, collection materials of African American museums might include photography, historic artifacts, books, etc. but most have art, film, video, oral histories, or furniture.¹⁰ The primary goal of most African American museums is to document, preserve, and disseminate Black history.¹¹ However, this is not their sole purpose for existing. Most if not all Black cultural institutions were conceived due to a lack of representation and value for Black culture and artistry within the museum field and greater society.

⁸ Susan E. Cahan, “Electronic Refractions II at the Studio Museum in Harlem,” in *Mounting Frustration: the Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (DUKE University Press, 2018).

⁹ Jeff Hayward and Christine Larouche, “The Emergence of the Field of African American Museums,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (January 2018): pp. 163-172

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Grobman, Laurie. “‘I’m on a Stage’: Rhetorical History, Performance, and the Development of the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum.” *College Composition and Communication* 65, no. 2 (2013): 299-323

A History of Systematic Oppression

Black cultural institutions have been a silenced aspect of Black history. Compared to mainstream museums, Black institutions are far less frequent and much less endowed than their mainstream counterparts. The reason being for this injustice is the struggle for equality and civil rights as persons of African descent in the colonial culture of Western society. Black and African American material culture has been devalued in the canon of 'fine art' since the conception of the colonial institution. This oppression is documented by many community members working to bring African American cultural institutions to their communities during the Black Museum Movement of the 1960s. The book by Ian Rocksborough-Smith, *Black Public History in Chicago: Civil Rights Activism from World War II into the Cold War*, details the struggles of Black artists, activists, educators, and organizations in Chicago using their public history to employ the fight for racial equality. Activists such as Margaret and Charles Burroughs did so by founding the DuSable Museum of African American History.¹² Mary Ellen Lennon explains the struggle against the colonial injustices of modern museums in her article, *A Question of Relevancy*, "in the late 1960s and early 1970s, African American visual artists led and attack on the de facto segregation of the art world in all its institutionalized forms."¹³ The lack of representation of Black artists and culture in mainstream institutions, "reflected the common belief held by mainstream art world critics

¹² ROCKSBOROUGH-SMITH, IAN. *Black Public History in Chicago: Civil Rights Activism from World War II into the Cold War*. Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018

¹³ Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

and curators that art by African Americans means art that is inferior in quality.”¹⁴ However, Black artists did not waver in their advocacy they led the struggle for representation and equality in the arts and faced injustices such as, “the omission of historical and contemporary African American artists from the pages of art survey texts, racially biased art criticism, the absence of art education in urban ghettos, the dearth of teaching positions, scholarships, and grants for younger artists, and most urgently, the absence of work by black artists on gallery walls throughout the country.”¹⁵

Unified Cultural Communities as Activism

Over the last decade the Black community has welcomed large cultural sites such as the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture and smaller house museums such as Philadelphia’s Colored Girls Museum into the family tree of Black art institutions. These museums were created for and by Black professionals to share narratives of the Black community via our own voice, one that has long been stifled. The unified voice of historic founding Black cultural institutions amplified the combined activism of the Black arts movement, civil rights movement, and Black museum movement and is responsible for the network of Black museums and cultural sites in modern-day society.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Mary Ellen Lennon, “A Question of Relevancy: New York Museums and the Black Arts Movement, 1968–1971,” *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, 2019, pp. 92-116, <https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813541075-006>.

Creating Black cultural spaces is a form of activism against colonial ideologies that characterize non-Western peoples and practices as less than or the 'other.' By introducing the histories of Black people as valid and worthy of acknowledgement on a global scale we can form more alliances and less stigma around Black material culture.

The Black arts community has been working for decades to develop institutional discourse that expresses the violent experiences of those working in the field and frameworks for battling injustice. As a result, we have seen more institutions positioning themselves on a praxis of social justice and storytelling. According to Alain Locke, "this notion of exploring the arts as an avenue for social change was part of the New Negro movement."¹⁶ The New Negro movement, coined during the Harlem Renaissance, advocated for a revived philosophy of Black pride, cultural production financial independence, and pro-Black politics in response to the constraints of Jim Crow and segregation. This network of Black cultural institutions born out of the African American museum movement has expanded large enough to create representative bodies such as the Association of African American Museums (1978), "a non-profit member organization established to support African and African American focused museums nationally and internationally, as well as the professionals who protect, preserve and interpret African and African American art, history and culture."¹⁷ In the modern day, calls for improved practice in the museum field are a result

¹⁶ Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

¹⁷ AAAM History. (n.d.). Retrieved November 11, 2020, from <https://blackmuseums.org/history-2/>

of the demands of communal activism amongst marginalized identities in the museum. Due to museums and cultural institutions being living mechanisms of colonialism we cannot fully eradicate the colonial functions they were designed to fulfill. Museum spaces restrict Black and Brown humanity through exploitation and erasure, a metaphorical death of Black history and cultural production that seals our literal bodies of work and physical bodies in the colonial tombs, basements, and archives of mainstream museums. Acknowledging the problematic aspects of the museum as an institution has created a language for discourse that advocates for reform.

Opposition to Black Institutions

Mainstream museums are usually well-endowed institutions with sizeable collections interpreted through conventional western exhibiting practices that perpetuate a very limited, colonial narrative to the public. Mainstream institutions are typically backed by wealthy donors and unethical outdated leadership that allow them to operate with a sense of entitlement and violence against Black artists and material culture. Mainstream institutions are often predominately white and not staffed with diverse administration that can inform the curatorial or programming initiatives to meet the needs of a underserved public. These museums uphold legacies of white supremacy in their collecting and archival practices that are ever apparent in the way material culture of ethnic peoples are portrayed. Western society's systemic oppression of these communities is rooted in a power dynamic designed to subvert Black genius. The unjust exclusion of Black art in mainstream museums

can be seen in the collecting practices of predominantly white institutions. According to a recent 2018 study by Art Net, concluded that, “over the past decade, purchases and gifts of work by African American artists accounted for a mere 2.4 percent of all acquisitions by the 30 museums we surveyed. Even starker is the fact that at four of these museums, this work accounted for less than one percent of all acquisitions.”¹⁸ In contrast, Black artists have made numerous contributions to the modern and contemporary visual arts with virtually no credit given to their innovations. In Dr. Kelli Jones article *Ancient to the Future*, Dr. Lowry Stokes Sims explains:

“the greatest challenge to recognize the contributions of black people to modernity would, ironically, be encountered withing the contemporary art circles. Despite the facts that modernists genres such as abstraction were grounded in African art and given that black dance and music had ushered in a modern source and sense of the body, African American artists and artists of African descent were positioned as followers and imitators of white artists recognized as the pioneers of modernism. For the artistic mainstream, modernity in culture and art was co-existent with social, economic, and political sovereignty and power. The colonial positionings of the “civilized” and the “primitive” – a mirror of the “west’s” relationship with the rest of the world that had been in the formation since the era of the Encounter and Exploration – established the vocabulary for a discourse that maintained, even supported, the

¹⁸ Julia Halperin, “African American Artists Are More Visible Than Ever. So Why Are Museums Giving Them Short Shrift?,” artnet News, September 18, 2019

power relationships of colonialism in the art world: the “center” versus the “periphery,” intellectual” versus “emotional,” “objective” versus “subjective,” “technological” versus “manual,” “conscious” versus “unconscious,” and “individual” versus “communal.”¹⁹

Dr. Sims explanation of how the western canon refuses to acknowledge the influence of Black culture to the foundations of art history echoes the climate of contemporary arts culture. This philosophy of discrediting the influence of Black culture positions Black art and artists as the inferior to sustain an unequal power dynamic and support the legacies of colonialism. Dr. Sims sentiment illuminates the reasoning behind the exclusion of Black art in mainstream museum’s collections today and their lack of exhibitions and programming that cater to a diverse art historical narrative or audience.

Lola Olufemi, writer of *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power* explains, “art is threatening because when produced under the right conditions, it cannot be controlled. But gatekeepers and cultural institutions have written women, especially black women, outside of the history of artistic creation and freedom.”²⁰ Black creatives have always been denied of their ability and right to produce art of any value especially in conventional institutions, “during the first centuries of black experience in America, partly to support a social system grounded on the denial of the humanity of black people, whites generally refused to admit

¹⁹ Kellie Jones, “Ancient to the Future,” June 26, 2020

²⁰ Lola Olufemi, “Art for Art’s Sake,” *Feminism, Interrupted*, 2020, pp. 82-94

that blacks could make art at all.”²¹ These exclusionary views have endured over the years for those opposing the creation of Black centered cultural institutions. Jane O'Brien from BBC news explains, “the idea for the museum (Smithsonian African American Museum of History & Culture) was first suggested almost a hundred years ago but was thwarted by lawmakers who maintained that black people had contributed nothing to the US.”²² Despite the painful and torturous physical sacrifices of the Black bodies that built the nation alongside other slaves and immigrants, Black culture was not only unrecognized but devalued in the museum field. No stranger to the push back of white leadership, Black artists continued to question the need for a Black cultural institution, “it was raised again during the 1960s civil rights era, but the federally funded Smithsonian preferred instead to incorporate black history within its existing museums.”²³

However, the narrative of the Black community has been poorly exhibited in museums ever since Black material culture was allowed in these institutions as a result of the activism that advocated for the human and civil rights of people of color. Antwaun Sargent of Artsy explains, “this move towards self-reliance and a self-contained ecosystem is rooted in the fervor of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960s and '70s, when long-marginalized black artists and curators created their own institutions and galleries, such as

²¹ Eugene W. Metcalf, “Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 18, no. 4 (1983): pp. 271-289

²² Jane O'Brien, “Should African-American History Have Its Own Museum?,” BBC News (BBC, June 23, 2013)

²³ Ibid.

the Studio Museum in Harlem.”²⁴ This shift in the Black communities focus to a establishing a Black museum was the beginning of the Black Museum Movement of the 1960s.

Today, mainstream museums are still controlling the accessibility and interpretation of African American and African art. For example, the hiring of Dr. Kristen Windmuller-Luna as the curator of the Brooklyn Museum’s African art collection. African American art historian Steve Nelson explains, “no one is debating Windmuller-Luna’s qualifications (her degrees from Yale and Princeton, and previous museum appointments). They are registering frustration that white people are continually made to be gatekeepers of art from the African diaspora.”²⁵ The Brooklyn Museum defended their hiring practices and reassured many frustrated professionals that her expertise was credible. Steven Nelson, who is the Director of the UCLA African Studies Center reflects that the appointment of white women as curators is a frequent happening because the field does, “A very poor job of recruiting a diverse pool.”²⁶ Nelson goes on to say that African art history as a discipline is mostly white and female.²⁷ Dr. Maria Berns, director of the UCLA Fowler Museum stated that the Brooklyn Museum Curator of African Art job posting was a part-time role and, “it goes without saying that for many this kind of employment is not practical.”²⁸ This can be attributed to many

²⁴ Antwaun Sargent, “How Black Artists, Dealers, and Collectors Are Boosting the Careers of Their Younger Peers,” December 14, 2017

²⁵ Karen Grigsby Bates, “Not Enough Color In American Art Museums,” NPR (NPR, April 13, 2018)

²⁶ Maya Salam, “Brooklyn Museum Defends Its Hiring of a White Curator of African Art,” April 7, 2018

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

gatekeeping phenomena in the field that filter out students and professionals based on their ability to thrive in scholarly settings and survive the financial burden of formal training such as graduate school, residencies, and unpaid internships. This is further complicated by problematic job postings that request extensive academic and experiential backgrounds or skills which creates a very limited pool of potential candidates. The lack of support for young Black professionals in higher education programs in the museum field leads to many employment and academic opportunities going to their white counterparts. All of these tactics reduce the chances of young Black creatives from occupying upper-level roles over their own culture in mainstream museums.

A Space to Value Black Culture

Many Black and African American communities desired cultural spaces specifically by and for their respective communities. This desire for representation was expressed in the social and political climate of the country in the 1960s. Artists and creatives alike expressed their disdain for American museum culture and the need for Black museums. Poet June Jordan states:

“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 what 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? This is one America, and after black cities have been

manipulated and after something like a nigger room has been reserved in the basement of the Metropolitan Museum for us, the people who have the power and the people who count the pennies and the people who hold the keys better start thinking it all over again.”²⁹

This powerful exclamation, made at the 1969 MUSE conference in front of a community of museum professionals, depicts the pain and hardship that African Americans faced in the oppressive culture of mainstream museums. Artists wanted to establish Black cultural spaces not just to create a safe haven for the Black community, but to define what Black art is to the public. *Mainstream, Blackstream and the Black Art Movement* by Elsa Honig Fine states, “unless the Black Artist establishes a “Black aesthetic” he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live.”³⁰ Fine explains why the Black aesthetic must be established saying, “the Black community is not a monolithic enclave that responds to one charismatic leader or one organizational philosophy, and the Black art community does not respond to a single aesthetic theory. The range of art by Black Americans extends from the crude, storefront exhibitions in Harlem to the elegance of the expatriate living in Paris.”³¹

²⁹ Andrea A. Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020)

³⁰ Elsa Honig Fine, “Mainstream, Blackstream and the Black Art Movement,” *Art Journal*/30, no. 4 (1971): pp. 374-375

³¹ Ibid.

Many mainstream institutions leadership are acknowledging their oppressive histories against Black artists. In contradiction with MoMA's collection policies since its inception, MoMA director Glenn Lowry states, "if you deal with contemporary art, it is self-evident that many of the most interesting artists are African American, and you realize that there were always important African American artists, even if they were not as visible to museums as they should have been. So, then you need to address that as well."³² This is an omission of guilt upon the institution and its leadership in the unfair treatment of Black artists and artwork. Glenn Lowry admits that the most interesting artists are African American despite the museums collecting practices, making obvious the systemic exclusion of Black work from mainstream museums. By implementing a space to consume Black culture in the proper cultural context we can educate the public on the diversity of the Black experience in a more sensitive, responsible, and respectful manner. Many Black artists feel a liberation of their practice when working and exhibiting in Black centered spaces. Brooklyn artist Derrick Adams says, "as a black artist who also curates, what I find with black spaces is that they give artists of color a certain level of freedom to explore the material...by being in a black space as a black artist you don't feel like you have to be representative of a larger group of people because the space provides the context."³³

³² Julia Halperin, "African American Artists Are More Visible Than Ever. So Why Are Museums Giving Them Short Shift?," *artnet News*, September 18, 2019

³³ Antwaun Sargent, "How Black Artists, Dealers, and Collectors Are Boosting the Careers of Their Younger Peers," December 14, 2017

Purpose of Black Museums

Afro-centric museums are a key component to the social and cultural infrastructure of the Black community's history and their connection to global culture. According to *I'm on a Stage: Rhetorical History, Performance and the Development of the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum* by Laurie Grobman, there are as many as 140 museums in the United States dedicated to African American history, life, culture, and art.³⁴ Many Black museums came out of this struggle for representation and equality and during civil rights movement of the 1960s and serve as a resource to African American communities by improving the lives of visitors. Statistics from the article, *The Emergence of the Field of African American Museums*, states more than ¼ of Black museums are involved in the development of Black communities.³⁵ Author of *From Storefront to Monument*, Dr. Andrea Burns explains how Black cultural spaces uplift the Black community:

“museums have this role in culture, whether European culture, global culture, whatever. So, they have traditionally been seen as these elite repositories of whether it's art or artifacts or stories, if you have something that's collected in a museum, it must be worthy and worthwhile, it must be important. And so, what African American

³⁴ Grobman, Laurie. "'I'm on a Stage': Rhetorical History, Performance, and the Development of the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum." *College Composition and Communication* 65, no. 2 (2013): 299-323

³⁵ Jeff Hayward and Christine Larouche, "The Emergence of the Field of African American Museums," *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (January 2018): pp. 163-172

museums have done and continue to do is provide a space for those stories that they actually physically be spaces, buildings that demand recognition.” Dr. Burns goes on to say “by physically taking up space and demanding recognition and showing the community that their work and their histories and their voices are valuable, that in turns empowers that community. To have a space where folks can go to see their histories presented to see their artifacts presented. And to be a welcoming space.”³⁶

Constructing and fostering pro-Black museums and collectives allows for a homecoming experience for those of the African diaspora to connect, learn, and conserve our collective identity. These pioneer institutions are necessary spaces of refuge, rest, and enlightenment for Black bodies where Black creatives and visitors can sew the fruit of their physical, intellectual, and spiritual labor and preserve traditions for generations to come.

³⁶ Interview with Dr. Andrea Burns

CASE STUDY: THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM



CHAPTER 1: ESTABLISHING A BLACK MUSEUM

Case Study: The Studio Museum in Harlem

Chapter 1: Establishing a Black Museum



The Studio Museum in Harlem on Opening Night (1968)

The Studio Museum in Harlem was conceived in New York, 1965 by a collective of interracial artists, creatives, and activists that sought to increase racial equity through the integration of Black artistry in a mainstream museum space. This approach to an interracial museum was an experimental and pioneer effort in unifying and diversifying the museum field during the civil rights era, a period characterized

by extreme racial injustice, violence, and segregation. The museum's founding was advocating for a more culturally expansive art institution, "as a result of such activism, the Studio Museum...among others, were founded, all round 1968. These organizations distinguished themselves as museums to showcase fine art and were different from those established earlier in the 1960s dedicated to broader representations of history and culture."³⁷ This dedication to showcasing fine art came in the form of Black art and artists practicing and exhibiting and practicing in the Harlem community. Dr. Brittany Webb, Curator of the John Rhoden collection at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts explains:

³⁷ Kellie Jones, "Ancient to the Future," June 26, 2020

“I think black institutions are very good at having to articulate who they imagine they're in community with, because it's usually in the history of their founding... black cultural institutions generally started in response to being left out of white institutions, that on their face, said that they were telling a kind of grand mainstream narrative. And what they were actually doing, was telling a narrative that was centered overwhelmingly on white straight men generally having means.”³⁸

Like many Black cultural institutions, they reveal an underlying flaw in mainstream museums, which is a lack diversity and audience awareness. This is made clear by the self-proclaimed general audience that exhibitions and programming in mainstream museums serve that turns out to be not-so-general at all but instead majority white, male, and privileged.

The Studio Museum in Harlem recognized the need for a Black voice in the mainstream museum. Founding director, Charles Inniss believed the Studio Museum in Harlem would, “be a place for good black artists to exhibit, a place where black people would be able to see each other’s work, but more than that we want to be a ground where the Black and white art worlds can really meet.”³⁹ In 1968 the Studio Museum in Harlem opened its doors to the public. Prior to the Studio Museum in Harlem founding the idea of a culturally specific museum was tolerated by white community leaders. However once the museum was formally opened and began engaging with the Harlem community many white sponsors

³⁸ Interview with Dr. Brittany Webb

³⁹ Susan E. Cahan, “Electronic Refractions II at the Studio Museum in Harlem,” in *Mounting Frustration: the Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (DUKE University Press, 2018).

abandoned the institution after hidden political and racial agendas were revealed. The initial dream of interracial integration was short lived by the late 1960s when the movement for Black Museums became synonymous with the movement for Black Power. This investment in dismantling white supremacy in the museum field and ultimately art history further positioned the institution into a space dedicated solely to exhibiting Black artists and culture. Today, the Studio Museum in Harlem continues to tell the story of the Black community by facilitating and uplifting righteous multigenerational Black artistry and programming for the Black public. The Studio Museum in Harlem is considered an elite Black museum in the high art scene of New York and the global arts community because of their lifelong mission to cater to Black excellence in the field by engaging with the history and network of the Harlem community.



The Studio Museum in Harlem (1993)

Across the mainstream museum field leadership has historically been predominantly white, male, and neglectful. However, in the network of Black cultural institutions, responsible Black leadership was the backbone of any successful Black cultural institution. In 1990 Ruffins presented a paper on African American preservation efforts entitled,

Mythos, Memory, and History at a conference at the International Center of the Smithsonian Institution. In the essay Ruffins explains how inconsistent practices of preservation of Black history and culture are rampant throughout the field due to institutional structures that reveal the lack of care for the documentation and interpretation of Black culture in mainstream museum governance.⁴⁰ This reaffirmed the lack of ethical leadership in mainstream museums as well as a disregard for Black communities, material culture and artists, an issue the Harlem community conveyed to the Studio Museum in Harlem's leadership in their first years. The former director, Ed Spriggs stated, "Harlemites considered Harlem to be under attack by white institutions."⁴¹ In a historic arts city such as Harlem that is under the constant assault of gentrification, the community feared the interracial work of the museum was ingenuine and a performative gesture to advance the white agenda by exploiting the participation of the Black community. According to Ruffins, "after 1964, the founders of Black museums tended to be younger people whose political rhetoric and cultural goals were informed by the demonstrations, sit-ins, and freedom schools of the Southern civil rights movement. These younger people... tended to share the older founders' sense of the absolute importance of preserving African American life, history, and culture."⁴² Edwards Spriggs, a young poet, filmmaker, and painter also shared the traditional conviction

⁴⁰ Finley, M. I. "Myth, Memory, and History." *History and Theory* 4, no. 3 (1965): 281-302. Accessed November 18, 2020. doi:10.2307/2504346.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.



Edward S. Spriggs, Second Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem (1969)

for preserving Black culture. Once Spriggs was in leadership succeeding Charles Inniss, his administration transitioned the space from one of interracial relations to one that establishes and amplifies Black artists and aesthetic.

The leadership of the Studio Museum in Harlem remains a key element in the cultural institution's achievement in the history of Black museums. They have transcended their founding mission of integration to embody an institution for and by the Black community. The unique narrative of the Harlem community has informed the museums leadership and cultural identity, cultivated by women like Kinshasha Holman Conwill, Mary Schmidt Campbell and Lowery Stokes Sims. Today, Thelma Golden is the sitting Director & Chief Curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem where she interned during her undergraduate career at Smith College. Prior to being Director, Mrs. Golden served as Curator in 1987 and Deputy Director of Exhibitions in 2000. The result of the work of young activist leaders in the past like



Thelma Golden, Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem

Edward Spriggs and contemporary Black female leadership like Thelma Golden at the Studio Museum in Harlem has, “built on and advanced a black exhibitionary complex, cast the Museum as an engine of art history and moved this cultural specific institution into the next century.”⁴³

⁴³ Kellie Jones, “Ancient to the Future,” June 26, 2020

CHAPTER 2: BLACK EXHIBITIONS & COLLECTIONS

Chapter 2: Black Exhibitions & Collections

Aside from the difference in the communities served by mainstream museums and Black museums are the exhibition, collection and interpretive practices that take place in either institution. In fact, these practices of methodically acquiring, naming, categorizing, storing and exhibiting diverse material culture are the main problematic and oppressive acts of violence that mainstream museums and cultural spaces have perpetrated throughout the history of the field. In her book, *Mounting Frustrations*, Susan Cahan explains:

“the institutions that make up the art establishment determine what constitutes high art through a process of selective acquisition and display. Until the late twentieth century, African American were virtually absent from this circuit as cultural producers and cultural consumers. Prior to 1967 one could count fewer than a dozen museum exhibitions that had featured the work of African American artists, with the exception of museums at historically black colleges and universities.”⁴⁴

These practices are built on a legacy of white supremacy and have been used to enforce systematic racism against Black audiences. The differences in collection and interpretation practices makes evident the ways in which Black cultural spaces better serve Black art, artists, and audiences in exhibiting and educating the public on the Black experience and culture. The Studio Museum in Harlem houses a permanent collection of “more than 700 artists, spans 200 years of history and includes over 2,500 works of art, including paintings,

⁴⁴ Susan E. Cahan, “Electronic Refractions II at the Studio Museum in Harlem,” in *Mounting Frustration: the Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (DUKE University Press, 2018)

drawings, sculptures, watercolors, photographs, videos and mixed-media installations. The collection is a record of the growth of the institution and its activities, including its foundational *Artist-in-Residence* program.”⁴⁵ Dr. Vedet Coleman-Robinson, the Executive Director of Association of African American Museums explains the difference in collection practices from mainstream institutions saying, “the cool thing about our museums, African art related or just our history is all of our museums are created and established in the communities in which they serve. So, we don't really have people misappropriating. Or we don't have the problem of people saying that I want my collection back, because they weren't stolen, they were things that were given to the museum from the community, or things that we're given to the museum directors as gifts. So it wasn't, we want our, artifacts back or, you know, be sure you give those back to such and such tribe. We don't really have that, because it came from a place of love and giving in the first place to make sure that people saw themselves in those museums.”⁴⁶ Museum professional and cultural activist LaTanya Autry frames Black cultural institutions collections and exhibition practices at the corner of self-care and memorialization. Autry explains, “black people have to love themselves and care for themselves and part of that is in terms of public memory through objects, through records. They [Black cultural institutions] do things like hire other black people train the next leaders in the field, take care of objects also. Value objects that are not

⁴⁵ “Collection,” Studio Museum (The Studio Museum in Harlem, September 15, 2020)

⁴⁶ Interview with Dr. Vedet Coleman Robinson

necessarily in white institutions might not even think is an important valuable kind of record.”⁴⁷

The Studio Museum in Harlem has been a leader in Black exhibitions since their founding, influencing institutions throughout New York and across the country. It was originally conceived as a space to create opportunities for both artists to make and exhibit new works and the general public to become involved in contemporary art.”⁴⁸ With a collection dating back 30+ years the Studio Museum in Harlem, “began to accept works from generous artists and donors. Today the collection numbers over 1600 objects and continues to grow in exciting directions from gifts and acquisitions.”⁴⁹ The leaders of the Studio Museum in Harlem’s exhibitions responded to the desire for Black culture to be understood, honored, and memorialized. According to Conny Choi, Associate Curator of Permanent Collections, “in its first year, the Museum exhibited shows that reflected on the local community, the national political moment, and an African diasporic artistic presence, and spoke against dominant art-historical narratives.”⁵⁰ The Studio Museum in Harlem’s

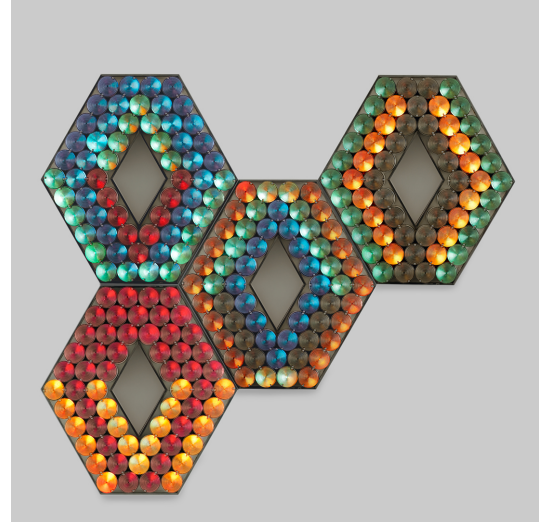
⁴⁷ Interview with LaTanya Autry

⁴⁸ “A Collection Is Born,” The Studio Museum in Harlem, August 11, 2020

⁴⁹ “Collection in Context,” Studio Museum (The Studio Museum in Harlem, December 1, 2020)

⁵⁰ “A Collection Is Born,” The Studio Museum in Harlem, August 11, 2020

exhibitions seek to, “serve as a bridge between artists of African descent and a broad and diverse public.”⁵¹ This is demonstrated in their innovative exhibitions that, “expand the personal, public, and academic understanding of modern and contemporary art by artists of African descent.”⁵² The first solo exhibition in 1968, *Electronic Refractions II* featured artist



Moussakoo, Tom Lloyd (1968) From the collection of: The Studio Museum in Harlem

Tom Lloyd’s electronic sculptures that lit up the museum on its opening night. Tom Lloyd’s



Tom Lloyd Solo Exhibition: Electronic Refractions II (1968)

exhibition challenged what Black art looked like to not only the white public but the Black community as well. This kicked off a long history of diverse exhibitions that reflected the multiplicity of perspectives on what Black art is. Some of these exhibitions included, “*Invisible Americans: Black Artists of the 30s* (1968), organized in response to a Whitney Museum of American Art survey that omitted works by Black artists; *Afro-Haitian*

⁵¹ “Fact Sheet,” The Studio Museum in Harlem, September 10, 2020

⁵² Ibid.

Images and Sounds Today (1969), which included works by thirty artists as well as Haitian music, documentary slides, and reconstructions of two vodou altars; *A Photographic Essay on the Black Panthers* (1969), organized by the de Young Museum with photographs by Ruth-Marion Baruch and Pirkle Jones; *X to the Fourth Power* (1969), featuring work by Melvin Edwards, Gilliam, Steven Kelsey, and Williams; and *Harlem Artists 69* (1969), an exhibition that celebrated the work of artists living in the community.”⁵³

The 2005 exhibition *Collection in Context: Selections from the Permanent Collection*, is an example of “the museum’s long standing commitment to the presentation of diverse works by Black artists at different points in their careers.”⁵⁴ The exhibition aimed to “highlight the key holdings and to expand the conversation around African-American art and artists of African descent.”⁵⁵ This exhibition featured



Black Refractions: Highlights from the Studio Museum in Harlem at the Museum of the African Diaspora, Installation View (2019)

work from prominent Black artists such as Alma Thomas, Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence, and Julie Mehretu. Today, popular exhibitions such as *Black Refractions*, a traveling exhibition of

⁵³ “A Collection Is Born,” The Studio Museum in Harlem, August 11, 2020

⁵⁴ “Collection in Context,” Studio Museum (The Studio Museum in Harlem, December 1, 2020)

⁵⁵ Ibid.



Black Refractions: Highlights from the Studio Museum in Harlem at the Museum of the African Diaspora, Installation View (2019)

artworks from 1920's to the present day "offer visitors different perspectives on Blackness and how it has been, and could be, framed within an institution and beyond the museum setting. The open framework of the show allows for

new connections to emerge continuously as the exhibition travels to new locations and is contextualized by new audiences."⁵⁶ Whitney Curatorial Assistant Mia Matthias and Associate Curator of exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Conny Choi explain the importance of this culmination of the museum's collection saying, "the exhibition reveals the strength and depth of the Studio Museum's collection, which grew out of the needs of the immediate community during a tumultuous artistic and political moment in U.S. history. As the exhibition continues its journey, it is important to reflect on the moments that led to the founding of the Museum, the climate in which it is now being presented, and how these lessons can be channeled as we look toward the next fifty years and beyond."⁵⁷ The Studio Museum in Harlem reaffirms the need to acknowledge their founding in the artistic activism of the civil rights era. Providing a space to exhibit innovative Black artistry and Black

⁵⁶ "Black Refractions," Studio Museum (The Studio Museum in Harlem, December 1, 2020)

⁵⁷ Ibid.

creativity, Black institutions such as the Studio Museum in Harlem, are necessary for the valid treatment of Black material culture and artists that builds the historical canon in a non-exploitive manner.

CHAPTER 3: BLACK PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

Chapter 3: Black Public Programming

Public programming in mainstream museums is often times not accessible or beneficial in the long-term for visitors or community members. Since 1968, “the Studio Museum in Harlem has presented a wide range of educational resources and public programs that bring the Museum's mission and exhibitions to life with offerings that encourage public engagement and access to art and artists of African descent.”⁵⁸ In the initial years of the Studio Museum in Harlem the museum served Harlem youth through a federally funded program called HARYOU that provided job training and resources to Harlem residents. HARYOU-ACT was a program designed to afford Harlem students opportunities in the arts and culture sector. The HARYOU-ACT program, “was open by application to teenagers who lived in Harlem, candidates had to demonstrate both an aptitude and an interest in art.”⁵⁹

Their longest standing public program, the Artist in Residency program is one of the most highly regarded residencies in the field for Black artists. According to Sotheby's, “the Artist-in-Residence program was one of the Museum's founding initiatives and gives the Museum the “Studio” in its name. The program has supported more than one hundred emerging artists of African or Latino descent, many of whom who have gone on to establish highly regarded careers.”⁶⁰ According to the Studio Museum in Harlem, “alumni of the

⁵⁸ “Learn & Engage,” Studio Museum (The Studio Museum in Harlem, July 9, 2020)

⁵⁹ Susan E. Cahan, “Electronic Refractions II at the Studio Museum in Harlem,” in *Mounting Frustration: the Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (DUKE University Press, 2018)

⁶⁰ Studio Museum in Harlem, “The Studio Museum in Harlem: Championing Artists of African Descent for 50 Years,” Sothebys.com (Sotheby's, July 16, 2018)

program, who now number nearly 150, include some of today's most significant and innovative artists, such as Njideka Akunyili Crosby, David Hammons, Titus Kaphar, Simone Leigh, Kerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, Wangechi Mutu, Mickalene Thomas, and Kehinde Wiley. These artists have been featured around the nation and the world in solo and group exhibitions, their work entered in important museum collections, and have received prestigious fellowships and awards.” The Artists in Residency program nurtures and mentors Black artists by connecting these artists with resources and opportunities as well as a platform that establishes their careers.”⁶¹ Artists in residence work are typically featured in



The Studio Museum in Harlem Artists in Residence (2019)

the Studio Museum in Harlem's exhibitions and often go on to live in the permanent collection. The Artist in Residency training is unlike many mainstream institutions and fosters a safe and constructive environment where Black artists can practice and

grow their careers while pushing the boundaries of Black artistry in the field. LaTanya Autry explains the invaluable training experience that Black cultural institutions provide Black museum professionals in contrast to mainstream institutions:

⁶¹ “About the Artist-in-Residence Program,” Studio Museum (The Studio Museum in Harlem, September 3, 2020)

“these black institutions are what is holding on to that memory and celebrating us. I went to Hampton University Museum a couple of years ago in 2018. It was through the African American Association of Museums. They were holding their conference in Hampton that year. It was just so wonderful to see the art and to really think about the history and to think about the number of people who have kind of come through how many black and brown students who have learned from them and got important training to be black centered. Instead of always thinking of yourself as just in the margins all the time, because being trained for white institutions [mainstream museums] is always to be marginalized, even when you're not trying to do it individually, but that's the training you're getting. Then working in white spaces, is also being pushed to the margins. So, these are places that give black people and brown folks an opportunity to really feel at home.”⁶²

Dr. Brittany Webb, Curator of the John Rhoden Collection and Twentieth Century Art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts expresses a similarly enriching experience working in a Black cultural institution:

“one of the things that I have told people that I appreciate about having worked for a black institution is, you know, as a black woman working in a building full of other black women, I have gotten the opportunity to see a lot of different kinds of professional advocacy that I don't think I have seen experienced in other kinds of institutions. And

⁶² Interview with LaTanya Autry

by that, I mean, there's like a kind of mentoring and modeling that can happen, it doesn't always happen with everybody. But it can happen that sort of gives me a sense of what it might look like to advocate for other colleagues at different institutions, whether that's interns, or peers, there's a sense of working in a place where you can kind of call out racism in the field, because everyone sees it.”⁶³

Black culturally specific museums offer not only a welcoming environment for young Black professionals to hone their training but access to Black mentorship that helps sustain emerging creatives in the field. This staff engagement and accountability is not typical of Black professionals practicing in mainstream museums where they are often pushed to the margins of the field.

Over the years the Studio Museum in Harlem has expanded its public programming to artists conversations, workshops, film screenings, and educational courses that “showcase the relevance and historical impact of art made by artists of African descent.”⁶⁴ As public programming becomes more challenging to facilitate in person, the Studio Museum in Harlem is transitioning their programming to online formats that more accessible for a remote audience. Legacy Russell, Associate Curator of Exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem and author of *Glitch Feminism*, explains, “the presence of our work, especially now, and given the pandemic has been largely digital, and thinking as well about ways where we can kind of

⁶³ Interview with Dr. Brittany Webb

⁶⁴ “Adults,” The Studio Museum in Harlem, July 14, 2020

program and differently running programs that have used, Zoom and YouTube, but as well, we have an ongoing Instagram Live series where we bring artists together to kind of be in conversation with myself, and we talk about, various strands of their practice, but also to kind of ask them in a more informal setting to kind of speak to their work.”⁶⁵ These digital efforts allow the broader public to engage with Black art and artists in a more intimate and multimodal way that bridges the divide between Black material culture and the general public.

The Studio Museum in Harlem is laying the foundations of impactful and effective public programming for future Black cultural institutions as well as the museum field. Collaborating with other cultural institutions is one of the many ways that the Studio Museum in Harlem has expanded their public programming and developed extensive relationships with neighboring cultural institutions. Legacy Russell talks about the Studio Museums in Harlem’s partnerships and their role in cultivating Black space :

“Yes, the museum is a long, amazing history of partnering with different cultural organizations, the Schomburg being one of them, which is really incredible, the Schomburg has had some amazing programs during this time., I will say that part of the interesting work to obtain the museums existing partnerships, as they have stood with our exhibition program, or these last couple years is that we partner with MoMA, MoMA ps1, and what that has done, I think, is allowed for different type of approach and thinking through what it means to create and cultivate black space. And

⁶⁵ Interview with Legacy Russell

to have that be something that can be possible in lots of different places. And as well, recognizing that the work of our mission, is one that does not begin and end in a culturally specific space, right, but it was one that should exist everywhere”⁶⁶

These relationships with neighboring cultural institutions such as the Schomburg and MoMA have allowed the Studio Museum in Harlem to cultivate a more assorted repertoire of exhibitions and programming that speaks to the needs and desires of a broad and diverse Black public. This approach also allows for a sort of experimentation amongst organizations that involves a Black perspective in the creation of public spaces and programming, a perspective often overlooked in mainstream museum practice.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4: BLACK SPACE IN THE FUTURE

Chapter 4: Black Space in the Future

One of the more noticeable differences in mainstream museums compared to Black cultural institutions is often the site or space they exist within. Mainstream museums' colonial design of mountains of steps, menacing facades, and sprawling halls that catalogue only a glimpse of civilization with an even more constricted narrative to tell are just some of the ways these institutions reenforce exclusionary ideologies externally and internally. These buildings are designed to make one feel small and magnify the wonder of humanity and nature have left many overlooked or underserved visitors hesitant to enter and often



Rendering of the New Studio Museum in Harlem Building

oppressed upon their exit. The Studio Museum in Harlem is combatting these barriers to community engagement through thoughtful design of a new museum

building that will serve as

“a permanent site to recount the history of the African diaspora...an excellent place to narrate black selfhood, whether civic, national, or international.”⁶⁷ David Adjaye, architect of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture and the

⁶⁷ Kellie Jones, “Ancient to the Future,” June 26, 2020

forthcoming Studio Museum building states, “this project is about pushing the museum typology to a new place and thinking about the display and reception of art in innovative ways.”⁶⁸ Adjaye has gone on to say recently, “such public buildings should be welcoming, addressing communities in a fashion that bespeaks institutional availability. These locales should offer, through the environments they create a sense of democratic access reminding one of their openness to the “ritual of people’s lives.”⁶⁹ Located in New York city, the Studio Museum in Harlem’s location in a historic arts scene allows work surrounding BIPOC & LGBTQ+ contemporary issues and history easier to do because of the diverse community they serve and operate within. David Adjaye welcomes these diverse identities into the Studio Museum in Harlem with the transparent and inviting structure of the new building that allows visitors to visually explore the museums offerings through an entirely glass structure on the street level. This attentive design and approach to attracting visitors will allow the museum to engage deeper with the Harlem community.

The same way that the Studio Museum in Harlem has served as an access point for Black thought, culture, and space, technology is a means to create space that don’t exist in the physical world. It is only natural for the marginalized to find themselves capable of fostering a safe space to socialize through the internet. The digital realm has allowed a site of exploration and respite for Black bodies to dance, laugh, cry, and live out loud. A site to

⁶⁸ “Studio Museum in Harlem Project Description,” architectmagazine.com (Adjaye Associates, July 6, 2015)

⁶⁹ Kellie Jones, “Ancient to the Future,” June 26, 2020

exhibit Black humanity on their own terms and conditions. Legacy Russell talks about the concept of building digital space alongside physical space with the creation of a new museum building. Russell states,

“it is a meaningful opportunity worth thinking through what the future of our new building can be, to consider deeply about, you know, the ways of running a digital program are kind of digital engagement and strategy alongside of expanding our physical space, those things really need to go hand in hand.”⁷⁰

In the wake of a pandemic that has rendered a more digital world as our future, Black museums and cultural institutions are engaging with their audiences virtually in what can often times feel like a more accessible, safe and viable space to exhibit and engage Blackness, the internet. Legacy Russell elaborates:

“oftentimes people enter into museum spaces for the first time on the internet. And I think that that is something that is very specific to this moment that we're in. But often I do think across different generations, these are kind of new moments to kind of continue to navigate some of those questions of access and visibility, and to do so with care and responsibility to one's audiences and recognition of different types of publics.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ Interview with Legacy Russell

⁷¹ Ibid.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic museums are transitioning their collections and programming to internet where they can be accessed from the safety of visitors' homes. Ironically, more visitors are showing up to the museum than ever, online. However, many mainstream institutions continue to struggle to recognize the needs of their audience and how to provide them with access to the tools and education the museum provides. The current landscape of the public health crisis has made it even more apparent that museums must take responsibility for their role in providing access to visitors. The former Studio Museum in Harlem Director's Office intern, Kimberly Drew embodies this call for care and responsibility to a museum audience in the digital realm with the creation of her *Black Contemporary Art* Tumblr page that grew in popularity during Drew's junior year at Smith College.⁷² Drew describes her hopes for a more inclusive digital realm in the diverse lineup of upcoming digital activist and artists, in her article *Towards a New Digital Landscape*. Drew explains, "as we embark on the new landscape, it's imperative that we labor to create a new biology that is as diverse and equitable as possible."⁷³ Welcoming the digital landscape into the museum model has made way for more spontaneous interactions with the museum's collections and artists. Legacy Russell explains:

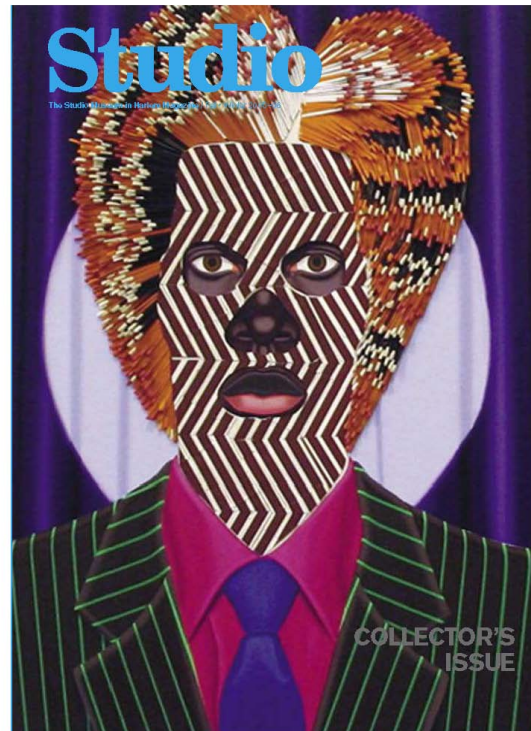
"The. Studio Museum, our mission in terms of being for artists, by artists, our artists and residency program has allowed for that to feel maybe more organic, because it

⁷² Christopher Knight, "Review: @Museummammy Knows a Thing or Two about Art. Listen Up," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, June 19, 2020)

⁷³ Kimberly Drew, "Towards a New Digital Landscape," We Stand with Our Community, May 11, 2015

allows for the conversations with artists to be the center point. And those things they can happen inside the building, they can happen on Instagram Live, they can happen on studio magazine, in terms of the online component of our studio magazine, which is a print publication typically. So, the joy of kind of finding those different directions has been something that has been an ongoing kind of blossoming effort across all of our different teams.”⁷⁴

As visitors’ interactions with the museum become more informal staff are seeking new avenues for the public to engage with the collections, exhibitions, and artists. With the growing obligation of museums to the public, the internet must serve as a tool for education, connection and creativity beyond the means we have traditionally utilized. The internet has become more expansive in its role of archiving human interaction and hosting institutions cultural exchange with artists and visitors. Legacy Russell states:



The Studio Magazine (2005)

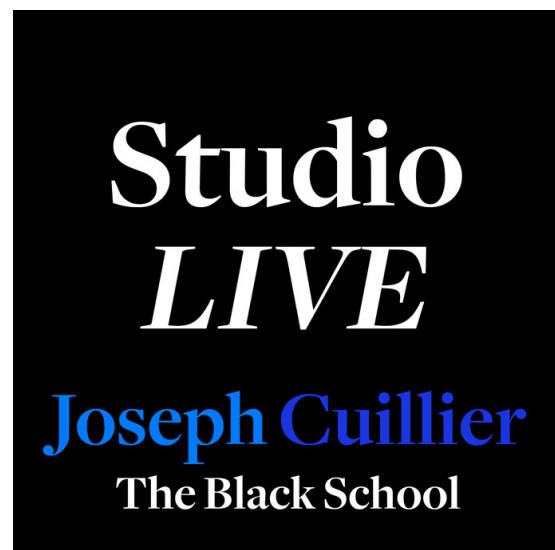
⁷⁴ Interview with Legacy Russell

“the internet in itself is like, you know, one could argue right is one of the biggest, is the biggest, right kind of monumental, massive institution, ever. Because it allows for so many different types of entry points, because things can move and be seen, and people can engage with different publics in ways that actually otherwise would have been impossible anytime previous in history. So, you know, I think it's a great place for cultural institutions, to be thinking critically about how they can do that work. And as well, you know, I think very much so to think about how to do it better and differently, to not be complacent.”

New narratives and methods for sharing these stories are becoming available online. Making the internet its own institution growing through the contributions of creatives across the globe. One of the ways Black creatives are using digital cultural spaces more to be seen is through activism.

Over the years we have seen that digital museum spaces can serve as sites for social justice work as well. For example, the many museum whistleblowing forums on Instagram and Twitter such as the @ChangeTheMuseum or the #MuseumsAreNotNeutral initiative cofounded by LaTanya Autry and Mike Murawski that helps organize progressive museum professionals in the dismantling of the idea of an impartial museum culture that upholds the legacies of white supremacy. Movements such as these begin as a spark on a platform and evolve into collective calls for more diverse and accessible mainstream institutions. The same way that the Black museum movement of the 1960s started out of activism, we must look to the past to imagine a more sustainable Black future. In the future I

imagine a non-physical space for Black exhibitions and education that is influenced by the activism that is being done within the museum for Black communities advocating for social justice and cultural pride. The Studio Museum in Harlem is creating an afro-future for Black museums across the country with their innovative approach to programming and timeless commitment to Black artist. The museum aims to create a network reaching beyond the physical space or local community of the museum through the digital realm that will allow more accessibility, connection, safety, and support for Black bodies. This is the next frontier for Black cultural institutions that are doing the work of exhibiting, educating, and serving the Black public. Contemporary Black cultural spaces are learning from the Studio Museum in Harlem's legacy like the Black School, an experimental program based in New York founded by Joseph Cuillier and Shani Peters that teaches art and radical Black history or @BlackArchives.Co a multimedia platform founded by Renata Cherlise that highlights Black visual culture. Black digital spaces will become an extension of the Black museum by allowing an additional entry point and experience with Black material culture and programming that isn't based on the constraints of time and space. This additional forum will create limitless opportunities for Black museums to engage with the public beyond the gallery space, fortifying the museum as a means for social and civic arts engagement.



Studio Live Program with Joseph Cuillier Founder of the Black School

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

While the museum field continues to define its civic role and confront their white supremacist histories, more Black creative spaces are being conceived and nurtured by descendants of the diaspora, broadening our view of what Black history and culture looks like in the present day. The recent emergence of more Black-led institutions can be understood by looking at the injustice Black creatives endured in the past and the journey of founding Black cultural institutions and the adversity they faced. The Studio Museum in Harlem was uniquely founded in a historically Black community and evolved into a think tank and epicenter for the development of Harlem after committing itself to the vision's artists of the African diaspora. This radical activism combined with a community-wide push for the museums field to cater to a more diverse community has allowed greater opportunity for Black cultural institutions to flourish and all institutions to clean house of outdated practices, collections, and staff.

There is much to be said and done in mainstream institutions to change this oppressive culture; however, Black creatives everywhere are taking initiative in the creation of their own arts institutions that are revealing deficiencies in mainstream predominately white museums. Although the fight for representation is not over, Black cultural institutions and collectives have more reason than ever to be celebrated. African American museums are a key component to the social, economic, and cultural infrastructure of the Black community's history and their connection to global culture. Black institutions like the Studio

Museum in Harlem are providing a model for what premiere Black arts work should look like in the future while building the canon of Black art.

As previously stated, the work and discourse surrounding Black museums and cultural institutions is not only necessary but urgent. As I am dedicated to furthering this research on the history and present-day manifestation of culturally specific museums, I would be obliged to deepen my look at Black museums on a broader level. Looking at the history of Black museums across the United States and their ties to adjacent cultural occurrences like the civil rights movement. Comparing these founding institutions across the nation to understand their place and relationship with the present-day community. Examining the function of Black cultural institutions as mechanisms for homecoming through healing, and identity reaffirming spaces that acknowledge trauma and celebrate diverse histories of overcoming adversity. I believe multiple case studies would reveal similarities in practice and interpretation across these institutions that would better our understanding of the Black community's art history and contribution to the museum field.

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Images Courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem Digital Archive

APPENDIX

Appendix

Dr. Brittany Webb Interview – October 17, 2020

How has your study of anthropology shaped your view of Black cultural institutions?

So, I think one of the things that cultural anthropology offers, that's really useful for how I think about institutions in general, but museums in particular is, ethnography is a method. Um, I tend to describe ethnography as a research method to people who are unfamiliar with it as a kind of deep hanging out. And so, there's like, there's a way that in a lot of the social sciences, a research design as orbiter was organized around like the idea of hypothesis testing, as a kind of, I am engaging in this study, I have a research question, here's what I think the answer will be. Here's how we're going to test whether or not that's the answer. I think that what I like about ethnography as a method is that it's really open ended. And so, as somebody who's really interested in institutions, Andrew really helped me think about how institutions worked. And granular and particular ways I'm, I'm interested in radical context. So, for me, what's interesting about black museums is not just this, the sort of like the moments that they're founded in, whether they're founded by activist movements. What those activists are responding to, what kinds of activism you're seeing is, are activists are kind of like community organizers who are really interested in the grassroots everyday vernacular black life, organizing those folks. to harness the kind of political power in an institution. Are your activists, members of religious communities who have a congregation that they can call upon, in a really embodied spiritual way, who understand their activism to be like an outgrowth of their spiritual foundation or spiritual trajectory? Are your activists, legal activists who are really looking at what are the letters of the law? What are the mechanisms of politics proper, that we can use to hold somebody accountable? Is there a city charter that you can take to a mayor or a city council and say, You're responsible professionally for providing us with this, based on these laws you've set, that's a different kind of way to sort of pull at the levers of power, then you're, then your business and civic activists who are really using their economic prowess to influence people because they are, you know, able to harness a whole bunch of financial resources, whether that's an audience for their products, or whether that's just, you know, I have X amount of money, I would like to put it towards you so that you will make this happen for me. I think that you also in black communities have a lot of what I would think about is intellectual activism, where the power that folks are trying to use to influence people is this, you know, a body of knowledge that they have, because they're historians, or because they're philosophers, or because there are historians, or because they're archivists, and they've been paying attention to materials for forever collecting things that are really important. And that's, you know, they approach activism differently. They can, they can influence power in different ways. And I feel like cultural anthropology, for me, helps me kind of tease those threads out, um, both in terms of paying attention to like, what are the specific? What are the specific histories that impact people in

a particular moment in time? And how do we study how they impact people in a particular moment in time. And because of the way you study the impact of, you know, power, like political power, or economic power, and if apology is kind of like deep hanging out with people following them around and seeing what happens to them. I feel like that helps me have language for thinking about how to start an institution, how people sustain institutions, how everything is so contingent on place and time, and history and politics of the moment and resources that are available. That just, I feel like that. That, for me was like the perfect sort of set point to look at what I think is interesting about black institutions.

Could you express the shift in perspective and community from a black cultural institution to a predominantly white institution and how that's affected or influenced your career and curatorial practice?

Yeah, that's a phenomenal question. So, I have a lot of colleagues in the field where I feel like, you know, community becomes this like, really slippery term where, whenever I hear people say it, they, it's, it can be really opaque. And so, it's, I'm always pushing people to say, when you say community, who do you mean, who do you imagine that you're in community with? And I think black institutions are very good at having to articulate who they imagine they're in community with, because it's usually in the history of their founding. So, at the risk of being executive, I'm going to think just about East Coast institution. So, if I think about like, New York, DC, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, like black institutions, like black cultural institutions generally started in response to being left out of white institutions, that on their face, like said that they were telling a kind of grand mainstream narrative. And what they were actually doing, was telling a narrative that was centered overwhelmingly on white straight men generally have means whether that's financial means or whether that's a kind of like ability to command a lot of public attention. or what have you, there are a lot of there's a lot of ways that white men are centered in arts institutions, or historical institutions, and black institutions. I think one of the things that makes them important is the ways that having to articulate we are responding to a particular community that is left out of your grand narrative, like that is the thing that sort of throws the mirror up at mainstream institutions to say, No, you're actually doing, you're actually centering whiteness, but you're saying that you're doing something general and a general audience and a white audience are not the same thing. A white audience is particular. So, I think about this, whenever people talk about culturally specific institutions, I think all institutions are culturally specific. I think that white institutions don't always name themselves as such. And I think that your institutions that are responding to be left out of those narratives, are the ones that by their very existence, sort of like push major mainstream institutions to realize how much of their general audience is actually just white people of means. And I think that that's part of what that has helped me sort of think about for my curatorial practice is just being really intentional about language and specificity. So, I don't say generally what I mean white, I say white, what I mean white. When I say general, I mean, in the city of Philadelphia, I mean, sort of general as in reflecting

the demography of where I am, which is Philadelphia in 2020. That's a different demography than if I were in New York. And that's a different demography, if I were in Manhattan versus Brooklyn versus queens. I mean, so that's the kind of, I think what has helped me sort of hold about my curatorial practice is thinking about who do I imagine I am in community with when I am producing cultural work, whether that is a program, a lecture, a symposium, working on an exhibition, even writing an essay, there's a there's a kind of, there's a way that having moving back and forth between, you know, large white institutions, and like small or mid-sized black institutions has just sort of helped me name Oh, who do I think I'm in community with what I'm doing this work? And it's okay for that to change from week to week or from program to program to say, Okay, today I'm doing something that is like very specifically about, you know, a cohort of black women artists of a particular generation, and then to decide, okay, so for this next project, what I really want to focus on is youth who are interested in like this very specific media, but that's, you know, sort of like photography or how it circulates. Like, I think that what it's really just helped me to do is hone my intentions and my language so I can call into the room that people that I want to have in the room.

What are some of the differences and collection practices within a predominantly white institution compared to a black museum or cultural institution?

I think I think collection policies are different from institution to institution. So that's sort of hard to generalize. Um, what immediately jumps out to me is probably resources. Um, I think that I think that all collecting institutions have more things in their collection than they can show at a time. That's sort of by design of like, that's just sort of the nature of museums, which I think is as it should be, because that's how you are able to tell different stories and rotate things that are on view, I think, white institutions probably have the opportunity to turn down more things, I think why those situations get offered more things. I think that there's, I think white institutions have a longer history in this country. And part of that means that, you know, because of the way that we do capitalism in America, like any kind of head start you get, as an institution compounds over time. So being, it will generally be easier to be 100 years old, that it will be to be 50 years old, that will show up in your collecting practices you will have been collecting for longer, you'll have more to build on, you'll have more stories that you sort of sit on as a foundation, there's also going to be a deeper history of relationships, you might have board members or philanthropists that have been supporting your institution for several generations of a family. This is something that you see in major white institutions often right, so one is on the board of a Metropolitan Museum of Art, or, um, you know, a Museum of Modern Art. Somebody is a longtime supporter, because their parent was a longtime supporter. And they're a longtime supporter, because their parent was a longtime supporter, you know, there's a way that that, that really kind of compounds over time, if you think about what that looks like, if someone, if someone is a member of a family, where they imagine that they're constantly giving money to a museum, because it's part of their families sort of legacy with that institution, or they've collected art

for years, or they're constantly thinking about that family collection and turning into an institution as, as like a promised gift, the idea that, you know, granddad's collection will get passed on to his children and grandchildren in part to this institution, and his children and their children will understand that the things that are in their family collections aren't meant to stay in their family, but they will also eventually end up in institutions, that's something that can show up in institutional collections, much more commonly in white institutions than in black institutions. Um, so there's, that's, that's one way that I think it shows up. But I also I think that depending on the kind of institution, if the, if I think about the arts institutions that mean to tell the kind of high art historical story, there are also always institutions that are wanting to tell stories of, you know, lesser known artists or community artist or, you know, self-taught artist or outsider artists, people who maybe weren't, who didn't go to art school, or who didn't get major recognition in their lifetimes, you always have multiple institutions doing different work at the same time. So, I don't think of, you know, I think of like the Folk Art Museum in New York as an institution that people don't necessarily think of in conversation with your sort of big white arts institutions. Or I think of you know, I think that there's a, there's a way that there are always different institutional collecting practices that don't cut cleanly along racial lines. It's not really like, I don't want to say you know, what museums collect like this, but like museums collect like this. I do think that museums that are more community oriented and community focused and interested in telling the stories of everyday people collect differently than museums that are trying to tell an elite kind of Best of the Best culture of a people of a time. And I think that because of the activist histories of many black institutions, you probably have more black institutions that are interested in the stories of everyday people in their collections. Just as a feature of how these institutions were founded in the late 20th century. And that kind of shows up.

As a Black curator, what have your experiences been, like battling institutional racism in the field?

I think that working in different institutions has helped me understand what possibilities are for pushing against institutional racism. So, part of one of the things that I have told people that I appreciate about having worked for a black institution is, you know, as a black woman working in a building full of other black women, I have gotten the opportunity to see a lot of different kinds of professional advocacy that I don't think I have seen experienced in other kinds of institutions. And by that, I mean, there's like a kind of mentoring and modeling that can happen, it doesn't always happen with everybody. But it can happen that sort of gives me a sense of what it might look like to advocate for other colleagues at different institutions, whether that's, um, you know, interns, or whether that's peers, there's, there's a, there's a sense of, like working in a place where you can kind of call out racism in the field, because everyone sees it. Or you can talk about strategizing racism in the field, because you work in a building full of people who have been thinking about this, and don't have a vested interest in pretending that it doesn't exist, is like a really interesting way to, to just sort of

have a moment in your career that sort of like sets, terms that make it possible for me and other spaces to recognize, you know, Oh, I'd be in gaslit. I'm not going crazy. And this interaction. I know this is racism, because I have worked other places where this has not happened. And this is the only outlier. And also, a challenge that I think a lot of people of color, in general have in white institutions is trying to articulate racism to people who have not thought about racism, and whose sort of initial reaction is to get defensive, rather than to sit and think, Wait, is this racism? Is this how racism works? Because what I find in the field, as there's a, there are a lot of white people in the field, who will tell you that, you know, they believe that racism is a problem and racism is terrible, but they haven't spent a lot of time thinking about what racism is, or how it shows up or how it works. And so, it's, it's how you can have, you know, the kind of thinking about the, you know, this great book racism without racists, right. It's like the way that, you know, people in white institutions can say that institutional racism exists. But if you ask them to sort of, like, name it, or talk about what that looks like, I think I have found that I ended up in a conversation that's much more about microaggressions, than it is about the structures of institutions that have benefited certain people over others. And so, some of the challenges is really, I hate that this will sound trite but some of this is really education. So, talking to people about if you have written a job description in a way where you would like to get a diverse pool of candidates, that's going to be difficult to do if you have decided that only certain kinds of experience for a job matter. So, you know, if I'm thinking about curatorial or collections work, I've told people you know, this is a field that runs overwhelmingly on unpaid internships. If you need people's job experience to be paid work. For a major institution, and you're not counting internships as years of experiences, and you're not counting volunteer work is years of experiences, if your education hurdle has to be a postgraduate degree, and you're not thinking about the ways that higher education has disproportionately negatively affected people of color, if you are not posting your jobs on, if you're only posting jobs, or like the elite job boards, and you're not making sure that you get the word out and professional organizations that target people of color, that you don't get to say, you know, we tried to have a diverse applicant pool, but we posted the job on the American alliance of museums website, we said it was master's degree required PhD preferred. We said salary commensurate with experience, we said it required five years of experience in the field of and we only ended up with a pool of white candidates. There's a way that that kind of like, well, meaning this is like I did everything I could, because it's becomes its own kind of like one instance of a way that you really kind of have to sit down with folks in institutional positions and say, Okay, I see that you were not intending to sort of re instantiate white supremacy in this practice. And I see how you think that you did everything you could to get a diverse applicant pool. And I want to talk to you about the ways that that didn't actually happen. Because you were not thinking about how people of color in this field get into this field, and also how folks of color get locked out of this field. And this is a, I realized that being sort of vague about, you know, I don't use black and people of color interchangeably. But I do think that, you know, in there, there are ways that folks of color, the museum field in general have a lot in common with, like, the ways that we experience

institutional racism. I think that one of the ways that black institutions are important is because there are, you know, like, if I'm moving from thinking about people of color to black institutions, um, what is particular about black institutions is that there is a history of HBCUs of this country. And so that, for me is not just the history of institutions, you know, if I think about institutions that collect, Howard and Clark Atlanta, the Clark, Atlanta, Morehouse, Spellman, the AUC Consortium, Hampton University, when I think about, like, the long history of black collecting and exhibiting institutions, that's been super important, like as not just like an ideological feature of our field, but also like a structure like, Where are those early collections? Like, where is the stuff of black material culture, those are also training institutions. So, people say that this field has like a pipeline problem for people of color, and always say, there isn't a pipeline problem, you've been able to study art history, or material culture or black history at HBCUs. For decades in this country, in a way that is not true for all people of color in this country. Like, that's a very particular history that gives us you know, somebody like a Dorothy Porter Wesley, who was an archivist who was married to both James Porter and Charles Wesley like that. She is like a grandmother figure in our field in a way that impacts a whole bunch of us that didn't even go to HBCUs. And that's not just about collecting and archiving. That's also about once you are black, and you go to grad school, what can you study? What can you write a thesis about? If you're looking at material culture, if you're at a white institution that doesn't have those collections? Where are you going, if you want to do that kind of work, study, you know, if you're I went to temple where we have like the Blockson collection, but I also recognize that if folks are wanting to do that kind of work and are at White institutions that don't have those collections, you might end up at a Clark Atlanta University asking to look at their art collection. Or you might end up at a Hampton or a Howard University art gallery to like to do your thesis project. That is a kind of pipeline that I think is super important to our field, like I mean, that kind of credentialing makes you eligible to apply for a job, once it gets posted to a job board that requires you know, X number of years of experience, or whether that's work experience or research experience or handling experience that's particular, to black Americans and black institutions. That's really important. And there's a way that for me, knowing those institutional histories and how they work, and the kinds of folks that they have produced are things that I think about when you know, I have a colleague from another institution that says, hey, we're running a job search for this particular position. We thought we were going to get a diverse pool of candidates, and we're not getting a diverse pool of Do you have any insights as to why that is, and I'm thinking well Sure, have you, you know, does the if you posted this on a website does AAA and know about this? Does the African American associate museums Association know about this? Um, you know, do you? Are you making sure that the art history programs at HBCUs are aware of these positions? You know, there are all these training institutions that are specifically producing the kinds of black professionals that are well positioned to do this work well, for any institution, not just black institutions. And so, said, you know, oh, there's a pipeline problem, or we can't help that we're not reaching people, or maybe these people don't exist. I think the history of HBCUs and

black institutions in this country are the things that we can get point to, to say, No, these things actually do exist. And so, what we have is a visibility problem. And we have to talk about the ways that that is a kind of racism, even if it's unintentional, that's the kind of racism that we can push against, in real time to have real material effects on our institutions like today.

How can Black cultural institutions be a form of homecoming for Black visitors to learn more about their history and tradition?

I think most of the black institutions that I have enjoyed working in or with or consuming their programming already take that as their, like their mission and vision. I think that part of part of what is really lovely about black institutions are the ways that they can focus in on the diversity within a community. There's, there's a kind of, there's so much multiplicity and blackness, I think about I've had Toni Morrison on the brain lately. And so, I keep thinking about her. I'm constantly articulating to people, you know, that she did not have this sense that she wanted to be like, more than just a black writer, which we hear artists say all the time, like, I you know, I hear artist say all the time, like, Oh, I don't want to be known as a black artist or artist, I don't want to be known as a black writer. I'm just a writer. And Toni Morrison is somebody for me, who is like a kind of anchor, like I appreciate this. He was like, No, I don't need to be like more than just a black writer blackness is actually a really rich place from which like, blackness is a really incredible place to write from. And that kind of world building like there doesn't need to be more than there's so much more here that typically gets written about. And so that's not like, that's not something that she experienced as a kind of like marginalized. She sorts of refuses attempts to marginalize her in that way. And I feel like black institutions do that really, really well. Um, I have loved the, in this moment, the ways that black institutions have gotten really expansive in the ways they're thinking about black communities. I think that this is, I think 2020 is a different moment for black institutions than probably like the 1970s or 80s were. So, I think, you know, being differently invested in the politics of respectability is a is a really beautiful moment that we're in the ways that black institutions understand like, reason, the regionality of blackness, the ways that you can get really particular about black culture or output. Whether that's literary traditions or you know, the history of movements. dams, music practices, like the material culture of just what historically is important to us, the ways that that's different based on like, what reason of the country, you know, that looks very different in like Philadelphia, the Delaware Valley than it does in like Weeksville. And that's different than what's happening with, you know, folks that are doing work around like the Gullah Geechee in South Carolina, which is very different from I'm originally from the west coast. So, like South, like the southwestern blackness is also very different. I think that there's a way that black institutions are really good at, like, understanding and like going deep and broad in that way. I also think about the differences of generation, you know, black Millennials are having a different experience recently, of course, then our parents or grandparents were having, that's something that comes out and black

institutional programming that I appreciate a lot. The diasporas really huge. I think that I feel like black institutions are doing that better now than maybe 30 or 40 years ago, I feel like there are more black American cities now that are this kind of mix of you know, if you look at the demographics of who's black in Philadelphia, or in a DC, or, you know, in a Chicago, or in, you know, North or South Florida, black institutions are better at understanding. So, here are the, you know, here, here, this segment of our community is your sort of like descendants of American slaves of the Great Migration. Here's another segment of our community that is black and from the Caribbean, we have another segment of our community that is that are like black immigrants from West Africa, whether that's first generation or second generation, or what have you. And what that means is you have like a lot of cultural mixing that's happening across generations. And we can get really expansive about what does that look like for our audience like, we can actually sort of widen the scope of the ways that we are celebrating the various things that make black people black in America, that are specific and gorgeous and important. We can hold clearness now in a way that institutions historically have not been great at doing and like a really celebratory and expansive way. I feel like black cultural institutions are doing really interesting work around media in ways that did not use to happen. I think we've gotten beyond the kind of, or where, for the most part starting to get beyond just moments of like, good and bad images of blackness and media, I think there are ways that people are being really expansive about what makes an image good, what makes an image bad. Does that have to be the only frame where we're talking about, you know, what, what we can celebrate? can we get into a more nuanced conversation around media and culture production in that way, the influence of black feminism on these institutions, thank God, it's like a different moment than I think it was 30 years ago, propriety has a different kind of place. It's not the, the water that the institutions are swimming in, we can kind of call it out a little bit. And we can sort of, like poke at it and look at it and figure out okay, what was propriety doing for people 40 years ago that they needed it to do? And how can we maybe kind of, how can we take that apart and understand that there were also things that have foreclosed for people that we maybe want to like, bring into the tent now. Um, so I'm also thinking about, you know, just how we think about the body, how we think about the state. You know, 2020 is a dumpster fire of a year for us. So being able to come together and talk about state violence and police violence, their black institutions are doing that in a way that feels super, super necessary. In a year where it feels like we're, we're, we're proud, we're always under siege. But in 2020, in particular, we're really under siege in a way that is exhausting. And I feel like black cultural institutions are some of the few institutions that can like really hold that.

Dr. Andrea Burns Interview – October 18, 2020

When was the start of the African American Museum movement? And what sparked this movement?

There have been African American type museums and libraries, right, for a long time since the early 19th century, maybe a little bit earlier. There's always been black book collectors, bibliophiles, and, and obviously, black cultural organizations. But if we're looking at the modern black museum movement, and kind of really the explosion of growth in it, that would be right about 1960-1961. I'm sure there's earlier ones in the 1950s. Chicago, 1961, right around there is I think the start of the main movement. I think we have to look at the civil rights movement in the 1950s, the emergence out of WWII and the development of the sit-down movement, the bus strikes, the major leaders of the civil rights movement, confronting traditional narratives about black history, black participation and representation. You know, with someone like Charles Wright, who founded the Detroit Museum, he was very directly influenced by the civil rights movement. He was, if I remember correctly, he participated in Selma march in 1965, but he's been active even before that, in the 50s, he was an OBGYN in Detroit. He was serving a population that was very underrepresented, he was working with African American women in Detroit. So, for all of these leaders, they were tied to civil rights, movement and activism prior to starting these museums, as the museum's start developing, then they become these leaders, some of them get connected to the messages of the Black Power movement, the formal movement that started in 1965-1966, you know, the messages of black power, about representation and history and cultural identity were ones that were not as prominent in the mainstream civil rights movement, it took the Black Power movement to really to bring out this different message. And so, we start to see these black museum leaders connecting with that message, and then promoting that message. So, the black power and black museum movements, I argue, are two very similar. They're very connected with each other. So, the spark is the civil rights movement, but maybe the fire is the Black Power movement that really helps the museum founders shape what these museums will become.

Why do you think Black cultural institutions are important?

When, when these museums started, they were doing, they were collecting materials, they were creating archives, some of them, they were reaching out to communities that had believed that their histories weren't worthy of being represented at in a space like a museum. Or they felt that nobody was that interested in this old stuff that they had in their attic. There's an advertisement in my book, I just happened to look at it a few days ago, that the saddle museum put in the Chicago daily defender, which is a historic black newspaper in

Chicago, and museums, like, hey, do you have anything? They called it? "Do you have any relics from slavery time" was the ad? Do you have stuff that's in your attic? Do you have quilts? Do you have papers. And, you know, if we think about the larger mainstream historical societies and museums at the time, they just simply were not doing this, but specifically, they were not doing it and trying to reach black audiences. So, the act of outreach was groundbreaking. And I think that's still the same now that these African American museums, as well as the other ethnic museums that have developed, you know, because it's not just African American museums, you know, like next museums and Japanese American museums, they are reaching communities and audiences that have been traditionally bypassed by elite white institutions, and even institutions that weren't so elite, just your average Historical Society. But the average Historical Society was focused on white people, and not interested in the materials and cultures of underrepresented populations. I don't think that need has gone away, even if mainstream museums are paying more attention now. The need and the space that black museums fill is still very much necessary.

How have Black cultural institutions contributed to power in the black community?

Museums have this role in culture, whether European culture, global culture, whatever. So, they have traditionally been seen as these elite repositories of whether it's art or artifacts or stories, like, if you have something that's collected in a museum, it must be worthy and worthwhile, it must be important. And so, what African American museums have done and continue to do is provide a space for those stories that they actually physically be spaces, these buildings physically demand, recognition, you know, even if it's the smallest museum that was created out of a movie theater in Anacostia, which is what the Anacostia community Museum, started out in a formerly segregated movie theater. Then DuSable starts off in Margaret Burroughs house, like the ground floor of her house. By physically taking up space and demanding recognition and showing the community that their work and their histories and their voices are valuable, that in turns empowers that community. To have a space where folks can go to see their histories presented to see their artifacts presented. And to be a welcoming space.

Do you think the role of black museum has changed black museums has changed from what they were initially conceived to the emergence of the present day?

I think there's a lot of things that have changed. It's hard not to change when you start off in a little tiny museum on the floor of someone's house. Then through the years, you go through relocations and expansions to occupy a huge Museum. So, there's a level of professionalization at most of these places. Now, you know, people, they have to have master's degrees to get hired at these museums. In some cases, like the Smithsonian, they're very focused on PhDs and that simply was not the case when these museums started. While that certainly is in, it adds scholarly knowledge and professionalism. There

could be something lost in translation too. The grassroots spirit that started these museums from the ground up, it becomes kind of smoothed over and you have to go through bureaucracy and administration and all of that. So, there may be these museums may not be able to be as radical as they once were, or they may just have to go through lots of different channels that they didn't have to when they first started out. And again, that's not necessarily a negative thing. It just changes the identity of these museums a little bit. But a lot of them are still working with very small steps, volunteers just as they were at the beginning. So, some things have changed, some things have not.

LaTanya Autry Interview– October 18, 2020

You co-founded the Museums are Not Neutral movement. Why do you believe museums are not neutral?

Because I know museum history, and I know people are the ones who shape and create museums and make all the decisions. And since they're humans they are, everything they do is, you know, shaped is made his decision. And that museums just from knowing the history, they are basically from a colonialist product. They are about power relations, just not just museum history, but the ongoingness of them what they are today in terms of which institutions get resources in terms of who has jobs, the fact that in art museums, over 80% of the jobs have, like the jobs to get to make the decisions at the institutions are in, in white people who don't have those jobs, and so that black folks, indigenous foot people, like next Asian people really do not have hardly any power in these Wait, I just call them white museums. So that in itself is not a neutral situation is all about power dynamics.

Are Black cultural institutions necessary in preserving the public memory of Black communities? Why or why not?

Yeah, I would say if the, you know, with black folks don't do everything yourself, it probably wouldn't happen. And also, they have to shape the narrative themselves. And it's just about the type of objects, just one, first of all, just the fact that they think black people are important, right? There's that because the other institutions, which I call white institutions do not find black people to be important, or they don't value us anti blackness is just prevalent in this nation state that we're in. And then of course, throughout the, you know, various sectors, including museums. So black people have to love themselves and care for themselves. And part of that is in terms of public memory kind of things through objects through records. And they do things like hire other black people train the next leaders in the field, take care of objects also. Value objects that are not necessarily in white institutions might not even think is an important valuable kind of record. And so, it's about just acknowledging other types of things, too. So, kind of getting out of a certain very certain kind of structure that white institutions just replicate over and over.

Do you think that Black cultural institutions assist in the dismantling of white supremacy ideologies in the museum field? And can you tell me why or why not?

Um, yeah, you know, it's hard though, because I would say they do in a way of by just being them own their own self. And staying out of that. Just being a, you know, independent, I guess independent might not be the word unless a standalone separate something separate might be one way to say it had to be careful, but independent, because a lot of times what museum Soho come out of really being found it through black people, for black people, but

some of them when you know, the history kind of started through white institutions that maybe didn't want to show black artists' work. And people kind of got together and sometimes those collaborations can be fine. If it really came together, it was just people coming together. I think it's weird when it's white institutions, they're like, yeah, we don't have space for your stuff over here, you make a separate black museum for your thing. I think that's are a really messed up weird power dynamic, and it's definitely happening. But sometimes, it's just, you know, groups of people for multiple kinds of backgrounds getting together and creating a space and saying, Hey, this is going to be the black center space, but there's also you know, money from white folks and others that are various people putting money together pulling it to have it happen, but it's going to be led by, you know, black creatives and feature black creative work. Um, but I also want to say is that sometimes black, black institutions that I actually haven't worked in too many, most of the places I've been at have been these so called predominantly white institutions and where I get to be one of the few black people listen, some tokenized position, but so I've kind of been curious about this, and I've been wondering if it would be would I have a much better experience in a black institution at least I could cut down on some of the racism or something But a friend of mine told me a couple friends who do work at Black museums. And they were like, the thing is you don't really get away from white supremacy. It happens still in black institutions and other ethnic, the ones that they call ethnic specific. I mean, the other ones are white museums. But you know, just don't call it that. But it is. She was saying that, well, one big part of that is because of funding. So, the black institutions are still often trying to get money. And the money is coming from white funders, or grants and stuff that are still really whiteness centered and is white people in charge of the foundations and stuff like that. And so sometimes they're doing a certain kind of self-censoring, to appeal to those, those funders, those white center funders. So, there's some of that, and then some of it is just coming internalized racism, of course, you know, unfortunately, as, as just what we are, as people we've internalized a lot of racism and colonialist kind of thinking to, and some of that comes out through like respectability politics. So, people do weird stuff about how people talk about people schooling. And I've definitely encountered that too. in academia, when I was in grad school meeting, black professors who brag about that they went to, you know, like boarding schools, private boarding schools. And I'm like, well, that's nice for you. But then they asked me where I would just go on my I went to public schools, you know, this K through 12. And they are just like, kind of astonished and grossed out by the whole thing that I went to a public school. And I'm like, that's actually most people, United States, and definitely most people. So, it's like this weird elitism. And that stuff is not just in the academy, it trickles, of course, into museums, too, because a lot of times the black curators are getting spots are part, often part of some kind of black middle class, black bourgeoisie kind of class. And not to say that all those people are doing internalized racism, but some of them definitely are, and is another way of doing some kind of gatekeeping, some kind of exclusionary behavior. And that is rooted in anti-blackness is rooted in white supremacy. So, it's a mixed bag, I don't think you can totally get away from it. There are some things that are

better than others. And so much of it is people aren't even identifying they might hear respectability politics, but not think about that as being part of internalized racism as part of white supremacy. But it is. The way there's another one a lot of colorism to put in there a lot of colorism and you can even look at someplace This is like why the other curators, other black curators are all light skin, like, you know, that could just some people just are but it's like actually kind of strange. It's almost like every curator that's coming through this program is all they're all light skinned black people, we come in all us and one family, there's multiple, you know, skin tone. So, I you know, I'm like that there's some, there's some shaping that's happening there. And that is some internalized racism, even if people might not see it, or even know that they're doing it. There's no kind of way to all your curators got like skin that are black. Like they're just that this is not possible. Unless you're making it happen. You're engineering a situation; you're privileging certain people. So, there's that white adjacency thing that black institutions are doing as well. And so that's some sad stuff. And it's like, so you just really can't get away from that. And apparently, like maybe museums are just all over the United States is just horrific anyway, but maybe museums that seemed like kind of a pinnacle, for certain kinds of bad things. Like I feel like museums, especially art museums seem like kind of the bastions of white supremacy. And I was I've been trying to think that these black ones will be better because I haven't worked at them. But I have been noticing certain patterns at some places where I'm like, well, it might be just this field because it attracts certain kinds of mindsets or people were shaped in a certain kind of way. And not to say it's everybody but it's interesting those some top-level museums. I'm not saying what you want is what some top-level places where I've seen some interesting things around like wow, okay, I think that's strange. Every curator from that place looks like it's like a light skinned person. Like everyone really?

I know you've talked a lot about museums being about power and having these strange power dynamics going on within and amongst institutions. How can or how are black cultural institutions, empowering the black community?

Well, you know, it's like one of those things, you kind of have to have examples and think about certain places I'm trying to think and there's like always a range, I actually feel like I used to before I was like working any spaces, I used to just think of like, bigger institutions, and like, probably places I had not been to, and think of them because I kept seeing her names repeated, you know, a studio museum or something I'd be really crushing on those places is that's the place it must be doing. And most work for black people, is the place that was in my mind, I didn't grow up in New York City or so later, when I was, you know, older when I moved to New York and stuff. But then, you know, allowing yours I actually feel like, the smaller institutions, they probably do not get dumped properly, they just don't they don't get that kind of media hype is like Studio Museum, for instance, which I like, a lot of stuff that's new museum pass, I'm just going to say that. But I feel like the places in Studio Museum I'll give it credit that is stayed in Harlem, since it's been there stayed at home is expanding and

everything now, but it stayed in the neighborhood, as much as that's Harlem has changed. So changed a lot and be really gentrified, and black communities are getting pushed out. But part of that I guess I'll stick with them for a little while. And I don't I don't feel like an expert here. Because I'm not studying Studio Museum. And I'm not work there anything. But just from what I know, in the field, and knowing New York, I'm some of that. I think that commitment is good, how they stay there. But also, maybe that can be part of the problem. That can be part of the problem, like the expansion of it. I'm in the gentrification, so I don't know, I feel like that's something to look into. That could be interesting. I'd be interested to read article on that. I can't say what it is, but I'm interested in it because of building you know, expanding a building to this multi-million dollar building in Harlem, I'm in a place that is fighting gentrification, in some ways, I feel like is making a strong commitment to staying in Harlan. But then again, if you're spending all that money on this building, that will do great things, but in in Hopefully, it will still be really rooted in the community, it feels like it has been just from me from the outside. tangentially thinking about it, but I haven't really studied it. So that's not a good one for me to choose. I would say some places, um, when I guess this is the first, the first black University Museum was a Hampton University, I think, their art museum. And it's one of these places I think is so important, because like they, I don't even remember, I mean, they've been around for a while, like 200 years or something. Because they, a couple years ago, celebrated a big anniversary. And I might have the book next to me, but I don't know where it is. Yeah, see right now, but um, yeah, they just celebrated. This one. They just celebrated on there their anniversary. And that one is such an important thing, because they do develop curators. And so, I think they're really important in that way. So, the next people coming up in the field, and just the kind of work that they have on view. These black institutions, in many ways are being or doing the thing that's kind of a challenge as a resistance to being racist. Because these white institutions have been erasing black people and black histories. Black brilliance, for all the time is just like kind of what they do. And so, these black institutions just generally, so are what is holding on to that memory and celebrating us. And I have to say, like, I went to Hampton University Museum, I had never been there before. But I went a couple of years ago in 2018. And it was through that African American Association of museums. They were holding their conference in Hampton that year. And it was just such It was so wonderful to see the art and to really think about the history and to think about the number of people who have kind of come through how many black and brown students who have learned from them and got just got that training and important training to be black centered. instead of always thinking yourself is just like the in the margins. All the time, because it's kind of being trained for white institutions is always to be marginalized, even when you're, you're not trying to do it individually. But that's the training you're getting. And then working in white spaces, is also being pushed to the margins. So these are places that give black people and brown folks, but because you'd like people an opportunity to really feel at home, for instance, in general, and not that they're perfect spaces, but to just have black culture be at the center and not feel like that's though, you know, thing that gets to happen once a year or once every 10 years just to just be at the

center and have that be kind of a regular thing to be learning about black artists from like, I'm thinking art museums, because that's my area, thinking, learning about black artists as a regular part of your experience. And becoming really fluent in that is a very special thing. And it doesn't happen unless usually unless you are in specifically in a black space. So that's like a big contribution, what they're doing is they're keeping that present and just really helping us see our existence is regular, and not a strange thing or something on the side, something that's not that important. Something that can happen once a month, once a year for like Black History Month. Something that gets the smallest space also being black and white museum spaces, a lot of times shows done by black curators or black theme shows get like the worst face in the building, they get less resources in terms of marketing, all of that, like the support and stuff, there's a lot less for those, those artists get paid less. So, if it's at least a black center institution, and they're still going to be all kinds of problems with that. But at least all the spaces are generally going to be showing some black artists, it could still be colorism going on and all kinds of elitism and sexism all that is definitely probably going on. But because all the places other places have got it too, but at least all of them are black spaces. And I don't know if I answered that enough, or completely?

Why is it important to acknowledge the tumultuous histories of Black cultural institutions specifically?

Yeah, well, if we don't, we all know, um, nobody else will. Because these places, like I said, are constantly trying to erase us. And like where I'm living right now in Cleveland, Ohio. I moved here last year, last March 2019. It takes a little while to get to know a place and I've been like, it's weird, because I'm just like, seems like a vibe here. Like these people don't. I'm not like I said, I've just moved here. So not from here at all. Never enough from anywhere in Ohio. But I was like, it seems like people are willing to take a lot of violence or just garbage from nice white people. I guess it's crazy. And why is that? And I and I kind of was like I don't know if it's just me or just the people I'm meeting but it seems like a certain passivity. But then I started thinking maybe something really bad happened to these people. And I don't know what it is. I can't tell what it is. But what I've noticed is that you know, this is not striking really but it but here's kind of start so the black institutions in town have like, like basically no money or a tiny bit of money for budget. And the way institutions not a huge art scene here I am in Cleveland, but they're you know, there's so there's couple these big institutions, and they're all whiteness centered and whitelisted. And they're getting millions of dollars like huge disparity right. So, I was like thinking about it a lot through the summer. And I was like, this is basically an apartheid situation. So, I get all these museums, typically black people are just our jobs are basically we are the security and the facility staff. Maybe some of us got some jobs, education, often part time jobs. They don't have benefits, and a few have some jobs as curators and stuff, but really not that many not that many above that in terms of the executive teams. And even when you do have higher levels now you probably still don't really

have any power. And I've been thinking about it a lot. Now. It's like we basically have an apartheid situation. So, we are just very low tiers very basically segregation. It's not talked about a second As Yeah, you can technically come in the building, I guess. And institutions are using these words about inclusion. But we don't really have inclusion, we have like a token form of bringing in one person, maybe a diversity fellowship and putting them onto the side, they have really no power in, they're only there for a temporary engagement. So, by the time they get to know any people, and people get to know them, they're out the door. And that's happened in multiple places, over and over again. So, it's like they say they're, you know, training the next setup, but really, you're going to be trained in a certain way, you're going to train about white supremacy. So, what was your question? Again, I probably like talking about all kinds of sounds like it's related, I think. Oh, yeah, because they're constantly lying, because white institutions are constantly lying, you know, using these expressions, like diversity inclusion, and now their new word to say is that they're anti-racist. And I'm like, you're definitely not anti-racist, that would mean you're against racism. So hello, you're not equity, other stuff. And like, these are just words for them to say, and we have to hold them accountable. Like by knowing histories, and the institution, some of them will say, we are accountable and like, what does that even really mean? Like, how are you holding yourself accountable? You get this, you know, like, it's just insane. Like these white institutions, the stuff that these people who are leading it, what they will go on saying it's like, first of all, you don't even know what you're doing, you're not acknowledging what you've done wrong, you won't listen, when it has been pointed out to you, like what we saw this summer, with so many black people who work in museums and other people highlighting problems in these institutions, right, by lights, like sometimes 10 points, and they're showing like, what they could be doing. institutions are just kind of ignoring that, even though they posted it, a lot of these silly places and violent places posted these, really just, I just find it insulting these posted, I put in June saying that they stand in solidarity with black colleagues and stuff like that. So many of these white museums perform that act. And it's just a performance, it means nothing. And I actually feel like the communities need to start holding them accountable. They can't just say the word and they are accountable, because it means nothing. like are they all resigning? No. Okay, then that? What does that mean, just to say a word, the city, or the community, rather, the people who live in a city, a lot of places, like majority black communities, or, you know, and we don't have any power in the institution. So, you have to know those histories. And not everybody's got time to mess around with these museums. I know a lot of people just ignore them. Because they're like, because guess what black people are disenfranchised across the board in every other sector, right, as well. So, a lot of people are like, I can't be bothered with this silly Art Museum thing, when I don't have health care, you know, I don't have like a lot of basic stuff people are concerned about. So, they're just like, that's not important. But I'm always like, we can try to force changes through this thing through this, this is part of the whole economy, right? Excuse me, museums are part of the economy, they have jobs, all the stuff they are part of, they are part of the city. And we if we, some of us, it's not everybody can't do it. But some of us can hold those

histories and share those histories and be able to organize more, I think we can force some changes, but it takes sustained in organizing. And that's hard to do when you have a group of people who are disenfranchised in every other way, as well. Because I do know, like, come on, if you out here, trying to get you know, while you're fighting pandemic, and it's mostly black people and indigenous people and Latinx people dying of COVID are you even thinking about museums? You know, like, come on, right? You're not probably, but I keep trying to think about like, my type of work that I'm doing as a curator, is about the type of shows that I'm doing who I work with, because I'm trying to put money in black and brown communities by the people. I'm partnering with thinking about that my shows focus on social issues, too. So, I think it does connect, but it isn't it's just important. I we need to know those histories. And we need to like think about how museums can be or should be more part of the social fiber of people's lives and not just some kind of playground for rich people. Because often they feel like they just playgrounds for rich people.

Legacy Russell Interview – November 2, 2020

Has digital engagement of Black cultural spaces cultivated new audiences and visitors for Studio Museum Harlem?

I do think that the Studio Museum is a place that has a 50 plus year history of working in physical space. And so, you know, it is a meaningful opportunity is worth thinking through what the future of our new building can be, to consider deeply about, you know, the ways of running a digital program are kind of digital engagement and strategy alongside of expanding our physical space, those things really need to go hand in hand. So, you know, the presence of our work, especially now, and given the pandemic has been largely digital, and thinking as well about ways where we can kind of program and program differently running, you know, programs that have used Zoom and YouTube, but as well, you know, we have an ongoing Instagram Live series where we bring artists together to kind of be in conversation with myself, and we talk about, you know, kind of various strands of their practice, but also to kind of ask them in a more informal setting to kind of speak to their work and as well to kind of riff a bit because I do think that there's something that's really wonderful, and lovely and generous about allowing that to be possible and having that be driven by the institution's mission. In a nutshell, that kind of speaks to that. But, you know, as we are continuing to expand, I would say, and this maybe touches on a different question of yours, but I do think they're related all these questions is oftentimes people they enter into museum spaces for the first time on the internet. And I think that that is something that, you know, is very specific to this moment that we're in. But often I do think for, you know, kind of across different generations, these are kind of new moments to kind of continue to navigate some of those questions of access and visibility, and as well to do so with care and responsibility to one's audiences and recognition of different types of publics. So, you know, I recognize that you are in school, and you're, you know, doing this wonderful research, but I do think that it's great, like they that you are in the space that you're in now, because when I was in school, those discussions, I think were happening very differently. I think that institutions at the time, you know, I remember my first role in a museum, it was like a whole different universe, like people were not having those same conversations. And this is like, over a decade ago about engaging digital space in the same way that physical space can be engaged largely because I think that there was such an attachment to the object in a way Made it almost impossible to even fathom that anything could replace, quote unquote, the object. And so, the idea that the digital is actually not looking to do that replacement, right, but rather to expand the conversation to allow it to take on new perspectives to open up different sides of dialogue, right, is one that I think has become more popular, but has taken a long time for that to become possible. And I know like for folks who kind of have come of age, in the era of the internet, that seems like bizarre and shocking, like the work that Kimberly has done right? There now so many tumblers, right, like, there are so many different places and spaces you can go to, to kind of engage with black art, that is really amazing to think there was a time

where like, Kimberly was really doing that, right. And that was something that was actually unusual. And, you know, she and doing that work actually, like expanded possibilities for other people to do the same. And as well to expand even further, how that might take form and shape. So, um, you know, I recognize that these are leaps and bounds that sometimes appear to be quite ordinary, if only because they become so organic to us. But I do feel very strongly about the fact that museum spaces need to exist on the internet in a way that, you know, does the generous work of bridging across different, you know, places spaces and times. And I think that you know, folks who have not, for example been to the Louvre, right, they will go to the loo for the first time on the internet. And so, it is actually the responsibility of these different institutions to do the work of thinking about what that architecture kind of as a framework, by a digital can look like in terms of making visible as you're kind of noting, in your questions. Your permanent collections, right, in terms of having, you know, artists interviews, in terms of these are all things that City Museum does on their, their website, you know, allowing for a kind of intersectionality of discourse, allowing for different perspectives to kind of be brought to the fore. And so, you know, it becomes more and more important, as we have this crazy situation of this pandemic, because I think that what it is brought to light for a lot of institutions that there was a great, kind of codependency on the physical, and that people assume that, you know, that you would always be able to walk in the door or, you know, kind of be inside of the building. Right? And what happens, you know, it's a kind of incredible global experiment, what is going on with museums right now outside of the really important questions of kind of changing and transforming these spaces. generatively. But, you know, the questions that museums are asking now, or, you know, how do you stay relevant and visible, and as well, you know, critical and rigorous, right, through digital material. So, a lot of folks I think, are playing some catch up. But I do think that, you know, it's been really wonderful because City Museum, our mission in terms of being kind of, for artists, and by artists driven by the artists, you know, in our artists and residency program, has allowed for that to feel maybe more organic, because it allows for the conversations with artists to be the center point. And those things they can happen inside the building, they can happen, you know, on Instagram Live, they can happen, you know, on studio magazine, in terms of the online component of our studio magazine, which is a print publication, typically. So, the joy of kind of finding those different directions has been something that has been an ongoing kind of blossoming effort across all of our different teams.

Would you consider the internet to be a more safe and viable space for cultural institutions to engage Black identities, if so why?

There's so much to say there. I think you know, I guess there are different strands and I think that I'm keen and curious to think about definitions of safety and viability. You know, those two words in particular I think are complex, and they're challenging when we think about any space at all, if only because I do think that there are, you know, the challenges of digital space mirror the challenges of the world. Right. And so, I think that we are past the point of

being able to say that the internet, you know, in terms of engaging as a fantasy is a place that is your topic, right, or that, you know, kind of allows for, you know, sort of the flaws of the world to not be seen, or to kind of move in the same way. However, I will say that part of the thing that I think has been really exciting about digital spaces, and it's allowed kind of different types of institutions, or maybe the redefinition of what an institution is, but actually individuals in different ways, they're kind of taking on the position of being thought leaders. And that That in itself, I think, is really, you know, sort of incredible and allows for different variants, right, that stands outside of a space that, perhaps, is seated in a particular cannon. So um, you know, when I think about this question of safety and viability, for me, it's it is both about having, you know, black people do that work, kind of for themselves, and as well to create, to call on a kind of turn of phrase, by amazing writer whose come out with a book, I encourage you to look it up. It's called distributed blackness, by Andre Brock. But Andre Brock talks about kind of enclaves and closures, and I believe enclave counter publics and this notion of spaces that can be perhaps safe, or protected or secure, that are uniquely black spaces. And that that happens online in a way that is really exciting and monumental and allows to for a different type of discourse to take place outside of institutional spaces, even though of course, these platforms like Twitter, and Facebook and Instagram are institutions in their own right. But so, you know, I think that the sort of Museum of everything has been this, there's been a rise in language around that. But the internet in itself is like, you know, one could argue right is one of the biggest, is the biggest, right kind of monumental, massive institution, ever. Because it allows for so many different types of entry points, because things can move and be seen, and people can engage with different publics in ways that actually otherwise would have been impossible anytime previous in history. So, you know, I think it's a great place for cultural institutions, to be thinking critically about how they can do that work. And as well, you know, I think very much so to think about how to do it better and differently, to not be complacent, I think, in this these kinds of questions of consumption or circulation, when it comes to black identity. I'll say Zindzi. I think that when you use the language refuge, it's a valid, I think it's great and valid to just to have that as a term because it comes up for me to like, it's wonderful to think about digital space as a refuge. That is not unusual in any way. And I actually feel like, you know, when it comes to questions, especially as we all the stuff that we've been going through in this moment, right, where it's the code switching from, you know, different types of places and spaces, I think, has been in itself, right, its own kind of violence. And so, part of the thing that I think is like really incredible about digital space is that it has allow for these different forms, like, you know, again, to call on Andres book, because it just is so phenomenal. Andre talks about the fact that like, you know, there was a time where you, you know, would go into your barber shop, and you'd have conversations with the person cutting your hair. And that would be like, what is now your WhatsApp, like chain? You know, like when you're texting your friends, right? So, the idea of a kind of a dispersion of a public space, like a site that ordinarily would have met him physically, for that type of space to travel online, right. The form it takes is in certain hashtags. It's in black Twitter. It's in your WhatsApp channel. It's in your DMS and your Instagram account or

and the fact that those same types of spaces right can be safe and to use your word right and, and viable. And ones that actually can allow for us to maybe have a reprieve from some of the ways that we move and exist out in the world is actually a really important thing. And I do think that, you know, regardless and similar to physical space, right, when we, you know, we've had our moments of being able to go to a friend's house, or, you know, go to the barber shop, or go to a bar, right, like these public spaces where we might meet and congregate, when they change shape and form, right, they like so many of them have, in many ways, done that by a digital material. And so, for me, that link, I think, is really important to be recognizing that actually very much. So, to in a moment where I do feel very strongly that there has been, of course, so much deep and complex navigation of what it is to be a black person out in the world physically out in physical space, right? that some of the work that has had to be done is thinking about ways to do that work protectively both of one another kind of as a kind of collective practice, right? If it means that it's happening in physical space in digital space, but also to maybe know where to draw the line and to use digital space as an opportunity to kind of do some of that work early on right before maybe taking a step outside into the world, that that enclosure then becomes a really important site to kind of generate and just stay on certain ideas and lines of thought.

Is Studio Museum Harlem partnering with other Black cultural institutions through the internet to expand their outreach? Why or why not?

Yes, I can see museum is a long, amazing history of partnering with different cultural orgs, the Schomburg being one of them, which is really incredible in the Schomburg has had some amazing programs during this time. Um, you know, I will say that part of the interesting work to obsidian museums existing partnerships, as they have stood with our exhibition program, or these last couple years is that we partner with MoMA, MoMA ps1, and what that has done, I think, is allowed for different type of approach and thinking through what it means to create and cultivate black space. And to have that be something that can be possible in lots of different places. And as well, recognizing that the work of our mission, right is one that does not begin and end in a culturally specific space, right, but it was one that should exist everywhere. And so, part of that work has been thinking very critically about, you know, who are the folks within these different institutions, culturally specific and otherwise, who are keen to do that work and thinking with us, and then as well to kind of expand beyond that into kind of different directions. But I would say, in this moment here, and now, you know, we also have partnered in this is in Harlem, with like the Ali Forney center, right, which is a really incredible LGBTQ+ space that has, you know, really long and great history in Harlem, and as a community space as an organization, so, and as well partnering with, you know, the our libraries, as they are kind of going through Harlem, which are spaces that I think, have historically had ebbs and flows and certain types of visibility and presence. And so, it's been a really big honor to collaborate with them in terms of these public spaces, you know, in collaboration with these kind of local community networks that really have made these

libraries, like their hubs. And I, you know, I will say that, outside of the discussion of kind of, kind of community space in this moment, given that so much has gone online, it's been a great opportunity to, to think through ways where we can kind of call different folks into conversation with each other. So, you know, we're having an upcoming program, that was a series of different artists that, you know, will be happening in the new year, we've, you know, had these great conversations, there was a wonderful program that's centered around Mr. Soul as a as a documentary, which was really phenomenal, and brought into collaboration, some great community partners alongside of artists and thinkers. And then, you know, another example would be like Maysles, which is a really amazing documentary center based in Harlem, and an incredible institution in its own right. And Maysles has been an ongoing partner of City Museum, through and for and beyond this moment, because, you know, they have done really great work thinking very locally, but as well as a very global reach in asking questions about what black cinema should be. So I mean that's the long and expansive answer just to say yes And something that we've done very enthusiastically, I'm feeling very much so kind of committed to what it means to have the mission be everywhere, embed embedded into everything, right, because the idea of artists of, you know, Afro Latin x and African descent, that is something that, you know, the hope is that it is sustainable, right that like, this is something that is not invested in as a kind of temporary discourse, but rather that the investment goes deep and wide. And that actually becomes a collective obligation to do that work supportively.

Dr. Vedet Coleman-Robinson Interview– November 2, 2020

Why must we “protect, preserve and interpret African and African American art, history and culture?”

As you go into mainstream museum you don't see African American history and culture throughout those spaces. Making sure those histories are protected preserved and interpreted properly is important. So, what they [AAAM] wound up doing is just really making sure to, to give us the foundation to be able to protect, interpret and preserve our history because nobody else is doing it. And if they were doing it, they were doing it in a way that as collections were coming to that they were kind of like putting it off to the side. So, things are just sitting on shelves as part of this larger crowd. You weren't making it to the floor, which is another reason why, you know, African Americans weren't seeing themselves in those museums. So, we you don't see yourself in a museum like that, especially during, you know, post Jim Crow, your kind of just get to the point where you have to build your own. So that's kind of where that kind of, but that's where our museums are kind of founded. Excuse me. And through that, you know, as the years went on, we've just had more museums be established that are for us. So, folks can continue to, you know, go into these establishments and see themselves.

How would you describe the African American Museum movement? And when did it begin?

I think it's this movement of making sure that our history is preserved and interpreted correctly. And all of this happened, like, really shortly after the civil rights movements. So you wind up seeing this influx of preserving our history, whether it was something that was happening intentionally, or if it was something that was happening, you know, just through Oh, my gosh, let's hurry up and get this person's papers, or, let's make sure that we have these artifacts are let's make sure that we have you know, these posters, and things of that nature, from protests, think things like that, that happened on the ground, somebody has always thought about the need to preserve this history, with black art, especially African art, the cool thing about our museums, African art related or just our history is all of our museums are created and established in the communities in which they serve. So, we don't really have people misappropriating. Or we don't have the problem of people saying that I want my collection back, because they want stole it, they were things that were given to the museum, from the, from the community, or things that we're giving to the museum directors as gifts. So it wasn't, it's nothing like, you know, even though some pop culture, stuff like Black Panther and things like that, as, as folks were like, Oh, I want our, you know, our artifacts back or, you know, be sure you give those back to such and such tribe. We don't really have that, because we it came from a place of love and giving in the first place to make sure that people saw themselves in those museums. And I can give you an example of

something that just happened recently, I received a phone call from a gentleman who has a museum, it's not a black Museum, but he has a PCM. He just said it was a history museum. So, I don't know what that is. I don't know if it's a historical society. I don't know if it's just, you know, American history. He didn't really give too much detail about it. But he said he has this museum, and it's in a community but nobody comes. So, I said, Well, what when you say and this was prior to the corona pandemic, so it's not like, you know, our conversation was during the pandemic, but he was saying that his numbers just were not reflecting anybody in the community coming. So, I said to him, I said, Well, number one, when you say community, what, what does that mean for you? And he said, Well, just to be honest, my museum is in a black community, but nobody around me is coming to my museum. And I asked him, I said, Well, do you have any collections from the community? He said, so then I said, Well, do you do any programming specific to the community and the needs of the community? He said, No. I said, have you ever opened your doors to the community to say, we're going to be kind of like an annex Community Center. Now you don't have to be a community center, but do things where you know, that people in the community feel welcome to come into your establishment, to maybe have a baby shower, to maybe have a wedding, you know, things of that nature? And he didn't, everything was no, no, no, no, no. And I told him that that was his problem, right? Because all of our museums, that's not our problem. So, if you look at just, historically, if you look at our museums, something that I always draw people's attention to, is, if you think about when there are riots, right, or anything of civil unrest, I have yet to hear about any of our museums being attacked. Mm hmm. They're protected. And the reason that they're protected is just like how a church is protected, because the community that, that that museum is in regard to that museum. And because they see themselves in that Museum, right, it's either somebody that they knew they can be, you know, they can say that sort of those grandmother's shawl, or, you know, the, you know, in the case of I think it's the Louis Museum in Baltimore, I don't know where you're located. But, you know, the reginal. f Louis Museum in Baltimore, there's, you know, several different artifacts from all over the state, that are in that museum on display from not just prominent African Americans, but just African Americans, in general, have done something in Maryland, done something of significance and want to have their stories preserved. And there's also an archive there. So, when you put all that together, think about the fact that there were riots, and there were protests in Baltimore, but nobody has touched that museum. Right. So, there's a lot to say about that, in just, you know, being out in the world. Something that was very profound is through these protests that are happening right now. Right? So, everything that's happened in 2020, really, our museums have been places of healing and reconciliation for African Americans, even though a pandemic when things are closed. So, you can look at something like the National Civil Rights Museum, right? There was a, there was a protest, and I forget where they started, let's just say that they started like at City Hall, right. So, the protesters started as a city hall, but then that, but they ended their protest at the National Civil Rights Museum. And the reason that that that happens is because that museum number one is, is a pillar in that community of Memphis. Number two, that museum has always made sure to

make has always made sure to take care of the community, and make sure that the community although it's a national museum, I heard the community themselves in it in some way, shape or form, right. As vendor, they have programming that speaks to that community. So, a lot of happening for this protest is everybody so we're going to stop there. And they had a like, had a program outside of the museum, which was phenomenal. And, you know, the staffers I can't remember, I can ask a couple of people for you if they were involved in the programming, but you know, the speeches and things that were happening Just from the protesters in general, whether that was part of whether that was part of the programming from the museum or not, you know, is neither here nor there, but it was just the fact that it happened. Same thing happened in DC at the National, African American History and Culture museum. It's just, you know, you see a point of love and security in a place that's designed for you. And intentionally even, right. So, like the National Museum of African American History and Culture was designed by black architects. Same thing with the National Civil Rights Museum. Same thing with eating lunch, Mrs. Louis Museum, architects that I would like for you to look up because it's pertinent to the work that you're doing. One is Darrell McKissick. She's very much on LinkedIn, LinkedIn, but even if you can't get an interview with her, she has blogs and stuff on her website. So, you'll be able to have a private session with her. Well, you'll be able to see some of the blog posts that she put out, and she's been in, you know, media like crazy. Then the next archetype that I would like for you to look up is Phil Free lawn. And he was a driving force behind the retina of Louis museum. He did this at the museum that he designed, as well as the two Mississippi museum. So, he did the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, and a whole bunch of other museums. But the reason I say look them up is because when they are designing African American museums, they are designing them in a way that speaks to the African American community. So, these museums aren't just, you know, buildings that pop up, right. And then a whole bunch of artifacts are put in, they're all built very intentionally, to African Americans. The rhetoric of Louis Museum, for instance, the way that Phil freeline designed, that museum is so great, it's so great, because when you walk up, you have to kind of walk, you walk up the sidewalk, and then you start to walk into the influence. It's almost as if there's no body of water there. But it's almost as if you're crossing over from like a slave ship, into the museum. So, it's kind of intentional in a way where, or period, it's almost intentional in a way that makes you that draws your senses to say, Oh, my gosh, I'm walking into this. Like, it's just a museum that you're walking up the stairs and some of the same things with, you know, the National African American Museum, and the civil rights meet the National Civil Rights Museum that I think there were a bit that one. And that's an annex, it's built around the Lorraine Motel. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.

How does the African American Association of museums enhance the ability of museums to serve the needs and interest of persons of African ancestry and those who wish to know more about the art history and culture of African derived cultures?

So, our standpoint is in the way that we do everything is just very intentional from the start from making sure that the collections are correct, making sure that just about everybody does stakeholders meetings. The reason for that is, you want to know what the community needs are. The National Museum by the National African American Museum actually traveled the country to figure out what folks wanted to see in that museum. And that was something that feel free live and Lord cultural resources, I work resources on the project, just traveling the country making sure that everything that was in there was intentional. You know, questions like, you know, hey, what artifacts Do you want to see here in DC? Do you want to see this museum, we're on the Mall, in particular, would you like to see this museum? And, you know, just about all of our museums do that. Across the country, but they do hold stakeholders' meetings, because that's really the only way that you can see what the public wants. You know, you can always have a program, but it's not well attended, because you didn't do research to figure out what the needs were, you have to meet the needs, you can't just go things out there and throw it at the wall, see if it's gonna stick. And finally, after a while, you have to remove strategically to find to make sure that you're meeting the needs of what people want to learn how they want to learn it, or more people are, you know, into senses. More people, you know, are sensory, some people just want to read. So, you have to fit, you have to figure out that balance. A little bit of something for everybody. And then you also have to think about like, how you're going to do learning for children? What are you going to put pieces of your collection are suitable for children, and how that can be, you know, pared down? And a lot of our museums partner with their local public administration, and administrators and stuff like that, and sometimes they'll bring in sometimes they'll bring in public school teachers, to be consultants, just to make sure that they're getting it right. But that's also done by the education department. For each Museum, they usually have their own education department education outreach.

What is the importance and goal of having a consortium of black cultural institutions that can network on a national and even international level?

The importance of what we do is really just making sure that we stay connected, we stay on trend with what the needs of our visitors would be, but then also what we need to do as far as the museum, the whole entire museum field is concerned, we don't really have the same needs as some of the mainstream museums, or vice versa. I can tell you that being a part of AAAM is a little different. Because, you know, folks come to us for a sense of community. And even you know, this year, we weren't able to have our conference in person, but a lot of our members are just like, it feels like a homecoming. It's one of those places where if things get too heavy at work, I can always come and have a conversation with other museum

professionals across the country and even internationally, we're dealing with some of the same stuff, dealing with some of the same racism that we're dealing with as frontline staffers dealing with some of the same issues that we're dealing with. We're trying to find fundraise in in this environment or trying to fundraise when your museum is so nice or trying to fundraise when your museum is almost right next door to one of the major museums that doesn't really see a benefit in partnering with you. So, our organization is more about networking, supporting one another and partnerships and making sure that everybody, once they leave from a triple am conference, or once they leave from what are our member focus groups, that, you know, they leave a little better and have, have the resources and tools in place to do their job a little better, and not just that just a little better, but you know, just feel good about what they're doing. You can't really get what we have other places. It's just we just, we support folks a little differently.