

Neutrality is Not an Option, Museums Don't Need Left-over Statues

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During the USA's COVID-19 disaster, social inequities, and lack of coordination in the healthcare industry laid bare the fragility of the American experiment democracy. Museums shuttered their doors across the nation; the majority of their staff were terminated or furloughed without pay, and many were left with limited access to government support. Amid this crisis, public rage erupted across the globe over the extrajudicial public execution of an unarmed Black American, George Floyd, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Despite the public outrage and international Black Lives Matter protests, the public killings continue, and each death sparks more outrage and protest yet.

In the United States and Britain, protestors have transformed their words into actions by tearing down monuments to slave traders, slave owners, and traitors. As statues fell, museum professionals realized the somber notion that for much of our publics, museums are perceived as the reservoir for all things historical. The news media, politicians, and protesters alike, promptly report that museums are the appropriate dump site for these unwanted relics because museums can be trusted to contextualize their history.

Somehow, “the museum” has come to represent kind of vessel for all the embarrassing artifacts of our heritage, irrespective of the artistic merit or historical significance. As museum professionals, we must understand that these uninteresting effigies served only one purpose when they were deployed on public property in our society: to remind a once enslaved people of their subjugation, and to validate the beliefs of the supremacists that they have an unalienable right to their privilege won through conquest.

We thank the Museum of the African Diaspora for their image to accompany this editorial (Figure [1](#)), just one of the responses raised to the Black Lives Matter movement that has gripped the world. Indeed, the editorial staff of this journal agrees that museums have no place on the sidelines and that the age of neutrality is over.



Figure 1. Museum web page supporting protests of the police killings of Black people in the USA. Image courtesy of the Museum of the African Diaspora.

As co-author of this Editorial, Bonita Bennett views this American shame from her role leading the District Six Museum a pioneering institution that grappled with the legacy of the displacement of black people in apartheid South Africa. It is a museum whose subjectivity is declared upfront: it tells the story through a lens of working-class histories, which had been silenced under apartheid. All its objects speak to that perspective. The lessons learned in that museum included knowing when to say no to the “stuff” of painful memory. In working with South Africa’s displaced community, the museum continues to learn how work with objects that contribute towards community as well as telling their story to others. Rather, museums can productively engage in debates like those roiling the United States, are to use the material culture to remember the lives of the oppressed well-lived, the errors that led to suffering, and to scaffold a more productive reconciliation with a regrettable past as ways to enable movement toward a more just future for all people.

We cannot let our public figures hide behind the museum as a closet for the ephemera of oppression. Museums are not the graveyard for unsettling floatsam of long-past oppressive regimes. To keep these items in perpetuity provides legitimacy to a national narrative powered by white supremacy and racism. Instead, a few items, carefully curated, are useful for remembering the past. As evidenced by many of the international *sites of conscience*, we only need a few examples of a horrific past to carry the history of injustice. While we can speak to the power of a room full of shoes worn by those who died in a holocaust museum, or

the skulls that stand as a monument to the victims at the Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, also known as Cambodia's Killing Fields Museum, the statues in question here do not stand as witness to the victims. Rather, they are the clean-scrubbed homages of their intellectual descendants to honor their cruel ancestors. These objects were tools of a fictional history of conquest, made permanent with metal and stone, erected decades post-mortem to the events they supposedly memorialize.

These structures of the American Apartheid¹ were intended to deny the loss of a failed insurrection and to reinforce the military rights of a ruling class to continued subjugation of a class of people. They represent the gloating victories of the powerful, victories won through oppression, exploitation and subjection, daily visible and tangible. Something needs to change about their conquering presences: maybe they should topple, be moved, or possibly even artistically interpreted by using them as raw material rather than artifact so their vainglorious manifestations can be challenged but not forgotten. There are likely to be several possible answers to the question of how to treat these statues, depending on context and location. But shipping these large millstones to museums is to freight our colleagues with obligations beyond their missions and budgets.

Focus: Black Lives Matter and Museum Practice

In this issue, our Research Practice Forum offers three responses to the Black Lives Matter uprising. Each offers a different insight into the issue. The first, the transcript of a live discussion by three senior leaders in the museum field and their reflections on the role of major cultural institutions to this civil rights issue. The second paper is a compelling letter to museum practitioners around the world from a docent, or more correctly, a griot at the Black Holocaust Museum, about his own experience living the unending history of the devastation caused by the persecution of him and his community. And lastly, an anthology from the International Coalition for Sites of Conscience, a collection of member statements from a range of museums to describe this moment in time. We hope this focus section will advance our professional dialogue and more importantly help museums to dismantle systems of racism and oppression that plague our world.

Re-Centering Interpretative Experience

The main articles in this issue also seem prophetic to us now that we see them against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement. Authors from Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum offer a forum piece on a more active role that museums can play engaging public audiences in understanding the Anthropocene from our perch here on the edge of an environmental change that does not bode well for human survival.

In our main section, we find articles by Nancy Mithlo and Aleksandra Sherman that calls our attention to how perspective-taking, a long-accepted education strategy, may increase bias in ways that are counter-productive to cultural learning. In kind, the set of papers that follow address digital learning labs (Bell & Smith), shared authority in art and historical collections (Beaujot), and the ability to understand our work through crowdsourced data (Nuessel, McNamara & Garneau).

We are also pleased to publish a new story cultural representation in exhibition development, In this case, the work of the Mutare Museum in Zimbabwe that co-created their collections with the community where they are based. This is our first publication by author Njabulo

Chipangura, and we look forward to seeing where these experiments move as they seek to tell the story of their community from the inside out.

We bookend this issue with the disquieting reflection on the exhibition Auschwitz, and the impact of that tragedy in light of the events we witness today. Editor Emerita, Zahava Doering, served as editor for the transcript that is the lead paper in this issue. Her insights on the design of the Auschwitz exhibition brings another genocide into the light and offers guidance for any exhibition about the risks of fascism and genocide. We recommend reading both her detailed examination of the Auschwitz exhibit alongside Reggie Jackson's Letter to Museum Practitioners in our Research Practice Forum.

And, we remind readers that the Wiley Online Library where this journal is found, now has a rich resource of virtual issues that explore the issue of identity and representation in museums. All of these issues and the introductory essay were released as open access on both CuratorJournal.org, our social media site, and on Wiley's Curator: The Museum Journal's web page: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/21516952> for the 2020 year.

Museum work is not neutral. Museums have never been neutral. The act of collecting preferences some cultural stories over others. The effort to interpret the collections will always be political. What we do with our power and privilege will continue to be the subject of scrutiny, as well it should. We are the gatekeepers of culture and history. We have a duty to recognize that history has never been neutral and that to think otherwise is obstruct the path of social justice. Neutrality is not an option and we don't want your statues.

Note

¹ We use the term American Apartheid, even though this term was more common in the political science studies of the 1990s because it offered a Americans a direct parallel to the experiences of South Africans. While the term has fallen from favor in the USA, we resurrect that term here because the time may have finally arrived for the American museums to learn from the pioneering work on truth and reconciliation led by many African nations' museums.

Biographies

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