
 Op-Ed

Museum Remedy

15 Resources for Museums
Through a Lens of Racial Equity

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On January 20, 2021, the light beam that is inaugural poet Amanda Gorman called out to the world with urgency and conviction, “even as we grieved, we grew.” As Gorman, the National Youth Poet Laureate, recited her poem – “The Hill We Climb” – at the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, she brought a much-needed spirit of catharsis, renewal, and restoration to our weary hearts after four-plus years of tumultuous times, trauma bonding, and outright racism.

We were trauma bonded, when George Floyd was murdered in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, as the world watched the horrific video reel of the killing, which lasted 8 minutes and 46 seconds. We were trauma bonded, during the United States Capitol siege of Jan 6, 2021, and the triggering video recaps, breaking news updates, and talking heads providing insensitive commentary and think pieces about the violent group of MAGA supporters and their insurrectionist actions.

As we shake loose the shackles of our trauma bond, we need to turn our eyes towards racial equity and repair. Witness how this past year has challenged our beliefs and heightened our anxiety. We must witness what our museums have undergone and still experience tremendous upheaval when it comes to institutional remedy in the wake of social justice movements, yet our collective consciousness demands structural changes to our institutions.

At the 2017 conference of MuseumNext® (a global conference series on the future of museums), I stated:

If we truly believe in the power of cultural institutions to impact communities and engage in museums’ capacity to bring about social change, improve cultural awareness, and even transform the world, then we must also believe that our internal practices have an impact, and must act according to the changes we seek.

It is imperative for museums to do the inner work so they can be ready for socially responsive practice, shining a light on social change, human rights, Black Lives Matter, and beyond. In the past few years, during times of community uprising and racial reckoning, the urgent need for museums to “do the work” has become even more explicit, evolving into open letters of demand aimed at cultural institutions from all over the world.

What is the work, you may wonder?

It is the work of relevance in exhibit making, curating experiences that are socially responsive; drawing parallels between our hallowed histories, with a myriad of interpretations and a modern story to tell. It is the work of representation in hiring BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, persons of color) curators, historians, designers, and developers to infuse a diversity of voice sorely lacking in our museums and perspectives from communities of color we aspire to build bridges with. It is the work of fostering a “civic mindset” in our audiences – the call to action our visitors can carry with them to enact fairness in the world. “Civic mindset,” writes Anthony Pennay in *The Civic Mission of Museums*, is essentially cultivating “the mental habits of engaged and informed citizens” that can grapple “with policy, tough history, and current events” and with “challenging community issues.”¹

Additionally, it is the work of racial equity, building anti-racism institutions and dismantling biased systems to reform museums who have never successfully “walked their talk” of diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is the work of redistributing

resources, decolonizing collections, and recruiting and retaining BIPOC persons to leadership and board positions in museums. It is the work of calling out gatekeepers, and calling forth better workplaces, wage equality, and better treatment for those museum workers who have been unceremoniously furloughed and harmed over the years. This is the work of museum remedy and it requires healing and momentum, action and advocacy and a willingness to change.

The veil has been lifted on the idiosyncrasies and tensions bubbling in our democracy. And be it a salad bowl or melting pot, America’s demographics continue to change ever more quickly with strength of numbers in diverse communities, as its public demands more transparency, community care, and relevance from its cultural institutions. In an era of public health concerns, polarizing views, global pandemics, and societal upheaval, museums are called upon to display community care, balancing mission alignment, institutional advancement, and core business operations with social justice and community engagement.

To that end, I have carefully curated articles, poems, blogs, and videos meant to spark your institution and your personal practice on a course of Museum Remedy through a lens of racial equity. Following these resources are discussion questions to share with colleagues as you reflect on what you’ve taken in. I suggest starting with a bonus: an artistic, beautiful, and hopeful take on the future we could envision, if only we adopt said remedies: *Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair*, presented by The Intercept at <https://youtu.be/2m8YACFJlMg>.

Resources for Museum Remedy

Resource Reads: Definitions + Toolkits



1

“Systemic vs. Systematic: What’s the Difference?”

by Madeleine Wahl

Readers Digest,
updated July 14, 2020



www.rd.com/article/systemic-vs-systematic-whats-the-difference/

2

“The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture”

by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun

*Dismantling Racism:
A Workbook for Social Change Groups*,
ChangeWork, 2001



www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html

3

“A Framework for Action in Response to Moments of Outrage & Crisis”

by Raquel Thompson,
Mateo Mossey,
and Lauren Benetua

OF/BY/FOR ALL,
June 2, 2020



[www.ofbyforall.org/
updates-feed/2020/6/2/
taking-action-or-not-in-moments-of-
national-outrage](http://www.ofbyforall.org/updates-feed/2020/6/2/taking-action-or-not-in-moments-of-national-outrage)

Don’t Believe Me, Just Watch: Videos



4

“Let’s Talk: A Conversation about Race and Museum Practice”

(videos accessible with
MAAM membership)

Mid-Atlantic Association
of Museums



[https://maom.wildapricot.org/
event-4029348](https://maom.wildapricot.org/event-4029348)

5

“Social Justice in Museums”

(four-video series)

Illinois State Museum,
updated December 17, 2020



https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQBdMvUE1cMD_89NzQrDC4PpMSvt4_4_t

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“Beyond Statements: People Power”

Association of
Art Museum Curators,
webinar, 2020



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEQcBpS-INc&t=2800s>

8

“Cartography: A Black Woman’s Response to Museums in the Time of Racial Uprising”

by Porchia Moore

The Inclusion (blog),
June 10, 2020



<https://inclusion.com/2020/06/10/cartography-a-black-womans-response-to-museums-in-the-time-of-racial-uprising/>

**Point of View:
Perspectives from the Field**



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“Whiplash”

by Monica O. Montgomery

“Additional Reflections on Arthur Jafa’s
Love is the Message, The Message is Death,”
Smithsonian American Art Museum (blog),
July 9, 2020



<https://americanart.si.edu/blog/additional-reflections-arthur-jafa-love-death>

9

“To Bear Witness: Real Talk about White Supremacy Culture in Art Museums Today”

by Kelli Morgan

Burnaway,
June 24, 2020



<https://burnaway.org/magazine/to-bear-witness/>

10

“What Should a Museum Look Like in 2020?”

by Kimberly Drew

Vanity Fair/Culture,
August 24, 2020



www.vanityfair.com/culture/2020/08/what-should-a-museum-look-like-in-2020

11

“Moving from Allyship to Solidarity Actions Look Like”

by Heidi Schillinger

Fakequity (blog),
July 2 2020



<https://fakequity.com/2020/07/02/moving-from-allyship-to-solidarity-actions-look-like/>

Deeper Insight: Articles & Books



12

“On the Limits of Care and Knowledge: 15 Points Museums Must Understand to Dismantle Structural Injustice”

by Yesomi Umolu

artnet® news, June 25, 2020



<https://news.artnet.com/opinion/limits-of-care-and-knowledge-yesomi-umolu-op-ed-1889739>

13

“Uncovering White Supremacy Culture in Museum Work”

by Hannah Heller, nikhil trivedi,
and Joanne Jones-Rizzi

The Inclusionum (blog),
March 4, 2020



<https://inclusionum.com/2020/03/04/white-supremacy-culture-museum/>

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The Civic Mission of Museums

by Anthony Pennay

Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021

15

Museums as Agents of Change: A Guide to Becoming a Changemaker

by Mike Murawski

Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield; series:
American Alliance of Museums.
Available May 2021

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Ask yourself these questions and discuss with your colleagues as you use the resources in the previous pages.

1. Privilege is our fulcrum in the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion. How can white persons show true care and regard for BIPOC persons who are having their humanity and dignity denied and questioned? How can allies turn into accomplices, using their privilege to advance racial equity and stand in solidarity?
2. How radically different would the museum sector look if our museums utilized the following to affirm #BlackLivesMatter: physical space, education, digital programs, artists' demonstrations, live performance, collections, directors' letters, social media? How can museums use their presence and resources to foster racial equity, expand interpretations, and increase tolerance in society?
3. Performative/fake solidarity can look like this: a museum speaks out and issues a statement about injustice and Black lives mattering in the world without acknowledging how their internal practices are complicit with trauma, erasure, and denigration of Black lives in the workplace and on the walls. What actions can museums take to be authentic both internally and externally?
4. In 2020, many open letters of demand – written by museum practitioners on social media – suggested a variety of interventions to reform museums into antiracist institutions and reconcile the injustices that some of them perpetuate. These interventions have included:
 - anti-bias / cultural sensitivity training;
 - diversity, equity, and inclusion task forces, statements, and plans;
 - employee-led review boards and committees for human resources (HR) and grievances;
 - hiring and retaining more BIPOC staff and curators;
 - adding more BIPOC and non-wealthy persons to museum boards;
 - decolonizing museums by repatriating sacred items and Indigenous remains;
 - decentering the default white gaze in museums;
 - unionization and wage equality for front line / per diem / education staff;
 - public apologies and redistribution of resources;
 - calls for leadership to step down and step back; and
 - creating an institutional focus on racial justice.

How has the open-letter format been a space for voicing long-held frustrations and advancing progressive agendas through interventions like these? What experiences have you had with the open call-outs in museum work? ■

¹ Anthony Pennay, *The Civic Mission of Museums* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021): 6.