A Museum in Progress: The Practice of White Accompliceship with African Exhibitions

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in the late 19th century, museums were places where the "exotic" was shared with White wealthy visitors. These objects were often from various non-European countries and acquired through illicit means. Still today, art museums display these same confiscated objects to a mostly White audience. But as we seek to ensure that complex stories of African cultural objects are shared, museum staff are asking tough questions that push administration to disrupt a paternalistic White supremacist framework that shapes what many museums exhibit and what audiences' exhibitions cater to. The Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) in Columbus, Ohio is working to critique this framework as they shape their identity as a "Museum in Progress." For CMA, to be a "Museum in Progress" is to embark on an iterative, research-centered, and inquisitive journey that intertwines personal convictions, biases, and the professional duty to operationalize self-reflection for themselves and visitors.

Keywords: museums, white privilege, ally, accomplice, African art, decolonize, art

Art museums are institutions that preserve collections of artifacts and creative works that hold cultural, artistic, and historical significance. Such institutions often have a mission to share these important works with the public through permanent collections or temporary exhibitions. From the late 1800s to the early 1900s American art museums modelled themselves after European art museums establishing large collections of artwork (Mayer, 1998). By the early 1900s United States art museums were places where the artifacts and arts works from Black and Brown communities was shared with White wealthy audiences (Berzock & Clarke, 2011). These objects were often from various non-European countries and acquired by European colonialists as trophies of their conquests (Karp & Lavine, 1991). Still today, museums display these same confiscated objects to a mostly White audience (Farrell & Medvedeva, 2010; Kini, 2018). But as we seek to ensure that complex stories of African cultural objects are shared, museum staff are asking tough questions that

push administration to disrupt a paternalistic White supremacist framework. It is a framework that highlights Eurocentric culture through an othering of non-Eurocentric cultures (Morrison, 1992) ultimately shaping the content of museums exhibitions (Crum & Hendrick, 2018). How can social justice oriented museum leaders create opportunities to challenge stereotypical notions of works created by African people? How might these leaders encourage museum administration, who uphold policies that result in African cultural erasure, without upsetting those who control their employment? How do we respectfully give honor to diverse and complex African ideas, culture, and values without romanticizing and essentializing them? How can museum leaders highlight and challenge the contradictory practices of ahistoricizing and homogenizing racial or ethnic groups while valuing the individual and the unique (Morton, n.d.)? How can museum staff and administration honor African cultures and values with which they don't identify?

Challenging Eurocentric narratives imposed on African and African descended people within museums is not new. In 1992, Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* was an exhibition of archives and resources from the Maryland Historical Society in The Contemporary. Wilson addressed the history of White violence against Black and Brown bodies historically suppressed by museums across the globe. In particular, Wilson unveils how museums are institutions that uses its cultural power to impact who is or isn't represented and whose history is silenced and whose is not. In his exhibition, Wilson made commentary on power and white supremacy by juxtaposing artifacts, like a silver teapot with iron shackles. He placed a Klan hood in an antique baby carriage, presented a whipping post encircled by Victorian furniture, and took carved nineteenth-century cigar store Indian sculptures and positioned them in a way that turned their backs on the viewer to face photographs of Native Americans. Wilson's curation initiates a revisionist dialogue that makes America's institutional racism and museums' history of cultural bias conspicuous (Corrin, 1994; Wilson & Halle, 1993). *Mining the Museum* was a new presentation of history that required a collaborative effort with other artists, community historians, volunteers, and museum staff. It set a precedent for subverting a White elitist narrative about nonwhite people and challenged the ideological boundaries of the museum as a space of shared societal values.

The Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) in Columbus, Ohio, is continuing Wilson's legacy as they shape their identity as a

"Museum in Progress." For CMA, to be a "Museum in Progress" is to embark on an iterative, research-centered, and inquisitive journey that intertwines personal convictions, biases, and the professional duty to operationalize self-reflection for themselves and visitors. It systematizes institutional policies that use exhibitions and community partnerships to critique and discuss issues such as the misrepresentation of race and ethnicity in powerful cultural institutions that impact contemporary society. I found CMA's journey to be intriguing and notable. As a diversity practitioner, researcher, and artist, I have a long-standing partnership with CMA and have been involved in many of their community-building initiatives. This relationship created an opportunity to talk with staff members as they made the shift to reframe their museum practices.

In what follows are the challenges, successes, and strategies pulled from the initiatives of three CMA staff members: Cindy Foley, Executive Deputy Director of Learning and Experience; Hannah Mason-Macklin, Manager of Interpretation and Engagement; and Daniel Marcus, Roy Lichtenstein Curatorial Fellow. They were the temporary exhibition team for CMA's donated African cultural objects. As two individuals who identify as White and one as biracial with Black lived experiences, they tasked themselves with challenging how White supremacy manifests in exhibition practices. Their efforts occurred in the midst of an international conversation on colonial theft of African objects housed in European and American collections (150th anniversary, 2018; Haughin, 2018; Maclean, 2018). The goals of this article is to support museum education professors who shape forward-thinking students, offer recommendations for practicing museum educators to question their practices of cultural erasure, and encourage museum administrators to support their employees in embracing more inclusive practices while interrogating how White supremacy manifests.

Accomplice vs. Ally

In order for White people to interrogate White supremacy, it is important that they determine if their actions align with being an ally or accomplice. I argue that an ally is a person who responds with empathy to injustices inflicted on the marginalized. They don't simply lament over those affected. Rather, allies identify with marginalized people's inherent human value, respect their perspectives, and see non-dominant people's lives as congruent to theirs. Allies listen to learn, connect, and build relationships. They educate themselves on social, economic, and political issues that affect non-dominant

communities, and are open to being uncomfortable when faced with the possibility that they (knowingly or unknowingly) are implicated in systems and institutions of oppression. Allies don't seek to save the marginalized, judge, become defensive when their motives are questioned, or believe that their amicable disposition will make racism, sexism, classism, or any other form of oppression dissipate. Allies understand that to operate out of ignorance is to collude with systemic oppressive structures that negatively impact the lives of marginalized communities. However, there are other uses of the term ally.

For example, Wendy Ng , Syrus Marcus Ware and Alyssa Greenberg (2017) make the distinction between museums being allies and engaging in diversity work. For them, diversity work takes the form of community engagement activities towards certain cultural groups or hiring initiatives, but maintain practices that do not critique "hidden problematic power dynamics" that perpetuate "privilege by excluding or disempowering visitors with marginalized identities" (Ng, Ware & Greenberg, 2017, p.143). As museum educators, they are interested in collaboratively implementing anti-oppressive work environments, programming, and inclusive exhibition content from a social justice perspective (Ng, Ware & Greenberg, 2017, p. 143-144).

I am in agreement with their position, however, I am interested in language and behavior that implies a higher level of accountability to, cooperation with, and sacrifice for marginalized groups. Colleen Clemens (2017) discusses the differences between ally and accomplice with a focus on how and with whom that individual is advocating:

> An ally will mostly engage in activism by standing with an individual or group in a marginalized community. An accomplice will focus more on dismantling the structures that oppress that individual or group—and such work will be directed by the stakeholders in the marginalized group. Simply, ally work focuses on individuals, and accomplice work focuses on the structure of decision-making agency (para. 4).

To be an accomplice is to move beyond identifying with a non-dominant group. I argue there is an important, yet limited form of allyship that includes a physical display of allegiance to a marginalized group such as wearing safety-pins (Qamar, 2017) and *Black Lives Matter* shirts (Jaschik, 2016). This type of allegiance can exist in silence, resulting in spectator solidarity. Accompliceship

cannot. Though listening to and learning from marginalized people are important, it can leave one stagnate, seeking to satiate feelings of social justice ineptness, instead of understanding allyship as one option in creating lasting impact. For the accomplice the silence is deafening. The connections to marginalized people are so strong that accomplices find themselves unable to unsee the oppressive structures that impact the lives of non-dominant communities.

Although, accomplice is often linked to breaking the law, my intent is not to make a direct link to extralegal behavior. Rather, I seek to use a term that encompasses the idea of an assiduous partnership battling the status quo. Being an accomplice means to work towards undoing oppressive systems while standing *with* and not *in place of* marginalized people. Accompliceship requires the sacrifice of one's time, talent, and/or treasure with the focused goal of deconstructing systemic oppressive barriers, actions and policies within one's sphere of influence. These spheres are often spaces in which marginalized people don't have the same access (historically or contemporarily). To be an accomplice is to identify oppressive policies, and procedures and use one's sphere of influence to undo (incrementally to massively) those systems. Ideally, an accomplice is able to gain enough individual or collective power to hold those in power accountable for their transgressions. An accomplice requires equitable adjustments and considerations for marginalized groups who may not be physically present. They also seek to ensure a holistic representation and interpretation of marginalized cultures' ideas, and that values are not compromised. It can be difficult for allies or accomplices to operate alone. Therefore in order to create sustained systems that deconstruct oppressive barriers, it's best to integrate opportunities for people to reflect, question, and learn.

Museums, *Black Panther* and Colonization

CMA is a visitor-centered museum dedicated to creating inclusive experiences that connect people to art by facilitating art-making projects, encouraging conversations, and supporting proactive engagement with individuals and organizations outside of the museum. With financial support from a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, CMA launched two engagement initiatives. First, the Center for Creativity is a designated space where visitors can immerse themselves in themes, experiments, and hands-on activities in connection to their gallery experiences. Second, the Center for Art and Social Engagement is a shift from tangible exploration of artistic materials to investigating the

complexity of social and emotional issues embedded in objects' historical contexts (Lehe, 2018). CMA seeks to be a space where visitors, artists and community partners reflect on their lives, respond to their environments, challenge how the museum determines cultural validity, make connections between colonialism and how current injustices manifest in museum practices, and explore how the museum can practice accompliceship by using art as a tool for constructive critical dialogue. One impetus that pushed museums into a public critical conversation regarding acquisitions of works was Marvel Comics' international cinematic sensation, *Black Panther* (2018).

Black Panther is a science-fiction re-imagining of an African existence unencumbered by European-imposed slavery or colonialism. Through the high-tech, fictitious African country of Wakanda, movie-goers were able to experience a chimeric restoration of culture, history, and identity. Nonetheless, the film presents the museum as a global institution that serves "as an illegal mechanism of colonialism" (Haughin, 2018). For example, a scene in the film presents Killmonger, the *Black Panther's* antagonist, in a British museum confronting a White female museum representative regarding how colonial theft was the means by which the museum acquired his Wakandan ancestral artifacts in their current exhibition. After the museum director approaches Killmonger to share information about the encased African artifacts, he shares with her that the piece was taken by British soldiers in Benin, but it's from Wakanda. Kilmonger reveals his plan to take the artifact created by is Wakandan ancestors. The woman states that the artifact isn't for sale. Then, Killmonger asks the questions that are the foundation for the colonial theft debate, "How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it… like they took everything else?" (Cascone, 2018).

Black Panther ushered in a centuries-long international fight onto the popular culture stage. For example, Ethiopians have sought the return of hundreds of items including manuscripts, tabots, crosses, necklaces, drums, amulets, and Emperor Tewodros' clothes stolen by the British military during the Battle of Maqdala of 1868 (150th anniversary, 2018). Since 1872 requests have been made to the British and Italian governments to return items such as A Kebre Negest (Book of Kings), a silver crown, and the Axum obelisk that were all seized during the Ethiopia's invasion in 1935-1936 (150th anniversary, 2018). However, the British government has denied most of Ethiopia's requests for the restitution of these objects. "According

to the Association For the Return of the Maqdala Ethiopian Treasures, only 10 of the 468 items known to have been seized at Maqdala have been returned" (Codrea-Rado, 2018, para.8). In 2018, The Victoria and Albert Museum in the United Kingdom responded to Ethiopia's request by agreeing to a long-term loan of the stolen objects. However, such an agreement allows for the objects to maintain European ownership and does not guarantee that the treasures are returned permanently.

Restitution efforts have also been made in Australia and throughout West Africa. Rodney Kelly, a sixth-generation descendent of indigenous Australian warriors, requested the return of the Gweagal shield, as well as other Aboriginal artifacts from the British Museum in October of 2016 (Voon, 2017). On June 21, 2014, Britain returned two of the hundreds of Benin Empire bronze artworks stolen from Nigeria by the British Army in 1897 (Cascone, 2014; Plaucheur, 2019). In July 2016, lawmakers and civil society groups from Benin and France sent an open letter to French President François Hollande requesting the return of an estimated 6,000 objects stolen from the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, by colonizers and missionaries (Buffenstein, 2017). As a result, restoring items to their countries of origin may be forthcoming.

During a 2017 trip to Burkina Faso, newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron told University of Ouagadougou students that the return of African artifacts will become "a top priority" for France during the next five years" (Codrea-Rado, 2017, para. 1). "I cannot accept that a large part of the cultural heritage of several African countries is in France…(Maclean, 2018, para. 4) African heritage can't just be in European private collections and museums" (Codrea-Rado, 2017, para. 2) His statement and subsequent commission report (Maclean, 2018) may encourage an international increase in restitution efforts. As some politicians are considering their role in these efforts, some museums are reigniting conversations of cultural affiliation and repatriation of objects (Schillaci & Bustard, 2010) that critically question their duty to the objects, cultures represented, and history often ignored.

Museums are institutions that historically uphold upper-class Eurocentric belief systems and exclude non-White experiences and oppositions to this narrow codified perspective. As artist Deborah Roberts states, "Black Panther's museum scene describes a centuries-old truth — colonialists robbing Black culture to put on display for European consumption" (Ragbir, 2018, para 5). Thus, museums

seeking to redefine their purpose through a social justice lens have an opportunity to push a national discourse about how museums can be spaces of racist institutionalized socialization. By participating in limiting the narratives of Africans, museums are complicit in a form of cultural colonization that mimics the trauma inflicted on the countries where the artifacts were taken and replicates that trauma through erasure. *Black Panther* provided an opportunity for conversations about colonial theft, identity, and wealth to spread among museums, to move beyond its walls and reshape attitudes and strategies for creating equitable learning spaces.

CMA begins the work of accompliceship

Whiteness is not a portrayal indicative of all people who identify with European ancestry. Rather, Whiteness is a manufactured concept that influences our social, political, and emotional ways of being. Whiteness is the homogenization of European ethnicities whose definition is reliant upon the dilution of and deleterious characterization of Black identities (Crum, 2010). To be grounded in Whiteness is to be grounded in an identity that rests on a pedestal of oppression. To sustain the dominant monolithic conceptualization of Whiteness, one must discount the ways in which Black people think of and present themselves within Black communities, the ways Black people conceptualize themselves outside of the constraints of the White imagination, and how Blacks openly or discreetly oppose stereotypical caricatures (Crum, 2010). The concept of Whiteness cannot exist without inauthenticity and the inherent disposition of supremacy.

A White ally or accomplice can display pride in their ethnicity, without grounding their self-worth in believing that European ancestry means they are inherently better, should have greater access to systems and institutions, or should have their perspective valued over others who do not identify as White. Those invested in Whiteness ignore how the concept creates and sustains oppressive structures and practices because nothing has required them to acknowledge it. Or, they deliberately ignore the oppression Whiteness causes because to implicate themselves in a construct they benefit from, but didn't create, renders them feeling defensive or helpless. A White accomplice understands that to have the option to ignore oppression is a benefit of White supremacy because marginalized people are rarely able to opt out of oppression. Therefore, White accomplices use their privilege to challenge other White people who choose to invest in Whiteness and create spaces for people outside

of the non-dominant group to lead and be heard (DiAngelo, 2018; Lipstiz, 1998).

Thus, when we investigate the effects of Whiteness in museums showcasing African art, it is imperative to ask: How do we disinvest in the White-Black racial binary used to erroneously define each other? How do we challenge Whiteness by questioning language, and information used in exhibitions that feature non-White subjects? Is the institutional Eurocentric perspective voice the loudest? How accessible are other voices? How are our life experiences, however limited or vast, determining the language used in the exhibition?

These questions create a reflective exhibition development process that centers non-dominant voices. This new centering practice allows for museum curators, visitors and museum educators to interrogate Whiteness and hold ourselves accountable for perpetuating it while making room for us to reframe silenced identities as powerful, valuable, and necessary. It requires us to build community relationships, engage in self-reflection, and critically think about how information allows for authentic interactions with the objects and the histories that envelope them. As a result, we are able to learn to question why what we've been socialized to believe counts as knowledge.

Figure 1. The gallery where the Floch exhibition was held

In 2018, CMA acquired several West African artifacts from the daughter of Austrian painter Josef Floch. The collection consists of carved figures and objects from various African cultures such as the

Bamana, Senufo, Baule, and Dan, produced in countries including Mali, Ivory Coast, and Liberia (Mason-Macklin, 2018). As a stipulation of CMA's acquisition, the donor required the works be displayed. In the midst of administrative shifts and lack of museum staff, the duty to create the exhibition was left to Hannah (Visitor Engagement Coordinator) and Daniel (Roy Lichtenstein Curatorial Fellow) with support from Cindy Foley (Executive Deputy Director of Learning and Experience).[1] Hannah's supervisor recently left the museum and Daniel was a new fellow whose formal obligations were still being determined. Both were interested in supporting the exhibition, yet neither was well-versed in African history, nor did CMA have an Africanist on staff to contextualize the art works.

The time constraints made it difficult for the CMA to prepare for the exhibition and the remaining staff was responsible for focusing on other areas within the museum. It wasn't until they saw the film *Black Panther* that they recognized an opportunity to integrate the Center for Art and Social Engagement's mission in the exhibition. The Killmonger scene in *Black Panther* and the international demands of stolen works created an opportunity for reflection. Hannah, Daniel, and Cindy were confronted with a White imperialist reframing of the museum, had the conviction to acknowledge historical wrongs, felt obligated to display the Josef Floch Memorial Collection of West African works, and experienced some serendipity which created the apex for Hannah, Daniel, and Cindy to explore how museums can use African artworks to critique the Eurocentric lens through which art is often interpreted.

Many art museums have elements of white supremacy power structures within its institutional practices that rely on a Western-centric art history canon to assign value to non-European art (D'Souza & Mackie, 2018; Topaz, Klingenberg, Turek, Heggeseth, Harris, Blackwood, Chavoya, Nelson & Murphy, 2019). Intimately aware of these systems, the exhibition team applied their critiques of the museum and themselves. For Cindy, the exhibition helped her forge stronger relationships with community members already affiliated with the museum and expanded her reach to developing new relationships with other community members. These relationships work to hold her more accountable in executing inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for staff and visitors (Foley & Mason-Macklin, 2018; Foley, Mason-Macklin, & Marcus, 2018). Cindy is a White woman who acknowledges her access to privilege and potential blind spots. Thus, she seeks partnerships with honest

1 I interviewed each of the staff members for this publication

and direct, yet caring community members of all ethnicities using critical conversations to deconstruct problematic museum practices.

Hannah sees herself as a "visitor lobbyist" (Foley & Mason-Macklin, 2018; Foley, Mason-Macklin, & Marcus, 2018) who creates the logistics to build relationships between the museum and its audiences. As a biracial woman, Hannah seeks to manage visitors' interpretation and engagement with the museum while asking herself if she might be unknowingly supporting racist museum practices in her role. Due to the shift in administration, which caused limited oversight, Hannah was able to take the lead on the exhibition. She could take more risks to determine how to rectify her internal chasm: How to create more socially just practices in a museum that never instituted such practices with African objects?

To push her thinking, Hannah attended the Museum as Site for Social Action (MASS Action) conference. MASS Action is a three-year initiative at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. It brings together museum practitioners to address equity inside the museum, create relevant programming, increase community engagement, and create inclusive museum practices (Minneapolis Institute of Art). MASS Action gave Hannah the tools to convene a team to re-imagine design, interpretation, and collaborations with outside partners. Those partnerships helped to develop a drop-in gallery engagement, question who were included in and who constructed narratives, determine how visitors could engage with the challenges the museum was grappling with, and investigate what CMA meant by being a "museum in progress." Hannah was able to put her professional development to work with the help of Daniel.

Daniel, a new art history doctoral graduate, joined CMA as the first Roy Lichtenstein Curatorial Fellow. His position as a new non-staff member allowed him to see a disjuncture between the progressive art history discipline he was familiar with and the current museum practices that maintain an elitist Eurocentric narrative. Specifically, he came to the CMA collection seeking to avoid a stereotypical categorization of African art objects. Jacqueline Chanda (1992) argues that when art museums categorize West African art as tribal and primitive, it labels the culture from which the objects derive as unevolved and uncivilized. Using such descriptors has historically and erroneously defined many African societies as homogenous, polytheist, and African artisans as unprofessional instead of classically trained using art-making technology still used today (Chanda, 1992). By being able to see the African objects beyond their

functionality, Daniel was capable of helping to curate an exhibition that sees the objects as functional treasures *and* works of art. He is interested in presenting African objects in a way that challenges us to redefine art. Such a re-presentation requires us to acknowledge the intentional aesthetic properties and social processes connected to their creation and political questions that are important to pose within the works' cultural and historical context. In Daniel's effort to respect the collection and own his positionality as a White man seeking to use his relative power of influence, he helped reframe the problematic reading of ancient African works as the precursor to Western Modernist art. Such purports juxtapose African works to Eurocentric culture in an effort to validate African objects' existence.

Daniel and Hannah collaboratively moved from discussions to operationalizing accompliceship by reshaping practices that were within their spheres of influence. Hannah was responsible for visitor engagement and Daniel focused on curating. Together, they were able to revamp the Exhibition Planning Form[2] (Mason-Macklin, 2018) in order to reinforce CMA's goals of increased diversity, inclusive practices, and promoting creativity. The Exhibition Planning Form is a seven-page document with checklists and questions to ensure that objectives for the targeted exhibition are met. The exhibition teams' desire to unpack and decolonize the White supremacy and racism inherent in how artworks are acquired, discussed, and displayed coalesced in a list of objectives and probing questions: Art can present new stories and new perspectives; art education can deepen the curiosity within visitors; and the exhibition will not be one that can be condescended to. Questions included: What's the big idea we want the exhibition to focus on? How can we (museum staff) facilitate people's experiences with art? These questions drove an increased engagement with the city's African communities and created new questions regarding how various African communities conceptualize the art. They consulted with Columbus-based Togolese artist Talle Bamazi to give historical context and reimagine the exhibition design: "He selected the colors in the gallery to encourage visitors and the spirits of his ancestors to engage with these works of art anew" (Marcus, D. & Mason-Macklin, H. (2018e)

2 Merilee Mostov (formerly the Director of Inclusive Interpretation at Columbus Museum of Art) originally created the Exhibition Planning Form template before she left CMA. Merliee began systemizing how staff could question the institution practices. Hannah was new to her role during Merilee's transition and continues to update the form.

Figure 2. Bamazi supports CMA in the design on the exhibition

The second partnership CMA formed was with The New African Immigrants Commission. This group advocates for the development and implementation of policies and programs that support Ohio's sub-Saharan African population (The New African Immigrants). After discussing the artworks, the younger members of the organization did not have the same reverential approach to the works as the artist, Bamazi. However, what appeared to be a lack of veneration for the artifacts did not preclude The New African Immigrants members from acknowledging that the museum would be doing their communities a disservice if their cultures are congealed and romanticized. Additionally, CMA encouraged professors, artists and other CMA staff to form "critical friends" to continue open dialogue. Creating "critical friendships" aligns the strengths of partners with the mission of the exhibition and creates cross department and community collaboration methods.

Planning for Visitor Learning Outcome

CMA's feedback from their community partners garnered more questions regarding how to think about the impact of race on museum practices. It was noted that there must be considerations about how we talk about African art, and how we think about ourselves in connection to the art. Although the exhibition is focused on African cultures, the covert yet dominant narratives that shape how we understand the works and those who made

them is embedded in Whiteness. The Exhibition Planning Form included the title of the exhibition, dates, gallery location, and brief exhibition overview. However, there was considerable focus on the interpretation planning and visitor learning outcomes. The interpretation planning begins with the Big Idea written in one complete active sentence. It identifies and limits the content of the exhibition and delineates strategies to execute the big idea. For example, "West African sculptural objects reveal values, beliefs, and practices of the cultures they represent." Supplemental questions include, what will visitors talk and think about, do, question, or make in this exhibition? There were seven suggested outcomes in response to the Big Idea (Marcus & Mason-Macklin, 2018c, p. 3):

> 1) critical thinking (observe, compare, question, reflect, or interpret);
> 2) conversation (talk or write);
> 3) collaboration (work together to make or do something;
> 4) experimentation (play and manipulate materials, their bodies or ideas);
> 5) awareness and curiosity (gain increased awareness and interest);
> 6) imagination (generate new ideas or combinations);
> 7) enjoyment (express joy, pride, or a sense of well being).

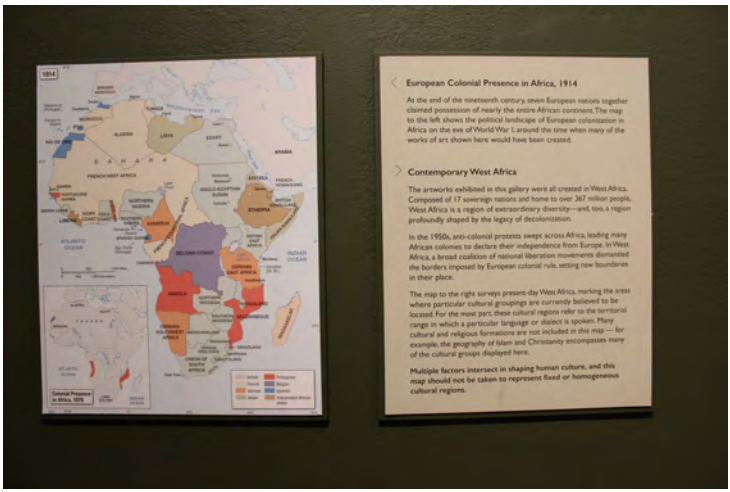

Figure 3. Colonial map of Africa in 1878

Three examples of strategies were used to execute the interpretation plan. Each offered an alternative view of African cultural groups, made connections between the objects and contemporary discussions, and highlighted local Africans. First, a color-coded ethnolinguistic map of Africa (a map that identified different African cultures by the languages they speak) is incorporated into the exhibition instead of a map focused on geography. In this way, visitors are encouraged to focus on where cultural groups occupied space prior to the creation of arbitrary colonial country lines. The second strategy is the "Join the Conversation Station."

Figure 4. The Conversation Station

The station is comprised of a vertical board between a set of comfortable chairs with backs on each side. The seating for this area was intentional as to ensure the seating is visitor-centered to encourage prolonged engagement with the works and conversations with other visitors. The goal was to encourage visitors to take their time in the galleries and connect to each other. The board contains an image from the scene with Killmonger in the museum looking at the Wakandan artifacts. There are post-it notes on either side of the image for visitors to respond to writing prompts about museums' current role in colonial theft and visitor reactions to the objects. Third, visitors can engage with local African communities by patronizing African businesses around the city. A Local African Business Directory is provided for all visitors. Next, the arguably more progressive execution of visitor learning outcomes was creating an alternative labeling system for the works.

Figure 5. Visitors engaging with each other at The Conversation Station

Figure 6. Visitors engaging with each other at The Conversation Station

More content, new labels

The exhibition team prioritized creating a variety of opportunities for visitors to be exposed to and contemplate multiple perspectives and voices in the exhibition (Mason-Macklin, 2018). There are two ways the team chose to highlight and challenge how power circulates in and around African works: They recontextualized the donor's relationship with the objects and revamped how works are labelled.

The exhibition text offers less information on the donor and more history on the ways the artworks were obtained.

Figure 7. Exhibition label with map of west African highlighting cultural groups. It also explains how the exhibition questions power, colonization, and gender norms.

An excerpt from the exhibition summary text states:

> *What can art do? The artworks that make up the Josef Floch Memorial Collection answer this question in strikingly different ways, channeling powers large and small— curing ailments, communicating authority, safeguarding crops and harvests, and even creating new life. They also share a common history: Each object on view in this exhibition was removed from West Africa during the early twentieth century, when much of the region was still subject to European colonial rule. Separated from the communities that made and used them, these artworks nevertheless keep alive their makers' creativity and retain the power to inspire* (Marcus & Mason-Macklin, 2018c, p. 2).

Centering the makers and colonial history over highlighting the life of the donor is a nontraditional answer to the question "who is celebrated in museums and in society" (Bond, 2018, para. 10)? In the same way, Professor Deborah Whaley argues that "it is vital that we see historical figures in their complete complexity, even if it encompasses a hidden history that is antithetical to their democratic facade." Like artists, we must see collectors in their complexity if we

are going to do African art and its makers any justice.

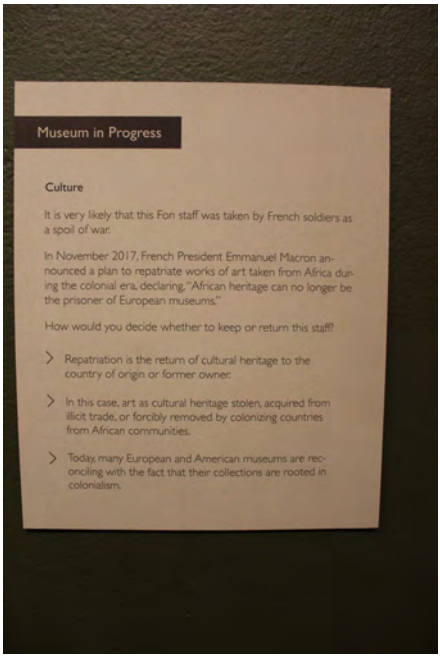

Figure 8. Museum in Progress label posing questions to visitors about repatriation of African objects.

The transparency efforts continued by installing "Museum in Progress" extended wall labels adjacent to each piece. The wall labels included four elements. The first component contained the historical context of the piece. For example, an oba mask from the ancient Kingdom of Benin is displayed in the exhibition. The label offered the following historical context: "The Kingdom of Benin (located in present-day Nigeria) included thousands of bronze sculptures, like the oba mask displayed here. When British soldiers defeated the King of Benin in 1897, they removed a large trove of Benin bronzes to England. Today, around 700 bronzes are owned by the British Museum in London, the largest collection of Benin royal art outside Nigeria. Since the end of British colonial rule in 1960, Nigerian authorities have argued for the return of the Benin bronzes, claiming rightful ownership over the cultural heritage of the Kingdom of Benin" (Marcus & Mason-Macklin, 2018a, p. 2).

The second component of the label was the way the team chose to highlight and challenge how power circulates in and around African

works. Therefore, the CMA used "Unrecorded Artist" instead of "Unknown Artist" when referring to the creator of the work.

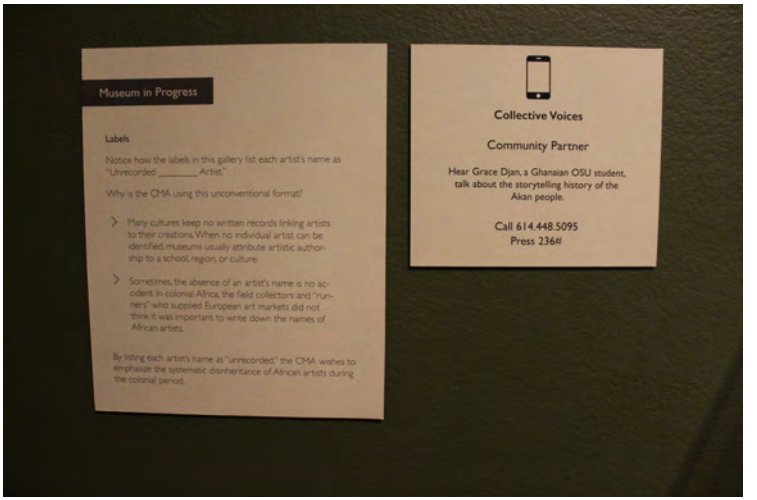

FIgure 9. Museum in Progress label explaining the reason for having the title "Unrecorded Artist."

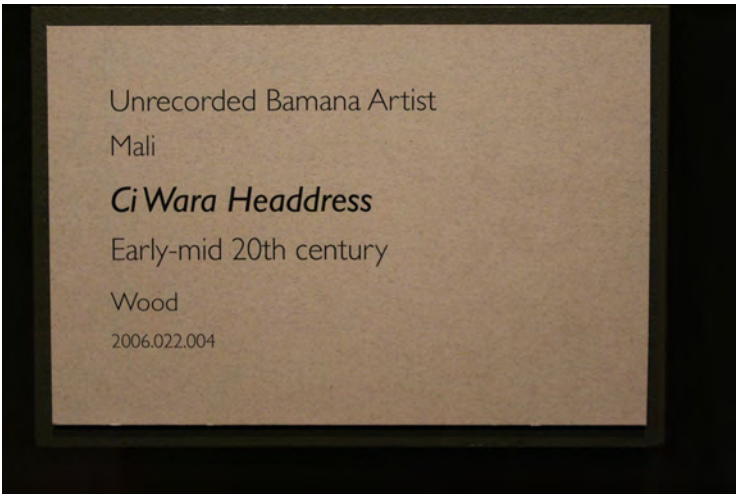

Figure 10. CiWara Headdress label

The exhibition team offered an explanation to its visitors to promote awareness and curiosity. Many cultures keep no written records linking artists to their creations. When no individual artist can be identified, museums usually attribute artistic authorship to a school,

region, or culture. Sometimes, the absence of an artist's name is no accident. According to Hannah, in colonial Africa, the field collectors and "runners" who supplied European art markets did not think it was important to write down the names of African artists. Thus, by listing each artist's name as "unrecorded," the CMA emphasized the systematic disinheritance of African artists during the colonial period (Marcus & Mason-Macklin, 2018a, p. 1). Elizabeth Morton, asserts that using the term "unrecorded artist" places responsibility of erasure "on the field collectors and the middlemen who employ them (who are usually local chains of 'runners' who bring objects to an African middleman who is connected to European or American middlemen)" (Morton, n.d.).

The third component of the "Museum in Progress" extended wall labels offered reflective questions for the visitor. For the Benin oba mask, as well as a Fon staff, the following questions were posed: How would you decide whether to keep or return the Benin bronzes? It is very likely that this Fon staff was taken by French soldiers as a spoil of war. How would you decide whether to keep or return this staff?

The fourth component of the labels made the visitors privy to the contemporary conversation surrounding the objects. Information included the British Museum proposing to loan its collection of Benin bronzes to Nigeria, but not offering full repatriation. Information also implied the current effects of colonizers seeking to erase African stories and potentially compromising various African communities' ability to reclaim their identity.

"Museum in Progress" labels beg the question, who gets to tell whose story and how does it feel when someone else tells your story (Ragbir, 2018)? By displaying the complexity of history, challenging ownership, and pushing against institutional oppression, we debunk the myth that museums are neutral. Museums are not simply a "repository of knowledge" with its only purpose to display instead of analyze (Bond, 2018). Being intentional about connecting the past to the present opened the door to incorporate contemporary African and African diasporic artists who explore ways of telling their stories.

Exploring Black identities with contemporary objects

To continue the connections between the past and present and honor diverse African stories, four contemporary African artists are included in the exhibition. Talle Bamazi (1964), Columbus-based Togolese artist who also provided historical context to the donated objects and

helped with the exhibition design, and contributed drawings to the exhibition including *Awaken Soul* (2018), *Winning Hearts* (2017), and *Intent of the Heart* (2018). His series on the human heart is made with ballpoint pens and integrates masks and other symbols. In Bamazi's words, "the core of human identity is found in the heart, which reveals the most essential element of human existence, [...Yet] the heart is often disguised because people mask their truths" (Marcus & Mason-Macklin, 2018b, p. 1).

Zak Ové (1966), is a Trinidadian-British sculptor. His piece *The Invisible Man* (2016) is modeled after an ebony statue given to him by his father who purchased it in Kenya during the 1970s. Ové's rendition of the statue transforms the small original into a seven-foot tall, 300-pound statue cast in graphite. The title of his work references African-American writer Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man* (1952). Although Ellison sought to personify the oppressive system of Jim Crow through the novel's protagonist, Ové' makes Black humanity and the subsequent social challenges visible through the figure's "hands-up" gesture. At the base of the statue is a futuristic coat of arms to symbolize African diasporic identity.

Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga (1991) is a Congolese painter who investigates Black identities within his work *False Memories* (2016). His acrylic and oil painting on canvas explores the past and future of the Mangbetu people, an ethnic group residing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). DRC produces over half of the world's supply of cobalt and coltan, key components in portable electronic devices (Conca, 2018). This lucrative and dangerous industry has resulted in the death of many miners and caused war in DRC and surrounding countries (Amnesty International Ltd, 2016). Ilunga draws our attention to these societal challenges. The female subjects in his work wear traditional West African garb, with software embedded in their skin. As they appear to be in conflict with each other, Ilunga's work alludes to how the long-standing Mangbetu culture and the global industrial pressures impact the lives and physical bodies of Congolese people.

Malian born painter, Amadou Sanogo (1977), also concentrates on ways external forces impact the lives of African people. His work, *L'Accord* (2017), is an acrylic painting of two stylized human figures in conversation with one another. In French, the official language of Mali, the word "accord" means "agreement," referring to formal and informal state-sanctioned decisions, such as a peace agreement (Marcus & Mason-Macklin, 2018d, p. 2). The conversing subjects in

Sanogo's work appear to reference the Bamako Agreement of 2015, which ended a violent conflict between the Malian government and a coalition of armed rebels (Marcus & Mason-Macklin, 2018d).

These artists' contemporary works initiate and maintain conversations that seek to explore the complexity of identity. Each work situates the personal into the global so that viewers see a different articulation of African humanity outside of a Eurocentric lens. Including these works in the show continued the exhibition team's mission to challenge the museum as a space of colonial stewardship that is beyond reproach. It was a curation choice that worked in tandem with accompliceship because it was artists from non-white communities pushing against a monolithic identity historically constructed within the historically White space of the American art museum. The process was not easy. Not having a precedent privileging African expansive history and diverse perspectives within CMA curatorial decisions allowed for several lessons that could be implemented in future exhibitions and strategies for staff engagement.

Taking risks and building support: Six Requirements to be a "Museum in Progress"

What are the practical steps to decolonize an institution grounded in colonization? Amy Lonetree, author of *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, stresses that the "process of decolonizing museums takes time, and does not happen overnight" (Kini, 2018, para. 7). Creating a shift in the culture can be seen as risky. More specifically, there may be fear of a financial risk. Therefore, some institutions allow the potential discomfort of donors to take priority over their attempts to engage and keep new audiences. As the exhibition team sought ways to change the Eurocentric approaches to presenting African objects, CMA was in the midst of campaigning for a new funding structure through a city entertainment tax (Bacome, 2018). However, for the CMA, increasing community engagement, incorporating accountability in museum practices, and garnering support from within the museum took precedence. Ultimately, CMA was successful in receiving increased funding from the city. Below are six lessons the exhibition team learned throughout the process. In addition, included are ways they plan to continue their work as a "Museum in Progress" (Foley & Mason-Macklin, 2018; Foley, Mason-Macklin, & Marcus, 2018):

1. **Ask the right questions.** Cindy believed that the team members were not asking the more productive

questions as they were preparing the shift in their practices. Upon reflection, the team created new questions to start exhibition planning that focused on the show's greater purpose: What are we saying when we put up this exhibition? Who is this individual? What story do I want to tell about the artwork? What story do I want to tell about the museum? What is our stance about the message contained in the objects, the historical context, and how it connects to people today?

2. **Get honest about the power dynamics**. When thinking about change in your museum, it's important to think about the people who impact the effects of your decisions and fulfillment of your requests. Oftentimes, decisions are made to protect upper level staff from potential repercussions from majority White donors or board members. Yet, many times the low-level staff, who are mostly those from minoritized groups, are tasked with creating innovative programs and practices. Seek to create logistics that bridge the chasm to strategically build support within your museum if it exists. For example, have all-staff meetings where every department has time to address everyone with updates and challenges.
3. **Plan how you will build internal support**. Being subversive, diplomatic, and having established relationships were important when the exhibition team had to manage pushback from peer colleagues. Danny and Hannah identified this work as "radical incrementalism." Radical incrementalism is a way to support those who are uncomfortable by creating buy-in through asking for and honoring others' insight. It is a diplomatic approach to subvert power and build consensus. For example, the exhibition team asked curators: what do you want visitors to be doing in the space, what kind of language are you using, and how do you want to communicate with visitors? Then openly discuss said goals. When doing so, use language around excitement and curiosity instead of burden and anxiety, be clear about any lack of knowledge you have about the subject of focus, and be direct about your intention with the exhibition (ie. new audience engagement, build new community partnerships, challenge the status quo to expand

visitors' knowledge, etc). The goal is to build an internal team to develop strategy, as well as support each other while venting and maintaining self-care.

4. **Recognize your individual power.** Sometimes we can feel powerless to make change, but in reality, we all have a sphere of influence. Hannah wanted to push back the exhibition date but did not have the power to do so. The team wanted to change the name of the exhibition but could not. The chief curator suggested continuing the show without the new labels, but Hannah had the influence to move forward without using the curator's suggestion. She was able to communicate the importance of the labels as a form of "restorative justice" (Bond, 2018). By keeping their stance about the objects and their tenuous relationships to museums as well as the stories that drove the exhibition, the team was able to ensure that through their spheres of influence, they could avoid centering the story of the collector and homogenizing African communities as another means to keep colonialism and oppression hidden.
5. **Determine other organizations with which you will openly identify**. Building alliances with other museums and organizations can help you become more informed about what impacts the communities your museum seek to serve. These relationships require your institution to become invested in obligations for a larger liberation struggle outside of the museum. Ask, what other organizations do you currently identify or could identify with to reach your objectives? Additionally, building alliances with other museums offers opportunities to learn what other like-minded museum professionals are doing. We must recognize that the journey of change cannot happen alone.
6. **Manage the difficulty of disassociating with Whiteness**. When challenging Whiteness, we have to acknowledge that many people, likely including ourselves, have invested in this concept directly by determining their self-worth by it or supporting systems built to sustain it. Decolonizing museums and decentering Whiteness can feel like a loss of identity and the ruining of a beloved cultural institution. Although you cannot control how people

feel or if they will internalize a new understanding of Whiteness versus White people as a whole, you can provide tools to help them through the process by doing the following:

a. Clarify the difference between the problems of Whiteness as a concept that is embedded in the museum and generalizing White people. Whiteness requires the homogenization of various European cultures. It also requires the creation of a manufactured form of Blackness or otherness that is antithetical to Whiteness. Yet, this oppositional juxtaposition is required to define Whiteness by saying what it is not. Whiteness has been normalized and established as the measure by which to determine the validity of all other cultures represented in the museum. Since it is a social construct, White people can choose to not engage in systems that support Whiteness while celebrating their specific cultural, ethnic, or national heritages.
b. Create docent training that addresses biases and provides new language for docents to use.
c. Remove the expectation of perfectionism. Support staff when they make mistakes throughout the process by using supportive and non-judgmental corrections. These correction conversations with you, the person being addressed, and one other staff preferably, should redirect efforts to the larger goals of the exhibitions.
d. Include self-care methods like creating space to vent to each other about challenges, such as unmet expectations, emotional difficulties, and administrative hurdles. To confront Whiteness is to simultaneously investigate our socialization and engage in an act of self-determination that allows us to reconstruct who we want to be in the world.

The questions that underpin becoming a "Museum in Progress" is who does the "public" consist of that museums seek to satiate? Who does our definition of "public" acknowledge and ignore? What does it mean to tell someone else's story? To share multiple perspectives

of history is to posthumously liberate the experiences that oppressive structures require we bury. It requires us to acknowledge our beloved institutions' complicity in colonialism and ways we maintain and justify the practices that stemmed from it. It also reconstitutes those who are silenced and their descendants within the definition of "the public interest" that museums often say are guiding their decisions. From European enslavement of Africans to Saartjie Baartman (Parkinson, 2016), African labor, artworks, and human remains have fueled much of Europe's economy. We may not have the power to offer restitution of objects or human rights, but we can create a network of critical friends to hold us accountable, choose to not be motivated by fear, and make it our business to find history and make it visible to the public, even if it is uncomfortable.

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