Exploring Manifestations of White Supremacy Culture in Art Museum Education and Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks specifically at Afro-Caribbean art and culture and explores White and Afro-Caribbean experiences and the impact of Whiteness on the ways that knowledge and practice of the arts in museums have been considered, interpreted, and characterized. Written by co-authors offering an Afro-Caribbean and White perspective, this paper offers various examples from our experiences as art museum educators of the ways Whiteness impacts our work.

KEYWORDS:Whiteness, Caribbean, museum education, colonialism, anti-racism, White supremacy

Introduction

This paper is co-authored by two art museum educators and art education scholar-practitioners; one is a Black biracial Trinidadian and the other a White American. This paper looks at Afro-Caribbean art and culture, and explores the impact of Whiteness on the ways that art and material culture from this region has been considered, interpreted, and characterized in art museums. We first share the definition of Whiteness that we use to analyze the cultural assumptions and ideologies that underpin exhibition displays and interpretation of Caribbean art and cultural content. This analysis reveals important ethical questions of the museums' role in historical revisionism, the development of Afro-Caribbean cultural identity within museum spaces, and how Whiteness negatively impacts pedagogical choices that White art museum educators (WAME's) make when teaching from this content.

We use a qualitative research methodology utilizing two case studies in order to explore our research question that asks how White supremacist culture, over time and geographical location, has impacted contemporary interpretive practice in museums of Afro

Caribbean art and material culture. In the first case study, we chart the history of exhibition displays of Afro-Caribbean material culture at the Barbados Museum and Historical Society (BMHS). In the second case study, we analyze observations of White museum educators teaching from an installation exhibition at a major New York City art museum by a Jamaican artist named Ebony G. Patterson. Together these cases will illuminate both past and present discrepancies in museological practices concerning Whiteness and the interpretation of museum objects.

By combining geographical locations both in the United States and the Caribbean, and by providing perspectives of Whiteness from a historical and contemporary lens we highlight the far-reaching implications of Whiteness on museum practice, and the continued need to subvert it. Thus, this paper acknowledges the regional specificity of the impacts of Whiteness, but it also presents Whiteness not as a localized phenomenon, but as a global entity whose; potency has proliferated through time and "transcends the nation-state" (Leonardo, 2002, p. 29).

Theoretical Framework

We use a definition of Whiteness offered by critical Whiteness theorists who ground Whiteness in its explicit relationship to White supremacy (Allen, 1995; Frankenberg, 1993; Roediger, 1991). It is important to note that long before Whiteness became acknowledged within the academy, writers and artists of color, particularly African Americans, had been writing about and defining Whiteness. African American writer and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) named "the problem of the color line"– the distance between White and "darker… races of men" to be the problem of the 20th century (p. 41). Other important Black thinkers such as novelist and literary critic Ralph Ellison (1952), novelist and activist James Baldwin (1985), and philosopher and critical theorist Frantz Fanon (1967) each acknowledged that Whiteness is the root of the problem that is racism. Baldwin (1963) in his book *The Fire Next Time* writes, "White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed" (p. 22). Historically, Black people studied Whiteness as a survival mechanism (hook, 1992; Ganley; 2003). hooks (1992) notes that despite people of color's invisibility to White people, Black people have been studying them through an anthropological lens since slavery.

While Whiteness has been defined in a variety of ways, it is generally agreed that it is a socially constructed concept, designed to privilege

its members, determined by those already considered part of the category (Giroux, 1997; Karenga, 1999; Roediger, 1999; Stokes-Brown, 2002). For too long, Whiteness has been defined as an expression of what it is not, an ever shifting, contorting construction of "otherness" (Jacobson, 1999). The "Other," a term advocated by Edward Said (1978) has been described as the process of claiming and projecting power and strength through manipulating and exaggerating perceived weaknesses of people of color (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995, p. 90). In Said's (1978) book *Orientalism* he explains, Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction that "tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient [colonized] as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (as cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995, p. 89).

However, defining Whiteness by its proximity to the Other overlooks naming the characteristics of White perpetrators of racist ideology—in other words, what is it about Whiteness that shapes White people's culture, values, and proclivities towards certain racist behaviors?

Whiteness has to do with having White skin—racially identifying as White—but it is more than that. Whiteness refers to aspects of White people's racial identity that are often unconscious and invisible to White people, which shape how White people orient themselves in relation to people from other groups. This orientation is hierarchical, based on the assumption that White people are superior to others. To be more specific, according to Critical Race Theory (CRT), Whiteness refers to certain privileges, as well as behaviors and values associated with privilege (Allen, 1995; McIntosh, 1988).

White privilege is fueled by the normalization of Whiteness (another tenet of CRT)—the sense many White people have that being White is racially "normal" or "neutral"—as opposed to actually being a member of a race with particular characteristics. bell hooks (1994) stated that Whiteness is a state of unconsciousness: it is often invisible to White people, which solidifies a lack of knowledge or understanding of difference, serving to perpetuate oppression. This normalization of Whiteness primarily serves to obfuscate cultural aspects of White supremacy. Naming these values and characteristics of the culture of White supremacy allows us to identify them in practice, and in turn combat them. In their training resources for uncovering Whiteness in majority White workplaces, social justice activists and educators Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun (2001) identify several elements of White supremacy culture. We have selected four to aid in our analysis: either/or thinking, power hoarding, right to comfort, and fear of open conflict. These will each be explained more fully in the sections that follow.

A key component of our research relies on our understanding of the interpretation of museum objects. For the purposes of this paper, we use the term "interpretation" to refer to the myriad of ways that museum curators and educators mediate the relationship between the viewer and the art object on display. Whether through an object label, wall text, or public tours, institutions constantly make choices regarding what information is (or is not) important for the public to know, and how that information is conveyed. Van Mensch's (1990) methodological museology asks us to "(re)integrate the different specialisms within the profession" (p. 141). Here, as Van Mensch has suggested, we cross examine the functions of interpretation of the museum educator (through facilitating tours for example) with the curator (through developing exhibitions) in our analysis of White supremacist culture.

We also acknowledge the revised interpretations of terms such as "art" and "culture" in the Caribbean, where it has become commonplace in some official documentation that these words are used interchangeably. This hybrid paradigm can be found in the official art education documentation in the region, for example in the objectives of the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) in the regional art curriculum (Caribbean Examinations Council, 2011). The updated interpretation of these terms attempts to move away from their Eurocentric classifications assigned under colonial rule; instead, "art" and "culture" are re-contextualized into a hybrid paradigm that reconstructs and conjoins their interpretation and meanings.

Research Design

In this paper, the authors employ a qualitative, case study approach. Case study is an "intensive, in-depth method of enquiry" focusing on "real-life cases" (or units) and utilizes diverse sources of evidence (McGloin, 2008, p. 48). Researchers have concluded that this methodological approach can provide a critical analysis that leads to improved approaches to practice (McGloin, 2008; Corcoran, Walker & Wals, 2004). We analyze some of the far-reaching impacts of White supremacist culture on Afro-Caribbean art and material culture in museum settings by investigating case study units in diverse geographical locations and periods in time: The Barbados Museum and Historical Society (BMHS) in the Caribbean, and White art museum educators (WAME) teaching in a modern/contemporary art and design museum in New York City, USA.

The two case studies offer insights into the global impact of White supremacist culture on Afro-Caribbean art and material culture in museums. The first case study, which is set in the Caribbean, was conducted through the collection of documentation on the curation of

exhibits at BMHS as well as through interviews and correspondence with the curatorial and education staff at the museum, including The Director of the museum Alissandra Cummins and Deputy Director Kevin Farmer. The study examines the collections and history of display at BMHS and the museum's historical role in the formation of Afro-Caribbean cultural identities in Barbados. We then examine *Africa: Connections and Continuities*, a permanent exhibition opened in 2005 at the museum that celebrates the relationship between Africa and the Caribbean and contributes to a new consciousness of Caribbean identity (Russel, 2013). The second case describes and analyzes the collective choices two WAME's at one NYC art museum make when interpreting an art installation by an Afro-Caribbean artist with K-12 group tours. We analyze observations and interviews as primary forms of data.

Case Study #1: The Interpretation of Afro-Caribbean Material Culture in Caribbean Museum Spaces

Colonialism is commonly defined as a process of geographical expansionism and the implications of political and economic control of one country over another (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2005; Rodney, 2018). However, the impact of colonialism spans much broader than commerce and politics. In a lecture at the International Conference on Academic Imperialism, Vinay Lal (2010), a Professor of History and Asian American Studies at UCLA stated that, "Imperialism is not simply to be recognized through economic, military, and administrative categories but also through the project of *knowledge*. Colonialism was also a conquest of knowledge (emphasis in original)." Colonialism was as much a process of deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge systems as much as it was of economic and political domination. Said (1978) adds to this idea, speaking about the varied power structures that colonialism impacts, including knowledge systems, the arts, and culture. He states:

> But rather [the representation of the colonized] is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial and imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, and values), power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do). (as cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995, p. 90)

Thus, the oppression of colonialism can be thought of more expansively than geopolitical control and economic exploitation, but also through intangibles such as knowledge systems, thus implicating the pedagogical practices within arts and culture.

 The complicated history of the Caribbean brings to light its contested past and battles of control by European colonial powers over the region. It is through this lens that we explore the historical foundations of interpreting the art and material culture of Caribbean people of African descent (Afro-Caribbean) in museum spaces. Here, we specifically address perspectives of colonialism in Barbados that align with aspects of Jones and Okun's (2001) White supremacy cultural characteristics, focusing particularly on power hoarding and either/or thinking.

Representing Culture at the Barbados Museum and Historical Society

During the colonial period, exhibition practices in Barbados sought to ensure that collection policies perpetuated a dominant vision of Empire and European occupation in the region. As a result, objects in collections that captured Afro-Caribbean identity were minuscule in number and if displayed, were exhibited as curios and trophies of conquest (Cummins, 1992; Farmer, 2013). One such example is the late Ms. B. Thorne's Ashanti collection of stools, chairs, drums, and brass musical instruments at the BMHS (Cummins, 1992). The provenance of this collection originated from the British invasion of the Ashanti Kingdom in 1897, and became the centerpiece of the museum's exhibits (Cummins, 1992). The collection was presented, "not as relics of a proud African heritage, but as trophies of the triumph of a civilization over savagery" (Cummins, 1994, p. 18).

Cultural interpretation of Afro-Caribbean content at the BMHS during the colonial era evinces the central role that White supremacy has played in their interpretation, specifically the dynamics of power hoarding and either/or thinking described by Jones and Okun (2001). Either/Or thinking is described as a mindset that categorizes ideas into binary terms and often simplifies complex issues to suit the dominant group's perception of reality, for example simplistically attributing a lack of education as the source of poverty (Jones & Okun, 2001). This either/or mentality can be seen in the way that Afro-Caribbean material culture was interpreted as curios without consultation of those representing their cultural origins. We are reminded again of Ms. B. Thorne's Ashanti collection, which was categorized as trophies of Empire over a barbarian African culture, with little regard for the considerably more complicated narrative an insightful, rigorous interpretation would offer. Unfortunately, images of the African collections and their display at BMHS during the

colonial period are either unavailable or extremely rare to source. Dispositions of colonial power-hoarding are also evident in exhibition practices, as the display of material culture of White colonials held precedence over the display of Afro-Caribbean material culture (Cummins, 1994).

The interpretation and representation of African heritage in Caribbean museums throughout the region did not begin to change until the onset of Black nationalist Marcus Garvey's Pan-African movement, the demands by Caribbean nation states for political enfranchisement in the 1940s and 1950s, and lastly the victory of independence for many Caribbean countries in the 1960s (Farmer, 2013). In the post-independence era, with the emergence of Caribbean nationalism, independent Caribbean nation-states sought to combat classical colonial historiography and imagery and sought to define their own cultural identity and portrayal of self (Farmer, 2013). Caribbean nation-states today are still struggling with the legacy of their colonial histories and face the ethical questions of the nature of history, ownership of artistic and cultural heritage, the development of cultural identity and have turned to their museums to act as stewards of change (Cummins, 2004; Farmer, 2013).

The BMHS today is a Caribbean museum that challenges itself to shape a new Caribbean consciousness of self, cultural identity, and public memories of the past as a central aim for its community and has implemented changes to the interpretation of its collections and its exhibition practices in order to do so (see the below section "Contemporary Connections: Africa: Connections and Continuities"). The goal of revisiting the cultural interpretation of the collections at BMHS is supported by the Barbadian government's The Barbadian Museum Development Plan Committee (Cummins, 2004). This development plan sought to reconstruct the identity of the museum to better serve and reflect its community (Cummins, 2004). In October 1980 the committee considered that:

> The Barbados Museum is not really representative of the various aspects of Barbadian life… The Minister is therefore committed to the development of national museum policy aimed at changing the character of the Museum in order to make it truly representative of the history, culture and development of Barbadian society. (as cited in Cummins, 1992, p. 48)

The report goes on to state that although there is "a great deal of information about Barbadian merchants and planters, their lifestyle and their adoption of European material culture, it says little or nothing about slaves, plantation laborers, peasants, farmers, and fishermen" (as cited in Cummins, 1992, p. 48). African cultural

material, vernacular architecture, chattel house furniture, traditional crafts, and means of transportation were absent in exhibition displays (Cummins, 1992). The collection focuses attention mainly on the colonizing segment of society and culture, therefore, does not present a coherent or complete story of Barbadian history. Cummins stated that, "the process of revamping the Museum and erasing its stigma to social exclusivity to the community has been a hard one for over the past fifty years" (personal communication, Aug 20, 2005). This social stigma, she explains, not only extends to its collections and exhibitions, but also to the building where the museum is housed. The BMHS is housed in a building that was originally a British Military prison in 1853; therefore, the building itself evokes social stigmas that are tied to its colonial history and forms tensions between the museum and its community (Cummins, 2004).

That being said, the museum today has revitalized and created more balance between European and Afro-Caribbean representation in its galleries. Noteworthy additions to the museum include an exhibition of fabricated and furnished laborer quarters in the Children's gallery. This exhibition functions as a living history museum with a laborer quarters that invites the visitor to envision themselves living during these historical periods. The concept of this laborer quarters exhibition directly juxtaposes an exhibition of furbished European period rooms of the eighteenth to nineteenth century (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. An exhibit of plantocracy with furbished periods rooms of the eighteenth to nineteenth century. Image courtesy of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society

The plantocracy period room exhibition consists of a bedroom, a dining room, a living room, and a children's room. The addition of the laborer quarters counter-balances the formerly Eurocentric nature of the period rooms. The exhibition additions show a respectful acknowledgement of multiple aspects of Afro-Caribbean history.

Contemporary Connections: *Africa: Connections and Continuities*

As the title implies, this exhibition seeks to connect Barbadian history with its legacy in Africa. In doing so, the exhibition affords Barbadian viewers an opportunity to better understand their cultural identity by forging connections in local cultural practices with the continent. It also illustrates the continuities and legacies of African traditions in the Caribbean through displays of craftsmanship by displaying metal, wood, and textile artifacts; displays of traditional African festival clothing; and architecture through the display of traditional and modern housing in Africa (Russell, 2013).

Opened in 2005, the introductory panel of the exhibition reads: "Over a period of about 500 years, many Caribbean societies, including ours [Barbados], were created by the forces of capitalism. We are the amalgam of four continents—Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas—an archipelago distilled and anew" (Russell, 2013, para. 11). This exhibition highlights the complex hybridity in the region as well as the intersectionality and evolution of traditional African ceremonial practices and their manifestations in modern Caribbean cultural festivals (Russell, 2013). The display *Masquerade* particularly emphasizes this hybridity by highlighting the overlaps between African and Caribbean artistic and cultural practices and identities (see Figure 2).

Masquerade consists of two festival attires displayed together, one originating from the Republic of Benin, known as an *Egungun,* and the other known as *Shaggy Bear.* Yoruban descendants living in Barbados created the *Shaggy Bear*, thus this display resonates with current Barbadian festival dress and Afro-Barbadian peoples' cultural connections to Africa (Russell, 2013). The descendants of Yoruban people of Nigeria conceived the *Shaggy Bear* in Barbados during slavery and has since become emblematic of legendary Carnival festivities in Barbados and its varied interpretations throughout the region (Russell, 2013). The original costume was made of dried banana leaves, however, over time African descendants on the island substituted leaves for shredded fabric that make up the costume today (Russell, 2013). The *Shaggy Bear* is now a popular traditional Carnival costume in Barbados and bears direct linkages to the *Egungun* costume, as both require the masquerader to dance in circular motions and share specific cultural symbolisms of "the cycle

Figure 2. Masquerade Display Shaggy Bear and Egungun Costumes.
Image courtesy of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society

of life" (Russell, 2013, Chapter 11, Section 2, para. 13.).These historical and contemporary examples exemplify a Caribbean museum that plays an important social role in its community as an agent of change in redefining Caribbean cultural and artistic identity through reclaiming invisible histories, and reviving living cultures. The museum combats the challenges entrenched in cultural assumptions in its displays of Afro-Caribbean identities on an island whose demographic is primarily of people of African descent. Through revamping the museum with living history and interactive exhibitions and by introducing new permanent collections that testify to the eloquence of African art and culture, the BMHS made a clear statement that history is not made only by the wealthy and the powerful, but also by the disenfranchised.

Henry Giroux (2005) writes about a politics of difference, saying that suggestions from White people that we should "all just get along" often comes together with the idea that we should forget the inconvenience of our differences as well. The inconvenient part refers to a de-centering of values from a strictly White, Western canon. This de-centering process starts at all levels of our cultural institutions— from individual staff introspection to reconsidering the infrastructure and culture of the institution itself. This is illustrated at BMHS where they have effectively revitalized the cultural interpretation of their exhibitions through a de-centering process, which restructured their curatorial and interpretative approaches in order to illuminate the Black experience of their audiences. This updated approach encourages the everyday Barbadian to rediscover their cultural identities, an initiative that not only enriches Barbadians, but also contributes to wider notions of a collective Caribbean sense of self-actualization throughout the region.

Case Study #2: Whiteness and Museum Education: Interpreting Afro-Caribbean Art in White Cultural Spaces

In the previous section of this paper, we discussed a transitional moment where the BMHS made attempts to correct the ways colonialism and Whiteness inserted themselves into the curation and interpretation of Afro-Caribbean material culture in Barbados. In this section, we examine how cultural aspects of Whiteness insert themselves into the ways that White art museum educators (WAME's) interpret this content in multiple contexts, such as field trips or public tours. As discussed in our introduction, our view of interpretation is expansive, including pedagogical choices educators make on tours, in an effort to demonstrate the wide and varied ways White supremacist thinking inserts itself into this work. This claim is in line with Van Mensch's (1990) ideas mentioned above, which assert that a methodological museology seeks through lines between different specialties within the field.

This case draws from both observation and interview data based on two tours, each given by two different WAME's (WAME 1 and WAME 2). Both work at the same modern/contemporary art and design museum in New York City and interpreted work by artist Ebony G. Patterson. While we acknowledge that the study includes a small sample size of two White museum educators, a pattern emerged from their teaching that signified some of the challenges that Whiteness presents to responsible, critical interpretations of Afro-Caribbean material culture. These emergent issues indicate that there is a need for further research.

Artist Ebony G. Patterson is originally from Kingston, Jamaica, but splits her time between Kingston and Lexington, Kentucky, USA. Her work, especially in the installation described in this paper, primarily explores invisibility, disenfranchisement, and related violence that occurs in marginalized communities of color. Patterson is known for utilizing bright, colorful, shiny found objects and textiles in order to draw the viewer in and compel them to look closer to the violent references hidden just underneath the glitzy and glittery surface (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Patterson, E. G. (2016), … buried again to carry on growing …, [installation]. Photo by Butcher Walsh © Museum of Arts and Design.

The highlighted installation uses the lenses of race, gender and sexuality to explore the visibility of violence enacted against Black communities in the United States and the Caribbean. Through analyzing observation and interviews through Jones and Okun's

framework, we have identified two main areas where Whiteness impacts the WAME's work: fear of open conflict, and right to comfort.

Example 1: Right to Comfort

Throughout the study, we found that the WAME's utilized euphemistic linguistic tools as a way of speaking *around* race, but not necessarily about race itself. Instead they relied on euphemisms like "urban," "diverse," allusions to class, or status, or strived to make references to specific racialized experiences more universally relevant (such as applying a particularly Black experience to all "people of color"). For example, the WAME lead a group of high school students through a discussion about one of the exhibition installations, which consisted of a group of ten brightly dressed mannequins (see Figure 4). During the gallery discussion, the high school students started to describe the figures as "thugs," speculating that they might be drug dealers based on visual evidence, such as the way the mannequins were dressed (in hoodies, for example), as well as the scattered and piles of cash and toy guns on the ground.

While the term "thug" is not itself indicative of race, researchers (Kitossa, 2012; Acuff, 2015; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016) note that certain "signs" become attached to Black culture that "help produce and maintain White fear" (Acuff, 2015, p. 164). Acuff (2015) notes that in the case of young Black men extrajudicially shot and killed by White police officers, hoodies are an example of a sign that has become associated with criminality, and criminality with Blackness in turn. These associations turn quickly to stigmas, which work to justify violent acts perpetrated against Black people (Acuff, 2015). It is (or should be) the responsibility of museums educators to support students in navigating these signs critically, particularly, as in this case, when the artist highlights the signs *in order to* trouble them. Instead of pressing the group on their word choice, which could be read as racialized assumptions about these figures, WAME 1 pivoted to a conversation about class markers, asking the students what they saw that made them think the figures were from "a lower social class." Instead of entering a potentially uncomfortable discussion about race, WAME 1 chose an easier, more comfortable entry highlighting class instead.

Jones and Okun (2001) describe Whiteness' "right to comfort" as the belief that White people "have a right to emotional and psychological comfort" over the needs of people of color to voice their frustrations with systemic racism—so much so that White people often scapegoat those who cause any perceived discomfort by bringing up systemic racism in the first place (para. 13). In order to subvert this, they suggest that White people "understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth and learning," and that they should deepen their

Figure 4. Patterson, E. G. (2016), *Swag Swag Crew*, [installation]. Photo by Butcher Walsh © Museum of Arts and Design.

analysis of racism and oppression in order to develop an understanding of how their feelings, defensiveness, and avoidance strategies fit into the larger context of racial oppression (para. 13). This speaks to the urgency behind Dewhurst and Hendrick's (2016) charge for museum educators to become comfortable using terminology such as systemic violence, institutionalized racism, structural racism, construct of race, etc. Too often White educators avoid these topics out of discomfort stemming from fear of speaking out of turn, offending someone, or citing incorrect information (a sentiment voiced repeatedly by the WAME's in this study). In so doing, we avoid potentially difficult, however productive conversations (Dewhurst & Hendrick, 2016). We would extend this to becoming comfortable with the *particular* cultural content we are interpreting; in this case, the educator might have felt more empowered to engage a conversation about race specifically (rather than class) if she had a better grasp on the particulars of racial dynamics in Jamaica that specifically impacted the artist's choices in this work.

This avoidance in preference of personal comfort does more damage than we may realize. This is particularly true when WAME's linguistic gymnastics not only obfuscate the specific racial experience the artist is referencing, but also erase the complicity of the White perpetrators at the root of the violence. For example, when discussing a different art work that made explicit reference to murders perpetrated

against Black youths, WAME 2 referred to "a child" in Chicago who "had been killed," (note the passive voice) but not his Blackness, nor the circumstances related to his death (police brutality). While subtle at times, the language that we use can be hugely important as far as representing certain values. Fine's (1987, 2003) concept of "naming" speaks to the importance of specificity of our language. Not naming forms of oppression may serve to temporarily alleviate White guilt and help White educators feel more comfortable in their interpretation of art works in the moment, but can have the long-term impact as a "means of silencing students" (p. 249) (specifically students of color) and creating a stark dissonance between their lived experiences and what they are taught in the art museum.

Example 2: Fear of Open Conflict

The literature on museum education makes a strong, ardent case for prioritizing students' interests, lending primacy to student directed inquiry and creating "safe spaces" as counters to a "culture of silence" in traditional schooling contexts (Freire, 1970). While these are not necessarily bad pedagogical elements, our findings support the idea that perhaps WAME's lean too much on this literature, placing student directed-ness and sense of safety over having potentially tense and yet vitally important conversations that students need to be having, and which museums can and should support (Dewhurst & Hendrick, 2016; Sandell, 2004; Sandell & Nightingale, 2012). For example, when asked about whether it was an explicit choice to not refer to the specific racial and/or cultural identity of the figures depicted in the example mentioned above, WAME 2 replied:

> "I honestly—no. I think I just kind of forgot, or I just didn't think about that as an aspect of it… in this one [tour] I felt like I touched on it a little… and it fell a little flat or people weren't responding so then I didn't carry that thread through. So then I decided, all right I'm going to focus more on these other threads."

Jones and Okun (2001) characterize Whiteness' "fear of open conflict" as the tendency of the dominant group to ignore or run from conflict out of fear, and to choose politeness over a potentially uncomfortable or tense discussion, no matter how productive—in fact, raising a difficult issue is seen as being impolite. In the context of museum teaching, being completely student-centered in the interest of avoiding conflict often comes at the expense of perpetuating racist tendencies and biased thinking on both the educator's and students' parts (Autry, 2017), perpetuating what Critical Race theorist and educator Zeus Leonardo (2002) refers to as a "pedagogy of politeness"

(p. 39). In response to this dilemma, a growing number of educators are seeing opportunities to push notions of critical thinking in museum spaces further. Director of the Peoria Playhouse Children's Museum Rebecca Herz (2016) queries the notion that museums need not concern themselves with ensuring visitors come away with the "correct" interpretation of museum objects. She cites museum consultant and educator Meszaros' (2006) lament regarding the "whatever" interpretation, which Meszaros finds characterizes the field's current state of education and transmission of knowledge. If anything goes, Meszaros wonders, does the obligation of museums to ensure responsible interpretation go with it? Meaning making, or developing a personal connection was always meant to be the start of interpretation, not the end goal.

We do not mean to suggest that every museum tour be necessarily anti-racist as a goal, or uncomfortable for that matter. Critical thinking and inquiry of all kinds serves many aims and it is within museum educators' rights to use it in different ways to serve their educational priorities. It is clear though that a typical model of critical thinking may be insufficient for the purposes of exposing the invisible structures of racism within art museums. For example, in reference to Figure 4, WAME 1 asked a series of open-ended questions about skin bleaching, seeking to create a link between the brightly colored textiles Patterson used on the mannequins in the place of skin color and the artist's interest in skin color as an accessory, given readily available methods of skin bleaching in Jamaica. While this connection was achieved, nevertheless the arguably more pressing and relevant question of why someone would want lighter color skin in the first place was never addressed. This omission makes sense given this educator's overall approach to inquiry with the artist's work, an approach that relies on the artwork's drawing people in visually through the use of bright, attractive materials. The educator correlated her approach with the artist's interest in drawing the viewer in visually and then gradually letting the hidden, darker message of the work settle in. WAME 1 explained that she allows her students similarly to start with what they see and develop lines of inquiry based on their observations—a common approach in museum education.

When asked about their choice not to address skin color in the interview, WAME 1 noted the relationship between why a person would want to appear lighter skinned, in order to be perceived as having a higher status within society. However, she never made the connection between light skinned-ness and Whiteness, and why within a nearly all Black society in Jamaica, Whiteness would still be held up as the thing that is "best." Because she felt more comfortable couching her course of inquiry solely within the connections the students generated, they were never compelled to interrogate more

critically relevant issues that may not necessarily occur to them by just looking, such as, what about White skin is desirable in the first place—a query that has nothing to do with class, but rather the values we construct and apply to skin tone (ie, race).

What we choose to examine and what gets left out ends up being a complicated web of potentially contradictory decisions. The following interview exchange with WAME 2 reveals a common sentiment concerning the question of how young is too young to discuss racism:

> "Me: Does the tour look different for younger students?
>
> WAME 2:   Yeah, I think it would be a different experience because you -- I think you wouldn't maybe focus on the violence as much, the violent aspect of it.
>
> Me: Is there anything else you would think about?
>
> WAME 2:   Although I have to think about that, because how can you leave that out because it's such an inherent part for most of the pieces. I mean, I think you would maybe focus on the first piece longer. And with younger kids maybe talk more formally about the pieces like colors and patterns and rather than the meaning behind them."

By relying on literature reflecting White, dominant ways of thinking that encourage us to pursue students' interests above all else to justify not engaging in tough topics, WAME's may be silencing important messages that artists are trying to uncover through their work. These ideas are closely related to the concept of White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), or the variety of defense mechanisms White people employ to deflect and avoid race talk (Sue, 2015). These aspects of White culture all serve a common, double pronged goal: to avoid talking about the ways White people are personally complicit in upholding White supremacist structures and systems, and assign blame to anyone who dares bring up these issues, and initiating an uncomfortable conversation by being too "aggressive," or politically correct, et cetera.

Conclusion

In the introduction of this essay the central question focused on how White supremacist culture, over time and geographical location, has impacted contemporary interpretive practice in museums of Afro-Caribbean art and material culture. We explored case studies in institutions based in the Caribbean, as well as the United States that looked at interpretive choices and found that colonialism and Whiteness, both being White supremacist and racist projects, are major influences behind these choices. In approaching colonialism as a conquest of knowledge that subjugates people of color's ways of knowing in preference of White worldviews, we see overlap between contemporary WAMEs' and historical institutional choices concerning cultural interpretation of Afro-Caribbean content.

Each example of art museum interpretation described above reveals a different way that WAME's choose to deflect and avoid, rather than engage with the racial and cultural nuances of Afro-Caribbean content. Whether it is through language choices that characterize neither victim nor perpetrator, object selections that avoid works that treat racism explicitly, leaning on pedagogy that unfairly places the onus of bringing up race related content on our students— all choices prioritize the comfort of the White educator, and the (perceived) comfort of the group. Similarly, during the colonial era in the Caribbean, White curators leaned on mechanisms of White supremacist culture such as power hoarding and either/or thinking as an approach to cultural interpretation of Afro-Caribbean content.

There is a growing movement within the museum world to combat the false notion of neutrality that has been touted in museum interpretation (Autry, 2017; Jennings, 2017). Attempts to represent "both sides" of oppression support an intellectually dishonest stance that can have violent repercussions for our students and audiences (Autry, 2017). As Leonardo (2002) points out, educators need to do more work to reveal to their students the interconnected "long, global arm" of Whiteness and colonialism (p. 33). He advocates for a neo-race theory that "finds it imperative to peer into the lives and consciousness of the White imaginary in attempts to produce a more complete portrait of global racism and ways to combat it" (p. 45). Similar to the original Black scholars of Whiteness, we hope this research contributes to an ongoing effort to name and subvert aspects of White supremacy in both our individual work and institutional cultures.

The success of BMHS comes as the result of decades of transformative, critical self- development, and exemplifies a holistic approach in support of inclusion and social justice. Personal, as well as institutional self-criticism is key; if museum educators,

curators, interpreters, leaders cannot bring themselves to explore the discomfort that inherently lies within uncovering these tangled histories, how can we ask our students and audiences to do the same?

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