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Cover
Pictured: *The Black Woman Coalition*, 2020, Mixed media, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 122 cm) by Lisa Whittington. Learn more about this piece on p. 6.

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The Black Women Coalition

Lisa Whittington, EdD
Independent Scholar/Artist

The Black Women Coalition is a 36x48 inch mixed-media artwork executed on canvas. In 2020, Black women in America were actie on the front lines of the election and stepped up and voted for Joe Biden. The actions of Black women changed the course of the United States, whic was headed toward fascism. This artwork honors the work of Black women in the 2020 United States election.

The Black Woman Coalition, 2020, Mixed media on canvas, 36 x 48 in.

Lisa Whittington, EdD is an artist living in Atlanta. She graduated with a doctoral degree in Art Education from the University of Georgia in 2014. Lisa not only creates art but loves teaching art as well, training artists from Kindergarten to twelfth grade in Atlanta for over twenty-five years. Her 2017 painting of Emmet Till sparked a NBC news interview defusing then protests at the Whitney Museum of Art and creating international discussions around the co-opting of Black pain and suffering for subject matter.

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Editorial:
The Arts, Social Movements, and Public Pedagogy

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In moments of geopolitical repression, cultural erasure, and contested truths, art education continues to carve out space for truth-telling, collective memory, and new imaginaries. Playwright, writer, and civil rights attorney Gloria J. Browne-Marshall (2025) reminds us: "Protest is an investment… the debt we all owe to the next generation" (p. x). When I issued the call for this volume, I asked: In what ways do the arts and forms of public pedagogy contribute to the goals of social movements? The responses we received not only engaged with that question—they stretched it, complicated it, and deepened it. Across classrooms, museums, community spaces, and digital platforms, contributors reflect on the evolving relationship between education, aesthetics, and activism.

This volume arrives at a time of heightened ideological surveillance and cultural gatekeeping. As recent headlines have revealed, even the Smithsonian Institution—long regarded as a symbol of public trust—is under political scrutiny. The current administration has launched a sweeping review of museum exhibitions, objecting to programming that references slavery, LGBTQ+ history, and immigration narratives. One federal directive calls for the removal of "divisive" language in favor of "American exceptionalism," while another publicly lists exhibits deemed "objectionable"—those addressing racial injustice, historical trauma, or resistance art.

It is against this backdrop of cultural tension that the essays in Issue 1 of Volume 42 of the *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* take root. In response to the overwhelming quality and diversity of submissions, we've decided to distill this volume into two issues. Together, they not only reflect the vitality of the field but also underscore the urgency of this moment.

We open with the work of **Rachel Fendler and Sara Scott Shields**, whose contribution explores the creative potential of youth-led social movements as pedagogical frameworks within art education. Drawing on participatory action research with high school students, they examine how zines, protest art, and visual storytelling become powerful tools for civic learning and social critique. Their work invites educators to view the curriculum as a living, dynamic space for activism—one shaped by young people's voices, visions, and demands.

Carissa DiCindio looks back to two historic printmaking initiatives—the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA-FAP) and *El Taller de Gráfica Popular* (TGP)—to reimagine the civic role of contemporary art museums. Through a comparative lens, DiCindio traces how both programs embodied collective agency, community engagement, and democratized access to art. Her analysis shows how museums, traditionally seen as elite cultural institutions, can shift into participatory platforms for community-driven change. Grounded in historical rigor and institutional critique, this article offers a blueprint for transforming museums into spaces of care, collaboration, and social action.

K. Lynn Robinson's essay, *Collective Actions: A Response to the Whitney Museum and a Case for Black Archival and Aesthetic Practices as Movement Building*, invites readers to view institutional memory through an archival lens. In the wake of the Whitney Museum's controversial handling of BLM protest art, Robinson challenges traditional curatorial authority by centering four artist-led case studies that model more inclusive and equitable approaches to the acquisition, archiving, and exhibition of works by minoritized communities. Through this intervention, she not only critiques extractive institutional practices but makes a compelling case for Black archivists and curators as critical agents in shaping discourse, fostering accountability, and building aesthetic practices rooted in care, sovereignty, and justice.

The politics of memory extend into the digital realm as well: **Lingran Zhang**'s analysis of the viral short video series *Escape from the British Museum* demonstrates how humor, emotion, and fiction converge to critique imperial legacies. On platforms like Douyin, audiences witness cultural artifacts animated with voice and agency, seeking repatriation and recognition. These works illustrate how storytelling—whether grounded in data or folklore—invites us to reimagine power and cultural ownership.

Nikki Kendra Davis's lyrical contribution, *Haunting as Public Pedagogy*, offers a bold, embodied inquiry into how spectral presence functions as both a form of social and political education. Through the creation

of her feminist play, Women Who Know, Davis explores the Pendle Witch trials as a conduit for processing the contemporary rollback of reproductive rights. Drawing from public pedagogy, haunting theory, and theatre praxis, she situates ghostly encounters as urgent teachings about historical violence, collective memory, and resistance.

> **Cover Art**
>
> This issue's cover features the work of **Lisa Whittington** (artist/art educator/scholar), whose work *The Black Women Coalition* (36 x 48, mixed media on canvas) honors the critical role Black women played in the 2020 U.S. presidential election—mobilizing, organizing, and ultimately shifting the trajectory of a nation teetering on the edge of authoritarianism. Through her layered visual language, Whittington portrays Black women not only as voters, but as cultural stewards and political protectors. With a palette rich in texture, symbolism, and ancestral resonance, this piece bears witness to the power of Black women's labor—then and now—and reminds us that protest, protection, and progress often walk hand in hand.

Together, the essays in Issue 1 of Volume 42 invite us to reconsider public pedagogy not as a fixed, singular concept, but as a living, breathing practice that evolves with the times. Whether through the creative agency of youth, the reclamation of cultural memory, or the radical act of embodied storytelling, each contribution challenges the boundaries of formal education and expands our understanding of what it means to teach and learn in a world marked by injustice and resistance. These essays remind us that public pedagogy pulses not only in classrooms and museums but also on the streets, in protest, and across digital spaces—everywhere art, action, and education converge to inspire change. In a moment of urgent social, political, and cultural reckoning, these scholars offer us pathways for collective engagement, solidarity, and the ongoing work of resistance.

With gratitude,
gloria j. wilson, Senior Editor

Reference

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Curricularizing social movements: Intersecting art, pedagogy, and social change

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersection of education, social movements, and art pedagogy in response to restrictive policies in states like Florida, which limit teaching on social justice and civic engagement. Drawing on the legacy of civil rights activist and educator Septima Clark, the authors propose "micro-movements" as small yet impactful curricular strategies to sustain critical thinking, civic participation, and creative citizenship. Through case studies in local schools, including projects on community-based art and historical inquiry, the paper highlights how educators can creatively navigate legislative constraints. The authors argue that by fostering place-based, student-driven curricula that references social movements, teachers can inspire incremental changes that uphold democratic values, encouraging students to engage critically with their communities and histories. These micro-movements represent a form of resistance, empowering educators and students to advocate for social awareness and transformation through pedagogy and the arts.

KEYWORDS: Social movements, Civic engagement, Art education, Micro-movements, Social movement pedagogy, Septima Clark, Curriculum transformation

In recent years, Florida's political and educational landscape has been increasingly marked by restrictions on the teaching of social justice, critical histories, and applied civics. This presents a significant challenge in teaching critical thinking and civic engagement (Pollock & Yoshikawa, 2024). On one hand, these policies, which limit discussions around race, equity, and social issues, have left many teachers

struggling to navigate the tension between their responsibilities as educators and the pressures of legislated curriculum. On the other, we know young people, particularly from underserved communities, are increasingly deprived of opportunities to engage with a curriculum addressing the societal issues that affect their lives (Clay & Rubin, 2020). This political moment presents a critical opportunity to reconsider how educators can still play a transformative role in their classrooms and communities despite these constraints (Mirra & Garcia, 2023).

This paper engages an established conversation within the field of art education, which has a long history of relying on critical pedagogy to develop social justice art education (Garber, 2004; Bell & Desai, 2011; Blandy, 2011; Dewhurst, 2014; Quinn, et al., 2012). Our aim is to add to this conversation by exploring the potential of creative micro-movements to offer a vision of resistance and respite. Drawing inspiration from Septima Clark, a pivotal civil rights activist and educator whose grassroots initiatives inspired future activists, we suggest strategies that allow teachers to act as change agents in their schools and communities, while working within today's restrictive environment (Brown et al., 2023). Clark's leadership highlighted how teachers play a vital role in building and sustaining social movements. As Brown-Nagin (1999) argued, Clark's work of teacher training for citizenship education sustained change even amid the shifting legal landscapes of the civil rights movement. While legislative activism defined much of the civil rights movement, Clark's work was a crucial foundation for grassroots organizing, raising the political consciousness of community members and building coalitions for direct action.

In the sections that follow, we examine Clark's citizenship education model to position schools as sites of transformation, even under legislative constraints. This paper demonstrates how teachers can foster civic engagement by making small, yet meaningful, curricular changes. Encouraging a broad approach, framed as curricularizing social movements (Wilson, 2021), we argue that social movements offer educators a pathway to challenge the status quo and foster civic engagement in young people. We conclude with k-12 curriculum examples that asked students to explore archives, engage with their communities, and advocate for change. In this way, we suggest how teachers can initiate micro-movements that inspire critical thinking and plant the seeds for advocacy and activism.

Septima Clark's Citizenship Education

Amid a legislative landscape that forces educators to navigate the challenges of pursuing social justice pedagogy at great personal risk, we look to the legacy of educator and activist Septima Clark for guidance.

Clark contributed to the civil rights movement through a decades-long career as an educator in the Jim Crow South (Charron, 2009). With a teaching career that began in 1916, she became increasingly active in the civil rights movement in South Carolina in the 1950s. Her centrality to the movement increased in the mid-1950s when she began to collaborate with the radical adult education center, the Highlander Folk School (HFS) (Charron, 2009). Together with HFS director Myles Horton, they established a program of Citizenship Schools, which offered a teacher training program focused on adult literacy education in Black communities across the South. Management of this program shifted to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1961, where Clark continued to oversee the program until 1969 (Brown-Nagin, 1999). The program is credited with overseeing 700 instructors and registering 42,000 Black voters in the HFS era, and supporting the registration of 700,000 voters in the SCLC era (Brown-Nagin, 1999).

Clark's citizenship education model focused on a form of literacy training that was responsive to communities, and aimed to provide teachers and students with critical civic competencies. Clark's work followed from an understanding that "lasting social change had to simultaneously emerge from and radicalize everyday experience" (Charron, 2009, p. 5). This informed her commitment to education as part of a grassroots movement. Clark, Horton, and other HFS collaborators used diverse pedagogical strategies designed to meet the needs of their students; combining training for voter registration tests, student-driven dialogue, and exposure to interracial and international perspectives designed to cultivate political awareness and action (Slate, 2022). This model demonstrated an awareness of how movements are built not only through direct instruction, but through the intentional development of pedagogical relationships that support dialogic engagement and democratic processes.

Clark's legacy rests in how she situated education as intrinsic to the movement, both nationally and locally. Brown-Nagin (1999) highlighted a tension between two approaches within the civil rights movement: the legislative efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), supported by direct action strategies led by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the day-to-day educational and community-focused work exemplified by Clark. Brown-Nagin (1999) concluded that legislative efforts alone were insufficient to catalyze and sustain meaningful change. This was partly due to the inconsistent interpretation and enforcement of laws: Clark and the citizenship school teachers operated a program that by design was better able than SCLC's method to uplift individual members of local communities. To the extent that undereducated local people learned to read and became socially conscious under the tutelage

of citizenship instructors, they achieved a degree of empowerment that can neither be conferred nor taken away by civil rights laws. (Brown-Nagin, 1999, p. 97)

This perspective underscores the central role of education in social movements. Not only can schooling prepare students to move into activism, seeking change elsewhere, but it can make a direct change in people's immediate lives. Clark's legacy is a reminder that the work carried out in classrooms is not only about preparing students for a movement; it is, in fact, a movement itself, raising awareness, building coalitions, and enacting change in the everyday lives of students and their communities.

Curricularizing Social Movements

Broadly speaking, Clark's work is a reminder of the value social movements offer for both teaching practice and curriculum. Social movements, in particular the civil rights movement, remain in state mandated curriculum, even in states like Florida that take a restrictive approach to teaching about Black histories (See: Florida State Department of Education, 2024). However, instruction regarding the civil rights movement typically follows a so-called master narrative (Aldridge, 2006) which canonizes the extraordinary leadership of Dr. King and his commitment to non-violent actions. The master narrative develops through the repetition of a simplified timeline, one that moves from Brown v. Board of Education, to Rosa Parks's arrest, culminating with Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech and the signing of the Civil Rights Act, does not tell an expansive story about citizen participation (Aldridge, 2006). When a movement is presented as an historical timeline, the vibrant social life of the movement itself is obscured (Wilson & Robinson, 2024). A question that is ripe for interrogation with students is: how is a social movement made?

When framed pedagogically, this question invites educators to look beyond a static timeline, towards the dynamic processes of collective action. This pedagogical gesture asks educators to curricularize social movements as a strategy for understanding the central role pedagogy has in social change (Wilson, 2021). Wilson suggested that social movements offer rich curricular content: a close reading of social movements can emphasize the collective nature of activism and can be a culturally sustaining focus for students, if choosing social movements local to school communities. Furthermore, social movements provide a pedagogical template, offering lessons about how to build coalitions and advocate for change. Wilson (2021) also suggested that curricularizing social movements is not only a way to infuse curriculum and pedagogy with the lessons of a movement, but also a framework for un-

derstanding how education plays a role in social change. By studying and teaching with social movements, educators can better understand the relationship between their curriculum choices and social change. In other words, curricularizing social movements can lead educators to follow Clark's footsteps; her work demonstrated how changemakers are formed through a dedicated curriculum.

While policies are shifting rapidly and our educational system is quickly moving away from equity-oriented processes (See: Exec. order 14190, 2025), educators may find themselves caught up in a movement they wish to resist. In this space, the pedagogical relationships that Clark foregrounded in citizenship education offer a different framework. Clark's citizenship education did not ignore policy, but kept a close focus on the sphere of influence accessible to teachers: students' sense of agency. This is a powerful legacy. Clark's work within and around a hostile policy context demonstrated how teaching practice can participate in the resistance, by sustaining educators and students through political and social challenges (Brown-Nagin, 1999).

Navigating Current Educational Challenges

Policy changes in the last four years, particularly in states like Florida, have intensified. In 2021, the Parents' Bill of Rights (Florida House of Representatives, 2021) increased parental control over educational content, complicating educators' ability to address diversity and inclusion. The Parental Rights in Education Act, HB 1557 (Florida House of Representatives, 2022)—nicknamed the "Don't Say Gay" law—prohibited instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in early grades and imposed vague restrictions on older grades under the guise of age appropriateness. The Individual Freedom Act, HB 7 (Florida House of Representatives, 2022)—nicknamed the Stop WOKE Act—further restricted classroom discussions by banning content that could cause guilt or responsibility for past injustices based on race or gender, limiting critical exploration of social hierarchies and inequalities. These shifts restrict curricular choices and create a complex environment for teachers addressing historical social movements, social justice, civic engagement, and equity.

In 2023, the Florida Department of Education rejected the pilot AP African American Studies course, objecting to content on intersectionality, systemic oppression, and social movements (Kim, 2023). Civics programs were also restricted, eliminating requirements for students to engage in real-world civic problem-solving. These changes reflect a political agenda aimed at narrowing civic education to fact-based knowledge while excluding inquiry-based approaches that promote skill building (Najarro, 2022). The threat of these policy changes is of-

ten effective enough at censoring educational discourse, notwithstanding the very real repercussions these policies have in how teachers are able to create opportunities for authentic inquiry and critical discussion around the history of our country. In Florida we have seen a ban on "the use of words such as culturally responsive teaching, culturally sustaining pedagogy, social emotional learning, and critical race theory" (Quezada et. al, 2024, p. 4). The last four years in Florida highlight the ways that banning and censoring language, ideas, and viewpoints in educational spaces serve government institutions and hint at what may be coming for the rest of the country. An early indicator of this are the sweeping deletions from governmental websites. For example, the Department of Education's website, in 2024 stated, "Teachers are the backbone of our democracy—fostering curiosity and creativity, building skillful individuals, and strengthening informed citizens" (Quezada et. al, 2024, p. 4). As of this writing, May 2025, that webpage has been taken down and the text no longer exists on the U.S. Department of Education website (See: Fig. 1).

Figure 1
Missing content from the U.S. Department of Education website.
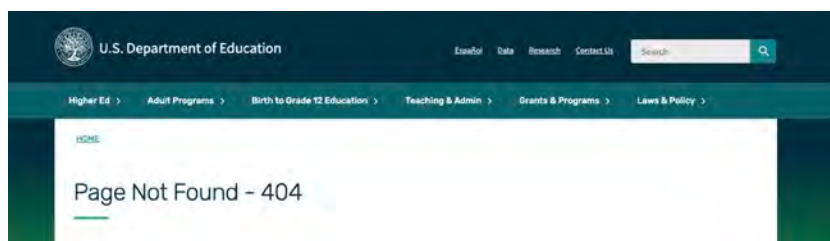
This erasure serves as a fitting metaphor for the larger political landscape surrounding education in our country. Similar to how words that once recognized teachers as central to the foundation of democracy have been removed, so too have educational opportunities for fostering critical inquiry, creativity, and civic engagement. Pollock & Yoshikawa (2024) documented the impact of this legislation on classroom environments. They found:

> In a cascade of pressure processes reaching down to educators' daily interactions with students–what we call the limitation effect–state policy played a key role in K12 system actors constraining basic opportunity that could support young people… As seen in these data, Florida policies put a cage of

restriction, threat, and intimidation around the educational triad of curriculum, instruction, and student-teacher relationship. (p. 6)

It is at this moment that the work of Clark's legacy emerges as a model, depicting a space of action–a movement–available to us within these current constraints.

Creative Micro-Movements in Support of Social Awareness

Somehow, even in this constrained environment, educators continue to teach toward social awareness (Fendler & Scott Shields, 2024; Bastos, 2024; Cohen, 2021; Conklin & Andolina, 2025; Lo, 2025; Paul, 2025). Consider the example of Mary Wood, a public high school teacher in South Carolina, whose work was highlighted by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) for its engagement with critical themes in literature (Bowers, 2023). Wood assigned *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) to her AP Language Arts class. Wood guided students to annotate, identify themes, and independently evaluate Coates' argument through research, critical, and analytical processes. The AP website states that the course Wood instructed "is an introductory college-level composition course. Students cultivate their understanding of writing and rhetorical arguments through reading, analyzing, and writing texts as they explore topics like rhetorical situation, claims and evidence, reasoning and organization, and style" (College Board, 2025). While this overview aligns directly with what Wood practiced in her unit, her use of Coates' book drew criticism, including public calls for her termination at school board meetings. In response, Wood found solidarity within her community, in particular with other educators speaking out in ways she described as unprecedented: "Teachers in general are afraid to speak out, but the ones who did spoke out in ways that haven't really happened before," she explained (Bowers, 2023, para. 13). Wood's choices are a prime example of how teachers can create spaces for critical engagement and civic learning. The community of support that grew behind her also painted a picture of how micro-movements spread into larger forms of action.

Wood's efforts exemplify what we conceptualize as micro movements: small, everyday choices that teachers make to meet the needs of students, despite restrictive policies. A micro-movement can refer to the choices teachers make inside their own classrooms to support student agency. Such efforts can draw on Clark's legacy to teach intentionally toward social awareness and criticality. This can entail building the skills for dialogue and empathy (Conklin & Andolina; Lo, 2025), studying the qualities of changemakers (Paul, 2025), and strengthening community attachment through place-based content (Fendler & Scott

Shields, 2024). Creative micro-movements capitalize on the curricular choices teachers do have, and can be used to reclaim education as a space for inquiry, imagination and democratic participation. These actions demonstrate that even under intense scrutiny, educators can foster opportunities for students to think critically about their world.

By making deliberate curricular and pedagogical choices, teachers can help sustain education's potential to shape informed, responsive citizens who are not only capable of understanding systemic issues, but are also prepared to take meaningful action. Unlike the large-scale social movements found in history books, micro-movements operate on a more localized and subtle scale. These micro-movements may not resemble large-scale historical movements in scope, but they embody the same principles of resistance and transformation (Giroux, 2025). They speak to the enduring force of education to inspire civic responsibility and foster change, ensuring that the principles of equity and justice continue to live on through the everyday actions of those within classrooms and communities (Saltmarsh, 1996).

Building on Social Movement Pedagogy in the Art Classroom

The arts, including visual art, performance, and music, have been integral to social movements in the 20th and 21st centuries, serving not only as a means of expression but also a tool for education and mobilization (Reed, 2019). This allows art educators to draw on the rich history of artistic activism to teach civic values (Bastos & Blandy, 2024). Art education's inheritance from social movements suggests ways to transform the classroom into a space for critical inquiry and action, where students are active participants in shaping and understanding their worlds (Cosier, 2021). Seen through the lens of public pedagogy, the arts can engender a site of hope and transformation, empowering students to not only understand the societal forces that shape their lives, but also to believe in their own ability to be those forces (Hochtritt et al., 2017; Schwittay, 2023). In this way, art education provides an opportunity for experiencing a form of critical, creative citizenship, inspiring a new generation of activists who can engage with and contribute to ongoing social movements (Fendler & Scott Shields, 2024).

In this climate, artistic practice offers a powerful way to navigate limitations, using creativity to explore and reimagine historical narratives, social justice issues, and community participation. This work uses creative practice as a tool for speculation and world building (Garcia & Mirra, 2023; Fendler, & Scott Shields, 2025), working on the assumption that artistic approaches can prompt productive micro-movements that allow educators to maintain spaces of inquiry, dialogue, learning and transformation. This work involves cultivating "response-ability"

(Mulcahy & Healy, 2021), where students learn not only to understand civic issues but to respond to them creatively and critically. By fostering these dispositions, arts educators can create pathways for creative citizenship, empowering students to navigate and influence the world around them in thoughtful and transformative ways. In doing so, art education becomes a site of resistance, resilience, and civic possibility in the ever-shifting landscape of the US educational system.

In the authors' own work, we have engaged with a social movement pedagogy to explore how art education curriculum can teach toward civic engagement, leaning toward a model of action civics (Levinson, 2014) blended with artistic activism (Duncombe & Lambert, 2018). This project began by using art curriculum to invite students to consider the legacy of the civil rights movement in Tallahassee, Florida (Scott Shields & Fendler, 2023). Most recently, we have worked with teams of local teachers, inviting them to develop and pilot art+civic curriculum in their interdisciplinary classrooms (Fendler & Scott Shields, 2024). We conclude this paper by sharing problem solving strategies found in their units. These are examples of micro-movements that illustrate how teachers commit to supporting civic engagement in the classroom, regardless of the political and legislative circumstances.

Mining the Archive: Primary Sources in the Present Tense

Social studies standards for high school typically include the analysis of primary materials. This indicates that archival material should be accessible content for teachers; an additional benefit is that digital and physical archives contain rich first-person narratives about organizing, providing intriguing artifacts that may capture student attention. In our work, we have had success bringing students to the state archives. However, many archival documents are available online.[1] Archives contain a counternarrative to the simplified presentation of a movement, giving life to the ongoing work of multiple people. The use of archival material in the classroom pairs well with units that allow space for research, as a single image may need to be contextualized, its significance unearthed. Teaming with media specialists or social studies teachers may be a way to create space for this research in the art education context.

In providing an example, we highlight two units. The first, developed by a Language Arts teacher and Digital Art teacher in a charter high school, centers on historic protest images from Tallahassee. The unit asked students to locate and research an archival image, then alter it to

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1   For archives about the civil rights movement, consult: SNCC Digital (https://snccdigital. org/our-voices/becoming-sncc/), CRM Archive (https://www.crmvet.org/), digital collections (https://library.mcla.edu/c.php?g=1096999&p=8000009), and so on.

make it relevant, today. The teachers relied on the state archives and introduced methods for historical research and content analysis. Criteria were provided for how students should reinterpret the image through collage or digital software to reflect their own ideas and experiences. This unit provided the technical instruction required for the digital art course. However, the focus on protest images allowed the teachers to introduce the work of social organizing and emphasize the presence and impact of social movements in the community.

Another team used material history in a different way. An art and a social studies teacher from a public middle school proposed students explore the names that show up around town: on streets, on buildings, and on the school campus. As the newest middle school in our district, the namesake of the school is living and present, and his daughter teaches at the school. Having access to their school's namesake engaged students in lively curiosity about the faces and actions behind other names that map our town. This unit's essential questions included: *What is in a name? What does it mean to leave a legacy? If I were to name a building after someone, what building would it be, and who would I honor?* These broad questions inspired 8th-grade American history students and 8th-grade art students as they worked on a project that asked them to design a future high school. While working on this unit, students crafted a mission statement for the school, imagined the student body, conceptualized how a school's values are imparted through its curriculum and, of course, named the buildings and facilities. During this work students engaged in intergenerational conversations, historical analysis, and future dreaming.

These units are a reminder that historical records create a space where students can touch history, literally and figuratively. Alerting students to the living presence of history in their everyday lives gives students a perspective about how our social moment is shaped by the actions and choices of individuals in the past. Because historical analysis is the foreground for change analysis (Institute of Arts and Civic Participation, 2025), we see the inclusion of social movements in curriculum, or a close read of how the city chooses to memorialize its past, as a micro-movement that support students' social awareness.

Connecting with Place: Taking the Classroom into the City, and Vice Versa

Connecting the classroom with the local community can serve as another powerful micro-movement. Place-based education is an approach that centers local places, histories, and community concerns in the curriculum (Smith & Sobel, 2010). This approach recognizes that education is deeply connected with the people and places that shape

students' everyday lived experiences. Place-based art education uses strategies like mapping and exploring (Ericson & Häikiö, 2025; Sharma, 2017), collaborations with local entities, including libraries, historical associations, neighborhoods, or artists (Fendler & Scott Shields; Scott Shields & Fendler; Danker, et al, 2023; Hersey & Bobick, 2016,), or the critical study of local ecologies and environments (Bertling, 2023; Coats, 2022; Graham, 2007). These practices and partnerships leverage art making to connect students to the histories, stories, and concerns of their community.

To provide an example for this strategy, we share public middle school collaboration between an art teacher and a social studies teacher. Their process exemplified the integration of history, quilting, and collaboration to explore the history of Tallahassee. Students connected to the history of the city through a series of field trips, individual research, and artmaking activities. During their field trips, students engaged with local landmarks from the civil rights movement to develop both historical knowledge and a deeper sense of connection to the past. These trips encouraged students to see the city as a dynamic entity–something to discover, understand, and feel a part of. Central to this unit was the integration of art and civic learning. Students engaged in artmaking techniques, such as cyanotypes and quilting, where they printed fabric and quilted images from personal and archival photography. They created quilt squares that reflected both past and present iterations of Tallahassee, culminating in a collaborative quilt that will serve to symbolize their connection to the city. During the unit, students were able to meet and talk with community members, including the mayor, a judge, local public artists, and quilters, which deepened students' understanding of the cultural narratives embedded in places.

This unit's blend of site-specific inquiry and artistic practice prompted students to critically engage with their surroundings and see themselves as participants in the ongoing history of the city. By extending the classroom into the city and bringing the city into the classroom, this middle school unit sought to cultivate relationship building between the students, the school, and local community. Through the teachers' micro-movement of expanding the reach of their classrooms–across disciplines and into the city–they modeled how education can become a collaborative act of reclamation, empowering students to envision themselves as members of a community and honor a shared history.

Community & Coalitions: Planting the Seeds for Advocacy

Art educators can lean on the pedagogical strategies of social movements to promote civic values and skills. Already, schools place an emphasis on service learning and volunteering; with intention, edu-

cators can orient this tendency toward actions reminiscent of organizing. There is a difference between conceptions of citizenship that are centered in personal responsibility versus forms of collective participation (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). The former, typically found in school environments, emphasizes normative expectations for contributing to the community. The latter model, typically found in social movements, emphasizes a long term commitment to diagnosing issues and finding solutions. Sensitivity to this difference can help educators consider how students are invited to show up and contribute in the classroom and the school. By allowing students to go beyond rule following and have opportunities for impacting change in the school setting, teachers generate micro-movements that build a foundation for students to impact change elsewhere.

An example of a project adapting this strategy came from two public elementary teachers, the art teacher and a 4th and 5th grade science and social studies teacher, who understood that to build civic engagement among students, students first needed to feel like part of a community. They considered ways to build community in their school and, working together, proposed a way for the afterschool art club to receive support from the 5th grade social studies class. The proposal was a yearly commitment to engage 5th grade social studies students in an exploration about the school community, through oral histories and research. The art club would then use this research to design a school-led improvement project. The unit was guided by the essential questions: *What does it mean to be part of a community? What role do you play in creating a community? How can we use art to create change within the school?* Centering art club activities on the work of building, honoring, and sustaining a community, this proposal did not invite students to complete pre-defined projects. Instead, it wanted to challenge students to build a sense of community through action within that community. It is relevant to note that this project is not a typical unit, but a larger proposal that incorporates informal learning (in the art club). We observed that the teachers themselves adopted a form of social movement pedagogy, demonstrating a commitment to infuse social organizing into the ways students are allowed to interact in the school.

Our aim in sharing examples of curriculum emerging in our own collaborations, in the context of Florida public schools, was to showcase teaching strategies that remain far from the headlines. While Clark and Woods are inspirational, we suspect in-service teachers or pre-service candidates are discomforted by the militant commitment of activists, or experiences like requiring representation from the ACLU. The teachers we work with want to continue in the classroom and, to the best of their ability, continue impacting and engaging their students. Mi-

cro-movements are a way to remind us of the choices we can continue to make, and a reminder of the everyday impact teachers continue to have.

A Call to Creative Action

The production of this article began during the late stages of the 2024 presidential campaign and concluded during the early stages of the second Trump administration. As outlined at the start of this article, education was immediately targeted by the administration as a site of indoctrination (Exec. order 14190, 2025). Conversations with the teachers in our own projects, however, provide important perspective-taking. It is clear that the changes in state and national legislation have informed their choices but have not necessarily altered their understanding of what it means to be an educator. In other words, many teachers have always seen themselves as participating in the movement; public awareness of the social context of education may shift, but for committed educators, the fight has been ongoing.

We honor this commitment by recognizing that not all educators have the resources, autonomy, or support to undertake such efforts on their own. Research indicates that teachers navigating politicized issues in schools require systemic support; according to a 2022 RAND report, "educators need more support to address politicized issues in their schools and classrooms, including clearer communication from leadership and support from their preparation programs and in-service professional learning" (Woo et al., 2022, p. 2). This points to the critical role that university faculty can play in supporting educators in the current educational landscape. Academic institutions can foster an infrastructure of collaboration that empowers teachers to both begin and sustain their efforts towards creative citizenship and democratic participation in the classroom (Woo et al., 2022). Clark, a teacher of teachers, understood this; the citizenship school model is a call to action for those involved in teacher education and professional development. Our (the authors') ongoing work in supporting teachers' efforts to deliver civically engaged art education is one example of how university work can participate in micro-movements that resist the current educational landscape shaping k-12 classrooms. Reflecting on the enduring legacy of Clark, we are heartened to see that she is still teaching–today, we can still be her students.

We conclude by sharing that the commitment and achievements of teachers, in particular their efficacy in the face of constraints, gives us hope. Our observation of the work of teachers in Florida over the last two years has solidified this understanding. What gets lost in the political rhetoric of teaching-as-indoctrination is an awareness of the cre-

ative, unfolding space of learning that teachers bring to life everyday in their classrooms, a space held together not by content standards, but by the strength of their pedagogical relationships. As Clark pointed out to teachers: "your creative ability is the thing that you need to pull out of these children their creative ability" (Clark & Brown, 1986, p. 107). In times of political uncertainty, when the materials we have in our classroom are under scrutiny, we honor the creative ability of teachers, whose ingenuity is continually under-estimated in policy conversations. We can lament the state of policy, while also recognizing that teachers are showing up, doing the work, and modeling a citizenship practice–a commitment to a better future–through the micro-movements they engender in their classrooms. This is a course of hope. Hope and optimism remind us that even under restrictive policies, teachers can make choices in their practices that nurture creative thinking, building on Clark's vision for schools to provide a pathway to a more just future.

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Exploring the potential for collective agency in art museums: What we can learn from two historic programs

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how two historic art programs from the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA-FAP) in the United States and El Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP) in Mexico, offer insights for contemporary art museums seeking to foster collective agency and community engagement. Through analysis of these Depression-era initiatives, the article explores how collective empowerment, shared decision-making, and collaborative cultural production served as foundational principles in democratizing artistic engagement. The WPA-FAP, despite its progressive goals, faced limitations due to governmental oversight and structural inequalities, while the TGP operated as an independent artist collective that sustained social initiatives through collaborative work. Both programs utilized printmaking as a democratic medium and established community-centered spaces that challenged traditional museum models. I argue that art museums can learn from these historical examples to reimagine their institutional practices, supporting community governance and collective action for social transformation.

KEYWORDS: collective agency, community engagement, art museum, Federal Art Project, Works Progress Administration

The Federal Art Project (FAP), designed to employ artists during the Great Depression in the United States, and El Taller de Gráfica Popular (The People's Graphic Workshop; TGP), a printmaking collective established by artists to communicate social issues and create change in Mexico, represent two important early twentieth-century initiatives designed to democratize artistic engagement through community interventions. While the WPA-FAP operated through federal funding, the TGP functioned as an artist-led collective that sustained its social

initiatives through collaborative work. This paper examines the implications of these two historical programs for contemporary art museum practice, with a focus on how collective agency, the coordinated efforts of groups to act toward shared goals to create social change, served as a foundational principle in their organizational structures and community-oriented missions. In exploring the ways these programs utilized collective empowerment, shared decision-making, and collaborative cultural production, I consider how art museums might reimagine their institutional practices to better harness collective agency for community engagement and social transformation.

Rethinking the role of art museums: Then and now

In the early twentieth century, John Cotton Dana, director of the Newark Museum and former librarian, wrote a series of publications critiquing art museums as inaccessible temples that followed a European model instead of being relevant to the communities that surrounded them. He explicitly drew a distinction between his vision of a museum and existing institutions, contrasting "marble palaces filled with those so-called emblems of culture" with the "new museum" that "examines its community's life first and then straightway bends its energies to supplying some of the material which that community needs" (1917, p. 32, see also, Weil, 2002, p. 87). He saw museums as serving only a small, socially elite audience. Conversely, Dana advocated for art museums to function more like public libraries to include lending collections, branch museums centered in neighborhoods, and open hours in evenings when everyday workers could visit. Like fellow philosopher and educator John Dewey (1934), Dana wanted people to engage and participate in art through dialogue and making, rather than as passive recipients consuming information curators conveyed to them. With the Newark Museum, he sought to create a democratized space for the entire community of Newark, one that focused on participation and engagement for everyone, regardless of class, occupation, and interests (Kern, 2016).

The role of museums in communities has come a long way since Dana's critiques, but institutional change moves slowly. Internal hierarchies, colonialist practices, and elitism are still part of art museums. Yet, the relationship between art museums and communities continues to evolve in new and innovative ways that include curatorial practices (Golding & Modest, 2013; Krasny et al., 2021; Pegno & Brindza, 2024; Pegno & Farrar, 2017), programming (Kletchka, 2018; Morse, 2021; Rasmussen & DiCindio, 2023), and institutional missions and frameworks (Jung & Love, 2017; Pegno & Souffrant, 2025; Weil, 2002).

Art museums, as sites of public pedagogy, have the potential to be a part of communities beyond traditional approaches. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) envisions a post-museum, which she describes as "a cacophony of voices [that] may be heard that present a range of views, experiences and values. The voice of the museum is one among many" (p. 152). Kletchka (2018) examines how post-critical museologies can serve as a socially responsive model for museums through "creativity, radical inclusivity, and visitor-centered practices" (p. 307). Gigante (2024), looks at the art museum as a democratic space, investigating how it "can participate politically in its local environment" (p. 1). The author explores how neighborhood assemblies in art museums that have the potential to create "a network of cultural citizens within and beyond the art museum" (p. 11). Gigante notes that these museum-community processes take time and are fragile as they build trust and relationships. Pegno & Brindza (2024) worked with directly with members of their communities to develop a model of community-based curation that involves transparency and direct input throughout the decision-making process from the initial planning to implementation of exhibitions.

In this article, I use the term "collective agency" to describe decolonizing museum practices through collective empowerment, shared decision-making, and collaborative cultural production (Chipangura & Mataga, 2021; Message, 2018). As Gonzalez Montero et al. (2024) define it, collective agency "is the product of interconnected individuals whose actions and relations produce and transform social structures" (p. 410). These structures continuously shift through community members' interactions and reflect "genuine interests and confidence in others." Unlike frameworks that center institutional change or individual empowerment, collective agency focuses on the interconnected nature of social transformation, demonstrating how cultural workers, community members, and institutions can jointly reshape traditional museum practices. This lens is particularly useful for examining the 1930s, a time when political and economic upheaval created conditions for new collaborative efforts between artists, government agencies, and communities. During this period of history, collective action became not only a means for survival, but also for transformative change.

These historic programs illustrate evidence of shared decision-making processes, community participation, and impacts on social structures beyond artistic output. They are initiatives in which there was a genuine effort for power to be redistributed. The sources for this article draw from archival materials, first-person accounts, and institutional records that document collaborative processes to investigate how collective agency functioned in practice.

As federal arts funding faces cuts and free speech concerns intensify, examining the 1930s through the lens of collective agency reveals critical lessons about the civic potential of art and art museums. It offers a framework for understanding how art museums can systemically change to share power instead of simply reforming existing practices, becoming spaces that support and inspire community organizing and activism. This article analyzes how Depression-era artists, institutions, and organizations built collective power to drive social change and serve the public good, offering a blueprint for how art museums today can become catalysts for community transformation through collective agency.

Federal Art Project

Although Dana died in 1929, his philosophies continued into the 1930s, particularly as the cultural administrators reenvisioned the public's relationship with the arts as part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA-FAP). The WPA-FAP's director, Holger Cahill, a former employee of Dana's at the Newark Museum and follower of Dewey, used similar values as the basis for federally supported programs. Although Cahill had worked in and with museums, he saw the need for art to be brought to rural and urban communities that did not have direct access to art museums. Started in 1935 as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, designed to employ millions of Americans during the economic strife of the Great Depression, the WPA-FAP gave artists work through creating, teaching, and documenting in a variety of art programs. A goal of the WPA-FAP reflects Dana's vision to create a distinctly American perspective of art and a national body of art consumers who were invested in the arts through participation.

Community art programs

Cahill's firm commitment to active participation was a foundational belief of the WPA-FAP. His criticism of museums focused on its elitist practices and separation from the people. He argued that the American art museum "hasn't devoted itself too much to serving the interests of the onlooker," stating that visitors only spend a few minutes "in contemplation" with art in the museum. He believed that "in art and in everything else, [people] demand participation- action- as well as contemplation. Our ability to understand and to enjoy art increases as we progress from the position of the onlooker to that of the participant" (Cahill, 1941, p. 9).

To put this philosophy into practice, Cahill developed a new model for community engagement with the arts. He designed and promoted community art centers as spaces in which people actively partici-

pate and create art. Daniel Defenbacher, director of the community art center program, devised the term "art center" to reflect the "motion and activity that worked for the community's cultural good" (White, 1987, p. 2). The centers held studio art classes, demonstrations, radio programs, and special initiatives designed to reach their communities (DiCindio, 2023). Central to Cahill's vision was the importance of fostering meaningful conversation and connection. In a 1941 speech, Cahill described community centers as "a place for talk- talk in the forms of club meetings, political rallies, or literary lectures, in small groups or large- talk in the form of casual conversation with people with common interests" (as cited in Warner, 2018, p. 50).

The implementation of these community art centers illustrates the promise and limitations to the WPA-FAP's approach to cultural democracy. Community art centers emerged nationwide, initially focusing on rural areas in the South and West, under the assumption that cities already possessed adequate cultural resources. In response, marginalized urban communities successfully advocated for their own centers (DiCindio, 2023; Grieve, 2009; Saab, 2004). Two examples from major urban centers demonstrate how communities mobilized to create these vital cultural spaces. In Harlem, Augusta Savage campaigned for a federally funded community arts center, which, despite significant WPA-FAP resistance (Bey, 2017; Calo, 2007), was established with Savage as inaugural director. By 1939, this center served over 4,000 individuals monthly through studio classes, outreach, and exhibitions in a collaborative environment (Cullen, 2012). In Chicago, five women, led by social worker Pauline Kligh Reed, advocated for WPA-FAP funding to establish the South Side Community Art Center in an old brownstone, with founding member artist Margaret Burroughs helping to create an institution that attracted over 50,000 visitors in its inaugural year.

Recognizing that not all communities could establish permanent art centers, the WPA-FAP developed mobile programs to extend their reach. The WPA-FAP's art caravan program developed in New York as a traveling program that used an army ambulance outfitted to carry works of WPA-FAP art to town squares and other local gathering points. The driver of the caravan was an artist who gave informal outdoor "gallery talks" and evening lectures (Ludins, 1973). The program was designed not just to display art, but to gather community input and assess interest in expanding WPA-FAP services. The exhibitions included ballots that asked participants their preference for future exhibitions. Along with contact information, the questions on the ballot reflect the goals of the WPA-FAP projects, including the work of art the visitor liked best, other art caravan exhibitions they would like to see, and interest in establishing a community art center in their town.

Printmaking in WPA-FAP

Among the various artistic mediums supported by the WPA-FAP, printmaking emerged as particularly aligned with the program's democratic ideals and collective vision. Printmaking held an important role in the WPA-FAP because multiples could be created and shared inexpensively, enabling artists to reach working-class audiences (Langa, 2004). Prints also reflected the democratic ideals of artists of the time who sought to create art for a broader public (Langa, 2004, O'Connor, 1973). Artists often chose lithography and screen printing, known as more commercial techniques than traditional intaglio, as more accessible mediums to communicate their ideas.

To support this democratic art form, the WPA-FAP established extensive infrastructure that fostered collaborative networks among artists and communities. Workshops around the country showed artists how to create prints and became sites of collective learning where experienced printmakers shared techniques to newcomers (Rudnick, 2023). These workshops operated as cooperative spaces where artists shared resources and equipment and collaborated on projects that addressed social concerns. These images could be found in community art center and art caravan exhibitions, on loan to public institutions, and in museum and gallery exhibitions, creating networks of cultural exchange that connected communities (Langa, 2004).

The exhibition of these prints in various public venues reflected a coordinated effort to impact public taste on art. Langa (2004) notes that some WPA-FAP artists were critical of public appreciation for the arts and felt that the public needed to be educated to appreciate the art of the WPA-FAP. For many artists, printmaking offered both creative freedom and the potential for broader social impact. Printmaker Elizabeth Olds (1973) reflected that artists could communicate through prints but also could choose their subjects. Like Dana, Olds envisioned access to prints through a lending library that would democratically share the works of art on a broader scale, creating a model that shared art with the public and challenged the traditional art market.

Inequities and activism in the WPA-FAP

Despite the WPA-FAP's progressive goals of democratizing art, the program's implementation revealed significant structural inequalities that mirrored broader social problems of the era. Hierarchical structure and inequitable representation in the WPA administration and the governmental oversight of this organization, meant that WPA-FAP programs carried some of the same issues as the institutions from which they sought to distinguish themselves. The experiences of artists var-

ied widely because each state implemented the program differently, and the experiences of Black artists particularly highlighted systemic inequalities within the program. Black artists found opportunities for cultural advancement, collaboration, and recognition through these programs, but they still encountered barriers from state directors and agencies (Sklaroff, 2009). Additionally, while these WPA-FAP programs were successful in the classes and resources they offered, they faced discrimination issues as administrators often downplayed achievements of community centers in African American neighborhoods (Hardy, 2018), adhered to racial segregation in the South (McKinzie, 1973), and gave more public attention to programs associated with well-known artists, with urban Black community centers receiving more recognition than their rural southern counterparts (Calo, 2016).

Importantly, the WPA-FAP programs themselves were not simply government initiatives but were the direct result of organized artist advocacy and activism. WPA-FAP programs were not gifted by the federal government but were created and protected by the organization and lobbying of artists (Fraser, 2023; Lampert, 2013). In New York, politically active artists formed the Unemployed Artists' Group, which later became the Artists' Union (AU). The AU became the primary vehicle for collective action. The group, which expanded to cities across the U.S., demanded public support for artists by the federal government (Tyler, 1991).

Beyond securing the initial creation of the WPA-FAP, the AU continued to serve multiple functions for its members and the broader artistic community. The organization became an important social network for artists, building a leftist culture within the WPA-FAP and sharing their messages through the publication *Art Front* (Cohn, 2010). AU actively recruited Black artists into the organization, declared support for civil rights, and advocated for equality in the WPA-FAP. They also organized protests, often successfully, when funding was threatened to be cut for artists in the WPA-FAP and for museums to support artist relief efforts (Fraser, 2023). The union's advocacy extended beyond the immediate needs of WPA-FAP artists to broader issues of labor rights and professional recognition in the art world. For example, the AU worked with professional artist groups to advocate for artists to be paid by art museums for work to be included in their exhibitions (Lampert, 2013).

The end of the Federal Art Project

Funding cuts eventually decimated the WPA-FAP, moving support for the arts mostly to the states and imposing limits on WPA-FAP projects. Additionally, accusations of Communism grew as politicians opposing the WPA-FAP used it to hinder artists' work (Lampert, 2013). These at-

tacks had long-term ramifications on artists who were blacklisted from teaching positions, put under FBI surveillance, and forced to face the House Committee on Un-American Activities, with the WPA-FAP on the list of organizations that were serving as fronts for Communist activities. Artists were forced to take a loyalty oath denouncing involvement with Communist organizations and pressured to censor their art to non-political themes (Lampert, p. 177).

In 1936, the AU brought forward language for a Federal Art Bill that was taken up by Representative John Coffee and Senator Claude Pepper in 1938 to establish a permanent Bureau of Fine Arts (Grieve, 2009). However, it was met with such resistance by not only opponents unwilling to fund the arts during the Great Depression, but also by some artists, who wanted to distance themselves from federal support after witnessing Nazi attacks on modern art or saw themselves as exceptional and not part of programs designed for the public (Grieve, 2009).

By 1940, Cahill shifted the WPA-FAP to focus on the armed forces. Roosevelt ordered all work of the WPA-FAP to end by 1940. However, as Grieve (2009) outlines, the WPA-FAP had both immediate and far-reaching effects. The Graphic Art Division produced over 11,000 prints by the time they closed in 1943. In 22 states, 100 community art centers were established, employing hundreds of artists and teachers. Some still exist today; although the South Side Community Art Center is the only community art center still functioning in its original form, other centers became art museums that were established by communities after the WPA (DiCindio, 2023). As Kalfatovic (1994) notes, 19% of WPA-FAP employees were part of educational services. Many of these teachers were also artists, who not only created art in the WPA-FAP, but taught it to a new generation.

When the WPA-FAP ended in 1941 as the U.S. entered World War II, more than 8 million people had visited or participated in programming by the community art centers of the WPA-FAP. Yet, governmental oversight meant that these programs carried some of the same serious issues as the institutions from which they sought to distinguish themselves. To exemplify this point, I will compare the WPA-FAP with an organization working outside of the government, the TGP, an artist print collective in Mexico.

El Taller de Gráfica Popular

The TGP was founded in Mexico City in 1937, after the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists; LEAR), an artist collective formed to support the Mexican Revolution, dismantled. The TGP utilized graphic arts to instigate public

awareness and social change in Mexico and internationally. Goals of the TGP included defending the national culture of Mexico, collaborating with cultural and political groups, and upholding artistic expression and professional interests (Avila, 2008). It also rested on the belief that to serve its people, "art must reflect the social reality of the times and have a unity of content and form" (Ades, 1989, p. 326, as cited in Richards, 2001, p. 36).

Avila (2014) notes, graphic arts in Mexico developed alongside Mexican mural painting, and like muralists, TGP worked within the community. Posters were at the heart of the TGP because graphic art was such an effective propaganda tool. The posters were not meant to last but instead crumbled or were washed away by rain after they had served their purpose in public spaces. As TGP artist Adolfo Mexiac describes, "[w]e were very concerned with everything that was going on in the neighborhoods of Mexico City. We went all around the city to draw, and…when the Taller met, we would discuss what we had seen, what interested us" (Blanco & Einy, 2008, 0:5:23). Many of the TGP artists were part of "cultural brigades" formed of teachers of different disciplines who went into rural communities to teach (Blanco & Einy, 2008). As a member of the TGP, Elizabeth Catlett describes helping with illiteracy, building schools, and farming, sharing that the TGP worked with the government, but they weren't paid by the government (Blanco & Einy, 2008). After World War II, the group was part of Mexico's literacy program, illustrating schoolbooks (Prignitz-Poda, 2015).

Between 1937 and 1966, there were over a hundred members in the TGP, usually twenty to twenty-five active members at a time (Prignitz-Poda, 2015). The TGP worked collectively. The TGP's studio space was "a significant site among key Mexican artists where dialogue and exchange were encouraged, social and political consciousness grew, and collaborations occurred" (Avila, 2014, p. 313). As in the WPA-FAP, the group found that printmaking lent itself to a collaborative atmosphere in which artists would share equipment and ideas. They met weekly and made decisions about everything from membership to commissions, resolving issues through majority votes (Richards, 2001). They used these meetings to critique each other's art, a process through which everyone was required to participate. TGP artists also used equipment to create independent art to support themselves (Prignitz-Poda, 2015).

Many of the artists worked as art teachers in K-12 schools (Richards, 2001). Older members of the group also fostered new artists. Member Arturo García Bustos remembers his high school literature teacher bringing him to meet the founders of the TGP, and he eventually became part of the workshop (Bustos, 2015). Unlike WPA-FAP that was created as a government program designed to support artists, the TGP

wanted to remain free of Mexican government commissions and paid dues to support the collective (Prignitz-Poda, 2015).

Artists of the TGP

As Cameron (1999) notes, Black artists of the WPA-FAP were influenced by the Mexican artists' commitment to social concerns and collaborative efforts to use art to promote awareness to racial inequality. Graphic artists of the TGP and artists of the WPA-FAP also became connected through a series of events that promoted cultural exchange between the U.S. and Mexico in the mid-1930s and 40s. Burroughs, then teaching in a high school, went to Mexico to study with TGP founder Leopoldo Méndez after being asked to pledge loyalty to the United States and disavow Communism (Langdale, 2022). Burroughs' work with the TGP inspired her to continue her activism in Chicago, including at Southside Community Art Center. Artists Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White were active in advocating for opportunities for Black artists in the WPA-FAP. Married at the time, they traveled to Mexico on Rosenwald Fellowships to work with muralists but soon became part of the TGP (Cameron, 1999). Catlett established permanent residence in Mexico partly because of hostility towards progressive artists in the United States at that time (Herzog, 2012).

The artists of the TGP were part of a community that included painters, photographers, and filmmakers, and these artists "participated in a reconstruction of the nation through their art" (Avila, 2014, p. 314). The work they created was meant to spread political awareness and activism but also joined people together for social causes. Working outside of the government and with communities, TGP artists were able to speak directly to the people in Mexico and internationally through their art and document the social and political changes of that time. Like the WPA-FAP community programs, the TGP broke down barriers between artists and the places of which they were part. However, working without the confines of the government oversight, the TGP served as a space of political change in ways that the WPA-FAP could not.

Collective agency in art museums

These 1930s programs illustrate ways in which art museums today can take on a more active, organic role in communities and how organizing together through common goals could open access and dialogue between artists, museums, and communities. Considering these historic initiatives in relation to museums calls for a reimaging of what art museums can become.

First, art museums should recognize that meaningful cultural programs come from collective community action, not institutional benevolence. Communities possess the agency to identify their needs, organize resources, and create their own cultural spaces. Like the TGP's democratic structure, art museums can support community governance over institutional policies and programming through collective decision-making. Following the model of WPA-FAP printmaking workshops, art museums can foster collaborative learning communities that democratize artistic knowledge through resource sharing. Finally, like the advocacy of AU to support artists, art museums can provide platforms and resources for community organizing efforts that help build broader movements for justice and social change.

Although many art museums are already working toward these ideals (see Gigante, 2024; Kletchka, 2018; Pegno & Brindza, 2024; Pegno & Farrar, 2017 as examples), articulating these goals and utilizing historic models in their implementation opens new ways of thinking about how art museums work with communities. How would these spaces transform into sites of care, engagement with social and political issues, and intercultural collaboration through collective action? What new forms of cultural institutions would emerge when communities have collective agency over their own cultural development? I believe the answer is in supporting communities to create the cultural institutions they envision for themselves, transforming museums into collaborative, democratic, and politically engaged spaces that may look very different than traditional museums but would directly reflect the histories, values, and cultures of the communities to which they belong.

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Collective actions: A response to the Whitney Museum of American Art and a case for Black archival and aesthetic practices as movement building

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ABSTRACT

Amid the 2020-2021 Black Lives Matter protests, the Whitney Museum in New York faced significant backlash for its handling of a controversial exhibition that many viewed as exclusionary and insensitive (MTlL Collective, 2018). This paper challenges the reader to view the Whitney Museum through an archival framing. Through four contemporary case studies, a proposition for more inclusive and equitable practices for the acquisition, archiving, and exhibition of art and material culture by minoritized people is centered, concluding with the value of Black archivists and curatorial staff in shaping discourse responsive to the contemporary moment and towards archival justice. The conversation concludes with practical examples for art educators and ways forward.

KEYWORDS: archive, public pedagogy, social movements, art museum, curatorial practice, archival justice, embodied archive

A surprise email turned up in the inboxes of artists Joshua Kissi, Mic-aiah Carter, Andre Wagner, Florian Koenigsberger, Anthony Coleman, and Dani Kwateng. It was early Fall 2020, squarely in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown. In the email was an offer of life-time admission to The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City (hereafter known as The Whitney or Whitney Museum) for them-selves and a guest, with one small pretense— their work, previously purchased at a steep discount from their philanthropic website sale, would be on display in an upcoming exhibit titled "Collective Actions: Artist Interventions In a Time of Change."

Joshua, Michaiah, Andre, Florian, Anthony, and Dani are part of a mo-mentary collective of Black photographers called See in Black. Joining

in creative work to invest in Black artists, they provide education-al opportunities and community building with a focus on increasing "Black visibility" (See in Black, 2024). The over half a million dollars in funds they raised that summer through the sales of their prints were earmarked to support restorative justice causes. The artists were in-censed and proceeded to their social media page to collectively high-light the museum's predatory behavior. Whitney's purchase was not only insensitive to the cause of the artists but also representative of an unusual or unconventional acquisition practice outside the framework of similarly sized art museums. Just five months after the start of the COVID-19 quarantine and the murder of Breonna Taylor, and a mere two months since the murder of George Floyd, moments that pushed the momentum of their work forward, See in Black found their names, likenesses, and art used in what felt to them like a performative gesture by The Whitney Museum (Webster, 2021).

The Fall of 2020 witnessed a contentious episode at The Whitney Mu-seum. The planned exhibition, curated by archivist-researcher Farris Wahbeh, aimed to showcase protest ephemera from the nationwide Black Lives Matter marches that erupted that summer. The backlash to The Whitney's actions was swift, with many critics and activists calling out the museum's attempt to capitalize on the racial unrest and activ-ism around the Black Lives Matter movement. The show was immedi-ately criticized and ultimately canceled (Ulaby, 2020). This controversy served as a catalyst, bringing to a head long-standing concerns about exploitative acquisition practices and the rampant exclusion of Black and Brown voices within major art institutions. The Whitney's acquisi-tion and exhibition of See in Black's work, without their consent or in-put, reflects a larger pattern of exploitative and exclusionary practices by museums. While museums have long relied on extracting cultural capital from the labor of BIPOC artists, The Whitney's handling of this exhibit laid bare its inability to center the "care and attention placed on the social history of the artist" necessary for a nuanced and equitable acquisition and interpretation of their work (Sidogi, 2023, p. 75).

As history has shown, visual documentation serves as a powerful teaching tool, offering a deeper understanding of the issues and emo-tions that fueled activism (Sirmans & Colón, 2020). The inclusion of protest ephemera in large museums has become a contested space. While these collections offer valuable historical documentation of so-cial movements and public dissent, their acquisition standards and exhibition raise critical questions (Sirmans & Colón, 2020). Concerns often center on the potential exploitation of the people who created the ephemera. Additionally, questions arise about the authenticity of rep-resentation as predominantly White curatorial teams navigating sen-sitive racial and social justice issues can create a disconnect between

the presented narrative and the lived experiences documented in the ephemera (Collier & Sutherland, 2020).

This paper seeks to challenge the reader to view The Whitney Museum through an archival framing, positioning the museum's controversial practices during the 2020-2021 Black Lives Matter protests as symptomatic of broader systemic issues in cultural institutions. Drawing on four case studies—The Black Bottom Digital Archive, We the Diaspora, #ArchivesforBlackLives and Maya Stovall's Liquor Store Theatre—the paper argues for a model of archival justice as articulated by Caswell (2021) that is rooted in Black-led artistic and curatorial interventions often occurring outside traditional institutions embodying innovative forms of public pedagogy. This article theorizes how aesthetic and archival strategies contribute to movement building and civic education, beginning by analyzing The Whitney Museum controversy as a paradigmatic case of institutional extractivism. Each case study then helps to demonstrate how Black artists and scholars reclaim the archive as a site of memory and its potential for k-16 learning environments.

Black Responses and Archival Justice

The Society of American Archivists (SAA) distinguishes between "archives" (in lowercase) as physical records and storage spaces, and "Archives" (in uppercase) as institutions responsible for acquiring, maintaining, and providing access to those records (SAA, 2016). Art institutions such as The Whitney fall into the latter category—collecting Archives whose acquisition policies and curatorial decisions shape public understanding and historical memory as they determine what records and materials to acquire, preserve, and exhibit. Some large art institutions, like the Smithsonian, are archival-forward, where they are transparent in their existence as an archive. Essentially, the work of the archive and the archivist, as well as those who might curate the experience for the broader public, is to assess, collect, organize, preserve, and provide access under the auspices of agreed-upon standards (Society of American Archivists, 2016). Community archivists, those often without institutional archival training or not operating in traditional archival spaces, have become a boon to the field yet still struggle with what the archivist title means— "The reason we called ourselves *Black Bottom* Archives before we were doing any explicit historical or 'traditional' archiving was that we saw ourselves as actively creating this archive. We understood what we were doing as creating an archive…" (Prosper, 2022, p. 75). Maya Cade of the *Black Film Archive* notes, "The act of collecting, sorting, preserving and making available is an act of love for a group. It's an act of care" (Kaur, 2022, para. 14), highlighting the responsibility and intentionality required when representing people's histories and the open call to communities to engage in archival work.

Archives serve a pedagogical purpose, and their archival material serves as "open educational resources" (Vergara, 2021, para. 6). In both the processing and exhibition phases of archival work, interpretation and public value are assigned to records through metadata, exhibit labeling, and physical placement within the collection (such as organizational labeling and tagging) and within a public display alongside other themed pieces. Art institutions are the most expressive of this work and thus hold significant power over the public's understanding and interpretation of art. With this understanding, The Whitney Museum's acquisition of See in Black's art and collection of protest ephemera would have fallen under its documented acquisition policies, and it would hold greater responsibility as it communicates an educational value to the public. As Vergara (2021) points out, archival institutions serve as primary sites where archives are also put on display for meaning-making, but may fall victim to the power dynamics often felt by their visitors:

> Instead of thinking of the archive as a sacred repository, I propose instead thinking of activist archiving as energeia, action, a practice that scholars can perform in educational settings for social justice purposes. (para. 8)

In response to the long history of exclusion in institutions like The Whitney, a surge of independent archival projects arose in the mid-2010s, spearheaded by Black creatives and historians. These Black archivists, artists, and scholars have begun to articulate and practice what is increasingly referred to as archival justice—a praxis committed to correcting historical omissions, redressing representational harms, and empowering communities to curate and interpret their own narratives.

Archival justice, as articulated by Caswell (2021), refers to an active and intentional practice that addresses systemic inequities in historical representation. There has been a shift in the profession's understanding of the archive and power, acknowledging the multiple points at which bias and thus harm can enter the process (Robinson-Sweet, 2018). The "power" of the archive, as Robinson-Sweet (2018) intuitively notes, is "its ability to oppose the state's chronophagy and the clearing of its debts for past wrongs" (p. 26), acknowledging the ways the state schemes to control these narratives. Countering, as many justice-oriented praxes require, the erasure and distortion of marginalized communities' experiences foregrounds the intentionality and accountability in the preservation and dissemination of cultural memory. Hartman (2008) emphasizes the archive's capacity to restore agency and voice through tools like critical fabulation, an imaginative reconstruction that "troubles the line" between history, our methods of interpretation,

and the necessity of filling in the silences of the archive. PG Watkins, co-founder of the Black Bottom Digital Archive, articulates in their meditation on Black archives that the vernacular materials and memories in these holding spaces offer an opportunity to add complexity to established narratives (Prosper, 2022). These practices affirm the radical potential of community-led archiving grounded in the everyday.

The surge of these non-traditional archives represents a critical act of interpolation—the insertion of distinct, Black community-based projects into an overwhelmingly White archival landscape. It stresses the power dynamics at play, but crucially, this movement reframes archival work as a form of public pedagogy, or pedagogy occurring in nontraditional sites, as this social movement inspires necessary educational endeavors outside of traditional classrooms (hooks, 2003; Sandlin et al., 2011). Archivist Dorothy Berry (2021) notes that the conceptual model of the archive has become synonymous with expressions of history and memory, which seems to be at odds with the standardization provided by a long archival tradition and representative association (the SAA). The definition has become slippery for those who practice citing how the expansiveness of the archive as a concept is troubling, while others who appreciate the amorphous boundaries of the methodology call for a new criticality, education, and way to make the archive public.

The 2020 Whitney Museum Controversy

Conspicuously undated, The Whitney Museum of Art's named director, Adam D. Weinberg, responded to the collective anger following the senseless and inhumane murder of George Floyd with a statement, as did many other predominantly White-owned and operating companies and institutions. Weinberg's edited copy includes the museum's understanding that they "have made mistakes," highlighting how racism and inequity are "devastating" and how their work in the arts "make[s] visible and condemn[s]" this injustice. Ultimately, they pledged to "re-examine our exhibitions and programs to ensure they continue to address the art and experiences of people of color, especially Black communities" (Whitney Museum of Art, n.d.).

In a search for a direct response from The Whitney on the Black Lives Matter exhibit debacle, there is little official documentation. Their brief, undated response might be a tactic to address any cultural or racial issues the museum could face, both past and future. In doing so, there seems to be a demonstrated "affected ignorance" (Moody-Adams, 2022) or inability to fully acknowledge the profound and implacable nature of its power over the "Black communities across the country" they seek to "stand with" (Whitney Museum of Art, n.d.). In their response, The Whitney Museum of Art effectively deflects accountability.

It denies the specificity of this crisis rather than exhibiting a sincere engagement with the critiques and concerns that the activists and communities they seek to represent have voiced.

Newspaper outlet The Guardian, in their article titled "'I felt taken advantage of': the story of another Whitney Museum controversy," highlighted a pattern of missteps by the institution in recent years (Sayej, 2020). This article specifically referenced the 2017 Whitney Biennial, where White artist Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till's mangled body sparked outrage for its appropriation and potentially exploitative nature (Sayej, 2020). This prior controversy foreshadowed the concerns surrounding the Black Lives Matter ephemera exhibition, once again raising questions about The Whitney's sensitivity to issues of race and representation within its curatorial practices. Arts news source Hyperallergic recorded the demographics of the opening exhibit in The Whitney's new 2015 expansion into downtown. In it, Hrag Vartanian, the author and co-founder of Hyperallergic, critiques the lack of diversity in the artists featured in The Whitney Museum's inaugural exhibition at its new location (Vartanian, 2015). Vartanian's analysis demonstrates the included artists' skew towards White and male artists, with a much lower representation of Latinx and Native American voices. In this analysis, he compares these numbers against the US population, noting which categories do and do not represent the larger population.

Figure 1
Instagram post by @SeeinBlackproject on August 25, 2020.
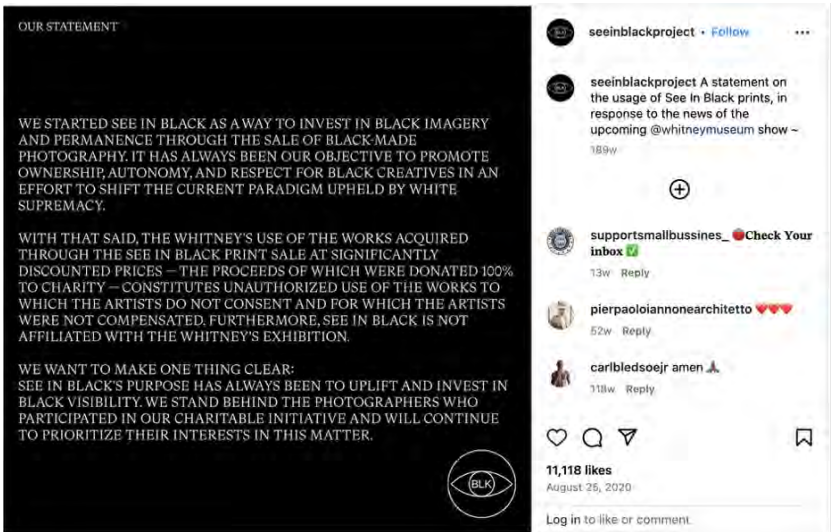
Using social media as a sounding board, artists, activists, and scholars criticized the exhibition. See in Black posted a response to The Whitney on their Instagram (See Figure 1), providing a clear counter to The Whitney's predatory practices. This social media exposure quickly gained traction, drawing widespread criticism as news outlets picked up the story, fueling the larger conversation about The Whitney's lack of sensitivity and community engagement.

Critics argued that The Whitney aimed to acquire protest materials at a significant discount from the artists who created them. This raised concerns about the museum profiting from the Black Lives Matter movement without fairly compensating the artists whose work documented it (Ulaby, 2020). The timing of the exhibition, just months after the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, sparked further criticism that The Whitney was insensitive to the ongoing struggle for racial justice. The Whitney's top-down approach, where a predominantly White curatorial team acquired and showcased protest ephemera without the consent or input of the Black artists and activists who created the works, created additional concern. Critics further questioned whether the museum, with its predominantly White curatorial staff, could authentically represent the experiences documented in the ephemera (Collier & Sutherland, 2020). Lastly, the planned exhibition involved the unilateral acquisition of materials by The Whitney through unconventional means, with no apparent collaboration with Black artists or activists involved in the Black Lives Matter movement.

The Digital Archive's Innovation

It should be noted The Whitney is not alone in its questionable behavior as we look through the lineage of these poor archiving and exhibition practices. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 "'Harlem on My Mind:' The Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968" exhibition notoriously excluded Black artists and creatives in the planning process and show– an exhibit meant to highlight the creative and cultural prowess of the zeitgeist they wished to portray. This lack of community engagement is a missed opportunity and further alienates the very community these exhibitions aim to represent; thus, the archival interventions discussed in this paper—both digital and embodied— function as examples of pedagogical acts and tools to enact in opposition to the norms set by large, established institutions like The Whitney Museum. The following case studies exemplify archival justice as a response to institutional extraction, showcasing four distinct yet complementary approaches to community-centered archival work and public pedagogy. By focusing on non-physical archives, these examples show how digital innovations move archives beyond storage in favor of community engagement and shaping public understanding of history.

Black Bottom Digital Archive

The *Black Bottom Digital Archive* is an example of public pedagogy through art. Dedicated to chronicling the history of Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood– a historic Black neighborhood demolished in the 1960s for a freeway project– the archive uses photographs, maps, oral histories, and other user-generated content to reconstruct and preserve the collective memory of a vibrant community displaced by urban renewal (Black Bottom Digital Archive, n.d.). The project's ethos of "putting the community in charge of its own history" reflects the counter-archivist stance of dismantling traditional power structures. Through this framework, the *Black Bottom Digital Archive* can reclaim a sense of power to chronicle and interpret history from within the community itself—Austin's (2022) "narratives of interiority" (p. 63). Moreover, its interactive digital format transforms the archive into a pedagogical tool. Rather than serving as a static repository, it invites users to engage critically with historical material, contextualize it through their lived experiences, and contribute to a living archive.

By inviting writers, videographers, educators, and documentarians to participate, the project reifies its motto—"bringing the past to the present and future." In doing so, it not only preserves memory but mobilizes it as a tool for critical engagement and activism, particularly around contemporary issues of gentrification and spatial justice.

Figure 2
Screenshot of the "Oral Histories" webpage on the *Black Bottom Digital Archive* website, showing a list of interviews with those who lived in Black Bottom during the 1940s and 1950s.
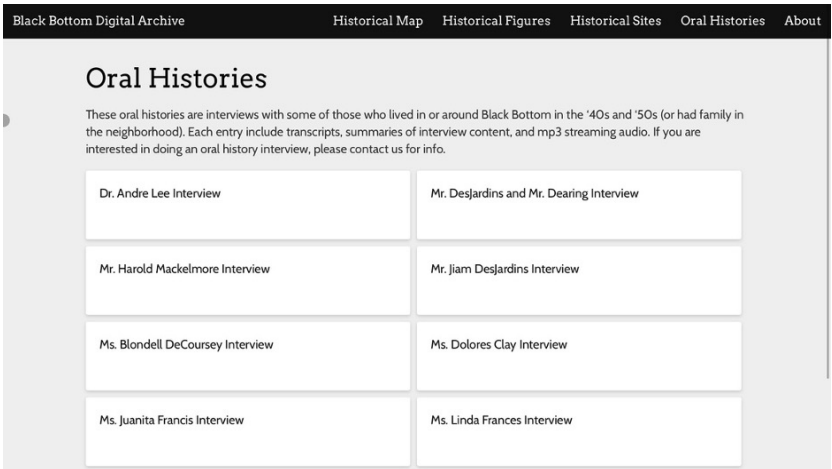
"We the Diaspora"

We the Diaspora, a virtual archive and exhibition curated by communications strategist Jiya Pinder, further illustrates the pedagogical and activist potential of digital archiving. This borderless digital project documents the global Black experience through visual, textual, and multimedia materials. Traversing geographies and temporalities, Pinder curates content that connects historical Black liberation struggles with present-day activism through art, photography, and video. *We the Diaspora*, uniquely reconfigures the digital archive as a site of political education and collective empowerment outside of established interpreting institutions.

Crucially, as a form of digital public pedagogy, this project exists within a context that offers immediate feedback and engagement. Pinder's emphasis on co-creation and community engagement redefines the role of the curator, transforming it from a top-down, exclusive practice to one of facilitation and dialogue. Pinder sources her posts and stories from the community she has built on social media, through collaborations with like-minded social brands, and via calls for submissions to "share [their] creative legacy" (See Figure 4). Here, Pinder inadvertently redefines the role of the archivist—not as an authoritative gatekeeper but as a facilitator of narrative agency and a site for further pedagogical development. Pinder and her work were featured in a CNN piece titled "How Black archives are highlighting overlooked parts of history and culture" (Kaur, 2022). This media coverage further highlights the rising prominence of Black-led digital archives as vital public pedagogical tools, but also the value of the working model they have created to empower rather than extract from the very people and communities they hope to serve.

Figure 3
Snapshot of content on the *@wethediaspora* Instagram page

Figure 4
@*wethediaspora* Instagram post from May 19, 2025, depicting a flyer for an open call for submissions in collaboration with podcasting and "storytelling" page @*allblackcreatives.*

#ArchivesforBlackLives

The #*ArchivesForBlackLives* collective exemplifies the public pedagogy model of the outside-the-norm teaching and learning sites while also demonstrating the potential of a diverse group of professionals. Composed of archivists, scholars, and activists, the initiative works to rectify systemic erasures by promoting the preservation of Black experiences. The collective's pedagogy is explicitly political, teaching communities how to take ownership of their narratives, build sustainable archival infrastructures, and advocate for representational justice within and beyond institutional contexts (Archives for Black Lives, n.d.). Through its workshops, online toolkits, and public outreach, #*ArchivesForBlackLives* epitomizes public pedagogy in action—facilitating informal, community-based learning about documentation, preservation, and historical recovery. The initiative does not simply critique traditional archives or denude them of their relevance—it builds alternatives by providing services to community archives as they collect, standardize, make public, and apply for financial support.

#*ArchivesForBlackLives* aligns perfectly with the core tenets of public pedagogy, which emphasizes dismantling power imbalances and

encouraging critical engagement with knowledge (Sandlin, 2011). By supporting the work of community archives and encouraging the public to engage directly with these histories, *#ArchivesForBlackLives* can challenge the dominant archival and exhibition practices by proliferating inclusive practices. In stark contrast to The Whitney's top-down approach, this grassroots initiative rejects the notion of the museum or archive as the sole arbiter of cultural memory, allowing space for diverse perspectives and self-determination.

Liquor Store Theatre

Black art and activism is a partnership as old as the social, political, and ultimately human struggles of Black people in America. A powerful example of its manifestation is performance artist Maya Stovall's multi-year project "Liquor Store Theatre," in which she offers a compelling example of embodied archival practice and site-specific public pedagogy. Situated in her Detroit neighborhood, Stovall danced in the parking lots and sidewalks of liquor stores, using these spaces as a platform to connect with her neighbors (see Figure 4). In her book of the same name, Stovall explains how liquor stores become vital community centers in underserved neighborhoods. Unlike the green parks found in wealthier areas, liquor stores often become a central meeting place—a "plaza" for local residents. Rather than operating within conventional gallery or museum spaces, Stovall intentionally located her work in sites that serve as informal social hubs in disinvested Black neighborhoods. Her choreographic interventions and conversations with passersby record oral histories that blur boundaries between performance, ethnography, and archival documentation. Here, we are attuned to the realities of a city struggling to recover from repeated recessions, shifting economies, and historic inequities, yet brimming with love and connection.

Stovall's interventionist work, informed by both her artistic practice and the sociopolitical constructs of her neighborhood (Desai, 2020), physically embodies the concept of the "archive" existing beyond traditional repositories. By understanding history as both "registered" through documents and "lived" through experience (Stovall, 2020, p. 3), we can see Stovall's performances challenging the limitations of conventional archives through active embodiment, reinforcing Stryker's (2010) concept of the "embodied archival imaginary" as a practice that expands historical accountability beyond social and physical boundaries (p. 107). These archives often prioritize official records and dominant narratives, neglecting the experiences of marginalized communities (McDermid, 2014). As Stryker (2010) theorizes, embodied archival practices allow for alternative modes of holding and transmitting history through gesture, dialogue, and presence. Moreover, Stovall's work exemplifies what Desai (2020) and hooks (2003) describe as rad-

ical pedagogy—a critically important practice that emerges from and responds to the sociopolitical conditions of marginalized communities. Through movement and interaction with the liquor store and its patrons and passersby as a site, the "ambiguous space" of the past (Stovall, 2020, p. 3) serves as a starting point for reimagining the role of archives and how the public can utilize them to engage with communities and document their living histories. By reconceptualizing the archive as something one can dance or speak, how can we view organizing and movement building as activities and practices that extend beyond strategy and logistics to center elements of aesthetics (Desai, 2020)?

The case studies demonstrate digital and embodied communal practices at work, countering and disrupting dominant narratives and the institutions that would see the continued dismissal of stories marginalized stories. Viewed collectively, they cultivate a critical consciousness that can prompt major archiving institutions like The Whitney to reconsider their practices.

Figure 5
Screenshot from *Liquor Store Theatre,* vol. 4, no. 4 (2017) on YouTube
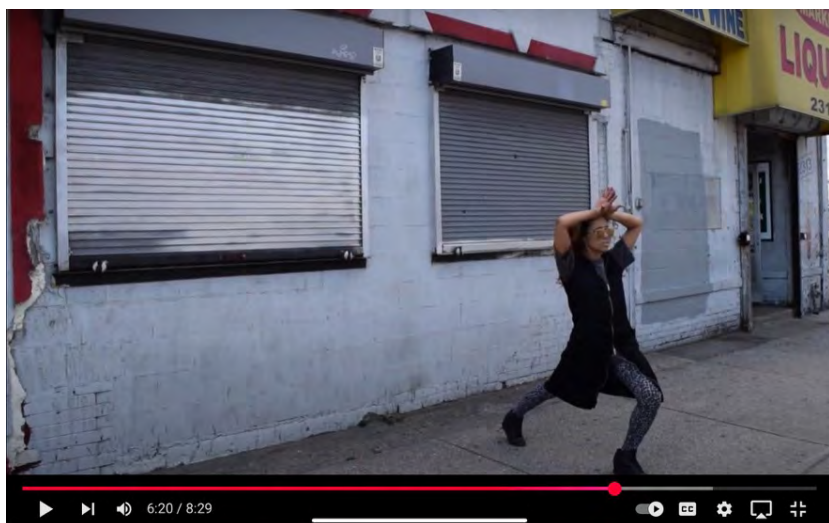
Table 1

Characteristics of Black Archival and Aesthetic Practices across Case Studies

Case Study	Type	Key Practices	Movement/Knowledge Building Contributions
#ArchivesForBlackLives	Grassroots collective	Develops toolkits, workshops, and partnerships to support Black archival projects	Democratizes archival practices; supports local memory work; challenges institutional gatekeeping
Black Bottom Digital Archive	Community archive	Collects and shares oral histories from Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood	Preserves and makes public community history; educates about displacement
We the Diaspora	Instagram page/archive	Publicly sources and curates digital stories and resources about and for the Black diaspora	Provides political education; creates connections to lost or understoried histories; promotes a transnational solidarity
Liquor Store Theatre	Art intervention	Stages performances at Detroit liquor stores to explore space, memory, and history	Critiques urban revitalization; amplifies community voices

The Power of Storytelling and Reclaiming Narratives

Archives are not static collections but dynamic creations. Archives are produced, curated, assembled, and studied. They are experienced, and the pedagogical work takes place within the moving spaces where we engage in these experiences with others (Schuermans et al., 2012). Critically rethinking how archives are assembled, curated, and accessed, with the understanding that the archive is continuously being produced, ensures a more complete historical record (Ramirez, 2015). As Black artists become archivists, they redefine the role and function of the archive by breathing life into it through artistic production. Simply put, their art is the making of the archive and the work it holds.

Black archives function beyond simply housing historical documents (Austin, 2022). They serve as spaces for healing, organizing resistance, and bolstering a sense of community and collective memory for Black individuals and groups (Rodney, 2020). The Combahee River Collective (1982) understood this sentiment as they wrote in their "Statement" that a "political realization" could come from the personal experiences of Black lives and even moreso from the unique challenges they face in society; they themselves a group of Black lesbian women. Public pedagogy, as Biesta (2011) interprets this relationship, "connects the educational and political and locates both firmly in the public domain" (p. 684). With this example and further framing by Cook's (2011) historical examination of the "shaping of the archival mindset" (p. 173), the oft-silenced counter-narratives that center on the viewpoints of historically minoritized individuals have the potential to expand both the archive and public knowledge. In other words, a truly public pedagogy that ensures the preservation and production of more-than-single narratives is always in service to the intersections of experiences, identities, and the ways in which politics can never be separated from them.

Ways Forward

In their work, "We Are What We Keep; We Keep What We Are," archivist Terry Cook documents the historic roles of archivists as curator, historian, and expert, and as White bodies have predominantly taken up these roles, they have perpetuated the values and priorities of the dominant group (Cook, 2011). The underrepresentation of Black professionals in archives and museums is a significant issue that contributes to the concerns surrounding The Whitney Museum's Black Lives Matter ephemera controversy. A 2006 report by the Society of American Archivists revealed that only 3% of archivists in the US identified as Black (Society of American Archivists, 2006). This lack of diversity has a direct impact on the perspectives preserved in traditional archives, which often prioritize White narratives and experiences. Furthermore, Collier and Sutherland (2020) point to Black artists and curators' continued challenges with representation, fueling a disconnect between the stories these institutions tell and the lived experiences of Black communities. This lack of diversity within the archival and museum professions hinders efforts toward inclusive representation. It manifests a sense of exclusion for Black artists and communities when they engage with these institutions.

In early 2021, *The Black Scholar* released a call for proposals on Black archival practice. The guest editors outlined a series of thematic engagements that point to the "imagination extinction" in the physical archive, the archivist, and their practice. What, then, they ask, are the "potential and promise[s]" of an orientation toward a distinct Black archival prac-

tice (Collier & Sutherland, 2022)? The archive, in their words, is both lived and remembered—existing in a dual present and past. This issue of the journal presents an "offer[ance]" to the "untamed" practices existing at the edges of contemporary archives (Collier & Sutherland, 2022), as presented by scholars working in these spaces.

These digital narratives promote historical literacy and spark critical conversations about race and social justice (Sweeny, 2017). Artistic and educational practices empower Black communities to reclaim their narratives and educate the broader public about their experiences. This stands in stark contrast to The Whitney's archival approach with See in Black, which aimed to exploit Black creativity without fostering dialogue or community engagement. Projects such as the *Black Bottom Digital Archive, We the Diaspora, #ArchivesForBlackLives,* and Liquor Store Theatre exemplify what archival justice looks like in practice. These interventions remind us that archives are not neutral repositories but socially constructed spaces with the power to shape collective memory and historical possibility.

Table 2
Practical Applications for K–16 Art Educators Inspired by Black Archival Case Studies

Case Study	Examples of Educational Application	Arts-Based Pedagogical Goals
#ArchivesForBlackLives	Use archival justice toolkits to guide student-led archive projects	Developing research skills; building community awareness and ethical stewardship
Black Bottom Digital Archive	Create classroom oral history projects; explore displacement through neighborhood mapping	Engaging with local history; critiquing urban development; understanding governmental processes and policies (historic and contemporary)
We the Diaspora	Identity and heritage-based digital storytelling projects using the format (rather than the application) of Instagram, TikTok, or other social media apps.	Cultivating critical media literacy; connecting diasporic experiences with visual culture
Liquor Store Theatre	Site-based performance or visual response assignments in public or contested spaces	Understanding space, memory, and protest through embodied and artistic practices

For art educators, these case studies offer important moves and practical frameworks (See Table 2). Educators watch, learn, and adopt new methods, as is the craft of staying current and connected to our learners. Digital storytelling projects inspired by *We the Diaspora*, oral history exercises drawing on Liquor Store Theatre's methods, or collaborative digital mapping, similar to the *Black Bottom Digital Archive*, can serve as new inspirations for facilitating critical arts engagement in educational settings. Students might analyze institutional collections through an equity lens, curate counter-archives of their communities, or collaborate with local activists and artists on preservation projects. These approaches encourage students to view art not just as a commodity but as a practice that stirs our lives and politics in aesthetic form—one that intersects with civic identity, historical accountability, and justice. Building on the work of Black artists and archivists who have critically interrogated and subverted exploitative processes, this moment can continue to spark critical conversations about representation and power dynamics in institutions and their impact on our communities and classrooms.

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Haunting as public pedagogy: Creating theatre with ghostly witches as Roe fell

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ABSTRACT

On May 3, 2022, I was visited by three ghosts: the ghosts of witches past, witches present, and witches future - a trinity of temporally separate entities that also transcend temporal boundaries. That is the nature of a ghost, after all - they arrive from other times with "intimations, hints, suggestions, and portents" (Gordon, 1997, p. x). I am Nikki Kendra Davis, and I am a white cis woman, a haunted historian, and a witch. In 2022, I set out to make political theatre with the ghosts of the murdered Pendle Witches to share with the public the "repressed and unresolved social violences" that were making themselves known to me. That is how sociologist Avery Gordon defines being haunted, as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known" (1997, p. xvi). Drawing on this conception, I claim that haunting is the public pedagogical method used by ghosts to educate the public about lingering and ongoing social violences in order to prompt the living to work towards social justice (Sandlin, 2011; Desai, 2020). We are all haunted but have been taught to ignore, write off, or fear such experiences. In this article, I will expound upon the ghosts and their hauntings as a form of public pedagogy, demonstrate why theatre - embodied storytelling - is a suitable artform for accessing and activating hauntings, and then reanimate my hauntingly educational interactions with the ghosts of witches past, present, and future through the process of creating a play about witches as Roe v. Wade fell.

KEYWORDS: ghosts, hauntings, public pedagogy, theatre, women

On May 3, 2022, I was visited by three ghosts. They had been haunting me from a distance for the prior seven months. But on that day, as I sat in a plane flying through the air towards England, they overwhelmingly converged, convening with each other and me in the skies. Into my research journal, I poured my haunted soul…

I am traveling to Lancashire in search of The Pendle Witches about whom I will write my next play. Women who practiced magic, blessed the land, healed the sick, delivered babies… Women ultimately murdered for being witches, "soldiers in the Devil's great army"… The murder of these women served as proof that the LAW, the "King's Justice," was in fact justice… Their murder, their inhumane imprisonment, their bodily examinations in search of the Devil's mark, their coerced confessions were offered up to the public as a "look how great and effective and righteous your government and judicial system is" advertisement. I'm getting ahead of myself. Last night, an opinion from the U.S. Supreme Court leaked to the public, a draft but still, that said the court will overturn Roe V. Wade. So, to say I am a bit bursting with rage would make sense. Women, the Law, religion, politics, women who exercise agency, women who choose to live in the margins or who have been marginalized being punished and that punishment somehow proving how "righteous" the law of the land is… It has happened, always.

Those ghosts that haunted me into writing this entry were the ghosts of witches past, witches present, and witches future - a trinity of temporally separate entities that also transcend temporal boundaries. That is the nature of a ghost, after all - they arrive from other times with "intimations, hints, suggestions, and portents" (Gordon, 1997, p. x). I am Nikki Kendra Davis, and I am a white cis woman historian who makes political theatre art with ghosts to share with the public the "repressed and unresolved social violences" that make themselves known to me. That is how sociologist Avery Gordon defines being haunted, as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known… producing a something-to-be-done" (1997, p. xvi).

Drawing on this conception, I stake the claim that haunting is the public pedagogical method used by ghosts to educate the public about lingering and ongoing social violences to prompt the living to work towards social justice (Sandlin, 2011; Desai, 2020). We are all haunted but have been taught to ignore, write off, or fear such experiences - the elephants in the room, the embodied knowing, the bad vibes, the educational echoes from other spacetimes. In what follows, I will expound upon the ghosts and their hauntings as a form of public pedagogy, then demonstrate why theatre, embodied storytelling, is a suitable artform for accessing and activating hauntings. I will then reanimate my hauntingly educational interactions with the ghosts of witches past, present, and future through the process of creating a play about witches as Roe v. Wade fell.

To conclude their literary review of public pedagogy, Jennifer A. Sandlin, Michael P. O'Malley, and Jake Budick called for a different type of public pedagogy research:

> We are not calling for public pedagogy research that utilizes empirical data as proof toward positivistic truth claims; rather, we argue for research… that draws on psychoanalytical, phenomenological… and poststructural understandings of learning to develop an empiricism that honors the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the mechanisms and processes of public pedagogy. (2011, p. 362)

To answer their call, I argue that the empirical experiences we label "hauntings" - embodied chills, fear, anxiety, emotional overwhelm, deja vu, bodily dispossession, witnessing apparitions, hearing whispers, intuitive knowing, etc. - are complex, ambiguous, and powerful yet undermined mechanisms of public pedagogy uniquely practiced by ghosts. To frame experiences of haunting as a pedagogical process is to imbue the ghost with agency, conjuring a (no)thing that has and practices a pedagogy. Moving forward, the terms "ghosts" and "hauntings" will be understood in the following way: Following Gordon, I argue that *ghosts* are the cumulative source, the "repressed and unresolved social violences," and their *hauntings* are the transmission of those ghosts and how they are received/felt/experienced/come-to-be known by the living. When you experience something you might label a *haunting*, ask yourself: Given the context of my current situation and spacetime, what repressed or unresolved social violences are trying to make themselves known to me and why? What concerns for social justice open up when we take our empirically-experienced hauntings seriously?

With his 1993 speech turned 1994 book *Specters of Marx*, Philosopher Jacque Derrida coined *hauntology*, the ghostly disruption of ontology (1994, p. 10). There is not only "to be" or "not to be." The ghosts' hauntings experienced by the living are proof of the persistence of the "already" and the "yet-to-come" in our present, a configuration which, with its non-present presence making itself known via haunting, makes a mockery of linear temporalities. This is what happened on May 3, 2022, when the ghosts of witches past, present, and future overwhelmed me all at once. Derrida argues that the living have a responsibility "to learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship" (1994, p. xvii-xviii). Ghosts do not want you to run and hide from or exorcise them. That understanding of ghosts has been perpetuated by hegemony to suffocate the complexity and potentiality of ghosts and hauntings. "Hegemony," writes Derrida, "organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting.

Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (1994, p. 46). It is not a pleasurable experience to be haunted. It can be utterly terrifying, but that is how the ghosts get your attention and make you assume responsibility. They come from other spacetimes to *haunt you into educated action* in your present. This reorientation of haunting as a counter-hegemonic pedagogy (Desai, 2020) makes clear the stakes and importance of what Donna J. Haraway calls, "staying with the trouble" (2016, p. 1) and "making kin with" (2016, p. 2) the ghostliness you encounter.

This project of "staying with" and "making kin" with ghosts also resonates with the work of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and his writing on historical materialism (1986). Though Benjamin does not use the word "ghost," his T*heses on the Philosophy of History* is ripe with what scholars deem hauntings (Richter, 2002; Gordon, 1997). Benjamin (1986) writes that for the historical materialist:

> thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions… by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad" (p. 262-263).

The *monad crystallization* can be understood as a moment in the research process that *the living historian experiences a haunting*. This initiatory moment "pregnant with tensions" (1986, p. 262) - a.k.a full of hauntings - is when the historian becomes entangled with a ghost, the moment they are crystallized into a monad - tied in a knot, if you will - with a repressed and/or unresolved social violence making itself known. This encounter opens up a spacetime, an opportunity to be with, *to stay with and to make kin* with the ghost that initiated the haunted. And an opportunity to let the ghost teach. Instead of encountering a historical subject and placing it in a linear timeline that is detached from now and from the historian, the materialist historian decides to stay with(in) the crystalized monad, the ghostly knot, and see what re(ve)lations might brew there.

We can learn how to more effectively access hauntings by analyzing the contrasts Benjamin makes between the practices of historicism and materialistic historicism: "Historicism gives the 'eternal' image *of the past*" while "historical materialism supplies a unique experience *with the past*" (1986, p. 262) [my emphasis]. This contrast demonstrates a shift from thinking (mind) to acting (body), from distant and detached research to proximate and relational research, and from a pedagogy privileging the historical archive of the past to a pedagogy privileging ghostly haunting (with)in the present.

I wish we were acutely attuned to hauntings but, alas, hegemony's disregard and erasure of such ways of somatic and intuitive knowing have made hauntings an inaccessible form of pedagogy. To bridge the gap between the ghosts' hauntings and the unattuned living I use a more accessible pedagogical tool: theatre, "an art that enacts the paradox of physical embodiment" (Luckhurst and Morin, 2014, p. 3). That paradox is the doubling effect that occurs when an actor embodies a character/another being, and it becomes evident that they are not autonomously themselves anymore, nor do they fully become the other. In that liminal space of acting, the actor is not-not themselves and not-not the other (Schechner, 2000), and this paradox shared through theatrical storytelling (Machado de Oliveira, 2021) can expose the inherent porosity of our beings and that we are never really autonomous, never not affected by and (re)entangling with others (da Silva, 2016). Every interaction with a ghostly other is a monad crystalizing, an open door appearing, but we will only notice the door if we are attuned enough to stay with the trouble. Actors are uniquely trained to embody, to be possessed by, to stay and make kin with an other. Then in performance, an actor makes present and legible to audiences the ghostly matters they embody, and actors together, ensembles of the living, can bring to life entire (ghost) stories from other spacetimes. This makes theatre a potentially effective conduit for translating hauntings that are coming from the shadow realm with urgent teachings.

Take, for example, the musical *Hamilton* (2015), a story of America's revolution and birth as a country. From the stage, the bodies of the founding fathers move and breathe in the same spacetime as you, the audience member, whose body sits, breathes, and experiences their performances. The actors dance, rap, sing, and educate you not from white bodies with powdery white wigs but *from Brown and Black and Asian bodies*. As these actors of color embody these white men, their performances invoke the ghosts of racial injustice and white supremacy, ghosts which have haunted this country from its founding to this moment in which it is now acceptable and exciting, yet still a bit unsettling - or *haunting* - to experience people of color playing the founding fathers.

As a white American theatergoer, how does it feel experiencing a Black George Washington? How does your white body feel receiving this early American history through rap and hip-hop music? As a Black American theatre goer, how does it feel to be represented in the founding of this country, to have this piece of theatre show that you too built, fought, and bled for this country? But also, how does it feel seeing people of color telling the stories of white men, most of whom owned slaves? Art educator and activist Dipti Desai writes, "Because invisibility is political in that it is an active form of erasure, to make visible

that which dominant institutions render invisible is an activist strategy that is inherently pedagogical" (2020, p. 15). In *Hamilton* (2015), the American exceptionalist, whitewashed narrative of the county's founding is ruptured by the bodies of people of color making themselves visible in performance. Their visibility on stage begs the haunting question, "where do people who look like me fit into the myths of and erasures made by American hegemony?" This politicizing piece of theatre makes the ghosts of American racism and white supremacy more present and their educational hauntings more deeply felt by actors and audiences alike.

Having laid the foundation of hauntings as ghostly public pedagogy and theatre as a potential translator of hauntings, it is time to (re)summon *the ghost of witches past, present, and future*, to trace and analyze what I was able to learn from their hauntings and *why* such teachings were so important to glean in our current spacetime.

<p align="center">***</p>

"Unfortunately, the witch herself—poor and illiterate—did not leave us her story… today we know the witch only through the eyes of her persecutors" (Ehrenreich and English, 1973). *And through hauntings from her ghost…*

a ghost story in five acts

characters:

ghost of witches *PAST*

ghost of witches **PRESENT**

ghost of witches ***Future***

`ME THEN`, me in a speculative, real-time conversation with the ghosts from 2021-2023

`Me Recorded`, quotes from my research journal kept from 2022-2023

[bracketed stage directions will help guide the tale]

ACT I: "Haunted Initiation" (November 2021)

PAST: For years, theatre performer Cassandra Gress had been haunted by the ghosts of the Pendle Witches, eight women and two of their sons hanged for witchcraft in Lancaster, England in 1612. I had brought this story of the Device and Whittle families to Cas-

sandra by way of the historical fiction novel Daugh-
ters of the Witching Hill by Mary Sharratt (2011).
Cassandra yearned to share this story with the public
through theatre.

PRESENT: *Once Nikki Kendra Davis formulated her femi-*
nist, political praxis for making theatre through and
with hauntings, I partnered with the PAST to bring
these two women together.

> [ME THEN experiences a haunting initiation. Once
> introduced to the Pendle Witches and Cas, ME THEN
> gets "taken up" by the ghosts (Povinelli, 2011,
> p. 6-7), quickly becoming obsessed, consumed, de-
> voted to the witches and this project.]

ME THEN: It's Autumn 2021, and Cas and I have hit it
off! We've drawn up a two-year project timeline, and
I'm feeling this passionate, dutiful need to bring
this story to the stage. But I'm also feeling… per-
plexed? I cannot articulate a substantial answer to
the important question: "why this story now?" Why
bother telling a story of the past if it doesn't have
something urgent to teach us *now*? Without a solid
why, historical theatre might regurgitate hegemony's
simplified, self-aggrandizing past for entertainment.

PAST: *That kind of art stifles the ghosts' teachings,*
maintains the status quo and creates more ghosts in
the process (Desai, 2017; Gordon, 1997).

ME THEN: Spectators must not be "allowed to submit to
an experience uncritically," wrote playwright Ber-
tolt Brecht in his essay *Theatre for Pleasure or The-*
atre for Instruction (1977, p. 71). "Alienation… is
necessary to all understanding" (1977, p. 71).

Future: *We cannot recognize the "laws of cause and ef-*
fect" when we only engage with the familiar (Brecht,
1977, p.71). We must look to the unfamiliar. Seek out
experiences of alienation - haunting experiences - to
learn how to change cycles of violence.

ME THEN: So, what haunting experiences am I trying to
share by staging this particularly unfamiliar histo-
ry here now?

: *Go start in the archive.*

PAST/**PRESENT**/*Future*: *We'll accompany you.*

ACT II: "Haunted Research" (Late 2021 – Early 2022)

> [ME THEN starts conducting traditional histor-ical research on the European Witch Hunts. All the while, these ghosts of witches whisper the following hauntings making ME THEN feel and ac-knowledge the personal and present resonances of this history.]

PAST: *"The Burning Times." "The Witch Craze." "The Women's Holocaust." "The Dark Ages when women were burned at the stake." These are a few ways the PRESENT re-members and the Future will continue to re-member this PAST. If the Future re-members at all.*

PRESENT: *The majority of witch hunts happened NOT during the so-called "Dark Ages" but during the heights of the so-called "Renaissance." Hegemony doesn't want you to know that (Federici, 2014).*

PAST: *The mass murder of witches was happening along-side the Renaissance, the founding of universities, and the Scientific Revolution - projects of power and capital accumulation. The witch hunts were a system-atic element of Europe's transition from communal feudalism to privatized capitalism and colonial im-perialism. This transition involved the Transatlan-tic Slave Trade, the invasion of the Americas, and the reshaping of the European workforce which neces-sitated "a massive, internationally organized, le-gally approved, religiously blessed assault on [wom-en's] bodies" (Federici, 2018, p. 31) to pave "the way [for] the confinement of women in Europe to unpaid domestic labor" (Federici, 2018, p. 47). The ghosts of all these events intertwine with me, the ghost of witches PAST.*

Future: *In the wake of transitions to capitalism will always be oppressed women, murdered women, and more ghosts (Moghadam, 2014, p. 58).*

PRESENT: *The murder toll of the European Witch Hunts is unknown. But focusing on that number obscures the fact that the number of life-altering accusations would have been much higher and that most of the accused and murdered were women (Barstow, 1988, p. 7).*

Future: *And many of those women were witches, in one way or another.*

PRESENT: *Well, most women are.*

ME THEN: Wait, what do you mean?

Future: *Well, the meaning of the word "'woman'… has been [continuously] produced and consumed both by power and resistance to it," (Park, 2017) [emphasis added]. Similarly, "witch" is a double-sided coin constructed by power on one side and reclaimed by the resistance on the other.*

PAST: *A non-insignificant number of women accused and/or killed as witches were once called cunning women, wise women, healers, or midwives (Ehrenreich and English, 1973; Horsley and Horsley, 1987; Barstow, 1988; Federici 2004). For centuries prior, a community's women were the holders of medicinal knowledge, practitioners of health care for their communities, deliverers of babies, hospicers of the sick, rulers of their own reproductive lives, and helpers of their women kin in all matters of the body and soul (Ehrenreich and English, 1973).*

PRESENT: *As feminist, Marxist, and deeply haunted philosopher Silvia Federici writes, "At the stakes not only were the bodies of the 'witches' destroyed, so was a whole world of social relations that had been the basis of women's social power and a vast body of knowledge that women had transmitted… over the generations" (2018, p. 33).*

ME THEN: Wow… destroyed women's knowledge and relationships…

Me Recorded: (May 4, 2022) Whatever they were in life, [in pop culture and in the archive] they [get] reduced to either soldiers of the Devil, murderers,

harmers, or they [get] reduced to tragic and helpless scapegoats, both of which ignore… the complexity and agency of their lives.

PAST: *Yes, binary thinking always births erasure and more ghosts… This shift from (wise) woman to witch systematically began in the late 15th century with the publication and distribution of religious, state, and judiciously sanctioned texts instructing the "learned public" –*

PRESENT: *also known as wealthy and powerful men.*

PAST: *– on the dangers that witches pose to men, on how to identify a witch, how to torture her to confess, and how to punish her. Most of the crimes were of a sexual/reproductive nature: castration of men, making men lust insatiably after them, birth control, infanticide, and abortion (Ehrenreich and English, 1973). The Malleus Maleficarum, the Hammer of Witches, written in 1486 by two German Catholic clergymen started the trend (Horsley and Horsley, 1987). Copycats of the Malleus called "demonologies" spread the "good word" throughout Europe that women and their sexuality –*

PRESENT: *"sexuality" meaning their sexuality yes, but this also encompassed their reproductive agency, freedom to move and assemble, to freely manage their reproductive lives, etc. all of this got sexualized (Barstow, 1988, p. 8).*

PAST: *– women's sexuality could be used as "instruments of the Devil" against men and had to be stopped "to protect the cohesiveness of the Church as a patriarchal, masculine clan" (Federici, 2018, p. 29).*

    [Through these hauntings, ME THEN begins connecting the archive to the present. ME THEN thinks of the bounty hunter bill passed the prior year in Texas targeting women seeking abortions and those who aid them (Feuer, 2021). The #MeToo movement that got ME THEN involved in politics feels like important connective tissue here as well (Khomami, 2017).]

PRESENT: *Sound familiar?*

ME THEN (in early 2022): Yes, disturbingly so. Donald Trump is no longer president -

Future: *[screams at an indiscernible frequency from 2024…]*

PRESENT: *– but the fact that he was elected tells us a lot about how women are viewed and treated in this country in your lifetime. Though feminist movements over the last century in the United States have orga- nized, fought, and won many legislative battles – for the vote, for economic freedoms, for birth control and abortion –*

Future: *[discernable grumblings from June 2022…]*

PRESENT: *– for safety in the workplace, etc. Misogyny runs deep, and with the election of Trump in 2016, permission was granted for it to rise up from those depths (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019). Trump became the avatar of masculine anti-establishment, evan- gelical (somehow) patriotism while Hilary Clinton became "the avatar of a feminist, anti-male estab- lishment" (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019, p. 603), aka a modern-day witch.*

ME THEN*: But wait… during the European Witch Hunts, witches were threatening to the establishment, not a part of it.*

Future: *"Witch" is wielded to demonize women, re- shaped to fit the political needs of the wielder.*

PRESENT: *In the case of Trump and his 2016 politics, the witches are feminist women who want to rule over men by way of the establishment.*

PAST: *Texts that guided the Witch Hunts told men that women who deviated "in appearance, behavior, or social status from the expected code for a woman" threatened "the stability and invincibility of the prevailing order," so in "men's view" it appeared*

likely that women were plotting against "male control of [women's] lives and society" (Horsley and Horsley, 1987, p. 15).

PRESENT: *While Trump, who brags about sexually assaulting women, made it clear to proudly misogynistic, ardently anti-feminist men that Hillary Clinton would "exacerbate the war on men," which these men took as permission, even encouragement, to sexually assault women to maintain their "alpha" identities (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019, p. 600).*

PAST: *So, again, to maintain "male control of [women's] lives and society" (Horsley and Horsley, 1987, p. 15).*

PRESENT: *Precisely.*

    [As archival research wraps up and these ghostly revelations surge exponentially, ME THEN experiences anxiety, waves of nausea, and nightmares.]

ME THEN: I think I'm going to be sick…

PAST/**PRESENT**/***Future***: *Stay with us. We got you.*

ACT III: "Embodied Research" (May 2022)

ME THEN: It's May 3, 2022, and up here in the skies, I am being overwhelmingly haunted from all temporal fronts.

PAST: *The ghosts of the Pendle Witches await your arrival in their homeland.*

PRESENT: *This leaked Supreme Court draft opinion means Roe v. Wade will be overturned. It is not a matter of if, but when.*

Future: *Women will be increasingly economically oppressed, physically assaulted, alienated from their bodies, made to suffer physically/emotionally, and many will die (Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, Dissent, 2022).*

ME THEN: I will pour my rage and fear into the immediate task at hand: accessing the hauntings of the Pendle Witches to make a political(izing), educational piece of theatre.

Future: *You can't control what is happening, what is coming.*

ME THEN: I will dive deep into what I can control - conducting embodied research onsite, knowing that my artwork(ing) matters.

Future: *As they say, I am not set in stone. Your "art can not only challenge [and] destabilize… the status quo… but also open up a space for radical alternatives and different futures" (Schuermans et al., 2012). I know the hauntings are overwhelming right now. But, please,*

PAST/**PRESENT**/*Future*: *keep going…*

> [In England, ME THEN experiences a poetic whirl-
> wind of hauntings emanating from the lands which
> bore witness to the witch hunts. ME THEN follows
> where the ghosts lead.]

ME THEN: I first visit Lancaster, north of Pendle, where the witches had been imprisoned, tried, and murdered. I make paper dolls of the women. I use them here to invoke their ghosts.

PAST: *I am so much more than the violence to which I was subjected.*

ME THEN: I sense their disdainful hauntings.

Me Recorded: (May 5, 2022) [The ghosts] don't want me to be here… or rather they don't want me accessing them here.

ME THEN: I leave Lancaster and take the dolls home to Pendle.

PAST: *Life was not easy. But, my god, these lush green hills and singing streams, the fresh air, and wide-open space…*

ME THEN: I meditate upon these lands. I walk dozens of miles, paths they tread in life. I do channeled-writing exercises, attuning to my hauntings and then seeing what scripts emerge.

PRESENT: *Seek to read "the emptiness or, conversely, the apparent fullness of the absence of the past" in this spacetime you occupy (Blanco and Peeren, 399).*

ME THEN: I listen to the wind, converse with trees, and question the shadows to access the hauntings. Monads crystalize. I am woven into haunted tapestries with the ghosts of the Pendle Witches, and there I stay with the trouble and make kin. I daydream about what their communal lives would have ideally looked like, which I am realizing align with my dreams for myself and the women of my spacetime.

PRESENT: *"Dreaming [is] an active and necessary part of shaping our political imagination" (Desai, 2017, p. 139).*

Future: *"Harness the power of dreaming to propose and enact viable alternatives" (Desai, 2017, p. 141).*

ACT IV: "Hauntings Hit Home" (June 2022)

ME THEN: It is June 24, 2022. And it is official.

PRESENT: *The U.S. Supreme Court Justices dissenting to the Dobb decision write*

> *Yesterday, the Constitution guaranteed that a woman confronted with an unplanned pregnancy could… make her own decision about whether to bear a child, with all the life-transforming consequences that action involves… As of today, this Court holds, a State can always force a woman to give birth… Perhaps, in the wake of today's decision, a state law will criminalize the woman's conduct too, incarcerating or fining her for daring to seek or obtain an abortion… one result of today's decision is certain: the curtailment of women's rights, and of their*

status as free and equal citizens (Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization Dissent, 2022, p. 3-4).

Me Recorded: (June 27, 2022) It has happened. It seems mad, wild, archaic, criminal, backwards. "How could America do such a thing?" "How could they make decisions about women's rights in 2022 based on decisions made by wealthy white men hundreds of years ago?" "It's unbelievable!" But if you are educated on the matter… [and] haunted enough… you know that none of this is unbelievable… It is a stunning design.

PRESENT: *Five decades in the making.*

Me Recorded: (June 27, 2022, cont.) An apparition came to us from archaic pasts, adjacent presents, foreboding futures. Of bloody clothes hangers, of secret journeys across state lines and down back alleys, of all the obscure(d) deaths… our bodies are the agenda - a political battlefield where the theocratic, misogynistic conservatives will always win and our autonomy will always lose. Because the now-victors, THEY made the rules!

PRESENT: *We did change the rules with Roe V. Wade. That was a win.*

Future: *Yes, she knows. But she needs to rage, to mourn.*

PAST: *"There can be no doubt that the witchhunt destroyed the methods that women had used to control procreation, by indicting them as diabolical devices, and institutionalized the state's control over the female body" (Federici, 2004, p. 184).*

    [ME THEN takes a few weeks away from the ghosts to cry and regroup.]

ME THEN: When you receive hauntings, "an open door comes alive and stops us in our tracks," writes Avery Gordon, and inside that door "is a flood of tears *and* consolation" (1997, p. 127). Post-Dobbs, when Cas and I resume work on the play, we indeed find both

tears and consolation. Gordon calls this particular consolation "the Utopian: the apperception of the fundamental difference between the world we have now and the world we could have instead" (1997, p. 127). *Future*: *Seek utopic existence. Keep going.*

ACT V: "Haunted/ing Theatre" (Autumn 2022 – Spring 2023)

ME THEN: It's August 2022, and a title has emerged: *Women Who Know: A Witch Play.* So much of the cycles of violence against women deemed (explicitly and implicitly) witches involved the erasure or extraction of knowledge shared amongst women. As 16th century ordinances began restricting midwives and women healers activities (Horsley and Horsley, 1987, p. 10) and as the male, University-trained, medical profession emerged (with the patronage of the ruling classes) (Ehrenreich and English, 1973), women must have experienced their shared knowledge and practices increasingly denigrated and vilified. For many, practicing healing and midwifery were sources of income in the early capitalist landscape -

PAST: *These practices had never before been monetized…*

ME THEN: - so the legal and societal restrictions on such practices made women more reliant on men for survival (Federici, 2018, pp. 27-28).

PAST: *And as generation after generation lost access to this knowledge, as women-who-knew educating women-to-know became more dangerous –*

PRESENT: *Women gradually did not know what they did not know anymore.*

Future: *They didn't know how to dream about knowing. They didn't know how to want to know.*

PAST: *And so I haunt on, trying to teach women that there was once and still could be another way of being. I haunt them into dreaming (Desai, 2017).*

ME THEN: As we write, we decide that one of the Pendle women admits to having an abortion. The play takes place in an afterlife Feminine Utopia or "FemUtop" which is being threatened by lingering ghosts of/from the patriarchal world of the living. These hauntings prompt the dead Pendle women to reflect upon and understand their lived lives more holistically. Structurally, the scenes oscillate between re-embodied scenes from their lives and these gatherings in the residually haunted FemUtop where they reconvene in death to debate, storytell, heal, and re-imagine their lives and legacies. Fern Redfearn -

PAST: *Who was approximately 40-years-old when she was hanged alongside her mother, Anne, for witchcraft -*

ME THEN: - in the midst of an argument in the FemUtop, proclaims for the first time in her (lived and after) life, "I had an abortion." In one of the Spring 2023 workshops of the play, a reader asks what is the point of Fern sharing this information. Because there is no historical evidence that the real Fern had an abortion, why did we choose to include it in our version of the Pendle Witch story?

    [ME THEN is struck by that all important question - *why?*]

PAST: *What story about us needs to be told?*

PRESENT: *And why that story now?*

ME THEN: I stare at my computer screen… How should I edit the scene? What is my *why*, and how can I make it clear in the text?

PAST: *It has happened, always…*

PRESENT: *Safe to share…*

Future: *A duty to share…*

ME THEN: and I write -

> FERN: You don't have all the details about that winter… you couldn't understand what it was like for us. How bad it got.
> ANNE: You don't owe her anything. You don't have to -
>
> FERN: But I do, Mom. Owe it. To all of us. Whatever we have to share that could help us we owe it to each other to speak aloud. Plus, I want to. Because it's not dangerous here. I had an abortion, yes (Davis and Gress, 2023).

This admission becomes a turning point in the FemUtop. Heated debates and accusations against each other begin to transform into empathetic inquiries and cumulative storytelling. They realize that while they were pointing fingers and crying "witch," the powerful men kept on winning. Why did we decide to have Fern share her abortion story? Because when women share what they know with other women, when we share personal experiences that we have been taught not to speak of, we find deep bonds that can alter worlds or birth new ones.

END of ghost story.

***

The ghosts haunted Cas and I into creating *Women Who Know.* We brought their hauntings to other women through intimate workshop readings and then in performance to hundreds of people in November 2023 at the Abbey Theater of Dublin, Ohio. The historical archive had been a necessary pedagogical tool in this process, but what we learned from the ghosts was far more valuable. We were haunted. We stayed with and embodied those hauntings which manifested as shock, rage, fear, and yearning for community, knowledge, and justice. Those empirical bodily experiences fueled our creative process, our why, and, ultimately, our ability to make sense of and work through our current moment as Roe fell. *Women Who Know: A Witch Play* is about women called witches who know/knew things you no longer know but should dream of knowing and how these ghosts of witches past hold secrets to unlocking present and future feminine joys, bonds, ways.

Future: *"Because until we embrace the cunning ways of witches, a Feminine Utopia will only be possible in death"* (Davis and Gress, 2023).

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"Escape from the British Museum:" The role of short videos in public pedagogy and social movements

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the potential of short videos as tools for public pedagogy that advance museum decolonization discourses, driving social movements for heritage restitution. Focusing on the viral Chinese video series "Escape from the British Museum," the research combines a close reading of the media text with a content analysis of audience comments on social media. By applying Dieter Rucht's (2017) social movement framework, it examines how these videos mobilize public discourse for social change, build online networks with a collective identity, and inspire public protest against colonial legacies. While celebrating the series' effectiveness in enhancing public understanding about museum decolonization and restitution, the article also addresses the challenges posed by short videos, including their limitations in prompting direct action and fostering sustained international collaboration.

KEYWORDS: museum decolonization, restitution, public pedagogy, short video, social movement, storytelling, social media

On August 16, 2023, the British Museum disclosed that items from its collection had been missing, stolen, or damaged, with later reviews estimating around 2,000 affected artifacts and leading to the dismissal of a senior staff member (British Museum, 2023a, 2023b). The incident intensified public skepticism about the museum's credibility as a steward of cultural heritage and prompted widespread internal and external criticism (Higgins, 2025; Marshall, 2023). Less than two weeks later, Director Hartwig Fischer resigned, acknowledging the institution's failure to act appropriately in response to the losses (Wang, 2023).

The events of August 2023 were not the first time the British Museum has faced public criticism. In recent decades, there has been growing

attention towards its significant number of objects acquired during co-
lonial conquests (Duthie, 2011; Hicks, 2020). Take, for instance, the Mu-
seum's collection of Chinese antiquities. With over 23,000 objects, the
collection is the largest of its kind in the West and includes invaluable
items looted from China during the late nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries, such as the "Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court La-
dies" (Wang, 2023). Not a single object has been returned to China from
the British Museum, reflecting a broader resistance against correcting
historical injustices within major global institutions.

This article explores how visual art, specifically a series of short vid-
eos titled "Escape from the British Museum" on Chinese social me-
dia, serves as a form of public pedagogy, which Sandlin et al., (2011,
p.338) describe as "processes and sites of education beyond formal
schooling", by envisioning a future where looted artifacts are returned
to their homelands. Using Dieter Rucht's (2017) framework of social
movement, it examines how these videos advance social change on
museum decolonization, build online networks, foster collective iden-
tity as restitution advocates, and inspire public protest against the Brit-
ish Museum. By analyzing the connections between media, culture,
and social activism, the article highlights the potential of short videos
as tools for public pedagogy and social movements focused on muse-
um decolonization and restitution (See Figure 1).

Figure 1
Structure of Analysis Created by Author
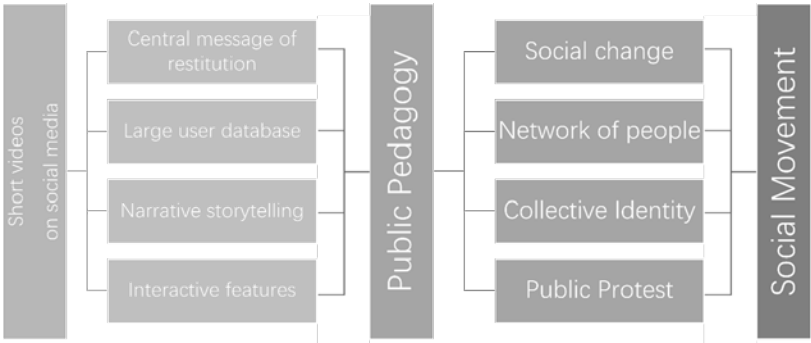
Decolonial Theory

The term "decolonization" originally referred to struggles for politi-
cal independence in the 20th century; over time, its meaning has ex-

panded to include the lasting impacts of anti-colonial struggles and the socio-cultural changes in former colonies as they shape their new, contemporary identities (Thomas & Thompson, 2014). This broader understanding is influenced by global movements such as decolonization efforts in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, the U.S. civil rights movement, and equality campaigns by First Nations in New Zealand, Australia, and North America (Wintle, 2016). Yet, coloniality remains embedded in global power structures (Whittington, 2022).

To address this persistence, this study draws on decolonial theory, which originated in Latin America in the late 20th century as a critique of continuing colonial domination beyond formal independence (Quintero et al., 2019). A key concept is the *coloniality of power*, introduced by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, which has "concentrated all forms of the control of subjectivity, culture, and especially knowledge and the production of knowledge under its [Eurocentric] hegemony" (Quijano, 2000, p.540). Western epistemologies are still treated as universal values and standards, marginalizing alternative worldviews and reinforcing historical inequalities (Dunford, 2017; Dussel et al., 2000). Scholars like Mignolo and Walsh (2018) argue that modernity itself is inseparable from coloniality and call for a radical "delinking" from Eurocentric systems to make space for plural forms of knowledge and being (Mignolo, 2007, 2017). Decolonial theorist thus adopt a more radical stance, directly challenging established practices through protest and confrontations (Noxolo, 2017).

Decolonizing Museums

Discussions about "decolonizing" museums have been raised at least since the 1970s. Research like the *Plundered Past* by Karl Meyer (1973) initiated a series of publications that tracked the unethical collecting practices of major Western museums. Many collections trace back to colonial origins and are tied to patrons whose wealth came from imperial ventures, for instance the British Museum (Shoenberger, 2024). The 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in the U.S. also marked a pivotal moment, compelling museums to return ancestral remains and sacred objects to Native American tribes and making consultation with source communities a required practice (Indian Affairs, n.d.). Discussions around museums increasingly adopted decolonial frameworks to advocate for approaches that respect Indigenous epistemologies (Simpson, 1997; Smith, 1999).

Museums around the world have experimented with various strategies to decolonize their practices. Examples include revising interpretive language or providing provenance history in object panels to eliminate colonialist biases and improve accessibility (Shoenberger, 2024).

Institutions are also embracing collaborative exhibition development with source communities rather than imposing top-down narratives (Maranda, 2021; Whittington, 2022). More foundational decolonizing actions rest on the restitution of cultural artifacts acquired through colonial violence. Restitution involves acknowledging the wrongful acquisition, ownership, or storage of items and returning them to their countries or communities of origin. It also seeks to restore power, authority, and voice to these communities (Rassool & Gibbon, 2023). One of the most prominent cases is the Benin Bronzes. Germany became the first country to return over 20 Benin Bronzes to Nigeria in 2022; and in 2025 the Netherlands agreed to repatriate 119 Benin Bronzes, the largest such return to date (Lawson-Tancred, 2025).

Unlike the imperial trophies from Africa, some of which are gradually being returned (Lawson-Tancred, 2025), Chinese artifacts with problematic provenances in Western museums continue to await meaningful action. Some of the British Museum's collections stem from violent episodes during China's Second Opium War (1856–1860) and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) (Kraus, 2009). In 1860, British and French forces extensively looted the imperial garden Yuanmingyuan, and the eight-national alliance further looted Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion, taking vast numbers of imperial treasures as war trophies (Hevia, 1994; Tythacott, 2018). Beyond warfare, artifacts were also taken through coercive treaties and exploitative expeditions, exemplified by the controversial removal of Dunhuang manuscripts in the early 1900s (Wang, 2019).

The British Museum often remains silent when facing critique or defend their collections as legitimately acquired, citing legal frameworks such as the British Museum Act, which restricts repatriation efforts (Duthie, 2011). For instance, the Museum's official website briefly notes the controversial acquisition of "Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies," as a legal purchase from "Captain Clarence Johnson (1870–1937) who was in Beijing in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion" without addressing the ethically problematic context (British Museum, n.d.-a).

While there remains little prospect of looted artifacts in the British Museum returning to China due to legal and institutional constraints, grassroots and community-generated initiatives continue to propel decolonial discourses forward. The short video series examined in this article, "Escape from the British Museum," inverts the traditional museum narrative, transforming artifacts from passive objects in Western collections into active protagonists seeking their own return home. This imaginative counter-narrative becomes a form of public pedagogy, especially how popular culture can "decode and interrupt dominant

ideologies" (Sandlin et al., 2011, p.347). By challenging the legitimacy of colonial ownership and aligning with decolonial efforts to "delink" cultural heritage from Eurocentric frameworks (Mignolo, 2007), it lays the groundwork for continuous social movements.

Public Pedagogy and Social Movement

In understanding how decolonial ideas and social movement ideas spread in society, the concept of public pedagogy is particularly useful. Public pedagogy expands the concept of education beyond formal schooling. It examines how learning happens through various social and cultural practices and settings (Desai & Darts, 2016). This article focuses specifically on public pedagogy manifested through popular culture and everyday life (Sandlin et al., 2011). In other words, the short videos and social media clips examined here, though originally did not have an explicit educational goal, still do the work of influencing the public opinions and convey messages through narratives.

This approach demonstrates how various cultural elements contribute to societal learning and challenge the status quo through critical engagement (Sandlin et al., 2011). It emphasizes real-world, corporeal interactions among citizens that disrupt traditional notions of community and cooperation, suggesting that popular culture not only reflects society but also offers opportunities for resistance and change (Desai & Darts, 2016; Schuermans et al., 2012).

Finally, this article utilizes Dieter Rucht's (2017) four-element framework to define a social movement, which he describes as "a network of individuals, groups, and organizations that, based on a sense of collective identity, seek to bring about social change primarily through collective public protest" (p.45). This framework emphasizes the importance of a "we-feeling," or collective identity lacking hierarchical or centralized power, which distinguishes between *us* and *them* (Rucht, 2017). Rucht's framework aligns well with the aims of the short videos at the center of this article. Such videos serve as powerful instruments for public pedagogy and social change, particularly in the context of museum restitution. These videos forge networks via social media to cultivate a collective identity among Chinese citizens as protectors of their heritage, and fuel video activism that prompts public protests against the British Museum.

Methodology: Qualitative Case Study of "Escape"

This study is guided by the central research question: "How can short video content on social media function as a form of public pedagogy and mobilize social movements?" A qualitative case study design is ad-

opted. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, making it especially appropriate for exploring the complex interplay between media, education, and activism (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The selected case is the viral Chinese short video series "Escape from the British Museum" (hereafter "Escape"), a three-episode online mini-series totaling approximately 16 minutes. Directed by influencer @JianBingGuoZai and co-starring @SummerSister, the series debuted on August 30, 2023, across multiple Chinese social media platforms, including BiliBili, Douyin, Rednote, Weibo, Kuaishou, and Mango TV (BaiduBaike, n.d.). This series was purposefully selected due to its exceptional reach and cultural resonance. Upon its release, "Escape" rapidly gained widespread popularity, accumulating hundreds of millions of views within weeks. As of April 10, 2024, the series has achieved over 500 million views on Douyin alone (Douyin, 2024).

This trilogy uses anthropomorphism for storytelling. The videos feature a Chinese Jade Teapot (See Figure 2) that transforms into a lively girl determined to escape the British Museum and return to China. During her journey, she meets Zhang Yongan (See Figure 3), a disheartened Chinese journalist living abroad. Initially skeptical, Zhang comes to believe that the girl is indeed the jade teapot carved with delicate branch patterns from the British Museum.

Figure 2
Teapot. The British Museum, London, United Kingdom.

Note: From https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_2017-3036-1

Figure 3
Screenshot of "Escape." Left: Zhang Yongan; Right: Little Teapot

Together, they travel back to China, exploring Chinese culture along the way. They practiced Taiji, drank tea, enjoyed opera, and visited pandas. Their journey ends at the Henan Museum, where the Jade Teapot reads out letters written by other artifacts from the British Museum.[1] These letters express their longing to return home and convey heartfelt messages to their "friends" and "family" in the Chinese museum. As the Teapot reads, the series brings the artifacts to life, giving them unique personalities and ages.

The videos reach an emotional climax as the artifacts speak together a collective plea: "May our nation, our motherland, be forever peaceful." Despite the joy of her homecoming, the Teapot ultimately chooses to

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1 For instance, a letter from a porcelain horse: "Tang Da Ma, brother. It is Me, Tang Xiao Ma! In the blink of an eye, we haven't seen each other for 163 years. Each day, after the foreigners leave, I run laps around this cage. And as I run, I am reminded of centuries past, of our vow to race across the vast and beautiful landscapes together;" A letter from a spherical sachet: "Brethren of my heart, my sibling was whisked away by foreign hands amidst war's fierce blaze. Together, we were halves of a whole. Should he find his way back before me, oh, do promise to whisper his tale to my soul."

return to the UK, holding onto the hope of a future dignified return to China. Inspired by this journey, Zhang decides to continue his journalistic work, which dedicates to advocating for the restitution and protection of plundered artifacts. The viral sensation of this video series ignited public discourse on the critical issue of restitution, spotlighting the plight of looted Chinese artifacts displayed in foreign museums.

Data Collection and Analysis Method

The primary data for analysis consisted of the "Escape" video trilogy itself. I conducted a close reading of the three short video episodes, employing this analytical approach that involves a "detailed examination, deconstruction, and analysis of a media text" (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2024, p.294). This method allowed me to delve into the finer points of the video content, analyzing aspects such as narrative structure, visual symbolism, and dialogue. To assess audience reception and emergent social movement themes, I also analyzed user comments from the video platform BiliBili associated with the "Escape" series. Specifically, on April 10, 2024, I manually collected the top 50 most liked comments for each episode from BiliBili, resulting in a total of 150 comments. I compiled all the comments into a Word document, totaling 8,012 Chinese words. Focusing on top-liked comments ensured that the analysis captured prominent or resonant audience sentiments.

Qualitative content analysis was adopted for processing the data, a method particularly appropriate for systematically interpreting textual data to identify explicit categories as well as implicit meanings and patterns (Schreier, 2012). I first used a free web tool called "LZL" to perform a word frequency analysis, identifying the top 40 most frequently occurring phrases, all consisting of two or more characters (See Table 1). To capture a more nuanced understanding, I used the initial results as a thematic guide to further search for significant single characters, such as *family* 家 and *tear* 泪, in the Word document via the "look up" function. This manual lookup allowed me to count hits more accurately for characters and phrases with similar meanings. Additionally, this direct lookup linked me back to the context of each phrase, helping to integrate the comments with the broader themes of my analysis. Codes and categories were then assigned to the comments, using Dieter Rucht's (2017) four-element social movement framework as a guideline. The outcome of this analytic process was a set of themes that synthesizes the messages of "Escape" and viewers' response.

Table 1
Word Frequency Analysis Result by LZL (Top 40 Hits)

Chinese phrase	English Translation	Hit		Chinese phrase	English Translation	Hit
玉壶	Teapot	59		说话	Speak	7
文物	Artifacts	55		堂堂正正	Upright and dignified	7
回家	Return Home	33		思念	Miss	7
中国	China	27		大家	Us	7
我们	Us	23		茶叶	Tea leaves	6
他们	They	23		感觉	Feel	6
大英博物馆	The British Museum	22		风风光光	With great honor and splendor	6
永安	Eternal Peace	21		声音	Voice	6
家人	Family	18		大哭	Cry	6
希望	Wish	16		回来	Return	6
家国	Home and Country, motherland	14		感动	Moved	6
看到	See	13		觉得	Feel	6
可爱	Cute	13		开始	Begin	6
文化	Culture	12		回到	Return	6
知道	Know	11		历史	History	6
自己	Myself	11		故事	Story	6
中华	Chinese	10		博物馆	Museum	6
海外	Oversea	8		黄皮肤	Yellow skin	6
在外	Outside	8		黑眼睛	Black eyes	6
眼泪	Tears	7		你们	You	6

Element 1: Short Videos as Public Pedagogy for Social Change

This video series introduces audiences to the topics of looted artifacts and museum restitution on a humanistic level through accessible and engaging storytelling. According to one of the most frequent words used in comments, such as the description of the Teapot as "cute" 可爱 13 times, an effective aspect of the video series was the creators' choice to use anthropomorphic techniques. By personifying the artifacts, "Escape" breathes life into objects and events that might otherwise feel

distant to viewers and turns them into tangible experiences. This narrative technique deepens the symbolic significance of the artifacts and enhances the historical weight they carry. The result is a more intimate, personal relationship between viewer and object, one that extends far beyond the typical museum visitor's experience of viewing objects in a case and reading about their plundered history on a text panel.

In addition to being immersive and easy to follow, the storytelling experience of the video is multivalent in its message that calls for restitution, including the use of subtle visual signals. For instance, Little Teapot appears with a dirty face, symbolizing how some artifacts in the British Museum are not protected by glass shields and can be freely touched (See Figures 5 to 7). Little Teapot's frequent assertion, "I am a 'Chinese Thin-Walled Jade Teapot with Branching Patterns'" (Episode 1, 1'28''), further highlights that many Chinese artifacts at the British Museum are merely numbered, not named. This genericization is echoed on the British Museum's official website (British Museum, n.d.-b), where the Jade Teapot is often referred to simply as "Teapot." Another poignant line from Little Teapot occurs when she enters Zhang's apartment: "Wow, this is your home? A huge cabinet for just two people?" (Episode 1, 2'00''). This brief line reflects how numerous artifacts are placed into limited display space in the museum (See Figure 8).

Figure 4
Screenshot of "Escape" Videos with Little Teapot Introducing her name

Figure 5-6
Object display at the British Museum.

Note. Photos taken by the author in the Egyptian Gallery in the British Museum on Nov. 7th, 2021. Even with the "Do Not Touch" sign, multiple visitors are leaning on artifacts or touching them for photographs.

Figure 7
Chinese Ceramics Gallery. The British Museum, London, United Kingdom.

Note: Johnbod. (2016, October 6). Percival David Collection, British Museum, Room 95 [Photograph]. Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Percival_David_Collection_DSCF3188_02.jpg

Storytelling, a more open and less structured genre, encourages listeners to reconsider established ideas, stereotypes, and social remedies (Kidd, 2015). Through the perspective of the character in the narrative, viewers receive a vivid depiction of the current condition of the artifacts held in the British Museum. This portrayal fosters empathy and builds a compelling argument against the continued retention of artifacts with problematic provenance in the British Museum, which has usually been celebrated as a secure and reliable custodian of heritage (Duthie, 2011). When viewers come across the video series while browsing on social media, they are subtly educated about the unethical practices of Western museums and may develop a desire for the restitution of looted artifacts.

Element 2: Social Media for Building Networks

The viral appeal of these videos and the amplification of their messages also owes much to the platforms on which they are disseminated. Social media platforms are unique in their multimedia capabilities, immediate content dissemination, and support for grassroots creators (Askanius, 2014). These platforms extend the content's reach and thereby play an essential role in fostering social movement by generating a network that promotes viewer participation and facilitate dialogue (Li & Prasad, 2018).

Recent trends in social media activism focus on fostering engagement and building community connections. Activists use social media platforms to connect with audiences and supporters who are often inaccessible through traditional media channels (Li & Prasad, 2018). Statistics as of September 2023 show a staggering active user base of 1.088 billion, predominantly frequented by a younger demographic, across major Chinese platforms like Douyin, BiliBili, and Weibo with a penetration rate of 88.9% (QuestMobile, 2023).

With this significant user profile, the "Escape" videos have garnered over 500 million views and 2.5 million comments on the Douyin platform alone as of April 10, 2024 (Douyin, 2024). This surge in popularity signifies a shift in the narrative surrounding restitution—from a topic once confined to official discourse to one that is widely accessible to the general public. Additionally, restitution, traditionally of interest primarily to older generations, now captivates a broad and youthful audience active on social media, illustrating its expanding relevance and appeal.

The intensive use of social media has become a social norm, with users engaging deeply not only online but also carrying these interactions into their offline lives through shared languages and social behaviors

(Lu & Lu, 2019). This engagement highlights how social media has transcended traditional communication methods to cultivate a vibrant, interactive public sphere where activism can flourish.

Element 3: Shaping Collective Identity

"Escape" and its viral impact exemplify the concept of *collective identity* as established by Rhys H. Williams (1995). The effect of the videos is not the result of any one person, even the creator, but depend on the formation of a "we" by reaching millions through social media platforms (Biesta, 2012). This process of forming collective identity involves not only defining who "we" are but also distinguishing ourselves from "others." The boundary work establishes a sense of belonging and differentiates the group from outsiders through reciprocal identification. Members express shared characteristics and values, which are contrasted against those of reference groups (Flesher Fominaya, 2010).

As evidenced by the comments, this construction of a "we" is an effective strategy for activating a broader public who might otherwise have no awareness of Chinese artifacts in Western museum collections. Take, for instance, the conversation between Zhang and Little Teapot when Zhang agrees to take her back to China (Episode 2, 3'46''):
Zhang: "Why do you call me your family? Aren't you afraid I'm a bad person?"

Little Teapot: "Other artifacts have told me: 'Those with black eyes and yellow skin who can understand my words are my family.' …As long as I encounter someone from my family, I am safe. I can trust them, and they will definitely help me return to China."

In the case of this conversational exchange, Zhang advances the idea of a collective identity among Chinese people, portraying them as a unified family by suggesting that physical traits emblematic of the Chinese identity like black hair and yellow skin are integral to the community no matter where we are. The lines oppose these characteristics with those of foreigners, who can potentially be "bad people" who won't help Little Teapot.

In the end of the video, as Little Teapot choose to return to her glass case rather than stay in China, her last words to Zhang are: "China is a great nation. Chinese people do not engage in those sneaky, underhanded acts. One day, we will return home in glory and with dignity" (Episode 3, 8'00''). These lines once again sharply contrast the collective identity of the Chinese as upright and honest with that of foreigners who plundered Chinese heritage centuries ago and continue to deny their wrongdoing and refuse to return the artifacts to China.

Viewers' comments indicate that this message about collective Chinese identity has been well received and embraced. The formation of a collective identity is articulated through a shared language (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). Repetition of discourse and sense of consistency generated are essential, helping individuals align the movement's messages, practices, and objectives with their personal values, experiences, and emotions (Beins, 2015). The terms related to identity of *me/myself/us* 我/自己/我们 appear most frequently in the comments, with 118 mentions. It is followed by the terms related to family 家 (*returning home* 回家/归家, *family members* 家人, *and home country* 家国), with 107 mentions. This high rate of repetition of words demonstrates the formation of a collective identity of Chinese passionate about heritage restitution among the short videos' viewers.

Furthermore, affective ties and emotional factors are crucial in collective identity formation (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). In the comments, a common theme among the audience is tears/feeling moved with 42 hits (*cry* 哭 *19; tears* 泪 *16 - tear drops* 眼泪，泪水 */eyes filled with tears* 泪目，流泪; *feeling moved/touched* 感动触动 *7*). The approach of personified storytelling by the artifacts themselves, expressing the wish to return home, fosters a deeper level of viewer engagement with the content. It creates a strong emotional bond between individuals and the social movement, solidifying their identification with the social movement's goals and values towards the restitution of looted artifacts by Western museums.

Element 4: From Interactions to Collective Public Protest

Social media platforms are celebrated as powerful drivers of political mobilization and radical change (Harlow, 2012; Jost et al., 2018; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). "Escape" can be viewed as a form of *video activism*, or videos creation by a grassroots community advocating for social change (Askanius, 2014). With advancements in technology that leads to the advent of platforms like YouTube, ordinary people now have the capability to both view and produce videos for online sharing. This development has fostered an alternative video culture where amateur videographers can upload raw or roughly edited cellphone footage, effectively placing the power of video production into the hands of everyday users. This shift has democratized access to media creation, broadening the landscape for how and by whom visual content is made (Askanius, 2014).

Created by amateur content makers and social media influencers rather than professional actors, "Escape" adopts a less mediated and informal approach that diverges from the polished productions typical of state or institutional media. The creators' work introduces a grassroots

perspective to the discussion on restitution and the decolonization of museums, topics that were previously covered mainly by official channels. These short videos on social media reflect the desires of ordinary Chinese citizens as per the comments posted about the video. The series' widespread impact further led to engagement from official media, with outlets like China Daily and The Global Times entering the conversation and advocating for the return of looted Chinese artifacts (China Daily, 2023). The BBC has also reported on the series (Wang, 2023). The shift from grassroots efforts to international media coverage highlights its great success. It presents an alternative, optimistic vision of artifacts returning home, in contrast to the grim reality that many looted items continue to reside in Western museums.

Moreover, social media platforms can function as spaces where individuals and communities gain visibility and avenues for influence, reshaping how they connect with one another and engage with cultural discourse. This redefines traditional roles, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, and artists and audiences (Li & Prasad, 2018). This potential for agency is conceptualized as *mediation*—an interactive process where individuals and marginalized groups recognize their ability to influence power relations by combining interpersonal interactions with technological channels (Kidd, 2015).

Viewer comments on the video series reflect this sense of agency and empowerment. Commenters describe feeling motivated to act within their own professional or educational spheres. For example, one viewer expressed renewed commitment to their journalism career, writing, "You really give me energy for pursuing what I am doing, Journalism. I thought about giving up, but now I believe what I am doing has power." Another mentioned their intention to educate others, saying, "I am a teacher. I will share this video series with my students to help them learn about our cultural heritage." One viewer shared their academic aspirations: "I want to study Cultural Heritage studies for my college degree, hoping that one day I can contribute to the museum decolonizing process!" These comments reflect the impact of the short videos in inspiring individuals to engage with and contribute to cultural and professional realms.

Furthermore, the concept of *mediation* is extended through *remediation*, where users can modify, adapt, and remix media content according to their needs (Kidd, 2015). Accessible platforms and editing tools enable individuals to act simultaneously as storytellers and audiences, engaging with existing narratives while infusing their own through annotation, appropriation, and redistribution (Li & Prasad, 2018). This dynamic process of video creation has become a pivotal aspect of con-

temporary online cultures, serving as a powerful tool for collective empowerment and social activism (Askanius, 2014).

For example, following the phenomenal success of the "Escape" video series, social media users launched the video activist campaign #PersonificationOfArtifacts 文物拟人 on Douyin. Influencers adopted the approach of the original series, dressing in costume and makeup to personify artifacts similar to the Little Teapot character. The typical plot features a poignant story of artifacts being looted, followed by their transformation into human characters (See Figures 9 to 16). These creators often tag the "Escape" series in their captions to maximize visibility. This campaign has nearly 10,000 participants whose video content has accumulated over 560 million views as of April 10, 2024—60 million more than the original video series. A single video series has catalyzed a public protest through widespread video activism, all unified by a shared demand for the restitution of looted artifacts from Western museums.

Figure 8-15
Screenshots of videos uploaded to the #PersonificationOfArtifacts campaign by Douyin users dressed as Chinese artifacts.

Note. A total of four videos are presented here, with two screenshots from each video grouped together in the same grid. Douyin users are featured dressed as a traditional Chinese kite, an ancient painting, a folding screen, and a Buddhist mural.

Remaining Challenges

While the short video series "Escape" has ignited a social movement aimed at decolonizing museums and advocating for restitution, several challenges remain. Key among these is the miscommunication of the central message, exacerbated by the brief engagement times typical of social media content, and the obstacles to achieving impactful actions that truly advance the decolonization of Western museums.

One of the chief misunderstandings of the original video series is that the Jade Teapot is a looted artifact, adding to the growing albeit misguided demand for the restitution of all Chinese artifacts in foreign collections, regardless of their provenance. This is made clear in viewers' comments, with the term *teapot* 玉壶 appearing 59 times in top comments, highlighting the intense audience focus on this artifact. However, the necessary brevity of the videos omits an explicit explanation for why this teapot was chosen as the main character. At the beginning of the first episode, Little Teapot exclaims to Zhang Yongan: "I've been wandering outside for a long time. I'm lost, and I don't know how to find my way home!" (Episode 1, 1'00''). Viewers who engage superficially with the content, as is common on social media, might easily misinterpret this to mean the teapot as a looted artifact when it was instead legally purchased by the British Museum in 2017 from a practitioner of intangible heritage of Jade Carving. Its maker, Yu

Ting, intended the 2011-made teapot as a celebration and recognition of a delicate and precious traditional craft (British Museum, n.d.-b). The "Escape" producers revealed in an interview that they have chosen the teapot as the major character because its provenance is clear, represents the continuation of the ancient craft of jade carving, and promotes Chinese culture abroad. When the teapot transforms into a girl, she is young and innocent, and can remember the way home (China Daily, 2023). However, without additional context, insights necessary for the accurate interpretation of the narrative may be lost, underscoring the limitations of conveying complex messages through short-form video.

Moreover, activism should transcend merely representing or describing societal inequalities by addressing cultural, economic, and political power structures through direct actions (Desai, 2017). However, video activism in online environments faces a significant challenge: videos often lose their power to spur actual action on the ground. Once uploaded to social media platforms, videos can be stripped of their original context. Unless videos explicitly incorporate calls to action within their content, they tend to disconnect from practical steps for viewer engagement outside the platform (Askanius, 2014). Regarding "Escape", while it effectively promotes the four key elements that drive a social movement advocating for museum decolonization and restitution, the campaign's reach is confined to the Chinese community on online platforms. Decolonization and the restitution process inherently require collaborative efforts from multiple international entities, at minimum involving China and the countries of the Western museums housing plundered artifacts. All three episodes are narrated in Chinese without English subtitles. Consequently, this significant advocacy effort remains largely inaccessible to non-Chinese speaking audiences, limiting its potential to galvanize broader international support for the decolonization of museums.

Furthermore, the campaign #PersonificationOfArtifacts inspired by "Escape," with creators dressing up as artifacts, often emphasizes costume and makeup over deeper engagement with the artifacts' provenance. While this trend reflects the series' cultural reach, it can sometimes shift attention away from the original decolonial message. As Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us in "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," meaningful decolonization involves material action and structural change, not just symbolic gestures. Their caution highlights the importance of grounding such creative expressions in historical context to ensure the message remains aligned with decolonial aims.

Conclusion

The "Escape" video series has not only become a viral sensation but has also inspired a social movement toward the decolonization of museums and the restitution of looted artifacts. In just 16 minutes, the series has successfully utilized social media to reach a wide audience. It has fostered a sense of collective identity among viewers while building awareness and emotional connections to the issue of heritage restitution.

However, challenges remain in translating this online enthusiasm into sustained, tangible action. To address this gap, future initiatives could foster collaborative partnerships between content creators, museum professionals, educators, and activist groups. For example, museums and cultural institutions might partner with influential content creators to produce follow-up educational material that enhances viewers' understanding of artifact provenance and colonial histories. International collaborations could specifically focus on illuminating the historical pathways through which artifacts were removed from China, bringing attention to the often-overlooked narratives of colonial exploitation in 20th-century China.

In sum, the "Escape" videos demonstrate the potential of short videos in public pedagogy and their role in driving social movement. The storytelling strengths observed could be applied to other forms of activism. Emotionally compelling, accessible narratives that translate abstract issues into relatable, personal stories paired with effective social media strategies can shift viewers from passive consumption to active participation. Ultimately, harnessing the power of storytelling and digital media not only enriches public discourse but also paves the way for meaningful and sustained social transformation.

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