# Dismantling Racism in Museum Education

**by Marit Dewhurst and Keonna Hendrick**

Last summer, after a late-night phone conversation about how museum educators were—or more often, were not—finding ways to address racial injustice directly in their everyday work, we decided to invite colleagues to an intensive, multi-part workshop focused on addressing racism in museums. Within two days of announcing the workshop on social media networks, over 40 people signed up. Clearly, they had struck a nerve.

Drawing from our recent experiences working in museum education and similar arts organizations—Keonna at the Brooklyn Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, and ArtsConnection and Marit at The Museum of Modern Art and City College of New York—we hoped to create an opportunity for museum educators to think critically about how to dismantle racist practices in their professional lives. Through a series of both open-ended and structured group discussions, colleagues from many New York City cultural institutions shared how racism affected their work and their personal experiences in museums. At times challenging and at times joyful, these conversations ushered an important dialogue about the large and small ways in which White supremacist thinking permeates the museum field.

Since that first facilitated gathering, we have led conversations for museum practitioners and professional associations from across the country. Much like museum education, the field of folklore shares similar commitments to the concepts of multiple narratives and the importance of listening. One of the things we've noticed in leading workshops is how important it is for people to tell and to listen to each other's stories. Just as folklore educators value the importance of oral narratives as sources of crucial social, cultural, historical, and personal knowledge, we've found that reflecting on these personal narratives can help people analyze how their racial identities shape their work in museums and in education.

As museum educators learn to listen to how other narratives align, contradict, or crisscross their own, they gain a greater understanding of the ways in which multiple narratives can be at play simultaneously. In terms of conversations about race, this ability to hold multiple truths together in the same moment is incredibly powerful in disrupting the idea that a single, often White-dominated and constructed narrative, is the only truth. The lessons learned and stories we have heard about how racism has been acknowledged, ignored, perpetuated, and dismantled in museum education suggest that the field has much work to do. In between workshops, we took time to reflect on what we have learned through leading and supporting colleagues in anti-racist museum education.

### Definitions

To understand anti-racist and anti-oppressive museum education, it's important to define racist and oppressive museum education. Racist museum education normalizes the cultures, histories, experiences, ideas, bodies, work, and objects of White people, thereby reinforcing White supremacist ideology. As a result, it diminishes and (in some cases) erases the beliefs, cultures, and bodies of people of color. Racist museum education can take on many forms—from educators policing Black and Latino students in the galleries, to avoiding teaching from objects created by or for people of

color, to inviting students to replicate Native American design without permission from indigenous peoples in the art studio— but it is always oppressive because it reinforces institutionalized power to Whites.

**Want to Learn More?**
Here are some of the texts on our shelves and websites that provide resources and thoughtful critique on topics of inclusion and anti-oppressive education:

Leonardo, Zeus. 2013. *Race Frameworks: A Multidimensional Theory of Racism and Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

*Incluseum* https://incluseum.com.

*Museums and Society Journal* http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/museumsociety.

Sandell, Richard, ed. 2002. *Museums, Society, Inequality.* New York: Routledge.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. 1997. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations about Race.* New York: Basic Books.

Pollock, Mica. 2008. *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real about Race in School*. New York: The New Press.

Delpit, Lisa. 1988. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." *Harvard Educational Review* 58.3: 280-98.

American Alliance of Museums, Alliance Lab Diversity and Inclusion Blog http://labs.aam-us.org/blog/open-forum-diversity-inclusion

Anti-racist museum education is a form of anti-oppressive museum education that focuses on dismantling ways racism or White supremacy manifest for learners in and with museums. Anti-racist and, similarly, anti-oppressive museum education has at its heart the goal of creating societies that are just and equitable for all. As sites of collective memory and public engagement, museums have a responsibility to consider how they can contribute to dismantling inequality in our communities. This must happen on multiple levels—it cannot be left to the education departments alone.

In calling for anti-oppressive museum education, we urge educators to help museums recognize how they are built upon historical foundations rooted in White supremacist thinking in terms of how they collect, exhibit, and teach about objects in their collections. This attention to White supremacist thinking—although that language can be initially jarring for some White educators—is intentional. By calling out the ways that White people have dominated the narratives in museums to align with their own thinking, we hope to call attention to the many large and small ways in which racism (and binary, heteronormative thinking) manifests in our daily practices. It is imperative that those of us who work in museums understand that our beloved museums have been used to tell a single narrative about power, beauty, history, and value that has been shaped by White (heterosexual and largely patriarchal) ideals and stories.

In identifying the ways in which racism has colored the entire enterprise of museums, we can begin to search out specific strategies to acknowledge this history and create new ways of working that allow learners to experience multiple narratives, expanded definitions of expertise, shared authority, and self-affirmation.

**Questions to Consider**
In the past year, we've facilitated multiple conversations with colleagues in the field about how to shift our work explicitly toward racial justice and equity. Often, we've found that a few key reminders and questions can be quite useful in turning our collective efforts toward dismantling racist practices in museum education.

The first area we suggest educators start with is terminology. All too often we have found that confusion about language has prevented colleagues from even beginning to talk about how power and privilege intersect with our racial, cultural, and gender identities. Caring colleagues and young audiences alike confide in us that they just don't know what to say and that they are afraid of being called racist, so they don't say anything at all. We encourage educators to seek out definitions of commonly used words such as prejudice, discrimination, race, racism (including internalized racism, structural racism, interpersonal racism, and institutional racism), gender, transgender, ally, power, privilege, sexual orientation, and intersectionality. For example, we often start by pointing out that discrimination is prejudice in action, and can be experienced by anyone, while racism is race prejudice in action and is tied up in historical legacies of power that means it moves from those in power to those without power. In these conversations about how we use language, we have found that many educators gain confidence in their ability to talk about race more productively.

Once educators have a clearer understanding of the current vocabulary about race, racism, and identity, we ask them to discuss how to use that language to facilitate brave conversations. Drawing from several colleagues' calls to move toward "brave not safe spaces" for dialogue about identity (Arao and Clemens 2013; Sensoy and DiAngelo 2014), we encourage educators to engage in some of the same practices we demand of our students. Just as we always tell our audiences to lean into the discomfort of learning—to embrace what is challenging, new, or different—we also ask educators to follow their own advice. Knowing that we do our greatest learning in moments that nudge us out of our comfort zones, be it looking at a work of complex abstract art, analyzing a dance performance from another culture, or simply listening to the narrative of someone who looks different from us, we offer guidelines to help educators challenge themselves. Among these guidelines, we urge educators to speak from their own experience; listen to hear, not to

**Using Familiar Tools**

As every museum educator knows, our greatest tool in helping audiences connect to artworks and artifacts is the question, "What do you see that makes you say that?" This inquiry tool is fundamental to our goals of helping audiences construct meaning in the objects they encounter in our collections. We use this question to guide inquiry-based discussions that layer personal connections, visual evidence, and contextual information into a co-constructed understanding of an object. At the root of this question is a belief in the value of multiple perspectives and listening as a radical act of learning.

In many of the recent workshops we've facilitated on racism in museum education, we have noticed that some colleagues are quickly overwhelmed by the seemingly daunting nature of dismantling the racism that surrounds them. In these moments we encourage colleagues to tap into the core beliefs of museum education as a way of thinking about anti-racist teaching. For example, we tell our students to seek out multiple interpretations of objects to gain a more nuanced understanding. We ask audiences to share their personal connections to works of art in an effort to make the object relevant and meaningful for each visitor. We use contextual information to deepen our understandings of the ways in which objects fit into our current lives and the roles they played in history. We talk endlessly about how critical thinking enables us to expand the stories we've become accustomed to as we create new ways of analyzing, challenging, and re-creating the world around us. Each of these values resonates clearly with anti-racist education strategies. In many ways, we need only turn our own teaching tools to the work of examining race to begin the conversation.

respond; accept that there are multiple truths; focus on language that expands rather than denies (replace "but" with "and"); acknowledge when something hurts and when something you've said is hurtful, apologize; and support each other in being uncomfortable together.

In a museum setting, we are lucky to work with artworks and artifacts. These objects can serve as excellent sites for discussions about who we are and why that matters. Once educators have built a foundation to talk about race, class, gender, religion, and other identity factors, we urge museum educators to turn to the objects with which we teach. If we revise our view of objects as sites for multiple narratives, personal connections, and historical/social interrogations, they become lively opportunities to talk about power and privilege in our society. For example, in encouraging audiences to make personal connections with objects (and even with the institution) we are able to challenge the idea that there is a single and White-centered narrative. Suddenly, the expert stance of the institution can come into question, allowing for audiences to share their own perspectives. As these previously unquestioned descriptions of objects are critiqued, we urge educators to think about how to use contextual information about each artwork or artifact to access conversations about racism and oppression. For example, we might delve into information about how an object was collected or categorized to talk about historical and contemporary forms of racism and colonialism. Or we might talk about the racial landscape of the object (craftsmanship and production, use and value, artist's background, historical context, why it was selected to be on view, etc.) to connect to current issues about racism in our society. Despite the rich racial history embedded within each object, we find that many educators avoid talking about race in relation to the objects they work in, thereby risking cultural and historical erasure. In other words, the decision not to discuss the racial context of an object is an act of silence that maintains the status quo.

Another approach that we highlight in our own work is the importance of holding ourselves and each other accountable for racial justice and anti-oppressive work. While we are often invited to facilitate special conversations about racism in museums, we know that nothing can be solved in a three-hour workshop. Engaging in racial justice and anti-oppressive education takes daily work. As such, we encourage educators to develop strategies to hold themselves and each other accountable on a routine basis. Examples can include forming reading groups, setting time aside in each staff meeting to talk about racial justice work, requiring educators to reflect on how race (and/or gender, religion, class, citizenship, etc.) shapes each tour they give or program they run, forming peer accountability partnerships or teams that set regular goals for racial justice education with colleagues. As educators learn to identify their blind spots they can support each other as they seek out more information about how power, privilege, and identity shape our experiences. To do so, we've found it can be helpful for educators to reflect on questions such as the following:

- Whose story is missing in this institution, program, object label? Whose is prioritized?
- When do I talk about race (gender, class, citizenship, etc.) and when do I leave it out?
- How has my racial identity provided me privilege?
- What assumptions and expectations do I hold for those whose racial identity differs from mine? How did I develop these assumptions and expectations? How do they manifest in my interactions with learners, colleagues, and objects?
- In what ways do I privilege ways of communicating and teaching that are rooted in my life experiences and biases?
- How might I change my views of what good teaching looks like to expand opportunities for multiple cultural approaches to learning and teaching?

As educators navigate these questions, both individually and with colleagues, we encourage them to remember that who you were, who you are, and who you will be are not necessarily the same. To

embrace a more racially just approach to museum education, we must allow ourselves, our colleagues, and our institutions to evolve.

**Museum Policies Influence Practice**

Although we spend a lot of time working with individual colleagues on how they can change their own daily behaviors, practices, and attitudes, we also believe strongly that change must come from all levels. Placing the burden of change solely on individuals only serves to alleviate institutions of their own accountability. We believe that for real changes to happen in how museums work to dismantle oppressive practices, the institutions themselves must make a commitment to racial, gender, and social justice. This may mean rewriting mission statements or offering new policies for racial, gender, and/or social justice across all domains: from HR to collections management to education.

An example that came up in a recent workshop was the idea of writing a policy of racial equity that would provide guidelines for educators leading school groups through a museum's collection. Such a policy might explicitly state that the museum will highlight art created by multiple racial identity groups on every school group visit or public program. A policy of this nature would serve multiple purposes: it would require educators to include artworks by artists from multiple racial identities; it would give visiting audiences a clear sense of what to expect on their tours; it would make public the institution's commitment to racial diversity; it would introduce the concept of racial identity into the conversation for all stakeholders; and it would protect educators from complaints about programs that promote racial diversity. Additionally, such a policy would require that the museum display works created by artists of different racial identities, thereby hopefully influencing exhibition and acquisition decisions.

**Sample Scenario**

One activity that we have found to be very productive is our scenario protocol. In this activity, we ask colleagues to share a scenario of racial injustice that they have experienced or witnessed. (Often we share several of our own to get started.) We then guide educators through a simple protocol to help them reflect on, analyze, and problem-solve the scenario. Using the questions below in the order listed, we have found that this simple protocol has led to indepth conversations about how racism is made manifest in our work, the emotional implications of that for different identity groups, and the potential short- and long-term strategies to dismantle racist thinking in our work.

*Scenario Protocol Questions*

1. What is your initial emotional reaction (not what you would do, but what you think/feel immediately)?
2. What is really going on here? Where is the racism?
3. What actions could we take to dismantle the racism here? In the moment? Long term?

In addition, Keonna and another colleague, Melissa Crum, have been working to develop a framework for reflection and accountability, called Multicultural Critical Reflective Practice (MCRP), to help educators talk about their own life stories and how they shape our work in museums. We've found that MCRP not only enables educators in expanding their cultural perceptions but also can be used to help learners think critically about objects and content and build inclusive learning spaces. MCRP practitioners engage in critical self-reflection to interrogate their identities, critical reflection with peers to gain different perspectives, critical reflection in teaching to be responsive and accountable with learners, and critical reflection on teaching to consider lessons learned and alternatives for the future. For more information on this, we encourage you to check out their recent

chapter “Multicultural Critical Reflective Practice and Contemporary Art,” in *Multiculturalism in Art Museums Today* (Hendrick and Crum 2014).

**Conclusion**

We’ve been thinking about the work—anthropological and literary—of Zora Neale Hurston quite a bit lately and its relevance to resistance, revelation, and resilience for communities of people of color amid the social acceptance of racism. While the U.S. has never been void of racism, there seems to be a growing social acceptance of interpersonal and institutional racism and a tendency toward cultural exclusion. Certainly, the contemporary political landscape is reinforcing ideas of cultural and racial hierarchies. In Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1984), we learn that while the tools for exercising racism and oppression may have changed, the premise of racist practices replicate themselves in many ways. In her attention to honoring the stories of people who have long been excluded, Hurston, like many folklorists, shines light on the important ways in which communities have developed tools to survive and thrive in the face of tremendous violence and racism.

Silence, in the face of racism and injustice, is complicity. While some may want to believe that museums are neutral spaces, they are far from that. It is our responsibility—as educators committed to creating more just and equitable societies—to understand how our daily practices might actually enable White supremacist (and heteronormative, patriarchal) thinking. And while the work that must be done can feel overwhelming at times, we just cannot be afraid to start.

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