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Reflections on *Race-ing the Museum* Two Years Later

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Two Years Later

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In our far from post-racial world, museums are not immune to the pressures of demographic change and urgent new campaigns for racial justice. Famous European museums are altering the titles of art works to eliminate demeaning terms; Confederate monuments are being dismantled in public space and sent to history museums for storage; museums across the United States are scrambling to shed their image as bastions of privilege and to diversify their audiences and supporters.

How have museums, as collections and as institutions, created, supported, or challenged constructions of race and racial identity? How are museums and their objects implicated in the history of slavery, indigenous peoples, and race relations? How have museums represented and interpreted these issues? How can and should their collections tell different stories? What can museums do to combat white privilege and become more diverse in their institutional structures and in their audiences?

The text above was first circulated as the introduction to a Call for Participation for a workshop that took place in May 2016. Looking back two years later, it is striking how much has changed, and yet how much is still the same. The opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture on September 24, just four short months after our workshop in Pittsburgh, was a milestone of international significance, and its impact on the topic of museums and racial identity will surely be felt for generations to come. The sense of optimism and hope that accompanies this achievement, however, is tempered by the memory of two incidents that took place in May 2017. Twice within the span of a single week, a noose was left on the Smithsonian grounds—the second time inside the galleries of the NMAAHC itself. Even more painful were the events of August 2017, when the very same tensions surrounding Confederate monuments that were mentioned in our Call culminated in the death of a peaceful counter-protestor in Charlottesville, Virginia. The litany of racially motivated incidents that have taken place since the election of Donald Trump is too long to be inventoried here; but, as art historians, we remain struck by how frequently these episodes play out in the arena of visual culture: museums and monuments in particular carry the heavy burden of defining public identity, and thus occupy a particularly fraught position in contemporary conversations about race in the modern world.

The scope of our workshop was local rather than global. Lasting only five days, and limited to just twelve participants and two co-facilitators, our goal was simply to start a conversation and to engage with an infinitely complex topic across a varied selection of Pittsburgh collections and art spaces. At the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, we were invited to examine materials that had been written from the point of view of European and American "explorers" who were looking to exploit the natural resources of a world that was new to them. Reading these accounts, we were struck by the constant presence of the people to whom these places were not new at all. The knowledge of geography, botany, and medicine that was gleaned by the newcomers relied so often on the expertise of indigenous communities, and yet these stories have rarely been acknowledged in later accounts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history. We remain grateful for the expertise of the curators who helped us see these voices in the primary sources. As co-facilitators we are likewise indebted to the generosity of the curators at the Carnegie Museum of Art, who arranged activities throughout the museum, including viewing a collection of African artifacts that had been brought to the United States by Walter H. Overs, fifth bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Liberia. On our own campus, the rare books curators and archivists of the University Library System pulled materials for us to examine in the Hillman Library Reading Room. We were presented with an eclectic array of items to peruse, from nineteenth-century printings of

sheet music by Stephen Foster to issues of *The Black Panther* from the 1970s to the controversial 2016 children's book titled *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*; and we reveled in the rare opportunity to discuss the potential for teaching and research offered by these provocative resources.

These visits to long-established institutions, managed by full-time, professional staff members highly trained in their respective fields were balanced with opportunities to explore other Pittsburgh collections that have been organized by members of local communities, often without resources beyond personal initiative and the desire to engage with their neighbors. The Transformazium, working in partnership with the Braddock Carnegie Library in one of the most economically depressed municipalities in the region, offered a model of community engagement that recognizes and nurtures local skills and talents, which often remain invisible to educators and charities. We speed-curated tiny pop-up exhibitions in their powerful art lending library, built from donations by internationally acclaimed artists as well as local collectors, artists, and prison inmates. In the process, we learned about the collection from their full-time paid cultural facilitators recruited from the local area, and heard about how the space doubles as an information clearinghouse where members of the community share their expertise about navigating social-service agencies. Across town, we saw the Allegheny City Historic Gallery, a grassroots collection of donated photography as well as material salvaged from attics and even trash piles. Dedicated to preserving and promoting the history of Pittsburgh's North Side, this collection, along with the personal stories that came from local donors, offered rare insight into a neighborhood that has had a tumultuous history of displacement, racial integration, and swift gentrification over the past century. We were able to get a glimpse of the amazing if precarious work such places do when collection and interpretation rely almost entirely on local networks and knowledge.

This itinerary connected us to public collections that exist beyond the oversight of watchful trustees and rich donors, and made more vivid the full range of audiences to be found in our city. We also witnessed how the gaps between elite institutions and local communities can be bridged. Among the most effective examples of this was the Teenie Harris Archive of the Carnegie Museum of Art, where every effort is made not only to preserve the life's work of Pittsburgh's most renowned photographer but also to engage with and document the African American community of the Hill District that was the primary subject and audience of his pictures. Started as a huge repository of photographs and negatives donated by Harris himself, the archive has now become a significant oral history collection preserving the stories of community elders who lived in the neighborhood and sometimes even appear in his images. It is no surprise that this archive led to several projects by workshop participants.

By the end of our five-day workshop, we were inspired and humbled by the collections and people we had encountered, and by the sincere and open engagement of our twelve participants. Though we could hardly have anticipated the disheartening political changes of the two years that followed, we find ourselves looking back on this workshop as a rare and powerful chance to foster a micro-community that could actively confront our changing world and its upheavals. Some of the lasting effects of that work can be found in the essays in the present volume. Much of it remains in progress, however, and in many ways that is the best outcome we could hope to have achieved: to know that we are part of a larger conversation that keeps moving forward, even during the darker moments of our time.

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