

# The #museumsrespondtoFerguson Initiative, a Necessary Conversation

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**Abstract:** The killing of unarmed African American teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, MO in August 2014 has stimulated an ongoing national dialogue about race and racism in the United States. Museums have been involved in this discussion, primarily on social media. This article documents the origins, the evolution, and the impact of the #museumsrespondtoFerguson initiative that began in December 2014 and that continues a year later. It discusses the role that museums can and should play in the Ferguson initiative, and addresses questions about the relationship of museums' individual missions to larger civic issues. The word "Ferguson" in museum discourse has come to refer not so much to the town and event as to larger concerns about race, racism, and the continuing lack of inclusion in our cultural spaces.

**Keywords:** #museumsrespondtoFerguson, #MuseumWorkersSpeak, Museum inclusion, Diversity, Race, Racism, Museum social media

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

Martin Luther King (1967)

It is 15 months since Michael Brown was shot by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO, and almost a year since the grand jury ruled not to indict Wilson. Yet a national conversation continues, generated not only by this case, but also by ever more atrocious murders of African Americans in the intervening months. More relevant to this article, discussions persist about the role that museums can and should play regarding Ferguson and related events. The word "Ferguson" has come to stand not so much for a place or incident as it has for a cluster of events and ideas. The killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and other black men by white policemen, the regularity and impunity with which this happens, and the light this sheds on race relations more broadly in the US—Ferguson has come to mean all of this. It is in this broad sense that I use "Ferguson" in this article. Ferguson and related events have been a turning point, in my view, in our

profession's reluctance to address the tricky question of race as it affects our cultural spaces.

## **Museums' Lack of Engagement in the Public Sphere**

The absence of observation of and commentary on major current issues, both national and international, in the realm of museum social media is striking. I first noticed this in early 2012 when Trayvon Martin's killing was in the news and in national discussion constantly. As I scrolled through my Twitter feed I discovered that Trayvon did not exist in the museum world. I saw no mention, despite the fact that many museums and individual colleagues that I followed online had collections relevant to American history, African American history, the Civil Rights Movement, and other related topics. As an example, the name Emmet Till, the young black man whose brutal killing helped spark the modern Civil Rights movement in the United States, was mentioned in many news stories. I thought to myself, "Isn't this an aspect of the story on which museums might shed a bit of light and offer context?" With a few exceptions (e.g. the National Underground Railroad Museum in Cincinnati) museums did not take this role. Over the next few years, as other crises (such as the destruction caused by Hurricane Sandy, the influx of immigrant children across our southern borders, or the Ebola outbreak in Liberia and Sierra Leone) flooded all media outlets, it was rare to find museum's social media express awareness of these issues, let alone concern or recommendations for action. This was despite frequent references in the professional literature to museums as forums, their relevance to the twenty-first century, and their aptness as spaces for civic discourse.

## **Early Museum Responses to Ferguson**

Thus it was encouraging to find that in the wake of the shooting of Michael Brown, the Missouri History Museum in St. Louis, Missouri, near Ferguson, organized a town meeting on the day of Brown's funeral (Figure 1). From Melanie Adams, the museum's Managing Director of Community Education and Events, I learned about the careful planning and training that the museum provides to its staff in order to be able to host timely programming such as the town meeting (Adams 2014). Similarly, staff members from the Newseum in Washington, DC, viewing the events of Ferguson as a First Amendment issue, also began collecting, documenting, and displaying news stories, placards, and other forms of material culture soon after Ferguson became news.

## **The #museumsrespondtoFerguson Initiative**

Mainstream media discussion of the Brown case died down during the fall of 2014, but was reinvigorated in late November 2014, when the grand jury declined to indict Darren Wilson, the police officer who had killed him. Around this time the video of the killing by police of Eric Garner, an unarmed black man illegally selling cigarettes



FIGURE 1 Members of the St. Louis/Ferguson community gather for a town meeting organized by the Missouri History Museum. The three-hour meeting featured speeches, song, and the sharing of thoughts and sentiments from people in the community. Image courtesy of the Missouri History Museum.

on the street in New York, became available, and there too, a grand jury again decided against indicting the police officers involved in his death. Demonstrations, some with violence, ensued in Ferguson, New York, Washington, DC, and other locations around the country. Media coverage was again nonstop, and many concluded that the post-racial society heralded by President Barack Obama's election had been only an illusion.

Once again there was scant attention to these happenings on museum social media. But I saw that fellow blogger Adrienne Russell (*Cabinet of Curiosities*, <https://adriannerussell.wordpress.com/>), an African American writer and museum professional, was tweeting about Ferguson, and I began retweeting her observations. At some point I suggested we use #museumsrespondtoFerguson to aggregate any museum commentary, despite the hashtag's length. An awkward but surprisingly resilient moniker was born.

### The “Joint Statement from Museum Bloggers and Colleagues”

In December of 2014, Sam Black, the president of the Association of African American Museums (AAAM), published a statement on the organization's website. The AAAM offered its condolences to the families of Trayvon Martin, Michael

Brown, and other unarmed black men recently killed by police. It urged its member museums to use their collections and institutions to provide understanding and context. Melanie Adams of the Missouri History Museum and president of the Association of Midwest Museums (AMM) also issued a statement from AMM on museums' possible roles related to the controversy (Adams 2014). Realizing that it was unlikely that any other official museum organization would take notice of Ferguson in a formal way, I began to think of those museum colleagues who often write or speak about difficult and contentious issues. I had come to value the power of social media; I endorsed the participatory, "bottom-up" orientation of the "open authority" concept in museum discourse (Adair, Filene, and Koloski 2011), and these thoughts led me to fellow museum bloggers. I contacted ten or twelve of them lamenting the silence from most major museum organizations and asking if they had thoughts about museums' roles in relation to Ferguson. A number responded that a common statement would have the most impact, so we drafted a shared document on Google Drive and began to comment and edit. On December 11, 2014, and in the days following, all of those involved posted the "Joint Statement from Museum Bloggers and Colleagues on Ferguson and Related Events" (See the Joint Statement in this issue, p. 106).

Within a week of the "Joint Statement's" publication, a national museum organization (the American Association of State and Local History) and a regional organization (the New England Museums Association) issued statements urging their members to use their collections and other resources to provide context and information. The organizations also published the "Joint Statement."

As discussion heated up, especially on Twitter, blogger Adrienne Russell and public history Ph.D. candidate Aleia Brown, both of whom worked on and signed the statement, proposed leading a Twitter chat on the topic. This dialogue, begun on December 17, 2014, has continued and expanded, convening on the third Wednesday of each month. A review of the summaries of each chat reveals the extension of this conversation into many aspects of museum work. In particular discussion has focused on the continued lack of progress in diversifying boards, professional staff, and volunteer corps in museums. There is still an "Upstairs/Downstairs" atmosphere in most museums, with professional staff mostly white, and people of color found mostly in maintenance, food services, and security. A second vibrant movement that has grown out of these discussions is the #MuseumWorkersSpeak initiative, begun by colleagues who connected during #museumsrespondtoFerguson chats (Figure 2). This group now chats monthly on Twitter and is convening regular meetings in Washington, DC, Chicago, and other cities to discuss income disparity within museums, the reliance of museums on unpaid internships, and other museum employment issues.

## Continuing the Conversation

I believe that documenting the origins of the #museumsrespondtoFerguson and allied initiatives is important. A year later, however, it has taken this (repeatedly updated) article to track the multiple directions, the variety of perspectives, and



FIGURE 2 Flyer distributed at the 2015 AAM Conference in Atlanta announcing a “rogue session” held at a local art gallery to discuss employment issues in museums. Design by Jillian Reese.

the offshoots into other spheres (e.g. academia) of the movement. It has indeed gone viral, and not just in the digital world. When the Ferguson discussion began, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) had already selected its 2015 theme, “The Social Value of Museums,” and the sessions at the conference focused on a wide range of social issues. In addition, seminars, meetings, and training sessions examining the connections between museums and social justice are proliferating throughout the country. To track the growth and progress of this conversation, I suggest those interested begin following the bloggers who signed the Joint Statement; joining and/or reading the summaries of the monthly #museumsrespondtoFerguson and #MuseumWorkersSpeak Twitter chats; reviewing the list of podcasts related to this topic on the website of the weekly satellite radio program *Museum Life*; and checking the websites not only of AAM but also of the AAAM and the Midwest Museums Association.

Among the overall trends to watch:

1. Ferguson in its broader sense has given the field an opportunity, and a kind of permission, to raise the specific issues of race, racism, and white privilege in the context of museums in a way that has not happened before.

2. Although this article focuses on recent examples of white on black racism, it should be noted that the larger issue of racism within museums includes attention to prejudice and discrimination against all people of color, at the same time acknowledging that race itself is a socially constructed concept (American Anthropological Association 1998).
3. The discussion provides an example of the power of social media in general and of its utility for generating awareness and even action in the sphere of social justice.
4. The conversation has, from the beginning involved a diverse group of museum professionals, and in particular many young museum colleagues. With their energy and their facility with social media, it is natural and encouraging that many are taking the lead in this sphere.

### Concerns and Questions About #museumsrespondtoFerguson

Discussion about the role of museums with regard to Ferguson (writ large) is essentially about two related and inherently contentious topics: (1) the changing nature of museums, and (2) their connections, in the US in particular, with our nation's racial history. Thus the conversation has not been without dissension (however polite, as is the museum way). Several questions emerge from this position.

Question 1: Which museums should respond? Is it more authentic for some types of museums than others? Several bloggers offer varying perspectives:

- In December 2014 Rebecca Herz published the “Joint Statement” on her *Museum Questions* blog (<http://museumquestions.com/>), but declined to sign the declaration because she disagreed with the bolded words in the following quotation from the Statement: “Where do museums fit in? Some might say that only museums with specific African American collections have a role, or perhaps only museums situated in the communities where these events have occurred. As mediators of culture, all museums should commit to identifying how they can connect to relevant contemporary issues irrespective of collection, focus, or mission.” I believe that Rebecca’s perspective is broadly shared.
- In her January 2015 *Museum Commons* guest post about the ways in which the Brooklyn Historical Society is addressing issues of race and prejudice in its community, Director Deborah Schwartz (2015) wondered,

As the former Deputy Director for Education at the Museum of Modern Art [MoMA], I have asked myself what my response to the Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, and Michael Brown cases would have been. Would I have developed a series built around the voices of contemporary artists who are engaged in matters of social and racial justice? Would Glenn Ligon, Carrie Mae Weems, and David Hammons in conversation with activists and journalists result in good programming at MoMA? Would there be a way to engage the curatorial and education staff in issues around whether deconstruction and abstraction both further and hinder our understandings of issues of race and social justice? Equally or more important, would the MoMA audience be ready to

participate in any such conversation? Would they have come looking for it? Would such a series be sustainable? Does MoMA have the same mandate that the Brooklyn Historical Society has?

- In a March 2015 post on the *Future of Museums* blog (<http://futureofmuseums.blogspot.com>), Elizabeth Merritt suggested that encouraging museums to respond to the questions of race and racism raised by Ferguson may lead to inauthentic and naive efforts that risk the kind of backlash Starbucks suffered with its #racetogether initiative. While praising the timely responses to Ferguson of the Missouri History Museum and the Newseum, given their missions, Merritt (2015) states, “I’m sure there are museums for which addressing race relations in America would be just as awkward a fit as it is for Starbucks.”

Behind these three examples lies an extremely powerful and durable assumption about the primacy of collections in governing museum policy and practice. This assumption is undergoing a reexamination. I believe that there is a basis more fundamental than content for museum practice, especially in relation to community, and it lies in the civic role of the museum, irrespective of collection, focus, or mission. This civic grounding of the museum is expressed in the International Council of Museums’ most recent definition of a museum, which does not mention specific collections or disciplines, instead emphasizing the public role of the museum “in service to society” (ICOM 2007). In their recent book, *Cities, Museums and Soft Power*, Lord and Blankenberg (2015) argue that, globally, museums have moved from their roots in colonialism and the support of the power elite, through a period of emphasis on their “brand” (collections, architecture, tourist appeal), to an era of “soft power,” i.e. the ability to exercise influence in the civic sphere.

More and more museums are being shifted from the governmental and corporate sectors to the nonprofit sector. This shift in patronage has led to new governance structures that reflect a plurality of voices and influences. As a consequence of their place in civil society, museums are finding themselves with new roles, responsibilities, and expectations. (Lord and Blankenberg 2015, 11)

The focus and format of these new roles and responsibilities will, of course, differ according to variables in each institution and community.

Question 2: Why Ferguson? What is it that is so compelling and urgent about the confluence of ideas and emotions related to Ferguson (essentially about race and racism in the museum) that demands museums’ attention and action? A June 5, 2015, posting on the *Incluseum* blog (<http://incluseum.com/>) provides a cogent answer:

In our view, framing race and racism as “issues” that a given museum can choose to address doesn’t depend on whether or not this decision seems to fit with a particular organization’s mission statement. It most likely won’t fit with the majority of museum mission statements out there. In other words, framing racism as a special “issue” that must “fit” an organization’s scope

misses the point; racism isn't an issue among many to choose from at a social issues buffet. Racism, like other forms of (intersecting) oppressions, is a reality already present in our museums; it pervades the whole institution and predates any one of us working there. Choosing to ignore race/racism—and by extension who our museums serve and why—doesn't mean this reality ceases to exist and bear impact on us. [...] let's be clear, race isn't a headline or the issue of the day or week or month. It's the issue of EVERY day because we never cease to be individuals marked by race in a country that has privileged one race over others. (Wittman, Kinsley, and Moore 2015)

It is not an exaggeration to say that each time I have worked on a draft of this article, beginning in April 2015, news of a killing or violent act by a white person against African Americans insinuates itself from the radio in the other room: the shooting of Walter Scott in April, the Dallas swimming pool incident in early June. Today in mid-June I sit at the computer after nine congregants of the historic black Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, were shot by a white man while all were at a bible study class. Racism has polluted our cultural groundwater, and it seeps into church basements, well-manicured lawns, and mean streets. It is our nation's original sin, and it cannot be hidden.

Museums—whose foundations penetrate the soil in our cities, towns, and rural areas, whose buildings occupy civic space, whose boards and directors are influential and respected citizens, whose members and visitors make up our communities—cannot stand to the side and let this sad national story repeat endlessly. We who are among the keepers of stories, both local and national, must participate. We must begin by looking at our own institutions, how they contribute to racism, and how they are suited to healing it. And then we must seek out others who are more experienced than we are in the ways of racial healing and ask to join them. We are neither above it nor outside it; we are in it, and we might as well get to work.

With apologies to Dr. King – The arc of the museum universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

## About the Author

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