

Co-Constructing Racial Identities at Seattle's  
Northwest African American Museum

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**Abstract**

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In the United States museums have played a key role in shaping our understandings of ourselves as members of particular geographical, national, and racialized groups. While many museums in the United States present this information from a Euro-American perspective (a reflection of both their leadership and their presumed audiences), the growth of minority-run museums and cultural institutions challenges these hegemonic understandings of race and identity by presenting alternative narratives of identity and belonging. Taking the Northwest African American Museum (NAAM) as a case study, this work will examine the role an African American museum plays in reflecting and shaping identities and local understandings about race. Within NAAM, ideas about what it means to be African American are continually co-constructed through the dynamic relationship that exists between the museum and the public. Through these interactions, various (and sometimes contesting) discourses of “blackness” are reshaped and reinterpreted within the space of the museum. However, the discursive power of the museum derives not just from its content and programs, but also from its physical location in a

neighborhood experiencing rapid demographic changes, and from its visitors whose racial identities impact the extent to which they are able to make personal connections with the museum's content.

## Acknowledgments

A dissertation is a community effort. Even though there is only one author listed on the front page there are always countless people whose input, advice, and support made it possible. Over the past eight years in Seattle I have been lucky enough to meet many wonderful and amazing people, but there are a few who deserve particular mention.

First and foremost, I want to thank the staff and volunteers (both past and present) at the Northwest African American Museum. I am proud to have worked with you to watch the museum grow from an empty shell to a buzzing and exciting institution. Thank you, thank you, thank you, for your support and encouragement. If even a small part of this dissertation proves to be helpful, useful, or interesting to you, I will consider it a success.

I have been fortunate enough to have had the support of wonderful and supportive committee members: Ralina Joseph, Associate Professor in the University of Washington's Department of Communication, Kris Morrissey, Director of the University's Museology Graduate Program, and, of course, my advisor Miriam Kahn, Professor of Anthropology. Mimi, thank you so much for your mentorship, your sense of humor, and for your unfailing encouragement.

The University of Washington's Graduate Opportunities and Minority Achievement Program (GO-MAP), the Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, and the generous contributors to the AC Peña Fellowship Fund made my time at the University of Washington possible. At a time of rising tuition rates and drastic cuts to funding, I am truly grateful for this support.

I reserve my biggest “thank you” for my husband, Timothy. Between the time I began applying to graduate school and now, Tim and I have celebrated major milestones and faced personal loss: We began dating, got married, bought a house, and had our first child.

Both of our fathers passed away.

During one of our very first dates I told Tim that—if everything went as planned—in less than a year I would be leaving Chicago in order to start graduate school. I wanted to give him a chance to rethink his interest in starting a relationship with me. For reasons I will be forever grateful for, Tim decided to stick it out to see where our relationship went. Our relationship took us far away from his family and friends in the Midwest to a city where he didn’t know a single person. Throughout my journey through graduate school Tim has been my steady supporter and my encourager. He has kept me grounded, listened to my rants, celebrated my successes, and empathized with my disappointments. Most importantly, however, he has loved me. Thank you Tim. Without you I would not have been able to this.

This dissertation is dedicated to two important people in my life: My father, W. Charles Littles, who passed away during the course of my graduate student journey, and my daughter, Iva Malinda, who was born almost exactly two years ago.

- Dad, during the last real conversation I had with you over the phone I told you that I had earned my master’s degree. “That’s GREAT!” you said in that enthusiastic, full-bodied way of yours. I know you’d think a Ph.D. was pretty great too. The stubbornness that it took me to complete this journey all comes from you.
- Iva-love: You come from a long line of determined women. Iva Lorraine Erickson was born in 1919 on a Nebraska farm, lived through the Great Depression, and kept her large extended family connected through her love and deep personal faith. Malinda Hall

Shields was born into slavery, supported her husband as he worked towards his M.Div., became a homeowner, raised her children, and supported the Black community in Linden, Alabama. Both women lived long enough to meet their great-grandchildren. I may not have the deep inner strength that allowed your namesakes to overcome all the hardships they faced, but, when you are older, I hope the fact that your mom was stubborn enough to complete her dissertation will inspire you to accomplish whatever goals you set for yourself. Be proud, be tenacious, be curious about the world around you, and, above all else, be kind.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

Seattle's Northwest African American Museum (NAAM) is a place that is shaped by its location, the history of the city, and the memories and experiences of the people who visit it. The building in which it is housed, the former Colman Elementary School, is located on the southern edge of the Central District neighborhood which, for much of the twentieth century, was home to the majority of the city's African American residents. Situated on a hill surrounded by parkland, the large, hundred-year-old building, with its red brick exterior, ivory terra cotta detailing, and tall, narrow windows, stands in sharp contrast to the other buildings in the neighborhood. It was the building's unique architecture and physical prominence in the



Figure 1.1. *The Colman School building seen from across Jimi Hendrix Park. (Photo by author)*

neighborhood that helped to land it a place on the city's list of historic landmarks in 2009. Today, the top two floors of the building house low-income apartments that are overseen by the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, and NAAM takes up the 19,000 square-foot space on the first floor. The museum's three galleries (one permanent and the other two rotating) highlight the history, art, and culture of African Americans in the Pacific Northwest and beyond through

various displays, videos, texts, and interactive elements. The museum also houses a small library and genealogical research center, meeting rooms, a small gift shop, administrative offices, and a collections storage space.

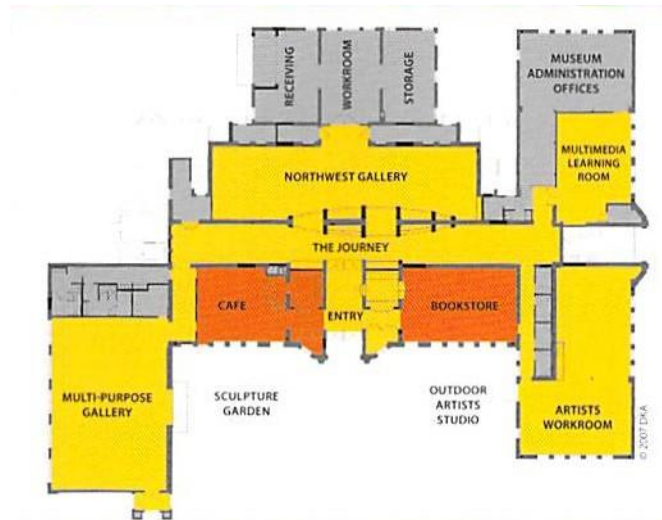


Figure 1.2. NAAM floor plan. ©2007 DKA. In the years since the museum first opened, the Multimedia Learning Room has become the PACAR Gallery, the multi-purpose gallery has been renamed the Norman B and Constance Rice Legacy Hall, and the bookstore now includes the Genealogy Center and the Jean Shy Farris Reading Room.

NAAM opened in 2008 as the only African American museum in the region, and its impact on local discourses concerning the racial and regional identity is larger than its small size would suggest. The museum’s mission is to “...spread knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the histories, arts and cultures of people of African descent for the enrichment of all” (Northwest African American Museum 2014). By accomplishing this mission, the museum envisions a “Pacific Northwest region where the important histories, arts and cultures of people of African descent are embraced as an essential part of our shared heritage and future” (2014). The work of NAAM, as articulated in the mission and vision statement, is intended to be both celebratory and transformative as the stories the museum presents to the public reshape understandings of Pacific Northwest history. This process of reshaping ideas works in both directions. Even as the museum presents and shapes local histories, it also reflects the ideas and

beliefs of others. NAAM is inextricably connected to discourses of both local and national African-American history and community identity, as well as to institutional and professional discourses concerning the work of museums.

This dissertation is a story about a particular museum situated within a particular place and time. By closely looking at NAAM, its history, and the various ways that individuals engage with it, this dissertation will help to shed light on the role African American museums can play in reflecting and shaping racial and community identities, and will explore the ways these identities are enacted within it. Each chapter will provide a lens through which to consider the following questions: How does an individual's identity (especially their racial and regional identity) influence the way they experience NAAM? How are various aspects of NAAM experienced as affirming, challenging, or shaping community and racial identities? How does NAAM both reflect and shape understandings of Northwest regional history and African American identity? By looking at NAAM one can gain a deeper understanding of the role museums play as dynamic institutions that both shape, and are shaped by, the communities of which they are a part.

### **Ethnographic Methods**

The work—and product—of cultural anthropology is ethnography. As a research process, ethnography involves spending significant periods of time “in the field” interacting with, and participating in, the lives of the people being studied through the process of “participant observation” (Davies 1999:4). Through this method of carefully and consciously listening, observing, and immersing oneself in a particular community, the stories, sights, sounds, and interactions that take place there all become the data that form the basis of this ethnographic

work. The resulting written ethnographic product “draws its data primarily from this fieldwork experience and usually emphasizes descriptive detail as a result” (1999:5).

From the perspective of an ethnographer, all that is observed is valuable information, and it is the minutiae of everyday interactions that form the basis of ethnographic research. At NAAM I participated in meetings, attended public museum events, spoke informally to visitors, read news coverage about the museum, observed visitors in the galleries and during events, and took part in the life of the museum. All of this provided important insights into NAAM’s role as a site of community interaction. Open-ended interviews with NAAM staff and volunteers, along with a formal visitor survey and analysis of comments left in visitor comment books<sup>1</sup> provided additional data that was used to provide greater detail and to highlight some of the voices of the people who have both shaped, and have been shaped by, the museum.

### **Researcher, Participant, and Subject**

Following the reflexive turn in anthropology in the 1980s, the strict dichotomies present in ethnographic fieldwork (field versus home, researcher versus subject, participant versus observer) have been called into question. In her article “Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research,” geographer Kim England argues in favor of a research methodology “in which intersubjectivity and reflexivity play a central role” (1994:82). In contrast to a positivist approach that attempts to construct a strict separation between an objective researcher and those that they study, an intersubjective and reflexive methodology shifts power over to the “researched” by acknowledging that research is a dialogical (rather than a unilateral) process between individuals, and recognizing that the positionality of the research is

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<sup>1</sup> Both the survey and visitor comment analysis will be discussed in-depth in Chapter 5.

“critical to the conduct of fieldwork... it induces self-discovery, and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions” (1994:82).

I first learned about the Northwest African American Museum during my initial visit to the University of Washington’s campus in 2006. I had applied to the UW graduate school in Sociocultural Anthropology with an interest in exploring the ways that museums can be used to legitimize the experiences of minority communities and shape the way these communities are viewed by the majority culture. Back in 2004, when I lived in Chicago, I had witnessed how the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington D.C. energized members of Chicago’s Native American community. After describing the NMAI’s location right across the street from the Capitol Building, a local Elder excitedly told me, “They [the government] can’t ignore us! We’re right *there!*” That excitement was infectious and I wanted to learn about the role museums played in other communities. Once I was in the graduate program I met with Professor Miriam Kahn (who would become my advisor). During our meeting she handed me a newspaper article about the NAAM construction project. The fact that this new African American museum in Seattle was getting underway at the same time I was arriving in the city seemed too serendipitous to ignore.

I began working at NAAM in 2007 as a volunteer, helping to fill out condition reports on some of the first objects loaned to the museum. At the time the museum had a staff of only five people who worked out of an office space in a downtown high rise while the one-hundred-year-old Colman building was being gutted and reconfigured to house both the museum and the apartments above it. Once the museum opened I was asked to move to the development department and to help with the membership program and grant writing. I now work at NAAM three days a week as the staff Grant Writer.

Being part of a new institution, from its embryonic stage into its toddlerhood, is both exciting and stressful. As a staff member I celebrate each accomplishment, no matter how small, and mourn each setback, vowing to do a better job next time. With the support of community members and volunteers, the staff at NAAM has worked on a shoestring budget to create events and programs that meet our high professional expectations. As this dissertation will illustrate, this drive to excel, to bypass all the developmental stages and leap from infancy to institutional adulthood, is not just a reflection of the personalities of those who work at the museum, but is also pushed along by a sense that, as an African American museum, this particular institution will be held to a higher standard than others. There is an acute awareness that this museum needs to stand as a testament to the achievements and capabilities of the local African American community, and that this museum, upon which so many expectations have been placed, simply cannot fail.

Over the past several years I have spent almost twenty-four hours a week at NAAM. The museum is located less than three miles from my house, which means that I often drive by the museum even on days when I am not working. Doing fieldwork in your own neighborhood means that you never leave the “field.” There is always something happening, and there are always “ethnographic moments” to record. The people who are touched by the museum are not abstract subjects, but my friends, neighbors, and fellow community members. They are the people I see at the grocery store, the people I run into downtown, the people I see at church, and the people with whom I celebrate birthdays and holidays.

In addition to living close to the site of my research and feeling connected to the community, I also identify as biracial (with a White mother and an African American father), and thus view the museum’s content and narratives as part of my own family’s history. I am not

from the Pacific Northwest, but the stories of African American migration and community-building echo the ones that I have heard my own family members tell.

In her article, “Of Hats and Switches: Doing Fieldwork ‘at Home,’” Nordquest discusses the continual mental shifts between the professional and the personal that take place when doing fieldwork within one’s own community (2007). The uncertainties and interpersonal relationships that are a part of all ethnographic work are brought into sharper and more immediate focus when working “at home.” Working collaboratively with organizations within one’s home community radically disrupts the traditional model of the anthropologist as outsider/expert. Identities are constantly shifting according to the varying perspectives and needs of both the researcher and the people with whom the researcher works. All anthropologists are, in one way or another, simultaneously researchers, partners, scholars, friends, students, and residents within the communities they work in. By acknowledging the profoundly personal nature of ethnography we can create ethnographic works that honor multiple perspectives and experiences without lapsing into the conceit of academic objectivity.

My relationship with the museum opens up certain avenues for analysis, even while it closes off others for reasons ranging from the professional to the personal. As a staff member at NAAM I am sometimes privy to internal institutional information that I cannot share, and there are some people that I cannot talk to without impeding the work that the museum is trying to do. Rather than limiting my work, I see my position at NAAM as one that has opened up opportunities to hear stories and perspectives that more limited contact with the museum would not have allowed and which has afforded me the opportunity to gain a much broader and deeper understanding about the discourses surrounding the museum.

The American Anthropological Association's Ethics Statement notes that, "A primary ethical obligation shared by anthropologists is to do no harm" (American Anthropological Association 2012). As both an anthropologist and museum a staff member, I am obligated to ensure that whatever work I do does not harm the community I am working in. However, beyond my efforts to avoid bringing harm to either the people involved in the work of NAAM or the museum itself, I also have an obligation to give back to the community I am working in. Cynthia B. Dillard articulates an "endarkened feminist epistemology" rooted in African and African Diasporic understandings of the world that offers "counter-practices/pedagogies in qualitative research and humanizing practices/pedagogies that move us beyond thinking of research as solely academic practice" and highlights the work of research as a "*responsibility*, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry" (Dillard 2008: 278, 280). The research questions that I laid out in the beginning of this chapter grew organically out of conversations I had with staff and from what I had observed during my time at the museum. They were designed with the goal of conducting research that would be of interest and use not only to the professional anthropological and museological communities, but also to the people who make up NAAM's community as well. This goal of combining theory, research, and practice in order to "give back" to the community I work in stems from a desire to counter the field of anthropology's historic tendency to create a false dichotomy between the researcher and the "researched" by creating a work that is accessible to the people whose lives, and experiences have helped to make my work possible.

England writes, "fieldwork is intensely personal, in that the positionality and biography of the research plays a central role in the research process, in the field as well as in the final text" (1994:87). I am deeply a part of this particular ethnographic process at NAAM. The data and

research I present here are, to the best of my ability, accurate and balanced, but it is my own circumstances and positionality that have shaped it into what it is.

### **The Anthropology of a Museum**

In the introduction to their book, *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World*, Macdonald and Fyfe write that their aim is

... both to highlight the pertinence and rich theoretical potential of the museum as an analytical locus for anthropology, sociology and cultural studies; and to show how social and cultural theorizing can illuminate many contemporary museum issues. It is intended as a contribution towards establishing an anthropology and sociology of museums (1996: 3).

In a similar vein, this research seeks to further scholarship that looks at museums as dynamic social institutions and sites of intersecting social discourses (Gurian 1999; Katriel 1994; Weil 1999).

Cultural museums serve as storehouses of memory and cultural knowledge. They are places we visit to learn about our pasts, celebrate the present, and imagine the future. Because museums are influential institutions that touch the lives of millions of people each year, it is important to consider the role they play in the lived experiences of their visitors, and the ways in which they help or hinder the public from understanding the complexities of racial and ethnic histories. Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, minority groups have sought increased input in the ways that their groups are represented in museums, and have used these sites to carve out space to tell their own stories (Erickson 2008; Teslow 2007). Although NAAM is a small, regionally-focused museum, its history resonates with larger national museums. The issues of racial identity, history, and representation that are part of the discourses surrounding NAAM relate to conversations that followed the construction of the National Museum of the American

Indian and discussions regarding the future National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. The intense interest surrounding these national museums demonstrates the power museums have in legitimizing and affirming the place of racial minorities within the larger framework of American culture and in challenging dominant discourses in new and thought-provoking ways. However, most museum research on the intersection of race, identity, and museums continues to focus on the ways that mainstream museums<sup>2</sup> work to integrate these narratives into their broader mandates, or how they work to reach out to non-White audiences that are underrepresented in their visitors. This dissertation is an attempt to bring needed attention to the work of minority-run museums and the impact they can have on their visitors and their surrounding communities.

### **A Note about Racial Terminology**

Racial categories and terms are socially constructed and grow out of constantly evolving social and political milieus. The term “Black” came into use during the Black Power movement of the 1960s and was used to assert a cultural and political identity distinct from the integrationist goals of the earlier Civil Rights Movement. With this shift, “Black,” according to Ben L. Martin, became “...associated with youth, unity, militancy, and pride, while Negro increasingly connoted middle age, complacency, and the status quo” (Martin 1991:92). In the late 1980s Jesse Jackson led a push for the use of “African American” to reemphasize a shared African heritage. The term was adopted first by Black-owned publications and then filtered down to editorials in the major papers before finally being adopted by the major style guides (Martin 1991:104). The term “African American” has never fully displaced “Black,” and today many individuals use

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this work I will use the term "mainstream museums" to refer to institutions that are not explicitly focused on minority or underrepresented cultural groups, and whose leadership and audiences tend to be mostly Euro-American.

both.<sup>3</sup> Throughout this dissertation I will be using both of these terms interchangeably as reflects common usage.

I have also made the decision to capitalize the term “Black” when used to refer to a racial category. In her *New York Times* opinion piece, “The Case for Black With a Capital B,” Lori Tharps argues, “When speaking of a culture, ethnicity or group of people, the name should be capitalized. Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a color” (2014). “Black” is more than just a descriptor. It is, as Stuart Hall reminds us, a historical, political, and cultural category with which individuals self-identify as being a part of (Hall 1997:53). As such, I believe it requires capitalization regardless of what many style guides continue to recommend. However, since many writers continue to use the lowercase spelling, when using direct quotes I will defer to the author’s preferred usage.

Because I am capitalizing “Black” to refer to members of the African diaspora in the United States, I will also capitalize “White” when referring to those who primarily self-identify as descendants of European immigrants. Although White Americans often do not see themselves as having a distinct racial identity in the same way that African Americans do, I believe that capitalizing “White” helps draw attention to the very real social and political effects of White hegemony by reminding us how racial categories define us in ways that are not always obvious.

### **The “Black Community”**

“The Black community” is a term that is frequently used in academic literature, in the media, and in personal conversations. However, it is a term that is worth unpacking as it carries with it a set of assumptions that often have the effect of reducing diverse communities to a

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<sup>3</sup>When I surveyed NAAM visitors they variously self-identified as "Black," "African American," "Afro-American," "Black American," and "Black/African American." "African American" was used by 48% of the respondents, and "Black" was used by 36%.

monolithic and unified whole. Stuart Hall reminds us that lumping members of the African Diaspora into a single, simple category originally served the purpose of unifying individuals in the face of political and social marginalization (Hall 1996:41). In a similar vein, Cornel West argues that this work of self-representation was both “moralistic in content and communal in character” as an effort was made to construct a unified “Black community” that aligned with White, middle-class cultural norms in order to present a positive image of African Americans that could counter racist stereotypes (West 1990:103). “Black specificity and particularity,” West writes, “was thus banished in order to gain White acceptance and approval. Second, these Black responses rested upon a homogenizing impulse that assumed that all Black people were really alike—hence obliterating differences (class, gender, region, sexual orientation) between Black peoples (1990:103).

Just as “Black” is a socially constructed racial category, so too is “the Black community” a socially constructed and imagined group identity. Benedict Anderson describes the modern nation-state as an imagined community—“... *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (2006:6). “The Black community,” as a term used both by African Americans and others, imagines a unified identity, a commonality of experiences, and a set of shared perspectives, goals, and ideologies. While this can, and often does, promote an important sense of unity and mutual support within a White hegemonic system, it also (as West points out) obliterates important differences and can be used within African American communities to narrowly define who is and who is not “authentically Black” in a way that is exclusive and limiting.<sup>4</sup> The idea of a singular “Black community” is also often utilized to construct an anonymous Black subject that can be used to support systemic racism. For example,

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<sup>4</sup> This notion of “Black authenticity” will be revisited in Chapters 3 and 4.

acts of violence carried out by an individual African American are often blamed on the moral or cultural failings of “the Black community” at large, while crimes committed by White Americans are framed as singular acts committed by individuals.

## **Museums and Race**

Museums in the United States have played a key role in shaping our understandings of ourselves as members of particular social groups. They are also sites where particular discourses of knowledge and identity are co-constructed and disseminated. Museum professionals, along with anthropologists and historians, have long been intimately involved in the process of propagating the notion of race as it has been variously defined. Chapter 2 will provide an historical overview of the ways museums in the United States have represented the histories and cultures of non-White people, with a particular focus on how African Americans have been represented in museums and museum exhibitions.

Although the idea that racial categories are based on some inherent biological differences between groups continues to persist (Hartigan 2006), there is, in fact, no genetic basis for dividing human beings into a finite number of distinct racial categories (Keita and Kittles 1997; Templeton 1998). Rather, racial categories are culturally constructed concepts that have grown out of the desire to separate groups of people for “social, economic, and political purposes” (Smedley 2007:7). Race is a relatively recent social invention that served to naturalize European enslavement of African peoples and their descendants (Smedley 2007). As landowners in colonial America moved from using a labor force based on indentured servitude to one of generational enslavement, people of African descent were transformed from being one group among several that could be used as forced labor to being a group that was viewed as a distinct

race for whom slavery was a natural condition (Takaki 1993:65-67). Socially constructed categories of race that served to rationalize European hegemony over other peoples were subsequently granted legitimacy through the work of nineteenth century scientists who held as biological fact a racial hierarchy that placed white Europeans at the pinnacle and people of African descent at the bottom.

Although race has no biological basis, it is a social reality that shapes the way we experience the world in very real ways. An individual's life expectancy, social relations, and economic opportunities are all impacted by the racial category that has been ascribed to them. As I hope to make clear in Chapter 2, social constructions of race have directly influenced the ways in which museum professionals have presented the histories, cultures, and bodies of non-European people to the public. From the "science" of racial evolution that was incorporated into nineteenth century museums, to the gradual shift towards inclusion and self-representation in late twentieth century museums, by studying museums one can see visually manifested social discourses of race. Against this historical background, NAAM's unique history, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, reveals the importance that members of Seattle's African American community placed on the discursive power of the museum to serve not only as a vehicle for racial self-representation, but also as a way to assert their presence in a majority-White city.

## **Discourse**

Theo van Leeuwen, in expanding on the work of Michel Foucault, defines discourses as "socially constructed ways of knowing some aspect of reality" (2009:144). A particular discourse defines the way one understands and talks about a particular subject while it also, as Stuart Hall notes, "'rules out', limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves

in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it” (Hall 2007:72). Discourses provide us with language to talk about and understand a particular object or idea at a particular historical moment in time by investing it with socially constructed forms of meaning. In the process, discourses both shape and reflect our social realities by influencing the way we understand the social world in which we live.

As discursively constructed spaces, museums are ideal subjects for the application of the analytic techniques of discourse studies and social semiotics. They are sites where countless social discourses are made manifest in ways that are both obvious and hidden. Although NAAM is a small museum, it is an incredibly rich subject for a semiotically informed ethnographic analysis and lends itself to a critical examination of the social discourses that are made manifest in the physical space, exhibits, and discussions surrounding the museum. In Chapter 4 I will explore the various ways NAAM engages, challenges, and co-constructs various discourses of “Blackness”—a complex racial signifier that is continually being appropriated and reconstructed in ways that can either include or exclude others (Johnson 2003:3). The varied discourses of Blackness that museum visitors bring with them to NAAM shape their expectations about what an African American museum is and should be. In turn, the challenge faced by NAAM’s staff is determining which discourses to engage with and support, and which ones to challenge.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a form of analysis that examines texts to gain insight into the ways that power relations and social inequalities are made manifest through the use of language (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). This type of analysis recognizes that any analysis of discourse must take into account the broader sociocultural and political context in which it takes place (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). Many CDA projects have taken a “top-down” approach that, as Van Dijk describes, focuses on “the elites and their discursive strategies for the

maintenance of inequality” (2007:300). While this approach to CDA is important for revealing the ways in which discourses maintain the dominance of a particular group, it can be problematic if it presents an overly simplistic picture of a society in which certain groups are the perpetual oppressors and other groups are perpetually oppressed. It runs the risk of overlooking instances where dominant discourses are challenged, and the ways in which power is reallocated within particular contexts. At a minority-run institution such as NAAM, the question of whose discourse is dominant is complex. Even as it challenges Euro-centric historical narratives, the museum, with its highly educated, middle-class staff, is in a position of discursive privilege relative to some segments of the African American community. Incorporating a Foucauldian conception of power into the analysis allows us to better see how power, rather than simply emanating from a single source such as “the state” or the “ruling class,” circulates throughout all levels of society. Even those who are considered socially “disadvantaged” can and do enact strategies of power that can challenge dominant discourses. As Ruth Wodak and Michael Mayer observe,

An important perspective in CDA related to the notion of “power” is that it is very rare that a text is the work of only one person. In texts, discursive differences are negotiated; they are governed by differences in power that is in part encoded in and determined by discourse and by genre. Therefore, texts are often sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance (2001:11).

Taking the museum—as both a physical and a discursive construction—as our text, CDA can offer additional ways to consider how discourses surrounding the institution contend for dominance.

## Space, Place, and Memory

Discourses take place in, and circulate through, physical spaces. NAAM, its surrounding neighborhood, the city of Seattle, the state, and the nation, all have a physical reality, but they are also constructed by the social relationships that exist among people, events, histories and objects as they intersect and overlap. In his writings about space, French philosopher Henri Lefebvre noted that “*(Social) space is a (social) product*” (1996:26). Spaces, such as the space of a neighborhood or a museum, embody social relationships, and are socially constructed reflections of current discourses and ideologies. It is within this social space that areas in the landscape are invested with social meaning and transformed from mere spaces into socially meaningful places.

Just as spaces are constructed through social relationships, memories, as Maurice Halbwachs reminds us, are also socially constructed (1980). Memories are recalled to us through other people and find strength in the multiplicity of mutually supportive perspectives that are shaped through personal experiences. Memories are also recreated through the use of objects that serve as visual storehouses of memories that enable individuals to recapture a shared past. As sites where objects and stories are collected and shared, museums have long been an integral part of our collective memory-making experience. For many of us this communal work of memory-making begins when we are children and travel to local or national history museums with our teachers or parents. Museums serve as both pedagogical tools and socializing agents as teachers, parents, and docents utilize the museum spaces to pass along particular narratives of the past to successive generations.

Chapter 5 will explore the ways that the loss of place in the wake of demographic changes and urban redevelopment in Seattle’s Central District has dispersed a formerly closely connected African American community and created a deeply felt need to preserve physical

spaces and memories of the past. Within this context NAAM becomes utilized as a space where a people make connections to a place, a collective past, and a shared future.

## **Identity**

In addition to serving as a locus of collective memory-making, NAAM also encourages visitors to engage in the work of individual identity construction. Jay Rounds argues that museums are uniquely suited for supporting the work of identity construction as they offer narrative order to human experiences and provide space to enact and explore identities (2006). Much of the research that examines the identity work in which visitors engage during their museum visits does not consider the ways that visitors' racial identities influence this process. In Chapter 6 I will use the three characteristics of museums that Rounds sees as supporting identity work (order and ontological security, enactment, and identity exploration) to examine how visitors at NAAM utilize the museum to engage in the work of constructing and enacting identity. This chapter will also consider the challenges NAAM faces as a partner in this work as it seeks to connect with a diverse audience.

This dissertation is an attempt to shed light on just one of many aspects of NAAM—namely discourses of identity and memory as they circulate around and through the museum. It is not a complete story, as no one dissertation can ever capture the full multiplicity of stories and perspectives that can be found in any space where people come together, but it is an important story of how issues of race, history, culture, and community intersect within the space of one particular institution.

## Chapter 2 Representing African Americans in Museums

*In the genealogy center I sit on the floor alongside twenty-one children. They hug their bags and lunch boxes in their laps. While the adults sit in chairs on the periphery of the group, the children sit rapt, their eyes upraised, as the storyteller begins her tale. “I have a story to tell you,” she says, “so listen very carefully.” Slowly she weaves a story about a time, long ago, “when the sky was low enough to break off a piece and eat it...”*

Most of us have memories of visiting museums and historical sites as children. From school fieldtrips to family vacations, museum visits are integrated into the educational experiences of most people in the United States and serve as socializing agents that reflect, construct and circulate contemporary beliefs about the world (Milligan and Brayfield 2004; Moser 2010). In his article, “The Museum: Temple or Forum,” Cameron Duncan argued that, in order to maintain their identity as *museums*, museums “...must meet society’s need for that unique institution which fulfills a timeless and universal function—the use of the structured sample of reality, not just as a reference but as an objective model against which to compare individual perceptions” (2004:72). However, even a brief consideration of the history of museums in the United States makes it clear that, far from being objective “temples” of information, museums have always been places that make manifest current social discourses. This becomes especially obvious when one considers the various ways that minorities and people of color have been represented within these institutions. For much of their history, American museums have served to buttress claims of White, middle class superiority—both explicitly through what museums chose to display, and implicitly by what they chose to ignore. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans were largely ignored or marginalized by mainstream museums. As will be discussed in this chapter, what these mainstream institutions presented was not an “objective model” of reality but rather a reality clouded by racist assumptions that viewed African Americans as subjects unworthy of serious

consideration. While this dismissal enabled African Americans to avoid much of the academically-sanctioned objectification experienced by Native Americans and other non-White groups, their absence created a vacuum that would not begin to be filled until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s helped spur growing efforts to construct purpose-built African American museums.

### **The Beginnings**

Modern museums have their roots in the “cabinets of curiosity,” or *wunderkammern*, that appeared during the seventeenth century. During this age of European exploration, as oceans and continents were being mapped and Europeans were coming into contact with new objects, animals, and people at every turn, these *wunderkammern* provided a space for the wealthy to display the wonderful and amazing items that were making their way to Europe for the first time (Weschler 1995:77). Paintings and carvings, baskets and fabrics, stuffed alligators and birds, an unusual rock or two, and perhaps even a “unicorn’s horn” were just some of the items that could be found in these special rooms. Some of these private assemblages of odds and ends eventually grew large enough to require professional staff to supervise them, and slowly these idiosyncratic collections were transformed into scientific specimens that could be examined, organized, and cataloged (Ames 1992:17).

The advent of the modern museum coincided with the development of the modern nation-state as European nations began the process of defining themselves as unique political and social entities (Macdonald and Fyfe 1996; Maleuvre 1999). Martin Prösler writes, “[i]n the form of a ‘national museum’ a museum could embody ‘common’ culture and history, symbolizing at a political level the unity of a nation” (1996:34). In the United States, the late nineteenth century

saw a flurry of museum building activity as the young country sought to display its modernity and refinement to the rest of the “civilized” world (Conn 1998). It was during this time that many of the best-known museums in the United States were built including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (1870), The Philadelphia Museum of Art (1876), The Art Institute of Chicago (1879), and the Field Museum of Natural History (founded as the Columbian Museum of Chicago in 1893) . They served as a reflection of both the education and social reform movements of the time (which advocated for accessible education), as well as of America’s foray into empire building and expansion across the continent and overseas as new territories were gained through both war and economic conquest.

Material objects from non-European cultures had long been of interest to collectors, but the Victorian-era museum set the precedent of relegating the histories and art of these “Others” to the natural history museum—alongside zoological, geological, and botanical exhibits—rather than in art and general history museums which were dedicated to representing the histories and art of Euro-Americans (or, in the case of art museums, art that conformed to a Euro-American aesthetic). Objects collected for museums during this time were the spoils of both internal and external colonization projects and, like trophies, their ownership demonstrated the dominance and supremacy of Euro-American culture.

Representing non-Europeans in natural history museums served to reaffirm discourses of European biological and cultural superiority. Heavily influenced by the theories of evolution and inherited characteristics developed by Charles Darwin and French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, American anthropologists and social scientists of the Victorian period divided human populations into categories that ranged from savage to civilized, and their work reinforced racist notions of White superiority that sustained and lent scientific credence to Western colonial

enterprises (Stocking 1991). Ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan articulated this concept of social evolutionism with his theory of “ethnic periods” wherein various human populations were located at different points along a continuum that ranged from the “lower status of savagery” to the “status of civilization” (Erickson and Murphy 2006). This path from the lowest to the highest status of development was envisioned as being a universal, predetermined, and narrowly defined sequence through which all populations had the potential to pass. “Each of these periods,” Morgan argued, “has a distinct culture and exhibits a mode of life more or less special and peculiar to itself” (Erickson and Murphy 2006:50). The distinct nature of these ethnic periods, as illustrated by the various technologies that were developed during each stage, meant that social scientists of the time felt they could easily define populations as being “typical” or “illustrative” of a certain stage of evolutionary development, thus allowing Morgan to state with scientific assurance that “the northern Indians and some of the coast tribes of North and South America were in the Upper Status of savagery; the partially village Indians east of the Mississippi were in the Lower Status of barbarism, and the Village Indians of North and South America were in the Middle Status” (Erickson and Murphy 2006:52).

Inherent in this and other evolutionary models of human culture was the idea that all races, conceived by anthropologists as being discrete populations with common physical and behavioral characteristics, were steadily progressing along an evolutionary continuum (albeit at different rates) that would ultimately result in their achieving a state of “civilization” as defined and embodied by Western Europeans.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In 2007 the *RACE: Are We So Different?* exhibition premiered at the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM) in St. Paul, MN. This award-winning exhibition, created in partnership between the SMM and the American Anthropological Association, challenged common misconceptions about race by presenting the current scientific and anthropological understanding that 1) racial categories are a recent invention, 2) racial categories are culturally, not biologically, constructed, and 3) “race and racism are embedded in our institutions and everyday life” (Moses 2007:2). The *RACE* exhibition (and its public education program and website) specifically addressed the scientific racism that museologists and anthropologists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries perpetuated in their museums.

In no place was the early American museum's role in promoting racialized hierarchies more apparent, and more available for popular consumption, than in the wildly popular ethnological displays that appeared at the world's fairs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although these living exhibits were just one of many forms of "white supremacist entertainments" available at the time (in addition to minstrel shows, Wild West shows, and others), they were notable in that it was the work of zoologists, historians, museologists, and anthropologists that lent authoritative credence to these racial hierarchies (Rydell 1987:6).

Located alongside the concession stands, amusement park rides, and animal exhibits, these displays featured entire ersatz villages that were recreated for display, complete with buildings, household items, plants, and animals. Within these faux villages, non-White individuals from around the world were put on view so that, as French explorer-scientist Xavier Pené put it, "the natives could be shown in their natural surroundings and living entirely in the native way" (Rydell 1987:146). These hugely popular attractions combined sideshow novelty and exploitation with academic authority as the presence of non-Europeans at the fair was viewed by scholars as a "living laboratory" that could further the interests of academic research (Rydell 1984:166). Indeed, University of Chicago students were given credit for an ethnography course given at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri in 1904; and University of Washington students were able to attend a summer-school course led by Cambridge anthropologist Alfred C. Haddon at the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle (1984:166, 199). These human exhibits also served the pedagogical interests of both scientists and the nation by presenting the bodies and lifeways of non-White individuals as examples along the evolutionary continuum. Visitors could see and experience for themselves the "savagery" and "barbarism" of the displayed "Other," and better appreciate the positive civilizing effect that

Euro-American contact had on those who had been brought under its influence. “The fair,” Rydell writes, “did not merely reflect American racial attitudes, it grounded them on ethnological bedrock” (1987:55).

The people represented in these midway villages included Native American tribes whose inclusion as a “vanishing race” of people served the dual purpose of providing an antithesis to White civilization, and, in the wake of “successful” efforts to force tribes onto reservation lands, demonstrated the triumph of “modernism” over “savagery.” Also at these fairs were people from America’s newly acquired territories such as the Philippines, Alaska, Hawaii, Cuba and American Samoa, as well as individuals from European colonies in Africa.

Within the context of these early international exhibitions and world fairs, as well as in museums at the time, the presence of African Americans proved problematic in that they were, by and large, not considered to be a community worthy of academic consideration. In his 1972 piece titled “An American Anthropological Dilemma: The Politics of Afro American Culture,” anthropologist John F. Szwed examined why this was the case. Referring to previous research on the topic, he noted that anthropologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to focus on “reconstructing the ethnographic past of isolated societies” (Szwed 1972:155). Because of this, for early anthropologists and ethnographers the “acculturated” nature of African Americans made them poor subjects for anthropological study since they lacked the exoticism of other “pure” groups (155). Szwed also highlighted other works suggesting that African Americans as research subjects were considered “too low status for professional prestige,” and who, furthermore, did not fit the standard mold of the colonized research subject living in a far-off land (155). In short, African Americans were too close (both geographically and psychologically) and too familiar.

Neither a “vanishing race” nor an exotic “Other” of interest to ethnologists, African Americans at the early world’s fairs were either relegated to the sidelines, denied the opportunity to present their own stories and perspectives, or used to illustrate the civilizing effects that slavery had had on their “savage” ancestors in the decidedly non-academic realm of the midway exhibits.

The “Old Plantation” concession was a perennial presence at these fairs. Located on the fair midways and run by White showmen far outside academic purview, reconstructed slave quarters full of “happy, dancing darkies” painted a nostalgic picture of the “Old South” and reminded visitors that African Americans, under the paternalistic guidance of Whites, comprised a menial and childlike workforce that knew and accepted its place on the racial hierarchy. At the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, the Old Plantation was advertised as featuring a group of “genuine negroes.” In fact, these “genuine negroes” had received lessons at a performance school prior to the fair’s opening in order to more accurately fit the preconceived stereotypes held by the average White visitor (Rydell 1987:146). This particular Old Plantation, with its faux antebellum façade and faux “negroes,” was located just across the street from the “Darkest Africa” exhibit, which displayed peoples from Europe’s various African colonies and was sponsored by geographical and anthropological societies. The juxtaposition of these two exhibits served to make explicit a message of racial continuity from the “primitive” Africans to the marginally less primitive African Americans (146).



Figure 2.1. “*Cake Walk at the Old Plantation, Pan American Exposition.*” Kilburn, B. W. (Benjamin West), 1901. *The Randolph Linsly Simpson African-American collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University*

During these early world’s fairs African Americans had few opportunities to represent themselves on their own terms because the various committees and departments in charge of selecting exhibitions and attractions were entirely controlled by a White hierarchy that either severely restricted or entirely thwarted the efforts of local African Americans to become involved in the process. While the fairs in Philadelphia (1867) and Chicago (1893) did not grant African Americans any avenues at all through which to participate, organizers at the fairs that took place in the American South did establish “Colored,” or “Negro,” Departments which allowed African Americans to stage exhibits in segregated pavilions. Although some African American participants used these exhibits as a platform from which to advocate for social and political change (Moresi 2003:54; Rydell 1987:81), this form of inclusion primarily served the political goals of the fair organizers who used the exhibits to extol the usefulness of Black industrial and farm labor in developing economic growth in the South (Rydell 1987:74). As a

result, many African Americans in the South rejected the fairs and chose not to participate so as not to be used as political props to extol the beneficence of the New South.

After the fairs, materials from the ethnographic displays made their way into the collections of various museums across the country. Because African Americans were not represented in these “scientific” displays, they were, subsequently, not represented in the natural history museums of the time. While this meant that African Americans avoided the scientific racism that was directed at other groups of people, it also meant that African American culture was effectively erased as a subject worthy of attention.

### **Ignoring Culture**

At the root of the erasure of African American culture as a legitimate topic of study, Szwed suggests, was the work of Franz Boas during the early twentieth century, which ultimately pushed the study of African Americans out of the realm of anthropological and museological interest and into the sphere of the sociological (Szwed 1972:155). Boas argued against racial determination and, through his research, determined that supposed racial categories were overlapping and arbitrary. According to Szwed, as these findings gained increasing academic support, some came to the conclusion that, if racial differences between groups were unimportant, so too were the cultural differences between White and Black Americans. He writes:

Indeed, it was in their very zeal to refute genetic racism for general audiences and to demonstrate a universal capacity for culture that they argued that Afro-Americans shared essentially the same culture as white Americans, and where they differed, the differences were to be accounted for exclusively as the result of environmental deprivation or cultural “stripping,” but certainly not as the result of any normal cultural process (Szwed 1972:158).

When aspects of African American culture did not neatly map onto the practices of White Americans, these came to be seen as indicators of a ““distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture”” (Gunnar Myrdal quoted in Szwed 1972:159). Explaining and finding ways to combat this “pathology” became the work of sociologists and White social progressives. African American culture was not a subject to be explored or validated within the halls of a museum, but something to be fixed so as to better conform to the standards and values of the White middle class.

An example of this can be seen in the 1927 exhibit *The Negro in Art Week*, at the Art Institute of Chicago, which was the first exhibition featuring African American artists in an art museum (Cooks 2011:3). Sponsored by the Chicago Woman’s Club, the artists selected to participate in *The Negro in Art Week* were expected to conform to classic Euro-American aesthetic traditions, a requirement that was specifically spelled out to a public concerned that the inclusion of works by Black artists would not meet the Eurocentric standards of the museum. For the Art Institute, “art that maintained the museum’s high standard *and* reflected some evidence of the Negro identity of its maker was not a possibility” (Cooks 2011:6). The selected works were chosen, not because they presented a window into unique African American cultural and artistic traditions, but because they demonstrated that the artists could paint like their White contemporaries and (from the perspective of the exhibit’s White sponsors) transcend the negative aspects of their own cultural communities. The fact that the exhibition was shown concurrently at the Chicago Women’s Club and in the children’s section of the Art Institute rather than in one of the main exhibit halls (along with the lack of reviews by art critics in the local press) is indicative of the fact that *The Negro in Art Week* was viewed as merely a novelty rather than a legitimate artistic exhibition (Cooks 2011:7). Apart from a few novelty exhibits, it wasn’t until

the artist Jacob Lawrence rose to prominence in the early 1940s that works by African American artists that reflected a unique cultural perspective were seen as worthy of inclusion in mainstream art museums. Until that time, such works were primarily displayed in public libraries and social organizations far outside the purview of any major institution (2011:10).

### **Finding A Voice**

During the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, even as anthropologists, art museums, and historians discounted or ignored the importance of African American history and culture, Black community members actively sought to examine, preserve, and celebrate their own stories. Just as Black artists found places to exhibit their work without the support of mainstream art museums, so too did Black communities seek out spaces to remember and celebrate the histories of their communities outside the traditional museum establishment.

Stewart and Ruffins refer to the period of 1825-1900 as “the first era of Afro-American public history” as Black churches, benevolent associations, and literary societies began the early work of creating a narrative of African American history that would “uplift” the race by presenting a heroic African past that people could aspire to (1986:308-309). Organizations such as the Bethel Literary and Historical Association (1881), the New York Society for Historic Research (1890), and the American Negro Historical Society (1897) were founded during this period (Burns 2008:7; Stewart and Ruffins 1986:311). In addition, the Hampton University Museum was founded in 1868 with the opening of the Hampton Agricultural and Industrial School (later the Hampton Institute, and today Hampton University), and Frederick Douglass’s widow founded the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association in 1900. According

to Stewart and Ruffins, these early organizations were run by the educated Black elite and “emphasized the similarity of blacks to other Americans and the veneration of mainstream American cultural values” (1986:310).

This early focus on veneration and assimilation began to shift during the early decades of the twentieth century as millions of working class African Americans began migrating to northern cities during the early waves of the Great Migration. Inspired by Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, self-trained African American historians challenged the notion that Europeans were the creators of modern civilization, and shifted the focus of African American history towards a celebration of the unique culture of the African Diaspora in the United States (Steward and Ruffins 1986:314). Garvey, along with other intellectuals, artists, musicians, and authors of the 1920s and 1930s brought attention to a flourishing African American culture with roots in the rural South during the period known as the Harlem Renaissance. This period helped create a growing racial consciousness that challenged racial stereotypes by articulating an African American aesthetic and a usable past that could help build community identity.

As both a trained historian and a political activist, Carter G. Woodson was a pivotal figure in shaping an African American popular history in the early twentieth century. In 1915 Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and created “Negro History Month” (now celebrated as Black History Month) in 1926 to help engender a sense of pride in the accomplishments of African Americans and to bring widespread attention to the contributions they had made (Burns 2008:8). Woodson’s main accomplishment, according to Stewart Ruffins, was the development and popularization of a “credible Afro-American history that was not dependent on white funding or support” (1986:318). By taking the study of African

American history out of the social clubs and libraries and bringing books, photographs and pamphlets directly to churches, schools and neighborhood organizations he democratized and popularized African American history. This Black public history found appeal across class lines and, separated from the white mainstream, affirmed a sense of Black nationalism, pride and creativity (318).

It was this spirit of self-sufficiency and pride that led to the African American museum movement of the 1950s to 1970s as neighborhoods and community activists began the work of carving out space in their communities for permanent exhibits about Black history.

### **The Black Museum Movement**

The Civil Rights Movement brought about a renewed interest in celebrating a uniquely African American identity, a renaissance that was strengthened by the growing political and demographic power of African Americans in northern cities. The Civil Rights Movement radicalized African American activists who harnessed the power of history as a tool for community empowerment (Stewart and Ruffins 1986:328). During this time, African American history expanded beyond the boundaries of historically Black colleges, libraries, churches, and local clubs, and independent organizations solely dedicated to exhibiting African American history and culture began to appear. The African American Museum in Cleveland, Ohio was founded in 1953 followed by The DuSable Museum in Chicago in 1961 (formerly the Ebony Museum of History and Art), and the International Afro-American Museum in Detroit (now the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History) in 1965. Burns points to the DuSable Museum as exemplifying the hallmarks of museums created during this era. These characteristics included:

...the presentation of full-scale exhibits themed around African and African American history and culture; the pursuit of a collections policy meant to challenge and revise the long-standing erasure of African American history and culture in mainstream institutions; and, above all, an emphasis on the need for public outreach to the local black community (2008:40).

The Civil Rights Movement, and the subsequent Black Power Movement, drew the nation's attention to inequalities faced by African Americans in a way that could not be ignored by White America. During this "climate of white concern" in the late 1960s African American museums found themselves the recipients of increased corporate and government funding partially, as Stewart and Ruffins somewhat cynically note, "because it was easier to spend money on a cultural institution than to finance an economic reconstruction of inner city ghettos" (Stewart and Ruffins 1986). The United States Bicentennial celebrations in 1976 also provided a catalyst for galvanizing financial support for African American museums. Several new African American museums received funding from state and national Bicentennial organizations who, in light of demonstrations and protests in the African American community over the ways that official celebrations ignored the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, "began to recognize that encouraging positive expressions of multicultural identity was in their best interest for promoting the Bicentennial as a whole" (Burns 2008:218). Regardless of the source or reasoning behind the increased financial support, museums that were founded during this period presented powerful narratives that countered the Eurocentric perspectives that were portrayed in other institutions.

### **Growing Pains**

By the 1980s and 1990s African American museums were growing in both number and size as new museums opened and older museums expanded. Museum staff became increasingly professionalized as they shifted from being comprised of grassroots volunteer organizers to being

made up of trained museologists and historians—a shift that sometimes led to friction between the museums and their community supporters (Burns 2008:36). This growth (in size, number, and professional capacity) shed light on some of the unique challenges African American museums faced. Unlike mainstream museums, which tend to be founded and supported by wealthy benefactors and generous endowments, African American museums often find themselves relying more heavily on grants and corporate support despite their much smaller size and operating costs (Kee 2000). Fundraising is also made more difficult as a result of the ongoing income disparity between racial groups. Williams notes that African Americans have roughly half as much discretionary income as Whites and that, even if population sizes were equal, African Americans by themselves “could still only support half as many institutions” (2007:6). Studies have shown that African Americans donate 25 percent more of their income to charities than Whites (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2012:5) but 90 percent of these donations go to religious organizations, leaving much less to support the arts (Williams 2007:7).

Lack of funding was (and continues to be) a barrier in hiring qualified staff such as grant writers and public relations teams—staff who would have the ability to bring in additional funding—and a barrier to expanding these institutions’ capacity to properly house collection materials and create compelling exhibitions (Burns 2008:296; Futterman 1999). Even the venerable DuSable Museum was not immune to these financial pressures as it has struggled to raise the funds needed to expand its collections capacity (Futterman 1999).

In addition to these challenges, African American museums also increasingly find themselves in competition with larger mainstream museums that have, over the past thirty years, begun to incorporate more multicultural perspectives and stories into their exhibits. It is no longer unusual or surprising for major museums to present the stories, art, and perspectives of

African Americans, and this has placed African American museums, with their small workforces and even smaller budgets, in a position of competing with much larger institutions for funds, audiences, and potential staff (Burns 2008:272; IMLS 2004:3).

In February 2014 the American Alliance of Museums (the professional accrediting body for museums in the United States) approved a Diversity and Inclusion Policy that aims to provide a model that museum institutions can follow to increase diversity within museums (American Alliance of Museums 2014). However, even though mainstream museums and museum organizations are now presenting exhibitions that highlight the experiences of racially and culturally diverse communities, all too frequently these exhibitions remain tangential to the central mission and structure of these institutions. In his examination of the ways in which museums interpret African American history, Lonnie Bunch notes that, “[o]ften museums ‘check off’ the African American exhibition and return to business as usual once the exhibition has closed, and ‘business as usual’ is celebrating whiteness” (2007:52). Even plantation house museums, where one might expect issues of race to play an integral role in the narrative presented to visitors, frequently make use of what Eichstedt and Small call the representational/discursive strategy of “segregation and marginalization of knowledge” in which information about enslaved people is presented largely through separate tours and displays that are unconnected to the main presentation, underscoring the fact that presenting African American history is not central to the mission of many of these institutions (2002).

Just as Eichstedt and Small discovered the ongoing segregation of African American history in their survey of plantation house museums, Gable discovered that the history of African Americans at Colonial Williamsburg also gets presented in ways that marginalize the experiences of African Americans (Gable 1996). By relegating information about African

Americans at Williamsburg to a separate, nonstandard, tour, and utilizing claims of professional objectivity to maintain a version of the past that did not challenge or question White hegemony, Gable found that the information that guides passed along to visitors served to reinforce the ongoing marginalization of African American history. In 1999 Colonial Williamsburg rolled out a new interpretive initiative called “Enslaving Virginia” which sought to better incorporate the experiences of historic Williamsburg’s enslaved African American population into the site’s programming. This renewed effort offered more opportunities for visitors to learn about the role that slavery played in early American history, but a 2013 article from the Washington Post points out that these changes did not translate into increased attendance by African Americans who, at the time, made up only 2 to 3 percent of all visitors (Eggen 1999; Freedom du Lac 2013).

The ongoing construction of museums focused specifically on African American history and culture reflects a desire to present a counternarrative to the marginalized stories that continue to be presented in larger institutions. Just as major U.S. cities during the Victorian Period worked to establish museums that would legitimize their status as significant metropolitan areas, so too do African American communities across the country hope to establish institutions that honor and legitimize their own stories. Yet despite the difficulties they face, African American museums continue to open. Within the last ten years The Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture, the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, The National Slavery Museum in Fredericksburg Virginia, and others have opened their doors. Perhaps nothing reflects the continued interest in these museums, and their perceived importance to both African Americans and the larger national community better than the current construction of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) which is due to open in 2016.

## **A National African American Museum**

Part of the Smithsonian Institution, the NMAAHC is being constructed on the last free space on the National Mall. Its location in the heart of Washington D.C. powerfully makes manifest one aspect of the museum's mission: "to help all Americans see just how central African American history is for all of us." The centrality of African American history is reflected in the architects' vision for the building with its design reminiscent of a Yoruban architectural pillar topped with a crown-like capital. This crown, according to the architects' vision, "expresses faith, hope and resiliency," and "reflects an African American presence that is a permanent part of the American landscape" (National Museum of African American History and Culture).

This notion of the centrality of African American history has also been articulated by NMAAHC's Director, Lonnie Bunch, who has argued that the existence of museums that explore African American history is of vital importance for all Americans. He believes that an examination of the institution of slavery, issues of race, and African American culture, rather than being a historical asides, are essential in order to understand what it means to be American. He writes:

As America continues its internal debates about who we are as a nation and what our core values are, where better to look than through the lens of African American history and culture? If one wants to understand the notion of American resilience, optimism, or spirituality, where better than the black experience? If one wants to explore the limits of the American dream, where better than by examining the Gordian knot of race relations? If one wants to understand the impact and tensions that accompany the changing demographics of our cities, where better than the literature and music of the African American community? African American culture has the power and the complexity needed to illuminate all the dark corners of American life, and the power to illuminate all the possibilities and ambiguities of American life (2007:49).

Bunch's idea of African American history as a lens through which to better understand America as a country will be reflected in the museum's architecture that will (according to the architects' vision statement) include openings, or "lenses" that frame views of Washington D.C.

"These framed perspectives are a reminder that the Museum presents a view of America through the lens of African American history and culture" (National Museum of African American History and Culture).

While some celebrate this new perspective on American history, others feel that the continuing existence of cultural museums that highlight one particular racial or ethnic group is divisive and runs counter to their ideals of a culturally unified nation. At an Appropriations Committee hearing in 2011, Virginia State Representative Jim Moran spoke against federal funding for the NMAAHC arguing that White people would not visit. "The problem is," he argued, "that much as we would like to think that all Americans are going to go to the African American Museum, I'm afraid it's not going to happen...."

The Museum of American History is where all the white folks are going to go, and the American Indian Museum is where Indians are going to feel at home. And African Americans are going to go to their own museum. And Latinos are going to go their own museum. And that's not what America is all about (Bedard and Huey-Burns, 2011)

While he acknowledges that the stories of minority communities should be shared since they are a "part of our history," he views this bifurcation of history as directly opposing the notion of national unity. Moran is concerned that these various museums are not only "breaking up the American story into separate narratives based upon specific ethnicities," but are overcrowding the National Mall and putting financial burdens on Congress as well. "It's a matter of how we depict the American story and where do we stop?" said Moran. "The next one will probably be

Asian Americans,” said Moran. “The next, God help us, will probably be Irish Americans” (Bedard and Huey-Burns, 2011)

This view was also articulated by Washington Post columnist Marc Fisher in his review of the then newly-opened National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). Fisher argued that NMAI “adds to the balkanization of a society that seems ever more ashamed of the unity and purpose that sustained it over two centuries,” a process, he states, that began with the creation of the Holocaust Memorial Museum and which will continue with the development of “museums of black and Hispanic history” (Fisher 2004). “The Smithsonian,” he writes, “instead of synthesizing our stories, shirks its responsibility to give new generations of Americans the tools with which to ask the questions that could clear a path toward a more perfect union” (2004).

Leaving aside Representative Moran’s misguided assertion that White Americans and African Americans, Native Americans and Latinos will not visit other museums (and his implied assumption that the Museum of American History is the museum for White Americans), the problem with these arguments is twofold. First, as Eichstedt and Small and Gable discovered, many museums have not successfully integrated African American history into a unified national narrative. It is fine to talk about the need to synthesize various aspects and narratives of United States history, but that simply has not happened. Second, it would be neither helpful nor feasible for a single institution to take on the mandate of presenting a history that encompassed such a wide scope of experiences. Most museums have a clear mission statement that informs their exhibition and programmatic choices, and governs their collections policies. Art museums, for example, do not collect indiscriminately. Rather, they focus their exhibitions and collections policies on specific types or periods of work as described by their mission statement or the terms of specific bequests. A city might be home to many different art museums which, with their

varying collections and staff expertise, all present different perspectives on art. No one museum can do it all. To assume that a single museum can adequately represent and do justice to all the various strands and perspectives that are woven into United States history vastly overestimates the capacity of one institution, and vastly underestimates the amount of effort that goes into building meaningful relationships with the community members whose stories they seek to tell.

It is in the area of community-building that culturally-specific museums excel. They provide spaces where visitors see their personal stories reflected and where often marginalized histories take center stage. African American museums came about in order to share the stories that were not being told elsewhere. They grew from small neighborhood collections that were designed to instill a sense of community pride for achievements made and obstacles overcome. While mainstream American museums still struggle to be truly inclusive, African American museums continue to serve as community anchors that inform all visitors, regardless of race or ethnicity, about a crucial part of America's collective history.

### Chapter 3

## “Four Hundred Years Have Been Much Too Long to Wait”: The Making of an African American Museum

### Opening Day

March 8, 2008 had finally arrived—NAAM’s opening day. Just the day before a team from the exhibit design firm had put the finishing touches on the displays in the permanent exhibit, and the smell of fresh paint and varnish still hung in the galleries. In the administrative offices boxes of papers and files sat on the ground, waiting for the shelves and cabinets that had not yet arrived. Outside, in front of the museum’s entrance, Seattle Parks and Recreation had set up several hundred folding chairs underneath large tents to protect guests from the rain that threatened to appear.

Hundreds of visitors wrapped in warm coats and scarves sat under the tents, and those who did not arrive in time to find a seat crowded under a tent set farther back in the green space of Jimi Hendrix Park. Although it was cold and damp outside many were dressed in their Sunday best. The guests sat facing a stage flanked by towers of balloons, just to the right of which was a section of V.I.P.s: the mayor, the governor, and a senator among them. Behind the stage, wide yellow ribbons and a giant bow hung across the entrance to the museum for the ribbon-cutting ritual that would formally open the museum to the public.

Just as the museum’s Executive Director, Carver Gayton, approached the microphone to begin the official program a young African American man, Wyking Kwame Garrett, stepped up and reached the podium first. At first the excited buzz of the crowd drowned out his words, but as people began to quiet down he could be heard saying:

I’m one of the people that was in this building, that occupied this building for our community—our youth. Our youth are dying on the streets and they put thirty-six apartments in here. There’s no youth programs in here, and this is a disgrace. This

is not what we fought for, this is not what we sacrificed our lives for, and this is a *scam!* NAAM is a scam on our community!

The audience began to boo as he continued, “. . .It stops right here. We’re gonna have a gang truce! We’re gonna have a gang truce and we’re gonna fight for our community!”

The crowd’s boos suddenly turned into applause as a few men grabbed the uninvited speaker and led him off the podium and into the museum, crashing through the carefully placed yellow ribbons as they went.

“Well,” said Carver Gayton, as he took his place back at the microphone, “That’s one opinion.” The audience cheered and clapped, and the celebration of the new museum began. By the end of the day nearly 3,000 attendees would walk through the museum. Entertained by musicians and dancers, they would be among the very first to see the history of their African American communities represented and honored within the space of Seattle’s newest museum.

Seattle, Washington, at first glance, seems like an unlikely place to find an African American museum. It is the birthplace of grunge music, Starbucks coffee, and the home of Microsoft and the outdoor recreation gear store REI. It is a place that brings to mind visions of perpetual gray skies and rain. The films and television shows set in Seattle such as *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Ten Things I Hate About You*, *Frasier*, and *Grey’s Anatomy*, feature casts that are almost entirely white and upper middle class. In short, it is not a place where one might expect to find a thriving African American community, much less an African American museum.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century almost six million African Americans moved from the American South to cities in the north in the hopes of finding better jobs and greater freedom (Wilkerson 2010:9). As increasing numbers arrived, the new and thriving communities they established were born out of a mix of discriminatory housing practices, racial prejudice, and the newcomers’ simple desire to live near friends and family who had arrived

before them. The effect of this ghettoization was the creation of spatially defined and largely self-sufficient neighborhoods. By the first quarter of the twentieth century these communities, in cities such as New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles, were large enough to wield substantial economic and political clout, and these new “Black Metropolises” became thriving centers of Black social, political and cultural activism (Gregory 2005:111).

African American migrants who arrived in the Pacific Northwest during the early twentieth century, however, found themselves, not in industrial northern metropolises, but in towns that had not entirely shed their frontier pasts. Also, unlike migrants to cities in the Northeast and Midwest, new arrivals in the Northwest were outnumbered not just by White residents, but also by Native Americans and Asian immigrants who could be both allies against White oppression and competitors for jobs that, in other U.S. cities, were filled exclusively by African Americans. The Pacific Northwest never became home to a Black Metropolis comparable in size to those found in other regions of the U.S., but members of the African Diaspora have, nevertheless, left an indelible mark on the history of the region. By the 1970s the desire to recognize and celebrate this particular history began to spark discussions about developing a space in Seattle where the stories of African Americans in the region could be honored. No one could have predicted that such a project would require decades of effort that would expose divisions within Seattle’s Black community over issues of representation, class, ideology, and personal animosities as the dreams and expectations of a diverse African American community came to rest on plans for a single institution.

### **Race in a Mixed-Race Frontier**

Histories of the Pacific Northwest typically begin with the story of exploration, colonization, and pioneer settlement. In popular imagination the roles of the “Wild West” explorer and pioneer are played exclusively by Euro-Americans. The weary members of the wagon train making its journey along the Oregon Trail, and the bold explorers mapping the region, are not people of color, but hardy White men, women, and children flush with the frontier spirit. To hear that some of the many mountain men, explorers, traders, trappers, and cowboys were, in fact, African American comes as a surprise to many, and runs counter to the notion that the Western frontier was solely the realm of White cowboys and “Red” Indians.

Members of the African Diaspora were intimately involved in the efforts to secure the Pacific Northwest as a United States territory. In 1788 Marcus Lopez became the first person of African descent to set foot in the Pacific Northwest. A native of the Cape Verde archipelago off the coast of Western Africa, Lopez landed in what is now Tillamook, Oregon as a crewmember aboard the American sloop, “Lady Washington.” The Lewis and Clark Expedition included York, William Clark’s slave, who proved to be an integral member of the expedition. Edward Rose was the son of a White trader and a Black/Cherokee mother who served as a well-respected guide, hunter, and interpreter in the early 1800s.

The history of American settlement in the Pacific Northwest was, from the beginning, a multiracial and multicultural endeavor. As Coll Thrush notes, “[f]ounding a city in the Pacific Northwest meant living alongside Native men, women, and children,” and the new settlers in the area that would become Seattle quickly realized that their Duwamish neighbors had no plans to simply disappear, but planned to participate in the creation of this new, mixed-race community—a community which would come to include African Americans as well (2007:32).

In 1858, only seven years after the Denny Party settled at Alki Point and began to establish the city of Seattle, Manuel Lopes became the first Black resident. Born in the Cape Verde Islands (like Marcus Lopez), Lopes worked as a sailor—a profession that took him from Cape Verde to Massachusetts, and eventually to Seattle where he opened a restaurant and became one of the city’s first barbers.<sup>6</sup> Lopes arrived in a city where a simple Black/White racial binary was not useful for negotiating the racial landscape. Records show that both White and Black male settlers married Native women, and in at least one case an abandoned African American baby, Julie Jacob, was adopted into a Suquamish family (Thrush 2007:57, 98).

The territories in the Pacific Northwest were advancing towards statehood during a time when the United States was embroiled in debates over slavery. Although thousands of miles away from slave-holdings states, the Northwest was, inescapably, part of this larger national discussion. White pro-confederacy advocates in Oregon and Idaho Territories saw to it that their nascent states were unwelcoming destinations for African American migrants (Zane 2001:38). Both enacted anti-miscegenation laws, instituted segregated school systems, and severely restricted the civil rights of Black residents. Oregon’s exclusionary “black laws,” which dated back to its territorial period, prohibited slavery but denied African Americans the ability to establish residency or own property. These laws restricting Black settlement were intended both to prevent African Americans from becoming economic competition for White landowners and to assuage White fears of a possible joint Black and Native American uprising against Whites. Faced with such restrictions, many influential Black pioneers chose to settle in Washington Territory where they saw the potential for greater social and economic opportunities.

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<sup>6</sup> Cape Verde also has a rich multiracial and multicultural history. Originally settled by Portuguese sailors, Cape Verde played a key role in the Atlantic slave trade, and the country’s culture and its residents reflect a mixed European and African heritage.

Zane describes the racial policies enacted in the early days of Washington's statehood as "frontier" race policies that were in sharp contrast to the policies enacted in neighboring states (Zane 2001:38). As a result of these more tolerant policies small, upwardly mobile African American communities were established throughout Washington. Their residents arrived as escaped slaves and as free peoples, as train porters and ship hands. They worked in the mines in Roslyn, the hop fields in Yakima, and as maids, porters, barbers, and dockworkers in urban cities like Seattle and Tacoma.

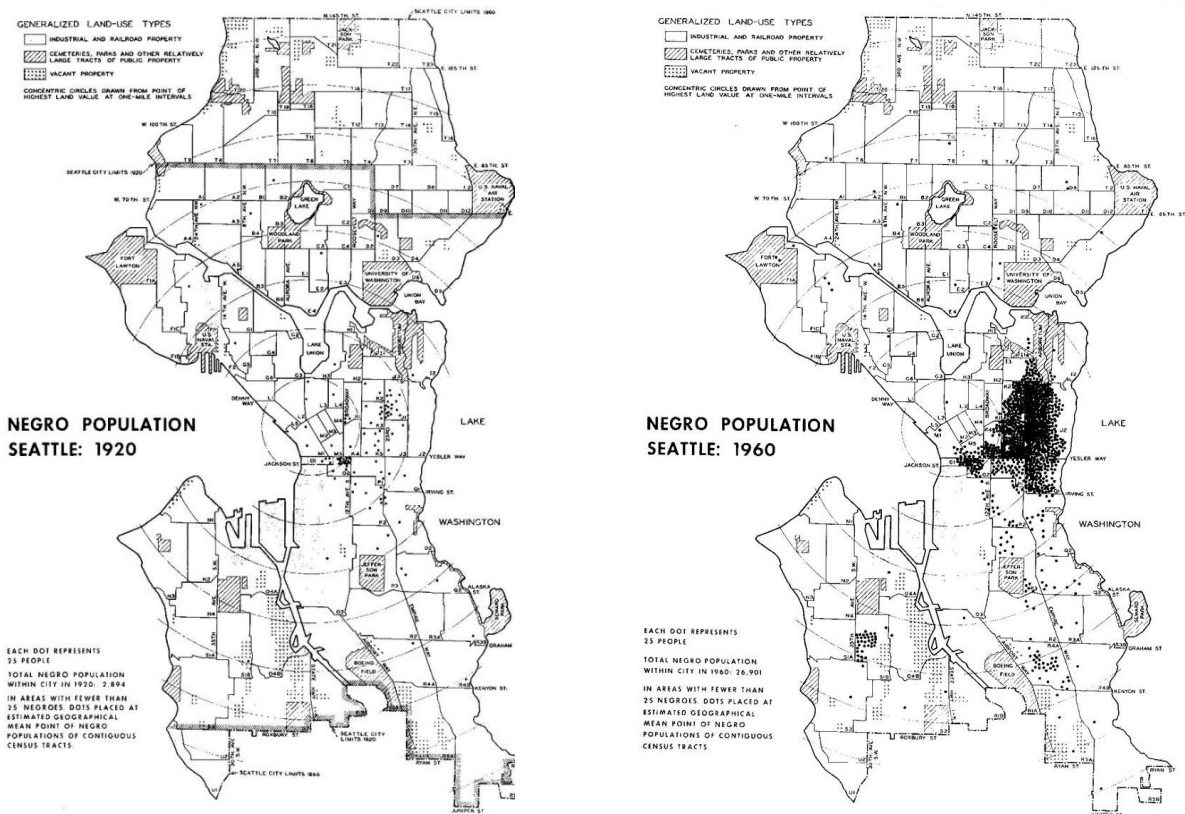
By 1900 there were 406 African Americans living in Seattle. The African American population in the city remained small for decades, and it was not until 1940 that African Americans comprised more than one percent of the population (Taylor 1994:7). This small population size meant that their presence was not seen as a threat to White interests, and racial animus was instead directed towards the much larger Asian population, as well as towards Native Americans (Mumford 1980:15; Taylor 1994:14, 22).

While their small numbers protected them from some of the most virulent racial hatred, it also meant that African Americans in the Northwest could not attain the same level of economic clout and self-sufficiency that was attained by those in other northern cities. Griffey notes that, "[d]espite the efforts of Black entrepreneurs, however, Seattle's Black community had neither the size nor the money to support many Black businesses and professionals without white patronage" (2001:88). While African American communities in Harlem and Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood were creating economically self-sufficient neighborhoods that could support numerous entrepreneurs who catered to a Black clientele, in Seattle economic success meant looking outside the Black community for customers and financial backing.

A general consensus among Seattle's Black pioneers seems to indicate that relatively little discrimination existed in the city until the nineteen-teens, and that more overt forms of racism first started to become apparent by the 1920s (Zane 2001:39). *The Republican*, an early Black-owned newspaper in Seattle, reported on a rising number of discrimination cases in the nineteen-teens. Some of Seattle's Black pioneers blamed this rise in discrimination on the newly arriving African American migrants in the Jackson Street area between 1900 and 1910 who were making the more established residents "look bad" (Zane 2001:40). Another explanation was that, just as Black Southerners were arriving in the city, so too were increasing numbers of White Southerners. Even as Black settlers sought to make a home in the "free air" of Washington state, White migrants arrived in the region looking for better job opportunities, and they brought with them the prejudices from the segregated communities in which they had grown up (Griffey 2001:104). By the 1940s the frontier racial policies that could be found in Seattle at the beginning of the century were no more, and *de jure* and *de facto* forms of racial discrimination comparable to that found in other U.S. cities were firmly in place (Taylor 1994; Zane 2001).

### **Interracial Coalitions**

During Seattle's early years the small African American community was centered around the Yesler and Jackson Street area, and in the East Madison neighborhood where William Grose's farm acted as a magnet to new arrivals looking for a place to establish themselves. William Grose had arrived in Seattle around 1861, and his successful hotel and restaurant soon made him the city's wealthiest African American. By the 1940s these two neighborhoods merged together to form the Central District (Zane 2001:66).



Calvin F. Schmid, Charles E. Nobbe, and Arlene E. Mitchell, *Nonwhite Races, State of Washington* (Olympia WA, 1968). Courtesy of the Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project, [http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/segregation\\_maps.htm](http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/segregation_maps.htm)

The community around Yesler and Jackson overlapped with the demographic center of Seattle's large Asian immigrant community. As discriminatory housing measures were enacted in the city during the first part of the twentieth century, African American and Asian Seattleites found themselves increasingly confined to this particular part of the city where they competed for customers and jobs. By 1940 Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino residents together accounted for seventy-two percent of the city's minority population (Griffey 2001:88). African Americans comprised just twenty-six percent, and many of the jobs they might have filled in other parts of the United States as housekeepers, bell hops, etc. were filled by Asian Americans (Fujita-Rony 2003:15).

Taylor writes that, "By the early decades of the twentieth century, Jackson Street stores reflected this rare Asian and African American residential integration, where a Chinese laundry

occupied a commercial block with a Japanese restaurant, a Filipino dance hall, and a black barbershop” (1991:408). Until WWII, Japanese residents were the largest minority group in Seattle. African Americans were able to rent rooms from Japanese landlords, eat in Japanese restaurants, and shop in Japanese-owned markets during a time when White-owned businesses were increasingly denying their services to Black customers. One Japanese café near the downtown train depot even had a “soul food” menu to attract the patronage of Black porters and ship stewards (Taylor 1991:414). Their large numbers and extensive business and kinship networks meant that Seattle’s Japanese middle class was larger and, on the whole, more upwardly mobile than the city’s Black community, and they were positioned to provide important services for the city’s Black residents.

## **World War II**

World War II brought a series of radical changes to African American communities across the Pacific Northwest. Executive Order 9066, signed by President Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, led to the forced internment of 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans from the Pacific coast. With the stroke of a pen Seattle’s thriving Japanese American community was suddenly destroyed. The removal of Japanese residents coincided with an unprecedented increase in African American migration to the region. Months after Pearl Harbor was bombed, the Kaiser Company opened the Swan Island shipyard in Portland and the Vancouver yards across the Columbia River in Washington. Nationwide recruiting efforts brought thousands of new African American workers, mostly from the South, to the Northwest, dramatically changing the region’s racial demographics.

Thousands of migrants came to Seattle to work in the defense industries, and in just ten years the African American population grew from 3,789 in 1940 to 15,666 in 1950 (Taylor 1994:159; Zane 2001:68). Due to restrictive housing covenants and redlining, most of these new residents settled in the increasingly crowded Central District, turning the formerly multiethnic neighborhood into a predominantly African American one. The thousands of new African American residents brought with them new habits, beliefs, and an increased willingness to challenge various forms of discrimination. These newcomers, Griffey writes, “contributed to the raising of class and interracial expectations within the Black community” and set the tone for the region’s Civil Rights struggles (2001:106).

### **Civil Rights in Seattle**

The Civil Rights Movement arrived later in Seattle than it did in other parts of the country, but once it did, efforts to overturn discriminatory practices gained support from numerous multicultural coalitions in the city. In addition to campaigns for equal employment opportunities and access to public transportation, one of the most lasting and successful civil rights efforts in the city was the fight to end the discriminatory housing practices that restricted Jews and people of color to certain areas in the city. After an initial defeat at the polls in 1964, Seattle’s Open Housing Ordinance passed in 1968. Once barriers to housing sales and rentals were abolished African American residents steadily began to move out of the Central District and into other parts of the city.

That same year, a more militant form of Black empowerment was increasingly establishing itself in Seattle. The Black Student Union was founded at the University of Washington, and in May students staged a successful sit-in in the university president’s office to

demand better support and recruitment of African American students and professors, and the establishment of a Black Studies Program. The Seattle chapter of the Black Panther Party was founded that same spring by brothers Aaron and Elmer Dixon. The first chapter of the organization to be established outside of California, the Seattle Black Panthers grew out of frustration with the slow pace of social change and ongoing social, political, and economic inequalities faced by African Americans. In addition to providing a new model of Black activism, the Seattle Black Panthers also provided free breakfasts to children in the community, established food banks and health clinics, and shadowed local police to hold them accountable for their actions.<sup>7</sup>

Although physically removed from the most virulent forms of racism in the South, and spared the riots that raged through other African American urban centers, Seattle's Civil Rights and Black Power Movements galvanized the city's African American community and laid the cultural and political groundwork for the establishment of an African American museum.

### **Creating a Museum: The Occupation of Colman Elementary School**

Although the idea to create an African American museum in Seattle had been circulating since the early 1970s, it wasn't until the early 1980s that events conspired to mobilize the community and turn talk into action.

By 1980 the population shift that had begun with the passage of the Open Housing Ordinance in 1968 had been exacerbated by "urban renewal" efforts in the Central District. Developers flocked to the formerly neglected neighborhood to build new condos and commercial

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<sup>7</sup> The Seattle chapter—in a reflection of the multiculturalism of the Central District—welcomed Mike Tagawa as a member, one of only three Japanese American members in the national organization (Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project). Born in an internment camp and raised in Seattle, Tagawa went on to co-found Seattle Central Community College's Oriental Student Union in 1970.

buildings, and the subsequent rise in property values forced many long-time African American residents to find more affordable housing elsewhere. Taylor notes that by 1980, for the first time in the city's history, the majority of Seattle's African American residents were no longer living in the Central District (1994:209).

Amidst this change, in 1981 a coalition of local activist groups protested efforts to build a new police precinct on 23<sup>rd</sup> and Yesler Avenue in the Central District. The activists argued that what was needed to reduce crime in the rapidly changing Central District was not another police station but a positive place where African American youth could learn about their cultural and racial heritage (Holloway 1985, Tahir 1985). The protest successfully prevented the precinct from being built and 5,000 signatures were subsequently collected from members of the community in support of the creation of an African American cultural institution. In light of this community mandate, Seattle mayor Charles Royer convened a Task Force of local citizens in early 1985 to explore the creation of an African American Heritage Museum.

The old Colman Elementary School building was, from early on, seen as an attractive location for a museum. Located in the Judkins Park neighborhood in the southernmost end of the

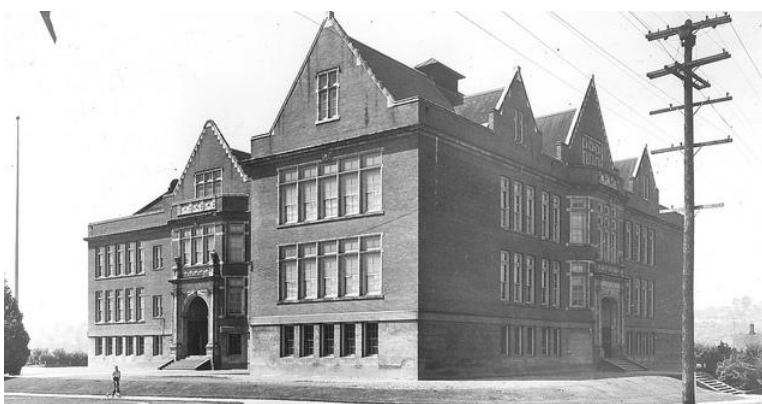


Image 3.1. *Colman School circa 1939. (Seattle School Archives 212-45)*

Central District, the school had been constructed in 1909 during a time when the immediate neighborhood was largely made up of Italian immigrants. By the 1940s the neighborhood, like

the rest of the Central District, had become predominantly African American. The percentage of minority students at Colman Elementary continued to grow until 1979 when the Seattle School Board voted to close the school after determining that the school was in violation of the district's complicated desegregation plan (Angelos 1979). In the fall of 1979 an alternative school opened in the building, but this was recognized as being a temporary situation as plans were already in place to permanently close the aging school to facilitate the long-planned construction of the Interstate 90 tunnel and lid (Angelos 1987). The School Board hoped to negotiate with the Washington State Department of Transportation for funds to build a new elementary school once the old building was permanently closed in June 1985.



Image 3.2. *Colman School Class, circa 1920. (Seattle School Archives 212-36)*

Several of the museum Task Force meetings in early 1985 were sparsely attended, but the group forged ahead, and by July a representative from the Mayor's office presented a report on using the old Colman School building as a potential site for the museum. However, after this important September meeting no other meetings were scheduled, and Task Force members soon discovered that the City of Seattle had moved ahead and offered to sell the Colman School and surrounding property to the State Department of Transportation. This surprising turn of events, combined with an announcement from the Seattle Public School District about the low academic

achievement and high discipline rates of African American students in the district, left some with the sense that the city was failing its African American residents, and a few people decided that, in order to be heard, direct action was required.

One member of the museum Task Force, Omari Tahir,<sup>8</sup> along with fellow community activists Earl Debnam, Charlie James, Michael Greenwood, Lawrence Robinson, and Greg Anderson, made the decision to forge ahead with the museum project on their own terms. Early in the morning, on November 25, 1985 they broke through a boarded window at Colman School and occupied the building to establish the African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center (AAHMCC).

One of the first actions taken by the Colman activists was the creation and distribution of a “declaration of occupation” that announced their grievances and intentions. The declaration of occupation began with a preamble in which the activists asserted that it was necessary for them to take action against the forces of racial discrimination. It was followed by a list of grievances against the city, and ended with a declaration of their right to found and defend the African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center. In the final paragraph of the declaration the activists invoked the “spirit of Frederick Douglas, Nat Turner and John Brown,” and made the bold pledge to “defend our right to this newly founded AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE MUSEUM AND CULTURAL CENTER with all of our heart, mind, and Christian conscience and if necessary our freedom and our lives. Four hundred years have been much too long to wait and our patience has expired” (Tahir et. al. 1985).

A precedent for this act of civil disobedience in Seattle had been set several years before. El Centro De La Raza, a community and cultural center, opened in 1972 after Latino staff,

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<sup>8</sup> Omari Tahir is also known as Omari Tahir Garret. I chose to use the former name in this work since it is the name that is used most often during the beginning of his involvement with the museum project.

students, and families of a local adult education program occupied the Beacon Hill School. The Daybreak Star Cultural Center opened in 1977 after a series of protests and demonstrations by Native American activists who laid claim to the former site of Fort Lawton. In both instances protests and subsequent negotiations with the city led to the establishment of vibrant centers of cultural celebration and learning.

According to their letters and documents, the Colman activists had these early successes in mind when they decided to occupy the abandoned school building. However, while the El Centro occupation lasted three months, and the Fort Lawton occupation lasted several weeks, no one could have predicted that the occupation at Colman would drag on for eight long years. During that time a rotating group of community residents lived and worked in the school building on behalf of the newly-christened African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center. Without water or electricity, they held fundraisers, hosted lectures, built small exhibits, and even established a bookstore, but another twenty-three years would pass before a museum would finally open.

One of the first problems the museum activists encountered was the fact that there were several jurisdictional claims on the site itself. The Colman activists initially directed their requests to the Mayor, and asked him to grant the school site to the museum. The Mayor's office claimed that, because the building was the property of the Seattle Public School District, the school superintendent needed to make that decision. The State of Washington, however, was in line to purchase the property using federal funds as part of the Interstate 90 project, and there were concerns that attempts to retain the Colman building for a museum would jeopardize the federal funds the city stood to receive for a replacement school. For over eight years negotiations

between museum supporters, the mayor's office, the school district, the department of transportation, and numerous other agencies moved forward at a glacial pace.

### **The African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center**

In 1993, after years of occupation and negotiations, the City of Seattle, under Mayor Norm Rice, finally agreed that the Colman building could be used as a home for an African American museum and convened a museum committee made up of the Colman activists and other business and community leaders. It looked as though the dream for a museum was on its way to becoming a reality.

After months of work the committee presented its final report to the Office of the Mayor in February 1994—the fifth such report on the museum that had been written since 1987. After laying out a mission statement, program outline, governance system, and fundraising plan for the proposed museum, the Committee concluded the report by stating that it was “submitted in a spirit of hope.... Recognizing that enormous challenges lie ahead, we undertake this assignment with cautious optimism and a commitment to hard work in the months ahead” (Mayor's African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center Committee 1994). Several members of this committee became members of the African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center's new board of directors, and its formation appeared to indicate that the dream of the museum would finally be realized.

Fault lines within the new board appeared almost immediately. The original activists felt that their methods were not respected by some of the new board members, while the new board members were concerned that the activists' methods were overly combative and would make securing financial support difficult (Strickland 1994). The infighting between these groups led

Chairman John Cannon to tender his resignation in June. In his letter to the Mayor, Cannon wrote that he had been unable to bring together the “divergent personalities” on the board, stating that, “I am not encouraged that conditions will improve” (Cannon 1994). Within a year these tensions had stalled progress on the project, leading Mayor Rice’s liaison on the project to send a confidential memo to the mayor declaring that, “The current board is organized for political theater, but has not been effective at either having events related to a museum or at fundraising” (Hunt 1995).

The impression that the board was engaging in “political theater” was partly due to the fact that, while all the board members sought to successfully create an African American museum, their ideologies, priorities, and methods were often at odds. Bob Flowers, who replaced the retiring board chair in fall of 1995, would be later quoted as saying, “All I knew coming in was that they tried to get funding, but there were no funds in the treasury. Our job was to get some credibility and give some structure to the organization” (Fryer 1999). In this context, gaining some “credibility” for the museum meant packaging the project in a way that would appeal to a wide base of supporters—including White donors and White-owned businesses and organizations that had the capacity to provide significant financial support towards the estimated \$8 million or more needed to stabilize and redesign the building (Mayor’s African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center Committee 1994). This conflicted with the more radical politics of some of the original Colman activists who wanted the project to retain its grassroots character as an effort supported by and for the local African American community. After he was voted off the museum board in 1996,<sup>9</sup> Earl Debnam was quoted in a newspaper arguing that while he was fighting “for the common man,” the new board members were “out of touch in

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<sup>9</sup> According to AAHMCC documents, the reasons given for Earl Debnam’s removal from the board included a mix of infractions of the AAHMCC by-laws and misconduct aimed at fellow board-members (AAHMCC Board of Directors, 1996a, 1996b).

every conceivable way, but they're in touch with what their corporate superiors want to see" (Mills 1996). In a theme that would repeat itself over the next several years a false dichotomy was made between those in the African American community who felt that they were in touch with the community at a "grassroots" level, and those who were perceived to be working for the White hegemony.

Another difficulty the museum project faced was the insistence by some members of the board that the AAHMCC needed to be not just a simple museum, but a holistic community center that would include a music studio, an art studio, a dance studio, recording studios, a work training program, and workshops. An early report created by Economics Research Associates back in 1987 found that focusing solely on making the AAHMCC a museum was the most feasible plan, noting that, not only did the most successful African American museums at the time focus primarily on their work *as museums*, but that the cost of building in the capability of these additional elements was prohibitive, and that any additional elements should instead be considered future projects (Economic Research Associates 1987). Despite this finding, board members who had positioned themselves as grassroots community activists continued to push for a "world class African American museum" that also included elements of a social service and job training center. A 1997 memo to the mayor notes that a proposed youth component to the project was becoming an increasingly problematic distraction to the work of creating a museum, as precious time and effort was being spent trying to find jobs for some of the young men on the board. The authors of the memo note that, "This is part of what seems to be a natural response to load all African American issues onto each project that is likely to have success" (Bunnell et. al. 1997).

For Tahir and some of the other activists, the museum project was seen as a means by which an entire community could be transformed if only the necessary programs and resources were attached to it. Their efforts to create a museum were inseparable from their efforts to revive the local African American community, reduce crime, celebrate Black pride, and increase job opportunities. The museum was a catalyst that could radically improve the lives of thousands and, from this perspective, they were not simply fighting for a museum—they were fighting for the very life and soul of their community. This perspective differed from that of other board members who considered the creation of a museum a worthy goal in and of itself. These different views about what the role and purpose of the museum should be exacerbated the growing divide between different factions on the board and led some to question the commitment of their colleagues to both the AAHMCC project and the Black community as a whole.

In his book, *Appropriating Blackness*, E. Patrick Johnson, writes that, “‘blackness’ does not belong to any one individual or group. Rather, individuals or groups *appropriate* this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups” (2003:3). Notions of “black authenticity,” he argues, are overdetermined and create essentializing notions of what it means to be Black. Thus, “authentic” performance of Blackness becomes tied to language use, place of residency, social class, clothing, and sexuality in ways that foster divisions between members of the Black community. The division within the AAHMCC board became a chasm as members who saw themselves as activists and authentic grassroots representatives of the Black community came to view the more middle-class professionals on the board as not having the community’s best interests at heart, while many of the professionals on the board become increasingly frustrated by the heated rhetoric, disparate goals, and aggressive methods of the activists.

In August 1997 the Youth Action Committee, led by Tahir's son Kwame (the same Wyking Kwame Garrett who would interrupt NAAM's opening over ten years later), submitted a memo to the board noting that,

Overall it appears that there exist certain elements and forces within the board who are new to this project and the concept of community building and who are attempting to steer this project from it's [sic] grassroots community origins. It seems that these individuals are striving to create an institution which caters to the preferences of the European dominated society and the upper echelon of the African-American community rather than an institution which serves as a solution to the problems faced by poverty stricken and working poor African-American community [sic] (Tahir et. al. 1997).

The heated "us versus them" rhetoric employed by Tahir and the Youth Action Committee, in the form of letters, picketing at the workplaces of other board members, and in statements that appear in board minutes, created a toxic atmosphere where the authenticity of one's "Blackness" was questioned if one did not align oneself with a particular perspective.

After several weeks of back-and-forth accusations that grew increasingly confrontational, the January board meeting disintegrated into chaos. According to the minutes:

Prior to the start of the meeting, Omari Tahir brought a chair to the front of the room and proceeded to over talk and override all attempts to convene and lead the meeting... Few agenda items were considered at this board meeting as board members were subjected to constant and ongoing verbal attacks... (AAHMCC Board of Directors, 1998).

The board was able to successfully ratify an agreement with the Seattle Public Schools to finally purchase the Colman building, but the "ongoing disruptions and the inability to conduct Board business" led the board to table the remaining agenda items and adjourn the meeting early.

Days later, architects from the firm that had been brought into the process sent out an open letter responding to accusations that had been made against them at the meeting. After addressing accusations of financial mismanagement, deceptive practices, and allegations that

African Americans had not been employed or involved with the design team, the letter ends with a plea for success. Noting that the community both needed and wanted a museum they wrote:

... we must all admit that the project is not on a course that will make this happen. AAHM has fallen victim to individual agendas and issues of personal ownership. To succeed it must have a broad community agenda and its stakeholders must understand that they are *stewards* of a community vision—not owners of a private enterprise... Far too much pressure has been brought to bear on the project. It is forced to do too many things too quickly. Cultural institutions have long gestation periods. They grow slowly, broadening the scope of their programs over many years, as they develop constituencies and institutional skills and resources. The development of the museum, even if all of the current ills are resolved, is a lifelong endeavor. We say it is time to turn away from the conflict and the accusations. It is time to make the museum itself the focus of people's attention (Streeter and Schacht 1998).

In early March, 1998, Omari Tahir re-filed the museum's incorporation papers with the State of Washington, bypassing the board in order to name himself as president of the organization. At a board meeting the next day, Tahir responded to calls for his removal by informing the board that they had no legal standing to remove him. Despite his protests, he was removed from the board by a vote of 14 to 1,<sup>10</sup> and two days later the incorporation papers were again re-filed, with Bob Flowers listed as the board president (AAHMCC 1998b).

Suddenly there were two boards claiming to be in control of the museum project, with two different board presidents, represented by two different attorneys sending conflicting correspondence to city officials. The City of Seattle, faced with these conflicting claims, stopped their payments and reimbursements to the museum, which left the museum unable to make payments on the Colman building to the school district.

While the City of Seattle eventually found that Omari Tahir had no legitimate claim to call himself the head of the Museum, and audits found no financial improprieties had occurred, efforts to create the AAHMCC never fully recovered. The school district repeatedly extended its

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<sup>10</sup> There were five abstentions.

deadline for the museum to purchase the Colman building, but they eventually placed the building up for sale again after the competing groups failed to come to any agreement. The museum's board dissolved while Tahir's alternate board continued to pursue legal action against the city and the School District in order to regain control of the project.

In a *Seattle Times* article Bob Flowers' successor, James Fearn (who had agreed to return to the project after several years absence), expressed his feelings of resignation about the project: "It's been a really difficult thing to work with. There have been lawsuits; there have been fistfights... There has been so much difficulty and controversy about a museum at this site. Maybe it's better to regroup and look someplace else than keep fighting these battles" (Ervin 2000). For his part, Tahir argued that the City, the Seattle Public School District, Fearn and Fearn's allies were "dream killers" who sought to gentrify the Central District "and run black people out of there" (2000).

### **Moving Forward**

In 2001, with the Colman building up for sale again, the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle entered into negotiations with Seattle Public Schools to purchase the property. With the Urban League officially attached to the project, financial support from individuals, private foundations, and community groups arrived, and in the spring of 2003 the sale was approved (Davila 2002). Although the Urban League's purchase of the building suddenly spurred the museum project forward at a faster pace, not everyone welcomed this new development.

Echoing his earlier "us versus them" rhetoric, Earl Debnam considered money the Urban League received from corporate donors to be "funding from an elitist point of view" (Kaiman 2003). Tahir, too, reiterated the idea that some in the Black community were not authentic,

contending that, “[t]hey’ve [the Urban League] always been lackeys for the white folks, the white business interests” (Denn 2002). Both Debnam and Tahir also insisted that their earlier contract with the school district to purchase the building was still valid, and that the sale to the Urban League was underhanded, if not outright illegal. Despite this, plans to create a museum at the newly-christened “Urban League Village” quickly moved forward. The new proposal called for the building to be repaired and transformed into a combination of apartment spaces that would be available for low-income renters, and a museum that would be operated independently from the Urban League.<sup>11</sup> The Northwest African American Museum was finally born.

A year after the Urban League’s purchase, the Museum Advisory Committee, made up of local historians, community members, museum professionals, and architects, appointed Carver Gayton as interim museum director. Carver soon asked local artist and Seattle native Barbara Earl Thomas to join the project. Barbara’s experience as an artist and as an arts administrator and marketer for both the city and local arts festivals provided a complement to Carver’s management and fundraising skills.

The Colman building was gutted. Small bulldozers were brought inside to scoop up decades of trash, pigeon droppings, and assorted detritus. Memos, letters, flyers, and signs that had been left behind by the Colman activists were carefully collected and added to the museum’s collection. Bylaws and policies were developed, fundraising for the capital campaign moved forward, and excitement began to build.

At both the groundbreaking and the museum opening the work of Omari Tahir, Earl Debnam, Michael Greenwood, and Charlie James was acknowledged as the catalyst that had finally, after so many years, led to the creation of an African American museum in Seattle.

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<sup>11</sup> Including low-income apartments in the Colman School building was in keeping with the Urban League’s mandate to provide communities with affordable housing. Allocating a single floor to the museum also made the museum project much more financially feasible.

Despite the fact the Colman activists were wary at best (and openly hostile at worst) about the plans for NAAM, museum staff were very intentional about reaching out to them and acknowledging the key role that they had played in galvanizing local efforts to create the institution. Some activists embraced these conciliatory efforts. Others dismissed them.

Charlie James, one of the original Colman activists, attended the museum's opening as, in his words, "an uninvited and unwanted spectator" but did not go inside the building (James 2008). In an opinion piece written for the *Seattle Times*, he recalled his early efforts to create both a museum and a cultural center, and extolled the important role the activists played in opening up opportunities for other African Americans. Although he encouraged everyone to visit the museum and celebrate the results of their efforts, he noted that he himself would never set foot inside.

Wyking Kwame Garrett's attempt to interrupt the official ceremony on the museum's opening day was a continuation of the work of his father, Omari Tahir. Like his father, Garrett viewed the museum as a tool that could help combat youth violence and solve a variety of social issues, but he believed that NAAM was not the type of museum the community needed. A year after NAAM's opening Garrett campaigned (unsuccessfully) for mayor. As part of his platform he called for compensation for damages the city caused in awarding \$800,000 in community block grants to the Urban League instead of the AAHMCC, for the Colman building to be returned to the AAHMCC, and for the development of a "world class African American Heritage Museum & Cultural Center in Seattle to engage our youth" (Wyking for Mayor 2009 website). Over twenty-five years after the initial occupation of Colman Elementary School, and even after a successful African American museum had finally opened, the early conflicts and old resentments have not entirely faded from memory.

## **The Northwest African American Museum**

The long, convoluted, and contentious path that led to the creation of NAAM illustrates both the importance that local African American community members placed on having a site to celebrate and legitimize the cultural and historical contributions they have made, and serves as an important reminder that the African American community is far from homogeneous. Politics, social class, and diverse ideas about identity and belonging all worked to shape the ways that people responded to, and involved themselves in, the creation of the museum.

NAAM has received overwhelming support from the majority of the area's African American residents who come to the museum to view the exhibits, participate in public programs, and rent space to celebrate personal milestones. For a small museum NAAM faced outsized expectations from the day it opened and, due to its long and complicated history, it is often perceived to be a much older institution than it actually is. Although it is shaped by its unique history NAAM is not defined by it, and museum staff seek to present engaging exhibitions and maintain a high level of professionalism even while acknowledging that a single institution cannot meet every need in the community or represent everyone's point of view. Now in its seventh year of operation, NAAM is currently led by Executive Director Rosanna Sharpe, and the museum continues to evolve as staff members work to develop new partnerships and experiment with new programs and exhibitions.

One day, two years after the museum opened, a visitor and his young son came to visit, telling a museum staff member that the only reason he was at the museum was because Omari Tahir told him to come. After looking up and down the gallery space the staff member told me that the man disdainfully asked him, "Is this it? Is this all there is?" Despite his initially dismissive attitude, he and his son were apparently still strolling through the gallery an hour

later, deeply engrossed in the timelines, the texts, the photographs and objects that tell stories about the African American community in the Pacific Northwest.



Image 3.3 *Colman building (Photo by author)*

## **Chapter 4**

### **“Please Send Me Information About Sojourner Truth”: Visitor Expectations and Discourses of “Blackness”**

Visitors arrive at NAAM carrying with them multiple discourses of “Blackness”—as an identity, a concept, a category, and a commodity—that shape their preconceived notions of what they will find when they visit the museum. As the events leading to the creation of NAAM remind us, even within the African American community, ideas about what it means to be “African American” or “Black” are often contested. John Falk notes that museum visitors seek out experiences that reinforce their preconceived notions and argues that “[t]he visitor perceives his or her museum experience to be satisfying if...[they] achieve what they expected” (2009: 158-159). At NAAM there are times when institutional or programmatic decisions and the expectations of visitors are not in perfect alignment, and this intersection results in a dynamic interchange of ideas as various discourses collide with one another. In these situations the museum is faced with the choice of either adapting to visitor expectations so that visitors will perceive their visit as satisfying, choosing to educate and challenge expectations, or striking a compromise between the visitor’s expectations and the museum’s goals. All museums face these choices. However, when this interaction occurs at a culturally specific museum such as NAAM, these decisions become linked to sensitive discussions about race and belonging, which create unique opportunities to explore how the museum is involved in the co-construction of discourses about what it means to be an African American museum.

#### **Which African American History?**

In the fall of 2008, soon after NAAM opened, a letter arrived addressed to the director. It was from a middle school student in Michigan who was working on a class project about

abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth. She described her project and requested that the museum send her all the information we had as soon as possible so that she could finish her report on time.

While the letter was unusual in that it came from Michigan, this type of request for information is common. Just this past January I received an email from a woman asking how her son should go about setting up a Black History Month program at his school. Apart from mentioning that the school had never put on such a program, she offered no other details. It was as though she expected me to magically deduce her son's grade level and the needs of the school, and present her with a prepackaged guide. Despite the fact that Seattle is home to several African American history professors and African American performing arts organizations, it is the museum that is often seen as the go-to place to find information about African Americans and African American history. Part of this is due to the role that museums have been granted and have cultivated as authoritative sources of information. In a 2001 survey researchers found that 87% of respondents found museums to be trustworthy, surpassing other sources of information such as books (61% found books to be trustworthy), and far surpassing television and print news media (American Association of Museums 2001). This sense of trust has been nurtured by museums since they first established themselves as authorities on art, science, and history. The authoritative voice of the museum (or "The Voice of Institutional Authority" as Lawrence Weschler humorously describes it<sup>12</sup>) in the form of museum text, audio, and visual displays, often presents information in such a way that most visitors accept it as established fact (Weschler 102:1995). While museums are increasingly moving towards incorporating visitor-generated

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<sup>12</sup> "The Voice of Institutional Authority" guides Weschler through the Museum of Jurassic Technology in his book, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*. The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles celebrates museums as places that cultivate a sense of wonder in the visitor even as it critiques the unquestioned authority that museums have cultivated.

content and working to make visible the dialectical relationship between museum staff, exhibit content, and the visitor, many still look to museums and “The Voice” as a definitive source of information.

Despite the expectations of the young letter writer, NAAM—with its focus on local rather than national African American history—had no information about Sojourner Truth to give her. The decision to focus on local history in NAAM’s permanent gallery space was largely based on the feedback collected during a series of focus groups that took place in 2006. During these facilitator-led “Community Conversations” participants made it clear that they wanted the museum to bring attention to the often overlooked stories of the local community—what brought African Americans to the region and how they created a place for themselves in the Pacific Northwest. However, some visitors come to NAAM seeking and expecting to find an authoritative “voice” on general topics of African American history. When they arrive at the museum and do not see information about Sojourner Truth, or an in-depth look at the trans-Atlantic slave trade, for example, these expectations are thwarted and these visitors find themselves disappointed and upset by what they see as a serious oversight on the part of the museum. “How,” they wonder, “can a museum call itself an ‘African American museum’ and overlook such important histories?”

Brian Carter, NAAM’s former Deputy Director, was deeply involved in the early Community Conversations and helped to develop the content of the museum’s Journey Gallery. As the museum’s head curator, he was often at the receiving end of complaints from visitors who were upset that NAAM failed to provide a comprehensive, authoritative overview of African American history. Noting that many museum visitors come to NAAM after having visited other African American museums in cities such as Detroit or Philadelphia, he felt that some visitors

measured the regional content of NAAM's galleries against the broader history presented at these other museums and find it lacking. "Where is the slave story?" they wonder. "Where's Martin Luther King?"

"So," Brian continued, "people do bring those expectations and comparisons with other institutions that they've visited."

I asked him, "So, some of those things, like 'where's the slave narrative,' 'where's MLK,' those are very pre-packaged ideas of Black history. Do you think that's what people come in with? They come in with this basket of things that make up Black history, and if you don't hit points A, B, and C you failed?"

Brian replied, "Yes. And I think we would have been wise to just acknowledge that at the beginning." He continued:

If I could go back I would have just acknowledged there were certain expectations, there were certain touchstones or keystones in history and our culture that people would expect more about, and I would have just done a better job doing that.

And when we started, I feel like we wanted to do something different. We wanted a gallery that you had not been in before. We wanted it to be new. We wanted it to be creative. We wanted to be a more nuanced interpretation of our history. And I think that we could have done that, but it would have behooved us to do a little more of what folks have come to expect.

I feel like it's just like a credential that people would give us. And then they would say. "Alright, this museum knows what they're doing. Now show me something new." And I think, not having that, it makes people suspect that we just don't understand our own history... that we missed it somehow. I think a compromise between the two would have been better (personal conversation, January 2, 2013).

Every museum has to make a decision about what it wants the scope of its institution's exhibitions and programming to be. Based on months of feedback and discussion, NAAM decided to keep the scope of its permanent collection locally-focused, but this choice came at the cost of providing information about national figures and events that some visitors expect to find,

and whose inclusion would (for some) attest to NAAM's credibility as an African American institution.

Of course, expectations about what information ought to be included in this, or any museum, varies from person to person. Several years ago I worked as a contractor for a local exhibit design company to help research African American history in Oregon and Washington State in order to provide text for some traveling display panels. These panels were intended to replace a large collection of over twenty panels that had been designed by a group of dedicated lay historians almost thirty years before, and NAAM partnered on this project in order to help provide a secure home base where the panels could be stored when they were not on loan. I was asked to pull out some general themes from my research that would provide viewers with a simple narrative structure and timeline that would guide them through the panels' text. Space constraints, plus the fact that the information for Oregon and Washington needed complement the style and content of the panels that had already been created for Alaska, meant that much of the old information that community members had collected in the 1980s could not be used. I knew that the information I selected for inclusion, when laid out and formatted by professional designers and displayed in schools and organizations across the region, would inevitably take on The Voice of Institutional Authority and that some would view this material as a definitive summary of local African American history. That thought made me incredibly uneasy. Who am I, I thought, to make this type of weighty decision? What if the picture of the community that I am presenting is flawed? For the first time I had a real sense of the impossible task set before museum curators. Curators have been granted authority as historians and museum professionals to choose which narratives appear in the museum and which discourses are circulated. The subjective decisions they make about which discourses to engage with and which to ignore

become (whether they intended them to or not) weighted with a veneer of authoritative objectivity. This puts museum staff in the position of constructing and promoting a particular discourse while also having to answer to those who hold competing discourses. Just as Brian found himself contending with those whose ideas about what stories NAAM ought to include differed from his, so too did I find myself having to answer for my narrative decisions. One community member involved in the project I did was upset that the final panels didn't look like the ones created in the 1980s. He was also angry that so much of the information from the old panels was not used. Another individual felt that there should be less information about Seattle's chapter of Black Panther Party, and that we really needed to include information about Seattle sports legend and dermatologist Homer Harris. Of course, these perspectives were no more objective than my own.

In the 1980s both the fields of museology and anthropology experienced a "crisis of representation" during which academics and professionals found themselves struggling with the question of who has the right to speak for other groups of people, and acknowledging that no single account could ever adequately represent a peoples' lived experiences. As a result of this epistemic crisis both disciplines began moving towards incorporating multiple voices in their work and encouraging collaboration with community members. However, in a paper recounting her own experiences and observations while developing a collaborative museum exhibition, Miriam Kahn notes that "[t]he more collaborative the process is, the more of a compromise the product will be" (Kahn 2000:71). In her experience Kahn found that not only did museum staff, exhibition designers and community members bring different (and often incompatible) perspectives and visions to the table, but also that intra-community conflicts within the various ethnic community groups added yet another layer of difficulty to an already complicated project.

Ultimately, she concludes that one of the major challenges in collaborative museum work is not simply due to the lack of community representation, but due to issues of authority and control within a system where historical realities have created unbalanced power relationships between museum professionals and community members. More often than not, it is the decisions of a museum's professional staff that will ultimately determine the content and aesthetics of an exhibition. The question faced by NAAM is how to draw from the vast diversity of African American experiences to present exhibitions that speak to as many people as possible.

### **In Search of Authentic Blackness**

Discourses about what it means to be African American and, by extension, what it means to be an African American institution, shape not only expectations of what information and exhibitions NAAM should present, but also what services it should provide. In the early days of the museum, after the restaurant owner who oversaw the first iteration of NAAM's cafe moved out, a staff discussion ensued concerning the type of food that should be offered. When one staff member mentioned that they would like to see simple sandwiches and hummus served, another replied, "Black people don't eat hummus."

"Well I eat hummus," the first staff member said, "Does that mean I'm not Black?"

In *Appropriating Blackness*, E. Patrick Johnson discusses the performative nature of "Blackness" and how "[t]he multiple ways in which we construct blackness within and outside black American culture is contingent on the historical moment in which we live and our ever shifting subject positions" (2003:3). Johnson argues that ideas about what constitutes "black authenticity," are overdetermined and create essentializing notions of what it means to be Black (2003:3). Thus, "authentic" performance of Blackness becomes tied to language use, place of

residency, social class, clothing, and sexuality in ways that foster divisions within the Black community by limiting the range of behaviors, activities and ideologies that are considered to be “authentically” Black (as was evidenced in the personal conflicts that hampered the first effort to create an African American museum in Seattle). While Johnson focuses on the impact this has on the individual, I believe that this concept applies equally well to African American institutions. In the above example the conversation about the museum’s café became caught up in discourses of Black authenticity, with the appropriateness of the hypothetical hummus being called into question. In a similar vein, during the first year NAAM was open, the museum received some criticism for not having any Kwanzaa-related programming. No one on staff had grown up in a family that celebrated the holiday, but those who complained felt that Kwanzaa was an essential marker of African American identity. Critiques about the absence of particular historical touchstones in the permanent gallery are also related to conversations about what an “authentic” African American museum should look like and what stories it should present.

Johnson points out that these types of measures of authenticity are arbitrary and, when treated as legitimate and absolute, carry the danger of “foreclosing the possibilities of cultural exchange and understanding” (2003:3). These contested notions of an “authentic” Blackness, he notes, can also be used and “manipulated for cultural capital” (2003:3). Given the overdetermined nature of discourses of Blackness, whenever NAAM makes institutional decisions that challenge certain tropes of Black authenticity (by serving hummus, not celebrating Kwanzaa, or not providing an in-depth look at the life of Sojourner Truth, for example), the museum stands to lose cultural capital and credibility in the eyes of some members of the Black community. As a result, NAAM’s institutional goals of developing content that expands

understandings of what it means to be African American comes into direct conflict with the essentialist notions that some visitors bring with them.

The outsized expectations placed on the museum to properly perform “Blackness” at an institutional level are ever-present. One measure that some visitors have used to gauge the extent to which NAAM is an “authentic” African American institution is by assessing the composition of its staff and volunteer corps. Although NAAM does seek out African American staff and volunteers, the museum is an equal opportunity employer and will welcome qualified staff and volunteers regardless of race. The diversity of the museum's staff, volunteers, and board of directors reflects the value NAAM places on being a multicultural and inclusive institution. But this can sometimes run counter to the expectations some visitors have about what a Black museum should look like.

A former museum staff member told me about an encounter with a visitor that she and a volunteer had one day. Apparently, upon seeing both the White volunteer and my White coworker at the front desk the visitor exclaimed, “Aw, hell no!” and immediately turned around and left. Apparently for this visitor the presence of non-Black staff was at odds with his ideas about authentic “Black museum-ness.” His anger was likely exacerbated by a sense that the White people he saw were somehow invading an exclusively Black space that was carved out in the community after years of effort on the part of the African American community. There is a strong sense of ownership that many local African American residents feel towards NAAM. This, combined with the sense that many of the things that are “ours” are in danger of being lost in the face of ongoing gentrification, creates an atmosphere where liberal notions of multiculturalism are viewed by some as a further attack on the city's remaining African American spaces.

NAAM's core group of roughly sixty volunteers is made up of individuals from a diverse array of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, and several of NAAM's oldest and most dedicated volunteers are White. One day a coworker came into the office and asked me to help her talk to an angry visitor. The visitor in question was an instructor from a local college who had brought her class to the museum for a tour. She was extremely upset that the volunteer who led the tour was White. She granted that although the docent was very knowledgeable, her whiteness precluded her from offering the perspective that she wanted her class to hear. She was very angry and wanted to speak to NAAM's executive director to complain. Since the director was out of the office my coworker and I did the best we could to mollify her. After talking for quite some time we were able to calm her down by acknowledging her dissatisfaction and promising that if she ever wanted to bring another class to NAAM she could specifically request an African American docent. Of course, the presence of an African American docent is no guarantee that this instructor would have been satisfied. Given that a monolithic Black perspective does not exist, what if the African American docent's perspective was not one the instructor wanted to share with the class? What if the docent did not conform to whatever notions of "authentic" Blackness the instructor had in mind? As for our assurances that she could request an African American docent for her next meeting—did we acquiesce too quickly instead of challenging the instructor to broaden her ideas about the type of cross-cultural connections that take place at NAAM?

Soon after NAAM first opened I came across a video posted on YouTube by New York-based actress, poet, and hip-hop artist Amanda Diva. Apparently, Amanda Diva had heard about the opening of NAAM from the perspective of those who, like Omari Tahir and his son Wyking Garrett, contended that Seattle's African American museum project was stolen from "true"

members of the Black community. In her clip she mocks NAAM as an elitist and out-of-touch institution by playing the role of an imagined museum staff member by adopting an over-the-top posh accent and standing in front of stark white walls similar to those of an art museum. “Hello and WELCOME to the Seattle Black Folks Museum!” she begins. “Here, in the Seattle museum of BLACKNESS we have made this building to honor the depth of our culture!” Then, pointing to a few small photos on the otherwise empty “gallery” walls, she continues,

Mah-tin Luther King Jr. Black Leaddaaaah.  
 The Cosby Show. Leadah in Black TV shows.  
 And our final exhibit, Oprah Winfrey. Black Leadaaaaah.  
 Thank you for visiting our Seattle Black Folks Museum, where we define Black culture! Please visit our souvenir shop, and come back next February when we will have a FOURTH Black LEADAAAHAH! (Diva 2008).

In this short clip, Amanda (who, as far as I know, has never actually visited the museum) presents NAAM as being antithetical to “authentic” Blackness by drawing attention to the museum’s perceived snobbishness and cultural bankruptcy. Through her pretentious accent and the “Black Leaders” she highlights, she presents NAAM as an institution that caters to, and does not challenge, an elitist and White-dominant status quo. As Johnson notes, ideas about “authentic” Blackness are often associated with the urban poor and working-class—which renders the Black middle class (and their institutions) as inauthentic and apolitical (2003:22). Although it is based on uninformed and faulty information, Amanda Diva’s critique of NAAM is a reminder that, like most museums, NAAM is a middle class institution largely staffed and supported by individuals with high levels of traditional education who come from comfortable socio-economic backgrounds. To artificially limit “authentic” Black identity to only the urban poor and working class is to do epistemic violence not only to NAAM’s staff, volunteers, and visitors, but also to a large portion of the local African American community.

NAAM coexists with various discourses of Black “authenticity” that visitors and community members bring to the museum. In some cases, as with the idea of hummus in the café, the lack of Kwanzaa celebrations, and staff and volunteer hiring, the museum has chosen to embrace a broad understanding of what it means to be an authentically African American institution, even if it means upsetting some visitors who would prefer to more closely police the boundaries of racial identity. In other cases, as with the angry professor, the museum tries to adapt in order to better meet visitor expectations in the hope that, by doing so, visitors will be encouraged to return and perhaps, bit by bit, break down and critically reconsider narrow notions of Black authenticity.

### **“I Need a Black Person”: The Commodification of “Blackness”**

January and February—from Martin Luther King Day through the end of Black History Month—is the busy season at NAAM. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2014 NAAM welcomed over five hundred visitors. Similarly, during February (and often into March) NAAM juggles an atypically large number of tour, speaker, and interview requests in addition to a packed public programs schedule. This time of year is always exhausting for the museum’s staff. Each year, as these two months approach, staff members put in extra hours in order to prepare for the busy weeks to come, and, each year, once February has come to an end, there is talk about the need to “recover from Black History Month.” Martin Luther King Day and Black History Month present both opportunities and quandaries for NAAM. During this time of year NAAM is expected to perform “Blackness” by offering programs and events that meet the public’s desire for African American cultural programming. These holidays provide the museum with needed visibility and revenue, but they also risk having the unintentional effect of

perpetuating a consumer-style multiculturalism that runs the risk of reducing meaningful cross-cultural exchange to just another item on a “to-do” list.

There are several Martin Luther King Day events that take place annually in and around Seattle. One event, the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Rally and March, has taken place each year since 1982. During the museum’s first year little forethought was given to how NAAM would mark the holiday. The holiday falls on a Monday when the museum is usually closed and there were initially no plans to be open that day. However, one staff member pointed out that community members would come to the museum expecting us to be open. She was right. Visitors I surveyed on one Martin Luther King holiday stated that they felt a visit to the museum was a very appropriate way to honor the memory Martin Luther King—despite the fact that there is actually little inside NAAM, apart from a brief video clip and a flyer that announced his talk at the Eagles Auditorium in Seattle in 1961, that directly addresses his life and work.

While a few visitors I spoke to on one Martin Luther King holiday expressed disappointment that they did not find more information about MLK at NAAM, in exit surveys many respondents linked the holiday and their desire to learn about African American history together. One respondent, a 22-year-old African American, wrote that the reason they visited the museum that day was “The celebration of a great man, Martin Luther King Jr. Also, looking in the museum and reading about my history.” A White visitor in their thirties noted that their family came, “To learn about the history of African/Amer [sic] in Seattle,” and “To try and educate daughter as well.”

Visitor attendance on Martin Luther King Day tends to be motivated by a desire to honor and reflect upon Martin Luther King’s legacy and to provide a learning opportunity for one’s

children. Black History Month, however, brings a much more complicated set of expectations to bear on the museum.

Black History Month was first recognized on a federal level in 1976, having grown out of Carter G. Woodson's successful efforts to establish "Negro History Week" in 1926. Black History Month successfully brought attention to the contributions that African Americans made to United States history and culture at a time when such histories were completely absent from popular discourse.

The role of an African American museum during Black History Month requires a complex negotiation that pits the museum staff's desire to avoid tokenism alongside the desire to meet both financial and attendance goals and public expectations about what an African American museum *is* and *should* do. In an article published in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* titled, "Black History Month: Serious Truth Telling or a Triumph in Tokenism," the authors (who are also on the journal's editorial staff) point out two of the major critiques about Black History Month: 1) focusing attention on a single month reinforces the belief that African American history "is not worthy of general recognition," and 2) the month has been co-opted by large corporations who "make token efforts to promote an awareness of black history in an effort to further their marketing efforts in the black community" (Franklin et. al. 1997:87). In addition to these critiques I would add that one of the effects of Black History Month is the commodification of "Blackness" for White consumption. Black History Month tends to neatly package essentialized tropes of history and identity into easily digestible portions that do little to truly challenge discourses of White hegemony.

In her well-known essay, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," bell hooks beautifully examines the ways that Black bodies and Black history become commodified.

“Within commodity culture,” she writes, “ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (1992:21). The Other is offered as evidence of progressive multiculturalism even as it requires that the Other be reduced to easily recognizable types that are decontextualized from the social and historical realities that shaped them (1992:21).

K-12 educators find that bringing their students to NAAM is a helpful way to supplement their Black History Month curriculum, but class discussions about African American history often do not take place any other time of the year. Similarly, the speaking requests NAAM staff members receive from community organizations suggest that some are only interested in the most superficial of cross-cultural experiences. One year, a staff member told me about a call she received from an employee at an after-school program in the suburbs requesting either “a Black person” who could talk to the children for Black History Month, “or someone who could dance for the kids.” When asked to clarify what specific topic the woman wanted the requested “Black person” to speak to the kids about she answered, “Oh, just Black history.”

“It is by eating the Other,” bell hooks writes, “that one asserts power and privilege” (1992:36). The request that NAAM serve up a generic “Black person” to perform tropes of Blackness, was a reminder of the ways that Black bodies can be exploited as set pieces in the name of multiculturalism. Although the exploration of racial differences is something to be encouraged, the danger, as bell hooks notes, “is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (1992: 39). The woman who made the request for a “Black person” sincerely wanted to present her students with a learning opportunity, but she

did not seem to see how problematic her request was and the ways it might reinforce a shallow stereotype that would do nothing to encourage ongoing discussions about race.

The challenge for an institution like NAAM is to figure out a way to channel the public's interest in exploring African American history and culture during Black History Month towards opportunities that encourage them to do more than pay lip service to a superficial multiculturalism that serves only to polish the progressive credentials of White visitors. In the case of the request for "a Black person" to speak at an after-school program, a NAAM staff member was able to gently deny the request while letting the caller know about the free curriculum packets, lesson plans, and traveling "Story Trunks" filled with interactive materials that the museum has created for K-12 educators. The caller was excited to hear about the availability of these items and was encouraged to make use of them.

NAAM's response to Black History Month has been to embrace it as an opportunity to reach new audiences, increase the museum's visibility, and secure needed revenue. Knowing that members of the public are actively seeking out Black History Month-related events to participate in (whether because they have a personal interest or because they feel obligated to participate), NAAM presents numerous public programs over the course of the month. The film screenings, lectures, artistic performances and special storytelling sessions that are presented during Black History Month are intended to appeal to a variety of ages and interest groups in the hopes that there will be something that will interest everybody. With a robust program calendar in place the museum is well prepared to respond to requests for individuals, schools, and local organizations that want to (or are expected to) do something to mark this month. The increase in the program schedule during this time brings in higher than average attendance numbers, and the resulting

increase in revenue from admissions, donations, and gift store purchases helps support the museum during the rest of the year.

It is during Black History Month that NAAM often benefits from the free publicity provided by local media outlets. Local television news broadcasts in search of African American-themed human-interest stories will come to the museum to interview staff or community members. Last year an image from one of NAAM's exhibitions was featured prominently on the cover of the local newspapers supplementary art section, and staff members have also been asked to appear on local radio stations. These marketing opportunities greatly increase NAAM's reach by providing the museum with a level of promotional visibility that it could not otherwise afford.

Just as Black History Month increases visitor and media interest in NAAM, it also brings corporate interest to the museum. Businesses that have corporate-giving programs are often interested in demonstrating that they support minority communities and those that are typically underserved by the arts. NAAM has received modest funding from a few corporations that are specifically interested in donating funds in support of the museum's Black History Month events. By financially supporting Black History Month these corporations are able to market their name to the African American community via the corporate branding the museum provides as a condition of receiving funding, diversify their giving portfolios, and actively support their corporate commitments to diversity and the arts. It took a few years for NAAM to truly embrace the idea that Black History Month could be leveraged for funding in this way and to realize that corporations actually expected, and even wanted, the museum to approach them for this type of support. NAAM's need for funding to support programs, and corporate desires to meet this need, create a mutually beneficial relationship, but it is not always a relationship of equals. At NAAM,

as with any museum, some companies, in return for their financial support, make demands that can quickly become onerous—such as rigorous signage requirements, or expectations for special invitations for events, product placements, or guest speakers. These serve as a reminder that corporate philanthropy is, at the end of the day, a carefully considered financial investment rather than a purely altruistic gesture. When support comes from companies whose staff and board lack internal diversity, it is also possible that this type of philanthropic giving provides a way for them to show a commitment to diversity without investing in the difficult work required to change their corporate culture and demonstrate this same commitment in their workplace.

There is no doubt that Black History Month perpetuates discourses that define African Americans as the “Other” that can be safely consumed and potentially forgotten once the month has come to an end. However, by fulfilling visitor expectations about what an African American institution should be doing during this time of year, NAAM is able to build goodwill in the community by providing an easy entry point for visitors to begin exploring African American heritage. Without this entry point, it is possible that some individuals would never take the time to explore African American history at all. It is also to the museum’s advantage to “do” Martin Luther King Day and Black History Month in order to benefit from the increased financial generosity of individual and corporate donors during this time of year. In many ways, to completely ignore Black History Month simply on principle or to “make a point,” would irreparably harm NAAM both financially and in the eyes of community members who look to the museum to provide opportunities to connect to and honor African American history.

There will never be a consensus on what it means to be African American, or what an African American institution should look like. The diversity of expectations both within and without various African American communities are simply too varied and complex. The

challenge and opportunity for NAAM is to create a space where multiple notions of “Blackness” can be both celebrated and challenged. A fine art exhibit may not read as “authentically” Black to some, but what about a book reading by a founder of Seattle’s chapter of the Black Panthers? If the Black Panthers are seen as too aggressively political for somebody, what about a presentation by local Tuskegee Airmen and their families? A community discussion about talking to your kids about sex led by a group of middle school girls, most of whom were Muslim? A presentation about James Baldwin and sexual identity? A “Funk Night” dance party? The diverse programs that have taken place at NAAM challenge narrow definitions of what it means to be African American by appealing to different audiences with different interests and expectations. As the museum interacts with various discourses of “Blackness” it alternately supports and challenges stereotypes of what it means to be African American in Seattle. In this way NAAM is able to appeal to very diverse audience expectations and provide a space where ideas of identity can be examined.

**Chapter 5**  
**Community and Collective Memory: “This Museum is My New Sanctuary,  
These Are My People I’ve Been Looking For... For So Long.”**

The ancestors of most African Americans, unlike every other racial or ethnic group that came to the United States, originally arrived on this continent by force and not by choice. The American slave system removed millions from their ancestral lands and, in order to ensure control, further removed enslaved people from their communities by dividing families, brutally suppressing the use of tribal languages, and forbidding traditional religious practices. As a result of slavery, for most African Americans, family histories can only be traced as far back as Reconstruction. Our ancestral lands may be in Africa but, for most, the question “where is your family from?” will be answered with the name of a Southern state rather than the name of an African country.

“The past,” Lowenthal reminds us, “is integral to our sense of identity...[and the ability] to recall and identify with our own past gives existence meaning, purpose, and value” (1985:41). For African Americans, the work of constructing a usable past that can form the basis of a collective community identity is much more difficult and emotional than for many other minority groups. It is a past painstakingly built, not out of memories of ancestral lands and intrepid immigrant ancestors, but out of the chaotic experiences North American slavery left in its wake.

Barbara Earl Thomas (a lifelong Seattle resident, artist, and NAAM’s former Executive Director) beautifully articulated this complicated work of creating a collective and unifying past at NAAM by contrasting the African American experience to that of other minority communities in Seattle. “What are the two things that El Centro de la Raza and Wing Luke [a local cultural center and an Asian American and Pacific Islander cultural museum] have that we [meaning NAAM] don’t have?” she asked me.

“Well,” I said, “Wing Luke has money... They’ve also been open longer.”

“No. They have culture,” she replied.

And I’m going to say...there’s Japanese, Chinese—you know, all the Asian cultures—they have a recent history of a country and a culture from which they have come. So when they come here, they have a common thing that, regardless of how far any of them go from that, they can come back. And they say, “Oh, well, yeah! You know Auntie Osashi came here in 1890.” And they can lead that back. And they can lead it back to their language. They can lead it back.

El Centro De La Raza—whether people came from Costa Rica, whether they came from Mexico, whether they came from Cuba... within *memory*, they can lead that back.

And so, built into that is a cohesiveness and a way for them to bind and do these small steps. Because, as immigrants, they have had to do those small steps. They *came* as outsiders! And so they’re out here. And so they’re working...

We’re *inside*! We’re supposed to be *it*! We don’t have any outside... We’re inside! And there’s nothing linking us together... except slavery, and the Diaspora, and the lack of connection that we have! And this whole thing about Blackness and our common culture... I think we have some common culture, but it’s based on—Oh, my god!—... You know, it’s like Jell-O. It’s like having your homeland be built on Jell-O (personal conversation, April 22, 2013).

As discussed in Chapter 2, the creation of African American museums coincided with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1950s and 1960s as a manifestation of cultural pride and a tool for community empowerment. However, as Barbara noted, the cultural history available from which to construct a collective history and identity is much different than that of other communities of color that can find commonality in a shared ancestral language, territory, or nation. This feeling that African American communities lack the type of strong cultural connection that exists in other minority communities is echoed in comments made by one of the participants in NAAM’s early focus group efforts. In response to a question about what they would like to see offered at NAAM, the individual responded,

I would like to see classes in African language. We’re the only group who does not have a second language, even if we just had Swahili. We need a place where people can come and learn... There are a lot of Filipinos at my job and they speak

English but when they talk to each other they change to their language. We're just about the only ones that aren't able to do that. It's important that we have those classes (Abram and Collins 2006 "Community Conversation").

As discussed previously, there is a multiplicity of ideas and discourses about what it means to be African American and what "authentic Blackness" looks like. The fact that there is no shared linguistic or national identity predating slavery that most African Americans can rally around to help reach a consensus about how to define a collective racial identity means that other resources must be recruited for the task. NAAM's permanent exhibit, "The Journey Gallery," works to discursively construct a collective narrative that binds together the region's African American residents. Visitors are greeted by life-sized cutouts of past and present residents next to a sign declaring, "We are the Northwest." Along both ends of the Journey Gallery are texts and interactive displays that temporally locate objects and individuals in the region's history by highlighting the contributions that local African Americans have made. The overall story is one of overcoming challenges and obstacles in order to establish thriving communities. "Where Did We Come From? How Did We Get Here?" asks one display, while a portion of the text on the timeline reads,

We came [to the Northwest] for many reasons—to escape racism and violence, to explore new territory, to find work, or to follow family and friends. Here we found room to grow our communities and families. Here we found success in our work, and courageously demanded our civil rights.

Through the exhibits and materials at NAAM a collective self-narrative (or what Patricia Erikson calls, an "autoethnography") of Northwest African American identity is presented in a way that firmly situates the historical experiences and cultural contributions of African Americans within the larger context of American history (Erikson 2002). The use of the word "we" serves to declare the existence of a shared African American history and identity while also asserting a presence in the Pacific Northwest. It is the journey to the Pacific Northwest from the

American South and (for some more recent immigrants) Africa, and the work of community building that took place once people arrived, that serves as the collective cultural bond rather than a shared history found outside the United States.

However, the community that was built in Seattle, which welcomed new arrivals and served as an incubator for a local African American cultural identity, has changed since it was first established. The Central District neighborhood in Seattle has long been considered the heart of the city's African American community, but over the past several decades the outmigration of Black families, combined with the effects of rising property values, have turned it from a predominantly African American neighborhood to an increasingly White one. When the neighborhood began to change and African Americans began moving away, there were suddenly fewer resources (human, material or institutional) to reach back to in order to reaffirm a shared community bond. With no "outside" from which to draw memories of a shared past, NAAM becomes conscripted into service as a site of collective memory-making and identity construction for visitors who are looking to connect with, and rediscover, their rootedness in community.

### **A "Golden Age"**

*"So now this has become the golden age. And luckily for me, I grew up there at that time."*

—*Barbara Earl Thomas* (personal conversation, April 22, 2013)

"When I was growing up you would have never seen White people walking around this neighborhood. Things have really changed." I've heard various versions of this statement repeated over and over again since the museum first opened. NAAM's location in the Central District neighborhood is a symbolic monument to the African American presence in a changing neighborhood and serves as a tangible reminder of the past. For several generations of Black Seattle residents, Colman Elementary School was "their" school. It was a school staffed by some

of the first African American teachers in Seattle, the students were mostly African American, and it was located in the Central District. Upon its closure in 1985 the school was considered by many to be the ideal location for an African American museum, in part because it was seen as a remnant of a rapidly changing neighborhood's history and a material symbol of discourses of gentrification.

Sitting on cushions on the floor of her art studio, Barbara Earl Thomas painted a verbal picture of the Central District she grew up in during the 1950s and 60s. “[It was a] kind of life and childhood that isn’t going to come again—I lived on a block that had twenty-five kids. Twenty-five kids!... [I]t was like being at summer camp all the time because you had those twenty-five kids, and you’re all growing up together.”

During much of the twentieth century racial segregation and restrictive covenants worked to create a close-knit community of a few hundred African American families in the Central District. Members were linked through a shared racial background and shared social institutions within a very small geographical area. “When you got up on Easter, you know, you were going to New Hope, First A.M.E., Goodwill, or Mount Zion CME,” said Barbara. She explained that if you were not a member of one of these local churches you were most likely a member of one of the many social clubs, “So everybody was linked in some way.” Colman Elementary School was one of these community links. Located within the Central District neighborhood and defined by both geography and the racial makeup of the families it served, the building itself was one of the centers of community identity.

Jaworski and Thurlow argue that landscape (which they define as “any public space... with visible inscription made through deliberate human intervention and meaning making”) is caught up in discussions of identity, social order, and power as individuals make sense of their

identity in terms of their shared physical environment (2010:2, 5-6). For many years African American identity in Seattle was inescapably linked to the landscape of this particular neighborhood. However, once the neighborhood began to change as people moved and as buildings were torn down and replaced, physical markers of community identity were lost.

### **Community Transition:**

*Used to own our homes, now we're all renters.  
Got folks moving south like birds for the winter.  
They asked momma to sell her home, she said no,  
but then we had to shake when them property taxes rose.  
I know you say you ain't the ones in them white sheets,  
but these suits and ties are similar to me.  
Don't try to paint me as the black man who's angry  
when you gut my community it's hard to build a legacy*  
– Draze, “The Hood Ain’t the Same”

“The Hood Ain’t the Same,” a recent song by Seattle hip hop artist Draze, captures the pain and sense of disconnection that the gentrification of the city’s Central District has brought to many in the local African American community. In an interview with *The Skanner* (a Black-owned website and paper published in Seattle and Portland, Oregon), Draze talks about how he was inspired to write the song one day when he decided to hang out in the Central District in order to avoid rush hour traffic.

And then I thought maybe I’ll go get something to eat. And I was in the mood for some soul food. I started looking around and the two or three places that I used to go [*sic*] weren’t there. I can’t even find any soul food in the heart of the Central Area? And then the next was, I’ll go hang out at my friends’ houses. And I was going through my phone, only to look up and say wow – nobody’s here (Loving 2014).

In 2014 a reporter for *The Seattle Times* noted that between 2000 and 2013 Seattle’s non-Hispanic White population increased to 67 percent, bucking national trends that have seen the nation as whole becoming less White (Balk 2014). Seattle’s suburbs, on the other hand, have

seen their minority populations continue to grow. With the makeup of the city's African American community changing, the loss of community cohesion directly impacts the ability to construct a shared past. Memories are collective and are recalled to us through others and find strength in the multiplicity of mutually supportive perspectives that are shaped through personal experiences (Halbwachs 1980). When people move away from a formerly close-knit community, these memories become increasingly weak and indistinct without a critical mass of individuals to share them. Memories are also recreated through the use of objects that serve as visual keepers of memories that enable individuals to recapture a shared past. Places and objects in the landscape invoke the retelling and reshaping of the past in ways that meet the needs of the present, and they gain discursive power through their connection to material realities (Bird 2002, Clifford 1999). However, just as places and objects can serve to recall memory, so too can their destruction silence and erase it (Urry 1996:50). When places are lost or destroyed the memories connected to them can be lost as well.

In "Storing Memories in the Yard," Hood and Erickson examine the shifting residential patterns of Macon, Georgia's African American community (2001). Construction in downtown Macon carried out in the name of "urban revitalization" has had the effect of not only dismantling Black cultural life in the city, but also of hiding or erasing physical sites that serve as triggers of memory and history. Shared memories of African-American history are fragmented and scattered as a result of changes in the landscape. Certain sites, deemed important to city administrators, were preserved, but "everyday landscapes" that serve as holders of memory were not. "Sites are scattered and lost, leaving the concentration of shared memories diluted" (Hood and Erickson 2001:182).

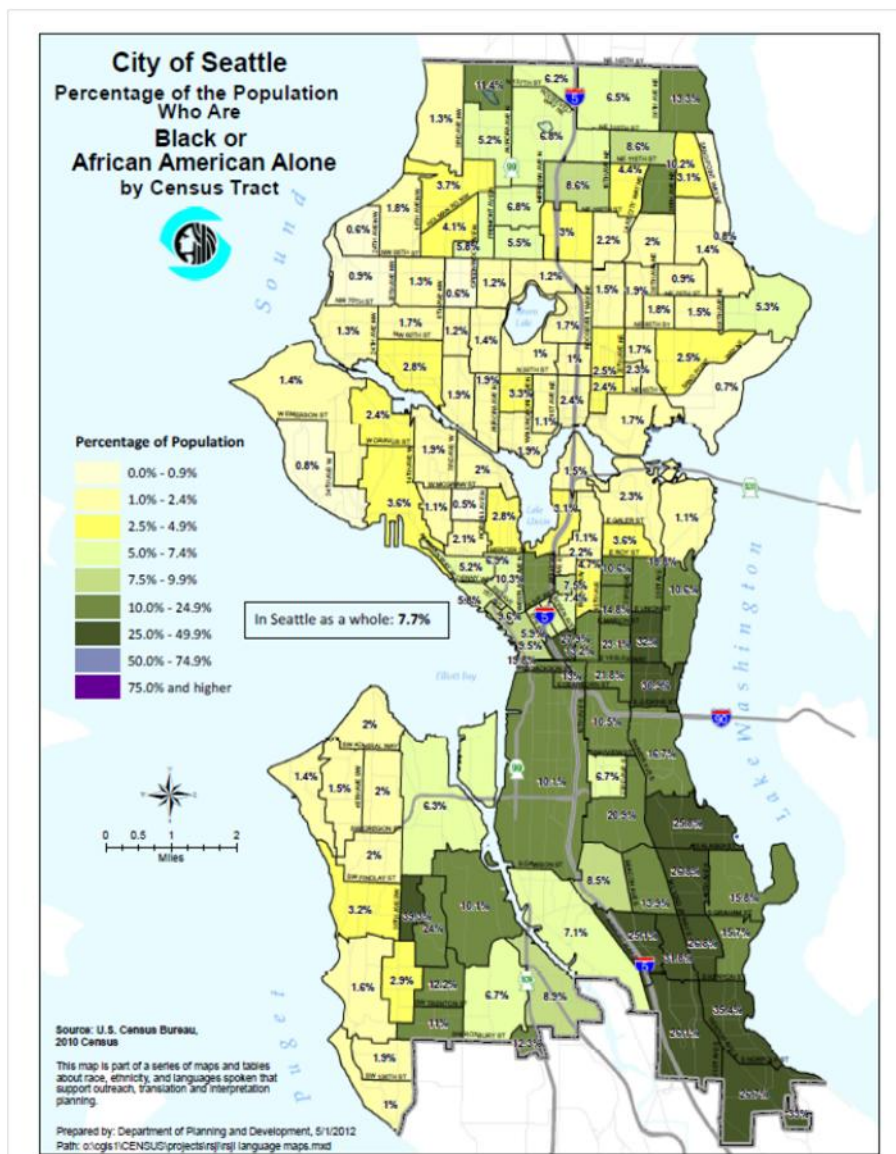


Image 5.1 The census tracks with the highest percentage of Black or African American residents are now south of the Central District as the population has shifted south. *Seattle Department of Planning and Development 5/1/2012*

[http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/cs/groups/pan/@pan/documents/web\\_informational/dpdd016866.pdf](http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/cs/groups/pan/@pan/documents/web_informational/dpdd016866.pdf)

In Seattle's Central District it is not simply the loss of individuals that contribute to the dissipation of a strong and geographically focused collective African American identity. As homes and businesses have been transformed or razed, the physical reminders of a shared past have been lost as well. New, modern townhomes continue to be built, taking the place of the older homes that housed generations of the city's Black community. The jazz clubs that could

once be found around Jackson Street and Yesler Avenues in the 1940s and 1950s have been torn down or transformed. The 908 Club is now an Irish-themed pub, and the Black and Tan building now houses a Vietnamese grocery. Even more recent additions to the community's cultural landscape have disappeared. Catfish Corner, Kingfish Cafe, and (farther south in the Rainier Valley) The Silver Fork are all Black-owned restaurants that have closed their doors in recent years. When important places vanish they take with them reference points that connect people to the past.

In 2013 Omari Tahir submitted a nomination form to the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board requesting that the old Liberty Bank building in the Central District be officially designated as an historic city landmark. The building was designed by African American architect Mel Streeter and, when it opened its doors in 1968, it became the first minority-owned bank in the Pacific Northwest. The public comments made during the building's designation hearing before the board make it clear that, for some members of the local African American community, the desire to save the otherwise physically unremarkable building from the wrecking ball was because of its connection to local history and the memories of a community (City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board 2014). For them, the old bank building was linked to memories of a successful effort to fight back against the discriminatory practices of other banking institutions during a time when practices such as redlining were commonplace.

In their comments in favor of the designation, speakers did not focus on the significance of the physical building, but instead used the building as a center point around which stories of childhood memories, neighborhood heroes, and neighborhood pride could be told. By keeping this one place protected they hoped to protect the memories that this site called to mind. The

Landmarks Board ultimately voted against granting the building status as a landmark, and as of last year plans were in the works to build mixed-use affordable housing in its place. One speaker at the designation hearing, referencing Jimi Hendrix lyrics about castles made of sand falling into the sea, said “that is what black history and black people’s institutions are in this city—they’re built on sand—and as soon as they are no longer defended they drift into the sea, and go back to the old status quo” (City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board 2014:24).

Another local property, the MidTown Center on the corner of 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and Union Street, is also slated for potential redevelopment. The last property on the intersection to have not yet been sold or torn down as part of urban “renewal” efforts, the MidTown Center houses several Black-owned business. Some local residents view its potential loss as yet another example of how efforts to remake the Central District often result in the further displacement of the African American community. An article in *The Stranger* quotes local African American architect Donald King who noted,

This is the last place where there’s black-owned businesses in that intersection... It’s a microcosm of Seattle, one of the whitest large cities in the US... There are those who say [the black population is] going to be replaced by other people, but in a sense it’s saying the black businesses and the black lives don’t matter, and we can lose them because they have no intrinsic value (Richards 2015).

Barbara Thomas articulated the powerful sense of connection to space and place saying, “You had this place. You went out to work. And you came back. Went out to work. You came back.” And once the fragile ecology breaks apart, as people move away and spaces are transformed, “You don’t have a reference point... You don’t know that you really needed that center or how that center nurtured you or how that center helped you be who you are.”

Lefebvre’s triad conceptualizes space as being constructed by the intersection between physical space, conceptual space, and social space where lived experiences occur (1996:33). This triad

depends on the delicate balance between all three. When the physical space changes as buildings are leveled, or the space is reconceptualized by developers and urban planners, the space as directly *lived* in by individuals changes as well. The hood just “ain’t the same” and there is no way to reconstruct the space as it once was.

This loss of a “center” has made the desire to preserve and create spaces of memory even more important as there is a vital need to not simply preserve history but to preserve the very identity of a community. It is within this context that the building that houses the Northwest African American Museum has been recontextualized as a site of African American community history and memory. The controversy and heated rhetoric that preceded the creation of NAAM was underpinned by an intensely felt need to preserve a piece of the “old” neighborhood and to claim it as a new reference point before more memories were erased from the landscape. The building stands as a physical testament to a community whose physical landmarks have been destroyed or profoundly altered, and whose members are now dispersed throughout the city and beyond. The building itself—and not just the objects it holds—is a text that invokes memories of a neighborhood as it once was.

### **Preserving and Creating Community Memory**

*Olivia: Where’s the center [of the community] now?*

*Barbara Earl Thomas: The center is just in your head... And it’s mythical... When I say “my community,” I guess it’s the group of people who are willing to struggle with me and not put out my light.*

—(personal conversation, April 22, 2013)

In her chapter, “Museums and Community,” Croke writes, “In examples of community where a sense of place is central, the disruption of place becomes a key threat and people will pull together to construct a narrative of belonging to counteract this” (2006:172). Within the

context of a rapidly changing community, NAAM fills the role of providing a physical space that helps to locate and define the city's African American community by providing a gathering place where memories are shared. Both exhibits and programs trigger memories that serve to reaffirm a visitor's sense that they belong to a particular community. Two events, the annual ROOTS (Relatives of Old Timers) Family Picnic, and the inauguration of President Barack Obama in January 2009, are examples of the way that NAAM has become a reference point around which to reinterpret a collective African American community identity.

Although still a relatively new museum, NAAM becomes connected to older narratives of local African American history not just through its exhibits, but also (and perhaps more importantly) when visitors and organizations such as ROOTS invest it with meaning by utilizing it as a symbolic site of African American community building. The annual ROOTS Family Picnic began in the 1970s as a way to bring together close friends who had been "scattered and out of touch" (Washington State ROOTS 2010:5). ROOTS membership is made up of individuals and their relatives who lived in Washington State before World War II when the war industry brought a huge influx of new African American residents to the region (hence the term "old-timers"), but everyone is welcome to take part in the family-style picnic. Each year hundreds of local residents and out-of-town friends and relatives gather together on the Sunday before Labor Day to listen to live music, and to celebrate family and their rootedness in Seattle. The first ROOTS picnic took place in Seattle's Seward Park, but "bees and a lack of parking forced a change of location to Gas Works Park" (unknown, ca. 1950). The opening of NAAM afforded a new location for the event, and since 2009 the museum has worked with the ROOTS Steering Committee to support this annual event.

The first inauguration of President Barack Obama was another early indicator of how the museum might come to be utilized by local residents as a center, or gathering point for the community. At the time of the inauguration NAAM was less than a year old. Staff were stretched thin, and were still getting a handle on how best to support and market public programs. The idea to show the inaugural ceremony on the big ceiling-mounted screen in the Legacy Gallery arose at the last minute. A few emails were sent out, the internet connection and projector system were double-checked, and in the pre-dawn hours of January 20<sup>th</sup> we set out some chairs and waited to see who would come.

People first arrived in small trickles, and then in a flood. Adults and children walked in from the damp fog. My coworkers and I rushed around to put out every chair we had, and still more people came. People were packed in, standing shoulder to shoulder. We opened the barn doors that lead out to the patio and late arrivals stood outside in a scrum, standing on tiptoes and craning their necks to get a look inside. It was so crowded that visitors repeatedly pushed up against the AV control panel, causing the internet feed to turn off. We turned on all the computers in the genealogy lab so that some of the crowd could watch the event on the screens in there.

The crowd of roughly 300 that watched the inauguration was racially and ethnically diverse. While they could have watched the event at home, they chose to witness it with others as part of a collective celebration. They came to the museum, not because it was the only public venue showing the event, but because it made sense to them to come to witness the swearing-in of the country's first African-American president at an African American museum involved in the work of community memory-making.

More recently NAAM has offered itself as a place for difficult conversations following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. In partnership with PechaKucha Seattle<sup>13</sup> the event “#Ferguson” took place only two weeks after the shooting and brought together a racially diverse group of community activists and artists to share their heartfelt and often anguished responses. Despite the short notice for this event, 275 people attended. When I arrived about an hour after the event began an overflow crowd was waiting outside the museum’s door hoping to find a seat during intermission. Afterwards, journalist (and #Ferguson speaker) Charles Mudede described the mood that evening as being “that of a church... a secular church, a church of the here and now, a church for believers and nonbelievers,” where audiences responded to the presentations as they would to a sermon (Mudede 2014). If churches such as New Hope, First A.M.E., Goodwill, or Mount Zion CME no longer bind Seattle’s African American community together as tightly as they did when Barbara Earl Thomas was a child, people will search out other places to gather together to celebrate, mourn, and commemorate events. As former centers of community have shifted or been lost, NAAM has stepped into a role in ensuring that a sense collective belonging remains.

### **Identity and Belonging**

*This museum is a history link. It connects us in a way. I see it as a connector. As a resource. I see it as one of the foundations in the community. Its doors are open to everyone in this community, and anyone who visits outside this community. I see it as a sense of pride. I see a lot of pride in the community for this museum.*

—Stephanie Johnson-Toliver (personal conversation, August 23, 2011)

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<sup>13</sup> PechaKucha Seattle is part of the global PechaKucha 20x20 network that promotes informal gatherings where speakers follow the PechaKucha format: A roughly 6 minute presentation (a lecture or performance) accompanied by 20 images that are displayed for 20 seconds each. The first PechaKucha Night took place in Tokyo in 2003, and they now take place in over 700 cities around the world. <http://www.pechakucha.org/>

Halbwach is credited with coining the term “collective memory” (1980). According to him, memory is built on the social framework of group experiences. We rely on our relationships with others to construct our own personal narratives by weaving our stories into historical frameworks that only make sense in relation to the group that we are connected to. Given that “every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework” (1980:140), he explains that groups of people and the places they live in co-construct one another as each leaves its imprint on the other. Groups of people “engrave their form in some way upon the soil and retrieve their collective remembrances within the spatial framework thus defined” (156). Places in the landscape thus become sites of memory through their impact on daily experiences.

The process of creating collective community memories within the space of a museum requires that visitors find a personal connection between their own histories and the narratives presented in the exhibits. Each visitor brings with them their own unique histories, identities, and motivations that impact how they learn and how they experience the museum. The dynamic process that takes place between visitors and the museum reshapes both as visitors locate themselves within the discourses presented in the museum, and the museum (as an institution whose discursive power is derived from the individuals who interact with it) is granted the role as a center of community identity.

In his book, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, John Falk identifies various categories of “identity-related museum motivations” that encourage an individual to visit a particular museum and shape how they find meaning in their visit (2009:157). For the purposes of his study Falk narrowly focuses the concept of “identity” to exclude variables of race and ethnicity (along with gender, social class and age) (2009:11). However, he acknowledges that these identities “would almost certainly be important in museums that focus specifically on

identity-related issues of race/ethnicity, gender, or nationality” (2009:11). Through the comments NAAM visitors share in comment books and surveys it is possible to see some of the ways that race and ethnic identity shape their museum-going experience and the ways in which they are able to make connections with content presented in the museum.

NAAM regularly solicits visitor comments in both rotating galleries. Visitors respond with a mix of written observations of specific events and exhibits and comments about the museum as a whole. For some exhibitions, prompts are provided to encourage visitors to interact with the content. At other times the comment cards or books are left blank, allowing visitors to write whatever they wish. These comments provide a rich source of information about how visitors experience the museum and how they connect to the content of the museum’s exhibits.

A total of 297 entries were made in the visitor comment books from two exhibitions: *After Hours: The Joint is Jumpin’*, which focused on the jazz scene that thrived in the Pacific Northwest between the 1930s and 1960s, and *East by Northwest: Ethiopian Journeys to the Northwest*, which looked at the experiences of members of Seattle’s Ethiopian community. After typing up the comments from these exhibitions, I categorized them by theme and content in order to gain a better understanding of the way these particular visitors were making sense and engaging with the museum during their visit. The majority of these comments (56%) consisted of mostly short, general expressions of thanks (“It is beautiful,” “I like it, it’s really really cool”), while another 22% (classified as “Other”) consisted of what Sharon Macdonald describes as a type of visitor “graffiti” made up of signatures, doodles, and other random bits (Macdonald 2005).

The most interesting comments, however, were the 18% that indicated the visitor was explicitly connecting what they saw or learned in the exhibits to their own personal experiences

and identity. This category of comments was distinguished by the use of terms of inclusion such as “my,” “our,” or “we,” as well as details that indicated the visitor was connecting to the museum on a personal level through the stories of community history and identity. These particular comments could be divided into five subcategories:

1. Expressions of racial/ethnic pride (18):  
*“I feel proud to be a Black man in Seattle today. Thank you!”*
2. Personal connections made to individuals highlighted in the exhibits or to other community members (11):  
*“It’s great to read about Bobby Bradford and his cousin Cleve Williams from Portland. Bob worked with me at the Vancouver V.A., at his day-job as a barber. He played pocket cornet, and Cleve trombone. Bob told me he worked for Cab Calloway and Quincy Jones. My brother John worked with Bob’s son Dennis Bradford, a fine drummer. Thanks”*
3. For some, their visit evoked memories of the past (10):  
*“My mother grew up in Seattle, and was in college during the 1940s. I remember her talking about wanting to go to the Black and Tan, because that was the cool place. But she didn’t ever get to go—I guess it wasn’t considered proper for white girls like her. She died more than ten years ago, and I think she would have enjoyed this exhibit. I did.”*
4. Expanded knowledge about one’s own community and/or neighborhood (9)  
*“I’ve never seen another museum that showed me so much of my culture”*
5. Expressions of general feelings of connection to community and community history (6)  
*“As a ‘white’ person, I am so pleased to see such a great collection of tributes to the history of our local communities. We need not just a single Black History month, but visible stories every day that acknowledge the lives of our Afro-American brothers & sisters...thank you for creating a space where that can be real, every day!”*

It is in the comments where visitors make personal connections to the exhibits that they often explicitly or implicitly identify themselves as being a member of a particular racial or ethnic group. Of those who made these types of personal entries, 64% indicated that they were of African American or African descent, and 3% identified as white. This difference can be attributed to both the fact that Euro-Americans tend to see themselves as not belonging to a racial

category (and so are less likely to use their race as a form of self-identification), and the fact that African American and African visitors felt a stronger personal connection to the museum.

This strong sense of personal connection to a particular shared history can also be seen in the results of a survey I gave to 89 visitors<sup>14</sup> over the course of several months in 2011. On the days I conducted the survey (both during the week and on weekends) I set up a table in the entryway of the museum and, as visitors entered, I asked if they would consider taking a brief survey at the end of their visit. As they exited the museum I was there to ask them for a moment of their time once again. Because NAAM is a small museum I was able to speak to every visitor who entered and exited the museum. With the exception of a few families with very young children who did not want to stop before heading home, everyone I approached participated and, in return, received a NAAM pencil, a fortune cookie containing a paper publicizing the *Checking Our Pulse* exhibition, or both. I very quickly discovered that visitors were generally more than happy to fill out the survey and enjoyed having the opportunity to articulate their experiences.

The survey respondents were asked eight open-ended questions, including “How do you most often racially or ethnically identify yourself?” and “What does this museum mean to you?”<sup>15</sup> Responses to the question “What does this museum mean to you?” fell into four general categories: 1) comments about the museum as an important addition to the cultural landscape of the area, 2) general expressions of thanks for the museum, 3) the museum as a place to learn about local history and African American culture, and 4) the museum as a place to which they had a personal connection. Comments in this last category included terms of inclusion, expressions of pride, and expressions of how the museum offers a way to recognize the

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<sup>14</sup> All survey participants were eighteen years of age or older.

<sup>15</sup> The other questions were “Where do you live?” “How old are you?” “What brought you to the museum today?” “Including today, how many times have you been to the Northwest African American Museum?” and “Before coming to the museum, what did you expect to find or learn here?” and “What aspect of your visit was the most memorable?”

importance of the local African American community. Much overlap existed among these three sentiments—with a single comment including more than one of these ideas. However, the way respondents personally identified as a member of a racial or ethnic group influenced their responses.

For example, 71% of the respondents who identified as Black, African American, or African indicated that, for them, the museum is first and foremost a place that they connected to on a personal and emotional level either through feelings of inclusion or pride, or by feeling that the museum offers long-overdue recognition of the local African American community. Of all the respondents, White visitors were the least likely to note that the museum was personally meaningful to them or to use words of inclusion in describing what the museum meant to them. These very different responses indicate that the racial and ethnic identity of museum visitors impacts the extent to which they feel themselves to be a part of the narrative of community presented at NAAM.

In their research report on cross-ethnic arts attendance for the Dance Center of Columbia College Chicago the researchers from Slover Linett Strategies Inc. found that for African Americans arts participants, even more so than for other non-White respondents, the strongest motivating factor that encouraged them to attend dance performances was the desire to explore and connect to their own cultural identity (2008:18, 33). This finding echoes a report by the American Alliance of Museums (formerly the American Association of Museums), which stated that, “African Americans are more likely to attend events characterized by black themes and in which blacks are well-represented among performers, staff and audiences members” (Farrell and Madvedeva 2010:14).

This previous research, as well as my own work, clearly indicates that there is a deep and profound hunger among many African Americans to forge tangible cultural connections, explore the meaning of African American identity, and pass this knowledge onto their children. This longing clearly came across in many of the survey responses I received from African American visitors. For these respondents NAAM means:

- "... the ability to express myself and learn more about my people"
- "It means legacy. As a Black student I look at this museum as a legacy of those who lived and pursued their dreams no matter the cost. These people paved a way for me to become the best that I can be w/o limitations."
- "This museum represents community & home for me."
- "Makes me proud to be AA—the recognition of all who paved the way is most important"
- "Very meaningful for my school-aged son. Want him to recognize his potential, see history of greatness."
- "The museum represents my pride in our collective heritage"

One of the most beautiful expressions of this search for self-knowledge and community belonging that I have come across at NAAM appeared in a gallery comment book one day. The visitor wrote: "This museum is my new sanctuary. These are my people I've been looking for... for so long. This is my new haven! Thank you for being here. Let's celebrate," (*After Hours: The Joint is Jumpin'* visitor comment book, 2010). For this particular visitor her visit to the museum was akin to a homecoming that gave her a sense of belonging and spiritual rest.

### **Why A Museum?**

One of the questions I have asked myself and others is, "Why are African American museums important?" The responses I received often referred back to these museums being a source of collective empowerment where histories that have often been under-valued or ignored in the past are now embraced and celebrated. Barbara Thomas pointed to these museums as

being a part of a collective “cultural maturation,” “And I think it’s important that we as a people just assert that, as part of our cultural maturation since 1864, we’re going to pick up the shreds of who we are and who we’ve been and own that. And part of owning it is creating some institutions that truthfully tell what some of those stories are” (personal conversation April 22, 2013). Many people I talked to pointed out that the lack of African American voices and perspectives in mainstream cultural institutions has compelled the African American community to take on this work themselves. The work of collecting, remembering, and presenting these stories at NAAM becomes a community effort to create a usable past that anchors African American history into the fabric of a rapidly changing demographic landscape.

**Chapter 6**  
**Identity and Self-Narration:**  
**“A Museum Is Very Special When You Think It’s About You”**

When I worked at Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry I saw train enthusiasts get excited about taking their picture by a 1930s-era passenger train, and I listened to World War II buffs talk animatedly about navel tactics at the German U-boat exhibit. However, the excitement of these museum visitors pales in comparison to that of the little boy I saw who recognized himself in a picture in NAAM’s permanent exhibit. “That’s ME! That’s ME! I’m in the picture!” he shouted to his friends, his teachers, and to everyone within hearing range. His face was beaming and his smile was huge. He was in the museum’s story, and the museum was now also in his story.

As discussed in the previous chapter, NAAM serves as a site of collective memory-making for visitors who are looking to connect with, and rediscover their rootedness in, community. In addition to this community connection, NAAM also provides visitors with the elements with which to help build and affirm their personal identities by providing objects, narratives, and experiences that offer external validation and semantic order to their lived experiences. As visitors utilize these tools NAAM becomes intimately involved in the work of constructing the identities and self-narratives of the people who come in contact with the museum.

In his article “Doing Identity Work in Museums” Jay Rounds examines the role that museums play in providing opportunities for people to do the work of identity construction. According to Rounds, “identity work” can be defined as “the processes through which we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe in that identity” (2006:133). Since identity is a process that develops and changes over

time rather than a stable “thing,” we are continually in the process of constructing, confirming, and changing it. Rounds notes three characteristics of museums that make them uniquely suited for supporting this type of work (2006:140-144). The first is that museums provide order and ontological security by systematically ordering reality in a way that provides a secure foundation onto which individuals can structure the events in their own lives. Second, museums provide a space where individuals can enact specific identities, “borrowing from those identities a bit of the aura of special importance held by the objects on display” (2006:142). Finally, Rounds argues that, although dramatic identity transformations are rare, museums offer experiences to explore identity in ways that visitors may refer back to in the future if they desire to adopt new roles.

### **Order, Ontological Security, and Personal Narrative**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the development of an African American popular history began in the early twentieth century. It is only within the past one hundred years, after the instability of slavery and Reconstruction, that a coherent and “orderly” African American historical narrative has emerged, and it was not until the end of the twentieth century that this narrative began to be adopted into mainstream discourses about United States history. One of the goals at NAAM is to fill the absences and silences in accounts of Pacific Northwest history by uncovering and highlighting the stories of African Americans in the region. Within the space of NAAM, the narrative of African Americans in the Pacific Northwest is given chronological and thematic order in the Journey Gallery. Along both ends of this gallery texts and interactive displays temporally locate objects and individuals in the region’s history by highlighting the contributions that local African Americans have made. The overall story is one of overcoming

challenges and obstacles in order to establish thriving communities. The main timeline in the exhibit, “Struggle and Success,” displays two hundred years of African American history in the Pacific Northwest alongside national events. Other sections of the exhibit— “African American Journeys,” “Building Community,” and “Community Stories”—paint a picture of the community building that has taken place in the region’s African American neighborhoods and communities.



Figure 6.2. NAAM’s Journey Gallery. (Photo by author)



Figure 6.1. “Reporting for Duty” display in NAAM’s Journey Gallery. (Photo by author)

The content of this gallery grew out of the community focus groups that were held prior to the museum’s opening. Participants in the “Community Conversations” repeatedly articulated a desire for the museum to include stories that had a local focus. Student participants at one focus group wanted the museum to include stories about famous African Americans from the region, as well as stories of White allies and historical information about the local neighborhoods (Carter and Moxley 2006). Notes from another meeting recorded that participants were interested in seeing “stories that talk about everyday life of those who migrated to Seattle, ‘not just the famous’” (West and Stallworth 2006). One facilitator commented, “All participants agreed that

when they enter NAAM they want it to feel like ‘home’ in ‘even the smallest corner.’ It must evoke to every visitor a place so special that, no matter who they are, regardless of race, ethnicity, or personal story, they ‘find their story there’” (McKinney 2006).

Reflecting the input gathered from these sessions, the Journey Gallery includes the stories of both well-known and everyday people. In addition to the stories of many Black “firsts” in the Pacific Northwest—such as Thelma Dewitty, Seattle’s first African American teacher, and Harold Mills, the first African American to pilot an Unlimited Hydroplane (the fastest class of racing boat)—the gallery also highlights the lives of lesser-known individuals such as James Kirk (a Pullman Porter who made his way from Arkansas to Seattle via Oregon) and early twentieth century rodeo rider Jesse Stahhl. The museum has also installed a number of small, temporary exhibits in the Journey Gallery at the request of community members or as part of other museum-related programs. For one family reunion that took place at NAAM, participants asked museum staff to display items and photographs of a prominent family member during the event. At other times the museum has installed displays celebrating the anniversaries of historically Black Panhellenic societies at the request of local chapters.

The Journey Gallery provides an outline into which individuals can insert episodes from their own lives in a way that gives their lived experiences coherence within the larger whole. This can be seen in the ways that one group of visitors I observed interacted with the exhibits to “find their story there.” Two women, one African American and one White, came to the museum with their two teenage children. As they made their way through the Journey Gallery the women used the exhibits to temporally locate their own experiences and to share them with one another. In the “After Hours” section of the gallery (which highlights Seattle’s old jazz clubs and music scene of the 1940s–60s) the women discussed the various places they were familiar with, which

prompted a discussion about when their families arrived in Seattle. The group then moved on to the “In the News” section where a video shows historical news footage of the civil rights protests and speeches that took place in both the American South and the Pacific Northwest. The two mothers talked to their children about the riots that took place in the 1960s and about how federal marshals were called in to escort African American students to school. As the video images continued to play, the White woman asked her friend, “Did something like that happen to you?” Her friend murmured something in reply. The group then wandered down the gallery where they recognized a picture of a local high school and the women reminisced about how high school lettermen “letters” and pins were awarded. Next they stopped at the exhibit highlighting some of Seattle’s African American churches where they talked about their memories of Mount Zion Baptist Church. The African American woman lingered at the exhibit and was then joined by another African American visitor who struck up a conversation about the people and places they both knew.

As I sat on a bench in the gallery observing and taking notes on this particular visit, I strained to hear the details of these conversations. I wanted to remain as unobtrusive as possible so that I would not influence the intimate conversations that were taking place, but I also wished that I could hear more of what they said. Both of these women utilized the exhibits in the Journey Gallery as a tool to help organize their personal narratives and to put these experiences in context in order to share them with their children and other museum visitors. Both inserted their personal histories into the timeline of the gallery’s narrative and made a connection between the displays, their memories, and each other. For the African American visitor the exhibits provided not only a narrative structure for her experiences as a Seattle resident in general, but also as an African American Seattleite in particular. The footage of Civil Rights-era

protests spurred her friend to ask, “Did something like that happen to you?” thus opening the door for her to mentally organize her own lived experiences against the backdrop of local and national events. Rounds writes that museums

... provide vantage points from which the order that’s invisible in quotidian life becomes intensified and visible in the space of an exhibition. Outside is the blooming, buzzing confusion of everyday life, an endless flow of one thing after another. Inside the museum, the visitor finds a world laid out in order, in which everything has its proper place in a meaningful system, in which everything is neatly labeled. The museum shows us a world that makes sense, and that is a world in which we can believe that our lives make sense (Rounds 2006:140).

For these museum visitors the exhibits placed their lived experiences into a narrative order and affirmed the importance of events they had lived through and places they had been. This interest in ordering experiences is made visible when one observes the amount of time visitors spend looking at the main “Struggle and Success” timeline in the gallery. The two women and their children spent a collective total of over eighteen minutes looking at this timeline either by themselves or with other members of their group. Like most NAAM visitors, the timeline, with its clearly organized and illustrated sequence of both local and national events, provided them with a scaffold onto which they could place events from their own lives.

In his chapter, “Self-Narration in Social Life,” Kenneth Gergen approaches self-narratives as “conversational resources” through which we create our identities by the use of “culturally and historically situated” elements (2007:249). Selected events are usually placed in a temporal sequence with an eye towards establishing a particular endpoint, and demarcation signs are used to designate the beginning and end of a narrative (Gergen 2007:249-252). Since the narrative tools we use are culturally constructed it follows that narratives of the self are dependent on our relationships with others. As Gergen writes, “Narration may appear to be monologic, but its success in establishing identity will inevitably rely on dialogue” (2007:257).

This idea that personal narratives and identities are inextricably linked to the stories and narratives of others means that personal narratives involve the actions of other people beside the protagonist, and that these narratives are dependent on the support and affirmation of the rest of the community. If the narratives are not validated by others they will not be sustained. By affirming the importance of particular stories and experiences, and placing them in a usable order, NAAM facilitates the construction of self-narratives through the accessible and relatable narratives.

### **Enactment**

The second characteristic of museums that Rounds notes as supporting the work of identity construction is that of “enactment.” Identity, whether racial, cultural, professional, or other, is performed within specific cultural contexts (Johnson 2003:7; Rounds 2006:141). We enact who we are in public and Rounds argues that museums, as “space[s] designed for the display and performance of meaning,” provide a unique venue for the public performance of identity.

Rounds focuses on the validation of external identity that museum visitors receive when surrounded by fellow museum-goers—“the sort of people that we imagine ourselves to be, or want to be ourselves” (2006:142). The various motivators that lead people to visit museums can shed light on the identities they seek to enact during their visits by providing insight into the roles they take on during the visit. When I surveyed museum visitors one of the first questions I asked was “What brought you to the museum today?” Of the eighty-nine respondents, thirty-three indicated that curiosity about the museum and interest in African American history motivated their visit; thirty-four specifically visited to celebrate either Martin Luther King Day

or in honor of Black History Month; sixteen came in order to teach others (most often their children) about Black history; and eight attended as part of a school or personal research project.<sup>16</sup>

These survey results, combined with comments left in visitor comment books, help paint a portrait of the various identities NAAM visitors enact during their visits. There are the curious cultural patrons who value the arts, enjoy participating in cultural activities and come to “experience something different”; the patrons who are particularly conscientious about issues concerning race in general and African American history in particular (“My children are biracial. History is very important to me and my family.”); people who identify as teachers and mentors for the next generation and who “want [their] kids to learn about our history.”; and students and life-long learners (“[Doing] research for film project on Afro American rappers. I’m a poet/filmmaker.”).

Comments collected from both the survey and the visitor comment books also show that visits to NAAM are a way for visitors to enact a particular racial identity—specifically as a way for African American visitors to enact “Blackness” by visiting a specifically demarcated African American space. For some visitors, visiting an African American museum in an unfamiliar city becomes a way to reaffirm a common racial connection by paying respects to the local African American community. In one comment a visitor from Orlando, Florida wrote:

We were on a long layover from a cruise back to Florida and wanted something to do. Your museum filled the need and was thoroughly enjoyable. We always visit black colleges or museums whenever & wherever our vacations take us. This rivals the Dusable in Chicago and the one in Boston. Thank you for enlightening a “southern girl” about her kinfolk in the Northwest! (NAAM visitor comment book for *After Hours: The Joint is Jumpin’*, 2010)

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<sup>16</sup> Some respondents provided more than one answer to this question.

Several out-of-town visitors have expressed the same sentiment to me. At one NAAM event I met an African American couple from Florida who were in town on their honeymoon. They learned about the museum through an advertisement in a local paper and decided to take a cab ride far away from the typical Seattle tourist attractions in order to visit the museum. Stories like this resonate with me because I also hunt down African American museums and landmarks when I travel. For me, this comes from a desire to pay respects to those who came before, to honor and connect with overlooked histories, and to financially support African American organizations. NAAM volunteer and consultant Stephanie Johnson-Toliver told me about a conversation she had with an acquaintance who told her that, like the visitor quoted above, she was going to make it a point to learn about the history of the African American community of every town she visited for the rest of her life. This resonated with Stephanie who said that she would like to do the same thing during her own travels. In speaking about NAAM, she told me, “I think this museum can be that for many, many people who not only live here but people who just come to visit [Seattle]” (personal conversation, August 23, 2011).

Several African American families celebrating family reunions have made a point of visiting NAAM. This suggests that Stephanie’s hopes that the museum would serve as a uniquely African American destination have, at least in part, been realized. For many African Americans, the family reunion is a highly organized affair, and an entire niche market has grown up to support and accommodate visiting groups. In her paper, “More Than a Picnic: African American Family Reunions,” Ione D. Vargus writes that most African American family reunions have a similar structure: an informal gathering on Friday night, Saturday activities followed by an evening banquet, and a Sunday worship service prior to everyone’s departure (2002:4). For many families one of the organized activities is a tour that serves the dual purpose of being an

enjoyable way to spend time with family while also providing an educational experience (2002:6).<sup>17</sup> Family reunion groups arrive at NAAM in chartered busses or vans to take part in guided tours (often dressed in the requisite matching family reunion T-shirt) and some groups also rent museum space for their formal evening banquet. By linking a visit to NAAM to this uniquely African American family ritual, the symbolic power of the museum reaffirms a particular cultural and racial family heritage as these visitors enact and reaffirm their identities as African Americans.

### **Identity Exploration**

Rounds, drawing on the work of Paris and Mercer (2002), agrees that “dramatic transformations of identity during museum visits will be extremely rare,” and are most likely to take place “in special museums and exhibitions that focus on significant social and historical events such as the Holocaust, the African diaspora, Ellis Island immigration, internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and similar collections” (Paris and Mercer 2002:402 as quoted in Rounds 2006:144). Because these types of “special museums” are not the topic of his paper, he uses the term “identity exploration” to refer to the trying-on of identities that we may or may not draw on in the future.<sup>18</sup> The bits and pieces of ostensibly “useless” information that we glean from museum visits can then be utilized at a later date if the need and circumstances arise (Rounds 2006:145).

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<sup>17</sup> Vargus’ description of the structure and activities that are typical of African American family reunions perfectly describes my own family reunions. In my family, organized tours have included visits to historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), trips to museums, and visits to outlet malls. In contrast, the White side of my family tends to have longer, informal gatherings in a rural setting, with lots of swimming and bike-riding.

<sup>18</sup> In his article Rounds does the same thing as John Falk in *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (see previous chapter). They both acknowledge that in some “special” museums racial identity might be an important factor in assessing visitor experiences, but choose to limit their work to mainstream institutions. This narrow focus harms the field of museology by providing researchers with an easy excuse to avoid addressing race entirely.

Some of this information that visitors glean from museum visits, Rounds suggests, is information about “alternative ways of living, and of making sense of the world” which, as presented in the safe confines of the museum, comes “without the risks that might be involved in actual immersion in those alternatives” (2006:146). As an outside observer the visitor “can encounter another culture in a way that supports [their] own identity work, without the inconveniences involved in having to directly encounter the people attached to the culture” (2006:146).

Based on Paris and Mercer’s explanation, NAAM would fall into the category of a “special” museum, which significantly complicates this type of museum exploration. Since many visitors are African American, the type of identity exploration that they engage in can, in fact, be deeply personal and transformative. One of NAAM’s Board members shared a story about a visiting high school student who was using the museum’s genealogy lab computers during a school tour activity. During the activity he discovered that he had been named after his grandfather—a man whom he had never met—and that they shared the same birthday. The student was so emotionally overwhelmed by this discovery that it brought him to tears. In another instance, at the opening of an exhibit that explored the history of Seattle’s jazz scene, a volunteer recognized her uncle in one of the large-scale images in the gallery. It was a photograph she had never seen, and she excitedly told everyone about it and had her picture taken while standing next to it. These experiences, and others like them, deeply impact visitors’ senses of self-identity by filling in voids that exist in their personal histories or by tying their experiences to a larger historical narrative. As one visitor noted in a comment in a survey I distributed, “This place means a lot. Knowing there’s a place where you can learn more about your background outside of school is wonderful.”

Members of culturally dominant groups often take for granted the fact that the histories presented in museums are those to which they can relate; they feature social actors that look like them and share similar life experiences. Although the representation of minorities has greatly improved over the past thirty years, museums, movies, television, and classroom history lessons still depict the historical experiences of Euro-Americans as normative. NAAM's visitors are often surprised to learn about the existence of Black cowboys since the archetypal cowboy continues to be the rugged White man of media fame even though thousands of cowboys in the American West (perhaps as many as twenty-five percent) were African American (Hardaway 2001:27). This new awareness about the roles African Americans have played in establishing communities in the Pacific Northwest can be truly transformative for many in the African American community who have had few encounters with historical narratives to which they can relate. One of the high school participants in the museum's Youth Curator program articulated this in a very simple but profound way when he, in a post-program survey wrote, "A museum is very special when you think it's about you."

Visitors to NAAM who are not African American, however, do find themselves in a situation that allows them to explore alternative ways of being. Their visit introduces them to experiences and perspectives that are different than their own, and highlights voices that they might not otherwise hear. Between 2010 and 2013 Seattle's White population increased by 1.5 percent (to reach 67 percent) even as the minority population in the U.S. as a whole has grown considerably (Balk 2014). This has garnered Seattle the distinction of being the fifth Whitest big city in the nation (Balk 2014). For some White museum visitors, NAAM might provide them their only glimpse into the region's various Black communities. However, these visitors must do their exploring "inconvenienced" (to use Rounds' term) by the presence of actual African

Americans. One can safely presume that NAAM's non-African American museum visitors value racial diversity and cross-cultural understanding, but as visitors in an African American space, surrounded by African Americans, a certain amount of self-policing takes place as these visitors take pains not to offend anyone and to present themselves as being culturally competent. This is especially true in a liberal-leaning city like Seattle where the prevailing White liberalism tends to take political correctness to heart. White visitors have discretely asked me if they should be using the term "African American" or "Black" when referring to people. Another White visitor once asked a staff member (who was also White) if White people were welcome at NAAM. These individuals were strictly policing themselves and their interactions in order to make sure that they would not give offence.

Although NAAM strives to provide an easily accessible way for non-Black visitors to learn about African American history and culture (affording them the opportunity to explore and enact their identities as culturally well-rounded individuals), this type of hyper self-policing suggests that for some visitors African Americans themselves remain "Othered" as mysterious objects of curiosity. These visitors act as though they are visiting a foreign land and are trying to figure out how to navigate. This disconnect was evident in my visitor surveys. As noted in the previous chapter, when I surveyed visitors about what NAAM meant to them, White visitors were the least likely to mention that they connected personally to the museum. Instead, White respondents (more than any other racial group) overwhelmingly identified the museum as being either a place to learn or an important addition to the cultural landscape rather than as a place to which they felt a personal connection as local residents, fellow Pacific Northwesterners, or simply as residents of a nation whose history has been profoundly shaped by the idea of race. Typical comments by White visitors in response to the question "What does NAAM mean to

you?” included “[It is a] valuable resource for Seattle/Pacific Northwest,” “Another heritage to learn about,” and “It’s a place for exploring African American history in the Northwest.” These types of comments suggest that some visitors simply do not see themselves as part of the story NAAM presents, but instead take on the identity of (to use a term from John Falk’s categories of museum-going identities) “the explorer” or “experience seeker” (Falk 2009:158). These identities, while helpful and appropriate for a museum-going experience, carry with them the potential to be distancing if these visitors cannot find a way to relate to the museum from a more equitable perspective as fellow community members and history-makers.

For a small number of White visitors NAAM has acted as a place where they can safely explore a very particular type of identity—that of the contrite confessor who contacts the museum in order to atone for past racial “sins.” Soon after the museum opened one woman donated a plate from Seattle’s long-defunct Coon Chicken Inn restaurant featuring the establishment’s caricatured “Coon” mascot of a gaping, red-lipped bellboy. In her letter she noted that she had purchased the plate as a young and ignorant teenager and, out of embarrassment, had hidden it away in her attic for many years. She did not want it in her home anymore and hoped the museum could make use of it. Another time, a White gentleman came to the museum with a bundle under his arm and insisted that he would only speak to the curator. The bundle turned out to be a large wooden plank painted on one side with the likeness of another “Coon” character with a large hole cut into the wood where the character’s gaping mouth was. Fitted into the mouth was a mirror. The man said that his brother had collected this piece of scrap wood at a dump for a woodworking project but had never noticed the offensive painting on the other side. This supposedly unremarkable piece of wood then sat in a closet for many years until the man, while going through his brother’s things, discovered what was painted on the

reverse side. He decided to bring it to the museum to be either added to the collection or disposed of. Whether his story was true or not, his act was one of penance for being in contact with a tainted object which caused him anxiety and was at odds with his identity as a tolerant person. Just recently the museum received an anonymous package containing a dirty apron decorated with a caricatured African “cannibal” roasting his White victim (who was wearing a pith helmet) on a spit. For these donors, NAAM provided a physical space where they could, quite literally, cast off an embarrassing past and reaffirm the sense of self that they wanted to portray.

### **Challenges to Identity Making**

In his article “Embracing Ambiguity: The Challenge of Interpreting African American History in Museums,” Lonnie Bunch (2007) suggests that most museums in the U.S. have failed to adequately address the nuances and complexities of African American history, and he points to what he sees as the four main challenges of interpreting African American history. These are “The Challenge of Transcending the Rosy Glow of the Past” in which African American history is presented as a conflict-free, steady and progressive march towards overcoming obstacles of discrimination; “The Challenge of Resisting Monolithic Depictions of the Past” wherein African American history is presented solely through the lens of the middle class; “The Challenge of Ambiguity” as museums too often seek to present the public with easy answers to complex problems; and “The Challenge to Find a ‘New Integration’” that would better integrate African American history and culture into exhibitions of American society (2007). His arguments, while focused on the ways that mainstream museums interpret African American history, are also

highly relevant to the identity work that occurs when visitors utilize the content of these exhibits to craft their identity narratives at NAAM.

*“The Challenge of Transcending the Rosy Glow of the Past”*

The feedback generated from the Community Conversation focus groups prior to the museum’s opening indicated that participants overwhelmingly wanted to hear positive and inspiring stories about the African American community. They wanted stories about how communities were sustained through collaborative efforts and about how the experience of overcoming a history of slavery and institutionalized segregation could be seen as points of racial strength. They wanted inclusive stories that showed how African Americans built businesses and became community leaders, and they wanted their children to hear the positive success stories that they might not hear in their classrooms. As a result of this feedback, the rosy, straightforward and unambiguous stories primarily appear in NAAM’s Journey Gallery.

A few participants did mention a desire to see more complex narratives. One wanted to “see people’s stories—difficult ones, ones that would even make you feel uncomfortable” (West Stallworth, 2006). Another wanted to see class issues addressed, and a group of teen participants was interested in learning about the local history of gangs and gang violence. Although not represented in the permanent gallery, some of these themes have been touched on in a few of NAAM’s rotating exhibitions. In 2010 *Checking Our Pulse: Health and Healers in the African American Community* included a section on the spread of HIV and AIDS in the Black community and the role that homophobia plays in preventing serious health issues from being addressed. *The Corner: 23rd and Union* in 2011 was both a photography exhibit and an audio documentary that included the voices of neighborhood residents who shared their thoughts and

feelings about Seattle's rapidly gentrifying Central District.<sup>19</sup> NAAM's public programs also regularly present powerful opportunities to discuss issues of police violence, sexuality, LGBTQ issues and other difficult topics. Yet unless visitors come during the time of an exhibition that addresses some of these current events or attend a public program, they are unlikely to see anything beyond the "rosy" portrait of success and achievement. This means that the nuances and challenges that make up the identities and life experiences of many visitors are not acknowledged in the permanent exhibit.

The challenge for a minority institution depicting a less-than-positive picture of its community is how to do so in a way that visitors from outside that group will not come away having their negative stereotypes reaffirmed and remain psychologically distanced from the stories presented. NAAM seeks to have non-African American visitors identify with the museum's narratives on a personal level and embrace them as part of a shared heritage and identity, but challenging and difficult narratives run the risk of reinforcing the notion that African Americans are "Others" to whom White people cannot relate.

*"The Challenge of Resisting Monolithic Depictions of the Past"*

The stories told in the Journey Gallery tend to highlight the stories of the middle class and the successful. African American visitors who are poor, those whose lives are marked by instability, and even those whose politics and personal ideologies are outside the mainstream may not recognize themselves here. By affirming a particular Black identity and ignoring others, there is a risk of also alienating a portion of the African American community. The museum has worked hard to highlight many different community voices and perspectives in the rotating exhibitions and by inviting a diverse assortment of speakers and partners to participate and lead

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<sup>19</sup> An online version of this project, which was created by Jenny Asarnow and photographer Inye Wokoma, can be found at <http://23rdandunion.org/>

public programs, but, as with the challenge of “transcending the rosy glow of the past,” these efforts might not always be apparent.

The difficulty, of course, is that a given museum only has so much space in which to install objects, texts, and displays. As has been mentioned previously, it is difficult for a single museum to present all perspectives, but as the only African American museum in the region NAAM faces the pressure to represent the entire continuum of African American experiences. Finding a way to embrace and honor the wide diversity that exists within the Black community in a way that is manageable will require ongoing effort on the part of museum staff.

*“The Challenge of Ambiguity”*

Bunch believes that museums have tended to simply satisfy the desire for “celebration, comfort, and closure” instead of providing “opportunities for audiences to embrace and even revel in the ambiguities of the past” (2007: 54). When considering how this impacts the work of identity construction at NAAM Bunch’s call for presenting a more complex and ambiguous past is more complicated than it might be at a mainstream institution. As discussed above, the content of the Journey Gallery grew out of the Community Conversation focus groups prior to the museum’s opening. Stories from the past that embraced “celebration, comfort, and closure” were the types of stories that community members expressed a desire to see and which, for many African American visitors, evoke an intense sense of pride when they are able to connect with and insert their life experiences into the gallery’s narrative. For Bunch, however, the goal of museums should be to push visitors beyond this place of comfort. He states, “I would argue that one of the signs of successful exhibitions or programs is whether the audience becomes more comfortable with ambiguity and with complexity” (2007: 54). Would presenting a more complicated past of African American settlement in the Pacific Northwest open up space for a

wider variety of Black experiences to be represented, or would it alienate a community members who are looking for a “sanctuary” or “haven” (as a visitor wrote in a comment book) where a shared past is affirmed? Given the fact that Seattle, for so long, lacked an museum where African American history was regularly validated and celebrated, constructing a stable past is just as important as challenging it.

*“The Challenge to Find a ‘New Integration’”*

For Bunch, the challenge for a mainstream museum is that African American culture continues to be segregated from the core stories that museums explore (2007:54). He writes:

Far too frequently, African American culture is segregated from the other more “mainstream” stories that museums explore. Either African American culture is interpreted as an interesting and occasionally educational episode that has limited meaning for non-African American visitors or it is trumpeted as a special attraction that is more exotic than instructive (2007:54).

As discussed above, this dynamic can also be seen at NAAM. White visitors still often treat their visit as an interesting cultural experience rather than internalizing how their own histories, experiences, and identities are intimately connected to the stories told at NAAM. The museum’s vision is “a Pacific Northwest region where the important histories, arts and cultures of people of African descent are embraced as an essential part of our shared heritage and future.”<sup>20</sup> Achieving this vision requires that NAAM engage in the work of identity transformation by helping all those who come in contact with the museum to internalize these stories and histories presented as being an integral piece of their own personal narratives.

It is possible that if the Journey Gallery highlighted some of the stories of White allies who have played, and continue to play, a vital role in the fight against racial and social inequality, White visitors would be more likely to embrace the stories presented at NAAM in the same way that African American visitors do. By seeing people they are more likely to identify

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.naamnw.org/mission-vision/>

with they may be better able to appreciate how issues of race impact their lives as well. Markus and Cameron write,

For buildings to become heritage objects, visitors must be induced to feel that in some sense they belong to the “inheriting” community—that the building is somehow “theirs.” Since buildings on their own cannot induce this sense of community and ownership, establishing it is a recurrent function of heritage texts. Yet the issue is more complex than it might appear at first glance. Many heritage sites are visited by a considerable range of people (maximizing this range is, unsurprisingly, one of the aims of the heritage tourism industry) and visitors must therefore be addressed in ways which do not exclude and alienate some in the process of making others feel they ‘belong’ (2002:122).

They then point to some strategies that museums, specifically museums focused on “minority” groups, adopt to accomplish this. Visitors at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, for example, are encouraged to imagine themselves as European immigrants being processed through the immigration station, and at the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC where visitors are given identification cards with the story of a victim or survivor of the Holocaust (2002:123). These techniques “emphasize the specificity of minority experience at the same time to make it accessible to others, so that ultimately ‘their’ heritage can be recognized as part of ‘ours’” (2002:124).

NAAM, however, does not include these White voices, nor, I think, should it have too. In the United States people of color are regularly expected to identify and empathize with the experiences of White Americans—whether they be actual people or characters in books, on television, or on film—and yet there continues to exist the notion that White Americans are simply unable to relate to the experiences of people of color. This idea has led publishers to design book covers depicting protagonists as Caucasian even when authors have explicitly described their characters as being people of color (Schutte 2012; Skurnick 2009), and film studios to hire White actors to play minority characters with the assumption that White faces and

White actors with marquee names (whose success cannot be separated from their Whiteness) are more marketable (Martin 2012; Vu 2009). This belief may have validity. When the first film adaptation of Suzanne Collins's "The Hunger Games" trilogy was released some fans were highly upset to discover that a beloved character was, per the author's description, Black. Many took to Twitter to express their (often vulgar) reactions. Among the many tweets posted by irate fans was the following comment: "Awkward moment when Rue is some black girl and not the little blonde innocent girl you picture" (Holmes 2012). Pondering this particular tweet, journalist Anna Holmes noted how, so often, "the heroes in our imaginations are white until proven otherwise, a variation on the principle of innocent until proven guilty that, for many minorities, is routinely upended" (2012).

The contrast between "some black girl" and "little blond innocent girl" speaks to the frequent inability of White Americans to truly see and empathize with the experiences of African Americans. It is this blindness that underlies the unequal media coverage that missing children of color receive when compared to their White counterparts (Min and Feaster 2008), the fact that African American patients are less likely to be prescribed needed pain medication than White patients (Joynt et. al. 2013), and the fact that young Black males are at 21 times greater risk of being killed by police officers than young White males (Gabrielson, Jones, and Sagara 2014). If NAAM were to provide an easy entry point for White visitors by presenting stories of allies that were more "relatable" (*i.e.* White) it would only serve to further entrench the invisibility of Black experiences by elevating the role of White people. While NAAM is an educational institution that seeks to speak to all of its visitors, it is also a place where the lives and experiences of the African Diaspora take center stage, and the hope is that the work that takes

place there will encourage all visitors to eventually embrace these experiences as an essential part of humanity's shared heritage.

### **“There’s Gotta Be More to My Own Story”: Museum Identity Work as Vocation**

Visitors are not the only people for whom the museum provides opportunities to do the work of identity construction. Staff members and volunteers who spend hours and years at NAAM are drawn to the museum as a result of their personal life experiences and identities, and those identities are in turn shaped by the museum in which they work.

For former Deputy Director Brian Carter it was, in part, his childhood interest in discovering stories about his own culture that led him to value the importance of African American museums. As a child, he discovered that he was unable to find many histories to which he could relate, namely histories about people who shared his experiences as a biracial individual in the Pacific Northwest (his mother is Spanish and his father is African American). As he told me, this caused him to become a lifelong “history nerd.” “We were always kind of relegated to a special day or a special assembly. And I just thought that was... I remember being very young and thinking ‘That just doesn’t make sense. There’s gotta be more to my own story’” (personal conversation January 2, 2013). His parents worked hard to make up for the lack of diversity in his school curriculum by taking him to the library and getting him books that introduced him to the histories that he was not hearing about in the classroom. One of these books was the autobiography of James Beckwourth, an African American mountain man who traveled throughout the American West during the 1800s. “I thought it was the coolest thing,” Brian told me. “He was like a Black superhero, and this book must have been four hundred pages long, and I just wanted to get through it. And I’ve just been that way my whole life. Just that kind of desire

to learn—especially about my own culture” (personal conversation, January 2, 2013). This desire to learn about his own cultural history and identity eventually fueled an aspiration to start an African American museum so that others would have the opportunity to do the same.

Another member of NAAM’s staff, Katie Williams, has found that her time at NAAM has led her to carry out a different type of identity work. The daughter of a White father and a mother of Spanish descent, Katie grew up in Spokane, Washington and never learned much about the history of African Americans in her hometown despite the fact that African Americans had been living there since the 1800s. For her, learning about regional African American history through her work at NAAM has helped to fill in some of these gaps. “I know a lot about the pioneer era,” she told me. “I know a lot about Washington state history and, growing up in Spokane, my mom volunteered at a museum—so I knew about Spokane history. But I knew about this one certain part of Spokane history... and I felt that this was the other half of the story that just doesn’t ever get told, or just isn’t illuminated” (personal conversation, April 18, 2011). Even though she is not African American, as someone who grew up in Washington, Katie recognizes that the stories at NAAM are very much a part of her own identity and history. She told me that, as she learned more about the role African Americans have played in shaping regional history, “I felt that it was my history as well. It was just the history I didn’t know about.”

Katie’s time at the museum has also encouraged her to think about her own racial and ethnic identity in different ways. Even though her mother does not self-identify as Hispanic, Katie does, and, as she explained, “I think that since working at this museum I identify with it more just because I talk about race almost every day. It’s just around. It’s just the culture of the work environment. So I think about it more. I embrace it more.”

Longtime NAAM volunteer and Seattle Central Community College professor Minnie Collins initially became involved with NAAM out of a love of museums and a desire to break down class barriers to accessing the arts. When I asked her why it was important to get people in the African American community to say, “I am in this museum,” she answered, “It’s the same as you saying to yourself, ‘Why is a PhD important to you?’ It gives me recognition. It allows me to grow and move from this point on to some place. And plus, it’s a basic need of ownership, of identity, and I’m on exhibit here. And my family, my community, my church, all know that we did something important” (personal conversation 10/11/2011).

Brian came to NAAM with the desire to provide a space where people could learn about the histories that he found so powerful and affirming as a child. During his time at the museum he had the opportunity to enact this role as an educator in a way that also utilized and nurtured his love of history and learning. Katie’s time at the museum has broadened her understanding of what it means to be a resident of the Pacific Northwest, and she has embraced the narratives of regional African American history as part of her own story. By putting herself in a context where racial identity is a regular topic of conversation she has also become more aware of her own cultural and racial identity as a mixed-race individual. For Minnie, the museum intersects with personal identity by providing recognition and validation of her African American cultural identity.

If identity work, according to Rounds, encompasses “the processes through which we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe in that identity,” (2006:133) then my own work at NAAM is an outgrowth of my lifelong efforts to learn about who I am as a mixed-race African American woman and to maintain a connection to the larger African American community. By working at the museum my racial

identity is legitimated and affirmed in ways that it is not in my day-to-day life in a city with a White majority. Through the exhibits, programs, and conversations I have with people, I (like the other staff members) am able to find new ways of thinking about my own life experiences. Being a staff member at an African American museum allows me to enact a level of cultural competency and racial awareness that I aspire to but am a long way from achieving. The museum also allows me to explore aspects of African American identity that I am not familiar with as I attend events, meet new people, and view exhibits that introduce me to different ways of “doing” and “being” African American.

Racial categories, while not “real” in a biological sense, shape the ways we move through and experience the world. Despite the centrality of racial identity in our lived experiences, few institutions validate the experiences and perspectives of racial minorities, or regularly challenge White Americans to consider the ways that their identities are also bound up in socially constructed ideas of race. Minority-run museums like NAAM bring to the fore race as a social category and offer tools that visitors can use to shape personal identities by offering external validation and semantic order to their lived experiences. While the museum affirms the experiences and racial identities of African American visitors, the identity work White visitors face is more difficult and is complicated by the fact that many White Americans find it difficult to overcome the tendency to view African Americans as the “Other.” The challenge for NAAM, and for other culturally-specific museums, is to work towards bringing the experiences of people of color to the fore and invite White visitors to become allies through the process of recognizing and internalizing a sense of shared humanity. Lonnie Bunch writes that, “It is important that we help all to grapple with the centrality of race in the construction of American identity” (2007:49).

African American history is not just a side story that has little impact on most Americans. It has shaped us all.

**Chapter 7**  
**“This Was a Secular Church, a Church of the Here and Now...”:**  
**Co-Constructing a Place of Belonging<sup>21</sup>**

I began this research with three questions in mind: 1) How does an individual’s identity (especially their racial and regional identity) influence the way they experience NAAM? 2) How are various aspects of NAAM experienced as affirming, challenging, or shaping community and racial identities? 3) How does NAAM both reflect and shape understandings of Northwest regional history and African American identity? I was drawn to NAAM in general, and to these research questions in particular, because of my desire to understand the emotional and personal impact culturally-specific museums can have on their visitors. The long and politically and emotionally charged beginnings of NAAM, as well as the debates surrounding the founding of the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC, make it clear that these types of institutions are enmeshed in complex discourses about racial identity and belonging that are absent from mainstream museums. By looking at NAAM we can gain a deeper understanding of the role museums play as dynamic institutions that both shape, and are shaped by, the communities of which they are a part.

**The Influence of Racial Identity on the Museum Visitor Experience**

My surveys and analyses of visitor comment books indicate that at NAAM the racial identities of visitors strongly impact the way they connect to the exhibitions. I found that

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<sup>21</sup> Mudede, Charles

2014 "Northwest African American Museum Just Became a Lot More Relevant: How Did a Historical Institution Get with the Current Moment So Quickly?" *The Stranger*, September 10, 2014. <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/northwest-african-american-museum-just-became-a-lot-more-relevant/Content?oid=20547537>, accessed on November 27, 2014.

although all visitors appreciated what they learned in NAAM's permanent exhibit, White visitors were the least likely to find a personal connection to the exhibit content. This is not surprising given the museum's focus on African American history, but at the same time the stories presented in the gallery all have a local-focus that should, in theory, provide all local visitors with a familiar touchstone to which they can relate. The fact that White visitors especially do not tend to make this connection suggests that, for many of them, the experiences of African Americans continue to be viewed as fundamentally separate from their own.

There are many studies that examine the role played by a visitor's identity in how the visitor experiences a museum. John Falk's book, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, draws needed attention to the fact that the experience of visiting a museum begins long before a person sets foot inside the building. Their experience is shaped by the expectations they bring with them and by their personal goals and identities that lead them to visit a particular museum in the first place. Jay Rounds' article "Doing Identity Work in Museums" affirms the fact that museums are important places for visitors to construct and maintain their personal identities. However, despite this critical relationship between museums and identity, little attention has been paid to the various ways in which visitors' racial identities impact their museum visits. When the racial identity of a visitor is considered, it is usually in the context of studies on visitor attendance and program participation. The fact that racial identity is ignored or overlooked in many studies about museum visitor identity does a disservice to the museum field during a time when many mainstream institutions are trying to attract more diverse audiences. A better understanding about the ways in which racial identities impact the way visitors connect to the content of exhibitions would give museums greater insight into how to make their institutions truly inclusive.

### **Affirming, Challenging, and Shaping Community and Racial Identities**

NAAM is invested with meaning as a result of being grounded in a particular geographic, social, and historical context. As such, the museum plays an important role in supporting, constructing, and maintaining a local, shared African American community identity. This becomes especially important in the face of rapidly changing racial demographics that have seen the steady displacement of Seattle's African American population. From serving as a destination for African American family picnics and reunions, to providing a space people are drawn to in order to witness major events and honor national holidays, the museum acts as a site where community identity is co-constructed through the interaction between the museum and its visitors.

As is evidenced by recent efforts in Seattle's Central District to protect Liberty Bank and MidTown Center from redevelopment efforts, there is a desire among many local African American residents for cultural touchstones to fill the void left behind as neighborhoods have changed and a previously tight-knit community has been dispersed. In this context NAAM's status as a tangible site connected with local African American history becomes just as meaningful as, if not more so than, the objects it houses as it becomes recruited for the task of collective memory-making. In her essay, "What is the Object of this Exercise?," Elaine Gurian writes,

The foundational definition of museums will, in the long run, I believe, arise not from objects, but from "place" and "storytelling in tangible sensory form," where citizenry can congregate in a spirit of cross-generational inclusivity and inquiry into the memory of our past, a forum for our present, and aspirations for our future (1999:81).

By providing a place where people can congregate to celebrate, share, and remember, NAAM offers a site where community connections are created and strengthened.

In addition to providing a place where collective identity-making can occur, NAAM reflects and shapes a regional African American identity by validating the importance of the lived experiences of African American visitors. This can be seen in the ways that visitors use the exhibits to organize events in their lives within the context of a larger historical narrative, and in the ways they make personal connections to the content of displays and to the museum building and its location in a neighborhood historically linked to Seattle's African American community. For visitors who are not African American, the museum works to shape understandings of regional history by introducing them to stories and perspectives that privilege the voices of the African Americans.

Jay Rounds argues that museums also facilitate identity work by providing a place where visitors can enact and explore various identities. During their time at NAAM visitors are able to enact roles of cultural patrons, teachers, and life-long learners—the various identities that motivated their museum visits in the first place. African American visitors also utilize NAAM to enact forms of “Blackness” by reinforcing their connection to various aspects of African America culture.

A dialectical relationship exists between the museum and the public. Each reflects and informs the discourses of African American history and cultural identity held by the other. The choices made by NAAM's staff—from choices about exhibit content and programming, to those about how to observe various holidays—variously support or challenge the discourses of “Blackness” that visitors bring with them to the museum. It is this dynamic relationship that creates an institution that is responsive to the perspectives of the community and allows NAAM to serve as an integral part of the community it represents.

## NAAM and the Transformation of the American Museum

As museums in America have worked to build their audiences and remain relevant they have expanded their focus beyond the traditional exhibits to serve as community gathering places. In his article “From Being *About* Something to Being *For* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum,” Weil describes this shift over the past thirty years. He sees it as the transformation of museums from offering the public “mere refreshment (the museum as carbonated beverage) to education (the museum as a site for informal learning), to nothing short of communal empowerment (the museum as an institute for social change)” (1999:236).

This shift has been accompanied (and endorsed) by changes in AAM policies and practices that prioritize community engagement and activism, and is also reflected in the programmatic decisions made at NAAM. After the museum’s #Ferguson PechaKucha event, journalist Charles Mudede posed the following question in his article about NAAM: “How did a historical institution get with the current moment so quickly?” (Mudede 2014). In response, staff members Chieko Phillips and Leilani Lewis wrote an essay posted by the Association of African American Museums titled “#FERGUSON\_Sea: A 10 Day Study in Social Media and Responsive Programming.” In their essay, Chieko and Leilani explained that the event was the result of previous work to build partnerships with other community organizations, successfully engaging with public media to tap into conversations that were already taking place, and a concerted effort by the museum to serve as “a conduit for connectivity rather than claiming the spotlight” (Phillips and Lewis 2014). Considering the role of the museum as a participant in the work of community engagement they write,

As we as a staff continue to think about responsive programming, we understand that crises will be different and so will the resultant programs. We are certain,

however, that people are growing to expect these types of programs... #Ferguson reinforced NAAM's commitment to social justice, and actively listening to the collective, and individual voices of our community, so that the Museum continues to inspire change (2014).

The idea of a museum serving as a site of “communal empowerment” has been also been embraced by NAAM through the museum's ongoing relationship with local Black genealogy groups, its partnership with the ROOTs family picnic, and (more recently) its growing relationship the Seattle People of Color Salon (SPoCS) which works to engage minority communities in the arts. The homepage of the SPoCS website (<http://redbird.wix.com/spocs>) currently features a picture of group members posed in front of the entrance to NAAM.<sup>22</sup> This visually links their community building efforts to the work that takes place at NAAM.

Fears about the supposedly “divisive” nature of culturally-specific museums (Bedard and Huey-Burns 2011; Fisher 2004) ignore the emotional and psychological need these institutions fill in minority communities. The lyrics of Drazé's song (“The Hood Ain't the Same”), the testimony of the community member who hoped to protect Liberty Bank from demolition, and Barbara's observations about the loss of a reference point or “center” that binds a community together, all speak to the need for these museums and the importance of the role they play as secular sanctuaries for community healing. To dismiss these institutions as unnecessary, or as a threat to notions of national unity, is to fall into the same trap as those who argue in favor of a racially “colorblind” society. Only those coming from a position of racial privilege can afford to ignore the reality of race in American society and the need for places where people of color can see their stories and experiences legitimized and celebrated. Racism and inequality thrive whenever it goes unacknowledged. By drawing attention to the stories of African Americans in the Pacific Northwest, NAAM works to counter the erasure of Black experiences in mainstream

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<sup>22</sup> This stunning photograph, along with the series of photographs on the SPoCs “About” page (<http://redbird.wix.com/spocs#!about/c1zqx>), were taken by Seattle photographer Daniel Carrillo.

narratives of local history, and provides a space where differences become a source of strength and pride.

### **Doing Single-Sited Ethnography**

By choosing to focus this research on a single museum, I was able to gain a much deeper understanding of the institution and the community surrounding it than I would have if I had visited a wider range of museums for a year or two. This decision, however, presents a challenge when attempting to compare NAAM to other African American museums. Having data from several museums would have provided a larger data set from which to draw conclusions about the work of African American museums in general. Multi-sited or comparative ethnographies can provide fresh and challenging ways to understand the networks of human interactions across space. However, my goal with this research was to highlight the work of one museum in one neighborhood in order to explore how one site can serve as a window into potentially relevant issues in minority-run museums, as well as a jumping off point to explore more complex issues in the future.

The detailed ethnographic description of the work at NAAM was made possible through my deep involvement with the organization. There is no doubt that my involvement with the museum as a paid member of the staff influenced my approach to my research and to the questions I asked. I had to leave some themes and topics, which arose in my conversations and observations as a staff member, for future exploration. All researchers have to make decisions about which research questions, out of a myriad of possibilities, they want to pursue. These decisions are always shaped by personal interests as well as the particular social and situational constraints they find themselves in.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

More research is needed to consider the unique needs and positionalities of minority-run museums. The museum field continues to take for granted the fact that most museums focus primarily on Euro-American visitors, and treat minority visitors as a special class of museum participants. This is evident not just in the lack of published scholarship, but also in the way that race is framed and discussed within the profession of museology specifically, and within the arts and culture community more generally. When discussing issues of diversity in museums the assumption is that organizations, staff, boards of directors, and the museum visitors are majority-White, and that increasing diversity means bringing more people of color through the doors. Minority-run museums are now an established part of this country's cultural landscape, and will continue to grow. To ignore the unique strengths and struggles of these institutions does a disservice to the field as a whole because it closes off the possibility of invigorating discussions about what it means for museums to pursue diversity as a goal. More work on culturally-specific museums might also shed light on the ways that minority visitors find meaning in their museum visits, which would allow mainstream museums to incorporate this information into their plans.

Another avenue for future research would be to explore the ways that minority-run arts institutions can help White visitors embrace the museum's missions as their own and avoid the "visitor as cultural tourist" phenomenon. If museums are to serve as sites of community empowerment and social change they must learn how to encourage these visitors to engage with the histories of non-White communities.

Museums can be read as texts in which discourses of power are made manifest through their location, construction, and content. As political institutions that reflect power relations

within particular social contexts, museums are used by cities to help present a specific image to both residents and outsiders. The physical location of these institutions (often in important parks, along waterfronts, and in the downtown core) serves to impress upon visitors the social, cultural, and political importance with which they have been invested. Minority-run museums engage with a complex set of power relations as they work to assert the legitimacy of both the narratives they present (and their importance to the larger community), and their legitimacy as institutions. By utilizing the discursive power of “The Museum” as a recognized and trusted social institution, they are able to raise the profile of alternative racial and community narratives that challenge the tendency of mainstream institutions to ignore these stories. In this way, supposedly “disadvantaged” communities enact very specific strategies to challenge dominant discourses.

### **Personal Reflections**

I recently took my daughter to NAAM for Martin Luther King Day for the second year in a row. Last year she was barely crawling, but this year she ran around the exhibits pushing buttons and pointing out various colors on the wall. In the museum’s small library she pulled out a children’s book for me to read to her before a group of young girls swooped in to adopt her as a new temporary plaything. She absolutely loved the attention.

My daughter does not look like me. Her skin is pale olive, her eyes are hazel, and her light brown hair is naturally streaked with blonde. I joke that the only evidence of her African American genetic legacy is in the few curls on the back of her neck. I take my daughter to NAAM for Martin Luther King Day for the same reason that many families take their children—to connect with her heritage. However, because my daughter will grow up looking

phenotypically White, it is also important to me that she grows up with many opportunities to get to know and interact with African American friends and community members.

Recent studies have shown that babies begin to favor certain faces at a remarkably young age (Burnes and Sommerville 2014; Kelly *et al* 2007). Babies who have had less interaction with people of different skin colors or facial features notice these differences and show an appreciable preference for people who look more like them. Unconscious racial preferences become ingrained at an early age. NAAM provides a space where I, and many others, can go to surround ourselves with people and histories that are familiar and valuable to us—histories that we want our children to remember and internalize. By introducing my daughter to these individuals and their stories I hope that even if she grows up without being treated as non-White “Other” she will be a strong ally in efforts to draw attention to the centrality of the African American experience in the history of this country, and to speak out against racism and inequality. NAAM is a place where I can take her to experience these interactions and to hear these messages. For so many of the people I have talked to during the course of this research, the desire to remember and celebrate Black history is motivated by a deep and heartfelt need to ensure that our children remember their past and find strength through the stories they hear. NAAM opens up opportunities for these community histories to serve as a source of empowerment in the face of change which individuals can draw from to find (in the words of museum visitors) a “sanctuary,” a “secular church,” and a representation of “community and home.”

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