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# The Need for Diversity and Inclusion in Developing Narratives

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**Keywords** Objects; Interpretation; Diversity; Perspective; Museum

**Abstract** Objects: they are the reason we visit museums and the reason most museum professionals are drawn to the field. Without objects, museums would be vast and empty spaces attempting to tell a story without content to conceptualize a narrative. Moreover, the stories experienced by visitors are greatly influenced by the interpretation of objects through guided tours, text panels, or exhibition titles. Like many other fields, the museum field is striving for diversity and inclusivity mainly because of the vital role interpretation plays when curating objects of a story. This article will provide a rationale for the need of a more inclusive approach when displaying and interpreting objects to examine the diverse ways in which the story of an object can be viewed based on a visitor's cultural and ethnic background. This article will utilize a case study dealing with objects from the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the Museum of Alabama both located in Montgomery, Alabama as a framework. To conclude, the article will discuss steps that museums can take to be more cognizant of the stories that objects tell and how to be a space that facilitates and encourages diverse conversations.

**About the Author** Cassandra Cavness serves as the Humanities Digital Archivist for Alabama State University. She is also the museum consultant for the National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African American Culture at Alabama State University. Previously, she has served as the manager of the Sue & Leon Genet Gallery on the campus of Syracuse University and has worked for the Crawford Family U.S. Olympic Archives. Her primary research focus is the interpretation of history through a visual lens. Cassandra has extensive experience in curating research and artifacts into an aesthetically pleasing and informative format. Cassandra brings four years of practical experience in the fields of museum studies, public history, and cultural outreach. She believes in giving back to the community and as such is affiliated with various nonprofits. Currently, she serves as the 2019 Junior Executive Board President for the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Montgomery, AL, as a board member for the Alabama Institute for Education in the Arts in Montgomery, AL, and as Co-Chair for the Alabama chapter of the National Emerging Museum Professionals Network.

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## Rationale

Museums are trying to find their place within society again as they understand that there is a definitive shift from being halls upon the hill filled with sacred objects to places integrated into their communities that showcase the culture and history of people.

*“As museums continue to define and refine their roles in communities and strive to make stronger connections for visitor learning and meaning making, it is vital that they pay close attention to their visitors’ personal relationships to objects. Doing so means that museums will grapple with the*

*idea that the content and meaning of their collections are different for every visitor who comes to see them.”<sup>1</sup>*

Recognizing this idea early on in the exhibition process is an important step for developing narratives that speak to people in an inclusive way. This idea of personal connection and paradigm shifts is not a novel idea but is one that has been explored within the museum world since the early 1990s. Edmund Gaither stated in 1992 that the “story these institutions tell of the history of our nation and its arts and sciences will have to be richer and more inclusive...”<sup>2</sup> However, museums must go further than merely recognizing the idea; they must actively seek out individuals to aid them in their quest for an inclusive narrative. On inclusiveness, Gaither states that we must reject the old model of conceptualizing the American experience as binary, “Lurking behind such concepts are constructs such as separatists/integrationist, we/they, and our/theirs. Instead, we must...assert its inclusiveness and embrace the reality that...we belong inseparably both to ourselves and to the whole.” This article emphasizes the necessity of collaborating with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds to help inform museum professionals about the way in which objects are perceived to help shape an inclusive and thought-provoking narrative.

This article uses the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the Museum of Alabama both located in Montgomery, Alabama, as a framework for the case study of objects and narratives. Analysis is focused on specific objects that help to further the discussion on the need for diversity in developing narratives. The objects’ physical placement, descriptive text, and placement within the overall narrative were considered. Assessments were made based on observational research through site visits and established research from the museum field. The study of these two institutions throughout this article aids in the conversation pertaining to a new subset of museum visitors: the critical museum visitor. “The critical museum visitor notes what objects are presented, in what ways, and for what purposes. She or he also explores what is left unspoken or kept off display. And she or he asks, who has the most to gain or the most to lose from having this information, collection, or interpretation publicly displayed?”<sup>3</sup> Understanding this new type of visitor will help museums enhance their offerings and engage with their audience on a new level. Therefore the following article has been framed through the lens of the critical museum visitor.

### **Case Study: The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration**

The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration (The Legacy Museum) is an emotional journey from start to finish. One enters the museum in a lobby area where they are bombarded with several televisions explaining a variety of aspects dealing with the topic of the museum. From there, visitors travel down a hallway where there are slave pens along a corridor to the right. At the end of the hallway visitors round the corner to the left and that is where the bulk of the museum is. There are large wall graphics that bleed out onto the floor with different facts and figures. There are walls covered in newspapers that depict the way in which Blacks were talked about through the use of articles, auction sales, and slave warrants. In the center of the museum are interactive screens that allow visitors to understand how widespread lynching was throughout the United States. In the back left there are replica prison telephones and an area devoted to Black leaders and innovators. In the back right there are walls with jars of soil and behind them there are televisions that show documentaries on slavery and lynching. The exit hallway begins with a small African American art collection and

then transitions to photographs and text that explain the epidemic of mass incarceration in the United States. The museum, although small in size, is mighty in content.

The planning of the museum began as the brainchild of Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer and social justice activist. He envisioned a place where the horrors of slavery and the legacy of that institution were front and center, where the visitor is forced to confront their own hesitations and reservations about the topics. According to Stevenson, “Our nation’s history of racial injustice casts a shadow across the American landscape. This shadow cannot be lifted until we shine the light of truth on the destructive violence that shaped our nation, traumatized people of color, and compromised our commitment to the rule of law and to equal justice.”<sup>4</sup> Bryan and his team consulted with historians, scholars, activists, and design firms to create a small museum in which the objects sit center stage, waiting for the visitor to engage with them in various forms. The museum is filled with text, but not an abundance of explanatory text. Rather, the visitor sees dates, facts, and newspaper articles. The primary interpretation is left to the videos and oral histories. Here is where the visitor is drawn into an experience that encourages them to think about racism in an entirely new light.

Three objects in the museum speak volumes to visitors due to their placement within the overall narrative of the museum: slave pen replicas, jars of soil, and telephones. Each of these items tells a different part of the narrative and are presented with minimal text. These objects can have a different meaning to each person that views them depending on the experiences and heritage that each brings with them to the museum. Understanding the way in which each visitor, with different cultural histories, might interpret these objects was key to making them effective within this museum.

The slave pen replicas (Figure 1) are the first objects that the visitor encounters. Objects, in this case, speak to a physical part of the building that already existed to hold slaves before auction. The museum team created holograms that come alive and talk to the visitor as they come in proximity to them. The only text is object labels that tell the visitor with whom they are interacting. The message of these individuals is delivered in rural dialects of the time and tell the story of each individual awaiting their fate as they were held in these slave pens before the auction.

The placement of the slave pens was given great consideration because they are in a small darkened corridor that makes the visitor interact in a more intimate way with the object. Yet, these objects can be avoided if the visitor chooses to do so by walking past the corridor. The visitor is given options because of the understanding that the visitor may not be ready to confront this part of the legacy of slavery. The exhibit design team understood that African Americans might see these holograms as their ancestors and become too emotional to interact or that Caucasians might see these as a reminder of the past that they carry with them and be overwhelmed. This type of forethought was a direct result of the inclusive nature of this exhibit development plan.

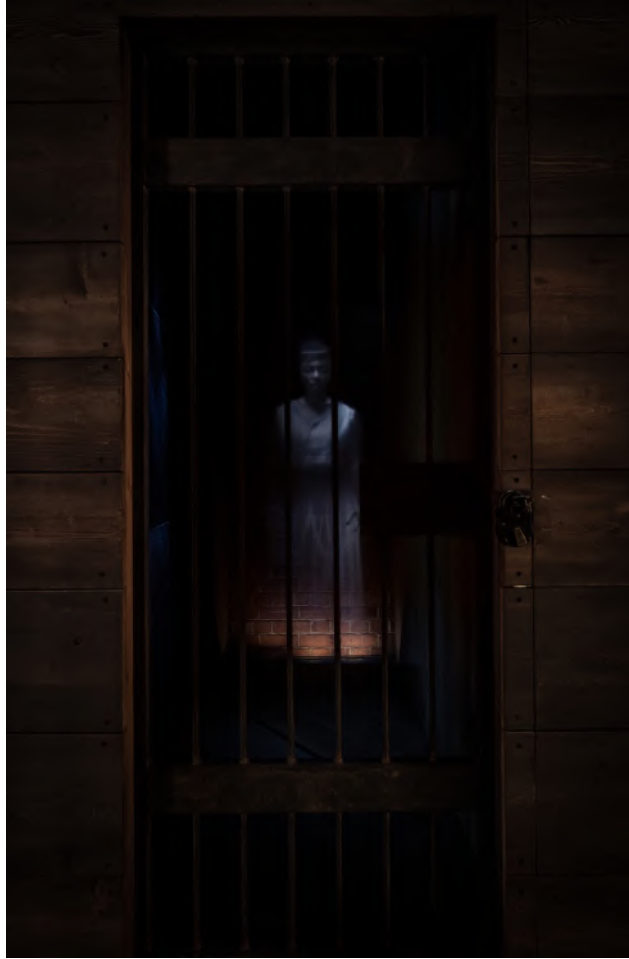


Figure 1. Slave pen replica, The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, photo credit: Equal Justice Initiative/Human Pictures.

“EJI has initiated a campaign to recognize the victims of lynching by collecting soil from lynching sites and creating a memorial that acknowledges the horrors of racial injustice. [They] aim to transcend time and altered terrain to bear witness to this history and the devastation these murders wrought upon individuals, families, communities, and our nation as a whole.”<sup>5</sup> The soil collection project was truly a community project as people from various socioeconomic statuses, ethnic backgrounds, education levels, and societal upbringing came together to create a testament to those whose lives were cut short due to domestic terrorism and racism. As such, the jars of soil (Figure 2) are some of the most powerful objects housed within this museum.

Each jar contains soil from a place within the South where an African American was lynched and is identified by a name written on the front. They line shelf after shelf from the ceiling to the floor of the stand-alone exhibit within the back right of the main exhibition space. There are no text panels that explain this object, but rather the visitor is encouraged to view a video that plays in a nearby sitting room that explains the soil project from conceptualization to implementation.



Figure 2. Jars of soil, The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, photo credit: Equal Justice Initiative/Human Pictures.

The use of the community, which is shown within the video, further roots the objects in time but also propels them forward. These objects are not only tied to history but are also now tied to the community. Beyond this, they speak to diversity and inclusiveness in their overall narrative because they tell the story behind the horrors of lynching from the perspective of the underrepresented and marginalized. The soil exposes the connection that this land has to its past atrocities, but in a way that is digestible for all people: white, black, young, and old, by being unassuming and simply present. They are positioned within the museum so that they are clearly visible from almost every vantage point which allows visitors to come to terms with their emotions at an arm's length if they so choose.

Lastly, the telephones (Figure 3) are located in the far corner of the main exhibition space. In order to interact with them, a visitor must pass through the entire journey of African Americans from slaves, to segregated citizens, to the new form of slaves known as prisoners. These telephone replicas of the visitor windows at prisons are connected to the wall with video screens in front of them and small benches to sit on. To hear the story the individual behind the glass is going to tell, the visitor must choose to pick up the phone and listen. The signage within this area is a duplicate of the rules and regulations that prisoners and visitors must follow. The display is dual sided with a wall in the middle constructed to be reminiscent of a concrete jail wall. The visitors are forced to leave the display from the same direction that they entered because there is no secondary “escape” route.



Figure 3. Telephones, The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, photo credit: Equal Justice Initiative/Human Pictures.

The visitors that choose to interact with this display are often moved to tears listening to the injustices that the legal system places on African Americans. The entire experience is meant to evoke a reaction. The reaction could be multifaceted and bring uncomfortable reminders for African Americans as too many African American families are entangled in the prison system, or the reaction could be fear of confinement as a visitor realizes that the only way out is through the metaphorical front door. The thought that was given to this section of the museum and to the narrative being told in this area is apparent in the way the interactive was designed. It is clear that people of multiple races and/or backgrounds were involved in the development of this display because it reaches and affects people from multiple backgrounds.

### **Case Study: The Museum of Alabama**

In the case of the Museum of Alabama, one must remember that inclusivity or lack thereof starts from the outside in. The Museum of Alabama is located in quite literally an “ivory tower.” The museum is housed within Alabama’s Department of Archives and History Building that is on a hill and drenched in white marble. The stairs to the second floor of the building where the museum is located are adorned with railings that are finished in a golden hue. The museum’s physical appearance does indeed present the image of an exclusive club, one which many museums must fight against when trying to engage a diverse audience. In a speech that Michelle Obama gave at the Whitney Museum she stated; “You see, there are so many kids in this country who look at places like museums and concert halls and other cultural centers and they think to themselves, ‘Well, that’s not a place for me, for someone who looks like me, for someone who comes from my neighborhood.’”<sup>6</sup> Many people from backgrounds such as the Former First Lady have a feeling of unwelcoming from the exterior of some of our country’s greatest cultural treasures.

Most museums cannot do much to change the structure of their building, but museums must work to ensure that the interior is as inclusive as they claim it to be. In 1993 Marilyn G. Hood conducted several surveys and focus studies groups related to this topic of inclusivity, specifically for African Americans' feelings toward art museums. Her results showed that even highly educated wealthier African Americans felt unwelcomed because "art museums haven't done an adequate job over the decades of welcoming minority audiences."<sup>7</sup> Therefore it is up to the museum professional to recognize that museums, in general, have not done enough in the past to welcome minorities and that "the residue of those earlier experiences still resonates through minority communities."<sup>8</sup> Museums must rise above this and reach out to the community to ensure that they understand that it is not an "us and them" paradigm, but a "we and ours" paradigm.

Looking at the Museum of Alabama through this lens allows one to recognize that inclusion and diversity were not utilized to the fullest capacity when the stories were developed, which counteracts the mission of the state institution to represent the story of Alabama in its entirety. Three objects that express this sentiment clearly and will be discussed in this case study include a bow and arrow, slave shackles, and a cotton gin. These objects are not inherently exclusive themselves; rather it can be argued that it is the placement of the artifacts that creates the exclusivity.

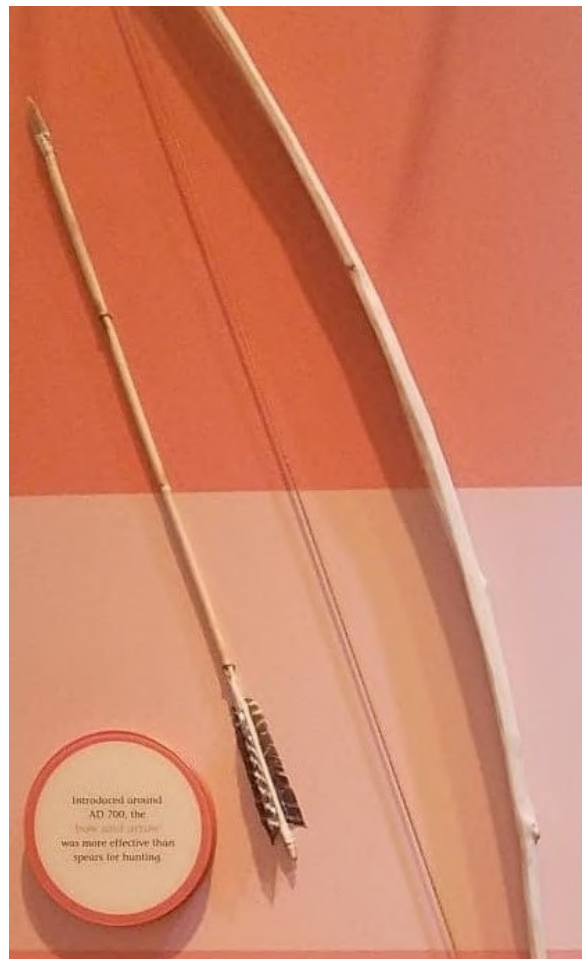


Figure 4. Bow and arrow, Museum of Alabama.

This museum is large and encompasses almost the entire second floor of the grand building with different exhibits throughout. The first exhibit, *The First Alabamians*, focuses on the Native Americans that settled on the land in Alabama and Mississippi. One particularly compelling object is a bow and arrow (Figure 4) located close to the exhibit entrance. This bow and arrow is hung from the wall with accompanying text panels that give descriptive details. The objects are set against a reddish backdrop meant to represent the clay upon which the Native Americans built their homes. However, the visitor from a minority group might view that very differently.

A person with a diverse ethnic background and with knowledge of the importance of what colors represent, perhaps a graphic artist, would understand that this was an unfortunate color choice. The negative connotations that this color has associated with it can be understood better by those in underrepresented communities. Having spoken with several people who work at this institution, the consensus was that minorities were involved in the planning of certain parts of the exhibit, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they had the right conversations while these individuals were there. Including these individuals into the conversation about the color scheme would have been a wise choice because they could have pointed out the similarity between the color and the term "Redskin."

The second object within this case study is a pair of slave shackles. The shackles (Figure 5) are well described and are a part of the first section on slavery in the *Alabama Voices* exhibit. However, the placement of the shackles is unfortunate. The prominent item within the display is not an object but rather a text panel with a quote from an enslaved person that states how much fun they had playing games as children and "dances, and suppers, and wrasslin" as adults. The slave shackles sit below on a table about knee level, easily missed and beneath the explanation of what life was like for "Field Hands."



Figure 5. Display including slave shackles, Museum of Alabama.

The unintentional narrative here is clear, although horrors existed, they needn't cross the visitor's mind unless the visitor chooses to look for them. Although it is important to give the

viewer the choice to interact with difficult history, it is of equal importance to make sure that the difficult part of the history is displayed in an easy to find manner over the sanitized version of history. The focus in this part of the exhibit is on the good times and happiness that an enslaved person could experience rather than the cold and brutal reality in which they actually lived. The harsh reality that the slave shackles represents is softened by the term “field hands,” used to describe the slaves that worked the fields. If diversity and inclusion were used in the development of this display, it would have been clear the emphasis was placed on the wrong subject matter simply by the placement of objects.

The last object is a cotton gin. This cotton gin (Figure 6) is beautifully explained and the text panels discuss how the symbolism of the object was different for different people, for White planters it was money and for enslaved Blacks it was the expansion of slavery. However, the dominant image that accompanies the object is of Daniel Pratt, a manufacturer of cotton gins. At knee-level is an image of an enslaved woman who was forced to use the cotton gin.



Figure 6. Display including cotton gin, Museum of Alabama.

The narrative, again, is clear, celebrations of the achievements of entrepreneurship for the White planter and only brief acknowledgment of the people whose lives were immeasurably affected by the object. This leads the visitor to suspect that if a person of color had been included in the conversation, they might have been able to explain the offensive nature of this juxtaposition.

Sadly, in two of the three objects discussed the emphasis is placed on the oppressor not the oppressed simply by virtue of placement and exhibit design. It is standard museum practice that objects that hold the most importance and tell the largest part of the story get the best placement within an exhibition. It is known in the museum field that “people are most comfortable and will spend more time looking and reading when printed materials and objects are comfortably placed....[and] positioned so the center of the material is at eye-level.”<sup>9</sup> By placing the objects that tell the story of the enslaved people at knee level, it ensures that most visitors will overlook the difficult history that is presented within the display.

## Results

Didier Maleuvre, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara wrote: "In broad terms, the practice of social inclusion in museums can be described as that of consulting with diverse social groups on the shape and contents of museum exhibits."<sup>10</sup> It is clear through these case studies that museums are capable of this type of collaboration and thorough exhibition design planning; other institutions do not embrace this idea to the necessary level.

The Museum of Alabama is an example of having substantial resources but not utilizing them to create an inclusive experience. The museum is situated in the capital of the state with broad public support but has missed the mark in some significant ways. But one must remember that as a state-run institution, they must rely on government money to operate and therefore must walk a tightrope between being inclusive and being radical due to the delicate balance of racial tensions still rampant within Montgomery. As the heart of the modern Civil Rights Movement, Montgomery is a place where slavery, Jim Crow, and police brutality are not easily forgotten and racism still boils beneath the surface as many of the people who lived through this transitional period are still alive, some with positions of power. Therefore it is with careful intention that a museum must represent the horrors of the past without disrupting their financial stability in the present. So the critical museum visitor must ask, were these misses intentional? Regardless of the answer, it is the responsibility of the institution to not only represent the whole of Alabama but to respect those individuals' histories and to be sensitive to those communities' needs. At the same time, museums need to ensure that those who have been the oppressors do not feel overwhelmed and attacked or the opportunity for education, the true purpose of a museum, will be lost.

## Discussion

In today's world, where museums and cultural spaces are vying for visitors against a variety of competing forces, it is becoming increasingly rare for people to accept museums as spaces that are just "pretty" or "interesting." For museums to thrive they must fulfill the visitor's needs through narrative learning. Narrative learning is shaped both by the experiences that the individual already possesses as well as the experiences that the individual has while in the institution's space. These two experiences should be used as counter-narratives playing off each other to create an environment where the individual can critically think about the issue brought forth through the use of objects during their visit and after they leave.

Beyond this, it is important to understand that developing a narrative with the use of inclusion and diversity is necessary because of the fabric of American society. Racism "is a permanent fixture in our society and has become as encompassing as the water we drink and the air we breathe."<sup>11</sup> Museums must be a place for the people. A place where all are welcome, not only for the good of society but also for the sustainability of themselves. "From issues of social justice to immigration to reproductive rights, communities across the country are seeking spaces that allow and encourage them to have challenging conversations. Museums must embrace this new role."<sup>12</sup> Yet, communities do not often interact in areas where they feel unwelcome.

If a museum wishes to thrive and grow within their community and beyond, they must accept and confront inherent biases in America and within themselves. I argue that it will be the

museum interpreter that must be able to make this adjustment. "The interpreter translates museum meanings to audiences in such a way as to facilitate their participation in the process. They are, therefore, communication specialists, whose knowledge of museum production is combined with an understanding of how visitors respond to spaces and displays. This may involve devising ways of interacting with visitors by communicating the subject (the concept and content) through an object (also a place or experience)."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, if a museum is going to embrace this new sense of diversity and inclusion, it will be up to the museum interpreter to seek out those individuals to help them communicate the meaning.

There are key actions that the modern museum must take to be a place for place-based learning and to gain new audience participation from cross-cultural sections within their own community. They must embrace this idea of true inclusivity by understanding that they have faults, recognizing those faults and then being willing to address those faults with substantive action because museums cannot hope to engage with those communities at large without doing so. Only then will museums become true "safe" spaces for engaging in often difficult but necessary dialogue.

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Slave pen replica, The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, photo credit: Equal Justice Initiative/Human Pictures.

Figure 2. Jars of soil, The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, photo credit: Equal Justice Initiative/Human Pictures.

Figure 3. Telephones, The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, photo credit: Equal Justice Initiative/Human Pictures.

Figure 4. Bow and arrow, Museum of Alabama.

Figure 5. Display including slave shackles, Museum of Alabama.

Figure 6. Display including cotton gin, Museum of Alabama.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham, *The Objects of Experience: Transforming Visitor-Object Encounters in Museums* (London: Routledge, 2016), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Barry Gaither, "'Hey! That's Mine': Thoughts on Pluralism and American Museums," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 1992), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Lindauer, "The Critical Museum Visitor," in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, edited by Janet Marstine (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 204.

<sup>4</sup> "The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration." Equal Justice Initiative.

<sup>5</sup> "Lynching in America: A Community Remembrance Project." Equal Justice Initiative.

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Obama, "Remarks by The First Lady at Opening of the Whitney Museum," speech, opening of the Whitney Museum, New York City, April 30, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Marilyn G. Hood, "The African-American Museum Visitor: Who Comes, Who Does Not Come, and Why? The Art Museum Visitor and Non-Visitor," *Visitor Behavior* 8, no. 2 (1993).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> David Dean, *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002), 43.

<sup>10</sup> Didier Maleuvre, "Must Museums Be Inclusive?" *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society* 4, no. 2 (July 1, 2012): 112-25.

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<sup>11</sup> Melanie A. Adams, "Deconstructing Systems of Bias in the Museum Field Using Critical Race Theory," *Journal of Museum Education*, Vol. 42 no.3, (July 14, 2017): 290-295.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Kerry Jimson, "Translating Museum Meanings: A Case for Interpretation," *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, 2015.

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