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**MUSEUM EDUCATORS CONCEPTUALIZATIONS: TEACHING  
SOCIAL STUDIES THROUGH ART**

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STUDIES THROUGH ART**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

For all three of my sunshines.

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On to the next adventure.

## **Abstract**

### **Museum educators conceptualizations: Teaching social studies through art**

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This case study on museum educators examined how they conceptualize and actualize their efforts in teaching for social justice and about social studies through the engagement of works of art. The study utilized research on museum and memory studies, activity theory, and aesthetic education to situate the findings. Interview participants included museum educators (both museum employees and volunteers) of the education department at the Arlen Museum of Art. Because of protocols due to the COVID-19 pandemic interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Each museum educator elucidated on their gallery teaching and discussed the negotiations and decisions present in their efforts. Interview data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. My findings suggest that museum spaces and museum educators illustrate significant possibilities for both learning outside of formal classroom settings and also for how teachers can engage works of art in their own classrooms with more critical intentionality. This study also highlighted works of art and the different ways in which the educators utilized them to engage students in necessary conversations of social importance.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2007 the International Council of Museums (ICOM) stated that:

“a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”

It's a statement that projects lofty expectations on the purposes and roles of museums today.

Even so, ICOM is in the process of broadening its current definition of museums. The desire to alter the definition of museums is indicative of the changing landscapes that permeate both society and informal learning spaces. In mid-September 2019 the ICOM Extraordinary General

Assembly was to vote on the following updated definition:

“Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.”

(see <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>)

Backlash to the proposed definition update was swift as many countries felt the ideological shift to “political correctness and trendy posturing” was too much and done “without consultation for the national committees” (see

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/icom-turmoil-definition-of-museums>) Led by France, opposition to the definition led to a 70% vote to postpone the vote for a new definition. The new definition is to be voted on during ICOM's next general conference in September 2022 in Prague.

The new definition represents an aspirational, albeit controversial tone about the role for all museums. It also represents the tensions in which museums operate. They are important spaces to engage issues of social value. Like Frank Jewell and the Valentine Museum of the 1990s to current times with Lonnie Bunch and his leadership in opening the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall (and since June 2019 as the Secretary of the Smithsonian), museums can be the spaces that push forward hard conversations and address controversies (both historical and contemporary). Museums also have a responsibility to be accessible and to engage difficult topics. They are at their best when they are responsive to the public.

### **Why museums matter**

“It has long been recognized, but rarely publicly acknowledged, that most people learn much if not most of what they know outside of the formal education system” (Falk, 1999, 259).

“Museums are not supposed to lie to us; this act seems a breach of faith. Assuming that our own memories are fallible, we rely on museums as well as historians to get the past ‘right’ for us” (Crane, 1997 as cited in Carbonell, 2012, 307).

Museums are specifically important for their value as informal learning spaces (Crowley, Pierroux, & Knutson, 2014; Screven, 1993; Tišliar, 2017). They are places defined by interests. Learning in informal spaces serves a primary role for people in their ability to extend their learning outside of formal school settings (Harrop & Turpin, 2013). Informal learning spaces are invaluable because of the possibilities they possess. The reality is that formal school settings rarely offer the free-range learning possible in museum-scapes. It is one reason that informal learning spaces help learners move beyond the strict constructions of standardized subjects taught in schools, arbitrary time limits, and restrictions on more deeply exploring student interests. Informal learning spaces can fill gaps left by formal learning spaces. There is also a

belief that informal spaces allow for visitors more choice in how their time is spent and what interests they engage. The possibility of creating life-long learners is of genuine consequence to museums because they are predicated on supporting and building visitor interest.

Understanding that visitors engage museums in a variety of different ways also means that their experiences are likely to be informed by any number of variables (e.g. age, sex, gender, race, geographic location, ability, interest level, and class). Recognizing the value in disparate visitor engagement is about knowing one's audience, their identity, and their own cultural milieu; such knowledge informs how museums go about the business of engagement with their audience. Museums are places for public interaction with constructions about the past (Lowenthal, 2011). As noted by Nora (1989), sites of memory such as museums are important for the visceral emotions that they can elicit. It is important to recognize the influence of museums in providing a space for interaction for and with visitors.

There is significant interest in creating more interaction between visitors and museums (e.g. see *The Participatory Museum* by Nina Simon (2010). Falk's (1999) notion that museums and other similar "free-choice" learning environments (more largely conceptualized as informal learning spaces in a 2009 National Research Council report) are becoming increasingly evocative in their educational stances as institutions are commonly engaging topics to include more diverse audiences in production and narrative. Fyfe and Ross (1996) more than a score ago argued that museums have an ethical responsibility to include diverse perspectives. Without opportunities for connection and representation, they asserted that visitors could undergo a decrease in interest in which engagement became non-existent or limited at best. This understanding has led to the creation of museum spaces for more diverse communities, especially in historically

under-represented and marginalized communities (e.g. the George Washington Carver Museum & Cultural Center in East Austin).

From audience dynamics (e.g. demographics, expectations, relation to the institution) to evolving content knowledge, museums balance the responsibility to adapt or risk becoming obsolete. There are a couple of questions worth acknowledging here: What type of image does a museum project? and What is the role of a museum? Both questions express a need for important answers because they bring up questions about values. The discussions that come from the questions can impact the ability of the institution to grow its audience, garner support, and create streams of revenue to help promote/enact its mission.

The desire to resonate with the public is a fundamental concern of museums. Lavine (1992) once noted that “it is dangerously easy to appear to celebrate shared experiences while actually selecting exhibition themes that implicitly support claims of superiority to the dominant culture” (141). Wallace (1996) stated that a necessary evolution of museums centers on the types of narratives it willingly engages with. Cross (2017) posited the need for museums to push back on the notion of museums as zones of white comfort. As Wallace (1996) argued, this can be a difficult task as research reveals that people usually attend museums in which their experiences are attended to and their expectations of information are met. Sanitized and decontextualized renderings of the past are common in museum settings (Linenthal, 1995; Segall & Trofanenko, 2014).

Teaching and learning are common in museums, but it is not straightforward. There are always negotiations about what should be learned and for what purpose (Falk, 1999). It is valuable here to consider how museums negotiate the different needs and wants of audiences within their greater mission statements. The educational efforts of museums are consistently

changing as they negotiate several issues (e.g. content, pedagogy, resources, funding) often in concert and/or tension with one another. There are also the basic questions that museums must ask of themselves: Who is our audience? What do we want to engage them with and what are their expectations? What are the implicit and explicit messages of our museum? Why should people come here? Do we offer community? Do we need to? What is our purpose? What are the ways in which the audience can maneuver through the museum space? What is worth learning? What prior knowledge/experience is being utilized by the audience?

More contemporary attention is being given to the above types of questions. Grappling with such questions has led to a rise in the substantiation and validity of the consciousness that visitors bring to the museums they visit. Ruffins (2006) comments that the success of museums is dependent on institutions and their ability to keep their audience in mind by staying relevant. It is important for museums to uncover what their audience hopes to learn, do, and experience while at the museum, and temper that with the overall mission of the institution. An increasing number of visitor studies regarding the nature of return audiences and their desire for interactions support such a claim (Bitgood & Shettel, 1996; Everett & Barrett, 2009; Serrell, 1996).

Gurian (1991) posits that if museums believe their visitors are inherently smart and believe that they are entitled to ask questions and receive answers then museums will address the questions and concerns of its audience. Research is showing that museums are expanding their educational opportunities to create more avenues for audience interaction (Crane, 1997; Newman, 2013). Considering that museums can be constituted as both independent and dependent learning spaces it is important to consider what learning opportunities are available to visitors in terms of what is presented, but also to the silences which are privileged within a museum space (Trouillot, 1995).

## **Theoretical influences and conceptual realities of memory**

There are different conceptualizations of memory. Ebbinghaus published “On Memory” in 1885 for the initial foray of psychology into what then constituted memory studies. His writing is now considered more of a treatise on verbal learning, but it laid a foundation nonetheless. Halbwachs’ (1925) *The Social Frameworks of Memory* also serves as germinal text in early memory studies around cognition, as do the works of Althusser and Durkheim. Each addressed the social aspects of memory and identity. More modern takes on memory include examinations on the interplay of individual and collective memories by Assmann and Czaplicka (1995), Lowenthal (2015 & 2011), Nora (2002 & 1989), Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy (2011) and have allowed for an expansion of memory as a field of study to elucidate more succinctly on issues such as cognition, reminiscences (via therapy), and other cultural aspects.

A bit tongue and cheek, psychologist Endel Tulving (2007) wrote a chapter in a volume honoring Henry Roediger and asked, *Are There 256 Different Kinds of Memory?* He listed all the current forms of memory that had been written about and studied. More so, the title is indicative of both the ubiquity and unsettled nature of memory. It is a field that is ever-growing. It is also a field that has been described as lacking defined direction.

Contemporary research has illustrated the connectedness of memory to one’s basic identity (both individually and in groups) by asserting that memory is utilized to mold, reify, and/or repurpose identities. This is typically done through processes of recall, omission, and/or distortion (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). There is a subjective nature of memory as well as an associative nature of memory. The fluid and constructed nature of memory begs for contextualization through events and ideas and sources, otherwise memory often too comfortably situates as heritage, reminisces, or remembrances.

Sanford Levinson, in his book *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies* (1998; 2018) echoed how memory is engaged through the service of monuments by inducing conceptual messages to the public via concrete presentations. Citing the work of governments in Eastern Europe and Confederate statuary in the American South, he offers commentary about the role of monuments and memory and how the passages of time changes not only meaning of a space but also who has the ability logistically, politically, and/or financially to enact remembrances on a public scale. It was a sentiment touched on by David Blight (2011), when he noted, in reference to the 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York City, that “memorials are always about the past; but are almost always also about the present in which they are erected.” The notion of informing the public via public pedagogy is a necessary discussion. There is a curriculum attached, even if unsaid, even if developed internally, that informs how spaces of association and/or remembrance are experienced.

In an interview with Sarah Edwards and Juliette Wilson (2014) the noted historian and geographer David Lowenthal, upon the release of his updated version of *The Past is a Foreign Country*, opined on the engagement of the past early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Advances in technology he argued make historical engagement both similar and different from previous decades. Particularly, the increasing ease of access to the past via videos, archives, and music means each is reaching wider audiences than ever before. With a nod to the growing democratization of information via increased technological capabilities and accessibility he further asserted that the visceral feeling of the past has become more important than even archeological record or historical correctness. Improved technology and the growing accessibility and democratization of information in society is seen as leading to the emergence of large scale social justice movements.

There is also a tremendous economic viability in the past because of its escapist qualities (i.e. retro television, and retro clothing) that make it appealing. Another shift in interacting with the past, Lowenthal (Edwards & Wilson, 2014) argues, are more social challenges to the notion of academic historians as the sole purveyors of the past. Historian Björn Weiler (2018) suggests that such a move can be problematic because “academic historians have been marginalised in disputes that are concerned more with the meaning of the past for the present, than with the factual accuracy of its representation” (see <https://blog.oup.com/2018/03/past-disputed-academic-historians-matter/>). Central is the concern that facts are viewed as fluid and loose, and where anything can mean anything. It is a valid concern. Nevertheless, a strength of the democratizing nature of examining the past is that there are new meanings attached to old ideas, new perspectives engaged, and new understandings developed.

Relatedly, Lowenthal (Edwards & Wilson, 2014) noted that marginalized communities were reclaiming their histories as a process of empowerment at rates previously unseen because of increasing access to information. He argues that changes in how the past is engaged underlines the complexity and subjectivity of the past. Important to Lowenthal’s conceptualization is Nora’s (2002) notion that access to the past and its artifacts has further democratized who has both the right and ability to engage memory – and, as such, historians no longer have “exclusive control of the past.” Relatedly, rising globalization and a widening of research in the field of memory, Anheier and Juergensmeyer (2012) argue, has led to a growing understanding of generalized international rights.

Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) argued that memory is a cultural construct that helps humans ensure their own survival and comfort through both collective and communicative

processes of initiation and replication while working toward acceptable behaviors/beliefs.

Consequently, Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) situate the cultural power of memory in its ability to unify or divide groups while simultaneously creating the obligatory signifiers of ‘us versus them’. In this way collective memory works as a stabilizing force for identity in the present and puts forth a sense of objective reality to one’s group association. Debates on the correctness or objectivity of memory tend to inform how people interact with the past in public forums of choice such as museums, festivals, commemorations, or street names. Curriculum in all these choices is present. The notion of objective/subjective realities correlates to the work of museums and how narratives are presented, and accepted or rejected.

### **Memory and museum education**

Museums are consequential structures of society. They are places of knowledge. Located in public spaces they often have expressed notions of learning placed upon them. Learning that is both implicit and explicit. Museums, however, often exist in public spaces that rarely reflect the diversity of their overall larger community. This is particularly true in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as rapid population growth, increasing mobility, and the continued diversification of the U.S. population are hallmarks. A central aspect of public spaces, including museums is that “public practices of remembrance are always about the future” (Simon, 2006, 113). The multi-meaning nature of remembrance means that museums necessarily navigate political, cultural, and historical landscapes continually through exhibition and visitor content, access, outreach, and museological practices. Pedagogies of remembrance and the role of public memory maneuver through and help create narratives (Simon, 2014).

Museums also tend to be elitist. Society’s most privileged inundate board of directors, hold immense collections, and provide much appreciated (and oftentimes needed) donations.

This is particularly important in consideration of the racialized and economic dynamics at play in objects preserved. Ünsal (2019) acknowledges history museums need to come to terms with the practices that have bred exclusion in order to become the “place for dialogue, inclusion, and participation...” that they wish to be. To this end, Mears and Modest (2012) note that museums are shifting from monologues (producing narratives for) to dialogues (producing narratives with). And, a growing number of museums, particularly non-collecting entities, are privileging audiences over collections (Leftwich, 2016). The poly-vocal perspectives making their way into museums mean more spaces are engaging in self-reflection and turning critical eyes in relation to exhibitions and programs. It is a change that goes hand-in-hand with Trofanenko’s (2006) assertion that museums are transitioning from sites of knowledge to sites of knowledge-production (i.e. the notion of visitors engaging in their own sense-making on their experiences). Museums are pushing for more inclusivity and becoming, per social demands, more participatory (Sandell, 2002; Sandell & Nightingale, 2012).

Previous literature on museums has considered the emotional and cognitive impacts of informal learning spaces such as museums (Falk & Dierking, 1992; Gottfried, 1980) and their ability to facilitate learning (Anderson & Lucas, 1997). Even back to early 20<sup>th</sup> century progressives such as John Dewey field trips were explained to hold social value. McGivney (1999) reiterated that trips into informal spaces create opportunities for informal education. Informal education being posited as a learning experience that happened outside of an academic classroom. Research has also shown that field trips to informal spaces, such as museums, are not innately better than in-class learning. Pre-visit preparation is essential for successful outings (Cox-Petersen, Marsh, Kisiel, & Melber, 2003). As noted by Falk (1999), free-range learning can aid in exploring interests. Similarly, Coughlin (2010) commented that museum visits offer

interaction and opportunities that lead to experiences of ‘lived learning.’ Visits are best used when integrated with everyday curriculum and not as one-off excursions (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to bring on new ways for sharing and accessing information. New possibilities inundate both physical and digital arenas (Robinson, 2012). This is a particular point of interest for “memory institutions” such as museums, libraries, and archives. As places of interpretation, these institutions are unable to not take a stance. What is said or done and what is not said or done are important. Memories evoked by collections and exhibitions inform visitors as well as educators who use them as resources.

Museums matter. The high esteem by which museums are held is essential to understanding how they function for visitors. Marcus, Levine, and Grenier (2012) highlight that a belief in museum objectivity tends to lead to a lack of questions and critical assessment by visitors. What is seen, is accepted. Trofanenko (2006) asserts that museums are inherently about pedagogy. Therefore, the function of history museums and their historiographical underpinnings about how they constitute history and its portrayal is a valuable understanding of their function. Specific to social studies, Marcus (2007) commented that museums have a “distinctive pedagogical value for teachers to help develop historical understanding for students.” As argued by Taborsky (1990), museums are also about historical consciousness. They are about interpretation; and historical consciousness serves as a dialogue intermediary between museums and visitors.

Museums like to believe that they are transformative institutions (Soren, 2009). Qualitative analysis of visitor data suggests that experience with authentic objects, opportunity for new understandings, and the ability to indulge interests are important aspects of museum

visits. It is indicative of what Leftwich (2016) suggests, in that “we should work toward finding a lens for them to understand how the past connects with their community today.” Community outreach, access interventions, and shared authority are becoming increasingly expectant amongst visitors.

Authority is a significant aspect of museums. It is found in presentation, mission, and the shaping of discourses via exhibitions, donations, collections, and through boards of directors. Hooper-Greenhill (1992) has noted that museums function at both micro and macro social levels – for their visitors and within social contexts. In 2010, Trofanenko iterated that museums tend to lean into soothing narratives to appease and appeal in order to boost visitor attendance. Environments of patriotism are propagated by favoring identity and nationalistic tropes. All of which lead to museums spaces where critical attention to ideas, events, and people are lacking. These gaps in critical attention creates space for learning. Marcus, Levine, and Grenier (2012) comment that museums hold significant value in helping promote historical thinking to address these gaps.

Research in museum learning has shifted attention toward visitor studies (including teacher and students) to examine museums and social connection as well as long-term learning outcomes. In *The Museum Experience*, Falk and Dierking (1992) noted that visitors, outside of museum mission statements, have goals and expectations that are sometimes completely at odds with those of a museum. Rounds (2004) applied ‘optimal foraging theory’ to explore the impact of visitor interest levels and how they move through exhibitions and museums. In 2006, Noel and Colopy noted that pre-visit teacher preparation is an important aspect of a quality museum visit for both teachers and students. Specifically, their research bore out that pre-visit preparation

equated to greater teacher familiarity with expectations and allowed for more free-choice learning by students as a consequence of a less rigid learning environment.

Research has shown that museums in general, and field trips specifically, are enticing places of engagement for teachers (Campbell, Campbell, & Dickinson, 2004; Finchum, 2013). Kaschak (2014) found that teachers wanted to integrate museum visits into their everyday teaching but felt ill-prepared to do so successfully. Kenna (2019) further noted that teachers utilized field trips in general for a variety of reasons: a change of setting, student interest, for connection to curriculum, and even because it was a school expectation.

Field trips as an educational experience are under perpetual administrative review for concerns that they are not properly academic and meet curricular needs for instruction (Anderson, Kisiel, & Storksdieck, 2006; Schatz, 2004). Kenna (2019) echoed similar sentiments about decreases in field trips, specifically citing issues of associated costs and concerns of accountability. The age of standardization and high-stakes testing reveal troubling relationships between classroom education and informal learning spaces such as museums. Johnson and McGrew (2011) note that federal standards such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required museums to write statements and create curricula that attempted to adapt to these new policies and legitimize their use for students. In 2014, Greene noted that field trips were seeing overall downturns in numbers as time spent in the classroom was considered better and a more appropriate avenue for student learning.

Furthermore, a lack of visits to museums were evidenced by desire of school administrators for more in-class instruction (via math, writing, and reading), concerns of clear curricular links, associated costs, and testing schedules (Johnson & McGrew, 2011; Marcus, Levine, & Grenier, 2012). A net effect is that museums have increased their online resources

and professional development opportunities for teachers to have at least some access to what museums have to offer in person (Johnson & McGrew, 2011). Increased movements for ongoing professional development by museum educators to share their resources and provide possibilities for inclusion in daily curriculum ensued (Marcus, Levine, & Grenier, 2012).

In 2019, Rose, Cahill, and Baron asked – what kinds of professional development do educators want/need (in regards to museums)? Moving beyond access to resources, teachers noted a desire for less content coverage and more time to collaborate with others and explore resources to see how to best utilize them in their specific classroom settings. A desire for more pedagogy was evident. Brugar (2012) has also suggested that museum educators can better assist teachers by improving museum outreach and connecting museum resources with state standards.

Marcus, Levine, and Grenier (2012) found that teachers express a general desire to promote historical understanding amongst their students during museum visits. Their work draws on the idea that museums hold cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Kaschak (2014) noted that teachers like the idea of using museums, but often felt unprepared as to how to do it successfully. Methods courses can be utilized to improve teacher understanding and ability to use museums as a beneficial learning experience (via museums as curriculum, critical assessments of museums, and citizenship and the museum) (Kaschak, 2014). Gilbert (2016) stated that critical inquiry (i.e. being able to read aspects of a museum such as collections and spaces) be a necessary component of museum literacy. In interviews with 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, Finchum (2013), found that students want teachers to be more prepared for visits and provide extensions once back in classrooms. McLoughlin (2004) iterated that visits should be joint ownership of both students and teachers as shared responsibility for pre-visit preparation (i.e.

background information and developing questions) tend to help create clearer understandings for museum visits.

What is unclear in the research on museums is the role that individual historical consciousness has on the work of museum educators. How do museum educators think about and then do their work? What thinking goes into how they maneuver museum spaces, museum missions, and visitor expectations? How are exhibitions and objects taken up for examination? What is the impact on how works of art are developed, discussed, and/or utilized by educators? These are all questions that were addressed through informal semi-structured interviews of a small group of museum educators.

### **Research questions**

Noting the challenge of museums and other informal public spaces to engage visitors in discussions of importance that rebuke dominant social narratives, this study explores the perspectives of museum educators.

My research questions are as follows:

1. How do museum educators conceptualize social justice-oriented work in a museum setting?
2. How do museum educators navigate student interactions/learning opportunities in a museum setting?
3. What role does historical consciousness play in how museum educators develop, discuss, and utilize works of art?

Overall, the study gathered ethnographic interview data from museum educators on topics from their own teaching, to learning in a museum setting, to how they conceptualize their use of art to teach social studies topics.

## **Rationale for study**

“At present, the most promising innovations in museums relationships with communities are coming not from the largest, oldest, and best-funded institutions but rather from institutions once viewed as marginal: children’s museums, in which interactivity is necessitated by the age of the clientele and the educational goals of the institutions” (Lavine, 1992, 138).

Historically, the western/colonial tradition of museums (e.g. art and historical) in the 19th century resulted from a need for industrialized nations to “establish and reproduce the dominant narrative in society” (Marcus, Stoddard, & Woodward, 2012, 22). For example, the norms of domination (from subject presentation and perspective, to issues of access) which have typified museums for generations are now being met with more conscious and steady calls of challenge (Steorn, 2012). Change is slow in many museums but ideas of critical interest are being engaged in ways they previously were not.

Findings show that museum efforts to explore relationships with its audience are highly contextualized and can influence constructions for engagement in particular ways (Lowenthal, 2011; Abram, 2005). In general - museums have a triumvirate concern with engagement, representation, and objects (Welsh, 2005). More and more museums are reorienting toward examining structures of inequity that make museums exclusive and inaccessible (physically and emotionally) to a wide number of marginalized populations (McCall, 2009; Newman, 2013; Wallace, 1996). Museums are becoming integral in fights surrounding social justice; as agents and also as places of contestation. There is the inclusion of new voices. Still, nationalistic, normative, and achievement overtones of museums are widely evident (Newman, 2013; Segall & Trofanenko, 2014).

The 21st century has also seen a number of museums moving away from the model of the museum solely as repositories for objects (Welsh, 2005). Objects are increasingly being engaged

in more contextual manners (Gaudelli & Mungur, 2014). Nuancing objects into larger stories of presentation has helped museums to be more responsive to cultures and perspectives previously appropriated at will for the delight of museum visitors. Indeed, the democratization of media, and access to information (via digital archives) once unilaterally utilized by smaller populations has altered the orientation of museums to their audiences. There are more and more attempts to address critical issues, engage marginalized ideas and populations, and more critically engage difficult and traumatic histories (Moyn, 2016; Rieff, 2016; Segall & Trofanenko, 2014).

The role and purpose of museums presuppose continued debates about the role, function, and aim of museums. One major reality influencing the structure of museums are the ever-evolving expectations of visitors about how they want to be engaged and what they expect to experience (Brugar, 2012; Marcus, Stoddard, & Woodward, 2012). Fyfe and Ross (1996) iterate that visitor expectation with museums is influenced by their own social and cultural identity, specifically, “the subjects have life histories which are interwoven with the dynamics of social-physical space” (148). A notion of expectation that Thelen (1995) examined with the Smithsonian exhibition proposal of the *Enola Gay* on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bombs. Indicative of the changing nature of museum-scapes is research showing a shift in the primacy of objects (Gurian, 1999).

Museums are also increasingly stretching boundaries as they negotiate the balance of education and entertainment (Carson, 1994). The use of new technologies position experiential learning as an important aspect of the modern museum via innovative uses of sound, music, oral histories, and other sensory type offerings (e.g. the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library after a comprehensive year-long remodel was completed in 2012 – visitors can now pick up phones and hear the conversations of President LBJ on a variety of topics). Other immersive techniques

are possible as well (e.g. Soto's Houston Penetrable at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston).

Emerging literature in museums is looking more and more at informal learning spaces. A central concern of museums being - how to document learning within such a space (National Research Council, 2009).

### **The power of memory**

Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998), in their groundbreaking study *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* found that people have strong and often visceral connections to the past. Connections create strong associations that are indelibly influenced and informed by different sociocultural understandings and realities of the past, present, and future. In this way, the past serves as a construct of and for collective and cultural memory.

Differing interests in the past also mean that one's processes and interactions to the past can be both dissimilar and divergent. From looking at collections of artifacts, to attending museums, reading books, gathering oral histories, watching movies, to conducting genealogy research, or participating in sit-and-listens/chats, there are infinite amounts of ways that people can interact and respond to the past.

The findings in Rosenzweig and Thelen's study reflect clearly that the past is important to people and that it is not uncommon for people to go to great lengths to ensure its protection. It is here that the building of monuments, the preservation of artifacts in museums and archives, and even the naming of public spaces take on added influence as they presume a public pedagogy of interest and remembrance. Public memorials and remembrances can easily bleed into veneration and heritage worship (Lowenthal, 2015). Implicit in such remembrances are also the silences they create. Another way of looking at the findings is that the past and one's view of it is an exercise in perspective. What one person sees and or feels is informed by individual as well as

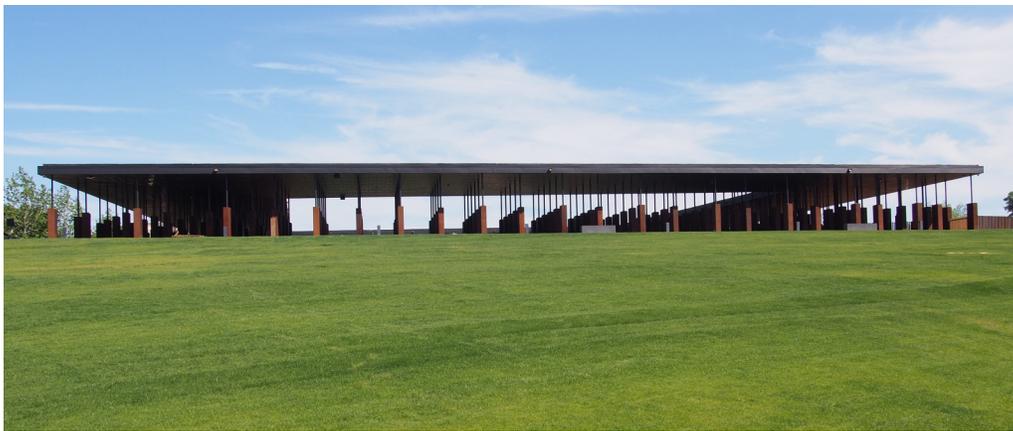
community or group associations, experiences, and social expectations. Faulkner (1951) had it right in his book *Requiem for a Nun*. The past doesn't pass with the throes of time. It stays. It lingers. It soothes as well as frustrates. It's venerated and it's attacked. The presence of the past is always present

To be sure, the past can be lots of things. It can be remembered, re-membered, fashioned as heritage, and lauded via celebration to name just a few. It is usable. It has utility. See festivals, books, museums, memorials, commemorations, music, and art as examples. In all such ways, the past is continually reified and/or made anew. It can be visible. And it is employed by people to take and make what they will of the past: Who is important and why? What is important and for what reason? What stories are shared and whose perspectives matter? And why should anyone care? What topics are engaged?

Collectively, the arc of such questions center on how shall stories of and about the past go? The past, however, is curious. It does not stay in the past. It acts as a frame of reference for engagement in the present as it frequently reconstitutes itself and circles back around for new arguments and new audiences. The past inculcates discussions of social importance and creates virtual and literal markers that dot both social and geographic landscapes, informs funding, and frames debates and legislation.

Who and/or what dictates and/or controls access to the past is also important. It is in these differences that the past has often been situated as a battleground of memory. For example, what are the variant ways that society remembers war? Are political and social leaders sacrosanct or do we place them within larger contexts of power structures? Is remembering the past responsive to changing social mores? Acts of remembrance in these manifestations, are both common in their ubiquity and contested ground for the different stories they wish to present.

There are a couple of fairly recent high-profile examples of collective memory that are pushing back on traditional narratives of the past that are worth mentioning. Bryan Stevenson and his organization, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) opened The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in 2018. From its website it is explained as “the nation’s first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence” (see <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial>).



*Illustration 1: The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Montgomery, Alabama.*

Present within the memorial space are 800 six-foot stone pillar monuments that symbolize the “racial terror lynching victims in the United States and the counties and states where this terrorism took place.” Located in Montgomery, Alabama the memorial sits on a 6-acre site with its adjoining museum that includes 800 identical monuments that can be claimed by counties in the U.S. in which racial lynching is recorded to have happened. The memorial space to a critical and oft-silenced history is necessary because it is a constant and chilling rebuke of feel-good narratives of the past that permeate traditional storylines of nation-state museums on justice and freedom. As well, the stone pillars are a visible reminder that lynchings

were not merely the domain of the Ku Klux Klan but an embedded practice of a society that promoted and allowed racial violence.

Mitch Landrieu, former mayor of New Orleans, made national headlines in 2017 when he went public with his push for the removal of Confederate statuary located on the city's public grounds (see

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/full-speech-mitch-landrieu-addresses-removal-of-confederate-statues/2017/05/31/cbc3b3a2-4618-11e7-8de1-ccc59a9bf4b1\\_video.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.1b47bb7258fa](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/full-speech-mitch-landrieu-addresses-removal-of-confederate-statues/2017/05/31/cbc3b3a2-4618-11e7-8de1-ccc59a9bf4b1_video.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1b47bb7258fa)). His desire to remove four Confederate era statues was in

reaction to the enduring power and of memory in the city's public spaces. The monuments were the Robert E. Lee Monument in Lee Circle, the Liberty Place monument, and statues of Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard. In explaining his decision-making process, Landrieu spoke of how his perspective on the statues changed when he was led to the realization that the monuments served as a representation of white domination by virtue of their social presence. The monuments were put up during the time of Jim Crow and willingly celebrated the subjugation of blacks through the memorial of historical events and people. They were symbols of "know your place" ideology by those in power who wanted a racial message couched in hero worship (see Landrieu's 2018 book *In the Shadow of Statues: A White Southerner Confronts History* for a more in-depth accounting of these events).

Both the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama and the removal of Confederate statues in New Orleans clearly reflect the need for critical engagement of the past. It means to sit in discomfort with difficult topics and to address silences and/or omissions. It requires the examination of structures and realities that inculcate division in both

overt and covert ways. Public spaces are essential to this endeavor. And, art museums can be powerful places in which to do the work of critical examination of the past.

### **Problem**

Traditional narratives of history are being challenged daily. Academic social/socio-cultural histories are pushing the field of history in more critical directions. Education in turn is using theoretical frameworks to continually trouble narratives and expand the use of varying epistemologies and ontologies to bring more experiences into the fold to address the limitations of dominant narratives. In consideration of these movements teaching is carving out pedagogical spaces to help re-conceptualize events, ideas, people, and themes, as well as their positions within historical structures of oppression (Yosso, 2002).

### **Challenges: Museums as critical spaces**

The historical foundations of museums can be traced back to what is known as the Wunderkammer (the German word for ‘room of wonder’) or cabinets of curiosity to 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. It was the name given to reflect the collectivity of things owned by the wealthy in Old Europe (e.g. rocks and minerals, paintings, taxidermied animals, scientific instruments, cultural oddities, and other obscure or interesting artifacts) as performances of power and influence. Modern museums work under very different auspices.

Contemporary research in particular has taken on a decidedly more critical view of museums (e.g. their spaces, concerns of access, the use and performance of artifacts, and other multi-modal activities of engagement) and their role in society. Research has extended the realm for understanding museums by theorizing on the range of pedagogical possibilities that are available to and through museums.

Current museums are conceptualized and constituted as much more than the Wunderkammer of yesteryear. In July 2013, the Museums Association of the UK issued a report envisioning the increased societal role of museums as institutions that change lives. Outlined in their summary was a call for museums to be places where social well-being is enhanced, for museums to help create places more conducive to quality engagement, to inspire people and enable the dispersion of ideas in museums through active learning, and to commit to being spaces that work toward positive social impact.

As repositories of knowledge (via exhibitions, archives, and collections) museums operate with a significant amount of legitimacy and expectation in society (Lowenthal, 2011; Trouillot, 1990; Welsh, 2005). From archives and collections, to objects and artifacts, and collections that tell, reveal, and/or recall stories of importance, museums are expected by society to contain information and/or insight of value. There is a certain amount of cultural capital by which museums operate because of this. Studies have shown that museums, across U.S. society, are often considered to be the most trustworthy purveyors of knowledge about the past (Brugar, 2012; Wallace, 1996).

Of measured influence to this are the inclusion of ‘things’ within a museum that seemingly connote importance simply by virtue of their inclusion within the museum-scape. There is an associated social or historical value placed on things being in a museum as something innately worth learning and/or experiencing. The inverse also holds true. To public visitor-ship, that which is not in a museum is often seen as less important and/or ancillary, or even false.

For too long, ‘things’ and their underlying importance as indicated by their inclusion in museums revolved to a large degree around white, middle class norms, and traditional narratives of presentation (Crew & Horton, 1989). A fallacy of such inclusions is that it limits to a great

degree who and what has been and is currently represented in museum spaces. It is also common for people to believe that museums are apolitical and clear of ideological influences (Brugar, 2012; Marcus, Stoddard, & Woodward, 2012). There has long been a public belief that museums are somehow purveyors of innate truth (Wallace, 1996).

There is also a sociocultural reality of museums. Exclusion was at the heart of many early museums. Crew and Horton (1989) noted that early museums were often almost exclusively positioned “as private preserves of wealthy white people” (i.e. in terms of access, but also in the saving and presentation of middle and upper class cultural artifacts). Access to museums has improved over time. There is ongoing research about how to make museums more inclusive via content (i.e. being more critical, pushing beyond heteronormative ideals), by increasing visitor diversity. But, it has also shown that old habits die hard. Pricing of admittance fees, and hours of operation, geographic location, transportation availability, and digital access are all issues that impact audiences and are evolving considerations of museums.

Museums have also long been built as spaces for people considered able-bodied. Contemporary research has looked at the disparate opportunities for differently abled populations to engage and enjoy. To be more linguistically responsive museums are increasingly offering information in multiple languages to meet diverse language needs. Funding also impacts a museum’s ability to enact all the changes that are hoped and wished for; changes in resources often necessitate prioritizing needs that will make the largest impact for visitors. Such changes require innovative thinking and pooling of new resource partners. The vast majority of museums never have enough funding and have to prioritize financial feasibility, along with absolute needs versus the ‘would like to haves’ in determining how to spend their funding.

It is here that Crane (1997) and Wallace (1996) offer the insight that learning is dependent on one's own interpretation of information. If one situates visiting a museum as a social endeavor of negotiation, it is easy to see that audiences bring their own expectations with them about what they hope to learn, want to see, and wish to experience (Rassool, 2006). Abram (2005) argues that museums need to be cognizant of the methods they use to present information. The visuals, objects, presentation, and stories told should support the artifacts on display. Having it the other way tends to revert museums back to uncritical rooms of wonder where 'things', not stories or context are most important. Guadelli and Mungur (2014) further iterate the possibility of objects as a means for connection (intentional as well as unintentional). Exhibitions are part and parcel to the museum experience, and Gurian (1991) highlighted that they have the ability to "make some portion of the public to feel either empowered or isolated" (177).

Consider the grounds of the Texas Capitol in Austin, Texas, which performs as an open-air museum space. It is particularly powerful in its message as the space is open and free for visitation. As of 2020 there are 21 monuments and/or statues located around the Texas Capitol. The most prominent of which line the southern walkway up from Congress Avenue to the steps at the front of the capitol building. A Tejano monument was erected in 2012 to the east just beyond the front gates entrance way, and the African American monument erected in 2016 was its multicultural mirror to the west side. Beyond those recent additions, the statuary on the Texas capitol grounds was decidedly white and had been for the 100 years prior.

These comments are all to say that the past is made manifest in many ways, that remembrances come in a variety of ways; as do the reasons for them. And they help create a public pedagogy of cultural memory.

## **Applicable theories**

My study will draw on several theories. Specifically, Engeström's (2001) consideration of Activity Theory as a means of expanded learning (Engeström, 1991) is one that acknowledges the complexity of learning in informal spaces such as museums. It negotiates formal learning, with the understanding that socio-cultural factors work in concert with one another to influence learning. It considers the ways in which collective voices and multiple perspectives impact systems of activity. Engeström (2001) lays out five general principles of Activity Theory that help analyze complex systems. His consideration of systems as being complex (being informed by a collective push, that includes multiple-voices, are informed by time and place, acknowledges contradictions, and sees the possibility to large scale transformation) is particularly relevant in museum research where learning, visitor interactions with environment, educators, visitors, materials, personal perspectives, and organizational culture are continually intertwined within and around each other to inform learning.

Secondly, aesthetic education will serve as both a pedagogical and conceptual frame for the use of works of art in teaching. As noted by Greene (2007), aesthetic education is,

“to discover not only possibility, but to find the gaps, the empty spaces that require filling as we move from the is to the might be, to the should be. To release the imagination too is to release the power of empathy, to become more present to those around, perhaps to care” (4).

Of particular interest in this study is how museum educators leverage art to explore lived experiences and provide salient commentary on issues of contemporary society. Furthermore, aesthetic education is an approach that prioritizes empathy while at the same time providing the space necessary to grapple with difficult and/or uncomfortable topics. It is about being in places of discomfort in order to learn, to question, and to respond.

Lastly, the study will draw on the concept of social (or collective memory) as a means to exploring identity, and one's interactions in understanding the meaning of works of art. Social memory considers how the past is mediated in both cultural, economic, and racial terms (Flores, 2002; Trouillot, 1995). Likewise, it provides insight about orientations toward perspectives. Of interest in this study is how individuals call upon social memory to make sense of difficult histories and/or social justice topics.

### **Personal connection (and/or conclusion)**

Having worked at several history museums in a variety of capacities I have long been fascinated by how museums orient themselves toward their visitors. How do museums, as entities of varying resources and flexibility, reorient with the ebb and flow of visitor expectations all the while negotiating issues of curation, funding, staffing, and outreach? In what ways do they engage the past?

During my undergraduate years I worked for two summers at Jourdan-Bachman Pioneer Farms in Austin, Texas as a camp counselor and a third-person interpreter. Pioneer Farms is located on Sprinkle Cut-Off in what is now Northeast Austin, situated amongst growing housing developments. Its main focus was to portray farming life of the 1880s Blackland Prairie. I had a personal connection to one of the buildings as the tenant farm house was originally built by my family in the mid-1800s. I also completed an independent study at the French Legation in Austin, Texas. There were few paid staff at the site and most of the people I came in contact with were volunteers. The time I spent there was largely clerical as I re-organized their facility records and helped create an online database for their archives. As a graduate student worker, I worked at the Museum of the Big Bend on the campus of Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas for two summers. The majority of my work there involved moving their collections (e.g.

artifacts, fossils, paintings, ephemera, and things given to the museum over the past several decades) from their temporary facility across campus into the newly renovated original museum that had first opened in 1937. As a doctoral student at The University of Texas at Austin I spent five months in the spring of 2016 working as a docent at the Capitol Visitors Center at the Old General Land Office building on the grounds of the Texas Capitol. In this capacity, I worked the front desk and assisted visitors with questions about the capitol grounds as well as serving as a tour guide for K-12 educational groups about the original role of the building as a land office, and its relation to the capitol building.

Each of these museum settings were quite different from the other. They operated under different auspices, varied missions, and available resources. The French Legation, just east of I-35, was at the time funded and run by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas. Pioneer Farms was at the time run by the City of Austin and has since become a site run by a volunteer organization and foundation. A change that has resulted in no full-time staff, the selling off of approximately half the property, and a general restructuring of the museum layout and educational focus. The Museum of the Big Bend is run by and through Sul Ross State University, a member of the Texas State University System, and the Capitol Visitors Center is one of five Austin sites (including the Texas State Cemetery, Texas State Capitol and its grounds, Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum, and the Governor's Mansion) under the purview of the Texas State Preservation Board.

In all these opportunities, the museums at which I worked presented certain contextually and geographically specific information. Implicit in these decisions were also the decisions that the museums made about their available resources. There, each space had its own dynamics of visitor access and expectations, from funding, to staffing, and numerous other ancillary things

that consumed them daily. Each museum had different resources and different mission statements.

As an educator, I found the interpretive direction and possibilities of each space to be of significant interest. Understanding that information itself does not always beget the capturing of a visitor's attention, it is often the pedagogical choices or opportunities of a space that make specific differences in visitor interest, access, and engagement.

Beyond my own employment in museum settings, there are a few museum spaces that are memorable in my mind for very different reasons. I remember the Dachau Concentration Memorial Site for its tone and use of physical space as a pedagogical tool, Dun Aengus (this is the Anglicized version) in the Aran Islands for its simplicity – which begat my imagination, Pwll Mawr (The Big Pit) in the Rhondda Valley of Wales for its experiential set-up and its physical reminders of an industrial past, and The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum for its continued attempts to share “the story of Texas.”

Prior experiences at museums as a visitor and a worker inform my continued interest in them as informal spaces of learning. And, my experience of a pilot study at the Arlen Museum of Art led me to want to explore further how museum educators engage ideas of social justice through art.

### **Overview of methodology**

The study used qualitative measures for the study. Specifically, the study examined museum educators at the Arlen Museum of Art. I drew on tenets of ethnographic study to ground my research through semi-structured interviews. Specifically I was interested in how educators conceptualize and then engage in the work they do. Another aspect of my study involved an analysis of the structures and environments in which the museum educators work. I

drew on the interviews as well as artifacts of the museum to aid in providing context and analysis for the study.

### **Chapter overview**

Chapter two is a review of literature in the field of memory studies. There is a particular focus on collective/cultural memory and the ways in which it is enacted in society. Within this discussion there are also intersecting lines drawn to the uses and function of public pedagogy via public naming, monuments, statues, and the creation of memorialized public spaces. Chapter two ends by drawing lines of connection among work in memory studies, museum education, and curriculum in presenting a type of public pedagogy.

Chapter three looks at the methods employed in my study of museum educators. Drawing on previous studies in museums, I line out the parameters of my study by citing work done in visitor studies, critical space studies, social justice education, and critical museum studies. Chapter four draws on participant interviews and looks at the processes that inform the efforts of the museum educators in the study. Chapter five relies heavily on the words of the participants as they conceptualize and discuss their efforts in choosing works of art that address issues of social justice via the engagement of social studies. Chapter six wraps up the findings of the study, notes limitations of this work, and offers a few suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“I’m just trying to provide a different perspective of all the gilded-lily-white amnesia that is the tourism industry in this town” – from *Heaven, My Home* (Locke, 2019, 219).

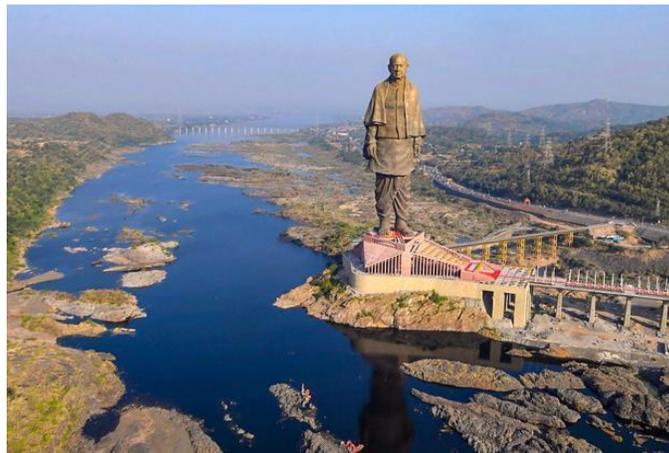
Contemporary events such as the neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville in August 2017 and the mass removal of Confederate statues throughout the South over the last few years (i.e. at The University of Texas at Austin, and in public spaces such as New Orleans) has brought the notion of memory and its tenuous nature (see collective, cultural, and public memory) to the masses (Walsh, 2020).

Even contemporary political rhetoric harkens back to a bygone era. The call of *Make America Great Again* from Donald Trump summons a return to an imagined past. For supporters of the phrase it is a call back to a supposed simpler time of love of community and unwavering patriotic commitment to the United States. For opponents, it rings as an elephant-sized dog whistle dressing up racism and the restriction of rights and opportunities on minorities, and the historically dis-enfranchised. It is a question of who and what is and isn’t.

The contested nature of the past and how its memory is inculcated on people is varied. Comedians such as Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, and Trae Crowder have noted as much in their scathing cultural commentaries. The past, and how it is remembered is often front and center. Arguments for and against the most overt presentations of memory often bleed into the slippery slopes of cultural wars. Wars that tend to devolve into dichotomous and gerrymandered commentaries of us and them, good and bad, right and wrong. In this way, disagreement is nasty. And support of different and tenuous sides is commonly seen as foolhardy by opponents. It is in

these spaces of disagreement that memory, specifically cultural (and/or historical) memory is utilized for arguments, for identity, for making sense of one's situation.

The politics of memory is international. In the fall of 2018, India unveiled the tallest statue in the world, the Statue of Unity. Rising to a little under 600 feet tall (182 meters), the statue stands nearly five times taller than Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro and almost twice as tall as the Statue of Liberty monument on Ellis Island in New York City. Its size is imposing. The likeness of the statue is of politician Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, known as the “Iron Man of India.”



*Illustration 2: “...the Statue of Unity will lead to the icon-based development of this entire region, which is predominantly a tribal area. Our vision is to make this place a world class tourist destination by providing infrastructure for edutainment, research, cultural, environmental enrichment and health promotion.” [from Statue of Unity website]*

He is remembered for his work in the national integration and unification of India in the 1940s. The monument, nevertheless, has faced staunch opposition from local tribes whose land was taken to build the monument, and by political opposition parties who see it as an attempt to hijack and pervert historical memory for political gain.

As an example, Wang (2008) illustrated how China, in an effort to increase patriotism in the nation, oversaw a significant growth in sites of memory after Tiananmen Square that focused on mythology, heroes, and struggle against foreigners. Efforts were directed at ingratiating patriotism through the growth of ‘Red Tourism’ and social media to “make entertainment a

medium of education.” Through engagement in multi-faceted and intergenerational activities and interests the government legitimized their political and social power by steering national historical memory through edutainment re-directions.

Work in memory studies cuts across numerous academic fields. Significant scholarship to the field of memory studies has been aided by input from the academic fields of psychology, geography, history, sociology, anthropology, and curriculum studies. As a result, the varied perspectives on memory studies show clearly the far-reaching social impact and importance placed upon memory as a field of study. Memory ensures that single narratives are impossible because memories are imbued with different experiences and perspectives. It is one of the reasons that memorials are commonly contested. Important questions of memory often begin with who and or what is remembered. Memorials also incorporate considerations of where and how remembrances take place. What a memorial is formally called, and what it should acknowledge are also points continually wrestled with.

Through the literature review I will further cite examples that highlight the variation present within the field of memory studies and the utility of memory as a pedagogical tool. I will also consider how people, communities, and organizations utilize memory for their own ends. The review will also highlight how productions of history, and the by-products of memory are influenced by silences, erasures, preferences, and exaggerations of the past through inducements of power.

### **The current (yet fluid) state of memory**

Memory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is different than in the past. Attempting to understand the interest uptick in memory relates to the increasing need of people to understand their own identity. Nora (2002), like Lowenthal (Edwards & Wilson, 2014), argues that rapid

industrialization and urbanization of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have helped precipitate this movement. Rapid growth in industrialization and urbanization has seen society undergo a fundamental change in its relationship to the past (Nora, 2002). Accelerations in the present via the economy and increased mobility and opportunity have created both temporal and spatial disconnects from the past. People are less tied to the living, jobs, traditions, and insular aspects of a less globalized world that were prevalent in previous generations. The supposed banality of the past now feels different. The past, therefore, situates as a mystery in the present for many people. Inherent then are widespread disconnects from the past. New pushes to understand one's identity has led people to want to delve further into their own historical and social consciousness. It has resulted in more opportunities to challenge traditional narratives of the past. It is similar to what Weil (2013) termed "kin consciousness."

Memory also has a usable quality. It is malleable. DeBres and Sowers (2009) have noted that connotative and denotative symbolism are powerful messengers of historical memory. Likewise, Bowers (2015) has argued collective memory is a powerful aspect of activism. Citing the example of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1972 Buffalo Creek (WV) coal impoundment failure, Bowers writes that "commemorating disasters provides valuable political and communicative resources for public advocacy within risk society, a value that extends beyond efforts to sustain the events in the collective memory of society" (120). Collective memory is an active ingredient for agency. Through deliberative rhetoric and advocacy, collective memory can be used to build communal identity, support calls for action, and create wider risk consciousness for the public.

It is also possible to look at just about any news source, media outlet, or social media platform daily and see some type of commentary on how the past is remembered, and the fights and/or support that attaches itself to public remembrances. Consider George Washington. He is

integral to the story of the United States of America. His celebrated historical achievements are well-known and he is memorialized ad nauseum. Yet, for over 80 years there has been a struggle over memory at Washington's birthplace at Popes Creek located in Northern Neck Virginia (Bruggeman, 2008). The birthplace has been under the stewardship of the National Park Service since 1932. As noted by Seth Bruggeman (2008), the struggle is not even really about Washington per se - "it was really about memory, ownership of the past, and the wonderfully slippery meaning of authenticity" (6). Similar debates imbue Confederate and Civil Rights memorials throughout the American South (Dwyer, 2004).

### **Memory and the function of heritage and nostalgia**

In *The Past is a Foreign Country* and *The Heritage Crusade*, David Lowenthal explains that history morphs into heritage when short-sided, mono-perspective memories become the lenses by which non-critical presentations of the past are presented. There is a certain amount of pageantry and celebration ingrained in the process of presenting memory in these instances. Trouillot (1990) argued that public remembrances such as Columbus Day are pre-packaged exemplars of memory as history cum heritage for public consumption. The remembrances are a commodity of celebration. As a national holiday since 1937 Columbus Day has been labeled important via celebration and remembrance and therefore made worthy of continued commemoration by the public. The processes of memorialization have mythicized Christopher Columbus. Traditional curriculum and memorials have sanitized him into a benevolent leader, great explorer, and finder of the New World. His actions have been appropriated and devoid of historical context. Even as other sides of remembrance are now growing in opposition to this presentation of Columbus there is still a nostalgia for Columbus and the positive qualities of adventure and exploration he represents.

Nostalgia, as the character Andy in the comedy the *Detectorists* deadpans, “is not what it used to be,” and there is truth in the statement (Crook & Tandy, 2014-2017). Nostalgia in the modern era, it is argued, has developed into three distinct orders of function (Higson, 2014). The first-order is a belief that things were better in the past. *Make America Great Again* is the most popular current example of this type. The second-order is reflexive in nature and requires a critical analysis of history. Interpretive nostalgia is the third-order. It examines the “meaning and purpose of the emotion itself” (this includes both restorative and reflective nostalgia).

The orders of nostalgia reveal the importance of mediated relationships and underscores the role of loss and tradition associated with the general idea of memory. The orders also acknowledge that memory plays a powerful role in one’s views of history. It is often loss or the fear of loss that move people to remember, or to recapture something from a past (e.g. individual, collective, historical) that is considered worthy of remembrance. Strong attachments to tradition can also elicit similar responses. It has been argued that nostalgia can be a vehicle for the engagement of belonging, and as a business model that engages individuals and their desire to remember the past as it makes sense to them.

**Vignettes on memory: What is said? Who says it? Why does it matter?**

“Memory offers a new way to conceptualize public history”

Glassberg, 1996

Memory is about what is said. It’s about narratives. The shaping of narratives in the public’s memory is aided by asserting leveraged control over the memorial landscape (i.e. for different reasons such as ideological superiority or celebration/achievement). Memorial landscapes are a public curriculum.

Symbols play an important role in this field. They connote literal and abstract meanings, and play a functionary and associative role in memory. Perspective, knowledge, and understanding influence how symbols are absorbed. For example, Southern iconography is known to be largely relegated to symbols of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. Confederate flag debates in the American South and the ongoing debates surrounding Confederate iconography include the semiotics of memory. The 1990s saw Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and the US Senate all attempt to deal with the centripetal and centrifugal forces of such Confederate iconography (Leib, Webster, & Webster, 2000). Nearly thirty years on, similar debates still surround what the symbols mean (via flags, monuments, and naming) and what cultural dog whistles are attached to them. It's similar to what led to the removal of Confederate era statues in 2017 in New Orleans and on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, and Mississippi's voting to adopt a new state flag in November 2020.

Memory is often about power; the power to promote, as well as the power to sustain over time. A central component of the struggle to memorialize is the role of power and its enactment by individuals and groups that have divergent access to power (i.e. politics, economics, agency, support). Mundy (2011) illustrated this concept through an analysis of 17<sup>th</sup> century biombos (two-sided folding screens) that expressed differential memories of city elites and Indigenous populations. The biombos of Mexico City reflected Spanish conquest of the 16<sup>th</sup> century through illustrated 'interactions' between Hernan Cortes and the Aztecs. Also included were decorative maps without the inclusion of peoples (to create a sense of authority or right of conquest). The biombos offered one-sided historical records/memories of the past. They served as both a visual and material genesis story for elites of the city, and offered a historical substantiation for the contemporary position of elites in Mexican society. However, for the Indigenous peoples the

biombos are material examples of colonial glorifications of a past that pushed for their annihilation. The biombos are visceral representations of contemporary Indigenous states of marginalization.

Memories, be it – individual, collective, cultural, or historical - are important. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been a boon for the numerous offshoots of study about memory. Growth of connective technologies has been a game-changer in terms of speed and depth. It has allowed for the troubling of traditional hegemonic views of the past through things such as digital preservation and greater accessibility to digital files thus allowing ‘common people’ to subvert histories that have been appropriated by those in power by sharing their own photos, documents, and stories with larger audiences than ever before possible (Fabos, 2014). It is a trend that speaks to the ‘emotional and cognitive engagement’ of collective memory.

Likewise, oppositional memory practices are being utilized to change meaning at memorialized spaces via dissection, substitution, and transformation (McGeough, Palczewski, and Lake, 2015). Counterargument practices challenge subjective pasts and help destabilize fixed histories, much like the pedagogical practices of counter-storytelling and Critical Historical Thinking. A pedagogical necessity that McGeough et al. (2015) believe is heightened when mourning and blood consecration interject remembrances (e.g. the Alamo, Little Bighorn, the Haymarket Riot). Oppositional memory practices offer refutation without negation as a process by which traditional narratives are countered to include a wider range of possibilities that remove the idea of the past being projected as an objective reality.

### **Intersections: Museums and the utility of memory**

Museums, in their traditional physical sense, are brick and mortar spaces where narratives are created, collections are curated, and stories are presented to be experienced. They are highly

contextualized and constructed to be navigated in particular ways (Lowenthal, 2011).

Museum-scapes come in all different types and sizes. There are content specific spaces for subjects like science, art, and history, memorials/monuments and cemeteries for overt and muted remembrances, children's museums for age appropriate engagements for younger children, and outdoor/wildlife centers for open-space engagements with nature. Museums can be public, private, expensive, cheap, mobile, temporary, and online.

One thing about museums is that they are inextricably connected to the experiences and stories they hope to curate. Narratives and the ways in which they are negotiated and then presented are heavily influenced by the mission of the space. The rise in visitor studies has shed new light on the importance of visitors to museums. As museums are becoming more concerned with creating communities of support there are plenty of questions about the way museums function. For example, how are the tensions of narratives balanced for visitors? What does a museum need to do in order to be seen as legitimate by its visitors? What is the role of staff? How does the museum treat its visitors? Visitors and their attached interests and attendance serve as one very important quantitative measure of social interest and success for museum spaces (e.g. attendance, financial support via donations, souvenir sales, memberships, and word of mouth support). Visiting is a tangible way in which to show support for a museum.

Issues of representation and presentation are perennial problems for museums about how to negotiate visitors, donors, and shifting social climates. Over forty years ago Schlereth (1978) argued that positing the past as dichotomous (e.g. social v. solitary, collective v. individual, and public v. private) severely constrained the possibilities of history museums. He noted six fallacies by which museums traditionally engaged: 1. History is progressive, 2. History is patriotic, 3. History is nostalgia, 4. History is consensus, 5. History is simple, and 6. History is

money. Schlereth (1978) suggested that museums move past these fallacies and take a critical stance toward the past in order to examine such things as diverse perspectives and under researched people, events, and ideas. To accomplish these goals it was argued that history needed to be inquiry based, reflective, and critical; and to challenge the traditional “feel-good” memories that tend to inculcate history museums.

Museums and controversy are inextricably connected. Controversy is a common occurrence that museums must navigate. One of the most-well known contemporary examples of museums and controversy involved “The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II” at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC in 1995. In recalling the events, former secretary of the Smithsonian, I. Michael Heyman, stated, “we made a basic error in attempting to couple an historic treatment of the use of atomic weapons with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the end of the war” (Thelen, 1995). The differentiated memories of the atomic bomb by veterans, historians, and other interested parties collided when expectations of historic presentation and patriotic remembrance did not gel collectively. Controversy erupted as the exhibition was attempted. Efforts to strike a balance of presentation between the dichotomies of celebration/sacrifice/service and critical analysis of the past did not go well, and eventually led to the exhibition being scrapped. A 2003 attempt to move the Enola Gay to a display hangar met a similar fate.

The intersection between controversy and memory is prevalent. Events on September 11, 2001 are a clear example. Attempts to memorialize the day, the passengers, and its meaning are ongoing. Doss (2011) cites 9/11 remembrance as the ultimate example of memorial mania in the American landscape. Memorial mania is built on emotions and the need to present ownership of the past in visible ways (Doss, 2011). There is a presumed value in being the first to stake a

claim to how something will be framed and what it will mean or be. Cultural legitimacy to enact memory is of major concern. Memorials and the utilization of cultural memory at Ground Zero in New York City and the United Airlines Flight #93 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania reflect that different groups had different ideas about the focus of 9/11 memorials and the collective narrative created by and for them (e.g. victims, survivors, perpetrators).

How to handle controversy has long been a tight-rope walked by museums. Visitor expectations, shifting social norms, and satisfying donors all are points of negotiation that impact how museums operate. While history museums have largely moved beyond the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Charles Willson Peale vision of museums, Wallace (1996) argued that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history museums were still largely institutions of genteel histories. Presentations rested on well-known dominant narratives of the past that coincided with the affective memories of museum goers. One museum that has attempted to push back against such memories is the American Civil War Center in Richmond, Virginia. It has positioned itself as a place for visitors to “share historical consciousness” about their own pre-existing notions of the Civil War (Maurantonio, 2015).

Critical museum studies have correctly pointed out the fallacy of museums that position themselves as apolitical. Museums are not apolitical and cannot be so. Decisions of presentation, interpretation, and engagement are all wrapped up in discussions of access and who and what the museum is about (McTavish, Ashley, Igloliorte, Robertson, & Terry, 2017). Current trends in museum studies reveal that museums are more aggressively addressing issues of race, class, and gender, as well as other critical subjects of social importance (e.g. inclusivity of perspectives/ideas, accessibility) because contemporary social climate demands it. And even as changes are occurring (via caveats and additions of resources and perspectives), the trajectory

of narratives in many museums are mostly staying the same. The narratives are comfortable and accepted for their visitors, and there is little need to change how they operate.

Through it all, the matter of support for museums is invaluable. Creation of financial and visitor support for a museum or memorial is not a matter of happenstance nor is it a haphazard process. It is through negotiations of ideas, history, and the calculus of cultural memory that museums work to curate narratives that will be welcomed by their visitors. Specific to understanding the relationship of cultural memory and museums is the working knowledge that memories are cemented and imbued by social enactments of power about what is saved, remembered, and presented through productions of history (Lowenthal, 2015; Nora, 1989).

Trouillot (1995) iterated that such processes of power coalesce around productions of history in which there are winners and losers. Those remembered and those forgotten and possibly erased. Ones whose stories make sense to us as a society, and those that don't. It amounts to what Trouillot explains as the domination of the historical narrative. The past is informed by lines of presentation that situate what is said to have happened as objective reality. Taboo topics that most museums tend to steer clear of either historically or in current times read like a laundry list of difficult topics that exist in opposition to traditional social norms. They include sexuality (Steorn, 2012), divorce, prostitution, abortion, domestic violence, underclasses, structures of inequity, racial violence, and productions of poverty and unemployment. Finding funding for the exhibition of difficult topics can be hard without the support of major donors who are often the power brokers for what is and is not presented within museums (Wallace, 1981; 1996).

Museums desire to broaden their constituencies is now including reaching out to and working with communities long ignored and/or forgotten. Outreach is a continual process

(Wallace, 1996). An important one that Crew and Horton (1989) espoused thirty years ago when they argued that museums primarily exist as places of continued marginalization for minorities. To elucidate their position, Crew and Horton (1989) wrote that black people have long been “the captives of generations of institutional policies derived from the habit of viewing museums as private preserves of white society” that led to presentations in which African Americans had been historically ignored, appropriated, cast as asides, and/or tokenized.

A desire for museums to create more openness about how the past is “created, constructed and used” led Craggs and King (2013) to suggest a four-step process for engaging students about presentations of the not-so distant past: 1. researching an event/looking at multiple views, 2. interviewing people with memories of said events, 3. consider how has the event been remembered and/or forgotten; commemorated and interpreted in social and historical memory, and 4. create one’s own interpretation based on research. The steps in the process are meant to show students how they can balance multi-perspective presentations of memory with notions of historical fact. As Craggs and King (2013) note of narrative creation,

“...none of this work is neutral. I’d like to suggest that museums could concentrate less on communicating information and more on engaging people in dialogue about how historical interpretations are formulated, and consequently how they are used (and abused) in the present” (3).

More broadly, Christopher (2007) situates museums as cultural institutions that help teach and define the parameters of history where presentations of the past are influenced by the “historical preferences and needs” of society (i.e. through audience, funding, scope, research, and rationale). What is it that museums provide visitors? Through the example of the *House of Seven Gables* in Salem, Massachusetts, Christopher (2007) showed how the past was appropriated. *The House of Seven Gables* served as a place to substantiate true Americanism against east coast immigration. Presentations of the past promoted overly positive interactions

between citizens. The museum largely met the needs of Americans who wanted to see the museum and its positive reminiscences of an idealized past made consumable as history via heritage. The past was positioned as a commodity for tourists seeking memorable experiences and/or an idealized sense of place.

Curatorial decisions are at the heart of understanding the performative nature of museums (Segall, 2014). Intuitively, what do museums want visitors to learn? And how do they go about achieving that ideal? From decisions regarding spatial dimensions and exhibit presentation/position, to a lack of context about topics, diffused responsibility of uncomfortable topics, a focus on objects, “good guy” positioning, and Americanization, Segall (2014) contends that museums (e.g. the National Holocaust Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian) tend to satisfy the public’s need for information consumption. Most museums tend to reify for visitors what is already known or believed.

This is especially true at presidential libraries. They are an example of a site of cultural representation and public record, where achievement narratives outweigh flaws and shortcomings; where style is privileged over substance (Ulyatt, 2014). Distortions of history are commonplace; and serve as the *modus operandi*. Controversial issues tend to be ignored or posited as something else entirely as a form of political bait-and-switch. Without fail, presidential libraries and museums include inspirational messages of service and aspirational messages of progress centered on visionary leadership. The prevalence for presentations that situate the president as the key actor that both limits and distorts larger discussions of historical context and decision-making; specifically excluding/downplaying the influence of advisers (Ulyatt, 2014). But, the need for mass appeal is also a contributing factor in the type of material presented.

For example, the Jewish Museum of Berlin has situated itself as a counter-memorial institution that celebrates the 2000-year history of Jewish culture in Germany in lieu of over focusing on its traumatic past (e.g. a Holocaust museum) (Sodaro, 2013). It was a conscious choice of the facility to turn against the growing trends of “dark tourism” of trauma and historical pain toward celebratory presentations devoid of guilt and more focused on modern multiculturalism in Germany. Philip Stone, the executive director at the Institute for Dark Tourism (at the University of Central Lancashire) has noted, “I think, for political reasons or cultural reasons, we are turning to the visitor economy to remember aspects of death and dying, disaster” (as cited by Hannah Sampson of The Washington Post on November 13, 2019: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/travel/dark-tourism-explainer/>). A consideration of visitor-ship which left the Jewish Museum of Berlin negotiating nostalgic memories, the broader context of Jewish structural struggles in Germany, and the historical trauma they have experienced.

The work of museums necessarily negotiates memory as it influences the expectations of visitors, addresses the realities of visitor experiences, impacts how exhibitions are presented, and informs the ways in which museum spaces are experienced.

### **Intersections: Geography and memory**

Geography and memory offer an interesting context in which to consider space. Critical geographers often theorize geography for its performative qualities. Specifically, the meaning of space is multiplicative. Space incorporates representations, power, and voice; both in having it and not having it. In 1980 Pierre Bourdieu wrote that geographies “are in fact inheritances, in other words, historical products of social determinants” (as cited in (Hoelscher, 2004, 27). Memorial spaces are enveloped by four main points: 1. symbolic representations are

constructions of collective memory borne of control, conflict, and negotiation, 2. memorial spaces are sites of social struggle about what has meaning in the past, 3. geography as memory serves as a source of pride/identity for both dominant and subordinate groups, and 4. naming engages the politics of space and commemoration (Alderman, 1996).

Research is clear on the notion that geographies are fluid in how they are shaped and mediated. What is seemingly obvious is that geography helps influence identity and ingratiate itself within memories of the past (Hoelscher, 2004). Evident are important questions about geography and its role in the production of cultural memory, such as: How is the past treated in the present? What role does geography play in the subterfuge and fights of remembrance? How is value connoted or removed through geographic means? Dwyer and Alderman (2008) have asserted that public symbols often serve as agents of legitimacy by normalizing social orders through memorial landscapes. Such landscapes, it is argued, are created in relation to what and how people feel about the past and see its function for the present and future through deliberate constructions of spatial utilization (Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004).

The use of space is integral to historical tourism. And, it is big business. Destinations like Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia to Robben Island (Wood, Berger & Hasian, 2017)) in South Africa to Chernobyl in Pripyat, Ukraine are tourism presentations of and about the past. Williamsburg is a reconstructed village filled with historical actors, Robben Island is a national estate and World Heritage Site, and Chernobyl (even with its still high levels of radiation) is constitutive of the growing interest in dark tourism.

Additionally, economic elements, however troubling, are embedded in each of their presentations of the past (Miles, 2015). Beyond the stories, geographically interesting places

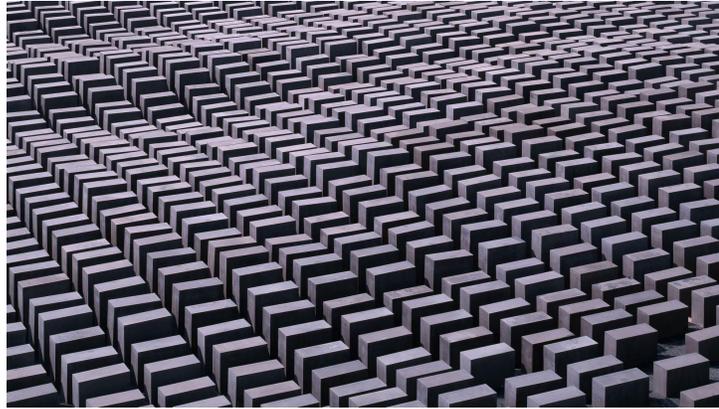
hold extra value because they transport visitors to another time via temporal detachment. They feel and look different than normal day-to-day experiences. They reveal something different.

One of the concerns of history via tourism and/or mass consumption is that it has become increasingly manipulative as presentation is concerned with selling items, getting repeat visitors, and creating an experience. Attaching monetary value to the past (i.e. festivals, parades, souvenirs) tends to focus on the pleasantries of the past or heritage celebrations (Trouillot, 1995). Commodification of the past serves as a marketplace for heritage to understand what identities and perspectives are economically valid (Kopytoff, 1986). What does tourism, and the monies tied to it do to the meaning of a place? An issue with these types of intersections of geography and memory is that they are often controlled by dominant classes of influence (e.g. money, political power, cultural capital). Sites of memory are utilized as a means toward capital accumulation (Nora, 1989).

The presentation of traditionally accepted dominant narratives usually occur in places of high visibility (e.g. statues of Martin Luther King Jr.). The relationship of geography and memory via public pedagogy is predominantly about messaging. In January of 2019, the city council of Kansas City moved to name one of its historic streets in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King. But, less than a year later in November 2019, Kansas City citizens, by nearly a 40 percentage point margin, voted to remove Martin Luther King Jr.'s name from the street. There were tensions about the renaming. Some were not against honoring Dr. King, but the renaming of Paseo Boulevard to MLK Jr. in a historically black neighborhood brought up issues of loss of identity for the community, not just memorializing an important historical figure. Others, however, felt re-naming the street in honor of MLK Jr was necessary as a point of historical recognition and representation.

The events of the street renaming in Kansas City highlight the role of geography and its intersection with memory. How does the identity of a place address issues of collective memory on micro and macro levels? How is geography, both physically and culturally utilized to present messages? Urban spaces are continually being transformed by physical representations of memory (i.e. memorials). Logistics of urban landscapes necessarily dictate questions such as: Where are green spaces promoted and maintained? And, who has access and/or conservatorship over them? What land is conserved or developed? What type of development is wanted/needed? What niche is promoted for commerce via tourism (e.g. Austin, Texas – “Keep Austin Weird”, “Live Music Capital of the World”)? How are public and private spaces utilized? What land is considered under-utilized and open for re-development?

Gurler and Ozer (2013) have argued for public memorials to be integrated into city life. The goal is interaction of memorial and people – instead of passive engagement. The political nature of memory mandates, they argue, for four considerations when designing public memorials: 1. never gain spaces (present spaces for past events and future emphases), 2. questions life experiences, 3. participatory design processes, and 4. the consideration of victims. The Berlin Holocaust Memorial (auf Deutsch: *Denkmal für die Ermordeten Juden Europas*; in English: *a Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*) is considered an exemplar of these dicta as it is constructed and presented as a place of living and as a place for reflection about the past. It serves as a place of social memory that privileges participatory engagement.



*Illustration 3: 2,711 concrete pillars, each 95 centimeters wide, heights from 8 inches to over 15 fifteen. Covers an area of almost 5 acres.*

*Built 1998-2005 by Eisenman Architects*

Others have noted that the interactivity of the Holocaust memorial is lost because of its historical vagueness and assumption of familiarity. A notion that Richard Brody commented about in 2012 when he noted that the memorial “separates the victims from their killers and leaches the moral element from the historical event, shunting it to the category of natural catastrophe.”

Heritage tourism plays a role in the socio-spatially mediated nature of memory. It is intertwined with what is considered significant and what is worth remembering (Dwyer & Alderman, 2008). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, heritage tourism is big business. The poster place for such a memory economy is Natchez, Mississippi. It is a town firmly situated along the intersection of the past and geography. With its accessible geographic location on the Mississippi River and its numerous Civil War era plantations visitors are transported from an ordinary strip-mall laden town to a bygone era of estates from a white-pillared past that promote both commercial and cultural capital to those who agree with and believe this presentation of historical memory (Hoelscher, 2006).

Specific and consistent racial components to geography are on display in Natchez. Hoelscher (2003) under the lens of memory and performance geographies noted the prevalence

of whiteness in productions of space in Natchez, Mississippi. With an overwhelming and celebrated amount of plantation homes and Old South money Natchez, Mississippi is steeped in fictionalized and/or romanticized ‘treasured past’ performances through pageants and heritage tourism. The result of which has been a sustained economic boom for the area. Through tourism, memory of the past has provided a strong economic connection to the present via pageants, genteel hospitality, tours, and wares of nostalgia. The result of which has enabled unequal power structures in the community to remain intact by reifying the present to the past via historical memory as cultural capital.

In places like Natchez, Mississippi the process of remembering is also simultaneously a process of forgetting (Trouillot, 1995). Acts of remembrance are partialities. As meaning and associations take place, there is a void of stuff not remembered; either by absence, amnesia/ignorance, ambivalence, or calculated maneuvering away from something unwanted. The memories wanted are promoted and non-essential memories unwanted are suppressed and/or ignored. Prevalent in such decisions are showcases of power as attempts to attain influence about who gets to remember and/or what gets remembered or rebranded are evidenced throughout processes of remembrance.

For instance, the ubiquity of memorial landscapes in public spaces highlight this dynamic through street/building names, placement and naming of parks, and the issuing of historical markers (Dwyer & Alderman, 2008). These all amount to public processes of symbolic accretion as over time meaning is either substantiated or challenged, dependent on a number of social variables. Symbolic accretion assumes that memory making is continuous in memorial spaces. Understandings of the past are fluid. And place, is a space ripe for creating and espousing, the by-product of change, which is meaning – both intended and unintended. As new

counter-voices enter spheres of social influence inevitable tensions occur as communities negotiate the want for positive histories that invite solidarity/reverence with the need to present difficult histories that include marginalized and difficult pasts.

Using the renaming of streets in the southern United State for Martin Luther King Jr, Alderman (1996) noted that the creation of new geographies of memory necessarily negotiate the differing meanings of space and the past into useable remembrances that help “redefine the ideological basis of race relations” (56). It is not unlike the naming of schools for social activists or the renaming of schools and buildings previously named for individuals who stood in the face of current social mores. Issues of power and spatial politics are innately at play in the naming and renaming of public spaces: What part of the city does the memorial/renaming go? Is the area in a space of high or low visibility? What is the purpose of the naming/renaming? Who shows support and who doesn't? What are the economic considerations?

The above questions get at the intersection of geography and memory when Ammon (2009) discussed the role of urban renewal in the creation and erasure of collective memory. In her consideration of the re-development of Southwest Washington, D.C. she argued that the Housing Act of 1949 removed a majority of poor and often minority populations as a prerequisite for urban renewal. With a complete effort on aesthetics and innovation over considerations of community and/or social justice, for residents pre-urban renewal, urban renewal was tantamount to wholesale cultural erasure. As a process, it changed the racial and economic dynamics of the area overnight. A change borne out in the memory of and remembrances of those impacted by the project. For the thousands of African Americans displaced and a community lost through forced removal and dispersal, the renewal was disastrous and marked the end of their lives in the area. To the post-urban renewal influx of

social activists and racial liberals, the urban renewal of Southwest Washington, D.C. reflected possibility and advancement (Ammon, 2009).

Likewise, Ardakani and Oloonabadi (2011) explored the power of collective memory to promote the ideals of urban conservation. Such considerations of personal memory, the authors argue, allow for a place to be seen for its community through specific events, community experiences, and through its people. As socio-cultural values and nuances of a place are more valuable than its economic development possibilities, the collective memory and identity (and voice) of a place is inherently more strongly tied to its people. When the people who have a history and presence to the place become a voice for its conservation, collective memory is used to protect areas of historical importance for marginalized populations/histories.

Places subject to urban renewal and/or development are often subject to such processes because value is solely economic-based as spaces are constituted in dollars not sense. If the memory of a place is ignored, then the memory of the place is allowed to be recast for a new population of inhabitants wherein replacing collective memory with newness (think gentrification, urban renewal and sprawl). Ardakani and Oloonabadi (2011) argue that sustainable urban conservation requires a commitment to engaging both the physical and social environment of a place and to recognize the need to balance the value of both through means of enacting and utilizing collective memory.

Cultural landscapes are often racialized. See Alderman and Inwood's (2016), article on Wendell Scott's 'hard racing' as spatial mobility in the all-white NASCAR of the 1960s and 1970s. A great impetus is further put upon public spaces as forums that are especially powerful as they are seen as sites that are transmitting notions/ideals/concepts of truth (Hague & Sebesta, 2011). Meaning is constructed around ideas of validity through symbolic accretion. For

example, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), an organization formed nearly 30 years after the Civil War ended, has had a direct hand in propping up Lost Cause narratives throughout the US for over 100 years. Erecting memorials in public spaces was and is their action of choice.

To have a presence in public spaces is to create an air of legitimacy. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the UDC placed memorials in the Pacific Northwest to reinvigorate Lost Cause narratives and celebrate the achievements of Jefferson Davis, an important figure from the Civil War. Attempts in 2002 to remove the Davis commemorations were met with large scale anger as opponents believed removal was an attempt by liberals to distort history and cause unneeded racial tensions. Incidentally, the same type of accusations have often been levied at the UDC for inciting false narratives of the Civil War and creating rose-colored histories surrounding the historical treatment of African Americans.

Memory and space coalesce around negotiations of representation. Narratives are associated with entanglements of public history, cultural memory, and official discourses (Trouillot, 1990; Trouillot, 1995). Questions of importance (e.g. who or what), negotiations of multiplicative realities with diverging acknowledgement of facts are all part of the processes of dealing with collective memories. In the case of New Brighton, South Africa, racial harmony and the humanizing views of overcoming difficult conditions were deemed the preferred presentations of the past in a mixed-race post-Apartheid residential area (Baines, 2005). The preferred presentation of the past is often moving forward, not looking backward.

### **Intersections: Memory and promoting interests**

Memory as a tool of and for nations takes many forms. Memory is utilized for multiple means. Most common is under the duality of bringing people under shared umbrellas of

experience, through ideology, or emotion, or to separate people by those very same means. Nations have perfected the use of memory for their own purposes. Roberts (2000) has argued that nations often use the “power of the state to generate and to suppress historical narratives” (513) via mediums of public pedagogy such as museums and memorials. National models are evident across the National Mall in Washington, DC. (Savage, 2009) to Eastern European countries and the American South (Levinson, 1998/2018). Historical examples are endless to show how nations often appropriate and rework symbols in service of the nation. Baines (2005) and Arnoldi (2006) both argue that the concept of a national memory constitutes a type of ‘colonialism’, in which the realities of the poor, oppressed, and those without power are erased because they represent connections to an uncomfortable past for ruling elites.

Wang (2008) suggested that a “state’s political use of the past and the function of history education in political transition and foreign relations” (783) is an important aspect of nation building. China, as an example, led an ideological re-education of its students through its history curriculum and memory toward a focus on national humiliation at the hands of imperialist powers in the early 1990s (China’s Patriotic Education Campaign of 1991). After the uprising at Tiananmen Square in 1989 when national belief in communism waned, China worked to reshape its curriculum toward patriotic ends and cast its great enemies as “foreign nations that had invaded and humiliated China in the past.”

The rise of counter-hegemonic narratives of presentations of traditional history come as challenges to traditional narratives. Their purpose is to reveal a complex interplay of power with distortions of history driven by statist narratives. Statist narratives are: 1. used to suppress alternative narratives and challenges to statist narratives, 2. used to define intellectuals, and 3. used to present the fluidity of history and memory as a process refashioned for use in the present.

Statist narratives, intuitively, are a means of legitimizing power of those already in power (Roberts, 2000). Hegemonic narratives of patriotism, progress, achievement (both social and material successes) or positive modifications of trauma intertwines history and memory and highlights the role of identity in its celebration of history.

State sanctioned memory is everywhere. Acts of memory are often celebratory. As an example, Haskins' (2003) looked at collective memory via a nationwide commemorative stamp program from the US Postal Service. The program included people, events, and trends from each decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The memorial program served two purposes: remembrance/celebration of the past, and offering soft reminders to citizens about what was worthy of remembrance via memorial inclusion. Through lenses of historical commodification, cultural iconography, and political amnesia the stamps present as symbols of cultural politics that create a civic religion that celebrate “the myths that have developed to help us interpret who and what we are in America” (Haskins, 2003, 3).

Similarly the presentation of a public memory has been important for regimes in France (on the mainland and in its colonial holdings) in producing a sustaining and legitimating message concerning its slave past (Michel, 2016). Mali has likewise enacted collective memory in service of varying national/political interests (be it democratic or socialist) (Arnoldi, 2006). The past is utilized differently depending on who holds national power (through performances and objects of material culture) – but the underlying theme for the usage of memory is to always be in the service of national interests via the current political brokers of national power.

There is a calculus about what messages take root in the presentation of narratives as the malleability of memory in official discourse serves as an instrument of both persuasion and function. Likewise, Mao (2008) has argued that curriculum, “as culture’s medium of social

identity construction, represents a struggle over who constructs whose identity and what is constructed.” In order for Taiwan to maintain its global market viability the country engaged in curricular corrections during the 1990s that addressed self-reflection concerning identity and representation of perceived indigeneity and “Chinese-ness” (Mao, 2008).

The Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification was created in the mid 1990s as part of the peace accords ending the 34-year Guatemalan civil war, where over 200,000 Guatemalans lost their lives. Oglesby (2007) argued the commission’s report, *Memory of Silence*, was co-opted by the government to promote peace education and other themes of triumph and reconciliation through “exemplary memory.” The atrocities of the civil war were re-packaged and cleaned up and framed as issues of governance and citizen disobedience/anger. Deeper discussions of social and political history (i.e. state supported/sanctioned atrocities) were wiped from the record. Government officials in Guatemala willfully promoted “exemplary memory” to navigate difficult narratives of the past and silence victims of the civil war.

Another armed conflict, The Malvinas War, a 10-week long undeclared war over territorial disputes between the United Kingdom and Argentina (also known as the Falklands War by the British) presents similarly. The events of 1982 still remain a continued point of contention. Benwell (2016) recounted how modern memory narratives of the war were perpetrated through national educational sources. His findings noted that both geographic and logistical proximity influenced how citizens understood the conflict. Benwell (2016) found that national narratives were ‘received, resisted, and performed’ as an effort of “resonance and connection.” The war was socio-politically mediated and linked globally to British colonialism (i.e. through acts of public schools).

Brown and Brown (2010) showed that presentations of race and racial violence in the official school curriculum are most commonly posited as perpetrated by bad people doing bad things. Instances of violence were largely de-contextualized as acts of violence were placed on the individual level. Foci on institutional/structural racism were nearly non-existent. The curated narratives on race have created a multitude of ‘false memories’ concerning race and racial violence. Brown (2011) argued that typical presentations of race and racial violence in curriculum has created a climate of racial amnesia and therefore a society deeply in need of a sociocultural education that examines the constructions of the past; especially regarding race. Promotion of racial cultural memory is needed to look at structures of inequality (i.e. economically, socially, politically) as purveyors on racialized bodies (Brown, 2011).

Religion has also been a continual battleground of constructed memory in curriculum. The work of the Texas State Board of Education and the development of social studies standards are a good example of the fight. Continual attempts have been made to promote curriculum that positions U.S. history as specifically and distinctly Protestant (Erekson, 2012). In 2007 Chancey noted the concept of “Christian Americanism” as a focal point of The National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (NCBCPS). It is a conservative organization that attempts to present idealized Christian remembrances of the past by constructing an American identity as “quintessentially conservative Protestant” through Christianizing American symbols (e.g. national flag, the Declaration of Independence, patriotism) through their 300+ page curriculum. For NCBCPS, the curriculum involves three main agendas: theological, ideological, and political. The hope of Christian Americanist ideology is to promote curricula in public schools across the U.S. that co-opts a new joint religious and historical memory of the past.

### **Intersections: Memory and the social studies**

There are fundamental flaws in historical narratives. Research has noted that narratives are inherently incomplete. They are slivers of a more complex whole. They are pieces of choice, of perspective, and perceptions of importance. For too long, historical narratives were overwhelmingly dominated almost exclusively by white hetero normative middle class norms. The time of acceptable historical scholarship is beyond the days of ‘by and for white men.’ Developments in new social histories means the inclusion of previously de-valued or excluded voices means there are new and more multi-perspective views on historical events, actors, and ideas (Hämäläinen, 2011; National Park Service, 2018).

In a small-scale longitudinal qualitative study of undergraduate students by historian Michael Frisch (1989) from 1975-1988 explored the intersections of collective memory and cultural iconography in the United States. Findings of the study clearly showed a prevalence of cultural structures (i.e. memorials and museums) to fixate on perfunctory memory tropes. Stories of “national tradition” and the promotion of historical memory via feel-good acts of patriotism and positive-spun innovations were the modus operandi. Ignoring histories involving systemic injustices and minorities filled the gaps of absence.

Portrayals of exclusivity within a story or a social or historical narrative are inherently inaccurate. Emphasis is less on a contextualized and nuanced truth but rather an incomplete one of “truthiness<sup>1</sup>.” In a March 16, 2010 episode of *The Colbert Report*, the host Stephen Colbert rhetorically asked noted historian Eric Foner, “Isn’t it said that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it? But if you change that history, doesn’t that solve that problem?” That statement was partly made in response to the Texas State Board of Education and its development of social studies curriculum standards for K-12 public school students in Texas.

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<sup>1</sup> Truthiness – Merriam-Webster “Word of the Year” in 2006: “truth that comes from the gut, not books; the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts of facts known to be true.” Coined by Stephen Colbert, host of *The Colbert Report*.

One-sided narratives are a historical gerrymandering of sorts. They are designed and presented in ways that have a habit of trapping narratives in binaries of: good or bad, right or wrong, SAD!, or morally bankrupt. Differing narratives on the other hand can create space for understandings that are more encompassing and require more deliberative consideration.

In the same vein of Trouillot's (1995) assertion concerning the incomplete nature of archives and their role in the purveyance of cultural and historical knowledge, Pajala (2010) explored the role of a Finnish television archive (Elava arkisto online archive) and its presentation of cultural memory. The mission of the archives was to produce a "shared history with sound and images" by allowing "easy access to the nation's memory." While the archives provided information on many different aspects of Finland, it had significant limitations. Pajala (2010) noted archives and their historical remembrances often privileged normalizing structures of the past. She specifically commented on the noticeable dearth of clips citing homosexuality in the archives. Homosexuality was decriminalized in Finland in 1971, but it still remained illegal to promote via the media until 1999. There is, therefore, a three-decade record of cultural silence on pro-homosexual footage in the archives.

Cultural memory has a long kinship with curriculum. Historical narratives are outlined and presented as fair by the groups included/celebrated. However, people excluded and/or not involved may look at the end result of the curriculum and see that the narrative as it is outlined seems incomplete without multiple or different perspectives and contextual understandings of the past. To look at historical narratives in U.S. history reveal numerous incantations of social studies curriculum that slant pro-USA and stay away from uncomfortable historical critiques. There is a significant focus on freedom, opportunity, and overcoming. Occasional vignettes touch on more difficult topics such as oppression and the notion of the U.S. as a flawed

democracy, that are then buffeted with notions of freedom, opportunity, and overcoming.

Curriculum debates on historical narrative tend to go hand-in-hand with culture wars (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1993; Evans, 2004; Zimmerman, 2009). Consider the 1990s curriculum debates that occurred in California regarding U.S. History. Debate revolved around what constituted the standard markers of traditional historical narrative and what was considered appropriate U.S. History. Traditionalists promoted curricula on political leaders, individual achievement, and patriotism as the cornerstones of the good and traditional story of America. In other words, those were the tenets from which the true story of the United States could be told. It was a story that validated dominant discourses about the United States, explained what it meant to be an American. At the same time it also stipulated which acts and attitudes were and were not American.

Not shockingly, challenges to these traditional treatments of history were met with opposition. Calls for multicultural education in the early 1990s were dismissed in 1992 as a “hatred toward traditional history” by former chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities Lynne Cheney (Erekson, 2012, 31). The debate eventually escalated with the rise of neo-nativists who doubled down in their attempts to codify history as the traditional historical narrative in which the story was Euro-centric (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1993). Attacks on multicultural education became part of the discourse as it was framed as a distortion of history, a dumbing down of history; and even more incendiary, as America hating and anti-intellectual. Protection of the dominant historical narrative was of chief importance (Wills, 1996). Similar pro-Christian conservative arguments emerged in Texas starting in the 1960s from Mel and Norma Gabler and their pseudo-intellectual textbook-screening organization Educational Research Analysts.

In 1999 Wineburg argued that a major problem in social studies was one of historical knowing. He noted that the “inability to perceive the experience of others,” (498) led to countless misunderstandings and was clearly evident in the misguided oppositions to multicultural education. Wills (2001) argues that easily remembered and constantly fed historical narratives, whether true or not, are often substantiated because they are believable. There is a step in the process from ‘believable’ to ‘feeling true’ that is made. In her study of how African Americans and European Americans situate themselves to history differently than one another, Epstein (1998) argued that one of the shortcomings of traditional narratives is that they do not take into consideration the historical perspectives and thinking that young people bring to historical inquiry. It is an important notation considering how the historical perspectives of students are influenced by their identities. African American students drew on their own personal experiences to understand the past and challenge information considered the canon whereas European American in the study students seemingly trusted traditional texts.

Epstein (1998) showed that when discussing the topic of rights in the U.S., African American students tended to focus on the history of rights denied to minorities. European American students focused more on the opportunities and privileges afforded by rights. Both groups drew on their own knowledge, experience, and therefore identity, to make sense of the topic. The resources of their families and their memories were essential to how African American “filled in facts” left out by official resources like textbooks. By comparison, European American students tended to see the textbook as factual as it typically went with the story of history that made sense to them and had been recounted to them over time. Official memory was their guide toward historical understanding.

African American students in Epstein’s study present what Wertsch (2000) referred to as the idea of “knowing but not believing in” – a concept of understanding largely attached to dominant narratives. It’s when people are able to give basic details of a narrative but do not necessarily believe it as valid. The narrative does not fit their understanding of lived experience. The flip-side of the concept is the idea of “believing but not knowing,” which is a belief typically attached to unofficial histories. It refers to when only pieces of a story can be recalled. Information is usually recalled in less detail than in official narratives, but nevertheless feels more believable. Narratives appear to draw from more accessible realities and perspectives that help aid in understanding them as truth.

Curricula across social studies has been shown to have a tenuous relationship with historical and/or cultural memory. *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (Loewen, 1995) notes that history textbooks are primarily veins of production and consumption for dominant narrative themes (i.e. freedom, liberty, individualism, expansion of rights, etc...). They curate stories. Specifically, the traditional and ongoing acceptance of historical textbooks reveals that dominant society coddles textbooks as canon knowledge. They are not challenged or critiqued, just accepted as the truth. VanSledright (2008) has argued that the omniscient voice present in textbooks precludes the need for other voices. They (the books) know all and tell all. They function as Google.

A case study on the California state mandated 8<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History textbook, *Land of the Free*, from 1967 through the early 1970s (Lewinnek, 2015) reflects the tensions present in their use. Resistance to the use of *Land of the Free* in classrooms was largely led by white female suburbanites who wanted patriotic history that focused on what they termed ‘American values’ and great heroes. Opposition to the textbook was situated around discussions on

presentations of history and the tensions over presentations of the past. Dissent of the text also was largely from populations facing physical integration and/or in suburban settings. Seen as presenting falsehoods, the textbook was attacked in community meetings and in documentary films as ‘leftist brainwashing’ that eroded American values.

Lewinnek’s study provides a historical bridge from Harold Rugg’s textbooks of the 1930s to the more recent curriculum debates in Texas, Arizona, and California about multiculturalism and the purpose of social studies. The perspective needed to move past tradition and dominant types of historical narrative is moving beyond the mere adding or subtracting of historical actors. Such attempts of addition and subtraction typically end in surface level coverages of “famous people” that fit sanitized historical narratives easily accessible to students. Historian Michael Frisch (1989) illustrated that the inclusion of more historical actors in curriculum, however, will likely make little difference to many, as students are fed a heavy diet of U.S. cultural narrative from an early age that supports the American creation myth, and lauds the progressive and forward-moving nature of the United States history.

Previously, VanSledright (2008) argued that the study of history, as a professional discipline, was nearly non-existent in K-12 classrooms. It is commonly presented as finished and factual, and more so, his research showed that curriculum is largely about substantiation of the nation-state through arcs of continuity and progress (e.g. politics, business, innovation, economics, and love of military). Even narratives of struggle and conflict in history are co-opted and molded into stories of triumph that corroborate the ‘U.S. equals freedom’ storyline. While the narrative of such stories are no doubt cringe-worthy to most historians it works with the masses because of its simplicity and familiarity. It is one of the reasons that a growing number of historians are producing works with more of a focus on narrative history rather than strict

academic analysis in an effort to combat rising concern that history is being circumvented by simplicity.

Oftentimes the U.S. narratives presented in the classroom are reflective of the public pedagogy students come into contact with on a daily basis. It is in the naming of public streets, buildings, memorials, and in the presentations of cultural iconography. Public pedagogy has shown to provide spaces for the promotion of non-traditional narratives, but such cases are the exception, not the rule. Non-critical and celebratory historical narratives are, and they draw on Lowenthal's (2011) conception of heritage. The celebratory nature of dominant historical narrative does not need or require inquiry or critique, because its function is pure adoration. Questions are not needed, nor are they wanted. Such narratives amount to what historian Michael Kammen coined as "history without guilt" (688; as cited in VanSledright, 2008).

One approach to challenge the limitations present in historical narratives is to engage in historical thinking.<sup>2</sup> Engaging in such a critical process envelopes the need to address the underlying socio-cultural nature of narrative constructions. Seixas (1993) notes there are three key elements of historical understanding that students need to learn: 1. they are able to identify events of importance, 2. they can use evidence to learn and know about the past, and 3. they utilize agency, empathy, and moral judgment when learning about the past. The processes of thinking and understanding historically are situated in inquiry and allow students to examine the critical nature in which narratives develop.

Critical Historical Thinking framework takes the examination even further to critique and reflect on the production of historical narratives (Salinas, Blevins, & Sullivan, 2012). Drawing on Wineburg's notion of historical thinking, the crux of Critical Historical Thinking is to read

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<sup>2</sup> A guideline for the practice of discipline-based history can be found through the work of the Stanford History Education Group at <https://sheg.stanford.edu/>

and analyze historical documents and sources under the sociocultural consideration of race, class, and gender. A central aspect is to consider why some knowledge is remembered and other disregarded. And furthermore, what are the ramifications of such a process? To use Critical Historical Thinking means to: 1. work from the understanding that historical knowledge is not neutral, 2. think about the way that information is gathered and presented, and 3. understand the pedagogy of avoidance (i.e. not talking about topics considered to be controversial histories).

Building on the idea of historical thinking, Bermudez (2015) addresses the need of four specific tools for the critical inquiry of history, social studies, and civic education. The framework was developed to address the seemingly perpetual esoteric juggling act of teachers to teach critical content and to also help students think critically; and to do so successfully.

Bermudez (2015) noted three main struggles of teachers. First: the ideal of critical thinking is conceptually appreciated for what students should learn, but how critical thinking as pedagogy looks is unclear. The ambiguity leads to the next struggle of teachers which is the debate over what constitutes critical thinking? The third aspect of the framework, reflective skepticism, asks that students orient toward inquiry and examine methods used in arguments, to uncover assumptions, and to correct distortions in the historical record. Bermudez (2015) argues that attention to this tool helps to keep the historical record from being “distorted by presentism and ethnocentrism” because it promotes empathy and a personal responsibility to others and for a common good. Lastly, the deployment of systemic thinking asks that students vacillate between micro and macro views of the world as no perspective is an all or nothing proposition for understanding. As Bermudez (2015) argues, it is a perspective that is iterative and allows students to look at the complexity of relationships and structures in society. Similarly Ibram Kendi (2019) has argued, in commenting on racism, that the verbiage of ‘structures’ should be

replaced by ‘policies.’ He asserts that the change to ‘policies’ more aptly reflects root causes than does ‘structures.’

The work of Bermudez (2015) also aligns with Epstein’s (1998) earlier work in which she examined the relationship of identity with the production and consumption of historical narratives. Findings of Bermudez’s work reveal that youth locate events of the past by their own relation to that past. She argues that the youth in her analysis of an online forum learn history by: 1. disciplined thinking about the past, 2. ethical reflection, and emotional engagement. The work of Bermudez explores how students situate their own personal and/or collective stories in larger historical narratives, and also how they come to conclusions about what is logical.

Accepting that all knowledge is incomplete is imperative to be in the iterative process of continual examination. Focusing on cultural, social, and interpersonal relationships is imperative. Citing his own educational experience as a Native pidgin speaker in Hawaii, Ching (2011) recalled the devaluing of his native language because of its attached stigma of being used by lower class plantation labor. Over time, as he leaned into the value of his local voice he began to understand the importance of situating his racialized body and language in society to lay witness to what others could not. Noting the work of Victor Villanueva Jr, *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, in which the theme of erasure (cultural and linguistic) is prevalent in schooling, Ching called for the creation of curriculum standards that promote additive models to pedagogy as well as content by situating cultural memory as an epistemological necessity to learning. The goal of which is for greater diversity to inform more heterogeneous experiences and activate student opportunities to speak to their own identity and challenge the normative conceptions of experience and memory that transcend normative curriculum standards.

## CONCLUSION

Taken in sum, these sample writings on memory and museums inform, and show, at least partially the considerations and possibilities available to museums and other informal learning spaces in engaging difficult memories. Memory is a powerful medium for understanding. As noted by Assmann (2008) memory is individual, social, and cultural. People, when given a space to consider the past, often grapple with positionality within each of these three constructs of memory. Identity in each may be similar or dissimilar. Regardless, identity is significant and deeply rooted in memory: Who? What? Why? When? For what purpose? Where do I stand in all of this? Memory draws on people's socio-cultural understandings of the world. Memory is action. It is remembrance, just as it is forgetting.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I will discuss the reasons, theoretical underpinnings, and methodological choices for my study with museum educators and their work with art. There will also be a discussion of the types of data that I collected for analysis in my study and the reasons for their use. I will also illustrate how my researcher positionality informed my work at the museums; in observation, during analysis, in interviews, and in overall perspective.

### **Introduction**

Informal learning spaces are important because they are able to serve a purpose and a population beyond what is typical in more formal learning spaces. For instance, designed spaces such as museums (and including zoos, memorials, libraries, and other public spaces) are positioned as educational additions to the learning that occurs in formal learning spaces like classrooms and lecture halls. Numerous personal experiences in informal learning spaces began early in my life through interactions with elders in my family.

My research questions for this study are borne out of my own experiences, work, and interests in informal learning spaces - specifically museums. I am intrigued by the malleable nature of museums. Part of that is the way that they change. Museums are continuing the widespread 21<sup>st</sup> century movement to be more participant friendly. Efforts in visitor retention and growth are increasing, and museum facilities are reaching out to educators and more diverse populations than ever before. Social justice orientations are becoming more mainstream in museums (Quinn, 2020). Part of this movement is increasingly addressing their environments for visitors with neuro-sensitivities (Shrikant, 2018).

And, at the same time, I am intrigued by the ways in which they do not. There are examples of how museums are still places of exclusion such as equity of access (e.g. hours and

days of operation, physical location, financial resources) and the presentation of narratives. Caveats of diversity in narratives are growing via inclusions of objectives, ideas, perspectives, and presentation but narratives still tend to skew toward notions of popular tradition and dominant understandings. There is a social comfort found in traditional and hegemonic narratives for many people. Nevertheless, exclusions are more visible and more widely felt with the advent of social media and the worldwide connectedness of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Visceral responses are a common effect of such connectedness. Museums are also sites of memory (Nora, 1989; Rivera-Orraca, 2009). Through promotion, emotion, or information – museums serve as avenues for teaching and learning, and presentation. As Rivera-Orraca notes “museums can be creative entities that open up the possibility of dialogue between past and present; a meeting point between history and memory” (32).

This study examined how museum educators think about and do their work within the contexts of these influences.

My research questions were three-fold:

1. How do museum educators conceptualize social justice-oriented work in a museum setting?
2. How do museum educators navigate student interactions/learning opportunities in a museum setting?
3. What role does historical consciousness play in how museum educators develop, discuss, and utilize works of art?

### **Theories informing the study**

My study drew on several theories in order to weave multiple strands and layers of information together. Activity Theory is applicable to put into context the role of cultural

institutions and the work of the educators in the study. The theory was utilized to explore actions. The pedagogical function and consideration of works of art were examined via the lens of aesthetic education, and considerations of memory. The roles and impacts of identity and historical consciousness as influences in one's understanding were necessary to consider in order to address the purpose of this research.

Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001) is also sometimes referred to as Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. The earliest iterations addressed the psychology work of Lev Vygotsky on mediation and individuals. Alexei Leont'ev extended Vygotsky's work to include group activity (Batiibwe, 2019). A second generation of Activity Theory drew on Engeström's (1987) notion that interactions were more than individual or collective, but also included interactions with the wider world to contextualize thought processes. The latest generation of Activity Theory looks at the interconnected aspects of the environment, and the ways in which learning and change takes place. Its applicability is being shown across various different situations (e.g. businesses, museums, large organizations). The theory undergirds the importance of socio-cultural factors as invaluable to understanding functions and impacts of organizations. Previous research in social studies and museums has applied this theory when considering visitors and conceptions of learning (Brugar, 2012).

Conceptually, the theory is interested in the way that systems inform the movement toward goals and objectives. This understanding can be at a macro or micro level. Activity Theory assumes a close correlation between thinking, interacting, and process. It is therefore helpful in analyzing complex systems. The theory also attends to the ways in which the socio-cultural perspectives of its participants (i.e. need, wants, concerns) inform their actions. The theory is particularly relevant in museum research where learning, and visitor interactions

are influenced by the environment as well as artifacts. The theory is also applicable in other aspects of museums as well – educators, visitors, materials, personal perspectives, and organizational culture are all continually intertwined within and around each other to inform learning within and around a museum setting. The theory helps describe and interpret the complex systems that inform action through mediated encounters. This study drew on Engeström’s (2001) iteration of Activity Theory to examine how educators negotiate institutional realities with professional expectations, and goals of the education department.

Secondly, the framework of aesthetic education was used to anchor the study in order to address how educators utilize works of art as vehicles for interpretation and understanding.

Maxine Greene (2009) offered the following as a basic premise of aesthetic education:

“To be grasped as a work of art the poem or the painting cannot simply be, opening itself automatically to any passerby. There ought to be an involvement of the perceiver in a series of questions that promote enhanced seeing, listening, rhythmic movement – an engagement of the perceiver against the background of her/his situatedness, funded meanings and transactions in the world” (2).

This study is concerned with how museum educators conceptualize and act out their teaching. Museum spaces and art as interpretation undergird their lived experiences and provide spaces for discussion of difficult issues; both historical and in contemporary society. The aesthetic education approach to art prioritizes and provides necessary space for educators and students to grapple with difficult and/or uncomfortable topics in order to learn, to question, and respond. As philosopher and hermeneuticist Hans-Georg Gadamer once commented “...the path to all knowledge leads through the question...the openness of what is in the question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled...every true question requires this openness” (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011, 98). Questions are an essential aspect of aesthetic education and highlight scenarios for how museum educators can go about engaging visitors in thinking about works of

art. It is a notion that Burnham and Kai-Kee (2011) iterate when commenting “...any museum that wants to get the very best out of its docents must first shift its value system from lecturing to the experience.” (17)

Lastly, the study drew on the concept of social (or collective memory). As noted by French (1995) social memory is a melding of social identity and historical memory. It reveals the sociocultural and interconnected nature of identity and memory. The collective aspect of memory will be used to examine how the interactions of educators with their past, present, and future lead them to extract and/or explore specific meanings and concepts through works of art. Importantly, social memory considers how the past is mediated across and between cultural, economic, and racial terms, as well as function on spatial and temporal landscapes (Flores, 2002). How groups internalized and utilized these notions toward meaning making provided insight about their personal orientations of examination and teaching via works of art.

My study engaged how educators call upon memory (individual, collective, and/or social) to make sense of difficult histories and/or social justice topics as well as the role of systems and activities in the process.

### **Researcher in a socio-historical context**

In consideration of my study I need to describe my identity and its relationship to positionality as a researcher. My positionality as a researcher is informed by my background. I am white. I am male. I am quiet. I have been described many times by others in my life as seeming aloof because of my silence. What these others do not know is that it feels sometimes near debilitating being expected to talk as the expected endeavor for interaction; not always, but sometimes. It is the reason that I often prefer spaces for reading, fishing, gardening, painting, working outdoors, going to sporting events, and even attending races at the dirt track. Each

stated activity engages elements of participation that do not rely heavily on verbal interaction to enjoy or experience.

A little biographical background about myself: I was born in Austin, Texas. My family, however, lived in Taylor, Texas, a town of approximately 10,000 in 1980. It is located about 30 miles to the northeast of the capitol. It was my father's hometown. It did not have a hospital, hence the reason I was born in Austin. I am also two-and-a-half years older than my only brother.

My mother was an elementary school teacher. In total, she spent over 30 years working in a variety of roles at the elementary level: teaching kindergarten, first grade, and second grade classes, community liaison, and instructional coach. At the time of my birth my father worked in Austin as a printer for the state of Texas. Eventually, he took a job at Schwan's Food Service. While in the company's employ my family moved several times because of my father's promotions before settling back in my mother's hometown of Pflugerville, Texas in 1996. From 1986 to 1996 we moved eight times as the responsibilities of my dad's job changed and required our family to move.

We were decidedly middle class and enjoyed the trappings of it. In all these spaces we enjoyed the privileges that being white and falling within Christian and hetero norms provide. One of the greatest personal benefits of our family moves from Texas to Minnesota to North Carolina and back to Texas was that I was able to meet and live with and around lots of different people, experienced a variety of places, and had encounters that others in my larger extended family did not. Experiences that have left indelible marks on me as I began to grapple with the privileges of my life.

My extended family has also left a lasting mark on me. Until his death from a heart attack in March 1990, my grandfather, George Krueger, would often come stay with us for months at a time while we lived in North Texas. His wife, my grandmother, Ola Krueger, died in a tragic car accident in 1982. Many of my early memories are dotted with him being present in my day-to-day life. My Granny and Paw Paw Murchison lived on a farm in Pflugerville. In the mid-1980s through the early 1990s it was a town of no more than a few thousand citizens. Far different from the 60,000+ population suburban off-shoot of Austin sprawl it is currently. My summers often included spending several weeks with them. Days were filled with feeding cows and going to cattle auctions where I was inevitably told to sit on my hands. My Paw Paw did not want me accidentally bidding on a calf.

I would classify the majority of my experiences with older members of family as tantamount to what VanSledright (2008) stated was history via vernacular narratives. I saw pictures, occasionally got to thumb through old documents, was able to see and sometimes hold objects of my family's story, and got to hear lots of stories about the past. Collectively, the experiences all fed my interest in learning about the past. After graduating with my bachelor's degree in history in spring 2003 I attended Texas State University on a full scholarship from the History Department the following fall to work on my master's degree.

It was a miserable experience. After one year of studies I found myself loathing the idea of being in school any longer and unsure what I wanted to do with my life. Deciding not to return to school the following year, I spent the next year or so doing a collection of jobs: substitute teaching, painting houses, construction odd jobs, and working at a liquor store. Since none of the jobs paid well, it was necessary to work as often as I could. It was common to work multiple jobs a day and I often did so seven days a week. It was difficult making financial ends

meet. Eventually, I made my way to remote West Texas. There I worked as an educational aide for students with different abilities and completed requirements for teacher certification. It was while there that my father died in a truck accident coming back from getting a haircut. It is often the event that marks how I currently refer to the passage of time – before my dad died, after my dad died. In the fourteen plus years since then, I have worked as a public school educator in four small Title 1 districts across Texas. I have also become a husband and a father to two children.

The experiences of my youth have informed many of my decisions as an adult, in particular, to follow a career path in education. In no small measure the experiences of my life are, at least partly, the reason I chose to continue my education at the University of Texas, the place where my Grandfather Krueger worked for years in the facilities department.

*Positionality in relation to this study*

I am not an art historian. Nor have I ever worked in an art museum. But, I have spent much time in museum spaces. As a child I had the opportunity to attend museums. A few stand out in my memory – the outdoor spaces of Fort Macon in North Carolina, Fort William Historical Park in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. I do not recall an overabundance of the specifics of these places, but I remember them fondly. I remember pieces of my visits – the feelings I had as well as some of their visual aspects. A distinct change in my perspective on the power and function of museums occurred when I visited the Dachau Concentration Camp in Germany. It felt different than my trips to previous museums – where the standard operating procedure of history museums seemed to be the promotion of positives or some notion of objectivity.

At Dachau I remember feeling emotionally detached from the immediacy of the history – it was not in my country – it did not happen to someone I knew or that I was related to. My

existence in that space, the allowance of emotional removal in that space was a privilege of my own racial and ethnic identity. The juxtaposition of humanity/inhumanity in that space was disconcerting. I guess it was easier for me to come face to face with difficult history in another country impacting other people. I could not recall a museum that I had been to that had really delved into difficult histories. But, in all honesty, maybe they had and I was just not ready or able to see it and engage appropriately. I remember feeling ashamed at my lack of knowledge and understanding of difficult histories that I knew existed in the United States.

A few years ago I attended a civil war reenactment weekend with my mother in East Texas. It was a space that she and I were able to be in without a second look. Our presence in the space was not uncommon. We looked like many of the attendees. The presentation and focus of content of the experience was decidedly uncritical, but what I remember most about my time there was that it was largely an exercise in promoting, skewing, and profiting off cultural memory.

From my previous training in history, I did not enter the space expecting any type of authentic retelling of the past. Authenticity does not seem the point of such re-enactments - they are presentations of heritage. They are pseudo-historical. There are parts of such events that are accurate-ish (e.g. clothing, tools, weapons) at a surface level, but overall do not stand up to deeper analyses. Nevertheless my time at the Civil War weekend was informative. What was visible and experienced by me was a memorialized retelling of events, and people - the encampments, the dress of the re-enactors, the events of the weekend, the emceed 'battle'. The commodities of the past that were for sale such as toys, books, and outfits were items in high demand.

My existence in that space was innocuous. I visited exhibits, engaged with re-enactors, and chatted at length with individuals who were promoting their non-profit organizations - most notably the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. I was given fliers and information brochures about the missions of their organizations and asked if I had any questions. In my life I had been in similar spaces many times over the years. It harkened back to reminiscences I have of my time living in North Carolina when I was younger and re-enactments and heritage weekends were plentiful. On a personal level, how I exist and interact in museums was changed by this experience. What I think about when I am in museum spaces is now different.

Professionally, as a social studies and special education teacher, I have had both work and avocational experience at historical museums. I see value in informal learning spaces. I have long seen a natural fit between my role as an educator and my interest in art and museums. As a middle school social studies teacher I took several of my middle school classes to a nationally-renowned area art museum. The students who typically went on these excursions were those who had participated in UIL Art Smart or were Junior Historians members. The trips were conceptualized as part free-range, part guided tour, and part examination of works of art we had learned about and discussed in class. Approval of travel requests for the art museum were never a problem. But, the requests usually elicited responses from school administrators and fellow teachers like, “Why are you taking your students to an art museum? You’re a history teacher.” Or, “How is this going to help on the test?” I would usually nod, while internally cringing or rolling my eyes. I have never been good at hiding my eye roll. Nevertheless, I would respond why I felt art was a valuable endeavor for my students. Comments about the

historical merit, curricular connections, and/or the aesthetic experience usually satisfied the queries. Other times I remained silent because to comment felt futile.

Full-disclosure: I did not take my students to the museum or show them pieces of art to engage them in critical analyses or highlight sociocultural and socioeconomic issues surrounding the creation, presentation, and preservation of works of art. I wish I had. I also did not use art to actively discuss identity. As I look back now, these were missed opportunities. Visits were constructed as part free-range exploration where students could roam on their own (via indulging their own artistic interests of style, period, or artist). Part of the experience was teacher guided where we talked about artist perspective/social message. Part of the visit also included questions to students about what art they liked. They were also asked to express why; to comment about why/how the art work piqued their interests. Being at the art museum was about having students elicit meaning, while engaging multiple perspectives and understandings of the world around them.

The sum of my experiences at museums as a child, as an adult, as an educator, and all the other identity markers that inform how I exist in the world influenced how I came to my study about teaching social studies through art. Much of the literature on museums and social studies focuses on nuances of content and engagement, or how museums can better assist teachers, or about the cognitive possibilities available in museum spaces. What seems to be missing is a discussion about how museum educators conceptualize their use of art to talk about social studies topics.

### **Social justice teaching and pedagogy**

Social Justice education draws from numerous academic fields. It is referenced by numerous different names such as restorative justice (Hopkins, 2002; Marshall, 1998; Payne &

Welch, 2015), social deconstructionist teacher education (Ryan, 1982), anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000; North, 2007), border pedagogy (Giroux, 1991), and humanizing pedagogy (Bartolomé, 1994; Fránquiz & del Carmen Salazar, 2004; del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Central in social justice is the work of Paulo Freire and his commentary regarding banking education (1970). The idea of education via banking is that all knowledge is deposited into the brain of a learner where sociocultural knowledge and lived experiences do not inform learning. Freire pushed back on the concept of banking. His work brought forth more research and commentaries on social justice and the role of education. Ideas around social justice tend to address such concerns as equity (Brown, 2004), anti-racism (Kendi, 2019; King & Chandler, 2016), cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2003), and empathy (Segal, 2011).

Determining a definitive direction for social justice education has proven elusive because of the breadth of differing opinions about both ends and means. Regardless of a specific definition, generally accepted goals of social justice education include a desire to eliminate educational inequalities across economic classes; between majority/minority ethnic groups; between the privileged and the powerless; and to address the punitive forms of school accountability that create greater educational inequities (Cho, 2017). Social justice education is also intertwined with the funds of knowledge concept (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Sleeter (2015) states that the purpose of social justice work is to teach *all* students to high academic standards in a culturally responsive manner, and to teach an inclusive curriculum that draws on ideas of democratic activism. It is more than just loving all students in a generic way. As commented, by Bettina Love (2019), teachers have to get to know students, hear their struggles, be willing to learn about their cultures, and be fierce advocates for them.

Social justice is concerned foremost with purpose (North, 2006). Wang (2013) writes that social justice tends to evoke conceptions of democracy, justice, equality, equity, and human rights. Social justice then, as a concept, encompasses a wide swath across all aspects of society. With regards to teaching and learning, social justice draws on equity-oriented theoretical frameworks from ethnic studies, cultural responsiveness and multicultural education. Critical pedagogies are utilized to examine how social justice is posited in educational settings (Cho, 2017). Wang (2013) comments that true social justice occurs when there is some type of disruption in the dynamics of power relations that made injustice possible in the first place.

Paul Carr (2008) argued that social justice education is tied directly to teaching about democracy and civic engagement. He makes his case via descriptions and comparisons of ‘thin’ (i.e. jingoistic, patriotic, passive, and prescriptive) and ‘thick’ (i.e. holistic, inclusive, participatory, and critical) manifestations of democratic education. He further asserts the importance for students to be engaged in difficult topics because the situation can help create motivation for action and the development of civic skills. It is a notion that ties-in with the social justice literacies North proposes (Cho, 2017; North, 2009).

As such, the idea is to teach empathy, and develop a cultural identity that utilizes student knowledge and competence and orientation that necessitates that educators look critically at information. The goal is to address injustice in all its requisite social forms. Hytten (2006) comments on the differences of opinion regarding social justice education by noting that “one of the primary challenges of social justice work is that its richness and variety cannot be easily reduced, and its advocates are often not speaking to each other or drawing from the same traditions” (225). Collaborative processes to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion that move

beyond siloed subjects and fields of operation are one such way to do this (Hartwell, Cole, Donovan, Greene, Storms, & Williams, 2017).

A common call to define social justice education centers on the argument that it is distinct from multicultural education. Social justice education focuses on policies that create structures which allow social injustice to exist/thrive/regenerate in perpetuity. Others argue that while social justice education and multicultural education may be tangentially different, they are nevertheless intertwined and similar. Social justice education is concerned with important questions such as: 1. What is the role of education in promoting social justice? and 2. How can education contribute to both redistribution and recognition? Two contemporary models of social justice currently used in education utilize the dualist notions of distribution/redistribution and relation/recognition. Distribution/redistribution considers how goods and services are distributed in society (i.e. access, educational opportunity), whereas relation/recognition elucidates how relationships and structures influence society (North, 2006).

There are numerous conceptions of social justice pedagogy. McDonald (2005, 2007, 2008) four conceptual dimensions of social justice for the field of education include: 1. Meeting individual student needs and providing additional support when necessary, 2. Recognizing opportunities to learn that are responsive to group identification (i.e. SPED, ELLs), 3. Providing student learning that is responsive to their race, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, and 4. To resist the structures of inequity in society. The dimensions address how to meet student needs, provide equitable access and ensure the proper distribution of goods and educational services. One critique of the dimensions is the scant attention paid to structures/systems that cause and foment oppression.

Differing from the work of McDonald (2005, 2007, 2008), North (2009) asks: What kind of learning experiences do children need to become knowledgeable, caring, and active students? What should students know and be able to do to become agents for social justice? These questions frame her conception of multiple literacies. To North (2009), the development of multiple literacies is imperative if students are to develop proclivities toward social justice.

There are five literacies that North mentions: functional (knowing how to maneuver in situations), critical (challenging claims on the reality of things), relational (can only be understood when being treated with respect), democratic (promotion of the common good and working through conflict sans violence by encouraging students to experience and understand the value of dissent), and visionary. Noted limitations of the literacies are that democratic literacy has a way of falling in line with western and middle-class ways of thinking. A byproduct of which may promote exclusionary thinking by teachers and students if undertaken without a specific cultural awareness of these concerns. For visionary literacy, a concern is that it can, if it leans too far into the value/importance of one's individual perseverance, can limit one's ability to see the role of structures toward traditionally marginalized populations.

Angela Duckworth's (2016) notion of grit is important in this space. She argues that grit is an invaluable tool in overcoming struggle and achieving greatness; a sort of social justice equalizer. Love (2019) however, iterates that the idea of grit sans an explicit understanding of structural inequities is dangerous and anti-black. In her book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, Love (2019) iterates that the notion of grit is inherently anti-Black when used merely as a slogan for character education. In that context, grit is a trait positioned as an all-in-one salve for success. It does not take into account systems of oppression that come with real and sustained barriers. Love asserts that the

flippant use of grit is akin to the moment in *The Hunger Games* (Jacobson, Kilik, & Ross, 2012) when Effie Trinket cheerfully comments, “Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favor.” The phrase in the movie is uttered as a cold calculus in front of all the people both directly and indirectly impacted by the cruel reality of a life-altering structural barrier. Meira Levinson (2012) has further noted that a focus on grit in character education has led to a ‘civic empowerment gap’ where compliance, not civic action, is the overarching goal.

Cho (2017), building upon North’s work, offers a sixth literacy: personal literacy. Personal literacy is positioned in the idea of using the strengths of all students to reach a diverse potential so that ability is seen in all students. The acknowledgement and promotion of personal strengths is fostered through what she calls a respectful classroom.

Picower (2012), in her discussion of how to integrate social justice in the classroom, outlines a framework incorporating six elements that can be used in curriculum design: self-love, respect for others, addressing issues of injustice, examining social movement and change, raising awareness, and social action. In these elements, Picower (2012) challenges the notion that social justice is only overt activism. To her, social justice is about the opportunity to develop student identity and sensitivity as prerequisites to being able to address social justice issues with depth. A perceived limitation of Picower’s work, much like McDonald’s, is that it does not specifically address concerns of equity in education and the need to push back against current systems and structures in education that breed wide-spread inequity. Conceptually, the six elements Picower suggests supports the five literacies of social justice outlined by North. Similarly, Ayers, Quinn, and Stovall (2009) suggests that classrooms be places “where social justice can exist” (590) by focusing practice on student lives.

Segal and Wagaman (2017) discuss the role of social empathy in teaching social justice. The context of their work is regarding the role and responsibilities of social workers, but their discussion is still valid for underscoring the possibilities of social empathy for social justice in a K-12 educational setting. For them, social empathy is a vehicle in which to understand others by macro-perspective taking and developing contextual understandings through intentional interactions. Pedagogically, the framework asks that people understand the behaviors of others. It is about recognizing the nuance and meaning of those behaviors, not necessarily agreement with them. Segal and Wagaman (2017) further argue the invaluable nature of developing interpersonal skills in being able to see oneself within the larger context of a connected world. Their writing expresses both a pedagogy and content objective for responsibly teaching about systems of power as barriers to social justice (i.e. historical oppression, discrimination, and gentrification). There is significant value to students being given opportunities to learn from one another. The hope is to increase the educational value of engaging in social justice education by privileging the lived and identity-based diversity of all people.

For Wang (2013), discussions of social justice (i.e. the systems and processes for more equitable distribution in resources and outcomes) rarely incorporate concepts of non-violence. A compassionate community of nonviolence, Wang argues, can dissolve “the very mechanism of control and domination that leads to violence while not enacting another form of imposition or coercion” (486). Believing in the power of relational dynamics, Wang draws on the wisdom traditions of Ubuntu (the Buddhist understanding of non-duality) and yin-and-yang (the Taoist dynamic of give and take, and non-force) as a means toward non-violence. The traditions inform a pedagogy of non-violence. Health of self and community are centered and engender a sense of close connectedness requisite for compassion. The pedagogy of nonviolence is about realigning

relationships along the plane of mutual understanding by building on internal connections across differences. To engage compassionately, even when there is disagreement; is done always in the hope of acting upon the world differently. Drawing on Desmond Tutu's book *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999), Wang expresses the process of Ubuntu as restorative justice (meaning that a relationship is restored by humanizing both victims and perpetrators).

Davis and Steyn (2012) argued for teachers to move past certain pedagogical assumptions as they try to enact social justice learning in their classroom. An important initial move, in their estimation, is to acknowledge the fallacy of social justice education as only for oppressed populations. It is important that the concerns and objectives of social justice are addressed across the widest swath of the population, even those with significant social privilege (Swalwell, 2013). The way social justice education is framed matters. Specifically, the words used to define it matter. The example Davis and Steyn use is whether to use 'privilege' or 'oppressor' when discussing the role of Whiteness. They posit that 'privilege' is less offensive than 'oppressor,' but is problematic because it focuses on symptoms rather than causes. 'Privilege' feels less harsh than using 'oppressor.' Nevertheless, 'oppressor' is posited as looking at position rather than action. A change they argue that will more likely lead to discussions of systems, structures, and beliefs in the macro. For educators, there is value in conversations around vocabulary and meaning so that they and students both may both struggle and wrestle with the contested nature of the work in which they are engaging.

Davis and Steyn (2012) acknowledge that it is important to expect some type of resistance in discussions of social justice (i.e. the deconstruction of self, beliefs, values, and culture while coming to terms with faulty thinking). Resistance should be expected and should frame the classroom pedagogy used. Viewing resistance as an opportunity to learn, and not an

innately negative or obstructive response can be beneficial. As noted by hooks (1994), the work of social justice oriented education may sow seeds of change that are not made manifest until later. Breunig (2016) has argued that “in many ways, critical/social justice pedagogy is a slow pedagogy” (2). She argues that it takes time to challenge hegemony as a whole – especially outside of the classroom. Time is required for intelligences to be respected, for attitudes to shift, and to inform new expressions of values. It is oppositional to what she terms speedy pedagogy that is often confined to the time constraints of a classroom.

Using dialogue and personal experiences as a method to engage social justice topics can render positive results; but those types of results are not automatic. Engagement has to be intentional and undertaken with fidelity: think the four agreements of courageous conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Personal experiences have to be tempered with a willingness of the privileged to take a stance of humility and listen to experiences which are likely to make them uncomfortable. Another method for social justice includes letting students express what they know and believe. Once such iterations are laid out, it is argued, can lay clearer pathways of engagement for social justice in the classroom.

The dissonance that such interactions can produce is viewed as desirable in social justice education because of its ability to ‘rupture silences’ (i.e. similar to an intervention) and to show students that there is an important role for functional discomfort. A major caveat to this is that teachers have to be willing to intervene when interactions turn problematic (e.g. victim-blaming, counter-productive personal attacks). Leonardo (2009) notes that while the tension of difficult conversations is a material reality of society for people of color, the benefit of being white typically allows for such conversations to be ignored or to have an opt in/opt out option.

Jansen (2009) iterates that social justice education needs to incorporate the necessary aspect of listening to one's oppressor because it "signals respect, not agreement" (153). In this I am reminded of Daryl Davis, a black R&B/blues musician who has spent nearly thirty years of his life reaching out to white supremacists for creating dialogue on race in America. In 1998 he commented, "Now I didn't like the Klan. But what I learned was that while you are actively learning about somebody else, you are passively teaching them about yourself" (Massey, 1998). His documentary, *Accidental Courtesy: Daryl Davis, Race & America* (Ornstein & Ornstein, 2016) highlights his actions and belief in dialogue as a positive action. Naturally, there are those that are opposed to such interactions as they deem them as inappropriate and counter-productive to anti-racism action.

How does social justice address notions of harm and safety in the classroom? Davis and Steyn (2012) note that "when people expect comfort" there is an associated understanding that said comfort applies to their views of the world and that their views will not be challenged. However, to curb discomfort may actually shudder the possibility of growth. The idea that there is discomfort and/or tension over a topic does not automatically equate to an unsafe/harmful space. The reality of social justice education is that it is very likely to be met with some type of resistance. In such cases, for learning to take place beyond the defensive stances of reticence, there has to be an ability to take responsibility without guilt. To understand their role in oppression and/or systemic structures of inequity.

### *Social justice and museums*

"Museums must become more inclusive places that welcome diverse audiences, but first they should reflect our society's pluralism in every aspect of their operations and programs" (Pitman & Hirzy, 1992).

Museum educator Deirdre Cross (2017) of the National Museum of African American History and Culture conceptualizes social justice at the museum by serving as “a voice to voices that had historically been silenced or marginalized” and to offer a place for community (33). The role of social justice is engendered in the mission statement of the museum. Development of exhibitions and public programs at the museum help create opportunities of community by presenting historical contexts around contemporary issues (i.e. mass incarceration, over policing, voter suppression, economic opportunities, and educational inequity) which, are in themselves, acts of social justice.

As a national museum, the education department worked to offer points of entry for their visitors and to “convene and lead discussions on race, difference, and healing.” To share new knowledge. As Director of the National Museum of African American History Lonnie Bunch iterated in 2017, “I don’t think there is a story or subject that we won’t touch. It’s a question of how you do it. Our job is not to force-feed people but to help them understand the context and bring real knowledge to the debate” (Cross, 2017, 39).

Jennings and Jones-Rizzi (2017) argue that museums are still inundated largely as white spaces in presentation, in access, and in leadership. A 2010 survey by Reach Advisors noted that the United States’ minority population is over 30% of its total population. Yet only 9% of core museum visitors are minorities. The numbers are revealing. They allude to a long-standing disconnect of museums being accessible to minorities. Historically, museums were the preserves and spaces of elites who were usually white (Jennings & Jones-Rizzi, 2017). This also included the leadership positions of museums.

Presentations of minorities in museum contexts were often exoticized. Swenson (as cited in Carbonell, 2012) noted how the promotion of cultural heritage led to widespread presentation

of ‘others’ at fairs from the mid-nineteenth century to the early-twentieth century. At play in these actions were the ongoing impacts of colonialism and its emboldening of eugenic thought. Kaufman (as cited in Carbonell, 2012) notes that “the Paris Exposition of 1889, meticulously reproduced pavilions and villages housed over four hundred Indochinese, Senegalese, and Tahitians, and at the Chicago Exposition of 1893, such displays of native life proliferated as amusement of the most popular sort (232).” One of the most stark examples of the appalling human zoo phenomenon is the story of Ota Benga. Similar is the exploitative and fetishizing exhibition of Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman in the early 1800s in Western Europe.

Efforts to de-center whiteness and diversify stories are occurring. Porchia Moore, an assistant professor of museum studies at the University of Florida and co-creator of the Visitors of Color initiative is prompting museums to consider how they welcome minorities (Mosley, 2020). It has been argued that structures, built on policies of exploitation and exclusion, have created and sustained museums as spaces of privilege (Murawski, 2019). Such understandings have led to increasing calls for museums to decolonize. Repatriation of cultural items and remains are being demanded. The shifting perspectives and moves toward cultural respect, but there is still significant progress to be made. In 2019, Jamara Wakefield, a poet and activist, wrote:

“Museums could be one of our greatest allies in liberation struggles. They have the physical spaces, the means, and the public confidence to partake in a large-scale social movement against colonial powers. Yet they reject this opportunity over and over again. They prefer to remain silent and hide in a world that desperately needs decolonizing.”

Her comments are telling. They reveal both possibility and frustration. Old habits die hard and time has shown, again and again, that many museums struggle to live up to their grandiose mission statements of diversity and inclusion.

Exclusion, however, while a lingering construct of museums, IS being challenged. There are more and more examples of museums taking initial steps toward social justice and breaking down barriers of economic access through free days and reduced admissions. It is a start, and a step in the right direction. The Arlen Museum of Art, an institution cited in this study, similarly offers a variety of free admissions: college faculty, staff, and students, all children 12 and under, active military and retired veterans, and teachers (K-12 to university level). Thursdays are also free admission to all visitors.

Social justice and its meaning for museums does not end with access. There are also ongoing debates around the function of museum landscapes: What should be open to the public? What is common access? Should such spaces be considered civic spaces? It has been argued that museum landscapes are “an essential expression of how museums are located in their communities, physically and ideologically, it speaks to each museum’s distinctive calculation of the exchange of social, political, cultural capital as well as the economic context that’s negotiated, navigated and communicated in and through the landscape” (Museum Next, 2015). If true, the notion of space constitutes further considerations for inclusiveness. Is it private? Or public? Or some type of hybrid-situation? Is access at the museum a function of prestige? How does a museum acknowledge its community?

Another step further for museums to take seriously is the need for ‘shared authority’ in the creation of exhibitions, the presentation of collections, and the development of programming. It means that communities be given institutional buy-in so that their stories can be told with their active input. Stories, events, and activities require buy-in, input, and leadership from people, organizations, and communities that are represented. Exhibitions cannot be developed and presented without the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives. It is a central component of

social justice in museums and of concern in museological practices. Moving from racial and ethnic reductionism, to simplistic identity tropes, collections need “to combat society prejudices and facilitate a better way of living with diversity; could serve as a more meaningful way to address the injustice embedded in society (Sandell, 2002, 308).

Relatedly, Bermudez (2012) has stated that looking into the values and emotions of youth into the negotiation of historical understanding as her research laid a specific focus on the function of one’s identity as integral to their historical understanding. Emotions and values (which are borne out of experiences to which one identifies and/or has been privy to) play a central role in how one understands differing discourses of history. It is valuable to understand the role of interest and willingness of people to acknowledge how and which topics are engaged.

Jones-Rizzi and Jennings commented in 2017 that:

“museums are microcosms of the world around us, ecosystems of their own governments, caste systems, policies, and practices that mirror much of our society at large. It is not possible to think about museums during these intense times without reflecting on the context of the social, cultural, and political climate” (64).

In 2020 - with the COVID-19 pandemic, a contentious presidential election, racial reckoning, cultural wars and the like have pushed museums to re-conceptualize their offerings and their practices in order to meet the current challenges before them. It is a time that has shown time and again that previous norms and accepted policies need to be revisited, reconceptualized, and reconsidered, as spaces of privilege continue the necessary movement toward being more inclusive.

## **Methodology**

Mertens (2015) defines research as the “process of systematic inquiry that is designed to collect, analyze, interpret, and use data” (2). This study on museum educators reflects these processes and are also undergirded by a reliance on constructivism. Because of my interest in the perspectives and lived experiences of my participants a qualitative methodology was utilized when conducting my research.

My research paid attention to contexts. As noted by Creswell (2016), “qualitative research involves reporting how people talk about things, how they describe things, and how they see the world” (6). It is through participant thoughts via words and actions that “we hear the voices of individuals – their personal views, their ways of thinking, their takes on the situation.” (6). I highlighted the thinking and the possibilities for the teaching of social studies through art by gathering data from participants that was mediated by and through their own experiences.

Implementation of qualitative research methodologies was appropriate for the study because of the focus of the research. I was interested in a small group of museum educators and wanted to know how they conceptualize their work teaching with and through art. Creswell (2016) has commented that qualitative research tends to “study a small number of people but go deep to develop the detail they provide us” (7). It is through the research of a small group of educators that I utilized qualitative measures to allow for thick descriptions of the study subjects and their thoughts. The presentation of multiple perspectives from research participants allowed for the development of themes across their shared endeavor of using art to teach about social studies. Informing my work were the assumptions present in a constructionist approach to research.

Gathering of data relied heavily on interviews. In this time of pandemic, the interviews took place via Zoom calls. The purpose of the interviews was to gather a wide-range of information. The structure of the interviews were fluid and were adapted as new information came to light and new spaces for more in-depth exploration were presented. A reliance on grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979) allowed leeway for the interviews to draw on ethnographic methods by having participants share their stories and elucidate their thinking on teaching.

I was further interested in their experiences, specifically how they conceptualized their work as museum educators, as well as how they centered their own content knowledge around their pedagogical choices. The informal structure of the interviews allowed for sharing of perspectives through vignettes. While not quantifiable or generalizable across a large population, the research was able to take a deep dive and introspective look at the meaning of participant comments (Mertens, 2015). Since the focus of the research was to examine museum educators' conceptualizations of their work I wanted to hear about their experiences and background, as well as their training, and values. The disparate lives of the participants provided different personal mosaics for their work. Incumbent then, in the research, was to draw on the personal as well as the social contexts along with their pedagogical practices to interpret their comments for more in-depth understandings. In the frame of hermeneutics, it was necessary to come to an interpretive understanding of what the subjects shared (Crotty, 2015).

The study was phenomenological in nature. As Wertz (2005) has noted, phenomenology relies on the experiences of subjects and focuses on their perceptions, comments, and understandings of a particular phenomena. In this instance, the research focused on museum educators and interviewing them on their work in teaching through art. To this end, this research attempted to “understand and describe...from the point of view of the participant” (Mertens,

2015, 247). The plan was to have the participants talk about their work as freely as possible. The scope of the study was small and done so for a specific purpose. Findings of the research are not meant to be generalized to wider audiences, instead the detailed and thick descriptions of contexts and experiences of the participants highlight the use of a case study model. It is an act that Geertz (1973) acknowledges allows for details to relay the interpretive nature and overall complexity of the research. The use of “how” and “why” questions provided opportunities for participants to elucidate on their work in a museum setting.

After interviews were completed, they were transcribed by the researcher and stored at a secure online location. An iterative review process of the transcriptions was undertaken in order to find themes across responses from participants in the study. Open coding allowed for initial iterations to look for generalized themes. Additional iterative reviews narrowed in on more specific themes. Themes that are presented, in part, in the participants’ own words.

### **Why conduct my research at the Arlen Museum of Art?**

I was particularly drawn to the Arlen Museum of Art for my dissertation for multiple reasons. It combined three important interests for me: an informal learning space, works of art, and a commitment to critical teaching.

My initial relationship with the Arlen Museum of Art began in the spring of 2017. I had reached out to the Director of Education to see about completing an internship at the museum. We discussed a number of topics related to museum education and I asked if it was possible to conduct research there as part of my educational ethnography class. In the fall of 2017 I conducted a pilot study at the museum on their new social justice educational initiative. The experience in conducting the pilot study was the impetus for wanting to conduct further research

at the venue. While my initial study focused more on the educational content and development of the new program, for this study I was more interested in learning from museum educators.

### **Selection of participants**

The inclusion of participants in the study consists of four museum educators at the Arlen Museum of Art. who interact with students and teach through the medium of art. Participants in the study include two paid education staff of the museum and two volunteers.

### **Participants**

#### *Museum educators*

#### **Ross Hunter**

Ross has been a museum professional for 20+ years. He is currently the Director of Education at the Arlen Museum of Art. He grew up in a small town in western North Carolina that is home to a regional public university where his father taught as a history professor. His father spent his whole career at the same regional public university, and its impact on Ross is significant:

“I feel like I was taught to sort of look out for the underdog and think about issues of fairness and then... you know as I grew up...in the 1980s and came out as a gay person I got a lot of direct experience about being the underdog, and a need to advocate for social justice. You know, in a way...for myself.”

Ross attended the university for his bachelor’s - where he earned a degree in English literature. For his master’s Ross attended an R1 in the South where he earned a degree in art history. In thinking back on this time Ross commented:

“I had thought I would get a Ph.D. and ended up with just a master’s degree ... because I didn’t want to do very very specialized research, I really preferred learning about art more broadly... and talking to regular people more than scholars. And so I worked as a museum educator [at an art museum located on the campus of an R1 university in the South] for about eight years and then I went and did a second master’s degree in education at [an R1 university in the Northeast].”

#### **Maggie McLain**

Maggie is from the Midwest, born and raised in “the all-white suburbs.” A childhood, she admitted, that meant much of her youth was spent around a dearth of people of color. Over the years she moved to Los Angeles, and spent time in a small town in South Texas. Maggie also lived in Mexico for a year due to a move related to her first husband’s job.

Eventually she found her way to Houston, where she lived for nearly 30 years. Maggie taught high school history at two different large local high schools. In Houston, she worked as an aerospace contractor at NASA in between her two stints in public education. While her time at NASA allowed her the opportunity to fly zero G and observe a shuttle launch, as Maggie noted,

“I really.... started looking at what I was doing and thinking ‘this isn’t it.’” I didn’t feel like I was really making any particularly good contribution. And I always felt like that when I taught. I really was doing something important and I think all of us want to feel like we are doing something important....so then I decided I would go back to teaching.”

On her teaching in Houston, Maggie noted: “It was great. because the diversity was just unbelievable.” It was, in her own words, “totally different” from her own high school experience where she “went to a lily-white, a large lily-white high school in the burbs.” She taught in public schools for a total of 16 years.

### **Janet Wilde**

Janet grew up in North Texas and went to a small private university in South Texas. She got her master’s and Ph.D. at the same university at which the Arlen Museum of Art is located. Janet taught in the Radio, Television, and Film department at the university for a little over 20 years. Of her time teaching at the university, Janet noted:

“I was a lecturer for a really long time – but one of the classes that I ended up teaching – it was not really my area of specialization, but that I just ended up in was the teaching class.... It’s the class that the grad students have to take if they want to teach undergrads.”

It was a class she taught for 15 years, both in the Radio, Television, and Film department and then also for the entire College of Communication. It helped develop her interest in pedagogy:

“...It was, you know - one of those things that, where I had been interested before and at the time I had....I had preschoolers when I got my Ph.D. - and so, as I was teaching they were going through school so I got really interested in teaching and in pedagogy – in communication pedagogy as well. So that was important to me, and then the more interested I got in pedagogy the more I started to become aware of....critical theories of education and looking at issues of equity in education.”

### **Emily Palmer**

Emily is originally from Northern Virginia, outside of Washington, D.C. She got a bachelor’s degree in both math and theatre. Her master’s degree is in secondary education with a focus in mathematics. She then taught high school math at a private school in the D.C. area for five years before deciding to go back to get her MFA in Drama and Theatre for Youth and Communities at the same university as the Arlen Museum of Art. It was during her time in the MFA program at the university that she developed a working relationship with the Arlen. Her thesis involved working with the docents at the museum around integrating drama and movement in museum education. Emily’s specific interest focused on dialogue with works of art that might be considered challenging topics.

### **Data collection and issues of trustworthiness**

Data was collected from each participant as well as from the institution at which the participants work/volunteer as museum educators. Participant data includes Zoom interviews conducted by the researcher with each participant. Collection of data from museum spaces

includes museum information found online as well as the in-person gathering of brochures, handouts, and other available texts during in-person visits.

Data collection is a process of choosing. Influences on what data came into and from the study includes (but is not limited to) the participants in the study, to what data was shared/not shared (via interviews or through associated texts), and also includes what information is presumed to be related/unrelated to the study.

*Interviews*

Each participant took part in two interviews. Interviews took place one-on-one and were around one hour each time. The ethnographic nature of the interviews were guided by grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979) in an effort to create a communicative space where the museum educators were able to share narratives of their work. The grand tour questions were meant to provide flexibility to the participants to vacillate, as needed, between planes of understanding that impact and influence their work in the museum setting. Information was gathered through and transcribed via video taped Zoom interviews.

<b>Name</b>	<b># of Interviews</b>	<b>Dates of Interviews</b>	<b>Durations of Interviews</b>
Ross Hunter	2	12/10/20 & 1/13/21	61 minutes & 60 minutes
Maggie McLain	2	12/11/20 & 12/17/20	65 minutes & 72 minutes
Janet Wilde	2	12/14/20 & 1/20/21	70 minutes & 61 minutes
Emily Palmer	2	12/16/20 & 1/26/21	68 minutes & 61 minutes

### *Museum artifacts*

Artifacts used in my research included available visitor brochures, pamphlets, and/or ephemera present at the museum, as well as examinations of the teaching frameworks used by the museum and/or its educators. The collection of materials also included teaching ancillaries. Museum artifacts were included in the data collection to help provide insight to museum messaging and toward contexts for educational reminders once one is outside formal museum spaces. The artifacts underwent a textual analysis.

Textual analysis of these artifacts went beyond only looking at their content. Conducting a textual analysis assumes that the meaning of texts is relational; especially in regards to events, practices, and structures. It is important to consider, why does a text exist within a specific situation? Analyses of museum artifacts took into account larger conversations and realities of their existence. As noted by Fairclough (2003), texts are “parts of social events” in which discourses are made, re-made, and interpreted differently – and they exist for a purpose. Texts are actions, representations, and identifiers that help create expectations, beliefs, and understandings for society. The textual analysis of artifacts looked at the roles that structure, design, intent, and function play in how they are understood. Specifically, the analysis attempted to show how a text interacts within larger historical, cultural, and social schema.

### *Timeframe*

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and out of caution for the health and safety of all involved the interviews with museum educators took place via Zoom during winter 2020. IRB examined my proposal and determined that it was a case study in which IRB approval was not required.

## **Data analysis**

Analysis is the process of making sense of data via interpretation. When engaged with fidelity, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) note, the process of analysis illuminates the lessons learned from the data. It “involves abstracting out between codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2013, 187). Getting to this point means spending lots of time with one’s data.

For my research study, I was concerned with the conceptions of museum educators and how they use art to teach about social studies. It was a case study of a small group of museum educators and the results of the research are not generalizable to a wider population. As noted previously, the data collected during the study was analyzed using qualitative measures. These measures included the textual analysis of brochures and other teaching materials. The notion of museum spaces as sites of learning helped guide my analysis. Additionally, interview data utilized participant voice for their personal insights on their work.

Interviews with participants were conducted via Zoom and were recorded. General information about the interviews were logged into a chart (e.g. date and duration) and then the interviews were transcribed. Each interview received a complete verbal transcription. Since the interviews were recorded via Zoom I had both a verbal and visual record of the interviews which allowed them to be re-examined as needed. As suggested by Agar in 1980 (as cited by Creswell, 2013, 183), it is important for researchers to “read the transcripts in their entirety several times. Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts” (103). It is practice that I implemented in my own interactions with the interview data.

The reason I undertook this type of action is that familiarity with the data was important for a nuanced and thoughtful analysis. Notations were also made on non-verbal communications (e.g. inflections, pauses, gestures) during the interviews. Memoing of the transcriptions included notes, comments, and highlighting of interesting quotes from the participant responses. All of these acts informed the initial labeling and organizing of participant data into general themes. Initial organization of the data was necessary to begin the creation of codes for more in-depth interpretation of the data. Codes served multiple purposes in analysis. Because my study drew on ethnographic, phenomenological, and case study approaches to conducting qualitative research, the creation of codes addressed variant aspects. In the vein of phenomenology – I looked for group comments on the experiences of museum educators in teaching social studies through art. In consideration of the ethnographic nature of the study, my codes took into consideration the context of the environments in which my participants exist by providing rich descriptions of setting, actions, and events.

As Creswell (2013) notes, the processes undertaken in the creation of codes are at the “heart of qualitative data analysis” (184). The creation of codes in my study started with the labeling of data into general topics. Further iterative analyses of the interview data allowed for more in-depth themes that emerged as a thinning out of superfluous data occurred. Results of which meant general codes were melded into a larger umbrella of associated codes. The reliability of the codes were ensured through detailed descriptions of the data.

### **Study site: The Arlen Museum of Art**

The site of my research was the Arlen Museum of Art located downtown in a state capitol in the South. It is located on the southern edge of the main campus of a large R1: Doctoral University (Doc U). Situated directly across and north of the state history museum, and just a

few blocks directly north of the state capitol complex the Arlen Museum of Art is ideally situated for both visitor access and visitation volume.

Ease of access is an invaluable aspect of the museum. Big Avenue, which runs from the northern edge of the state capitol grounds to Foster Drive, where the museum is located, is being remade into an open air walking thoroughfare. Replete with four city blocks of walkable green space, and benches, the project when completed, will connect the grounds of the state capitol to Doc U. Albeit on a smaller scale, the completed project will resemble the National Mall in Washington, D.C. with increased foot traffic throughout the newly designed green space. Consequently, visitors will be more readily able to visit the capitol, the state history museum, and Doc U, as all three buttress the walking area along with a number of state office buildings. The whole area is becoming ever more geographically defined as an important space imbued with cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Visitor admission at the Arlen Museum of Art is free for several groups: museum members, university faculty, staff, and students, teachers, children 12 and under, as well as members of the military. Other visitors pay entry fees which range from \$5 to \$12. There is also a collection of free admission days to the museum throughout the year in an effort to make visiting the museum more financially accessible. With a collection of more than 19,000 artifacts, the Arlen Museum of Art is considered one of the pre-eminent cultural institutions in the region. Housed within the walls of the museum are artifacts that span the spectrum of art; from paper prints, to film and videos, to contemporary works that utilize an array of mediums and platforms for presentation. Like most art museums, the Arlen engages visitors through a collection of temporary, rotating, and ongoing exhibitions. In recent years the education department at the

museum has even begun an association with the university medical school and their students by teaching empathy through the study of art.

The Arlen Museum of Art is also known for its midday music events, gallery concerts, family events, and visitor socials. The museum makes a visible and conscious effort to provide varying opportunities and access to grow its visitor-ship. The museum itself has a significant endowment, community resources, and resources at its disposal. It also often hosts renowned speakers of cultural relevance in art, history, as well as museum educators from across the globe.

### **The space of The Arlen Museum of Art**

The museum consists of two main buildings. They sit adjacent to one another. Both buildings sit on the north side of a major city thoroughfare. There is the Education Building (which sits to the west) and the Gallery Building (which sits to the east). They are located directly north of the State History Museum and four blocks north of the State Capitol Grounds.

The Education Building includes a long row of round tables with chairs that line the full length of the outside (east side). They are utilized during all times of the day by students, employees, and visitors alike for a comfortable outdoor sitting experience. The building also houses a café, museum store, and an auditorium (with nearly 300 seats) on the first floor. There are classrooms and museum staff offices upstairs on the second and third floors. The museum education staff is housed on the third floor. Separating the two buildings is a curated green space scattered throughout with a collection of deciduous shade trees that provide a nice respite. There are also metal benches for sitting. Depending on the time of day this outside area is populated with all sorts of people: teachers, students, state workers, construction crews, kids, and tourists. And squirrels, lots and lots of squirrels. The space has previously been utilized as a place for an

art exhibition of Nina Katchadourian with unique sounds coming from speakers located around the space.

The second building, east of the Education Building, is the Gallery Building. Entering through two sets of double doors leads visitors to the front desk of the museum. It is located on the left side. Here, visitors are greeted by museum staff. Typically, there are a few docents present to assist or field questions from guests. Visitors with bags are directed to a side room with lockers and cubbies where personal belongings are stored during their visit.

At the front desk, there are color pencils and paper available for visitors to use to draw or take notes during their visit to the museum. It is an option that my daughter has taken advantage of several times. There are a variety of fliers available at the front desk that provide information on upcoming exhibits, and those that have a map of the museum. As well, there are ones that reflect a general openness to the type of experiences available to visitors. Brochures titled *Are You a Tortoise or A Hare?* and *Can You Find Yourself in The Art Museum?* (printed dually in English and Spanish) are fliers that present different possibilities of engagement to visitors. Textual analysis of museum documents such as brochures provides insight into the variation of ways that museum education manifests for visitors. The brochures provide guiding questions and a list of things to consider. In a small but tangible way, the fliers reflect the desire of the museum to be open and accessible to different kinds of visitors. The museum wants to help visitors find their niche in the museum, enjoy their visit, and come back to visit.

Moving into the main downstairs space, the atrium itself is a work of art. Located off of the atrium to the north and east are two galleries which house temporary exhibitions. There is a long set of stairs up the west side of the atrium which lead to the second floor (there is also an elevator by which the second floor can be accessed). The second floor is an interconnected

space of galleries of different sizes, hallways, and niches. Works of art from the permanent collection are displayed throughout. There is the Paper Vault which exhibits prints and drawings. There are also galleries for European Art, Latin American Art, and American and Contemporary Art. Proceeding through the second floor itself is quite easy. The museum is replete with open spaces. It is also quiet. One will find works of art on the wall, on displays located on the floor, and hanging from the ceiling. There are cushioned benches scattered throughout the floor for visitors who have a need or want to sit.

### **Contexts informing the study**

#### *Museums as informal learning spaces*

Informal learning space definitions generally include three specific types: designed spaces, everyday experiences, and programs. Designed settings such as parks, planetariums, zoos, museums, aquariums, and gardens are typically content curated with built-in aspects of free-roam learning as integral to the overall visitor experience. They are spaces that contain site specific contexts for learning, mission, and/or preservation. Spaces for everyday activities include just about anything that an individual may encounter on a daily basis (e.g. walking, fishing, hunting, living on a farm, going to the grocery store, playing at a park). These types of spaces are focused on contextualized and common lived-experiences. Program spaces consist of things like science and garden clubs, 4-H, and FFA (Future Farmers of America). Such spaces deal with individual and/or group interest in certain subjects and provide practice and experience to increase expertise/experience in a subject.

Research has shown that the benefits of the three different types of informal learning environments reflect that everyday learning is valuable and takes place across variant experiences. Common characteristics are found across different types of informal learning

spaces. They include, but are not limited to, the proclivity to provide educational engagement opportunities in multiple ways (e.g. physical, emotional, and cognitive), encouraging interaction, and building learning experiences around visitor knowledge and interests.

Informal spaces tend to function much like waves. There is an ebb and flow, push/pull nature to the interaction. There is space for more or less or different interaction; change and variety is a central aspect of engagement in informal spaces. Informal spaces create choice and offer opportunities for sustaining interests. They strive to be attuned to their visitors: What is wanted? What is needed? Is change needed in how we function/serve our visitors? What type of outreach should we engage in? What is our community role (micro and macro)?

Learning in informal spaces is accessible and malleable to learner interests. Specifically, the implementation of standardized testing (common to formal learning spaces) to show a specific level of competence is not needed because the manner and purpose of learning in informal spaces is inherently different. It is embedded in the doing and processes of activities. Indulging interests, increasing competence and/or knowledge is the goal; as is the movement and/or inclination toward greater understanding over time by participating in said activities. For designed environments the greatest option for learning is in the choices afforded to learners about how they choose to interact within a space. Their own interests and/or needs necessitate choice within these learning spaces. Research has noted that short sporadic points of engagement prevalent in designed spaces can be problematic for situating learning as one-off propositions. There are, however, growing efforts to see how introducing information and activities through pre-visits or extending experiences via post-visits might help address the concern and help lead to more sustained learning.

A major tenet of informal learning spaces is how they address abstract information and work to make it more concrete and therefore more accessible for learners. Informal spaces as juxtaposed against formal learning spaces typically provide multiple arenas for engagement (such as The Arboretum in Dallas, Texas and the Gathering Place in Tulsa, Oklahoma) with an increasing premium on interactivity. Interactivity being the idea of having people “learn by doing.” These spaces are also multi-spatial and cross curricular.

One of the most pointed concerns about increasing interactivity is that while it promotes engagement it does not automatically indicate a better and/or more successful learning experience. There is a belief that increased interactivity has a tendency to situate ideas too simplistically or without proper context in ‘fun’ edutainment games/experiences. The concern of interactivity also highlights the willingness of informal settings to redesign spaces and experiences cognizant of learner responses; to adapt as needed. Reflective practices in such learning settings are important to see if what is being done to engage learners is proving effective. Again, a concern is the notion of immediacy in learning. Is learning evident quickly? Are there aspects of latency that mute learning in the immediate future but plant a seed of interest or growth in the future?

Another important aspect of informal spaces is centering learner interests as a resource for developing multiple avenues for interactions between visitors, as well as between visitors and presented content. With a desire on creating connections, informal learning spaces want to create visitor connections and work to do so by fostering curiosity, promoting discovery, and privileging personal responses to assist in developing environments that support multiple interaction opportunities by creating spaces for different kinds of conversations (e.g. perceptual, conceptual, connecting, strategic, and affective).

Museums are quintessential spaces for informal learning (National Research Council, 2009). They and other similar type informal learning spaces are at their best when they provide learning opportunities that are hands-on, informational, and/or cognitively appropriate via addressing the needs and abilities of their visitors.

### *Museums and the function of culture*

In a 2014 article for *The New Yorker*, titled The Meaning of “Culture”, author Joshua Rothman argued that the connection of culture and museums is commonly viewed solely within the realms of activity and enjoyment. Visiting a museum is commonly considered an experience in culture, or maybe more appropriately, an experience to appreciate and/or gain culture. Much like a trip to the theatre or reading a classic book might be posited, culture is traditionally situated as something to be gained from visiting a museum. It is the byproduct of the experience; a tool in the work-belt of becoming a more well-rounded person.

For this study, however, culture is constituted as a collection and interconnected web of actions, beliefs, and patterns. Geertz’s (1973) writings on the interpretive nature of culture offer guidance here. His notion that culture is “not a model inside people’s heads but rather is embodied in public symbols and actions” works well with and undergirds Griswold’s (2012) assertion that culture can be reflective of a “particular way of life” for a specific group of people that includes but is not limited to their “patterns of behavior.” Further included in Griswold’s understanding of culture are the importance of values and beliefs in informing the actions of groups of people. My particular focus will be on the actions and decisions of museum educators.

### **Pilot Study**

I conducted a pilot study at the Arlen Museum of Art during the fall of 2017 as part of work on my Graduate Portfolio in Museum Studies through the Art History Department. The early implementation of their new social justice program became the focus of my study.

Data for my initial study at the Arlen Museum of Art was gathered during the fall of 2017 through tour observations and interviews with museum educators. During tour observations, I took note of discussions and activities related to the pieces of art that were being studied. Conducting tour observations allowed me opportunities to observe the different pedagogical practices of the tour guides. After the tours finished I debriefed with the educational staff at the museum who conducted the tours. These informal dialogues occurred as museum groups were being ushered outside at the end of their tours. These brief chats engaged a variety of topics. Most common of which were discussions about just-finished tours, comments on the impact of weather on tour groups, and finding ways to better utilize the outdoor space of the museum.

As I observed, interviewed, and interacted with museum staff, I became increasingly interested in how and why the education staff at the museum adapted and modified the new social justice program. My preliminary findings also incorporated feedback from schools about their recently completed tours. In the feedback teachers suggested that some of the works of art were too abstract for their students to understand. To address this concern and better meet the needs of students the education staff met to discuss how to better scaffold in the more abstract works of art by building confidence on more concrete works of art at the beginning of the tour. This adaptive step required that the staff be more cognizant of the works of art they were choosing for students to engage with.

It also revealed a willingness to modify the program to meet student needs and create new opportunities for learning. In general, the education staff was very accepting of feedback

from visitors. Even a forum was set up on the museum's internal network for everyone associated with the tours to share and learn from one another. Discussions revolved around how museum educators planned to interact with the students by utilizing the four agreements of Courageous Conversations: 1. stay engaged, 2. experience discomfort, 3. speak your truth, and 4. expect and accept non-closure. Collectively, the education staff worked to facilitate opportunities for learning during their tours.

This pilot study laid the groundwork for my current study about museum educators. The crux of my first study looked largely at how museum education staff was responsive to the implementation of the new social justice program. It was insightful how the museum worked through a new program initiative, but I knew that I wanted to delve more specifically into how museum educators conceptualize their own individual work. I wanted to explore more what informs their perspectives and how they negotiate within museum settings. These questions, of course, occur amidst the background of how art is used to engage the social studies in their own social justice work.

## **CHAPTER 4: PROCESS (also known as museum teaching and its ancillaries)**

There are many definitions available when describing processes. A general definition, and one that sufficiently grounds how it will be used moving forward in this study is as a series of actions or considerations leading toward a goal, also interdependent steps for an outcome or an end. Conceptually, processes can be straight-forward and streamlined in certain circumstances. They are not necessarily linear nor incremental. Processes can be, and oftentimes are recursive. As a visual, processes naturally evoke movement - sometimes forward, sometimes backward, maybe even back upon itself. Processes can be complicated - messy, even. Process is the antithesis of stasis.

What follows in the chapter is a discussion with art museum educators about the processes and considerations that inform how they engage with works of art in their teaching. Process, in terms of this study, will elucidate on several planes: structural, organizational, and personal. Considerations that museum educators undertake are influenced as much by visitor groups and the spaces in which they do their teaching as they are by their pedagogical comforts. Throughout the chapter, discussion will highlight how museum educators understand and negotiate their efforts in working with museum visitors and inform discussions around social studies topics.

### **Museums as sites of value**

Museums in general have long been spaces of privilege (Jennings & Jones-Rizzi, 2017; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Karp, Kratz, Szwaja, Ybarra-Frausto, Buntinx, & Rassool, 2006; Perin, 1992). Documentation on the social privileges of culture (Coffee, 2008), race (Jennings & Jones-Rizzi, 2017), class (DiMaggio & Useem, 1978), gender (Mellon Foundation & Ithaca S+R, 2019), access (see access programs at the Whitney Museum of American Art & the

Metropolitan Museum of Art), ableism (Campbell, 2012; Nario-Redmond, 2019; Rieger & Strickfaden, 2016), and equity (Ng, Ware, & Greenberg, 2017) in museums are prevalent and long running. Critical museum studies rightly point out that museums are spaces that need to reflect and act upon the privileges that exist in them and create more equitable spaces for all people (Bayer, Kazeem-Kaminski, & Sternfeld, 2018). Contemporary times have renewed calls for acknowledged structural issues to be taken on and not left as is. The Arlen Museum of Art, the site for my study on museum educators, is an organization that has intentionally sought out and continues to engage in important conversations. They are, however, implicated, as are all art museums, in the structural mores prevalent throughout them - mores that skew toward privilege and exclusion.

Critical social dialogue about the function and legitimacy of organizations has ushered in movements to explore the role of structures and policies in creating and perpetuating social disparities. To serve as an example, in 2017, the Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded the United States from a “full democracy” to a “flawed democracy.” The label highlighted the tenuous and influx relationship between public confidence with government institutions. Overall confidence in governmental institutions has seen a steady decline in the last 50 plus years. Erosion of faith in government’s ability to conduct the work of serving public good beyond party strata or doctrinaire belief is indicative of this feeling. However, even as faith in government institutions and larger overarching societal structures wanes - museums continue to be seen as institutions of high reputation and trust (IMPACTS Experience, 2021). Perhaps this support feels much starker when put against the backdrop of continual dings on public trust of the government and other social structures. Museums have shown to hold significant support in present society (IMPACTS Experience, 2021). Museums are seen as spaces of legitimacy in the public sphere.

Organizations such as the International Council of Museums, the American Alliance of Museums, and the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries and many others are pushing boundaries as to the role that museums serve to the public. Learning has long been a central aspect of museums. It continues today, albeit a little differently. Coinciding with current moves to engage in difficult topics, to provide community, to be advocates for social change, and to be spaces of interaction and introspection, museums are attempting to be more for more people than ever before.

### **Why art, exactly?**

Difficult conversations can take place in any number of different situations. Importantly, art museums are an arena for the examination of works of art and furthermore provide a contemplative space for such conversations (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011; Dewhurst, 2013; Dewhurst, 2014; Greene, 2001). As noted by Ross,

“... history or art or literature – like... they’re worth learning in and of themselves, but they also... not to think about disciplinary purity, but to think about ‘why are we studying this and what does it have to do with our lives today?’”

Art is open to and for multiple interpretations, and therefore offer numerous possibilities for learning. Possibilities that manifest via avenues for critical discussions, or examinations of identity that include dialogue about humanity. The examination of art - in terms of this study, is about utilizing it as a medium of expression to understand the world around us.

Ross continued on:

“.... art museums have been pretty bad about that historically – you know... saying, ‘learn art history’... you need to know stuff before you can appreciate this, but I feel like art is much bigger than art history, and... that it’s not a very big move to move to think about to art in the larger world... and I think when you do that ... it sort of activates the humanities in a useful way.”

The notion of activating the humanities through the examination of art is empowering. It moves learning about art to wider audiences and extends its reach. Relatedly, he opined:

“...if you want to have new audiences you have to speak to them in their terms. You have to be curious about what’s meaningful for them, not just relentless about telling them what they need to know in order to experience art.”

### **A note on participants**

This chapter will further delve into the comments of the museum educators in the study to more deeply connect their words to broader themes of teaching and learning. What follows is a presentation and examination of the ways in which the participants conceptualize their work as educators in a museum space.

Each of the participants in this study spoke candidly about how they see their role as museum educators. Their reflections recall how they came to work in museums, and also about how their efforts in museum spaces draw on their lived experiences and inform how they conceptualize their work. Considerations such as dynamics of tour groups assume an essential role in how the museum educators position themselves relationally within what works of art are appropriate, as well as what activities might prove most beneficial during a museum tour. Responses of the museum educators are presented throughout the next three chapters in earnest.

### **Note on the impact of COVID-19**

*The Arlen Museum of Art, like society as a whole, has been impacted significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews for this study took place under these auspices. Comments by the participants are reflective of this experience.*

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the Arlen Museum of Art was completely closed to the public from mid-March 2020 to August 12, 2020. During the shutdown there were no guests to the museum. There were no tour groups meandering through the exhibit halls. There were also

no events. It was a time that required and ultimately showcased the organizational flexibility of the museum.

COVID-19 necessitated big changes for employees at the Arlen. Expectedly, the employees at the museum were impacted in disparate ways. Staff in departments like education and curatorial could logically continue their work from home and did so. Other employees were not in such a position. When the Arlen was shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ross noted: “... really the first thing when we were sent home in March – the director – really leaned into was: oh my goodness, I’ve got all this staff.” Beyond immediate considerations of safety, the foremost challenge of the museum became keeping people employed.

The shift to work from home was not felt equally by all employees. Ross mentioned, “there were people – like Visitor Services, and Security who – you know, their whole job was about being there in the museum building... with people.” The reality of the pandemic meant that it was not feasible for such employees to continue their work from home. Their work was museum-site specific and guests were now not coming into the museum. The same reality held true for special event staff. The question for the museum became, what is going to happen to them?

In an effort to keep people on payroll and working, the leadership team, under instructions from the museum director, the senior staff did a skills assessment of all staff. This included skills not directly required by their job, but that they had anyway (such as graphic design or technology expertise). There was also a survey of the technology access that employees had from their homes. The hope of the leadership team was to find a way to activate skills, knowledge, and expertise of site-specific employees for the benefit of the museum. Once a list of available skills were compiled, Ross commented:

“... then we did a survey of what...was the work that could be done that’s always on the backburner because...we’re running a museum - then we sort of built a chart of projects and, you know – people who could be assigned to them, and then we sort of divvied up assignments, because we wanted to keep everybody working and not have furloughs and layoffs.”

Ross cited one particular assignment that was undertaken. It included,

“... looking at our website and trying to make things more accessible. Writing descriptive language for images that would be seen by people with low vision – a lot of it was like looking at collections records and updating them, generating keywords that would support people in searching the database, the collections database, and then short descriptions that would support people who have visual impairments - things that we should be doing to make sure that our videos and other resources are more accessible. And that we were able to accomplish really because – you know, we had 30 staff that needed work.”

Another reality of the shift away from in-person gallery tours and daily work at the museum was the pivot of the education department to the development of digital resources. This pivot included the development of virtual exhibition tours, art primers, social emotional learning videos, instructional art-making videos, educator talks, and content related instructional guides for works of art with focuses on specific content. Ross noted the importance of the move to develop digital resources bluntly: “we hadn’t done that in a very concerted way and this becomes, you know – a way to expand our audience that I think we’re now committed to... into the future.” A future that the education department hopes will also allow them to expand virtual tour options to rural schools and districts that may not have the option of visiting the museum in-person.

COVID-19 required the museum to reconceptualize their work. In other words, it provided an opportunity. Organizational pliability allowed the museum to meet the necessity of the day to protect its employees and still carry out its mission. The move to activate other skills of their workers and move forward under the circumstances was a move that Ross commented was “pretty remarkable, given what has happened in many, many, many art museums around the

country.” After being shuttered for nearly six months at the onset of the pandemic, the Arlen Museum of Art reopened its doors in August 2020. The reopening meant no groups. There was no cash exchanged and walk-ins were only by advanced appointment. Safety was and remains the essence of the operating environment of the museum during the pandemic. While having the museum open again to visitors is important, Ross noted a pointed limitation of the reopening: “it’s not a very income generating environment. I mean we cut the special events programming and sort of reassigned that staff indefinitely....which was like a department of 3 or 4.” It is a challenge that continues to exist because of the impact the pandemic has had on the ability of the museum to bring in income. A study by Wilkening Consulting commissioned by the American Alliance of Museums published in October 2020 found a growing number of museums growing perilously close to shuttering. With attendance down, and income generating events limited to non-existent, COVID-19 has pushed museums to the brink of having to close.

Reflecting on the role that COVID-19 has had and will continue to have on the museum, Ross iterated, at least for -

“...educators and curators, like in some ways it was....easy to transition our work and to work from home, but I really admire that the director has...so far been successful and committed to keep peoples’ jobs. Because that is not the story of many many many art museums around the country.”

### **The Arlen Museum of Art as an organization**

The Arlen has a particular organizational identity. It is a well-funded university art museum with international prestige. It has a mission and the resources to reach a broad constituency. The museum exists in an urban area that has numerous other museums nearby. It’s located in a city known for its cultural offerings. There are also several other smaller art museums, a large children’s museum, a burgeoning number of local, state, and regional history museums, as well as a number of nature-based learning centers. Additionally, there are a large

number of libraries with their own community-infused programs, local outreach, and educational programming. The Arlen exists in both a geographic and temporal space that allows it to serve its community through art by its outreach, programming, and overall mission.

Upon its exhibition of Vincent Valdez's *The City*, a portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan in a modern landscape, the Arlen museum director stated: "Art raises uncomfortable questions at times, but the rewards that come from having difficult conversations are many and important (Cascone, 2018)." The purchase and subsequent exhibition of *The City* by the Arlen is indicative of where the museum sees itself in terms of mission and engagement. It is a place that does not shy away from important conversations. It invites them.

An organization can be a powerful vehicle for the efforts of its employees. About the mission of the museum, Ross iterated:

"...the Arlen spends more on education than Brew [a prestigious R1 university in the northeast] does, you know ...not that the Brew comparison is so interesting, but you know they have so many many millions dollars more to operate the place at Brew, but the Arlen is doing more work for more people. And more innovatively."

There is an organizational dedication to doing work that moves beyond only the university community and students of art history. The work of the Arlen Museum of Art, especially in more recent years, has taken a decidedly more critical presentation. A willingness to have difficult conversations and lean into such spaces of criticality has been intentional. Such acts are evidenced in temporary exhibitions over the past several years such as *The Avant-garde Networks of Amauta: Argentina, Mexico, and Peru in the 1920s*, *Joiri Minaya: Labadee*, *Charles White: Celebrating the Gordon Gift*, and *Wael Shawky: Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*. Temporary exhibitions dating even further back also reflect a willingness to push against whiteness as privilege in museum spaces.

The work of the education department effectively addresses this organizational commitment in its own work. On the role of using works of art to talk about difficult topics and uncomfortable subjects Emily stated:

“I think that it is a decision that the education department made...and continues to make – that’s important to us...we think that education happens in those spaces of discomfort and so, if the conversations that we’re having aren’t difficult in any way...then how much learning is happening?”

The Arlen is in a prime position to facilitate important conversations. As a well-funded art museum on a R1 campus in a capital city it has the collection, resources, support systems, and ability to push this agenda forward. Organizational ability coupled with intentionality, allows for conversations that might be difficult and/or uncomfortable to be anchored by the works of art on exhibit and also through the permanent collection of the museum. It’s a sentiment reflected by Emily:

“... we’ve just had such exciting exhibitions over the past couple of years that have really inspired deep, and thoughtful, and challenging conversation.”

A significant element of the organizational identity of the Arlen Museum of Art is its effort and intentionality. For the educational department, intentionality is posited as growth, development, and reflection. Each notion is seen as natural and necessary as learning opportunities for museum educators. As processes, both individually and collectively, the notions enable avenues of learning that are, and feel fluid - allowing for flexibility, and having needed professional development. For example, docent workshops are used as a means to provide learning opportunities for the museum volunteers. Janet commented about an important benefit of the docent workshops and getting to look at works of art with other people:

“...there are the ones that I really love that I go to a lot then there are others that I don’t necessarily pay attention to, so when I see someone pick one of those and do something really interesting with it...it’s like, ‘oh, I need to look at that piece again.’”

She continued about the value of having the opportunity to see other people's perspectives on different pieces of art by admitting, "...you know...a lot of us are old white women, but not all of us." Janet's acknowledgement is important. At its most basic, Janet's comment recognizes that there are more than singular understandings and responses to works of art.

Previous work by Burnham and Kai-Kee (2011) and others have examined how age, background, experience, and perspective are just a few of the layers that inform one's interaction and interpretation of art.

### **Why the Arlen?**

The Arlen Museum of Art is located in a city with innumerable options for employment and/or volunteerism. And yet, each participant interviewed for this study made a specific choice to align their time and efforts with the Arlen. When asked to express how or why they chose to work or volunteer at the Arlen Museum of Art the participants of the study expressed commonalities. Evident in their answers about association with the museum came via a throughline of their experiences, historical consciousness, and values.

#### **Janet Wilde**

Janet noted her association with the Arlen began approximately seven years ago as she began to step back from university teaching:

"I decided to kind of volunteer at the Arlen as part of a transitional – transitioning out of teaching, so I could still get that kind of...frankly the rush out of...when you're with a classroom and you really get people going – and you're making something new, right?"

The rush she mentioned was the collaborative effort of teaching and learning. It was the power of a conversation as a means of enriching engagement that she wanted to continue. She further noted that,

“the conversation is...the synthesis...it’s the constructivist argument – where everybody’s together...and something new and exciting comes out of that. So I still wanted to be able to get that... So that’s why I started volunteering at the Arlen.”

Having worked at the university for over two decades Janet had lots of institutional knowledge and experience and volunteering at the Arlen felt like a natural fit to Janet:

“My field was Radio, Television, and Film – so you know, visual media...is super important to me. I did – that’s what my work...my academic work – I did a lot of analysis of visual media – so it was kind of a natural thing to do.”

Being at the Arlen also seemed a likely extension of her other volunteer efforts as an anti-bias educator with the Anti-Defamation League. A role she undertook in both schools and for training law enforcement. Much of her work has centered around ally empowerment. While the arena for her ally work was a bit different from her efforts at the Arlen, her training and work in facilitating difficult conversations were skills put to good use in her gallery teaching at the museum.

The Arlen as a space for critical examinations has been a conscious choice. Janet noted, “When I started...it was a lot more ‘let’s teach kids about art’ – the social studies, gearing things towards social studies and gearing things towards social justice came later on.” In the years since becoming a volunteer it is a change she fully supports.

### **Emily Palmer**

Five years ago Emily was working toward an MFA in Drama and Theatre for Youth and Communities at the same university where the Arlen Museum of Art is located. It was at the Arlen that she conducted her thesis research. Her thesis included workshops with the education department, museum docents, and graduate fellows on,

“how to integrate drama and movement strategies into museum education with a specific focus on building dialogue and dialogues around works of art that could be deemed as challenging.”

When talking about her study, Emily expressed her desire to work with works of art by artists from a variety of non-dominant identities. Specifically, she wanted to examine how museum educators can have conversations around identity and content that were being true to the artists. Her desire to work with artist identity was a choice of value. However, the initial expectation of the study shifted:

“So I really discovered that a lot of my focus needed to shift just in to kind of traditional lesson planning – how to write open-ended questions – what an essential question is, so like – how are they building a thread line through their teaching and not just picking you know five works of art that they like and just throwing them all together.”

Following the completion of her thesis project at the museum, an opening for the manager of the docents came open. Emily applied, interviewed, and was offered the position. It was a scenario she described as:

“– I was really interested in working at the Arlen – because my thesis had been with the docents and the position that was open was managing the docent program – and so, I was really interested in that position.”

### **Maggie McLain**

Maggie came to the Arlen upon her retirement as a public school teacher. No longer teaching in public schools, Maggie and her husband moved to Bluebell from another major city in the South.

Retirement necessitated her desire to find a place to volunteer:

“When we first got here I volunteered at our local library...which is a really cool library. I mean I still volunteer there. I feel like libraries and art museums are really important things in a community. I feel very strongly about that. So I started off with the library. But in the back of my head...for a number of years...even, way before I retired I thought...I want to volunteer at an art museum when I retire.”

Prior to their move to Bluebell, Maggie had decided upon retirement to volunteer at the large art museum in the major city in which they lived. As one of the largest art museums in the United States, it offered plenty of opportunities for involvement for Maggie in her retirement. The post-retirement move changed those plans. Of the Arlen Museum of Art, Maggie commented, "...it was an approachable place...it was very approachable. It wasn't super big, everybody was really friendly. And I went there several times." Eventually she became part of a docent training class at the museum, and has been volunteering at the Arlen for nearly a decade.

### **Ross Hunter**

Recalling how he came to be at the Arlen Ross noted:

"I was working at the Brew Art Museums during a time when – they hired me in 2008 to be their first ever museum educator, professional museum educator – which seems like so late to the game."

As a preeminent university art museum in the northeast, the Brew had tremendous financial resources and capacity. The educator position at the museum came with a desire from the university for more community outreach by the museum and to move beyond 'art museum for art history' academic purity. This idea, however, did not last. Once it became evident what community outreach looked like under the leadership of Ross, they became ambivalent and wanted to refocus on undergraduates of the university. So, instead of growing the footprint of the museum, possibilities of outreach and engagement for the museum were being limited.

As Ross put it, the museum was not so into the,

"– work with the medical school that I had initiated or not so much work with schools that had expanded greatly under my leadership, but – you know, just focus on Brew undergraduates....and be sure that your sort of pedagogical emphasis is on art history as a discipline."

His reply was simple: "And so, that's just not what I wanted to do...it's not." At some point, the Arlen Museum of Art approached him about coming to work for them and iterated

their commitment to working across disciplines at the university level and working with both school and community audiences. His response was, “.... so it’s like... you know, I went to public schools. I believe in public education and I was honestly just offended by the selfishness that Brew was willing to dedicate its multi-million dollar budget to a very tiny audience. I don’t believe in it.” He took the job as Director of Education at the Arlen Museum of Art.

For each participant, the decision to be at the Arlen Museum of Art was informed by personal beliefs about the possibilities of teaching and learning. They each iterated, in their own ways, strong notions about the power and value an art museum can have to a community.

### **The museum and its relationship to space**

The Arlen Museum of Art has a prominent spatial footprint and exists in a geographically accessible space. It is also centrally located in a corridor of political influence and power; buttressed to the north by a large R1 university and to its south by government buildings and the state capitol. The spatial prominence of the museum applies to both its interior and its outdoor arena. This is particularly true in terms of its layout and relative location. As noted by Brundage (2017), space is a powerful purveyor of value. Klauser (2013), likewise, has written on the notion of geography as surveillance in public and civic engagement spaces.

Similarly, Judson (2006) has commented on the pedagogy of space and its influence of curriculum processes. The confluence of space and curriculum processes manifests itself in art museums through the exhibition and placement of art, and in the teaching and educational programming of the museum. Usable space in a museum is something that all the museum educators noted. Janet, in particular, provided a specific example of importance about the consideration of space in teaching. She noted that if:

“...there are eight other tours taking place at the same time and somebody’s got a group of kindergartners at the artwork next to the one you wanted to talk

about....we're not going to be able to have a discussion about some kind of really sensitive topic next to these little kids, right?"

Reflecting on the interplay of space and the Arlen Museum of Art, Janet commented, "I mean, it's kind of interesting....just kind of being in the space....especially because it's on a college campus, and it's near the capitol – so we're near seats of power." In reference to plans to create a National Mall-esque green space that will run several blocks from the state capitol north to the university Janet commented:

"....it's going to feel so much more connected. Right? All of that. So it's – I can only hope that it's going to be good. I know they've got a big kind of landscaping plan that they are working on to make it....to make the entrance more inviting and more obvious..."

The hope is that connectivity will invite more visitors to the corridor and improve access to the capitol, the university, museums, and other state buildings

She also noted about the museum, that: "...it's a place that can be super uncomfortable ...we try and make it a really welcoming place." The notion of museums as uncomfortable spaces has multiple meanings. Pedagogically, it can refer to the idea that museums can be spaces in which important conversations take place, where social commentaries, and representations of diverse voices can provide a more complex rendering of events and society; where accepted tomes of society are challenged and where different lenses reflect different realities. Janet also commented about another aspect of museums and space:

"I have known people...I've talked to teachers who teach on the east side of town and said, you know – their students never come over to west Bluebell. They're afraid of being harassed or whatever....it's a totally fair feeling –."

Museums have not historically been welcoming spaces to all people. Barriers have been a long-standing aspect of museums, even as many are pushing back against barriers in a variety of ways (via access, presentation, representation, and employment). Museums exist in an ether

of multiplicity - they are implicated in structures of exclusion just as they are implicated in efforts to be more inclusive. Research and dialogue around museums have shown that the concerns museums are addressing reflect considerations of access and safety, and to also being more welcoming to immigrants, the poor, and refugees. For example, the American Alliance of Museums has cited the specific efforts of the Anchorage Museum, the Queens Museum, and the Levine Museum of the New South during Welcoming Week as organizations working to make museum spaces more open to minority populations.

The privilege of museums and other cultural institutions, as well as the inexorable inclusions that abide in them also call one's attention to work such as Krzysztof Wodiczko's Homeless Projection in Montreal, Quebec in 2014. He video recorded the words of the city's homeless population in conversation and then projected the interactions upon the Place des Arts, one of Canada's largest performance halls. The visual projection and verbal accounting of the people occurred in a very public place. It was shown raised on the walls of the building so that the subalterns were presented above the audience of onlookers, so as to require the audience to look up to people silenced by society's apathy toward them. It is similar to the activist art of Banksy. Also see the work of Björgvinsson and Hansen (2012), and Avern's (2017) for further examples of activist public art.

The operating privilege of museums is understood at the Arlen. There appears to be a keen sense of understanding that manifests itself in the development of the organizational mission in and for their community. Concerns of access, representation, and critical conversations are important aspects of the Arlen mission. Janet noted: it's "...one of the things that I love about the Arlen .... we're trying to be a lot more welcoming ... a lot more open, you

know....for a lot of people.” For the Arlen, these are opportunities to continue their commitment to being available to all people. As Ross noted about the role of the Arlen:

“It’s like, I want every visitor to feel like they have permission to be curious about the world. You know – so if you’re black – I assume that you might be interested in works by black artists, but I also assume that you have the capacity to be interested in everything. So I think that’s one of my guiding principles is to sort of signal... a sort of cultural breadth and welcome, and not make too many assumptions about what people are going to be interested in.”

Physical interior space of the museum is also important. It is, however, not just that works of art are up and visible and that they are being seen. The context of visibility is important. What does the space around the work of art suggest about what type of learning is possible? Where and how is content presented? These types of probing questions have been taken up in research around critical geography and museums as spaces of knowledge and learning for decades (Gorman-Murray, 2008; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

### **Advocacy for education**

The American Alliance of Museums elucidates the relationship of museums and advocacy and its own role in them as the following:

“Museums of all kinds are critical educational, cultural, and scientific institutions in our society, but the value of our work is not always fully understood. The American Alliance of Museums helps museums tell the stories of their important activities and contributions and promotes a deeper understanding of museums with policymakers, the press, and the public.” (see <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/advocacy/>)

As an organization, the Arlen Museum of Art is implicated in this definition. It is not defined by it, but it is associated with its meaning. Advocacy is a central aspect of the Arlen's identity. Because advocacy is multiplicitous, it can be conceptualized as a process of support, an expression of views and concern, or an action taken to defend rights and/or responsibilities of people. At times, the Arlen is all of these. Parsed into a more compartmentalized understanding of an organization, the education department of the Arlen and those associated with its endeavors

are likewise impacted, as are the visitors that come to the museum. There is an understanding that advocacy as a part of the work of the education department is an invaluable aspect of agency. It allows the department to be able to do the kind of work in the museum they feel is important. Emily commented specifically about the importance of Ross, the Director of Education, and his advocacy for doing the type of work at the museum that the education department feels compelled to do:

“He’s an incredible advocate for our department – the way that he interacts with curatorial and makes sure that we have the works of art that we feel like we need to be teaching from.”

The need for such advocacy is paramount. For educators, access to the art and placement of the art directly impact their interactions with visitors. Emily noted the interplay of different departments on her own advocacy: “– curators make decisions about where works of art are, because they have a narrative that they’re creating and as like a museum visitor I might find that really stimulating and wonderful, but then as an educator, it’s like – our needs are very different...” As an educator, Emily advocates for the type of conversations around works of art that she feels are necessary. To Emily, advocating for the needs of the education department is an act of respect. Two particular areas of advocacy around works of art are content and placement.

As an example, Emily mentioned:

“... a couple of works that we use all the time for teaching social justice – the portrait of Madam CJ Walker that’s made out of combs by Sonya Clark, ...not just used for social justice – that work, I mean really – any time there are students in the gallery you are probably going to see a group there...it’s just such a wonderful...work. The works by Vincent Valdez – the Strangest Fruit collection – sometimes we have one of them up, sometimes we have two of them up – those are really integral to the way that we teach social justice, but really for older audiences –”

The ability to teach about art in the museum has certain conditions that make engagement and dialogue more conducive. It is not always as simple as ‘I just want to teach about this work of art so I am going to teach about it.’ Like many things in life, the ability to teach certain works of arts is influenced by ancillary factors. With respect to the work done at the Arlen Museum of Art - this tension is highlighted by the relationship between the education department and the curatorial department.

Emily expressed the sometimes parallel considerations of the education and curatorial departments in dealing with space and pieces of art:

“If you put 3 works of art that we really love and want to teach from all in the same room that means that only one person can really be teaching in there at a time. And so, you’re really minimizing the use of those works of art because of that..”

She was also quick to point out that in such situations, while the works of art thematically make sense together, it is hard for them to be utilized by the education department to their fullest potential: “Because it’s so exciting to have certain works up, but if they’re not in places that they’re usable for us, like they might as well not be up, you know?”

One of the ways in which advocacy for the education department manifests itself with the curatorial department is that if a work of art is going to be swapped out, especially one that the education department uses quite a bit, Ross advocates for what type of work the department needs up in its place. There is a discussion that happens around the work of art, how it is used by the education department, and then attempts are made to find another work of art that addresses similar aspects and purposes.

### **Materials matter**

Materials can be used as a beneficial pedagogical tool in student learning (Thompson & Lambdin, 1994). Research has also shown that materials can have a tangible impact on visitor

engagement (Andre, Durksen, & Volman, 2017; O’Connell, 1984). Art museums in particular, have to negotiate within constructs that promote an environment of ‘look, but no touch’. As such, art museums must negotiate ways in which to provide a variety and equity of experience - this sometimes includes the use of materials. Part of material use is to add additional pedagogical notches to one’s teaching. Another is, that addressing the varying modes of teaching feels respectful to the range of learning differences and preferences possible within humanity. To assume that all visitors will enjoy the same style of teaching, or will be inspired by similar activities is to miss the value and inevitability of difference. It’s a notion that Janet believes the museum has done a good job of addressing by, “.....bringing in examples; of doing trainings - to teach people how to use different modes.....to engage.” One particular such training she mentioned included how to use poetry (to read or create) in one’s teaching about art.

*Examples on use*

Emily commented how her view of materials has evolved dramatically since she began working at the Arlen. A co-worker, who works with family and community programs, expressed the importance of young people having something to touch. Her new understanding of materials necessitated a new conceptualization on the importance of providing opportunities to touch and manipulate objects during museum tours. She noted how their conversations helped her think through the need for materials:

“....she really helped me to think about how important it is for young people to have something to touch in a place where they are not allowed to touch anything.”

Janet iterated her commitment to the use of materials as a means of eliciting responses that moved beyond strict verbal communication. In her thinking, the silence of tour groups did not necessarily equate to disengagement or not understanding - she noted: “It doesn’t mean they’re not getting it.” With this understanding in mind, she explained the following activity:

“So, a lot of times I’ll have like a paper activity to give to the students so that they can – if a discussion doesn’t go well...then we can get out, ... then I’ll have a handout and then the students can fill out the handout. And from the handout sometimes then you can go from there into just having people read what they’ve written.”

Another activity had students using tin foil to make sculptures. As mentioned by Janet, “it’s just making sure that you’re engaging as many of those different ways of doing it.” Emily similarly commented that having students only sitting and talking about art for thirty minutes feels like a lost opportunity for engagement:

“I feel like for any age, but definitely for elementary and middle, but really for any age – half an hour of just sitting and talking...like an hour of sitting and talking is really hard.”

There is an intentional effort by the museum educators to have materials be associated with activities that enhance the museum learning experience. Emily continued this line of thought by noting, “...to have something that they can manipulate and also try to have no more than like one work of art where all we are doing is sitting and having a conversation.” The use of materials is also an acknowledgement that having a variety of tools in one’s pedagogical basket is beneficial. What works on one day for one group may not work with another. Materials might include activities for writing, or drawing, or designing with wiki-sticks, or working with textures. The use of materials does not even necessarily involve students sharing what they created, but is more about creating spaces of comfort and engagement through expression. The overall point is that there are tangible things/materials that can be utilized to enhance the learning experience. It’s a sentiment that may help account for the diversity of groups that are likely to come through the doors of the museum.

Reflecting upon how the use of materials changed at the museum in early 2020 when initial widespread concerns about COVID-19, Emily commented:

“– it definitely did change for, you know...a couple of weeks when we were still teaching, but were wondering if or when the museum was going to close – we really stopped using a lot of the materials we would usually use – or we would be sanitizing them after – you know...it was a very different relationship to materials.”

The reality about the use of materials is that the pandemic has caused a collective re-examination of lots of aspects of society, about systems, and other ways of doing things. Materials are no different. How they will be utilized during a museum visit in a post-pandemic world is unknowable; but it is likely to change. Emily estimates that, “it’s going to be a hugely different relationship to materials when we come back.”

### **Pre-visit communication as preparation and expectation**

Collectively, all the participants of this study commented on the dual importance of communication and preparation as important aspects of the museum pre-visit. Understanding why groups want to come to the museum and what they hope to gain and/or experience from their visit, or what they want to be introduced to is information that helps solidify a foundation for a beneficial museum visit.

Ross iterated that “... all of our gallery teaching is customized based on an intake conversation with a teacher or a faculty person. Or, at least a written survey about their students and their interests, and why they’re coming. So yeah, I think we try hard.” Maggie reiterated a similar statement by acknowledging pre-visit communication is a good way to see if there are specific things groups want to do/learn/experience from the museum visit. Similarly, Emily mentioned the pre-visit work in its functional benefits: “We send teachers a lot of information before they come to visit and it has museum rules...but also gives them a little bit of a sense of how we teach...” Communication as part of the museum pre-visit is about clear expressions of what will happen once groups are at and in the museum space.

It is a notion that Emily expanded upon:

“.... it took some time for schools to really understand how we teach – that we are not giving you a tour/overview of the museum, we are delving deeply...into you know....3 to 5 works of art and this is more about students being in dialogue than it is us sharing what we know about the art – and, you know...it took...it took time for teachers to understand that and we definitely have that information in the communication that we send out to them after they book a tour –”

Some of the pre-visit communication is about expectations. Despite efforts to open museum spaces to wider audiences, there are still roadblocks. One of the most innocuous roadblocks is the function of expectations. Often positioned under the guise of logic, expectations have the ability to alienate when not expressed in informational terms as opposed to punitive edicts. Ross views transparency of museum expectations as a means to promote an experience bound in safety. He commented on the importance of atmosphere, specifically in terms of making expectations and rules clear to visitors, as such:

“I mean, some of the things that I think are important in creating a safe and welcoming atmosphere for everybody is... you know, really... making the sort of rules of the game visible so that it’s clear – I always try to protect people from getting in trouble with security.”

These are things that are about removing barriers and being clear about what specific norms they will be expected to uphold. The notion of safety is invaluable. Clarity of expectations is important and helps promote respectful interaction between staff and visitors. Ross noted, “I think making the sort of expectations about behavior very, very clear actually supports people in feeling like they’re safe – because they know how to behave.”

Maggie considers it important to provide an overview,

“I’ll tell them – teenagers, five year olds – ‘I’m really glad you’re here.’ And, you know – I’ll say just a few things – you know – don’t touch anything unless I tell you ‘you can touch it’, which will be one thing that you can touch....just don’t get too close because that’s the thing,.....I try to say, ‘I’m really glad you’re here. And this is what we are going to do today.’ So the kids that really need that overview are going to get it.”

Some expectations, like ‘do not touch works of art’, no food, no drink - these are non-negotiable. Others, like ‘don’t get too close to the works of art’ are considered good practice. Yet, other expectations, like noise level are more relative. Emily describes it in the following way:

“ ... in terms of noise – I mean every once and a while you will have someone come up to you and be like ‘y’all are being too loud’, but I don’t think that’s really a thing – unless the students are like screaming – like if there is – if the classroom management is off that’s one thing –”

Noise, in and of itself, is not inherently good or bad. As Emily notes,

“I think if noise is happening productively I am super happy for there to be noise in the museum – because I think that’s great, I think we’re kind of interrupting some narratives about museum spaces when we’re allowing that noise to happen.”

### **Decisions on topics: How are they made?**

A particular strength of the education department at the Arlen Museum of Art is the amount of malleability in the experiences they are able to provide. Paid staff and volunteer docents work to ensure that each group that comes to visit the museum is given a tour that is engaging, appropriate, and informative. When possible, groups are obliged with the specific tours they requested. Additionally, the museum has a growing number of tour options for K-12 and higher education groups, as well as the ability to create completely individualized tours.

Emily noted that choice in works of art used during tours is necessitated by.... “just paying attention to who that group is going to be ...” All the educators in the study mentioned the nuance in picking works of art as largely about understanding what types of art will help move conversations forward and which ones will stall out discussion or aid in conversations going off the rails. Throughout our interviews, all the participants voiced a number of topics that they regularly discuss, as well as broaching topics they feel are necessary and important

conversations moving forward. One consideration was the importance of pre-visit knowledge as an aspect about what works of art are shown. Emily cited the following example:

“... so if there’s a middle school group that is coming and really wants the Doing Social Justice program .... – I have had the experience before of middle school students not knowing what lynching is... and I feel like it’s – it’s not really my place to be introducing them to that concept.”

One note on topics is making sure to address concerns of groups up front when possible.

The single largest concern voiced by younger school groups is being shown works of art with nudity. Normally this concern is handled by acknowledging that works of nudity will not specifically be focused on, but that in an art museum there is a good chance that works with nudity will be up on exhibit and may be seen in passing. Largely, though - groups that come to the art museum are open to examining a wide range of works. Groups that make the choice to visit an art museum come with a certain amount of understanding that art presents a variety of aesthetics and addresses a wide breadth of topics. There is an understanding that works of art might address contentious topics or have differing perspectives than those who are looking at them. It’s a point to which Emily commented:

“I don’t think I’ve ever been asked to not talk about certain content... I feel like groups tend to be pretty open – I mean, it’s interesting though, because I have had groups that have come from like certain religious schools and just the way that they approach the works and the conversations they have around the works are really different, and they maybe don’t agree with certain messaging that they’re seeing in works of art – but, I’ve never been asked to not go to those works of art.”

### **Against the grain: The art of pushing back/interrupting narratives of museum spaces**

Emily commented that museum visitors tend to struggle with:

“... this kind of awkwardness of like... What is the right amount of time to spend at a work of art? And, how many of the labels should I be reading? Like, is somebody going to judge me because I only looked at one work in this entire gallery?”

It's a fairly easy and ubiquitous example of a common way in which museums tend to be explored or feel like how they should be explored. The quote also reveals part of the reason that Emily relishes her role as a museum educator because it allows her to push back with groups against perceived notions of proper museum experience.

Art museums are notorious for promoting norms. Be quiet, whisper, don't touch - these are earmarks of tradition. Such notions, while well-meaning, have the ability to alienate and cast museum spaces as unwelcoming. All of the museum educators in the study spoke about the ways in which through their teaching they push back against dominant norms and expectations of museums. Some of their acts are subtle; others less so.

Part of working with groups is being able to read the room. It is invaluable to have information that will allow one to better be able to maneuver a tour and know as much as one can about one's group in order to help create a quality tour. In talking about groups that come to visit the museum, Emily noted:

“... you really get this sense that there is – a right way to look at the art – and we tell them constantly there isn't – but, you know...if you've had that feeling up until this visit to the museum....then it's going to be really hard to break through that –”

Leaning into working with groups offers the opportunity to explore visceral reactions to works of art and not feel constrained by behaviors. She can spend time interacting with tour groups and not be bound by expectations. It also serves the dual purpose of loosening fears of visitors for educators to legitimize museum experience by modeling different ways of being and experiencing. Experiences with art do not have to be clinical. There is no requirement to look at every work of art, or spend a requisite amount of time at each piece. Read labels, don't read labels - either is okay. To look, to question, to consider - these are the aspects of museum experience that the educators are leaning into. It's a notion that she feels is important to address,

because sharing is integral to moving beyond expectations of expertise. Adding voice and sharing one's thoughts, ideas, and critiques lean into the idea that multiple perspectives are beneficial in learning about art. Art for experience and understanding is more than expertise.

Be quiet. Be quiet. It's a sentiment that Janet expressed clearly needs to be pushed back against and one that Emily voiced several times in our interviews a desire to push back on the expectations of whispering in museums:

“...there are some teachers who are like ‘you have to whisper’ and I’m like ‘you don’t have to whisper’ – you know they’ve told their students they have to whisper –” but, I mean... those are the groups that I love – teachers that have like, ...reigned them in too far...it is much easier to loosen those reigns than the teachers that haven’t said a word to the students about what it’s like to be in a museum – and...there’s like no control. That’s much harder than the other way around.”

Janet also mentioned that museum educators engaging in intentional acts that push against preconceptions of acceptable behaviors in museum spaces are important. One activity that Janet uses as a means to break down expectations is one in which students pair up. One person wears a blindfold while the other describes the work of art. During the activity students are taking the lead in describing a work of art to their partner. Descriptions take on different tenors dependent on the describer.

An aspect of the activity is that art does not have to be enjoyed only via the lens of an expert or docent. Perceptions of art and experiences with art are valid regardless of specific training and/or expertise. Of the activity, Janet comments: “It is interesting because some of them do go a lot more into meaning, some of them... stick very much with colors.” The activity requires a give and take of both participants. It includes opportunities for speaking, listening, interpreting, and understanding. Because the activity is participant led, a variety of different strategies are used. There is no prescription for making sense of the works of art or how it is

described. Once the tour group comes back together as a whole group, Janet engages them by deconstructing the activity. Questions she asks include:

“If you were blindfolded, are you seeing what you expected? What are you seeing that you didn’t expect? How is it different? What did you expect instead? If you were describing the work of art: What did you do? What strategy did you take? And some students will say, ‘Well, I started at the upper left hand corner and I worked across and then did another layer and another layer [so on and so on] ...so you know, some of them will do that. Some people will say, ‘this thing in the middle was the most important thing so I talked about it and then I kind of worked to the other things. So, it’s interesting to also see how they all have different strategies.’”

The activity is largely about demystifying the examination of art. Art does not need to be hard to enjoy or interpret. In another activity, Janet has everyone lie down on the floor under a specific work of art, “...to look up at it and just kind of feel it...it’s another way to just kind of break down their expectations of...what being in an art museum is going to be like.”

Study participants also mentioned paralysis of participation as a legitimate fear for visitors to the art museum. Validating the effort of visitors was noted as an important act in recognizing that all have something of value to express. For Maggie it is about letting students know that at a museum there is not the dichotomy of right and wrong answers. It’s more about sharing and listening. Janet noted, “– a lot of times when students are looking at art work and they’re talking, they feel like they need to know more about art to say something.” Commenting on the importance of experiences like the blindfold exercise and having students share their thoughts, Janet stated: “.... it really does kind of break down barriers of the whole, ‘I’m in an art museum, I have to behave a certain way.’”

In discussing why breaking down barriers about how to share in a museum feels necessary, Janet elucidated on a past experience:

“When I was a...in grad school, I TA’ed for a class, for a film class and one of the things the professor kept saying – and it was an aesthetics, like a film

aesthetics class...narrative theory – and one of the things the professor would say is ‘don’t be afraid to say something obvious’ – so, ‘it’s blue’ – that’s a perfectly reasonable observation.”

Learning is about the process of being willing to listen, to share, and be open to an experience that may be different than what you are used to or understand. There is value in acknowledging effort when someone is brave enough to share honestly and it might lead to others being willing to share. By being able to tie works of art with experiences beyond the content of art - it becomes more available on an engagement level.

### **Necessary conversations: The museum as a space of teaching and learning**

Art is more than art history. Teaching through art is more than an exercise in academic purity. Emily described engagement with art as a way for, “.... students to draw their own conclusions and go in their own direction around a work of art instead of really trying to steer the conversation to be about something specific.” For Ross, utilizing works of art to engage in conversation of contemporary and historical social issues, “... builds skills and it’s more true to the complexity of human experience.”

Their comments are related to the notion of necessary conversations. In its basic form a necessary conversation means to have a candid interaction about something important. It is a conversation that is not always enjoyable or fun, but it is important to have. It means to coalesce and interact around a topic, an idea, or an event that requires the oxygen of consideration. For the Arlen Museum of Art, this means having conversations about things like racism, the environment, taking care of nature, gender, religion, class, and mental health. It means considering identity and representation as a means to understanding the past, the present, and the future. Maggie iterated her desire for there to be more conversations around unconscious bias and its function in contemporary society. For her, she noted that the topic is important as a

matter of respect. She also expressed her belief that the museum should be, “talking about prejudice more. Just flat out and out prejudice - and what that looks like.” To name it and to call it out.

Too often in society, challenging conversations are not encouraged in daily interactions, nor is the modelling of productive discourse. Disagreement is too often cast as over the top outrage, and difference situated as insurmountable. Furthermore, discomfort with a topic is, at times, posited as unsafe. It’s the old adage of staying away from politics and religion. Don’t talk about it; it’ll cause friction. Keep interactions surface level and non confrontational. It’s a consideration that Ross has thought about quite a bit:

“I think that there’s a lot of potential for the art museum to be a really useful environment for these conversations...for several reasons – it feels like a little bit safer, now I know that it’s not about cultural safety but like the real physical safety – I mean, there’s security around there and you’re not in the streets and nobody’s going to throw a Molotov cocktail or anything, you know – it’s just whether you feel psychologically safe that’s a different question. But, it is a safe environment where people go expecting to see new things, and wonder about them, and try to figure them out.”

Ross noted that he feels such conversations are possible with the collection at the Arlen, because the work they do, “is so rooted in the works of art.” The conversations are possible because of the works of art at the museum. Ross continued:

“...it’s like they provide the opportunities so that it doesn’t feel like proselytizing or propaganda... it feels like we’re looking at this thing and we’re trying to understand it, and maybe we’re trying to understand artist point of view and maybe there are opportunities to respond with our points of view, but there’s something about these conversations that feels less arbitrary because they’re kind of stimulated and grounded in a work of art.”

Emily feels that tour groups tend to be open to such conversations, because “the choice to come to an art museum” feels like an opportunity to explore.

Beyond teaching to tour groups - the educators were also asked what kind of conversations they felt were necessary in art museums writ-large. All the participants in the study had comments. Some of those are noted here. Janet, after a long pause, commented:

“... I kind of feel like... if anything – and I know that this is something that has come up... it’s kind of the structure of the museum world, the ways in which... that reproduces power... most of the people that work there are white, most of us who are docents are white... there’s a lot of things going on with that. You know... the donors. Who is it that’s getting the special tours? How does...how do those things affect, impact?”

Her comments reflect undercurrents of privilege that museums continue to grapple with. And, to Janet’s point - it’s a topic that should be available for dialogue amongst visitors and on tours. For Emily, one of the most prescient conversations is about the artist of a work of art:

“I think that – something that has become really important for me is sharing about the artist – especially when we’re doing... when I am teaching about social justice...but it’s important to know that this is an artist who identifies as a black queer man –that’s important to the conversation that we’re having about this work of art.”

Because while the content of a work of art is important, it is not the only thing. So too does context, identity, and the historical positionality of an artist. Emily continued on:

“.....– it is also really important for us to see his face and identify him and to see him as a full whole human and not just as this one work of art in front of us – that’s something that has kind of changed for me as I have taught more...”

In thinking about what information to share with visitors, the educators shared a common thread. There is no hard and fast rule about what needs to be shared, more so - the decision is necessarily influenced by the groups that come to the museum. It vacillates depending on context.

One of the things that the Arlen affords their education department is the autonomy to teach from the collection as they see fit. It’s a notion that Ross commented: “...we are more generalists, which temperamentally suits me just fine –.” Part of what Ross enjoys most about

his work is translating the scholarly knowledge of the curators into pieces of information and creating a basis for discussions that will be accessible to tour groups. It's the act of meeting groups where they are; not where you wish or hoped they were. He expressed his thinking in the following terms:

“... – maybe I'm an audience expert, and I try to think about where are people developmentally, what are people going to resonate with or how can I design a learning experience where I get a lot of information about what people are curious about and I filter in information.”

He sees his role as an educator as one that is inquiry based and improvisational.

Teaching is not a lecture, but about creating a learning environment in which students are able to wonder. Making sense of the experience is valuable in and of itself. Even in his role as the Director of the Education Department, pre-COVID Ross gallery taught on average two to four times a week. One particular session he mentioned involved a group of MBA students who came for a tour as part of their Politics and Power class. He noted:

“... one person in that group sort of stayed afterwards to sort of challenge a work of art that I had chosen, a work by an artist named Frank Moore – and I thought it was perfect to talk about politics and power, but the content was about the AIDS crisis, and.... advocating for... to release AZT and you know it was politics – but he objected to just the imagery and the focus on gay sex, which you know was just part of that work. He said, ‘are you proud that your museum is showing this work?’ And – ‘I think it's trash.’ And I said, ‘you know, I don't think about it as whether I am proud of it or not – I think it's the source of an important conversation about public health and discrimination and the results of protests in the political domain, so that's why I thought it was relevant for your class. I think it's kind of ugly and it's not my favorite work of art, but...that's more a personal preference, not whether I'm proud of it or not.’”

Social justice topics have a way of polarizing audiences. Ross commented that, “I think the people who feel uncomfortable with the social justice conversations tend not to complain or express a lot of emotion, they just tend to be quiet.” For clarity's sake, he did acknowledge that unless there is a particular class dynamic in which students are talkative, silence when examining art is not uncommon. It tends to be the precedent.

Silence, in general, is not seen as an inappropriate act. Ross noted, he thinks, "... it's kind of fine if white people sometimes listen more." To acknowledge privilege is important to understanding the function of difference and to recognize the world beyond tropes of fairness. It is similar to arguments around merit that Michael Sandel (2020) addressed in his book *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*

What is true, even if topics are seemingly innocuous, is that the majority of individuals who the museum educators have interacted with in their time at the Arlen are not apt to engage verbally. The silence of uncomfot, however, that Ross was referring to was relative to other communication that occurs throughout a tour - the banter and informal communication that occurs between works of art.

Ross iterated over and over his belief that works of art help ground conversations and keep them from getting too big or becoming esoteric. As he sees it - it helps center the conversation and makes it feel less forced:

"I feel like the pedagogy of look closely, talk about what comes up for you, and if the work of art, you know...is about racism, then thoughts about racism are going to come up for you and it feels natural."

He broke down his thinking even further. Specifically, in relation to how art is presented to visitors:

"it's...welcome to the museum...let's look at this together...and see what we can understand...about the image - when we start to understand the image we begin to start to understand something about racism or ourselves or how to talk about racism but there's somehow this sense that we're just looking at this art thing together,..."

In discussing the power of art, Ross commented that learning through art is a process of not letting it get too big, and to be grounded in an examination of a work of art. To see and learn

about something in conjunction with others. The benefit of which, Ross continued, is:

“...so – it’s not these two people are at loggerheads, or disagreeing, or hurting each other’s feelings – it’s just, like these two people are actually looking at the third thing and using it to have what may be a tentative exploratory conversation that is catalyzed – I think of it as...the object both stimulates the conversation and the questions, but it also grounds it so it doesn’t get too big.....It’s still this thing we’re looking at...it doesn’t have to be ‘this is racism in America, and slavery days, and everything....’ – it could be, just this thing that we are looking at together.”

### **Pedagogy as process: Educator vignettes**

The educators at the Arlen expressed during the study how each of them utilized the autonomy afforded them to lean into teaching practices that invite people to interact and be present in the tours.

One of the things that Maggie noted is that sometimes kids come to the museum who have never been to a museum before. It can be overwhelming - heads are swiveling back and forth looking at everything. Concentration and focus are in short supply. What she does is she takes them to the gallery where they are going to start and has them stand in a circle facing out to the works of art. And for a few minutes they rotate around and get to look at everything in the room. It is largely a move to acknowledge student excitement and wonder about being at the museum and then also to help them focus as they move forward in the tour.

Ross expressed the importance of letting people talk from their own experience. He noted that using such spaces of expression and/or introspection is a way to democratize knowledge and to share with one another in learning together. Ross expressed:

“You’re owning that, by sharing your story or your insight – and the artist wants us... to be available, to the whole range of life experiences. And so, so as a facilitator – like I mean... it’s not that rare that people sort of tear up or share something personal.”

Likewise, Janet commented about the value of conversation over lecture in a museum teaching situation:

“But being in conversation...it’s so much more engaging and so, that’s one of the reasons while we try and do other kinds of exercises along the way.... in part because I’m one of those people who....I get bored if someone just talks to me for a long time.”

Social concerns are people’s concerns, and the Arlen Museum of Art does not shy away from interactions that can get emotional. The recognition is that emotional responses are a necessary part of the learning experience. Regardless of the group, Ross mentioned the importance of thoughtful and authentic questions. Specifically, he noted that they have the ability to convey care about a topic and can help keep a conversation going. Another such pedagogical tool is to be comfortable with silence in teaching. When asked why, he noted:

“... when they see my teaching they comment on how calm I am and how willing I am for there to be silence... and I just say, well – it’s a complicated question that I put out there and it feels respectful to wait...”

Questions can be tricky things. Too complicated and/or convoluted and they elicit no response. Too easy and they run the chance of curt or flippant responses. It’s about creating a balance of give and take available in the question. Does it invite sharing? To do so means there is an understanding that people’s ideas and thoughts, perspectives and experiences are valued. Is there exploration possible? An example that Ross noted:

“So, like for example, a 1 word response that goes around the circle and everybody offers one word so, it’s not too much to ask. But, it sort of symbolizes that we are all going to be doing this together. And, that’s part of what the wait time is to... to show them that we’re seriously having a conversation here, not waiting for me to perform.”

He continued on:

“I don’t expect a lot of expertise, but I expect a little curiosity and a little willingness to put energy into making the experience happen.”

Emily commented how the museum as an educational space took some time to get used to. Having taught in public schools for five years, there was a transition to museum teaching.

The environment was different and required an altered approach. She noted that in the past she tended to be high energy in her teaching; which left her exhausted. In time, she realized that, “dropping my energy level down....to create a more relaxed conversation....” allowed for conversations to go on longer and have more space for interaction.

For Maggie, museum teaching meant that she had to become more familiar with works of art in the museum. She addressed it this way:

“I didn’t know a lot of the works and so I would...I would go like the week before I would have a tour and you know I’d go through and look at what I thought I might want to show and it depends also on what teachers want.”

In the beginning of her time at the Arlen this often meant over-preparation.

Another reality of gallery teaching in museums is not being tied to a teaching regimen that is tied to considerations of testing and scheduling. Flexibility trumps pedanticism. In general the environment for teaching and learning has flexibility to adjust if something does not go according to plan; good, bad, or otherwise. Emily expressed it in the following way: “– I am less tied to like ‘I have made a decision that at 10:45 I am going to move onto this next work of art – now I’m like...’oh, well...we did two works instead of five.” Janet iterated a similar educational philosophy: “... I try to be more of a facilitator. So, I...I take them to a piece and I ask them a question or ask them questions and then I see where they take it.” She went on to explain her role as a facilitator: “Well, I mean part of that has to do with the fact that I am an old white woman. Right?”

There is a recognition of positionality and the need for other perspectives to be shared. A belief in the strength of collectivity undergirds her thinking. It’s one of the reasons that she believes having people be willing to talk about identity is invaluable because it can be a starting

point to looking inward and then to think about oneself in relation to others. Janet elucidated on this point in terms of how she approaches engaging with works of art:

“So part of it is just kind of realizing that I may be the person in the room with the most training but that doesn’t make me the smartest person in the room....And that...the meaning that we make together is so much better than any.... what any one of us can take away individually. Does that make sense?”

Pedagogically, Janet noted: “I think for me – the most important thing that I’ve learned is... the more tricks I have up my sleeve, the more likely I am to find one that’s going to work.” One such move was:

“I am very comfortable with letting there be silence for a while so that they can think – and then trying rephrasing or giving people a pencil and a piece of paper and having them gather some thoughts before we talk about it.”

All the participants commented about the ability to pivot in one’s teaching being essential. It’s different from a traditional class in which you see students on a regular scheduled basis. In the traditional regular classroom environment one of the benefits you have is time. Over time, teachers tend to gain an idea about what will work and what might not, there is more experience with individual class dynamics, and have a more personalized feel for what participation looks like from specific students. There is also likely the increased ability to understand unspoken markers of engagement, boredom, and/or disinterest that tend to be group/student specific. Teaching in a museum, at least in terms of a relationship with a group, is categorically different.

Emily spoke on a clear difference of teaching in a museum and in classroom:

“It is freeing. Yeah...I think it’s so much fun and to...because there is so much freedom and leeway to be able to allow the students to go where they want to go – like sometimes they’ll...I’ll start a conversation and think we’re going in one direction and then we’ll go in an absolutely different direction – and for the most part it’s like – ‘cool, yeah...let’s go there’ –”

Maggie made a similar sentiment point about time. Because they are only for an hour or so,

there is freedom to be present with them. To enjoy the moment and learn. It's about the experience.

There are also times when things just aren't working. Diverting eyes, silence as a means of disengagement - these are actions anathema to productivity. Emily on a few of the more prevalent challenges that museum teaching offers:

“... the thing that is just difficult is so often you have these students for an hour and that's it...so, trying to figure out...how to make a connection with them, how to get a sense of their dynamics with one another, trying to figure out you know who's the kid that you need to pull, to pull forward...who's the kid that you need to figure out, ok you've spoken enough right now – all of those things...it's so much trickier then when you have a semester or school year to get to know your students.”

Maggie commented on the challenge of building rapport with students:

“The most difficult thing is the fact, that in a classroom you have time...you have an hour everyday – or whatever schedule you happen to be on but it takes you time and you build that rapport and so over time you can build a rapport and get the class going etc...”

She also noted that gallery teaching is inherently different. It's,

“I have an hour, maybe, with these kids and so it's – that's a huge challenge to try and get in, build some kind of rapport and show them – show them some things – get them to talk, get them to do activities and have a good time. So that's a huge challenge.”

Getting to know students takes time.

### **In sum**

The processes described in this chapter reflect the ways in which the participants of my study understand and conceptualize their teaching at the Arlen Museum of Art. As cultural sites of value, art museums exist in a social structure that lifts up museums as places of respect. In doing so, museums have a responsibility to engage with the public. In this chapter, museum educators discussed the ways in which their work as educators is influenced. From their positionalities, to the spaces in which they teach, the educators in this study are pushing for

conversations that interrupt narratives and ask visitors to think deeply and reflectively about the world. As well, they noted why they believe that art museums are spaces that can be used for necessary conversations about the world. The chapter addressed a few of the considerations such as materials and advocacy that impact the teaching they do in the museum.

### **The connection to social studies**

Opportunities for social studies learning reside in museums of all sorts. The efforts of the museum educators indicate the possibilities for learning social studies in museums. Through art, the educators in this study ask students to consider humanity. They ask them to think critically about the world around them. In those spaces of consideration, the museum educators recognize that being in a museum is a different learning environment for students. It is not inherently better. But, it is different. The advocacy of the educators in this study, their consideration of materials, a desire to interrupt narratives about being in museums, and the ways in which they engage students show an appreciation for pedagogy and learning. Through art, they ask students to think about the world around them and to consider their place in that world. As museum educators then enjoy a certain amount of flexibility in their teaching. It is flexibility that they parlay into acts that push for necessary conversations. These are conversations not restricted by strict adherence to a curriculum. Art is the guide.

Educators in this study expressed their processes in choosing art for school groups. The art helped ground their conversations. Their efforts highlight the possibilities of museum trips for learning as well as offer insights into how classroom educators can address social studies topics via engagement with works of art.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCEPTUALIZING AND ACTUALIZING WORK

“[Art] could be converted into an effective weapon against lying to the people, teaching [the people] to discover, through its contents, the lies power uses to exploit it.”

- Diego Rivera, from *Conversations with Diego Rivera: The Monster in His Labyrinth* by Alfredo Cardona Peña

### **The power of art**

Art is many things. It is a discipline. It is an expression of culture, of values, of agency. Art is everywhere. It encapsulates humanity. Art emboldens value in a variety of spaces - from the physical and temporal, to the emotional, and historical. Art accounts for positionality and context. It addresses accessibility and interaction. Art includes personal responses, religious expressions, cultural commentaries, and creative ventures into all avenues of politics and society.

There is also a relatable aspect to art. Art is expression. From a very early age people begin to express themselves creatively; visually. Cue finger painting, building forts, foam and bubbles, sidewalk chalk, and crayons. Art can also be made with household items or offerings of nature, or some other amalgamation. Because of these creation and experimentation experiences, art has a way of feeling familiar in its process.

On the power of art to sow connection, Janet commented: “I think another thing is ... there’s so many different.....kinds of ‘languages’ that we use to communicate with one another, to teach one another –.” Connection can be a powerful tool for teaching. Art, like other ‘languages’ such as books, photographs, music, or religion, has something about it that draws in an audience. Janet described it in the following way:

“For some people, it’s a work of art. So, seeing that these things can be ... that they’re important, that they’re beautiful, that they’re affecting, that they are

effecting – and that they’re all of these things ... - it’s another language that we can use to kind of reach them.”

In this sense then, the examination of art can be a means towards impactful dialogue. On the importance of art being a catalyst for necessary conversations Emily stated: “I mean, I just think that art has... you can have such a visceral reaction to art – art of any kind.” Works of art are particularly engaging around discussions of emotion, and explorations around intersections of presentation and interpretation. As such, art serves as an invitation to engage in social studies/humanities specific topics. To share with people and to explain one’s reaction is a valued part of that experience. Janet mentioned one of the things she particularly likes about art is that, “it’s kind of sneaky. Right?” Asked to elaborate, Janet iterated that she loves the ways that art can be inviting, especially when it is presented as an opportunity to observe and think. The invitation to look at someone else’s art feels inherently reflective.

### **The choice of intentionality**

The Arlen Museum of Art is intentional about having important conversations with visitors to their museum through works of art. It is made manifest via effort in the events of the museum, and in the training afforded to docents and staff. On training, Maggie noted:

“I got to tell you we are so well trained. I mean it isn’t just ‘OK we’ve trained you – go out into the world and teach in the art museum.’ It is all the time and it is really good stuff. I mean they have brought in people from outside to teach...the educational staff at the Arlen is so good. I mean these people are just absolutely outstanding.”

It is also evidenced by the rotating exhibits and in the permanent collection of the museum.

Museum collections are notoriously overrepresented with the works of white males. The Arlen, while having a significant Latin American collection, still boasts a robust collection of European works of art that make up approximately a third of its permanent collection. An important aspect of this is - how to activate artwork that on the surface leans into notions of

racial, class, and religious privilege and utilize them into necessary conversations that are grounded in the works of art.

It's a notion to which Ross commented: "I think it's sort of intuitive and I'm not sure that I always get it right." Other participants noted similar sentiments on choosing works of art from which to teach. Choosing art was not haphazard. It was a process. Part of the process included considerations in acknowledging the privilege often paid to art collections. Who is collected? What is represented? And, the opposites of those as well - who and what are missing? Works of art for discussions were chosen because something about them felt elicitive for broader conversations.

Another aspect of choice was to recognize that examinations are subjectivities of importance. It's one of the reasons that Ross believes that resources of all kinds can be used as avenues for important conversations. A work of art does not have to look a certain way in order to help facilitate engagement with visitors. Especially, when thinking about how a third of the Arlen's permanent collection are European paintings, he explained:

"I believe that we can learn from the past, and I believe we can learn from other cultural experiences, and I think it's just very shortsighted and limiting to not support students in being curious about the world. The big world. Not just their world, but the world of the past, the world of the future... and I think art is great at that. It can give us access, just like in fiction too... you know, they give us access to experiences and people that we may not get to meet in real life."

Each of the museum educators in the study expressed the importance of leaning into the resources of the museum. What follows in the chapter is the presentation of several works of art that the museum educators in the study use in their teaching. Even in the works of art in which they share a common interest, the ways in which they engage with the work of art offers differences. The consideration of their words are luminous, but not prescriptive. Each of them offer the ways in which they conceptualize teaching social justice through works of art.

## Teaching: The logistics of being all up in it

“You have to be fully present to it - to focus your attention on it and, again, to allow it to exist apart from your everydayness and your practical concerns.”

- Maxine Greene, from *Variations on a Blue Guitar*

Maggie acknowledged that when they started the DSJ program she internalized a lot of what she was feeling. She explained,

“I’m the leader ...I’m supposed to be comfortable doing this and I’m thinking what is an old white lady doing talking about race to these kids. And I carried that around with me for at least a year and I’m thinking I’m not...I’m really not comfortable doing this – who am I? Really when you think about it though – who is anybody who is white –?”

She continued on about volunteering at a No Place for Hate event with the Anti-Defamation League. She was still internalizing her feelings about teaching for social justice. Maggie noted,

“I said to him the same thing I said to you – you know what’s an old white lady doing – and he looked at me and he grinned and he said ‘you know’, don’t you think it’s about time as a white person you started talking about this.”

His comment was both an indictment and permission.

When interviewing participants for this study, each of them brought different personal and professional experiences into their work and explained how they conceptualize the act of teaching. Coming up time and again in their notions of teaching were the importance of listening, to being present, the willingness to acknowledge effort, and working to help facilitate conversations that address difficult topics.

Commenting on the charge of the education department at the museum Emily commented, “we do want this to be an educational experience where they’re in dialogue with one another, where they’re exploring ideas that maybe they haven’t thought about before.” Ross commented about the necessary work of museum educators in facilitating such conversations:

“I just believe we all need to get a lot more skillful about talking about hard things. And not – avoiding them. Which is... we mostly get rewarded for avoiding.”

To move forward in this regard, each of the educators in the study commented about the role of art as a way to engage students across a variety of topics. Ross noted:

“I think that art can be really useful in opening up these conversations, giving us practice, and inviting us to wonder about other situations – and as we wonder and as we speak and listen, we learn more about our own situations and our own limitations.”

For Emily, teaching is about being vulnerable and acknowledging that you do not know everything. She explained that when she works with groups:

“I say to students – I am a facilitator here, I am not here as an expert...I am here to provide prompts to facilitate dialogue...that doesn't like let me off the hook to not, like...work to have expertise – in an area, but – I'm never...in anything that I do feel like I am walking into a room as the authority or an authority...on that content.”

Janet acknowledged that her own education as a teacher was influenced by her kids:

“I had preschoolers when I got my Ph.D. ....as I was teaching they were going through school so I got really interested in teaching and in pedagogy – in communication pedagogy as well.”

She continued on,

“So that was important to me, and then the more interested I got in pedagogy the more I started to become aware of....critical theories of education and looking at issues of equity in education.”

Maggie mentioned that part of her learning as a museum educator included reminding students to take the time and look at the works of art - to take the time to consider what is before them. Part of this was about focus, but it was also important for students to, “get their clues from the work of art.”

The participants in the study also explained their dedication to social justice teaching in various ways. For Ross, on the consideration of whether he considers himself a social justice educator, noted:

“I mean for me – it feels like a through line to my work based on my values, but I don’t call myself that...I mean, I call myself an art museum educator – I’m troubled by the ways in which art museums can alienate people or make them feel inadequate ...”

His teaching is firmly situated in using art to have necessary conversations. It was a sentiment echoed by the other participants as well. As mentioned previously in chapter 4, grounding conversations in the works of art is a means to keep them from getting too big. Each museum educator expressed that issues of social justice and other necessary conversations feel natural when they are tied to specific examinations of works of art. They expressed that conversations in this manner doesn’t feel esoteric or pedantic. To the participants, teaching with art is an excellent arena for critical examinations. It’s an idea that leaves Ross:

“.... really energized thinking about how experiences with art can matter in people’s lives – so that’s sort of broader than social justice, but social justice is in there. Right? So, I mean - if anything I would say that social and emotional skills are the through line.”

Social justice teaching in the art museum, therefore, is less about a specific tour but about addressing issues of humanity. And when those issues - representation, equity, history, identity, the environment, politics, distribution of resources, and any other number of things, become part of a conversation - then, they are broaching important topics of social justice. Conceptually, detractors might decry calls for such acts of teaching as being pie in the sky - but, that feels disingenuous to the capacity of people to listen, to be vulnerable, and to be present in honest conversation with one another.

Discussions and decisions around what works of art to use for social justice teaching are not engaged lightly. Each of the participants expressed how their considerations lead them to consider what types of probative interactions and/or quality conversations can happen from the works of art. As noted by Janet, the work of the museum helps to plant and water seeds of change. Action in affirmation of that goal is to pick works of art that will elicit and sustain both interest and response.

Sometimes though, as Maggie notes - things don't go as planned - as with a particular 8th grade class. She explained:

“I had taken them to this one work of art and they went ‘We’ve seen it’ and I said ‘oh, come on’ let’s just try – I bet there’s something – just tell me what you remember and of course they were having none of it but they were being nice about it and there was a new work of art in that gallery that I had seen several times and thought ‘ooh that’s really interesting. I really need to find out more about it because that’s really the way you do it is your own research and I had been lazy and hadn’t done it – and they said ‘oh what’s this’ and I thought great the one I have no idea about and this was a difficult one because there was lots of symbolism and I said, ‘ok – I’ll tell you what – you want to look at this – yes – I said we’re going to look at this together because I don’t know this work – so I said let’s not look at the wall copy let’s just look at this and talk about it and then we’ll look at the wall copy. ‘ok’? And it was wonderful – I mean we – they were really into it and we talked about it – it was about AIDS.”

She described the work of art in the following way:

“It is mostly blue – it is an empty hospital bed and there are some pretty birds up on the top of the bed. You can see where blood has been hanging – there are beautiful, what look like snowflakes – it turns out that it is actually the HIV virus and what it looks like under a microscope – very powerful work of art. And, it was just – it was just... it’s one of the best experiences I’d had – I didn’t know... I didn’t know the work – we had a good time.”

Emily shared a similar experience of when planning gave way to something different. She noted:

“.... so this was a group, we’re working with this piece by Glenn Ligon that is writing – that you can’t really see very well, it’s all covered with kind of this coal dust. So it’s like... like block screen printed writing that’s kind of covered with this coal dust so you can’t really read it, and then you can see up in the corner that there’s kind of a little bit of a photograph screen printed too – and you’re like, I

have no idea what's going on here – so, it's a tricky work because it's hard to unpack it on your own, and so I usually bring in a lot of extra information about this work – so, Glenn Ligon is a black queer artist.”

She continued on:

“In this work he is dealing with the James Baldwin text *Stranger in the Village* (from 1953) about being the only black man in – [in Leukerbad, Switzerland]. He's like the only black person they've ever seen. And then there's the screen printed image is from the Million Man March, and so –...Ligon's just pulling a part this idea of blackness and masculinity and queerness and where do they intersect and where are they different and what places do you feel like you belong and don't belong and, as a part of this work, because there is so much layering to it – I had this activity where we make kind of a soundscape for each layer and then put them all together and see what we hear.”

She acknowledged that she was, “asking students to take a lot of risks in that activity, right? So, I was like – for this group, this is going to be super interesting,…” She continued:

“So we did this thing – they hated it... and, but what super interesting is like – I think that from doing so much theater work, like people are super uncomfortable with theater work – all the time. If they don't do it on a regular basis. And like, I teach... for the most part of like the past five years I've taught arts integration... and so, you're constantly working with people who do not work in the arts and exposing them to how they can use the arts in their areas, and like – they're always uncomfortable. So, I'm very, very used to people like hating... at first the things that I'm asking them to do – so it doesn't really bother me anymore.”

The agonizing discomfort of the activity for the students was not what Emily had planned, but she pivoted. She leaned into her understanding of pedagogy - of meeting students where they are, and drawing on their experiences. She continued:

“So this turned into a conversation about – why do you hate this? I was like – I don't care, it's totally fine that you hate this... but, I want us to... interrogate why – Why do you hate doing this? And we got into this really great conversation about discomfort – why for them it felt uncomfortable...”

Emily continued:

“I'm like, for some people it probably doesn't even cross their minds – like they're talking on their phones in the museum making a ton of noise and they do not care. It does not cross their mind. Why for us... for this specific group – is it uncomfortable to be making this kind of noise in a museum, you know?”

“And so, we went through all these things and then it ended up coming back to this work of art because the work of art is about belonging and comfort and what spaces are you like being allowed to be a part of... so it ended up turning into this moment that actually felt really successful after feeling like this total, total disaster. It was just so authentic... which was really nice. You know – allowing students to... say that they don’t like something – I feel like is really empowering.”

New to the museum, Emily stayed the course, largely, “because I didn’t have a backup.”

The museum is also cognizant of its younger visitors. As noted by Emily, it is important for students to be engaging with art and using it as a through line to thinking critically about the world around them. Emily added,

“But, we also want it to be a fun, and exciting, and an enjoyable experience – so that they want to bring their parents or they’re excited next year when they are coming back with their school group.”

### **Doing Social Justice at the museum: A vignette**

The Doing Social Justice program is an educational offering originally piloted at the Arlen Museum of Art during the fall of 2017. With a stated purpose of inspiring students to action and nurturing empathy, the focus of the program was for students to be able to learn about their existence in the modern world via discussions of identity and around conversations addressing critical social topics. Originally conceptualized as a 3-visit 90-minute per visit program, it was adaptable depending on the needs of school groups that participate in the program. The then Director of Teacher and School Programs noted the willingness of the museum to tailor lessons if needed, because the program was all about “breaking down barriers so that kids can have these conversations.”

The genesis of the program began with a simple recognition. On the origins of the program, Ross commented that the education department:

“... noticed that we had powerful works of art that could move that conversation forward and so then we just got intentional about designing it. It wasn't with grant funding in mind... it was more... thinking it would be developmentally appropriate for middle and high school students, and that we had the collection to support it.”

Janet noted that the Doing Social Justice program was indicative of a sea-change at the museum she had seen since she had been working as a volunteer. Early in her time as a volunteer, Janet noted, “... when I started with the Arlen...it was a lot more let's teach kids about art.” It was a scenario where people picked their favorite works of art and talked about them. Tours were more general in scope and less tied to specific goals or curricular standards. The push to add more focused tours, such as the social studies, and gearing tours more towards social justice topics came later on.

The change came in earnest, Janet noted, when Ross came on board at the museum. Tours became more intentional, more focused, more culturally responsive. The museum began developing and offering different types of tours like STEM, as well as social studies related, and literacy related offerings. The DSJ program, however, was fundamentally different. It was spearheaded by a woman of color and was specifically designed to have students consider difficult topics that were necessary to engage with - race, identity, and gender - to name a few. The program was conceptualized in the same vein as Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance) with the Southern Poverty Law Center, and efforts of the Anti-Defamation League in teaching difficult topics. A central component of the teaching was the acknowledgement of difference. Recognizing and appreciating differences is viewed as valuable to help delve into social issues, commentaries, historical contexts, and perspectives that are inherently different than one's own.

Janet noted that the tours with a focus on social justice typically begin with discussions around identity:

“...the idea is that you start off with the idea of identity and start to recognize your identity, other peoples’ identity and things like that and that’s a good kind of grounding – that’s a place to kind of ground people... it makes it personal, and helps them to recognize – it allows them to start to recognize difference.”

Maggie admitted:

“– The first time I did it I just...I fell so hard on my face it wasn’t even funny ...because you don’t know what to say...you know...you are trying to talk to these kids about bullying...which is... really it would be easier to talk to them about sex I swear to God it would be easier – but, with that you’re told so much of the time...when you’re... as you’re being raised – oh well, hmmm – we’re not going to talk about race – heaven forbid we should do that – so, at first it was very very difficult.”

Initial roll out of the program went well. Ross noted that the response to the tours during the pilot roll-out of the Doing Social Justice program were tremendous. There was widespread support for the new offering from the largest local school district. The local district wanted all their middle school students to participate in the program. It was excellent news for the new program and drove up attendance for the museum far beyond its expectations. To which Ross commented: “I think our middle school attendance went up something like 600% in the first year. It was like crazy.” While the overall increase in student attendance at the museum was a boon for the program it produced several consequences. One, as noted by Ross:

“– we didn’t really have the capacity to have all the middle school students come for a three visit multi-visit program.”

Constraints on the number of staff available to provide the tours outstripped the resources of the department to deliver the program as it was originally planned. The initial demand for the program was not able to be met moving forward. Ross verbalized this recognition:

“So, we hadn’t anticipated that kind of enthusiastic response and we weren’t able to deliver on it for staff reasons – so... we’re now pretty much offering it as a one visit, instead of a three visit experience. And, we’re not pushing it.”

The program continues, but it has been scaled back to alleviate pressure on the number of tours.

The DSJ program also required a pivot and a few other acknowledgements. Emily commented that,

“Over the past year we pulled back our Doing Social Justice program a little bit...because we found that our gallery teachers were getting pretty fatigued because the material is not easy to teach –.”

Maggie noted that the Doing Social Justice program was the most difficult teaching she had

ever done.

The pivot to not push the program, and begin to integrate its mission into other offerings, was necessary to guard against program solvency. It was also important to pause and make sure that the material for the tours was being given its due diligence. Topics can be tough to teach and there were concerns that needed to be addressed. Some gallery teachers expressed unease in teaching the social justice content, while others did not appear to be fully prepared to lead tours with the kinds of critical tilt for which the tours were designed.

### **Comments on social justice as teaching and learning**

In response to a question proffered about the teaching done by the museum’s education department, Ross commented “I feel like we are doing specific social justice resources and lessons, but I almost feel like social emotional learning and social justice are more like through lines for everything we do.” He also iterated how the choice in use of works of art to talk about social issues is an expression of values.

As noted previously, the Arlen Museum of Art is intentional about having impactful conversations. The education department enacts this mantra within its own efforts. Regardless of the specific tours, there are always spaces in which the humanities and social concerns can be

addressed. It's a proposition that the museum educators in the study want to come through all the time. Ross noted:

“I really think it's most effective, and I feel really happy when it just feels like this seamless art experience – it's about art, it's about life, it's about... you know – hope and possibility, but also it's a place where we can talk about hard things, because that's what artists do...I would like the anti-racist love and respect message to come through everything, all the time.”

Admittedly, one of the prominent struggles of teaching about and for social justice is in expectations surrounding the experience. As noted in the literature review there is no agreed upon notion of what constitutes social justice. It is malleable. This ambiguity, for lack of a better word, sometimes leads to frustration about what is going to happen during a museum tour. Janet commented that early on in the DSJ program,

“...there were a bunch of people who signed up for it who really didn't know what they were doing, they didn't know what they were asking for, right?”

In the excitement of participating in the program, at times, teachers did not engage the topics on a consistent basis prior to the museum visit. It led to more than a few instances where students did not know why they were at the museum. Janet commented further:

“They don't know what we're doing, they've never talked about anything like this before – it's not a comfortable experience.”

The museum educators noted that early on it almost felt like the DSJ program was serving, at least for some schools and teachers, as a diversity box to check off or tick mark. See: Social justice complete - Check - Now let's move onto the next thing - Stop at the Arlen Museum of Art as part of a full day of visiting spots of cultural importance in conjunction with the state capitol, state history museum, and major R1 university - Done, done, done - Experiential learning complete. Janet noted that a reality of that type of thinking was,

“... – the teachers hadn't prepared the students...they didn't know what was going on they just knew they were going to the museum. And so, that was...that

was kind of hard...working with the students there because they were....pretty much disengaged.”

All the museum educators noted that the struggle was not because of a lack of ability by students, but rather in preparation for what would be expected and would occur during the tour. It was a learning experience on both ends - for the museum and the schools. It led to the implementation of pre-visit materials from the museum to explain what could be expected upon their visit.

To acknowledge that students came to the museum with all levels of interests and prior knowledge Janet noted she tends to, “start off with asking them, ‘what do we mean when we’re talking about social justice?’ So, just to kind of....see where they are.” It’s a simple step but is grounded in the belief that all people can learn. It’s an effort to meet students where they are in their understanding.

### **Works to use (and why it is important)**

An important consideration for the museum educators in the study was about representation. This included not only the works of art they use in their teaching, but also in the environment of the organization. Specifically, their comments addressed the need for increased diversity (see: language, age, socio-economic level, race, education level, professional experience) amongst its paid staff and volunteers. The importance of representation and diversity being found throughout the museum was expressed several times.

Diverse representation in artists and in the works of art is a salient expectation of 21st century art museums. To this ideal the Arlen has a significant portion of its collection from people of color. Specifically, it is a national leader in collecting works by Latin American artists. Their collections also have a strong presence of European art and 20th century contemporary art. But, as noted by Ross:

“... one disappointing thing about the Arlen is that our collections don’t include much art from Africa or Asia.”

On addressing the need for representation in works of art while gallery teaching, Ross noted:

“... we’ve made a real concerted effort to be sure that there were many works of art by women and by African American people on display at all times. And in our teaching – because in a typical one hour gallery lesson we might look at... you know, 4 to 6 works of art. It’s very easy to have balance and representation if you’re choosing 6 works of art.”

Representation, at its core, should be about respect. It is a starting point, not an end point - and one that the education department at the Arlen has made important to them. There is a strong belief within the education department that works of art need to reflect diversity and representation both in content presentation and in who the artist is. Ross commented: “– one of my beliefs is... if people don’t see their culture represented as, in the collections... it feels, I think, disrespectful or disheartening or inclines people to turn off.”

All the museum educators noted the importance of having visitors be and feel respected as well as included in the ongoing conversations taking place at the museum. Ross believes this means that the museum needs to think about who they serve, and to be open to all the possibilities for engagement. It’s one of the reasons he is adamant that the entire museum collection be activated on behalf of all the visitors to the museums. He noted: “We need to think broadly about who our people are, not narrowly.”

One recognition of growth needed in the education department is around language diversity offerings. Ross, succinctly:

“... I think we could do a better job especially with Latino audiences, and especially working on some of the language barriers and welcoming messages.”

He added that the concern is being addressed at the museum:

“It’s been verbalized... the museum director – who grew up in Mexico City, has asked us to come up with ideas that are on brand and fundable and important for us to pursue, and I am going to sort of push for that.”

His comment also included a nod to a previous partnership with the university’s College of Education on the development of a dual language English/Spanish co-teaching model that had docents, “...just interacting with students in whatever language they were initiating.” The partnership was quite successful in garnering increased interest from groups with language diversity. Much like the DSJ program, eventually demand outstripped capability, and so Ross noted: “we have got to come up with some new strategies so that we have more Spanish speakers available.”

In their dual language collaborations the education department emphasizes works of art by Mexican American or Latin American artists - but not exclusively. Works of art from Europe, as well as other places are occasionally included. It has led to tensions, as noted by Ross below:

“In some of my collaborations with people who are – sort of experts, maybe in bilingual education – you know, they really have said... well, the work that children look at needs to be culturally relevant. And by that they mean – we want them to see only work by Latinx artists. And, I really disagree with that. --- I think... it doesn’t give them credit for their capacity to be curious. And I don’t think that it’s that healthy for a culture... you know, we’re in a multicultural society and it’s not useful for us to only be interested in our own people.”

Each participant noted that part of the role of the museum educator is to see the multiple possibilities of art and be flexible in their examinations and critiques. This also included the ability to be able to offer their insights as well as facilitate the thinking of visitors toward a constructivist notion of collaboration.

**Art and/in teaching (Representation, using the hand dealt you, and other anecdotes from the front lines...)**

The museum educators in the study explained the importance of how they engage school groups with works of art. For Ross, it is important to broach works of art in a way that does not preclude possibilities of engagement. The exploration of art, especially with groups of students, is oftentimes about stripping away pretense with questions that invite informal responses. An example for such a question might be “as simple as - what do you think this artist is interested in?” The simplicity of the question invites the opportunity for visitors to move beyond the aesthetics of the art. It invites perspective and opinion, and can be a gateway to more specificity. The question is,

“... an invitation to empathy, to wonder about someone’s situation that may or may not be like my situation – and I just think that really honors our human capacity for imagination and connection.”

The museum has lots of choices in its collection to teach from. Emily noted that one of the blessings of the Arlen Museum of Art is that “... there are specific works of art in our collection that are really wonderful to teach about for social justice.” She cited her own experience in theatre as impacting why she feels there is great value in using works that have varied representation. When asked to elaborate on this desire, Emily stated:

“It’s really a similar experience in theatre, in visual art, and I think in music and in the arts in general – white men, and specifically dead white men are so incredible overrepresented in our museums, in “our canons” [her air quotes]... and so I just try so hard to not fit into that box.”

The recognition of a cannon overrepresented by white males is important. It recalibrates the representation of white artists as accurate to oversaturated. The need to examine works of art by minority voices and offer critical perspectives, is situated as necessary - not an appeasement to political correctness. It is not a culture war rallying point. Emily continued,

“...we pay really close attention to make sure that we are...sharing works of art that are by artists that are not in the majority in the museum – so, really focusing

on artists of color, on women artists – to really have that different representation.”

Emily admitted of her decision to move away from white artists, that it didn't, "... make Ross especially happy because for my first year I really steered clear of the European collection.”

Emily's avoidance of the European collection was driven by the impetus to push against whiteness in museums. It was a small, but meaningful act of resistance.

The main reason that Ross wants the entire collection of the museum to be utilized by the education department is pedagogically he feels it is important to be open and genuine to the resources available. It is an understanding that has altered how Emily views the European collection “– I'm doing better with it, figuring out how are you weaving that into the story and so it's another aspect of the story that's being told.” Emily acknowledges: “So yeah, it's a bad practice. Definitely not recommending 'don't teach from European art'.” Emily noted of Ross that, “– he's really just wanting us to be well-rounded and representing all different aspects of our collection.”

While Emily admits her initial practice of not teaching from European art was likely not best practice, her inclination to push back on privilege and whiteness of museums is valuable. Choice of works of art and the consideration of engagement for them, in this manner, is an act of social justice. To highlight voices, expand representations, and incorporate multiple perspectives are acts of inclusion. The role of the education department in this vein is to find spaces to represent the collection in ways that acknowledges that learning, done thoughtfully, needs to happen across spectrums and through differences. Emily offered the following example of a museum curatorial fellow,

“...who was just so motivated by social justice and so she helped us a lot to figure out how we can use the European collection to have really deep and important conversations that resonate with what is happening in our world today.”

An additional aspect to utilizing the full breadth of the collection is to model for others (that work in and collaborate with the education department) how the collection can be activated to have discussions about a variety of important topics. To push for the representation of diverse perspectives in education is important. These inclusions do not necessarily invalidate nor minimize the contributions of dominant voices - but it does resituate them. The inclusions then are additive; not reductive. In this way, stories become more interesting, honest, and human - as do, hopefully, the conversations around them. For Janet, this means spending adequate time with groups to allow them explore works of art that deal with notions of belonging and exclusion.

### **The works**

In keeping with the considerations mentioned above, each of the participants in the study talked about several works of art that they use in their discussions around social justice. For context on their comments: At the end of my first interview with each participant I asked each of them to come to the next interview being willing to talk about a handful of works of art that they are particularly drawn to in their teaching. What follows in this section are some of the favorite works of art that participants teach from and also why they choose to do so. There is some overlap in choice, but not always. Offered below are the teaching examples offered by the museum educators with additional context added as necessary.

Let's begin with a work of art that at the surface, felt like a hard sell for teaching about social justice. Janet explained that she is particularly drawn to the painting *Lady Hamilton* by George Romney. Romney was a preeminent English portrait artist in the mid-to-late 18th century. By all accounts he fits the bill of the dead white artist that Emily previously mentioned is so painfully overrepresented in the art canon. Romney is best known for his portraits of the well-to-do in 18th century Europe. It's the story of Lady Hamilton that Janet uses as an

opportunity to teach social justice. She noted that when she asks students to describe what they see – it is typically some version of a rich white lady. But, her story is much more – born into a poor family, she was sold by her parents to be a kept woman for a wealthy Englishman. At another point she was given, much like property, to the man’s uncle Lord Hamilton, a man 35 years her senior. He was the British Ambassador of Naples. They ended up marrying and she became a beloved hostess in Naples. Eventually had a known affair and child with Admiral Horatio Nelson. Both her husband and Nelson die, and she was left penniless. Janet continued:

“What we see with our 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes is – rich white woman, and so we talk about the way lenses and the way our 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes see her and offer her no sympathy whatsoever.”

She iterated that it is a good piece to have students talk about assumptions, considerations of property, and of human rights. It also allows for discussions around class and gender.

Emily talked about a work of art that she uses quite a bit called *Parade* by the artist Mequitta Ahuja. When asked to explain why she uses this particular work of art in her teaching, Emily commented:

“I love it for so many reasons. The artist is like - pretty young, which I think is really exciting for young people to see that. She is of African American and I think also... South Asian background.”

In describing the work of art, Ross commented:

“... it shows a strong woman of color, brown skin, flowing black hair and she’s sort of striding forward. And, it looks like it’s about determination and resilience and then... but it’s in two panels. So the left hand panel is just completely abstract and sort of murky and then the right hand is figural – with this woman, who is sort of life-sized.”

Emily added her own perspective on the work:

“– she takes photographs of herself and then builds these kinds of mythic representations out of them. So, all of those things I think are just incredible – I think her work is just so empowering, there’s so much strength to it. There is... like representational aspects to it, and also abstract aspects.”

Ross expressed his own feelings about Ahuja's work as "currently obsessed" and also that he likes to use the work of art in conversations around social justice because it exudes optimism. It shows that even in struggle, "... it's possible to move out of difficulty to hope and possibility." For Emily, the aesthetics of the painting were valuable as an avenue for engagement. She noted:

"So, like a lot of different types of art that you're seeing in this one work – and, also just like the range of emotion that you see and that it evokes I think is really exciting – because, depending on where people are in their lives, they can see this women as being like incredibly vulnerable or incredibly strong, and I think that there's a lot of evidence in the work that you can point to that takes you in both of those directions."

The work of art allows for discussions about identity and embodied enactments. It calls for discussions of agency. Commenting further about *Parade*, Emily mentioned:

".... that's a work that I, that I really love to have conversations about and I also like that one for young people to get up on their feet and actually put their body into the shape of how she is holding her body because I also think that also helps with trying to figure out what are those emotions –... why might my chest be out, why might my chin be up, why might my arms be back."

Emily also mentioned: "Like, what are all those things – how do they feel in your body?" The purpose of thinking about the work of art in that way is to have students consider social situations and how they are inherently different for people. It provides an opportunity for students to think about situational differences in terms of both expectation and outcome. Difference not only as a choice, but as a label enacted by others upon you. What are the ramifications, consequences, and/or freedoms of such labels?

Fluidity in meaning and understanding of works of art underlines why Emily believes in the power of art to speak to people where they are. Art can be different things to different people at different times. She commented: "... those are the works that I really love – that people can

see... whatever they need in that moment, to see in it.” The work of Ahuja is indicative of the possibilities available through art. It explores identity and social realities and allows visitors to think about differences and perspectives. As a work of art by a woman of color it is also not part of what is considered the traditional canon. It pushes back and moves forward when and where it needs to.

Another work of art that Emily loves to work with when having students consider identity, is *Rock Bottom* by Joan Mitchell. She noted: “there is so many things you can see in it.” Also,

“– it’s an abstract work, which I think is really interesting to teach from when we’re talking social justice because a lot of times we’re drawn to the representative works and so I really like that one....I love to share a female artist.”

It’s a favorite of Maggie as well. Emily noted that she likes,

“.... to use it for some of our Art and Feelings lessons when we’re talking about emotions, and so the connections between colors and emotion and like the way that the brushstrokes are... how that can be connected to emotion... and, you know – letting the students kind of choose if there’s one part of that painting that you feel like really represents how you are really feeling in your life right now, what is it? And, what about it? So, just having that kind of connection between feelings and emotions and all of these different aspects of painting.”

The abstract nature of the painting creates a nice segue into thinking critically about art. It also calls forth students to think creatively. Emily continued:

“When I first started working at the museum – I’m like, is this work too depressing to be used with young people? And I realized it’s not a depressing work at all, for most young people. And then, when you give them the title... sometimes young people will know what that means and sometimes they don’t even know – they’ll be like, ‘oh yeah, it looks like, it looks... it looks like a lake that has rocks at the bottom of it. And it does kind of, so it’s like... that’s a great interpretation of the title too.”

Another of Emily's favorite artists is Zanele Muholi, a queer black artist that identifies with they/them pronouns. Muholi's works are self-portraits that express intersecting identities.

Emily commented:

“Oh gosh. I absolutely love Zanele Muholi's work. I actually follow them on Instagram now, and like it's so lovely. Just like – it feels like every couple of days they're like posting a new work that's just astounding. So we have at least two of their works in our collection. So... that's definitely work that really gets me in the gut too”

When addressing identity, Janet uses the work *Untitled (I am Somebody, 1990)* by Glenn Ligon. She described the work by Ligon in the following way: “Well, it's basically a big black and white piece and it says...I am somebody I am somebody I am somebody I am somebody – and it gets smeary down towards the bottom.” When asked to comment on why she uses this work of art Janet noted:

“– you know, we would look at the piece – we would talk about the I am somebody I am somebody – is it starting at the top and then just degrading as it goes down or is it rising up? – and what does it mean to be somebody? Who has to say ‘I am somebody’, right...because if you have to say I am somebody that means that maybe somebody thinks you're nobody. So...we have these kinds of conversations...that was a really good one to work with.”

Again, in her discussion of the piece, she iterated how it often leads to conversations with students about human value, about the function of narratives and structures that express who and what are worthy of consideration and respect. It is also a piece for conversations about merit - and why there is a need to exalt merit as a functionary aspect of value in society. Maggie also uses that work of art for students to think about who they are - for them to consider the multiple identities that inform their lives.

Janet also talked about a piece by Trenton Doyle Hancock, an African American artist from East Texas, called *Painter and Loid Struggle for Soul Control*. She noted:

“– he's kind of created these characters Painter and Loid...and there's some really interesting stuff with him but it's semi...it's not really semi-abstract, it's almost

kind of cartoony but semi-abstract and its got pieces stapled onto it and part of the canvas is cut out – it’s kind of a crazy piece, and there’s painted all the way across it over and over again is ‘you deserve less you deserve less you deserve less you deserve less.’”

She was quick to note that the painting takes on different meanings for people. Which in turn, often leads to a sustaining conversation around the piece. Pedagogically, she has found it beneficial for groups to have discussions and parse the statement ‘you deserve less.’ Janet expressed a variety of foci that have arisen in conversation from mental health and access to care, to other times the tenor of dialogues addresses race, class, gender, and other types of ‘othering’ that occurs in society. For example, she described a student group from a local all-girls school and spoke about how they thought about the work of art as girls in a society that they expressed feels like it values them less. They shared instances in which they have been told (implicitly and explicitly) that they deserve less. Their reaction to the work of art drew on their own personal experiences. In talking about identity Janet also likes to use the neon *Webelonghere* sign by Tavares Strachan. She noted:

“We talk about – who do we mean by we? What do we mean by here? And, you know – what does it mean to belong?”

For a piece with more direct historical context, Janet also likes to use a piece called *Dance Marathon* by Philip Evergood. It’s one where she tends to use the blindfold exercise that was described in Chapter 4. She expressed that her reason for using the painting is its relationship to reality television and the notion of getting one’s entertainment from another’s pain. While the medium of entertainment is obviously different today and the dance marathons of the early 20th century are no more, the example of reality television is an important connection of the past with the present. Janet explained the type of questions and conversations elicited from the work of art:

“...we think about – who would be desperate enough to do a dance marathon? What does that mean? What was going on? And students will know – and some students know more about the [sic] depression than others... We talk about – and then we get into conversations about that. It’s a really.... So, that’s a really kind of meaty one. You get a little history in there... we talk about – you can talk about gender, because if you look at the figures the women are not very feminine although they’re wearing high heels.”

It’s a good work of art to ease students into discussions of class, because as Janet noted:

“Evergood is pretty obvious. He’s not the most subtle artist.” Janet articulated that there is a lot going on in the painting - so opportunities for students to call out descriptions are fairly available. She went on to describe the work of art in the following way:

“So, like in the foreground you’ve got somebody clapping their hands with a big diamond ring – and all you can see is the big diamond ring. So you’ve got those kinds of things – so you can kind of see... it pretty quickly comes into a recognition of haves and have nots. Right? And the way that class....class plays out. And then we get into gender and the women – apparently during ‘prime time’ the women were required to wear dresses and they were required to wear heels all the time – but this one, it’s supposedly like 1 a.m. And so, they’re all wearing... so they’re wearing pants and they’re super muscular – you can see... and so it get into these kinds of notions of what women were like....so instead of this, ‘oh, old timey women were all very coddled’ – suddenly you start to realize... maybe a certain class of women.”

Per Janet, students seem to engage well with the work of art,

“...because it starts to open up a lot of things for them... and you can ask students, and they actually can come up with some connections to present day life....so it’s really interesting seeing those kinds of things, wheels turning in their heads. So that’s one of my... that’s a favorite of mine.”

She commented how even as she has taught it over and over, students always have fresh takes on what they see and how they interpret it - especially in how they express and make sense of notions of privilege. Also, sometimes the fresh eyes of students see something new. One example she shared was how a student explained that the dance floor looked like a spider web. To which Janet laughingly commented: “how did I miss that?” It led to a discussion about whether the dancers were caught in the dance

marathon against their will and without a choice. Other topics examined via the work of art is the function of structures in society - Who benefits? Who is exploited? Also in the ways in which injustices are viewed as legitimate and/or acceptable.

Maggie likes to start groups off with a work by Jorge de la Vega titled *Caída de conciencia [Loss of Consciousness]*. She noted:

“I always like to show artwork if I can – at a distance, and have them talk about what they see at a distance and then we get up closer and they watch it change a little bit – so, the de la Vega is – it’s a painting but yet it also has a little bit of paper mache with it as well – so it’s, it’s slightly three-dimensional – it has some interesting colors – there’s some... it’s the head of a rather ugly man and he has what looks like a hat on, but then up here [reference the top of her head on the right side]...”

She utilizes the work of art to have students begin thinking about actions and thoughts - to also think about perception, both those that stem from intentionality and those that arise subconsciously. It is also a primer for thinking more deeply with other works of art. Maggie continued:

“.....so you’re seeing here, but then up here there is something and this is the paper mache object – and it, you know... you can make it be his conscious or his subconscious – depending on...you know – what you’re doing – what you want to say. And so, as we talk about it – the kids go ‘oh – that’s what that is’”

In the past, Maggie has used Angie Thomas’ book *The Hate U Give* in conjunction

with this work of art. She shares an excerpt from the book and asks students to consider what they would have done in the situation presented.

On the topic of injustice, Janet spoke about a piece by Luis Felipe Noé called *Cerrado por brujería [Closed for Witchcraft]*. She describes it in the following way:

“– if you’re walking by...it’s got a bunch of boxes at the bottom with faces in them and at the top there’s a... it’s a priest holding a big red crucifix but you can’t tell, it’s a guy holding an X...”

Noé, an Argentinian journalist and painter, painted it in the early 1960s during a military junta and government takeover. It was during a time when the new military government of Argentina had extended the right to censor the nation's media to the Catholic church. Janet continued:

“So, you’ve got this crucifix... this guy holding this crucifix but it just looks like a big red X – and when you get up closer he’s collaged on this kind of marionette, a Jesus figure on to it. It’s creepy. Everything about this painting is totally creepy.”

For Janet, the painting is a way to engage in questions about the ways that groups and/or institutions support injustice when it furthers their causes or serves their benefit. Again, it invites groups to consider their own experiences as a means to understanding the broader theme of the work. The painting addresses a specific time and place, but conceptually - the discussions of power, injustice, and structures of power are transcendent. They are notions with applicability to contemporary considerations as well as personal experiences. Janet noted that often times students tend to invest in such conversations, but -

“Every once in a while I’ll get some students.... And it’s interesting. There are a couple of these pieces that are in the Latin American collection that are really critical of the Catholic church. And I will get some students who are just... not going to hear anything critical of the church.”

The response is indicative of why Janet appreciates the opportunity to work with art to have students consider critical aspects of humanity. Works like Noé’s are invitations to think about how and why a work of art was made. To consider, who was the artist? And, why was this the work of art they created? What was the historical context/environment that influenced and/or induced the creation of the work of art? What was the response to this painting when it first came out?

Ross also commented about a work he likes to use by trans woman artist Jay Lynn Gomez (formerly Ramiro Gomez) called *The Broad*. He noted: “it’s mostly abstract because it’s

a big building of an art, a contemporary art museum in Los Angeles and it's got a tiny little worker on it." He talked about how the work leans into perspective as meaning-making. Ross iterated:

"Well, if you look at that with a group of people... some people are going to see that little worker as the 'other'... oh the poor Latina who gets overlooked and she's so hardworking and we didn't even notice her because she's dwarfed by the museum. Well, some people are going to see that woman as their cousin, right? And as we... we almost... become aware of, it's not prejudice... it's the limitations of our experience, and who we feel connections with that."

His quote acknowledges a powerful aspect to learning - to become aware of something previously unknown, misunderstood, unrecognized...etc. It is an opportunity to look at one's life and consider perspective; to think about the function and outcomes of privileges, and the realities that dot the human experience. The work of art becomes a visual for discussions about difference and humanity and what it means to exist in the world. He continued that,

"... the artist I think really wants to call us out on not questioning why that building is so beautiful, why Los Angeles Gardens are so carefully coiffed. It's because of workers. Don't take it for granted. And that's what the artist cares about - and you know, [s]he's making that work because [s]he thinks we've got a problem with that."

To make audiences take notice of workers is informed by Gomez's own experiences of being born in Southern California to undocumented Mexican immigrants (his mother a school janitor and his father a trucker) and then also working as a nanny to a wealthy family in Beverly Hills.

Ross also commented about a work he likes to use in his teaching by Deborah Roberts called *Skewered*. Roberts, known for her visual commentaries on beauty, race, and identity. *Skewered* is of a young black girl. He described the work of art further:

"... this black girl is holding masks in her hand, and it's as if she might try on this white mask with a smaller nose and whiter skin, and so this is obviously about a lot of things in this one image. It's about growing up, it's about being a girl, it's

about beauty, it's about... wondering if your black skin is going to be safe or dangerous or pretty or ugly. You know – it's a lot of things.”

Maggie also likes to have groups look at the Byron Kim work *Synecdoche*. It includes 20 panels (four rows by five columns). The panels represent different skin colors of twenty people that Kim encountered on the campus at Doc U. As noted on the collections website: Kim's “work points to the futility-the absurdity even-of defining human beings by their skin color alone.”

Initially, she noted:

“... I have the kids again stand back, and then ‘this is what we're going to look at – their coming forward – and you know...they'll just be standing there – and I'll go –...you know what this is?”

Student responses usually note that the panels look like different shades of paint.

But, she will tell them that,

“... it's a portrait. So we start talking about skin color... and I explain to them... what - you know, this is an amalgam of the skin color that is found on the Doc U campus, and... they think that's pretty cool. Then of course the next thing they want to do is get up close and match.”

The interest in skin color is then parlayed into a discussion about the ways in which one's skin color matters and doesn't matter in society.

## **Valdez**

All of the museum educators in the study spoke at length about the works of Vincent Valdez as being central to their efforts in teaching for social justice. The Arlen has several of his paintings in their permanent collection - there are four works of art from his *Strangest Fruit* collection in the permanent collection at the museum. Additionally, there is *The City*, his work referencing the KKK. The museum educators' comments about Valdez's works and how they conceptualize them in their own teaching are presented below.

In thinking about Valdez's *Strangest Fruit* collection, Ross commented: "I love thinking about the artists' experience of making that work." He continued on about a conversation he had with Valdez:

".... he tells the story of coming to campus to do research... where he was looking at early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs and he came across photographs documenting lynchings of Mexicans and Mexican Americans along the border, including lynching perpetrated by Texas Rangers... and his response was – I am Mexican American, I grew up in San Antonio and had two years of Texas History and they never talked about this."

His trip to the library archives were revelatory and helped calibrate his efforts. Ross continued:

"He said – I learned about lynching of African Americans in the South, but nothing about things that were happening in Texas."

The story of Valdez and his works are partly about providing light to suppressed histories, ignored histories and/or forgotten histories (Carrigan & Webb, 2003). His work is also about creating a visual that demands critical discussions. Valdez's response to Ross about his efforts was:

" – I really feel this is suppressed history. And, I'm going to use my skills as an artist to surface and make visible this suppressed history. And, then he thought – what do I do with this documentary photograph?"

His decision eventually settled on:

"I'm not going to re-create that. I don't just want to draw attention to this historical circumstance, but bring it into contemporary life because I think my work could point out that Mexican Americans still experience a metaphorical lynching in terms of the kind of constraints they face."

It was in this recognition that Valdez's works elicits visitors to consider the function and insidious nature of structural racism and to reflect on the policies and actions that criminalize racialized bodies.

For Ross, the backstory of Valdez's process is necessary to his discussion of the *Strangest Fruit* collection. He believes there is value in understanding why Valdez painted a Mexican

American male, seemingly suspended in air against a white background. Ross further elucidated:

“They’re not handcuffed, but their hands are kind of in that position, and... so you look at it and there is something like beautiful and something that you can empathize with, and then something a little odd about the imagery – and then when you learn that it’s called *Strangest Fruit*, and that he’s referring to that song about lynching, and when you hear the story about his research and creative process – I feel like that is both... I think the reason I present it that way, is that it is both a hard story about our history and an inspiring story of agency.”

Still talking about Valdez, Ross noted:

“... I just felt... when he told me that story I just felt like, ‘yes!’ This is the story of somebody who isn’t afraid to face the truth, who thinks that history is important, and who thinks they can make a difference in the world using his skills.”

When engaging the work of art in a group, Ross said he usually wraps up the discussion in the following way:

“... I might say to a group – I feel really inspired that he is both making us aware of this history that was suppressed, current circumstances that need to change, and then he’s doing whatever he can do to... make us care and to get us thinking about who we want to be and how we want to use our own sphere of influence.”

Janet also uses the *Strangest Fruit* collection from Vincent Valdez, as well as *The City* when it was on exhibition. In describing the works of Valdez, Janet noted the difference in the aesthetics of the painting with the story: “If you look at the piece purely from an aesthetic point of view, it is beautiful. He is such an amazing painter – the composition, the lighting, everything...it’s just, it’s amazing. But then... but it’s an ugly story.” One of the first things she has students do is listen to the Abel Meeropol song *Strange Fruit* made famous by singer Billie Holiday,

“...I’ve got a copy of the lyrics printed out that I hand out to people and then we will listen to the song and they are kind of like [makes a shocked face] and then Valdez has kind of rewritten it from a south Texas perspective...and we look at that –.”

Pedagogically, she commented,

“... that’s one that I kind of like using poetry with – we look at the painting, we talk about what is going on in it. What’s unusual? The fact that it’s lit from below, the lighting is red ...”

For Janet, addressing the act of lynching is tantamount. One of her concerns is, “.... to make sure that we’re not downplaying...that we’re not presenting lynching in a way that kind of bleaches away the horror of it.”

She noted that dialogue around the work has led to conversations about what kind of thinking so permeates a society that it allows and perpetrates such an act, and at the same time creates memorabilia to remember the act. The act of dehumanization is a central aspect of the discussion. Janet noted that at times, she has used this work of art in conjunction with conversations about Texas Rangers and their past of terrorizing racial minorities on the South Texas border. Her efforts are reflective of the stories of terror presented in the book *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (2018) by Monica Mun(enya)oz Martinez.

Maggie shared the following about a time when she took a group of middle school students to look at Valdez’s work:

“...and all of a sudden this one girl was just – so... so solemn – and she was just staring at this and said ‘I have....I have a cousin that looks like that...he looks like my cousin’ – and when she said that – that opened it up to some other kids, who said – ‘yeah, he looks like people I’ve known.’”

The conversation became very personal as students began to verbalize their thoughts on the implications of their racialized bodies - and how it impacts them.

## **Conclusion**

The museum educators in the study believe that teaching through art is an important language for students to engage with. Art can be engaged for its aesthetics and its historical context. To activate art in service to the humanities and discussion around social studies can be

about addressing positionalities and narratives. It can also be about utilizing art to examine differences, to lean into curiosity, and be empathetic toward those different from ourselves. Art can challenge preconceptions, and call attention to necessary conversations of humanity. The educators in this study teach with art in service of these types of things.

### **For the social studies**

It is easy not to talk about social justice and social studies. People do it all the time. They opt out. They talk about other things. They do other things. As noted earlier in the chapter, the Arlen Museum of Art was not always as invested in necessary conversations. There was a time when school groups came to the museum and received general overviews and docents talked about their favorite pieces of art. Social studies and social justice were not intentional.

That is not the type of work that is currently being done at the museum. The museum educators are choosing works of art that challenge students to think critically. Their efforts are about having students dig into the stories that reside within the paintings. To have students think about contexts that informed the works of art. To consider how and why the identity of the artist matters. To consider the messages of the works of art and to pull away the layers of their content.

The ways in which they are asking students instead of telling students is about engagement. The pedagogical choices they make about which art they choose to engage is indicative of the type of conversations they want to have. There is a willingness to be vulnerable. Each of the educators acknowledged the tensions of privilege they inhabit. It is part of how they teach.

## CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Well, backwater done rose all around Sumner now,  
drove me down the line  
Backwater done rose at Sumner,  
drove poor Charley down the line  
Lord, I'll tell the world the water,  
done crept through this town  
Lord, the whole round country,  
Lord, river has overflowed  
Lord, the whole round country,  
man, is overflowed  
You know I can't stay here,  
I'll go where it's high, boy  
I would go to the hilly country,  
but, they got me barred

- *High Water Everywhere*, Charley Patton (1929)

Patton's song about the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 is about bearing witness to racial injustice. It's what artists do - they reflect on and engage the happenings of society. They acknowledge concern, dissonance and injustice, and implore people to pay attention. Cue the music of Beyoncé, The Clash, and Woody Guthrie, or as in the case of this study, through paintings - artists comment on society. The museum educators in the study described the ways in which they examined works of art for accessible engagements and discussions with students.

### **Introduction (and thoughts on art)**

One of my favorite paintings is *Fishing Boats* by Georges Braque. It's not overly colorful, and it's innocuous - but it brings up lots of memories for me. What I initially think of when I see it is my Paw Paw Murchison. With that painting I recall the times I went fishing with him at the tank when I was younger. I remember digging up worms in the garden and putting

them in an old tin coffee can. We didn't use a boat. The tank was small enough that we just fished off the bank. We were in central Texas, not off the coast of Normandy. And, I don't ever remember catching fish, even though I imagine we did - but I do remember seeing a water moccasin one time. But that Braque painting - it activates these memories.

I share this, because art is cool like that. As noted previously by Janet, art can be sneaky. It evokes. It's one of the ideas that the study elucidates. Each of the participants, drawn to works of art in their own ways - to make sense of art, to have an experience with art, and teach with art in ways that showcase not only its flexibility, but its relatability. Art invites and allows for interpretation that moves beyond academic purity.

Art is expression. Art is also associative. It leans into connections, emotions, and responses. Take the different ways in which the museum educators thought about the *Strangest Fruit* collection by Vincent Valdez. Ross focused on the journey of the artist in the creation of the work of art - to consider Valdez's thinking, his process, his purpose. Other educators in the study focused more on the content of the painting - the systems of oppression and/or terror that attach themselves to racialized bodies, or to examine the historical context of racial lynching. Each educator engaged the Valdez piece a little differently, and yet - all addressed important and necessary aspects of the work of art.

The purpose of this study was to look at how museum educators conceptualized and actualized their efforts in using art to teach. What informed their thinking? How did they decide how and what to teach? What considerations did they make in their teaching? What processes informed them?

Throughout the study, the museum educators willingly shared their insights and explained in further detail when asked. Specific interest was focused on social justice and teaching social studies via works of art - in this case, paintings.

Frameworks utilized in the study were aesthetic education, Activity Theory, and social memory. Maxine Greene's (2009) notion of aesthetic education situated the value of intentionality and the importance of the willful engagement of works of art on behalf of social studies and social justice. Whereas, the focus on memory studies worked as the sinew in exploring the role of historical consciousness (Clark & Grever, 2018) in teaching. Engeström's (2001; 2009) work in Activity Theory was helpful in the examination of the layered relationship between organizational culture and process. Drawing on these frameworks allowed for this study to look at the ways in which museum educators engaged with works of art and to also examine why they made the specific choices they did.

As presented in chapters four and five art provides a space for necessary conversations. The conversations might be about the content of a painting, or it may address the impetus for its creation. Conversation might also examine artist representation and/or positionality. Overall, the works of art are seen as a way to ground conversations and to be open to learning from one another - to examine emotion and identity, and to think about experience and expectation. An important aspect of learning through and from art is the understanding that art is multiplicative.

Emily iterated that art as a vein for understanding is, "so incredible...to have that learning experience - but then, to be sharing with other people and trying to explain it to them" is a space for connection. In many ways, the sharing of art and engaging with others is the crux of the study. Each of the four museum educators in the study willingly expressed their thoughts. Free

range was given to explore lots of different avenues. Interviews were begun with a set of guiding questions, prompts if you will. But, there was much more discussed - from the role of book club, to the role of media outlets, to reflection in teaching and learning, and to visiting social justice sites of commemoration - but we always circled back to the focus of the study.

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and presented in chapters four and five focused on the following research questions:

1. How do museum educators conceptualize social justice-oriented work in a museum setting?
2. How do museum educators navigate student interactions/learning opportunities in a museum setting?
3. What role does historical consciousness play in how museum educators develop, discuss, and utilize works of art?

#### **Chapter four**

Chapter four focused on the theme of process. One of the initial aspects of the interviews with the museum educators was their belief that museums have an exceptional opportunity to teach. Museums enjoy a significant amount of cultural authority (Bunch, 2019). They are respected and afforded trust in their messaging. At the Arlen, such an opportunity to teach is grounded in intentionality. For the educators the intentionality was felt organizationally, departmentally, and individually. Understanding and operating within the connectedness of all three was presented. Organizationally, the Arlen wants to make sure that the museum is culturally representative - in its exhibitions, and in its language offerings.

Departmentally, the push is to think about social justice messages that can be activated through the collection of the museum. Each of the educators noted that an important aspect of their work was being able to situate their efforts within the organizational intentionality. Respect for having important questions emboldened the museum educators to push for those aspects of education that are collaborative and ask students to think critically about society, identity, history, and perspective. Their efforts are indicative of the works of art covered in chapter five that they chose to engage.

The intentionality of the organization leads to advocacy for education to be available to a wide conceptualization of community. It goes beyond the university populace. The efforts of the museum reflect an understanding that that kind of work is never complete. It feeds their development of online resources, different types of tour offerings, and guides their work on being culturally responsive. As noted by the museum educators, their efforts are not haphazard. There is time and effort, and numerous considerations that influence the choices they make in regards to their teaching. The chapter looked at the role of materials and pre-visit communication. It also addressed how the museum educators went about their decisions of topics, most notably the age of the group and if they have any specific tour requests. But, by and large groups understand that coming to an art museum is a tacit understanding that they are likely to see things they disagree with and/or find aesthetically unappealing.

The process of teaching described by the museum educators was part content based and part pushing back against art museum expectations. The reason, as explained by the educators, was to break down the notion of unnecessary barriers in the museum setting (expectations of examination, of behavior, and through a variety of activities); to create an experience of freedom

and exploration, and respect that would permeate the whole experience. These considerations became choices - and were, in large part, the impetus for pedagogical moves that were meant to elevate engagement and conversation.

Conversations were a big aspect of the process undertaken by the museum educators. Each of them expressed the need for necessary conversations; and they felt like using works of art to ground conversations was a great way to do so.

### **Chapter five**

Chapter five was all about presenting how the museum educators in the study conceptualized and actualized their teaching efforts with and through art. Through their comments - about their thinking and their actions - the participants in the study iterated time and again about the need for teaching for social justice through art. Relatedly, a section of the chapter provided a basic summary of the Doing Social Justice educational initiative that the museum initially piloted in the fall of 2017. The DSJ program was an organizational effort to codify their commitment to social justice.

Beyond the DSJ program, the educators discussed how they envisioned and enacted their work within the museum space. Telling, in all their responses, was belief that all types of art could be utilized for social justice conversations. There was no rigidity in having a work of art being just one thing. Each participant shared several works of art. And as such - the museum educators explained how they were able to parlay their own experiences and content knowledge into examinations across this wide breadth of works of art. As noted by the participants of the study many considerations informed the works of art that they chose: content, artist representation, as well as variety and accessibility of message.

Each of the participants also shared some of their favorite works of art to teach from. The works of art they chose ran the gamut. Race, class, gender, identity, history, perspective, language, and religion were some of the conversations they were having. Their responses were leaned on heavily in the write-up of chapter five to provide first-hand access to their thinking and explanations as to why they made the choices they did.

### **Looking at the moment**

The COVID-19 pandemic required museums to reconceptualize the work they do. As Emily noted, at “the beginning of the pandemic...we were like – ‘we don’t know what’s going on’, and then we got to the point that I think every institution made a decision about what their path forward was for the moment –.” For the Arlen,

“part of that was reaching out and talking to other museum educators and asking – What are you doing? What are we doing? What’s working? What’s not working? What could we be doing together?”

All are questions that get at the value of reflection - to look and to take account of what is happening and to adjust. It recalls the efforts of the educators in chapter four when they spoke of the times they needed to pivot. Different times highlight the importance of different considerations. It also acknowledges that the work of the museum and the museum educators is not static. The world is becoming more ideological. There is an opportunity to talk about more. Part of that thinking is also about considering events in the world and how they need to be talked about. Think Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, the 2020 Presidential Election, the development of vaccines, the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, cyber-attacks, misinformation, access to necessary resources, and the rising prevalence of anti-history.

## **Implications**

“We are the United States of Amnesia, we learn nothing because we remember nothing.”

- Gore Vidal, from *Imperial America: Reflections on the United States of Amnesia*

Vidal’s remark is telling. He is also nowhere near the only person to assert such a belief. The quote acknowledges a fundamental aspect of learning about social studies. The interconnectedness of what and how we remember, blended with why we remember is where we get the offshoots of history, memory, and nostalgia. Each is different in its function and each serves different purposes. Which in turn is where we get spaces for community and fracture, for support and dissent. Cue the tensions of critical studies and cultural boogeymen; the balance of museums, monuments, festivals, and remembrances with the past. Reflections of the past, interpretations of the past, and celebrations of the past are strongly linked to the present (Blight, 1989; 2002; 2011; Brundage, 2000; 2008; Simon, 2006; Trouillot, 1990). They are about placing value (Lowenthal, 2016).

This study on museum educators’ wades into such waters. The implications of the study present a number of options about how art can be used to teach social justice and social studies. There are four particular aspects of the study that will be considered in implications: teaching with intentionality, choosing works of art, conceptual considerations of engagement, and museum visits.

### *Teaching with intentionality*

Ross believes that museums can play an integral role in, “educating people for democracy.” For Ross, that means to know how to analyze information, to understand how systems work, to understand the nuance and messaging of written and visual materials. For

Maggie, teaching with intentionality is about respect: “I take their opinions seriously. If I ask a question - and they give me an answer, I listen to that answer.” Janet took a slightly different perspective and noted teaching with intentionality feels at its best when it blends both theory and reality into pedagogical practices that address the needs of their students.

Because learning with and from art can be in many different ways, what this study wanted to address is how museum educators conceptualize their work in using art to teach social justice and social studies. For that reason - the study leaned heavily on the comments of the museum educators. They teach from art as a daily practice. They see in art its possibilities, and their considerations for activating art on behalf of discussions around social justice and for social studies are important to share.

Part of that effort is recognizing that teaching is part preparation. The museum educators of the study expressed the ways in which they conceptualized their preparation. It included having works of art that they planned to examine during a tour, as well as others they could shift to if the planned works of art were not available. It involves being knowledgeable about the works of art and/or being able to facilitate comments. Teaching is also improvisation. It is not winging effort because of a lack of preparation, knowledge, or understanding. It is precisely the opposite - it is born out of extraordinary skill in each of those aspects. Improvisation is the ability to switch, to move, to pivot – to lean into and out of form to create something different. The museum educators in the study shared exactly the ways in which they did that.

To teach with intentionality is indicative of an ability to see possibility. For example, Ross noted his belief that art can be activated across spectrums. During our interviews he commented: “I – for about 15 years now have done a lot of work with health professionals...sort

of using the art museum as a site to support them in professional reflection, exploring team dynamics, empathy, empathic communication, creativity...and especially resilience and self-care.” This is in addition to his work on using art to help people study for the U.S. Citizenship exam and also developing a community-based exhibition of the world’s five major religions.

*Works of art and the conversations around them*

Art is not formulaic. It just IS. The participants in the study expressed a number of ways in which works of art can be utilized for teaching and learning. As a social studies educator I am immediately reminded of John Gast’s *American Progress*. Painted in 1872, it showcases the sanctity of American exceptionalism; art in support of Manifest Destiny. The din of western darkness being illuminated by the upcoming light of progress from the east: pioneers and planters, families and electricity. All the while buffalo and Plains Indians run further into the darkness. A critical eye can examine that work of art beyond its obviousness, but it takes effort. It takes a willingness to think about context and purpose, and to look at symbols and messaging.

It is similar to how Ross sees the role of art and museum education: “I mean... I think that visual interpretation is a skill that is... so central to museum education. You know, visual and media literacy are critically important for our citizens.” To see and to examine. To acknowledge and critique. These are cornerstones. They are not groundbreaking pedagogical acts - but they are intentional. What the educators provided, through their insights, are how their thinking is measured and considered. The intentionality of their work acknowledges the importance of their work. It also begs the question: What works of art should educators choose for their teaching?

It was a question I asked the participants in the study. Their answers were typical in that they offered a variety of answers. There were a handful of pieces that the educators commented on that are in heavy rotation in their teaching. But, even so - those works of art represented only a handful of nearly two dozen that were discussed during the interviews.

The implication of such variety - is that art of all types can be activated for learning about social studies with a focus on social justice. Artist identity is a necessary aspect of choice amongst works of art. As noted in chapter five - the art canon, as are most other canons, bloated with overrepresentation of privileged white male voices. To select art that pushes against that grain - for respect toward intersecting identities, to push against merit, to showcase the artistic efforts of the marginalized and historically mis/mal-represented, is in itself an act of social justice.

Content of art is also important. Works of art can address variant understandings of historical events. The choice of art is about value. Their examples about how they engage works of art also expresses how works of art can be activated in service of broader conversations. Conversations that acknowledge difference, systems of oppression, historical events, people, and ideas. Art can also be leveraged as a means to have students talk about identity and positionality, and representation. These acts are important in an age where outrage easily gains oxygen. Acts of engagement and learning are necessary to lean into. Ross notes they are especially important today as the fomenting of division means commentaries aren't "... grounded in honor."

Art can be another language in which students can learn social studies. To grapple with issues of humanity, and to examine the past and its impact and/or relationship to the present is what the museum educators in this study do.

### *Conceptual considerations*

The data collected in the study is grounded in and around the efforts of an art museum. As such, it does not directly translate to the realities of a classroom setting. There are however many applicable aspects for the teaching of art outside of the museum setting. The comments, considerations, and overall efforts of the museum educators are instructive. They are also malleable and can be adapted by teachers. Data from the study narrowed on five interrelated and overlapping conceptual considerations that the museum educators made in their decisions in teaching through art: content, context, historical situatedness, artist identity, and space.

### *Comments on content, context, historical situatedness, artist identity, and space*

Commentaries about what is and is not appropriate for students to be learning are ongoing. Note the current rise in state legislatures attempting to ban and divert funds if critical theories such as Critical Race Theory are taught in public schools. There has also come the development of ‘patriotic’ alternatives to *The 1619 Project*. For example, in June 2021, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas signed H.B. 2497 to create *The 1836 Project*. At the time of the signing, he tweeted: "To keep Texas the best state in the nation, we can never forget WHY our state is so exceptional." It's hard to not see this as anything more than chest-thumping political pandering to a section of society that wants to desperately believe in the history of Texas as described by T.R. Fehrenbach in his book *Lonestar: A History of Texas and the Texans* (originally published in 1968). As of 2019 it has gone through 24 reprintings. Fehrenbach's

work is an attempt to legitimize the myth-making origin story of Texas. It's fantastical as much as it is a warm hug to some, and is a (his)story that many historians and educators have been pushing back against for years.

Its relation to this study - is this: the things that educators talk about matters. As expressed by the museum educators in this study, their willingness to engage students in questions and considerations of conversations that might be messy or uncomfortable is laudable. The museum educators in this study showed an ability to understand and maneuver aptly within many considerations.

Content is related to context. Context is the circumstance(s) that informs. It can be beliefs, actions, feelings, understandings, or the willingness to engage/disengage. The power of context is its ability to outline complexity where simplicity seems to dictate. To know a context or understand a context is not to necessarily agree with it or to validate it. But, it is to acknowledge it. For this study, it also meant that works of art could be used to engage with social commentaries. To broach topics through works of art - feels, as noted by Ross,

“So, how can we get some practice, in a sort of low stakes situation? And, I think that art can be really useful in opening up these conversations, giving us practice, and inviting us to wonder about other situations”

When broaching historical topics, there is value in considering historiography. Historiography is how something has been interpreted or positioned over time. It can, when engaged with fidelity, acknowledge multiple sides of an argument without necessarily agreeing. It is the critical analysis, critique, examinations of these positions that are the important element.

To situate artist identity as valuable is to honor the role of representation in providing the space for the variety of perspectives. As noted by Emily in chapters four and five, expressly noting identity is a way to push against canons that tend to be overwhelmingly male, heteronormative, and white.

All of the considerations mentioned occur within different conceptions of space; namely physical and temporal. Physically, where are works of art engaged? What does that space feel like for teachers and students? Is there space for movement? To touch or to make something? What is the physical environment for learning? It can be an avenue to think about comfort/discomfort as physical space both allows and restricts. For educators, physical space needs to be considered for how it can be used in support of them. Temporal space is ethereal. It involves creating questions and dialogue around topics of importance; and to think beyond the tangible. Often this aspect of space is about emotion.

#### *Museum visits*

As noted, in the study by Ross, the desire at the Arlen is for social justice to permeate every aspect of their work. It is not merely a seminar to attend, or a topic to discuss. It is in their continual efforts – this includes how they attend to museum visits.

The study explored how engaging with museums, whether in-person or virtually, can be rigorous. While the perspective of the study was from the museum educators, their comments inform how museum visits can be more than free days. All of the museum educators in this study spoke to the benefit of students coming to the museum space. They also spoke at length about the value of students coming to the museum with a clear understanding of what was expected of them. This includes sharing information about the museum with students and also

informing them about the particulars of the visit. Specifically, what is the purpose for going? A pedagogical aspect to that understanding is to engage students pre-visit in primer activities.

Part of the consideration when going to a museum is how a visit is conceptualized. For museum visits to be more rigorous, or to have them be more than days off – it is important for it to be more than learning, for it to move beyond being reminded of old information, or being introduced to new information

To shift from a notion of acquisition in the visit to one of consideration. How is information being considered? In what context are ideas being examined? What further questions or extensions of learning can come from the visit? The possibilities for museums and schools in this area are significant.

### **The need to push against notion of reinforcing/benign aspects of museums**

Museum visits can be an opportunity for students to learn. As noted previously – museums tend to reify what people believe and or feel that they know. It's important to acknowledge that as the world becomes more ideological there is value in museums engaging difficult and controversial topics. This is especially true as museums still operate with significant social support.

Ross commented earlier that grounding museum visits in works of art (or stories, objects or other types of ephemera) help keep a topic from getting too large. It is a notion that is applicable to all museums – to use their resources, whatever they may be, to engage visitors in general and students in particular in conversations about why what they are looking at matters. It is not a matter of offering official edicts of importance, but rather to have people consider why

these things they are looking at matter. What is the value in examining it? What can be learned/unlearned/re-learned? To consider, how can that learning be taken outside of the museum and look with a more thoughtful position of the things one sees around themselves?

### **What does this study have to do with social studies?**

I'm reminded of Caroline Randall Williams' opinion piece in The New York Times from June 2020, *You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument*. Her comments resonate to the unavoidable connections that exist between society, and history, and the ways in which people inhabit spaces. It's all tied together. Just consider the Mellon Foundation. In the fall of 2020 it was announced that they are going to spend \$250 million in grants over the next five years to help rethink the commemorative landscape of the United States. This includes funding new monuments and statues as well as the relocation of others. In speaking about this concerted effort, foundation president and poet Elizabeth Alexander commented,

“So much teaching happens without us going into a classroom, and without us realizing we're being taught. We want to ask how we can think about how to give form to the beautiful and extraordinary and powerful multiplicity of American stories”

(see <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/05/arts/mellon-foundation-monuments.html>).

Museums exist as part of a vast cultural landscape. Landscape that relentlessly, if not overtly, informs on value and importance. Museums are related to but different from monuments, or statues, or other commemorative landscapes such as gardens. They are sites of collections, of exhibitions, and of stories. Within them there are presentations - of narratives and

perspectives. As such, they are implicated in the ways that society connotes value and engages with topics (Clouse, 2008). The physical spaces in which they exist are situated as valuable.

As noted in chapters four and five, the museum educators in the study expressed the ways in which they work to make the Arlen a place where visitors can come and be engaged in important conversations. There is a definite choice in this act of engagement. Because, it is easy not to talk about things. The Arlen Museum of Art and the participants in this study show the importance of having conversations, of having a willingness to be vulnerable, to learn, and to acknowledge when things do not go as planned. Their efforts of intentionality are instructive as a general guide to other educators.

Museums are curious. They are viewed as cultural institutions that operate with a significant amount of cachet as places of learning. But they are no monoliths. Museums are more than items and exhibitions. They invest in community and educational outreach, and more and more are now pushing boundaries on new foci and functions for museums. A local museum, or a house museum is not going to have the resources (financially or spatially) of a national museum. And yet, in each of these places - learning is a goal.

As the study noted, the Arlen Museum of Art is located on a prestigious R1 campus in the South. It is well funded, it has a permanent collection of over 19,000 works of art. While the efforts described by the study participants are situated at the museum, it is not confined to it. The space informs their work. The efforts of the museum educators illustrate how they conceptualize working with students in museum spaces, and also offer insights into how art can be engaged critically in more formal classroom settings. An added aspect of that is how social studies educators can think about how they utilize museum trips and museum resources.

## **In support of the social studies**

Merriam-Webster defines social studies as: a part of a school or college curriculum concerned with the study of social relationships and the functioning of society and usually made up of courses in history, government, economics, civic, sociology, geography, and anthropology. It's a decent if incomplete attempt. In fairness, if one were to ask a variety of individuals for a definition of social studies one would likely get numerous thoughts - both diverging and coalescing. Of particular interest in the definition is the part that reads "the study of social relationships and the functioning of society." The quoted section attends to what the museum educators in this study spoke to - the idea that the study of social studies and attention to social justice happens outside of classrooms all the time. For this study, that engagement with social studies comes through art at an art museum.

The topics they were addressing were grounded in the works of art they engaged in. Conversations leaned on perspectives, personal experiences, and required students to delve into visual literacy, and they were led to questions of considerations about the art: What is it? What does it mean? How do I feel about it? How do others feel about this work of art? Some of the conversations they engaged in were historical while others were more contemporary. But, the way in which the educators asked students to consider the art was more about consideration than it was necessarily about knowing concrete facts or being able to recall specific dates. Discussions with the work addressed such items, but it was not a prerequisite for engagement with the art.

Participants in the study were asked about important topics that they either wanted to delve deeper into or wanted to begin to address in earnest. Below are a few of their responses.

- What is a livable wage?
- What does it mean to care about people?
- How do we listen? And how do we want others to listen to us?
- What is privilege? Where does it exist in the context of our lives?
- What does it mean to be a citizen?

To begin to broach such topics is an act of social studies. It is all about the consideration of people and their lives, and how they exist in the world. It is not about names and dates, but it's about something more.

### **A new relationship with museums**

Much of the recent scholarship on museums and social studies addresses the relationship in terms of curriculum standards, professional development, and standardized testing. The efforts of museums feel siloed from the efforts of school teachers. What this study hoped to elucidate is that museums are helpful examples, not only for what field trips can do and be, but also illustrative of how school educators can integrate art in their classroom discussions and examinations. As noted by the educators in the study, museums are continually asking themselves how they can be better and do more for the communities they serve.

It is in this space that the relationships with schools and school aged visitors are becoming more. Access to museums and their resources are moving beyond the visit. A relationship that could be built on integrating young voices into a museum setting through a variety of options such as working oral history projects, creating art exhibitions, and producing social commentaries on their communities (both historical and contemporary). These efforts could be strengthened by working with museum educators and curators in these processes.

## **Limitations, complications, and next steps**

My study about museum educators and their conceptualizations of teaching about social justice through art were influenced by my positionality.

### *Limits of the study*

There are several noted limits of the study. First and foremost, the findings of the study are not generalizable across a wide population, nor are they meant to be. The anecdotal qualitative interview data gathered during the study is not meant to be prescriptive; rather illustrative of what is possible when teaching social studies through art. An aspect of that is also how museums can continue to build relationships with school groups so that museum learning is part of what they learn in formal school settings.

Considerations of context, knowledge, location, access to resources, and other factors may inform how teaching social studies through art takes place. As a case study, I only looked at one museum; a well-funded university art museum with a significant permanent collection. Other museums are likely to operate in different structures and have different opportunities afforded them than that of the Arlen Museum of Art.

As a researcher, there are limitations that need to be acknowledged. My perspectives and insights are informed by my positionality. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) explored the insider-outsider dynamic present in research. Particular to my research in this study, I felt a tension with regards to my previous work in museums, but not specifically in art museums. My expressed intent of the study was to listen and learn as much as I could, and to ask clarifying questions as needed. I have long believed in the value of art - and as such, that assumption of value was situated in this study and informed the type of prompts and questions I engaged with

the participants in the study. The value of art as a prompt for learning was never in question. Instead the study was meant to provide insight into the ways social justice-minded educators addressed social studies topics through pedagogical engagements with works of art.

For their examples of work of art to teach from, the participants in my study drew only from the collections available to them at the museum. Therefore, their responses reflect a finite number of possibilities for works of art. They did not discuss works of art that are not directly accessible from the Arlen. Also, the data presented is my own interpretation of it boiled down and separated. It is not definitive, nor is it measurable against other data.

#### *Complications*

The study was completed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. While it is not a pandemic study, it was nevertheless influenced by it. Data was collected from participant interviews only. Participant interviews were conducted via Zoom. During the timeframe of my study there were no in-person tour groups to the museum. As such, there were no opportunities for field notes of museum teaching, tour observations or teaching demonstrations.

#### *Future research*

Much of the early research around museum education examined the pedagogical value of museums as informal learning spaces. Research then shifted to examine the pedagogies of engagement. Much research was conducted in and around science museums and children's museums. Specific scholarship in social studies has often looked at museums and the professional development they offer teachers. Since the early 2000s the relationship that standardized testing places on visits to museum spaces has been explored. This study was interested in something entirely different. It wanted to explore the ways in which museum

educators thought about teaching for social justice (via social studies and social emotional learning). It wanted to examine what informed their pedagogical practices and influenced their thinking on teaching with art.

The research is not definitive. It is exploratory, in that there are still several possibilities for future research related to this study. As noted in chapter four and five, the development of digital resources took on a new tenor of importance in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic as inequities of access to all types of resources were magnified toward society as a whole. New research could examine the relationship of these digital resources with rural schools and/or underfunded schools that are unable to come visit museums in-person.

This study involved highlighting works of art that the participants chose to talk about in their teaching, but no specific attention was given to provenance. To examine provenance and donation is a space for further examination of the sociohistorical aspects of works of art and how they found their ways to the museum. It is also an area in which to talk about donors and influence, and to consider the role of such in the development of community through exhibitions and events. Touched on briefly in chapter four was the relationship of museum educators and curators. It begs future research in how their conceptions of education for visitors drive both of their related but different missions, as well as looking at the role that museum hierarchy plays in such actions.

#### **A final quote**

*"A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within."*

*One Writer's Beginnings*, Eudora Welty

**P.S.**

Thank you to the four museum educators who participated in this study. It was an absolute pleasure to hear from each of you the passion you have for teaching, for museums, and for art. The work you do is important.

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