

# Grassroots Museums & the Changing Landscape of the Public Humanities

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*This essay is a brief history of the development of “grassroots” or community-based museums since the 1960s. These museums pioneered new kinds of relationships with their communities that were far different from older museums and, in the process, helped fundamentally enlarge and diversify public humanities. The essay begins with a focus on three museums founded in 1967: El Museo del Barrio in New York City, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (Smithsonian) in Washington, D.C., and the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle. Over the last fifty years, these museums have grown and stabilized and newer, bigger museums with similar goals have developed. These changes suggest that one future for humanities scholars is to become involved in new publics outside of the academy who are seeking humanistic analysis of their distinctive, previously marginalized, community stories.*

When I joined the staff of the Museum of History and Technology in 1981, I was excited to be working in one of the largest museums dedicated to the preservation, analysis, and interpretation of American history. I knew that I wanted to do historical analysis, but in a way that spoke to a wider public than that of a university classroom. I did not know that I was entering a field that was just beginning to organize itself.

Around 1977 or so, the phrase “public history movement” emerged.<sup>1</sup> As the University of California, Santa Barbara, began shaping its public history program, Professor G. Wesley Johnson organized a series of discussions with people working in museums and at historic sites and national historic parks as well as with other federal government historians, archaeologists, and folklorists. Many discussed how their work was distinct from that of university-based scholars in the same fields. Working with funds from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Arizona Humanities Council, Johnson organized a public history conference in Phoenix. As a direct result, in 1980, the National Council on Public History (NCPH) was incorporated in Washington, D.C.<sup>2</sup>

I also did not expect to discover and then become a part of a cultural movement: scores of people working diligently across the nation to develop “grassroots museums.” Though understudied to this day, grassroots museums have had

some large-scale influences on American cultural and social life over the last sixty years. My scholarship has focused in part on the complex intersections between “public history” or “public humanities” and the ethnic-specific histories of preservation, interpretation, and presentation by African Americans and other American minority groups. This essay investigates what can be posited about the future of humanistic disciplines and practices by viewing public history and grassroots museums in tandem.

Since the NCPH was formed in 1980, there has been an ongoing debate over what constitutes the fundamental elements of public history or public humanities. In the beginning, some suggested that it was simply traditional history, but presented outside the academy, in venues such as museums or historic houses. More recently, several principles have coalesced that define contemporary public history, including:

- “Shared authority” between public professionals and oral history interviewees and/or other community members to “shape a narrative process” or product (such as an exhibition or program).<sup>3</sup>
- “Active collaboration” between public professionals and their stakeholders, “constantly reframing questions and improving interpretations in conversation so that there is a ‘shared inquiry.’”<sup>4</sup>
- “Multidisciplinary” or “interdisciplinary” approaches of necessity. Authority is shared among public professionals from a variety of disciplines to analyze and form interpretations holistically.<sup>5</sup>
- Service to the public; a “scholarship of engagement” or mutual learning.<sup>6</sup> Not only does the public humanist seek to educate the audience but also to “learn something about the ways in which average people understand, use, and value the past.”<sup>7</sup>
- A commitment to “reconnect with the public and demonstrate [the] value and relevance” of the humanities “in contemporary life.”<sup>8</sup>

For many practitioners, these five elements express the key values they hold and share as the fundamental praxis of their work. Indeed, these statements reflect a multidecade process of conflict and dialogue among public humanists. Even so, many public historians continue to debate how best to translate these ideas into action.

Fortunately, public humanists can take inspiration from the grassroots or community museum movement because it pioneered these same ideas and created many durable examples by successfully applying them in the real world. Beginning in the 1950s, African American cultural activists created grassroots museums, often using skills they had developed as civil rights community organizers. Soon,

activists in other urban minority communities began to invent their own museums. The new museums and cultural centers emerged from social relationships in which like-minded people had bonded over local (and sometimes national) struggles, mostly for civil rights. These institutions came into being by sharing authority between the founders, staffs, and activated community members. Both the content and process of their exhibits engaged with and served their communities and enlarged America's interest in what museum professionals call the public humanities.

Over the last sixty years, more than 450 grassroots or community museums have been built (although not all survived). Though it is hard to get solid figures, the Association of African American Museums estimates that there are over four hundred African American museums.<sup>9</sup> The online Guide to Hispanic and Latino Museums lists twenty-four such institutions.<sup>10</sup> Due to the overlay between Asian art and Asian American museums, it is difficult to get firm figures on the number of specifically Asian American museums as well as the number of Japanese internment and other historic sites that are part of the National Park Service. However, there are at least twenty listed in major cities such as New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Seattle. This is an extraordinary number of new public humanities institutions that were founded mostly outside of preexisting organizations, such as universities or state historical societies. The continuous formation of these new museums and cultural centers suggests a tremendous public desire for humanities content.

The first of these grassroots or community museums was the Ebony Museum in Chicago in 1961 (now known as the DuSable Museum of African American History).<sup>11</sup> In the mid-1950s, Margaret Burroughs (1915–2010) and her second husband Charles (1920–1994) were both longtime social activists. Margaret was an artist, poet, and teacher in the Chicago public schools. In the late 1930s, she was one of the founders of the Southside Community Art Center, a place for Black artists to show their work, build community with other Black artists, and teach skills to young people and emerging artists.<sup>12</sup> However, Burroughs had remained too leftist for the anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s and was asked to leave the board of the Center. During the 1950s, the Burroughs opened an art gallery in their sizeable home and invited in schoolchildren for educational tours. They also sponsored evening events and salons for their community and welcomed their artistic, activist, intellectual, and interracial group of friends. By 1961, the effort had outgrown their home, and the Burroughs and a small cohort of friends decided to incorporate formally.<sup>13</sup> Today, the DuSable remains the “oldest independent African American museum”; it celebrated its sixtieth year of operation in 2021.<sup>14</sup>

Most of these museums emerged in large urban areas, often in neighborhoods associated with a particular minority ethnic or racial group. The DuSable origi-

nated in the Southside of Chicago, long known as the “Black Metropolis.” Other examples include the Museum of Afro-American History, first located in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts (1963); the Charles Wright Museum on Grand Boulevard in Detroit (1965); El Museo del Barrio in Spanish Harlem in New York City (1967); the Wing Luke Museum in a pan-Asian neighborhood in Seattle (1967); the Anacostia Museum in Anacostia, east of the river in Washington, D.C. (1967); and the Studio Museum in Harlem (1968). These are just some of the earliest and most successful of these grassroots institutions.

What made these museums distinctive and essentially unlike most historically White museums was their relationships to audiences and communities. Traditional large-scale museums tend to be built in the most prestigious parts of town, and most historic houses and estates showcase the wealth and stature of the notable worthies who founded them. The purpose of most of these institutions was to bring ordinary people to important places where they could be uplifted, or to provide a setting where scholars, connoisseurs, and collectors could congregate and appreciate elite culture.

By contrast, the grassroots institutions were established in specific neighborhoods and directed toward marginalized minority groups. In a sense, this was an early form of restorative justice or “restorative history,” particularly for African Americans. From the very beginning of the nation, scholars, newspaper writers, politicians, and ministers in predominately White institutions maintained that Black people and Native people had contributed nothing to the heroic building of the country or to its predominant Anglo-American culture. This “history of no history” was crucial to the maintenance of slavery and later segregation. People without a history and a record of contributions can be more easily and thoroughly oppressed.<sup>15</sup> These grassroots museums saw their mission as correcting these mainstream historical inaccuracies. They sought to present a more authentic history of their people’s cultural contributions and historical sacrifices, such as serving in the military during America’s wars.

**I**n the beginning, none of these museums would have qualified as such according to the standards of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). At that time, the AAM’s fundamental definition of a museum required having and stewarding a collection of artifacts and/or maintaining a historic building. Initially, these new grassroots institutions were not so focused on acquiring collections. Instead, they were committed to producing art and exhibitions that uplifted and inspired people by focusing on their distinctive histories. Rather quickly, as they become more significant in their local communities, they received objects and had to confront the care of those collections. At first, what separated the museum staffs from their visitors was only their zeal and commitment to interpreting the history and culture of their people.

None of these early founders or founding directors were “museum people” who had attended either Winterthur or Cooperstown graduate programs in decorative arts or museum studies. Rather, they were teachers, social workers, and civil rights activists who saw needs in their communities that they wanted to address. A number were also working artists, such as many of the founders of El Museo del Barrio. These artists often had a keen sense of how the mainstream museums ignored minority artists. Compared to some of the other founders, they may have had a better sense of how museums functioned.

These museum founders and the early cadres of students, activists, and volunteers worked with their families, neighbors, and friends to learn what kinds of exhibitions they would like to see and what kind of programs they would like to attend. A fundamental practice involved showing their communities that they had a history, that their ancestors had contributed to building the nation, that their ancestors had struggled to resist and protest their unfair treatment by the larger society, and that their artists had contributed to the cultural efflorescence of America.

Three examples demonstrate the trajectory of these grassroots museums: El Museo del Barrio (New York City), the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience (Seattle), and the Anacostia Community Museum (Washington, D.C.). All of these museums first opened their doors in 1967. In the fifty-five years since, they have expanded more than once. Today, they are located in newly constructed or renovated buildings, designed specifically to look and feel in many ways like professionally run museums. Briefly, here are their stories.

In the mid-1960s, a number of teachers, artists, and social activists in New York’s Puerto Rican community began to call for some kind of cultural center. In 1967, artist and art teacher Raphael Montañez Ortiz became the founding director of El Museo del Barrio, supported by a much larger group of local artists, educators, activists, and volunteers. In describing its mission, Ortiz said the museum “is bravely girding itself to meet . . . ‘the needs of Puerto Ricans for a cultural identity. As a people, Puerto Ricans have been disenfranchised, economically, politically and culturally.’” He added, “as a group like the Young Lords was born to deal with the political and economic disenfranchisement, so Museo is an attempt to begin to come to terms with our cultural disenfranchisement.”<sup>16</sup>

At first, the museum had no specific home and consisted of boxes of materials in an available classroom in a New York City public school. Over the next few years, the museum bounced from a few rented rooms to various storefronts. Yet even when the museum had no permanent home, Ortiz and the artists, teachers, and volunteers organized exhibitions in libraries, schools, and occasionally small galleries. Their goal was to encourage the collection of personal records documenting the lives of families in East Harlem; to provide an outlet for Puerto Rican (and other Latino/a) local artists; to represent the importance of Puerto Rican culture in New York City; and to inform their community about the history

of Puerto Ricans, both locally and on their Caribbean island homeland. By 1977, the museum had gained enough public support from the city to move into the unused Heckscher building, located on Fifth Avenue. Today, the building has been renovated to include a working theater, lobby, and more collections and gallery space.

Of these three museums, El Museo has suffered the greatest internal turmoil. On some occasions, the staff and director worked for free. Several times in the 1970s and 1980s El Museo almost closed due to its financial problems. At other times, the directors, staff, board members, local supporters, and critics have fiercely disagreed over whether the museum was dedicated solely to Puerto Ricans, to all Latin Americans, or to Latin artists throughout the hemisphere. By the early 2000s, El Museo had garnered criticism from some of the former activists who had been involved in its earliest phases. It was also attacked by scholars who critiqued the whole concept of “Latin American art” in part because that positioning tended to uplift artists from other nations and to devalue U.S.-based Latino/a artists.<sup>17</sup>

Today, El Museo has clarified its purpose, acknowledging a complex institutional history. Its website states:

#### OUR PURPOSE

- El Museo del Barrio’s purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret the art and artifacts of Caribbean and Latin American cultures for posterity.
- To enhance the sense of identity, self-esteem and self-knowledge of the Caribbean and Latin American peoples by educating them in their artistic heritage and bringing art and artists into their communities.
- To provide an educational forum that promotes an appreciation and understanding of Caribbean and Latin American art and culture and its rich contribution to North America.
- To offer Caribbean and Latin American artists greater access to institutional support in the national and international art world.
- To convert young people of Caribbean and Latin American descent into the next generation of museum-goers, stakeholders in the institution created for them.
- To fulfill our special responsibility as a center of learning and training ground for the growing numbers of artists, educators, art historians, and museum professionals interested in Caribbean and Latin American art.
- This mission reaffirms the vision of Raphael Montañez Ortiz, who founded El Museo del Barrio in 1969, and of the Puerto Rican educators, artists, and community activists who worked in support of this goal.<sup>18</sup>

This contemporary restating of their purpose reiterates their original and on-going commitment to the arts of Caribbean peoples, such as Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans. But it also makes it clear that other Latinos are explicitly included in the museum's purview.

The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum opened in Washington, D.C., in 1967 as an outpost of the Smithsonian Institution and the first federally funded grassroots museum. The museum is often described as being established by Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley (1913–2001). In reality, an organization of older activists in the Anacostia neighborhood had spent years trying to get a museum or cultural center in their part of the city. When Secretary Ripley began to look for a likely community spot, the Anacostia Neighborhood Alliance seized the opportunity. Marion Hope and her group successfully insisted that the Smithsonian hire their candidate as the founding director: Reverend John Kinard, a local activist, minister, and native son.<sup>19</sup>

Zora Martin Felton, the first director of education at the Anacostia Museum, remembered that the staff often had to stay until 10 p.m. or later. Since its first location was in the former Carver Theater on Nichols Avenue in the heart of downtown Anacostia, the museum had an auditorium with a stage. Community choirs would practice there. School bands might rehearse there. Local activist groups could schedule meetings there.<sup>20</sup>

In this way, the museum was revolutionary in being fully participatory with its neighbors and community. It took forty years for the concept of the “participatory museum” to become an important and urgent new idea in the wider public humanities/museum world. The staffs of these early grassroots museums often had the urgency and the fierce commitment of a cadre of civil rights workers. In fact, many were veterans of those struggles. They saw their work on social and cultural issues as being critical tools in empowering their communities for political and electoral battles.

Because Nichols Avenue (later renamed Martin Luther King Boulevard) became drug-ridden and dangerous, the Anacostia Museum moved to a new location in 1987. Though it has a commanding view of the city, the Museum is in a somewhat isolated spot, further from the “thick of the neighborhood” than when it was in the Carver Theater. However, the attractive building was specifically built to be a museum and has been renovated several times over the years, providing more space for the library, collections, and storage.

In recent years, the Anacostia Community Museum has articulated a new mission to document the various communities of the city of Washington. The museum's recent exhibition, “A Right to the City,” details the changing nature of six neighborhoods, including the once Latino-dominated Adams-Morgan; a shrinking Chinatown; and the Brookland neighborhood, which was integrated long before the current wave of gentrification.<sup>21</sup>

In Seattle, the Wing Luke Memorial Museum was also organized in 1967, by a group of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese American activists. The museum was named after Wing Luke (1925 – 1965), a Chinese American lawyer who served as the Assistant Attorney General of Washington State in the Civil Rights Division and a member of the Seattle City Council from 1962 until his death in a plane crash in 1965.<sup>22</sup> A group of pan-Asian shopkeepers, teachers, and activists came together to establish a memorial in his memory and to give voice to a community that had lost their chief spokesman.

The Wing Luke Museum was unusual in that it was dedicated to the wide spectrum of Asian and Pacific Islander American people, while most Asian American museums today are nation/ethnic specific: Japanese American, Chinese American, or Korean American, in part due to the different geography of where these groups settled.<sup>23</sup> The Wing Luke Memorial Museum began in a storefront, but moved in 1987 to a larger building. In 2008, the museum became associated with the National Park Service as part of the Asian Pacific American Heritage Corridor and relocated into an even more spacious building associated with a number of related historic structures nearby. In 2010, the museum's current name was adopted: the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. Today, it is still the only pan-Asian museum in the United States.

What remains distinctive about these grassroots museums is their shared mission to give voice to their communities. The Wing Luke Museum, in a previous values statement, highlighted the importance of community-based work: "People give us meaning and purpose. Relationships are our foundation. We desire community empowerment and ownership." They went on to outline the ten principles of community-based work:

1. Community-based work must be rooted in relationships of trust and respect.
2. Community-based work requires a safe, comfortable environment to express ideas and share experiences.
3. Community-based work requires listening, flexibility, agility and patience.
4. It is democratic in nature – not top-down, and not a funnel for input.
5. Community ownership of their stories enables communities to hold and use them towards their own self-determined purposes.
6. Opportunities to learn abound in community-based work.
7. Community empowerment results from bringing together diverse people within communities who might not otherwise connect and collaborate together, increased community pride through increased visibility, development of professional skills and resources within the community from grant writing to educating to publishing and more.



8. Community-based work draws together communities and creates deep engagement and connections within as well as to the broader public.
9. Community-based work creates a safe place to speak your story and your truth.
10. People get involved in heart-felt work, doing something that they believe in.<sup>24</sup>

As with El Museo and the Anacostia Museum, the Wing Luke's values statement resonates and reaffirms the original concerns of their founders. Strikingly, what has emerged as "best practices" in the public humanities echoes many of the sentiments that these museums first articulated sixty-five years ago.

**D**uring the 1980s, the number and variety of grassroots museums increased. In 1980, community organizer John Kuo Wei Tchen and an interracial group of activists launched the New York Chinatown History Project on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Art enthusiast and Urban League activist Aurelia Brooks (1931–2021) became the founding director of the California African American Museum in Los Angeles in 1981. Carlos Tortolero and a group of fellow public school teachers opened the Mexican Fine Arts Museum in Chicago in 1982, now known as the National Museum of Mexican Art.

A growing number of the founding directors of these museums were academically trained in related disciplines such as history, while in the 1960s, none of the founders of these institutions were academics, though most had been to college and were professionals. By the mid-1980s, more of these leaders had PhDs, though none were trained as public humanities scholars.<sup>25</sup> In 1988, the National Afro American Museum and Cultural Center opened in Wilberforce, Ohio. John Fleming, a Peace Corp volunteer, civil rights scholar, and activist, was its founding director. Also in 1988, former member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and former D.C. city councilmember Frank Smith formed the African American Civil War Museum and Memorial in Washington, D.C. Other founding leaders in this period were professional administrators. For instance, in 1985, a group of Nisei (that is, second-generation Japanese Americans) organized the Japanese American National Museum, which opened with Irene Hirano (1948–2020) as the founding director.

These directors showed an increasing interest in consulting university-based scholars. And unlike earlier grassroots museums, which had started in storefronts but grown into larger buildings, these 1980s museums often started as new buildings or in major renovations of historic buildings. To generate funds beyond their local communities, these institutions needed the support of major foundations such as the Ford Foundation or the Mellon Foundation. They also began to apply to government programs such as the National Endowments for the Humanities

and the Arts and the Institute for Museums and Library Services. These foundations and programs required academic consultants as par for the course in their grant applications. To get these larger grants, museums across the board needed to forge relationships with university-based scholars.

These newer directors were instrumental in this process. Many had previous contacts with university-based scholars and could initially rely on personal contacts to seek scholars interested in this public arena. Directors sought scholars' advice as consultants, asked them to serve on museum panels and boards, and sometimes contracted them to work as guest curators, often paired with a more experienced museum exhibition developer or designer.

The grassroots museum movement of the 1950s and 1960s largely preceded the formal founding of African American and other ethnic studies programs and departments at universities.<sup>26</sup> However, by the 1980s, they could draw on the books and expertise of social historians and others interested in history "from the bottom up," as a growing number of scholars began publishing in ethnic studies, women's studies, and cultural studies. As these areas of humanities scholarship grew, there were more sympathetic academics than there had been in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1980s and 1990s, grassroots museums could consult and call upon them to inform their exhibitions and programs.

Some of these grassroots museum directors and staff began to publish journal articles and essays in books that detailed and analyzed their values, methods, and practices. For example, John Kuo Wei Tchen, cofounder of the Chinatown History Project, published an extremely influential essay, "Creating the Dialogic Museum."<sup>27</sup> Tchen described the Chinatown History Project as having a "dialogue driven approach" that was essential to determine what the "public needs" that history can serve. Rather than having exhibitions and programming organized exclusively by professional historians and specialists, this dialogic approach required working with and sharing interpretive authority with those who brought the wisdom of "lived experience." In this process of dialogue, new historical knowledge might well surface. Since much of the work produced by professional historians over decades tended to stereotype and marginalize Chinese people and Chinatowns, this new knowledge often served as a corrective to the previous professional scholarship.<sup>28</sup>

By the early 1990s, several public or community-facing museums opened, such as the National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM) in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1991 and the Birmingham [Alabama] Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) in 1992. Both museums originally focused on the specific and distinctive local aspects of the modern civil rights movement. In Memphis, the NCRM acquired the Lorraine Motel, the Black-owned hotel that Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was staying in when he was assassinated in 1968.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, this museum is set in a historic location and stewards a historic building. The BCRI is likewise situated in a historic district in

downtown Birmingham and stands across from Kelly Ingram Park, where many demonstrations took place, including those met with the infamous use of dogs and hoses. Down the street is the 16th Street Baptist Church where four girls died when the Ku Klux Klan bombed the church in 1963. Both the NCRM and the BCRI were organized by Black-led interracial groups of cultural activists who felt that what was most historic and meaningful about their African American community was its history of direct resistance to segregation.

The Memphis and Birmingham civil rights museums demonstrated the profound new effect grassroots museums could have on local heritage tourism and even traditional tourism. Although some White businessmen and chamber of commerce folks (and some ordinary White people too) feared that the presence of these museums would only interest African Americans, the museums proved to be popular with “mainstream” or White visitors as well. Indeed, the Alabama Tourism board revealed that BCRI was one of the most visited and popular sites in the state, bringing significant new dollars to hotels, restaurants, tour guides, and businesses.<sup>30</sup> This unexpected prominence in tourism was a boon to those two institutions, in part because they proved their monetary value to mainstream interests, some of whom had initially opposed the museums.

Grassroots museums and centers continue to emerge, though during the last twenty years, the trend has been toward larger and more imposing museums and centers, often with million-dollar buildings and professional staff (though not necessarily trained in museum work). After twenty years of work by activists, in 2000, the National Hispanic Cultural Center (NHCC) opened in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with a twenty-acre campus. Over the years, the center has encompassed a plaza, three theaters, an art museum, a historic building, an education center, a library, a genealogy center, and a restaurant. The NHCC also houses a Spanish Resource Center, a branch of the Spanish embassy, and the Instituto Cervantes. The NHCC is a division of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs. The museum’s website carefully states that they produce exhibitions and programming “that are meaningful to the local community. [The NHCC] offers the Hispanic, Chicano, and Latinx artist a place to present their work and bring it to the national stage.”<sup>31</sup>

**W**hat might we conclude from this history that is instructive for thinking about the possible future of the humanities? There are two significant conclusions and/or signposts that emerge from these complicated histories of the development and growth of the grassroots museum.

First, outside universities, there is a tremendous interest in humanities that are “relevant” to particular publics. “Relevance” was a watchword of the 1960s that has since fallen into disuse. Nonetheless, the concept of relevance is helpful here. The landscape of public history has been changing for sixty years: there are new

publics, sometimes nontraditional publics, that are hungry for information pertinent to their own identities, however constructed. Though this essay has focused on ethnic-specific museums, there are other types of grassroots museums, such as for LGBTQ+ histories, for readers of comic books, and for many kinds of music. Museums retain widespread public trust whereas many other institutions, such as governments, newspapers, or even universities, have lost a great deal of public trust.

Second, many of the people who know and were shaped by those kinds of institutions are now rising to leadership positions in public humanities institutions. The preeminent example is Lonnie Bunch, who was named Secretary of the Smithsonian in 2019 after serving as founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Bunch selected Korean American Meroe Park, a former CIA official, and Native American Kevin Gover, former director of the National Museum of the American Indian, as two of his administrators. As mainstream museums attempt to appeal to diverse national and international publics and as predominantly White museums explore shared authority and digital co-curation, they will need the expertise of more people who were shaped by these grassroots institutions, professionally or personally.

In the months since the global protests over the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, various predominantly White museums and cultural centers have named an African American or Latino/a American to a prominent position, often for the first time. During this current, highly polarized racial climate in the United States and the world, public humanists from these minority communities have moved from the margins to some of the most important mainstream museums in the land. Often formally trained in public humanities, a younger generation of directors and curators, many honed in these grassroots institutions, are now posed to lead and influence mainstream institutions. This new generation may be able to make fundamental changes in American museums and cultural centers and provide new directions for humanistic institutions, speaking both locally and globally to new publics.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Barbara J. Howe, “Reflections on an Idea: NCPH’s First Decade Chair’s Annual Address,” *The Public Historian* 11 (3) (1989): 70. See also Denise D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Towards a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), xiv–xvii; and Robyn Schroeder, “The Rise of the Public Humanists,” in *Doing Public Humanities*, ed. Susan Smulyan (New York: Routledge, 2021), 6–7.
- <sup>2</sup> With funds from the NEH, a second conference was held in Santa Barbara in 1979. Another outcome of these discussions was the formation of the Society for History in the Federal Government. Howe, “Reflections on an Idea,” 71.
- <sup>3</sup> Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, xxiv. See also Schroeder, “The Rise of the Public Humanists,” 11; and “How Is Public History Different from ‘Regular’ History?” National Council on Public History, <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/> (accessed August 2, 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, xxiii–xxiv.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xxv.
- <sup>6</sup> Schroeder, “The Rise of the Public Humanists,” 13. See also Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, xxv.
- <sup>7</sup> Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, xxv.
- <sup>8</sup> Schroeder, “The Rise of the Public Humanists,” 13–14.
- <sup>9</sup> “History,” Association of African American Museums, <https://blackmuseums.org/history-2/> (accessed January 8, 2022).
- <sup>10</sup> “Guide to Latino & Hispanic Museums in the U.S.,” Mi LegaSi, <https://www.milegasi.com/blogs/hispanic-heritage/latino-museums-guide> (accessed January 8, 2022).
- <sup>11</sup> “About Us,” DuSable Museum, <https://www.dusablemuseum.org/about-us/> (accessed July 31, 2021). In 1968, the name was changed to honor Jean Baptiste Point du Sable (before 1750–1818), who many celebrate as the first non-Indigenous permanent settler of what is now Chicago. He is sometimes called the “Founder of Chicago.” He was a frontier trader, married a Potawatomi Nation woman, Kithawa (Catherine), and became a

wealthy merchant. He later moved near to what is now St. Louis, Missouri (then Spanish Louisiana), and died there.

- <sup>12</sup> “About Us,” Southside Community Art Center, <https://www.sscartcenter.org/about-us/> (accessed August 2, 2021); and “History and Archives,” Southside Community Art Center, <https://www.sscartcenter.org/about-us/building-legacy/> (accessed August 2, 2021). In some respects, the Southside Community Art Center (SSAC) grew out of artists’ involvement with the Federal Art Project that was part of the WPA. Artists began organizing to buy a building in 1938 and succeeded by 1940. Dedicated by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in May 1940, Burroughs was one of seven original artist members that included Archibald Motley, Eldzier Cortor, and Charles White; she was the only woman. Over many ups and downs, the Southside Center has persisted as a vital institution. The building earned Chicago Landmark status in 1994. In 2017, the SSAC was named a national treasure and, in 2018, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- <sup>13</sup> Fath Davis Ruffins, “Building Homes for Black History: Museum Founders, Founding Directors, and Pioneers, 1915–1995,” *The Public Historian* 40 (3) (2018): 13–43, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.13>. See also “Margaret Burroughs: Biography,” interview, The History Makers, June 12, 2010, <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/margaret-burroughs-40> (accessed January 5, 2022); and “South Side Stories: The Art and Influence of Dr. Margaret T. Burroughs, 1960–1980,” DuSable Museum, <https://www.dusablemuseum.org/exhibition/south-side-stories/> (accessed January 5, 2022).
- <sup>14</sup> By which they mean the first African American museum not attached to a university. African Americans have a longer history of independent “public history” organizations than is generally known to many scholars of public humanities. While many ethnic and racial groups founded fraternal and sororal societies, religious sodalities, and other affinity organizations, African Americans are among the first to have museums. The first African American museum opened in 1868 at what is now Hampton University in Virginia. Although originally more of a naturalist’s collection, by the 1890s, the Hampton Museum began to acquire collections of African art and artifacts. Howard University opened its museum on paper in 1867, but did not designate a formal museum and archives space until the 1870s. By the 1930s, renowned HBCUs Fisk University (Nashville, Tennessee), Howard University (Washington, D.C.), and Atlanta University (Atlanta, Georgia) had all developed art galleries and/or museums on their campuses.
- <sup>15</sup> Many early African American historians articulated these sentiments. For this essay, perhaps the most important was Carter G. Woodson (1875–1950). In 1915, Woodson and several associates formed the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in Chicago (later renamed the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, ASALH). Woodson was the second African American to receive a PhD in history from Harvard University, in 1912. (W. E. B. DuBois, 1868–1963, was the first in 1895.) This was the first and is still today the largest organization devoted to African American history and culture. Therefore, Woodson intentionally created a financially independent historical society, an early organization of truly public history. For many decades, African Americans with PhDs could not teach in predominantly White institutions and had great difficulty getting published in mainstream journals, such as the *Journal of American History* or the *American Historical Review*. In 1916, Woodson founded the *Journal of Negro History* and later the *Journal of Negro Education* to fill this gap. In 1926, he founded “Negro History Week” to have public celebrations of the histories that Negro scholars were writing. By the 1940s, Negro History Week was observed in segregated Negro schools, churches, and by a full array of Negro organizations, newspapers and

other publications, and businesses. Indeed, a key service that the ASALH performed was to produce and distribute kits to teachers, ministers, and other thought leaders for each year, focusing on particular themes and providing background information, feature articles, and art to help plan celebrations with the appropriate content.

- <sup>16</sup> Grace Glueck, "Barrio Museum: Hope Si, Home No," *The New York Times*, July 30, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/07/30/archives/barrio-museum-hope-si-home-no.html>. See also Will Lissner, "Puerto Rican Art Museum Finally Gets Its Own Home," *The New York Times*, July 10, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/10/archives/puerto-rican-art-museum-finally-gets-its-own-home.html>; and George Gent, "Puerto Rican Art Is Shown Uptown," *The New York Times*, May 1, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/05/01/archives/puerto-rican-art-is-shown-uptown.html>.
- <sup>17</sup> See Arlene Davila, "Latinizing Culture: Art, Museums, and the Politics of U.S. Multicultural Encompassment," *Cultural Anthropology* 14 (2) (1999): 180–202, accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1999.14.2.180>.
- <sup>18</sup> "Our Purpose," El Museo del Barrio, <https://www.elmuseo.org/history-mission/> (accessed January 9, 2022). This website also features a thirty-eight-page history of the museum that candidly lists financial and other problems. It also documents an astonishingly long list of exhibitions and artists' works on display despite the difficulties.
- <sup>19</sup> John Kinard, founding director of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., interview with author, April 1, 1985.
- <sup>20</sup> Zora Martin Felton, interview with Jeffrey C. Stewart and Fath Davis Ruffins, 1986; and Zora Martin Felton, interview with author, November 2019. See also Anacostia Neighborhood Museum 1967/1977, Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution, 1977.
- <sup>21</sup> "Right to the City," exhibition, Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, <https://www.si.edu/exhibitions/right-city%3Aevent-exhib-6222> (accessed January 8, 2022). See also the online exhibition, "'A Right to the City' Digital Exhibit," Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/34d99cccb2c5454da7b4fo8e482c1987> (accessed January 8, 2022).
- <sup>22</sup> "Our Namesake—Wing Luke," Wing Luke Museum (accessed July 31, 2021).
- <sup>23</sup> David Takami, "Luke, Wing (1925–1965)," History Link.org, <https://www.historylink.org/file/2047> (accessed July 30, 2021). See also Sherry Stripling, "Wing Luke: The Man Behind the Museum," *The Seattle Times*, February 25, 2005, <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/wing-luke-the-man-behind-the-museum/> (accessed July 30, 2021).
- <sup>24</sup> About Us," Wing Luke Museum (accessed January 8, 2022).
- <sup>25</sup> When they went to graduate school, public history did not exist as a field within history or American studies.
- <sup>26</sup> In 1968, a five-month-long student rebellion at San Francisco State University ended in a bloody attack by the police sent into the campus by California Governor Ronald Reagan. Although some of the students were beaten senseless and some were arrested and served time in prison, by 1969, there was an Afro-American studies department with other similar ethnic studies programs on the way.
- <sup>27</sup> John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Creating A Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 285–326. This book includes chapters by a number of the found-

ers or founding directors mentioned in this essay. Today, it is the Museum of the Chinese in America; see “History,” Museum of the Chinese in America, <https://www.mocanyc.org/about/history/> (accessed July 31, 2021).

- <sup>28</sup> Tchen is an example of an activist who cofounded a museum, earned a PhD, and became a professor. He has written extensively on the theory and practice of the public humanities and helped to train a new generation of students who became museum professionals as well as scholars. Tchen is currently the chair of the Public History and Humanities Department at Rutgers University, Newark, and serves as the director of the Clement A. Price Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience.
- <sup>29</sup> Years later, the NCRM also acquired the rooming house from which James Earl Ray, King’s convicted assassin, fired his shots, which is across a courtyard and an alley from the Lorraine Motel.
- <sup>30</sup> Fath Davis Ruffins, “Revisiting the Old Plantation: Reparations, Reconciliation, and Museumizing American Slavery,” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, ed. Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).
- <sup>31</sup> “About Creating a Cultural Home,” National Hispanic Cultural Center, <https://www.nhccnm.org/about/> (accessed August 4, 2021).