



## Worker-led feminist mobilizing for the museum of the future

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### Abstract

Museum workers have taken a massive hit during the pandemic when many museums closed their doors, cut staff hours, instituted layoffs and furloughs, and pushed more into precarity. For many workers, the effect of the pandemic has highlighted long-standing issues of racial, economic, gender and political inequality. This article engages with how workers are responding to this insecurity by highlighting worker-led feminist mobilizations for transformation in museums based in the United States and the United Kingdom. By focusing on efforts for engaging with the Black Lives Matter movement, decolonizing the museum, unionizing workers and providing mutual aid, this article examines worker-led practices of transformation of the museum amid crisis. A special emphasis is put on how workers articulate the importance of feminist solidarity and collective action in envisioning a more just museum of the future.

### Keywords

Labour organizing, museum, racial justice, social justice, transformative activism

‘It has become clear to us that when our institutions will not stand in solidarity with us, we must stand in solidarity with one another’, Museum Workers Speak organizers (Antar et al., 2020).

The global arts and culture sector has been hit hard by the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The issues that lower-ranking and minoritized workers of colour have been facing and calling attention to for years are suddenly more prescient for their White, more privileged and formerly more secure, colleagues. Amid mass layoffs and

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furloughs, more museum workers who were not previously forced to confront the inequalities and precarity of much of the museum sector now also struggle to see a future in the field. The pandemic has exacerbated what so many queer and feminist museum workers, especially workers of colour, already know: the institution will not care for workers so museum workers must care for one another (Antar et al., 2020). With an intersectional feminist understanding of the structural change necessary for achieving this transformation, we consider how museum workers resisting the exclusions of capitalism and the legacies of colonialism have laid the groundwork for responding to the current pressing crisis impacting everyone. In the face of uncertainty, museum worker-led activism is pursuing feminist transformation of the sector in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) by building on existing solidarity initiatives, establishing mutual aid funds, unionizing with their colleagues, and calling for radical change.

We look at museums as a site of transformative activism in the US and the UK focusing on worker-led activism confronting the recent devastating layoffs and furloughs across the industry while also engaging with other long-standing social justice issues within the institutions where they work. Rather than surface-level initiatives, transformative change requires looking more concretely at where the power of museums as institutions lies by addressing sexism and racism directly, while also confronting the legacies of colonialism. We recognize the COVID-19 pandemic as just one of many overlapping experiences of crisis, acknowledging the interlinkages between the economic, political and social dimensions of the struggle for social justice. Importantly, the feminist museum workers mobilizing today are striving for more than achieving equality and justice for the individual worker but rather, as the feminists who successfully unionized the New Museum explain, 'changing the cultural landscape and reminding people that you can achieve so much more when you work together toward a common goal' (Fox et al., 2021).

As many institutions seek to repatriate<sup>1</sup> collection objects and confront colonial legacies in museums, it is critical to hold them to the same anti-racist standards of care and concern for museum workers. Although museum work is imbued with cultural cache for its proximity to wealth, organizing in museums is rarely funded and the field's long-time association with elitism undermines the sympathy museum workers might receive from would-be supporters. Museum positions are competitive, often demanding graduate degrees for entry-level positions and as a result, museum workers are frequently described as over-credentialed and underpaid (Baldwin and Ackerson, 2017: 175). Often burdened by student debt, museum workers struggle to pay rent in expensive cities on paltry salaries (Steinhauer, 2019). In a crowded field that touts notions of public trust and instilling a love of learning in the next generation, museum workers' values-driven passion for their field is used against them as their employers reinforce the idea that they should be grateful simply to have the job and because 'you get to do what you love' (Friedman, 2019).

Much has been written about ethics in museums (Yerkovich, 2016), as well as diversity and inclusion in the museum (Adair and Levin, 2020; Coleman, 2018; Janes and Sandell, 2019; Sandell, 2017; Sandell and Nightingale, 2012). However, this scholarship tends to focus on collection practices,<sup>2</sup> exhibitions and programmes, or serving visitors and the community. Motivated by social justice aims, recent work on museums is situating the experience of the museum worker as a site that matters and a place for

transforming the museum (Catlin-Legutko and Taylor, 2021; Murawski, 2021; Raicovich, 2021; Salerno et al., 2019). Given that the museum sector is a 'pink collar profession', some have drawn attention to the experiences of women, including making recommendations for how to address pay inequality, gender stereotypes, and the museum as a workplace for women (Baldwin and Ackerson, 2017). Instead of looking at women or gender in the museum through how it impacts the individual, we centre transformative intersectional feminist organizing that confronts gender-related injustice alongside other forms of structural inequality in the museum (Callihan and Feldman, 2018).

We the authors of this article are White, queer feminists. Margaret Middleton is an exhibit designer and museum consultant who spent the first 10 years of their career in American children's museums. Middleton writes and consults on queer and gender-inclusive museum practice and has been active in museum social justice efforts including MASS (Museums as a Site of Social) Action and Museum Workers Speak (MWS). Jamie Hagen is a lecturer in International Relations and the former Equality officer in the University and College Union at Queen's University Belfast whose work focuses on gender, peace, and security. We do not face the same precarities and inequities faced by many of the museum workers we focus on in this article: Hagen is a permanent full-time staff member at a University and Middleton is a freelancer whose contracts with museum clients were largely unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Context

The activism we consider in this article is grassroots, led predominantly by museum workers with the least institutional power and in the lowest pay brackets. The field is majority women, yet men maintain a larger share of the power and money (Schwarzer, 2010: 17). Most queer museum workers (Middleton, 2021: 183) and museum workers of colour are among the most precarious and poorly paid. The museums we reference here are larger, more prominent museums in the US and the UK, including art, science, and natural history museums. Although overall most museums are small,<sup>3</sup> large institutions have an outsized influence on the museum sector's public reputation and internal practices. These museums' traditional ties to wealthy donors, boards, and founders, penchant for glamorous galas, and public personas as keepers of riches obscure the lived experiences of most museum workers who are non-leadership staff. In this article, we focus on aspects of museum work that are often invisibilized: the experiences of workers who are employed full or part-time by museums, including (but not limited to) educators, docents, preparators, cafe and gift shop workers, and security staff. In our look at the mobilization of museum workers as a practice of feminist transformation, we build on Andreas Huyssen's (2019) assertion that, 'it is at the local level that . . . museums can best intervene in public debates about accountability, juridical proceedings and potential reconciliation' (p. 56).

When workers observe firsthand how the museum cares for collections objects better than the people who make the museum run (Baldwin and Ackerson, 2017: 163), some funnel their passion for the field into organizing for structural change. It is an activist initiative to situate museum professionals as workers and frame them within a labour movement. Organizing people with the identity of worker is a powerful act of solidarity

for everyone who 'does not own or otherwise control the workplace' (Kelly, 2019: 392). Transforming the museum requires structural and radical change, addressing the root causes of inequity. Intersectional feminist leadership seeks to address racism while prioritizing gender justice, both central to social transformation (Batliwala, 2011). Our objective here is to highlight the transformative leadership of feminist museum workers in a time of crisis magnified by the pandemic. It is through worker-led social justice organizing and protest that, 'the past can be opened up and its debilitation legacies transformed' (Hirsch, 2019: 3).

The activism we focus on is grassroots worker-led activism by museum workers for museum workers, foregrounding an intersectional understanding of inequality which unlike previous organizing efforts of this kind explicitly frames initiatives for changing the museum as feminist projects. This is examined through four lenses of organizing, one movement based, with the three other lenses defined by analytical categories of organizing: the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, decolonizing, unionizing and mutual-aid. We recognize any initiatives for transformation motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic builds on a legacy of ongoing mobilizing, mostly by workers of colour. We conclude by 'imagining otherwise' alongside museum organizers who are challenging the role of the museum in society and the role of the museum as a workplace as they work towards a more just vision of a museum of the future.

## **Do Black Lives Matter in the museum?**

In response to the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri, a group of prominent US-based museum professionals crafted the *Joint Statement from Museum Bloggers and Colleagues on Ferguson and Related Events* in which they urged the museum field to 'reflect on their internal oppressive practices and actively demonstrate their roles as change agents fully embedded in our nation's social, educational, and cultural infrastructure' (Brown and Russell, 2015: 114). Two Black women who contributed to the Joint Statement, museum consultant Adrienne Russell and historian Aleia Brown, whose research explores the material and digital culture of Black women's activism, began hosting Twitter discussions with the hashtag #MuseumsRespondtoFerguson 'to push museums and public historians to more thoughtfully engage race, racialized spaces and the history of state sanctioned violence' (Fletcher, 2016). Brown and Russell credit the accessibility of digital platforms with significant Black communities (like Twitter) for the way BLM influenced museum workers (Brown and Russell, 2015: 109).

Six years after #MuseumsRespondtoFerguson began, BLM protests reignited globally after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. The three women who founded the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, Patrisse Cullers, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, as Charlene Carruthers writes in her book about transformative social justice movements, are unapologetically black, queer, and feminist (Carruthers, 2018). Scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) argues that while Black women have always played an important role in organizing for Black freedom, the face of the BLM movement is largely queer and female while also being explicitly intersectional in their approach to organizing (pp. 165–167).

Following the protests, some museums and museum associations in the US were inspired to craft statements of their own in support of the movement (Jennings, 2015), with others adding diversity, equity, and inclusion language to their mission statements. In 2019 even the historically apolitical International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2019) proposed updating their 50-year-old official definition of ‘museum’ to include a reference to ‘social justice’. The proposal caused an international uproar with nine committee and board members resigning, and as a result, the new definition was not adopted (Knott, 2020).

Some statements, like the one from the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, specifically named BLM while also acknowledging police brutality and victims George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. However, many others like the statement from the Guggenheim in New York, were vague, making claims about listening, grieving, and supporting collective action for social justice with no specific commitments (Greenberger and Solomon, 2020). Some institutions drew connections to the legacy of colonialism in museums, like the 2020 statement from the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA) which announced their support for the BLM movement alongside support for Aboriginal Lives Matter. In their statement, AMaGA (2020) acknowledged indigenous ways of knowing and the ongoing effects of the violence of colonialism in Australian museums. The British Museum also released a statement asserting, ‘The British Museum stands in solidarity with the British Black community, with the African American community, with the Black community throughout the world. We are aligned with the spirit and soul of Black Lives Matter everywhere’ (Brown, 2020a). Immediately critics pointed out the hypocrisy of a museum claiming to stand with BLM while maintaining a firmly anti-restitution policy regarding looted objects in their collection (Brown, 2020a). The National Gallery of London did not mention BLM or police brutality in its statement at all, instead suggesting it was time to ‘listen, pose important questions and reflect’ on the role of the museum (Greenberger, 2020). Notably, the institution was the site of a BLM protest just days before the statement was issued making the lack of reference to the movement even more glaring (ibid). Gender or feminism is rarely mentioned in these BLM support statements. One notable exception is the statement from the Glasgow Women’s Library that pledged to amplify Black women’s voices and described themselves as ‘an intersectional feminist museum’ (Glasgow Women’s Library, 2020).

Six months after the flurry of statements, a reporter for *Artnet* followed up with some of the American museums to see where they were with their plans, but was met with repeated refusals museums to share their budgets they had allocated for the work they had spoken about doing, including staff training, creation of diversity and equity-focused positions and task forces, and the acquisition of works by Black artists (Small, 2021). The Metropolitan Museum of Art did report hiring a chief diversity officer (CDO), but there is little evidence that these positions make much difference in institutions unless there is a strong institutional commitment and structural change accompanying them. Rather than engaging in the more difficult work of acknowledging harm and shifting power dynamics within an institution necessary for meaningful change, too often CDO positions are appointed as token figurehead positions meant to outwardly signal an organization’s commitment to diversity and equity. The people who are hired to fill these

positions, usually women of colour, are often faced with racist work environments and stymied by leadership when they attempt to make any real change. This role is meant to single-handedly achieve new goals without affecting any existing roles, ultimately an unsustainable practice. Suffering frustration and burnout, 'they leave, or they are pushed out' (Owusu, 2020).

This experience mirrors queer theorist Sara Ahmed's (2012) findings from her interviews with diversity workers in Academia who speak about the experience of coming up against the brick wall of the institution as diversity workers (pp. 26–27). Organizers of Decolonize This Place,<sup>4</sup> a feminist grassroots collective that uses museums as sites of resistance and reclamation in their demonstrations, had a similar experience as they pushed from outside the institution, noticing, 'the default response of institutions to a crisis of governance is to contain and assimilate the crisis through internal processes that allow for stalling, evasion, and damage control while leaving systems that perpetuate injustice intact' (Decolonize This Place, 2021a).

If museums do not want their public statements to come across as 'inauthentic and performative', they need to focus on internal work, urges Melanie Adams,<sup>5</sup> director of the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum, and Kaleigh Bryant-Greenwell of American University's Antiracist Research and Policy Center (Adams and Bryant-Greenwell, 2021). Adams and Bryant-Greenwell cite toxic internal cultures, gatekeeping of access to the field, and White supremacist founders and collection policies as dimensions of museum practice that must be grappled with in order to meet BLM with authenticity (Adams and Bryant-Greenwell, 2021).

Independent curator Kelli Morgan (2020), who specializes in African American women's art and Black feminism, describes museums' performative struggle with diversity/equity/inclusion efforts as 'blatantly and purposefully ignorant'. Morgan wrote this upon leaving her curator position at the Indianapolis Museum of Art citing a toxic work environment (Bongiovanni, 2020).<sup>6</sup> Morgan draws direct connections between the racism she experienced in the museum workplace and the colonial history of museums arguing these institutions 'have decisively produced the very state of exclusion that publicly engaged art historians and curators (including myself) are currently working hard to dismantle' (Morgan, 2020).

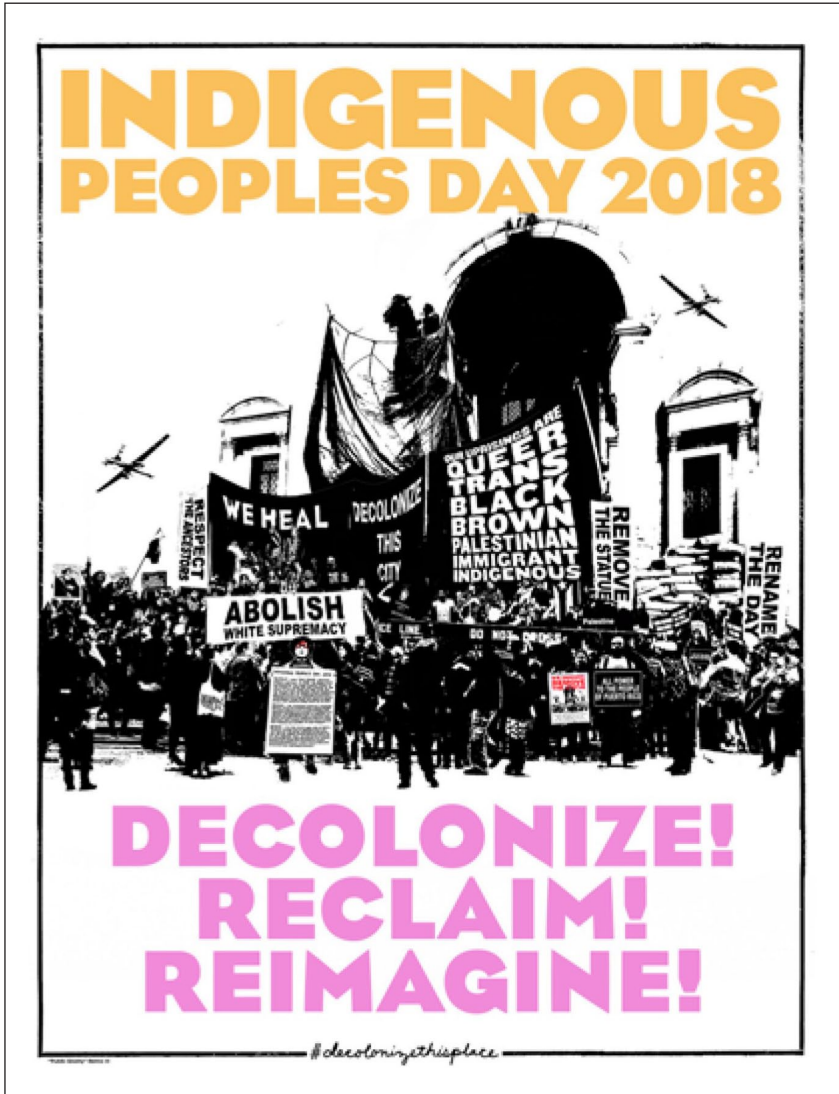
In 2020, Morgan participated in an oral history with a group of other Black women curators, including several queer curators, to reflect on how they got involved in curation and the direction of Black women's roles as part of curatorial practice at major institutions throughout the US (Adeyemi, 2020). In this conversation, two queer Black women, Meg Onli, the associate curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia, and Legacy Russell of the Studio Museum in Harlem reflect on the challenges of doing work that embraces diversity beyond only focusing on Blackness. Russell (2020) writes, 'I couldn't talk about being queer, or have any belonging within a feminist politic as part of my curatorial ethos' (p. 437). That fall Russell (2020) penned the widely acclaimed, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* which does just that by embracing those aspects of her gender understood by society as a glitch through a generative point of cyberfeminist refusal and creation.

## Decolonizing the museum

Amid a renewed public interest in decolonial practice spurred by global protest, the work of activist museum professionals has gained new traction. With more museum workers confronting their institutions' racist and colonial legacies, some misguided attempts by the museum at decolonizing take the form of diversifying rather than dismantling. Decolonize This Place co-founder Nitasha Dhillon warns against superficial engagements with decolonization that focus solely on representation in exhibitions: 'Just being critical of race and gender is not decolonization at all' (Cills, 2019) (Figure 1). Decolonizing requires the unlearning of Eurocentric history and exposing legacies of colonial genocide and slavery which continue to affect the everyday lives of people of colour while also valuing alternative locations of knowledge.

To historicize the decolonization struggle for museums requires an awareness of those who have long been working to confront inequalities in the museum sector. Two decades before BLM and Decolonize this Place, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), professor of indigenous education at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, wrote about the practice of decolonizing explaining, 'Coming to know the past has been a part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization' (p. 34). As such, conversations about decolonization in the public political discourse in the US and the UK often focuses on memorials and statues dedicated to historic figures who perpetuated and benefitted from slavery, colonialism, and empire. Activists around the world have used the removal of these symbols as part of larger protests: from Cape Town where Rhodes Must Fall protesters called for a statue of Cecil Rhodes to be demolished, to South Carolina where Bree Newsome climbed a flag pole and pulled down the Confederate flag, to Bristol where BLM protesters pushed a statue of Edwin Colston into the harbour. In museums, the vestiges of empire are evident in their collections. British journalist Gary Younge (2020) explains, 'Museums are incubators of memory and culture. In Britain, which has a selective amnesia about our colonial past, our museums and galleries reflect that. The recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations have challenged that amnesia'. Like statues and memorials, museum buildings and collections are symbols of that colonial past, so naturally museums became backdrops for BLM protests. While Younge's work focuses on British colonialism in museums, museums in other contexts are reckoning with their own pasts (eg. Pakistan, Peru, Argentina, Haiti, Korea, Japan, Hungary, Chile, Germany, Turkey, Lebanon, and Uganda). All of these countries also have their own histories of nationalism, state violence, military coups, and genocides to tackle (Altinay et al., 2019).

Curatorial interventions like updating labels and recontextualizing objects are popular early steps in the decolonization process. However, Dan Hicks, curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, does not think updating of labels is a panacea. He argues that regardless of the labelling, leaving stolen objects on display is 'allowing the violence to endure' and perpetuates the White supremacy that the displays were intentionally established to communicate in the first place (Younge, 2020). Instead, Hicks advocates museums repatriate stolen objects in their collections, with a focus on what are known as the Benin Bronzes, objects looted by the British in their bloody raid of the Kingdom of Benin in 1897 (Hicks, 2020). Museums all over the world hold Benin Bronzes in their collections despite the Nigerian government requesting their return. British Museum director



**Figure 1.** Indigenous People's Day poster calling for the removal of the statue of Theodore Roosevelt in front of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, 2018. Image courtesy Decolonize This Place.

Hartwig Fischer has expressed his reluctance to repatriate the Bronzes in the Museum's collection, suggesting instead that the Museum offer the objects on extended loan (Gompertz, 2020). However, as Nigerian-American historian Nwando Achibe states, 'you cannot loan back that which is not yours' (Wiggins and Fennell, 2020). Given that 90% to 95% of sub-Saharan cultural artefacts are housed outside Africa (Godonou,



2009), repatriation of looted objects will require significant commitment and investment from the museum sector.

But a commitment to decolonizing the museum must go beyond the collection; it must also include structural changes at the institutional level. The American and British museum workforce is majority White<sup>7</sup> and that poses a challenge to the work of decentering whiteness (Heller, 2018). Responding to this reality in UK museums, the professional network Museum Detox fosters solidarity among museum workers of colour and works to challenge institutional racism in museums. Sara Wajid, a founding member of Museum Detox, says that hiring leaders of colour is an important aspect of decolonization: 'In most museums the place where you see black staff is in cleaning and security. You won't see them in curatorial departments, you won't see them in management' (Gompertz, 2020). Wajid cites her role as co-CEO of Birmingham Museums Trust which she shares with another leader of colour, Zak Mensah, as exemplifying feminist and decolonial practice (Kendall Adams, 2020). Wajid's leadership role is significant: although women make up a majority of the art museum workforce, men still hold the majority of museum leadership positions in both the US and the UK (Andrew Mellon Foundation, 2019; Jones, 2015).

A significant obstacle to transforming the museum into a place that values racially diverse leadership and decolonial practice is the influence of board members, trustees, and donors. Activists with Decolonize This Place played a critical role in pressuring the Whitney Museum of American Art to remove military supply company owner Warren Kanderson from their board of directors (Decolonize This Place, 2021b). Kanderson is the owner of Safariland, a weapons manufacturer that owns Defense Technology, the company that supplied the tear gas used on migrants at the US/Mexico border, Indigenous Water Protectors protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline, and BLM protesters in Ferguson, Missouri (Cills, 2019). Activists have also successfully campaigned for the removal of climate denier Rebekah Mercer from the board of the American Museum of Natural History and groups like Culture Unstained continue to pressure the British Museum to cut ties with BP and to urge the Metropolitan Museum and Victorian & Albert Museum(V&A) to end their relationships with the Sackler family who own Purdue Pharma, makers of OxyContin, the drug at the centre of the opioid crisis. Campaigns like these demand that museum leaders answer for their relationships with corporations that are hostile to migrants, Indigenous people, Black people, the poor, and the ill despite their insistence that the museum is a space of political and ideological neutrality.

Created to combat this myth of museum neutrality, the Museums Are Not Neutral initiative was founded in 2017 by curator and cultural organizer La Tanya Autry along with educator and museum consultant Mike Murawski. The US-based initiative took the form of a social media hashtag and an online t-shirt campaign that in its first 3 years raised over \$20,000 for social justice causes including the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Museum Workers Relief Fund (MWRF). 'Our initiative spotlights actions for change and exposes how the claim of neutrality fosters unequal power relations', says Autry, 'and Museums Are Not Neutral became my way to inform people that I reject the status quo' (Autry and Murawski, 2019). Amanda Figueroa, co-founder of Brown Art Ink, draws parallels between the institutional critique of the Museums Are Not Neutral campaign to Chicana feminist frameworks that interrogate colonial and racist power

structures (Figueroa, 2020). Since its founding, the campaign's call to reject the status quo has spread to the UK. In Brighton, England in 2019, Museum Association director Sharon Heal invoked the phrase 'museums are not neutral' in her keynote address to attendees of the annual conference. The theme that year was 'Sustainable and Ethical Museums in a Globalized World' and in her speech, Heal addressed issues facing museums including climate change, restitution, decolonization, and democratization of museum collections and institutions (Heal, 2019).

## Unionizing the museum

Museum salaries continue to be one of the most obvious indicators of inequality for museum workers. Although US museums in recent years have been 'in a state of constant growth', boasting multi-million dollar expansion and renewal projects, museum workers report meager wages that force many of the most precarious workers to work second and third jobs only to qualify for subsidized housing in the expensive cities where they work (Steinhauer, 2019). In some of the biggest cities, museum directors not only receive outsized salaries but also generous perks including mortgages, housing stipends, and college tuition for their children. In 2015 the director of Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston received almost a million dollars (Healy and Pfeiffer, 2015), while unionized security staff held protests out in front of the museum for practices that could be interpreted as union-busting (Houseman, 2015) (Figure 2).

This inequality has been exacerbated by the pandemic. In *Culture in Crisis*, the policy guide developed by UNESCO to support a resilient creative culture, the impact of COVID-19 is described as having,

revealed fault lines in the world of arts and culture – weaknesses that were already there but have been exacerbated by the crisis. It has revealed gaps in the social and economic protection available to those at the heart of the cultural and creative industries, the artists and culture workers who are often freelancers with multiple employers, placing a stain on the schemes that already existed. (UNESCO, 2020: 6)

As the funding landscape changed and museums felt the pressure of the neoliberal drive for growth and expansion, these gaps and weaknesses became more and more apparent. The Museum Association (MA) has been tracking redundancies in the UK since March 2020 and as in the final count on March 2022 reported 4824 redundancies (MA, 2022). Nearly half of respondents to an April 2021 American Alliance of Museums (AAM, 2021) survey reported that their total staff size has decreased by an average of 29% and only 44% of all respondents plan to rehire or increase their staff size in the coming year. Since the report came out, US museums have reported rehiring in curatorial and leadership roles, but the hardest hit lower levels have yet to see the same level of recovery (Ludel, 2021).

In addition to drawing attention to the wide gaps between the highest and lowest salaries, a number of museum worker efforts highlight the increasing precarity in the industry. For example, the Museum Freelance survey in 2020 surveyed 314 people working in the museum sector, offering some of the only existing data about freelancers' experiences



**Figure 2.** The protest poster of a security guard at Museum of Fine Arts in Boston comparing the value of the staff to the value of the art in the museum, 2015. Photo by Haley ED Houseman for Hyperallergic.

working in the UK. The survey found that 83% of survey respondents are women stating this could be attributed to, ‘the flexibility that freelancing can provide for people with caring responsibilities; the incompatibility of some employed positions with caring responsibilities, forcing women out of such positions; and the limited career progression opportunities for senior women in the sector’ (Museum Freelance, 2020: 16).

A groundswell of union organizing efforts were taking place in museums in the years prior to the pandemic. In an effort to improve working-class representation in museums, the UK-based Museum as Muck group was founded in 2018. That same year approximately 200 members of MoMA Local 2110 (which represents white-collar workers across the museum) walked off the job and took over the lobby of the Museum for Modern Art in New York City chanting ‘Modern art, ancient wages!’ (Cascone, 2018). The following year, science museum workers from the National Science and Media Museum in Bradford, the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, Blythe House in London, and the National Collections Centre in Wroughton, Wiltshire, went on strike over pay for 14 days in October (BBC News, 2019). Museum security workers went on strike for 5 days at the Centre Pompidou museum in 2017 (Buffenstein, 2017), the Louvre

in 2019 (Wansley, 2019), and the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston in 2019 and again in 2021.<sup>8</sup>

These examples represent only a cursory overview of the dozens of actions by museum workers in the US and the UK to either start a union or strike for fair pay in recent years. There are some notable differences when it comes to the US and UK legal landscapes for collective bargaining. While both countries are hostile to union organizing, the US has a much more robust and established industry devoted to union busting, although these tactics are now also spreading to the UK (Logan, 2009). Another importance difference, unlike the US, the UK does not require majority support to establish a union (Logan, 2009). Union membership in the UK (23.2%) is nearly double that in the US (10.1%) (McCarthy, 2021).

Given the unequal distribution of pay and lack of job security for museum workers in more precarious or under-valued roles, in many instances layoffs began with workers in visitor-facing positions like retail, catering, education, and programming (AAM, 2021) before hitting museum workers in positions higher up in the institution. For example, the Tate museum laid off 313 staff from Tate Enterprises which amounts to nearly half their workforce in London, Liverpool and St. Ives in August 2020 (Brown, 2020b). Tate then cut an additional 120 gallery jobs in November (Bakare, 2020). 'This is about survival', said Helen Legg, director of Tate Liverpool, when asked about the layoffs (Swain, 2020). The Public and Commercial Services Union that represents many Tate workers noted the hypocrisy of the layoffs amid the Tate's recent statements in support of BLM, stating: 'Many of these colleagues will be amongst the lowest-paid staff on the Tate estate, with some at risk earning little more than the national minimum wage, and in some of the most diverse teams across Tate' (Quinn, 2020). Southbank Art Centre, the largest of its kind in the UK, warned of nearly 400 cuts due to COVID-19 in July 2020 which would amount to roughly two thirds of staff (Bailey, 2020). The Centre faced massive backlash, including the #SouthBankSOS letter signed by over 6000 people (Save Our Southbank, 2021). The letter also made explicit the outcomes from proposed layoffs that threatened to reduce the number of Black and Asian employees by 6%:

The current representation of BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] staff (20%) is already wrongfully low and does not reflect the wider population in its local borough of Lambeth (47.2%) or London as a whole (40.8%). These actions to reduce levels of BAME staff so significantly contradict statements made by management both internally to the Southbank Centre staff and BAME group, and externally and publicly around Black Lives Matter.

Additionally, the letter pointed to the institutional racism BAME staff face.

Feminist organizer Alicia Graziano explains the impetus behind her and fellow New Museum union members' organizing as a desire to 'create a change that would outlast all of us' (Steinhauer, 2019). Notably, the New Museum was founded by feminist Marcia Tucker in New York City, NY, in 1977 who from the beginning sought to create a museum that was different from other museums where she had worked like the Whitney, with 'no top-down decision making, no palace intrigue, no favoritism, no quid pro quo, no secret negotiations' (Tucker, 2008: 125). Tucker's legacy working to create a nonhierarchical institution informed the mobilizing efforts at the New Museum. In a conversation with the *Art and Labor* podcast, three members of the union organizing committee, Garziano,

Dana Kopel, and Lily Bartle, speak about the hopes for the broader impact of their organizing strategy. Bartle explains,

I hope that in the future people look at the New Museum union campaign as an example of how to diversify or challenge a mainstream feminist perspective because so many of the museum directors are women, so many of the people in power are women, and yet there is still so much inequity at that institution, it just really speaks to how inadequate a mainstream corporate feminist model is for actually creating equity in an institution. (Fox et al., 2021)

Together the organizers critique the representational politics of women leaders in the museum, centering the need to address class-based inequality noting, ‘no matter who is at the top, if they are making 20 times more than their employees it’s a problem, and it’s not a feminist institution’ (Fox et al., 2021). Organizing with an explicitly intersectional feminist mission is a transformative approach to addressing inequality in the museum (New Museum Union, 2019).

## **Mutual aid in the museum**

Although many contemporary US museums are more vocal than ever in espousing values of welcoming and inclusion, the women-led collective Museum Workers Speak (MWS) has pointed out the failure of museums to truly uphold these values as largely White institutions with White leadership and colonial legacies, firmly embedded in the nonprofit industrial complex. The collective which aims to ‘build solidarity and exert pressure on museum leadership to protect workers’ began at a 2015 gathering in Atlanta, Georgia, during the AAM annual meeting. Held at an off-site location, the event was not an official offering of the conference, the largest of its kind in the US and known for its steep cost of attendance. Together, museum workers discussed labour, access, and inclusion in the museum field and a collective of activists was born. Reflecting on the event MWS organizers Alyssa Greenberg and Nina Palaez (2015) note, ‘a discussion about museum labor practices is inevitably a discussion about racism, sexism, misogyny, elitism, and various other social inequalities’, and this discussion was no exception.

When the pandemic hit and museums began mass lay-offs and furloughs, MWS activists launched the Museum Workers Relief Fund (MWRF). Rather than respond to crisis on an individual basis, mutual aid offers ways of working together for survival. As Dean Spade (2020) argues,

Mutual aid cultivates the practices and structures that move us toward our goal: a society organized by collective self-determination, where people have a say in all parts of their lives rather than facing the coercive non-choice between sinking or swimming: between joining a brutal and exploitative workforce, insurance scheme, or housing market, or risk being left in the cold. (p. 40)

Because of these dynamics, under resourced queer and trans communities who may not be able to rely on state-based health care or safety nets have found mutual aid organizing especially powerful. Recognizing this, in April 2020 Outright Action International, a LGBTIQ human rights non-governmental organization that addresses human rights

violations and abuses against LGBTIQ people launched the COVID-19 Global LGBTIQ Emergency Fund with the stated aim of making a 'transformative difference and save lives' (Stern, 2020). Beginning in April 2020 Outright's mutual aid fund began granting \$2500–\$10,000 to LGBTIQ grassroots organizations. Likewise, MWRF sought transformative change through small grants.

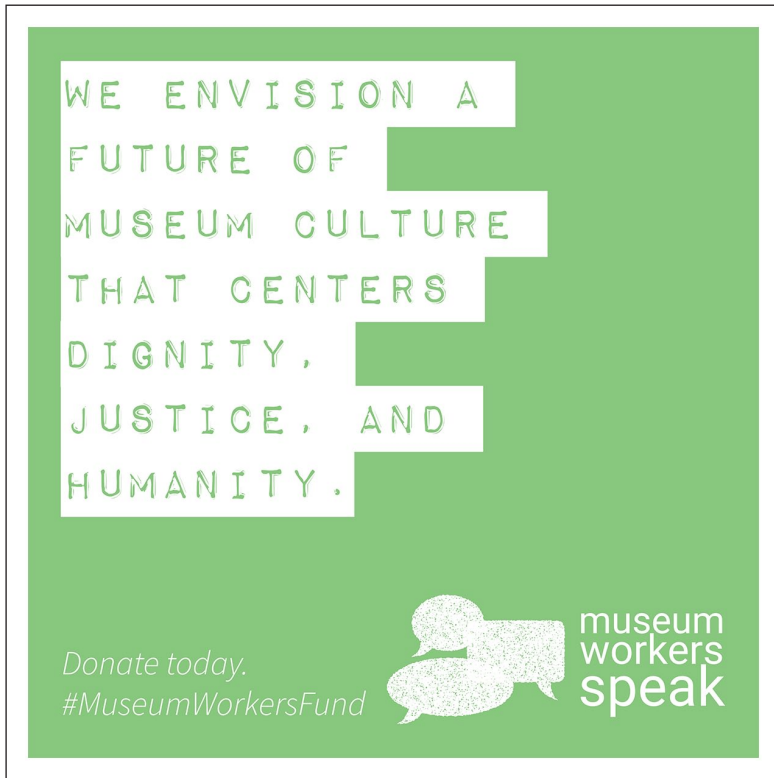
Before the pandemic, museum workers had already been facing racial discrimination, low wages, and a lack of benefits like paid time off and employer-paid health insurance. This was magnified as lay-offs disproportionately impacted front-of-house, security, and education staff, the most racially diverse departments of the museum. The MWRF mutual aid fund is based on the concept of radical redistribution. The plan was to raise \$10,000 and then use a lottery system to select 20 recipients of \$500 donations. In line with a mutual aid approach rather than a framework of charity, applicants were not chosen based on merit and they were not required to prove their need. Amid BLM protests, Black applicants were given priority for the second round of payments, and Black and indigenous applicants were prioritized in the third. The lottery system did not take gender into account when making awards. MWS ultimately far exceeded their goal, raising over \$80,000 in aid (Figure 3).

In some instances, the mutual aid funds that proliferated amid the pandemic served culture workers broadly, as was the case with the MWRF. In other instances, funds were geared specifically to museum workers employed by or recently fired from specific institutions, as was the case with funds for the Tenement Museum, The Brooklyn Museum, the MFA in Boston (this fund raised over \$100,000 (Cascone, 2020)), and Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

In the case of the Tenement Museum, the organizing involved in launching their Mutual Aid Fund built on the momentum from their recent unionization efforts. Soon after the pandemic began, 12 of the 89 members of the Tenement Museum Union bargaining unit were laid off. Union organizers responded with a multi-pronged approach which included suing the museum, but also launching a Tenement Museum Union Mutual Aid In Hardship Fund in March (TMUMAIHF) which raised \$23,398 within the first 3 months (Figure 4). In June of 2020, as the mutual aid initiative continued, organizers posted an update to the GoFundMe Page for the fund with direct mention of racism and police brutality (TMUMAIHF, 2020). The statement also contextualizes the Union's commitment to the BLM movement by using their Tenement Museum expertise in immigration history to draw clear connections between workers' rights and racial justice (TMUMAIHF, 2020). By linking mutual aid efforts to a commitment to racial justice, museum workers found ways to use a time of crisis to build solidarity by asking more of each other and more of their institution. The union was awarded a contract in December 2021.

Members of MWS point to a continuing lack of institutional support for their work explaining in a blog for National Art Education Association (NAEA) that museums and their funding structures operate under capitalism and mutual aid is an alternative model that 'can be adapted to a more sustainable, long-term version that centers human dignity' (NAEA Museum Education, 2020).

Notably, the AAM barely acknowledged the MWRF despite publishing two blogs about mutual aid funds in museums, including one with a link to a toolkit for establishing

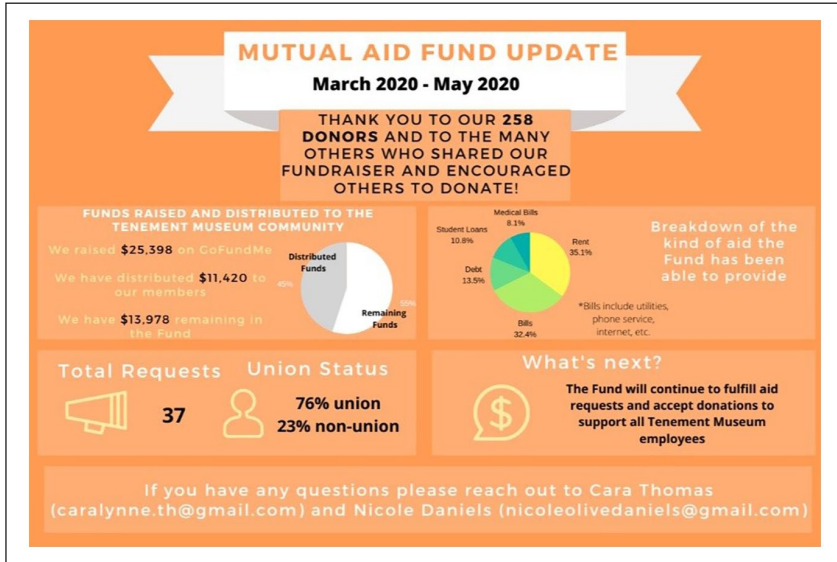


**Figure 3.** Museum Workers Relief Fund mutual aid campaign promotional graphic, 2020. Image courtesy Museum Workers Speak.

a museum mutual-aid fund (Merritt, 2020). The toolkit was developed by the organizers of the mutual aid fund at the MFA Boston (whose efforts were informed by the mutual aid organizing at the Brooklyn Museum and the Tenement Museum). In contrast with the work of MWS, these initiatives are structured as aid in the framework of ‘staff for staff’ with organizers being encouraged to alert their institution prior to beginning the fund. It is not evident confronting structural and systemic inequalities is a commitment made by most of these museum mutual aid efforts, especially given that many closed less than 1 year after being established.

Paula Santos, MWRf organizer, educator, and founding host of *Cultura Conscious*, a podcast that explores the intersection of museum work and social justice, articulates the complexity of transformation amid crisis: ‘Perhaps this is a moment of loss, of intense loss, but we are literally building the foundation in this moment of what we want museums to be and what we want us to be to each other right now’ (Anderson, 2020). Becoming active in mutual aid efforts can serve as an onramp for further transformative work to address harm while working in community (Spade, 2020: 96).

While the growing interest in mutual-aid organizing is welcome, there is also anger and frustration that the new mutual aid initiatives do not always work alongside or even



**Figure 4.** Tenement Museum Union mutual aid fund update infographic, 2020. Image courtesy Tenement Museum Union.

acknowledge previously existing mutual aid work. As Eshe Kiama Zuri (2020), a queer Black founder of a radical mutual aid group UK Mutual Aid in 2018, observes in an article for *gal-dem*, White people are choosing to create new networks instead of supporting preexisting local marginalized community networks. Zuri compares this trend of ‘discovering’ community and organizing as a kind of colonization and points out the lack of transformative potential in initiatives that ‘that only comes into existence once the privileged people in society start needing support’ (Zuri, 2020). Furthermore, Zuri emphasizes the importance of reparations and redistribution of wealth a central component of the work that mutual aid can do as anti-racist efforts.

## The museum of the future

In the same way that decolonization demands grappling with legacy, visionary organizing in museums relies on reflecting on the past to imagine the future. Decolonize This Place co-founder Amin Husain describes visionary organizing as being, ‘about building as much as it is about resisting’ (Cills, 2019). Part of this building means connecting with those movements that have not always been invited in or celebrated as part of the museum sector such as queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming youth who participated in week 7 of the 9 Weeks of Art + Action organized by Decolonize this Place in 2019 (Decolonize this Place, 2019). As Black women museum leaders, Adams and Bryant-Greenwell (2021) envision a future of museums where power is not diversified but instead originates with community power among people within historically marginalized groups. Likewise, museum visionary and activist-scholar Porchia Moore acknowledges the shared trauma of the pandemic and the compounded trauma for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other



people of colour) individuals amid a global racial uprising in her keynote speech for the Death to Museums unconference. In her address she calls on fellow museum workers to

come together to collectively reject this notion of The New Normal. The things that made us normal before are the things that actually hurt our discipline. We normalized legacies of exclusion. We normalized low wages in the field. We normalized dominant white leadership. We normalized white supremacist workplace culture. (Moore, 2020)

In her speech, Moore calls for specific actions museums must take in order to ‘burn themselves down and rise from the ashes’: deconstructing the board, distributing leadership, actively naming and calling out racism and anti-Blackness. This aligns with the motivations of groups like the UK-based group Space Invaders (2021),<sup>9</sup> founded in 2016, whose crowd-sourced feminist manifesto makes explicit demands for equal power, fair conditions and sharing stories about women in museum spaces.

The contemporary art exhibition ‘Imagine Otherwise’ at the Museum of Contemporary Art (moCa) in Cleveland is an example of museum professionals bringing the Black feminist values of institutional critique, redistribution, and future-visioning to museums. The artworks draw inspiration from Afrofuturism as well as Black and queer organizing. Opened to the public in February 2021, the exhibition was imagined into being by La Tanya Autry, a cultural organizer focused on social justice and public memory and who cites the influence of Black feminist and womanist thought in her work. Recognizing the racial inequity of Cleveland art spaces, Autry spread the wealth by hosting part of the exhibition at the White institution of moCa and hosting other parts at two Black-owned art spaces in Cleveland: Third Space Action Lab and the Museum of Creative Human Art (Boucher, 2021). Autry was the first Black on-staff curator to put on exhibitions at moCa. In a personal essay for *Hyperallergic* Autry (2021) writes, ‘Often people celebrate “first Black . . .” appointments while failing to consider the internal dynamics, the realities of existing in these white workplaces’. She goes on to detail the racism she experienced while curating the exhibit and her eventual decision to leave moCa (Autry, 2021).

Relying on individual workers to do the heavy lifting in representing and engaging with marginalized communities comes at a cost. To be sustainable, transformation requires solidarity from workers who have power and privilege within museums. Museum workers have made clear, context-specific guidance about what structural changes need to take place to transform the museum. This has taken many forms ranging from crowd-sourced resource guides, open letters with specific demands of institutions to academic publications with guiding principles of allyship to confront White supremacy. Museums are encouraged to embrace practices like a celebration of queer possibility to actively interpret beyond White supremacy and heteronormativity in a queer positive way (Middleton, 2020). At present many museum workers are finding it unsustainable and unhealthy to stay in a sector that not only gives little support to this work but also often punishes it (Pogrebin, 2018).

## Conclusion

Transformation-minded museum workers argue that it matters whether or not a museum makes a commitment to social justice beyond their mission statement. What does it look

like to be explicitly feminist as a museum? What does it mean to be committed to queer possibility while confronting queer erasure? What actions are necessary for museums to reject assumed neutrality and to instead really open themselves up to historical reckoning with the power structures that have sustained them, and to collective re-imagining of the museum as an inclusive, egalitarian, transformative site? Many of the museum workers we engage with in this article have already invested significant labour doing the creative and challenging work of re-imagining the museum as this future place, a museum that prioritizes structural transformation and embraces solidarity among workers.

As institutions continue to focus on challenges to their own survival, museum workers committed to transformation are asking who gets to survive and what does this survival look like through the lens of social justice? Will this moment prove a time for listening, learning and transformation, or a rush to return to normal? Ultimately, how museums meet this moment of widespread pain and struggle will have lasting implications for who and what makes up the museum of the future. Feminist worker-led mobilizations towards the museum of the future are taking advantage of this moment to push the museum in new directions. It is important to recognize this work would not be possible without the efforts of museum workers who called for massive change in the museum sector long before the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have shown how efforts for social justice in the museum, whether through diversity and inclusion hires, or public engagement with movements such as BLM and decolonizing the museum, are inadequate if they are not led by museum workers and are not also tied to commitments by the museum to transform their relationship to museum workers. Future research about transforming the museum will benefit from looking beyond more privileged voices. Worker-led feminist activism serves to demystify the way museums operate while offering new ideas for how museums can meet a spectrum of demands for social justice.

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### **Notes**

1. Referred to as 'restitution' in the UK context.
2. Collecting practices include accessioning, deaccessioning, and restitution of museum objects.
3. AASLH (American Association of State and Local History) defines a small museum as having an annual budget of less than \$250,000, operating with a small staff with multiple responsibilities and employing volunteers to perform key staff functions (<https://aaslh.org/communities/smallmuseums/>).

4. Founded in 2016, Decolonize This Place ‘aim[s] to cultivate a politics of autonomy, solidarity, and mutual aid within a long-term, multi-generational horizon of decolonial, anti-capitalist, and feminist liberation’ (Decolonize This Place, 2021a). While the transformation of museums are included in their demands, the movement is far more broad-reaching, encompassing liberation causes for Indigenous and Black people as well as the people of Palestine and Puerto Rico, workers, debtors, and migrants, and the fight against gentrification and patriarchy (Decolonize This Place, 2021b).
5. During the Ferguson uprising, Adams held the position of Managing Director of Community Education and Events at the Missouri History Museum where she and her colleagues hosted responsive community programming including a town hall and collected ephemera from the protests for the museum collection.
6. Six months later, the Indianapolis Museum of Art came under public scrutiny for a job posting for a new director in which they described their goals for the position as ‘attract a broader and more diverse audience while maintaining the Museum’s traditional, core, white art audience’ (Bahr, 2021).
7. Twenty-eight percent of US art museum employees are people of colour (Andrew Mellon Foundation, 2019). According to the latest report from the Arts Council in England, only 6% of museum workers in England identify as Black, Asian and minority ethnic (Arts Council England, 2020: 8).
8. Notably, about 70% of all staff at the Museum of Fine Art Boston are White, the majority of security guards are people of colour (Greenberg and Sweeney, 2019).
9. The group gets their name from feminist scholar Nirmal Puwar’s 2004 book *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* which examines the embodied experience of taking up space in institutions to promote gendered and racialized diversity.

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