# An Exploration of Race, Social Media, and Museums

*by Porchia Moore*

**Porchia Moore** *is a third year PhD Candidate at the University of South Carolina in the School of Library and Information Science. She is the recipient of the Cultural Heritage Informatics Leadership Fellowship. She may be contacted at moorepa@email.sc.edu.*

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## The Issue: Museums, Race, and Social Media

For years museum professionals have worked diligently within minority communities to increase active engagement. Diversity is a chief concern for museum professionals because it promotes the core values of the modern museum. It is my belief, however, that one aspect of diversity requiring immediate examination in the museum community is the realm of social media. While we have made great strides in bridging the gap in minorities' use of home-based broadband internet, I believe that there is a new dimension of the digital divide to which museums especially need to pay close attention. Museums may be unwittingly excluding people of color as a result of minorities' lack of participation within museum's social media platforms. We must be careful that as museums work toward the goal of total digital immersion, an agenda which includes social media as the fulcrum, visitors of color do not become even further marginalized. In addition, a gulf presently exists in the diversity of physical visitors to museums. If the numbers of visitors of color do not measure up physically, how can we expect them to be equally substantive, or even translate, digitally?

## What's at Stake

The ideas presented here are my own opinion, and at this stage, are in response to some key writings central to my pre-dissertation research. I am curious to understand how museums are addressing social media engagement directed towards communities of color. Some of my questions about how race operates within the museum stem from my reaction to assertions about race in John H. Falk's *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience.* In this seminal text, the author states:

> Overwhelmingly, these many efforts to describe museum audiences categorized visitors utilizing traditional demographic categories like age, education, gender and race/ethnicity; qualities of individuals that do not vary from day to day—a white female is always a white female. A predictable outcome of segmenting groups into various measureable categories such as demographics is that patterns emerge, whether those patterns are actually meaningful or not is another question (Desolneux, Moisan & Morel, 2008). So it is perhaps not surprising that a number of demographic variables have been found to positively correlate with museum going, for example the finding that museumgoers are likely to be white, well educated and affluent (e.g., Doering & Bickford, 1994). However in an intensive multi year investigation of the use of museums by African Americans I came to the conclusion that race/ethnicity provided no useful insights into why black Americans did or did not visit museums (Falk, 1993); and subsequent research in Los Angeles has confirmed that race/ethnicity, as well as age and even education and occupation are poor predictors of who does or does not visit museums. (2009).

I believe that we do not fully understand the role that race plays in museums. I would argue that the qualities of individuals do vary from day to day. The white female mentioned above will enter

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the museum and be viewed as white, consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, implicit assumptions, attitudes, behaviors, and privileges will have been assigned to her the moment that she steps into the museum. How will these implicit assumptions, attitudes, behaviors, and privileges extend to the museum's social media platforms? My main point here is that Falk's assertion that race is not an indicator of who might visit a museum is not wholly accurate because the American museum—in particular its social media platforms—is rarely viewed and therefore has not been studied as a racialized space. Perhaps, what patterns emerge in terms of racial demographics have yet to be discovered. Social media platforms are based on the social nature of a core group of users. In the context of the museum it is possible that these social media participants are mostly white. Museum exhibits implicitly create invited spaces. Are our social media platforms equally inviting? Even if they are, is there a likelihood that museums, especially in their membership communications, only do more to "subtly encourage [their visitors] to assume the role of 'beneficiaries' or 'clients,' which influences what people are perceived to be able to contribute, or entitled to know and decide" (Lynch and Albert, 2010).

My hope is that I can answer some of these questions using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as an informative framework.

**What is Critical Race Theory?**
Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines the relationship among race, power, and institutional racism. The theory was initially established as a lens to spotlight racial injustices for people of

color involved in the legal system. Since its conception in the field of critical legal studies during the mid-70s, CRT has grown to become a significant theoretical framework taken up by a number of scholars in the field of education. For instance, Ellen Swartz, in her article, "Diversity: Gatekeeping Knowledge and Maintaining Inequalities," investigates how race influences educational success for students of color (2009). Critical race theorists within the education field study race and its subsequent influence on: a) educators, b) parents, c) administrators, and d) the educational system on a legal, social, economic, psychological, and policy basis. A number of tenets form the core of CRT, including:

- Racism is embedded in the fabric of American society.

- Inequalities of racism and social injustices cannot be met with a colorblind mentality.

- Race is socially constructed.

- Racial oppression involves intersectionality (sex, class, gender expression, etc.).

- Whiteness is considered a socially constructed normative which bears some form of societal privilege.

- It is essential to listen and respond to the lived personal experiences of people of color as the counter narratives to the dominant white narratives which shape societal norms.

Clearly many of the above tenants are

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weighty, even intimidating, and on first read may not seem applicable to the daily work of a museum. However, I encourage museum professionals to consider that while the implementation of technological innovations within the museum space is a progressive step toward capturing the audience of the Information Age, it is doubtful that technological innovations alone will sustain the existence of museums. Addressing the needs of museum visitors is a much more likely path to sustainability for museums. As changing racial demographics continue to literally darken the face of this country, museums will need to find real and lasting ways to engage the visitor of color, to promote the needs and interests of people of color, and to immediately halt any and all practices which impede cultural heritage institutions from demonstrating to visitors of color their value and importance as stakeholders.

Drawing on tenets from CRT inspires me to examine more closely how museums might benefit from a deeper, more active engagement with visitors of color. I believe that once museum professionals begin to critically examine and rethink policies and practices that institutionalize racism an increase in the number of visitors of color may occur. I envision that employing CRT as an analytical framework can provide access to the language, theory, and cultural context necessary to meet the unique information needs of the 21$^{st}$ century visitor of color. In particular, adopting a lens informed by CRT might help uncover the following:

1. How cultural heritage institutions unwittingly further exclude people of color as a result of the latter's lack of participation within museum's social media platforms.

2. The ways in which museum professionals unwittingly privilege white cultural mores in exhibitions, and how this might affect museum-going as a leisure activity for people of color.

3. How exhibition development and curatorial authority might be perceived as a dominant narrative of whiteness. This narrative could contribute to a sense of exclusion and isolation for non-whites.

**What We Know and Need to Know**

The Center for the Future of Museums reports that of the core group of museum visitors, only 9% are people of color (2010). Do we know if these visitors are actively participating in these museums' social media outlets? The 2012 research conducted by Adrienne Fletcher and Moon Lee, "Current Social Media Uses and Evaluations in American Museums," provides a great resource for beginning our task of creating racially diverse social media platforms. Fletcher and Moon's work identifies which social media platforms are being utilized and for what purposes. It also evaluates how museums are using social media platforms to foster engagement and full participation. What would occur if we created social media strategies that targeted visitors of color—would this effort result in an increase for both virtual and physical participation?

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(2013). For example, African Americans overwhelmingly prefer Instagram and Twitter to other platforms. In comparison, almost all users of Pinterest are white females under 50. Ken Vernon of the social media forum, "Everywhere All the Time" (2010) informs us that with respect to Facebook usage:

- 71% of the total number of Asian Americans surveyed used at least 1 time a week;

- 53% of the total number of Black Americans surveyed used at least 1 time a week;

- 52% of the total number of Hispanic Americans surveyed used at least 1 time a week.

In fact, people of color are highly connected to the web via their mobile devices. Museum professionals need to assess whether or not this usage is representative of their audiences. The question becomes, "Are they connected to your museum?" In particular, diversifying social media outlets becomes increasingly urgent as museums are relying more and more upon such media to promote exhibition and programming in conjunction with the new paradigm shift of museums as places of community for the community. Again, *whose* community?

**Implications and New Horizons**

There is much that we can and must learn about race and social media in order to understand the information needs of the 21st century museum visitor of color. I would like museum professionals to consider that we need to re-imagine the museum as a kaleidoscope. The museum itself is the cylinder, the colored bits of glass beads and paper represent the diverse racial groups, the mirrors are its objects, and racial diversity is the light we draw upon to produce a multi-faceted vision—a racially kaleidoscopic vision. Where are museums headed with all of this brilliant, innovative work around technology and digital immersion if people of color are not really actively participating in the process? Moving forward, how can we create a kaleidoscopic vision of what culture is?

If we share the belief that museums are as much about people as about objects, then museum professionals will have to go about the business of developing new ways to create active participation and engagement for the visitor of color—especially online. Moving forward, I encourage museum professionals to facilitate important conversations within and between various departments to ensure diversity is present in the following areas:

- Marketing materials and plans;

- Representations in staff;

- Exhibition and content;

- Collaborative partnerships and programming.

Tackling these issues collectively will go a long way toward the goal of completely diversifying the museum. Accordingly, museums should be asking four key questions of their social media departments:

1. Who are the friends of our museum's friends?

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What conversations are taking place in online communities?  What are the information needs for minority users interested in cultural heritage?

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2. Who is re-tweeting our tweets?

3. Within other social media platforms employed such as Instagram, Vine, and Pinterest, is the content and perspective racially inclusive and balanced?

4. Are we aware of the social media trends and behaviors of people of color and are we engaging visitors accordingly?

**Concluding Thoughts: Striving for the Kaleidoscope**

Globally, we are more connected than ever. The term community is being used frequently to describe our online audience. What conversations are taking place in online communities? What are the information needs for minority users interested in cultural heritage? The museum must be prepared to answer these questions. Without realizing it silence can be viewed as an act of exclusion. Hesitancy and inaction can be viewed as exclusion. In what ways have museums established patterns of inclusion and exclusion?—this is the core question. It is not enough to draft diversity initiatives if we are not truthful with ourselves in assessing the efficacy of our work. We need to learn the language of cultural competency. We need to understand what racially coded language is and the exclusive messages it sends to users and non-users—especially within our social media platforms.

It has been my experience that people want to see themselves in totality; not in sparse chunks or—to return to my metaphor— not in dim light. Visitors want to see patterns of shared authority, equity, and power in the museum. The kaleidoscope holds the viewer's attention because there is startling beauty in its diverse colors and patterns. Museums have the ability to sustain the gaze of people of color if we make our vision, and subsequently our missions, racially kaleidoscopic. Failure to do so would be like looking through a kaleidoscope to discover that only green beads were inside. Imagine that. ✺