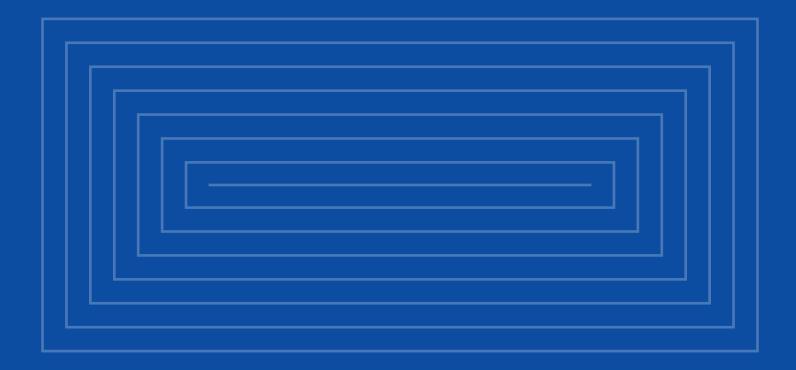# (Re) Frame

The Case for New Language in the 21st-Century Museum

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Museums strive to be welcoming places, but the ways museums communicate can inadvertently exclude and alienate visitors. Words have the power to reinforce or negate the social value of museums.

This concern has been central to our individual and collective work. In her work with the Incluseum, Rose has been encouraging museums to unpack what they mean by terms such as "diversity," "inclusion," and "community." Margaret's perspective on inclusive language is informed by her experience working with children's museums and her queer activism. Her focus is on making museums welcoming places for families of all kinds, with special emphasis on sexual and gender identity. In her activist scholarship and consulting work, Porchia employs "Critical Race Theory" to interrogate cultural heritage institutions, using it as a tool to uncover the ways in which structural racism functions as an embedded barrier to participation for visitors of color.[1] She has been an advocate for dismantling legacies of social exclusion in order to increase equity in the representation of cultural heritage in digital and physical landscapes. Since 2014, we have been bringing these complementary perspectives together, co-authoring blog posts for the Incluseum blog and giving presentations on the power of words. Throughout this work, Margaret's "Family-Inclusive Language Guide," which lays out inclusive ways to talk about family, has been a powerful tool.

After a brief conceptual exploration of why words matter, we will use our Family-Inclusive Language Guide to show how word choices can hide unconscious personal and institutional biases and assumptions about concepts like "family," which we focus on in this article. We will then present two cases of how the guide has been used in museums for docent training. While these cases focus on personal interactions with visitors, we believe they shed light on larger issues of language that extend beyond how we face-to-face interactions with visitors to how we write for them in exhibitions. This is what concerns us: how words and their use in language can perpetuate unjust power dynamics—by dismissing narratives that do not fit the dominant perspective, providing false consensus, or serving as code.

1   Critical Race Theory, or CRT, examines culture, society, law, and power through the lens of American racial hierarchies. For more on CRT, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Garry Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York, New York: The New Press, 1996).

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Words Matter

Word choice matters. Words communicate cultural meanings and values, and can influence attitudes and actions. On an individual level, words can hurt or affirm us. On an institutional level, the presence or omission of certain words can help people—or make them feel excluded. While isolated occurrences of hurt feelings and exclusion might be passed off as common and benign, when these incidents occur recurrently across interpersonal encounters and institutional settings, they become a systemic problem.

For example, exhibit labels that describe the United States as a country made up entirely of immigrants are not only inaccurate, they contribute to the erasure of the experiences of the millions of indigenous people who lived in North America before colonization, as well as that of the enslaved Africans who were forcibly brought to the country.

Cornell University history professor Edward E. Baptist, whose studies focus on the history of the 19th-century United States, and in particular on the enslavement of African Americans in the South, illustrates how this unfolds. Power is reinscribed, he argues, through the words used to describe social phenomena and practices. For instance, he provocatively argues that reframing "plantations" as "slave labor camps" would have a significant impact on our relationship to the past. In this example, the word "plantation" obfuscates the reality of slavery, essentially recounting it through the dominant lens of white culture and supremacy. The term "slave labor camps," however, centers the reality of slavery rendered invisible by the word "plantation," thereby legitimizing its existence and inherent injustice.[2] Imagine how this reframing—from "plantations" to "slave labor camps"—would impact how curators and designers approach an exhibition.

"We"-statements, commonly used in exhibition labels, can provide a false sense of consensus that can be experienced as marginalizing. For example, labels that read "we won the war" or "we wouldn't do this nowadays" assume a specific audience and exclude anyone with a different experience. There are, of course, exceptions: when "we" is used to represent a specific, identified team or is referencing the human race (an instance most frequently found in science museum exhibitions). But in every other instance, the first-person plural will undoubtedly leave someone out.

Finally, coded language can contribute to perceptions of Other or Outsider status for certain visitors, and must be interrogated. One example is the use of the term "Community." Museum professionals often speak of and create exhibition and programming for "The Community." However, within the context of diversity initiatives, the term "Community" often becomes code for discussing black and brown visitors or other marginalized groups.

As trusted institutions with a history of being associated with the dominant perspective of wealth and whiteness, museums must resist taking their power for granted, and must instead

2   Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 2014).

embrace the opportunity to be allies. "Ally practice," writes exhibit designer Xander Karkruff in "Queer Matters: Transforming Museums Through Ally Practice," is "an implementation framework that museum professionals can use to transform inclusive ideals into concrete actions."[3] An ally is usually thought of as an individual, but allyship can occur any time an entity in the dominant group leverages their privilege in support of an entity outside that dominant group.

In the same way that "Community" is often used as code for black and brown visitors, "Family" is often used as code for a nuclear family with two heterosexual legally married parents of the same race and their biological children, residing in the same household.

Family-Inclusive Language

One concrete way that museums can act as allies is by making thoughtful word choices in everything communicated by the museum: written, spoken, and visual. This includes exhibition labels, websites, tours, front desk scripts, press releases, membership forms, wayfinding symbols, marketing photos, grant applications, and tweets. By reading and listening

critically, museums can begin to identify the problematic phrases they are using and substitute more inclusive choices that avoid making assumptions about staff and visitors' lived experiences.[4]

In the same way that "Community" is often used as code for black and brown visitors, "Family" is often used as code for a nuclear family with two heterosexual, legally married parents of the same race and their biological children, residing in the same household. Yet according to a report by the Pew Research Center, "Fewer than half (46%) of U.S. kids younger than 18 years of age are living in a home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage."[5] In response to this data, Margaret, together with colleagues Laura Callen and Rachel Kadner, developed the term "21st-Century Family," and defined it as follows:

> **21st-Century Family n.**
>
> 1 A family as defined by the individuals involved, inclusive across race, culture, gender, age, and marital status. Family members may or may not be biologically related, share the same household, or be legally recognized.
> 2 As opposed to "nuclear family."

Since the experiences of the majority of American children do not align with the outdated code for family, museums that are not actively engaging 21st-Century Families are not serving a significant population of visitors. Adopting inclusive language is one of the first steps to creating a welcoming environment for all families.

In order to help identify problematic phrases that had the potential to alienate visitors,

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3 Xander Karkruff, "Queer Matters: Transforming Museums Through Ally Practice" (master's thesis, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, 2014), p. 46, http://xanderkarkruff.weebly.com/graduatethesis.html.

4 For more on museums and language, see Rose Paquet Kinsley and Aletheia Wittman, "Bringing Self-Examination to the Center of Social Justice Work in Museums," *Museum*, January/February 2016, 40-45.
5 Gretchen Livingston, "Fewer than Half of U.S. Kids Today Live in a 'Traditional' Family," Pew Research Center, December 22, 2014, http://pewrsr.ch/1ZelGJX.

Family-Inclusive LANGUAGE

avoid	why?	instead
"parents" "mom" "dad" "mom and dad"	Not everyone accompanying a child is a parent. Grandparents, step-parents, and nannies may not identify as parents. Not all children have a mom and dad.	"grownup" "adult" "caregiver"
"son" "daughter"	The children in someone's care could be grandchildren, nieces, nephews, godchildren, etc. You may also not want to assume the gender of a child.	"children"
"extended family"	This term is usually meant to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins but for folks of many cultures this isn't "extended" family- it's just family.	"family"
"family resemblance"	We're conditioned to look for similar features in family members so you may see resemblance where there is none. Many families include step-parents, adoptive parents, or parents who conceived with donated eggs or sperm. Inversely, don't assume that a child who doesn't look like their caregiver is adopted- many multi-racial children resemble one parent more than the other.	keep it to yourself
"members of a household"	Families don't always live together. For example, families with divorced parents or incarcerated parents.	"family members"

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fig. 1. The Family-Inclusive Language Guide.

in 2014 Margaret developed the Family-Inclusive Language Guide (fig. 1) to help identify problematic phrases and offer suggestions for inclusive language alternatives.

Over the last two years, the Family-Inclusive Language guide has been used in different settings, including the Boston Children's Museum, Historic Columbia Foundation (a cultural organization that maintains seven historic house museums and garden), and the Columbia Museum of Art in Columbia, South Carolina.

Margaret's Experience: Floor-Staff Training and Implications for Exhibitions

When I joined the Boston Children's Museum (BCM), I brought with me the Family-Inclusive Language Guide I had created, and offered it as a tool for educators and exhibit developers. It caught on quickly, and is now included in the floor-staff handbook (and a reference copy of it can always be found in the staff lounge, for easy access).

As the originator of the guide, I was asked to lead a one-hour floor-staff training about family-inclusive language. We went through the guide line by line and talked about real-life scenarios in which this language might come up. As in many of the conversations I've facilitated about the guide, the discussion we had at BCM resonated deeply with participants, who shared anecdotes from their own lives: adoptive parents who are not recognized as family because they do not look like their children, mothers who are mistaken for grandmothers, and children with two fathers who are hurt and confused by everyone asking where their mommy is.

When I present this guide, I often receive positive feedback about how concrete and actionable the guide's suggestions are. When the three of us presented the guide at the American Alliance of Museum's 2015 annual meeting, several of the participants in our session said they were inspired to create style guides based on the chart—and to

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make new charts with other words that are in desperate need of unpacking, such as "community" and "diversity."

While it may be readily apparent how the Family-Inclusive Language Guide could be used in interpersonal interactions in the museum, as an exhibit designer I think about the important implications a more expansive definition of family could have on label text and exhibition development. For example, a content developer working on a science museum exhibition about heredity might think twice before including a label that assumes a visitor's family includes biologically related parents from whom they inherited traits. Children's museums could replace signage addressing "parents" with more inclusive signage addressing an "adult caregiver" or "grownup." Exhibits and facilities staff could advocate for museum seating that is easily moved and reconfigured by visitors to accommodate a variety of family sizes. Graphic designers could consciously choose to illustrate signage with depictions of families that go beyond the codified "nuclear family." These types of changes would go far in making all visitors feel welcome and included.

Porchia's Experience: The Relevance of Cultural Competence

In 2014, I was hired by Historic Columbia to conduct cultural competence training on an

ongoing basis for volunteers. Historic Columbia, located in Columbia, South Carolina, was developing strategies to create a more inclusively engaging experience throughout their seven historic sites. These sites include the newly reinterpreted Woodrow Wilson Family Home and the Mann-Simons site, a property owned by a formerly enslaved, African American couple, Celia Mann and Ben Delane. When Historic Columbia reopened the Woodrow Wilson Family Home to the public in fall 2014, it reinterpreted it—and the Reconstruction era—through the perspective of formerly enslaved people, such as the Delanes.

I was asked to help docents reframe their use of language to make the tour experience more inclusive for contemporary visitors—and thereby more relevant. Another goal was to assist volunteers in identifying outmoded terms that impacted their ability to help interpret sites as relevant 21st-century historic house museums. Using Margaret's Family-Inclusive Language Guide, I conduct training workshops with volunteers on the impact of language.

As we go through the guide, line by line, we discuss the significance of the inclusive words, and how actively choosing them ensures that each docent:

- sets a tone of inclusive intentionality at the start of every tour;
- models the institution's vision for inclusion, allyship, and cultural responsiveness;
- has the tools to provide a rationale for their word choices that the institution can back up in the event that a visitor questions or finds certain language problematic; and
- can facilitate deeper discussions about historical context (enslavement and Reconstruction), historic structures (presidential homes and legacies of classism and racism), and exhibition design.

An interesting outcome of these cultural competence trainings has been our discussions pertaining to the use of "family" as opposed to "extended family members." For many of the volunteers—who are Southern-born, over 50, and grew up in an era of entrenched institutional racism—a deeper level of discussion was required to critically assess the rationale for some of the language shifts. While many of the volunteers can understand why the language reframe is a necessary shift in order to help bring contemporary relevance to a tour, for others it is difficult to imagine why one might not distinguish between an extended family and traditional nuclear family structure. The conversations provide a great opportunity to discuss the wide range of definitions for family, definitions that can fluctuate according to cultural and gender perspectives.

The discussions are important in terms of examining how language choice might cause moments of discomfort or confusion for visitors. But we often uncover an even more complex impact for this differentiation: the ways that historic houses portray constructions of family when the house is connected with the history of enslavement. For example, in one of the historic houses, an old portrait is prominently featured. It portrays several white adults, small children—and one black adult, who at the time of the portrait was not a paid worker or servant but an enslaved individual. The inclusion of this person in the family portrait suggests familial ties and kinship. Yet, what is the reality? Several volunteers and one staff member shared how they did—or did not—reference the person of color as a family member. When I suggested that they reframe their language, it forced them to think about the ways in which they either included or excluded people of color in general, whether they were enslaved or formerly enslaved Africans.

In some of the most powerful exchanges we had, volunteers shared how they had typically addressed images on the tour that included people of color: they disregarded or quickly swept

over their presence; ignored the photograph entirely; or, they mentioned the enslaved person—but did not identify them as family because they felt uncomfortable about addressing the subject, and did not feel as if they had the language tools to do so without potentially offending visitors.

Subsequently, in 2015, I was hired by the Columbia Museum of Art to train both incoming and current volunteers on cultural competence, and to be an inclusion consultant for both the curatorial and education departments. I assist the museum in their bold, new mission to ensure relevance, community engagement, and racial equity as outlined in their new strategic plan. The training lasts 12 weeks for new volunteers, and spans an entire year or more for current volunteers. When we talk about how we can reframe language to address 21st-Century Families, volunteers often share how the words "mother" and "father" are automatic default choices for them. One volunteer, for example, shared that because she is raising her very young grandchild and looks particularly youthful, people often refer to her as the child's mother. This causes confusion and discomfort for the grandchild, who, understandably, feels the need to always correct the assumption.

During training, I used this volunteer's story to discuss the relevant impact of language reframes to ensure the creation of safe and inclusive family spaces. We spoke about the neutral quality of the term "caregiver" and how its use can make space for families of all structures. This conversation was the most important because I had shown volunteers roughly seven to eight images of families: gay and lesbian couples with children of varying ethnicities, intergenerational families, single-parent families, blended family structures, and more.

Together, we discussed how we might make the museum's interactive art gallery for children a place that fosters inclusion for all types of families—a space that would feel culturally relevant to 21st-Century Families. We talked about how the docents could use language to interact with visitors, and how this attention to language could also be applied to how they talk about the art and its associated history. This conversation was especially significant because the docents admitted that they had not once considered varying types of family structures beyond stepfamilies. And, it opened up the conversation for how the exhibition itself could be informed by new understandings.

Conclusion

By consciously choosing inclusive language, bringing to light nondominant narratives, avoiding exclusionary false consensus, and clarifying meaning embedded in coded terms, we can help disrupt the perpetuation of unjust power dynamics. Whether a museum aims to achieve social bridging, enhance its education programs, promote wellbeing, or create a more inclusive museum and exhibition experience, the language it chooses to use can reinforce or undermine those goals.

As our personal accounts of using the Family-Inclusive Language Guide show, starting the conversation about inclusive language is not about policing language. It's about analyzing the meanings (intentional and otherwise) of the words that are used and thinking critically about how they reflect the mission of the museum. Ideally, this effort is about improving the culture of the museum for staff and visitors. Using the Family-Inclusive Language guide can provide a concrete place from which to begin. ▮

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