CHAPTER 3

CONFRONTING THE
"TYRANNY OF RELEVANCE"

Exhibits and the Politics of Representation

In a 1973 Washington Sunday Star article titled "The Anacostia Tree: How a Neighborhood Museum Has Become a Source of Pride to 'the other' Washingtonians," reporter Joan Kramer cited an exchange between Anacostia Neighborhood Museum assistant director Zora B. Martin and visiting African American schoolchildren:

"Why did black people leave Africa?" asks Miss Martin. "Because they were afraid of the animals," several children shout in unison. "No," says Miss Martin. "Black people didn't want to leave their homes. White people came to Africa, separated the families, and put them into boats. When black people were brought to America, they called them by a different name. Do you know what that was?" One child pipes up, "White people?" "No," says Miss Martin. "They called them slaves."1

The children's answers revealed their ignorance about why and how Africans arrived in North America, and what happened to them once they reached its shores. Since textbook authors were only beginning to rethink their portrayal of slavery as a benevolent institution, Martin and museum director John Kinard were keenly aware of these deficiencies and their potential impact upon African American (and white) audiences. Kinard explained in 1968, "Many in Washington and America are enthusiastic about the idea of giving the American

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Negro his proper place in history. . . . All the history books have been untruthful about this—not with lies—but by what is excluded from the material. The result has been psychologically and physically damaging to the black man, who senses he has been ignored and is made to feel he has contributed nothing to society.²

The conversation between Martin and the visiting schoolchildren demonstrates the process through which neighborhood museums like the ANM transformed the “hidden” stories of African American history into a pubic history. Even with limited resources, many African American neighborhood museums began to produce increasingly complex exhibits and educational outreach programs as their creators challenged traditional methods of interpreting and presenting black history. In doing so, they served as a resource for traditional museums that struggled to remain relevant to audiences as riots, assassinations, and the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement from nonviolent civil disobedience to black power rocked the country.

Early Exhibits and Public Education at the DuSable Museum

During its first year of operation, the DuSable Museum hosted a variety of visitors, including the South Park YMCA, the Negro History Roundtable Group, the Ida B. Wells Children’s Art Class, the Chicago Conference of Christians and Jews, and the African Students Reception.³ Although exhibits and artifacts constituted an important draw for these audiences, the DuSable’s early exhibit content did not represent the full extent to which the black museum movement would come to challenge traditional representations of African American history and culture. An October 1961 dedication ceremony for the new museum, for example, simply presented a watercolor exhibit on the “Arts and Crafts of Southern Plantations,” lent by the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.⁴ Along with displays of African and African American art and artifacts, the DuSable’s exhibits during the early to mid-1960s generally emphasized the contributions of Africans and African Americans in science, industry, and the arts. Indeed, many African American museums embraced this “we, too, were here” technique, wherein the contributions of notable African American individuals were emphasized at the expense of a more complicated interpretation of social, political, and economic events.⁵

While simplified, the relative absence of even the “heroic” version of African American history in contemporary museums at the time, let alone in the
textbooks to which Chicago's black schoolchildren (and their parents) were exposed, make the content of the DuSable's early exhibits crucial. The DuSable's exhibits clearly revised the then standard construction of American history through the deeds and words of white men. A December 1961–January 1962 exhibition, for example, presented portraits of prominent African Americans collected by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. The exhibit for February–March 1962, A Free Negro Family in 1840, consisted of a collection of papers and other artifacts from the family of Thelma McWorter Kirkpatrick, a descendant of the slave Free Frank McWorter, who founded the town of New Philadelphia, Illinois. In keeping with the Burroughses' international ties and the connections black activists forged with concurrent African independence movements, African heritage and culture also became a focus at the museum. For instance, April–June 1962 featured the exhibition All About Africa—Saluting African Freedom Month, while July–August 1962 continued the African Diaspora theme with a photographic exhibit of Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria.

The exhibits staged by the DuSable during the late 1960s reflected an intensified political focus. For example, a 1968 exhibit featured a series of original paintings with several distinct themes: the kingdoms of West Africa; the periods of enslavement and slave revolts in America; the successes and failures of Reconstruction; the brutalities of lynching; and the work of activists like W. E. B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells. Also around 1968, the museum highlighted a series of dioramas by Chicago artist and sculptor Bob Jones. Jones's dioramas depicted particularly painful periods in African American history; his "Slave Ship", for example, illustrated "how slaves were crowded for months in a filthy ship in their passage to the American shores," while the "Slave Market" replicated "a market in which human beings were sold, families separated, and huge profits were made."

Jones's dioramas recall an earlier body of work by African American female sculptor Meta Warrick, who was commissioned to display a series of dioramas at the 1907 Jamestown, Virginia, Tercentennial Exhibition. At first glance, Warrick's works presented a linear narrative of scenes depicting the historical progress of African Americans. While seeming relatively "safe" for the largely white audiences who attended the exhibition, Warrick's narrative, rendered in physical form, represented a significant departure from the standard interpretation of black history penned by most white authors. Within these dioramas, and without the benefit of exhibit labels or other text, Warrick enfolded a
"hidden in plain sight" commentary about sensitive subjects such as miscegenation and racial violence. Bob Jones thus was continuing the tradition pioneered by Warrick, though by 1968 there was less need for such contextual ambiguity; for, unlike Warrick, Jones was now working in a physical space created and defined by African Americans.

Public Outreach Programs at the DuSable

From its beginnings as one of the first major African American museums of the postwar era, the DuSable Museum represented more than just a repository for African and African American artifacts and exhibits. Rather, museum leaders believed that its educational programs could influence an audience believed to be in danger of slipping through society's cracks: black children and teenagers. One of the more practical reasons that educational programs became so important in the development of African American museums was because the space to develop and display exhibits remained limited during the early years of most of these institutions. Consequently, the activities sponsored by the DuSable became critical in sustaining the museum's mission not just to "develop a center of materials on the Negro to serve the research students and schools and universities of the Midwest," but also to serve as "an instrument for community accord." Schoolchildren, who toured the DuSable at no cost, made up the museum's primary audience. Attendance during the DuSable Museum's first year of operation, from October 21, 1961, to September 30, 1962, reflected their predominance: 499 children came to the museum during February—presumably drawn there by the museum's celebration of Black History Week. February also attracted the highest number of total visitors, with 572 children and adults visiting the museum. In all, 2,664 people visited the DuSable during its first year—a remarkable achievement considering the fact that volunteers staffed the museum until 1968 and the building was open to the public only from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, and noon to 5:00 p.m. on Sundays.

DuSable staff designed their education programs to attract both adults and children. In 1962, the museum sponsored an essay contest titled "Why It Is Important for Negroes to Know Their History." Winners received copies of books on or by African Americans, and "every contestant . . . [would] be given a year's free membership in the museum." Teachers, too, were seen as important resources. For example, interested teachers could receive a black history materials
kit that contained short biographies of ten to twelve important African Americans, which could then be distributed to students. The DuSable also held teachers’ training classes on black history at the museum; in 1966, twenty teachers enrolled in an eight-session class on “Negro History for School Teachers.”

The DuSable actively engaged with the community that surrounded the museum, with staff members offering extension lectures on African American history in easily accessible neighborhood locations, such as homes, schools, and churches. The Burroughses and other DuSable staff and volunteers lectured to a variety of groups, including the Negro Labor Council, the Emma Lazarus Club, and the Jewish Community Center. Other outreach programs targeted international audiences; one such “foreign guest hospitality program” allowed international visitors who wanted to meet African Americans to “be invited into a Negro’s home and get to sit down and eat with them and not feel tense about it.”

In another ambitious outreach move, the museum sent fourteen teams, each comprised of one adult and two high school students, into the predominantly African American neighborhoods of Chicago’s South Side in 1970. The team, dubbed Operation Awareness, had received funding from the federally implemented Model Cities Program. Participants carried displays of the museum’s cultural and historical exhibits and reached thousands of people, according to the museum newsletter. Students also recorded interviews with senior citizens, the transcripts of which served as a resource for both the community and the DuSable. Other programs during the 1970s included a black history essay contest for junior high students and museum internships for elementary and high school students. The internships taught students black history and museum procedures, and introduced them to other ethnic museums—all in the hopes of creating the next generation of black history museum staff and volunteers.

Besides being a source of much-needed revenue, the DuSable Museum store represented one way to extend the museum’s philosophy beyond its walls. The store sold a variety of items themed around African American and African history, such as “10 mimeo broadsides on Negro history” (fifty cents); an ancient map of Africa; a collection of Negro History Poems for fifty cents; and the pamphlet “Problems of a Black Artist” by artist Marion Perkins, which featured a discussion of problems facing black artists and pictures of the author’s sculptures. Margaret Burroughs also sold her written works, including a collection of poems titled “Africa! My Africa,” a recording of “What Shall I Tell My Children Who Are Black,” and “Whip Me Whop Me Pudding and
Other Stories of Riley Rabbit and His Fabulous Friends," which she described as "a new book of animal stories taken right from the heart of African and African American folklore. No dialect is used but the full flavor of all idioms is given in easily read English."22

For one dollar each, museum patrons could purchase prints of well-known African and African American figures such as Frederick Douglass, Phyllis Wheatley, and Alexander Pushkin.23 The museum also offered calendars for sale; the DuSable's 1964 calendar highlighted "Negro scientists and inventors." Subsequent Heritage Calendars featured subjects such as black musicians and, in 1966, black women.24 In addition to serving as an effective marketing tool, an item as simple as a calendar could communicate the museum's mission; visually denoting the months of the calendar year through the achievements of Africans and African Americans subverted the usual Angelicized methods of marking the passage of time.

The DuSable's growing status as an African American cultural institution allowed it to draw attention to other black organizations in Chicago that had difficulty garnering public attention or support—particularly after the divisive pressures of the McCarthy era. Burroughs wrote in 1966 that "we have tried to act as a clearing house or referral agency to publicize and direct the public's attention to such groups or institutions as The South Side Community Art Center; The Frank London Brown History Club; The Negro History Roundtable... and all other groups interested in the promulgation of Negro History. Increasing numbers of research students have worked in our library."25 Seventeen-year-old Brandon Smith, who attended Chicago City College, was one such student who found more than just an intellectual sanctuary within the DuSable Museum's library. In an article included in the December 1970 newsletter, Smith testified to the transformative power of the DuSable in terms of his consciousness as an African American. Smith wrote that while

'I've never been impoverished or on the brink of starvation, but anyone who lacks the self-respect, love of his people, and ambition to improve himself as I did is extremely destitute... My proud heritage meant nothing to me, because I was never told that I had a heritage, and that it was something to be proud of. Besides, why should I give a damn about Crispus Attucks, Frederick Douglass, Dr. Charles Drew, etc., because they were all dead and buried and didn't have anything to do with me. Anyway, they couldn't have been much because they were "Negroes," weren't they?26
The resources offered by the DuSable Museum, on the other hand, contributed to Smith’s heightened sense of identity and self-worth—qualities emphasized by Margaret Burroughs and the activists leading the “Black Muslim Movement,” the original subject of Smith’s research. Smith recalled that the lack of material on the “Black Muslim Movement” at the public library led him to the DuSable, where “I somehow became intrigued with the outstanding achievements of great Afro-Americans, past and present and I come to the Museum as often as I can. I’ve decided to enter the mainstream ... of the movement directed to achieving equal rights for all American citizens.”

The DuSable Museum’s Second Annual Educators’ Committee Luncheon, held in 1974, demonstrated the powerful connections forged between the DuSable and other local African American organizations. A variety of area high schools and colleges, including Malcolm X College, Garrett A. Morgan Elementary School, Charles H. Judd School, and Martin Luther King High School, acted as the primary sponsors of the luncheon, together with churches, black sororities, and fraternities. In their advertisement for the luncheon, individual sponsors Evelyn and Irwin Salk, a white Jewish couple long invested in Chicago’s radical Leftist movement, linked the DuSable’s achievements with its significance for black America as a whole. The Salks believed that “Afro-American history can well serve as a surgeon’s scalpel in cutting open and exposing the depth of the racist cancer in the entire body politic. ... Today Black America is the basic revolutionary force in this country.”

A “Museum on Wheels” for the Motor City

International Afro-American Museum founder Charles Wright likewise believed that his intent to preserve and disseminate black history could encourage Detroit’s African Americans not only to serve as a revolutionary force for change within their neighborhoods but also to become active agents in a national (and, as the museum’s name implied) an international freedom movement.

Like the DuSable Museum, space limitations necessitated that the International Afro-American Museum’s early programs extend beyond the walls of its first location in Wright’s apartment on Detroit’s West Grand Boulevard. During the first few years of the museum’s operation, for example, the IAM produced a radio broadcast titled “Spotlight on Black People,” which aired October 12, 1967, on Detroit’s WJLB radio station. The museum also held an ongoing lecture series on African American and African history, distributed a quarterly

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newsletter about the museum, and produced two fifteen-minute career films, "You Can Be a Doctor" and "The Bank is Open to You," aimed at recruiting African American schoolchildren for these professions. Museum brochures advertised "daily memorandum books with events in the history of Black people for every day in the year," as well as placemats that depicted scenes from African American history—another nontraditional method of communicating black history to mass audiences.

Wright prioritized reaching out to African American senior citizens as part of the museum's overall educational mission. For example, the IAM sought to record the stories of elderly African Americans and include these tapes in an oral history library. Here, too, museum staff made use of mass media to impart the museum's mission. The Oral History Committee, which held their first meeting on June 9, 1966, planned to "[seek] contacts with persons able and willing to recount their experiences which illuminate some facet of the Negro's history." The committee intended to distribute these tapes to multiple audiences, including schools, clubs, and churches; these recordings were also broadcast on radio station WJLB in Detroit on Saturday evenings. Although these sorts of outreach programs are relatively common in twenty-first-century public history practice, at the time the IAM's efforts to reach underrepresented audiences were groundbreaking, and further encouraged the nascent partnership between the museum and the African American community.

Arguably, the IAM's most important early accomplishment came with its initiation of a mobile exhibit van. The van, which opened to the public at the Michigan State Fair in August 1967, later traveled to various schools and churches—mostly black, but some white—throughout Detroit. Discussions surrounding the possibility of creating a "museum on wheels" began almost immediately after the museum opened its doors because of concerns that not enough people were "being exposed to the impressive culture of blacks." A mobile museum, staff and volunteers reasoned, could "reach those who could not visit the museum." The mobile exhibit sought to achieve three goals concurrent with the IAM's overall mission:

1. Repair the distorted image of the African World—an image of jungle savagery, ignorance, brutality, and superstition
2. Create in Afro-Americans a greater sense of pride in their African heritage
3. Increase the knowledge and respect of all Americans for Africa and Africans, past and present.
Establishing the mobile unit allowed museum staff to address what they believed to be the outright manipulation and distortion of African and African American history contained within most textbooks and mainstream museums. Advertisements for the museum on wheels reflected this approach; one brochure, for instance, exhorted its audience to “abolish racism from American education by supporting the International Afro-American Museum’s Mobile Museum Series.” Detroit’s major African American newspaper, The Michigan Chronicle, called upon African American organizations and individuals to demonstrate their support for the museum by offering the van a place to park, and drew attention to the van by linking the self-worth and identity of their African American audience to its success: “Are you concerned with the Negro image?” Members of the International Afro-American Museum Committee, presently laying plans for a summer mobile unit, are. Citizens or organizations interested in offering temporary location of the unit on their property are being urged to contact the committee, which hopes to base the exhibit in the Dexter–W. Grand Blvd. area and later tour the city.

The mobile museum’s first exhibits included an African art collection donated by a former governor of Michigan, G. Mennen Williams, as well as oral history tapes of “outstanding Negroes.” The museum planning committee proposed that additional exhibit content for the mobile unit focus on three distinct chronological periods: “early history,” “the medieval period,” and the “modern period.” Although the exhibit would examine indentured servitude, slavery, colonialism and racism, museum planners also wanted to emphasize the “contributions of the African peoples to the development of the cultures in the New World.” As such, the mobile exhibit implemented a “heroic” interpretation of black history that highlighted achievements in art, the military, agriculture, and the contributions of important individuals, such as Crispus Attucks, Benjamin Banneker, and Phyllis Wheatley.

Staff in charge of the mobile van unit began building innovative contacts with other local organizations promoting black empowerment, such as the Black Arts Confederation of Unity—a national organization headquartered in Detroit and “dedicated to the cause of Black Nationalism, unity and self determination.” The confederation sponsored a Black Arts Convention from June 29 to July 2, 1967, at Detroit’s Central United Church of Christ. Other programs at this combination of conference and festival included a black arts parade, lectures on African American history, a black business trade fair, and a youth conference. Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X, attended a keynote meet-
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ing, along with H. Rapp Brown, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Rather than accept “whitewashed” interpretations of black history and culture, the Black Arts convention informed its patrons that “we need genuine Black Sociologists and Black Historians reflecting on our past, present and future. We must not allow ourselves to be fooled and hoodwinked by historians, who either overtly or covertly tell us that we have never contributed anything to civilization.”

The phrase “genuine Black Historians” is revealing. The confederation was as dismissive of African Americans they viewed as “Uncle Toms”—or, in their literature, “Uncle Roy or Whitey Young”—as it was of whites. The prose produced by the IAM usually did not reach this level of confrontation, as is made clear by their revision of the museum’s June 1965 planning document in an effort to diminish the charged, even “brutal,” accusations levied against whites. Yet despite such caution, the IAM’s approach to reinterpreting black history meshed with the goals of black power organizations like the Black Arts Confederation of Unity. The fact that the mobile unit, stationed on the conference grounds, raised around $160 in donations—a small amount, to be sure, but perhaps representative of the income level of most conference participants—seems indicative of this mutual support.

The deadly riot that began in Detroit on July 23, 1967, lent new urgency to the museum’s mission to reach Detroit’s black community. On July 23, at around 3:45 a.m., the Detroit Police Department raided a “blind pig” (an illegal, after-hours liquor establishment) in a largely black neighborhood. The police arrested eighty-two people who, according to some sources, had gathered to celebrate the return of a black soldier from Vietnam. A crowd formed when the first patrol wagons arrived to take away those who had been arrested; ten to twenty people soon swelled to two hundred. According to the subsequent Senate investigation, the growing crowd “began throwing rocks at windows, and by morning looting had begun and the riot was on.” President Lyndon Johnson and Governor George Romney sent 9,200 members of the National Guard, 800 state police officers, and 4,700 paratroopers to quell the rioting. By the time one of the worst riots in U.S. history was over, forty-three people (thirty-three blacks, ten whites) were dead. The Detroit Police and the National Guard arrested around 7,200 people, most of whom were black. Nearly seven hundred fires destroyed or damaged businesses and homes, most of which were located in the black community.

Utter devastation—economic, structural, psychological—rippled through...
Help us to put... HISTORY ON WHEELS with the NEW...

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Brochure for the International Afro-American Museum's mobile museum. The van brought the museum's message of black pride to neighborhoods, churches, and schools around Detroit. Other African American neighborhood museums, including the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, borrowed from this innovative approach to educational outreach. Courtesy of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History.

...the heart of Detroit as a nation questioned how race relations had reached such a deadly impasse in this once Model City. The aftermath of the riot left many African American museum and community leaders deeply perplexed, for here was evidence of a disenfranchised, poor, and forgotten black "underclass" now making their voices heard through often violent means. A celebration of "Black History Week," or an invitation to view African artifacts on display, would not begin to address their needs. Indeed, it is evident that museum staff and board members wrestled with doubts over whether their dream of building a new,
larger museum in Detroit was realistic, in light of the destructive federal and municipal neglect of Detroit’s black community and the chaotic aftermath of the riot. Minutes from an August 1971 Board of Trustees meeting reveal the board’s skepticism regarding the efficacy of sending the mobile unit into an area deemed the “inner city,” and whether a new African American museum should be built in such a location. Upon hearing that the mobile unit had parked at an “inner-city” supermarket, Trustees questioned: “should we build in the heart of the ghetto? Will ‘these’ people be as interested in a museum as to a recreation . . . [sic]?” The quotation marks around the word “these” acknowledges that the board knew they were employing exclusionary, class-based language to describe an audience unknown or unknowable to many of the museum’s board members. Yet the self-conscious quotation marks do not diminish the board’s profound doubts, as they likely believed that a recreational facility such as a public swimming pool might be a more sensible destination than a museum—even an African American one—for “these people.”

Mobile exhibit staff also encountered some resistance at schools they visited, which may have heightened the frustration the board felt in bringing the van to certain areas of Detroit and in planning for a new museum. For example, in a letter to Charles Wright, volunteer Neomi Hill reported that students and teachers at Southeastern High School showed little interest in the mobile van’s exhibits, to the point where “the students were rude and disorderly, and the teachers didn’t try to control them.” Interestingly enough, Hill admitted to her own weaknesses as a guide, and even perhaps to the shortcomings of the museum’s volunteer training program: “the fact that I knew little about the exhibits may have been the reason why the children ignored me.”

Regardless of these problems, staff and volunteers still believed they must continue their innovative method of mobile activism by bringing the museum to those unable, or unwilling, to travel. By and large, their efforts met with overwhelmingly affirmative reactions. While those affected by the riot might not be able (or willing) to visit the museum itself, let alone the museums or libraries in Detroit’s cultural center, the staff could bring the museum to them. In a September 1967 letter, C. Eltrie Chrite, the executive director of the IAM, proudly reported that more than a thousand people “in the heart of the Detroit riot area” viewed the exhibits in the mobile unit. During that same period, Chrite reported that Wayne State University hosted the mobile unit, and that the van would soon tour Detroit High Schools at the invitation of the Detroit Board of Education.
Additional indicators of the mobile unit’s impact upon Detroit’s black and white communities may be found in the numerous requests from pastors, teachers, and ordinary citizens, both black and white, that it visit their schools or churches. Teacher Doris DeDeckere wrote a letter on February 19, 1968, that indicates one of the ways in which educators used the mobile van. DeDeckere first confirmed the mobile museum’s reservation at St. Matthew’s Roman Catholic Church, and then asked, “May we also have a selection of material to be presented to the students before their tour of the van? We want them to be as prepared as possible so they will derive the most from the displays.” Three parochial schools with mostly white student bodies—St. Matthew’s, St. Clare Grade Schools, and Dominican High School—participated in this event, and DeDeckere requested that the IAM provide three hundred copies of museum material to distribute to the students.

Clearly, a simple visit to a mobile African American history exhibit could not fully ameliorate the obstacles faced by Detroit’s black communities. Yet even in the desperate months and years after July 1967, the mobile van attracted enthusiastic audiences. By bringing the mobile museum to churches, schools, and other community centers throughout Detroit, the museum exposed Detroit’s schoolchildren, as well as older audiences, to a new and accessible interpretation of African American history and culture. Many of the students’ reactions to the exhibit revolved around a similar theme: “It’s about time someone thought enough of Negroes to tell us something about ourselves!” The connection between the riots and lack of education was not lost on people like Margaret Burroughs, who commented in July 1967, “if you’re going to stop riots on the West Side or Watts, you’ve got to give these people what has been denied them—a background.”

The mobile unit attempted to expand museum access by acknowledging the real barriers that many of Detroit’s African American families came up against, such as unreliable public transportation, or the inability to pay a museum admission fee. But perhaps the mobile van’s deeper power lay in its ability to address obstacles more intangible—and more hurtful: the potential for racial discrimination and exclusion that African American audiences, particularly schoolchildren, had to encounter when they visited “established,” mainstream museums and other cultural institutions. One such disheartening experience for black children visiting the Detroit Institute of Arts occurred in 1968. Four teachers who taught mostly African American students at Ferndale High School (located about eight miles from downtown Detroit) complained to Detroit
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mayor Jerry Cavanagh (1962–70) about their most recent visit to the art museum. On July 11, 1968, the teachers had taken fifty students to the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Detroit Historical Museum. At the Art Institute, the students were a bit loud and made some questionable comments about the artwork. According to the teachers, a guard then “descended upon us and ordered our departure.” The teachers reasoned: “Considering all the problems that face such children in these times it would certainly be better judgment on the part of the Art Institute to lean over backwards to welcome the culturally less fortunate. . . . That this was a black–white confrontation may be born[e] out by an incident that occurred while our group was being escorted out. Another small group of Negroes were standing at the side of the room; they were also herded along despite their protestations of innocence. It was not until we [white] teachers interceded for them were they allowed to remain.”

As a result of the attention garnered by new museums like the IAM, as well as the dialogue prompted by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, staff at the Detroit Institute of Arts slowly began to address patterns of discrimination embedded in their organization. For example, during the tenure of director Willis F. Woods (1962–73), curators integrated African art into the main collection. Woods also helped create the Friends of African Art support group, and in 1966, he dedicated a gallery to African art. The institution also began to hire and train minority employees in an effort to reassess their approach to underserved audiences. This would not be the last time, however, that the International Afro-American Museum and the Detroit Institute of Arts would be pitted against each other in the intertwined battles over culture and race in Detroit.

“IA M A Man”: Gendering the International Afro-American Museum

Like most museums, the International Afro-American Museum engaged in continuous fund-raising and membership recruitment in order to promote growth. In the summer of 1972, for example, the museum staged a month-long summer program for children called “IAMARAMA,” which “encourage[d] youngsters to be informed and curious about Afro-American history and literature.” In addition to being “inundated” for one hour each day with exhibits, films, and lectures on African American history and culture, the children would “receive a year’s membership worth $1.00 in the IAM; a button to wear with the Museum’s logo and a brochure depicting IAMARAMA of 1972.” The museum expected one hundred schoolchildren to attend the program each day.
Staff and volunteers increased awareness of the museum and its work through conference sponsorships. In March 1969, the IAM held a conference celebrating the fourth anniversary of its founding. The theme of the conference was “Black Awareness, New Directions,” and its charge was to “seek a Community Answer to ‘How Might the concept of THE MUSEUM’ be developed and expanded to address itself to the current pressing needs of the Black Community?”

To recruit attendees, museum staff sent an individually addressed letter to leading figures in professional fields such as education, the arts, religion, and business, and argued that “it [is] important, if not imperative, that you serve as a resource person to deal with problems relative to Black participation in the developing Black museum as it seeks an effective role in the life of the community.” Although the IAM constituted the conference’s primary focus, staff also drew connections between the “Black liberation” struggle and the role that African American museums might play in this movement.

The museum positioned itself as a unique facilitator for these discussions, thereby breaking down the notion that museums must remain static institutions distant from social concerns.

Another IAM-sponsored conference on “Black Historical Museums” began in September 1969 at Wayne State University. Charles Wright solicited the attendance of African American-themed museums around the country, both large (such as the DuSable Museum) and small (such as the Old Slave Mart Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, founded in 1937). The conference brochure stressed community identification and involvement with the museum and its future: “OUR AIM as the Detroit Committee of I.A.M. is to ADOPT the COMMUNITY’S IDEAS in our planning for the FUTURE. You are cordially invited to join with us in our attempts to define: THE LIVING MUSEUM.”

Local African American leaders, including Wright, Congressman John Conyers (D-MI), and Congressman Charles Diggs (D-MI), presented lectures on a variety of topics, such as the correlation between the black museum movement and the growth of black studies programs. Richard Austin, the county auditor of Detroit and an African American mayoral candidate, concluded the conference with a speech on “The Impact of Black History Museums upon the City.”

In spite of these fund-raising and marketing efforts, however, Wright’s private correspondence and the minutes of board meetings revealed a worrisome trend. In 1969, just four years after the museum’s debut, expenses were “running neck and neck with the income.” Revenue from January through June of 1969 to organize many Af
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1969 totaled $14,634.04, while the expenses ran to $14,658.07, leaving the organization with a small but growing deficit. Yet the fragile state of funds for many African American neighborhood museums was symptomatic of the poverty within the communities that typically surrounded these museums. Yet Wright also blamed the apathy of people who belonged to the “Black Establishment,” as well as the fact that the media—even the black media, such as the Michigan Chronicle—failed to publicize his museum. In a bluntly worded press release from July 1968, Wright suggested that a new, larger museum could be built if African Americans simply redirected their spending toward more worthy goals. Charging that only “about one in every 500 black Detroiter’s” had supported, the museum financially or in-kind since its inception, Wright bemoaned the fact that the “black leadership in Detroit only gives us a casual glance, if they see us at all... If we the smokers and beer drinkers would contribute to the International Afro-American Museum what we spend in one month we would break ground for our museum this year. ... Come and see what we are doing and join with us to produce the only real emancipation—freedom of the minds of black people.”

Charles Wright and his staff targeted African American men specifically, stressing a “particular” brand of leadership they could offer the black museum movement—a type of leadership black women seemingly did not possess. An August 1968 letter to board members compared the contributions of black women on the board to the significantly smaller efforts of black men:

One of our primary goals in IAM has been to reflect a strong, black male image. Yet, the female members of our board have made, and are making a significantly larger contribution to your organization than the male members. It is imperative that the male members of the board demonstrate their confidence in the future of IAM by a creative rededication to it and its programs. ... The future of IAM is in your hands.

The museum’s gendered method of recruitment reflected concern over the sexual division of labor between black men and women. Ideally, black women were expected to embrace the feminine role of raising children while allowing black men to (re)claim their position as head of the family and primary breadwinner. Of course, in 1965 Wright had designed the museum’s very initials as a declaration of black manhood—an affirmation replicated much more publicly in 1968, when striking sanitation workers in Memphis wore placards that declared “I AM A Man.”
Thus, even though women ran much of the museum’s daily operations, the IAM’s promotional efforts revolved around concerns about black masculinity. Museum member Verona Morton penned a direct plea to the museum’s male audience in an article titled “A Man’s Reach Should Exceed His Grasp, Else What’s a Heaven For?” for the 1975 newsletter. Morton referenced the tensions that surrounded the appropriate private and public roles for black men and women, and while her overall tone was encouraging, she nonetheless called attention to the gap between the slogans of the Black Power Movement and the actual work needed to achieve these ideals. Morton exhorted her audience that, “since black men rap about doing something for their own—Then Get To Doing It! There are few, if any men at the tables selling museum wares; few are seen in the membership drives. But there are plenty of women.”

Morton did not call for black women to quit their jobs in order to elevate the masculinity and social standing of black men, as she recognized that many black women worked outside the home in order to make ends meet. Instead, she argued that African American men must find leadership positions that allowed them to move beyond being caught in the trap of repetitive jobs with little hope of advancement. Volunteering at the museum could accomplish this, for “Black men want their ‘dues.’ They want to get a piece of the action their ancestors sweated over 300 years for. And the black men claim there is no outlet for their creative, managerial, leadership talents; and they’re right to a certain extent. G.M. [General Motors] isn’t about to budge. The Metro Museum of Modern Art isn’t about to budge. So why not use these talents at our museum where it is not necessary to become mixed into the mediocrity of middle management. There is a black museum awaiting all this black, male ability.”

Morton also acknowledged that some African American men might believe that the IAM was not prestigious enough to deserve their full involvement. She countered this belief, however, by asking “who else is going to build that prestige? There’s enough myth about ‘Mormism’ and inept black males to inspire more black men, of all ages, to stop in the museum and demand the opportunity to be a part of its next Decade of Progress.” Conscious of the power and sense of belonging that one’s job title could confer (or deny), Morton informed potential male volunteers, “everyone will admire and recognize your position. Your title will be clear and self-explanatory, Director or Curator or Historian—no assistant to or ‘co-ordinator to the or third vice-chairman.’” While racism might indeed function to strip black men of their masculinity, Morton reassured her male readers that black women had faith in their abilities: “since we
[women] know you black men can perform, you don't have to prove to us that you can. Thus the internal job pressures are off, and all of your energies can be concentrated in dealing with external pressures." Any residual anxieties between the sexes, Morton maintained, could be alleviated by men seeking greater involvement with the museum.

Although the black museum movement represented a chance for African Americans to establish equitable footing within the museum profession, an inherent contradiction existed in the movement's ideals and practice. African American women like Verona Morton and Margaret Burroughs took on the positions of organizer, volunteer, and staff member at many black neighborhood museums. At the same time, however, the IAM's publications suggest that the black museum movement (at least in its early years) emphasized that it was men, not women, who should assume the crucial leadership roles within these institutions.

Furthermore, despite women's overrepresentation in volunteer and staff positions at African American neighborhood museums, they were typically underrepresented in the exhibits produced by these institutions. The exclusion of black female artists from exhibitions was an early trend at the Studio Museum in Harlem, as it was within the Black Arts Movement as a whole. The Studio Museum of Harlem exhibition Harlem Artists '69, for example, featured African American artists from all over New York City; yet out of fifty-four artists, just five were female. Likewise, during a symposium held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, artist William Williams reiterated Studio Museum founder Edward Spriggs's equation of art as solely the province of the black male by emphasizing that black artists should serve as a "male image, symbols of attainment for the community."

In a 1972 Smithsonian Institution oral history interview, Doloris Holmes pressed African American artist Cliff Joseph on the reasonable extent to which black artists could expect to be represented at shows held by the Whitney Museum of American Art or the Metropolitan Institute of Art since, after all, the art world rarely bestowed recognition upon female artists (regardless of race). In a rare admission—in these sources, at least—Joseph agreed that black female artists faced greater difficulties than black male artists in gaining recognition for their work. Joseph acknowledged that "women have gotten very badly shaken in this field as well as other creative fields or industrial fields or whatever. And certainly I believe that black women have come up with the shortest end of the stick."

Lawrence Reddick's reaction to Philadelphia's plans to depict women's history during the Bicentennial parallels Joseph's observations to a certain extent.
Arguing that it would “shock the public” if they learned that more money had been appropriated to celebrate the history of women in Philadelphia than had been spent on the depiction of African American history, Reddick also thought that the city’s focus on the achievements of white women seemed particularly overbalanced. After reviewing Philadelphia’s Bicentennial exhibit plans, Reddick pointed out that “we could not find a word about Black women or Puerto Rican or Native American women.”

The comments by Verona Morton, Cliff Joseph, and Lawrence Reddick all reveal the contradictory dimensions of the black museum movement. Even as African American museums battled the constrained and stereotyped roles assigned to black history by mainstream cultural institutions, they themselves also restricted many black women based upon the belief that the contributions and leadership of black men were inherently more valuable. Thus, while African American museums may have represented a “free space” for African Americans suffering from discrimination and poverty, the categories of gender, race, and class still delineated the composition of these free spaces. Such restrictions would inevitably inform the ways in which various audiences (women, middle-class African Americans, whites, etc.) perceived the work and identity of black neighborhood museums.

The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum and the Smithsonian Challenge

Compared to independent neighborhood museums like the DuSable and the International Afro-American Museum, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum’s direct affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution significantly distinguished the museum from its counterparts. Indeed, perhaps due in part to its relationship with the Smithsonian, the ANM’s exhibits during its opening year barely hinted at the museum’s future identity as a uniquely “black” cultural institution—despite being located in a predominantly African American neighborhood.

Louise Daniel Hutchinson, the director of the Research Center at the ANM from 1974 to 1986, reflected that the Smithsonian initially viewed the ANM as a “facilitator to move people from one point to the other, to introduce them to museums and then carry them into the total museum experience on the Mall.” In 1966, Smithsonian staff suggested a series of artifacts for the new museum that reflected this generic “outpost” identity: a hot-air engine, a crystal detector radio receiver, and a collection of bells from the neighborhood that
Confronting the "Tyranny of Relevance"

The museum's first permanent exhibits, borrowed from the Smithsonian's collection, included a model of a 1890s general store, a small petting zoo, animal skeletons, and other artifacts designed to withstand repeated touching and use. These were unremarkable objects apart from the fact that they were designed to be frequently handled. Some Smithsonian staff members assumed that any valuable objects lent to the museum would be vandalized, given the poverty of the area and the association of "slums" with crime.

The museum's first special exhibit, Doodles in Dimension (November 1967), featuring sculptures inspired by the pen-and-ink doodles of President John F. Kennedy, also did little to suggest the museum's potential to transform the field through its focus on the needs and concerns of Anacostia residents. Indeed, in a January 1968 letter to Charles Blitzer, who served as Director of Education and Training at the Smithsonian, Wilcomb Washburn lamented the apparent lack of "groundbreaking" exhibits at the new museum; he blamed inexperienced director John Kinard and the tight control he exerted over ANM. Washburn, who headed the American studies program at the Smithsonian, admitted that while he "admire[d] the sentiment of allowing local autonomy . . . the exhibits installed so far (such as the Kennedy doodles) do not inspire confidence."

The museum's failure immediately to produce innovative exhibits may have also been an extension of the communication problems between the ANM and the Smithsonian. Much to the frustration of some Smithsonian employees, S. Dillon Ripley often sided with the ANM in its attempts to assert its own identity as a black museum apart from the Smithsonian. Ripley chided two Smithsonian staff members in a 1968 memo:

I was really depressed to hear recently (not from Kinard I assure you) that for his exhibits at the ANM, the curators of MNH [Museum of Natural History] and MHT [Museum of History and Technology] had been unable to bring themselves to lend anything with the sole exception of some African drums for the current show. Is this the way to bring our exhibits to the people? As someone who has been a curator for twenty-nine years, I cannot understand why a colleague would not be greatly impressed by this experimental one-of-a-kind museum and its unique opportunity to bring museum techniques to people who otherwise do not visit the main museums on the Mall, and thus eventually to get them over to visit those very museums. What is the trouble?

Museum of History and Technology Assistant Director Silvio Bendini responded to Ripley's accusations with incredulity. Stating that, in fact, the Museum of
Natural History and the Museum of History and Technology had willingly lent multiple objects to the ANM, Bendini asked “what can be done to improve communications with the staff of the Anacostia Museum so that our own staff can engage in greater participation with better cooperation? Our show of willingness to cooperate and our efforts to do so will continue to prove fruitless as long as communication within the Smithsonian itself is liable to misinformation.”

Despite the ANM’s less-than-promising beginning and the evident communication barriers between it and the Smithsonian, the neighborhood museum’s staff and volunteers gradually broke away from presenting “traditional” exhibits and programs. Kinard began requesting funding to produce exhibits that featured pressing social commentary about the living conditions of the poorest African American residents of Washington, D.C., as well as the history and culture of the African Diaspora. A major catalyst for the museum’s shift from the ordinary to the groundbreaking came with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1968 and the chaotic unrest that followed in Washington, D.C. and other American cities. Indeed, it was not until after King’s murder that the museum’s status as an “African American” museum would be fully realized. With King’s death, Hutchinson recalls, “the community began to articulate new concerns for the museum . . . [they] began to look at themselves and say, ‘Where do we fit into a museum experience? . . . If we go downtown, are there any exhibits about us, about people who look like us? Anything about our past, our heritage?’ The answer was a resounding no.”

The methods the Anacostia museum employed to initiate such exhibit and program changes borrowed from the template created by earlier African American neighborhood museums. For example, taking a cue from the International Afro-American Museum’s “museum on wheels,” the ANM instituted a mobile museum to increase attendance and museum exposure in 1969. The mobile division consisted of a van that traveled to schools, hospitals, and playgrounds in Anacostia to present exhibits and lectures. Mobile exhibit kits featured interactive objects, such as a twenty-one-piece puzzle map that formed the neighborhoods of Anacostia (an interesting tool for teaching children to become conscious of their “place” within Anacostia), a black history puzzle map, as well as exhibits on topics such as pollution in Anacostia and the “Black Man in Science.” During the first three years of the mobile division, according to museum staff member Fletcher Smith, more than 75,000 people viewed its exhibits.

The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum began to present a rotating collection of special exhibits with a strong emphasis on internationalism. For example, in January 1968 the Native American and another one of Hawaiian culture. Exhibits featured themes from the Anacostia's African American heritage as well. An exhibit on the history of coal mining in the area was also part of the museum's offerings.
January 1968 the organization introduced children's art from Brazil; in February 1968 the museum's Negro History Week celebration featured a collection of portraits of distinguished African Americans from the Harmon Collection of the National Portrait Gallery. Education curator Zora Martin remembered that after viewing the exhibit one child exclaimed, "I've never seen so many Negroes in one place in my whole life!" In May 1968, the exhibit This Is Africa offered a food fair with African cuisine, a fashion show, performances by the African Heritage Drummers and Dancers, and lectures on African history and culture. Exhibits on Makonde sculptures (October 1968) and a Jamaican Festival (September 1969) both established and reinforced a shared identity between Anacostia's African American residents and African communities around the world.

A Turning Point: The Rat—Man's Invited Affliction

An exhibit titled The Rat—Man's Invited Affliction (November 16, 1969—January 25, 1970) marked a key turning point in the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum's exhibition history. Staff designed the exhibit to realistically present and analyze a decidedly unpleasant issue faced by a wide swath of the Anacostia community, namely the problem of rat infestation brought on by overcrowded apartment buildings and haphazard trash collection—the legacy of urban renewal and municipal neglect. The Rat influenced the content and method not only of future exhibits at the museum but also of exhibits at museums across the nation and internationally. Indeed, Kinard and Esther Nighbert argued that The Rat "convincingly demonstrated the need for the staff to present exhibitions dealing only with life in the past. Such exhibitions, if they are not well subsequenced, must have relevance to present-day problems that affect the quality of life here and now in Anacostia."

The exhibit's conceptual origins reveal how exhibit ideas at the ANM now traveled from the bottom up—from schoolchildren to senior museum staff. For instance, staff noticed that mice were disappearing from the museum's small petting zoo; in the meantime telltale bones surfaced in the snake cage. When asked, neighborhood children responded that "it was those bad boys" from the neighborhood who were responsible. The staff surmised, however, that the children's hatred for rodents, rooted in their daily living experiences, was the real reason for the disappearing mice. Hence, staff proposed mounting an exhibit that addressed Anacostia's rat problem.

To determine what the museum should present in the exhibit, the staff
surveyed children about what they had learned about rats from daily life. Their responses startled Kinard: “Rats can give you rabies. Rats tear up things at night. They bite you. They can do many tricks.” The children suggested things they wanted to see portrayed in the exhibit, including “Show why they see very well in the dark. Tell the different diseases they carry. Show how to poison them.” Accordingly, when visitors arrived at the museum’s new exhibit in November 1969, they found panels on the history of rat infestation and the impact of rat bites and learned about pest control. A model of a backyard featured live rats in cages, and a CBS-TV film titled *Who Do You Kill?* portrayed a black family living in a one-room apartment; their child had died from a rat bite. As the museum’s Calendar of Events described the film, “the parents’ struggle to deal with life in the ghetto demands that the viewer seek answers to poignant questions.” Anacostia teenagers also presented an original skit called “Rats” based on their day-to-day experiences. 

As part of their public outreach program connected with the exhibit, ANM staff invited representatives from the National Park Service, the mayor’s office, and other city offices to tour Anacostia in order to determine the source of the neighborhood’s endemic rat infestation. The representatives informed Kinard...
that rats were difficult to eliminate in Anacostia because of the overlapping jurisdictions between the municipal offices; nobody knew which office was responsible for rat control in Anacostia, and therefore nothing was done. As was the case with the district’s urban renewal programs, bureaucratic neglect of a basic necessity led to real misery for people living in one of Washington, D.C.’s poorest neighborhoods.

The grim subject matter portrayed in The Rat prompted some Anacostia community leaders, including those who had campaigned for Kinard’s hiring at the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, to protest the museum’s choices. Marion Conover Hope, one of the leaders of the Greater Anacostia Peoples Corporation, complained to Kinard that “people will despise [the exhibit] and not like it. It will be the beginning of the end of this museum.” Kinard, however, argued that the museum was not exaggerating the issue, nor was it trying to be a “prophet of doom.” Rather, it was attempting to help Anacostia’s residents combat the problems of urban life—and to remind Washington’s policymakers that its citizens would not suffer in silence. Kinard argued during the November 1969 seminar at the Bedford Lincoln Neighborhood Museum, held the same month as the The Rat’s debut, that the museum “can and must speak forthrightly, without fear of retribution, on such social evils as rats, water pollution, and racism, and that if it does it will become a new creature. Other museums—the marble halls and the huge architectural structures—if they take this challenge, will also become new creatures to enhance the quality of life in this country.”

The public responded strongly to The Rat, with the exhibit attracting high attendance and extensive local and national news coverage. Other museums also noticed Kinard’s achievement. Kinard took the film Who Do You Kill? to France for viewing at the 1971 International Council of Museums conference, and those who saw it were astonished: after viewing the film, one attendee told Kinard, “That ain’t no museum.” The Rat’s success paved the way for future exhibits that tackled the issues facing Anacostia’s residents, such as the two-part exhibition Evolution of a Community, which received grants from the Carnegie Corporation and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The first half of the exhibition, which opened in February 1972, examined Anacostia’s early history; the second half, which debuted in September 1972, dealt with current problems faced by Anacostia and other economically depressed communities. Slide shows, information from various community agencies, drawings, photographs, and oral history interviews conducted with Anacostia residents were among the highlights of the second half of the exhibit. Interviewers asked community members to
define which they considered to be most serious problems in Anacostia and how to solve them, then incorporated their answers into the exhibit.96

Although the second half of Evolution of a Community addressed the community's major concerns—unemployment, transportation, and education—attendance began to decrease. The declining number of visitors bothered Kinard, "because this is what the community said they wanted us to do. They wanted us to amplify their concerns."97 Puzzled, Kinard closed the museum for three days in order to examine how the exhibition might be "turning the community off." Staff soon realized that, "inadvertently, we had mirrored all of their concerns, but we had not offered any solution to the concerns... We said, 'Then all right, what is the most positive approach? What is it that the community has been most responsive to?' The history. That's when we decided to do 'The Anacostia Story.'"98

Kinard discovered that, in retrospect, the ways in which Evolution of a Community interpreted Anacostia's history were "replete with omissions" concerning the role of African Americans in building Anacostia. These omissions, in turn, negatively affected the psyche of Anacostia's black citizens. Consequently, The Anacostia Story, 1608–1930 (1977) revisited the first half of Evolution of a Community by exploring Anacostia's history from 1608 to 1930 and offered residents an active opportunity to remember and celebrate their community's heritage.99 In the preface to the exhibit catalogue, Kinard lauded The Anacostia Story as "designed to inspire concentration on the significance of local history. It is the first effort of its kind on the history of Anacostia."100 By incorporating the voices of Anacostia's citizens, including oral histories drawn from descendants of the original settlers, the exhibit went beyond simply documenting an often forgotten community's history. Instead, it "has been written to inspire a sense of pride and to heighten the aspirations for dignity and self-assurance of every person, no matter his station in life." The ultimate goal of The Anacostia Story and the museum itself, maintained Kinard, was to "return this rich history to the people of Anacostia—for it is their story."101

Transforming the Visitor Experience

By producing exhibits like The Rat and The Anacostia Story, as well as implementing a mobile museum and innovative outreach programs, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum differed starkly from most traditional museums at this time, many of which remained oblivious to the struggles of the communities in
which they were located. The contents of the museum’s suggestion box reaffirmed its community mission. Of the few surviving records, one reads: “I like this museum. It’s good to feel you’re part of something. A lot of times I go into different museums and enjoy the items on display but there’s an empty feeling. This place gives you a chance to feel history.”

The museum’s transformative leadership within the black museum movement and the field of museology as a whole also emerges in the records of the ANM’s Office of the Director. Numerous letters from museum administrators appealed to Kinard and his staff to advise them about how to include black history in their current exhibits and about viable methods to initiate museum extension programs within minority communities. A letter from the Curator of Education at the Norfolk Museum of Arts and Sciences in Norfolk, Virginia, represented a typical plea. The curator invited Kinard to address a group of sixty female docents about the “obligations of museums such as my own to Afro-Americans,” confiding that “as a group, they are intelligent, but have led very insulated lives as to your experiences.”

These requests reflect an increased concern among some museum directors and curators that significant changes in museum interpretation and outreach were on the horizon. The focus of the American Association of Museum’s annual meeting in 1969, “What Are We Doing to Justify Our Existence?” tapped into this growing anxiety, as did the federally commissioned publication of The Belmont Report, which detailed the state of American museums in the midst of tumultuous social change. In a special 1972 Washington Post series on “The Urban Museum Crisis,” journalist Elisabeth Stevens lamented the lack of progress that most mainstream museums had made in addressing the needs of “inner city” audiences. For Stevens, the failure of these institutions to reach minority audiences was not simply a problem confined to the museum world. Rather, museums’ efforts (or lack thereof) to serve neglected audiences exerted a ripple effect on broader social problems. Even after the dire warning issued by the Kerner Commission’s Report on Civil Disorders (1968), Stevens pointed out that “only a few of the big urban museums are trying to attract inner city people with outreach and other programs . . . and many of these efforts may well be doomed to insignificance, even failure. And others have failed to grasp the implications of their roles as ‘white institutions.’” Yet as these large museums floundered, Stevens also observed a new and hopeful trend: “in the heart of the ghettos, small, new and often remarkably successful small-scale museums run by and for blacks, Puerto Ricans and other minority groups are cropping up.”
Success stories that Stevens cited included the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, as well as Brooklyn’s MUSE, El Museo del Barrio, and the Store Front Museum in Jamaica, Queens (1971).

The Smithsonian Institution scrambled to adjust the content of its exhibits in response to the increasingly publicized work of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, not to mention the tumult of national and local events. The directive for change at the Smithsonian emanated from its leadership. S. Dillon Ripley corresponded with African American historian John Hope Franklin shortly after the 1968 Washington riot about the Smithsonian’s responsibility toward the African American community. Acknowledging that the Smithsonian fell short in its inclusion and interpretation of African American history and culture, Ripley asked Franklin to assist the institution in its efforts to provide a more balanced narrative. Ripley admitted, “although we are proud of our experimental neighborhood museum in Anacostia and of our training programs, and some of our newer exhibits’ technique and content, I am very much aware of how much remains to be done.”

Ripley’s description of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum as an “experimental neighborhood museum” is illuminating. Clearly, the ANM was proving its worth as an institution in its own right, connected to yet independent from the Smithsonian. Yet Ripley, who by all accounts remained a dedicated advocate of the ANM until the end of his administration, still perceived the museum as an experimental outpost of the Smithsonian—not quite in the same league as established institutions like the National Museum of American History. Furthermore, not all Smithsonian employees shared Ripley’s enthusiasm for the ANM’s work and his conviction that the Smithsonian had a “moral responsibility to consider its exhibits for the effect they may have upon all sorts and conditions of people.” Indeed, some Smithsonian staff members questioned the ANM’s emphasis on African American history, arguing that such a focus precluded the staff’s objectivity in designing exhibits. Upon reviewing the ANM exhibit Negro History and Culture (1968), for instance, John Anglim, the chief of the Smithsonian’s Office of Exhibits, criticized it for “lacking expertise and objectivity ... [and for] its lack of organization and emotional connection to exhibit topics.”

Smithsonian employees also took issue with relatively inexperienced ANM staff members who were unfamiliar with the technical aspects of the museum profession, such as writing exhibit scripts. Anglim complained, “any remarks [that criticize the choice of scriptwriter], no matter how mildly phrased, receives an immediate response from John Kinard that bristles with defensiveness.” Yet
Kinard's defensiveness was, perhaps, necessary: in order for the ANM to fulfill its identity as an African American "neighborhood center," African Americans had to run it—even if they did not have extensive experience as museum professionals.

Although the ANM's exhibits did not yet "measure up" to the Smithsonian's professional standards, maintaining institutional relevance for diverse audiences seemed to be increasingly crucial for the survival of mainstream museums. The only way for the Smithsonian to accomplish this was to learn from the successes of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum and to understand the sweeping changes taking place in the community and across the country. Some Smithsonian staff members other than Ripley recognized that museums like the one in Anacostia might hold the key to the Smithsonian's renewal. For instance, a July 1968 memo from Frank Taylor, the director-general of the Smithsonian Museums, urged all curators to add black history to their existing exhibits. Taylor stated, "I cannot over-emphasize the urgent need the Smithsonian faces to make visible its sincere and continuing concern for the recognition of the Negro in American history." Taylor included a bibliography on black history and provided content examples that curators could add to existing exhibits, such as information on black inventors and scientists, or a lithograph of the Boston Massacre that featured Crispus Attucks. Even if curators believed that they could not locate appropriate black history-related artifacts within the Smithsonian collections, Taylor instructed curators to revise exhibit text in an effort to incorporate this "new" perspective on American history.108

Determining how the Smithsonian should integrate elements of African American history into their exhibits became a process fraught with complications. For example, staff at the National Museum of American History feared that presenting separate exhibits on African American history, rather than including narratives of African American history within existing exhibits, would highlight how few resources related to black history the museum actually had. On the other hand, curators wondered whether these "integrated" exhibits would attract black audiences. Left unspoken in these records, perhaps, was a more pressing fear: Would exhibits devoted solely to African American history attract white audiences and their financial resources?109

Responding to the "Tyranny of Relevance"

A 1969 New York Times article titled "Museums Respond to New Needs" tracked these shifting dynamics within mainstream museums by examining the
changes taking place at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). Local Times readers invested in the survival of their own long-standing, tradition-bound cultural institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, may have been interested to read reporter Jerry Flint’s assessment of how museums like the DIA could no longer remain oblivious to what was taking place in their own communities.

Flint first situated the Detroit Institute of Arts geographically to help readers understand why the museum faced such challenges. If the art institute had been located in Detroit’s suburbs, it is likely that the museum would have been able to continue in a state of relative oblivion to the dynamics of urban change. But the museum was located in Detroit’s “inner city,” with “poor blacks to the east, college students to the west, more poor Negroes and equally poor whites to the south.” In effect, black residents and other undesirables were “crowding up around” the museum. The impact of the still raw wounds inflicted by the 1967 Detroit riot “reminded Detroit museum men of their vulnerability. Their memories were refreshed this spring when a handful of Negroes raced through the museum at Flint, 60 miles to the north, breaking some windows and damaging some works.” The Times reporter did not speculate about why this group targeted a museum—in this case, the Flint Institute of Arts—nor did he connect the similarities between Detroit and Flint, two cities firmly rooted in the (now declining) automobile manufacturing industry and a shared history of racial unrest.

While additional security expenditures at the Detroit Institute of Arts might prevent this sort of criminal activity, museum leaders believed that maintaining the public health of the institution meant rethinking and expanding their outreach programs. Jazz concerts on Tuesday nights were one such popular addition to traditional programming that drew “non-traditional” audiences to the museum. In the tellingly detached language of DIA public relations director Robert Rodgers, the jazz concerts successfully attracted “great undigested lumps of people that come from somewhere.” These “undigested lumps,” Flint went on to explain, were Detroit’s blacks, “Appalachian whites,” and “Spanish-Americans.” In short, those who attended the jazz concerts had long labored in Detroit’s factories or, like Wright, had perhaps even owned their own businesses, but they were an audience who had been—and likely still remained—largely invisible and inexplicable to museum men like Robert Rodgers. The behavior of these nontraditional visitors was, of course, scrutinized: Flint reported that for the most part, those who attended the concerts behaved as
they should, except for the “occasional listener carefully saving a cigarette butt, which could mean the weed smoked in the sculpture court isn’t tobacco; but then, it might mean the listener is just tidy.”

Flint explained how other museums were attempting to respond to the suddenly “new” needs of unexpected and formerly invisible audiences by designing programs and exhibits that seemed more “relevant.” For instance, Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry planned a Festival of African American Arts, while the Chicago Historical Society renewed their efforts to collect African American-related artifacts. As did both the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum and Detroit’s International Afro-American Museum, the Oakland Museum of California instituted a traveling van that brought African American artifacts to black churches and redevelopment centers. Reflecting on the upcoming one-hundred-year anniversary of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and its efforts to revitalize its programs, art critic John Canaday argued that such museums must not fall into the current vogue of making art “relevant” for today’s audiences. Instead, art should be relevant for art’s sake.\(^\text{113}\) The director of the Oakland Museum, historian J. S. Holliday, also let slip an admission of his feelings about the changes his museum was undergoing, declaring that museums must reconcile with the “tyranny of relevance [that] demands that [they] serve the needs of today and nourish the interest of all, rather than only the interest of the few for whom museums have been a traditional experience.” Yet while Holliday, who was white, may have felt burdened by dealing with this new directive, he rejected Canaday’s dismissal of the need to transform museums into welcoming spaces for diverse audiences. Indeed, two years after assuming the directorship of the Oakland Museum, the museum’s governing commission fired Holliday because of the extensive changes he made to programming and, more specifically, his efforts to involve Oakland’s black community in the governance of the museum.\(^\text{114}\)

The Smithsonian’s reaction to the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum’s “emotional,” and therefore (in the eyes of some staff members) “unprofessional” exhibits, together with Emily Harvey’s shocked impressions of African American dissidents at the 1969 seminar at the Bedford Lincoln Neighborhood Museum, clearly reveal that not all museum administrators welcomed the tyranny of relevance—a burden often coupled with drastic critiques of museum operations. At the American Association of Museums conference in 1972, Evan Turner, director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, bristled at the charge that museums were elitist and racist institutions uninterested in responding to
the needs of underprivileged communities. Indeed, Turner believed that most museums were already initiating public programs for minorities, and whether the museums developed these programs out of a “sense of moral conscience or out of a sense of self-preservation doesn’t affect the very fact that these programs exist.”

John Kinard’s handwritten comments on the pages of Turner’s speech offer a terse rebuttal of Turner’s justification, and illuminate the ways in which Kinard understood the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum’s mission. Kinard wrote that it did matter whether museums created programs for minorities either “out of a sense of self-preservation” or out of “moral conscience,” because the reasons why museums developed these programs exercised a direct impact upon their survival and success. Through the creation and presentation of exhibits that challenged and inverts the historically obsessive representation of the deeds and material culture of white America, African American neighborhood museums like the DuSable, the International Afro-American Museum of Detroit, and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum spoke to the needs and interests of formerly neglected audiences. Although Evan Turner may have abhorred museums that engaged in “social confrontation,” black museum leaders like John Kinard viewed social confrontation as a vital part of everyday life—and a necessary function of museums. Social confrontation, according to Kinard, could and should extend beyond “protest ideals, demonstrations, bombings or any particular outward show of force.” Rather, it must resonate in the ways in which museums both initiated and responded to social and political change.

Whether by establishing groundbreaking educational programs or by offering students a welcoming space in which to study black history, black neighborhood museums consistently worked to generate these social, cultural, and political changes through deceptively quiet measures.

**Protesting Invisibility in New York City**

Evan Turner’s dismissal of the need to reshape the Philadelphia Museum of Art continued to persist within the mission and mindset of many cultural institutions during the 1970s. Yet it seemed increasingly evident that such dismissal would be met with public protest; to refuse to address issues of race and representation would, at the very least, embroil the museums in a public relations disaster.

In New York City, home of upstart neighborhood museums like the Studio
Museum in Harlem and El Museo del Barrio, mainstream museums responded inconsistently to the demands levied by nonwhite audiences. These audiences responded in kind. For instance, in 1968, African American artists and supporters picketed a Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition titled The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America because it excluded black artists. Henri Ghent, director of the Brooklyn Museum's Community Gallery and cochairman of a group known as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), which formed in 1968 to protest the exclusionary tactics of mainstream art galleries and museums, led the demonstrations. In their defense, Whitney officials maintained that they designed The 1930s to expose artistic trends other than social realism, which dominated the Depression era. As such, most African American artists from the 1930s would invariably be excluded from the exhibition. Staff pointed to the fact that the museum had featured black artists in previous shows, and that an "Art Resources Center" had been opened for minority students on the Lower East Side.

These steps (or, as some viewed it, concessions) were not enough for Ghent, who organized a Studio Museum in Harlem show titled Invisible Americans: Black Artists of the '30s as a counterresponse to The 1930s. Works by Jacob Lawrence, Hale Woodruff, and Henry O. Tanner were represented among the fifty paintings and sculptures on display, as well as many other lesser-known African American artists of the 1930s. New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer admitted that it was difficult to review Invisible Americans, since he did not want to "[infl]ict further injuries on the sensitivities of artists who have undoubtedly suffered much." Nevertheless, Kramer felt that the exhibition was "an extremely feeble one. The work is mainly banal, academic, and incompetent. Mr. Ghent is inviting us to judge black artists by standards greatly inferior to those we bring to the appreciation of—the term is absurd but unavoidable—white artists." Ghent and the Studio Museum in Harlem, argued Kramer, did not advance the status of black artists by continuing to place art "at the service of a political ideal."

Ghent, not surprisingly, took issue with Kramer's charge that he promoted political ideology over aesthetic quality. In a letter to the New York Times, he angrily contended that Kramer applied the hegemonic standards of white European culture to a subject that resisted such applications. The Studio Museum did not invite the audience to judge the artists of Invisible Americans in the same ways as it judged European masters of the period; therefore, Kramer had inherently misunderstood the goals of the exhibition. The fundamental
purpose of Invisible Americans, argued Ghent, was to present work by artists who, by virtue of their race, have been "functionally invisible to the white establishment and therefore not considered for inclusion in a major survey of a period when their contribution was indeed considerable."122

Some highly respected museums in New York did attempt to create exhibits that integrated the narratives and artifacts of African American history and culture; whether the black community responded positively to these efforts remained another matter entirely. In January 1969, just two months after Invisible Americans opened, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition Harlem on My Mind: The Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968, debuted. Harlem on My Mind represented one of the more infamous examples of the complex public response accorded to the early attempts of mainstream museums to incorporate the voices and stories of nonwhite audiences.123 Metropolitan Museum of Art director Thomas Hoving and New York State Council on the Arts visual arts director Allon Schoener placed great hope in the exhibit's transformative potential, believing that it could present the Met as a "regenerative force in modern society" by inviting "new" audiences to feel welcome at the museum.124 The heavily anticipated show spawned heated controversy and a series of public relations disasters and mass demonstrations, which seemed to catch Hoving and Schoener off guard, despite the similar outcry against the Whitney’s The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America exhibition two months earlier.

Contending that the Met had ignored the voices of Harlem community leaders in favor of promoting Harlem on My Mind as "entertainment," as evidenced by curators’ emphasis on photographs and music segments, Harlem's leaders dropped their endorsement of the exhibit.125 Henri Ghent again led the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition in organizing mass demonstrations as the show began attracting record-breaking crowds in January 1969.126 Picketers outside the Met carried signs reading "That’s White of Hoving!" "Tricky Tom at it Again?" and "Visit the Metropolitan Museum of Photography."127 Several African American artists speaking at a symposium held by the Met argued that Harlem on My Mind isolated and rejected black artists. For them, the exhibition represented an "example of total rejection on the part of the establishment, of saying ‘Well, you're not really doing art,’ or of not dealing with the artists that may exist or do exist in Harlem. These shows deal with the sociological aspects of a community, a historical thing."128

Calls for the exhibit's closing began to issue from organizations other than
by artists the white rvey of a e exhibits story and se efforts after Invis- n Harlem debuted. les of the am muse- Metropol- council on e exhibit’s "regener- elcome at versy and seemed to gainst the months ." as , Harlem’s in led the ons as the Picketers ricky Tom. Several argued that he exhibit establish- with the the socio-

the BECC. Robert J. Mangum, Commissioner of the State Division of Human Rights, argued that the exhibit should close "until it reflects a more accurate record of the aspirations, achievements and goals of the black people of New York." Thomas Hoving, under fire for the apparently anti-Semitic remarks penned by an African American high school student in the exhibit catalogue’s introduction, withdrew the catalogue completely at the end of January after continued pressure from the New York City Council, which threatened to withhold funding from the Met. Nevertheless, the exhibit continued to attract protests—and large audiences—throughout its stay.

The battle over exhibits such as the Whitney’s The 1930s and the Met’s Harlem on My Mind, together with the inconsistent and tentative approaches toward black history and culture taken by organizations as esteemed as the Smithsonian, underscore several important points. While such cultural institutions might once have appeared neutral by virtue of their remove from the everyday currents of politics and community dynamics, they now had to choose whether to acknowledge, at least in part, their uncomfortable position as a staging ground for highly public debates about race, power, and representation.