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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Incluseum Manifesto for the Humanities in the Public Sphere

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Abstract

The Inclusuem is a collaborative project established in 2012 with international reach and global impact. The three co-directors, Aletheia Whitman, Dr. Rose Paquet, and Dr. Porchia Moore share a mission to "advance new ways of being a museum through dialogue, community building, and collaborative practice related to inclusive practice in museums." We have provided a platform for over a decade which prompts arts and cultural heritage professionals to push the bounds of museum work to be as expansive and inclusive as possible while enacting structural change. In this piece, we focus on museums as sites where the humanities are made public. Our manifesto proposes a vision for the public humanities in a changing political landscape and will introduce new perspectives for both an emerging museum and an emergent new understanding for the public humanities within museums faced with an antagonistic intellectual and cultural ecosystem.

Keywords: belonging; inclusive praxis; museology; museums; public humanities

"It is my deep belief that in talking about the past, in understanding the things that have happened to us we can heal and go forward. Some people believe that it is best to put the past behind you, to never speak about the events that have happened that have hurt or wounded us, and this is their way of coping – but coping is not healing. By confronting the past without shame, we are free of its hold on us."

– Bell Hooks, Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope

1. Introduction

In this piece, we focus on museums as sites where the Humanities are made public. We highlight two intersecting contemporary currents impacting museums and the Public Humanities therein in the United States. These are: (1) the need for healing combined with a pedagogy of hope within museums, and (2) the present threat posed to the Humanities and critical thinking. We see these currents as challenges, as well as opportunities to activate a new and emergent museum we call "incluseums." Informed by our work with our grassroots organization *The Incluseum*, we propose a Manifesto for the Public Humanities as both a vision and a call to action.

2. Hope and healing

We often frame the Humanities as a vast study of diverse disciplines – from religion, philosophy, and history to anthropology, literature, and others – which often demands that our gaze be looking back. And, while looking back affords us the opportunity to make sense of our current realities, the process of looking back must be accompanied by a pedagogy of hope to guide us into envisioning viable futures.[1] Without the presence of hope as a fundamental aspect of the Public Humanities and their exploration and appreciation within museums; the debate of their merits is moot. Without hope, the deluge of misinformation and disinformation can contribute to increased pessimism and jadedness that hinder our humanity and abilities as sentient beings with infinite creative power.

In her important work *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, now ancestor bell hooks demonstrates to us that there are two critical aspects necessary to advance the Public Humanities. These are:

- **Critical Aspect One**: The power of the Humanities to build community.
- **Critical Aspect Two**: The power of the Humanities in creating community affords us the ability to collectively decide to invest in *hope.*

With our *Incluseum* project, we offer a **third critical aspect**: When a community is present so too is the opportunity to teach and to heal.

Healing in the museum looks like racial equity, social justice, complex interpretation, and inclusive practices. In other words, upending the ways in which museums' colonial and imperial origins, which are rooted in the modern onto-epistemic order, continue to ripple through to the present, manifesting in innumerable ways.[2] It is the need for such a healing process *combined with* hopeful pedagogies that have the power to shape change in our world and make way for a new museum.

This emergent museum is a powerful tool to advance a sustained and thriving future for museums and the Public Humanities therein in that: (1) museums tend to bring together all the disciplines, values, and promises of the Humanities for the greater good of its publics, and (2) the value of community is what shapes the foundation of museums' commitment to education, entertainment, and sharing information. These ideas and practices have shaped the museum field for the last couple of decades, and have been central to our work with *The Incluseum* for the past 12 years and counting.[3]

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[1] Many disciplines inform our thinking about pedagogies of hope including critical theory, Black feminism, environmental activism, and systems theory. See, for example, Grain 2022; Hooks 2003; Freire 1995; and Macy and Johnston 2012.

[2] See Bennet 1995; Escobar 2018; Hicks 2020; Hooper-Greehill 1992; Machado de Olivera 2021; and Patterson et al. 2017.

[3] We think of the museum field as comprising museums of all disciplinary backgrounds as well as the study of museums, or museology. For how these ideas have been influential in the museum field for the last couple decades see, for example, American Alliance of Museums 2018; Bunch 2000; Caitlin-Legutko and Taylor 2021; Fischer, Anila, and Moore 2017; Garibay and Huerta Mingus 2014; Gonzales 2019; Janes 2009; Morse 2018; Museum as Site for Social Action 2018; Paquet Kinsley 2016; Robert 2014; Sandell 1998, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2013; Shellman 2022; Tlili, Gerwitz, and Cribb 2007; and Wittman 2017. See www.incluseum.com. The blog was inaugurated in 2012 and hosts the writing of over 100 unique individuals from around the world. This is the longest-run project dedicated to inclusive praxis in U.S. museums.

3. The Incluseum

The Incluseum, established in 2012, has functioned as an international collaboratory to "advance new ways of being a museum through dialogue, community building, and collaborative practice."[4] We – the three Co-Directors, Aletheia Wittman, Dr. Rose Paquet, and Dr. Porchia Moore – have facilitated a one-of-a-kind, multi-vocal online platform, the co-creation of resources, as well as keynote presentations and workshops aimed at co-envisioning what museums can become. With this project, recognized by the American Alliance of Museums as a key resource for diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEAI), our mission has been to expand notions of inclusive praxis to co-create generative structural changes within museums.[5] This has meant, for example, encouraging the creation of new language, structures, and visions for a more human-centered museum where relational and care-centered values, such as reciprocity, accountability, and belonging are foundational to genuine inclusive transformation.[6] Taken as a whole, *The Incluseum* platform can be read as an unwavering manifesto for how we, as museum professionals, scholars, and publics must release ourselves from the colonial and imperial structures of museums as we know them and embrace new ways of being.

4. Humanities and critical thinking under threat

At this time, we see an important need to expand on the ideas presented on our platform and in our book *Transforming Inclusion in Museums: The Power of Collaborative Inquiry* (2022) to the Humanities in general. We see this no place more acutely than within academia, especially as it relates to the perceived relevance of the Humanities in preparing students for a job market driven by the use of Artificial Intelligence and a demand for skills in cybertechnology and STEM fields.[7]

Moreover, in 2024, we are witnessing curious and dark legislative turns engendered by the current culture wars. These legislative turns set fire to the principles and values of the (Public) Humanities, making it more challenging to explore and promote rich and complex narratives. For example, while Sociology is not necessarily considered part of the Humanities and more related to the Social Sciences, *The New York Times* and the National Education Association (NEA) reported in early January 2024 that the Florida Board of Governors voted to remove Sociology as an academic option from general education requirements.[8] This act was part of a larger series of actions that successfully ended state and federal funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in Florida. These motions are in line with earlier actions related to Florida House Bill 999 which sought to eliminate vital disciplines critical to 21st century Humanities discourses. For example, this bill originally sought to eliminate Women & Gender Studies as a degree or even as a course of study.[9] The most recent bill adjustments, however, allow Women & Gender Studies to remain a part of higher education curriculum but prohibits "radical feminist theory," "queer theory," and does not agree with concepts such as "intersectionality" and "Critical Race Theory."[10] These bills in Florida, along with similar bills proposed in other States attempt to hinder critical thinking and seek

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[4] The Incluseum n.d.
[5] American Alliance of Museums n.d.
[6] Paquet Kinsley, Middleton, and Moore 2016; Moore, Paquet, and Wittman 2023; Paquet Kinsley and Wittman 2016.
[7] Editorial 2021; Groening 2020; Huiskes 2023; Heller 2023; Krislov 2023.
[8] Hartocollis 2024; Barrett 2024.
[9] Nittle 2023.
[10] Gary 2023.

to propose a "civic education" that is stripped of ideas and academic disciplines deemed divisive. In other words, these legislative turns forward a narrow and homogenizing scope on memory and culture; one that favors a single storyline.

5. Manifesto

In response to this adversarial context, and aligned with the need for healing and hope-full pedagogies within the museum field, we propose *The Incluseum Manifesto for the Public Humanities.* This manifesto acts as a declaration and vision for an emergent museum for and by the people in an ever-shifting socio-political and environmental landscape. In short, we call for **incluseums**. It is our view that incluseums can be creative and effective bridges for shaping change and providing inspiration for vibrant Public Humanities within and outside of museums.

6. Incluseum manifesto for museums and the public humanities

We believe that the future of the Public Humanities within museums can benefit from re-framing museums and cultural heritage institutions as **incluseums**, institutions committed to shifting current museum structures and praxis to be:

- Human-centered, yet
- Rooted in planetary consciousness[11]
- Trauma-informed/healing-centered
- Inclusive (economically, socially, intellectually, etc.)
- Transdisciplinary[12]
- Narratively complex

Incluseums are grounded in *relational, care-centered values* such as reciprocity, accountability, and belonging from which grow nourishing practices that affirm everyone's humanity and promote solidarity with all living beings.[13] Although human-centered, incluseums are not human-centric; they support planetary consciousness, that is, *critical thinking and radical imagination* regarding human's and non-human's place and agency in the *interconnected web of life.* A commitment to enacting trauma-informed/healing-centered practices infuses and guides this relational approach so that *genuine and generative* inclusion and belonging can sustainably be cultivated into the future we are co-creating.[14] The narratives incluseums weave are complex yet accessible, bringing together knowledge from an array of disciplines and sources, and thus foregrounding the diversity and richness of life in this universe.[15]

To support this vision and structural shift in praxis, incluseums present a number of characteristics including:

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[11] Many contemporary crises, such as climate change highlight the fact that human societies and social systems are deeply entwined with and inextricable from planetary (eco)systems. As such, we understand "planetary consciousness" as an awareness and promotion of this relational reality, along with action rooted therein (see: Escobar 2018; Macy and Young Brown 2014; and Mbembe 2024).

[12] See, for example, Darbellay 2019.

[13] Mbembe 2024.

[14] Regarding "belonging," we are influenced by the work of The Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley (see https://belonging.berkeley.edu/; and Powell and Menedian 2024), along with the groundbreaking work taking place at Shedd Aquarium in Chicago (see Junkin Lopez 2024).

[15] See, for example, Barndt and Yaeger 2024; Rose 2016; and Westover 2023.

Adaptability – Incluseums are responsive, empathetic, and willing to change shape and direction when needed. They are free of restrictions such as rigid time schedules dictated months and years in advance, embracing instead emergent strategies grounded in relational, care-centered values.[16]

Emergent Strategies for Change – Incluseums create space for developing and supporting care-full (post)humanists invested in shaping change with deep respect for all life. In doing so, they enact new and more accountable relationships both internally (e.g., staff, board of trustees) and externally (community members, local ecosystems).

Twenty-first Century Success – Incluseums envision their publics thriving and achieving twenty-first century skills. Informed by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, these skills underscore the critical role museums and libraries can play in helping publics strengthen literacies in:

- information
- communications and technology
- critical thinking
- problem-solving
- creativity
- civic literacy
- global awareness[17]

Dialogic Space + Critical Discourse – Incluseums exist as public spaces for critical discourse, debate, and discussion. As such, they become public spaces for practicing critical inquiry as a tool for dialogue, and learning through the sharing of complex ideas. Dialogic spaces within incluseums thus support complex narratives woven from a multitude of viewpoints and artifacts that can sometimes be in tension and contradiction with one another. Incluseums provide their public with useful tools to navigate complexity and multiplicity in a generative and enriching manner. Moreover, this type of dialogic space is attuned to multiple types of learners and supports them in exploring these complex, multivocal narratives.

Shared Knowledge + Power – Incluseums privilege the knowledge of their communities and share knowledge and power for the benefit of the multiple publics they serve.

No Fear of Obsolescence – Incluseums do not fear obsolescence because humankind and its cultural products, both tangible and intangible endure. Thereby, incluseums free cultural products and objects from storage units, suppressed archives, gatekeeping practices, and the frailty of memory. They commit to the relevant task of supporting their public in navigating the past and activating hopeful possibilities for the future.

Dynamic Cultural Heritage Objects – Cultural heritage objects are powerful both in and of themselves because of their existence, as well as the possibilities they provide for expanding understanding of our planetary entangled pasts, presents, and futures. Cultural heritage objects are leveraged to support play, inquiry, creativity, reconciliation, restoration, and justice, all of which contribute to a pedagogy of hope.

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[16] Brown 2017; Moore, Paquet, and Wittman 2022.
[17] See: Institute of Museum and Library Services n.d.

Innovative Technologies – Innovative and responsible use of (digital) technologies strengthens incluseums and the relevance of the public humanities therein. This responsible and ethical technology use provides space for engaging broad audiences and creates new learning and educational formats for diverse types of learners, all the while advancing public knowledge beyond single narratives. Incluseums are expansive, thoughtful, and creative in their innovative technology, always considering context and impact. For example, in context, creating and facilitating a discussion circle (a technology in the broadest sense) can be just as impactful as the use of augmented reality, and intentional technology non-use can sometimes be the most appropriate tool.

Digital Hybridity as Continuum of Experience – Related to the above, incluseums weave digital and analog initiatives as a continuum of experience with their communities.

7. Conclusion

The Public Humanities provide a nourishing source of cultural heritage information that invites us to see the humanity in one another regardless of race, ethnicity, political affiliation, or other descriptors we use to other-categorize ourselves, individuals, and our world. As a project, *The Incluseum* recognizes that the humanities as a whole, as well as institutions such as museums, have not equally acknowledged everyone's humanity over time. Incluseums address this discrepancy guided by relational, care-centered values, pedagogies of hope, and critical inquiry. These incluseums have the ability to expand the use and function of museums and the Public Humanities therein. They are institutions that do more than merely collect and display cultural heritage objects; they use their spaces to ignite interest in the Humanities to promote deeper levels of understanding beyond either/or thinking within a rapidly antagonistic and polarizing intellectual and cultural climate.

Dr. Porchia Moore is an innovative thought leader, cultural heritage scholar, outdoor enthusiast, writer, artist, curator, and museum consultant specializing in racial equity. She is the Associate Director for the Center of Arts, Migration, and Entrepreneurship as well as an Assistant Professor and Rotating Program Head of Museum Studies at the University of Florida. Porchia has traveled the world visiting and learning from museums and centers the practice teaching to transgress as outlined by Black feminist scholar bell hooks for liberatory education. She cofounded the Visitors of Color project with nikhil trivedi and partners with museums across the nation to increase racial literacy, cultural competence, and engaged and empathic praxis. She is codirector of The Incluseum. Porchia is committed to creating a world that is verdant, free of anti-Blackness, joy filled, and uplifts the material culture and world heritage of all peoples.

Dr. Rose Paquet is a transdisciplinary public scholar, artist, educator, and consultant. She collaborates with museums and cultural heritage organizations seeking to learn and grow. She often supports these partners in navigating harmful aspects of their pasts to activate future possibilities grounded in reparative action, harm reduction practices, and care. Rose nurtures the power of the imagination to dream and enact worlds and museums otherwise where care is envisioned in its widest sense – care for the body and soul, care for both human and morethan-human kin, care for the soil beneath our feet, the air we breathe, and the water we drink. She cofounded The Incluseum in 2012 and acts as codirector. Rose has been working with museums for the past 20 years and has been particularly shaped by her experiences at the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository in Kodiak, Alaska, where she supported projects of cultural repatriation.

Aletheia Wittman partners with people and teams shifting cultural institutions in pursuit of new ways of working, doing, and being through inclusive transformation. She specializes in projects that center institutional memory and genealogy to achieve organizational learning and action. Aletheia's practice is grounded in values of creativity, curiosity, and collective care. Her research and writing focus on museum legacies, enacting care in museums, as well as power dynamics in contemporary museum culture. She currently acts as the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility Officer at the Washington State Historical Society. Aletheia cofounded and codirects The Incluseum since 2012. She holds a graduate degree in museology from the University of Washington (2012), where she researched emerging curatorial practice in art museums and how those practices engage with social justice issues.

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