

# MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD

## MMF Convening: Retention of BIPOC Staff

August 9 2021  
3–4:30PM EST

ATTENDEES: 20

SPEAKERS: Cheryl Finley, M. Rachael Arauz, Dr. Kelli Morgan

- I. INTRODUCTION AND GROUP AGREEMENTS
- II. PRESENTATIONS

**Cheryl Finley** is the Inaugural Distinguished Visiting Director of the Atlanta University Center Collective for the Study of Art History & Curatorial Studies. She is the author of *Committed to Memory: the Art of the Slave Ship Icon* (Princeton UP, 2018), and co-author of publications including *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South* (Yale University Press, 2018), *Teenie Harris, Photographer: An American Story* (Carnegie Museum of Art, 2011), and *Diaspora, Memory, Place: David Hammons, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Pamela Z* (Prestel, 2008). She has published texts in numerous academic and popular publications, and contributed catalog essays on the artists Berenice Abbott, Terry Adkins, Lōis Mailou Jones, Lorna Simpson, Hank Willis Thomas, Carrie Mae Weems, and Deborah Willis. On leave from Cornell University, where she is an Associate Professor of Art History, Dr. Finley is also a Visiting Professor at the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre at the University of Johannesburg and a member of the Advisory Committee of the Getty Research Center's African American Art History Initiative. Multi-Generational Learning at the Minneapolis Institute of Art; and prior to that, was the Manager of Public Programs at the Brooklyn Museum. She is the co-founder of Museum As Site for Social Action (MASS Action) and has written extensively on the topic of museum culture, community engagement, and social action.

Cheryl: Attracting BIPOC high school and early college students to the art world Discussed work at Atlanta University Center Collective and the scope of the interdisciplinary program. The Atlanta University Center Art History and Curatorial Studies Collective runs 2 programs that expose students to the museum professions early in their careers and to the HBCU system. These pathways are important to bring in young talent as early as the late high school years.

- High School Program: Juniors and seniors in collaboration with the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.
- Early College Program: Spread across three Universities in Atlanta but housed at Spelman College. Students earn college credit.
- Art history and curatorial studies majors, minors and interdisciplinary.

Looking to the Future

# MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD

- Investigating how they can open it up to community colleges as well.
- Want to make a difference not just in leadership positions but in the art industry writ large, including commercial galleries and publishing.
- Looking beyond the roles of curator and director, to roles like Registrar (looking at innovations and new technologies), Art Preparation, and Conservation. Seeking to address the broad lack of diversity across these different areas.
- Program graduated first official class this May. 6 students, 4 going on to pursue MAs (AIC, Williams College, Columbia). Another student studying with Sarah Lewis at Harvard in 3rd year of PhD.
- Bringing on new faculty, and implementing innovative teaching.
- This Fall will integrate a travel component to expose students to field study through “Art Inside.”

**M. Rachael Arauz**, PhD, is an independent curator of modern and contemporary art. Past exhibition and publication topics have included mid-century abstraction, Mexican photography, language and text in contemporary art, non-figurative portraiture, sound sculpture, and weaving. She has also written about her museum experience as a “minority intern” in the 1990s. She has organized exhibitions and contributed to museum catalogues in the United States, Mexico, and Europe. Arauz was co-curator of the 2019 exhibition *In the Vanguard: Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, 1950-1969* for the Portland Museum of Art, Maine.

Rachael: Following up with fellows/interns and getting feedback after the program is over Described her early experiences as a “minority intern” and fellow in programs designed to create racial and ethnic diversity in museums. Those experiences were overwhelmingly positive but also deeply complicated. Her first internship, at the National Gallery of Art in the 1990s. There was always an expectation to perform her ethnic identity to receive the fellowship but simultaneously adopt and conform to institutional expectations. Now that she has had time to reflect on and critique her experiences, she has noticed some similarities:

- Not one institution kept track of her afterward.
- No efforts to host reunions to develop alumni networks.
- No follow-up surveys to see if she had stayed in the field.
- Exit interviews, but no follow-up.
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## Taking the Initiative

- She began doing research into these programs and their outcomes. She reached out to places she worked, including the National Gallery of Art, where she had her first internship. She contacted the Education Dept and Curators in charge of the diversity programs, to ask if anyone had ever conducted research in all the years that these programs have been offered, to gauge their efficacy.
- She wondered if her lack of an institutional affiliation was why she wasn’t being contacted following her positions.

# MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD

- She wrote an essay about her experience at the NGA that was published in [Hyperallergic](#) this spring.

Moving Forward: Institutions need to have long-term accountability and relationships

- 1. We Need Data
  - a. Need to keep track of people: how many participants stay or leave the field?
  - b. Who are the participants?
  - c. These programs are not the same: feedback is key to determining whether they are effective.
- 2. We Need Stories
  - a. We need the personal stories of all the participants—anecdotal stories. b. How do people sit with that experience while they have it?
  - c. How does it resonate with them afterward, five, ten, or twenty years later? d. How does the experience differ as an undergrad, grad, or in a cohort?

**Dr. Kelli Morgan** is Professor of the Practice and Director of Curatorial Studies at Tufts University. A curator, educator, and social justice activist who specializes in American art and visual culture, her scholarly commitment to the investigation of anti-blackness within those fields has demonstrated how traditional art history and museum practice work specifically to uphold white supremacy. Dr. Morgan has held curatorial positions at the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, the Birmingham Museum of Art, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. She has held teaching positions at the Tyler School of Art and Architecture at Temple University, Wayne State University, and the University of Michigan where she merged the classroom and the museum gallery to create various anti-racist paradigms for how curators can actively address the complexities of traditional art history, community engagement, and scholarly innovation. In 2014, Morgan was awarded a dissertation fellowship from the Ford Foundation and earned her PhD in Afro-American studies and a graduate certificate in public history–museum studies from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2017.

**Kelli: The House is On Fire**

It is crucial for BIPOC museum professionals to share their personal experiences and reveal sordid realities—the “underbelly”—of the way these institutions have functioned. Getting BIPOC folks in the door is not the problem. The environment is the problem. The house is on fire and no one wants to acknowledge it. It is heartbreaking to her that Black and Brown students, like those in Cheryl’s programs and fellowships like Rachael’s, get inside these institutions where they are broken down and discriminated against. No one is talking about how the leaders are extinguishing the talent. Some of the situations are so bad that people are looking for other jobs but who has the time, money or the mental capacity to be

# MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD

switching jobs all the time?

Issues:

- Insidious narrative of “gratefulness”: institutions make you feel like you should be happy to have this job so you are not allowed to say anything.
- Curators are not inviting Junior Curators to meetings where they can learn.
- How to get around HR when it’s not functional?
- How to build alliances and work around Senior Curators who are also in bed with the problems?
- Power and paternalism impact a broad spectrum of workers—across race, class, gender, and sexuality.

## Establishing Support

Kelli and Judith Pineiro at AAMC recently created the Professional Alliance for Curators of Color (PACC), an environment where young curators of color have support and a cohort.

- It’s a safe space where they can talk to each other and with more senior people in the field.
- A space to focus on strategies to deal with real problems—harassment, etc.
- Working to provide executive coaching resources:
  - Access to 25-27 Senior Curators/Directors/Mentors—27 people “on call” who can provide advice drawn from their personal experiences.
- PACC has had 4 meetings. Discussion topics include:
  - How to get around HR when it is not trustworthy or reliable,
  - How to build better alliances with Senior Curators who are on par with the toxic person in the environment.
  - How to build and facilitate relationships with other museum departments and outside institutions (e.g., academia, community-based organizations.)
  - There is also a DEAI consultant, Tanya Odom, who works with the group.

## V. DISCUSSION

There are a lot of moves that need to be made: some are small and daily, some are institutional, some are departmental. We all need to start somewhere immediately; we can’t let perfect be the enemy of good. It feels like we are finally in a place where people are being real and outspoken and some people in power are listening.

## Data Collection: Up to This Point

*Is it fair to say that no one has been gathering data on folks of color in the field and tracking their trajectories?*

- The Walker might have some information on their programs.
- The Mellon Curatorial Fellowship has had 8 years of its program and is considering pausing in order to collect data on where people have ended

# MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD

- up. Thank you, Rachael, for your article.
- The Ford Foundation and Walton Family Foundation might be conducting a report on their Diversifying Art Museum Leadership Initiative (DAMLI).
  - MOMA: Advocates for Antiracism (which is a large peer group of staff at MoMA that started meeting in summer 2020—not formally sanctioned by leadership) conducted a survey. Here’s the description: “The survey was compiled by members of the Internships and Fellowships subgroup of Advocates for Antiracism (A4A) to better understand the experiences of past and current interns and fellows, with special attention to issues of social and racial equity, financial burden, and workplace environment. 66 people participated. The survey was disseminated through informal social networks of past interns and fellows and carried out online with care taken to guarantee the anonymity of respondents. The network approach to invite participation helped ensure the sample included many varied voices and experiences giving an overview of the intern and fellow experience at MoMA.”

## Data Collection: Moving Forward

### *What would it mean to create that tracking?*

- Would it be useful to the field for MMF to create an intake form online for folks to self-identify and opt-in to sharing their professional trajectory? Maybe also share the specific issues that they are struggling with (maintaining confidentiality)?
  - Do we offer money for people who participate?
  - Critical to keep confidential.
- Museums are generally lacking in collecting data and have been focused on audience data rather than internally-focused data on staff, turnover, demographics, etc. Must shift to critically look at ourselves as institutions.
- It is important to provide care and remuneration for people alongside data collection; we need to remove the stigma of money.
- If a museum can track donors via CRM programs, they can track past BIPOC predecessors and fellows.

## What Solutions Can MMF Provide?

- Collect data and stories so that BIPOC folks can see themselves reflected in the data/research and see the data do something – have an impact.
- Offer tools and templates that museums can use to collect their own data and encourage or even incentivize them to self-report.
- Prove the Problem: Use our position to write a paper/report that illuminates how systemic racism functions in our field, by connecting data with oral histories.

## Issues Related to Race and Ethnicity

### *The Diversity Myth*

# MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD

- “They don’t want your Diversity Initiative”: poor treatment is by design.
- “All I see is my community through an ethnographic historicized lens.”
- Colleagues in some institutions were asked to remove their pronoun identifications because of museum style guides.

## *Essentializing*

- Constantly pigeon-holed into topics that relate to our race or ethnicity; not allowed to demonstrate the full range of our knowledge.
- Expected to perform DEAI work, and not be paid for it.
- Expected to be the voice for our race or ethnicity.

## *Infantilizing*

- Repeatedly being referred to apply for minority internships after earning a PhD.
- When you’re not considered “qualified enough,” despite how many of these types of fellowships you’ve done, your pay is commensurate with that assessment.

## *Value Systems*

- “Professionalism” is a white supremacist myth, born of white, male, middle-class systems.
- BIPOC are not allowed to bring their value systems to work, but white people are.

## Survival Skills

### *Emotional Modeling*

Emotional modeling and emotional tools and skills aren’t taught within curatorial or art history programs. It doesn’t matter how educated you are, these are the tools you need to survive and thrive.

- We are allowed to experience the full spectrum of our emotions.
- Don’t worry about being angry when you witness injustice in action.
- If you find yourself in an uncomfortable space, like a meeting, announce your discomfort and excuse yourself.
- Care about yourself more than anything else.

### *Self-Actualization/Self-Advocacy*

- We have the power to establish our work cultures and to ask for what we need.
- How to stand firm in your own philosophies and belief systems.
- We need to understand and recognize that we have AGENCY.
- Know your institution’s language, and policies and use the guidelines and standards, emails, etc. given to you as part of the supposed commitment to this work as the entry point for advocating.
- You can choose a different path, e.g., to go freelance; to not be anyone’s “diversity hire”.