



Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary

If I Were to Objectively Speak: Meanderings on Relationship Building Based on “Use” of Community Advisory Groups

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Abstract: The following letter is in response to the panel “All Ears? How Museums Use Community Advisory Groups to Listen and Act towards Local Relevance and Engagement,” which was conducted on February 18, 2023 at the College Art Association and sponsored by the CAA Museum Committee. The transcript to the panel was circulated to museum professionals to respond. The author of this response selected the letter response format to convey a conversational tone, one that can be imagined to take place in a casual setting such as in the author’s or the requester’s home at the kitchen table. People are often most comfortable and likely to be most candid in settings while sharing food and beverages. The focus of this letter is to share open responses with considerations toward the limitations expressed on behalf of the institutions but with a stronger focus on the community representatives who are often individuals, groups, and lesser resourced organizations that often respond to the requests to take part in the work of larger institutions.

Keywords: *Active Descendant Community, Community Advisory Groups, Cultural Heritage*

Letter

Thanks for inviting me to contribute feedback to the “All Ears? How Museums Use Community Advisory Groups to Listen and Act towards Local Relevance and Engagement” case study presentations. I will attempt to provide my initial musings—just some preliminary thoughts—after having listened to the presenters multiple times to ensure clarity and with an open mind. Do not worry; I will try to get through my thoughts without interjecting too many non-sequiturs as I have a habit of doing. By the way, who came up with this title? I think the use of language is pretty indicative of how relationships are perceived, pursued, built, and maintained.

A *dear* frenemy and colleague in an adjacent field to mine (archiving/library and information science profession) once sardonically said to me that “I *love* to be in conversation”—that it was as if all I lived to do as an archivist was to be “in conversation.” My rebuttal was the practice of “being in conversation” is called engagement; if one really and truly wants to know what the deal is with people, who happen to manage organizations, other people as employees, and represent a plethora of ideas, standards, policies, and so forth, then you have to talk with them, and it is a must to be in dialogue.

This is the only way to know, balance, and shift the power dynamics to sway and/or leverage advocacy, equity, and onus; unearth levels of transparency; trace, tie-in, and unearth thinly veiled or objective honesty in either genuine or disingenuous attempts at community partnerships that lean heavily on the work of organizational appointed advisory groups, individuals, and lesser resourced organizations “tapped” to do their work.

Better resourced organizations who are driven to uphold mission-driven work often benefit from the privilege of being more financially stable and supported with better outfitted staff, which also translates to them participating in behaviors that demonstrate less equitable practices while engaging with community advisory groups.

If one does not engage in being “in conversation,” you otherwise will always be on the outside of the knowledge circle albeit institutional, community, and so on.

My experiences are layered: (1) as an entity and often asset; (2) as one not treated as a valued professional peer, colleague, or community partner but as (3) one who *represents* that of the work of the memory worker, information professional, community liaison; and (4) at times as an institutional representative. When I am in the role as an institutional partner or representative, I have to place importance on key relationships while centering individuals, groups, etc. all while being fully aware that I am viewed as the “meal ticket” or key component to the success of the requesting institution.

This rounds me back to my point; I immediately began listening to the case study presentations with laser focus from the viewpoint through the lens of someone with the aforementioned experiences and developing a critique with keen discernment as a trained professional versed in understanding the centering of justice, Black feminist critical race theory frameworks and as one who is often sought out for participation in museum designated community advisory groups as well as one who has had the responsibility of identifying, convening, and facilitating museum-advisory groups, which often have been comprised of community members—often depicted as groups that exist as (1) outside of, (2) not aligned with, or (3) in concert to the requesting, often encyclopedic museum.

Listening patiently and with empathy, it is worth noting that the presenters seem to have genuinely made attempts toward reciprocal collaborations in their processes to develop and engage community advisory groups. However, my critique is that quite a few of them as institutional representatives still fell short on implementing inclusive practices toward achieving diversity throughout their processes to achieve successful outcomes. They also did not really lean into developing meaningful and sustainable relationships with the members of the community advisory groups and instead the deliverables from the meetings came across as “one off” programs or partnerships that lend more toward superficial and exploitative practices.

One sole presenter spoke at great length about how she facilitated the entire development of the process for creating and working with the community advisory group but heavily focused on the meetings with her peer group, a brief encounter (aka reviewing a similar past exhibition whose local curator still lived within the community), and other surface-level information.

A more genuine and reciprocal collaboration would have demonstrated her ability to participate alongside members of her peer group and members of the community advisory group for the presentation, including compensation for all involved, and consulting with the local curator of the like-exhibition versus making reference to the past exhibition.

Many of the speakers were more adamant about the successful outcome of their programs and exhibitions for the organizations that they overlooked the importance of developing sustainable relationships with outside groups, especially ones that are comprised of and often led by community leaders who are often seen as the leader within community advisory groups. I would think building relational versus transactional partnerships should be the main goal of coordinating and working with advisory groups, but I suppose that is just me—and all the other cultural heritage workers and community representatives who are poached for intellectual property to strengthen mission-driven organizations. There was one presentation led by co-presenters that I think provided an exemplary case study on how they were able to foster meaningful relationships with the community advisory group they worked alongside to develop a successful program.

I have to tell you that I am often perplexed about the decision-making processes of the institution and how institutional representatives are selected to implement particular delegated tasks. I prefer to refrain from making references to the “institution” as if it is not made up of and led by people. I believe we should be able to identify specific people to better understand systems and decision-making, to revisit the outcome to ensure the well-being of the community advisory group, and to consider future partnerships and continued relationship building.

Recently the trend with inviting external advisory groups or community groups has been strongly linked to fulfilling organizational missions toward demonstrating their willingness and ability to implement diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility frameworks into their engagement strategies.

This practice is often most prevalent in predominantly white institutions that are challenged with practicing and demonstrating diversity, equity, and inclusion but often fall short with balancing ethical treatment of the community advisory groups who have been targeted then invited. The Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) often are keenly aware that the invited groups who often represent the “other” or non-white groups are known to enhance the organization’s projects, programs, and holdings, including exhibitions and various types of engagement, and contribute toward increasing the museum collections.

To draw context, one of the first engagements that came to mind was the experience I had when I arrived at James Madison’s Montpelier, of course after having accepted the invitation to “contribute to the development of a robust database.” I can see myself gesturing the rabbit ears and rolling my eyes at the absurdity related to me thinking I needed to justify my decision to attend the workshop that physically took place during a weekend on a former slave plantation.

Honestly, I have never been intrigued to knowingly step foot onto a plantation nor have I ever had the desire, but I found myself in full swing exchanging ideas, providing critique,

breaking bread, and building community with the Montpelier staff and the Montpelier plantation former inhabitant's descendants who are better known as the active Descendant community. For what it is worth, it was a meaningful experience primarily because the staff was intentional and genuine. The project was led by a well-rounded, down to earth, culturally competent white woman who implemented person-centered and radical empathy frameworks into her work. It was a complicated and challenging project on so many levels, but each participant felt they had a stake in the process and the outcome.

These experiences move beyond the understanding or what we understand the purpose of the gathering to be, but it seems that little else is considered. There is an omission of the emotional, mental, and physical drain of the members of the community advisory groups as they work alongside organizations to provide their intellectual capital. That focus for the organization is one that remains on the successful deliverable for the organization. Basically ignoring the fact that, in the case of many other Black women's experience at Montpelier, the organization is asking a Black person with slavery/enslavement as a part of their legacy to participate in a project to enhance the community engagement tool, "a robust database," that supports the operations of a plantation (albeit in part to tell a story that humanizes the enslaved but even still not holistically considering that, in my case, this Black person works at and represents a Black cultural heritage organization and is a Black person who is a woman, a Black woman, who at the time of the height of this wealthy plantation and slave holding government was never considered a human being, one who had but was not allowed to express ownership of her own self, her mind, and thoughts). There was no implementation of ethics of care while doing the work. That lack of care, specifically, is what I am referencing as what is missing in the majority of the presentations in the "All Ears? How Museums Use Community Advisory Groups to Listen and Act towards Local Relevance and Engagement" case study presentations.

This preface is provided as background to my overall response, which is that when encyclopedic or universal museums are not "in conversation" with the people they have identified to participate in their advisory groups then they are in fact perpetuating and not uplifting a "new" or "groundbreaking" practice toward implementing genuine, reciprocal community partnerships delivered to them through sourced outside labor to produce and hand deliver the product of the advisory group—that they need to "do the work" and better by ensuring fostering genuine and reciprocal relationship building that will honestly inform the patrons and public of the programs taking place within the institutions. The onus is on the entire group to address concerns and challenges and to develop solutions by being receptive to having open and honest conversations to implement necessary changes to develop a more just society based on our collective abilities to edify the public through implementation of inclusive engagements.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Skyla S. Hearn, a proud Chicagoan by way of the Great Migration (Mississippi), is an information professional who is most concerned with supporting community efforts to further substantiate first-person-centered perspectives to strengthen their own documentation and to contribute to incomplete, misinformed, and ill-served overarching records. Addressing efforts to establish personal, community, and cultural heritage archives, Hearn founded *ActivelyArchiving* and works closely with creators on local, national, and international archives projects. She is also a co-founder of *The Blackivists*. Hearn earned an MLIS (special collections certificate) from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a BA in mass communications and media arts (cinematography and photography) and Black American studies (minor). She is a graduate of the University of Chicago Civic Leadership Academy. Toward legacy building, Skyla co-edited the zine publication *Our Girl Tuesday: An Unfurling* for Dr. Margaret T. G. Burroughs alongside Tempestt Hazel and Sarah Ross, with an introduction by Mariame Kaba, published by Sojourners for Justice Press.

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