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**Northwest African American Museum: Forging a Black Identity**

Sadiqua Iman

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Arts Ecosystem Research Project

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**Abstract**

The Northwest African American Museum opened in March, 2008, but had been in the works since 1985. During that time, community members, historians, and activists sometimes cooperated, sometimes argued over the best way to create an African American cultural center that could meet the needs of Seattle's black community. Over the next twenty years, hardships, betrayals, and compromises would divide the African American community. When class, politics, economics, and racism must be reckoned with in building a new institution, change is the only constant and compromise the only solution. In the end, the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, the Black Heritage Society of Washington, the City of Seattle, business leaders and community activists collaborated and compromised to make the museum a reality. Today it is a cultural touchstone for Seattle's African American community; a beacon of hope among a people who felt hopeless.

### **Author's Statement**

As a member of the African American community, I will use both African American and Black to describe the people and histories recounted throughout this case study. Though both terms have been under scrutiny by members of said communities and scholars alike, my personal identification with these terms as a descendant of African colonization and slavery has rooted me in the acceptance of both my genetic makeup and my externalized perceived racial identity. From this point of view, I will infuse Critical Race Theory and Endarkened Feminist Epistemology.

According to Harvard Law:

Critical race theories combine progressive political struggles for racial justice with critiques of the conventional legal and scholarly norms which are themselves viewed as part of the illegitimate hierarchies that need to be changed. Scholars, most of whom are persons of color, challenge the ways that race and racial power are constructed by law and culture. One key focus of critical race theorists is a regime of white supremacy and privilege maintained despite the rule of law and the constitutional guarantee of equal protection of the laws. (The Bridge, n.d., para. 1)

Acknowledging the racist practices that have been put into place to oppress the African American communities in America is critical to understanding how and why many of the issues and successes of the Northwest African American Museum came to pass. Critical Race Theory is utilized to debunk stereotypes and monolithic beliefs of inferiority that led to the need for a culturally specific museum in the first place. To take this theory beyond the white gaze, I include methods of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, created by Cynthia Dillard, who has conceptualized the way that black women specifically envision and experience the world due to

an innate knowing.

According to Dillard:

In the midst of the familiar trappings of education—competition, intellectual combat, obsession with a narrow range of facts, credits, and credentials—what we seek is a way of working illumined by spirit and infused with should. An important component of African indigenous pedagogy is the vision of the teacher [and researcher] as a selfless healer intent on inspiring, transforming, and propelling students to a higher spiritual level. (Dillard, 2008, p. 277)

I believe a combination of these two methods will give a broad overview of the Northwest African American Museum's place in Seattle's Art Ecosystem, as well as a reflection of the city's responsibility to its founders, inhabitants, and transplants that make it the blossoming metropolitan city that it has become today.

### **Northwest African American Museum: Forging a Black Identity**

The Northwest African American Museum (NAAM) is the only museum in the Pacific Northwest to focus on the African American and African immigrant community. The Pacific Northwest includes Washington, Oregon and Idaho (Center for the Study of Pacific Northwest, n.d.). According to the 2018 census, these three states have the lowest African American population as a percentage of the total population of the state (World Population, 2020). This fact alone makes the museum a unique establishment. Its founding is a fascinating story. This case study focuses on the time period from the 1985 occupation of the building that is the museum's current site, to its grand opening and initial exhibitions in 2008.

### **A Black Past Securing a Black Future**

Seattle has a complicated racial history which includes the impact of the Japanese American Internment during World War II; its large population of displaced Native Americans; and the systematic redlining of black communities; all of which limited economic advancement for people of color. The current home of the Northwest African American Museum in the former Colman School, located at 2300 S. Massachusetts St. in Seattle's Central District, is emblematic of such disparities. The Colman School was built in 1909 and by the 1960s, had become a symbol for the city's African-American community because it was one of the few majority black elementary schools in Seattle. Unfortunately, this meant that the school was underfunded, under resourced, and academically inferior to its white contemporaries (Clark, 2005). In the 1960s, the Washington State Department of Transportation began aggressively purchasing homes as part of the land acquisition for the completion of the I-90 freeway. Many African American families living in the area were displaced. This was not just an early sign of gentrification. Simultaneously, as a result of voluntary city-wide school desegregation, many black families

began to bus their children to schools located on the north side of the city so that they had access to better education (HistoryLink, 2013). The city has since continued to feel the pressure of gentrification in the Central District with the African American population decreasing from 70 percent in the 1970s to less than 20 percent in 2014 (Balk, 2015). In June 1979, a combination of state funding for the new highway and consistently low academic performance led to the Colman School's closure. There were promises of a new school being built in a different location, but African American activists, teachers, and community members fought to keep the school and to keep it demographically black. When their demands were not heeded, they refocused their efforts on establishing a black history museum.

One proposed use of the Colman property was a police precinct. Many community activists were opposed; they wanted something positive in the building that could continue to be a beacon of black advancement instead of imprisonment. An onsite protest and a 5,000 signature petition stopped the precinct proposal from moving any further. The City of Seattle formed a task force of city officials and community activists to discuss the proposed African American museum. The task force met once, no action was taken, and the black community was left feeling ignored by the people in charge of the city they called home. On November 25, 1985, task force member Omari Tahir-Garrett and community activists Earl Debnam, Charlie James, Michael Greenwood, Lawrence Robinson, and Greg Anderson, decided to take matters into their own hands by breaking into the closed Colman School building and starting the museum themselves: the African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center. They held exhibits and lectures, opened a bookstore, and raised funds. Supporters throughout the community allowed the occupiers to use their bathrooms and showers, while others brought over food and toiletries (Erickson, 2015). Though they were there illegally, they felt they were on solid moral ground.

The occupation, the presence of protestors, and the negative publicity helped to keep the building in legal limbo (Erickson, 2015).

In 1993 Seattle gained national attention by being the first majority white city to elect an African American mayor, Norman B. Rice. Rice won on his skills in helping to balance the city's budget while on the City Council during the recession in the 1980's (Egan, 1989). This would be an important factor in how the Colman School occupation would pan out. Mayor Rice collaborated with the activist group occupying the school, community supporters, and city officials, and again a committee was formed to move the museum forward, but this time there was a focus on sustainability (Guilbert, 2008). In 1995, Rice appointed Robert Flowers, a senior vice president at Washington Mutual Bank, to head the new committee (Tate, 2015). Some of the original protestors like Tahir-Garrett aggressively opposed this change of leadership. They felt that having a high profile member of Seattle's black elite represent the museum was a way of taking the museum away from the people of the community and marketing it to rich investors. This was not untrue, but it was a pragmatic approach (Shapiro, 2006).

There was plenty of support pouring out of the African American Central District community in the form of donated goods and volunteers, but actual funds raised were not enough to operate and staff the multi-purpose cultural center that was envisioned. The new focus on investors, partnerships, and corporate sponsorship allowed the committee to gain traction for purchasing the Colman School, but the feeling of betrayal remained, and Tahir-Garrett tried to get justice by organizing his own board and registering a business license which delayed the sale of the building. The discord between the community and the city-appointed board made the School District apprehensive and they put the building back on the market where it was purchased by the Urban League in 2003 (Guilbert, 2008). The Urban League of Metropolitan



Seattle empowers African Americans, as well as other diverse underserved communities, to thrive by securing educational and economic opportunities (Urban League, n.d.). This project allowed them to fulfill their mission in a meaningful way. They would be able to create a space for the new African American museum, have a new home office, and provide affordable housing in the quickly gentrifying Central District. With the Urban League now playing a leading role in the future of the museum, more funders and donors were willing to invest (Erickson, 2015). After Tahir-Garrett and his allies invested eight years of free labor occupying the building, organizing volunteers, and fundraising, the project was now in the hands of a board that did not see them as fit to turn the vision for the museum into a reality.

### **The Need for an African American Museum**

Historically, major U.S. museums have interpreted culture through a white Eurocentric lens. Archaeologists and sociologists have always been intrigued by African culture that they viewed as primitive. They exhibited artifacts collected on the African continent and in some cases, actual living Africans, displayed in special exhibits showcasing their perceived animal-like behavior, which was actually simply the reflection of any human stolen from their land, stripped of their culture, and put on display for spectators to cast judgement upon. Olivia Little's Erickson (2015) gives a clear example of this in her University of Washington doctoral dissertation, *Co-Constructing Racial Identities at Seattle's Northwest African American Museum*.

Objects collected for museums during this time were the spoils of both internal and external colonization projects and, like trophies, their ownership demonstrated the dominance and supremacy of Euro-American culture. Representing non-Europeans in natural history museums served to reaffirm discourses of European biological and

cultural superiority. Heavily influenced by the theories of evolution and inherited characteristics developed by Charles Darwin and French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, American anthropologists and social scientists of the Victorian period divided human populations into categories that ranged from savage to civilized, and their work reinforced racist notions of White superiority. (p. 21)

These primitive renderings still make up many of the African exhibits in museums today. In contrast, African Americans were ignored altogether. Without the exoticism of being from another country, they were simply the by-product of colonialism and the hired help that had no history beyond slavery. It would take a lot of commitment from the community to retell these stories for generations to come as an attempt to give hope to the future of black people in America.

During the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, even as anthropologists, art museums, and historians discounted or ignored the importance of African American history and culture, Black community members actively sought to examine, preserve, and celebrate their own stories. Just as Black artists found places to exhibit their work without the support of mainstream art museums, so too did Black communities seek out spaces to remember and celebrate the histories of their communities outside the traditional museum establishment. (Erickson, 2015, p. 29)

The Civil Rights movement intensified African Americans' desire for their own institutions, giving birth to the Black Museum Movement. In the 1950s and 60s, African American museums were founded in Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit (Erickson, 2015). Black communities around the country began developing resources to teach future generations about the struggles and successes of being black in America, specifically how it had shown up in the

specific neighborhoods. Seattle was no different. The Black Heritage Society of Washington State began archiving and collecting artifacts and art in 1977, and were the original stewards of the present day Northwest African American Museum collections (Black Heritage Society, n.d.).

### **Finances at the Forefront**

It is no secret that African Americans across the country have been at a financial disadvantage since the first slave ship landed in Philadelphia in the 1600s. Though we have come a long way from chattel slavery, the beliefs and policies that were in place then regarding social status, human rights, and economic growth still linger in today. This played out in the attitudes of the community members that fought so hard for the museum, versus the new Urban League ownership. As a national organization the Urban League had to work with various corporate and political entities in order to grow to a status that would allow them to move the needle on black advancement. This success was what put them in a position to purchase the Colman School. They began to search for other long-standing community movers and shakers to help fundraise for the renovation and build-out of the museum. None were more worthy of this task than Dr. Carver Gayton. A descendant of one of the prominent black families of Seattle who arrived in the 1800s, his resume boasts experience as an FBI agent, a state employment security commissioner and an executive at Boeing (Henry, 2008). Under Gayton's leadership, the museum raised enough money to start construction and to begin recruiting employees.

The Urban League began a national search for an Executive Director, but concluded that that position should be filled by someone from the local community. Urban League president James Kelly offered the position to Gayton, impressed by Gayton's understanding of the museum's importance to the community. Gayton recruited Barbara Earl Thomas as Deputy Director and lead curator. Her vision would shape the museum's collection and exhibitions

(Henry, 2008).

Gayton and Thomas had met while he was a professor at the University of Washington and she was a graduate student in the Art Department. Thomas was a protege of Jacob Lawrence, the world-renowned black artist known for his paintings depicting the history of African America, such as the Migration Series (Phillips Collection, n.d.). Thomas is an award-winning writer and visual artist. A daughter of southerners, she was one of the first in her family born in the Pacific Northwest. “Her tempera paintings and linocut prints vibrate with electric, elaborate line work and apocalyptic, sunburst skies” (Manitach, 2013, para. 2). Beyond her legacy as an amazing visual artist, Thomas is a respected arts leader who has worked on major arts events such as Bumbershoot, as well as for the Seattle Arts Commission (now the Office of Arts & Culture) (Barbara Earl Thomas, n.d.). Funding was one of the first challenges Gayton and Thomas faced in bringing the dream to reality. They had enough funds to operate the museum for a total of two months.

The Urban League wanted to take advantage of the demand for housing in the area. They collaborated with a developer who financed the renovation of the top two floors of the building into 36 affordable housing units for working people, called the Urban League Village. Though they could not offer the apartments to the African American community exclusively, they did their due diligence to ensure that African Americans that had already been displaced from the Central District, and those who worked in and for the community received the first notice that applications were open. This was the Urban League’s way of getting ahead of the gentrification that was slowly consuming the Central District. With this arrangement the museum would now only occupy the 19,000 square feet on the ground floor of the building, big enough for three galleries, a library/research room, and a gift shop, but not large enough to hold the hopes and

dreams of a full scale cultural center. As the plans for the museum moved forward, so did the pushback from the community about how much they had to sacrifice (Henry, 2008).

### **Let's Build a Museum!**

Gayton and Thomas continued to prioritize community connections in building the museum's staff. Education Director Brain Carter and Community Relations Manager Leilani Lewis were graduate students at the University of Washington at the time they were hired. No one on the team had ever started a museum before.

"Barbara told me pulling together this museum would be a lot like flying an airplane while building it in the air" Lewis recalls (personal communication, March 5, 2020). Carter has similar memories of the experience.

I think we were all nervous in our own way, because nobody had started a museum on that project. At that point, I was the only person who had some kind of official museological training. Barbara Earl Thomas, as an artist, she has been around museums and cultural organizations, but there was a lot of learning on the fly about how to build a museum. (B. Carter, personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Carter was a first year graduate student studying Museology. He planned to write his thesis on African American Museums when he was approached by Gayton to help develop programming for the new museum. Carter learned very quickly that he was not taking on an easy task, due to the history of the project.

We [were] not going to satisfy everybody's hopes and expectations. But what you can do is you can build something that's sustainable, you can build something that is willing and able to evolve, and you can let it be in that evolutionary state. That's what all museums are, and that is its greatest purpose. (B. Carter, personal communication, March 3, 2020)

In an effort to assure the community that their stories and the histories that were important for the youth and the world to see would still be prioritized, Carter traveled around the Pacific Northwest to get as broad a scope as possible.

I spent more time on people's couches, hearing their stories, looking through their closets, and miles on my car. But the idea was, you don't know what it is the community wants to have reflected in the space. It takes humility, takes saying, 'I've got the academic credentials, I've got the past work experience, right', but putting that aside and saying that this particular museum has got to be a reflection of this community. (B. Carter, personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Thomas encouraged this sort of tenacity of all of her team members. She taught them that preconceived visions could sometimes get in the way of the process and relationships that are necessary for real creativity or effective interpretation. Carter shared this wisdom with Lewis when she joined the team right before the museum opened. Lewis recalls,

I learned early on that relationships were important. And so I would reach out to organizations or accept partnership organizations where I knew a collaboration or an audience could be cultivated or there is a platform where there was a theme. (L. Lewis, personal communication, March 5, 2020)

The team was finalized and plenty of volunteers were ready to help anywhere they were needed. A permanent exhibit called the Journey Gallery, which traces African Americans in the Pacific Northwest from the 1700's to present day, is still on view at the museum. It includes artifacts and videos of famous Seattleites like music idol Jimi Hendrix and Tuskegee Airman William Holloman. "Making a Life/Creating a World" was the first temporary exhibition and featured the work of Seattle artists Jacob Lawrence and James Washington Jr. A glass case at the

front of the museum holds artifacts left over from the occupiers in the 1980s, honoring their hard work in setting the foundation for the museum.

On March 8, 2008, city officials, artists, and families gathered for the grand ribbon cutting ceremony. The event turned from joyous to questionable in a matter of seconds, when Wyking Kwame Garrett emerged from the audience to seize the podium. "This is a disgrace," Garrett exclaimed, followed by a mixed response of disapproval and cheers. Garrett is the son of Omari Tahir-Garrett, the activist that tried to put a stop to the museum opening after the occupation. He was there on behalf of his father's legacy, and wanted to express that the museum was a scam in his eyes and that the community had been fooled into taking less than what they deserved. Garrett was arrested at the event, and the ceremony continued with tension and hesitation. Ultimately, the museum opening was a success after over twenty years of fighting, fundraising, and compromise. Though it was much smaller than the African American community had wished for, it still came into existence and still has room to grow.

African Americans in the Pacific Northwest have a unique history, not rooted in the same type of chattel slavery and blatant racism found in the southern United States and on the east coast. Many black people traveled to the area to find work as free people, and have therefore had greater opportunities to acquire wealth and become respected leaders in their communities and in their political undertakings. This is reflected in museum exhibits that do not showcase the marches and lynchings found in many other African American museums. This is not to say that there were not unjust laws put in place to oppress black and brown people in the Pacific Northwest, rather it explains the passive oppression of the white attitudes that kept those laws in place. It is much more difficult to fight for a cause when one is comfortable in their environment and much easier to accept compromise, when the other option is non-existence. The Northwest

African American Museum has had many leaders step up and forge new paths. It has been an incubator for social change through art, history, and cultural programming. The museum's mission is to spread knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the histories, arts and cultures of people of African descent for the enrichment of all. They have done that from conception to curation and have made room for many leaders since to come in and continue to fight and forge.

**Method note:**

This case study was developed by Sadiqua Iman, MFA 2020, as part of Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership applied research seminar focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. Interviews were conducted with Brian Carter, founding Education Director and later Deputy Director/Head Curator of NAAM, currently Executive Director of 4Culture; and Leilani Lewis, former Director of Marketing and Communications at NAAM, currently Associate Director of Diversity, Communications and Outreach for the University of Washington; as part of this research during Winter quarter 2020. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.



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