The Empathetic Museum: A New Institutional Identity

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Abstract   The Empathetic Museum is a group of colleagues who advocate institutional **empathy** as a transforming force for museums. Our initiative emerged in the second decade of the 21st century amidst a confluence of seismic events in the US that forced the museum field to examine its relationship to social issues. The Empathetic Museum arose as a critique of museums' indifference and reluctance to engage with issues deeply affecting their communities, especially those of color. We propose a lack of institutional empathy as a subtle yet powerful cause of this indifference. The article traces the development of the Empathetic Museum initiative; the evolution of its philosophy of institutional empathy; the creation of the Maturity Model as a key tool for empathetic practice; and its use and impact in the field. As a work in progress, the Empathetic Museum initiative has evolved and expanded through constant observation of, reflection on, and engagement with the important issues of our time.

INTRODUCTION

The Empathetic Museum is a group of colleagues who propose institutional **empathy** (Words in bold italic at their first use can be found in glossary following the references at the end of this paper.) as a transforming force for museums.[1,2] We offer a philosophy and a set of standards and tools that provide practical and iterative steps for resonance and relevance in the 21st century. The rise of social justice conversations within mainstream media, social media, and public spaces makes it easy to dismiss the expansion of social consciousness in museums as merely zeitgeist–a transient moment that will end as the culture pivots to the next big thing. The question we should be asking is not, *When will this social justice thing end?* but rather, *How much longer do museums have in their life cycle as disconnected (non-empathetic) organizations?* The Empathetic Museum holds that the qualities of the 21st century museum are impossible without an inner core of institutional empathy: the intention of the museum to be, and be perceived as, deeply connected with its **community**. The time has come to disrupt the persistent lack of institutional empathy in museums.

CAVEAT: We recognize that our project developed (within and in response to) certain

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dynamics in North American society, particularly in the US. Each nation and global region has its own unique networks of power and privilege that influence systemic *inclusion*/exclusion in museums. We believe that readers around the world can adapt our analysis of empathy in museums to their own specific situations; better still they can create new insights about institutional empathy based on their particular experiences.

THE ORIGINS OF THE EMPATHETIC MUSEUM INITIATIVE

> I believe that there is a basis more fundamental than content for museum practice, especially in relation to community, and it lies in the civic role of the museum, irrespective of collection, focus, or mission (Jennings 2015, 103).

Questioning the Museum Role in the Civic Sphere

Between 2012 and 2015 a confluence of seismic events dominated news and civic discourse in the US, revealing deep rifts over questions of racism, climate change, ethnic and religious bigotry and other social and cultural issues. Social media at the time highlighted the contrast between 24 hour coverage in the news and the notable silence of American museums, provoking the following questions by the blog *Museum Commons:*

- Why is the museum world essentially silent in the national conversation about Trayvon Martin?[3] (Jennings 2012a).
- Why are libraries opening to provide warmth, water, and connectivity to local neighborhoods after Hurricane Sandy[4] while museums seem to conduct business as usual in the midst of devastation? (Jennings 2012b).

- How can (and should) Boston museums respond as the city recovers from the Marathon bombings?[5] (Jennings 2013c).
- Why are majority white museums silent while cultural organizations headed by African Americans are speaking out about what happened in Ferguson?[6] (Jennings 2015, 100).

The Empathetic Museum initiative emerged from this landscape.

Our questions led to group conversations including pop-up "unconference sessions" on institutional empathy at meetings of the American Alliance of Museums in Baltimore, MD (Jennings 2013a) and Seattle, WA (Jennings 2014). The attendees were united in a belief that issues of civic justice are not extraneous to museums' purview (Vlachou 2019, 47) and that working to address museums' apparent indifference to the outside world is a worthwhile goal. "Unconference" participants left the sessions committed to explore a quality of organizational culture which from the beginning we called "empathy." We will discuss this term in more detail below, but we used it in its most commonly understood sense of resonating with the experience of others. As we reviewed the ways in which museums responded to many of the social conflicts at the time, we found more indifference than resonance (Jennings 2015, 98-99). After these early discussions Gretchen Jennings, Janeen Bryant, Stacey Mann, Rainey Tisdale, Elyssa Frankel, and Matt Kirchman proposed a session for AAM 2015 on the need for institutional empathy in museums, and on the specific qualities required.

Convergence and Disruption in Atlanta

> So you keep having those meetings while you're there in Atlanta, and cause as much

trouble as you can (Lonnie Bunch to interviewer Adrianne Russell 2015).

On the eve of the 2015 AAM conference in Atlanta we could not foresee the convergence of current events and industry that would play out in real time and give new momentum to museum social justice efforts (Russell 2015).

On the first morning of the conference, Missouri History Museum Education Director Melanie Adams presented "Missouri Burning: Turning Conflict into Conversation" (April 2015) to a standing room only crowd. Ms. Adams described the town meeting attended by hundreds in the Ferguson area, organized by the History Museum on the evening of Michael Brown's funeral. The speed with which the museum pulled together a compassionate event featuring a skilled moderator, powerful speakers, and outpourings of song and testimony from the community, was an early inspiration for the Empathetic Museum initiative's thinking on the necessary qualities of institutional empathy. The History Museum had developed deep connections with the local community and was thus able not only to respond in the immediate aftermath but to sustain engagement in the ensuing months (Jennings 2015, 99).

While Adams' presentation was in progress, abstract reflections about museum response to social injustice took on a concrete urgency within the room. Word spread among attendees that Freddie Gray, a young black man arrested in Baltimore, had died as a result of injuries sustained in a police van. As we met in Atlanta, demonstrations echoing Ferguson were happening in Baltimore. (Baltimore Sun 2016). Those at the session, including a number from Baltimore museums, asked, "How should we respond?"

Two other sessions outside the official conference program galvanized colleagues around social justice issues. The #MuseumWorkersSpeak movement held its first "rogue session" in a packed art gallery to examine income inequality and working conditions in museums (Jennings 2015, 101). A presentation on museums and Ferguson, (Munley and Jennings 2015) sponsored by The Museum Group, a consortium of independent consultants, was held in a local hotel. The meeting attracted not only the usual established professionals, but young activists involved with #museumsrespondtoFerguson and #museumworkersspeak. The discussion turned toward sustained action on issues of museums, social justice, and in particular, institutional racism, and laid the foundation for the Museums and Race Convening of January, 2016 (Museums & Race 2016).

The Empathetic Museum session "Empathy in Mission and Practice: Why Should We Care"? (2015) had particular relevance within this context. After hearing the presentation, organizational consultant Jim Cullen suggested reformulating the qualities of an Empathetic Museum as a Maturity Model, a tool for organizational change which we will discuss in more detail below. We spent the rest of 2015 and much of 2016 on the creation of the Model.

The Empathetic Museum in the Context of Museum Social Justice Initiatives

A number of other museum social justice movements emerged during the same period as the Empathetic Museum's development (2013–16). We exist in solidarity and collaboration with these groups in the US, UK and elsewhere[7] as we focus on **internal institutional transformation** and **transforming sector discourse.** In addition to our common work to dismantle legacies of *oppression,* we are changing the language of museum transformation from the use

of codewords such as "community" (Jennings and Jones-Rizzi 2017, 71-72) or "*diversity*" (Moore 2016) to direct discussions of racism, *white privilege (supremacy),* sexism, homophobia, *colonialism,* and other vestiges of museum practice that continue to thwart true change (Callihan 2017).

INSTITUTIONAL EMPATHY AS AN ANTIDOTE TO STASIS, SILOS, AND SILENCE

> I argue that acting for change and social justice is fundamental to the museum's mission; a task we should embrace rather than avoid, if we wish to be relevant to our 21st century audiences (Vlachou 2019, 47).

As we worked on the Model, we kept our eyes on the field, exploring museums' reluctance to be involved in the churning world outside their walls. We identified three key trends. Stasis, Siloing, and Silence.

Stasis: 25 years with little change

In 1992 AAM published *Excellence and Equity*, a groundbreaking document that recommended greater inclusion and focus on the "public dimension" (p 7). Despite this call to action the US Museum field remains to this day overwhelmingly white and patriarchal in structures of staffing, collection, and exhibition. In 2000, museum leader Lonnie Bunch's essay "Flies in the Buttermilk: Museums, Diversity, and the Will to Change" highlighted the lack of progress. (It is important to note that Bunch and colleagues of color have been raising these issues for the many years they have been in the field (Cole and Lott 2019). Studies funded by AAM (Farrell and Medvedeva 2010) and the Mellon Foundation (Schonfield and Westermann 2015) tell the same story. In particular the Mellon survey found:

- **A lack of diversity in professional museum roles** that did not reflect the demographic composition of the US population
- **The existence of "structural barriers to entry in these positions for people of color"** (emphasis ours)

While the Mellon study focused on diversity in art museums, two work force surveys conducted jointly by the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC) and the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) produced similar data for the very low number of people of color in leadership positions in the science and children's museum sector (ASTC-ACM 2011, 2016).

Silos: disparate attempts at inclusion

Since *Excellence and Equity* the field has mounted multiple efforts to achieve diversity and inclusion, as Jennings and Jones-Rizzi (2017, 66-67) recount: the hiring of people of color to be "community outreach coordinators;" the creation of diversity fellowships placing people of color in curatorial or management roles; temporary exhibitions featuring artists or scientists of color; grants to promote the attendance of people of color at museum conferences. These efforts, while well-intentioned, did not effect long-term fundamental change because they were piecemeal, siloed within one museum department, and often one-off (Jennings and Jones-Rizzi, 67-71). The Empathetic Museum group's conclusion: it is not that museums have been unaware of the continuing lack of diversity and inclusion. Instead, the profession has yet to grasp the **systemic** nature of the problem,

untreatable by disparate initiatives. Failure to become more inclusive lies in the field's **inattention to the *intersectional*** roots (interrelated conditions of racism, sexism, elitism, colonialism, white privilege) of exclusion (Patterson et al. 2017).

Silence

Museums' habit of silence in the face of social issues has persisted throughout the decades under the influence of the long-standing tradition of museum neutrality, the idea that museums must not "take sides." The problem with this tradition is that by their selection of topics and choice of what to exhibit or program, museums are always taking a stance. Museum neutrality is mostly invoked as a reason not to take on controversial exhibitions or topics.[8] Along with a misguided belief in the necessity of neutrality, museums have other concerns—fear of donor opinion, fear of controversy, the idea that "this is not our issue" (Wittman et al. 2015). For the Empathetic Museum group this indifference is the ultimate example of a lack of empathy on an institutional level. Whether conscious or not, it says to African Americans and all people of color: We want you to visit, but your deepest concerns are not our own. We asked: *If silence, fear, and inaction are characteristics of a lack of empathy in museums, what would empathy at an institutional level look like?*[9]

DEFINING INSTITUTIONAL EMPATHY

Empathy: the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner (Merriam Webster 2013).

When asked to say what they mean by "empathy," participants in our programs most often cite the commonly understood meaning of personal empathy, i.e. "standing in someone else's shoes" or "seeing through someone else's eyes" (Rutsch 2014).[10] The Empathetic Museum's mission is to take this widely understood **personal** definition and explain how it can be used to describe **institutional** structures and policies. We recognize that institutions are made up of individuals; therefore, institutional empathy extends that personal definition to the broader organization. The holistic nature of the term "empathy," as well as its intuitive quality (you sense a person's state without being told) provide an analogy to an institutional condition that is organizationally inclusive and in tune with its community.

While some may equate "empathy" with ineffective or complacent responses (Lau et al. 2017), we reject empathy as weakness. Rather we foster a definition that holds individuals and institutions accountable for building awareness of and holding space for the deep-seated needs and experiences of their surrounding communities.

Despite analyses suggesting that institutional structures are incompatible with empathy (Anderson 2013, 2016) we intentionally describe empathy in terms of organizational culture, as seen in our Maturity Model. While staff at any institution may be individually and personally empathetic, the overall message (institutional body-language) of many museums can be unwelcoming and overwhelming, especially to audiences the museum wishes to attract (Dawson 2014). The Empathetic Museum initiative shapes institutions that are structurally, holistically, and authentically resonant with the communities they serve.

As many museums explore exhibitions and programs to inculcate empathy in visitors

(Gokcigdem 2016), we argue that these efforts run the risk of glossing over underlying institutional fault lines. These efforts promote **external** change in visitors and communities. Yet, without **internal** structures such as inclusive boards, administration, and staff; inclusive collections and programming; just salaries and working conditions for staff; and acknowledgement of histories of oppression and privilege, museums run the risk of inauthentic initiatives that alienate audiences to whom they wish to offer justice. Often, as in the case of the 2017 conflict between the Walker Art Center and the Dakota Nation over an outdoor art installation, efforts at systemic change come **after** the effort, when the museum has been chastened by its indifference and lack of understanding of the context.[11]

THE FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF EMPATHETIC PRACTICE

An empathetic museum is one that, at the core of its mission and in all its outward manifestations, resonates closely with the people it serves. It achieves this by adopting and embodying five important qualities that shape both its internal organization and its external relations with its publics (www.empatheticmuseum.com).

Between 2013 and 2015 the Empathetic Museum group identified five qualities that form the basis for empathetic practice at an institutional level: Civic Vision, Institutional Body Language, Community Resonance, Timeliness, and Performance Measures (Figure 1). We formulated these characteristics based on observations of current museum practice (see our Honor Roll examples); museum theory around inclusion (Sandell 1998); timeliness (Gurian 2010) and the potential of museums for social impact (SJAM 2014). Our

Maturity Model builds on these five characteristics, illustrating progressive (and measurable) levels of performance for each one–from regressive to proactive (Figure 2).

#1: Civic Vision

Civic vision is a matter of imagination and behavior. According to Lord and Blankenberg (2015) museums, like universities, libraries, and hospitals, are "anchor institutions," part of the civic infrastructure of their communities. Boards and directors must have the imagination (vision) to see their institutions as such: that they matter in their communities. Museums must behave as civic leaders, joining with other institutions of civil society to use their combined efforts to influence and shape (soft power) the quality of life in their community and the promotion of social justice in their municipalities (Scott 2013).

Example: In 2016 the Erie Art Museum in Erie, PA, used a state folklore preservation grant to hire newcomers from Bosnia, the Middle East, and East Africa to train local child care providers. Bringing strong musical traditions, these immigrants assisted caregivers in incorporating music and song into their curricula. The museum has taken a leading role in an issue of local and national import: the integration of refugees and immigrants into its community (Empathetic Museum Honor Roll 2017a; Vanco 2016).

#2: Institutional Body Language

Analogous to personal body language, institutional body language (Jennings 2013b) refers to the powerful messages museums convey through unspoken and unwritten manifestations of their being: the design of their buildings, the content of their advertising, the behavior of front line staff to visitors, the

Figure 1. The five characteristics of an Empathetic Museum capture the wide variety of ways that empathy can be reflected within and by an institution.

demographics of their staff and boards, the choices they make in their collections, exhibitions, and programs. In the context of diversity and inclusion, museums' body language often conveys the message that the museum is for the white, the wealthy, and the powerful. (Dawson 2014; Gurian 2019, 111-112).

Example: Histories of exclusion linger for generations, and may influence museum visitation. In the US, museums may discover that their location is in a part of the city that was once off-limits to African Americans. One of the authors, who lives in Washington, DC, has been told by long-time African American residents that during the Jim Crow era the area "below U Street" was not a place where black Washingtonians were welcome except as laborers. (personal communications to Gretchen

Jennings). This area still contains major downtown office buildings, department stores, and the Smithsonian institution. Museums, once aware of unwritten histories and social codes like this, should take proactive steps to overcome a relationship that appears neutral to the museum but is fraught with insult for communities of color.

#3: Community Resonance

Just as an empathetic individual resonates with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of another group or person, an empathetic museum is so connected with its communities that it is keenly aware of their values, needs, and challenges. The best way to achieve this is through a board and staff that reflect the diversity of a

community; advisory boards, collaborations, and partnerships also reinforce a museum's ability to be in touch with and responsive to its community. (Kinsley and Wittman 2016, 40-44).

Example: The Canadian Immigration Museum in Halifax, Nova Scotia takes proactive steps to educate a local community that is mostly of European origin about the "four centuries of immigration and thousands of years of First Nations history" in the province and beyond. The museum has diversified its small staff through the engagement of volunteers from First Nation and immigrant communities. It invites these communities to take the lead in telling their own histories through public programs and exhibitions. (Empathetic Museum Honor Roll 2017c).

#4: Timeliness and Sustainability

Because an empathetic museum is so connected to its constituents (see Community Resonance), it is able to assess and respond to particular events or crises that affect its community (and beyond) in a timely and sustainable way. For example, if a museum is aware of racial tension in its community because of the racial diversity of its staff and/or strong collaborative community relationships, it can be well-informed about what programs, exhibits, social media and other initiatives it might take within its mission and vision to address this civic issue. And it is aware that one-off efforts are rarely effective. It maintains a continuous and sustained awareness of and collaborative spirit toward its community and its needs.

Example: As discussed above, the Missouri History Museum, with the leadership of Director Frances Levine and Director of Education Melanie Adams, fostered close ties with the people of Ferguson, a suburb of the city St. Louis. Long before the events of 2014, The Museum was engaged with the history of segregation and racial tension existing in the city and its surrounding area. Thus, the institution was able to respond with a town meeting and with other events that gave voice to the community (Jennings 2015; Kinsley and Wittman 2016).

#5: Performance Measures

We can't know where we're going or how to get there if we don't know where we are. A museum working to develop the characteristics discussed above also incorporates them into its strategic planning. It creates tools to assess the level of achievement of each characteristic and its related goals. An empathetic museum commits resources to regular assessment, not only of its revenues and attendance, but also of its public and social impact (Korn 2013, 31-43).

Example: The Oakland Museum of California recently conducted studies of its social impact, to "understand and measure how our museum changes lives in our community" (McKinley 2017).

This study punctuates a decade of work by the museum to become "an empathetic organization. . . our major first step was the reinstallation of all of our collection galleries of Art, History and Natural Sciences. . .with the explicit goal to create welcoming, accessible, and relevant experiences for our very diverse audience. More recently, we have embraced programming that is designed to be responsive to urgent, vital issues – often with direct Oakland connections, but with broader national implications" (Empathetic Honor Roll 2017b).

A Maturity Model for Organizational Change

How then do we support museums and museum professionals in becoming more empathetic in their practice? The combination of these five characteristics creates a cohesive

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scaffold to structure empathetic practice. Originally published as definitions on our website, the characteristics come to life in The Maturity Model as progressive steps that can lead to empathetic practice (Figure 2).

A **Maturity Model** is a useful and versatile tool for mapping the developmental stages of an organization's practices or culture and identifying the key characteristics of each stage. Current academic and business literature shows the application of such a model to diverse topics such as: organizational culture related to safe operations in petrochemical plants (Filho et al. 2010); business processes (Van Looy et al. 2013); energy management (Jovanovic and Filipovic 2016); project risk management (Hopkinson 2011) and innovation capability (Corsi and Neau 2015).

Organizations, like people, have long been considered to have life cycles–from inception through adolescence and progressive stages of maturity (e.g. Kimberly and Miles 1980). Further, there is well-established management theory around the stages of team development (e.g. Lencioni 2002). Our model recognizes that institutional empathy is not a binary "on/off" proposition, and in the Empathetic Museum group's experience, elements of empathetic practice may be evident in many museums, whether or not they are particularly empathetic in an institutionally holistic way.

We sought to create a tool that would not only reflect our members' practical experience, but would also serve to challenge the status quo that we intuitively and experientially recognize within the museum field. Through a number of iterations, we charted steps that museums could take that might indicate progress in civic vision, community resonance, and the other characteristics.[12] "Maturity" in our model is intended to describe incremental stages of development and should not be confused with just the passage of

time; museums do not become empathetic simply by how long they have been in existence; in fact, we can argue that the passage of time has entrenched many regressive and immature behaviors with regard to equity across the field.

Applying the Maturity Model

In considering the life cycle of museums, and in a committed effort to enhance equity across all aspects of museums, our Maturity Model (also referred to as our rubric) is explicitly designed to be a useful and intuitively appealing tool. Through multiple conference presentations and training sessions for museum boards, staff, and volunteers, we have found that museum practitioners of diverse backgrounds, professional roles, and career stages are able to grasp the contents of the rubric fairly quickly, and then begin to apply it to their professional situations.

That said, the Model is not an end in itself. It represents an accessible starting point and tool for assessing an organization's particular stage on its empathetic journey. It helps an organization track its progress while avoiding the trap of prematurely declaring "victory," either by focusing on a single empathetic incident rather than sustained performance, or by optimizing only one area of strength to the detriment of the other characteristics.

We recognize that for many organizations, the work of developing more authentic empathetic practices will benefit from concurrent diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) work. As staff members begin to wrestle with the *implicit and explicit biases* influencing how policies or projects are developed and implemented, the need for holistic solutions becomes obvious, sometimes painfully so. In a collaboration with Delaware Art Museum, The Empathetic Museum engaged staff in dialogue and reflection

Characteristic	Regressive (Lowest Maturity)	Emergent (Low Maturity)	Planned (Medium Maturity)	Proactive (Advanced Maturity)
Civic Vision i.e. How the museum expresses empathy externally through its civic role. *An "anchor institution" of civil society (like universities, libraries, etc.); exercises "soft power" (influence for social good) in community.*	☐ Identifies as independent, stand-alone player ☐ Indifferent to/unaware of issues within community ☐ Focused on core subject matter only	☐ Interested in being more relevant to civic life in the community ☐ Willing to reassess mission and vision ☐ Lacking required resources or clear direction	☐ Acknowledges role as anchor institution in community ☐ Ensures mission and vision reflect civic role ☐ Explores authentic ways to be part of its community and allocates project resources to do so	☐ Embraces and internalizes role as an anchor institution in community ☐ Key civic player with responsibilities and influence used for growth and social justice ☐ Exercises soft power in the community with dedicated staffing and project resources
Institutional Body Language i.e. How the museum embodies empathy through staffing, policies, workplace culture and structure, etc. *Aware of unconscious & unintended messages of white privilege communicated by building, administration, staff hiring practices, collections, advertising, etc. Values intersectional cultural competency at all levels of staff and governance.*	☐ Museum culture embodies privilege (racial, cultural, social, etc.) ☐ Governors, leaders, employees, exhibits, collections, etc. are predominantly single demographic (usually white) reflecting that of founders ☐ Unaddressed issues of pay (unpaid labor, low wages, wage disparity) and employment equity in hiring practices	☐ Token "community coordinator" is hired, or a "diversity function" is added to someone's job to attract "diverse" audiences ☐ "Diversity" initiatives consist of short term "outreach" programs or only overlap with "ethnic" holidays ☐ Some labor practices amended to create more equitable working conditions ☐ No substantial change in internal culture in terms of board, staffing, collections, exhibitions, programming	☐ Enacts formal policies through staff collaborations with community partners, advisory committees, experts on inclusion, equity, etc. ☐ Assesses and reorganizes board, staff, collections, exhibits and programs—its entire ethos—to reflect its community ☐ Hiring practices examined for bias; efforts made to address staff concerns ☐ Parity in representation is prioritized as the responsibility of all staff ☐ Changes from a place of white privilege to a place where all feel welcome	☐ Internalized awareness of privilege communicated by building, leadership, staffing, collections, advertising, etc. ☐ Workplace culture reflects inclusive environment with participation from staff of diverse thought, experience, and cultural competencies at all staff levels ☐ Fully resembles the complex and intersectional community's evolving demographics and values ☐ Recognizes and supports need for staff self-care to limit burnout ☐ Enacts long range plan to ensure sustainability of this transformation

EMPATHETIC MUSEUM MATURITY MODEL

www.empatheticmuseum.com/maturity-model

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Figure 2. The Empathetic Museum maturity model rubric outlines progressive levels of maturity in empathetic practice—Regressive, Emergent, Planned, and Proactive. *(pdf download available:* http://empatheticmuseum.com/maturity-model).

Figure 2. (Continued)

Category				
Community Resonance i.e. How the museum values, relates to, and serves its diverse communities. *Persistent awareness of surrounding community; forges strong, trusted connections with all (often underrepresented) segments of community in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status.*	☐ Concerned with "attracting wider audiences" to expand audience base ☐ Uninterested in investigation of institutional connections to exclusion, racism, sexism, oppression, white privilege, etc. ☐ Perception that community issues have little connection to museum	☐ Authorizes research into the history of its building, location, collections in relation to racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege ☐ Examines its relationship with previously ignored or excluded communities ☐ Community connections focus on execution of the museum's mission and vision; relationship is predominantly one way, serving the museum's needs; involves cultural appropriation	☐ Solicits help from experienced facilitators and community partners to address engagement issues from an intentional, structural perspective ☐ Revisits institutional policies (staffing, collections, exhibitions, programming, etc.) to prioritize internal transformation ☐ Secures partnerships with other anchor institutions and local organizations more fully integrated with community issues	☐ Acknowledges complicity in legacy of exclusion, racism, oppression, cultural appropriation and privilege ☐ Implements plan to reverse these connections; seeks reconciliation with affected communities ☐ Nurtures reciprocal, community-driven relationships with local organizations that link the museum and its mission to local/national/global issues relevant to the surrounding community
Timeliness & Sustainability i.e. How, why, and when the museum responds to community issues and events in a sustainable way. *Able to respond to unexpected issues affecting its community due to continuous and sustained relationships & role as anchor institution.*	☐ Rarely acknowledges or responds to local, national, or global events. ☐ Programs are reactive, one-offs and not sustained; do not emanate from prior planning.	☐ Responds and can reallocate committed resources as a plan deviation ☐ Aware that one-off, unsustained responses do not build lasting community engagement	☐ Plans strategically for the future and engages periodically with stakeholders (internal/external) so that appropriate community/national/global issues can be addressed ☐ Allocates resources to provide responses that are flexible and sustainable	☐ Plans strategically; reciprocal relationships with community members enable museum to anticipate and respond in a timely way ☐ Rarely blindsided, highly nimble and flexible; resources already allocated ☐ Community resources and programs are fully funded and protected in budget
Performance Measures i.e. How the museum measures success in empathetic practice. *Values and commits resources to regular assessment of public impact; shares this with the public.*	☐ Traditional measures focus on outputs, attendance and revenues ☐ Metrics rarely reported to internal/external stakeholders or the local community	☐ Traditional measures supplemented by attempts to gauge community collaboration and impact ☐ Museum reports to internal stakeholders annually	☐ Community impact and effectiveness as anchor institution are included in outcomes to be measured ☐ Annual reviews for all staff include engagement metrics ☐ Museum reports to internal and external stakeholders annually	☐ Museum continuously assesses and redefines its public value impact ☐ Commits resources to continued impact assessment along with attendance and revenue ☐ Reporting is increasingly transparent and widespread

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in advance of their *Wilmington 1968* exhibition about the uprisings and National Guard occupation of the city in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination. We helped the staff think more broadly about their individual and collective roles and responsibilities within the museum, as well as the broader community. Discussing the Maturity Model and unpacking specific examples within a setting of safe and open dialogue allowed for honest discourse and surprising insights that continue to reform their approaches to staffing, collecting, storytelling and more. This served as a promising early confirmation that our model is useful in helping organizations advance their institutional empathy (Mann et al. 2018).

Since first publishing the Maturity Model on the Empathetic Museum website in 2016, we have fielded a steady stream of requests for the associated print materials (approximately two to five per week). Our Empathetic Museum colleague Nayeli Zepeda reports that over 20 museum professionals in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, El Salvador, Mexico, and Spain have requested the Spanish version of the Maturity Model. These colleagues are using the Model as a diagnostic tool for assessing community resonance and for professional development both at individual museums and across museum networks. (Unpublished report from Nayeli Zepeda. September 2018).[13] We project a French translation of the Maturity Model by 2020. We are excited by potential applications of a trilingual tool in helping the global museum sector better understand and build institutional empathy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A MORE EMPATHETIC FUTURE

Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better. Maya Angelou.[14] (Angelo 2014)

Becoming an empathetic museum requires a long-standing commitment to serve as a value to the community. Institutional empathy requires that every facet of an organization undergo examination and reconciliation. There is no quick fix. To move museums through this path of lasting institutional transformation, we propose a process of awareness, acceptance, and action.[15]

Awareness

What do we mean by awareness? We propose that museums must come to recognize and understand the multiple strands of traditional white, male, Western, Judeo-Christian heteronormative ideals that permeate the institutional fabric of most museums. Threaded together, these strands form a tightly woven, change-resistant fabric of institutional racism and a monolithic worldview (Bryant et al. 2017, 18).

Once something is known it cannot become unknown. Once a museum is introduced to the theoretical concept of institutional empathy, its board, administration, and staff must confront the practice, policy, and personnel changes affecting every facet of their internal culture and external engagement strategies. Developing an awareness of this systemic phenomenon requires attentive listening to audiences (both actual and desired); an interrogation of the experiences of museum board, staff and volunteers; the examination of historical legacies such as colonialism and racism; and distinguishing between intent (museum goals for an initiative, exhibition, or program) and impact (how it was received by those who experienced it) (Bryant et al. 2017, 18-22).

Acceptance

As a museum comes to understand the depth and breadth of its culture of white

privilege and oppression, it will (we hope) come to accept that this legacy is real and that it no doubt has an impact on patterns of visitorship and engagement, especially from communities of color. This is an area that is ripe for further research and investigation by the field (Bryant et al. 2017, 18-22).

Acceptance follows awareness, doing better after knowing better, as Angelou advises. Together the concepts of empathetic action related to diversity have the potential to transform museum practice toward sustained relevance into the 21st century and beyond. But, to be effective is to deconstruct systems that have been in place for years, sometimes centuries.

Under increasing pressure to create equitable workspaces, diversity and inclusion become strategic buzzwords, readily accepted and promoted by nonprofit leadership, but seldom aligned with changes in behavior, hiring practice, or proactive advocacy for equitable salaries. (Callihan 2017) Empathy, in much the same fashion, is a concept that has gained admiration with little practical follow through.

In recent years museums such as Eastern State Penitentiary (Kelley 2016), the Abbe Museum (Catlin-Legutko 2019), and the Oakland Museum of California (Empathetic Museum Honor Roll 2017b) have shared their time-consuming yet rewarding journeys: revising mission statements, reorganizing boards, reimagining collections, exhibitions, programs; rethinking staffing–all in pursuit of institutional transformation. These examples informed the construction of our Maturity Model: the rubric reflects the transformative work that museums are already doing, and it codifies this work so that other museums can emulate it.

Action

Stepping back and examining the legacies and assumptions on which our institutions are based is difficult because: it takes time and effort to research and peel back the layers of history; it will require admitting to some ugly beliefs and actions; it will involve a redistribution of power, policy, and procedure in our institutions. . . . Self-examination is often a painful process, even when done privately; this type of institutional self-examination will be more public and will require great transparency; it is this transparency that can help affect the disappointing dynamic that museums have with many communities. (Bryant et al. 2017, 26-27)

Once a museum has accepted the need for institutional empathy, its board, administration, and staff must initiate practice, policy, and personnel changes affecting every facet of their internal culture and external engagement strategies. As institutions struggle for sustainability, the prevailing impersonal model of leadership is rapidly losing ground (Lord and Blankenberg, 6-27). Institutional empathy offers much to holistic "business" processes of efficiency. "Empathy plays a vital role in civic participation and the functioning of democracy" (Merritt 2017). The Empathetic Museum proposes an organizational structure through which museums can reflect the needs of the community without compromising mission or values.

True change will only come through an honest assessment of internal culture and external practices–including a process of *decolonization* and the rejection of systemic white supremacy. This is a radical word but appropriate for institutions that are founded on histories of imperialism and colonialism. Organizations may inherently resist empathy if it threatens their self-interest, raising issues of ownership, authority,

appropriation, and oppression. Historically, protests, legal action, and controversy predate the pursuit of inclusivity. Wouldn't it be nice to see this work accomplished because it's simply the right thing to do: a humanist solution to the challenges of an interconnected global community?

SO WHAT DOES AN EMPATHETIC MUSEUM LOOK LIKE?

There is no perfect model museum of empathetic practice, yet. Museums the world over are puzzling about new ways of existing and engaging with the audiences we serve–from exploring participatory models of storytelling, to decolonizing collections, to dismantling a collective legacy of white supremacy (Patterson et al. 2017). As we approach this new tipping point, we look to institutions that are intentionally seeking to address disparities in their midst. They inspire our "proactive" vision of the empathetic museum.

An empathetic museum will:

- Internalize and publicly embrace its role as a civic player, an anchor institution in its community;
- Be aware of the privilege and exclusivity it communicates and take steps to mitigate this; fully resemble in its personnel and activities its complex and intersectional communities and their evolving demographics and values;
- Acknowledge its complicity in a legacy of exclusion, racism, colonialism, cultural appropriation, and white privilege, implementing plans to address these in collections and interpretive planning;
- Develop budgets and strategic plans in reciprocal relationships with a variety of organizations that allow for long range planning as well as flexibility in

addressing unexpected issues that affect its audiences;
- Commit resources to continuous assessment and redefinition of its public impact, and report on this in transparent manner.

What has taken centuries to solidify will not be undone over three months of brown bag "Lunch and Learns." Museums around the world are in a moment of readiness for change. The Empathetic Museum–its philosophy, its members, and its resources–exists to support and energize museums that wish to join the movement toward internal transformation.

END

NOTES

1. Since 2013 our think tank of museum colleagues (currently Gretchen Jennings, Stacey Mann, Janeen Bryant, Jim Cullen, Matt Kirchman, Charlette Hove, Kayleigh Bryant-Greenwell, and Nayeli Zepeda) has been meeting, sharing ideas, posts, and papers, presenting conference sessions and professional development seminars, and crafting a call to institutional empathy as the central task of 21st century museums. Ongoing work and publications can be found at www.empatheticmuseum.com
2. The Empathetic Museum initiative is not to be confused with **The Empathy Museum**, an art project developed by Roman Krznaric, Claire Patey and others. **The Empathy Museum** uses storytelling, programming, and its traveling

exhibition *A Mile in My Shoes,* to encourage empathy in others. Begun in the UK in 2015, the project has become international in scope. For more information go to http://www.em pathymuseum.com Empathy Museum (2015).

3. In February, 2012, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year old African American youth, was followed, shot, and killed by a neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman, in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman was not arrested until six weeks later, and was tried for second-degree murder. The case was racially divisive, especially after President Obama commented on the issue by saying that if he had a son, he would look like Trayvon. Zimmerman was acquitted, and the case become an iconic symbol of violence against unarmed black men (Bates 2018).

4. Between October 22 and 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy battered the entire eastern coast of the United States, devastating parts of 24 states, killing over 100 people and causing over $70 billion in damage. Vast areas were without water, heat, and electricity for weeks (CNN 2018). While libraries opened their doors, providing shelter, warmth, bottled water, and electricity for charging devices, most museums, after assuring that their collections and buildings were safe, made no special efforts to address the physical needs of their communities (Jennings 2012b).

5. On April 15, 2013, two bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, an annual holiday event in the city. The bombs killed three spectators and injured more than 260 other people. Police captured 19-year-old Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, while his older brother Tamerlan died during the manhunt. It was determined that the brothers, originally from Kyrgyzstan, planned and executed that attack on their own and were not allied with other terrorist groups. They cited retribution for US attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan. Dzhokhar was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death but is awaiting the result of appeals. In addition to the physical impact, the bombings had a devastating psychological effect on many in the city (history.com).

6. "Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed on Aug. 9, 2014, by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis. The shooting prompted protests that roiled the area for weeks. On Nov. 24, the St. Louis County prosecutor announced that a grand jury decided not to indict Mr. Wilson. The announcement set off another wave of protests. In March, the Justice Department called on Ferguson to overhaul its criminal justice system, declaring that the city had engaged in constitutional violations." New York Times 2015. Like the name of Trayvon Martin, the town of Ferguson has become a code word for police violence especially against black men.

7. Some of the change-makers: Fakequity https://fakequity.com/welcome-to-the-fake quity-blog/; The Incluseum https://incluseum.c om; Margaret Middleton https://www.margaret middleton.com/family-inclusion; MassAction https://www.museumaction.org; Museum Commons www.museumcommons.com; Museum Hue https://www.museumhue.com; Museum Detox https://museumdetox.com; Museums and Race https://museumsandrace. org; Nicole Deuful's Blog https://nicoledeufel.c om; #MuseumsAreNotNeutral https://art stuffmatters.wordpress.com/museums-are-not-neutral/; #MuseumsRespondtoFerguson https://adriannerussell.wordpress.com/museum srespondtofergusonarchive/; #Museumwork-ersspeak https://twitter.com/hashta g/museumworkerspeak; Social Justice Alliance for Museums http://sjam.org' and Visitors of Color https://visitorsofcolor.tumblr.com.

8. The Museums Are Not Neutral initiative begun in August 2017 by LaTanya Autrey and Mike Murawski has opened up widespread analysis and discussion of this concept.https://art stuffmatters.wordpress.com/museums-are-not-neutral/

9. Note that this silence has been broken in part by initiatives like the *Joint Statement by Museum Bloggers and Colleagues on Ferguson and Related Events* https://www.museumc

ommons.com/2014/12/joint-statement-muse um-bloggers-colleagues-ferguson-related-eve nts.html and in particular by the #museumsre-spondtoFerguson Twitter chat led for several years after December 2014 by public historian Aleia Brown and museum writer and blogger Adrianne Russell. (Jennings 2015). Dina Bailey also discusses a number of activist museums in her recent article in Janes and Sandell, *Museum Activism* (2019, 291-302).

10. A search on ResearchGate https://www.researc hgate.net/topic/Empathy reveals that there is a broad range of research on empathy, its mean-ing, and the ways it manifests itself in human (and perhaps animal) behavior. While some authors caution that strong identification with one's own group may work against justice and equity (Decety and Cowell 2015) empathy appears to be a human quality that is widely understood, admired, and practiced (Merritt 2017, 8-16).

11. In 2017 the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis installed a life-size scaffold on its grounds. The structure commemorated seven mass hangings in US history, including the execution of 38 Dakota Indians by the U.S. government in 1862. Artist Sam Durant's intention was "to raise awareness about capital punishment and address America's violent past." (Artforum 2017) Dakota Indians protested both the display of the work itself, and the lack of acknowledgement that it rested on Dakota land. In January 2018 the Walker issued a commitment "**to examine our institutional structures and internal policies in order to make systemic changes."** (emphasis ours) (Walker Art Center 2018).

12. Members of #MuseumWorkersSpeak and Museums and Race contributed to the language of the Maturity Model during its development in 2016.

13. On May 16, 2019 the Deputy Ministry of Cul-ture and Sports of the Principality of Asturias (Spain) sent a report (unpublished) to our col-league Nayeli Zepeda on its use of the Maturity Model in analyzing its network of ethnographic museums. The Ministry found the rubric very useful and is interested in pursuing its sustained use with us.

14. Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was a poet, singer, dancer, writer, and thought leader in the United States. An African American, she worked constantly for justice and equity for all.

15. Three of this article's authors–Bryant, Bryant-Greenwell, and Jennings–co-wrote (with Cin-namon Catlin-Legutko and Joanne Jones-Rizzi) Chapter 2 of the MASSAction Tool Kit (2017) entitled "Moving Toward Internal Transformation: Awareness, Acceptance, Action." This section is based on the thinking in that chapter, as the citations indicate.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Bias–explicit: in the context of social relationships, the term "bias" is based on stereotyping–assigning common characteristics to everyone in a group and judging them accordingly. Noticing patterns and creating categories is normal for the human brain, but consciously judging and acting on stereotypes–positive or negative–is called explicit bias. (Payne et al. 2018) https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-think-about-implicit-bias/

Bias–implicit: The "tendency for stereotype-confirming thoughts to pass spontaneously through our minds is what psychologists call implicit bias. It sets people up to overgeneralize, sometimes leading to discrimination even when people feel they are being fair." (Payne et al.) https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-think-about-implicit-bias/

Community: We use the term community in this article to mean all of the audiences, both actual and potential, for a given museum, based on its location and its focus. "Sometimes the term is used in museums for its convenience, expedience and as short-hand for describing a stakeholder group. The word can be reductive, for example when used to describe a large group of different people by focusing on a single attribute these people share. The word can also feel racially coded, as in "the black community." (Moore 2016, 191)

Colonialism: Conquest and control of another country or region, its people, land, and resources, using them for the benefit of the conquering country. The implanting of settlements in another country. (Singh 2000. Colonialism/Imperialism. https://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/eng-11-globalization.htm)

Decolonization: "In museums, decolonization may refer to 1) the return of cultural heritage held by museums 2) the right (of colonized or formerly colonized people) to being consulted in the creation of museum narratives and spaces representing them AND/OR 3) the museum itself addressing the ways in which knowledge systems of colonizing peoples dominate museum activities to the exclusion of knowledge systems of colonized peoples." (A. Lonetree 2012 in Callahan 2016, 192)

Diversity: "All the ways that people are different and the same at the individual and group levels. Even when people appear the same, they are different." (AAM 2019). In this article we use the term in the above sense but agree with museum thinker Porchia Moore's cautions about "diversity." Moore writes that In museum discourse "diversity" is often used as a code "the other." When a museum wants to "diversify" it wants to bring in people of color or other groups that differ from the mainstream

audience that visits. https://incluseum.com/2014/01/20/the-danger-of-the-d-word-museums-and-diversity/ This use of the term can be shaped by and communicate implicit bias as defined above.

Empathy: In this article we focus primarily on the practice of empathy by institutions. We intentionally base our discussion of institutional empathy on the Merriam Webster (2013) definition:

Empathy: the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner*.* (emphasis added)

We find that audiences grasp easily the analogies we make between this common, personal description and its institutional version.

Inclusion: "The intentional, ongoing effort to assure that diverse individuals fully participate in all organizational work… the ways that diverse participants are valued as respected members of an organization and/or community. (AAM 2019) While this article uses "inclusion" in the above sense, museums can also use the term to imply assimilation into an institution without it really changing. The terms diversity and inclusion used in this sense "allow museums to not only perpetuate oppressive systems, but to enjoy the reputational benefits associated with diversity and inclusion without the work of institutional change." (Callihan, 193)

Intersectional/intersectionality: "A term coined in 1989 by American feminist legal scholar, critical race theorist, and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. intersectionality proposes that people possess multiple, layered identities, including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and ability, among others." (Callahan, ed., 2017. 193–194). In consequence, social issues cannot be examined without understanding their layered and multiple causes. The term is especially useful in our discussion of museum transformation because it acknowledges the multiple identities of museums as well as the communities they wish to serve.

Oppression: "identifying the complex – and too often unacknowledged – ways in which systemic structural norms influence decision-making so that cultural institutions present themselves in ways that are unacceptable and exclusionary to many." (Museums and Race 2016)

White Privilege: "I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group… As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to

see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, ...I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks." (McIntosh 1988)

White Supremacy: "Most of us fixate on white supremacy as a function of racial divisions. We think about white hoods, burning crosses, and bombed churches. The reality is that white supremacy is a system for maintaining power towards an exclusionary "norm." That norm is overwhelmingly white, male, cisgender, protestant. Power structures have overwhelmingly been led by and for people with this identity- thus they created laws, policies, and practices to sustain and uphold their power. This then creates pressure those [of us] outside the norm to perform/act/serve in ways to uphold the power, even if it is against our own self-interest. We begin to act in ways that are actively against our own liberation, suppressing our cultural, ethnic, and gender identity in support of normative comfort." (Janeen Bryant in email to Gretchen Jennings May 28 2019)