

Intro

Positionality

(Brooklyn Museum virtual background)

Oh hi there. I'm Sarah. We're here at the Brooklyn Museum - well, not really. But I'm about to talk to you about my grad school thesis research on how characteristics of white supremacy culture show up in American art museums.

Thrilling, I know.

As an astute viewer, you probably recognize me from my candidacy for The Beigest Woman Alive. That's right, I'm a white lady..... About to talk about systemic racism.

To be honest, if you're not suspicious of that, you really should be.

White women have an incredibly long, and incredibly bloody, history of benefitting from ingrained racism as with affirmative action, but also legitimizing and instigating the violence of white supremacy and racism, as with Carolyn Bryant.

This topic has very real meaning for Black, Indigenous, People of Color, not just as a history, but as a very real present and future.

I do not take that lightly, and anticipate questions and concerns. I hope my presentation offers some insight into what is important to me about this work, and the way I approach it, however I'm always happy to talk about this further, especially with people of color. White people, yeah sure.

Everyone's relationship with whiteness is different. Audre Lorde said "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" What, then, does that mean for people like me? How can I leverage the access and legibility I have within the master's house for anti-racist purposes?

But why am I talking about **white supremacy culture** and not some other euphemism that makes white people marginally more comfortable like Racism?

I believe that white supremacy is the water we all swim in. White supremacy is the foundation of white American culture, and it affects the ways we all learn to assign value, treat each other, and make choices based on skin color.

White supremacy is often dismissed as something in the past, or a caricature of neo-nazi tiki torch weilding proud boys.

But I believe that in order for the kind of systemic racism we currently have to be sustained for as long as we've had it, it logically has to be maintained by more than just these caricatures of white supremacists. I believe it is reaffirmed, and built as an accumulation of the large and small choices made by individual people both consciously and unintentionally every, single, day.

While that is wildly depressing in many ways, I find a lot of hope in this, because I believe it gives people, especially white people, the opportunity to make different choices *if* we can recognize when we're about to reaffirm the supremacy of whiteness.

That brings me to museums, where I work.

I see these as meaningful case studies for many of the oppressive systems in our society - they're like Costco, they have everything - super wealthy boards of trustees, collections built on and extending the legacy of imperialism into late stage capitalism, the hierarchy of labor which spans million dollar salaries down to minimum wage workers and intersects with an equally strict intellectual hierarchy of labor, a complicated public which includes alienated communities, and members who have a hyper-personalized relationship with the museum. Everything. I believe if we look at museums as a microcosm of our larger society, we will find accessible entry points to larger dynamics.

So that's what I mean by marking the load bearing walls. Undermining the master's house from the inside so the tools which *are* capable of destroying it have easier work, and maybe we can all focus on the beautiful, the inspiring, the terrifying, the mediocre, the disgusting,... all of the things being created in the world outside of the master's house. I would love to stop talking about the master's house entirely, but we're just not there yet.

So let's do this.

(Pause to change to Met sculpture courtyard background)

What do you mean by whiteness?

Whiteness as the Absent Norm

So now that we're at The Met, let's define some terms. We're talking about Toni Morrison's fishbowl from *Playing in the Dark*, here.

"It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl — the glide and flick of the golden scales,

the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface — and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.”

We’re talking about that moment of erasure where whiteness shrinks from definition in order to maintain its power as the standard that defines what is normal. This is done by making us focus on what is inside the fishbowl. White people, by actively and passively maintaining a culture of white supremacy for centuries, have been able to use, as Richard Dyer says, “their spirit of mastery over their and other bodies, in short their potential to transcend their racial bodies” to create a paradox of power so all encompassing it is invisible. In shrinking from definition of itself, whiteness extends the power of white supremacy beyond the white body. The absence of itself is often the best indication of the presence of more complicated dynamics at play in order to maintain the power of whiteness.

Another way this absence, or erasure, of itself in order to maintain power manifests is in the prioritization of the mind over the body. Whiteness is sometimes most visible in its physical absence, in a focus on an intellectual interpretation and experience, and this is especially apparent in museums. Think of the restrictions put on your body as you enter a museum, or how difficult it is to access any amenities that cater to the needs of your body like restrooms, restaurants, and seating.

To help identify whiteness in museums, we'll also be using the 13 characteristics of white supremacy culture by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, as well as Layla Saad's prompts from *Me and White Supremacy*, which will be called out in the examples we discuss.

Museums

What type of museums are we talking about? They all share these characteristics, which you might see here (*gestures to background*):

Founded between the Enlightenment and Colonial eras, which means they are based in imperialism. If they were not specifically founded during this time, they are modeled after this standard template created in Europe in the mid-19th Century.

They have collections which represent "the world's diverse artistic traditions." That was from the mission statement of The Art Institute of Chicago, and others have similar phrasing. This, again, gestures from their founding in imperialism. The ways this wealth of culture, so to speak, were accumulated is of course because of the violence, theft, and appropriation of imperialism.

They aspire to inspire "the public." There's a lot in there that I want to tease out.

Tony Bennett, not the singer, wrote in *The Birth of the Museum* that these museums were meant as spaces to "elevate the populace" out of their rowdy behavior, as said explicitly by their founders. In a clear demonstration of the whiteness we have defined for our purposes, these museums were founded on the idea of creating a unifying idea of "the public" for the white populace of sovereign imperialist countries. They did, and do this, by showing the

“primitive” Other in a capacity that is beneath that of white culture. The result is a united, elevated, public of lower class white people who could now see fewer differences between themselves and wealthy white people. Any gesture to change this which does not address this systemic root of white superiority, will always continue to be a gesture *from* imperialism.

Staff is majority white and female, and have a strict hierarchy of labor. The Mellon Foundation of course performed two surveys of the demographics of museum staff. It showed that museums are about 70% white and 60% female, but that increases to 80% white and majority male if you go into what they term “intellectual leadership” roles which include curatorial, conservation, education, and leadership roles. Security officers, front facing retail staff, housekeeping, etc. are all statistically the most likely to be staff of color. Their roles require a physical presence in the museum, are often on the lowest end of salaries, and hold little positional power in terms of the hierarchy of labor in museums.

It is important to remember that these statistics, as bad as they are, are *progress*. And I *do not* say this to be hopeful. The museums we have inherited were created exclusively by white people, and a deep skepticism is necessary in order to identify the crux of the systemic racism they perpetuate.

Once in the galleries, there are signs of how the disembodied nature of whiteness performs itself on an institutional level, exposing internal machinations of whiteness as opposed to exerting them on the visiting public. This is in the difference in which members of staff are visibly present, which are not, and the power dynamics between them.

(Pause to go to no virtual background)

This brings us to our visual aids. You might have noticed that this is...

...an art...

(pause for retake)

.... An art....

(pause for retake)

(whispers) shit.

(pause for retake)

This brings us to our visual aids. You might have noticed that this is...

But, remember that we're not talking about the contents of the fishbowl, but the bowl itself.

So the art itself is secondary. What we'll be talking about today instead is...

The humble wall label.

In my thesis I've developed a taxonomy of 9 ways all of this comes together in museums. I

developed this through research, as well as in person site visits and anecdotal evidence.

Some of the nodes I've named have to do with how we experience the physical space of the museum, such as a disembodied presence and experience of the galleries, white superiority

in hierarchies of gallery space and display, pride of place and ease of access, historic

relationalities. Others have to do with the ways museum staff interpret and order the

collections and their impact, like siloed curatorial departments, freezing time in order to maintain white superiority, a colorblind display and interpretation. Others are more abstract, like the many ways absence is experienced as a way to exert power.

The one we'll focus on today, wall labels, touches on many of these aspects in different ways.

Wall labels as paternalistic technologies of interpretation

Throughout my research, I have come to see wall labels as a particularly diabolical example of many different characteristics of whiteness in one, small, discreet, unassuming piece of foamcore.

First, let's talk about what they are. Wall labels, didactic plaques. These small labels carry the following information:

(Pause to use wall label close to camera)

Artist name

Geographic location

Lifetime

Name of the work

Materials used

Brief interpretative text

Most recent provenance

(Pause to show label on wall)

They are typically small, just to the left of the works, and either printed on foam core the same color as the walls, clear plexiglass, or even vinyl lettering directly on the wall of the gallery.

(Pause to cut back to speaking view)

The process of creating them is typically begun by the curators, but goes through an incredibly complicated series of edits, approvals, galleys, etc. involving many different departments before ever getting on the wall. All of this varies based on the size and complexity of the museum. My label today, for instance, was a pretty quick turnaround all things considered.

So how does this deceptively simple rectangle play on characteristics of white supremacy culture? First and foremost, wall labels perform a complicated act of erasure in order to exert power. They are created to be invisible vehicles for the interpretations of the curator, who as we know are statistically likely to be white. These labels perform the erasure of the white curatorial body in order to maintain its dominance as the only static interpretive material available. These are the experts of the museum, and fall high in the hierarchy of labor performed within museums. They are also notably absent in body. Their intellectual labor evidenced by the art itself, the written interpretations, the pairings, etc. Wall labels are a **paternalistic** technology of interpretation. The expertise of the curators highlight

only a single type of obtaining and interpreting knowledge.

Using Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun's characteristics of white supremacy culture, we see **worship of the written word** as an obvious example here. The text is only written in one language, unless a clear effort has been made in a micro-exhibition or installation to include additional voices or cultures. This, however, ties into the siloed nature of curatorial education, research, funding, and display in my taxonomy. This results in works being interpreted in an **either/or** capacity, another characteristic of white supremacy culture. Limiting the interpretive perspective to one curatorial department prohibits pieces from telling truly intersectional stories.

Wall labels also tie to the way these museums freeze time in order to maintain white superiority in the experience of the galleries. These museums use a temporal series of organizing and display which contributes to an understanding of white superiority. White centric art is shown to have a logical series to its timeline - developments of styles, techniques, complications, etc. are all teased out. However, in the galleries of Arts of Africa, or South America, or Asian Art, or the Americas, the art objects are often frozen in time and place. In-gallery talks, performances, or additional programming can and do build connections to past and present, and tell intersectional stories. Museum practitioners do excellent work in bringing these objects to life. But they depend on being available during a certain time. These labels are the interpretive foundation as they remain across time.

Another characteristic is **objectivity** - the tone in these labels is academic English. This kind of English has such a power to gaslight, to tone police, and to obscure truths. There are

so many examples of harmful obfuscation, white washing, tone policing, exoticising, promoting white saviorism, etc. in wall labels it is impossible to discuss them all. I want to highlight an example I believe is representative in a label at The Art Institute of Chicago for Paul Gauguin's *Merahi metua no Tehamana* which is a painting of one of Gauguin's young, teenage, mistresses. The beginning of the text from the wall label as of March 2020 is below:

"Tehamana was a Tahitian girl who became Paul Gauguin's companion [sic] and, in some ways, the embodiment of his feelings about Tahitian culture. Here he showed her wearing the prim dress imposed on native women by European missionaries, a sign that Tahiti was not quite the "primitive" paradise the artist had hoped to find."

This work also has an audio guide stop indicated on the label by the headphone icon and the number 796. I used the Art Institute app I downloaded on my phone to help members troubleshoot their digital member card to listen to the audio. It is old, referencing Douglas Druick as the President and Director of the museum who retired a few years ago. A portion of the transcript is below:

"NARRATOR: This painting depicts Gauguin's Tahitian companion [sic] Tehamana. She wears a modest dress of the kind provided by Catholic missionaries. But the fragrant flowers in her hair signal the very sensuality that the dress was intended to obscure.

Douglas Druick: ... He had travelled to find the authentic Tahiti. In the absence of

finding it he had to invent it and this is a portrait of that invention”

Tehamana is believed to have been thirteen years old when Gauguin met her.

This label centers the creative expression of a white man as he exoticized the people, and especially young girls, and culture of Tahiti. The objective tone serves to validate the interpretation of the work, and the written text solidifies it as truth.

Wall labels are also the vehicle for information on provenance, as we talked about, or the history of ownership. In the majority of cases, only the most recent owner is named. This tiny, logistical seeming detail is another reason why wall labels are too easily dismissed. As deeper provenance is obscured, so is the lasting legacy of imperialism as it currently manifests in capitalism and philanthropy.

This complicated dynamic between museums, capitalism, and philanthropy is really important, because museums *do* rely on the truly generous donations of wealthy supporters in order to survive. This dynamic also ties to absence from my taxonomy as well - what forms of power are obscured, omitted, absent, in our experience of these museums? Another example of the same kind of power being maintained by a physical absence is with the names of donors on the walls of the galleries. ***(tilt to show “named gallery plaque” at the top of the wall)*** Named gallery spaces are a longstanding best practice for development teams at museums. It anchors the power dynamics of the donors on the very structure of the building. You might not notice them, but donor recognition walls are also standard practice. The names of significant donors and trustees are often carved into the walls, or

otherwise placed on the walls of main thoroughfares as you enter.

(Pause to add Koch Plaza at the Met to virtual background)

Before you see art, you often see the names of donors. This kind of institutional body language speaks volumes sometimes. Especially at The Met, where this photo of David Koch Plaza was taken, recently laid off 81 people, despite its \$3Billion endowment.

(Pause to you sitting somewhere)

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk about the *wildly* exciting topic of wall labels in museums! Again, this is just one node in the taxonomy I've identified in my thesis. But it is a rich example of how important it is to ask questions and dig deeper to reveal the power dynamic at play. As I said at the beginning, when we have the ability to spot when we might be reaffirming the superiority of whiteness, we have the opportunity to make a different choice.

I love museums, and I believe in museums - I think. I *do* believe in my colleagues. At the Art Institute, and across the industry, there are so many talented, incredibly dedicated museum practitioners who are doing the work every day to dismantle these nodes, and also to build something better. I'm grateful to be a part of that community, and I look forward to what we can create together.

