

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

From Preservation to Reparation: Descendant Engagement and Museums

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**Center for the Future
of Museums**

ABOUT THIS PAPER

An opinion piece envisioning a future in which descendants of enslaved communities have an equitable, reparative seat at the table as we strive toward true repair and stronger museums.

ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT

This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM's Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums' evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today*](#).

Descendant engagement. It's a hot-button phrase for museum professionals, historic preservationists, and those in higher education.

In recent years, many institutions have worked to establish descendant councils and more intentionally engage with their surrounding communities. But what does descendant engagement *actually* mean? And if it is done well, what might the future of museums look like in a post-engagement world?

If predominantly white mainstream museums were able to separate themselves from their colonial past, we might imagine a future where these museums and communities reach a place of thriving. Museums thus must consider three key buckets as they strive toward repair with descendant communities:


1. They must center transformative curation and apply it towards reparative action.
2. They must implement descendant parity in leadership.
3. They must work toward reparations of all forms.

As a descendant of the enslaved communities of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, the University of Virginia, and other plantations in central Virginia, I've experienced myriad ways in which institutions have reckoned with their history. Some have recently challenged their outdated narratives through innovative exhibitions. Others have established scholarships and descendant-specific oral history preservation efforts. Many others are just beginning to explore what embracing a more comprehensive narrative looks like in practice.

I envision a future in which descendants of enslaved communities have an equitable, meaningful seat at the table as we work toward stronger institutions and true transformation. But repair doesn't stop with a seat at the table; it continues with the ability to choose the venue, prepare the menu, and decide who is sharing the banquet with you. And it ends with the ability to set the table for future generations to fashion as they wish. By centering repair and transformation, museums can collaboratively work with descendant communities to do just that.

CURATION

Throughout their history, predominantly white mainstream museums have caused harm to enslaved people and their descendants, including by using enslaved labor in their development and telling Black stories in an incorrect or misleading way. Many of these museums emerged directly from the legacy of slavery, whether they were




founded by Confederate descendants, neo-Confederates who wanted to preserve the legacy of the Lost Cause, or on the site of former plantations. Some have done harm by omission, centering celebrated historic figures without nuance or neglecting elements of Black history. And lest we forget, some have unethically collected and still hold the remains of large numbers of Black people, including many who were enslaved. The harm is ongoing.

To counter these harms and work toward repair, these sites must tell an honest, complete story of Black history. They must center slavery and its impact, but also highlight Black stories that center our humanity and lived experiences outside of the horrors of bondage. Following the powerful example of Black museums, they must center our pain and our joy.

I'm grateful that in our local community in Virginia, we have engaged in a good bit of truth-telling. From commissions centered on memorials and public space to widespread changes in school programming and curriculum, we have laid the foundation for accepting and acknowledging our complex history. And we've preserved and celebrated Black history by sustaining a number of Black museums and cultural spaces.

However, truth-telling is not the final destination, but the launchpad for reparative action. It solidifies a shared understanding of the *why* for repair and reparations. The future of museums rests not just on our ability to tell the truth, but on what we do with this knowledge.

If we establish that museums function as institutions designed to provide "evidence of humankind," a crucial part of this preservation and interpretation is telling the full history of those who have lived and labored, and the full nature of their existence. Some have argued that depictions of slavery must also center embodied experiences, and not just visual ones. I argue that by intentionally centering the impact of slavery and the legacy of descendants, museums are uplifting the power of these communities in transformative ways.



We must adopt the approach that Black museums and cultural sites have long held and advocated for, where contributions of our peoples are not relegated to the Eurocentric gaze or featured only in response to colonization. Rather, we must acknowledge the contributions of Black people as independent and apart from those who have sought to silence our voices. We must embrace a decolonized approach to museum representation.



PARITY

For this transformation in storytelling to take place, it must be accompanied with power-sharing. In order for narratives to be changed longitudinally, positions of power in museums must be held by descendants themselves. It is not enough to bring in token descendants to check off a box for “descendant engagement.” Organizations must be run by, for, and with descendant communities at the heart of their operations.

In 2018, the National Trust for Historic Preservation convened at James Madison’s Montpelier to craft *Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, a powerful document that guides institutions in building relationships with their descendant communities. The rubric provides guideposts for institutions to evaluate the ways in which they collaborate with descendants in five key areas: sources and methodology, multi-vocality, collaboration, transparency and accountability, and accessibility.

This list summarizes the ways institutions must center, and not merely “engage,” descendants throughout their work. Montpelier was a fitting venue for drafting this rubric as it subsequently became the first historic cultural site to achieve descendant parity in leadership—a significant milestone for the descendant movement.


Yet while this document provides an important framework for engaging with descendants, it is not a complete roadmap to the future where this collaboration leads. Museums will need to consider the long-term outcomes of their engagement and remain rooted in their commitment to true repair.

This will partly entail being intentional in how we define “descendant communities” to begin with. Are they the descendants of those who labored in the surrounding community? The descendants of people who are connected to the collections? Or, using a broader frame, are they descendants of the enslaved who might have no direct connection to the site, but can speak to the impact on the surrounding community?

While there is no one-size-fits-all answer, I believe the core of all such engagements must remain local, whenever possible, and with impact as the primary goal.

REPARATIONS

Reparative history is certainly important, but it must translate to reparative action. How does highlighting neglected histories open up possibilities for transformative action?



Parity in leadership is one answer. But museums should also utilize their spaces in ways that facilitate healing. They should use their resources to create community spaces, or even meet community needs like housing or education. Collections should be accessible, data should be widely available to all, and descendants and institutions should enter into mutual partnership.

Black museums and cultural collectives have been doing this work for decades. They have worked to repair the archive by preserving and centering Black stories and histories. They have used their platforms and spaces to serve the needs of their communities. And they have provided spaces for community organizing, gathering, and celebrating. All of these efforts are acts of repair.

Some Black museums, like the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and the International African American Museum, have pursued reparations through reclaiming space. By transforming former sites of bondage into healing spaces of legacy reclamation, these institutions have made headway toward repairing the gap between past harm and future possibilities.

Predominantly white mainstream museums should follow suit with efforts like these, but they must also consider how they can make more direct reparations, like monetary and in-kind contributions, to surrounding descendant communities. Perhaps they can generate funds toward existing community reparations. Or maybe, using their large institutional platforms, they can support and advocate for reparations, speaking power to what Black folks have voiced for decades. Or, better yet, perhaps they can offer a new and powerful mechanism through which such funds can be funneled. What better institutions than sites of heritage to foster our collective healing?

Another way that museums can drive reparations is by engaging in descendant-driven curation. What would it look like for museums to co-create exhibitions with descendants in the design room?

One potential model is the redesign of the Sand Creek Massacre exhibition at History Colorado. The museum originally opened an exhibition on the topic in 2012 without consulting the tribes impacted by the massacre, then closed it quickly due to public outcry over the harmful tone and inaccuracies of the content. After this, the museum thoughtfully re-engaged with the tribes and worked for several years to co-create a new version of the exhibition, which relaunched in 2023.

The benefit here was not only a more powerful, honest, and meaningful exhibition, but a new relationship and understanding between the institution and the tribe that not only promotes repair but leads to a stronger museum. This effort is something that all institutions can achieve.



Additionally, what would it look like for museums to play a more active role in educating about Black history? Black history and cultural knowledge is under attack in our public schools, with cries of “critical race theory” and perpetuation of white supremacy in our classrooms. Museums have the space, information, and power to ensure these attacks are mitigated with facts and knowledge.

An example here is “[Black History Saturdays](#)” in Tulsa, established by Tulsa Race Massacre descendant Kristi Williams. This community learning program is designed to equip young folks with knowledge of Black history. Mainstream museums can, and should, implement similar programming. It is a reparative act to ensure that these narratives are not erased for our students.

Finally, larger museums can engage in the reparative work of supporting the creation of Black archives and community-driven museums. While these spaces should be driven by descendants and Black community members, larger institutions have the ability to provide funding, infrastructure, and support in mutually beneficial ways. These community spaces and archives give power to descendants in ways that do not center the larger, often white-led institutions.

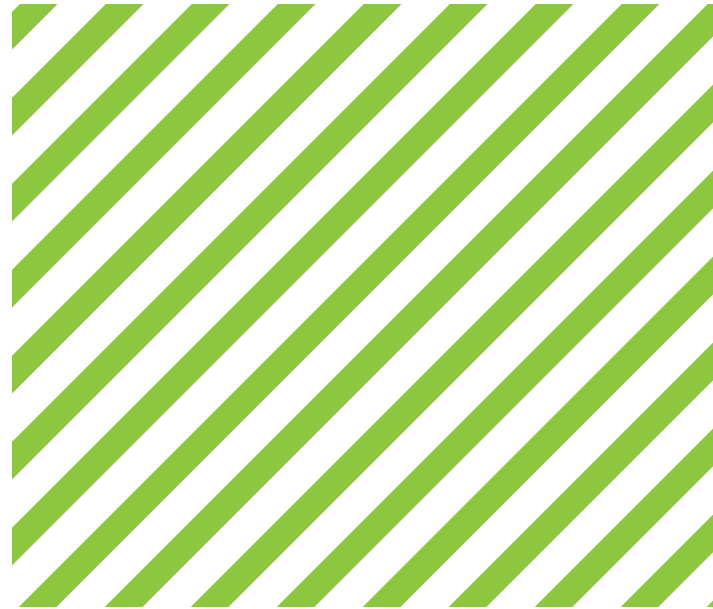
CONCLUSION

Our mission at the [Descendants of Enslaved Communities at the University of Virginia](#) is “to research and reclaim the narrative, to honor the legacies of enslaved and free Black communities and their descendants, and to achieve restorative justice for communities rooted at the University of Virginia and surrounding regions.” How beautiful would it be if all museums embraced the same purposes?

Museums can help research and reclaim the narrative by making archives more accessible and putting forward funding for descendant-centered projects. They can honor the legacies of enslaved and free Black communities by including content that is reflective of all aspects of Black culture and experience. And they can engage in restorative justice for descendant communities by acknowledging years of harm, accepting responsibility, and creating a pathway for reparations.

True descendant engagement comes not from forming an organization, holding meetings, or simply asking for descendant review and approval. It comes from co-creation that is aligned and sustained toward repair, rather than merely feel-good truth-telling. The museum field is slowly moving toward a wide embrace of honesty and centering reparative history. We must move into this next horizon of cultural work with our sights set on reparations of all forms.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Harris is a descendant of enslaved communities in central Virginia, including those at Monticello and the University of Virginia. She is currently the Board President for the Descendants of Enslaved Communities at UVA. She is also the Community Research Program Manager at the Karsh Institute Center for the Redress of Inequity Through Community-Engaged Scholarship, where she focuses on community-embedded research and community projects. Jessica holds a master's in educational psychology from the University of Virginia, where she earned an interdisciplinary BA in arts nonprofit management and education, and is pursuing an EdD at the University of Pittsburgh focused on out-of-school learning. Her work is situated at the intersection of community engagement, education, and arts and place-based praxis. As a descendant of enslaved communities, she believes that truth-telling and memorialization efforts are of utmost importance.





Center for the Future of Museums

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American Alliance of Museums

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This report was generously supported by

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