March 2020 saw most of the world’s cultural heritage institutions close their doors, voluntarily or by government order, as a precautionary measure taken to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. In response, organizations and individuals developed new forms of online programming, utilized social media as sites of dialogue and curation, digitally remediated exhibitions and events that were planned to take place in other formats, and disseminated content and materials that had previously been digitized or digitally recorded. As these efforts were underway, it became clear that COVID-19’s impact would be far greater than a temporary closure. Practitioners of public history and cultural heritage more broadly, digital and otherwise, now face challenges that seem unprecedented in terms of their severity and scale: economic hardships created by lost revenue that have resulted in layoffs, hiring freezes, budget cuts, and other austerity measures; and illness, death, trauma, and other negative effects on our physical and mental health. A scan of social media over the last few months reveals many examples of creative and exemplary work by public historians, but we also find many conversations and Twitter threads by our peers documenting the ways that the pandemic has created new professional crises while also magnifying hardships that predate our current situation. What follows is a brief snapshot of some efforts in digital public history in the immediate wake of the
global pandemic, accompanied by perspectives from practitioners and thoughts on how this work fits into the field at-large in increasingly uncertain times.

In the early days of the lockdowns and disruptions created by the spread of COVID-19, cultural heritage organizations offered more digital engagement opportunities than usual for audiences to playfully and creatively engage with institutions and with one another. For example, in late March, the Getty Museum issued a popular challenge to its followers on social media that invited them to “recreate a work of art with materials at home” and then share the results.¹ The instructions were clear and brief, acknowledged that its audience was likely mandated or encouraged to stay at home, and were easy to disseminate, interpret, and subvert. Images of participants juxtaposed with source materials circulated on The Getty’s accounts and elsewhere, and hashtags connected to the institution’s brand (#gettymuseumchallenge, #gettychallenge), connected to the Netherlands Instagram account that inspired the museum’s efforts (#tussenkunstenquarantaine), or created by users (#MuseumChallenge, #artrecreation) made works linked and accessible elsewhere online.

Many participants seemed to view the challenge as a fun way to spend an afternoon, or a chance to connect online with friends and strangers unable to view art in physical museums and galleries. Others saw the prompt as an opportunity to reflect on personal relationships to art, aesthetics, and the histories cultural institutions document and make accessible. In May, The Iris, The Getty’s blog, highlighted the hashtagged contributions of Peter Brathwaite, a British broadcaster and opera singer who used the challenge as an occasion for “Rediscovering #blackportraiture.” Over the course of more than a dozen recreations, Brathwaite’s interpretations include details and revisions that are personal, playful, and critical of both the

cultural contexts informing the original work and contemporary assumptions about race, art, and histories of representation. For example, he notes that the choices he made in his re-creation of Albert Schindler’s 1836 work “Portrait of a Gardener and a Horn Player in the Household of Emperor Francis I” were efforts to “shift the balance in what has overwhelmingly been a series of images showing Black people without power.”

Digital outreach efforts, during a pandemic or otherwise, may result in audiences thinking about materials and contexts far beyond the confines of their immediate project or institution; these responses should be expected and can be productively encouraged and acknowledged. For instance, it’s worth noting that many of the works Brathwaite re-created are not part of The Getty’s collections; the Schindler painting was digitized by The Art Institute of Chicago, and the image is available for “free, unrestricted use” via a Creative Commons Zero license. The Getty has similarly committed to what it calls an “Open Content Program,” which explains that items that the museum owns the rights to or digitized public domain materials may be used “for any purpose” without requiring permission. The Getty’s substantial and long-term investments in digitization, metadata creation, search engine tools, and open access made it easier for the museum to make cultural resources visible and available in the wake of COVID-19. But they also have committed to maintaining and updating avenues of access and discovery like The Iris, a space where staff can use open access materials in virtual spaces that are increasingly popular during the pandemic. In addition to social media, the Getty’s materials have been used as background images in Zoom virtual conference calls, and as wall art and decorative templates in

---

the popular Nintendo Switch game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Models of use and clear information on copyright and terms of use are important elements of digitization work by institutions and can lead to widespread forms of engagement, encouraging use by educators and public history practitioners but also extending far beyond these networks.

The Getty is a well-funded and globally recognizable cultural institution, and so its approaches and their reception are likely not always replicable wherever digitized collections are curated or digital public history is practiced. Smaller institutions have also found creative ways to work with comparatively limited resources. For example, due to the precautions in place during the pandemic, Seth Spillman, the Chief Marketing and Communications Director of Oklahoma City’s National Cowboy Museum and Cultural Heritage, collaborated with the museum’s head of security to update social media feeds while he was making rounds in the building. The ensuing posts from Tim (no last name provided) quickly circulated well beyond Oklahoma City, due in part to his informal tone and the ways Tim mediated the museum’s collections through his humor, interests, and personality. It’s unlikely, for instance, that a social media manager would describe Dorothea Lange, subject of a current museum exhibition, as “someone I’d want to have a beer with.” Social media collaborations with members of museum staff and visitors can be a welcome reprieve from content that aspires to the more didactic tone of traditional museum label, or the hyperbole of the traditional press release. The museum has continued to have Tim update its accounts since reopening its doors; in an interview Spillman described him as “an authentic voice for the Museum.”

---


6 nationalcowboymuseum, Instagram post, March 18, 2020, [https://www.instagram.com/p/B94hG8Elf_j/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B94hG8Elf_j/)

“authenticity” is defined, mediated, compensated, and supported over time, in this particular context and when considering whether to adopt similar social media strategies in their own professional spaces.

Amelia Grabowski, social media coordinator at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, notes that The National Cowboy Museum’s work “is not an approach that would work for every museum, but you wouldn’t want it to.” She argues that “the spectrum of different voices of museum accounts is part of what makes following a variety so rewarding.”

Adam Koszary, social media and content editor for the Royal Academy of Arts, points out that individual accounts can be spaces where the wide range of work and perspectives present at an institution can be made visible: “Collections people can use it for crowdsourcing for things like transcriptions. Learning can use it to share educational packs. Curators can have discussions about history and meaning with people online.” When citing the COVID-19 efforts of the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which involved broadcasts of tanks and programming created in Animal Crossing and broadcast via the popular livestreaming service Twitch, Grabowski notes the role that investments in high-quality photographs and video feeds play in order for the institution’s “creative and experimental team” to test out different platforms and pivot quickly in changing situations.

Both Grabowski and Koszary remind us that online engagement may seem to happen casually or without much planning, but it is often the product of careful labor, coordination, and development involving multiple parties at an institution. Even the decision to encourage a more serendipitous approach at The National Cowboy Museum was planned,

---

8 Amelia Grabowski, email to the author, June 1, 2020.
9 Ibid.
11 Grabowski, email to the author, June 1, 2020.
It was strange to revisit social media at a point in time when our feeds were not full of images of police violence, white supremacy, fascist acts of governance, and the protest movements that have emerged in defiant response to assert that Black Lives Matter. As these scenes continue to spread widely, online discourse has also been dominated by renewed and magnified calls to decolonize museums and revise approaches that cultural institutions take to staffing, collecting, and reckoning with their racist pasts. These conversations have been ongoing in public history for some time: as public historian Aleia Brown observed in a July 2020 Twitter presentation and discussion sponsored by the NCPH, “The COVID-19 pandemic, continued anti-Black violence, and acute wealth and income inequality are all highlighting the realities that many Black, brown, Indigenous, and low-income earning folks have been resisting since the beginning of this settler-colonial project.” Patrons and professionals have channeled

12 In answer to the question “What is Decolonization?” The Abbe Museum notes that “‘decolonization’ means, at minimum, sharing authority for the documentation and interpretation of Native culture” (“What is Decolonization?” [https://abbemuseum.wordpress.com/about-us/decolonization/](https://abbemuseum.wordpress.com/about-us/decolonization/)). Movements like New York City’s *Decolonize This Place* (DTP) believe that “decolonization necessitates abolition,” and their actions have involved organizing “Days of Action” at the American Museum of Natural History, The Whitney Museum, and other cultural institutions, efforts that “used cultural institutions as platforms and amplifiers for movement demands, but [...] do not understand the transformation of these institutions as an end in of itself” (“Faxx,” *Decolonize This Place*, [https://decolonizethisplace.org/faxxx-1](https://decolonizethisplace.org/faxxx-1)).

13 Aleia Brown (CollardStudies), Twitter, July 8 2020, [https://twitter.com/CollardStudies/status/1281002248072544262](https://twitter.com/CollardStudies/status/1281002248072544262). The quoted tweet is part of Brown’s larger presentation: conversations related to it made use of the hashtags #EthicofCare and #BlackLife. For additional context on museums in the context of conversations about settler colonialism, see Julia Rodriguez’s “Decolonizing or Recolonizing? The (Mis)Representation of Humanity in Natural History Museums” (*History of Anthropology Review*, January 10 2020, [https://histanthro.org/notes/decolonizing-or-recolonizing/](https://histanthro.org/notes/decolonizing-or-recolonizing/)).
the energy and urgency of the social uprisings of this moment into calls for direct and substantive commitments to antiracism by institutions, as well as long-term accountability. Many of these calls and demands have played out on social media, with accounts for museums and other institutions serving as important focal points of ongoing critique and conversation.

For example, while The Getty was commended for its participatory virtual programming at the start of the pandemic, the museum was roundly criticized for a May 31 Instagram post that referenced “hope for justice and peace for all, and a spirit of caring for one another” but did not explicitly reference Black Lives Matter or the killing of George Floyd. Reflecting on the impact of Black Lives Matter, Koszary notes that “A social media manager may want to use their platform for empowerment, change, and critical debate, but if their organization has a history of racist action, then that [approach] will be the lightning rod.” Getty President Jim Cuno apologized for the museum’s statement, but even these remarks (“We heard you. Thank you.”) sound like non-committal statements that Molly Lambert identifies as ubiquitous in public statements made by institutions and public figures after consultation with crisis management firms. Many audiences and professionals want actions that extend beyond brief statements of

16 Adam Koszary, email to the author, June 9, 2020. Koszary’s previous social media work for the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) may be familiar to some Public Historian readers: specifically, the April 2018 viral tweet describing an Exmoor Horn aged ram as an “absolute unit.”
17 Molly Lambert, Twitter, April 8, 2020, https://twitter.com/mollylambert/status/1248000755354624000
solidarity and evidence that commitments to significant change over time are being made by institutions. For example, an open letter published by a collective of Black art conservators in July 2020 rejected “the inconsequential statements of solidarity that some cultural heritage organizations continue to make today” and made explicit recommendations for how the profession could demonstrate “True BIPOC solidarity” by “address[ing] the lack of diversity in positions of leadership in conservation” and “review[ing] the salary ranges of conservators at their institution and ensur[ing] that BIPOC employees receive equitable pay,” among other actions.¹⁸ The reception to online programming during the COVID-19 crisis, no matter how creative or engaging, will be impacted by what audiences view as a willingness or unwillingness to take actions that may impact its prestige, cultural authority, and implicit or explicit beneficence from structural racism and white supremacy.

Public historians doing exemplary work on social media are well-versed in navigating the material, economic, and cultural realities of social media: the forms of attention cultivated and monetized in these spaces, the prevalence of misinformation, sexism, trolling and hate speech in these networks, and the creation and use of algorithms that remediate forms of oppression and restrict our view of the world. An additional challenge magnified by the repercussions of the global pandemic has been reckoning with the reality that, as Koszary reminds us that “social media cannot operate independently of its institution.”¹⁹ We see this in critiques of statements


¹⁹ Ibid.
circulated in these online spaces that fail to acknowledge the demands of our present moment’s reckoning with the prevalence of racism in our cultural institutions.

Many professionals in public history and cultural heritage maintain their own social media accounts, channels used to network with peers, discuss a wide range of topics, and make their ideas, labor, and contributions to the field of public history more explicit and visible beyond exhibition catalogs and resumes. At times, tensions have emerged during the pandemic when personal or collective accounts run by employees feel compelled to amplify critiques of their employers. For example, in April, the New York Times wrote a profile on The Tenement Museum and its efforts to “weather the pandemic,” work that included “virtual tickets and tables” for its annual gala and reference to innovative digital programming such as “a digital exhibit on the census” and “a live craft-making program for children ‘inspired by the resourcefulness of former tenement residents.’”\textsuperscript{20} The article circulated widely on social media, with folks lamenting the devaluation of cultural heritage and encouraging followers to contribute to the museum’s fundraising efforts. As it spread, members of The Tenement Museum’s union pointed out that “the Museum’s fundraiser won’t go towards paying furloughed workers during the indefinite closure” and directed readers to contribute instead to a mutual aid fund on GoFundMe.\textsuperscript{21}

In early June, the Tenement Museum Union’s Twitter account critiqued the fact that the building “has boarded up [its] windows, while other institutions open their doors and facilities to protestors.”\textsuperscript{22} In July, when the museum announced that it was laying off 76 employees

\textsuperscript{21} R. E. Fulton, Twitter post, April 21, 2020, 8:01 PM (EST), \url{https://twitter.com/rebfulton/status/1252749210308542464}
\textsuperscript{22} tenementmuseum_union, Twitter post, June 6, 2020, 1:06 PM (EST), \url{https://twitter.com/tenemuseumunion/status/1269314772174024707}
(presumably due to a significant loss of revenue in the wake of the pandemic), the Union’s Twitter account published a detailed critique of the narrative of events offered by an press release, noting, for example, that “all the laid off workers have been furloughed, without pay, since March.” These public statements have not seemed to dissuade the Tenement Museum’s from acting in direct opposition to the interests of many of its present and former staff, but circulating these remarks on social media have created important counternarratives that circulates among professionals in public history and contribute to wider calls to unionize workplaces.

If we are serious about public engagement in public history and cultural heritage more broadly, we must find effective ways to act on important feedback we receive on social media: concerns about the colonial legacies of archival knowledge production, reminders of the lack of diversity in museum and library professions, questions about the ethical dimensions of crowdsourced labor, requests to make collections and exhibitions more widely accessible. These are issues that public historians should address and respond to in every aspect of their work, but digital public history efforts and their sites of dissemination and reception often bring these matters to the surface more quickly and visibly, especially in a global crisis. As public historians and cultural heritage practitioners initiate or expand efforts in digital public history on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, institutional web sites and elsewhere, we cannot ignore what is present around and alongside this work in social media feeds, browser tabs, app notifications. We must embrace the networked dimensions of these virtual spaces, be clear about where and how our

---

23 tenementmuseum_union, Twitter post, July 24, 2020, 9:30 AM (EST), https://twitter.com/tenemuseumunion/status/1286654898646454273
work already aligns with the values of our desired audiences, and acknowledge where reform is needed and what we are doing to address our complicity and shortcomings.

Jim McGrath is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Digital Public Humanities at Brown University’s John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage. His writing has appeared in *Doing Public Humanities* (Ed. Susan Smulyan), *American Quarterly*, and *Digital Humanities Quarterly*. He is on Twitter [@JimMc_Grath](https://twitter.com/JimMc_Grath) and his professional website is [www.jimmcgrath.us](http://www.jimmcgrath.us).