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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Placing African American museums in the American tourism landscape

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### ABSTRACT

According to the Association of African American Museums (AAAM), there are more than 200 African American history and cultural museums—or other sites with substantial African American collections such as libraries and archives—across the U.S. Many of these museums had their start shortly after the height of the Civil Rights Movement, with a surge in establishments in the 1970s. Black museums serve to decentre White stories of America and refocus on Black experiences. While geographers have studied an array of memory, heritage, and tourism sites, museums remain understudied and under-theorized. Building upon the subfields of Museum geographies—particularly by considering the concept of museums as *theatres of pain*—and Black geographies, our research examines the ways these museums are integral to the relationships between Black placemaking and the tourism landscape, which remains steeped in anti-Black racism. Using museum exhibit documentation, semi-structured interviews of museum staff, and content analysis of online travel reviews (primarily TripAdvisor and Google Reviews), this paper analyzes two case studies: The National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio, and The Colored Girls Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Through our two case studies, we show how Black museums enact curatorial practices of commemorative geographies and create redemptive spaces that cultivate not only a homeplace for visitors, particularly for Black Americans and people of the African diaspora but also serve as sites of belonging and joy.

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## Introduction

Increasingly, work by tourism scholars—especially in the United States—has called attention to how a myopic White gaze has been blind to the Black tourist experience (Benjamin & Dillette, 2021; Carter, 2008; Finney & Potter, 2018; Philipp, 1994). Mainstream museum spaces, which are major tourist destinations, have traditionally

disregarded key moments of American history (such as enslavement, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement) and the lives of African Americans but also the everyday lived experiences of Black travelers. At the same time, African Americans have long challenged existing places of memory, particularly by establishing their own museums that bring Black experiences front and center within the retelling of the nation's history, providing the opportunity for recovering an African-American sense of place (McKittrick, 2011; Ruffins, 1998).

Recently, much scholarly and media attention has been paid to what is now described as the 'world's best-known African American museum,' the 400,000 square foot Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) that opened in Washington D.C. in 2016. By 2019, the NMAAHC had an annual visitorship of 2 million people (Banks, 2019, p. 193; Smithsonian, n.d.). But as NMAAHC founding director Lonnie G. Bunch III has noted, 'the national museum stands on the shoulders of pioneering institutions such as ... the Charles Wright Museum, and we are humbled that [the NMAAHC Act] contributes to the support and growth of institutions that enrich our nation by exploring and presenting African American history and culture' (Weiss, 2018, p. 162). Given that history and heritage museums are key transmission points for the narration of the American story, this paper seeks to reorient tourism geographies to the important placemaking work of Black museums. Black or African American<sup>1</sup> History and Cultural Museums can be defined as sites that—and employing professionals who—'protect, preserve and interpret African and African American art, history and culture' (Blackmuseums.org, n.d.).

Considered here are two Black museums that serve as case studies demonstrating the full spectrum of placemaking work that Black museums carry out: The National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio—which opened in 1988—and the Colored Girls Museum, established in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 2015. This paper is structured in three parts. First, we provide a brief overview of several strands of geographic literature informing this work: an analysis of Museum geographies, memory work, and Black geographies, paying particular attention to Black placemaking. We then transition to a brief history of how Black history and cultural museums were established in the U.S., before finally shifting to our two case studies. As we will demonstrate, Black museums offer more than being places for mere viewing. Rather, they institutionalize sites of belonging and disrupt normative socio-spatial narratives.

## Museum geographies

This research is informed by the subfield of 'museum geography' and represents one engagement with Hilary Geoghegan's call for more geographical research with and on museums as museums are 'important sites of dialogue and spaces in which past, present, and future can be encountered' (Geoghegan, 2010, p. 1462). Museum geography studies have often focused on state-funded museums. For example, Smith and Foote (2017) examined the ways the History Colorado Center in Denver confronts critical histories of the state and the American West, while Waterton and Dittmer (2014) consider more-than-representational approaches through the lens of the

Australian War Memorial. Of particular relevance to this study is Divya P. Tolia-Kelly (2016) exploration of the everyday space of the British Museum and 'what happens when the racialized 'other' encounters themselves in the museum cabinet,' particularly the Māori visitor (p. 896). Tolia-Kelly (2016) describes museum spaces like that of the British Museum as a *theatre of pain*, 'a site that materialises the pain of epistemic violence, the rupture of genocide and the deadening of artefacts' (p. 899). This experience, while named by Tolia-Kelly, dates back to at least the early 1900s, when W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) lamented in *The Souls of Black Folk* that Black people were either not admitted to most museums, libraries, and concerts at that time 'or on terms peculiarly galling to the pride of the very classes who might otherwise be attracted' (p. 124). Instead of approaching the Black museum in the framework of a *theatre of pain*, we want to understand the ways these museums, unlike national and state-run museums spaces, give those who have traditionally been 'othered' or altogether excluded their *place* in the museum landscape (Said, 1978), essentially turning the museum into a space to 'flourish and pursue liberatory dreams' (Moulton, 2021, p. 5).

### Memory work, place, and power

Memory creates spaces and places in the present where 'the past comes back to life' (Davis, 2016, p. 14). We perform and materialize memory, and in doing so, it constructs us. Memory work is 'identity/cultural' defining work (Davis, 2016, p. 14–15). Hoelscher and Alderman (2004, p. 349) suggest memory study 'inevitably comes around to questions of domination and the uneven access to a society's political and economic resources.' If this is so, then geographers must emphasize questions of power, inequality, and memory—particularly memory reflective of the legacies of colonialism, racial capitalism, slavery, Indigenous and Black dispossession, and uneven development (Gilmore, 2002; Moulton, 2021).

An interrogation of power and inequality calls for a broadening of how geographers understand landscapes that goes beyond their implanted memories, many of which are framed by master narratives. We create public memory (objects and practices such as books, monuments, museums, landscapes, holidays, and a myriad of other mnemonics) as bulwarks against forgetting (Davis, 2016; Johnson, 2013). It is a memory put forth for public consumption (Dickinson et al., 2010). Public memory in the form of material objects and various forms of text is ingested by the public in the hopes that it will adhere them to particular readings of the past. Museums are one of the most prominent storehouses of memory objects and memory text. Through museums, public memory is used as a device to create and maintain collective memory.

Black museums have provided insurgent interventions in place-based knowledge production within Black neighborhoods and for Black communities. As has been argued elsewhere, 'Attention to the geographical aspects of race and, more specifically, Blackness is a long-standing, if underdeveloped, approach in the history of Geography' (Bledsoe et al., 2017). We emphasize the dialectic of race and memory because we understand how, as Bobby M. Wilson (2002) argues, 'racial practices are (re)constructed at different historical moments and places' (p. 32). We emphasize that memory work is identity/culture-making work and, by extension, placemaking work.

## Black geographies

While placemaking<sup>2</sup> has a long history in geography and tourism studies, we draw heavily on the theoretical and empirical approaches of Black geographies, which resists the intellectual tendencies of 'naturalizing racial difference in place' (McKittrick & Woods, 2007, p. 6). Rather, our approach to this work aligns with the call to embark on critical analyses of Blackness that extend beyond the bodily scale and reductive engagements such as environmental determinism. In this paper, we frame placemaking through the lens of Black geographies, which invites us to rethink the production of spatial knowledge by drawing attention to and centering Black worldviews (Allen et al., 2019; Bledsoe et al., 2017). Additionally, we argue that Black museums engage with a Black sense of place, which 'is not a steady, focused, and homogeneous way of seeing and being in place, but rather a set of changing and differential perspectives that are illustrative of legacies of normalized racial violence that calcify, but do not guarantee, the denigration of Black geographies and their inhabitants' (McKittrick, 2011, p. 950).

Our interest in Black geographies and Black museums foregrounds 'geographic expressions of Black populations' (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019, p. 419). To frame our work in Black geographies is to think deeply about the role of Black geographies in cultivating and preserving sites of memory in and for Black people. Put differently, we offer Black history and cultural museums as modalities of Black placemaking, aligning with Katherine McKittrick's (2006) assertion: 'Black matters are spatial matters' (p. xii). Additionally, as will become evident later in the paper, Black museums have been and are a crucial gathering point for interrogating underlying structures of racism and inequality that also elucidate a range of Black histories in powerful ways. We argue that through Black storytelling, freedom-making, and a place-based ethics of care, these museums are sites of transformative racial justice, which as Winston (2021) says 'requires deep understandings of racial history alongside avowals of the alternative definitions and practices of humanity and placemaking based in Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color' (p. 2185).

We contend that Black geographies' emphasis on Black experiences and spatial histories aids in the development and analyses of Black museum placemaking, memory work, and tourism geographies. In thinking through the intersection of Black geographies, tourism geographies, and memory, we elucidate two primary threads which guide our analysis and will be illustrated through our two museum case studies:

1. Recognizing a Black sense of place as indispensable to memory work and, therefore, to how Black museums enact commemorative geographies; and
2. Emphasizing Black museums as redemptive spaces, working as counter-archives to racist logics and the terror of White supremacy and instead as sites of belonging and joy for Black tourists and museum visitors.

Both of these threads are made apparent in the next section cataloging the development of Black museums and in the analyses of our two case study sites that follow.

## Development of Black museums in the U.S

The construction of separate communal places in the United States are a spatial manifestation of the afterlives of slavery (Hartman, 2008; see also Baker, 1998; Brooms, 2011; Jackson, 2012, 2019; Kendi, 2016; Orser, 2007). This socio-spatial separation has primarily been a product of active exclusion. Jackson (2019, p. 677) defines active exclusion as a process 'in which the actions of agents/actors result in the marginalization, exclusion, or denial of rights of full participation in society as equal citizens to people relegated to the status of others based on race/ethnicity.' Over time this exclusion solidifies into separate social and cultural spheres and their associated separate social and cultural institutions (Barry, 2002; Silver, 2007; Weyeneth, 2005). One such institution formed as a reaction to White narrative privilege in American society is the African American museum.

Before the formal establishment of the first Black neighborhood museums throughout the U.S., Black churches and educational institutions, such as Black primary schools and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), safeguarded and fostered an appreciation and understanding of Black history and culture. While there are early nineteenth century precedents, which include the founding of the Hampton University Museum in Virginia in 1868, the Black museum movement gained momentum in the 1960s, shortly after the height of the Civil Rights Movement, with a surge in their establishment in the 1970s (Burns, 2013; Hayward & Larouche, 2018). 'These new museums gave Black history and art their first permanent homes outside of universities, homes the wider public could visit and enjoy. In these Black institutions, Black people controlled the narrative and they could decide how the complexities of the Black experience could be explored and exhibited' (Ruffins, 2018, p. 14). Notable examples include the founding of the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago (originally called the Ebony Museum of History and Art) in 1961, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit (originally, the International Afro-American Museum) in 1966, Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in D.C. in 1969, Studio Museum Harlem in 1968, Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum in Philadelphia in 1976, and the California Afro-American Museum in 1977. In 1978, the African American Museums Association (today, the Association of African American Museums, or AAAM) was established (Ruffins, 2018). Over the past half-decade, many high-profile African American History Museums have opened. For example, in September 2016, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., made its much-anticipated debut, and many other national-scale museums have or are currently undergoing major construction and expansion projects.

## Methodologies

The researchers selected two case study sites—The National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio, and The Colored Girls Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—to reorient tourism geographies to the importance of Black placemaking work. The sites were selected from a list of more than 40 museums visited by the

research team during pilot research for a National Science Foundation grant. Because each team member initially selected sites during the pilot work phase, site selection was somewhat random. Some of the 40 museums were studied because of their proximity to each researcher, while others were chosen because they are in major cities (i.e. Washington, D.C., New York City, Philadelphia) with many African American museums and thus were more frugal to visit. From this list of sites, however, the two discussed in this paper were specifically chosen to demonstrate the wide and varied range of characteristics that Black museums span. The two sites provide striking contrasts and comparisons—and yet at the same time, the sites are powerful Black spaces of memory and meaning-making, heritage, and art.

At each of the two sites, the researchers observed and documented the site, and conducted and analyzed semi-structured interviews. The two researchers that conducted the fieldwork in 2018–2019 (site visits and interviews) both acknowledge their privileged positions at the intersections of being White, middle-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual professors. As a team that includes two Black scholars and three White scholars, we are all firmly committed to challenging and dismantling the many systems of oppression inherent in the United States. Three members of the team conducted follow up visits in Philadelphia (2022) and the U.S. Midwest (2023).

To observe and document both sites, the researchers toured the museums, took pictures (where permitted) of all relevant exhibits and supporting artifacts and text, and documented the exhibits' themes, curatorial style, layout, etc. with a guided observation form. Together, these data were used within the research to guide interview questions with museum staff and provide context to the interview and virtual content analysis (museum reviews) data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two full-time employees of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center and the founder of the Colored Girls Museum. Interviewees were purposely selected as the individual at the site best able to discuss the museums' history as well as the exhibits' themes. The interview questions were wide-ranging in scope, including questions on museum management, curation, community engagement, hiring, and visitor trends and their responses to exhibits. Interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded for transcription purposes.

Finally, the researchers conducted a web search for both sites to capture the ways in which visitors experienced the site. The visitor review data came from TripAdvisor and Google Reviews. For the National Afro-American Museum, we analyzed 53 reviews across Google (47) and TripAdvisor (6) that had text comments (a review that went beyond a star rating) and we reviewed 57 Google Reviews for The Colored Girls Museum. The reviews were analyzed using content analysis for evidence of words and themes.

## Case study: The National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center

The National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center (NAAMCC, [Figure 1](#)) is located in Wilberforce, Ohio, a small town adjacent to the city of Xenia, itself just a few miles southeast of Dayton. In the mid-1800s, Ohio was crossed by multiple heavily traveled



**Figure 1.** Front entrance hall at the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center. Photo by Matthew R. Cook, August 2018.

routes of the Underground Railroad, which contributed to Xenia becoming home to several notable free Black families (Greene County (OH), 2015). In 1850, a White lawyer and former speaker of the Ohio General Assembly named Elias Drake bought a parcel of land east of Xenia and established a health resort called Tawawa Springs, which became a popular destination for wealthy Cincinnati families and Southern planters (Powell, 2021).

Although the resort closed after only a few years, its hotel and cottages were bought by the Methodist Episcopal Church, which went on to found Wilberforce University in 1856. This makes Wilberforce the oldest private HBCU in the U.S. Despite facing substantial obstacles including a temporary closure during the Civil War and losing most of its original structures to fire in 1865, Wilberforce University has continued throughout its more than 160-year history to be a Black 'intellectual Mecca and refuge from slavery's first rule: ignorance' (Powell, 2021, n.p.). Another HBCU, Central State University, was founded at the same site by the Ohio General Assembly in 1887 as a public university to complement Wilberforce. The two colleges formally separated in 1947 as distinct four-year-degree-granting institutions, after a tornado destroyed a significant portion of the campus. Wilberforce University moved to a new site, while Central State (and later, NAAMCC) rebuilt at the original location. Thanks to the presence of these two beacons of Black education, Wilberforce was

home at various points to many of the most important Black historical figures of Black freedom, education reform, Africana Womanism, equal representation, anti-lynching and more in the late 1800s and 1900s. These icons include Mary Church Terrell, Hallie Quinn Brown, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Colonel Charles Young (all four of whom taught at the universities), Civil Rights activist Bayard Rustin, and classical singer Leontyne Price.

It was also at this important site of Black higher education that a confluence of state- and national-scale movements led to the founding of the NAAMCC (Ruffins, 2018). As we have highlighted in this paper, there has long been a desire for a national museum devoted to African American history; indeed, the lack of a national museum such as a Smithsonian Institution site played a major role in the creation of several early Black neighborhood museums (Burns, 2013). And as Ruffins (2018, p. 25) notes, these early Black museums and cultural centers succeeded on the strength of their founders and staff 'work[ing] well together because most shared the intellectual values, operating protocols, and social networks of America's HBCUs.' The desire to establish a national museum, however, lacked the political willpower in Congress and other branches of the Federal government to see it accomplished (Wilkins, 2003). It was not until the 1970s that proposals to establish a national museum for African American history gained new traction, aligned with efforts in Ohio, which passed legislation in 1972 to create a Black history museum in Wilberforce as part of its state historical society. A 1979 report by the National Park Service agreed with the recommendation, recognizing Wilberforce as a fitting site for such a museum. Further support was added by President Jimmy Carter in 1980 through Public Law 96-430, which provided for the museum's establishment in Wilberforce, and during a visit by Carter to the Dayton area (NAAMCC, 2018). The museum was approved by Congress in 1981—though without allocating any money for the project, the museum was largely funded by Ohio state resources (Ruffins, 1998). In the 1980s as the museum was opening, the staff put forth a call for donations of artifacts from the late 1940s to early 1960s to help build their collection. An exhibit seen during the 2023 follow-up visit on the site's history included a reproduction of a mid-1980s advertisement that specifically asked:

What's in your attic?

Bet you don't know. But, we're willing to bet that it is some of the very things that will enable us to save our Black heritage for the future. What began as a local movement to create a national Afro-American Museum has blossomed into a federally-supported mandate to establish a national repository for the preservation, study and interpretation of Afro-American history and culture.

With your help, our dreams of tomorrow can be the reality of today in the minds and eyes of our children.

The museum opened to the public in April 1988, and today houses more than 9,000 artifacts and art pieces and 650 linear feet of archival material. The collections include cultural artifacts such as author Alex Haley's typewriter (Figure 2) and a draft of *Roots*, more than 400 works of art (including a particularly strong collection of art associated with Black protest movements), Black political campaign buttons and



**Figure 2.** Alex Haley's typewriter on display in the exhibit *Color Outside the Lines: Celebrating 30 years at NAAMCC*. Photo by Matthew R. Cook, August 2018.

ephemera, and one of the largest collections of Black dolls in the country (NAAMCC, 2018).

In August 2018, co-author Matthew R. Cook and an undergraduate advisee took a self-guided tour, documented NAAMCC's exhibits, and also interviewed Curator Rosa Rojas and Assistant Curator Hadley Dodge about the museum's history and curatorial practices. In terms of curation, the National Afro-American Museum has designed several important Black history exhibits over its 30-plus-year history, including some national touring exhibits. As Rojas mentioned,

What we have to keep an eye on—and at 'top of mind' awareness, kind of our unspoken mission—is to tell the stories of the people that have been important in the movement of social justice, even if those are the names that...aren't nationally recognized, or internationally. But so many come out from this area and from Wilberforce and Central State. And even with some names, they are out there, but nobody knows that they're associated with this area. So being a local institution, that's the story, that is up to us to tell (Rosa Rojas, interview by Matthew R. Cook, August 2018).

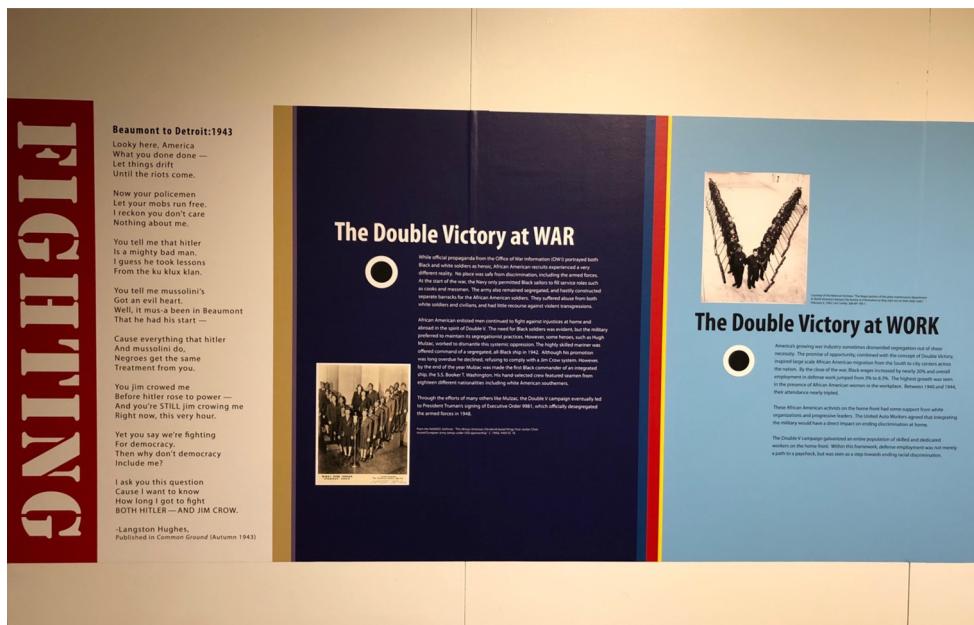
As one example of the kinds of personal stories that NAAMCC can tell that draw visitor attention to lesser-known Black socio-spatial histories, Dodge described in our interview the museum's recent success in securing the personal collection of Anna Arnold Hedgeman:

Anna Arnold Hedgeman gets written out of history almost completely. She was one of the founding members of the March on Washington—there are photographs of her actually mapping it out with A. Philip Randolph. And she never gets mentioned. It's always the 'big six,' it's always men. ... She donated, when she passed away, over 200 boxes: [most of] her entire archival collection as well as three-dimensional objects. And [NAAMCC's archivist] is finding the evidence to help tell her story, and once we get that processed, then we'll be able to say this history has not been told in a way that is honoring her nor is it correct. So, I think that's a big thing, too, is to help actually flesh out and tell American history in a better way and a more honest way (Hadley Dodge, interview by Matthew R. Cook, August 2018).

The museum serves as an excellent institutional repository and archive for Black historical figures and everyday citizens alike:

One of the women donated a collection [that] was created by her mother, and when she came in and talked to me about her mother—this is a piano teacher, a woman who was involved in her church in Springfield, Ohio—but she mentored John Legend. So those are the stories, I think, we don't get enough. I feel like if we focus on those and focus on the human connections, we will have a better understanding of ourselves and a better desire to support each other even more (Hadley Dodge, interview by Matthew R. Cook, August 2018).

NAAMCC's long-term gallery features a World War II-focused exhibit titled *African Americans Fighting for a Double Victory* (Figure 3), which weaves objects and artwork from the permanent collection alongside substantial explanatory text to teach visitors about African American life in the homeplace and abroad during WWII (hooks, 1990; National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center (NAAMCC), 2017). The exhibit highlights the importance of African American involvement in military conflicts throughout U.S. history, but emphasizes the particular role of Black military personnel



**Figure 3.** Wall text from the exhibit *African Americans Fighting for a Double Victory*. Photo by Matthew R. Cook, August 2018.

fighting for a 'Double Victory'—a "simple slogan [that] became a powerful campaign... Double Victory 11 called for freedom on two levels: 'The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within.' ... African Americans demanded an end to oppression at home" (National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center (NAAMCC), 2017, exhibit wall text). The exhibit concludes by calling for unity ('Together we are strong!') while reminding visitors that 'The fight for **Victory** continues and your voice is power' (NAAMCC, 2017, exhibit wall text, emphasis original). Alongside the focus on the military efforts in WWII is an equally powerful section on the role of women and the homeplace. Curated from NAAMCC's extensive collection of authentic artifacts, this section of the exhibit notes that 'Life on the home front changed dramatically ... While doing their part for the war effort, women experienced a sense of social and economic independence, often for the first time. African American women entered the work force in large numbers, but continued to face discrimination' (NAAMCC, 2017).

Analyzed vis-a-vis Tolia-Kelly (2016) description of the British Museum (and other national museums) as *theatres of pain*, the NAAMCC seems to us to be a polar opposite. Rather than being a museum operated by colonial oppressors, NAAMCC—like most Black museums in the United States today—is a Black space created to celebrate and commemorate Black histories, run primarily by Black staff, in a community that emerged from the period of enslavement to become a bastion of Black education and home to two HBCUs.

To analyze visitorship and public perception of the NAAMCC, researchers collected public web reviews on Google Reviews and TripAdvisor. (These were the two sources for reviews of NAAMCC; no social media sites contained visitor reviews.) Many reviews (24) discussed specific museum content and/or exhibits, which were described as 'beautifully curated,' 'rich and enlightening,' and 'packed full of art, history and information' just to mention a few platitudes. One of the most detailed reviews on TripAdvisor came under the heading 'A Good History Lesson,' with the reviewer's comments reflecting back on their experience:

On our way to Dayton, we decided to stop...for a lesson in Afro-American history. While the Underground Railroad Museum in Cincinnati focuses on the early [U.S.] history, this museum focuses on more contemporary history and art. The art exhibit was especially impressive and I was unaware that there was such an Afro-American history in the arena of comic books as seen on display. My Afro-American grandchildren (ages 5,8,12) were especially interested in the WWII displays while I enjoyed the doll collection. It's a worthwhile stop...

Another reviewer commented on TripAdvisor: 'Well worth a stop with plenty to see, learn and experience! A beautiful space on beautiful grounds! Go take a look and be amazed!' Visitor reviews such as these quoted here drive home the significance of NAAMCC as a tourism destination and site of Black life, joy, and freedom spatialized.

### Case study: The Colored Girls Museum

The Colored Girls Museum (TCGM) is located in the historic neighborhood of Germantown, six miles northwest of downtown Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The

neighborhood was founded in 1683 by German settlers who purchased tracks of land from William Penn. It once served as the seat of the U.S. Federal Government when a wave of yellow fever struck Philadelphia in the 1790s. It was also an important site of anti-slavery organizing and a stop on the Underground Railroad. In the twentieth Century, the neighborhood experienced two waves of southern Black migration between 1930 and 1970 making it the predominantly African American community it is today (Young, n.d.). There are currently four Black museums located in this neighborhood.

TCGM had its origins as a pop-up museum. Giordano defines this phenomenon as a 'short-term institution, mobile museum or outdoor exhibit, created outside the confines of its traditional location, in existing temporary and unexpected places, with strong community anchors and the aim of enhancing civic engagement' (Giordano, 2013, p. 462). The museum's founder and Executive Director, Vashti Dubois, started the museum in 2015 as an experiment to understand the impacts of immersion into one's own familiar cultural context, specifically the 'colored girl.' Dubois further elaborated:

We're a public ritual for the protection, praise, and grace of the ordinary colored girl. So, thinking about her and talking about her, whether you're 80 or you're 16, and really noticing that girl and creating opportunities to address what she needs because you can always give to her what she hasn't gotten. And how that can begin to take care of the spaces in which the girl may have been sort of left. So that's why it is the Colored Girls Museum. (Vashti Dubois, interview by Amy E. Potter, August 2019)

Given the success of that early pop-up museum, over time it acquired a fiscal sponsor, The Painted Bride, and became a permanent museum, housed in Dubois' home in the Germantown neighborhood (Figure 4).

And so, because of what had been happening in the world politically, this house presented as a bed and breakfast because if you knew that she was a Colored Girls Museum, you might in some ways seek to harm her.<sup>3</sup> So, really disguising herself ... in a way that is not offensive to White folks, so that you don't bring her harm. (Vashti Dubois, interview by Amy E. Potter, August 2019)

Interestingly, the location of the museum, in the inconspicuous home of its founder, harkens back to the early days of the African American Museum movement, where museums such as the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit began in the founder's family home and apartment respectively (Banks, 2019). Winston (2021), in her work on marronage, reminds us that because of the ongoing legacies of enslavement, 'the practice of holding ground outside of racial violence continues to shape the organization of community' (p. 2187).

The bi-annual transformation of the museum space—the museum is open March through October<sup>4</sup>—begins with identifying 25 to 30 artists who work in pairs and curate objects for individual rooms within the home to tell a cohesive story.<sup>5</sup> For example, after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the museum responded with



**Figure 4.** The Colored Girls Museum is located in an inconspicuous home of the Museum's founder in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia. Photo by Amy E. Potter, August 2019.

two exhibits: *Urgent Care: A Good Night's Sleep* followed later in the year by the installation of *Urgent Care: A Social Care Experience*. *A Good Night's Sleep* was based on research about sleep disparities, particularly for African American women. In an interview, Dubois described the myriad of ways Black women's sleep is impacted: 'We're losing sleep over the future of health care...We're losing sleep over the future of

education. We're losing sleep over the future of our children, the safety of our streets, of our institutions, what will happen to the arts in our country. We're losing sleep over lost girls, and lost boys' (quoted in Siegel, 2017, n.p.). The exhibits throughout



**Figure 5.** Ornately framed images of hairstyles from different countries on the African continent for the exhibit created by Victoria Edwards entitled *Queens: The Weight of Our Crowns*. Photo by Amy E. Potter, August 2019.

the house featured remedies, objects, music, and fragrances to invoke a good night's sleep for the visitor.

Co-author Amy E. Potter interviewed Executive Director and Museum founder Vashti Dubois in August 2019 following a tour of the museum with a large group of mostly adolescent Black girls and their chaperones from a Philadelphia summer camp program. In the remainder of this section, we wish to highlight two exhibits from the August 2019 tour: *Queens: The Weight of our Crowns* and *Washerwoman*.

The first floor was largely devoted to an exhibit created by the late artist Victoria Edwards entitled *Queens: The Weight of Our Crowns*. The artist created the exhibit with the intent 'to restore some of our lost identity by revealing the complex history of our beautifying culture.' While all were welcome to experience the exhibit, its ultimate aim was 'to create, empathy, understanding, and rehabilitation within the African Diasporic communities' (Edwards, n.d.). Connections to the broader African Diasporic experience are common in African American Museums in the U.S. (Banks, 2019). The artist used ornately framed photographs of African women from Nigeria, Senegal, Cameroon, and Madagascar to center hairstyles before Western influence (See [Figure 5](#)).

In African cultures women wove their identities into intricate hairstyles, leading to the creation of a complex language system. Tribes use hair design to communicate not only with each other but their god(s). The Queens in these images took pride in their appearance and spent precious time and care to create the perfect look (Edwards, n.d.).

These images from the continent were then connected directly to the Black women chaperones and children on the tour who were encouraged to 'celebrate natural beauty' and wear their 'crowns in their natural states' as 'a symbol of pride and rebellion' (The Colored Girls Museum (TCGM), 2019, exhibit wall text). Ultimately the exhibit asked visitors to confront the myriad of ways anti-blackness impacted how women of the African Diaspora feel about their hair: 'So how do we untangle our relationship to our hair? The answer lies in the radical acceptance of ourselves. We start by taking a critical lens to how we view ourselves and other women of color. We look in the mirror; radically accept, heal, and repeat' (TCGM, 2019).

On the second floor was the museum's only permanent exhibit *Washerwoman*, a room dedicated to Black domestic workers ([Figure 6](#)). The room was curated by artists Denys Davis and Monna Morton who drew upon objects from their family archive (including an antique iron) to honor their two grandmothers. It is not uncommon for Black supporters to donate family heirlooms to Black museums as they view these



**Figure 6.** Panorama of the museum's permanent exhibit dedicated to Black domestic workers. Photo by Amy E. Potter, August 2019.

museums as important spaces to 'protect and memorialize' family legacies (Banks, 2019, p. 59). During the tour in 2019, Dubois reminded the group of girls, 'Without this work our community wouldn't be here.' A jar of bills and a poem by Langston Hughes speaks to the ways domestic workers were the backbone of the Black community, their hard-earned savings often contributing to 'education funds and community projects' (Siegal, 2017, n.p.).

This room in particular is reminiscent of the work of the late Black feminist scholar and cultural critic bell hooks, whose essay 'Homeplace (a site of resistance)' describes the ways Black women created place, particularly in the form of 'households that were spaces of care' (hooks, 1990, p. 42) or what Winston calls 'Black worlds of care' (2021, p. 2191). The Colored Girls Museum and hooks are directly in conversation with memory work, which is considered to be labor in the furtherance of a 'place-based ethics of care' (Till, 2012, p. 1228). 'This task of making homeplace,' hooks (1990) continues, 'was not simply a matter of black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination' (p. 42).

Prior to the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, the museum averaged between 100 to 250 visitors a week when it was open from March through October. According to the museum's Executive Director, 45% of visitors were local to Philadelphia and the majority were women and girls of the African diaspora. An analysis of 57 Google Reviews of the museum found that all but one of the reviews were favorable. Five of the reviews, four of which are featured below, drew specifically upon the emotional journey of experiencing the museum as Black women.

I highly recommend all people but Black women in particular visit it and spend some time.

Came out feeling empowered and proud! Love the skin your [sic] in!

When I walked on the grounds, it felt like a sacred, safe and creative space. When I walked through the doors, it didn't feel unfamiliar or strange. Every room held its own story and place in time, yet they connected at the same time. Since we were listening for 'her' voice, the intertwining made sense.

The warmth, passion, creativity and care is present in this space. Each artist captured the themes beautifully and how they tied them together, again, was remarkable... This time, will bring others with me to experience history, herstory and their story.'

Three reviews personalized the history presented in the museum as ours. 'Im [sic] passionate about our black history and will bring others.' These comments resonate with the work of Patricia A. Banks (2019) who writes, 'While these narratives and objects that center African Americans are valued for how they can empower all people, there is often a particularly clear and concretized understanding of how they perform this function for blacks. Black patrons' personal experiences, and the experiences of their families, give them intimate knowledge of how they can motivate and embolden African Americans' (p. 60). Other Tripadvisor reviews from visitors described the museum as 'a necessary space,' and that the 'overall atmosphere is welcoming and healing.'

These visitor reactions align with the founder's goals for visitors after they experience 'her.'

Well, one, I want them to leave with whatever they need. And I do believe that there are things that ... there's such intentionality behind the work, the way that people work in this space, that I do think that people ... well, one of the things that people say quite often is, 'I didn't know that I needed this until I saw this.' (Vashti Dubois, interview by Amy E. Potter, August 2019)

Again, visitor feedback and museum founder intention counter this museum as a *theatre of pain* and instead show it as a site of healing, belonging, and joy for Black tourists and museum visitors, especially women.

### Discussion: museum comparison

In this paper, we have presented two examples of present-day Black museums. The NAAMCC offers a more traditional, self-guided museum experience, and is a site with long-standing relationships with the Black educational community in Wilberforce and Black museum networks throughout the United States. Its collections and recent exhibits are greatly informed by the trends of the broader Black museum movement that dates back decades. The museum also draws from and contributes back to the deep historical–geographies of Black freedom-making and Black storytelling, both of which attract visitors from the greater Midwest region and around the country. In light of Winston's (2021, p. 2185) definition of *maroon geographies*, NAAMCC is a site of Black historical storytelling—part of the 'ongoing spatial praxes of Black flight from and placemaking beyond racial violence.' Beyond its collections, art, and history exhibits, the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center was also the headquarters of the African American Museum Association (today, the AAAM) for about a decade beginning in 1992. The museum has continued to champion the broader work of Black museums by remaining active in AAAM and supporting the next generation of museum leaders. One of NAAMCC's institutional goals in recent years has been to create opportunities for students of color that want to enter the museum field, providing students at Wilberforce, Central State, and Wright State Universities with internships, academic opportunities, and even working with public history graduate students in an academic course every two to three years to design, research, curate and install a temporary exhibit from start to finish.

In contrast, TCGM had its origins as a pop-up museum. Its mission is largely centered on celebrating women of the African Diaspora, whether it is Black women and children visiting from a Philadelphia summer camp or visitors from around the globe. Its intimate, guided tour in a residential home in the Germantown neighborhood pays tribute to the important placemaking work of Black women 'whose domestic space[s]... were ...site[s] for organizing...resistance' and generally places of uplift (hooks, 1990, p. 47). Visitors are guided through the home and invited to engage with positive and affirming Black identities, particularly Black women's and Black girls' identities. Furthermore, given the oft-patriarchal and masculine-centered nature of museums (see Sanford et al., 2020), the Colored Girls Museum mobilizes the possibility of a homeplace - a site of resistance, mobilizing spatialities of care - for 'the colored girl.' In building on the legacies of Black feminism, TCGM addresses questions of representation and humanness for Black women, as also seen in the NAAMCC

interview with Drodge describing the inclusion of Anna Arnold Hedgeman in their exhibit. In addition, such institutionalizing work brings TCGM (and therefore tourism geographies and memory work) into conversation with Black girlhood studies through the inclusion of Black women and girls' hair, through the *Crowns* exhibit. Black girlhood studies is an interdisciplinary body of work that has gained traction among education researchers and social scientists over the last two decades. Black girlhood scholarship builds on the legacies of Black feminist thought and emphasizes Black girls as knowledge producers—doing Black girlhood, being Black girls, and Black girls as placemakers (Butler, 2018; Halliday, 2019; Hill, 2019)—and, consequently, how systems of oppression become enacted on Black girls' embodiments, including the policing and surveillance of Black hair (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Visitors to the Colored Girls Museum largely emphasized the site's emotive and affective impact, particularly on Black women, girls, and femme visitors. TripAdvisor visitor feedback for TCGM contrasted markedly with NAAMCC visitor comments, which focused exclusively on the site's presentation of history.

Both museums, however, are situated in their local place, be it the educational community of Wilberforce, Ohio, or the 'homeplace' offered against the backdrop of a historic predominantly Black Philadelphia neighborhood that work to 'uncover/recover black geographic agency' (Allen et al., 2019, p. 1003). Additionally both museums contrast with museums as *theatres of pain* in terms of their artifacts and collections. NAAMMC's extensive collection is built in part upon a call in the 1980s seeking donations depicting the lifestyle of Black Americans. TCGM museum's objects, particularly in the permanent exhibit Washerwoman, contain family collections that pay tribute to the work of Black women who supported and uplifted their communities. The artifacts loaned and donated to both museums represent an important counter-archive and the work of Black museums enfranchising their communities 'to include the value of artifacts in the communities from which they come' (Tolia-Kelly, 2016, p. 903). These donations also serve as a critical act of memory work, engendering agency via the 'power to intervene in imposed systems of meaning' (Smith & Watson, 1996, p. 15).

Katherine McKittrick (2011, p. 949) reminds us that the 'structural workings of racism kept Black cultures in place and tagged them as placeless, as these communities innovatively worked within, across, and outside commonsense cartographic and topographical texts—help form a Black sense of place.' These museums are not simply sites that are 'descriptors of social ills' (Wright, 2017) but rather reflections of the 'Black knowledges, black excellence and black lived experiences' and an 'articulation of black geographic visions of society' (Allen et al., 2019, p. 1002). These museums convey histories not only of African American struggle and perseverance but also impart histories of African Americans' many contributions to the country.

## Conclusion

The Colored Girls Museum and the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center remind us not only of the important placemaking work of Black museums but also the importance of placing AAHMs within the larger tourist experience. These

understudied sites in tourism geographies are important cultural locations in the geographies of Blackness that undergird African-American communities across the nation. These two museums are but brief examples from the more than 200 African American history and culture museums across the country that employ the power of memory to create sites for remembering (Inwood & Alderman, 2021) and, beyond that, institutionalizing a Black sense of place that is oppositional to structures of oppression and the manifestations of White supremacy that work to stifle and erase Black histories, agency, and power (Brooms, 2011). As Fath Ruffins (2018, p. 36) reminds us about the early founders of Black neighborhood museums, they 'came to believe that building permanent homes for Black history provided a wider way of healing the African American community's cultural traumas.'

A growing body of literature on African American travel and tourism has revealed that despite countless impediments to African American travel, Black people in fact made a way. In making a way, they created museums dedicated to telling stories in myriad forms of Black way-making, and they affirm their right to nation (see for example Alderman et al., 2022; Alderman & Modlin, 2013; Benjamin et al., 2016; Dillette et al., 2019; Dillette & Benjamin, 2022; Holland, 2002, Philipp, 1994). In this paper, we have focused on two African-American Museums to draw attention to the process and impact of resituating history and place away from the White gaze and, instead, through the plurality of Black experiences and placemaking practices. This reorientation to center Blackness makes an important intervention in the current landscape of museum geographies, where Black museum landscapes have limited engagement. Our work emphasizes that Black museum geographies emphasize community as co-curators of the museum spaces, with both museums actively acquiring material from community members for both permanent collections and temporary exhibits. Such a practice represents the importance of collective memory work as Black placemaking. Black museums are places where Black Americans and members of the African diaspora can find connection, belonging, and joy.

## Notes

1. We use these two terms interchangeably.
2. As outlined in Lew (2017), there is no general consensus on the spelling of 'place making' (other spellings include place-making and placemaking). While we draw heavily upon the work of Black geographies and Black Sense of Place (McKittrick, 2011), our use of placemaking emerges from is very also very much connected to cultural geography which has traditionally aligned placemaking with sense of place (Tuan, 1977) as well as 'how a culture group imprints its values, perceptions, memories, and traditions on a landscape and gives meaning to geographic space' (Lew, 2017, p. 449). See also Allen et al. (2019) for a discussion of landscape and place.
3. Vashti Dubois, the museum founder, refers to the museum as she/her. The museum is a person and not a building.
4. One room's exhibit is sometimes altered as many as three times a year.
5. Artists can submit their work, curate the space or submit objects from their family or personal archive.

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