From 'Our Divided Nation' to 'Our Shared Future'

Museums and the Advancement of Equity and Understanding

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Narrator:

America, 1846. An audacious idea. To grow and broadcast more knowledge than the world had ever seen. With an eye to the future. That dream was the Smithsonian.

Your Smithsonian. Expanding the portrait of a people, revealing the building blocks of life. To discover new species… and save those we already know.

Your Smithsonian. A knowledge powerhouse with purpose, and a community mindset inspiring a new generation to learn from the past, speak up, be civic. Serve a nation, so that together, we can step into the future with optimism.

No dreams deferred.

Kevin Gover:

Good evening, everyone, welcome to our program. This evening, we're going to be discussing museums and the advancement of equity and understanding. What is the

role of museums in the advancement of equity and understanding in our country? And we'll be joined by a group of our Smithsonian leaders to talk about that subject.

You know, our Smithsonian and our history museums really are repositories of the American memory, and we believe that with a more complete understanding of our shared past, we can shape our shared future and make it one in which equity and equality of opportunity are the central features of our society. And to that end, we welcome you this evening.

So now it's my pleasure to introduce Alan Curtis, the president of the Eisenhower Foundation.

Alan Curtis:

Thank you, Kevin. Thank you to the Smithsonian for this event, and thank you for the Mellon Foundation for its support. The National Museum of African-American History and Culture's exhibition, Reckoning: Protest. Defiance. Resilience features a portrait of Breonna Taylor done posthumously by Amy Sherald who painted the portrait of Michelle Obama.

The Breonna Taylor painting is a powerful, elegant, and psychologically direct statement on reckoning in America. It is also about Black Lives Matter and 2020 and George Floyd. The painting's meaning carries America back as well to the disturbances of 1960s in Detroit, Newark, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, and 150 other American cities around the nation. Whites tended to call the 1960s disturbances "riots". People of color called them protests. For the most part, the same differences in framing hold true today. In response to the '60s protests, President Lyndon Johnson formed the bipartisan Kerner Commission, which concluded that the underlying cause was white racism. The commission advised, it is time to make good the promise of American democracy to all citizens. Rural and urban, Black and white, Spanish surname, and every group. I'm quoting directly.

It is time to make the promise of American democracy. In the 50-year update to the Kerner Commission, we have concluded that America has made relatively little progress in racial justice, reckoning with poverty and inequal, and in many ways have gone backwards. Since the Commission, wealth inequality, school segregation, and mass incarceration of people of color has increased. White nationalist movements have strengthened, as we saw in Charlottesville, the Capitol Building in Washington was invaded on January 6th, the pandemic has made things disproportionately worse for people of color, and the truly disadvantaged.

Nevertheless, over the past 50 years, the nation has built up considerable evidence on economic, education, public health, justice, youth development, housing, and other policies that work. Yet as we have talked around the nation on Kerner and healing, we have found that the public does not, for the most part, understand that we know a lot

about what doesn't work, and that policy needs to be based on evidence and science, not on dogma and supposition.

Surely, the importance of evidence is a theme that carries across all of the Smithsonian museums. We also have learned a great deal about what doesn't work, like zero-tolerance policing, mass incarceration of people of color, and willful indifference to the unequal distribution of prosperity.

Most of all, what doesn't work includes false rhetoric on government being the problem. But now, to the contrary, and based on the evidence, we need to advocate for a more activist public sector, I believe, that recognizes Kerner priorities and scales up what works.

It is time, I suggest, to seize the day, renegotiate the social contract, restructure basic power equations, and change the rules of the game. The goal is not to get back to normal. Normal has been the problem in America. We have, in fact, already reversed false rhetoric on government. 2020 hosted the largest expansion of federal activity in American history, and the momentum continues in 2020 and 2021. At the same time, in order to seize the day, to scale up what works and scale down what doesn't work, we still need what the Kerner Commission called "new will", way back in 1968. How, then, can we create new will in our divided society? That is one of the most important questions of our time. Many say that generating new will begins with ensuring the right to vote, and I agree. Many go on to say that generating new will can in part be a function of the humanities, the arts, museums, and higher learning institutions. Martin Luther King, Dolores Huerta, John Lewis, Cesar Chavez created cultural change in the 1960s, change that was facilitated, visualized, and amplified by museums and other cultural institutions by the visual arts and by the performing arts. That cultural change helped influence public sector legislation, like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. In turn, that legislation created more cultural change and more legislation. Culture impacts policy, and policy impacts culture. To better define the power of the cause and effect relationship that can heal our society, we are collaborating with culture visionaries, and will then assemble lessons learned and report back to the Mellon Foundation on a possible national strategy.

For example, we will be asking the directors of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts how they can better focus their prestigious international institutions on the people who will benefit most from the priorities of the Kerner Commission. We will be doing the same with grassroots organizations that use the arts to further their Kerner-aligned visions like EXPO Chicago and the Laundromat Project in Brooklyn.

We soon will be asking Harvard professor of African American studies and art, Sarah Lewis, to build on her Better Vision in Justice project to suggest how photo images in the public realm can better advance Kerner and healing. We have the insights of Marc Bamuthi Joseph, vice president for social impact at the Kennedy Center, and the Asian-Pacific perspectives of Roberta Uno, director of Arts in a Changing America.

We have just completed an event with Bishop William Barber and his colleagues on the Poor People's Campaign. The campaign is a diverse moral fusion movement that has embraced white Appalachian coal miners, Latinx border immigrants and African American gospel.

Bishop Barber reflected with us that the sanity of any movement is contingent upon the strength of its song. Sometimes the pain is so great, you need to begin with music. Bishop Barber recalled how important Aretha Franklin and Mahalia Jackson were to Dr. King. We have held an event with the American Academy of Poets featuring Poet Laureate Joy Harjo and former Poet Laureate Tracey K. Smith. As well as a LULAC event on Latinx culture and Congresswoman Deb Haaland, who now is of course the first Native American woman Secretary of the Interior.

Now, we are honored by the wisdom of the Smithsonian. So I ask tonight's panel: Is there, or can there be a cause and effect strategy that leads from a collaborative museum innovation and artistic innovation to measurable cultural change in America, and can that cultural change embody new will that then leads to measurable reductions in racial injustice, economic inequality, and poverty?

As part of such a cause and effect strategy, will young people on the South Side of Chicago, in South Central LA, and South Bronx travel to DC to see the Breonna Taylor portrait and the powerful Smithsonian exhibition on racial and economic reckoning? Most will not be able to. Does that mean that the portrait and exhibition must be creatively projected on the Smithsonian website? And what the is role of our imperfect social media? And how can small local museums across America attract crowds as well as large national museums? Do we expand the art for justice strategy in which funds are used to inspire collaborative grassroots organizing by nonprofit groups to reduce economic injustice, racial inequality, and poverty, to further Black Lives Matter and the Poor People's Campaign? Do we try to motivate those cultural institutions called universities to apply academic knowledge more effectively in the communities where they are located? For example, by replicating Bard College's premier College Behind Bars prison education model?

Do we build on how foundations like Mellon and Ford are expanding fellowships for practitioners of color in the arts and the humanities?

And does the movement not need to focus to target multiple audiences, as Director Young has suggested in a June guest essay in the New York Times? In 1968, before he was assassinated, Dr. King was forming a new coalition among all races and most classes. Today, we need to motivate believers in Kerner and healing priorities to continue the struggle. But we also need to communicate to independents and fence-sitters, as well as to Americans who may be opposed to Kerner and healing priorities, like at least some whites living in poverty, and like state legislators who have passed voter suppression laws.

When he announced the new Smithsonian initiative on racial reckoning, Secretary Bunch concluded that the only way to find a shared future was to engage and to debate. He promised, quote, we will be testing ideas, testing different kinds of collaborations, testing different technology.

He concluded that he hoped the testing will make the country better, and also the Smithsonian better.

At this moment of intense debate on the shared future of our democracy, it is with Secretary Bunch's collaborative spirit that we dedicate our convening tonight.

Kevin Gover:

Thank you for that, Alan, and thanks for all of those provocative questions. We're going to attempt to answer at least a few of them this evening. So with that, let me introduce some of my Smithsonian colleagues.

First, Theo Gonzalvez is a curator at the National Museum of American History and is currently serving as the acting director of the Asian Pacific American Center.

Tey Marianna Nunn is the director of the American Women's History Initiative at the Smithsonian.

Deborah Mack is the director of the initiative entitled Our Shared Future: Reckoning with our Racial Past. Kevin Young is the director of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture. And Anthea Hartig is the director of the National Museum of American History.

Thank you all for joining us tonight. Why don't we all just jump right in to the question that Alan has posed to us. I'll start with you, Kevin. What can museums, and more specifically, what can the Smithsonian collection of museums and research centers do to advance equity and understanding in a country that seems to be terribly divided right now?

Kevin Young:

Well, thanks a lot, Kevin. It is a big question, but I think it's one that the Smithsonian's tackling in Our Shared Future, but also, we think about it a lot at the National Museum of African-American History and Culture. A few things we've done specifically, and then a broader point, I think.

One is that museums can help us understand that this is a precedented time, at least that's what I refer to it is. Sometimes we think of it as out of the blue, the past, and of course the framing of the question, and thinking of the Kerner Commission, helps us realize this is an ongoing concern. But even thinking 100 years ago when the museum was starting to be wrestled over as an idea, and it took 100 years to build, I think that

even then, you know, we had questions of pandemic, we had the Tulsa race massacre, Red Summer of 1919. So to think back on that, and to connect the dots for people, is I think very important to help contextualize the moments we're in, and have deep conversations about those moments. I remember encountering the Tulsa massacre exhibition that's part of our permanent exhibit at the museum when I was just a visitor, and it was so moving and powerful. And what I think was powerful IN that is not just telling the story of what happened and showing postcards, horrible postcards that people posted of the destruction, but also showing the testimony of survivors. I think that was really important, to give that voice. And the Kerner Commission quote about making good the promises also helps me think about the originator of that quote, Fredrick Douglass, and title is one of the most recent shows about Reconstruction and its legacies. What I like about that show, which opened last month for our fifth anniversary, is not just that it thinks about Reconstruction not just in a time when it's coming to the fore about who can vote, where people with live, are people going to be compensated for their losses, how do we talk about finance, and some of those questions that are with us today. But we also have this legacy section that thinks about that too. And it's a very powerful section, which has everything from the stained glass taken out of the National Cathedral that represented Robert E Lee, which was there until very recently, to the last effects from survivors of the Emmanuel massacre and also Trayvon Martin's last effects. I think the power I see when I visit those collections and see people interacting with them, and really overcome, in many ways, is that they're saying how much this is relevant to their lives. And I think we have to continue to help people understand the historic context, but also the ongoing conversation, and the everyday concerns. You know, people are coming in with their own things that they're dealing with and wrestling with, and these questions they want to address in museums, and that's what we find in people from all over the world who visit the Smithsonian.

Kevin Gover:

And, Anthea, so, these events of the past couple of years have really, really shaken us up. Has it shaken up the National Museum of American History? Are you doing things differently in the aftermath of a pandemic and the murder of George Floyd?

Anthea Hartig:

Thank you, Kevin, and thank you, my brother director, Kevin, for so beautifully articulating what the National Museum of African-American History and Culture is doing. I've been honored to lead now the American History Museum, a good old flagship museum, if you will, for longer in COVID than I did in the before time. So it's been an incredible test of our mission, which is to use community input to create a more just future by looking at the complexities of our past. And it has the goal of representing the people we welcome, to represent the demographies of the nation. So that's our mission,

and then the pandemic hits, and the cascading crises, racial, viral, economic, have come to the fore. We have brought into our mission for the first time what we think is one of the only internship programs with formerly incarcerated individuals from the Goucher program, similar to what you mentioned at Bard, to the museum center, and we're launching the Center for Restorative History, which aims to combine the methodologies of restorative justice with those of public history. Doing what we know how to do -- collect and interpret -- and address the harm that we've done as the Smithsonian, as well as the good that we can do moving forward to help heal the nation.

So it's been a truly remarkable set of changes, and I'm so struck by the Alice in Wonderland comment at the end of the Kerner Commission report by none other than Kenneth B Clark who said, I read the report of the 1919 riot in Chicago, investing the Harlem riot in 1943, the Kohn Commission, the Watts riot, and I must say in candor again it's kind of like Alice in Wonderland.

So I think it's our responsibility to help break that chain, to help create those new narratives, those new histories, really, that tell a broadly inclusive and very complex past, and not to lose hope in our own agency. I think James Baldwin had that great quote that nobody could take away your responsibility, or something similar. So, thanks.

Kevin Gover:

That brings us to mind, Deborah, that museums are also changing, have been changing and are continuing to change in terms of their relationship with the communities that surround them, and even communities that are distant from them. And your work in particular, both at the African American Museum, and now as the director of Our Shared Future, how are you imagining the future relationships between institutions like our Smithsonian museums and these communities out there in the world who are facing these daunting problems?

Deborah Lynn Mack:

This work is new in one way, and not new at all in other ways. As you're very well aware, so many of the Smithsonian museums have had ongoing relationships with their own constituents, their own communities of relevance and of collecting, of shared memory.

I think what is now about this initiative is that it's the first time that we have a completely pan-Smithsonian approach, where it's not just the National Museum of American History, or the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, or the Asian American and Pacific Program, but it's also the Air and Space Museum and the Postal Museum, and all the research centers and museums that are looking collaboratively and pan-institutionally at what they can be doing not just in their own right, but with their partners who they've already been serving.

I think one of the motivations of this initiative is also to reposition the Smithsonian as a leading partner, not as a leader, per se. Clearly Smithsonian has unmatched capacity, convening capacity, interdisciplinary capacity, and wealth, incredible collections, objects, archives, resources that we can bring to bear on this.

But this work has to be done, if it's going to have any sustainability, in collaboration with our partners on the ground who know their communities in face-to-face ways that we cannot. We do in some instances. But by working with partner institutions and organizations, often that is museums and archives and libraries, but also community organizations. Activist organizations. We are able to amplify their work, to sometimes provide credibility and legitimacy, in other words, currency to their work. If we can work with them, we're also learning from them. Because I believe that this kind of work, this racial justice work, which is multigenerational, which precedes the founding of this country, is interdisciplinary and it's ongoing, and it's collective.

So this has been -- we're currently moving through a really difficult period again in our history, not unprecedented, as colleague Kevin Young has indicated. But at the same time, if we continue to work in a collaborative way with organizations on the ground, and they do this even better than we do, by listening to where they are, and what they know, by also engaging in this work in, I'd say, very multicultural ways, in differently linguistic ways, in ways that resonate where our communities are, where they live, where they are even intellectually around this, we don't want to have another cycle of communities feeling that they are being told how they should think, what they should do, where individuals may feel not necessarily welcome or not identified with this work, or they may feel that they're the bad guy in this kind of work. This is for all of us collectively. I think the Smithsonian across the board, in working with all the organizations that do this work every day, all day, in face-to-face ways, and have done so for a very long time, can really play a large role in amplifying the resources, goodwill, social justice, and resources that are already out there.

Kevin Gover:

Theo, could you talk a little bit about the Asian Pacific American Center, and specifically how its work has changed, perhaps, in response to these twin pandemics of COVID-19 and a seemingly, seeming increase in violence against people of color, and in particular, violence against Asian American people?

Theo Gonzalvez:

Sure, yeah, thank you for the question, Kevin. You know, at Asian Pacific American Center, it's going to be entering its 25th year of work at the Smithsonian, and it's been doing this work of telling complicated stories of a very complicated group, which is now the fastest growing racial minority in the country. Coming from disparate locations in

Asia, but having an impact in America for centuries long. How have the last years affected our communities? Well, that's a story of shock and misery and woe. And ultimately, it is, in the same way that Kevin and Deborah have been describing, this is not a new story. Asian Americans are not new to the Americas. These are very old stories, and when we talk about this season, the season of hatred and violence in which Asian faces are now targets, again, we have to come to this moment where we understand that this is a place that we have been before. This is a cycle. And the sooner we get to understanding that this is a cycle of history, it puts us in a different relationship. Not just Asian Americans and Pacific islanders. I think this should be a lesson really for all Americans and all persons who are thinking about visiting a museum or thinking about history. History is not something that is bad. It is not something that is in the past. So if we can riff on that Faulkner comment, I think we all need a new relationship with history. Because what we're trying to convey, whether it's African American, Native stories, Chicano Latino stories, Asian Pacific Islander stories, it's about how we all have been here. All of us have been here before. So our responses might be different, but some of our responses are the same. And when we look at Asian Pacific history, we are more than what has been done to us. We have to be more than the victimization of our history. We are the sum total of our solidarities with each other. And that's an American story. That's a Pacific islander story. That's people standing up for each other, standing with each other. And as Japanese Americans think about, decades long, years after the internment, how they see their own stories reflected with children at the border in cages, that's an act of solidarity that goes across racial groups, ethnic groups, that goes across generations. That's a historical and a teachable moment. And that's the kind of conversation that I think a place like the Smithsonian can foster and facilitate. A new way to think about history. Because I think so often, we are... we're tired of it, we're bored of the subject, we claim that we don't like history. But this, for many of us, this is really how we find life and joy in the struggle. We find joy in these stories. And not just happiness. I'm talking about true, deep-seated joy, because they represent deep traditions when you can stand for and with each other.

So I think these past two years have really been a real challenge for a lot of our communities. We're still facing it. And as I think about October as Filipino American history month, I think about those Filipino Americans who have been on the front lines, they've been 4% of the nursing corps, but 30% of COVID deaths. That's a shocking statistic in the present. Yet it goes all the way to the past, to the U.S.-Philippine war in the 20th century. Why don't we learn more about this? There's more of our history, more of our connection to learn, and the better we can connect to each other, the better we can unravel a sense of what these solidarities mean.

Kevin Gover:

Yeah, we're going to come back around on this idea of a shared narrative, but first, I want to bring Tey into the conversation and say, so, where does Women's History fall in this conversation about social justice, and how we present and understand history?

Tey Marianna Nunn:

Well, thank you, Kevin, it's so great to be with my colleagues. I mean, gender intersects with all of this, right? And I was listening to our video tour of the new Hun Lu exhibit, which is at the National Portrait Gallery, and I highly recommend. She starts off echoing what Theo says, which is that history is not a noun, it's a verb, because it's going on right now. I just thought it was a new way of saying it. I really enjoyed that. But it brings the shared past that we're talking about at the Smithsonian, the shared future, but for me, it also means, you know, a shared imagination about how we're going to do this. And the Women's History Initiative, like the race initiative, works with all of the Smithsonian entities in recovering, researching, and amplifying and disseminating the voices of women, and this intersects with everything. The work that we're doing can be so micro as to be doing Wikipedia edits to change the narrative in Wikipedia and the times that women's histories are told through the Smithsonian collections, to sort of macro discussions about, oh, I don't know, everything from space-making and why that can create communication, whether that's virtual or physical, and how gender influences that, or how gender can be... the discussions around gender and women's voices can be amplified through that.

I was just reflecting, you know, as a Latina and working with the Women's History Initiative, I keep on looking at all these things in the news, and just, you know, I think it was October 21st was a day that commemorates Latina Equal Pay Day, right? It takes 10 months for Latinas to make the money that an Anglo man would have made in 2020. So it takes 10 months into the year 2021.

Those are things that, really, museums, libraries, and cultural institutions, whether virtually or physically in a space, have a social responsibility to investigate, and address, and any sort of interpretation that's made public, you know, in a museum is a statement, in a way. Right? And it invites dialogue. And whether, again, that's virtually or physically, and we need to be sort of talking about the virtual realm, you know, museums are considered trusted members of community, and we need to facilitate all these dialogues.

Kevin Gover:

Anthea, it would appear right now there is no common understanding of what the American story is. That in fact we do not share an understanding of what our past is. Which leads me to wonder, do you think it's even possible to construct an American narrative upon which we all agree?

Anthea Hartig:

That's a wonderful question. Can we construct an American narrative upon which we can all agree? This has been debated, of course, as, you know, from the rise of the word and the practice of history.

I think that it's possible for us to create a very complicated landscape of interwoven narratives in which we see the intersections, like to one of Theo's great points, where we understand the solidarities, where we know and come together to make change. Where we've created opportunities for each other. Without the reckoning, however, which I know we're all using quite a bit, but it's a very powerful action verb, as is "history", Tey, historia for the Greeks, the act of inquiry, I think we have to address some of the core, phenomenally challenging roadbooks to that. White nationalism, obviously. Going back to the subject of tonight and why the work of this effort is so critical, once you read the Kerner Commission report again, it is astounding that what they had immediately picked up on as this kind of duplicative, Alice in Wonderland, as I mentioned previously, but really the ways in which change has not happened, and change has been resisted.

So I think less about a grand, sweeping American narrative. I think that's such a part of the hegemonic progressive understanding of the American task. And I think much more about the complicated challenges weaved to that. And as Secretary Bunch challenged us, to use history to let the nation reach its loftiest ideals. I think that of as we reach the semiquincentenial, the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and we know that all men and women were not viewed as equal in the eyes of those who made that document.

So I think it's not the question to ask in a sense that it takes us back into that kind of a grand sweeping mononarrative. But I'd love to know what my colleagues think. I think about this quite a bit. I think there's a big chance for the type of stories, for the type of artifacts that we collect. We collected the beautifully folded cranes, right, these cranes that were done by the families or interred families themselves. That was constructed, that was immediately

So thinking about the story that those cranes tell as the weave of the intersection of people standing up for each other in times where their human rights were so jeopardized and when they were subject to such violence and hatred. So I don't know if I answered your question well, but...

Kevin Gover:

Yeah, I mean, my mind wanders on that subject all the time. So I'm going to have Kevin pin it all down for us.

(Laughter.)

What, then, is the role of museums like the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Museum of the American Indian, our new National Museum of the American Latino, in creating this complicated weave that Theo and Anthea have been talking about? How do we, you know -- do we need all these different museums in order to be able to do it? I mean, what -- how do we do this?

Kevin Young:

Well, I think it's, uh... yes, we do!

(Laughter.)

I think that's the short answer.

But I think a lot about how the museum, and I'll just take our museum as a starting point, helps us see ourselves and then see each other. And I see that every day when I come in, and you see people of all stripes and all walks of life going through the museum and being transformed by it. And I think people want these museums as a place of discovery, learning about themselves. I learn something every time I'm in the space. But also about each other. And I think that's really important. Secretary Bunch, my predecessor in the museum, the founding director, always says it so well, about, we provide an African American lens on American history, and that American story.

I also think there's a real opportunity in the museum to think about how we can collect what's happening now, and the newness, collecting the now and the new is something I've been saying. And thinking about history as living, and indeed, living history has also come to the fore as something we've been talking about a lot at the museum. Because we are living through history, history is living in us. And things like the Breonna Taylor portrait and the Reckoning show we put up really thinks about the past five years, say. Happens to be the five years we've been open, but also it's been a transformative time, and seeing the artwork that I think has been created in this time, but also that's been created over a century that's featured in the show really thinks about the ways that African Americans are engaged in history and art history, and I think that that aspect of culture, too, I would bring to the fore. We've been talking about history. Obviously history and culture are interrelated. But what the museum shows is the ways that artists and everyday African American folk, they created food, they created music, they created many balms and resistances to some of the difficulties they faced. And out of them. And I think it's really important, you know, when I walked into the museum and saw basically the pot my grandmother cooked all her good food in, I saw myself! And I also tasted some meals I miss quite a bit.

But I also think about, you know, she made a stew once, and I remember asking her what the fish was, and she said it was gar. I said gar? Now, gar is this bottom feeder, just terrible fish! If you know! And it tasted like, you know, name your favorite delicious high-end fish.

And I think that transformation is part of the cultural thing that people want to experience in the museum. They want to experience that kind of transformation. That kind of recognition. And sometimes it is a reckoning. And I think of the reckoning in the big sense of to reevaluate, to reconsider, but also the African American idea of, you know, I'm gonna reckon something. I'm going to think about it, and also to see.

And so those aspects are really coursing through, I think, where we are at now and where we can be in the future.

Kevin Gover:

And so, Tey, you worked at the Hispanic Cultural Center in New Mexico. Do you see it that way too, that we're viewing the same things through different eyes when we have these different museums.

Tey Marianna Nunn:

I think that ethnic-specific museums or, you know, subject-specific museums really arose out of the need, and probably at the same time this report was issued that we're talking about, a need for a place and space of our own, keep on repeating "place and space!" But it arose from a need because mainstream institutions weren't showing the differences, right? They were showing the sort of solid tale, and relating history depends on who is the storyteller. Who is the chronicler, who is the person in charge, who is the person in power. So when we have museums where we can sort of do deep-dive community work in those fields, when other museums don't have the capacity or perhaps the expertise on staff, which is completely changing museums now, but in the past... I think you need both. Because I think there's too many stories to tell not to have both simultaneously. So with the Women's Museum and with the Women's Initiative, we have a lot more stories to tell that we'll be able to tell throughout the Smithsonian, and within the physical museum.

Kevin Gover:

Yeah, so, Theo, Alan Curtis was challenging us in his opening comments to find ways to measure impact, and what are your thoughts about how museums would go about judging the quantity and quality of impact that we're having on these communities and on these conversations?

Theo Gonzalvez:

Sure. It's a great question. Well, a lot of that can be dealt with in terms of better quantitative tools that allow us to survey who's coming into the museum. But, you know,

Secretary Bunch also has made quite a big deal about the fact that to be on the Mall, to have feet into the various units is not enough. The idea of the Smithsonian being able to reach a billion people a year really has to be done digitally, and there's going to be a lot of information that the Smithsonian can learn. And I think one of the things that can be brought about and understood is a sense of, I think tradition and community that have been waiting to be represented at the Smithsonian for a very long time.

I think we have to be real about, also, the institution in which we work. There's a lot of reparative work that this institution has to come to grips with. Like many museums, they functioned as institutions of extraction, as institutions of hierarchy, to uphold certain hierarchies in life, in culture, in policy. And so I'm very thankful to be in the company of these fellow directors. Because they get the notion of what reparative work means. It's not simply doing the work that they're doing, but it's also having to undo the work of what has been done, where people have been misrepresented, insulted, and cast out, and communities from coast to coast, island to island, have been waiting for a chance to tell their story.

So I'm thankful to be able to work with Asian Pacific American Center, because I think, you know, one of the stories that we're having to think about when we think about community impact is in the middle of this crisis, of this pandemic, and also the anti-Asian violence that we've been thinking about, I think about this example of the Auntie Sewing Squad on the west coast. Mostly Asian American women who realized that there was a crisis afoot. State and market had fallen apart. Supply chains were broken. People needed very practical things: Elastic, fabric, distribution systems, and hundreds of women, really starting with Asian and Pacific American women but branching to hundreds of thousands of people, to get to people what was really needed. Personal protective equipment, masks. And understanding that this is what is really needed, not charity. Charity is not what is needed in a crisis. This is mutual aid. This is what we need right now in this particular moment. By hook or crook, they proved that aunties get stuff done.

(Laughter.)

And this is an Asian American tradition. So when I think of Christina Wong and Valerie Tso, it allows me to think, and us practitioners here, it allows us to think about the traditions of what mutual aid has meant to allow us to find a shared narrative. I don't think we need a single story of America. We need to have multiple stories of what our solidarities are about, what our mutual aid traditions are about. Benevolent societies during Jim Crow. Food programs for young children, or health clinics for seniors, or community job boards for folks in different neighborhoods.

All of those represent different kinds of traditions. Not simply Asian American and Pacific islander. They stretch across traditions. And I think it's up to us to help unlock these stories so that people can understand. These are stories that people had at the ready. They've gotten buried because of different ideas of how we think we got where we are. But we have those traditions of mutual aid. And we cannot forget what moment

we're in. That's the moment that I think Auntie Sewing Squad reminds me of. We're still in the middle of a cries us. -- crisis. What's the role of a historian? I hope we can play a part in that. The Smithsonian museum plays the role of a mirror that people can see themselves in that Kevin was talking about. But it can also act as a light, shrine a light on other cultures, regions, and neighborhoods, and we can say, I see myself in different parts of this country, and thank goodness there's a museum that allows me to see that.

Kevin Gover:

Yeah, I think aunties are one of those things that really are universal, right? We all have aunties, and they all fill that role for us.

Deborah, one of the most startling statistics I've read in the past few years is that there are more museums in the United States than there are Starbucks and McDonald's stores combined. And it really had never -- it had never occurred to me. But when you start looking for them, there are museums everywhere. And so obviously, even as large and grand as the Smithsonian is, we're not so large when compared to the sum total of the museums out there in our country.

So, in working on your initiative, how are you thinking about engaging with those local institutions and really... working with them to try to achieve some of our objectives?

Deborah Lynn Mack:

As you said, there are -- there are SO many. Not all of them are involved, or even interested, in what we might call social justice work. That still leaves not only dozens, that leaves hundreds of partners, many of whom our various programs already have relationships with.

As I had mentioned before, there are museums that have been doing this work, we could call it social justice work, we can call them civil rights museums, the museum in Seattle, the National Japanese American Museum in California. There are larger and smaller, and many of them community-focused, neighborhood-focused, because they decided that they would serve very directly constituents who did not find services, did not find representation, did not find ways to be heard elsewhere. Whether they addressed and focused themselves on very specific and pressing issues, or larger issues of self-representation and creativity, the bottom line of economics, you name it. We have -- one of the great advantages of this initiative is that we are inheriting multiple relationships because of Theo's work, because of Tey Marianna's work, because of the work of many others that have worked with the Smithsonian, so they begin to understand who we are and what we do and what we don't do, have confidence in telling us what we could be doing better, are teaching us how to listen better, and have enough trust with us to allow us to work and try out, to experiment with them and through them, because they can really act as, in many ways, interpreters on some of these other national goals that we

may have. Again, I feel Smithsonian will learn as much from these museums, the thousands of museums that exist around the country, where -- and many places that Smithsonian has not yet ventured -- as anything else. And we see this as a great opportunity. Not only the multidisciplinary nature of this, but in a sense the truly multicultural nature of this, across class, across region and geography, across political leaning, is a major opportunity for Smithsonian to even more fully represent the nation. Represent who we are.

Kevin Gover:

Yeah. I'm going to ask everyone for some closing thoughts, but I really want to focus around, again, around the fundamental subject of our conversation, and that is, we're all part of this very large institution, and in that respect, we have resources and access to resources that very few others do. We really are in a privileged position. So how do we -- what is our responsibility to deploy these resources to the cause of equity and equality in our country? We could choose not to, could we not? So, do we have --

(Laughter.)

What is our obligation in that respect? And I'll start with Theo.

Theo Gonzalvez:

(Laughing) that's a great question. You know, I think about one of the most important documents, I think, that's ever been written, and that's the Letter from Birmingham Jail by Dr. King, and it was a note that was created out of sheer frustration, because he's thinking about how white liberal ministers are telling him to wait, that his tactics demanded another kind of response. And he was thinking about 1963, but he's thinking about 1863, and the question is, how long do you want us to wait? I think those of us in the museum have to act on the certain and similar agency and urgency, which is we cannot wait to tell these stories. Just like Kevin Young, we cannot wait to collect these items, to tell this history, to tell it now. When I come home and tell my partner I love her, it's not like, I love you tomorrow, I love you next week. It's about the present. That is a performative statement about what it means to be in the present. And we can bring that sense of that kind of love to our practice. It has to be as urgent as how we love. And so that for me should be the effort that should guide us. We cannot hold back. We cannot wait.

Kevin Gover:

And Tey, what is your answer to that question? What is our obligation?

Tey Marianna Nunn:

I think we don't have a choice. I think we're absolutely obligated to make more equitable history or stories of what you call America, the Americas. You know, we have to have different perspectives. And they have to be told in different ways. It can't be through one person's lens, or can't be through an old-fashioned guise, and what we have to do is move backwards and look at even just how we described -- we're looking at how gender has been described historically in Smithsonian catalogs. So we have to look backwards, go fix that, so we can move forward with it fixed. Does that make sense? And we just, you know, we have an incredible team working on this, and I think -- we don't have a choice. We have to act.

Kevin Gover:

Deborah, I mean, did you get into the museum business in order to be an agent of social change?

Deborah Lynn Mack:

Actually, absolutely! That was, when I was invited to create a department that would support and amplify the work of African American museums around the country, when I joined the African American Museum of History and Culture, it was specifically with that charge. I had declined that offer the first two times when it was a general, wouldn't you like to join the Smithsonian? Because I'd seen a long time what Smithsonian practice was, and how it could take a hundred years to do something. But given a charge that was very clear, and given a charge that basically said, you know, that an activist stance, an engaged community stance, a listening and collaborative stance would be totally appropriate, and that was the history that I brought to the museum, it's been really excellent. It's been great to bring on the next two generations of practitioners, of staff, across Smithsonian, to see them engage in this work in ways that actually reinforces their activism, their sense of equity, their sense of social justice, and in a sense that also tells them that when they come to Smithsonian, they can bring their total selves to Smithsonian. They can bring their histories and their aunties and their communities and their collections and their beliefs with them, and THAT is part of who we are. I think that Smithsonian, in many ways, the way that -- the Foreign Service, when I go abroad and I'm looking at U.S. embassies now, it's nothing like American representation that I saw even 10 years ago. You can go anywhere and it actually looks like our country. And Smithsonian is in many ways becoming that way, not just in appearance. This is not about diversity per se. This is about really welcoming people to engage with who they fully are. So I believe this is an exciting time. I also believe it's an obligation, given that the American people are the ones who fund much of what we do.

We are in their debt. And we are obligated to follow through in that way.

Kevin Gover:

Yeah.

And is that why you came to the Smithsonian, Anthea?

Anthea Hartig:

It is, actually! I was at a point in my life and my career where there was no higher calling than to do my best every day to lead the National Museum of American History. I think to your question, Kevin, it's Talmudic for me. It's the classic "if not now, when, and if not us, then who shall do this work, shall make these changes, shall lead as best and humbly as we can in service", as my director Deborah so nicely said. In service always to the people of the United States, and the complexities, as Tey said, of the Americas. I do take it as the charge that the Kerner Commission laid out for us, that David Walker laid out for us in his appeal in 1830, that Phyllis Wheatley did two generations before. The fundamental needs of a democratic and civilized society are domestic peace and social justice.

Kevin Gover:

Nice. And I'll give the last word to you, Kevin. Are museums going to change the world in the way we'd like?

Kevin Young:

I think so, actually. I think they already have in many ways. I think some of what I see at the Smithsonian, and I'm newly here, is that kind of change, that kind of transformation, and what I think, what I love about it is that it's physical. You can go into the museum and see the transformation. You can stare out at the Washington Monument, which is our neighbor, and which our corona, our crown effect, exactly mirrors the angle of. You can go and see, speaking of the Poor People's Campaign that Alan so eloquently mentioned, you can see in our museum a wall from the Poor People's Campaign in Resurrection City. I was struck seeing it at all the languages on it. The English, the Spanish. People talking about and taking democracy in their hands and effecting change. And I think the museum does that, too, through its collections, but also its connections. I think a lot about how we can change how people think of collections, because as you'll recall, there was a moment where people thought the museum not only couldn't be built, may shouldn't be built, but couldn't be filled. But what we've seen is an outpouring of people caretaking Harriet Tubman's handkerchief, shawl, and veil for generations. The Poor People's Campaign wall, people had kept it and held onto it. So

it's not just believing in the museum, but believing in the people who believe in the museum. And to me that's crucial to the future and to all of us.

Kevin Gover:

Very nice. Well said. Well, listen, thank you all for this conversation. I enjoyed it very much. I hope that our audience did as well. Thank all of you for joining us this evening. We'd like to especially thank the Mellon and Eisenhower Foundations and Alan Curtis for bringing us together this evening. Please continue to follow the work of these museums and these initiatives, and the work of the Eisenhower Foundation. We thank you for joining us, and good night.

(End of program).