

## Inclusion | Museums

### EXHIBITIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

September 5, 2019 · by the inculseum · in Culture, Heritage, & Identity · [Leave a comment](#)

Today's blogpost is a fantastic follow up to all the #MassActionReadingGroup content that we've published over the last few months. We hear from Elena Gonzales, PhD about her recently released book *Exhibitions for Social Justice*. Below, she describes her book, shares her motivations for writing it, and lets you know where you can find it.

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It has been a pleasure participating in the #MASSActionReadingGroup as well as watching the Toolkit be put into practice here in Chicago, where institutions such as the Chicago Children's Museum are letting it inform and reshape their modes of working. When the Toolkit came out, I was deep into writing a book called *Exhibitions for Social Justice*, just out last month from Routledge's Museum Meanings series. The book is about how we can use the gallery of a museum or other cultural organization to work for social justice, a topic which intersects with the work of the Toolkit and amplifies it. The Toolkit does several important things at once: it is extremely accessible and practical. It offers an excellent background concerning why DEAI (Diversity Equity Accessibility and Inclusion) work in museums is an ethical mandate. And it addresses the institution as a whole, offering useful suggestions on how to audit and evaluate where the institution stands, change the institutional culture, and eventually communicate that change. Interpretation and curatorial work are one area in which the Toolkit prepares a museum to explore and stretch. Other areas include collections, education, and leadership.

*Exhibitions for Social Justice* is focused specifically on what takes place in the gallery, although I provide context about the way in which the whole museum functions. I look at the history, present, and future of inclusion, welcoming, sharing authority, and participation, and I offer some tools to help museums to live up to their responsibilities to all of their stakeholders. But the primary focus is curatorial work, including all of the many different types of work by educators and designers, that goes into the visitor's experience in the gallery. In particular, the book delves deeply into exploring how curatorial practices can make the most of the natural tendencies of our bodies and brains to support goals for social justice – more equitably distributing risks and rewards in our societies. For example, if we're interested in visitors being moved to take action or work for change after their visits, then several conditions must be met first. The visitor must have a memorable experience. So, I examine the ways in which we can use exhibitions to create deep, long-lasting memories. The visitor must also feel a kinship

#### WHO WE ARE

The Inculseum is a project based in Seattle, Washington that advances new ways of being a museum through critical dialogue, community building and collaborative practice related to inclusion in museums. The Inculseum is facilitated and coordinated by Aletheia Wittman and Rose Paquet. Contact us for consulting, collaboration or guest blogging at [inculseum@gmail.com](mailto:inculseum@gmail.com).

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- RT @CollardStudies: Somehow I missed the 5 year anni of the first #MuseumsRespondtoFerguson Twitter chat. @adriannerussell and I facilitate... 2 weeks ago

with others and wish to explore that feeling in the world beyond the exhibition. So, I offer ideas for building empathy and then moving visitors from empathy to solidarity. If there are opportunities to act within the exhibition, shortly before or after visiting, or even long after the visit, and those opportunities are properly scaffolded for the visitor, they will have the greatest success. Perhaps the visitor will even engage further with a given area of interest.

Ever since working on *The African Presence in México* at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, I have been captivated by the idea that museums are a tremendous force that can help us create the just societies that we need to live sustainably on the planet. At the moment, deep socio-political divisions, racist words and actions, and extreme environmental injustice threaten our existence. Prior to beginning work on the book in 2016, I had spent more than fifteen years following the changes that have moved the museum world in general and curatorial work in particular towards a more equitable purpose and structure. I knew that the question was no longer whether or not museums could work for social justice. Many excellent scholars and grassroots educators alike have demonstrated that they can and do. Rather, the question I wanted to address was how can we do more of this work and do it more effectively. How can we harness the power of our cultural landscape to move society away from white supremacy, exploitation, and greed toward prosocial, inclusive, sustainable, feminist ideas and practices?

I developed the book through a hybrid methodology. I used ethnographic methods as I interviewed nearly 80 museum professionals, some several times for several hours each, and researched on-site at numerous museums. More than 20 institutions appear in the book. I completed several months-long research residencies at a small number of museums locally in Chicago and arranged research trips to another cohort. Still another group was kind enough to facilitate my research from a distance. My archival research supplemented and complimented my ethnographic research to provide a fuller picture of institutional practices and operations and to allow the book to be more generalizable to a diverse range of institutions, even with a small sample.

There are 80,000 museums around the world today, more than the number of Starbuck's and McDonald's stores combined (see Gail Lorde and Ngaire Blankenberg's *Museums, Cities, and Soft Power*, 2015). Most museums are small. But when we consider that number of organizations, it throws into sharp relief the resources that this set of organizations has to inspire, to educate, to elevate diverse narratives, to make ideological waves, and thought waves that we can all feel and see. Wherever you work, there are opportunities to alter the way that risks and rewards are distributed in society. Put together, *Exhibitions for Social Justice* and the MASS Action Toolkit offer robust, inspiring, and practical resources for doing this kind of work. You are not alone. You do make a difference. We make the most change when we work together. Inspire your visitors and they will work with you as well.



If you would like to order *Exhibitions for Social Justice*, you may do so here:

- [Purchase at Routledge](#)
- [Purchase on IndieBound](#)
- [Purchase on Amazon](#)

If you would like to review the book for your publication, you may request a review copy here: [Review Copy](#)

If you would like me to speak at your institution or give a guest lecture in your class, please email me. [info\(at\)elenagonzales.org](mailto:info(at)elenagonzales.org)

- We have been proud to feature @the\_nphm on the includeum blog and can't wait to see this new museum open in 2021!  
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If you'd like your library to order the book, here are the details you'll need:

Title: Exhibitions for Social Justice

Author: Elena Gonzales

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*Elena Gonzales is an independent scholar focusing on curatorial work for social justice and the role of museums in society today. Her book, [Exhibitions for Social Justice](#), is published in the series "Museum Meanings" at Routledge (2019). Gonzales received her doctorate in American Studies at Brown University in 2015 and her Masters in Public Humanities from Brown in 2010. She has curated exhibitions at the National Museum of Mexican Art, the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology at Brown, the John Nicholas Brown Center for the Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, and the Culinary Arts Museum at Johnson and Wales University. She has also worked at the National Museum of American History and the Anacostia Community Museum at the Smithsonian. She has also taught curatorial studies at Brown. Gonzales was a 2012 Ford Dissertation Fellow and a visiting scholar in American Studies at Northwestern University from 2011-2015. In 2015-2016, Gonzales served as an advisor on the redesign of [Navy Pier in Chicago](#). Now she is writing, consulting, chairing the Exhibitions Committee of the [Evanston Art Center](#), and co-developing a digital anthology on [Museums and Civic Discourse](#). [www.elenagonzales.org](http://www.elenagonzales.org) @curatorialogist*

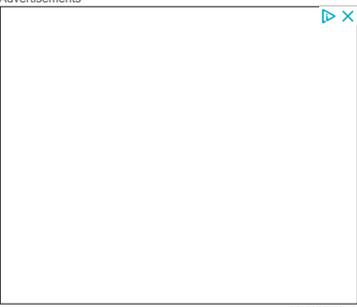
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