

# Artivism and the Museum of Impact

## Creating Counternarratives in Nontraditional Museum Spaces

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At a time of growing social and political unrest, how might museums support audiences grappling with relevant, troubling issues? The Museum of Impact (MOI), a mobile social justice museum, proposes the use of counternarrative—a theoretical tool developed by Critical Race Theory proponents—to engage visitors, helping them to enact their own interpretations of a better, more just, and more inclusive future.

Founded in 2013, the Museum of Impact was created in the wake of the #Black Lives Matter movement to shine a light on humanity, advocacy, art, and activism. While its site is virtual and its exhibitions are all pop-ups,

MOI hopes to provide both a theoretical and practical framework for implementing creative, political, and revolutionary storytelling in more traditional museum spaces.

At the Museum of Impact, we archive the “now.” We curate current events and chronicle movements of the people. Our programs and exhibitions are centered around advocacy, participation, and dialogue. Our goal is for visitors to not just be passive viewers, but to be transformed by experiences that are tailor made for sharing stories and championing specific causes. Our motto reflects our practice and our goals for our visitors: Hear. Care. Act!

In 2015, Founding Director Monica O. Montgomery and a team of volunteers, including the organization’s historian, Hannah Heller, created our inaugural exhibition, *The Movement Is Rising*, to connect visitors to human rights injustices—specifically those perpetrated against people of color in the United States. Our goal was to raise awareness about racialized violence; about the social movements #BlackLivesMatter and #HandsUpDontShoot, created in response to the violence; and about the wellspring of “artivism” (art + activism) that they, in turn, inspired.<sup>1</sup> This article uses two of our New York City pop-up events

<sup>1</sup> M. K. Asante Jr., *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).





**fig. 1.** Participants at the Museum of Impact pop-up event at the Brooklyn Museum, February 2016. Everyone had an opportunity to cycle around multiple exhibits that featured various opportunities for participation, including art making, talkback walls, letter writing, and reading.

for *Movement Is Rising*—one in September 2015 at RawSpace, an art gallery and special event venue in Harlem, and one in February 2016 at the Brooklyn Museum (**fig. 1**)—to explain how we used counternarrative to tell a multifaceted story about how our audiences experience racism, and how, by blurring the lines between art and activism, between traditional and nontraditional exhibits, we can create a more dynamic space for dialogue and participation.

### “Counternarrative” Defined

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a lens through which we can look at the institutions and cultural structures of American society and examine them for the deep-rooted racism that characterizes American life. It was developed in the 1970s by theorists, activists, and academics who saw Civil Rights activism as incremental, not effective enough, and, as in the case of much of the litigation to come out of this era—particularly in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* and school desegregation—already in the process of being curtailed and repealed.<sup>2</sup> In many ways, CRT developed out of a need to develop a new vocabulary to describe

2 Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. (New York: NYU Press, 2012). Derrick A. Bell, Jr., “*Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma*,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995).

embedded, institutionalized structures of oppression.

A central tenet of CRT is that racism is a “normal,” embedded element of American society.<sup>3</sup> The ordinariness of racism makes it all the more difficult to address, because it is universally unacknowledged.<sup>4</sup> And its embedded, nearly hidden aspect not only makes it difficult to dismantle, but also serves the dominant group—in this case, white people.

One method that CRT theorists developed to counter the “normality” of racism is counternarrative, or counter-storytelling (considered interchangeable concepts in CRT literature);<sup>5</sup> in fact, many consider it one of Critical Race Theory’s main objectives.<sup>6</sup> To this end, several writers have called for acknowledging “the experiential knowledge of people of color.”<sup>7</sup> Through stories that share their specific and varied experiences,

3 Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, “Introduction,” *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), xvi.

4 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 8.

5 The terms “counternarrative” and “counter-storytelling” are used as interchangeable concepts in CRT literature, and as such are used interchangeably throughout this article.

6 Laurence Parker and Marvin Lynn, “What’s Race Got to Do With It? Critical Race Theory’s Conflicts With and Connections to Qualitative Research Methodology and Epistemology,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002): 7–22.

7 Mari Matsuda, Charles Lawrence, Richard, Delgado, and Kimberlee Crenshaw, *Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 6.

people of color are able to dismantle the idea that they are a monolithic group—and, at the same time, voice the sentiment that it means something important to be other than white in today’s world. Dr. Taunya Lovell Banks provides a good example when she writes about her experiences as a black woman, both in the world as well as a law professor. Her experiences not only show how microaggressive behavior against people of color occurs on a regular basis, but how these lived experiences influence her own layered, complex, and intersectional approach to teaching law.<sup>8</sup>

The counternarrative concept takes a two-pronged approach: it critically addresses longstanding, persistent myths that have rendered people of color “one-down”; it also reconstructs the dominant narrative by providing alternative stories that counter accepted, stereotypical, and biased ways of thinking about race.<sup>9</sup>

### **Counternarrative and *Movement is Rising***

For the exhibition *Movement is Rising*, we implemented the theoretical framework behind counternarrative in two practical ways. First, we used artwork and installations as counternarratives, purposefully choosing pieces and creating environments that reflected the notion of counterdiscursive, or alternative storytelling. Second, we embedded multiple opportunities for visitor participation and feedback.

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These gave visitors the chance to reflect on, or create, their own, personalized counter-stories about the experience of racism.

### ***Art as counternarrative***

One of the foundational artworks for the exhibition—and the inspiration for the show’s title—is #MovementIsRising ([intro image](#)). This series of eight, artist-commissioned, large-scale digital collages was inspired by the notion of social media as a public commons for outcry and interrogation.

8 Taunya Lovell Banks, “Two Life Stories: Reflections of One Black Woman Law Professor,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995).

9 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, xvii; Richard Delgado, “When a Story is Just a Story: Does Voice Really Matter?” *Virginia Law Review*, 76 (1990), 95–111; Daniel. G. Solorzano and Tara. J. Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8, no. 1 (2002), 23–44.



**fig. 2.** Detail of *Every Mother's Son* (the original mural was painted in acrylics on the side of a building), Sophia Dawson, 2016. Participants were instructed to respond to the exhibition's reproduction of the mural by placing sticky notes on the piece with their thoughts, ideas, and feelings around the charge: "not one more!"

The series was conceived by MOI founding director Monica Montgomery, and created by local artists who chose an alternative view for audiences to empathize with the movement to dismantle racism and shine a light on the impact of police brutality in the African American community. The large-scale collages feature figures, imagery, screenshots, and text that evoke the experience of racism and response via social media. Their titles are taken from social media hashtags: the rallying cry and organizational moniker *#BlackLivesMatter*, created in the wake of George Zimmerman's 2013 acquittal in the shooting of African American teenager Trayvon Martin, and others, also coined to protest

racism—*#HandsUpDontShoot*; *#IfIDie*; *#SayHerName*; *#PropheticGrief*.

By appropriating these viral hashtags—which articulate the horror of racialized violence and urge citizens to join in solidarity with a fight for justice—the artworks become counternarratives. Like time capsules filled with urgency and uprising around these issues of our time, they become physical, symbolic reminders of the shifting contexts for when, how, and by whom protest is enacted.

Another counternarrative piece in the exhibition is *Every Mother's Son*. The mural, created by MOI

artist-in-residence Sophia Dawson, honors several mothers of young black men who were murdered by police: Kadiatou Diallou, Mamie Till, Constance Malcolm, Margarita Rosario, Gwen Carr, Lesley McSpadden, and Iris Baez. By remembering these specific women, Dawson draws our attention to the profound, isolating impact that the murder of young black sons and daughters has on the black community. In the artist's own words:

[The victims and their mothers] have been intentionally excluded from mainstream American History and their stories must not be forgotten.... I always start working from black, as a conscious artistic exercise but also as a statement: it represents my opposition to the art education I received in institutions where I was taught that art had to begin on a 'pure and white' surface.

In the mural, Dawson uses different color bars to draw attention to the vibrant life that once existed in the young, murdered men who were all mothers' sons; the colors are juxtaposed with images of their mothers, painted in a solemn gray scale. The counternarrative—a depiction of grief felt by those so often silenced in popular media outlets—is intended to spark participation. The mural (fig. 2) includes an interactive component that asks visitors to visualize these families and others through the

lens of harm reduction. Visitors responded by writing and posting sticky notes on the work itself, transforming it in real time into a collective expression of grief and condolence (fig. 3). Audiences expressed their feelings and ideas on how to ensure that not one more parent, guardian, or spouse has their heart broken, and shared their responses to a salient question: How can you contribute to there being not one more death?

### **Visitor participation as counternarrative**

In addition to the art and exhibits—which provided a counter-story that broke with traditional, embedded narratives—visitors were offered the opportunity to create their own counternarratives in a variety of ways.

In *The Unindicted*, a collaborative performance piece, visitors spoke or acted in response to images of vigilantes and police officers who killed or harmed people of color. The images, which resemble “wanted” posters, present the names of the vigilante or police officer and their victim. Visitors can tear, color over, or destroy them in response. *The Unindicted* expresses a community's grief and creates a space for the real, raw, and uncomfortable emotions of allies and sympathizers in the #Black Lives Matter struggle.

Additionally, all of our events featured an exhibit titled *Activist*

fig. 3. Detail of sticky notes written in response to *Every Mother's Son*.



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*Love Letters* (fig. 4).<sup>10</sup> The goal of this transmedia project was to highlight activism as a public benefit, and honor activists. *Activist Love Letters* is a community archive encouraging visitors to write and share their support and admiration for activists past, present, and future. Participants act as “organizers in training” and artistically or literally record oral histories on a recording device, articulating their shared hopes and dreams and personal, intersectional understanding of the social justice

ideologies” of traditional, whitewashed notions of what it means to be an activist or a hero.<sup>11</sup> In a world where all aspects of the media—movies, television shows and commercials, fashion magazines, literature, and more—overwhelmingly display white faces and bodies, *Activist Love Letters* provides an outlet that prioritizes black changemakers. It also encourages personal, emotional contemplation around how activism works, the ultimate sacrifices it takes, appreciation for the self-identified activists doing this work, and the role of everyday people in championing change on their own terms in their own communities.

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fig. 4. Visitors writing their own “Activist Love Letters” at the pop-up event at the Brooklyn Museum, February 2016.

movements and actions that are meaningful for them. *Activist Love Letters* enables visitors to articulate who their heroes are, and the ways in which they envision themselves to be heroes. These contributions serve as counternarratives, or counter-truths, able to “destabilize dominant explanations and

### Conclusion—and a Way Forward

During the course of the exhibition, we conducted an informal evaluation on the show’s impact. We asked a sampling of visitors at the Brooklyn Museum pop-up if the exhibition had changed the way they thought about the #Black Lives Matter movement. Recurring themes among the 27 different responses gathered were “validation” and “hope.” Visitors expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to share reactions to the art, expressions of frustration, and hopes for the future (in other word, variations of the concept of counternarrative) in a communal, community-driven setting.

<sup>10</sup> While we are aware that another project by the same name exists (see: <https://syrusmarcusware.com/past-projects-exhibitions/activist-love-letters/>) Museum of Impact is and always has been completely unaffiliated.

<sup>11</sup> Maria Elena Torre, “Participatory Action Research and Critical Race Theory: Fueling Spaces for Nos-otras to Research,” *The Urban Review* 41, no. 1 (2009), 111.

Some examples of these responses include:

*“It’s not necessarily new information, but seeing it all together, it kind of has a greater impact, and for the fact that you are sharing the moment with other people who are like-minded... then I guess it has a bigger effect and you see it.”*

*“I think it’s a very good space for community building, just meeting a lot of people with similar interests, and I feel like I’m finding out a lot of what’s going on in activism in the community tonight.”*

*“I actually just did a letter to an activist which I thought was really thoughtful. It can feel very exhausting and very lonely being an activist, so great idea.”*

Interestingly, while several visitors claimed that the exhibition had not made them feel differently about the #Black Lives Matter movement, they did express that it was inspiring and special to see so many people who cared about, and acted on, the same issues they cared about. One visitor noted that an exhibition like this can let visitors know that “your thoughts and your actions are validated.” Another echoed this sentiment, saying that the event was an “affirmation and strengthening” of her ideas about the movement. Yet another acknowledged that she and her friends are very much part of the movement already, but that an event like *Movement is Rising* can be “confirming in a

way,” demonstrating that “a lot of people understand the rage and understand the message and that’s why they’re here.”

As exhibition planners, we found this instructive. Sometimes, exhibitions can open up an entirely new conversation, or direct our attention to an important but less noticeable issue. While learning new information is valuable, sometimes it can be just as productive and welcome to provide visitors with an opportunity to think differently about, and react to, a conversation that is already happening.

In this way, the Museum of Impact and its inaugural exhibition, *Movement is Rising*, honors the voices of its visitors, acknowledges the individualized ways we react to troubling events, and provides a means to express pride in ourselves and our communities. Professionals in museums might also remember the importance of *listening* to our visitors—to get a feel for the issues they are interested in discussing; the types of opportunities for engagement they interested in; and to learn what pockets of our communities are being silenced. How can we, as professionals, ensure that individual stories are told in ways that are authentic, counterdiscursive, and impactful? We hope that the Museum of Impact’s practice—which embraces activism, using a nontraditional, temporary, pop-up exhibition approach to

provide counternarratives of the experience of race and racism—might serve as a model for other institutions seeking alternative methods of engagement around social activism. ■

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