

**Fig. 1.** *You, Me, We*, scheduled to open in the summer of 2022, builds on the themes explored in *Block Party*, creating an environment and scaffolded experiences where families examine bias, belonging, and race.



# Your Invitation to the Block Party

## Confronting Bias With Children and Families at Boston Children’s Museum

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Since opening in 1913, Boston Children’s Museum (BCM) has engaged families in learning through exploration and play in the Boston area and beyond. While the experiences the museum creates are informal, the purpose is serious: to engage children and families in joyful discovery experiences that instill an appreciation of our world, develop foundational skills, and spark a lifelong love of learning. Over the decades, the museum has pushed itself to be relevant, responsive, and innovative – using exhibitions to address challenging topics and themes that many adults avoid addressing with children.

In 2004, BGM opened *Boston Black: A City Connects*. Developed collaboratively with community advisors, this permanent exhibition explores diversity within Black communities of Boston and stimulates dialogue about race. *Mimi’s Family*, a 2015 temporary exhibition, displayed photographs of Mimi, a transgender grandparent, and her family. It invited visitors to explore all the things that make our families unique and special through personal stories, self-reflection, observation, and dialogue. Beginning in 2016, BCM introduced Block Party, an ongoing program exploring conversations of bias, belonging, and race with children and families hosted within *Boston Black*.<sup>1</sup>

Building on the programmatic success of Block Party, BCM undertook the development of a new permanent exhibition, *You, Me, We*, scheduled to open in the summer of 2022. The exhibition builds on the themes explored in Block Party, creating an environment and scaffolded experiences where families will be able to examine bias, belonging, and race (fig. 1). This article explores key methodologies and reflects on the successes and hurdles in creating an inclusive space where we put children first in our search for a more equitable future.

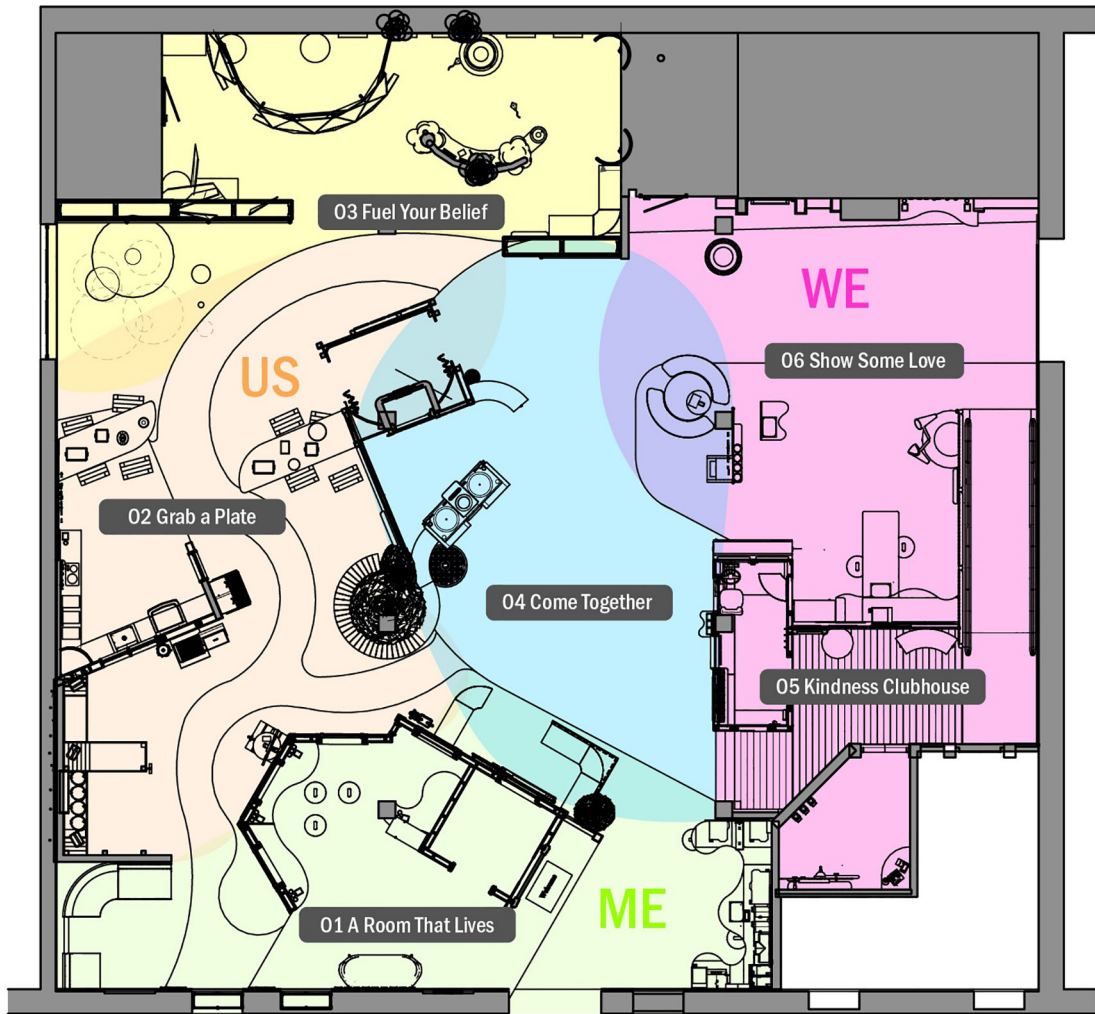
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**Fig. 2.**

In *You, Me, We*, discrete zones create opportunities for exploration of identity, similarity/difference, and equity.



### ***You, Me, We: An Anti-Bias Block Party***

Although BCM has undertaken public-facing diversity and inclusion initiatives throughout its long history, this work was not embedded within the museum’s organizational culture. Groundbreaking projects – such as *Opening the Museum* and *Kidsbridge*, in addition to those mentioned earlier – were each celebrated for promoting inclusion.<sup>2</sup> Despite these successes, or perhaps because of them, BCM did not explicitly turn that “transformative” lens inward to its own organizational culture. Outside, the world was changing, and conversations were unfolding. Inside, staff found themselves without the foundational skills or language to engage in dialogue with one another and to address the evolving needs of visitors.

### ***Enter You, Me, We.***

Boston Children’s Museum dove into this ambitious project in the midst of heightened public discourse about diversity, equity, and empathy. At its core, *You, Me, We* intends to support children and adults in exploring identity development – from “me” (celebrating our unique selves), to “us” (sharing similarities and differences), to “we” (building equitable communities) – and disrupting bias which, when left unchecked, can develop in parallel to devastating effect (fig. 2). Each exhibition zone will create and hold space for caregivers and children to reflect upon and celebrate the innate and collective power of their own unique identities; provide adults with critical tools and resources to support children;

and inspire families to build a more just and empathetic future together.

While BCM was ready to design a space to support families, its leadership had not fully considered what preparation would be necessary to manage this transition. *You, Me, We* was conceived to replace an aging *Boston Black* exhibition. In the midst of the Black Lives Matter racial reckoning, shuttering an intentionally Black-centered space was (and still is) a concern for staff. Would the new exhibition feel like an “All Lives Matter” space by comparison? Staff felt ill-equipped to address this complex question. Project meetings for *You, Me, We* became forums for confronting current events (for example, the 2016 mass shooting at Orlando, Florida’s Pulse nightclub) and discussing long-standing, organization-wide equity and diversity issues, as well as problematic power dynamics, decision-making processes, and staffing norms.

This was a painful period as BCM leadership and the exhibit team realized they had not addressed root causes of tension within the organization. To address this gap, BCM launched a museum-wide process in 2018 to examine and improve communication, cross-cultural understanding, and organizational structures in order to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Further, this internal work demonstrated that BCM required outside perspective and expertise to meet both the exhibit’s experiential needs and the staff’s professional development needs.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that many of the ideas and solutions were not present within the institution. Rather, these voices needed amplification. In 2018, the exhibition team engaged Stacey Mann, a founding member of the Empathetic Museum, to guide interpretive planning and content development for the project.<sup>4</sup> To begin, Stacey identified three critical questions for the team:

1. Is this an exhibition BCM can and should develop?
2. What will be required to see it through – in terms of personal and professional support?
3. How will BCM ensure its long-term commitment to the exhibition and audiences?

The exhibition development team, in addition to staff from our community engagement, programming, and research departments, examined the origins of *You, Me, We*, its inherent opportunities and challenges, and the museum’s capacity to tackle this consequential work. Together, we identified four key tenets:

- *You, Me, We* would need a layered approach – prioritizing adults alongside children, encouraging caregivers to check their own biases and giving them tools to introduce conversations that they might feel ill-equipped to manage.<sup>5</sup>
- For *You, Me, We* to be successful, BCM’s staff members would have to commit to ongoing internal EDI work.
- We would need an intentionally inclusive process to center Boston-area families and communities and ensure an authentically representative and welcoming space.
- Critical staffing gaps would need to be addressed to ensure a representative and inclusive development process and long-term commitment to staffed facilitation.

With these in mind, BCM embarked on defining a new process to broaden its competency and capacity, and to change the culture of exhibition development across the museum.

**Welcoming Diversity:  
Voice, Vision, and Representation**

In early 2019, the museum hosted a series of design charrettes with community partners, content experts, and caregivers to explore exhibition concepts and identify potential blind spots.<sup>6</sup> Participants challenged BCM to be brave – to not shy away from the “tough stuff.” Several participants questioned whether this space was for white families. In the absence of *Boston Black*, which centered the African diaspora, how would BCM ensure that *You, Me, We* would work to decenter white-normative culture? Participants agreed on keeping identity and bias formation and the power of belonging at the experiential core of the exhibition.

We believed that for *You, Me, We* to be successful, the museum – and specifically the exhibition team – needed to remain connected to communities and families across Boston. Prototyping and testing concepts and experiences along the way would help us keep the experiences authentically representative, relevant, and adaptable to contemporary social discourse. The museum’s community engagement staff would work with community partners to develop accompanying programming and caregiver resources and support, including space and processes for rapid responses to local and current events. Further, BCM would commit to ongoing training and professional development to prepare staff and partners to support children and families in the exhibition and across the museum.

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Beyond community outreach, this process also required a new way of designing to ensure a welcoming, engaging, challenging space undeniably *for* diverse families. Most museum spaces in the United States are designed by white designers and reflect their social and cultural aesthetics, lived experiences, and biases.<sup>7</sup> To counteract this problematic norm, BCM engaged professionals from divergent backgrounds to inform both content and design. Humanities advisors with content expertise in the intersection of identity with culture, music, religion, and food, *and* who had local experience working with Boston families, brought fresh insight and deep knowledge to the table.<sup>8</sup> Further, BCM intentionally sought out nontraditional design partners who could blend technical design skills, artistic empathy, and community-centered

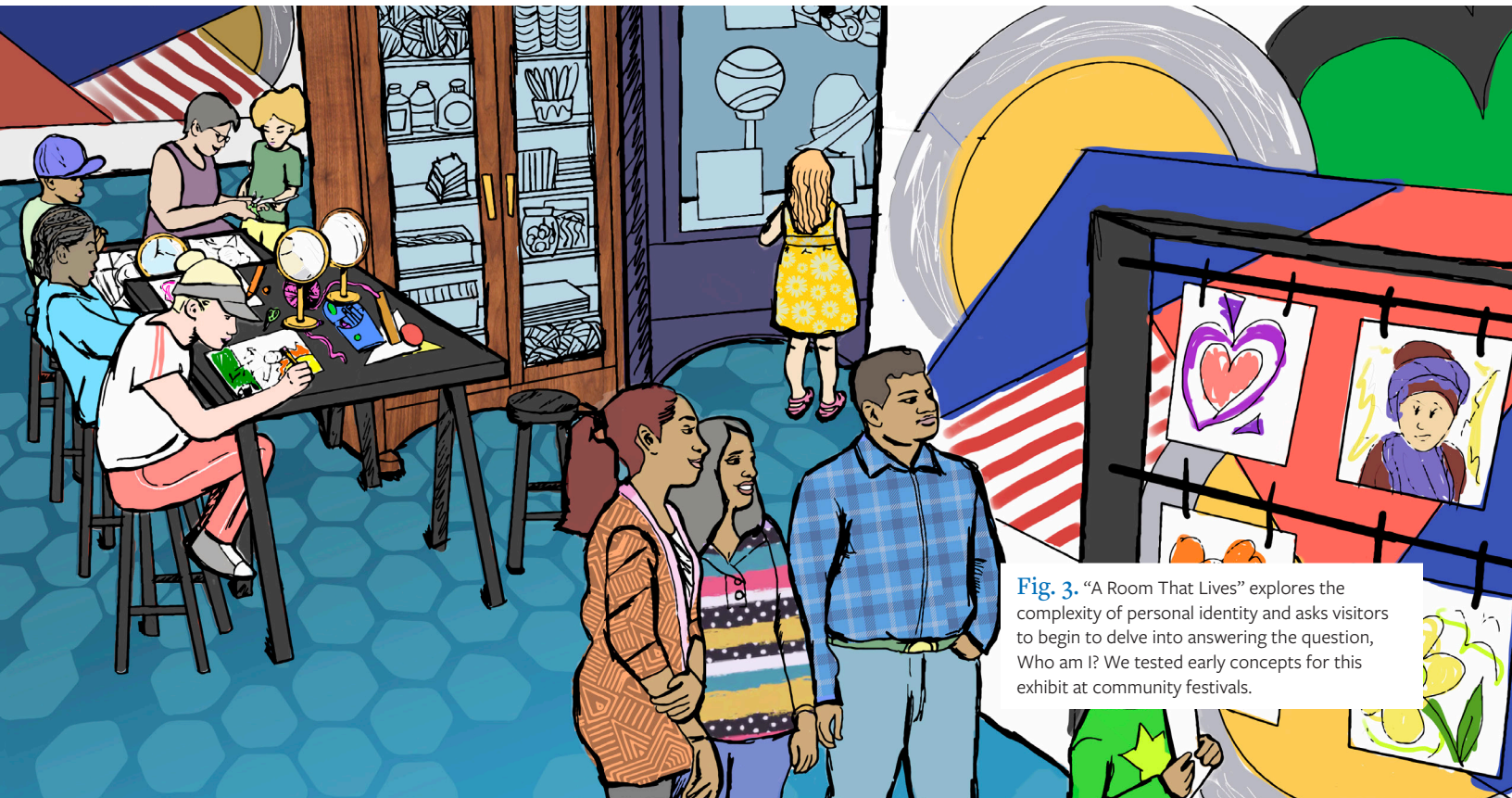
practice, resulting in our collaboration with Dan Wallis, a 3D exhibition designer, and two local artists: Silvia López Chavez, a Dominican-American muralist, and Chanel Thervil, a Haitian-American artist and educator. Together, they wove many experiential threads into an environment intended to welcome, engage, and educate visitors. Their work was enriched by the diverse perspectives that the full team – which represented a variety of intersectional racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and gender identities – brought to the development table.<sup>9</sup>

As part of the process, BCM was committed to testing ideas and approaches to make sure that structures, content, and artistry would enhance understanding of this complex topic in ways that resonated with visitors. Early testing centered on exploring ways to turn successful

programs into exhibit experiences. The team identified key elements to prototype directly with families (fig. 3) and took advantage of community programs and outreach that BCM already had on the calendar – such as facilitating self-portrait experiences at community-sponsored festivals.

But sometimes even the best-laid plans fall apart.

As the global coronavirus pandemic raged, limiting our ability to conduct in-person testing, we rapidly reformed our process and developed workarounds. Instead of prototyping with visitors, we prototyped with kids within our quarantine bubbles, using materials that could be dropped in the recycling bin or disinfected between tests (like cardboard and plastic sheeting). Through partnerships with university philosophy and religion



**Fig. 3.** “A Room That Lives” explores the complexity of personal identity and asks visitors to begin to delve into answering the question, Who am I? We tested early concepts for this exhibit at community festivals.



**Fig. 4.** “Grab a Plate” uses foodways to explore the importance of belonging and fosters a community of care grounded in love, kindness, and respect. Visitors are invited to share and record a food tradition.

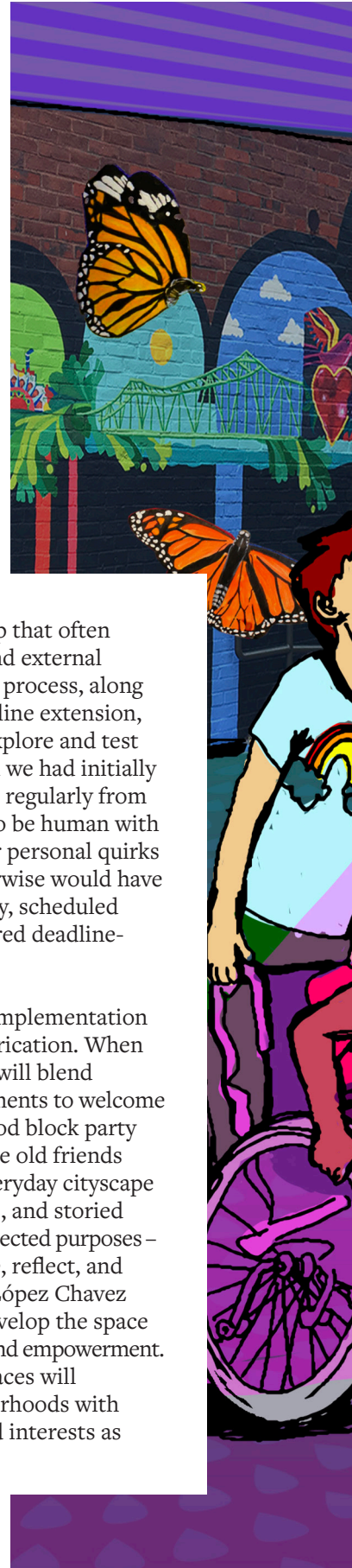
departments, students developed and tested discussion prompts with targeted children and reported back their findings. Our advisory panels of scholars, professionals, and Boston community members continued to provide critical feedback on the exhibit experiences and framing for visitors (fig. 4).<sup>10</sup> Rather than sharing static drawing sets in-house, as we typically do, we adopted an “always-live” digital model, which we shared, and edited together, at weekly virtual meetings.

Beyond COVID-19, the ongoing racially motivated violence across the country threw into stark relief the weight of this project and the potential consequences of getting it wrong. Anger, frustration, and hopelessness all became topics of discussion as we grappled with the realities of this project and current events. In working meetings, we shared the hard questions that we encountered in our own homes, especially from the children in our lives. Team members worked through this discomfort and relied on one another to maintain focus and re-center as necessary.

A silver lining emerged as personal and professional transparency blossomed,

allowing us to close the gap that often exists between in-house and external exhibit teams. Our flexible process, along with a COVID-forced timeline extension, gave us opportunities to explore and test ideas in greater depth than we had initially anticipated. Touching base regularly from our homes created space to be human with each other, and to discover personal quirks and motivations that otherwise would have remained hidden in cursory, scheduled hand-offs or in manufactured deadline-driven processes.

*You, Me, We* is now in the implementation phase and moving into fabrication. When completed, the exhibition will blend familiar and surprising elements to welcome families into a neighborhood block party (fig. 5), with a chance to see old friends and meet new ones. An everyday cityscape of houses, parks, sidewalks, and storied buildings will take on unexpected purposes—inviting families to explore, reflect, and connect. Murals by Silvia López Chavez and Chanel Thervil will envelop the space with messages of kindness and empowerment. Co-created community spaces will highlight different neighborhoods with individual stories of shared interests as





**Fig. 5.** “Come Together” explores the proposition that we are stronger together and encourages inclusion and collaboration as a means of building empathy for one another. Visitors come together to celebrate and dance together.





**Fig. 6.** “Share Some Love” evokes the feeling of the neighborhood park where individuals come together to build community and explore what it means to play fair and practice the Platinum Rule – treat others the way *they* want to be treated.

well as ethnic, cultural, and racial identities. Digital story-sharing stations will encourage visitors to leave their own imprint on the exhibition. Hands-on play, with opportunities for creative making and guided reflection, will enable visitors to express themselves and build empathy (fig. 6).

### Lessons Learned & Key Approaches

Overall, the starts, stops, ups, and downs of this process led to breakthroughs in the ways the BCM exhibition team worked – with implications for future projects and takeaways for others.

**Build a bigger table.** Bringing diverse voices of experience and expertise into the process early on – including academics, artists, activists, parents, educators, designers, musicians, chefs, and theologians – only made us stronger. Conversations and critiques informed our design and our practice. This approach required that we remain flexible about timelines and our decision-making as we moved at the speed of trust.

**Let artists lead.** From week one of the design process, artists have been at the table, often leading the first crack at how to

transform challenging ideas around bias and identity into approachable and whimsical experiences. We leaned into their unique capacity to “see” our design challenges differently and welcomed the empathetic lens they used to define creative solutions.

**Prioritize humility.** While each member of the team was brought in because of a specific skill or background, a concept this large and complex was beyond any one of our own capacities. It became clear that we needed to slow down, step back, listen, and learn from one another. We failed a lot. But we grew comfortable with open critiques and became okay being wrong in front of our teammates.

**Embrace ambiguity.** Over time, we learned to express doubt, confront hard questions, and embrace certain ambiguities that might have stopped a project dead in a normal design arc. In truth, these tensions forced a project pause early in the development process. However, a foundation of trust, openness, and honesty around discomfort and doubt pushed us in new directions.

**Confront your biases.** Alongside project challenges like budgets and schedules, each of us confronted personal and

professional biases. Individual comfort levels with content, expectations about roles, and capacity for critique led us to hard conversations that went beyond the normal development scope. Through this, we found a way to give voice, form, and context to challenging social issues.

## Conclusion

We recognize that this work has only just begun. While *You, Me, We* has provided ample testing ground for new ideas and ways of working, we still have much to learn and remain committed to the path we're on. As a longstanding resource for Boston families, we know that we are uniquely positioned within the local landscape to empower children and their caregivers to recognize and address critical issues of inclusion, justice, and action in society. We affirm that Boston Children Museum's commitment to building an inclusive space for families to engage meaningfully in dialogue around identity, belonging, and bias outweighs any potential difficulties, challenges, and associated emotional labor met along the way. Even so, BGM staff members remain aware of the responsibility they carry for the emotional well-being of the visitors in their care, young and old alike. We envision *You, Me, We* as a space where visitors can set judgment aside and witness the future in action.<sup>11</sup> The children can lead us, if only we let them. ■

1 In fall 2016, a formative evaluation conducted by Boston Children's Museum found that there was strong engagement with activities that involve sharing interests, identities, and stories through collaborative projects, and that visitors were highly motivated to share their stories and contribute to the co-created environment. Additionally, community partners were eager to return for subsequent Block Party programs.

2 Patricia A. Steuert, Aylette Jenness, and Joanne Jones-Rizzi, *Opening the Museum History and Strategies Toward a More Inclusive Institution* (Boston: Boston Children's Museum, 1993).

*Kidsbridge* opened to visitors at Boston Children's Museum in 1990; due to its popularity and impact, the exhibition then traveled for three years through the Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibitions Services.

3 Initial planning for *You, Me, We* was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (grant number MA-10-16-0398-16). The views expressed in this article do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

4 Stacey Mann also served as lead exhibition developer for *Torn from Home*, a family-focused traveling exhibition about what it means to be a refugee, which was hosted by BCM in 2011.

The Empathetic Museum represents the collective work of museum professionals dedicated to a more inclusive future for the museum industry. See: <http://empatheticmuseum.com>.

5 In spring 2017, a formative evaluation conducted by graduate students at Harvard's Graduate School of Education foundation found that caregivers were ready and eager to explore the themes of diversity, culture, identity, and race within the context of a Boston Children's Museum visit, and were specifically looking for support materials.

6 Participants included Boston Public Schools, Wee the People, Embrace Race, Project Implicit, Facing History and Ourselves, Beyond Conflict, and BCM parent ambassadors.

7 Joanne Jones-Rizzi and Stacey Mann, "Is That Hung White? A conversation on the state of museum exhibitions and race," *Museum* 99, no. 2 (March/April 2020).

8 Paid advisors included a diversity of academic scholars, educators, and practitioners with expertise in foodways, music, religious literacy, anti-bias education, philosophy for children, and museum exhibitions.

9 Even with this intentionally composed team, we still recognize that we have blind spots and are responsible for holding each other accountable throughout the development process.

10 Thank you to Diane L. Moore, PhD, founding director of the Religion and Public Life and the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School, and Amy Reed-Sandoval, PhD, Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and founding director of the Philosophy for Children in the Borderlands program in El Paso, Texas for supporting prototyping efforts.

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