

**PRISON MUSEUMS ON TRIAL:  
THE POLITICS OF REMEMBRANCE AND REFORM AT EASTERN STATE  
PENITENTIARY, SING SING PRISON MUSEUM, AND ANGOLA MUSEUM**

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## ABSTRACT

Prison museums provide a critical bridge between historical penal practice and contemporary criminal legal issues in the United States. Over the past 15 years, challenges to museum neutrality, heightened awareness of mass incarceration and racial and ethnic disparities in the incarcerated population, social justice protests and museums, and Confederate statue controversies have redefined prison museums' roles and responsibilities. A comparative case study of Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), Sing Sing Prison Museum, and Angola Museum demonstrates the various ways these factors have spurred change in exhibitions, programming, and public statements. Notably, the composition of leadership and staff is highly predictive of prison museums' ability to respond to criticism and engage with socio-political events. Centering justice impacted individuals in decision-making—e.g., ESP and Sing Sing—enables prison museums to contribute more effectively to criminal legal debates. By contrast, a greater influence of state corrections departments on museums' interpretative aims—e.g., Angola—hinders reform efforts. All prison museums, however, must be strategic in their reforms, so they can both foster dialogue across the political spectrum and engage in policy debates without appearing partisan. Importantly, growing awareness of a broader prison museum community has created new possibilities for informal knowledge sharing networks and collaborations.

**Keywords:** prison museum, mass incarceration, justice impacted, criminal legal system, racial and ethnic disparities, Eastern State Penitentiary, Sing Sing Prison Museum, Angola Museum

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## INTRODUCTION

[O]ld prisons can be remembered both as monuments of painful personal stories and as monuments of power and justice.

~ G. Swensen<sup>1</sup>

Prison museums are at the nexus of public history and criminal legal policy, acting as important forums to address penal punishment and incarceration practices in the United States.<sup>2</sup> For over a decade, progressive activists, scholars, and organizations such as the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) and *The New York Times* 1619 Project have brought mass incarceration to the forefront of national conversation and popularized a racialized historiography that understands present injustice within a 400-year timeline of oppression.<sup>3</sup> Concurrently, museums have been at the center of divisive debate regarding neutrality and their responsibility to embrace social justice aims. A uniquely hybrid and publicly accessible institution, many prison museums have therefore begun to reevaluate their role in confronting mass incarceration, fostering critical debate on American penal exceptionalism, and acknowledging racial and ethnic disparities within the criminal legal system.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. Swensen, "Concealment or spectacularisation: analysing the heritagisation process of old prisons," *Defense Sites: Heritage and Future* (2012).

<sup>2</sup> The term "prison museum" encompasses both prisons that have been fully converted into museums and active prisons that have museum affiliates. Furthermore, I intentionally use "criminal legal policy" as opposed to "criminal justice policy" based on Michelle Kuo's argument that "interlocking mechanisms have made the criminal legal system so unjust that some activists and scholars have abandoned the phrase 'justice system' altogether." Michelle Kuo, "What Replaces Prisons?" *The New York Review of Books* (2020), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/08/20/what-replaces-prisons/>.

<sup>3</sup> Publications such as Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2012) and Clint Smith's *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (Little, Brown and Company, 2021) emphasize certain, albeit contested, continuities between slavery and modern prison practice. Also see Ruth Delaney et al., "Reimagining Prisons," *Vera Institute of Justice* (2018), [https://www.vera.org/downloads/Reimagining-Prison\\_FINAL2\\_digital.pdf](https://www.vera.org/downloads/Reimagining-Prison_FINAL2_digital.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The deeply entrenched influences of the carceral state and broader assertions of American penal exceptionalism are well documented. Over the past fifty years, the U.S. incarcerated population has increased 500%. The incarceration rate is 664 per 100,000 population—more than five times higher than most countries despite comparable crime levels across democratic, industrialized nations. With approximately 2.3 million people held in the criminal legal system, many characterize currently and formerly incarcerated populations as a permanent underclass, having been stripped of their voting rights and denied educational opportunities, federal housing, and government assistance programs. Furthermore, Black men are six times and Latino men are three times more likely to be incarcerated than white men, indicating persistent racial and ethnic disparities in penal practice. Carceral punishment is not limited to

Prison museums, both nationally and internationally, aim to educate the public, memorialize the institution, and recontextualize the objects, practices, and imagery associated with incarceration.<sup>5</sup> According to a 2012 study, there are over 100 prison museums across the world; approximately 60 percent are located in the United States, with the highest concentrations in Texas, California, and Colorado.<sup>6</sup> Many prison museums and gift shops have recently closed due to financial constraints, including those at San Quentin State Prison in California and the State Prison of Southern Michigan (commonly known as Cellblock 7).<sup>7</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated funding and staffing issues for even the most prominent prison museums, since operations and revenue streams were shut down for most of 2020 and 2021.

Prison museums have taken different approaches to and demonstrated variable interest in recontextualizing their exhibitions and visitor experiences to address contemporary criminal legal issues. An interesting paradox emerges when mapping the relationship between prisons and such recontextualization efforts: “[J]ust as prisons have strived to purify their inmates, so too have they struggled to cleanse themselves, since there has always been something shameful

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the physical infrastructure of prisons and jails; electronic monitoring, surveillance, and other mechanisms of control (known as “e-carceration”) have allowed conditions of confinement and notions of imprisonment to expand from the tangible to the intangible. Chris Hedges, “Why Mass Incarceration Defines Us As a Society,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (2012), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/why-mass-incarceration-defines-us-as-a-society-135793245/>; Emily Widra and Tiana Herring, “States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2021,” *Prison Policy Initiative* (2021), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2021.html>; Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020,” *Prison Policy Initiative* (2020), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>; Patricia J. Williams, “Why Everyone Should Care About Mass E-carceration,” *The Nation* (2019), <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/surveillance-prison-race-technology/>; “Criminal Justice Facts,” *The Sentencing Project*, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>; and “Mass Incarceration,” *ACLU*, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Welch, *Escape to Prison: Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment* (University of California Press, 2015), chapter ten, “Cultural Power” and chapter two, “The Museum Effect.”

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Ian Ross, “Touring imprisonment: A descriptive statistical analysis of prison museums,” *Tourism Management Perspectives* 4 (2012).

<sup>7</sup> “San Quentin, California: San Quentin Prison Gift Shop (and Museum),” *RoadsideAmerica.com*, <https://www.roadsideamerica.com/tip/21453>; Mary Frances Knapp, “Death Row Inmates Are Selling Their Art on Etsy (and It's Beautiful),” *VICE* (2021), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvx4ed/how-to-buy-art-from-san-quentin-death-row-inmates>; and Lori Rackl, “Time’s up: Cell Block 7, a museum within a Michigan prison complex, will close at the end of the year,” *Chicago Tribune* (2019), <https://www.chicagotribune.com/travel/ct-trav-cell-block-7-museum-closing-1201-20191121-ejqhbou4wbq4hcoqtihfz7yety-story.html>.

about incarceration.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the institutions whose purpose was punishment and reformation are now themselves being critiqued and redefined as they attempt to illuminate the abuses witnessed within their cellblocks through educational, expository, and cautionary exhibitions.

When charting patterns of change and resistance, it is important to situate prison museums within broader discussions of public art, memorials, monuments, museums, and dark heritage in the United States. Such renegotiations of public space, however, have a distinct political character. Notably, recent national protests over racial justice, sustained media coverage of police brutality against minority communities, Confederate statue controversies, 1619-style historiographies, and the rise of social justice museums have both impacted and complicated prison museum operations. By creating a socio-political environment where neglecting to acknowledge racial and ethnic disparities bears an exceedingly high cost, these factors have pressured museums to embrace social justice aims more explicitly.

Factors driving change in prison museums can be broadly categorized as either internal or external pressures. Internal pressures refer to the conversations between and motivations of leadership and staff that indicate a discontentment with current practice and desire to better address contemporary legal issues. External pressures can be twofold. On the one hand, it encompasses social justice activists and organizations who—through their engagement with programming, educational content, and exhibitions—offer pointed criticisms of museum operations. On the other hand, it also includes societal changes stemming from media coverage, national political events, and shifting expectations for museums.

Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP) in Pennsylvania, Angola Museum at Louisiana State Penitentiary (LSP), and Sing Sing Prison Museum at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New

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<sup>8</sup> Shanisse Kleuskens et al., “Reconsidering the boundaries of the shadow carceral state: An analysis of the symbiosis between punishment and its memorialization,” *Theoretical Criminology* 20 (2016).

York are apt case studies to consider how the aforementioned pressures have resulted in tangible and significant change for prison museums. Analysis of their boards, operations, programming, exhibitions, funding, grants, and affiliation with active prisons reveals distinct combinations of internal and external pressures that have propelled each institution's reforms.

During the past 15 years, ESP has critically examined its origins, recontextualized content, and unveiled new exhibitions in order to address more meaningfully contemporary legal issues—steps reminiscent of the different approaches to addressing Confederate statues. ESP leadership and staff, upon recognizing both the striking increase in Pennsylvania's incarcerated population from 1970 to 2012 and the museum's silence on criminal legal issues after 1970, began to reevaluate its programming and exhibitions. This process of comparative historical analysis led ESP to expand its audio tour to include discussion of current carceral practice, unveil *The Big Graph* and *Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, revise its mission statement, center justice impacted individuals, and reimagine the Halloween event *Terror Behind the Walls*. Thus, ESP continues to position itself at the forefront of change and serve as a model for other prison museums, including Sing Sing Prison Museum.

First conceived during the 1990s, Sing Sing Prison Museum has shifted radically from an economic development project to one servicing justice impacted communities. Reports, assessments, and concept designs prepared by consulting agencies prior to 2014 focused exclusively on Sing Sing Correctional Facility's history and prohibited criticism of the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. New funding and leadership relaunched the project in 2014 with the intention of opening the museum in 2025, marking a critical juncture in the museum's development. The influx of progressively minded personnel coupled with external socio-political pressures that valued the museum's contribution to criminal legal debates



over its economic potential redefined the museum as a platform to elevate artists, activists, and writers working with contemporary issues. Currently, the museum's leadership is focused on bridging historical and modern carceral practice, while drawing from the experiences of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals to inform their discussion of mass incarceration.

Angola Museum's exhibitions and programming vary significantly from ESP and Sing Sing given its longstanding reluctance to address mass incarceration and critically reflect on its history as a plantation. The catalyst for change came in 2018 when author and public intellectual Clint Smith—along with 15 other community activists, social justice advocates, and prison museum employees—sent a letter to the LSP Museum Foundation, criticizing Angola's lack of transparency. Given that Angola had worked hard to distance itself from controversies surrounding corruption, excessive punitive punishment, and the inhumane treatment of incarcerated people, the museum board recognized that failing to respond to the letter would likely have financial and reputational consequences. Pressures intensified with George Floyd's murder and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in 2020. The resultant 2022 symposium titled "In Pursuit of Equal Justice" along with the 2021 announcement of a new museum represent initial steps to appease these pressures and increase transparency.

The three case studies reveal that centering justice impacted individuals in partnerships, hiring practices, and content development enables prison museums to address more effectively contemporary criminal legal issues. By contrast, the predominance of corrections affiliated individuals in decision-making processes and greater influence by state corrections departments on interpretative aims hinder museum reform efforts. Thus, the composition of leadership and staff is highly predictive of prison museums' ability to respond to criticism and engage with socio-political events, more so than affiliation with an active maximum-security prison.

Sing Sing Prison Museum coordinates with the Sing Sing Correctional Facility on title, land ownership, and occupancy issues whereas members of the LSP Museum Foundation repeatedly consult the secretary of corrections on Angola Museum's programming and interpretative decisions. Variable relationships with the adjacent prisons help explain the museums' different trajectories. That being said, ESP can implement reforms more easily because it is constrained neither by Sing Sing's logistical complications nor Angola's entanglement with the penitentiary. Given the absence of an immediate external force, ESP has had greater flexibility earlier on when redefining its role in contemporary debate.

Despite the distinctive timelines and approaches to reform, all three museums have been reluctant to explicitly endorse the 1619 Project and critical race theory (CRT). ESP, Sing Sing Prison Museum, and Angola Museum have, however, acknowledged continuities from slavery and convict leasing to modern disparities in the incarcerated population. This asymmetry shows the difficulties of simultaneously fostering dialogue across the political spectrum and engaging in current criminal legal debates without appearing partisan.

Importantly, the variability amongst prison museums can be mitigated through informal knowledge sharing networks and working partnerships. Given the different pressures, timelines, and content development initiatives, these collaborations provide further possibilities for reform as each institution recognizes its connection to a broader prison museum community.

### **PRISON MUSEUMS: DIVING DEEPER INTO THIS HYBRID INSTITUTION**

Prison museums have a unique tripartite identity: public museum, dark heritage site, and carceral institution. As such, it is advantageous to consider how these different formulations may affect prison museums' responsiveness to political pressures.

## *Redefining Museums' Roles and Responsibilities*

The contentious position of museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is captured by the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) definition of "museum."<sup>9</sup> A proposal to update the definition to include "democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures" and "human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing" was bitterly contested and the final vote postponed at the 25<sup>th</sup> ICOM General Conference in Kyoto in 2019.<sup>10</sup> Supporting the proposal, museum progressives championed this language as representing "fundamental, transformational earth-moving changes that are taking place in museums."<sup>11</sup> Traditionalists, however, decried the amendments as an "ideological manifesto" with a "political tone" that perverted museum operations.<sup>12</sup> These distinct perspectives are continually reproduced in international deliberations and within the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Efforts to navigate these competing perspectives have been riddled with controversy. Museums are criticized for either resisting pressures to change by presenting ostensibly neutral narratives or changing too much by engaging in political activism.<sup>14</sup> Such polarization and mounting challenges to traditional museum practices have created a lacuna in public discourse

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<sup>9</sup> "Museum Definition," *International Council of Museums*, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

<sup>10</sup> ICOM restarted the definition debate in 2021. Zachary Small, "A New Definition of 'Museum' Sparks International Debate," *Hyperallergic* (2019), <https://hyperallergic.com/513858/icom-museum-definition/>; and Geraldine Kendall Adams, "Ideological rift persists as Icom restarts museum definition consultation," *Museum Associations* (2021), <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/03/ideological-rift-persists-as-icom-restarts-museum-definition-consultation/#>.

<sup>11</sup> Alex Marshall, "What Is a Museum? A Dispute Erupts Over a New Definition," *The New York Times* (2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/arts/what-is-a-museum.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Suyin Haynes, "Why a Plan to Redefine the Meaning of 'Museum' Is Stirring Up Controversy," *TIME* (2019), <https://time.com/5670807/museums-definition-debate/>.

<sup>13</sup> Notable domestic examples include museums addressing lynching, the legacies of enslavement, racial history, and class politics. Kate Brown, "Are Art Institutions Becoming Too 'Ideological'? A Debate Breaks Out at the International Council of Museums Over Politics in the Galleries," *Artnet* (2019), <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/icom-museum-definition-debate-1630312>; and Shirley Li, "American Museums Are Going Through an Identity Crisis," *The Atlantic* (2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/11/american-museums-are-going-through-identity-crisis/617221/>.

<sup>14</sup> Willard L. Boyd, "Museums as Centers of Controversy," *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (1999).

whereby museums are accused of either willfully neglecting historical injustices or embracing partisan indoctrination.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, museums—non-profits in particular—must chart a middle way that educates the public on critical perspectives without the overt political advocacy that may undermine institutional credibility.

Clearly demarcating the expectations for museums is essential, since the majority of visitors regard museums as places of unquestioned intellectual authority.<sup>16</sup> They are repositories of objects, stories, information, and knowledge with great cultural, intellectual, and symbolic value and thus hold an elevated status in scholarly communities.<sup>17</sup> Museums are, however, unique in their dissemination of information because there is no identifiable intellectual mouthpiece communicating and framing the exhibitions. In other words, “[W]e do not know who is speaking; the exhibit takes on the quality of an institutional oracle... The time has come to unmask the museum oracle, revealing the people who create exhibits and crediting them at exhibit entrances.”<sup>18</sup> “Institutional oracle” should not be conflated with neutral historical narratives.<sup>19</sup> To borrow the phrasing from a 2017 global advocacy campaign co-produced by La Tanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski, “Museums Are Not Neutral.”<sup>20</sup> For prison museums, both the mention of carceral violence and its intentional omission are political choices that can shape public perception of American incarceration. Institutions of such cultural and intellectual import

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<sup>15</sup> Jillian Steinhauer, “Museums have a duty to be political,” *The Art Newspaper* (2018), <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/03/20/museums-have-a-duty-to-be-political>; and Michael Savage, “Against the Politicisation of Museums,” *Quillette* (2018), <https://quillette.com/2018/05/04/against-the-politicisation-of-museums/>.

<sup>16</sup> “Museums for the New Millennium: A Symposium for the Museum Community,” *Center for Museum Studies, Smithsonian Institution* (Symposium held 5-7 September 1996); Lonnie G. Bunch, “Fighting the Good Fight: Museums in an Age of Uncertainty,” *Museum News* (1995); and Neil Harris, “Exhibiting Controversy,” *Museum News* (1995).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Boyd, “Museums as Centers of Controversy.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> “Museums Are Not Neutral,” <https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com/>.

must therefore operate with the highest degree of transparency if they are to address contemporary political concerns and meaningfully reflect on their own history.

### ***Prison Museums as Dark Heritage***

Prison museums deal specifically with dark heritage and tourism, a subset of cultural heritage. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines cultural heritage as “the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations.”<sup>21</sup> An alternate articulation of cultural heritage is “that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes, be they economic, cultural, political, or social.”<sup>22</sup> Importantly, both definitions imply that objects and sites undergo a kind of cultural selection and social construction in order to assume the added value of identity and thus become heritage.<sup>23</sup> The definitions do, however, suggest different beneficiaries of heritage—“future generations” or “for contemporary purposes”—that, while not mutually exclusive, have severe implications for the value and treatment of dark heritage.

Dark heritage is envisioned as a “conflictual site that becomes the repository of negative memory in the collective imaginary.”<sup>24</sup> Theoretically, a dark heritage site can occupy one of two roles: “[I]t can be mobilized for positive didactic purposes... or alternatively be erased if such places cannot be culturally rehabilitated and thus resist incorporation into the national imaginary.”<sup>25</sup> This dichotomy between cultural rehabilitation and erasure, however, becomes less clear in practice. Consider, for example, Sing Sing Prison Museum. It has the potential to engage

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<sup>21</sup> *Cultural Heritage Preservation: The Past, the Present and the Future*, ed. Tomas Nilson and Kristina Thorell (Halmstad University, 2018), <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1224014/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Brian Graham, “Heritage as Knowledge: Capital or Culture?” *Urban Studies* 39, no. 5/6 (2002).

<sup>23</sup> Christian Barrère, “Cultural heritages: From official to informal,” *City, Culture and Society*, Elsevier (2016).

<sup>24</sup> Lynn Meskell, “Negative Heritage and Past Mastering in Archaeology,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2002), 558.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

visitors in meaningful debate regarding current carceral practices and remember the individuals who suffered there. By the same token, it preforms an uncomfortable bit of spatial transformation—Sing Sing Correctional Facility’s 1825 Cellblock, which was once a space of punishment and anguish, becomes a tourist destination. If the site is not properly contextualized, it may inadvertently glorify carceral abuse and give credence to punitive criminal legal policies.

### ***Prison Museums as Carceral Institutions***

Prison museums are also carceral institutions. They remain forever tethered to the criminal legal system and continue to function as engines of incarceration either through their connection to active prisons or their portrayal of history. Prison museums are, in many cases, visitors’ sole exposure to carceral institutions.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, the people and communities who are most impacted by the criminal legal system are less likely to visit prison museums.<sup>27</sup>

Although the literature remains limited, initial evidence suggests that even brief exposure to museum exhibitions can have a lasting impact on visitors and shape their opinions despite previous experiences and ideological leanings.<sup>28</sup> Prison museums must therefore reckon with several contradictions as they implement reforms. By engaging in dark tourism and developing exhibitions around carceral violence, they may be excluding the very people whose experiences they are trying to recognize. And despite their reluctance to engage with contemporary issues, they may still impact visitors’ perspectives on current criminal legal policies.

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<sup>26</sup> Interviews with Sean Kelley, Lauren Zalut, Matthew Murphy, Marianne Fisher-Giorlando, Nicole Belle DeRise, and Nicole Hamilton.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Although this study considered a transitional justice museum in Chile, its conclusions are relevant to prison museums: “We therefore agree with the notion that symbolic justice can influence citizens’ emotions and subsequent attitudes and behaviors... At the same time, it can draw attention to painful pasts, stir up negative emotions, and highlight prior societal divisions... Where our argument differs from existing accounts is by suggesting that these phenomena need not be at odds with the persuasive effects of these policies. In a nutshell, we anticipate that appraisals of the museum will be driven by ideology but suggest that the museum is nonetheless capable of shifting opinions on salient political issues.” Laia Balcells, Valeria Palanza, and Elsa Voytas, “Do Transitional Justice Museums Persuade Visitors? Evidence from a Field Experiment,” *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 1 (2022), 499.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This thesis uses qualitative research methods to construct a comparative case study of three prison museums in the United States: Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), Sing Sing Prison Museum, and Angola Museum. I systematically reviewed each museum's mission statements, reforms, exhibitions, and programming as well as reports, assessments, and concept designs prepared by consulting agencies. I collected and analyzed all relevant news sources, criticisms, and reviews of the museums prior to, during, and after (if applicable) their physical and substantive changes. I also conducted ten virtual interviews with leadership from all three prison museums. The purpose of these interviews was to gain specific insights and firsthand knowledge of the pressures felt by museums affiliates and to identify the impetuses for changing their exhibitions and operations.

The case studies were deliberately chosen from the total set of prison museums in the United States based on three criteria:

- Financial viability: defined from closed to highly lucrative.
- Public awareness: defined from completely unknown to national tourist attraction.
- Responsiveness: defined from no concrete reform plans to completed reforms.

Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened museums' longstanding financial struggles.<sup>29</sup> Many prison museums have either closed or lack a robust digital presence, meaning they would not be feasible to study. All the selected museums have sufficient funds to remain open for the foreseeable future and support reform initiatives.

Secondly, prison museums must be relatively well-known if they are to contribute to criminal legal debates. Therefore, I did not consider local museums that attract only the surrounding community. ESP, Angola, and Sing Sing are nationally recognized for their

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<sup>29</sup> "Museums, museum professionals and Covid-19: third survey," *ICOM* (2021), [https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Museums-and-Covid-19\\_third-ICOM-report.pdf](https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Museums-and-Covid-19_third-ICOM-report.pdf).

exhibitions or the associated prison. Although internationally renowned, I chose not to research Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay, California—the infamous, now shuttered federal penitentiary operated between 1934 and 1963.<sup>30</sup> There already exists a comprehensive body of scholarship addressing Alcatraz as a dark tourism site and a museum grappling with American incarceration.<sup>31</sup>

Thirdly, I selected museums that are at different stages of implementing reforms. Angola Museum has announced its plans for a new museum but has not made any concrete decisions for exhibitions or content. Sing Sing Prison Museum has provided extensive plans for new exhibitions, content, outreach programs, and interpretative aims; however, it will not open to the public until 2025. ESP has announced, planned, and opened two nationally acclaimed exhibitions related to mass incarceration. These case studies allowed me to assess how various internal and external pressures have resulted in different timelines.

It is important to note that these three museums are located in different states, which introduces significant variability regarding state politics and history. Furthermore, Angola Museum's and Sing Sing Prison Museum's connection to active prisons places them in markedly different circumstances than ESP, a stabilized ruin. That being said, ESP has presented itself as a model for other U.S. prison museums—including Sing Sing and Angola—that want to engage more critically with their controversial histories and foster debate on criminal legal issues. Overall, the conclusion of this thesis discusses the most salient factors affecting ESP, Sing Sing, and Angola as well as their approaches to reform, which may be reasonably generalized to other prison museums.

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<sup>30</sup> “Alcatraz Origins,” *Federal Bureau of Prisons*, <https://www.bop.gov/about/history/alcatraz.jsp>.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., Carolyn Strange and Michael Kempa, “Shades of Dark Tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 30, no. 2 (2003).



## PRISON MUSEUMS IN A POLITICAL MOMENT

Over the past decade, prison museums have, in increasing numbers, begun to critically assess mass incarceration and acknowledge racial and ethnic disparities in the criminal legal system. As recently as October 2021, Alcatraz unveiled a new permanent installation titled *The Big Lockup: Mass Incarceration in the U.S.*, which replaced a 1990s Bureau of Prisons exhibition.<sup>32</sup> Given that prison museums serve as touchstones for the public's understanding of incarceration, they are now being reframed as reflective spaces to confront assumptions about criminality and platforms to elevate the voices and ideas of justice impacted communities.<sup>33</sup>

The following sections detail how Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), Sing Sing Prison Museum, and Angola Museum have each navigated competing political, internal, and external pressures to reexamine their role as both rememberer of and present contributor to the carceral state. The concluding sections then draw similarities across and differences between the three case studies and discuss the importance of professional partnerships and informal knowledge sharing networks for driving change in the prison museum community.

### EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, architect John Haviland envisioned a carceral space whose architecture reflected both Jeremy Bentham's panopticon and the reformist-minded Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons' approach to penal punishment, which argued that solitary confinement and forced labor could most effectively induce behavioral

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<sup>32</sup> "The Big Lockup: Mass Incarceration in the U.S." *National Park Service*, <https://www.nps.gov/goga/thebiglockup.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Megan Cullen Tewell, "Historic Prison Museums and the Promise of the 'New Museology,'" *Theory and Practice* (2018), [https://articles.themuseum scholar.org/2018/06/14/tp\\_vol1tewell/#:~:text=Historic%20prison%20museums%20are%20the,and%20implications%E2%80%94of%20mass%20incarceration.](https://articles.themuseum scholar.org/2018/06/14/tp_vol1tewell/#:~:text=Historic%20prison%20museums%20are%20the,and%20implications%E2%80%94of%20mass%20incarceration.)

changes in incarcerated individuals.<sup>34</sup> The ensuing prison—Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP)—officially opened on October 25, 1829, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Known for institutionalizing solitary confinement and pioneering the penial methodology called the Pennsylvania System, ESP’s incarcerated population was regularly placed in barren and dark cells, confined by straitjackets, tranquilizing chairs, or iron gags, beaten with sticks, forced into cold baths, and given reduced food rations.<sup>35</sup> The penitentiary closed in 1970 and was subsequently abandoned. Following significant preservation work, ESP reopened as a historic site in the 1990s and has since garnered national attention as a prison museum and stabilized ruin.<sup>36</sup>

For about 15 years now, ESP has intentionally positioned itself at the forefront of change for prison museums. Incremental steps to introduce new exhibitions, reform its mission statement, and reimagine public engagement have given ESP a newfound relevancy in criminal legal debates. Although not without criticism, ESP has been steadfast in its commitment to confront mass incarceration and has exercised an unprecedented willingness to recognize its own violent history.<sup>37</sup> Such reform efforts have been driven primarily by internal pressures, assessments, and deliberations since 2007 that challenged museum leadership to question and constantly reassess how its interpretations shaped visitors’ perception of American incarceration.

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<sup>34</sup> “History of Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia,” *Eastern State Penitentiary: A National Historic Landmark*, <https://www.easternstate.org/sites/easternstate/files/inline-files/ESP-history-overview.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Dickens wrote of solitary confinement at ESP, “I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body: and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay.” *American Notes* (1842), chapter 7, “Philadelphia, and Its Solitary Prison,” <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DICKENS/dks7.html>. Also see Ashley Fuchs et al., “Congress must exclude the provision banning transfers from GTMO to the U.S. from the 2022 NDAA,” *The Rule of Law Post* (2021), <https://archive.law.upenn.edu/live/news/11413-congress-must-exclude-the-provision-banning/news/cerl-news>.

<sup>36</sup> “Timeline,” *Eastern State Penitentiary*, <https://www.easternstate.org/research/history-eastern-state/timeline>.

<sup>37</sup> Seth C. Bruggeman, “Reforming the Carceral Past: Eastern state penitentiary and the challenge of the twenty-first-century prison museum,” *Radical History Review* (2012).

Museum leadership has long been aware that the penitentiary's closure did not signify an end to its impact on punitive punishment and practices. The mission statement adopted by the board of directors in December 1999 included the following:

While the interpretive program advocates no specific position on the state of the American justice system, the program is built on the belief that the problems facing Eastern State Penitentiary's architects have not yet been solved, and that the issues these early prison reformers addressed remain of central importance to our nation.<sup>38</sup>

The statement simultaneously provides for and forecloses the possibility of using the past as a vehicle to discuss the present; the opening clause, in no uncertain terms, constrains the museum's interpretative aims by prohibiting any political advocacy related to contemporary criminal legal issues. Thus, ESP maintained a purportedly neutral posture, emphasizing its history and accomplishments in preservation. This is aptly captured in the first iteration of the "The Voices of Eastern State" audio tour—narrated by actor Steve Buscemi and introduced in 2003—where the last stop brought ESP's story to an abrupt close with the penitentiary's shuttering, abandonment, and historic preservation.<sup>39</sup>

Starting in 2007, ESP embarked on a series of self-reflective museum processes, which included a full audience analysis detailing how visitors moved through the building and what they took away from the experience.<sup>40</sup> These efforts culminated in the 2009 interpretative plan that assessed ESP's operations, messaging strategies, and institutional goals. The interpretative plan yielded, *inter alia*, several main themes that leadership and staff identified as central to the museum's mission, one of which was engaging with contemporary issues. They felt that ESP's unique location was an extraordinarily good place to reflect on the prison system today.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "About Eastern State," *Eastern State Penitentiary*, <http://dev.interactivemechanics.com/easternstate/about-eastern-state>.

<sup>39</sup> "Timeline."

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Sean Kelley.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

During the next two years, ESP leadership superimposed these themes onto the building layout, foot trafficking patterns, programming, and art installations. It found that all themes were well represented and distributed throughout the museum except for contemporary issues, which was in low foot traffic areas at the physical fringes of the property and relegated exclusively to artist installations.<sup>42</sup> This distance between ESP's main content and contemporary corrections was previously enshrined in the mission statement. The museum could ostensibly remain neutral if all political perspectives were ascribed to artists' individual voices.

ESP Senior Vice President Sean Kelley and others, although worried that such action would spur dissent from the board of directors and public, decided to incorporate contemporary issues into the main audio tour, where visitor engagement is consistently the highest.<sup>43</sup> In 2012/13, ESP added a final stop showing how Pennsylvania's incarcerated population had drastically increased between 1970 and 2012 with no similar population growth or notable reduction in crime—an prime example of comparative historical analysis.<sup>44</sup> Staff and visitor testing revealed that individuals were more receptive to striking statistical formulas as opposed to discussions of, for example, discrepancies in sentencing lengths over time as a starting point to engage with contemporary issues.<sup>45</sup> This addition was significant for ESP given that mass incarceration was presented in the museum's voice and not outsourced to art installations.

The period from 2014 to 2021 represents the core of ESP's radical transformation, where contemporary criminal legal issues directly informed presentations of the institution's historical origins and incarceration practices.<sup>46</sup> The following developments punctuated these eight years

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., "Incarceration Trends in Pennsylvania," *Vera Institute of Justice*, <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-pennsylvania.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> Interviews with Sean Kelley, Lauren Zalut, and Matthew Murphy.

<sup>46</sup> Shannon Eblen, "A Former Prison Breaks From the System That Built It," *The New York Times* (2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/arts/eastern-state-penitentiary-museum-philadelphia.html>; and Starr Herr-

of progress: unveiling *The Big Graph* and *Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, removing the word “neutral” from the mission statement, reimagining the Halloween event *Terror Behind the Wall* as well as elevating, hiring, and partnering with justice impacted individuals. Museum leadership’s rhetoric, press releases, and media appearances suggest that comparative historical analysis and internal pressures scrutinizing how ESP shaped visitors’ perception of carceral practices drove and accelerated reform.

ESP’s recontextualization efforts and new exhibitions began to erode the institutional neutrality articulated in the 1999 mission statement. As ESP’s aims grew to include contemporary issues, internal reckoning with neutrality became the cornerstone of the museum’s development. Before constructing a granular analysis of ESP’s timeline, it is advantageous to consider claims of neutrality and reform strategies in the context of Confederate statues—another example of controversial heritage in the United States. Debates surrounding Confederate statues are relevant to understanding the political moment prison museums face. Moreover, similarities between ESP’s actions and responses to these statues reveal the complexities and consequences of renegotiating public space both inside and outside museums.

In the report *Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy*, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) identified 1,747 Confederate symbols (e.g., school and park names, flags, monuments, and roads) in public spaces across the United States.<sup>47</sup> The SPLC found that 114 of them were removed between the June 2015 Charleston church shooting and February 2019.<sup>48</sup> Within this timespan, it is worth highlighting the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville,

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Cardillo, “A Prison Reformed: Eastern State Penitentiary Confronts Injustice,” *Hidden City* (2022), <https://hiddencityphila.org/2022/02/a-prison-reformed-eastern-state-penitentiary-confronts-injustice/>.

<sup>47</sup> *Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy* (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019), <https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy#findings>.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

Virginia, which came after the city council's decision to remove the Robert E. Lee statue. The violence, white supremacist chants, and images of torches changed the national calculus regarding the legacy and impact of Confederate symbols; the city became a "national battleground over issues of hate and extremism."<sup>49</sup> In 2020, 168 Confederate symbols were taken down.<sup>50</sup> Importantly, 167 of these removals occurred after the murder of George Floyd, which suggests a concentrated period of reckoning with America's cultural heritage propelled by Black Lives Matter (BLM) and media attention on police brutality against minority communities.<sup>51</sup>

The Confederate statue debates warn against trivializing the relationship between art and politics and thus reaffirm that the past is contested through monuments, museums, art installations, and exhibitions. With this in mind, it is beneficial to examine two prominent arguments supporting Confederate statues. Firstly, arguments that champion a monument's aesthetic beauty cast Confederate figures, who are both remembered and venerated when displayed in public, as apolitical art pieces, even though their achievements are linked to the defense of slavery.<sup>52</sup> Secondly, arguments in favor of preserving the statues as history operate under similar, albeit false, assumptions that history is objective, and art is innocuous. Here, the statues become part of a larger, immutable conception of American identity that celebrates figures' military prowess and leadership at the cost of willfully ignoring their racist ideology.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "Four Years After 'Unite the Right,' Charlottesville Still Struggles to Move On," *The New York Times* (2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/18/us/charlottesville-nc-unite-the-right-rally.html>.

<sup>50</sup> "SPLC Reports Over 160 Confederate Symbols Removed in 2020," *Southern Poverty Law Center* (2021), <https://www.splcenter.org/presscenter/splc-reports-over-160-confederate-symbols-removed-2020>.

<sup>51</sup> *The Preservation of Art and Culture in Times of War*, ed. Claire Finkelstein, Derek Gillman, and Frederik Rosén (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); and Christina Carrega and Karma Allen, "Historians debate America's history of racism and Confederate monuments," *ABC News* (2020), <https://abcnews.go.com/US/historians-debate-americas-sordid-history-racism-confederate-monuments/story?id=71486827#:~:text=Historians%20have%20debated%20the%20issue,oppression%20and%20African%20American%20pain>.

<sup>52</sup> Danielle Kurtzleben and Miles Parks, "Trump Defends 'Beauty' Of Confederate Memorials," *NPR* (2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/17/544137751/trump-defends-beauty-of-confederate-memorials>.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas S. Szayna, "Confederate Statues Symbolize Role of Racism in America," *RAND Corporation* (2020), <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/07/confederate-statues-symbolize-role-of-racism-in-america.html>.

The outcome, in either case, is the same: communities of color are physically absent from public spaces, which can reinforce a sense of political silence.<sup>54</sup>

Political choices dictating representation in public spaces both bolster certain historical narratives—like the Lost Cause of the Confederacy—and have contemporary consequences. In fact, historical remembrance entangles itself with contemporary politics most pointedly in art and exhibitions. This is because monuments and museums exist within a larger, ever-shifting architecture of power in society. They make physical the spectral forces of power, partisanship, and prejudice that inform groups’ sense of self-expression and representation in public discourse. Any one exhibition invariably bares traces of the political environment and influences present at its construction. Importantly, recognizing these political origins and reflecting on how silence and omission are themselves political choices undermine claims of neutrality.

Most Confederate statues were erected between 1895 and World War I by the United Daughters of the Confederacy not to commemorate fallen soldiers, but to further white supremacy ideals and Jim Crow segregation.<sup>55</sup> As University of Chicago history professor Jane Dailey succinctly noted, “Most of the people who were involved in erecting the monuments were not necessarily erecting a monument to the past, [b]ut were rather, erecting them toward a white supremacist future.”<sup>56</sup> Modern interpreters may emphasize the statues’ historical and

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<sup>54</sup> Referring to the Robert E. Lee statue in Kentucky, Sherman Neal II, a coach and resident in the community, powerfully stated, “I am a black male. I am no longer willing to accept state-sponsored symbols of institutional racism in my community.” Thus, even at an individual level, public art is taken to have political significance. Aimee Ortiz and Johnny Diaz, “George Floyd Protests Reignite Debate Over Confederate Statues,” *The New York Times* (2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/us/confederate-statues-george-floyd.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Karen L. Cox, “The whole point of Confederate monuments is to celebrate white supremacy,” *The Washington Post* (2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/08/16/the-whole-point-of-confederate-monuments-is-to-celebrate-white-supremacy/>.

<sup>56</sup> Miles Parks, “Confederate Statues Were Built To Further A ‘White Supremacist Future,’” *NPR* (2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544266880/confederate-statues-were-built-to-further-a-white-supremacist-future>.

commemorative elements; in doing so, they intentionally or inadvertently allow a revisionist narrative of neutrality to expunge the political context that informed the statues' construction.

There have been several approaches to reform within the Confederate statue debates. One approach has been to remove them. Such was the case with the Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson statues in Charlottesville.<sup>57</sup> Another option has been to recontextualize them through the addition of plaques, educational material, and further art installations. In Atlanta, Georgia, for example, a plaque next to the controversial Peace Monument now reads, "This monument should no longer stand as a memorial to white brotherhood; rather, it should be seen as an artifact representing a shared history in which millions of Americans were denied civil and human rights."<sup>58</sup> While each of the aforementioned approaches has its merits, neither purports to undertake the radical project of building something new.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, certain artists, lawyers, and social justice advocates have assumed this mantle—their work draws on the interconnectedness of art and politics to put forth their own historical narrative.

Ghanaian sculptor Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's Blank Slate Palimpsest Monument (also known as the Blank Slate Monument) is pioneering in this regard.<sup>60</sup> Subtitled "A Tribute to African American History in the Face of the Confederacy," the monument depicts the Struggling Mother Activist (holding a placard and baby), standing atop the Lynched Union Soldier Martyr (holding a tattered American flag and memory jug), standing atop the Slave Ancestor.<sup>61</sup> Through

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<sup>57</sup> Ben Paviour, "Charlottesville Removes Robert E. Lee Statue That Sparked A Deadly Rally," *NPR* (2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/10/1014926659/charlottesville-removes-robert-e-lee-statue-that-sparked-a-deadly-rally>.

<sup>58</sup> Hannah Natanson, "There's a new way to deal with Confederate monuments: Signs that explain their racist histories," *The Washington Post* (2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/09/22/theres-new-way-deal-with-confederate-monuments-signs-that-explain-their-racist-history/>.

<sup>59</sup> "Radical" is used not as a pejorative, but as a means to emphasize the impact and gravity of such pursuits.

<sup>60</sup> "A BLANK SLATE," *Blank Slate Monument*, <https://blankslatemonument.com/>. Akoto-Bamfo's work is also featured in the Lynching Memorial.

<sup>61</sup> "Symbolism," *Blank Slate Monument*, <https://blankslatemonument.com/symbolism/>.



this lineage, Akoto-Bamfo gives life and strength to the people that other monuments relegate to historical silence. Such art pieces allow communities of color a physical presence in public spaces, which can then reinforce a sense of political empowerment. In other words, the Blank Slate Monument uses artful remembrance to enable people of the present to speak their truth.

Confederate statues demonstrate how politicized origins undermine present assertions of neutrality and the extricable connection between history and present policy. In these debates, reforms are defined along two main axes: recontextualization efforts where qualifying information is added to preestablished content and new exhibitions geared towards reframing contemporary issues. Such analyses can also be applied to ESP. Considering the penitentiary's profound influence on American penal practice, present claims of neutrality introduce a false sense of distance between ESP and modern criminal legal debates. As elaborated below, ESP's reforms can be charted along the two axes. It has both recontextualized content—e.g., the main audio tour—and built new exhibitions to address contemporary corrections.

Opened to the public on May 9, 2014, *The Big Graph* is a 16-foot sculpture charting the growth of the U.S. incarceration rate since 1900 on the one side and racial disparities in the U.S. prison population on the other.<sup>62</sup> The 1970s, shown in red, is the clear turning point ushering in the era of mass incarceration. President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Crime," Presidents Richard Nixon's and Ronald Reagan's "War on Drugs," and President Bill Clinton's championing of harsh prison reforms such as three strikes laws helped drive this punitive turn.<sup>63</sup> Within the context of ESP's history, 1970 marks the year the prison shut down. The irony is not lost on the

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<sup>62</sup> "The Big Graph," *Eastern State Penitentiary*, <https://www.easternstate.org/explore/exhibits/big-graph>.

<sup>63</sup> Michael S. Sherry, *The Punitive Turn in American Life: How the United States Learned to Fight Crime Like a War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020); and Marie Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

museum visitor. As ESP closed its doors, hundreds if not thousands of facilities constructed in ESP's image opened theirs. Following the exhibition's opening, Kelley emphasized,

Americans are not more violent, they do not commit more crimes than they did—in a significant way—40 years ago. Our laws have changed, and our policing and prosecution have changed. We are much more committed as a country to send people to prison as a response to crime than we were 40 years ago.<sup>64</sup>

Importantly, this deliberate organization of data stops short of interpretation. Museum visitors have the latitude to draw their own conclusions regarding ESP's impact on contemporary policy as they grapple with the affective presentation of statistical data.

The immediate response to *The Big Graph* surprised ESP leadership: “The funders have loved it. The audience has liked it. The board has rallied around it. The staff hated it.”<sup>65</sup> Staff and frontline educators—i.e., individuals responsible for leading tours—were given a year's notice to prepare for the official opening and supplied with extensive educational and research material.<sup>66</sup> They also attended numerous preparatory meetings that catastrophized tours of *The Big Graph* to prepare them for potential public backlash and difficult conversations surrounding racial disparities in the incarcerated population. In particular, several members of museum leadership were concerned that emphasizing racial disparities would inadvertently reinforce stereotypes of Black criminality.<sup>67</sup> Unexpectedly, many frontline educators staunchly resisted the museum taking a political stance. Such deeply entrenched opposition resulted in several firings.<sup>68</sup>

ESP's willingness to be explicit in its interpretations continued with the unveiling of *Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration* in 2016.<sup>69</sup> The exhibition opens with

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<sup>64</sup> Peter Crimmins, “At Eastern State, massive sculpture points to exploding U.S. incarceration rate,” *PBS* (2014), <https://why.org/articles/at-eastern-state-massive-sculpture-illustrates-exploding-us-incarceration-rate/>.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Sean Kelley.

<sup>66</sup> Interviews with Sean Kelley, Lauren Zalut, and Matthew Murphy.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Sean Kelley.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> “Prisons Today,” *Eastern State Penitentiary*, <https://www.easternstate.org/explore/exhibits/prisons-today>.

the provocative phrase, “Mass Incarceration Isn’t Working.”<sup>70</sup> Kelley explained the underlying rationale for the exhibition: “For a major prison site to not mention what’s happening in the American prison system today would be irresponsible. ... I think we actually were irresponsible for a long time by not pushing it harder.”<sup>71</sup> This interpretative leap is significant and won ESP the American Alliance of Museums’ Excellence in Exhibitions award.<sup>72</sup>

ESP’s turn towards present policy required leadership and staff to reassess longstanding notions of neutrality. In fact, the opening of *The Big Graph* and *Prisons Today* so profoundly redefined the museum’s sense of purpose that ESP removed the word “neutral” from its mission statement.<sup>73</sup> Museums officials explained their rationale in the 2016 essay “Beyond Neutrality”:

We believe that the bedrock value that many of us brought into this field—that museums should strive for neutrality—has held us back more than it has helped us. Neutrality is, after all, in the eye of the beholder. At Eastern State, more often than not, the word provided us an excuse for simply avoiding thorny issues of race, poverty and policy that we weren’t ready to address.<sup>74</sup>

In June 2017, the board of directors adopted the new mission statement:

Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site interprets the legacy of American criminal justice reform, from the nation’s founding through to the present day, within the long-abandoned cellblocks of the nation’s most historic prison.<sup>75</sup>

In light of ESP’s politicalized history and impact on current criminal legal debate, neutrality was no longer considered a virtue, but a euphemism for disengagement and negligence.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Peter Crimmins, “Eastern State Penitentiary focus shifts from Al Capone to prison policy,” *PBS* (2016), <https://why.org/articles/eastern-state-penitentiary-focus-shifts-from-al-capone-to-prison-policy/>.

<sup>71</sup> Amy McKeever, “Eastern State Penitentiary and the Critique of Mass Incarceration,” *Pacific Standard* (2017), <https://psmag.com/news/eastern-state-penitentiary-and-the-critique-of-mass-incarceration>.

<sup>72</sup> Nicole Frankhouser, “Taking a Stand: Prisons Today, The Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site Award Winner,” *American Alliance of Museums* (2017), <https://www.aam-us.org/2017/09/27/taking-a-stand-prisons-today-the-eastern-state-penitentiary-historic-site-award-winner/>.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Merritt, “Leading Forward: engaging with complex and controversial topics,” *American Alliance of Museums* (2018), <https://www.aam-us.org/2018/03/15/leading-forward-engaging-with-complex-and-controversial-topics/>.

<sup>74</sup> “Beyond Neutrality,” *American Alliance of Museums* (2016), <https://www.aam-us.org/2016/08/23/beyond-neutrality/>.

<sup>75</sup> “About Eastern State Penitentiary,” *Eastern State Penitentiary*, <https://www.easternstate.org/about-eastern-state>.

<sup>76</sup> *Museum Activism*, ed. Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (Routledge, 2019).

A philosophy of facilitated dialogue has been integral to the aforementioned changes. Tours and public programming are structured to encourage visitor participation and empower them to share their opinions and experiences.<sup>77</sup> As one ESP supervisor and former tour guide commented, “A really good tour of Eastern State feels like a really good conversation. I know I am doing a good job when folks stop talking to me and start talking to each other on their own accord.”<sup>78</sup> Staff training and content development therefore focus heavily on pedagogy, so educators can use this foundation to construct their own tours. The subjectivity of ESP’s unscripted tours allows the staff to update content and relate it to political developments.<sup>79</sup> Every week ESP selects an article dealing with an important criminal legal issue. It is then discussed at meetings and becomes an approved source that can be integrated into programming.<sup>80</sup>

Despite the subjectivity of tours and evaluations, frontline educators are required to visit several locations and meet certain core interpretative standards.<sup>81</sup> They are expected to take visitors to one of the John Haviland era cellblocks, the central rotunda, and inside a cell. In terms of content, they must discuss solitary confinement, give a cradle to grave history of ESP, and highlight the lived experience of at least one person incarcerated at the penitentiary. Furthermore, they must explain why ESP is significant and relate it to contemporary corrections content.<sup>82</sup> Tour guides are also encouraged to ask one to three open-ended questions that are meant to engage visitors.

Subjectivity, however, has created problems with staff members. Several years ago, certain frontline educators became adversarial with visitors and adopted a preachy attitude.<sup>83</sup> As

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<sup>77</sup> Interviews with Lauren Zalut and Matthew Murphy.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Matthew Murphy.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Lauren Zalut.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Matthew Murphy.

<sup>82</sup> ESP has not offered history only tours since 2010/11.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Lauren Zalut.

a result, ESP leadership hosted “visitor empathy training” to reinforce that tours are a two way street, focused on meeting visitors where they are and facilitating “open-minded exchange of ideas across diverse beliefs, cultures and experiences.”<sup>84</sup>

Beginning in earnest around 2016, ESP began hiring and partnering with formerly incarcerated individuals who would have a voice in programming, consulting, hiring practices, visitor engagement, and financial decisions.<sup>85</sup> This led to initiatives such as *Hidden Lives Illuminated* where animated films made by incarcerated individuals were projected onto the front walls of the penitentiary. In fact, Jerome A. Loach, the current supervisor for education and partnerships at ESP, participated in *Hidden Lives Illuminated* while incarcerated.<sup>86</sup> Loach powerfully articulated the importance of integrating local community members and justice impacted individuals directly into museum operations:

Eastern State has given me the opportunity to be the voice for those that don’t have a voice. It is all about who is telling the narrative. ... I’ve been here for the past six or seven months. It changed my whole perspective on museums. Now, if that can change me, I know what it can do to those in my community.<sup>87</sup>

ESP’s interactions with justice impacted communities further elucidate its responsibility to foreground the experiences of those most affected by the carceral state.

ESP’s emphasis on reentry programs and fair chance hiring culminated in its most recent change—the reimagining of its famed and lucrative Halloween event. *Terror Behind the Walls* amounted to a complete spatial transformation of the prison where carceral violence and tragic personal stories were recast as characters in a fright-night style narrative. In 2021, ESP announced that it would drastically reform and rebrand this event as *Halloween Nights*, an

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. This statement is part of the most recent “About Eastern State” webpage, <https://www.easternstate.org/about-eastern-state>, under the subtitle “Welcome to the Conversation!”

<sup>85</sup> Interviews with Lauren Zalut and Matthew Murphy.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Jerome A. Loach.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

immersive festival that includes minimal haunted attractions, a beer garden, cocktail lounges, live music, and more opportunities for visitors to learn about the prison.<sup>88</sup> Such efforts signify ESP's mounting reluctance to sacrifice educational experiences and downplay the prison's history in the name of profit margins.

ESP has maintained a central focus on expanding its visitor population.<sup>89</sup> A 2008 study concluded, "Although Eastern State attracts interest across a much larger age spectrum than most history museums do, by and large its audience consists of well-educated middle- and upper-class white tourists visiting from out of town."<sup>90</sup> ESP leadership confirmed that visitor demographics have largely remained the same for racial and socio-economic classifications.<sup>91</sup> That being said, partnerships with the Philadelphia School District and local organizations have allowed ESP to build more meaningful and deeper ties with the community.<sup>92</sup> Museum leadership has also observed that tour groups are more receptive to discussing criminal legal issues and generally come with a baseline understanding of mass incarceration and racial disparities. Unfortunately, ESP has lost some momentum in its reform initiatives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which approximately 40% of the staff were laid off.<sup>93</sup>

ESP's trajectory since 2007 makes clear how its recontextualizing and reimagining of exhibitions and programming have redefined the prison museum as a deliberative space.

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<sup>88</sup> Peter Crimmins, "From Terror Behind the Walls to Halloween Nights: ESP reimagines annual event," *PBS* (2021), <https://why.org/articles/from-terror-behind-the-walls-to-halloween-nights-esp-reimagines-annual-event/>.

<sup>89</sup> *Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site Strategic Business Plan FY 2017-2021*, [https://www.easternstate.org/sites/easternstate/files/inline-files/ESPHS-StrategicPlan-ExecutiveSummary-ForWeb\\_1.pdf](https://www.easternstate.org/sites/easternstate/files/inline-files/ESPHS-StrategicPlan-ExecutiveSummary-ForWeb_1.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, "Over eighty percent identify as white and well over half have attended college." Bruggeman, "Reforming the Carceral Past."

<sup>91</sup> Interviews with Sean Kelley, Lauren Zalut, and Matthew Murphy.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Hadriana Lowenkron, "Eastern State Penitentiary lays off staff, cancels Terror Behind the Walls for 2020," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (2020), <https://www.inquirer.com/news/eastern-state-penitentiary-terror-behind-the-walls-cancelled-coronavirus-20200618.html>.

Furthermore, its local partnerships and heightened awareness of justice impacted communities have allowed ESP to spotlight contemporary criminal legal issues while servicing currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. These pioneering actions have established ESP as a model for other prison museums—notably, Sing Sing Prison Museum—throughout the United States.

### SING SING PRISON MUSEUM

Sing Sing Correctional Facility is a maximum-security prison in Ossining, New York, whose name has assumed a folkloric quality given the prison's prominence in popular culture, films, theater, and sports as well as its incorporation into the vernacular with phrases such as “up the river.”<sup>94</sup> A contemporary of Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), Sing Sing Correctional Facility championed a competing penial philosophy to the Pennsylvania System's emphasis on solitary confinement known as the Auburn System in which incarcerated individuals worked throughout the day, endured physical punishment, and spent only the night in their cells.<sup>95</sup>

Sing Sing Prison Museum—scheduled to open in 2025 as part of the facility's 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary—will be located directly adjacent to and within the prison. The current museum plans provide for the following three main structures: the 1936 Powerhouse, the 1825 Cellblock, and a secure corridor connecting the two areas through the correctional facility.<sup>96</sup>

Projects looking to develop a prison museum in Ossining span over three decades. In its earliest iteration, Sing Sing Prison Museum was an outgrowth of early 1990s waterfront revitalization and economic development proposals in the Village of Ossining.<sup>97</sup> Since then, the

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<sup>94</sup> “Sing Sing in Print,” *Sing Sing Prison Museum*, <http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/sing-sing-in-print-media.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Hill, “Museum planned at New York prison Sing Sing,” *The Columbian* (2021), <https://www.columbian.com/news/2020/mar/20/museum-planned-at-new-york-prison-sing-sing/>.

<sup>96</sup> “Bird’s-eye View,” *Sing Sing Prison Museum*, <http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/birds-eye-overview.html>.

<sup>97</sup> *Sing Sing Historic Prison Museum Complex Concept Design* (Westchestergov.com, 2009), [http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/uploads/7/8/5/7/78575536/sing\\_sing\\_historic\\_prison\\_interim\\_concept\\_design\\_2009\\_.pdf](http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/uploads/7/8/5/7/78575536/sing_sing_historic_prison_interim_concept_design_2009_.pdf).

project has been interrupted by numerous starts and stops due to logistical hurdles, fundraising issues, and difficulties negotiating with New York State authorities. The year 2014 marked an important turning point after which the newly developed museum board and partnered consulting agencies began the process that will bring the project to fruition. Significant dynamism in the goals for and approaches to Sing Sing Prison Museum defines the period from 2014 to March 2022. Shifting expectations for museums and the recent emphasis on hiring, partnering, and servicing justice impacted individuals have moved the dial on the Sing Sing project from economic development to critically discussing modern American incarceration.

Many of the assessments and plans published prior to 2014 continue to backlight current developments; therefore, it is essential to first signpost Sing Sing Prison Museum's long and complex history. From August to December 2001, ConsultEcon, Inc./Office of Thomas J. Martin with Davidson-Peterson Associates, Inc. and Herbert Sprouse Consulting—serving as economic research and management consultants—prepared a report titled *Market Potential for Sing Sing Historic Prison*.<sup>98</sup> Situating the prison museum within Hudson River Valley tourism, the report outlined the project's socioeconomic benefits, logistics, target market, and overall aims.<sup>99</sup> It also described four main exhibitions: *Sing Sing and the Genesis of the American Prison*, which would focus on penal punishment from colonial America to 1820; *Up the River*, which would serve as the walkway between the Powerhouse and historic cellblock and allow visitors to experience the prison's 19<sup>th</sup> century intake processes; *Cellblock*, which would use the ruins to frame historical

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<sup>98</sup> In the report, Angola, ESP, Alcatraz, and West Virginia Penitentiary were listed as comparable prison museums.

<sup>99</sup> *Market Potential for Sing Sing Historic Prison*, (ConsultEcon, Inc./Office of Thomas J. Martin, 2001), [http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/uploads/7/8/5/7/78575536/market\\_potential\\_for\\_sing\\_sing\\_historic\\_prison.pdf](http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/uploads/7/8/5/7/78575536/market_potential_for_sing_sing_historic_prison.pdf).



discussions of prison life; and *Death House/Sing Sing Today*, which would focus on capital punishment and its evolution to the present day.<sup>100</sup>

At this time, the prison museum was conceptualized in economic development and historical terms. In a section titled “Appeals and Drawbacks,” the report stated, “The most significant appeal of the museum is its potential ability to offer an *interesting historical* and *educational* experience. Most believe it will help teach children of the dangers of crime and feel they will also learn.”<sup>101</sup> Sing Sing’s educational value was therefore associated with deterrence and providing insights into punishment and incarceration from a distant perspective.

The same approach persisted through 2007 when students from the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University published *Sing Sing Historic Prison Museum: Assessment of Economic Impacts and Planning Framework*. The report assessed the museum’s potential benefits for the Hudson River Valley, Westchester County, and Ossining through its “economic impacts; the existing regional tourism market and resources; access, parking and transportation; and connectivity of the museum site to downtown Ossining.”<sup>102</sup> “Positioned to become a significant regional attraction,” stakeholders framed the project as a driver of tourism and economic growth in the region.<sup>103</sup>

In 2009, the Westchester County Department of Planning released the *Sing Sing Historic Prison Museum Complex Concept Design*—a revision of the 2000 *Sing Sing Historic Prison Interim Design Concept* prepared by DMCD Incorporated and Li Saltzman Architects, PC. Similar to previous reports, it analyzed economic development and outlined the three

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. Original emphasis.

<sup>102</sup> *Sing Sing Historic Prison Museum: Assessment of Economic Impacts and Planning Framework* (Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University, 2007), [http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/uploads/7/8/5/7/78575536/sing\\_sing\\_historic\\_prison\\_museum\\_assessment\\_of\\_economic\\_impacts\\_and\\_planning\\_framework.pdf](http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/uploads/7/8/5/7/78575536/sing_sing_historic_prison_museum_assessment_of_economic_impacts_and_planning_framework.pdf).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

components of the Sing Sing Historic Prison Museum Complex: Sing Sing Historic Prison Museum Exhibit, 1825 Cellblock Historic Site, and Archives and Research Library.<sup>104</sup> The report also brought into high relief the dynamics governing the relationship between the museum and Sing Sing Correctional Facility:

[T]he exhibitory must not present content that could be deemed offensive to the current Sing Sing staff, inmates and those who visit them. Accordingly, as the facility's name makes clear, the main focus of the interpretive material will be on Sing Sing's past and the interpretation will not go beyond its working life, which came to an end in 1943.<sup>105</sup>

Built into the project's fabric was an understanding that exhibitions, content, and programming would, in the process of retelling Sing Sing's history, refrain from criticizing and/or challenging the correctional facility and the criminal legal system it shaped.<sup>106</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the artifact list for *Sing Sing to the Twenty-First Century* and *Sing Sing Today* included only three items: newsletters, weightlifting equipment, and educational materials.<sup>107</sup>

Progress on Sing Sing Prison Museum was soon derailed due to the Great Recession (2007-2009). It was not until 2014 that preparations, funding, personnel, and momentum once again converged around the project. Current museum leadership identified three critical factors that both reinvigorated and reimagined the Sing Sing project.<sup>108</sup> Firstly, New York State Assemblywoman Sandy Galef (D-Westchester/Putnam) made legislative funding available for project planning and renovation costs.<sup>109</sup> Secondly, Brent Glass, former director of the

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<sup>104</sup> The museum's main sections echo those given in the 2000 *Sing Sing Historic Prison Museum Complex Concept Design: Sing Sing and the Genesis of the American Prison, Up the River, Cellblock 1825-1943, and Death House/Sing Sing Today*.

<sup>105</sup> 1943 refers to the year the 1825 Cellblock closed.

<sup>106</sup> Dana Levenberg, Ossining town supervisor and museum board member, reflected, "There was pushback in talking about what was happening in criminal justice or what's happening in prisons in general when you're right next to an operating prison. ... It was a sensitive subject." Emily Nonko, "Can This Prison Museum Tell the Full Story of Mass Incarceration?" *Next City* (2021), <https://nextcity.org/features/can-this-prison-museum-tell-the-full-story-of-mass-incarceration>.

<sup>107</sup> *Sing Sing Historic Prison Museum: Assessment of Economic Impacts and Planning Framework*.

<sup>108</sup> Interviews with Brent Glass, Nicole Belle DeRise, and Nicole Hamilton.

<sup>109</sup> In 2014, Senator Chuck Schumer (D-New York) also endorsed plans to open the Sing Sing Prison Museum: "We have the potential here to create the Alcatraz of the East, a tourist destination that could attract hundreds of

Smithsonian National Museum of American History and accomplished public historian, was hired to spearhead the project. Thirdly, a board of trustees was formed to provide structure and guidance. Although less consequential, Lord Cultural Resources was hired to devise a strategic plan and Jan Hird Pokorny to conduct a preservation assessment around 2015/16.

The 2016 *Museum Program Plan* developed by Lord Cultural Resources presented a vision for Sing Sing Prison Museum reminiscent of ESP, thereby signifying a radical departure from previous versions of the project.<sup>110</sup> The four goals established by the board of directors and later incorporated into the mission statement pointedly captured the museum's shifting focus:

1. De-sensationalize and humanize the stories of the prison impacted: Become a prominent voice in the national conversation about social and criminal justice.
2. Challenge what it means to be a prison museum: Become the leading prison museum in the U.S., with a facility of architectural distinction and a reputation of outstanding programs.
3. Listen to and uplift those living the experience daily: Have a positive impact on the incarcerated, workers, victims, and families.
4. Revitalize Ossining: Stimulate local and regional economic development in the Hudson Valley and the village of Ossining.<sup>111</sup>

Not only was economic development listed fourth (in the *Museum Program Plan* it was listed third), but it was also dwarfed by the board's social justice aims and desire to engage with justice impacted communities and contribute to contemporary debate. In fact, the plan features "Joy and Happiness in the Morning"—a poem written by Roger Porcelli, while he was incarcerated.<sup>112</sup>

The plan details a comprehensive approach to reform that considers diverse stakeholders, confronts the facility's history, proposes community outreach programs, and seeks to elevate the

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thousands, maybe even millions of tourists each year." Allison Dunne, "Senator Schumer Backs Sing Sing Museum Plan," *WAMC Northeast Public Radio* (2014), <https://www.wamc.org/hudson-valley-news/2014-07-01/senator-schumer-backs-sing-sing-museum-plan>.

<sup>110</sup> *Volume One: Museum Program Plan* (Lord Cultural Resources, 2016), [http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/uploads/7/8/5/7/78575536/singsingprisonmuseum\\_volumeone\\_2016\\_public\\_web.pdf](http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/uploads/7/8/5/7/78575536/singsingprisonmuseum_volumeone_2016_public_web.pdf).

<sup>111</sup> "Mission Statement," *Sing Sing Prison Museum*, <http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/mission-statement.html>.

<sup>112</sup> *Volume One: Museum Program Plan*.

voices of those directly impacted by carceral violence.<sup>113</sup> This language reflects a new understanding of prison museums as playing a vital role in present criminal legal debates. These conceptual changes also manifested physically in the proposed content and exhibitions.

Visitor experience at Sing Sing Prison Museum will be bookended by a discussion of contemporary criminal legal issues. Visitors will first encounter *Sing Sing Prison Today*, an exhibition that draws from the lived experience of incarcerated individuals, their families, law enforcement officials and victims, and other community members to convey the magnitude of Sing Sing's impact on modern prison practice.<sup>114</sup> Shortly thereafter, visitors will see *1 in 100: Incarceration in America*, an affective statistical interpretation and timeline similar to *The Big Graph* in its critical reflections on mass incarceration.<sup>115</sup> Made explicit through exhibitory content is the fact that 95% of individuals incarcerated in Sing Sing will eventually be released.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, visitors will be challenged to reconsider their preconceptions surrounding rehabilitation, the goals of incarceration, and their potentially stereotyped understandings of prison life. Although exhibits and content may be subject to change, the articulations and formulations presented in the 2016 plan represent a change in approach and mindset that has taken root in the project and drastically altered its nature.

Museum leadership along with community partners and stakeholders pressured Sing Sing Prison Museum to integrate social justice aims and activist practices throughout its different spaces. The 2016 plan, for example, relied heavily on statements, feedback, and writings from

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<sup>113</sup> "Can This Prison Museum Tell the Full Story of Mass Incarceration?"

<sup>114</sup> *Volume One: Museum Program Plan*.

<sup>115</sup> Executive Director Brent Glass said in an interview for this thesis, "I am most interested in documenting the last 50 years of Sing Sing's history from 1970 to the present because that is clearly the break. That is what you see in Eastern State's *Big Graph*. You see a dramatic change in the incarceration rate in this country."

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*.

community meetings, interviews, workshops, high school students, and focus groups.<sup>117</sup> These conversations yielded five main points that the community felt it was essential for Sing Sing Prison Museum to address: humanizing incarcerated populations and correctional employees (and including them directly in museum programming), making clear the prison's significance, incorporating multiple perspective, addressing fraught subjects (e.g., mass incarceration), and economic development.<sup>118</sup>

Especially since 2019/20, Sing Sing Prison Museum has prioritized involving individuals impacted by the criminal legal system in museum operations and projects. Executive Director Brent Glass affirmed that “the connection between Sing Sing’s history, which is so extraordinary, and current issues surrounding criminal justice, mass incarceration, sentencing, and prison life are becoming more and more important than when I first got involved with the project.”<sup>119</sup> There are two formerly incarcerated individuals on the board and the wife of someone incarcerated at Sing Sing, all of whom have been instrumental to decision-making.<sup>120</sup>

Most efforts intended to penetrate Sing Sing’s walls—e.g., interviews, oral histories, and podcasts similar to “Ear Hustle” at San Quentin State Prison—were delayed with the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>121</sup> Museum staff therefore shifted its focus towards increasing its digital presence and

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<sup>117</sup> *Volume Two: Supporting Documentation* (Lord Cultural Resources, 2016), [http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/uploads/7/8/5/7/78575536/singsingprisonmuseum\\_volumetwo\\_public\\_web.pdf](http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/uploads/7/8/5/7/78575536/singsingprisonmuseum_volumetwo_public_web.pdf).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Brent Glass.

<sup>120</sup> Museum leaders estimated that 10-15% of the Sing Sing population will want to get involved with and advise on museum programming. They also anticipated that a small percentage of correctional staff and a large portion of Sing Sing’s volunteer network will contribute to the museum. As Glass made clear, “There is a population within the facility that will be considered stakeholders.” Importantly, Sing Sing Superintendent Michael Capra is open to having an advisory board drawn from the incarcerated population to guide the museum in telling the current story of mass incarceration. Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Museum leadership “hoped fellows would conduct and record interviews with others impacted by the prison — formerly incarcerated people, their family members, volunteers and staff of the prison — so those stories could be integrated into the museum narrative.” “Can This Prison Museum Tell the Full Story of Mass Incarceration?”

speaking with returning citizens in partnership with Columbia University's Center for Justice.<sup>122</sup> As organizations such as Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, Rehabilitation Through the Arts, Fortune Society, and Osborne Association resume work in Sing Sing Correctional Facility, the museum will continue to establish productive partnerships and deepen its engagement with currently incarcerated individuals.<sup>123</sup>

Sing Sing Prison Museum has also turned its gaze toward Ossining to pursue partnerships and educational opportunities. In addition to developing two school curricula on mass incarceration, museum leadership has maintained an acute awareness of local demographics and economic hardships. For example, around 44% of the population is Hispanic.<sup>124</sup> In 2021, the museum received a grant to reimagine a community center exhibition, which they made assessable through bilingual content.<sup>125</sup> They have also conducted oral histories in Spanish.<sup>126</sup> Even though the Sing Sing project is no longer cast in purely economic development terms, revitalizing and reaching out to the community remains central to its mission.

In response to the community perspectives featured in the 2016 *Museum Program Plan*, museum leadership and staff have been developing exhibitory content. Reform is baked into the identity of the Sing Sing Correctional Facility as evidenced by the Mt. Pleasant Female Prison in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Mutual Welfare League in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Warden Lewis Lawes who became a national leader in reform as well as the introduction of theater, baseball, radio, and television into prison life.<sup>127</sup> Reform in the historical sense, according to Glass, gives the museum an avenue to talk about reform today.<sup>128</sup> For example, the staff is considering an

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<sup>122</sup> Interviews with Brent Glass, Nicole Belle DeRise, and Nicole Hamilton.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Data is available at <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/ossining-ny>.

<sup>125</sup> Interviews with Brent Glass, Nicole Belle DeRise, and Nicole Hamilton.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Brent Glass.

exhibition titled *From Cholera to COVID* to connect and contrast past and present health conditions in Sing Sing.

Central to Sing Sing's post-2014 evolution is a hyperawareness not to sensationalize prison life, notable escapes, and capital punishment.<sup>129</sup> Although these topics will be discussed, they will not serve as the museum's principal focus—this privilege is reserved for artists, activists, creators, community leaders, and justice impacted individuals who are critically assessing contemporary criminal legal issues and American carceral practices.

The Sing Sing project has, however, encountered significant logistical difficulties stemming from its negotiations with the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision and New York State regulatory agencies. Importantly, the museum is not connected to or governed by the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision—an arrangement that contrasts sharply with Angola Museum, as discussed in the next section. Museum leadership agreed that oversight has been confined to title, land ownership, and occupancy issues that inevitably arise when constructing a museum in a maximum-security prison.<sup>130</sup>

This is especially true for the current negotiations surrounding the 1936 Powerhouse, which still contains a steam plant that heats the facility and a mechanics garage where the facility's vehicles are maintained and repaired. A previous arrangement stipulated that if the museum were to take over the Powerhouse, it must build a new garage for the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.<sup>131</sup> Such new construction projects are not only expensive but also trigger an array of bureaucratic processes, which include negotiating fees with the New York State Office of General Services and addressing zoning issues.<sup>132</sup> Aside from the

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<sup>129</sup> 614 individuals were executed at Sing Sing.

<sup>130</sup> Interviews with Brent Glass, Nicole Belle DeRise, and Nicole Hamilton.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, the Sing Sing project has also been in conversation with Westchester County, the Town of Ossining, and the Village of Ossining, all of which have created obstacles to establishing a brick-and-mortar museum.<sup>133</sup>

Fundraising remains a central concern for Sing Sing Prison Museum, which, according to various estimates, requires a \$45 million budget for construction and renovations.<sup>134</sup> The museum possesses approximately \$6 million to begin renovations at the 1936 Powerhouse; however, the corridor and access to the cellblock are not yet funded.<sup>135</sup> The immediate financial priority is to gather the requisite funds to move the mechanics garage and other functions currently housed in the Powerhouse to a new location. Given persistent financial constraints, museum leadership is catastrophizing location scenarios and scouting other sites in Ossining that would allow them to begin renovations.<sup>136</sup> Having some physical presence would enable the museum to prototype exhibits and programming and thus generate additional funding.

The Sing Sing project's prolonged timeline captures the shifting expectations for prison museums within the context of a single case study—what began as an economic development project later evolved into a platform designed to examine contemporary criminal legal issues. If the museum was to remain viable and receive community support, it had to connect Sing Sing's history to current carceral practice and partner with incarcerated individuals. While these lofty goals harken back to ESP's revised mission statement, Sing Sing Prison Museum must contend with logistical considerations given its location next to and within the correctional facility.

Overall, the museum's relationship to Sing Sing Correctional Facility has increased costs and

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> "Can This Prison Museum Tell the Full Story of Mass Incarceration?"

<sup>135</sup> The Sing Sing project has received, *inter alia*, state funding and grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and American Express. Interviews with Brent Glass, Nicole Belle DeRise, and Nicole Hamilton.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.



complicated construction but allowed it to adopt a set of ambitious and progressive interpretative aims. It is now worthwhile to turn to Angola Museum, whose complex relationship with the adjacent penitentiary severely impacts its interpretive aims and hinders reform.

### ANGOLA MUSEUM

Angola Museum is located directly adjacent to Louisiana State Penitentiary (LSP), the largest maximum-security prison in the United States, and within the approximately 18,000 acres of prison property in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. Established in 1997 under the supervision of Warden Burl Cain, the museum's initial design and exhibitions were heavily influenced by individuals working in or affiliated with corrections.<sup>137</sup> The Texas Prison Museum, opened in Huntsville, Texas, in 1989, served as a blueprint for the Angola Museum.<sup>138</sup> In both cases, the exhibitions tended to overemphasize incarcerated individuals' crimes and disciplinary infractions, portraying them in a singular, vilified light.<sup>139</sup> Clint Smith, one of Angola's most vocal critics, described how the museum "almost relentlessly, depicted images of violence," making clear that to unveil Angola's institutional oracle is to reveal a narrative crafted predominantly by corrections employees.<sup>140</sup>

The Angola Museum is supported by the LSP Museum Foundation, which has a cooperative endeavor agreement with the Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections.<sup>141</sup> Considered a shared public interest, both the museum and penitentiary were recognized for their financial, cultural, and historic importance to Louisiana tourism.

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<sup>137</sup> Interview with Marianne Fisher-Giorlando.

<sup>138</sup> "About Our Museum," *Texas Prison Museum*, <https://www.txprisonmuseum.org/about-us>.

<sup>139</sup> See, e.g., Lianne Hart, "A New Museum Shows Death Penalty as a Way of Life," *Los Angeles Times* (2002), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-nov-17-na-prison17-story.html>.

<sup>140</sup> Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, 91.

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Sheryl Ranatza.

Approximately 8,000 to 9,000 visitors tour the prison annually.<sup>142</sup> As stipulated in the agreement, the Department of Corrections provides for the museum's rent, facilities, utilities, insurance, security, and grounds maintenance.<sup>143</sup> The LSP Museum Foundation organizes and hosts programming, fundraises, and coordinates all tours for the penitentiary.<sup>144</sup>

The Angola Museum's defining feature and a significant hindrance to reform is the proximity between the museum and the penitentiary, which manifests itself in physical space, interpersonal relationships, and individuals occupying multiple positions that span interpretative museum responsibilities and correctional duties. The notorious descriptor "Angola: A Gated Community"—which still adorns t-shirts, coffee mugs, and reusable bottles in the museum gift shop—aptly captures Angola's close-knit, closed-off institutional culture. During his 21-year tenure (1995-2016), Warden Cain was intent on controlling and carefully monitoring all of Angola's public relations, messaging, and representation in media, film, and news coverage.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, Angola boasts high rates of intergenerational employment and longstanding ties to local families, as evidenced by interviews, media reports, and most recently the "Meet Angola: Behind the Gates" Facebook series.<sup>146</sup> Institutional norms are more likely to crystalize than constantly evolve in such environments built on continuity.

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<sup>142</sup> Visitors include middle school, high school, and university students as well as white, middle-upper class individuals. Furthermore, Angola hosts more than 10,000 attendees at its annual rodeo—the longest-running prison rodeo in the United States. Clint Smith, *Letter* (2018); and interview with Sheryl Ranatza. For additional discussion of the Angola Rodeo, see Jessica Adams, "'The Wildest Show in the South': Tourism and Incarceration at Angola," *The Drama Review* 45 (2001).

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Sheryl Ranatza.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> James Ridgeway, "God's Own Warden: If you ever find yourself inside Louisiana's Angola prison, Burl Cain will make sure you find Jesus – or regret ever crossing his path," *Prison Legal News* (2012); Wilbert Rideau, *In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Redemption* (Vintage, 2010); and *The Farm: Angola, USA* (1998).

<sup>146</sup> See, e.g., Laura Sullivan, "Doubts Arise About 1972 Angola Prison Murder," *NPR* (2008), <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96030547>.

The composition of LSP Museum Foundation leadership—i.e., officers of the foundation/executive committee (the terminology varies), board of directors, and advisory board—since 2016 makes clear the predominance of voices with corrections experience. *Table 1* summarizes the proportion of LSP Museum Foundation leadership affiliated with corrections, which broadly encompasses wardens, sheriffs, district attorneys, judges as well as individuals previously or currently employment at LSP, Department of Public Safety & Corrections, Board of Pardons & Parole, Office of Juvenile Justice, and other correctional facilities. Such categorizations are intended not to undermine these individuals’ perspectives, but rather as a point of contrast to other prison museums whose boards have been intentionally diversified to include historians, preservationists, social justice and community activists, formerly incarcerated individuals, and a minority of corrections-affiliated personnel.

**Table 1**

<b>Proportion of LSP Museum Foundation Leadership Affiliated with Corrections<sup>147</sup></b>						
Fiscal Year*	Officers of the Foundation/Executive Committee		Board of Directors		Advisory Board	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
2016-17	3/4	75%	9/13	~70%	7/13	~54%
2017-18	3/5	60%	8/12	~67%	7/13	~54%
2018-19	3/5	60%	8/12	~67%	7/13	~54%
2019-20	3/5	60%	7/11	~64%	8/14	~58%
2020-21	4/5	80%	5/13	~39%	--	--
Website	4/6	~67%	5/12	~42%	--	--

\* *Fiscal year is defined from July 1 to June 30 of the following year.*

In all but two categories, corrections-affiliated personnel formed the majority perspective in the officers of the foundation/executive committee, board of directors, and advisory board. It

<sup>147</sup> This analysis is based on five LSP Museum Foundation annual reports and current listings on the Angola Museum website, which are available at <https://www.angolamuseum.org/foundation>. This chart does not address leadership changes or turnover; therefore, continuity in the number of positions does not imply that the same individuals held those positions each year. With that being said, 10 of the 18 individuals listed in the 2020-21 annual report also appear in the 2016-17 annual report.

is reasonable to conclude that working as a warden, sheriff, etc. inculcates, through both training and in some cases decades worth of experience, an understanding of the criminal legal system from a perspective of power and authority. When coupled with a lack of racial, gender, and age diversity, this leadership structure prevents Angola from centering justice impacted individuals, effectively responding to outside criticisms, and reflecting on its exhibitory content.<sup>148</sup> Notably, Norris Henderson—who was formerly incarcerated and now serves as the founder and executive director of Voice of the Experienced—joined the board of directors in 2021, which represents initial attempts to diversify museum leadership.<sup>149</sup>

Angola has long come under national scrutiny as the “bloodiest prison”—a reputational stain that Warden Cain further complicated through his religious initiatives, celebrated violence reduction, ordered beatings and use of solitary confinement, threats towards journalists, and unethical business deals leading to his 2016 resignation.<sup>150</sup> Despite these controversies, museum leadership spoke of a paradigm shift at the prison over the past decade that has had resonant effects on the museum.<sup>151</sup> Once embracing a “we just house them” mentality, Angola has started to transition away from the language of “inmates” and “convicts” towards “offenders” and “returning citizens” to refer to its incarcerated population.<sup>152</sup> This shift alone, however, did not prompt any notable changes in programming, exhibits, or content prior to 2016.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Interviews with Sheryl Ranatza and Marianne Fisher-Giorlando.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with Mandi Sanchez.

<sup>150</sup> Maurice Chammah, “What Angola's Resigning Warden Is Leaving Behind,” *The Marshall Project* (2015), <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/12/14/the-final-judgment-of-burl-cain>.

<sup>151</sup> Interviews with Sheryl Ranatza and Mandi Sanchez.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with Sheryl Ranatza.

<sup>153</sup> That is not to say there was no recognition of racial injustice prior to 2016. For example, Joanne Ryan and Stephanie L. Perrault (member of the LSP Museum Foundation board of directors) co-authored a research study titled *Angola: Plantation to Penitentiary* as part of the Preserving Louisiana's Heritage series funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers New Orleans District. These observations, however, did not gain enough traction to be meaningfully incorporated into museum operations, programming, and exhibitions. See [https://www.crt.state.la.us/Assets/OCD/archaeology/discoverarchaeology/virtual-books/PDFs/Angola\\_Pop.pdf](https://www.crt.state.la.us/Assets/OCD/archaeology/discoverarchaeology/virtual-books/PDFs/Angola_Pop.pdf).

Compared to the previous two decades of operation, the period from 2016 to March 2022 is marked by incremental change for Angola Museum. Public backlash against the museum's exhibitions and tours has centered almost exclusively on Angola's failure to reckon with its history as a slave plantation and acknowledge persistent racial disparities in its incarcerated population—approximately 75% of whom are Black.<sup>154</sup> The amalgam of political pressures underpinning Angola's reform efforts are encapsulated in Clint Smith's 2018 letter to the board of directors. Although this was the primary catalyst for change, it is important to recognize the impact of the Whitney Plantation opening as a museum, Confederate statue debates, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, racialized historiographies similar to the 1619 Project, and the work of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) on Angola's changing programs. These pressures led Angola to announce on November 2, 2021, its plans for a new museum to be housed in the old Tunica Elementary School, several miles down the road from the current location.<sup>155</sup>

Museums do not operate and reform as a cohesive unit; individual personalities and relationships can have significant bearing on institutional decision-making. In the case of Angola, however, overlap between museum and penitentiary operations have created a certain degree of cohesive thought where individuals either occupy multiple positions that span both interpretative museum responsibilities and correctional duties or share similar experiences working in the prison system. One member of LSP Museum Foundation leadership described this overlap as “a really good working relationship” and felt such dual appointments did not

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<sup>154</sup> “Slavery, the Prison Industrial Complex: Photographs by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick,” *Frist Art Museum* (2018), <https://fristartmuseum.org/exhibition/slavery-the-prison-industrial-complex-photographs-by-keith-calhoun-and-chandra-mccormick/>

<sup>155</sup> “A New Angola Museum,” *Angola Museum* (2021), <https://www.angolamuseum.org/the-museum-blog/2021/11/2/a-new-angola-museum>.

create conflicts of interest.<sup>156</sup> In practice, however, this arrangement seems to have foreclosed early opportunities for museum reform regarding Angola’s controversial and brutal history.

Angola has long “danced around” issues related to racial disparities in the criminal legal system and its history as a slave plantation.<sup>157</sup> At times, however, disregard bordered on intentional silencing. Prior to the 2016 symposium titled “Angola Bound Revisited: Prison Music of Louisiana,” an executive committee member was explicitly told, “There would be none of that slavery stuff,” referencing the work songs that formed the foundation of prison music.<sup>158</sup> This exchange occurred months after Warden Cain left the prison and as staff was dealing with financial scandals from his tenure. Charles Neville, one of the symposium’s featured participants, squarely addressed issues of race and slavery; however, this does not negate the museum’s attempts to expunge considerations of race from Angola’s history.

The following fiscal year (2017-18), Angola Museum began to confront these issues more directly with its biennial symposium focused on prison reform and reentry programs and by creating the *History of Angola Plantation* land exhibit.<sup>159</sup> The most substantial changes, however, began in fiscal year 2018-2019. In fall 2018, recipients of the Art for Justice Fund—a donor collaborative managed by the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors—convened for a three-day event in New Orleans, Louisiana, on the future of criminal legal reform. Grants had been awarded to organizations focused on addressing the harms of racial bias and mass incarceration. During the event, recipients were able to take a field trip, so approximately sixteen high profile social justice advocates, criminal legal scholars, artists,

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<sup>156</sup> Interview Sheryl Ranatza.

<sup>157</sup> Interview with Marianne Fisher-Giorlando.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> *LA State Penitentiary Museum Foundation FY 2017-2018 Annual Report*, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c5cb39fe5f7d13637acff9/t/5dbc97c955d2e25fcd1572eb/1572640713763/FY+17-18+Annual+Report.pdf>.

authors, lawyers, and prison museum employees traveled to Angola for a tour of the penitentiary and museum. During the tour, one person inquired why slavery was not meaningfully discussed as part of Angola's history; the tour guide responded with something to the effect of, "Well, you can Google it."<sup>160</sup> The group found this comment and the omission of Angola's racialized history to be particularly striking as they observed incarcerated individuals—most of whom were Black—working the agricultural fields under the supervision of white corrections officers on horseback.<sup>161</sup>

After the tour, the group debated how it could propel change at Angola. With Clint Smith as the lead signatory, the group sent a letter to Gary Young, assistant warden and member of the LSP Museum Foundation, on November 30, 2018. The letter urged "Angola to be more direct and forthright in addressing the institution's long history to the relationship of slavery and institutional racism."<sup>162</sup> In a direct rebuke of the tour, the group voiced their concern that "without being proactively guided through that history by the institution itself, visitors who are not cognizant of that history will not even know that it is something they should be aware of."<sup>163</sup> The letter also emphasized "how closely the past and present of racial injustice are intertwined" on the issues of slavery, Jim Crow, and current carceral practices at Angola.<sup>164</sup> Importantly, the letter cited the Whitney Plantation and the Legacy Museum as comparative models that Angola should reference in order to reckon with its history and "move forward successfully, instead of repeating past injustices."<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Interview with Marianne Fisher-Giorlando; and Smith, *Letter*.

<sup>161</sup> Interviews with Sean Kelley and Marianne Fisher-Giorlando.

<sup>162</sup> Smith, *Letter*.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

Reframing incarceration at Angola as a modern iteration of slavery—as the November 2018 letter suggests—represents a racially focused historiography that gained national recognition with *The New York Times* 1619 Project. Similar publications such as “How the 13th Amendment Kept Slavery Alive: Perspectives From the Prison Where Slavery Never Ended” and “American Slavery, Reinvented” constitute a school of thought where present injustice is understood as part of a 400-year lineage of oppression.<sup>166</sup> In a museum context, both the Whitney Plantation in Louisiana—the “only museum in Louisiana with an exclusive focus on the lives of enslaved people”—and the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration in Montgomery, Alabama, which was established by Bryan Stevenson and EJI as a companion to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (also known as the Lynching Memorial), have unequivocally embraced this approach.<sup>167</sup> This thesis focuses on the latter given that Angola leadership has both traveled to and been in contact with individuals affiliated with the Legacy Museum and its focus on connecting slavery to modern criminal legal issues.<sup>168</sup>

Bryan Stevenson and EJI have significantly bolstered the acceptance and legitimacy of such social justice projects. Their work on the Lynching Memorial—built on the site of a former slave warehouse—is unprecedented in its use of art, sculpture, archival research, and political commentary to challenge historical silences. Opened to the public on April 26, 2018, the Lynching Memorial foregrounds the identities of individual victims—many of whom have never been named publicly—in its broader reflection on the horrific practice and destructive legacy of

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<sup>166</sup> Daniele Selby, “How the 13th Amendment Kept Slavery Alive: Perspectives From the Prison Where Slavery Never Ended,” *Innocence Project* (2021), <https://innocenceproject.org/13th-amendment-slavery-prison-labor-angola-louisiana/#>; Whitney Bennis, “American Slavery, Reinvented,” *The Atlantic* (2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/prison-labor-in-america/406177/>; and “History of Angola,” *Angola Museum*, <https://www.angolamuseum.org/history-of-angola>.

<sup>167</sup> “Whitney Plantation,” <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/>; “The National Memorial for Peace and Justice,” *Equal Justice Initiative*, <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial>; and “The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration,” *Equal Justice Initiative*, <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/museum>.

<sup>168</sup> Interview with Sheryl Ranatza.



lynching in the United States.<sup>169</sup> At the memorial's center is a cloister, where visitors observe 800 steel columns attached to stone blocks engraved with the names of American counties and the people lynched there.<sup>170</sup> The blocks first appear attached to the ground. As the floor lowers, the blocks steadily rise until they hang overhead. This configuration initially separates the visitor from the victims. The visitor stands amongst the headstones of lynching victims, looking at the past as one does in a graveyard. By the end, however, the visitor is forced to gaze up at the dangling stones. They become participants in the public murder, collapsing the silence that divides the past and present.

On September 29, 2021, EJI unveiled the Legacy Museum, which deals specifically with the modern resonances of slavery.<sup>171</sup> Consider the aggregate effects of the following three exhibitions: the Community Remembrance Project, the mass incarceration wing, and the Reflection Space. The first features 800 jars of soil collected from sites of lynching and racial violence across the country.<sup>172</sup> The second, in addition to its other exhibits, brings the visitor into the folds of the carceral state by having them pick up a phone and watch a video of an incarcerated individual as if they were conversing across a glass partition.<sup>173</sup> Through art, music, and powerful quotations, the third recognizes the hundreds of people who dedicated their lives to combating racial injustice.<sup>174</sup> Together, these exhibitions argue that remembering the past and critically engaging with the present are inextricably linked.

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<sup>169</sup> "The National Memorial for Peace and Justice."

<sup>170</sup> Campbell Robertson, "A Lynching Memorial Is Opening. The Country Has Never Seen Anything Like It," *The New York Times* (2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/us/lynching-memorial-alabama.html>.

<sup>171</sup> "The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration."

<sup>172</sup> "Community Remembrance Project," *Equal Justice Initiative*, <https://eji.org/projects/community-remembrance-project/>.

<sup>173</sup> "The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration."

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

Clint Smith's vision for Angola aligns with those of the Legacy Museum. In his book *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*, published in June 2021 and regarded as the most famous critique of Angola Museum, Smith reflected,

I wanted the prison to create a sign at the entrance naming that it had been a plantation. I wanted markers erected in the places where incarcerated people had died, and for the first and last sentence of every tour to begin with the word 'slavery.' I wanted Angola, where 71 percent of people are serving life sentences and three-quarters of the population is Black, to not pretend as if that was a coincidence. What I wanted more than anything was for this prison to not be here, holding these people, on this land, with this history. It all felt so profoundly irredeemable.<sup>175</sup>

The criticisms enshrined in the November 2018 letter and later reinforced by Smith's book served as the primary catalyst that drove the LSP Museum Foundation to action.

In fiscal year 2018-19, Angola Museum began planning a symposium titled "In Pursuit of Equal Justice: Race and Criminal Justice in Louisiana from Jim Crow to Criminal Justice Reform, 1898-2017."<sup>176</sup> Initially scheduled for 2021, the symposium was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and will now be held over the course of four days from March 24 to April 1, 2022, with the title "In Pursuit of Equal Justice: Race and Criminal Justice in Louisiana—Reconstruction, Convict Leasing, Jim Crow Governance, and Prison Reform." The symposium will feature the following four panels: "The Legacy of Jim Crow in Louisiana: Non-Unanimous Juries"; "Legal Antecedents of Mass Incarceration in Louisiana"; "Criminal Justice Reform in Louisiana"; and "What Would Equal Justice Look Like in Louisiana and How Do We Get There?"<sup>177</sup> During this time, Angola Museum also edited and uploaded its historical timeline to the museum's new website as "an online learning tool for the general public."<sup>178</sup> This revised

<sup>175</sup> Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, 101.

<sup>176</sup> *LA State Penitentiary Museum Foundation FY 2018-2019 Annual Report*, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c5cb39fe5f7d13637acfff9/t/5dbc77553f8d1a048a4b02a1/1572632405514/FY1819+AnnualReport+v2.pdf>.

<sup>177</sup> "Upcoming Events," *Angola Museum*, <https://www.angolamuseum.org/events>.

<sup>178</sup> *LA State Penitentiary Museum Foundation FY 2018-2019 Annual Report*.

timeline begins in 1835 with the construction of Louisiana’s first state penitentiary and ends in 2017 with criminal justice reform, while signposting topics such as plantation to prison camp, capital punishment, and prison operations.<sup>179</sup>

Importantly, these reform initiatives overlapped with journalistic endeavors such as the 1619 Project and widespread racial justice protests that shifted the public narrative towards emphasizing racial oppression and disparities. LSP Museums Foundation leadership feared that failure to address the letter’s criticisms would subject the prison and museum to scathing media coverage. In their deliberations, individuals cited Black Lives Matter (BLM) and racial justice protests as motivating factors to pursue change.<sup>180</sup> Given that Angola had worked hard in the proceeding years to distance itself from controversies surrounding the inhumane treatment of incarcerated people, excessive punitive punishment, and corruption, the prospect of coming under further national scrutiny had significant financial and reputational ramifications.<sup>181</sup>

BLM’s growing prominence and sustained media coverage of police brutality against minority communities have impacted museums in two notable ways: first, they have pushed museums to embrace more explicitly social justice aims; and second, they have created a socio-political environment where a refusal to acknowledge racial and ethnic disparities bears an exceedingly high cost.<sup>182</sup> Before returning to Angola, it is beneficial to chronicle these changes in the museum landscape writ large.

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<sup>179</sup> “History of Angola.”

<sup>180</sup> Interview with Marianne Fisher-Giorlando.

<sup>181</sup> Recall, for example, the Angola Three—Robert King, Albert Woodfox, and Herman Wallace—who were incarcerated in solitary confinement for decades. *Also see* “Slavery, the Prison Industrial Complex: Photographs by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick.”

<sup>182</sup> Nationally publicized acts of police brutality are not recent phenomena. Recall, for example, Rodney King, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Breonna Taylor, which all sparked national outcry.

Following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, museums were polarized in their expression of solidarity with BLM and condemnation of racial violence.<sup>183</sup> The Getty, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), Philadelphia Art Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), and others initially issued lackluster statements that failed to mention Floyd or the Black community.<sup>184</sup> The public backlash was swift and penetrating; museum employees and affiliates, writers, pundits, and activists challenged these museums' statements, with some extending their criticisms to exhibitions, workplace culture, and staff choices that perpetuate white supremacy and racial insensitivity.

Some museums, after shying away from overt political statements, were pressured to issue apologies and renege on their attempts at neutrality. In his apology, Getty President Jim Cuno wrote, "We learned that we can do much better expressing our Getty values than we did yesterday, and we apologize."<sup>185</sup> Similarly, the SFMOMA's corrective statement made clear that it could have "more directly expressed our sadness and outrage."<sup>186</sup> After initially affirming that "every individual life matters," Philadelphia Art Museum Director Timothy Rub and President Gail Harrity backtracked on their comments: "Institutions like ours, beginning with leadership but also extending into every aspect of work, have not done enough to acknowledge their own shortcomings."<sup>187</sup> Other museums, however, remained steadfast in their apolitical stance. For

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<sup>183</sup> Manuel Charr, "How Have Museums Responded to the Black Lives Matter Protests?" *Museums Next* (2020), <https://www.museumnext.com/article/how-have-museums-responded-to-the-black-lives-matter-protests/>.

<sup>184</sup> Matt Stromberg, "Palm Springs Art Museum Criticized for Staying 'Neutral' in Wake of George Floyd's Killing," *Hyperallergic* (2020), <https://hyperallergic.com/571454/open-letter-criticizes-palm-springs-art-museum-for-neutral-george-floyd-response/>.

<sup>185</sup> Alex Greenberger and Tessa Solomon, "Major U.S. Museums Criticized for Responses to Ongoing George Floyd Protests," *ARTnews* (2020), <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/museums-controversy-george-floyd-protests-1202689494/>.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> Stephan Salisbury, "Philadelphia Art Museum leaders apologize for word choices in Black Lives Matter message," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (2020), <https://www.inquirer.com/news/black-lives-matter-philadelphia-museum-of-art-response-protest-staff-criticism-20200611.html>.

example, the Toledo Museum of Art continued to emphasize that it “does not have a political stance,” condemning the “unconscionable homicides that disproportionately target people of color” but foregrounding that a “nonpartisan and disinterested approach is baked into our institutional DNA.”<sup>188</sup>

Individuals working for or affiliated with such museums have become increasingly vocal when advocating for firmer political statements and heightened awareness of social and racial issues. Chris Anagnos, executive director of the Association of Art Museum Directors, issued a powerful statement in favor of museums wading into social justice debates:

As a community, I do not think art museums have done enough. We have dabbled around the edges of the work, but in our place of privilege we will never live up to the statement that ‘museums are for everyone’ unless we begin to confront, examine and dismantle the various structures that brought us to this point.<sup>189</sup>

In an open letter to the Palm Springs Art Museum, signatories made clear, “It is not enough for the museum to ‘reflect’ on the ‘power and possibility of art’ when there is no commitment to concrete and direct action against racism and anti-blackness at your institution and within your community.”<sup>190</sup> Many museum professionals have expressed their discontent in open letters. The Guggenheim Museum Curatorial Department described to its leadership “an inequitable work environment that enables racism, white supremacy, and other discriminatory practices.”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Valentina Di Liscia, “Amid Historic Black Lives Matter Protests, One Museum’s Call for a ‘Nonpartisan Approach’ Disappoints,” *Hyperallergic* (2020), <https://hyperallergic.com/569393/toledo-museum-nonpartisan-approach/>.

<sup>189</sup> Chris Anagnos, “Message from the Executive Director: Black Lives Matter,” *Association of Art Museum Directors* (2020), <https://aamd.org/for-the-media/press-release/message-from-the-executive-director-black-lives-matter>.

<sup>190</sup> Andrea Romero, “Open Letter to the Palm Springs Art Museum,” (2020), [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdUM7xME5FtTi0S5uUX9\\_8Dk-ppTYlMasgc5AL3n3sKE4553g/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdUM7xME5FtTi0S5uUX9_8Dk-ppTYlMasgc5AL3n3sKE4553g/viewform).

<sup>191</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “Curators Urge Guggenheim to Fix Culture That ‘Enables Racism,’” *The New York Times* (2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/arts/design/guggenheim-curators-racism-sexism.html>.

Similarly, MET staff members urged the institution to address “what we see as the expression of a deeply rooted logic of white supremacy and culture of systemic racism at our institution.”<sup>192</sup>

Public figures have intensified these political pressures. Writer and art critic Antwaun Sargent, for example, questioned the extent to which public statements lead to measurable change: “[D]o black lives matter on your curatorial team or board? [D]o they matter in your collections and shows? [T]hey have to earn the right to say black lives matter.”<sup>193</sup> Putting a finer point on broad criticisms, one comment directed at the Philadelphia Art Museum urged, “We ask that you take a really good look at how race impacts the museum. From the staff makeup, to how they are treated, even to who gets the privilege of being considered staff, not contractors.”<sup>194</sup> These multiples streams of backlash create an environment—both physical and virtual—where a reluctance to address political and social issues is immediately condemned.<sup>195</sup>

In the case of Angola Museum, this environment continued to propel reform following the receipt of the November 2018 letter.<sup>196</sup> The *LA State Penitentiary Museum Foundation FY 2020-2021 Annual Report* details the museum’s adoption of a new strategic plan to “help us be more collaborative and efficient in our work and to engage new and more diverse audiences in meaningful ways” as well as a new exhibit, *Angola: The Beginning*, that “will dive into Angola’s past as a plantation and its transition into a prison.”<sup>197</sup> Although these initiatives were disrupted

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<sup>192</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “Upheaval Over Race Reaches Met Museum After Curator’s Instagram Post,” *The New York Times* (2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/24/arts/design/met-museum-staff-letter-racism.html>.

<sup>193</sup> Greenberger and Solomon, “Major U.S. Museums Criticized for Responses to Ongoing George Floyd Protests.”

<sup>194</sup> Salisbury, “Philadelphia Art Museum leaders apologize for word choices in Black Lives Matter message.”

<sup>195</sup> The physical environment is defined by public spaces of protests. The virtual environment is defined by social media and other online channels of communication.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with Mandi Sanchez.

<sup>197</sup> *LA State Penitentiary Museum Foundation FY 2020-2021 Annual Report*, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c5cb39fe5f7d13637acff9/t/61167be2aadc49e2507a32/1628863470762/FY+20-21+Annual+Report.pdf>.

by the COVID-19 pandemic, the museum announced on November 2, 2021, its plans for a new museum. According to the press release,

Our goal with this new opportunity is to create a meaningful institution that is better able to provide more transparent educational experiences and resources for our community, based around the history of the prison's transformation from slave plantations into the Louisiana State Penitentiary.<sup>198</sup>

LSP Museum Foundation leadership is currently deliberating the new vision for the museum, which may retain the look and feel of a prison museum and/or be reimagined as a space to reflect more broadly on the Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections.<sup>199</sup> Given that it will be in a former elementary school, the new museum will likely include a community gallery and try to incorporate local voices and initiatives.<sup>200</sup> Although the funding, resources, exhibitions, and substantive context remain undecided, the aforementioned announcement suggests a notable turn towards transparency and historical reflection for Angola.

Providing for a new Angola Museum does not nullify the challenges associated with the leadership's lack of diversity, the overrepresentation of corrections-affiliated personnel, and the overlap between museum and prison operations. Secretary of Corrections James M. LeBlanc has expressed a willingness to embrace these changes. In the past, certain members of museum leadership have repeatedly consulted the secretary of corrections on programming and interpretative decisions that may have a negative impact on Louisiana corrections and Angola.<sup>201</sup> This will likely occur with content and programming for the new location. Although such relationships may fall short of informal oversight, it further constrains Angola's ability to confront its history and address contemporary criminal legal issues by creating a potentially

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>199</sup> Interviews with Sheryl Ranatza and Marianne Fisher-Giorlando.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Interviews with Sheryl Ranatza, Marianne Fisher-Giorlando, and Mandi Sanchez.

volatile and fraught situation if Angola's messaging runs contrary to the interests of the Department of Public Safety & Corrections.

### **SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE ACROSS THREE PRISON MUSEUMS**

In depth consideration of Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), Sing Sing Prison Museum, and Angola Museum makes clear that centering justice impacted individuals in partnerships, hiring practices, and content development better enables prison museums to address contemporary criminal legal issues. Notably, ESP and Sing Sing Prison Museum have established diverse boards comprised of preservationists, historians, social justice and community activists, formerly incarcerated individuals, and a minority of corrections-affiliated personnel to inform decision-making and determine interpretative aims. These two prison museums have also actively connected with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals through, *inter alia*, oral histories and art projects. This approach has deepened ESP's connection to the Philadelphia community and Sing Sing's relationship with Ossining residents.

The Louisiana State Penitentiary (LSP) Museum Foundation, by contrast, remains dominated by corrections affiliated individuals. Wardens, sheriffs, district attorneys, and judges as well as experience at LSP, Department of Public Safety & Corrections, Board of Pardons & Parole, and other correctional facilities inculcate an understanding of the criminal legal system from a position of power. The predominance of this perspective increases institutional resistance to external pressures and prevents Angola Museum from critically examining mass incarceration and racial disparities to the same extent as ESP and Sing Sing Prison Museum. It also minimizes opportunities for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals to contribute to museum operations, which is a central driver of reform.



Importantly, affiliation with an active prison does not necessarily hinder reform efforts. Sing Sing Prison Museum and Angola Museum are both located directly adjacent to and within active maximum-security prisons, yet their approaches to exhibitions, programming, staffing, and remembrance vary substantially. This discrepancy can be attributed to the issues museum and corrections staff are required to collaborate on. In the case of Sing Sing, interactions and negotiations between museum staff and the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision are largely confined to title, land ownership, occupancy, and construction issues. At Angola, however, certain members of museum leadership have repeatedly consulted the secretary of corrections on programming and interpretative decisions. Angola's reform initiatives are necessarily constrained by these informal relationships.

As a stabilized ruin, ESP can more easily implement reforms because it is not hindered by Sing Sing's logistical complications nor Angola's entanglement with the penitentiary. Given the absence of an immediate external force, ESP's changes have been driven by internal deliberations and members of the leadership team, such as Sean Kelley, pushing the institution to reevaluate its responsibility to educate the public on modern carceral practices.

ESP's and Sing Sing Prison Museum's internal structures and interpretative aims have placed them in a better position to respond to emerging political events. The latter, for example, hosted one of its Justice Talks—a webinar series focused on contemporary issues—on solitary confinement as legislation was introduced in New York to ban the practice.<sup>202</sup> A comparable online program, ESP's Searchlight Series has allowed the prison museum to address issues related to, for example, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on prisons.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> “Justice Talks,” *Sing Sing Prison Museum*, <http://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/justice-talks.html>.

<sup>203</sup> “The Searchlight Series,” *Eastern State Penitentiary*, <https://www.easternstate.org/visit/events/searchlight-series>.

Political events have spurred internal deliberations at Angola Museum but have not resulted in the same robust programming. For example, amidst the Confederate statue debates, Angola leadership and staff began to reassess the mural's impact (located behind the cash register) on visitors, which depicts predominantly Black incarcerated individuals working in the fields under the supervision of white corrections officers on horseback.<sup>204</sup> Limited concrete action has been taken aside from several small book talks, including Joshua Rothman's *The Ledger and the Chain: How Domestic Slave Traders Shaped America*.

Prison museums' political responsiveness also includes their engagement with racial justice protests. Black Lives Matter (BLM) and nationally publicized acts of police violence against minority communities have created an environment of high consequence for museums unwilling to confront their own racialized history. Reflecting national museum trends, the Sing Sing Prison Museum expressed its "sympathy to the families and communities of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor" and made its intentions clear: "We stand in solidarity with Black communities across the country."<sup>205</sup> ESP's public programming and even Angola's hosting the "In Pursuit of Equal Justice" symposium show how BLM values have permeated these institutions. Overall, the volatility of the political landscape demands a baseline level of political responsiveness from prison museums.

The notion of bringing institutional knowledge and authority to racial justice issues recalls the work of the Lynching Memorial and the Legacy Museum. Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) vision for a "sacred space for truth-telling and reflection about racial terror in America and its legacy" resulted in the construction of a new memorial and

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<sup>204</sup> Interviews with Sheryl Ranatza and Marianne Fisher-Giorlando.

<sup>205</sup> The statement is available at [https://mailchi.mp/6343ba0f56c0/solidarity-statement?fbclid=IwAR3EXbJSH-woRvNUejqVs79CgRQNKWRzI0gqAUU8bx3A--UzqmnOws\\_DmRI](https://mailchi.mp/6343ba0f56c0/solidarity-statement?fbclid=IwAR3EXbJSH-woRvNUejqVs79CgRQNKWRzI0gqAUU8bx3A--UzqmnOws_DmRI).

museum.<sup>206</sup> Unfortunately, not all organizations—particularly museums—have the resources, funding, independence, or willingness to adopt such sweeping renovations or ambitious development projects. Museums must therefore employ a calculus that tempers their response to mounting political pressures with logistical considerations.

In the aftermath of Floyd’s murder, for example, ESP leadership received an influx of requests from visitors and schoolteachers asking that it teach police brutality and the impact on communities of color.<sup>207</sup> While ESP hosted a Facebook Live event and other programming during the pandemic that related contemporaneous events to parallel instances of violence in the penitentiary’s history, ESP leadership also recognized its limitations.<sup>208</sup> ESP leadership wanted to contribute to the national conversation but understood they could not provide the nuanced discussion of generational trauma visitors and community partners demanded.<sup>209</sup>

When addressing issues of racial justice, all three prison museums have legitimized—through exhibitions, programming, and public statements—Stevenson’s assertion that “[r]ecognizing the unbroken links between slavery, Black Codes, lynching, and our current era of mass incarceration is essential.”<sup>210</sup> Racialized historiographies outlining a 400-year timeline of racial oppression in the United States gained national traction with *The New York Times* 1619 Project. Prison museums’ implicit embrace of this analysis, either prior to or during the 1619 Project’s release, did not translate into overt acceptance of the 1619 Project or critical race theory (CRT). In fact, individuals from all three museums were either openly hesitant or stated that such discussions did not occur.<sup>211</sup> Analysis of the 1619 Project and treatments of CRT therefore brings

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<sup>206</sup> “The National Memorial for Peace and Justice.”

<sup>207</sup> Interviews with Sean Kelley and Lauren Zalut.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (One World, 2021), 281.

<sup>211</sup> Interviews with Sean Kelley, Brent Glass, and Sheryl Ranatza.

into high relief the nuances of simultaneously fostering dialogue across the political spectrum and engaging in current criminal legal debates.

The 1619 Project—appearing in the August 2019 issue of *The New York Times Magazine* and, after revision and expansion, as a book in November 2021—refracts U.S. history through the prism of 1619, the year enslaved Africans were first brought to American shores. Notably, the Pulitzer Prize winning longform journalism project has been criticized for its methodology, rigor, and intellectual legitimacy.<sup>212</sup> Both liberals and conservatives have opposed, albeit for different reasons, such attempts to create what American historian James Oakes calls “racial consensus history.”<sup>213</sup> In an effort to depoliticize the project, Clint Smith argued that discussions of slavery need not imply a liberal agenda; however, disentangling the politics from the project’s rendering of history remains a challenge.<sup>214</sup>

Conservative politicians and pundits have been vocal in their backlash.<sup>215</sup> Following Republican Senator Tom Cotton’s (R-Arkansas) failed “Saving American History Act of 2020,”

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<sup>212</sup> After the magazine release, Leslie M. Harris and other historians defended the project’s corrective framing but made clear that it mischaracterized, inter alia, the role of slavery as the primary reason colonists supported independence. Historians Victoria Bynum, James M. McPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon S. Wood went so far as voicing their factual concerns in a public letter. Patricia Barnes, “Ideology Over Excellence: Awarding The Pulitzer Prize To The 1619 Project,” *Forbes* (2020),

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/patriciabarnes/2020/09/27/ideology-over-excellence-awarding-the-pulitzer-prize-to-the-1619-project/?sh=5e68fcc94e65>; Lauren Michele Jackson, “The 1619 Project and the Demands of Public History,” *The New Yorker* (2021), <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/the-1619-project-and-the-demands-of-public-history>; Leslie M. Harris, “I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me,” *Politico* (2020), <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/06/1619-project-new-york-times-mistake-122248>; and “We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project,” *The New York Times* (2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html>.

<sup>213</sup> James Oakes, “The Art of History: On Changing My Mind,” *Perspectives on History* (2012), <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2012/on-changing-my-mind>; and Carlos Lozada, “The 1619 Project started as history. Now it’s also a political program.” *The Washington Post* (2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/11/19/1619-project-book-history/>.

<sup>214</sup> Clint Smith, “Telling the Truth About Slavery Is Not ‘Indoctrination,’” *The Atlantic* (2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/real-stakes-fight-over-history/616455/>.

<sup>215</sup> Highly critical of the 1619 Project’s ideological implications and alleged assault on patriotism, President Donald Trump contended, “The left has warped, distorted, and defiled the American story with deceptions, falsehoods, and lies.” His administration released the *1776 Report* in retaliation at the end of his tenure. In April 2021, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) expressed his misgivings in a letter to U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona in which he implored the secretary to oppose the project’s incorporation into state and local

which “prohibits the use of federal funds by an elementary or secondary school to teach the 1619 Project or by a local educational agency (LEA) to support its teaching in public schools,” conservative politicians mobilized to ban the 1619 Project and CRT in public schools.<sup>216</sup> As of November 2021, Idaho, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and North Dakota passed legislation banning CRT in classrooms; Florida, Georgia, Utah, and Alabama state school boards introduced guidelines barring discussion of CRT; and approximately 20 more states have taken similar actions.<sup>217</sup> Intent on increasing teachers’ and already budget strapped schools’ liability, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis proposed the “Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees Act” in December 2021, which would allow parents to sue schools that teach CRT.<sup>218</sup> As of February 2022, reports estimate that no fewer than 36 states have either introduced or adopted policies restricting instruction of race and racism.<sup>219</sup>

The 1619 Project has also been subjected to many leftist critiques. Historians and public figures argued against its pessimism and insistence on a racial caste system that originated with slavery and persisted continuously through time despite marked periods of improvement (e.g., the antislavery movement and Civil Rights era).<sup>220</sup> Such origin-centered analyses, grounded in an

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curricula. Adam Serwer, “Why Conservatives Want to Cancel the 1619 Project,” *The Atlantic* (2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/05/why-conservatives-want-cancel-1619-project/618952/>; Kathryn Watson and Grace Segers, “Trump blasts 1619 Project on role of Black Americans and proposes his own ‘1776 commission,’” *CBS News* (2020), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-1619-project-1776-commission/>; “The 1776 Commission,” *The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission* (2021), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>; and “READ: McConnell letter to the Education Department regarding ‘1619 Project’ programs,” *CNN* (2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/30/politics/mitch-mcconnell-miguel-cardona-letter/index.html>.

<sup>216</sup> “Saving American History Act of 2020,” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/4292>.

<sup>217</sup> Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons, “Why are states banning critical race theory?” *Brookings* (2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>.

<sup>218</sup> Nicholas Reimann, “DeSantis Unveils ‘Stop W.O.K.E. Act’ So Parents Can Sue Over Critical Race Theory In Schools,” *Forbes* (2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nicholasreimann/2021/12/15/desantis-unveils-stop-woke-act-so-parents-can-sue-over-critical-race-theory-in-schools/?sh=3e4a4cad24d3>.

<sup>219</sup> Cathryn Stout and Thomas Wilburn, “CRT Map: Efforts to restrict teaching racism and bias have multiplied across the U.S.” *Chalkbeat* (2022), <https://www.chalkbeat.org/22525983/map-critical-race-theory-legislation-teaching-racism>.

<sup>220</sup> Adam Serwer, “The Fight Over the 1619 Project Is Not About the Facts,” *The Atlantic* (2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619-project/604093/>.

unchanging historical narrative of oppression, do not account for instances of progress or allow for transformative change.<sup>221</sup> Critics also emphasized that confronting the past does not in itself signify an end nor does it necessarily translate into measurable progress.<sup>222</sup>

Polarized characterizations of and responses to the 1619 Project and CRT have placed prison museums in a difficult position. Felt most acutely since 2019, ESP, Sing Sing Prison Museum, and Angola Museum must avoid certain political stances when discussing racial justice otherwise they may be accused of partisan indoctrination. Sean Kelley made clear that it would not benefit ESP to offer explicit endorsements because it would prevent them facilitating conversations across the political spectrum that are integral to its mission.<sup>223</sup> Sing Sing Prison Museum echoed this sentiment: embracing the values of the 1619 Project and CRT is different than supporting them by name.<sup>224</sup> Prison museums' selective engagement with socio-political events thus reveals the fine line these institutions must walk to embrace social justice aims, avoid perceptions of partisanship, and facilitate dialogue across a diversity of visitors.

In recent years, the development of a broader prison museum community has offered possibilities for informal knowledge sharing networks and working partnerships that help propel change. Notably, ESP, Sing Sing, Alcatraz, Old New-Gate Prison & Copper Mine in Connecticut, and several others participate in the National Prison Museum Consortium, a monthly meeting where museum leadership share ideas and challenges. Channels of communication also exist between individual museums.<sup>225</sup> ESP and Sing Sing leadership have

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<sup>221</sup> Matthew Karp, "History As End," *Harper's Magazine* (2021), <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/07/history-as-end-politics-of-the-past-matthew-karp/>.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Interview with Sean Kelley.

<sup>224</sup> Interview with Brent Glass.

<sup>225</sup> Interviews with Sean Kelley, Lauren Zalut, Marianne Fisher-Giorlando, Nicole Belle DeRise, Nicole Hamilton, and Brent Glass.

been in close contact with individuals from Alcatraz regarding exhibition development.<sup>226</sup>

Angola has visited and coordinated with the Legacy Museum to understand their methodology in addressing enslavement and modern incarceration.<sup>227</sup> In 2015, ESP leadership visited New York to collaborate with the Sing Sing staff.<sup>228</sup> Individuals such as ESP's Sean Kelley and Sing Sing's Brent Glass have advised on several other prison museum projects.<sup>229</sup> Furthermore, ESP has presented itself as a model for other prison museums and continues to offer its assistance.<sup>230</sup> This cross pollination of ideas is essential to reform in prison museums.

## CONCLUSION

Heightened visibility of mass incarceration and racial and ethnic disparities within the criminal legal system through their incorporation in exhibitions and public art has redefined the responsibilities of prison museums. Designed as historically focused institutions, prison museums are now expected to actively contribute to contemporary criminal legal debate and draw connections between past and present carceral practices. Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), Sing Sing Prison Museum, and Angola Museum are uniquely hybrid institutions, functioning as museums, dark heritage sites, and carceral spaces. These multiple identities interface with socio-political pressures and cultural debates in ways that create enormous opportunities for reform.

This shift is driven in large part by reexaminations of museum neutrality. Expectations regarding social justice aims, commenting on protest movements, and having programs mirror contemporary debates represent a rapid erosion of and dwindling tolerance for museums that distance themselves from the present—from impacted communities. Sean Kelley recounted his

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<sup>226</sup> Interviews with Sean Kelley, Lauren Zalut, Nicole Belle DeRise, Nicole Hamilton, and Brent Glass.

<sup>227</sup> Interview with Sheryl Ranatza and Mandi Sanchez.

<sup>228</sup> Interview with Sean Kelley.

<sup>229</sup> Interview with Sean Kelley and Brent Glass.

<sup>230</sup> Interviews with Nicole Belle DeRise and Nicole Hamilton.

coworker's comments during the development of *The Big Graph* in the influential essay "Beyond Neutrality": "We talk about race and the US criminal justice system every day... our silence tells visitors exactly what we think about it."<sup>231</sup> Thus, neutrality has become a euphemism for silence.

Silence seems a thing in and of itself: an unwelcomed guest cunningly creating tension between colleagues; a palpable sense of separation in an ever-polarized political landscape; or a figure of solidarity that allows its company to reflect on the past. Silence can be devastating for democracy and yet silence, when taken in a different form, is essential. Recall the murder of George Floyd. At 11:00 A.M. on June 9, 2020, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz declared 8 minutes 46 seconds of silence to honor Floyd. In doing so, a powerful silence replaced one of powerlessness. When police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck, he not only took his life but imposed a silence on his final moments, embodied in the words "I can't breathe." 15 days later, silence became solidarity—a rallying cry for racial justice.

As prison museums redefine neutrality, embrace transparency, and work to elevate justice impacted individuals, they fill a silence in the lives of hundreds of thousands of visitors who have no direct exposure to carceral institutions. In doing so, they serve as the critical connective tissue between historical practice and contemporary criminal legal debates. Thus, recent reform efforts make clear the following: prison museums have the potential to be powerful occupants of a silence within public history and the carceral state.

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<sup>231</sup> "Beyond Neutrality."



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## INTERVIEW LIST

### **Eastern State Penitentiary**

*Sean Kelley*, Senior Vice President, Director of Interpretation. Interviewed on March 11, 2022.

*Lauren Zalut*, Director of Education and Tour Programs. Interviewed on March 11, 2022.

*Matthew Murphy*, Supervisor, Tour Programs. Interviewed on March 10, 2022.

*Jerome A. Loach*, Supervisor for Education and Partnerships. Interviewed on March 16, 2022.

### **Angola Museum**

*Mandi Sanchez*, Museum Director. Interviewed on March 29, 2022.

*Sheryl Ranatza*, President, Museum Board of Directors; Retired Deputy Secretary, Louisiana Department of Corrections. Interviewed on March 11, 2022.

*Marianne Fisher-Giorlando*, Chairwoman, Museum Education Committee; Retired Professor of Criminal Justice, Grambling State University. Interviewed on November 30, 2021.

### **Sing Sing Prison Museum**

*Brent D. Glass*, Executive Director; Director Emeritus, Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Interviewed on March 14, 2022.

*Nicole Belle DeRise*, Assistant Director. Interviewed on March 10, 2022.

*Nicole Hamilton*, Collections Manager. Interviewed on March 10, 2022.