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# Charged Spaces: Navigating Complex Exhibition Content for University Audiences

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**Keywords** Academic freedom; exhibition case study; art exhibitions; colleges and universities; diversity and inclusion

**Abstract** This paper explores some of the ways in which academic museums navigate politically charged conversations on campus, specifically addressing public programs, curatorial strategies, and administrative brokering. The authors discuss the complexities of collaboration and academic freedom when tackling such sensitive topics, and discuss lessons learned from a recent exhibition case study. This text is largely adapted from a panel presentation first delivered at the 2018 Association of Academic Museums and Galleries (AAMG) Annual Conference at the University of Miami.

**About the Authors** Craig Hadley is Director and Curator of Exhibitions and University Collections at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. He is the Vice President of Communications for the Association of Academic Museums & Galleries, and also serves periodically as a grant reviewer for the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Each year, DePauw University museum staff offer a topics course in museology for liberal arts undergraduates. The common reading for the most recent course was *Who Owns America's Past? The Smithsonian and the Problem of History* by retired Smithsonian curator Robert C. Post.<sup>1</sup> As is typical with every college course, a syllabus was distributed on the first day presenting the learning objectives as follows:

1. Introduce museums as complex social enterprises;
2. Provide opportunities to discuss and debate the ethics of object ownership and the role museums play in fabricating and reinforcing historical narratives;
3. Develop basic visual analysis and interpretation skills.

The first goal, in particular— “introduce museums as complex social enterprises”— dovetails seamlessly with the museum’s mission statement:

*The educational mission of the [museum] is to inspire and engage diverse audiences through our collections, exhibitions and public programming, and to stimulate the spirit of inquiry through a variety*

*of learning styles. As part of an institution of higher learning, the museum is dedicated to providing educational programming that enhances the cultural life of the immediate community by contributing to the educational enrichment of students, faculty members and the general public.*

Through exhibitions, programming, and even coursework, the museum invites students, faculty, staff, and community members to think critically about the museum as a “complex social enterprise.” How do the power dynamics of display, interpretation, and contextualization continuously shift based on an individual’s personal relationship with museums, artists, and exhibition content? In essence, who wields the power to shape exhibition narratives and how should such power be wielded with responsible effectiveness?

Directors and curators often find themselves on the frontlines of this debate; utter *Enola Gay*,<sup>2</sup> for instance, and museum professionals almost universally understand the implied censorship and controversy that ensued. Today, the museum as a charged and contentious space—a battleground—has reemerged at the forefront of national headlines. During the Great Recession, administrations at Brandeis University<sup>3</sup> and Randolph College<sup>4</sup> (and in 2018, LaSalle University<sup>5</sup>) targeted art collections for deaccession to bolster floundering endowments and build new programs and initiatives for prospective students. With the recession now largely in the past, headlines morphed to reflect the deep political and racial divides so prevalent today:

“At Cal State Long Beach, an art exhibition on police violence turns into protest over the firing of the museum's director”<sup>6</sup>

“University of Kansas Removes Controversial Flag Art”<sup>7</sup>

“2 Museums Wanted to Spark Dialogue with Provocative Art. They’re Handling That Very Carefully”<sup>8</sup>

“An Interview with Artist Serhat Tanyolacar on Censorship at Polk State College”<sup>9</sup>

In retrospect, DePauw University’s museum could have very well been among the many on this not-so-exclusive list. What follows is a case study, written with the intention that the facts, coupled with analysis, might serve the wider academic museum field in navigating some of the most challenging and important duties of the present: curatorial and community responsibility.

This text is largely adapted from a panel presentation first delivered at the 2018 Association of Academic Museums and Galleries (AAMG) Annual Conference at the University of Miami.<sup>10</sup>

### **Setting the scene: the university and community in context**

The museum prides itself on maintaining high standards for undergraduate teaching and research. As such, a small yet dedicated staff of three full-time and six part-time employees curate ten exhibitions per year in approximately 8,500 square feet of rotating exhibition space,

maintain a permanent art collection of 3,750 objects, teach courses in museum studies, and mentor and advise student volunteers and interns. Located in a small midwestern city, the 180-year-old private liberal arts university is home to 2,200 undergraduate students and is largely responsible for funding the museum's operations. As the only dedicated art museum within a 30-mile radius, it also delivers critical K-12 outreach programs to county residents and community visitors at no cost. True to its culture of continuous improvement, the program earned first-time accreditation from the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) in the spring of 2018, and is the recipient of over \$140,000 in federal and private grant awards in recent years. In that time, the staff have also successfully completed three AAM Museum Assessment Program reviews along with the revamped Collections Assessment for Preservation Program, now administered by the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works.



Figure 1. Gallery installation photo (Fall 2017). Photo credit: manuscript authors.

Exhibition planning for the museum's Visual Arts Gallery (approximately 2,200 square feet), a space typically reserved for artist solo and student/faculty exhibitions, occurs two years before an exhibition opens. A committee comprised of art and art history faculty along with museum staff selects artists at a Fall meeting. Following artist selections, the museum works directly with the artist on all aspects of exhibition planning, including: curatorial decision-making, budget, installation, programming, and evaluation. Rewind to the Fall semester of 2015, when both museum staff and a studio art faculty member jointly recommended California-based artist and Scripps College Professor Ken Gonzales-Day to the committee. After some discussion and review of other artist proposals, a solo exhibition of Gonzales-Day's work was unanimously approved. In general, the committee felt strongly that his artwork would resonate with students and faculty in a timely and important way. The artist's work could easily bridge campus disciplines and lend voice to the important dialogue about diversity and inclusion occurring at both the campus and national levels. Moreover, the committee felt strongly that Gonzales-Day's research and artmaking practice would prove useful in advancing

conversations about race, history, and the power of privilege on the university campus. It was, the committee believed, a conversation that needed to happen—one which would be greatly facilitated by the visual arts.

It is important to note that the DePauw campus climate, in general, has continued to deteriorate during the past decade. A series of racially-motivated incidents, including derogatory language found in public locations as well as restrooms, has fueled tension on campus and in the community. Reminders that racism is still alive in the county appeared in local newspapers several years ago, citing an incident that occurred just 20 miles south of campus. Racial epithets shouted from car windows and directed at students of color have occurred more than once. Most recently, student protesters demanded changes in university policy and administrative action, with students chanting “we are not safe.”

As a result, new measures and support services have emerged in recent years, including the construction of a new Center for Diversity & Inclusion (CDI), the creation of a Bias Incident Response Team, and a campus-wide program called “Day of Dialogue,” which provides workshops, keynotes, and sessions for the entire campus community once per academic year. Program attendance was made mandatory for all first-year students in 2018.

The CDI, however—perhaps more than any other campus resource—is critical to understanding this particular case study, since both CDI and museum staff were involved in key discussions. Their mission provides a brief overview of the program’s charge and its commitment to students:

*The [...] CDI is committed to fostering a sense of belonging through education, celebration and advocacy to enhance the overall experience of Students of Color and students who identify as Women, International, LGBTQIA+, and Undocumented. The CDI strengthens [the university’s] dedication to respecting and valuing difference by creating an equitable space that engages the entire campus.*

In many ways, the CDI and museum mission statements appear at odds with one another. While the CDI is committed to creating and sustaining a sense of community through celebration, education, and advocacy, the museum seeks to instill a sense of lifelong learning and the interdisciplinary pursuit of object-based learning and inquiry. While the two programs have some overlap in mission and share a common parent organization, the overarching mandates of the two are quite different as evidenced by Table 1. These key differences became readily apparent to both museum and CDI staff when it came time to discuss how best to introduce the exhibition of photographs and new media by Ken Gonzales-Day to the university community.

**Table 1: Key mission components**

CDI	Museum
Support programs for marginalized students and campus community	Object-centered programs for campus and local community
Celebration	Educational enrichment
Advocacy	Inspire and engage
Value (human) difference	Value different learning styles
Respect	Spirit of inquiry

**A brief introduction: *Ken Gonzales-Day: Shadowlands*<sup>11</sup>**

Ken Gonzales-Day (b. 1964) is an interdisciplinary artist whose practice considers the construction of racial differences and the history of lynching in the United States. His scholarly research, photo-journalistic sensibility, and rich aesthetics create jarringly haunting portraits of historical trauma.

Gonzales-Day’s photographs are often tied to specific moments in American history and raise questions about race. He uses the dichotomy of presence and absence in his *Erased Lynching* series to address the erasure of Asians, Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans from the history of lynching in the American West. His *Searching for California Hang Trees* series revisits these lynching sites by presenting the trees as living witnesses to, and unmarked memorials of, traumatic history.

*Ken Gonzales-Day: Shadowlands* is a concise survey that brings up one of his most poignant questions: how does collective resistance confront racial violence? It is a question being asked after recent tragic events in cities around the country, such as Ferguson, Charleston, and Los Angeles, as well as Saint Paul and Minneapolis. By presenting historical occurrences in conjunction with contemporary events, Gonzales-Day collapses time and exposes the persistence of racialized violence in America today.



Figure 2. Ken Gonzales-Day, *This Day (Re-enactment of a lynching, McCook, SD, 1925)*, from the *Erased Lynching Series II*, 2006, Chromogenic print, 28x60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles.



Gonzales-Day's work for *Shadowlands* was largely premised upon the removal or erasure of the victim, thus facilitating the viewer's "reading" of the social dynamics behind historical lynching and the resultant mob and spectacle that so often ensued. He does not manipulate historic photographs to erase or censor historical trauma; nor does he preserve the victim in perpetuity to endure an unending cycle of violence. It is this method—along with the loaded history and the violent settings in which the archival imagery is set—that makes the work of museum interpretation an integral yet challenging component of the curatorial process.

### **Navigating complex exhibition content**

Preparations for the exhibition began in earnest eight months prior to the anticipated exhibition opening. At the same time, the university announced and broke ground on the new CDI located directly across the street from the museum's Visual Arts Gallery. Museum staff were energized by the prospect of new partners who might share the same enthusiasm for visual imagery that challenged, provoked, and sparked debate in service of the museum's academic mission.

Programming efforts were well underway during the summer months, with plans to invite the artist for a formal 45-minute public lecture at the exhibition opening. Additional programs, all in various stages of development, included a gallery tour facilitated by curatorial staff as well as the creation of a small resource library of books and articles published by Gonzales-Day. Finally, staff contacted university faculty who were teaching courses related to the artist's research to plan for and facilitate class visits to the exhibition.

As the new academic year began, it became clear that a planning meeting with newly-minted CDI staff was the next logical step. A date was set and museum staff looked forward to gaining what they hoped would be valuable insight for programming and content delivery; perhaps there were new strategies and best practices for framing such a sensitive topic for an increasingly diverse, and perhaps troubled, student body.

That fateful planning meeting in early September, however, was unlike anything either party likely anticipated. Emails with weblinks and attachments sent in advance of the meeting by the museum were not reviewed by the new CDI staff. The meeting location selected was an informal meeting space with little or no privacy. To complicate matters further, exhibition content and the postcard image presented at the meeting elicited immediate pushback from CDI staff and was not well received, with predictions that student protests and perhaps even riots might ensue if such a show were mounted. In short, the exhibition content shocked and clearly hurt, perhaps even offended, many of the CDI staff.

In retrospect, it is clear the museum failed to recognize the significance of the unanticipated pushback encountered at the planning meeting. Museum staff dismissed much of the CDI's initial reaction since materials sent in advance of the meeting seemed to have been ignored, which contributed to an overall sense of frustration. As a result, museum staff dismissed this critical warning; as one faculty colleague put it best, the "embodied knowledge" conveyed vis-à-vis intellectual and emotional pushback should have been accepted as a *legitimate* response to the artist and his artwork. The museum, however, countered with arguments concerning pedagogical value and the artist's academic and professional accolades and largely felt vindicated in their defense of the artist and his artwork. After nearly an hour, the

meeting ended without a clear path forward, and the debrief among museum staff and faculty partners was one fraught with immediate concern:

- Museum and studio faculty are trained to read and understand complex visual images. CDI staff, in a sense, did not possess this training and perhaps “misread” the work presented. Or did they?
- Did the Visual Arts Committee choose the “wrong” artist for its students?
- Are faculty and museum staff insensitive or perhaps approaching diversity and inclusion in the wrong way?
- If other university staff find difficulty in approaching, reading, and interpreting Gonzales-Day’s artwork, then how might we expect undergraduate students to do so?
- Should the exhibition be canceled?
- Is censorship a concern if the exhibition is canceled?
- Is there a problem with the artist selection process?
- Are the jobs of museum staff protected? If so, how and by whom?
- What is the next step?

From both a formal and conceptual perspective, faculty and museum staff believed strongly that Gonzales-Day’s work was of outstanding quality. His lengthy list of accolades bolstered this opinion: Minnesota Public Radio recently featured the artist and his *Searching for California Hang Trees* project on its website,<sup>12</sup> the artist holds a distinguished teaching position at Scripps College, his work appeared extensively in print, and the National Portrait Gallery had recently selected a new series of his work for display in the Spring of 2018.<sup>13</sup> Two previous museum venues, one at another small liberal arts university, reported no incidents or problems with the exhibition. Perhaps, then, the issue laid somewhere within the university’s internal structures and its tenuous campus climate.



Figure 3. *With none but the omni-present stars to witness*, from the *Searching for California Hang Trees* series, 2004, Chromogenic print, 36 x 46 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles.

Other complications emerged during the meeting that neither party knew in advance. Chiefly, the new CDI building was set to open within days of the Ken Gonzales-Day exhibition opening. That same weekend also the university's celebratory homecoming event, with trustees and dignitaries on campus, and a home football game against the university's longtime rival. Finally, AAM scheduled the museum's accreditation site-visit during this same time. No one wished to have their specific events canceled or severely hampered; nor, presumably, did the university want a public relations challenge over what was perceived by many with a peripheral understanding of the situation to be a "controversial exhibition."

### **Moving forward, moving differently**

A series of meetings between academic administration, faculty, and museum and CDI staff began within hours of the initial meeting. Over the course of several months, this eventually led to a renewal in working relations between the two organizations. Museum staff formally apologized for the meeting circumstances and acknowledged that the exhibition content could certainly elicit a strong emotional response and perhaps even pushback—especially within communities identifying with the historical trauma of lynching and the more recent events involving campus climate, police brutality, immigration, and the reemergence of the white supremacy movement. Moreover, some of the artwork was inherently more difficult to "unpack" and understand to an eye unaccustomed to dissecting complex images. Despite the fact that the content might be valuable for pedagogical reasons, CDI staff professed their mission as one of student caretaker rather than academic facilitator. Learning to come to terms with each other's perspectives and the distinct yet intertwined missions of both the museum and the CDI went a long way in reestablishing a working relationship and in building a culture of trust between the two organizations.

Ultimately, a number of key concessions were made to accommodate both parties and to further engender good will. First, the museum agreed to move its exhibition opening back three days. This would eliminate the double opening with the CDI dedication, and provide both events with discrete dates. Secondly, museum staff selected a new image for the exhibition postcard. The first image was printed during the summer months prior to hiring the new CDI staff. After further dialogue, museum staff acknowledged that the original cyanotype image was more challenging to understand given the limited caption space available for contextualization on the postcard. As a result, museum staff selected and replaced the postcard image with a more neutral landscape, one that was also used in a previously published news article.



Figure 4. Exhibition postcards.  
Photo credit: manuscript authors.

In conjunction with these minor adjustments, CDI staff agreed to meet with faculty representatives to learn more about Ken Gonzales-Day and the immense pedagogical value of his artwork. Faculty from across the humanities, including anthropology, sociology, art, history, and women and sexuality studies, participated in a fruitful dialogue organized by the dean of faculty. It was, in essence, an opportunity for honest discussion and exchange to occur between faculty and staff. It was agreed that representatives from the museum should allow their faculty colleagues to facilitate the conversation on their behalf. Put another way, it was a facilitated “moment” to better understand differences of opinion and perspective.

Finally, much debate ensued among museum staff about the value of a “trigger warning” on or near the exhibition entrance. The debate about the virtues and value of trigger warnings was still circulating widely at the time, and the museum did not have policies in place for guiding such decisions.<sup>14</sup> With glass double doors opening into the gallery directly off the museum lobby, the museum staff was also keenly aware that young children and their families visit the space regularly. Eventually, the museum decided that a “soft” warning of sorts may be useful in this situation. A semi-transparent vinyl graphic panel was created, covering half of the doors at eye-line, while also serving as introductory text for the exhibit itself. During the course of the exhibition, museum staff received anecdotal feedback from visitors that this was an effective tool for introducing the artist and his work while also serving numerous other roles: exhibition title, introductory text, space for sponsorship logos, and a subtle method to provide some separation between the sensitive exhibition content and the public lobby.



Figure 5. Gallery installation photo: introductory text.  
Photo credit: manuscript authors.

In the end, Gonzales-Day's campus lecture in mid-November was incredibly well received, drawing over 120 students, faculty, staff, and community members to a 90-seat auditorium. The student newspaper ran the headline: *Giving attention to those history has erased: Photographer Ken Gonzales-Day uses sites of lynching in California as a subject*. The author noted that students were touched by the lecture and artwork on exhibition:

*...I think for me it was interesting because of my background: I'm Mexican-American, and many times it doesn't seem like we talk about Mexican people [being] lynched or Hispanic people [being] lynched," said [a] first-year student.<sup>15</sup>*

The paper likewise cited faculty members who valued Gonzales-Day's lecture and exhibition:

*Professors from all disciplines were also enthusiastic about hearing what Gonzales-Day had to say about his artwork. 'Gonzales-Day's work is a vital part of a long tradition of resistance to racial violence and white supremacy by artists of color in the United States,' [stated a] professor of English.<sup>16</sup>*

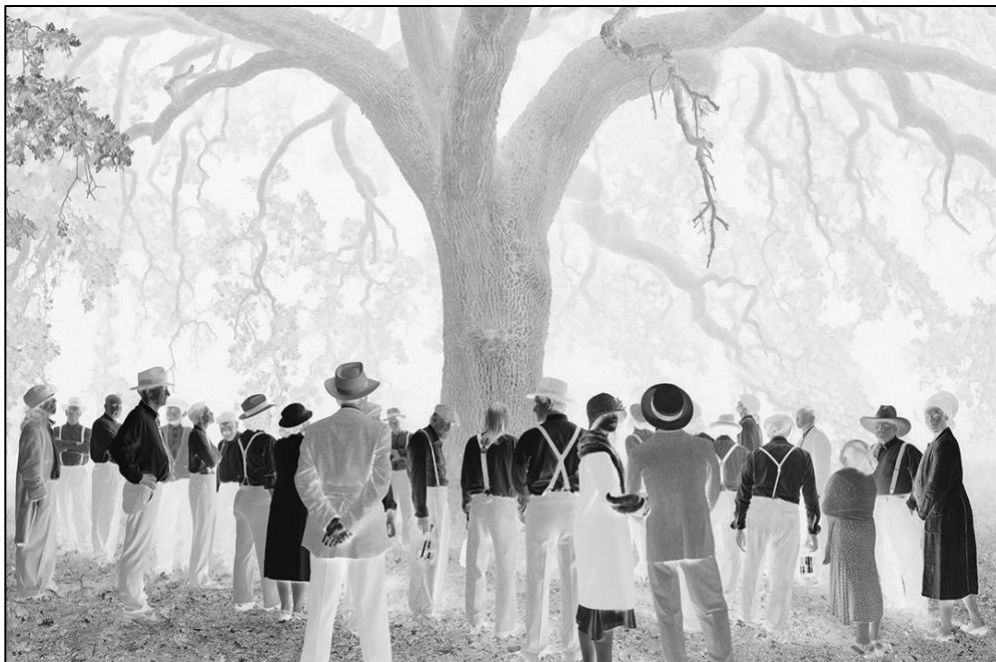


Figure 6. *The Lynching of "Spanish Charlie," Santa Rosa, CA (Inverted)*, 2016, Vinyl wallpaper, Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles.

To the credit of both museum and CDI staff, the entire length of the public exhibition was uneventful, sparking neither student nor community protest. The CDI dedication and opening went smoothly, and the museum completed a successful accreditation site-visit.

## Lessons learned

Clarity requires time often afforded only by hindsight. This manuscript is the result of further reflection and public presentation during the past year:

### **1. The museum should not have assumed its educational efforts would be well received by all.**

This is perhaps the most important takeaway. Museum staff spent a great deal of time defending and justifying the artistic, professional, and pedagogical virtues of Gonzales-Day's artwork. After all, the curatorial practice is a direct descendent of academic writing: exhibitions rely upon thesis statements, "big ideas," and research. All elements of creating an exhibition, from curatorial decision-making to label writing, is a series of deliberate, rationalized decisions. This is precisely how the museum approached the defense and justification of Gonzales-Day's artwork when it encountered pushback and even ideological opposition from CDI staff.

As mentioned earlier, museum staff dismissed this critical warning; the "embodied knowledge" conveyed vis-à-vis intellectual and emotional pushback by CDI staff should have been accepted as a *legitimate* response to the artist and his artwork. Only after this difference in perspective was acknowledged and recognized as valuable and legitimate should the museum have engaged in more direct dialogue with CDI peers about exhibition content and programming concerns.

### **2. The situation could have quickly escalated out of control.**

Academic administration was debriefed the same day by museum staff and a roadmap put in place to rebuild the faltering relationship through mediation. Ignoring or perhaps brushing aside the meeting outcome would have likely strained relationships to the breaking point. Word of mouth was also a serious concern, knowing that misinformation about the exhibition content and the artist might spread quickly unless formal channels of communication and an action plan were put in place immediately.

### **3. Small adjustments averted possible exhibit censorship and perhaps protests.**

Sensitive and thoughtful changes to advertising materials and museum didactics (i.e., introductory panels on the entryway doors and a new postcard image) added layers of much-needed contextualization to an exhibition with charged content. Visitors often engage with relatively few exhibition didactics, but perhaps they will opt for one among the many choices curators and educators provide.

### **4. Museum work is highly specialized and utilizes rare skillsets.**

According to the US Bureau of Labor and Statistics, museum careers comprise just 31,000 of all available jobs—a mere .009% of the entire US population.<sup>17</sup> The museum profession is highly specialized. The skillsets the profession demands, such as "reading" and dissecting complex imagery, is not common among the general population. Museum professionals need to be actively reminded that most visitors will not view artworks and objects in the same manner they do.

**5. Email is an imperfect communication tool.**

Museum staff should not have relied upon email to do the difficult task of front-loading exhibit contextualization. This important work should have been done face-to-face with no added assumptions.

**6. 90% of the museum's interaction is directly with students and faculty. Interaction with other university staff members occurs less frequently and is distinctly different.**

The museum's primary audience is undergraduate students and, by extension, the faculty who teach and mentor them. Museum staff realized very quickly that interaction with professional staff outside academic departments occurs much more infrequently. Collaborating with staff colleagues to deliver academic programs requires a different outlook and approach.

**7. Staff roles and responsibilities were misunderstood.**

As mentioned previously, neither CDI staff nor museum staff fully understood the role and mission of the other. Developing a deeper understanding of everyone's distinct professional role helped rebuild a stronger foundation for collaborative relationships.

**8. Meeting logistics were poorly planned.**

Very little thought went into meeting logistics. The location selected was a public lobby space in the art building where many casual meetings typically occur. Given the new staff introductions and the sensitive exhibit content, a more formal location or even meeting in the CDI offices could have facilitated a more comfortable conversation.

**9. Inclusion in the exhibit planning process is essential.**

Importantly, a seat at the newly-formed exhibit advisory committee was extended to CDI staff. Program and exhibition schedules are now shared twice per academic year with community members, faculty, and staff. Although a non-voting committee, the advisory committee strengthens the museum's collaborative efforts and provides an additional layer of external transparency for the program.

**10. Museum staff often lack many of the protections that tenured faculty enjoy.**

One unsettling position museum staff found themselves in during the mediation process was a state of intense vulnerability. Like so many institutions of higher education, the university employment handbook does not offer specific protections for staff members with regard to academic content and pedagogy, nor does the faculty handbook extend protection concerning academic freedom beyond tenured professors and their students. As a result, museum staff found themselves in a difficult position: wanting to defend and fight for an exhibition they believed in, yet forced to recognize their unprotected status as staff.

As of this writing, the university administration is reviewing how academic protections might extend to university curatorial staff. As museums across the nation embrace creativity, open dialogue, and "a forum for our present,"<sup>18</sup> providing a certain degree of assurance and protection to museum staff is increasingly critical. Affirmations of trust and the value of curatorial work is crucial to the health and vitality of exhibitions that challenge, inspire, and facilitate critical conversations on the twenty-first century university campus.

In closing, visual artists such as Gonzales-Day offer a critical voice to a past rarely acknowledged by mainstream history and media. Museums, as highly trusted arbiters of sociopolitical discourse, are well positioned to take up this enormous responsibility and embrace the role of public forum, yet museums should remain ever vigilant and aware of blind spots and inherent biases.<sup>19</sup> Although sensitive content is challenging to navigate among a multitude of constituencies, philosopher José Medina reminds us that the important work of “resisting the omissions and distortions of official histories”<sup>20</sup> can, as evidenced by this case study, be an incredibly effective tool for facilitating complex conversations. If nothing else, let this serve as a reminder that museums remain, more than ever, complex social enterprises in the twenty-first century.

## Figures

Figure 1. Gallery installation photo (Fall 2017). Photo credit: manuscript authors.

Figure 2. Ken Gonzales-Day, *This Day (Re-enactment of a lynching, McCook, SD, 1925)*, from the *Erased Lynching Series II*, 2006, Chromogenic print, 28x60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles.

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Figure 4. Exhibition postcards. Photo credit: manuscript authors.

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Figure 6. Ken Gonzales-Day, *The Lynching of “Spanish Charlie,” Santa Rosa, CA (Inverted)*, 2016, Vinyl wallpaper, Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Post. *Who Owns America's Past?: The Smithsonian and the Problem of History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2017.

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