

IJIDI: Book Review

Cole, J. B., & Lott, L. L. (Eds.). (2019). *Diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion in museums*. American Alliance of Museums. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN 9781538118627. 182 pp. \$35 US.

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Despite a longtime vocalized support for diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) in the museum field, a disappointing lack of progress persists. Most museum professionals, when asked, generally say they support DEAI—yet most museum professionals, board members, and visitors are wealthy and White, and exhibitions lag in representation and accuracy. Why?

Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums addresses this disparity between intention and action (or theory and practice) in the museum field. In 17 chapters, contributors examine the administrative issues and social aspects of museum professionals, visitors, and exhibits, from historical, contemporaneous, and forward-looking perspectives. They attempt to answer the question, “Why do challenges of inequity and inaccessibility in museums persist?” (p. ix). Many of the contributors reflect on long careers spent in the museum field, musing on what has and has not changed over the years. They all agree that pro-DEAI rhetoric is in ample supply—and has been, for quite a while now—while action sadly remains lackluster or, in some cases, totally absent. Some feel that change is in each individual museum professional’s hands; some think that change will not occur without a coordinated and holistic group effort; and others believe change will never happen unless it is imposed externally (e.g., through legislation or grant requirements).

While intellectual, political, and financial commitment will all be required to successfully diversify the profession, most agree that lack of funding is not the real problem. Additionally, there is no longer a real human resource pipeline problem (there is a diverse candidate pool; although some point out that unpaid internships still serve as a barrier to entry for those who cannot afford to work unpaid). The real issue, it seems, is one of will: not only are DEAI issues usually put on the back burner in museums, but the institution itself was originally built by and for the homogenous elite and is still largely run by wealthy (and overwhelmingly White and male) boards and trustees. Yes, there have been gains in diversity hiring in museums, but many of the authors point out that these hires are, unfortunately, usually low on the totem pole—and when the only diverse employees serve as security guards and maintenance staff, it can send the message that the museum is not meant for an inclusive staff or audience.

The contributors agree that museums have much to gain by increasing the diversity of the staff, visitors, and exhibits. They point out that the U.S. is poised to become a majority-

minority country (and therefore if museums fail to become more inclusive, they will become financially unviable); women are more philanthropic than men, despite still being underrepresented in exhibits and on boards; and differently-abled people should be welcomed not only as visitors, but as subjects of exhibits, as they have much to offer in terms of experience and creativity. Disability is not a barrier; society and expectations are. Many of the contributors point out that museums influence society, which means they are in a unique position to either maintain the status quo or promote justice. (Society also influences museums, which is how we ended up with colonial/racist/sexist/ableist cultural institutions to begin with.) A few of the proposed solutions to the lingering DEAI issues in museums include bias training; power sharing; making websites accessible; designing exhibits in collaboration with underrepresented communities; making all aspects of the museum dialogic; accommodating neurodiverse visitors and staff; and increasing the visibility and representation of women, people of color, LGBT+, and Indigenous people in exhibits.

One of several books published this year in the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) series, *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums* is classified as a book for professionals, but aims to be a resource for anyone interested in diversity fieldwork. The thin, edited book covers myriad and serious material without succumbing to density or slog. While there are many common themes, ideas, and issues, the book does not read as repetitive. Although intended for a professional readership, it would make an excellent text for any graduate-level Museum Studies course; it is one of the few professional books to successfully combine practical advice with academic considerations. Because the contributors take a holistic approach to remedying the museum field's diversity problem, their ideas ought to be shared generously with the next generation of aspiring museum professionals—they will be necessary components of and agents for the institutional change called for by these authors. Perhaps partially due to the practicality of the book, it is quite readable; it is written for professionals but is accessible for even undergraduate-level students who already know they are interested in museum work.

Overall, the book is well-written, with minimal variability in writing quality across authors. The book is comprised of essays, speeches, and reports, and is divided into four parts: “A Call to Action;” “Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Strategies;” “The Necessity and Power of First Person Voices;” and “Personal Journeys.” It includes bibliographical references, an index, and four appendices (Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Definitions; The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey; Museum Board Leadership Report Excerpt - The People; and Selected Resources).

There is a good range and fairly-even spread of topics in terms of which specific type/s of DEAI each essay attends to. I identified six categories across 17 chapters: DEAI/General (5); Disability (2); Indigeneity (2); LGBTQ+ (1); Race/Ethnicity (6); and Women (1). The Race/Ethnicity category can be further broken down into four subcategories: General (3); Black (1); Latinx (1); and White (1). Half of the chapters (8 out of 17, or 47%) are either reprints or adapted from previously-delivered remarks. Some of the chapters are in explicit conversation; for example, chapter 2 (“Museums, Racism, and the Inclusiveness Chasm” by Carlos Tortolero) is essentially a critique of chapter 1 (“Flies in the Buttermilk: Museums, Diversity, and the Will to Change” by Lonnie G. Bunch III). (Tortolero criticizes Bunch for never actually invoking the term “racism” despite providing several clear-cut examples of it.) A common thread throughout the book is that museum professionals have been espousing DEAI for quite some time, but now must actually do something about it—at this point, excuses

are unacceptable. The problem is both structural and personal, and it is urgent.

Since this is a book about diversity and inclusion, it is imperative to also consider the contributor and editor demographics. All of the identities discussed in the book are represented by the contributors. The overall background and expertise of the authors and editors are impressive, making the collection authoritative; many of the contributors are at the pinnacle of their careers. The co-editors, Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Laura L. Lott, have long and distinguished careers in museums, and Lott currently serves as the president and CEO of AAM. They each also contributed a chapter (Cole's covers DEAI/General and Lott's deals with Race/General).

Although intended to be an analysis of what can be learned from those who have long been observing, experiencing, and writing about DEAI issues in museums, the book would have benefitted from at least one contribution from an emerging, rather than seasoned, professional—especially since it intends to be an intergenerational dialogue. An identity that was not explicitly addressed, that is both timely and important, is the T in LGBTQ+: transgender. However, the relevance and importance of this book cannot be understated, and it is an impressive accompaniment to AAM's online collection of DEAI resources (American Alliance of Museums, 2019).

Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums promises to be a guide for a new generation of museum leaders; it might be more accurately described as a retroactive reckoning, but nevertheless, it delivers. The lessons of the past are imperative for the future, and it inspires hope that current museum thought leaders have the willingness to be both self-reflective and honest. Museums are embedded in practically every town and city in America, and therefore most libraries would do well to purchase this book. Libraries that have a museology collection, or support museology academic or professional programs, as well as libraries that are connected to museums, should also consider purchasing this book.

References

American Alliance of Museums. (2019). Diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion resources. Retrieved from <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/resource-library/diversity-equity-accessibility-and-inclusion-resources/>

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