History, Healing, and the African American Museum in Philadelphia: Going into the City with the Black Docents Collective

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 lockdown of summer 2020, docents at the African American Museum in Philadelphia (AAMP) decided that if the museum could not open, they would move their educational practices into the city and online, organizing tours and talks, and producing digital resources, working collaboratively under the name of the 'Black Docents Collective' (BDC). Based on qualitative interviews with docents, this article makes sense of the BDC's work, specifically in relation to their mission statement to *heal* the Philadelphia African American community. In particular we aim to understand the urban imaginaries of healing evoked by docents: what kind of city and communities do the BDC hope to create? What kind of public sphere is necessary for healing to take place? We suggest that docents' urban imaginaries of healing go beyond cultural recognition and envisage healing as necessitating a redistribution of resources historically denied to Black Philadelphians. In addition, BDC claim the right for healing to take place within a Black "counterpublic", of which AAMP already performs a constitutive role. The article contributes to academic debates concerned with the African American museum as well as literature on the topic of wounded cities.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 lockdown of summer 2020, and following the Black Lives Matters (BLM) protests against the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, docents at the African American Museum in Philadelphia (AAMP) decided that if the museum could not open, they would move their educational practices into the city and online, organising tours and talks, and producing digital resources. They formed the 'Black Docents Collective' (BDC) with the aim, as Richard White, BDC president, told us, 'to bring it to the neighbourhood, bring it to the community'.[1] Even when AAMP reopened in 2022, the BDC's programme of activities continued.

The African American Museums Association, founded in 1978, stated that 'a distinguishing trait of Black museums is the intimate relationship which they enjoy with their communities' (Burns 2013: 5). In cities damaged by racial conflict, police brutality, residential segregation, and material inequality, there is a pressing need for African American museums to be closely connected with local Black communities, although this has often been balanced against the aspiration to become established metropolitan cultural institutions (James 1996; Burns 2013; Davis 2013; Ruffins 2018; Wilson 2012). During lockdowns, the BDC used ingenuity to extend AAMP's commitment to Philadelphia's Black communities. Indeed, BDC members became engaged in such a range of activities across the city and online that boundaries between BDC, individual and AAMP endeavours are increasingly blurred.

Our specific focus is to make sense of the BDC's practices (and their accounts of these practices) in relation to their mission statement, released on their website in 2020, to 'educate, empower, and *heal* the Philadelphia African American community through the celebration of our history, culture and African values' (emphasis added).[2] Our aim is not to pass judgement upon whether the docents' activities *do* heal, but rather to understand the urban imaginaries of healing evoked by docents: what kind of city and communities do the BDC hope to create?

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What kind of public sphere is necessary for healing to take place?

The BDC's adoption of the language of "healing" speaks not only to debates surrounding African American museums and community engagement, but also to urban and cultural geography literatures regarding how cities recover and heal from trauma and/or harm. Jane Schneider and Ida Susser (2003) argue that globalization impacts cities, causing wounds that are experienced by the entire city polity. More relevant to this investigation is how Karen Till (2012: 6) defines "wounded cities" as those 'harmed and structured by particular histories of physical destruction, displacement, and individual and social trauma resulting from state-perpetrated violence'. Till (2011) suggests that cities, and their museums, can provide environments that offer residents care; a milieu to come-to-terms with the past whilst collectively reimagining the future of the city. Nuala Morse (2020: 2) also explores the museum 'as a space of social care'; a site where 'therapeutic work can take place' (ibid. :14). Indivisible from the practice of healing a wounded city, is the development of shared "urban imaginary" that reconfigures a city's public culture. Indeed, attention has been given to how museums provide spaces for the co-creation of urban imaginaries (Estada-Grajales et al. 2020; Melhuish et al. 2016). As Andreas Huyssen (2008:3) explains, an urban imaginary marks the ways that city dwellers imagine their city as the place of everyday life, but also as scenes of histories of destruction, conflict, and injustice.

We advance three related arguments. First, the activities of Philadelphia's BDC are evidence, within the conjuncture of 2020 and its aftermath, of the extension of what Andrea Burns (2013: 186) calls the 'peripheral edge' of African American museums; their ability, arising from a position of historical marginality vis-à-vis the museum sector and spurred by the ideals of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements, to 'challenge how a museum should function'. Second, docents' urban imaginaries of healing go beyond cultural recognition and envisage healing as necessitating a *redistribution* of resources denied to Black Philadelphians. Third, members of the BDC articulate the right for healing to take place, at least in part, away from the gaze of the (White) city, within a Black "counterpublic", of which AAMP (and now the BDC) performs a constitutive role. The theoretical framing of our second and third arguments derives from Nancy Fraser's understanding of (i) recognition and redistribution as remedies for social injustice (Fraser 1995; Fraser and Honneth 2003); and (ii) relations between the public sphere and its counterpublics (Fraser 1990), taking into account subsequent discussions of African American museums and Black counterpublics (Wilson 2012).

This article draws on research carried out as part of a larger project titled Archiving the Inner City: Race and the politics of urban memory,[3] in which over fifty semi-structured interviews have so far been conducted with archivists, activists, artists, and heritage and museum practitioners in Philadelphia. Of these, eight interviews were with the BDC. Irteza Mohyuddin carried out these interviews, which, along with the BDC's online materials, were thematically analysed. Most online material was located via the BDC's website; other material was brought to our attention in interviews and personal correspondence. Michael Clemmons was the first docent with whom Irteza connected in summer 2022. Sharing a mutual interest in African American history in Philadelphia – Irteza's prior research in the city concerned history teaching in Black Muslim schools – Michael led Irteza on a walking tour of Black neighbourhoods in South Philadelphia. He introduced Irteza to the other docents, including the BDC President Richard White. Irteza attended a Saturday morning meeting with the collective, where she introduced the project and shared her background as a South-Asian Muslim immigrant woman who studied Black history in an attempt to understand her place in American history. In the following months, Irteza conducted interviews with docents which included questions about the BDC's activities and their urban imaginaries of healing. All docents waived the right to anonymity. Both authors have since met, chatted, exchanged emails, and attended cultural events in Philadelphia with members of the BDC outside of an interview scenario.

The article is structured as follows: the first section introduces AAMP and the BDC; the second section provides an overview of why Philadelphia is a racially wounded city, followed by a discussion of extant literature around history and healing; in the third section, docents' accounts of their practices are examined in terms of their urban imaginaries of healing, focusing

upon the connections between imaginaries of recognition and redistribution; and in the fourth section the BDC's imaginaries of healing are discussed in relation to the public sphere and Black counterpublics. A conclusion follows where we elaborate upon our three arguments.

The African American Museum in Philadelphia and the Black Docents Collective

African American museums emerged in the latter nineteenth century, with the number of such institutions, as well as their popularity and influence, growing significantly during the century that followed. The first African American museum was the Hampton University Museum in Virginia in 1868 (Hayward and Larouche 2018). Another early example of groundbreaking curatorial practice was W.E.B. Du Bois' presentation for the 1900 Paris Exhibition (Rothenstein 2019). Hayward and Larouche (2018: 165-6) report that a dozen African American museums appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, mainly in the South. Impetus picked up in the Northeast and Midwest during the 1960s, especially in cities that were prime destinations during the Great Migration. The new museums – starting with the Ebony Museum, Chicago in 1961 (now the DuSable Museum), followed by the Studio Museum in Harlem (1968) and the Anacostia Community Museum in DC (1969) – challenged cultural institutions that overlooked or relegated Black experience, whilst raising awareness of 'the inequities that have plagued Black communities historically and in modern times' (Hayward and Larouche 2018: 169). African American museums not only collected and displayed artefacts, but aimed to 'inspire Black citizens to action' (Wilson 2012: 253).

Existing literature on African American museums highlights two tensions that are relevant to our analysis. First, the 'core identity' of African American museums is to act as 'instigators of change within their communities' although, as was the case with Studio Museum, this can conflict with the aim to establish a stable cultural institution (Burns 2013: 179-80). Balancing the aspiration to professionalize museum operations and build permanent collections and archives alongside efforts to involve local communities has proved difficult. As Portia James (1996) explains, DC's Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (ANM) struggled to integrate local engagement with a focus on broader African American history, eventually dropping its "neighborhood" designation in its move towards institutional growth (ibid.: 28; see also Autry 2016). Second, for African American museums, representational struggles do not exist in isolation from struggles against material inequality. For example, Mabel Wilson (2012: 295) explains how the 'fight for access to decent work, education, health care, and housing' underpinned the mission led by advocates for the first Black museums.

The campaign for an African American museum in Philadelphia began, as in many Northeastern cities, during the 1960s (Burns 2013: 41). Proposals received significant public support but were continually blocked at the final stage by City Hall.[4] A temporary Black history exhibit was offered as part of the city's 1976 bicentennial celebrations but this was viewed as a derisory gesture by campaigners for a full museum (ibid.: 55). Permission was eventually granted for a permanent museum in January 1975 (ibid.: 56). Museum advocates favoured a site in affluent Society Hill, close to the old "Seventh Ward" where W.E.B. Du Bois carried out his famous study *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), but residents opposed (ibid.: 67-70). The location that was eventually agreed upon at 7th and Arch was criticized for being separated from Black communities, as well as from Philadelphia's other cultural institutions (ibid.:71).

AAMP opened in 1976. Until 1997 it was known as the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum. The new museum struggled to retain leadership. In its first decade, five directors rotated through the position.[5] AAMP has always depended in part on state and city funding. This decreased by half a million dollars in the first five years.[6] In 2005, perilous finances forced leadership to lay off a dozen employees. In 2020, the City of Philadelphia again reduced funding.[7] Exhibits initially focused on art from the African diaspora, such as the 'Art from Zaire' exhibition in 1977 (Burns 2013: 118), before prioritizing the African American experience, for example the successful 1986 exhibition 'The People's Art: Black Murals, 1967-1978'. Since 2009, visitors have engaged with a permanent exhibition with a local focus, titled 'Audacious Freedom: African Americans in Philadelphia 1776-1876'.

AAMP's location in Center City, far removed from African American neighborhoods, has been a long-running issue. Critics pointed to how AAMP was always an 'establishment'

rather than a community-based initiative (Burns 2013: 125); that it has struggled to develop as an autonomous African American museum (ibid.: 127). However, AAMP has recently re-envisioned its community engagement. For example, the AAMP in the Community project connects the museum with community-based organisations in Philadelphia, New Jersey, and Delaware to support unserved and underserved communities. AAMP has also organized a nonprofit food bank, Philabundance.[8] In September 2022, AAMP announced it was moving to a new location on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, close to the Free Library of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Museum of Art – a fitting site for a leading city museum but not one that will address the separation of the museum from Black communities.

Figure 1. The African American Museum in Philadelphia (© Monique Perry for Archiving the Inner City)

The Black Docents Collective

Educational programmes in museums are often run by volunteers known as docents, 'adult educators who voluntarily lead small groups of visitors through museum galleries or historical sites on educational and informative tours' (Neill 2010: 68). Docents emerged in the 1890s, when museum education was primarily performed by professional men (Giltinan 2013: 104). By the 1930s, docentry became prevalent amongst middle-class White women (ibid.: 105), although as Irina Mihalache (2020) explains, the wider history of volunteer women's committees tends to be excluded from museum histories (see also McTavish 2008). Similarly, there are few accounts of Black docentry. It is suggested they first appeared during the 1960s, leading plantation tours highlighting the history of enslaved people (Modlin, 2008). The urban African American museums provided more opportunities for Black residents to volunteer as docents. John Fleming (1994: 1020) notes the role played by Black docents as interlocutors between museums, urban inequalities, and the 'American ideal' 'embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights'. Amina Dickerson (1984:15) argues African American docents are like scholars in that they place 'the events of the past, significant or mundane, in a context in which they can be critically examined or validated'. Black docents have often taken a creative approach, writing memoirs (Redford 1988), re-enacting enslaved women's experiences (Bates 2005), and performing slave narratives as a counter-point to White-planter heritage tours (Benjamin 2015).

In Philadelphia, the BDC enact their educational practice within and beyond the museum. All members lead tours and have scheduled gallery duties at AAMP. Since the summer of 2020, BDC have organized programmes and activities "outside" of the museum, including walking tours, producing online presentations about famous Black Philadelphians, conducting historical/archival research, applying for preservation orders, and organizing public events such as AAMP in the Square, a 'family-friendly outdoor series featuring culturally relevant and educationally rich content from local and visiting musicians, griots, lyricists, community leaders, and artists', held in Franklin Square.[9] The BDC exists independently of AAMP, viewing its activities as complementary to the mission of the museum, as an extension and reimagining of AAMP's commitment to Black communities in the city.

History, Healing, and the Wounded City

Philadelphia remains a symbol of democratic possibility for many African Americans; but also, at the same time, a 'terrain of shockingly undemocratic treatment' (Awkward 2013: 18). In the eighteenth century, Philadelphia was home to some of the earliest communities of free Blacks in the US (Nash 1988). The Mother Bethel AME Church, founded in 1794, hosted the first Black congregation in the city. The first national meeting of The Colored Convention Movement was held in Philadelphia in 1830. In 1899, W.E.B. Du Bois published *The Philadelphia Negro*. The city was a hub for Black music and arts during the twentieth century (Jackson 2004; Kilkenny 2015). Since 1984, Philadelphia has elected four Black mayors, including the latest, Cherelle Parker, in 2024. But like most North American cities, Philadelphia is also, in Till's (2012) terms, "wounded" by centuries of racial oppression. During the nineteenth century, prominent Black institutions and individuals were attacked, including the murder of civil rights activist Octavius Catto on election day 1871 (Biddle and Dubin 2010). Violent opposition to Blacks moving into "White" neighbourhoods led to riots in 1918 (Bauman 1975). Acute economic hardship characterized much of the twentieth century, especially post-WWII (Adams et al 1993; Simon 2017). In November 1967, a peaceful march of school students requesting Black history be added to their curriculum was brutally suppressed by police (Countryman 2007). Police bombed MOVE, a Black commune on Osage Avenue, in May 1985, killing six adults and five children (Stein 2022). The University of Pennsylvania was later found to have illegally transferred the bones of the deceased to their Penn Museum.[10] Black Philadelphians have experienced residential displacement, due to urban renewal in the mid-twentieth century and gentrification in the twenty-first-century (Hunter 2013). A related form of violence is racial segregation, a legacy of red-lining, the Federal policy that prohibited investment in Black neighbourhoods (Hillier 2003).

Outside of museum studies, literature on racism, history, and healing explores ways of ameliorating the generational consequences of racial trauma. This has resulted in therapeutic practice and research with Indigenous communities (e.g. George et al. 2014; Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Waldram 2014). This approach supports healing by building community solidarity, as opposed to 'white-dominant approaches' that attend to 'normalising the individual' (Alvarez and Tulino 2023: 1488). Similar work with African Americans (e.g., Bartholomew et al. 2018; Henderson et al. 2021) advocates healing through raising historical awareness and critical consciousness. In a discussion of the influence of critical race theory on healing, Rebecca Tsosie (2005: 40) points to the interrelationships between materialist and idealist perspectives: the former involving the development of reconciliation narratives, and the latter implying material redistribution and/or reparations. In a toolkit published in 2017, BLM embraced the notion of 'healing justice',[11] connecting the revisiting of systemic trauma with building collective resilience for the ongoing fight for liberation (see Bosley et al. 2022). Addressing the importance of creating a healing milieu, BLM (2017) praise how 'healers committed to our liberation have stepped up and created spaces in our communities'. This in part comprises the discursive intellectual and activist context from which the BDC emerged in 2020, adopting the language of healing in their own mission statement.

From an urban (and cultural) geographical perspective, Till (2012) argues that effective healing from past trauma requires a place-based ethics of care that is based around memory-work, artistic practice, and invoking a politics of 'being seen, giving voice, and making visible

those particular places, people, and stories that have and continue to be physically and socially marked by histories of exclusion, displacement, and violence […]' (Till 2011: 284). For Till (2008: 108), wounded cities 'embody difficult social pasts' but they also require protection as places of healing (ibid.:109). Discrete urban places – such as neighbourhoods and institutional settings – and the wider, public city, are equally important in terms of offering care, since attachments to both provide the 'thick meaning to inhabitants' experience of place and the city' (Till 2011: 286).

Museums can help nurture a place-based ethics of care. Elaborating upon the memory work conducted at the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, Till (2011: 292) argues the museum is 'defined by an insistence on remembering difficult pasts as well as on the right to narrate those pasts'. This allows those who have been previously excluded to inhabit future urban imaginaries (ibid.: 296). Till's (2012: 13) emphasis on memory work and artistic therapies is central to her broader critique of a 'North American urban geography [that] has tended to emphasize economic and Marxist interpretations of the city when seeking to imagine possible political change and more just urban futures'. Morse (2020) examines how care for vulnerable social groups is implicated in the community engagement of museums. Morse re-orients the museum through ideas of care: 'care for things, care for stories, care for the issue, care for people, care for the community, care for staff, care for the present and the past and care for the future' (ibid.:2). Although healing and care are not the same, where they align is in an understanding of the museum as a potentially therapeutic space.

Practicing memory work within a healing framework constitutes an "affirmative" orientation towards cultural recognition, and a reallocation of respect for the experiences of excluded or discriminated against social groups (Fraser 1995). As Fraser puts it, 'affirmative remedies for such injustices […] propose to redress disrespect by revaluing unjustly devalued group identities' (ibid. :82); although, crucially, without 'disturbing the underlying framework that generates them' (ibid.). An emphasis upon recognition, respect, and identity is important, but it can underplay the persistence of material inequalities. Unlike many cultural institutions, African American museums (and their docents) are always already positioned within a struggle that demands an affirmative remedy for 'racial injustice in the economy' (ibid.:90). As Wilson (2012: 295) explains, the founders of African American museums accepted, from the outset, the need to confront racist state and institutional structures.

The Museum in the City: Recognition and Redistribution in Urban Imaginaries of Healing

This section of the article examines the varied activities of the BDC, and how individual docents interpret and imagine these activities as contributing to healing. We begin with Michael Clemmons' historical preservation work. Working with Dr Donna J. Rilling, Michael was successful in getting the Smith-Whipper Houses on Lombard Street listed by the Philadelphia Historical Commission. The houses were the home of Stephen Smith, a Civil War-era abolitionist, and William Whipper, a businessman, abolitionist, and founder of Philadelphia Library of Colored Peoples. The houses were a locus for abolitionist activity during the nineteenth century. Michael's successful application includes a fourteen-page case for preservation on the basis of three criteria: that the buildings are associated with (i) the lives of significant persons; (ii) events of city-wide and national importance; and (iii) exemplifications of the cultural, political, economic social, and historical heritage of the community. Preservation is tied to an urban imaginary that is also a set of values; a conviction that objects which embody a particular past *matter* (Urry 1990). Indeed, museum staff regularly engage in caring for artefacts, and in developing an awareness of their vulnerabilities (Morse 2020). For Michael, this extends to the city; imagining important structures as artefacts in a "living archive" (Hall 2001). And as Till (2012) emphasizes, demonstrating care for the city is necessary if the city is to provide a healing milieu.

The BDC also produce online resources aimed at fostering public recognition of prominent Black Philadelphians. For example, there are video presentations on the aforementioned Stephen Smith (1797–1873), Octavius Catto (1839–1871), and Charles L. Blockson (1933- 2023), historian, author, and founder of the "Afro-American" collections at

Temple and Penn State Universities. The BDC creates a "digitally mediated" space (Degen and Rose 2024) that facilitates collective healing by reimagining Philadelphia as a city where Black luminaries retain a presence. A related aspect of healing is genealogy: encouraging Black Philadelphians to research their family histories and, where possible, for families to reunite.[12] In Adrienne Whaley's video for the BDC on family reunification, she speaks of establishing a 'sense of unity that extends to the past'.[13]

Michiko Quinones worked in Washington, D.C. before moving to Philadelphia and volunteering with AAMP. When asked about healing, the first thing Michiko mentions is the harm caused by Penn Museum's claiming of human bones after the MOVE bombing:

> There might be room for recompense, there also might be room for Penn to make a statement of apology. I think there's room to take this into a really good healing direction […] Ultimately what it boils down to before is just erasure.[14]

Michiko suggests that Penn Museum makes an apology; and in addition to returning the bones, she raises the possibility of further recompense. The removal and placing *elsewhere* of human remains is a source of profound pain to social groups who have experienced trauma (Hodder 2010). Michiko requests that a City institution, in this case the Penn Museum, addresses its role in historical injustices. Michiko's fear of (cultural) erasure and (material) dispossession – a city of Black absences abetted by City institutions – is a powerful, if negative urban imaginary that motivates much of BDCs work, providing it with urgency. For example, BDC produce online learning resources about significant Black history events in Philadelphia, so that they will not be forgotten. There are BDC videos available on YouTube about the MOVE bombing, the 1838 burning of Pennsylvania Hall by white supremacists, and on police brutality in the 1970s led by Police Commissioner of the time (and future mayor) Frank Rizzo.[15]

A former Philadelphia social worker, Alisa Rashid, prioritizes teaching in her role as a docent: 'I integrate everything – academic, music, or whatever. My objective is to come from a teaching perspective, so I want people to leave [the museum] with a body of information'.[16] She explains how the BDC started after she sent an email to other docents in 2020, stating 'let's do something'. Another reason 'why we set up a black docent collective was to establish a framework [of other Black cultural institutions in Philadelphia] that can help the next generation'.[17] The BDC seek to make connections between Black institutions rather than work as separate entities. As Alisa explains:

> We have a responsibility to take the information at the museum library and to spread it as much as and as wide as we possibly can. We should do something with this information, we need to use it to heal the community…You need to tell your stories, and if you don't tell them then someone else will tell them.[18]

Alisa emphasizes the responsibility to heal but also the struggle to retain ownership of the past. It is first necessary to *claim* the 'right to narrate the past', as Till puts it (2011). Alisa also believes it is easier to positively impact children with historical education:

> They [adults] have not looked at it and seen it as trauma, and so we're still suffering from that trauma…And once you let trauma continue, it just festers because there's no intervention and there's no counselling, there's no nothing.[19]

Another docent, Lyn Gibson Thompson, explains how 'many of us [adults] don't even realize that we're hurt'.[20] Alisa (above) emphasises the scarcity of counselling services, which compounds another issue, highlighted by BDC President Richard White: 'the deal, especially with many black men right, is you don't have no health care', adding 'I'm really paranoid, still, of white psychologists'.[21] Healing through education is clearly compromised by deficits in health care and mental health provision among Black communities. Building collective self-esteem through learning about the past cannot be achieved without investment in the wellbeing of Philadelphia's African American communities. As Fraser (1995: 74) argues, claims for recognition and redistribution often need to be made simultaneously (see also Tsosie 2005).

Valerie Anderson – in her late fifties and born and raised in Philadelphia – enjoys helping young people find pride in their Blackness through the arts:

> I like the kids to see more than the trauma, like the joy of art – braiding people's hair, being in the streets. Artists like Dawoud Bey, Carrie Mae Weems. This is more than just the slavery trauma part. We gotta tell other parts of the story too. The celebration, the contributions, making lemonade out of lemons. Just our lives. That's us. We have to connect the dots, to make history real. There is also the BLM stuff, that spins off the Black Power stuff, and *they* were building on the 1800s – dang, they were fighting for the same stuff! [22]

Valerie's imaginary of healing emphasizes sharing the joys of 'Black livingness' (McKittrick 2022): of everyday life, art, styling hair, of celebrations and 'connecting dots'. Here, signifying the BDC's radical extension of the museum, *the streets* are imagined as a milieu that facilitates healing. Valerie, however, is incredulous that the struggles of the past have not been resolved. Perhaps this explains how, for Richard White, amidst the joy that arises from celebrating Black history, you can also 'hear our rage, you hear how we *contain* our rage'.[23] The docents' willingness to connect joy, anger and the everyday (as well as past and present) resonates with Lonnie Bunch's (2007: 52-3) suggestion that African American museums resist the 'rosy glow' of heroic depictions of the past and embrace 'the challenge of ambiguity'.

In their urban imaginaries of healing, Black docents accept that healing through education and consciousness raising cannot be separated from material redistribution. Adding to access to healthcare (mentioned above), Alisa Rashid explains how formerly incarcerated Black men 'can't get into jobs, they can't get any housing'.[24] Or as Valerie Anderson, another docent, explained to us, 'sometimes it's just the money, it's just money'.[25] Indeed, Valerie continues, explaining how many Black neighbourhoods in Philadelphia are 'dangerous', characterized by 'pollution…dirty streets, some people live on the street because they're not working, and you've got drugs coming into the neighbourhood';[26] all of which hinder education and healing. For Valerie, material inequalities are an obstacle to healing, but they also persist as ongoing sources of humiliation and trauma. As Black docent Lyn Gibson Thompson suggests, AAMP itself suffers from financial hardship due to disparities in recognition vis-à-vis other cultural institutions in Philadelphia:

> AAMP need some money. It's just always been the stepchild of museums. You have lots of museums in Philadelphia and we are blessed to be very rich with history, but a lot of care doesn't get given to AAMP.[27]

The financial struggle of many African American cultural institutions is well documented (e.g. Hayward and Larouche 2018). Museums directed primarily towards redressing cultural disrespect are not exempt from requiring material support.

To summarize, the urban imaginaries of healing expressed by the BDC and discussed above – including imaginaries of erasure/ absence; historical preservation; honourable and fair City institutions; consciousness and self-esteem raising; of Black museums working together; unity and justice for living and dead Black Philadelphians; of inhabiting ambiguity; as well as equitable service provision and reinvestment in Black neighbourhoods – reveal how recognition and redistribution cannot be separated in practice (Fraser 1995: 74). Healing a wounded city necessitates a greater understanding (and celebration) of Black history and culture, but it also demands remedies for socio-economic injustices (see Fraser and Honneth 2003: 12-13). BDC believe that healing via celebrating, learning, sharing, and preserving must also be accompanied by greater mental health provision, safer streets, successful Black-owned businesses, fairer funding for AAMP, and more equitable access to housing and employment. Their accounts do not decouple the "two-dimensionality" of race as comprised of status *and class* (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 22). They are consistent with historical analyses that emphasize the commitment of African American museums to addressing the structural and material inequalities that impact Black urban communities (see Burns 2013). However, the autonomous activities of the BDC are also an example of how this commitment was adapted and extended in the conjunctural conditions of 2020. The language of healing adds a new inflection to the historical missions of urban African American museums. It is a development of the innovative, activist "peripheral edge" that Burns (2013) argues has empowered African American cultural institutions. In relation to the geographical literature on wounded cities,

a 'place-based ethics of care' (Till 2008: 2012) that prioritizes artistic, therapeutic forms of memory work clearly does not go as far as the BDC in considering how 'culture and political economy are always imbricated with one another' (Fraser 1995: 70). The BDC acknowledges how a healing process that only remedies cultural recognition is insufficient to heal a wounded city like Philadelphia.

The museum *and* the City: The Public Sphere and the Black Metropolis

So far our analysis has concerned BDC's urban imaginaries of healing in terms of the inseparability of recognition and redistribution. Another tension is whether docents envisage the "body politic" of the *whole city* becoming involved in healing or whether healing should primarily take place *within* Philadelphia's African American communities. Till (2012: 7) stresses the importance of public visibility in therapeutic memory work. However, the BDC add that healing also requires privacy. This points to friction between the idea of a liberal, urban "public sphere" (Habermas 1991), which has historically excluded and/or discriminated against Black citizens, and a co-existing Black counterpublic constituted, in part, by the relationship between African American museums and communities, and through which 'counterattacks' on the American ethos of democracy and freedom can be nurtured and publicly articulated (Wilson 2012: 9). Fraser (1990: 57) argues the idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice, but there also exists a plurality of 'subaltern counterpublics', that is to say, 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (ibid. :67). Rather than undermining the public sphere, this contestation actually better promotes the ideal of participatory politics (ibid.:66). Museums are widely agreed to be integral to the public sphere (see Barrett 2012). However, Wilson (2012: 11) places the emergence of African American museums within 'the genealogy that emerges from the urbanisation of black populations'; as extensions of a Black counterpublic where alternative agendas for social advancement, cultural identity, and national belonging are presented and debated (ibid.:8). As AAMP docent Valerie Anderson puts it:

> That's the other thing I learned about being in the Black museum [AAMP]. We get to be ourselves. When you come, you coming into *our* house. This is our home, our story. This is the space I get to be unapologetically Black.[28]

Wilson (2012:11) suggests that African American museums offer 'social spaces through which Black Americans made their presence known to white citizens as well as to their own counterpublic sphere […] within segregated black neighbourhoods'. In interpreting the urban imaginaries of healing of the BDC, it is important to acknowledge how they envisage interplay between the public sphere and Philadelphia's Black counterpublic.

Richard White is sceptical as to how the City can enable healing, preferring to emphasize the importance of Black autonomy:

> When one comes to a point in their healing process, they need to have a sense of their *own* being, more control over *themselves*; which is different than being a part of something…In the healing process, the social body that was harmed needs to be able to say "I need to have some space to myself, I need my own agency", and it [the City] might not have space for that because it thinks it's destructive.[29]

Richard (above) suggests that Philadelphia's Black communities – the 'social body that was harmed' – must be relieved from the pressure to be 'a part of something' (i.e. the public sphere) and instead appropriate a Black space within which a sense of agency and self can be fostered. He acknowledges how this process faces disapproval since Black counterpublics are viewed as 'destructive'. Fraser (1990: 67) argues that while counterpublics are often decried as 'separatist', they simply assume an alternative orientation to publicity. Indeed, Philadelphia's Black counterpublic, as imagined here by Richard, is not a refusal of the public sphere of the City. Rather, it is grounded in Philadelphia's history:

> To create a historical identity for Black Philadelphia, we focus on the 1830s, what we call the 'Black Metropolis', so we can be that holistic, interconnected, synergistic community of people; so that we can be productive in the environment we are in. It requires creating an identity, institutions that reinforce the value of it, and it has to be able to provide a social network, a social safety network, a mutual aid society. Part of that healing is to be able to say, "we recognize that education or healthcare is not something that a people should have to struggle to try to achieve", right? So, the outcome from this healing, is to be able to recognize, without the gaze, that these are things which we are able to create on our own, to benefit us, and others, but to benefit us.[30]

Richard (above) reiterates that healing should be internal to the Black community. It should occur "without" the (White) institutional gaze (Tolia-Kelly 2016). Richard believes in the need to create an arena to 'be ourselves', to create stable institutions, social safety networks and mutual aid. He values the kind of autonomy that the BDC themselves are practising. Healing equates to 'being productive in the environment we are in'; a 'structured setting' (Fraser 1995: 69) comprised of the segregated Black spaces of the city, a realm that AAMP itself has historically struggled to connect with. Notably, Richard reiterates his refusal to decouple healing from the struggle for 'education or healthcare'.[31]

Richard's evocation of the "Black Metropolis" relates to an 1838 census of Philadelphia conducted by Bacon and Garner for the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, a survey which included questions about wealth, real estate, education, manumission,[32] social networks, occupations, and family units, all connected to names and specific addresses. The census, researched by another docent Michiko Quinones, reveals that in 1838, 18,768 Black people lived in Philadelphia. They created 16 churches, 23 public and private schools, 89 beneficial societies, 300 Black-owned businesses, and possessed over $40,000 in wealth.[33] As Gary Nash (1988: 5) explains:

> From the beginning free black Philadelphians understood that the only secure foundation upon which to fashion their lives was one constructed of independent organisations embodying their sense of being *a people within a people* and relying on their own resources rather than on white benevolence (emphasis added).

In her online talk about the Black Metropolis, hosted by the Pennsylvania Historical Society,[34] Michiko Quinones says to the audience 'we want you to restore it'. The Black Metropolis is a historical phenomenon that, for the BDC, also serves as a vision for Black autonomy and healing.

Black docent Michael Clemmons offers another view on the relationship between the public sphere and Philadelphia's Black counterpublic. He explains how the BDC work with Black and White residents, adding, 'the Black community is not monolithic and people have differences of opinion about how to do things'. For Michael, the city *can* facilitate a healing environment:

> The city is like a neighbour. They can provide some things but I'm not looking to get a whole bunch of money from the city. The city is an enabler. For example, the city is enabling the movement of AAMP to a new location.[35]

The city is a "neighbour", a statement which presupposes Black autonomy but a cordial relation between a Black counterpublic and the City; a neighbour whom one does not ask financial favours, but from whom one expects respect, trust and occasionally, a helping hand. As such, Michael retains some faith in what Elijah Anderson (2011) calls the 'cosmopolitan canopy' that exists in Philadelphia, an ethic of urban civility between publics:

> What would a reconciled or healed Philadelphia look like? That's a real good question. It's aspirational, okay, and I think that in some regards we've seen glimpses of it. We have Black city council president, he's not the first one, we've had Black mayors—we don't refer to them as Black mayors, just a mayor. That's progress. Probably the big thing that we haven't reconciled is the poverty. The poverty levels in Philadelphia are really high. People say Philadelphia is 'the

> largest poor city in America'. Or 'the poorest large city in America'. And I think a lot of is racial because, '*it's too Black*' is basically how people think of Philly. One of the reasons I like the city is because Philly does have so much Black pride and black history and it's doing this work but it is still very much struggling with the poverty and also segregation.[36]

Michael admits healing is an aspiration – a process rather than a final outcome – but stresses that progress towards healing *is already* evident in Philadelphia's public sphere, through the democratic election of Black mayors and the growth of Black pride. However, Michael's concern with ongoing poverty is a reminder of Fraser's (1990) argument that an adequate conception of the public sphere requires not merely the bracketing, but the elimination of social inequality. The racialization of poverty prevents 'participatory parity' in the public sphere because 'social inequality taints deliberation within publics' (Fraser 1990: 65). While Michael perceives "glimpses" of healing, the drive for collective self-esteem and public recognition is thwarted by the elision of poverty with Blackness.

This tension between a city public sphere that is historically exclusionary and a Black counterpublic – a model of autonomy and self-sufficiency forged in the Black Metropolis of the 1830s – infuses all BDC's urban imaginaries of healing. Healing from a traumatic racist past cannot occur solely *in public* because privacy and autonomy, features of the Black counterpublic, are necessary to develop solidarity, collective self-esteem, and historical consciousness. Besides, historic racial segregation, disinvestment and poverty disrespects Black communities, creating a symbolic obstacle to participatory parity in the public sphere (see Wacquant 2008, and Awkward 2013). AAMP itself was born out of this paradox: inaugurated publicly 'as a political response to a divided community' (Burns 2013: 124), but also as a museum intended to flourish as a prestigious, autonomous African American cultural institution (ibid.:127). The imaginaries and practices of healing of the BDC, however, reveal a more engaged, reflexive understanding of their urban field of action. Their unflinching recognition of historical and enduring racial divisions in Philadelphia – and the privations and profound senses of solidarity that these divisions have at times engendered – is very much situated on the extended 'peripheral edge' (Burns 2013) afforded by the events of 2020. However, as the BDC demonstrate, this periphery is also a place from which attempts to reach the heart of Philadelphia's Black communities can be more flexibly made.

Conclusion

This article examines how the Black Docents Collective based at the African American Museum in Philadelphia responded during the COVID-19-related closures and BLM protests of 2020, detailing how they maintained their commitment to Black communities by moving their activities into the city and online. This work continues today as BDC remain motivated by their mission to use history and culture to heal the city's African American communities. A focus on these practices (through docent's reflexive accounts) allows for a thorough examination of the evolving relationship between an African American museum, its volunteer docents, and the city, in the conjuncture of 2020 and its aftermath. Post-1960 African American museums were born from the urbanization of Blacks in the US and remain embedded in this historical experience (Wilson 2012). Indeed, the city is not simply a location, but also, as the BDC demonstrate, a field of action. This article contains three closely-related arguments.

First, the BDC aim to use Black history education to heal. The urban imaginaries of healing that accompany this aim, in the conjuncture of 2020, can be considered a continuation and an extension of what Burns (2013: 186) identifies as the 'peripheral edge', that is to say, the potential of African American museums to act as effective agents of community change by challenging ideas about how a museum should function. The BDC's connection with, yet apparent autonomy from AAMP, is critical in understanding how African American museums continue to innovate, with a renewed sense of urgency, from the periphery.

Second, while the educational activities of BDC are largely concerned with increasing recognition of Philadelphia's Black history, their urban imaginaries fuse the raising of self-esteem, critical consciousness, and solidarity with the redistribution of material resources. We highlight how this redistributive dimension is not anticipated in the geographical literature on

wounded cities or the museum as a site of care, both of which tend to focus on healing and care predominantly as an issue of "recognition". BDC's acknowledgment of the importance of recognition *and* redistribution is a reminder of the materialist rather than ethical roots of the African American museum (Wilson 2012).

Third, docents' urban imaginaries of healing disavow the prominence of a singular public sphere represented by the administrative body of the City. As Marcus Anthony Hunter (2013: 173) explains, for many Black Philadelphians, the City 'is perceived as the source of political power and control over resource allocation', rather than a benign entity equipped and willing to 'offer its residents care' as Till (2012: 3), writing in more abstract (and hopeful) terms about 'the city' suggests. The BDC highlight how healing implies not only a connection between the African American museum and Black communities, but also mediation between Black counterpublics and the public sphere. Even when the importance of the broader public sphere is acknowledged, within which the African American museum assumes a peripheral role, BDC prioritize healing within the literal and figurative spaces proffered by a Black counterpublic, within which such museums and their docents play a constitutive role. Whilst the public sphere is required to gain the benefits of citywide recognition of African American history, the freedom to seek 'withdrawal and regroupment' (Fraser 1990: 68) is also necessary. Docents' urban imaginaries of healing coalesce on the symbol of Black autonomy and self-sufficiency provided by Philadelphia's Black Metropolis of the 1830s.

Notes

1 Richard White, personal communication, 27 July 2022.

2 See https://www.blackdocents.com/, accessed 20 May 2024.

3 See https://archiving-inner-city.org, accessed 30 October 2024.

4 City, when capitalized, signifies the City of Philadelphia as a governmental entity.

5 Stephan Salisbury, 'African American Museum names new president after a yearlong search' Philadelphia Inquirer 2021. https://www.inquirer.com/arts/african-american-museum-philadelphia-new-president-20210908.html, accessed 30 October 2024.

6 Stephan Salisbury, 'African American Museum funds slashed in revised city budget' Philadelphia Inquirer 2020. https://www.inquirer.com. https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-budget-cuts-coronavirus-african-american-museum-funding-20200512.html, accessed 30 October 2024.

7 Stephan Salisbury, 'African American Museum funds slashed in revised city budget', Philadelphia Inquirer 2020. https://www.inquirer.com. https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-budget-cuts-coronavirus-african-american-museum-funding-20200512.html, accessed 30 October 2024.

8 See https://www.aampmuseum.org/aamp-in-the-community.html, accessed 24 October 2024.

9 See www.aampmuseum.org/, accessed 14 July 2023.

10 Jill DiSanto, 'Report on the handling of human remains from the 1985 MOVE tragedy', Penn Today 2021. http://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/report-handling-human-remains-1985-move-tragedy, accessed 15 January 2023.

11 Autumn Brown and Maryse Mitchell-Brody (2014) *Healing Justice Practice Spaces: A How-To Guide.* Just Healing. https://justhealing.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/healing-justice-practice-spaces-a-how-to-guide-with-links.pdf, accessed 26 February 2025.

[12] Black Docents Collective (2023) *Family Reunions with Shamele Jordan.* YouTube video, 7 January. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APQH3Pi5LyY, accessed 9 May 2024.

[13] Black Docents Collective (2023) *Researching Your Family History with Adrienne Whaley.* YouTube video, 7 January. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akosaR-t02Y&t=1239s, accessed 10 May 2024. Adrienne Whaley is not a docent, but Director of Education and Community Engagement at the Museum of the American Revolution.

[14] Michiko Quinones, personal communication, 25 July 2022.

[15] See https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCd4iiAqZN3UgRV4ZFWzXhJg, accessed 9 May 2024.

[16] Alisa Rashid, personal communication, 28 July 2022.

[17] Alisa Rashid, pers. comm., 28 July 2022.

[18] Alisa Rashid, pers. comm., 28 July 2022.

[19] Alisa Rashid, pers. comm., 28 July 2022.

[20] Lyn Gibson Thompson, personal communication, 26 July 2022.

[21] Richard White, pers. comm., 27 July 2022.

[22] Valerie Anderson, personal communication, 27 July 2022.

[23] Richard White, personal communication, 6 March 2023.

[24] Alisa Rashid, pers. comm., 28 July 2022.

[25] Valerie Anderson, pers. comm., 27 July 2022.

[26] Valerie Anderson, pers. comm., 27 July 2022.

[27] Lyn Gibson Thompson, pers. comm., 28 July 2022.

[28] Valerie Anderson, pers. comm., 27 July 2022.

[29] Richard White, pers. comm., 6 March 2023.

[30] Richard White, pers. comm., 6 March 2023.

[31] Richard White, pers. comm., 6 March 2023.

[32] Manumission refers to slave owners freeing people from slavery.

[33] See https://www.1838blackmetropolis.com, accessed 4 June 2024.

[34] Historical Society of Pennsylvania (2022) *The Philadelphia Black Metropolis of 1838.* YouTube video, 2 August. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4VDRgzNJDU&t=5s, accessed 8 April 2023.

[35] Michael Clemmons, personal communication, 3 March 2023.

[36] Michael Clemmons, pers., comm., 3 March 2023.

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