



## *Do I Dare?*

### *What's an African American Museum's Role in Public Controversies?*

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History preserved and shared in museums and the contemporary history unfolding daily, travel parallel lines. Occasionally, those lines intersect – particularly in the African American experience.

When intersections occur, those museum directors have asked themselves whether they will act as historian/storytellers or whether they will move closer to the pressurized third-rail of advocacy.

Such a situation last fall prompted Association of African American Museum Board President Samuel W. Black to write an open letter. The objective storyteller versus advocate question he was navigating is a tightrope requiring balance between a museum's core convictions while not alienating board members and lead donors.

“The Association of African American Museums supports the family of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Miles, Jonny Gammage, and many others who are examples of how racism gives birth to injustice,” Black wrote in his November 2014 letter. “As a national organization and like most Americans of conscience, we cannot sit idly by as unchecked police power cheapens our lives and creates a “failure of government not witnessed since the dark days of lynching.”



Black says African American museums always have addressed social ills but wrestle with exactly when they should step beyond traditional boundaries of museum work. The central conflict it seems, involves presenting an often-tragic racial story to a mainstream public fixated on benign racial interpretation.

“You may have museum staff who want to jump in feet first but you may have administration or board members not wanting to touch it,” Black said. “They may fear it’s controversial, or, (feel it’s) not good for our reputation or our brand.”

Lisa Dodson, a grant writer and museum consultant as well as the executive director of the Kansas Museum Association, said museums not only can advocate, they should.

Dodson said the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) plans a day annually to visit Capitol Hill and advocate. The organization’s website features a section titled “Advocacy.”

The website headings include, “Ways to Advocate Today,” “Contact your members of Congress,” and “Use this members-only resource to see where elected officials stand on key issues for museums.”

Black said African American museums, however, operate in a different social milieu. “Black museums were born from the black revolutionary period,” Black said. “They basically have a revolutionary DNA. This is part of who we are.”

In his letter, Black encouraged African American museums to use creativity to contextualize the African American struggle.



“Let’s use our collective voice as museums, curators, educators, designers, artists, poets, and playwrights and continue to tell our story as a people seeking freedom, democracy, and demanding justice,” he wrote.

For Black, this advocacy or storytelling dilemma isn’t an “either or proposition.” “We can be both,” he said. “We have to be both. But whether we are storytellers or advocates, more than anything, we have to be truth-tellers.”