



an initiative of the
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS

“Towards a New Mainstream?” Lecture Discussion Guide

January 2010

Note: This discussion guide is written for people who work in or with museums. We welcome viewers from all sectors to use this guide, view the webcast and participate in the associated discussions. However, depending on your background and area of expertise, you may want to look for additional resources to supplement this guide.

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Foreword—A Note from Our Speaker

The words “museum” and “mausoleum” sound an awful lot alike. And according to two recent studies out of Washington, if America’s museum directors and curators don’t make some fundamental changes in the way they do business, their institutions might soon become tombs.

The National Endowment for the Arts recently published the sixth in a series of surveys it has conducted since 1982 that seek to measure public participation in the arts. The news was not good. The NEA found a notable decline in theater, museum and concert attendance and other “benchmark” cultural activities between 2002 and 2008. In 2002, 39.4% of people 18 and older participated in such events within the previous 12 months. Last year, that number had dipped to 34.6%. Sure, the economy probably has something to do with the drop. But if you look deeper into the study’s numbers, you will see that by and large cultural institutions are having a difficult time keeping pace with the demographic changes that are reshaping the American population.

Perhaps the most troubling news for museums in the NEA study is the declining percentage of Latino adults visiting the nation’s art museums. In 1992, the survey found that 17.5% of Latino adults had been to an art museum in the previous year. That number dropped to 16.1% in 2002 and 14.5% in 2008. A 2005 study out of UCLA found a similar trend in Southern California. Between 1984 and 2005, the rate of Latino museum attendance locally declined, while Anglo attendance saw a rise.

Although some of that drop can be explained by the increase in the number of blue-collar immigrants, who may not visit museums because of financial or cultural reasons, there is evidence that museums have not done a great job of reaching out to the stratum of minority populations that does share

the income and educational profile of Anglo culture lovers.

Last year, the Center for the Future of Museums published *Museums & Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures*. Data from Reach Advisors, authors of the report, shows that only one in 10 “core museum visitors” today is non-Anglo. Given the fact that nonwhites are projected to make up roughly half of the national population by mid-century, that figure should terrify anyone who loves museums.

Why are museums lagging behind the demographic shift? According to the NEA study, museum-going—particularly art museums—is largely the province of people with higher educational attainment and incomes. Because whites have more years of education than Latinos or blacks (the NEA does not report data on Asians), it makes sense that they have higher rates of museum attendance. That said, the NEA survey also shows that nationwide, only 26% of whites had visited a museum in the previous 12 months.

To me, this suggests that the most effective and realistic way for museums to catch up with demographic shifts is to try harder to reach the growing ranks of college-educated, English-speaking non-Anglos. In particular, they should be trying to create cultural habits of museum attendance among all first-generation college graduates. And, yes, though they may want to occasionally create exhibits that are ethnically targeted, these guardians of houses of curiosity welcome any and all who are curious about the wider world.

—Gregory Rodriguez

What Is the Lecture?

"Towards a New Mainstream?" was presented by Gregory Rodriguez, author, *L.A. Times* columnist and founder of Zócalo Public Square, on Dec. 9, 2009, at the Embassy of Canada in Washington, D.C. This was the second annual lecture presented by AAM's new Center for the Future of Museums (CFM). CFM helps museums explore the cultural, political and economic challenges facing society and then devise strategies to shape a better tomorrow. It is a think tank and research and design lab for fostering creativity and helping museums transcend traditional boundaries to serve society in new ways. The purpose of this lecture is to present critical perspectives on demographic change in America and spark new thinking about the ways museums can engage their audiences and help shape the future of society.

Why Watch This Lecture?

That can be summed up in one graph from *Museums & Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures:*

Minorities in America



Museums face profound challenges in a society rapidly approaching majority-minority status in many parts of the country. Historically, the typical museum visitors have been highly-educated non-Latino whites in higher income brackets. As the nation becomes more diverse, and as the gap between wealthy and poor (even middle-class) Americans grows, museums will have to expand their audiences if they want to remain relevant to society as a whole.

In this lecture, Rodriguez argues that museums often take a limited and perhaps misguided approach to diversifying their audiences. Instead, he suggests museums should:

- Stop assuming that individuals self-identify primarily by their cultural background. It's patronizing, for example, to target Latino audiences only for an annual Day of the Dead festival or for Cinco de Mayo, or African-American audiences for an exhibit of Jacob Lawrence paintings.
- Realize that there are huge differences between first-generation, Spanish-speaking immigrants struggling for an economic foothold in their new country, and assimilated third-generation Latinos with higher educational attainment and English as a primary language.
- Re-imagine the "American mainstream": mix it up, get rid of expectations, don't expect people to play roles.

Mechanics of the Webcast

The lecture will be webcast for free at 2:00 p.m. EST on Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2010. You can register through the [CFM website](#). After the webcast, the video will be posted to the [AAM website](#).

This webcast is sponsored and hosted by [Learning Times](#).

The basic technical requirements to participate are:

A PC or Mac (OS X 10.2 or higher) computer with a standard Internet connection (56 kbps or higher)

The free Flash Player 8 or higher

Speakers or headphones connected to your computer

Please visit the following web page to check that the computer you intend to use is ready for the webinars:

www.learningtimes.net/connectcheck

Login to the webcast through the site

www.learningtimes.net/aamlogin

If you have any technical questions about the AAM webinars or require any assistance at all, please contact LearningTimes at help@learningtimes.net.

How to Get the Most Out of the Webcast

Do some preparation:

- Read through this discussion guide.
- Decide how you will participate (alone or with a group) and what level of engagement you want (low, medium, high) and select pre- and post-lecture activities accordingly from the menus on pages 6 and 8.
- Do some background research. What is the demographic makeup of your museum's audience? Of your community? What will each look like in twenty years? (Resources on page 10 can help you find this information.)

WATCH IT WITH COLLEAGUES!

Our experience of the live lecture suggests that it will leave you bursting with ideas to share. We encourage you to recruit a group with whom to watch and discuss the lecture and how it applies to your work. The major impetus for the Jan. 27 webcast is to encourage discussion among staff at museums and across the field. Simultaneous viewing of the webcast will help foster a national dialogue on this topic by making it easier for you to exchange thoughts in real time with colleagues across the country (and perhaps the world) via an online chat window during the lecture and for two hours afterwards. If you can't be with your colleagues in the same room during the webcast, we encourage you to recruit your own online group to exchange thoughts in the virtual realm (e.g., via e-mail, a chatroom, instant messaging).

APPROACH THE TOPIC WITH CURIOSITY:

Rodriguez sets forth some provocative ideas and you may disagree with some of his premises and/or conclusions. To give his ideas a chance to percolate and shake up your own thinking, mute your inner critic for now and listen with curiosity. After the lecture you can turn the critical volume up again and join the discussion about the merits of his ideas (online or with your group).

Activity Menu: For People Watching Alone

Levels of Participation

Low

Watch the video.

Medium

The above, plus:

- Read and comment on posts from the [CFM Blog](#) related to the lecture (look for the tag “CFM Lecture 2010”)
- Read the report *Museums & Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures*, available at the [CFM website](#), for one picture of the future that museums may help society to face.

High

The above, plus:

- Review the guided discussion questions (page 7) and spend some time after the lecture writing down your thoughts about one or more of them.
- Select and participate in one or more of the lecture activities (page 8).
- Listen to this radio program on “[Museums in Recession](#)” featuring Gregory Rodriguez, CFM director Elizabeth Merritt, Oakland Museum director Lori Fogarty and California Association of Museums president Jim DeMersman. Consider the connection between audience diversity and financial sustainability.
- Read in advance some of the material in “Resources” (page 10).

Activity Menu: For People Watching in Groups

Low

Watch the video.

Have an informal discussion during and after the lecture about any points that strike you as being particularly pertinent or interesting.

Medium

The above, plus:

- Meet ahead of time to read and discuss posts from the [CFM Blog](#) related to the lecture (look for the tag “CFM Lecture 2010”).
- Read the report *Museums and Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures*, available at the [CFM website](#), for one picture of the future that museums may be helping society face.

High

The above, plus:

- Choose some of the guided discussion questions (page 7) and structure your post-lecture discussions around these questions.
- Select one or more of the lecture activities (page 8) and participate individually, or with your group.
- Listen to this radio program on “[Museums in Recession](#)” featuring Gregory Rodriguez, CFM director Elizabeth Merritt, Oakland Museum director Lori Fogarty and California Association of Museums president Jim DeMersman. Consider the connection between audience diversity and financial sustainability .
- Read in advance some of the material in “Resources” (page 10).

Discussion Questions

These are suggested questions to guide your thinking or your group's discussions. You may wish to choose one section of questions to focus on, or one question from each section, to tailor this list to your available time. And feel free to write your own!

ABOUT MUSEUMS AND THEIR AUDIENCES

1. The primary audience for most museums is overwhelmingly well-educated, relatively well-off and white. Is this true for your museum? If so, why do you think that is so? If not, why not?
2. What are the primary barriers to museums cultivating audiences that are more culturally and ethnically diverse?
3. In what ways do you agree or disagree with Rodriguez's proposition that museums have never and will never be able to make significant inroads in reaching low income communities and new immigrants?
4. Discuss what your museum does to attract diverse audiences.
 - a. Are there things about your museum (e.g., location, reputation, architecture, staffing) that you think discourage certain segments of your community from visiting?
 - b. What event, exhibit or program at your museum has been most successful at reaching new audiences? Reaching a diverse mix of audiences? What made it successful?

ABOUT EXPECTATIONS AND ROLE PLAYING

Watch this [video clip](#) from the lecture in which Rodriguez discusses role playing and people's expectations based on race and culture.

1. Think about your personal experience with role playing and expectations. In what ways do people categorize you (e.g., by age, gender, culture, etc.) and what expectations do they project on you because of that categorization? How do you feel about those expectations? Do you find yourself conforming to or rebelling against the role(s) you are expected to play?
2. In what ways do you find yourself categorizing other people and expecting them to play certain roles? Do you have specific expectations for visitors to your museum (or museums in general)? Do these vary for people in different categories? If so, what role(s) do you expect them to play?

ABOUT REPRESENTATION VERSUS INDIVIDUALITY

1. Rodriguez sardonically asks, "did you ever notice how a panel has the black panelist and the Latino panelist and the Asian panelist, and it's always the white guy who is the moderator?" Examine whether this is true at your organization. Think about your board of trustees, committees, advisory groups and panels you may have convened—what are the expectations of the composition of these groups? Who tends to lead or have authority?
2. Rodriguez also contends that "we tend to think that whites behave as individuals and all non-whites act as representatives of their people." He argues that it's unrealistic (and patronizing) to expect anyone to speak for his or her group. How does this play out at your organization? Are there expectations regarding the diversity of committees, teams, staff, etc? Are people recruited with the explicit or implicit expectation that they speak for or represent a particular group? If people aren't expected to represent a group, what is the purpose of having

“diverse representation” on boards, committees, etc.?

ABOUT MULTICULTURALISM, INTEGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

1. Rodriguez states that multiculturalism has become a “glass-ceiling,” limiting what the United States “does best,” which is integration. What are the pros and cons of separating and celebrating distinct cultural identities versus forging a common culture? Can we, as a country, do both? If we have to choose, which should we choose? What role can museums in general, and your organization in particular, play in promoting multiculturalism and/or assimilation?
2. During the Q&A portion of the live lecture (not included in the webcast but available in transcript), Rodriguez was asked about the future of culturally-specific museums. “I don’t think they’re going to go away. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with them but it would be great if the stories of multi-faceted people were integrated [into mainstream museums]. In many of your museums, they are. I think they’ll continue to exist but hopefully they’ll be a bigger part of the museums that everyone goes to.” An increasing number of young people decline to identify themselves by ethnic/racial category in the U.S. census. Will there continue to be a proliferation of ethnically and culturally specific museums at the local and/or national level? If “mainstream museums” integrate more diverse stories into their narratives, what distinct role will ethnically-specific museums play? Does your museum currently provide rewards or incentives to visitors to encourage certain types of behavior related to achieving your mission, and if so, what are they?

Lecture-Related Activities

1. Prepare a summary comparing the demographics of your community to your current audience.
 - a. For current demographics of your community, access the U.S. Census Bureau’s official population statistics at the American FactFinder [website](#). Use their search tool for demographic information by zip code or geographic unit.
 - b. Use internal data or your best guess to describe the demographics of your current audience. Remember that the demographics of various users of your museum—on-site visitors, program participants, website users, social network members—may be quite different.
2. Review and discuss population projections to the year 2050 from the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) or the [Pew Hispanic Center](#).
3. Discuss: How are the demographics of your community changing? (Remember: demographics includes not just race or ethnic background but gender, age, national origin, religion, etc.) What do you think your community will look like in 2034 or 2050? How will changes affect your museum—its audience, governance, support and mission?

Next Steps

- Keep the discussion going!
- Engage in the lecture-related activities.
- Share the discussion guide and the video with those in your museum who might be interested (educators, exhibit designers, your director). (Excerpts from the video are available free on the CFM [YouTube](#) channel and the entire webcast is available through registration on the AAM [website](#).
- Tell us what you think about the lecture.
- Send comments to futureofmuseums@aam-us.org.
- Record your thoughts about the future of museums and society by participating in CFM's Voices of the Future video project. For more information e-mail futureofmuseums@aam-us.org.

“Towards a New Mainstream?” Lecture Glossary

Adrian Wooldridge: management editor and columnist for *The Economist* magazine. Until July 2009 he was *The Economist's* Washington Bureau Chief and “Lexington” columnist. Rodriguez recruited him as Zócalo Public Square’s first lecturer.

Banana Hammock: Code word used by AAM staff during the lecture to remind Rodriguez where he was in his script. Refers to an episode of the TV show “Curb Your Enthusiasm.”

Gustavo Dudamel: Venezuelan violinist and conductor. Currently Music Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Cited by Rodriguez as an example of “mistaking importing elite Latin Americans for integration,” thus enabling the white cultural elite to feel good about themselves.

Harold & Kumar (full title *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*): A comedy film starring John Cho and Kal Penn released in 2004. Rodriguez characterizes it as “a brilliant movie that tells the story of becoming American.” Actor Kal Penn now works in the White House Office of Public Liaison, with a focus on connecting the Obama administration with Asian-American and arts groups.

IRCA (Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986): A law that criminalized the act of knowingly hiring an illegal immigrant and established financial and other penalties for those employing illegal aliens.

John Hope Franklin: Prominent African-American historian. Author of *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947) and *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (1956). Helped prepare the winning arguments in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, in 1995. Rodriguez cites *The Militant South* as an early example of a minority scholar writing about whites.

Manny Ramirez: Dominican-American left fielder for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Mentioned by Rodriguez in the “Korean sushi bar” anecdote. .

Richard Alba: Distinguished professor (emeritus) of race and ethnicity at the State University of New York, Albany. Rodriguez quotes from Alba's article “Assimilation's Quiet Tide,” *The Public Interest* no. 119 (Spring 1995), pp. 3-18.

Zócalo Public Square: A Los Angeles-based non-profit organization founded in 2003 whose mission is to “mobilizes broad audiences around the fundamental issues that affect our lives as Americans.” The organization uses a [Web magazine](#), lectures, panels, screenings, and conferences to present ideas from a wide range of fields — politics, governance, health, economics, technology, foreign policy, arts, science, etc. Gregory Rodriguez is founder and executive director.

Resources

Note: This is a highly selective listing and should be considered a starting point for further exploration. Questions or suggestions for a more detailed bibliography? Contact Philip M. Katz, AAM's assistant director for research, at pkatz@aam-us.org.

The U.S. Population—Now and the Future:

James Chung, et al., *Museums & Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures* (Center for the Future of Museums, 2008). The section on “the Changing Face of America” describes a “fundamental challenge” to museums: “While the [U.S.] population is already one-third minority, heading towards majority minority, today only 9% of the core visitors to museums are minorities and approximately 20% of museum employees are minorities.”

The U.S. Census Bureau provides easy access to official population statistics at the American [FactFinder](#) website—including a handy search tool for demographic information by zip code or geographic unit. Population projections to the year 2050 are also [available](#).

In 2006, *Time Magazine* devoted a special issue to “[America by the Numbers](#).” The graphics that accompany the online version of this issue are an excellent introduction to U.S. population trends.

Center’s 2009 report on *Who’s Hispanic?* is especially helpful for making sense of the different definitions and ways of counting people of Spanish heritage.

The annual *Hispanic Fact Pack* from *Advertising Age* magazine is another good source of information, with a focus on marketing to Hispanic consumers.

Racial/Ethnic Diversity and Museum Participation:

One recent attempt to identify patterns of museum usage by Americans of different racial/ethnic backgrounds was *InterConnections: The IMLS National Study on the Use of Libraries, Museums and the Internet* (2008). Adult survey respondents were asked whether they had visited particular kinds of museums in the previous 12 months, either in person or via the Internet:

Demographic group		African	Asian	Hispanic
Museum type	White	American		
Art	32.2%	21.0%	36.6%	26.2%
Historic House/Site	37.3%	22.6%	24.4%	25.5%
History	24.3%	19.0%	19.5%	22.3%
Natural History	21.6%	18.3%	24.4%	25.3%
Science/Technology	25.6%	21.8%	34.1%	25.5%

Source: *InterConnections* report, showing in-person or virtual visits in 2006

A classic discussion of cultural barriers to museum participation is John H. Falk, “Factors influencing African American leisure time utilization of museums,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 27:1 (1995), 41-60. An earlier version can be found [online](#). Falk uses socio-economic, institutional, cultural/ethnic, and regional factors to analyze the museum-going habits and attitudes of African Americans.

Kirsten M. Ellenbogen provides a condensed review of current literature on museum audiences in “Understanding Your Audience,” *Handbook for Small Science Centers*, edited by Cynthia Yao, et al. (Rowman Altamira, 2006), 189-192. She emphasizes that “psychographic variables, which describe people’s psychological and motivational characteristics, are far more predictive [of an individual’s museum-going habits] than demographic ones.”