

Research Assessment Exercise 2020

Impact Case Study

University: **The University of Hong Kong (HKU)**

Unit of Assessment (UoA): **UoA 35, Area Studies (e.g. Japanese studies, European studies, etc.), cultural studies and other arts/humanities**

Title of case study: **Reframing the Kinsey Collection for Local Audiences and Raising Awareness of African American History and Culture in Hong Kong**

1) Summary of the impact

Dr. Tim Gruenewald has raised awareness of issues of racial justice and equality in the local community by bringing one of the world's largest and most important private collections of African American art and history to Hong Kong. As a result of his research on the traumatic and marginalised histories of minority groups, Gruenewald played an essential role in the exhibition "Rising Above: The Kinsey African American Art & History Collection," which was held at the University Museum and Art Gallery between December 2016 and February 2017 and attracted over 15,000 visitors from Hong Kong and abroad. Gruenewald's research shaped how these materials were presented to the Hong Kong public and contextualised the contents of the exhibition through a series of public lectures, which were later turned into a book. The exhibition and affiliated events generated significant media coverage, raising awareness of African American history and art and educating the public about the effects of institutionalised racism and the importance of diversity. This was the first time the collection had been exhibited outside of the United States. In addition to cultural and social impacts on the Hong Kong public, it impacted on the Kinseys' work by disseminating it to a wider international audience while helping them to recognise different aspects of its significance and potential. It also benefitted sponsors through the publicity the exhibition generated for their own diversity initiatives and in the collaborative networks it produced.

2) Underpinning research

Gruenewald joined the University of Hong Kong in 2009. His research focuses on the remembrance of difficult and traumatic histories and the national imagination in the United States, as well as how these histories are excluded from institutionalised forms of public memory (i.e. memorials, museums) [3.1, 3.2]. In 2015, Gruenewald's practice-based research on memory of difficult pasts resulted in the release of the documentary film, *Sacred Ground*, which he wrote and co-directed. Like the Kinsey exhibition, *Sacred Ground* critiques mainstream remembrance of U.S. history and the exclusion of minority and traumatic memories [3.2]. The film uses the remembrance of Native American pasts to argue that dominant memory discourse in the United States is characterised by strategic forgetting. Both *Sacred Ground* and the Kinsey exhibition ask the viewer to rethink marginalised histories – Native American history in one case and African American history in the other – as foundational to American history. The award-winning documentary was an important means of disseminating Gruenewald's research to academic and non-academic audiences, and was selected for the official programme at several international film festivals, as well as major academic conferences in Europe, North and South America.

Gruenewald's research on the exclusion of African American art and history from mainstream, public museums and galleries, such as the Smithsonian, is published in his essay "Collecting/Collective Identity: Collection and Remembering African American Art and History" (2019) [3.1]. This work shows how national historical narratives are constructed by excluding minority and traumatic contributions from mainstream museums and galleries. The paper demonstrates how private collectors like the Kinseys have provided alternative venues for important exhibitions of African American art since the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. They have helped both shape African American identity and integrate African American contributions within the U.S. national imagination. The paper was later published as part of the collection *Rethinking America's Past*. His forthcoming monograph, *Pain and the Nation: Remembering Difficult Histories and Nationalism*, explores how public memory contributes to U.S. national ideology and nationalism by

analysing five national museums in the United States dedicated entirely or in part to traumatic pasts. The analysis of the new National Museum of African American Culture and History is a cornerstone of this study of public memory. Gruenewald's research for both the edited volume and forthcoming monograph was funded by a GRF Early Career Scheme grant awarded in 2016. He has presented his work-in-progress at international conferences and seminars, including the Sadler Seminar Series at the University of Leeds in 2017 and the Memory Studies Association's Second Annual Conference at the University of Copenhagen, also in 2017. Gruenewald's extensive research in memory and remembrance of African American history informed his reframing of the Kinsey Collection to educate the Hong Kong public about the effects of racial discrimination and promote racial tolerance. While remaining faithful to the spirit of the Kinseys' vision of raising awareness of the accomplishments and contributions of African Americans, his research on the importance of acknowledging traumatic histories – and the fact that these histories were less familiar to a Hong Kong public – resulted in a greater focus on African American oppression and resistance.

3) References to the research

- 3.1 Gruenewald, T. "Collecting/Collective Identity: Collection and Remembering African American Art and History," in Gruenewald, T., ed. *Rethinking America's Past: Voices from the Kinsey African American Art and History Collection*. University of Cincinnati Press, 2019, pp. 1–42.
- 3.2 Gruenewald, Tim, writer. *Sacred Ground*. Dir. Tim Gruenewald and Ludwig Schmidtpeter. Saarland Medien, 2015.

Grants

1. "Traumatic Histories and the National Imagination: Narrative Construction in U.S. National Memory Museums," ECS Award, July 2016–June 2019, HK\$340,000.
2. "Monuments, Memorials and Museums – Visual Narrative Strategies of Memory Spaces in the United States," HKU Seed Fund, August 2014–September 2016, HK\$120,000.
3. "Federal Assistance Award," U.S. Dept. of State, September 2016–March 2017, US\$4,000.

4) Details of the impact

The exhibition "Rising Above: The Kinsey African American Art & History Collection" was held at the University Museum and Art Gallery (UMAG) at HKU between December 9, 2016, and February 26, 2017, with supporting satellite events hosted in venues on and off campus. It featured over 120 items from the Collection, which is widely recognised as one of the largest collections of artefacts relating to African American history in the world. The items exhibited spanned a period of 400 years – from objects documenting the presence of African Americans in the New World from 1595, to documents from the civil rights era, to contemporary African American art. Over 13,600 visitors saw "Rising Above"; over 400 attended guided tours of the exhibition in Cantonese, English, and Mandarin (including primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong and members of supporting organisations such as the Asia Society, the HKU Museum Society, American Airlines and Goldman Sachs); 240 attended the *Rising Above* lecture series; over 1,000 went to concerts featuring African American music; and 500 attended gallery receptions and other special events. The exhibition and related events resulted in significant social and cultural impacts by educating the Hong Kong public about the experiences of African Americans and their contributions to American history and culture. They raised awareness of the importance of racial justice and equality and fostered an appreciation of the ethical, social, and cultural value of diversity.

Reframing the Kinsey Collection for Hong Kong Audiences

"Rising Above" represents the efforts of Gruenewald and UMAG to frame and present the materials collected by Bernard and Shirley Kinsey for the cultural and social benefit of local and regional audiences. This was the first time the Kinseys had exhibited their collection outside of the U. S.. Bernard Kinsey writes that his discussions with Gruenewald "were helpful in particular with regard to shaping and communicating the Kinsey exhibition for the Hong Kong context and audiences. Dr.

Gruenewald's research and advice was instrumental for understanding the lack of awareness of these [painful] aspects in African American and U.S. history among the Hong Kong public" [5.1]. The importance of Gruenewald's contribution was echoed by UMAG's Director, Dr. Florian Knothe: "While the Kinsey exhibition in its previous iterations placed a stronger emphasis on positive achievements of African Americans, through our collaboration with Dr. Gruenewald, we came to the conviction that oppression as part of African American history to the public in Hong Kong needed to be featured prominently. This was reflected in the choice and arrangement of objects as well as the exhibition's title *Rising Above*. Dr. Gruenewald's research [...] had a massively positive impact on how our exhibition was communicated and received" [5.2].

The reframing of the Kinseys' collection for a Hong Kong context was accomplished in a number of ways. Gruenewald and his team of students contributed to the development of the informative gallery panels, which narrativised and contextualised material artefacts and works of art in both English and Chinese. Gruenewald organised the "Rising Above: African American History and Culture Lecture Series," which consisted of eight public lectures by different scholars held at UMAG. Speakers, including Gruenewald and experts in African American Studies from HKU and overseas universities, took items in the exhibition as the starting points for their talks. These lectures were later transformed into a book of essays edited by Gruenewald, *Rethinking America's Past: Voices from the African American Art and History Collection* (2019). For Jacqueline Dace, Deputy Director of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Centre, the book "changes the narrative [of American history] and no longer allows [the] contributions [of African Americans] to be hidden" [5.3]. The Kinsey Collection was further contextualised for local audiences through three free concerts exploring the African American experience, all of which played to a full house: two in the 900-seat Grand Hall at HKU and one at the 60-seat UMAG venue. These included a jazz-fusion programme by the acclaimed Jonathan Scales Fourchestra; a performance by distinguished scholar and award-winning blues musician Steven Tracy; and a concert by the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra featuring conductor Jung-Ho Pak, DJ Spooky, and guest speaker Professor Collins, Dean of Arts. One of the most striking elements of the concert was Paul D. Miller's (aka DJ Spooky) "Rebirth of a Nation," a multi-media remix of D.W. Griffiths' 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, which served as a critique of historical and contemporary racial injustice in America. The aim of these concerts was to reinforce the message of resistance and the need to confront painful memories that framed the exhibition itself.

Educating the Hong Kong Public about Issues of Racial Justice and Equality

Testimonials from visitors to the exhibition speak to its impact in educating the public about African American history, issues of racial justice and the importance of equality. In an article for *Hong Kong Lawyer* (2017), barrister William Tse confesses that he "was not initially interested in the exhibition," for "while Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city," there are "relatively few exhibitions of this kind to learn about African American art and culture." However, by the end of the exhibition he could not "agree more with Kinsey's statement [...] that deep down *we are more alike than we are dissimilar*" – taking its underlying message regarding the importance of tolerating difference and celebrating diversity to heart [5.4]. Parents from the German Swiss International School who visited the exhibition "realised that [they] did not know much about African American art and history [...] Seeing documents and items from the time of slavery touched [them] deeply and [they] had lots of discussions about cruelty and racism after the tour. This exhibition left a long and lasting impression" [5.5]. In an email from 2019, Enid Tsui – a journalist at SCMP – wrote that "it was certainly the first exhibition on the subject that [she'd] ever come across and it completely transformed [her] understanding of early African American history" [5.6]. "Rising Above" also educated the public through the extensive media coverage – in English and Chinese – that it received in a variety of outlets, reaching an audience of over 100,000. It received full-page features in print and online editions of the *South China Morning Post* and *Ming Pao* (2016). It was also featured in articles in *Ta Kung Pao*, *China Radio International*, Weibo, *Hong Kong Free Press*, the SCMP's *Post Magazine*, *Hong Kong Lawyer*, RTHK Radio 2 and 5, and *Lifestyle Asia*. Bernard

Kinsey was interviewed on the RTHK Radio 4 programme *Morning Call* (2017), and for the RTHK bilingual television programme *The Works* (2017) [5.7]. Many articles reported not only on the events but also discussed much of the content of the exhibition, thereby extending its impact.

Impact on the Kinseys' Work and External Partners

Gruenewald's framing of the "Rising Above" exhibition had further impacts on the Kinseys' work, and on external partners and organisations. "We are extremely proud of our recent exhibition at Hong Kong University Museum," wrote Bernard and Shirley Kinsey. "We have always desired to share our story with large, diverse audiences, and we now have published catalogues in English, Spanish, and Chinese" [5.8]. "Rising Above" was an opportunity for the Kinseys to display their life's labour to a new international audience. The Kinsey Collection blog presents its Hong Kong debut as a milestone (<http://www.thekinseycollection.com/category/blog/>). It announces that the "Hong Kong exhibit [...] is being met with incredible energy and visitorship," and that the HK Philharmonic collaboration was a "surreal moment and testament to the global interest in African American history and culture." The Kinseys praised Gruenewald's 2019 edited collection: "We are so grateful for the blessing of Tim Gruenewald and all contributors to this book of essays [...] This helps to enhance the educational impact of the Collection for students, and spreads it to a wider and broader audience [...] This book continues the struggle to address the large gaps in education [...] by highlighting the accomplishments of African Americans in building America" [5.8].

The exhibition engaged with several external partners and sponsors, to the benefit of the Kinseys' work, the general public, and the sponsors themselves. Darragh Paradiso, Public Affairs Officer of the U.S. Consulate General of Hong Kong and Macao, wrote that the exhibition "provided an underappreciated view of American diversity and had a positive and reassuring impact on Hong Kong and international perceptions of the United States in a politically tumultuous time. The Consulate [...] benefitted from the positive attention and nuanced view of the U.S. the exhibit generated [...] HKU went to great lengths to bring together stakeholders [...] A model network of private partnerships formed – connecting the university, our Consulate, the business community and others. These partnerships will continue to benefit everyone involved as we look toward future collaborations" [5.9]. American Airlines (AA) provided support for the shipping of the artefacts from Los Angeles to Hong Kong and arranged an exclusive evening at the exhibition for its travel partners. The relationship forged in Hong Kong has led to further collaborations, with items from the Kinsey Collection displayed at AA Headquarters and frequent flyer lounges in Dallas, Los Angeles and Miami throughout Black History Month 2019. Sponsor Goldman Sachs funded a dedicated day at the exhibition for their staff and a panel discussion on diversity led by the company's Black, Hispanic and Latino network. Over 100 employees attended, with eight regional offices connected online. Managing Director for Goldman Sachs (Asia), Ronald S. Lee, wrote that the exhibition "provided a valuable opportunity to create more open dialogue about the African American experience through unique access to artwork and other rare historical artifacts" [5.10].

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Statement from Bernard Kinsey.
- 5.2 Statement from UMAG Director, Dr. Florian Knothe.
- 5.3 Book review by J. Dace, Deputy Director, National Underground Railroad Freedom Centre.
- 5.4 Review by William Tse for *Hong Kong Lawyer*, February 2017: "A Journey into the Soul of African American Culture".
- 5.5 Statement from parents at German Swiss International School.
- 5.6 Statement from Enid Tsui.
- 5.7 Media reports.
- 5.8 Bernard and Shirley Kinsey, "Collector's Preface," *Rethinking America's Past*, 2019, University of Cincinnati Press.
- 5.9 Statement from D. Paradiso, U.S. Consulate General Hong Kong & Macau.
- 5.10 Statement from R.S. Lee, Managing Director, Goldman Sachs (Asia).